



PETER MCLEAN

WAR FOR THE ROSE THRONE BOOK III

PRIEST
OF
GALLOWS

Priest of Gallows

Peter McLean

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War for the Rose Throne Book III

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Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Also by Peter McLean](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Map](#)

[Dramatis Personae](#)

[Part One](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Part Two](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

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Also by Peter McLean

War for the Rose Throne

Priest of Bones

Priest of Lies

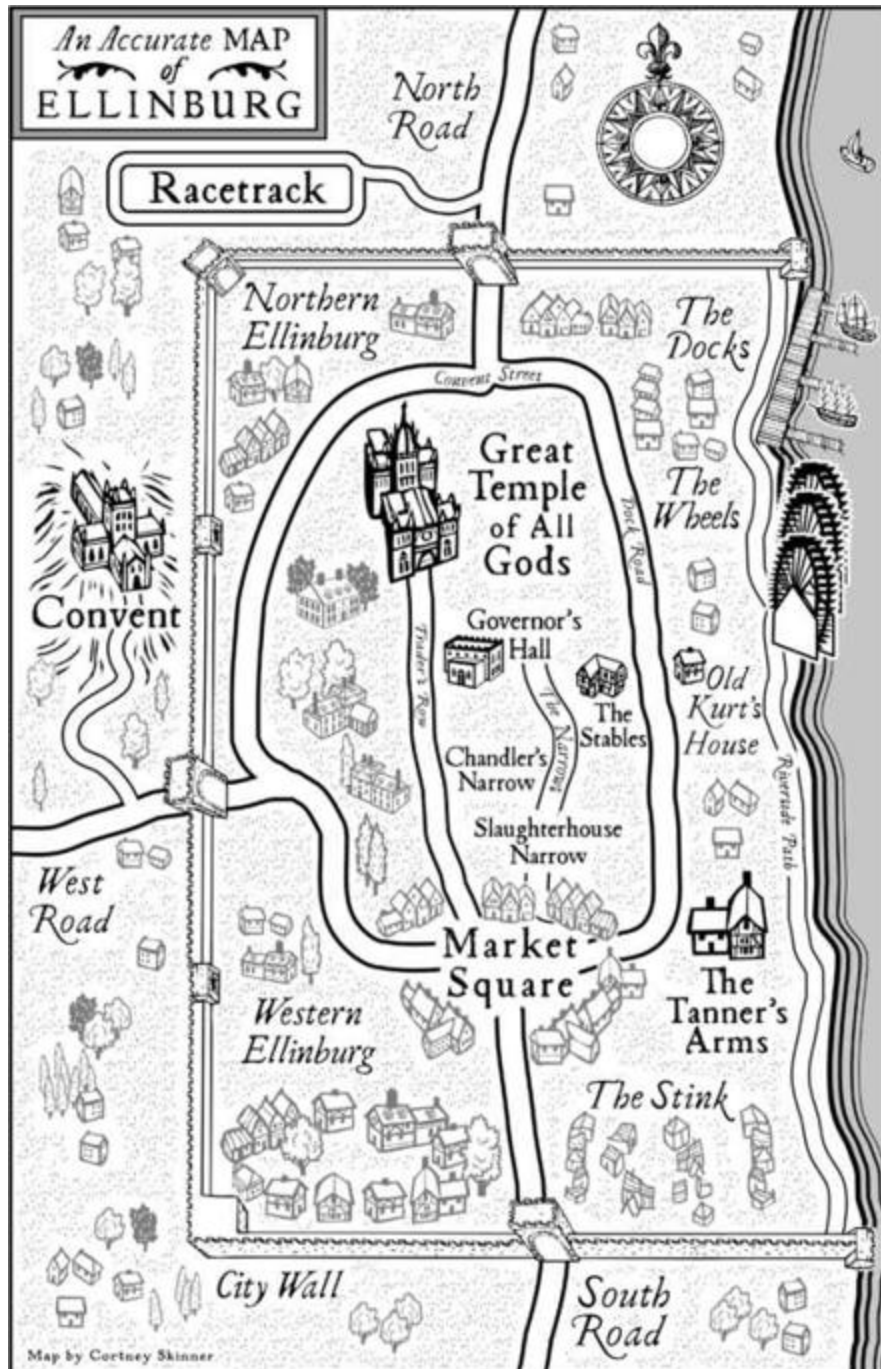
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*For Diane,
my world.*

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‘Si vis pacem, para bellum.’
‘If you would have peace, then prepare for war.’
– Vegetius

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Dramatis Personae

The Piety Family

Tomas Piety: Interim governor of Ellinburg and a Queen's Man. Formerly a gangster and army priest. Your narrator.

Ailsa Piety: His estranged wife, and a Queen's Man.

Billy Piety: A lad of perhaps fifteen years, strong in the cunning and touched by Our Lady. Their adopted son.

Jochan Piety: Younger brother to Tomas, and a very disturbed man.

Hanne Piety: Wife to Jochan and mother of his infant daughter.

Enaid Piety: Their loving aunt. Grand matriarch of the Pious Men, and Bloody Anne's second.

The Pious Men

Bloody Anne: Head of the Pious Men, and Tomas' most loyal friend.

Fat Luka: Head of propaganda, master of listeners, agent of the Queen's Men.

Mika: Underboss of the Stink.

Black Billy: Mika's second in the Stink.

Florence Cooper: Underboss of the Wheels, and head of the Flower Girls.

Jutta: Florence's second in the Wheels.

Brak: Aunt Enaid's man, despite being a third her age.

Simple Sam: A slow lad but a faithful one.

Hari: Tavern keeper of the Tanner's Arms.

Cutter, also known as Yoseph: A former Sacred Blade of Messia with a grievously scarred face. Lover to Jochan.

Emil: A veteran, and a hired man.

Oliver: A hired blade but a trusted one.

Various other ruffians and hired men whose names are not recorded here.

Notable People in Ellinburg

Governor Schulz: A career bureaucrat from Dannsburg. Someone who understands how things work.

Rosie: Boss of the Chandler's Narrow girls, and an agent of the Queen's Men. Bloody Anne's woman.

Old Kurt: A cunning man, rouser of rabbles and causer of trouble.

Mina: A young lass with the cunning. Billy Piety's woman, young though they are.

Salo: A steward.

Notable People in Dannsburg

Her Majesty the Queen: Ruling monarch of the country.

The Princess Crown Royal: A girl of twelve years, heir to the throne.

His Royal Highness Prince Wilhelm, the Prince Consort: Husband to the queen, father of the Princess Crown Royal.

Lady Lan Delanov: A Lady-in-Waiting.

Dieter Vogel: The Lord Chief Judiciar, and Provost Marshal of the Queen's Men.

First Councillor Aleksander Lan Letskov: Presiding head of the governing council.

Councillor Hristokov: A member of the governing council with some unpleasant hobbies.

Councillor Markova: A member of the governing council with connections.

Councillor Lan Drashkov: A member of the governing council who thinks a lot of himself.

Mr Grachyev: A gangster, or so he believes.

Iagin: Mr Grachyev's second, and a Queen's Man.

Ilse: A Queen's Man of special talents.

Konrad: A Queen's Man from Drathburg.

Sabine: A Queen's Man from Varnburg.

Leonov: An underboss, extremely good with a crossbow.

Brandt: The head of Ailsa's household guard.

Mr and Mrs Shapoor: Ailsa's parents.

Lady Lan Yetrov: A very rich widow who is greatly in Tomas' debt.

Arch High Priest Rantanen: Highest priest of the Grand High Temple of All Gods. The holiest man in the land.

Major Bakrylov: A war hero, from a certain point of view, with connections to the Queen's Men.

Baron Lan Drunov: An unwise and unfortunate man.

Nikolai Reiter: Archmagus of the house of magicians.

Doctor Almanov: A physician.

Edric Nyman: A tutor.

Sister Galina: A nun.

Beast: A slave.

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Part One

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Chapter 1

One murder can change the fate of a nation.

I had been governor of Ellinburg for less than four months when it happened. It was a warm spring evening, and I was relaxing in the private drawing room of the governor's hall, a glass of brandy in my hand and a book open in my lap. Billy and Mina were sitting under the window together, playing some game of cat's cradle between them. I watched them over my glass, watched the entwining of the cords between their fingers, and I could see in the looks they shared with each other just how fierce their young love was. I knew how strongly Billy felt for her.

We had almost come to blood over it back in the winter, after all.

After I had crushed the strike at the factory, Mina had come to me herself to confess what she had done. That was brave of her, I'd had to allow, but it didn't change the facts of the thing. I remembered how the rebellious workers had known we were coming when they shouldn't have done, and how Old Kurt hadn't been there when he should have been. He had known we were coming because someone had told him, and that someone was Mina.

Mina, who was a cunning woman even Billy looked up to.

She's very strong.

Mina, who couldn't do magic without spewing obscenities that would have curled the hair of the lowest conscript soldier.

Mina, who Old Kurt had once taken in when she was a little orphan girl on the unforgiving streets of Ellinburg.

That was a betrayal, and I took it ill.

Very ill indeed.

'Don't kill her, Papa,' Billy had begged me, in the end. 'Please, please don't kill her.'

'She betrayed us,' I said.

The cold fury Ailsa had left me with was still upon me in those weeks, and I couldn't find it in myself to feel understanding or mercy.

Not for anyone.

Billy got a hard look about him then, and it came to me through my icy rage that perhaps I recognised that look. Perhaps it wasn't so very different from how I had looked at my own da, the night I killed him.

'You won't kill her,' Billy said, in that way he had when he knew a thing was so. 'You won't, because I won't *let* you.'

There was something in his over-bright eyes, something that told me he truly meant it. Billy the Boy was strong in the cunning, if still not quite so strong as Mina herself, and he was either a seer of Our Lady or possessed by some devil out of Hell. No one, neither cunning man nor priest, was really sure which.

Sometimes he gave me the fear, and I've no shame in admitting that. There are few men in this world who I would fear to face with swords, but I fear the cunning. I fear what I can't see, what I can't fight – disease, and magic, but not men. And yet that wasn't what stayed my hand.

At the time it had been barely four weeks since Ailsa had left us both and returned to Dannsburg. Billy had lost his ma, and I knew that had hit him hard. Was I really going to take his woman away from him too, betrayal or not? Beside that, Mina had saved my life at the sit-down with Bloodhands, her and Jochan. I had told myself then that I wouldn't forget that, and I hadn't.

I spent a long night thinking on it, and perhaps I even prayed on it too. Priest I may be, among other things, but I'll confess that I don't pray often. Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows doesn't answer prayers, after all, but perhaps that night She heard one.

I spared Mina's life, and I found it deep inside me to forgive her too. Family is important, after all, and I understood that Old Kurt had been like family to her. By the end of a long, sleepless night I understood why she had done it. I loved Billy as my own son, although he wasn't, and since Ailsa had deserted me, he was all I really had left. My aunt was distant, my brother mad, and Bloody Anne was so busy running the Pious Men and I the city that we hardly saw each other any more. I wasn't going to lose my son too, and if forgiving Mina was the price of that, then so be it.

Watching them now, I was glad I had.

I'm a harsh man, I know that, but I like to think I'm a fair one.

'I win,' Mina said, although I couldn't make head nor tail of their game.

Billy laughed and leaned forward to kiss her, and I turned back to the book in my hand. I'm no great reader but the governor's hall contained a

library of almost a hundred books, and in Ellinburg that was a treasure indeed. I had resolved to read them all, although I'll allow that my progress was slow. This one was a treatise on mercantile law, and I understood little of it, but to my mind a city governor should know such things.

I was working my way painfully through a section on the finer points of the rates and levies of the import duty on tea when Salo entered the room and uttered a polite cough.

The house I had shared with Ailsa off Trader's Row was closed up, unneeded and unwanted. Exactly how I had been to her, in the end. I had kept the staff on, though, and brought them with me to my new official residence in the governor's hall. I'd known I wouldn't have been able to trust any of Hauer's former servants, and Salo was a good steward.

'What is it?' I asked, without looking up from my book.

'There's a messenger, sir,' he told me. 'A rider just arrived from Dannelsburg. The guard have her in the downstairs office and they assure me she knows the correct words of exchange. She says she has come from the Lord Chief Judiciar with an urgent message for you.'

I frowned at that. The Lord Chief Judiciar was Dieter Vogel, of course, and he was also secretly the Provost Marshal of the Queen's Men.

That made him my boss.

'Aye, well,' I said, and closed my book. 'I'll see her in my study, then.'

Salo gave me a short bow and left the room, and I got to my feet with a sigh. Any urgent message from the house of law was unlikely to be a good thing. I refilled my glass from a bottle on the side table and took it with me, leaving Billy and Mina to each other's arms. I don't think they even noticed me leave.

*

The woman was thin and dirty and she looked tired half to death, and those things told me she had seen hard riding on the road.

She was grimy of face and her clothes were nondescript, a stained cloak over a coat and britches that any rider might have worn. The Queen's Men have no uniform, no insignia or badges of rank. We are invisible and officially non-existent, and those who work for us could be anyone – bakers or soldiers or chandlers, farriers or fishwives or whores.

Only a very few carry the Queen's Warrant, people like Ailsa and Iagin. People like me.

I wondered if this one even knew who she truly worked for. Many of those who serve us don't even realise it, after all.

'What is it?' I asked her, once the guardsman who had shown her into the room had closed the door behind her.

I was sitting behind the huge desk in my study, the same study where Governor Hauer had received me before I had him arrested and dragged screaming to Dannsburg.

The messenger stood stiffly upright in front of me, her posture alone enough to tell me that she had been a soldier once.

'A letter, my lord Governor,' she said. 'Most urgent.'

She passed me the folded paper then returned to her rigid stance.

I turned the letter over in my hand and glanced at the seal. It bore the arms of the house of law, not the mark of the royal warrant. I broke the stiff red wax and scanned the words on the page.

Nephew,

I have hard news.

Mother is dead, by the hand unloved.

Tell only those who know and serve the family, and no other. You will be relieved of your position within weeks, sooner if the roads are kind, and then you must ride. Bring those of your people closest to the family and return home with all haste.

Your uncle,

V.

I blinked at the letter and read it again, taking a moment to sift the meaning from the carefully phrased words. For one heart-stopping moment I thought he was talking about Ailsa.

Letters such as this were never written in plain, in case they fell into the wrong hands on the road. 'The family' meant the Queen's Men, of course, and by those closest he meant my chiefs of staff. But he called himself uncle and me his nephew, so Mother was . . .

In Our Lady's name, he means the queen!

The queen was dead, and by assassination. Of all the things the letter might have said, that had been the one I was least expecting.

I took a drink to cover my shock, then looked up at the messenger.

'What's your name?' I asked her.

'Caelyn, my lord Governor.'

'And do you know what this letter says, Caelyn?'

‘No, m’lord,’ she said. ‘Only that it comes with great haste from the Lord Chief Judiciar himself.’

No, it fucking doesn’t, I thought. This came straight from the Provost Marshal of the Queen’s Men, and for all that they were one and the same man, they wore very different faces indeed.

I sighed and held the letter to the flame of my desk lamp, thinking as I watched the paper slowly blacken and curl between my fingers. I wondered how many versions of that letter had been written, and where else they had been sent. To Drathburg in the west I was sure, perhaps as far as Varnburg or even away across the sea. Who knew how far the reach of the Queen’s Men extended? Nobody, I suspected, except Vogel himself.

The more the news sank in the less it surprised me.

Lady’s sake, I’d as good as known this was going to happen. I remembered my visit to the Royal Palace of Dannsburg, and how I’d thought then that the place was ridiculous and would be impossible to defend.

I put that thought aside for the time being, and offered the messenger a seat and a drink. She was all but swaying on her heels, and I wondered how long it had been since she last slept or ate.

Vogel’s letter had been dated not four days ago, and Dannsburg was a good week’s ride at a sane pace. When news was desperate it wasn’t unknown for a messenger to set out with four or more horses and simply ride them to destruction one after another, changing mounts and acquiring more along the road when each lamed or dropped dead beneath her.

Caelyn sank into the offered seat with a grateful sigh, and I poured brandy for her from the decanter on the side table.

‘I’ll pen a reply for the morning but you’re to spend the night here before you ride back,’ I told her. ‘The response is not half so urgent as the news was.’

‘Thank you, m’lord,’ she said, and the relief on her face was plain to see.

I wasn’t sure she could have made it back to Dannsburg again at the same pace, however many horses she took with her, but if I had ordered it I knew she would have tried.

She was a soldier, after all, and I thought that we would be needing those soon.

All of them we could fucking get.

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Chapter 2

I rang the bell on my desk to summon a footman, and told him to put Caelyn in a guest room for the night and see to it that she got a bath and a hot meal, and a good breakfast in the morning. Once he had led her out of the study I sat back in my chair and looked at the charred ashes of Vogel's letter where they lay strewn across the polished wood of the desk.

When I first opened the letter I'd thought Vogel was talking about Ailsa, and that had scared me more than I would have expected. The cold rage had finally died within me sometime after I forgave Mina, but I was still a long way from being able to see past what Ailsa had done. And yet, when I read those words, a dread had gripped my heart until I realised the truth. I wondered why that was.

Still, those were thoughts for another day. There were more pressing things to think on that night.

The queen was dead.

I sipped my brandy and let that sink in.

The Princess Crown Royal was heir to the throne, I knew that much. I had seen her once, very briefly, at a court reception in Dannsburg the previous year. She'd had eleven years to her at the time, I remembered Ailsa telling me, and although I didn't know when her nameday was she couldn't have reached her age of legal majority yet. She would still take the throne, of course, but the law said she couldn't be crowned or rule in her own right until she had thirteen years to her. That meant a regent, then.

Had the queen had a husband? I realised I had no idea, and there my ignorance shamed me. A Queen's Man I might be, but Ailsa had given me the warrant in what felt at the time very much like a battlefield promotion. I'd had no training, nor been formally brought into the knighthood. There were a great number of things that a Queen's Man should know that I still had no idea about.

I swallowed the end of my drink and left the study, and walked down the corridor to the library to look it up. The most recent copy of *Peerage of the Realm* I could find had been printed five years ago, but according to that there was a husband by the name of Wilhelm who was father to the Princess

Crown Royal. He was styled Prince Consort, apparently. Assuming he was still alive, that meant he would become regent until his daughter was of age. The princess had been the royal couple's only offspring at the time the book was written, I noted, and as our late queen had been past her fortieth year at the time of the birth I suspected there had been no more children after her.

I may not know much about such things, but that the royal house had only a single direct heir seemed troubling to me. Perhaps the queen had married late in life or their majesties had struggled to conceive, I really wouldn't know, but I knew it made that little girl's life the most precious thing in the country right then. I could only hope Lord Vogel and his organisation would protect her better than they had the queen.

I was angry, I realised. Not angry that the queen was dead, as such, for I'd had no great love for this royal woman I had never set eyes on. She had condemned me and nearly everyone I knew to the Hell that was Abington, after all, and that was a hard thing to forgive. No, it was more the simple fact that it had happened when the organisation I served, the Queen's Men, existed primarily to ensure that such a thing was impossible. Someone, I thought, had fucked up very badly.

That, or there were traitors in the royal palace.

I stood in the library and thought on that for a moment, and I remembered how Borys had betrayed me and the Pious Men the previous year. I remembered what I had done to Borys, and I could only wonder what Vogel would do to any traitors he uncovered in Dannsburg.

That was a thought to keep a man awake at night and no mistake.

I pushed the notion away and returned to my study to pen a reply to Vogel's letter.

My esteemed uncle,

I am greatly saddened to learn of Mother's death. I shall inform those younger members of the family who are closest to me, and as soon as my seat here is in safe hands we will make haste to join you at home.

Your loyal nephew,

Tomas

That looked about right, as far as I understood how such things were supposed to be phrased. Rosie would have known better than I did, but she was away in the house on Chandler's Narrow and the hour was late by then. She would probably be with Anne, and I didn't want to disturb them that night. I heated wax over the flame of the lamp and closed the letter with the

governor's seal, then rang for a footman to take it to Caelyn. She would be gone by first light, I was sure.

I was surprised to find Billy still in the drawing room when I returned to get another brandy before retiring for the night. Mina had presumably gone to bed, but the lad was sitting there waiting up for me.

'Something's happened,' he said at once. 'What is it? Is it word of Mama?'

I sighed.

'No, lad,' I said. 'No, it's not that. I'm sure your ma's well, wherever she may be.'

It was hard to keep the bitterness out of my voice, but I tried for Billy's sake. He still loved Ailsa as a mother, I knew that, and it would be ill done of me to speak badly of her to him.

'There's something, though,' he said, and I could tell he wasn't going to let it pass.

'Aye, there is,' I said.

I crossed to the side table and refilled my glass, then sat in a chair across from him and fixed him with a look.

'What is it, Papa?' he asked again.

'It's business, Billy,' I said after a moment. 'The other sort, I mean.'

'Dannsburg business.'

'Aye, lad, it's that.'

I made a decision then, one that I will remember for the rest of my life. I told him, and thus included him in those closest, and in what that would mean in the times to come.

I may never forgive myself for that.

'You're my son, Billy. You're my family. I know I can trust you with this. You know what I do, don't you? Aside from the governorship, I mean. Aside from the Pious Men.'

'You work for the queen,' Billy said at once.

'That I do,' I said. 'It's . . . more complicated than that, but aye, I work for the queen. Well, here's the lay of things. The queen is dead, Billy. That's what the messenger came to tell me, but you can't breathe a word of that to anyone. Do you understand me? No one, not even Mina. Tomorrow I'll tell Bloody Anne and Fat Luka, and in a week or two someone will come to Ellinburg from the capital and then they'll be governor here instead of me. I won't be governor any more because I have to go back to Dannsburg, and

I'll be taking Anne and Luka and Rosie with me. Do you want to come with us?'

'Yes, Papa,' he said at once, and never for a moment did he hesitate in his answer. 'Me and Mina, we'll both come.'

'You can't tell Mina,' I said again. 'I'm sorry, lad, but she can't come, and there it is.'

'But Papa, she's got nowhere else to go!'

'I know, and I won't see her out on the street. If I'm to be replaced as governor then we'll have to move back to the house anyway. She can stay there while we're away. Salo and Cook will look after her.'

'It's not fair,' Billy muttered, in the way that only those in their teen years do.

'I know, son,' I said. 'Few things are, in this life.'

*

The next morning I sent out runners to bring Fat Luka and Bloody Anne and Rosie to me at the governor's hall. It seemed strange to be holding a council of war with them there in my study instead of at the long table in the back room of the Tanner's Arms, but that wasn't my place any more. That was Anne's table now, not mine.

I had made her head of the Pious Men when I became governor of Ellinburg, lacking enough hours in the day to do both myself. She had done very well indeed in the months since then, and the peace with the Northern Sons and the Alarian Kings had held throughout the winter and into the beginning of the warm months. Luka had brokered that peace, to be sure, but it was Anne who had enforced it.

She made a good boss, I thought now as I looked at her across the wide expanse of my desk. I could only hope I had made as good a governor.

'How's business going, Bloody Anne?' I asked her.

She sipped tea from a shallow bowl and looked at me over the rim for a long moment. I had never seen Anne drink tea before. She was guarded around me now, as might be expected. She was the biggest underworld player in the city, and I was the city governor. We were still friends, of course we were, but I thought perhaps the nature of that friendship had changed some since I had been her boss in the Pious Men. Rosie sat quiet beside her, the bawd's knot proudly displayed on her shoulder in yellow cord as she watched and listened.

Anne sucked her teeth for a moment while she considered her answer, making the long puckered scar on her face twist and pull the corner of her mouth up into a bitter half-smile.

‘Well enough,’ she said, at last. ‘I made your aunt my second. Mika is underboss of the Stink now, and Black Billy *his* second. Florence Cooper runs the Wheels with Jutta as hers.’

I nodded.

‘Aye, I heard,’ I said. ‘Any trouble on your streets?’

‘No,’ she said shortly, and that was all she said on the subject.

There *had* been trouble of course, after that first strike I had put down the previous year, but Anne had suppressed it with ruthless efficiency and that was good. She never had been one to boast of her deeds, not even when we fought together back in the war.

I looked at her and Fat Luka and Rosie, and nodded slowly.

Bring your chiefs of staff, that was what Vogel’s letter had meant.

Well, that was those three, to my mind, and I wasn’t going into the nest of vipers that was Dannsburg without Billy’s magic beside me either. My aunt was Anne’s second in the Pious Men now, so it would be up to her to run the business while Anne was away. There especially I thought she had chosen wisely. Admittedly, the last time Aunt Enaid had run the Pious Men she had lost all our businesses to Bloodhands and his Skanian-backed Gutcutters, but I knew she had more than proved herself since then. During the battles of the Stink for one, and since then too. During the troubles Anne said she hadn’t had.

Florence Cooper was better suited to the job, perhaps, and certainly more ruthless, but she ran her own crew and had done even before the war. She was an independent woman, our Florence. Once given power, if only for a little while, I didn’t think she would be eager to give it back again afterwards. Aunt Enaid put the family first, always, but Florence perhaps wouldn’t, and despite their friendship Anne had seen that.

She was no one’s fool, was Bloody Anne.

‘I have something to tell you all,’ I said, after a long moment of silence. ‘Something sealed to crown secrecy under the Queen’s Warrant. I’ve told my Billy but no one else and it’s to stay that way, do you understand me?’

The three of them nodded, and I told them what Vogel’s letter had said. Luka winced as he listened, but he held his peace. Anne and Rosie just sat quiet until I was finished.

‘What does this mean for us?’ Anne asked.

‘A new governor will be here in a week or two, to take over from me,’ I said. ‘Rosie, Luka, you’ve that long to set things in order here and make sure business carries on without you, then you’re coming to Dannsburg with me and Billy. Anne, I’d like you to join us as well, but that’s your choice.’

‘In case you need people killed when we get there, you mean,’ Anne said.

No, she was no one’s fool at all.

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Chapter 3

It was ten days before the new governor arrived in Ellinburg.

Her name was Schulz, and she was a career bureaucrat from Dannsburg. I found little enough to like in the woman, but she had been appointed by Vogel himself so I could only assume she had at least a rough notion of how this worked. At least she'd had the sense to come on horseback with her guards and leave her baggage train to follow behind rather than riding in a carriage, so she understood urgency if nothing else.

'It seems you leave me the city in good order, Governor Piety,' she said as we finally finished going over the books of record in my study.

'Aye, well, Governor Schulz, I was only ever interim governor here but I've run things as best I could.'

She nodded, and showed me a smile that I thought a touch condescending.

'I'm sure you have,' she said.

I found that I was glad to leave the governor's hall. It was an overlarge and uncomfortable building, and noisy with the constant comings and goings of guardsmen and messengers and city officials and suchlike. Salo had reopened the house off Trader's Row and we had moved back there two days ago, Billy and Mina and me.

The governor's hall was vacant for Schulz to do with as she willed, and I wished her well of it.

When our meeting was done I got to my feet and offered her the chair behind the desk, in a symbolic handing over of power. She took my meaning, and she too stood and she shook my hand before she sat down behind the desk and rather fussily repositioned the inkwell.

'Oh, Mr Piety, one more thing,' she said.

I was Mr Piety now, I noticed, not Governor, already removed from my position.

'What's that, then?'

'Our mutual superior in Dannsburg sends you his respects. He asked me to assure you that I will continue the tradition of the governors of Ellinburg of working in partnership with the Pious Men.'

Schulz was one of Vogel's in truth, then, not just some lackey of the governing council. Not a full Queen's Man, I was sure, or she would have been needed in the capital the same as I was, but she had certainly risen high enough in the organisation to know how things worked. Vogel was assuring me that it was safe to take Bloody Anne away from the business, I understood that, and that meant he wanted her in Dannsburg every bit as much as I did.

Which meant he knew that she existed and who she was, what her skills were and why I would want her with me. Fat Luka had worked for the Queen's Men long before he worked for me, I had learned, since before the war, in fact, and who knew what information he and Rosie between them still passed to the capital.

Everyone is watched by someone.

Ailsa had told me that, once, and I knew it was true.

'That's good of you,' I made myself say. 'My thanks.'

'I assure you, Mr Piety,' she said, 'I'm only following orders.'

Aye, well, weren't we all?

*

That done, I paid a call on my brother to say farewell before we had to leave for Dannsburg. The maid I had hired for Hanne showed me into the parlour where her mistress was resting, the babe asleep in a crib beside her chair. Hanne looked tired, I thought, but then, new mothers usually did. There was a greyness to her face, though, and something in her once-smiling eyes that spoke of a quiet despair.

We exchanged pleasantries for a moment, but I barely knew the woman and she was plainly terrified of me. A year ago she had been my undercook at the house off Trader's Row, after all. That was before my brother had accidentally got her pregnant in a meaningless fuck over the kitchen table while I was hosting a dinner party for Governor Hauer and a number of factory owners and pointless minor aristocrats who I didn't know. Jochan had astonished me by marrying her, and now she was my sister-by-law, but I could see that we both knew where Jochan's heart truly lay.

'You'll be wanting your brother, I'm sure, Mr Piety,' she said after a moment. 'He's in his study with his . . . friend. You'll forgive me if I don't get up, but I don't like to leave her, as it were.'

She turned a doting smile on her baby, and the bleakness left her face for a moment. She loved the child, that was plain to see, and I supposed that

was good even if nothing else about their marriage was.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘Don’t trouble yourself, I know the way.’

Truth be told, I was glad to be free of the formalities of society life, if only for a little while, and not having to be escorted by a footman felt like a blessing. I left her there in the parlour and crossed the hall to the opposite door.

I knocked, and heard a muffled and clearly drunken response from within.

Jochan’s study was a drinking room, as might be expected. It was a long time since my brother had studied anything but the bottom of a bottle. There was a desk in there but it looked seldom used, and the room stank of brandy.

Cutter was with him, as I had expected. They were seated together on a padded settle like the lovers they were. I felt for Hanne in that moment, but it was what it was and none of my business, in Our Lady’s eyes.

‘Brother,’ I said. ‘Cutter.’

‘Hello, Tomas,’ he said. ‘Come in, have a drink with us.’

Jochan was slurring slightly, and he showed me a drunken grin as he spoke.

Cutter just lowered his gaze and turned his face away. He was hideously scarred from the battle with the Skanian magician the previous winter, one of his eyes gone and covered by a black leather patch. That whole side of his face was a mass of knotted, burned scar tissue where the beard didn’t grow any more. It was only thanks to Billy and Mina’s cunning and the later crude ministrations of Doc Cordin that he lived at all.

‘Boss,’ Cutter said quietly.

‘Aye,’ I said, for want of anything better, and looked at my brother.

‘Jochan, I just wanted to let you know I’m going away for a while, and I’m taking Bloody Anne and Fat Luka with me. Our aunt’s in charge until Anne gets back.’

Of course Anne had chosen to come too. I had never really been in any doubt about that.

‘Fuck a nun, Tomas,’ Jochan said, ‘I know you don’t fucking trust me. Just say it and have done with it.’

‘It’s not that,’ I said. ‘I *do* trust you, Jochan. I trust you with my heart, and with the past. You know that, or at least I hope you do. You’re a

warrior, but you're not a leader. You're just not, and that's all there is to it. Anne is, and so is Enaid.'

Jochan turned and spat into the fireplace, and Cutter gave me a look I wasn't sure I knew how to read.

'I'm leaving tomorrow,' I said. 'Please, if you do nothing else, support Aunt Enaid. When we were little she took us in when we needed her the most, Jochan. She fucking raised us. Support her now.'

Jochan looked at me for a long moment, and then the tears came. He was in my arms a moment later, sobbing incoherently as the battle shock and childhood trauma overcame him once more. I loved my brother, in my way, but there was no way I was putting him in charge of anything. There was one thing he could do for me, though.

An important thing.

'I'll want reports,' I whispered into his ear. 'Not the sort Enaid will send Anne. Honest ones, you understand? I want the truth of these streets, this city.'

Jochan clapped me on the back like any brother might have done, and he gave me a short nod.

'Aye,' he whispered back, and that was done.

*

We were on the road the following day, Bloody Anne and me, Fat Luka and Rosie and Billy the Boy, and we had Oliver and Emil along as extra muscle. I had wanted to bring Black Billy and Simple Sam instead, but Enaid needed them in the Stink and there was nothing to be done about that. The peace with the Northern Sons wasn't so secure that I could take too much of Anne's strength out of the city, and I had to accept it. They weren't my crew any more, and I knew I had to accept that as well.

Billy was sullen about leaving Mina behind, but the lad stayed true to his word and hadn't told her why we were leaving Ellinburg nor where we were going. I knew I could trust him with the things that mattered, young as he was. Besides, we were riding too hard for him to have spare energy to waste on complaints.

He didn't look well, and I didn't think it was just on account of the shit weather and the constant riding. His face still looked too tight, pinched and drawn beneath overly bright eyes. Mina had much the same look about her these days. The pair of them had done since the day of the second battle of

the Stink, when they did whatever they had done to that Skanian magician to . . . how had Billy put it? Steal his strength, that was it.

We feasted on that last one before we pulled him apart.

Billy had told me that, and the thought still didn't sit well in my mind. Truth be told, it made me shudder to think of it. It reminded me of the old sailors' tales I had heard, of distant lands and cannibals. To my mind it's not right to feast on another man, but what would I know? I'm no more a cunning man than I am a king, and I know little of such matters. Shortly after that, Billy had been wrong about something for the first time in my memory too, and I wasn't sure those things were unconnected. I pushed it away for another day, pushed it into the broken strongbox in the back of my mind with all the other things I didn't want to think about. I concentrated on the plodding rhythm of my horse, and on the road ahead of me.

There were heavy rains most of the way to Dannsburg. The endless fields to either side of us were waterlogged, the road a deeply rutted quagmire beneath our horses' hooves. We'd brought no baggage with us other than what we could carry for the journey, but I had brought a very great deal of money. As far as I was concerned, we could simply buy whatever we needed once we reached the capital. Speed was the important thing, and I hadn't wanted to be held to the pace of a wagon. Looking at the state of the road I was glad of that, however wet I was.

Even so, what with the constant rain and Luka and Billy's inexperienced horsemanship, the journey took us nine days all told. When we finally crested the last hill and saw the walls and banners of Dannsburg ahead of us in the grey distance, I thought Fat Luka might weep with relief. He really wasn't built for long periods in the saddle, it had to be said.

Dannsburg itself seemed much as I remembered it. The hundreds of royal banners flew all across the city, their bright red hanging dark and wet in the rain. I had expected to see them raised at half-staff as a sign of respect for our late queen, but it appeared not.

The heavily armoured City Guard who manned the gates were brusque and efficient as they worked the line of folk waiting to pass through the walls, but there were no black sashes of mourning over their red surcoats where I had thought to see them.

'What's the lay of things in the city?' I asked a guard captain as he rode past.

He gave me a strange look.

‘Well enough,’ he said, and turned away to make an end of it.

I was wet and filthy and I didn’t look like a lord that day, nor a city governor neither. I looked and sounded like the commoner I was, and the likes of me didn’t hold conversations with guard captains. Not in Dannsburg we didn’t, anyway. The relentless rain showed no mercy, soaking through my already sodden cloak and coat. I had almost forgotten what it felt like to be dry.

I paid the gate tax for our party without complaint. I didn’t want to arouse the notice that showing the Queen’s Warrant would have entailed, not just to save a few coins that I could easily afford.

You should use it sparingly, Ailsa had told me, and I knew she’d had the right of that.

We were admitted at last, and we rode through the gatehouse tunnel under the massive city wall and into Dannsburg itself. I glanced up as I rode, and I was dismayed by what I saw. The gate was in poor repair, to speak lightly of it, and the city walls themselves didn’t look much better. I spotted cracks in the masonry in a number of places, and patches of crumbling mortar. That didn’t bode well for how the governing council had been prioritising public spending since the war ended.

Bloody Anne was looking around herself with interest, having never seen the capital before. The rest of them had been there with me the previous year, save for Rosie, but I had a feeling she might have been Dannsburg born. She looked bored, if anything.

The wide cobbled street was glistening wet in the rain but every bit as busy as I remembered it, a bustle of carts and wagons and folk afoot. Trade and commerce don’t stop for a bit of rain, not if folk want to eat, they don’t, but I had thought the death of a queen might at least slow them some.

‘It’s busy,’ I thought aloud. ‘I had thought perhaps—’

‘No,’ Rosie cut me off.

I turned and glanced at her, and I caught the flinty look in her eyes.

Where she might have been, on the surface at least, but she had the eyes of a killer.

The streets were teeming with people. The City Guard were everywhere, clothed in their casual brutality, and save for the weather, nothing seemed to have changed from how I remembered it.

In Our Lady’s name, I thought, *they don’t know. It’s been what now – three, maybe four weeks? – since the queen died, and they don’t know. None*

of them do.

I wondered how that could possibly be, until the slow, steady rhythm of my horse's hooves on the cobbled street lulled me to the understanding of it. They didn't know because Lord Vogel didn't *want* them to know, and in Dannsburg Lord Vogel's will was law.

'No, of course not,' I said at last, and Rosie nodded. 'Let's not talk about it in public.'

That could have been a fuck-up and no mistake.

A Queen's Man, a *real* Queen's Man, would have known at once, of course. Again I felt like I was groping my way blindfolded down a corridor full of deadfalls when I should have known where each and every trap lay. I was woefully unprepared for this world Ailsa had thrown me into, and I didn't care for it.

'Where are we going, boss?' Fat Luka asked, interrupting my thoughts.

If ever a man had looked so miserable in a saddle or so keen to be out of one then I've never seen it. I thought briefly of Ailsa's house, and felt a fool for doing so.

'An inn,' I said. 'You remember the Bountiful Harvest?'

'Where we had that sit-down with Grachyev last year? Aye.'

I nodded, and turned my horse that way. I've a good memory for city streets, if I say so myself.

'Who's Grachyev?' Anne asked.

I nudged my horse closer to hers so we could speak quietly and not be overheard. In Dannsburg someone is always listening; I remembered that well enough.

'A businessman,' I said. 'He's a big man here, the boss of the only crew in the city, and he owns that inn. His crew's a front for the family, not that he knows it. We'll get rooms there.'

Anne raised an eyebrow at that, but said no more.

We left our horses with the inn's stablehands and carried our saddlebags inside. The Bountiful Harvest was in a wealthy part of the city, and it was very respectable and very expensive. The innkeeper took one look at us, sodden and travel-stained and dirty as we were, and he shook his head.

'We're full,' he said, although the half-empty stables had told me they obviously weren't.

'My name is Tomas Piety,' I told him. 'From Ellinburg. I am a personal friend of Mr Grachyev.'

I wasn't, of course. I had only met the man once, and that briefly, but Grachyev's second was Iagin and Iagin was a Queen's Man. If he knew his job, then as soon as the summons was sent, my name would have been left with every inn their crew owned in Dannsburg, which was virtually every inn the city had.

The innkeeper's face turned the colour of spoilt milk, and I saw that Iagin knew his job very well indeed.

'Of course, Mr Piety,' he flustered. 'Forgive me, I didn't know you. Rooms and meals and hot baths for Mr Grachyev's friends, of course, at once.'

I nodded and put ten gold crowns down on the counter in front of him one after the other, watching his eyes widen when he saw them. Those coins would pay for our board and lodging for a year or more, and much besides. Also, of course, they would pay for the innkeeper's silence, and, I hoped, his loyalty.

They say the Queen's Warrant opens all doors, and I'm sure that's true. In my experience though, money and respect and influence do it just as well, and more importantly, they do it *quieter*.

Gold, power, influence.

Those are the levers that move the world.

Chapter 4

Once I had eaten and shaved and taken a much-needed bath, I opened my saddlebags and changed into clothes that were somewhat dryer than the ones I had taken off, if not by much. Luka had the room next to mine, and once I was dressed and had the Weeping Women once again buckled around my waist, I banged on his door. The weight of the twin blades Remorse and Mercy hanging heavy in their scabbards at my hips was reassuring.

‘We’re going out,’ I called.

I heard Luka groan.

‘Aye, boss,’ he said, at last.

I had to present myself at the house of law immediately, I knew that, and I wanted Luka with me. His saddle sores would just have to suffer a little longer. I left the others to rest, and met Luka in the common room of the inn.

‘Is there any chance we could hire a carriage?’ he asked.

I looked at the way he was walking, and I felt a rare moment of pity.

‘Aye, I suppose so,’ I said.

Fat men and riding don’t mix for any length of time, especially not in the wet, and with the size of him I thought his poor horse would be as glad of the rest as he was.

I had the innkeeper arrange a carriage for us, and by that point I was glad to be out of the saddle and the rain myself. We sat in relative comfort as the carriage took us across the city to the forbidding stone bulk of the house of law.

It was still raining, and the huge royal banners hung sodden and lifeless from the heights. I presented myself to the guards on the gate. They were stone-faced, unwelcoming. I thought these ones might at least have a rough idea that *something* had happened. There must have been a great deal of comings and goings at the house of law over the last few weeks, and if they didn’t know exactly why, then at least they couldn’t have missed that.

The time for subtle and silent was past.

‘My name is Tomas Piety,’ I told them. ‘I’m expected.’

They snapped to attention, and admitted Fat Luka and me into the echoing stone hall. I was still wearing the Weeping Women, I realised, but it seemed that the prohibition against carrying weapons in the house of law didn't extend to the Queen's Men themselves.

Of course it didn't. We were above the law, that was the whole point.

A liveried attendant came hurrying out of an antechamber and led us deeper into the building. I had only been there once before, to a reception Lord Vogel had hosted the previous summer. He'd had a man murdered after dinner, I remembered.

Lord Lan Andronikov, that had been his name. Ailsa had forced his own wife to inform on him, for all that the woman was supposedly her friend. She had locked poor Lady Lan Andronikov in a room and withheld the poppy pipe she was hopelessly dependant on, until her own miserable addiction broke her. It was fair to say that the house of law held no happy memories for me, or in all likelihood for anyone else either.

The attendant led us up a narrow stair and into a long hall lined with doors. Some were open, and as we passed I could see folk bent over desks in what were obviously offices of some sort, their quills scratching against paper as letters were written and entries recorded in ledgers. From the end of the corridor I could hear raised voices.

That door was open too, and I saw that Iagin was in there shouting at three men and a woman who I didn't know. He was giving them a bollocking that any sergeant would have been proud of, and I don't think I would have wanted to be on the receiving end of it.

Iagin himself looked much as I remembered him from the sit-down with Grachyev, a man somewhere close to his sixtieth year, with thinning grey hair and a heavy white moustache that all but covered his mouth. The anger was plain to see on his face, and I wasn't sorry when the attendant kept walking and led us around a corner to a closed door at the end of the corridor.

There he stopped and tapped lightly on the heavy oak. I heard a muffled voice from inside, then the door was open and we were being ushered in.

The office was large but plainly furnished, the desk less impressive than my own had been in the governor's hall back in Ellinburg. That didn't matter. The only thing in that room that mattered was the man who sat behind the desk, upright in his chair in a plain black coat. He was tall and

lean and white-haired, and at that moment quite possibly the most powerful man in the country.

He was certainly the most feared.

‘Lord Vogel,’ I said, and offered him a stiff bow.

Luka did the same beside me, but said nothing. Vogel regarded us in silence for a moment.

‘Tomas,’ he said. ‘Good. You, close the door.’

Luka did as he was told and Vogel waved us into the two chairs across the desk from him. They were plainly made too, and not designed for comfort. Nothing in that room was.

The silence stretched until I felt the need to fill it.

‘I apologise for the delay, Provost Marshal,’ I said. ‘The weather on the road—’

‘Quite,’ Vogel interrupted. ‘You did well, in Ellinburg. Ailsa was right about you.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ I said.

I’m not one to go grovelling to those who think themselves above me, but this was different. There was something about Lord Vogel, something made of razors and hate that had me feeling cold all the way down to my boots. No sane man would ever cross Dieter Vogel, or show him anything but the greatest of respect. The devil himself, I’d thought him once, and I saw nothing in his soulless eyes to make me change my mind on that now that I worked for him.

‘Tell me what you saw, when you arrived in the city,’ he said.

‘Nothing out of the way,’ I said. ‘I take it the news isn’t widely known.’

‘Indeed not,’ he said. ‘Tell me why not.’

He was always testing, was Vogel, probing with his questions as though he were trying to find the limits of my intellect. I didn’t care for it, but he was my boss so that was just the lay of things and nothing to be done about it.

‘If the people don’t know then it’s because you don’t want them to know,’ I said.

I had given this a great deal of thought while I was in my bath at the Bountiful Harvest, and I thought I had worked my way around to the answer.

‘Obviously. Go on.’

‘You’re worried about the succession,’ I said. ‘The Princess Crown Royal is the heir, but she’s too young to rule in her own name so you need a regent. The Prince Consort is the obvious choice, but it can’t be that simple or it’d be done by now. Someone killed the queen and you don’t know who, so the whole royal household is under suspicion. Including him.’

The ghost of a smile touched Vogel’s thin lips.

‘Very good,’ he said. ‘The whole royal household is, as you say, very much under suspicion. I have a good number of them here now, being questioned. Not the prince, of course, that would be going too far. For the moment, anyway.’

‘He must know his own wife is dead,’ I said.

‘Of course he does. He, the princess and their immediate body servants are sequestered within the palace. The queen is officially indisposed with illness, as are her family. Court functions continue to run surprisingly well without them, thanks to your lady wife. She’s very good at this sort of thing, you know.’

‘Aye, that she is,’ I said.

So the late queen’s husband and the heir to the throne were effectively under house arrest, then, while Ailsa ran court society for them. Most of their servants were being tortured right now somewhere in the depths of this very building, that was what he was telling me.

Vogel was in a cold fury, I realised, and anyone and everyone was under suspicion.

I was back in Dannsburg and no mistake.

*

Thanks be to Our Lady, my interview with Lord Vogel didn’t last long. He’d said his piece, it seemed, and a few moments later Iagin entered the room and took me and Luka away with him.

Iagin and me hadn’t exactly got on the last time we’d met, but that had been mostly down to brandy and us not really trusting each other. Now that we could both be sure we were on the same side I found him genial enough.

‘The Old Man’s chewing the fucking walls,’ he told me as he led Luka and me down a back stair. ‘The whole fucking house of law has been in uproar for weeks. I’m glad you’re here, Tomas. Ailsa’s busy holding society together at the palace, but there’s only so long we can pretend the queen’s got the shits or whatever bollocks it’s supposed to be. I’ve been running the

whole fucking circus for weeks and I could use some help. That tit Grachyev's starting to wonder where I am.'

I snorted laughter. This was a whole new side of Iagin that I hadn't seen before. Far from the snake in man's clothes that I remembered from last year, he sounded like a comrade now, honest and blunt in the way of soldiers. I thought that was a good thing. This was Dannsburg, where no one trusted anyone, and I needed all the friends I could get.

'There must be more than fucking three of us,' I said.

'Aye, there are, but the road from Drathburg is flooded with the rains, and Varnburg's a fucking long way away,' he said. 'It might be a while before the others come in.'

'There's no one else operating in the capital?'

'Just Ailsa and me and Ilse, and she's busy. Come on, I'll introduce you.'

'Is she one of us?' I asked him.

'She carries the warrant, if that's what you mean, but she seldom leaves the house of law,' he said. 'Ilse has . . . particular talents, you might say, the sort that are best put to use at home. Down in the dark, where no one can hear.'

'I see,' I said, a cold feeling of unease starting to build in my gut.

We reached the bottom of the stair and he pushed open a door and led us down a corridor, then through another door onto a second stair that took us below ground level. The air was stale with the smoke of lamps, and I could smell something that reminded me of the surgeons' tents back at Abington. A wooden step creaked under Luka's heavy tread, but other than that all was silence.

At the next landing there were two bored-looking guards sitting at a table playing dice by lamplight. They stood up sharp enough when they saw Iagin, though.

'As you were,' he growled. 'This is Tomas and Luka. They're with the family.'

'Sir,' one of the guards said, and they gave us respectful nods.

The Queen's Men weren't like the army, I had to remind myself. They seemed very informal, to me, all first-name terms, and they didn't go in for saluting any more than they did for uniforms or ranks.

'We're going below,' Iagin said. 'Give me the pot.'

The other guard reached up to a wooden shelf and handed Iagin a small glass jar filled with something white and waxy-looking. He dipped a finger into the stuff and smeared it liberally into his thick moustache, then held it out to me.

‘Here,’ he said. ‘Rub some of this under your nose, both of you.’

I lifted the pot and felt my eyes stinging at the smell that came off it, harsh and acrid.

‘The fuck is this?’

‘Lamp oil and wax with mineral salts or some shit in it, I don’t know,’ Iagin said. ‘Trust me, you’ll be glad of it.’

‘I was at Abington,’ I said. ‘I’ve smelled suffering before.’

He fixed me with a look.

‘Not like this, you fucking haven’t.’

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Chapter 5

I had to allow that Iagin was right about that.

The next level down was horrific, even with the ointment burning under my nose to mask the worst of the smell. The narrow stone corridor was lit by lamps and lined with cells, their iron bars letting us see well enough what each contained.

There were folk with missing limbs, with weeping burns or crushed feet, and maggots swarming over the holes in their rotting bodies. I heard Fat Luka gag behind me. Something wrapped in seeping grey rags, and I honestly couldn't have said whether it had been a man or a woman before it had been dragged down there, was screaming as it beat its head against the stone wall of its cell.

'In Our Lady's name,' I whispered.

'Our Lady don't come down here, not if we can help it,' Iagin said. 'We don't want them dying before they've talked.'

'Aye, well,' I said, and found I had no more words to say.

I followed Iagin in uneasy silence, and Luka followed me. I tried to shut out the noise of the screams, the whimpers, the pleading, but it was no good.

This was Hell.

This was the true face of the house of law.

In a room at the end of the corridor, presiding over her domain like the very devil herself, was Ilse. She wasn't some hideous old harridan drenched in blood with snakes in her hair, and she wasn't a leather-clad she-devil from one of the big illustrated books the temple priests don't want folk looking at, either.

She was just a woman with some fifty years to her, pleasant of face and slightly plump, wearing a woollen kirtle under her stained apron. She could have been a baker or a farmer, a cook or a nun. She could have been anyone, just some woman you passed in the market square and never gave a second thought to, but the hooked knife in her hand was dripping blood.

The man on the table in front of her was shrieking.

'Ilse,' Iagin said. 'This is Tomas Piety, from Ellinburg.'

She looked up and gave me a motherly smile, and I think that was the very worst of it. I will never forget that smile. There are two bones in a man's forearm, and Ilse had almost removed one of them from the fellow in front of her. The man's arm had been filleted like a fish, and the bones glinted reddish-white among the neatly flensed meat. No one should be able to smile like your ma while they did that, but it seemed that Ilse could.

'Nice to meet you, Tomas,' she said, and the knife in her hand twisted and gristle split with a wet pop. 'Ah, that's got it.'

The man's head hit the table with a thump as she lifted the bone clear, and I prayed to Our Lady that he had finally passed out.

'What the fuck are you doing?' I whispered.

'Asking questions,' she said, as though it was the most natural thing in the world. 'This is the second houseman of the royal privy chamber. He emptied Her Majesty's chamber pots, in other words. He had access to her bedroom and to her most intimate things. I'm sure he knows something.'

'You've cut a fucking bone out of his arm.'

'Yes, well, he hasn't been very forthcoming so far,' she said.

'No one can answer questions when they can't talk for screaming, for Our Lady's sake!'

'No, of course not,' she said, and she showed me her smile again like she was addressing a foolish child. 'He had ample chance to answer my questions while I was explaining what would happen to him if he didn't. Still, he'll talk in a day or two.'

'If that didn't make him talk then nothing will,' Luka said.

'Oh, nonsense, dear,' Ilse said. 'I'll pack the cavity with night soil and sew it up, and put him back in his cell for a little while. Infection is guaranteed, that way. Once the rot gets into his blood he'll talk, believe me.'

I swallowed. She was going to fill this poor bastard's arm with shit where his bone should be and stitch it up again. My stomach heaved as I thought about it. There was no way he'd live after that, not even if she took his arm off at the shoulder.

'He'll be raving,' I pointed out. 'Delirious.'

'Well, quite,' she said. 'A stubborn enough person can resist almost any pain, but a madman says all *sorts* of things. It's always easier to break their minds than their bodies, Tomas. You remember that.'

Aye, I didn't think I'd ever forget it.

*

I'd had more than enough of the house of law by then, and I was happy to leave it.

The fresh air was like breathing heaven when we finally got outside again. I wiped the worst of the waxy ointment off my top lip and took a deep breath, turning my face up into the falling rain. Beside me, Fat Luka was the colour of old cheese.

'Lady's sake, boss,' he started, but I cut him off.

'Not here,' I said. 'Not now.'

We got into our waiting carriage and let it take us back to the Bountiful Harvest, where the others were waiting for us.

'Been out?' Bloody Anne asked, in a casual way that meant she had something on her mind.

Rosie would have known where I had gone, of course, and she had no doubt told Anne.

'Aye,' I said.

I told the innkeeper to let us into the private dining room, the one where me and Grachyev had had our sit-down the previous year. Those ten crowns I had given him meant I virtually owned the place, for now at least, and I was going to make the most of that. Once we were all inside and the door firmly closed, I took my place at the head of the table and looked at them.

'What's the news, then?' Rosie asked.

'Much what you said,' I told her, 'or rather what you didn't. No one outside the house of law or the palace knows what's happened. The royal family are under house arrest, and half the palace staff are in the cells, and . . . Aye, well. Such are the times we live in.'

'Did you see Mama?' Billy asked.

'No, lad, I didn't,' I said. 'She's at the palace, apparently, doing important work. Truth be told, I don't know when we'll see her.'

The look on Billy's face would have been heartbreaking at any other time, but after what I had seen that day it barely registered. My hands were trying to shake, I realised, and it took all my effort to stop them. That was always the first sign of my battle shock coming out, I knew that. The smell down there, the screams . . . that had been Abington all over again, when the siege broke, and worse beside. I shot Fat Luka a sideways glance, and I could see in his eyes that he felt it too.

Breathe, I thought. Just breathe.

Fat Luka had worked for the Queen's Men a lot longer than I had, although I hadn't known it at the time, but only in Ellinburg. I doubted he had ever seen anything like that before either.

I looked across the table and my gaze met Rosie's, hard as nails.

Oh, she knew all right.

'I met Ilse,' I said to her.

'Nice for you.'

'No, it fucking wasn't.'

Rosie just shrugged. She knew who I meant, I was sure of it. Rosie was Dannsburg born and deeper in the Queen's Men than I had given her credit for, I would have bet gold on it right then.

I wondered if Bloody Anne truly understood what kind of woman she had fallen in love with, and the sort of people she worked for.

'What do you mean, the royal family are under house arrest?' Anne asked. 'He can't do that, can he?'

I showed her a thin smile.

No, she had no fucking idea, had she?

Chapter 6

Two days later Ailsa came to see me.

That surprised me, but I supposed it was only natural that she had heard I was back in the city. All the Queen's Men were supposedly equal under Lord Vogel, but I wasn't fooling myself on that score. In Dannsburg Ailsa was considerably better connected than I was, and there she had me at a great disadvantage.

I had her shown into the private dining room of the Bountiful Harvest, which I had claimed as my office by then. The innkeeper thought me a friend of Mr Grachyev, but it was Iagin who had given him my name, and me who had given him far too much gold. He might not know exactly who I was but he knew well enough that I was *someone*, and in Dannsburg that was good even if nothing else was.

'Hello, Tomas,' she said.

I raised my eyes from the papers on the table in front of me, and looked at her. She was truly beautiful, I thought, even though I knew paints and powders played a part in that. Paints and powders can make a woman look younger than her years, aye, but they can't change the shape of her face or the expression in her eyes. I looked into Ailsa's eyes then, and I smiled a cold smile.

This was my wife, the woman I had almost loved and perhaps still did. The woman who I had adopted a son with, and who had deserted us both without a second thought the moment Lord Vogel crooked his finger.

'What are you doing here?' I said.

She sat down across the table from me.

'We work together, Tomas,' she said. 'I gave you the warrant myself. Please tell me you aren't harbouring some petty resentment over the interruption of what was nothing more than a sham marriage to begin with.'

I swallowed the truth like bitter medicine.

'Of course not,' I said. 'There was no love between us, I know that, but Billy took it hard. He's young, Ailsa, young for his age, even, and no wonder after Messia. Too young to understand these things.'

I had arranged a tutor for Billy by then, much to his displeasure, so he was away at his studies. I knew how badly he wanted to see Ailsa, but I thought it was probably best that I see how things stood between us before I allowed that to happen.

‘Perhaps he is,’ she said. ‘But then perhaps he was too young to kill a house magus last year too. You let him do that, though, didn’t you? You let him go into battle against Skanian magicians. He wasn’t too young to kill for you, was he?’

She had me there, I had to allow.

‘Aye, well,’ I said. ‘We’re neither of us saints of the temple.’

‘No, we most certainly are not. This business of ours is ill-suited to saints.’

‘So I’ll ask you again, what are you doing here?’

‘You’re to be knighted before too much longer,’ she said. ‘It’s a requirement before you can be formally sworn into the Queen’s Men. Lord Vogel thought you would want to know.’

Just then I couldn’t have cared less about the knighthood. Ilse was a Queen’s Man so she must be a knight too, and to my mind that was no endorsement of the office. Still, I wasn’t going to give Ailsa the satisfaction of hearing me say so.

‘You run his errands now, do you?’ I said instead. ‘I’d thought you more than a simple messenger girl.’

Ailsa sighed, and looked down at her hands.

‘Is it too much for you to believe that I simply wanted to see you?’

‘Aye,’ I said, and all the bitterness of the past months rose up like vomit in the back of my throat. ‘It fucking well is.’

‘Yes, well,’ Ailsa said, and fell silent.

‘How can I be knighted, anyway?’ I asked, wanting to talk about almost anything other than her insulting pretence of having feelings. ‘Who’s going to do it, for one thing? We’ve no queen, and the princess is both a child and still under house arrest. We’ve no regent either, and no sign of one being announced. No one is actually running the fucking country!’

‘Don’t be silly, of course they are,’ Ailsa said. ‘That’s what the governing council are for, to run things day to day. Anyway, the situation will soon change, I think. I have been talking at length with one of the late queen’s ladies-in-waiting, a Lady Lan Delanov. Since the terrible things that

have happened in the palace, she has come to think of me as her closest friend and confidante.'

I looked at her, at the lioness seated across the table from me, and I took her meaning.

'This is the Lan Andronikov woman all over again, isn't it?' I said. 'Is this one a poppy addict as well?'

'No,' Ailsa said. 'She is the youngest of the queen's ladies and also the lowest-placed in the aristocracy, and she has no friends among the others. Quite the opposite, in fact – she is too young and far too pretty for their liking, and not rich enough or sufficiently well bred to soften that blow. A shoulder to cry on and a sympathetic ear were all she needed from me.'

'All she needed for you to get her to incriminate herself, you mean.'

'I've heard enough to make me suspicious, yes,' Ailsa said. 'Ilse will get the rest for us, I have no doubt. Once we have the facts, the Prince Consort and the Princess Crown Royal will either be proven innocent, or . . . not. Either way, we will have our answers and can begin to restore order to the palace.'

This was what she was really here to say, I knew, not all that horseshit about a knighthood that I didn't even want.

'And if they're *not* innocent, then what? The princess is the only fucking heir.'

'The only *direct* heir,' Ailsa corrected me. 'Royal families tend to be large and complicated and I won't bore you with the details, but suffice to say there is a clear next in line. The Grand Duke of Varnburg, the queen's cousin. He is a . . . difficult man, but the succession will be assured either way.'

'Well, that's good,' was the only thing I could say.

Ailsa was going to feed this poor young lady who thought her a friend to that horror under the house of law, that's what she was telling me. I didn't really want to think about that.

'Yes, it is,' Ailsa said. 'Anyway, the point is, there's to be a closed trial in four days' time to hear her confession. The Lord Chief Judiciar will preside, of course, but we both have to be there. I thought you'd want to know, so you had time to get yourself some decent clothes made. Wear something formal.'

'If she confesses,' I said.

Ailsa's smile was pitiless.

*

Of course she confessed.

I had been a fool to think she might not. Whether she was actually guilty was perhaps another matter, but I supposed that by then it was of no consequence one way or the other.

Those were the times we lived in.

Four days later I was seated in a small but formal courtroom in the house of law, wearing a new black coat with a stiff brocade collar over a doublet of dark-red silk. Even my boots were new, all of it made in great haste and therefore at enormous expense. Fat Luka was seated at my right hand in his own freshly made finery, fidgeting uncomfortably while we waited. It was very early in the morning, and I didn't think he was quite awake yet.

I could see Ailsa on the other side of the half-empty room. She was seated next to an older man who I didn't know, and I found myself intensely interested in finding out who he was. I had left the rest of my crew at the Bountiful Harvest, seeing no need for them to sit through this obvious mummary.

Lord Vogel was presiding, as Ailsa had said, in his official role as the Lord Chief Judiciar. The trial was closed, by which they meant secret, the queen's death still not being public knowledge. That being the case, I could only assume that most of the people in the room were connected to the Queen's Men in some way, although there were apparently also a number of higher-ranking members of the governing council there who I thought probably weren't. At the very least, everyone in the room had to be privy to the knowledge of the queen's death, so that meant they were important in some way, and more to the point, it meant they were trusted to keep the secret. As the small room was half empty I surmised that Lord Vogel trusted very few people, which didn't surprise me at all. Iagin was there as well, but he seemed to be alone. Ilse hadn't come, and I found I was glad about that. I didn't want to see Ilse again, not if I could avoid it.

At the front of the courtroom was a small desk and an ornate oak throne on a raised dais, with two armoured guards waiting behind it. A clerk sat at the desk, a quill already in his hand and an open book on the surface in front of him. There was a bottle of ink and jar of sand set neatly to one side. In the middle of the room between the throne and the rows of seats we occupied was a plain wooden chair.

A liveried attendant stepped into the space between the dais and the empty chair, and she thumped the floor with the end of the long staff she carried.

‘Come to order,’ she said, her voice loud in the already silent room. ‘All rise for the Lord Chief Judiciar.’

We stood, and a door behind the dais opened.

Lord Vogel strode into the room. He wore a long black robe, and a curious little black hat that rested on his white hair. The attendant’s staff struck the floor again, and everyone bowed while Vogel took his seat on his throne of office.

‘Be seated,’ he said, his voice quiet but carrying well in the enclosed space.

I sat with the others, and my eyes found Ailsa’s across the room. Her face was expressionless, the face of the lioness, and I made myself keep mine the same way. I wasn’t sure exactly what to expect here, but I had a suspicion it wasn’t going to be pleasant.

I was right about that.

Chapter 7

‘Bring in the accused,’ Lord Vogel ordered.

Ailsa had said that the Lady Lan Delanov was young and pretty, but neither of those things were evident now. The woman that was led into the court between two guards was bent like a crone, her bare, scabbed feet shuffling painfully on the smooth boards. She wore a rough grey shift, and a stained bandage was wrapped around the shortened stump of her left hand.

She had no eyelids.

‘In Our Lady’s name,’ Fat Luka whispered beside me, and I could only agree with him about that.

Ilse had done the gods only knew what to her hand and taken her eyelids. Lady Lan Delanov bore the marks of harsh questioning indeed. Very harsh. I wondered how brightly lit her cell had been kept, and how many days it had been since the poor woman last slept.

It’s always easier to break their minds than their bodies, Tomas.

The guards led her to the chair and helped her to sit, and then stepped away and took up position against the walls.

I swallowed sour spit and looked away.

Lord Vogel’s face was completely impassive, and his soulless gaze held no hint of emotion when he spoke.

‘Introduce yourself to the court.’

The woman’s voice was cracked and faint, but audible in the utter silence of the courtroom.

‘The Lady Olena Lan Delanov, my Lord Chief Judiciar. Lady-in-Waiting to Her Majesty the Queen.’

The clerk’s pen scratched across the page as he recorded every word that was spoken. He kept his eyes down on his book, I noticed, and avoided looking at Lady Lan Delanov.

‘Do you swear upon the names of the almighty gods of the temple to speak only the truth, and the whole truth, and to hold nothing back?’

‘I do so swear.’

She’s been coached in every word, I thought, but by then I supposed it no longer mattered. Whether or not she was truly guilty or just so broken by

torture that she would have said anything to make it stop no longer mattered. The outcome of this trial was a foregone conclusion. There could only be one reason we were there at all.

‘Are you, Lady Lan Delanov, complicit in the murder of Her Majesty the Queen?’

‘I am, my lord.’

I heard someone gasp, and a mutter of condemnation from someone else.

‘Traitor,’ someone whispered.

‘Silence!’ barked the attendant with the staff.

Vogel continued as though she had not spoken.

‘Did you, Lady Lan Delanov, Lady-in-Waiting to Her Majesty, act alone in this grievous and shameful matter of assassination and regicide? Did you with your own hand murder our noble queen?’

‘No, my lord.’

Here it comes, I thought.

‘And will you now name for the court those accomplices with whom you worked? Will you name those who opened the gates and unlocked the doors, and those who were paid to look the other way?’

‘I will, my lord.’

Here come the death warrants.

She named fifteen people in all.

Six of the Palace Guard, three footmen, four maids, the Prince Consort’s personal secretary, and the head of the royal bodyguard. The clerk of the court dutifully recorded the names in his book. Those last two were interesting, I thought, being so much higher placed than the others.

‘And what of the royal family themselves?’ Vogel asked. ‘Were the Prince Consort or the Princess Crown Royal involved in this matter in any way?’

‘Absolutely not, my lord. Their hands are clean.’

And thus so simply was order restored, and the direct line of the succession preserved. This was also, I thought, a fucking good way of getting rid of difficult but important people.

‘And on whose behalf did you act, Lady Lan Delanov? Whose hand held the blade?’

‘I . . . I do not know his name, my lord,’ she said. ‘A foreign man. A northerner.’

‘And from which country did this foreign assassin come?’

Her voice dropped almost to a whisper.

‘From Skania.’

Aye, well, that at least made sense enough. I had known that ridiculous fucking palace would be impossible to defend, and it seemed I had been right about that. All it had taken was an assassin with a big bag of gold, and the brains to work out which of the queen’s household could be moved by coin. I could have done that myself.

‘This court has heard the confession of Lady Lan Delanov, and recorded the names of her accomplices. The matter is now concluded,’ Vogel said.

‘Take her away.’

We do not have executions here, not for traitors, Ailsa had told me once. There are no heroic ends, no ritual or grandeur to it. We make no martyrs and we leave nothing for others to aspire to, nothing to be emulated. They just disappear, and are forgotten.

I didn’t think anyone would ever see Lady Lan Delanov again. Given what Ilse had done to her, perhaps that was almost a kindness.

The woman was led away between the same two guards who had brought her in, and the attendant once more banged on the floor with her staff. We all rose and bowed as Lord Vogel left the room, and that was it.

I thought of the second houseman of the royal privy chamber, his arm filleted and filled with shit to make his blood run black with rot. He must surely have died screaming and raving by now, in the hellish depths of the house of law.

It seemed he had been innocent.

*

By the time we were summoned to Vogel’s office later that morning, Ailsa and Iagin and me, the death warrants had already been signed.

Ailsa received those for the Prince Consort’s personal secretary and the head of the royal bodyguard, as I supposed was only wise. She was the aristocrat who was placed highly within the palace, after all. Iagin, the man of the people, took the warrants for the footmen and the maids, and I, the soldier, got the six guardsmen. There was always a reason behind Lord Vogel’s actions, even in such a small matter as this. That much was plain to see.

‘Get it done quickly,’ he said, and with that we were dismissed.

I followed Iagin back down the corridor to his office and cleared my throat.

‘You want something, Tomas?’ he asked.

‘Can I have a word?’

He nodded and waved me in.

‘You ain’t done this before, have you?’ he said, as I closed the door behind me.

‘Not exactly this, no,’ I had to admit. ‘What’s the form of it?’

‘They need to die. You make them dead. It’s not complicated.’

‘We don’t have to arrest them first?’

He snorted and spat into the cold fireplace.

‘What the fuck for? Once that paper’s signed they’re dead folk walking. You stop them walking, that’s all that matters now. Use who you like, that’s why you’ve got people. Just try not to make a big fucking fuss about it. Nice and quiet, that’s how the Old Man likes things done.’

I thought about Messia, and about the things we had done there during the sack. That had been a place for knives in the dark, and I couldn’t think this would be any different.

Knife work was Bloody Anne’s bread and beer.

In case you need people killed when we get there, she had said.

Exactly that, Anne.

Exactly that.

Chapter 8

Anne took it better than I had expected, and that was good.

‘I fucking knew it,’ was all she had said when I told her, and I’d never had any doubt about that.

We understood each other, Bloody Anne and me. We always had, and she knew how business was done. That night we both wore leather and mail, and we carried our weapons concealed under our cloaks. I had the Queen’s Warrant in my pouch.

‘Go careful, love,’ Rosie said, and she stood on tiptoe to kiss Anne on the scarred corner of her mouth. ‘I’ll be waiting up for you, like always. Meantime I’ll organise the cart like you wanted, Mr Piety, and some boys who can be quiet.’

Anne gave her a nod and the ghost of a smile, and she followed me out of the inn and into the darkness.

‘How do we get into the barracks?’ she asked me as we walked away down the street, leaving the comforting warmth of the Bountiful Harvest behind us.

I patted the pouch at my belt.

‘Easy enough,’ I said. ‘I’ve got the key to every fucking door in Dannelsburg right here. It’s there to be used when needed, Ailsa told me, and this is official business. Our boys are all off duty and together, that’s already been seen to. Rosie had a word with the captain of the watch for me too, and she passed him some silver. They’ve got an extra brandy ration to keep them busy tonight. A very generous one.’

‘Oh, did she now?’ Anne said, and I could feel her eyes on me as we walked.

I still didn’t think Anne had truly grasped the part that Rosie played in my operation, just like she had when she worked for Ailsa before me. Rosie was subtle, when she wanted to be, and very adaptable. When she tied the bawd’s knot on her shoulder and put on her working smile and wiggled her hips in that way she had, she could go virtually anywhere unchallenged.

Licensed whores don’t grow on trees, after all, and few question their comings and goings. Especially not in the officers’ quarters of a guard

barracks they don't, not if they're wise. It was the perfect false face for an agent, but I didn't think Anne saw it for quite as false as it was.

I knew all too well how that felt.

'Can I say something?' I asked her after a moment.

'What's that?'

'Rosie,' I started, picking my words very carefully. 'I know she's your woman, Anne, and I respect that, but you need to remember that isn't all she is.'

'I know that,' Anne growled. 'Soldier I may be, but I'm not some shithead man who thinks he can own his woman. She's her own person.'

'She works for the family,' I said, keeping my voice very low. Dannsburg was full of eyes and ears, and it wouldn't be wise to name the Queen's Men in public. 'She did that for a long time before she met you, and if the dice ever fall bad I wouldn't like to say which she'd put first.'

'She isn't Ailsa,' Anne said. 'I know she chose her work over you, Tomas, and for what it's worth I think that's made you bitter. Doesn't mean my Rosie would do the same.'

'No, it doesn't,' I said. 'But it doesn't mean that she wouldn't, either. You keep that in mind, Bloody Anne. That's all I'm asking. I don't want to see you hurt, you understand?'

Anne was silent for the length of the street, then she turned her head and spat into the gutter.

'Aye,' she said. 'I mark you, Tomas Piety.'

We were quiet for a while after that, and I couldn't help but wonder if Bloody Anne had taken my words ill. I hoped not; I hadn't meant them that way. I was only trying to watch out for my friend, but it's a hard thing to bring up with someone as obviously in love as Anne was. Rosie was a good woman to Anne, I had no doubt about that, and she was a good agent to me too. I wished I knew which she valued the most.

I wondered which I did.

*

At last we reached the wide mall that led up to the palace gates, and there we turned off into a side street that served the barracks.

The palace itself was a ridiculous iced cake of a building, with too many windows and banners, and a proliferation of pointless ornamental balconies and colonnades that served no apparent purpose. Beside it, the barracks of the Palace Guard was the sort of solid, ugly slab of stone that made a

soldier feel quite comfortably at home. No wonder it was hidden away on one side of the palace, out of sight from the formal approach. I knew which one I would have felt safer in, but that was beside the point.

The Queen's Men were coming, and no one was safe that night.

Do what your father says or the Queen's Men will come and take you away.

I remembered Ma saying that to frighten me into doing what I was told, when I was very little. A shiver worked its way down my back as I fingered the Queen's Warrant through the leather of my pouch. The Queen's Men were to be feared indeed. The Queen's Men were listeners and spies, and they were licensed, professional murderers who made people disappear.

Aye, I was that now.

And I had work to do.

I pulled the rope beside the great doors of the barracks to ring the bell. A moment later a sliding hatch in the sally port opened to show me a lad's eyes and a portion of his nose, dark with greasy blackheads.

'What d'you want?'

I opened my pouch and took out the Queen's Warrant, and I held it up for him to see. There was no need for words, not with that in my hand.

The key to every door in Dannsburg.

I heard bolts being thrown back, and a moment later the sally port opened to admit us.

The guardsman was even uglier than he had looked through the hatch, his face a riot of livid boils under his ill-fitting helmet. He couldn't have had more than sixteen or seventeen years to him, I thought. The war wasn't so very long ago, and the army was still recruiting hard to fill the huge gaps in its ranks left by the carnage of Abington. A lot of soldiers and guardsmen were young now, probably too green to be of much use if it came to war again.

I didn't want to think what would happen, if it came to war with Skania.

'Sir?' he asked, standing nervously to attention as I stepped into the stone hall with Anne behind me. 'Ma'am? What . . . what do you need?'

'You to shut up,' I said. 'I'm not here, you understand me? You never saw us.'

'Sir,' the lad said, and he had the sense to hold his peace after that.

'There's a cart coming,' I told him. 'Watch for it, and have the carter and his men wait. They're with me.'

The guard saluted and turned back to his hatch, watching the street as though his life depended on it. He probably thought it did, at that.

I led Anne down an echoing stone hall, past two more youthful guardsmen who turned to watch us go by with confused looks on their faces. If I was the commandant of this place I'd have had the pair of them flogged for taking that little interest in strangers in their barracks, but that was a matter for another day. We were in now.

'Where are we going?' Anne whispered.

'Mess hall three,' I said, reciting what Ailsa had told me. 'We've made sure they're all together, I told you that.'

'Fucking *how*?'

'Ailsa arrested the head of the royal bodyguard this afternoon,' I whispered. 'It didn't take her long to get his signature on some special orders. The family help each other out, Anne.'

'Just like back home,' she said.

'Aye, it's just like that.'

It was, as well. From what I had seen, the Queen's Men worked exactly like the underworld gangs of Ellinburg did, and that wasn't lost on me. Each Queen's Man ran his or her own crew like an independent business, but we all answered to Lord Vogel as our overboss in the end and that meant we worked together when we needed to. It wasn't how I had ever expected to find an arm of the crown operating, much less an order of the knighthood, but it was comfortingly familiar for all that. I wondered if that familiarity was part of why I had been chosen in the first place.

That aside, Ailsa had no doubt stuck a red-hot iron into the head of the royal bodyguard until he signed the orders that got my boys the night off and had them assigned a private mess hall all to themselves. Whatever she'd done, it had worked. Just another sweet little reward for their blind eyes and open doors on the night of the assassination, as far as they were concerned.

That was well and good but there were still six of them and two of us, and I hadn't wanted to involve Emil and Oliver in this. No soldier I had ever met stayed sober in the face of free booze, though, so I'd sent Rosie instead with her bawd's knot and a bag of silver and a kiss for the captain of the watch to ensure they would be shitfaced by the time we arrived.

Always cheat, always win.

The captain had told me that once, during the war, and it had been true then and it was true now.

‘Here we are,’ I said, stopping outside a stout wooden door.

Anne reached for the door handle, then paused. ‘Is there a plan, beyond “kill everyone”?’

‘No,’ I said.

She nodded and threw the door open, her crossbow swinging up from under her cloak in one fluid motion.

Inside the mess hall there was a man dancing an unsteady jig on a table to the sound of a flute being played very badly. Anne’s crossbow thumped by my ear, and the man flew backwards off the table with a bolt through his chest. Then I was through the door with the Weeping Women in my hands, and behind me Anne dropped her crossbow and drew her daggers.

I heard her kick the door shut behind us. By then I had crossed to the table and buried Remorse in the back of a man who was slumped face down across the wood with an empty brandy bottle by his hand. He gave a low groan as he died, but that was all. Two more lurched to their feet, swaying with shock and brandy, and Anne took one through the throat with a thrown dagger even as I thrust Mercy into the other’s guts.

A fifth hurled a bottle at Anne’s head and charged at her with a bellow of drunken fury, but she ducked the bottle and slammed him in the face with the back of her mailed forearm as he came on. Glass smashed on the floor, and Anne twisted her hips and rammed her other dagger into his groin. She wrenched it free in a spray of dark blood and threw him to the ground with a grin of savage satisfaction.

The flute player dropped his instrument and looked up at us with panic on his face. He was a lad of maybe sixteen, and he was no guardsman.

Fuck!

‘Where’s the other one?’ I demanded.

There were supposed to be six of them, and this musical prick wasn’t supposed to be there at all. The lad pointed at a door, his hand shaking in sheer terror.

‘Privy,’ he whispered.

I nodded and crossed the room, and booted the privy door open.

The fellow was sitting on the wooden bench with his britches round his ankles, half passed out and half taking a shit. He looked up at me in utter confusion, obviously struggling to focus his eyes.

‘Gimme a fuckin’ minute, pal, I’m nearly done,’ he said, his voice thick with drink.

‘You’re done,’ I said.

I stabbed him where he sat, Mercy going into his guts so hard he finished his shit in a long, stinking rush. He slumped sideways on the bench in a spreading pool of blood.

That was done, then. I left him lying there and went back into the mess hall.

‘Let the bard live,’ I told Anne, but she had already knifed him.

That was how the crown’s justice was done.

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Chapter 9

It all got done that same night.

The cart that Rosie had arranged for me turned up a few minutes after we finished the killing. I dismissed the door guard and let Rosie's quiet boys file past me into the barracks. Ten hard-looking lads with bundles of cloth under their arms walked silently past us, and I turned to watch them go. I wondered who they were and where she had found them, and whether this was another favour I owed Iagin. It didn't matter, I realised. Rosie knew how to get things done in Dannsburg, and that was all that was important.

Anne showed the lads into the mess hall and after a while they started to leave again, dragging wet things wrapped in blankets between them. I thought that somewhere south of the river, in that part of the city where the rich folk didn't go, someone's pigs would be eating well for the next few days. Seven bodies disappeared into the night on that cart, and no one said a fucking word about it.

That was what the Queen's Warrant could do.

By the morning all the death warrants had been filled, and once more me and Ailsa and Iagin were called to Vogel's office in the house of law.

'Have the Prince Consort and Princess Crown Royal released from their apartments,' he said. 'Make sure they understand what has happened, and what must happen next. The queen died suddenly this morning. This afternoon the news of her death is to be made public, and the Prince Consort immediately announced as regent until the princess comes of age. There will be no unrest. See to that.'

We nodded, and assured the Provost Marshal that there would indeed be no unrest. What else could we do?

How the fuck the three of us were supposed to ensure there was no unrest across a city the size of Dannsburg I had no idea, but it seemed that wasn't going to become my problem.

'Iagin will see to the populace,' Ailsa told me as we walked together through the corridors of the house of law. 'This sort of thing is the whole point of Grachyev's organisation.'

I thought about that for a moment, and nodded. Mr Grachyev dealt in taverns and inns, tailors' shops and bath houses and brothels, all the places where folk gathered and gossiped. If word needed to be spread, those were the places to spread it from. That word would be about the Prince Consort's noble character and his exemplary leadership, I had no doubt, and about what a wonderful regent he would make.

That's what I would have done, anyway, and I couldn't think Iagin would go about it any different. A large part of leadership is reassurance and telling people what they need to hear, after all. Even more so, when you're trying to deceive them.

'That's good,' I said.

'Oh, don't look so glum, Tomas,' Ailsa said. 'You did well last night.'

'I murdered six men who'd done nothing to me,' I snapped. 'Seven, including that lad who shouldn't even have been there.'

'No, you didn't,' she said. 'You executed six traitors and you made the realm a safer place by doing so. You did your job.'

'And the lad? Who did he betray?'

Ailsa stopped and looked at me.

'You're a soldier, Tomas. Do you honestly think that no civilians were killed while our cannon were smashing Abington to rubble? Do you think no innocent people died of starvation during the siege, or of plague or the bloody flux? You were there, you know better than that.'

I sighed. She was right, of course she was. I remembered the horrors we had seen when the walls of Abington finally came down and we forced our way onto the streets of the city. I remembered the starving children, the burned and the maimed. Even now, if I close my eyes I can still see the beggars with bodies so twisted by plague they hardly looked human any more. I will never forget Abington, and the things that I saw there, and the things that I did.

Such things happen in war, but that didn't mean I had to like it. That didn't mean it was right.

'Aye, well,' I said. 'Those—'

'Are the times we live in, yes, quite. Enough of that now, Tomas. Lord Vogel's orders are to be obeyed, not questioned. You need to remember that at all times.'

That felt like a warning, to me, and a little bit closer to a threat than I was comfortable with.

Everyone is watched by someone, even me.

Ailsa had told me that herself, what seemed like a long time ago. I was a Queen's Man now and the Queen's Men were above the law, but we most definitely were not above Lord Vogel's justice. I didn't know what would happen to a Queen's Man who crossed him, but I would have bet gold that it was nothing I wanted to find out. From what I had seen of it, Vogel's idea of justice was even harsher than mine.

'You're right,' I said at last.

'Of course I am,' she said. 'Now, I have to go to the palace and smooth the waters with the Prince Consort. Come with me?'

'What for?'

'You should meet him. He's about to become the regent, which makes him king in all but name. For a year or so, anyway, until the princess comes of age. The crown at least should know its most loyal servants, even if nobody else does.'

'Aye, that makes sense.'

I had to allow that it did, for all that I would have preferred to return to the Bountiful Harvest and catch up on some much-needed sleep. That or find a bottle of brandy and drink myself unconscious. After the night we'd had I wasn't sure which I wanted more, but it seemed neither of those things were an option that morning.

Ailsa's carriage was waiting for her outside the house of law, and one of her footmen stood up smartly and opened the door for us when he saw us coming. I vaguely remembered him from the summer I had spent living in her house here the previous year, although I had forgotten his name. I had no doubt that he would remember me too, but he was wise and he gave no sign of it.

'Where to, ma'am?' he asked once we had taken our seats inside.

'The palace,' she said. 'The private gate.'

'Ma'am,' he said, and went to speak to the coachman.

A moment later we were moving, the horses' hooves beating a steady rhythm on the cobbles. It was strange to be there again, seated beside Ailsa in her carriage as though no hard words had ever passed between us. I cleared my throat, searching for something to say.

'It's not far, we'll be there soon,' Ailsa said.

I knew that, obviously. It came to me then that she might be finding the two of us working together as awkward as I was, and that surprised me.

Perhaps the lioness wasn't completely made of stone after all.

*

We approached the palace from a different direction than usual, not coming down the great mall that led to the main entrance but along another street that I didn't know. There was a small gatehouse at the end of it, but there were still eight of the Palace Guard on duty there. They wore heavy plate half-armour under their red surcoats, and they had halberds in their hands and long war swords hanging at their belts. These were proper soldiers, not green boys, hard-faced and watchful. I wondered where *they* had been the night the queen was killed, but of course that was done with now and I didn't think further questions about the matter would have been wise.

Their sergeant came to the carriage, and Ailsa spoke briefly to him, and that was enough. It seemed her face was known, which I supposed made sense given the amount of time she seemed to have been spending in the palace of late.

'This is my husband, Tomas Piety,' she introduced me. 'Treat him as you would me.'

She was still acknowledging me as her husband, then, which was something of a surprise.

'Ma'am,' the sergeant said, and gave me a nod of respect. 'Sir.'

This one obviously understood how things worked, and that was good.

'Never use the main entrance if you can avoid it,' Ailsa advised me, as the carriage rolled through the gates. 'There are too many eyes there, and our comings and goings should be as unremarked as possible.'

'Aye, I know how to sneak about,' I said.

'Not in Dannsburg, you don't,' Ailsa said. 'That guard sergeant is on my payroll, but I know for a fact that at least one of his men is on Lord Vogel's. In Dannsburg *everyone* is watched, Tomas. Even us. Perhaps *especially* us.'

'I heard you the first time,' I said.

Ailsa showed me a cold smile. 'Good,' she said. 'I do believe you're starting to understand how this works.'

I thought I was too, and I wasn't sure that I liked it.

Chapter 10

The Prince Consort, soon to become the reigning Prince Regent, was a tall man in his late middle years. He was balding and weak-chinned, and he sported a huge moustache which did nothing to disguise either of those things.

He received us in a private drawing room in his own personal apartments within the palace, attended only by a steward, three footmen and four of the Palace Guard. Of the Princess Crown Royal there was no sign.

‘Your Highness,’ Ailsa said, as she dropped him a low curtsy. ‘May I present my husband and colleague, Father Tomas Piety.’

I bowed and waited for the prince to speak.

He took a sip from the bowl of tea he held and regarded us over the rim. His hand was trembling slightly, I noticed, and I suspected that more of the tea ended up in his moustache than his mouth.

‘Your colleague in what way, Lady Ailsa?’

‘He too carries the warrant.’

‘I see.’ He glanced at the steward and raised a finger. ‘Go away, all of you.’

The steward and the footmen dutifully left the room. The guards didn’t. It came to me then that they weren’t there to protect him so much as to enforce his house arrest. That meant that they were ours, then, or at least they were Vogel’s.

He waited until the door closed behind the steward before he turned and looked at me for the first time.

‘Are you here to kill me, Father Tomas?’

I glanced at the guardsmen, standing with their backs to the wall of the drawing room. None of them had so much as moved at the suggestion, and I suspected that even if I had been there to stab him, none of them would have tried to stop me.

‘Absolutely not, Highness,’ I assured him. ‘The tragic matter of Her Majesty’s death has been resolved by a court of law, and those responsible for the atrocity have been dealt with. We are here to talk, that’s all.’

‘And what of Colonel Lan Roskov, the head of the royal bodyguard? What of poor Davik, my own personal secretary? Both seem to have disappeared. What of them?’

‘They will be replaced, Highness,’ Ailsa said, and showed him a smile. ‘All in good time. There is urgent business you need to attend to.’

‘I need to attend to mourning my wife,’ he snapped.

‘Of course, Highness,’ she said, ‘but affairs of state must always come before personal considerations, as I know you well understand. This afternoon the queen’s death will be formally announced to the people. She suffered a seizure of the heart at first light today, most sudden and unexpected. You will at once assume the regency until your daughter is of age to take the throne. Is that clear?’

The prince took another sip of tea, and this time his hand shook enough to spill it onto the lapel of his magnificent crimson coat.

‘My daughter, on the throne,’ he whispered.

Perhaps I was mistaken but for a moment I thought he looked truly scared, even more than he had when he thought I was there to stab him.

‘Of course, Highness,’ I said. ‘She is the direct heir, once she reaches her majority.’

‘Of course,’ he repeated, and there was a note of something like despair in his voice just then. ‘Of course she is.’

‘Where is she?’ Ailsa asked. ‘I need to speak to her.’

‘My daughter is indisposed,’ the prince said.

‘Be that as it may, I still need to see her. I, ah, understand such things, shall we say, as one woman to another.’

‘It’s not her cursed moonblood!’ the prince shouted suddenly, the bowl of tea falling from his hand to spill on the priceless Alarian carpet beneath him. ‘She . . . forgive me. Forgive me, Lady Ailsa. Please, forgive me. I am . . . I am under some strain at the moment.’

He slumped back into his chair and put his head in his hands, and he said nothing more.

‘Of course,’ Ailsa murmured. I shot her a look, but she shook her head a fraction to tell me to hold my peace. ‘I believe I remember the way to the princess’ apartments. We will leave you to compose yourself, Highness, but you will be expected upon the royal balcony at sundown. The people need to see you. The full military dress uniform with medals, I think.’

She turned then and swept out of the room, and I followed behind her.

Something here wasn't quite right, to speak lightly of it.

*

I waited in the corridor outside the Princess Crown Royal's personal apartments while Ailsa spoke to her in private, as one woman to another. There were two more of the armed and armoured Palace Guard stationed there as well, and we ignored each other in stoic silence.

The sound of voices floated through the door, but my hearing had been damaged by cannon during the war and I couldn't make out the words. I could hear Ailsa's tone, though, smooth and consoling. The other voice was shrill, edged with fury, and I could only assume that was the princess. I had seen her once before, at a court reception, but only from a distance, and I had never before heard her speak.

Ailsa was saying something, but she was interrupted by a shriek of rage and the sound of shattering glass. There was a moment of silence, then the unmistakable crack of someone being slapped very hard. It all went quiet after that.

A minute later Ailsa came back out into the corridor and motioned for me to follow her, her lips set in a thin, hard line. She didn't speak, and I took the hint and stayed quiet until we were all the way out of the palace and back in her carriage, rolling down the long path to the private gate.

'Odious child,' Ailsa said at last.

She rubbed the palm of her right hand and winced.

'You *hit* the fucking Princess Crown Royal?' I whispered.

'Yes, I did. If someone had done that more often when she was younger we might not be in this mess now.'

I frowned at that. My da had hit me often enough when I was a lad, hit me and worse besides, and all that had done was make me hate him. I don't hold with hitting children, not unless they're armed and they're trying to kill you.

'What mess is that, then?'

Ailsa made an irritated noise in her throat and turned to look out of the window.

'Nothing,' she said. 'Forget I said that.'

That made me frown, but she obviously didn't want to be drawn on the matter.

'The royal balcony, what was that about?' I asked, changing the subject.

‘The Prince Regent needs to be seen by the people, as I told him,’ she said. ‘There is a formal balcony at the front of the palace, overlooking the parade ground. It’s only used for ceremonial occasions, royal namedays and suchlike. Once the announcement of the queen’s death has been made in the streets, the common folk will flock there, to grieve and mourn and more importantly, to be reassured that the reins of the nation are in safe hands. The prince will appear on the balcony and wave and be seen in all his splendour, and the commons will be appeased.’

I thought of the weak-chinned man with the trembling hands who I had been introduced to, and I frowned at her.

‘He’s not actually going to be ruling the country, is he?’

‘Someone has to,’ Ailsa snapped.

‘Aye, of course, but he hardly seems . . . regal.’

‘Of course he doesn’t,’ she said. ‘He’s a weakling and a fool, but what do you suggest, Tomas? We got through the last month by simply pretending that the queen was ill and carrying on as normal, but that was hardly going to do forever. The governing council may look after the day-to-day details of the bureaucracy but they don’t rule and they never will. The *last* thing this country needs is power in the hands of the sort of people capable of getting elected to councils. No, there must be a monarch, and as the princess is too young to rule, that means there must be a regent. If it has to be him, then so be it. If he needs guidance, which he obviously will, then that guidance will be provided to him.’

‘I see,’ I said.

I left the question unspoken, and Ailsa chose not to answer it.

It didn’t take a great deal of intellect to see who would be providing that guidance.

Chapter 11

‘I want to see Mama.’

I looked at Billy, and sighed.

‘Aye, lad, I know you do,’ I said.

It was late afternoon, and the sounds floating in from the streets outside the Bountiful Harvest were frankly astonishing. I’d been trying to sleep but I’d had to give it up for a bad job, and now I was back downstairs in the private dining room with Fat Luka and the lad. Anne was somehow asleep in her room despite the noise outside. I could hear wailing and keening, a public outpouring of shock and grief that was nothing short of ridiculous.

The queen herself led a full military triumph through the city when victory in the south was announced, and the cheers all but reached heaven itself. Everyone rejoiced in the streets, and do you know why? There were agents of the crown spread throughout the crowd to lead those cheers, and Queen’s Men to note the names of any who did not join in.

I remembered Ailsa’s father telling me that the previous year, in hushed tones that said he was fearful of his own servants overhearing him, perhaps informing on him.

In Dannsburg, you show respect to the crown. You show your love for the queen publicly and loudly and often, or you disappear and are never seen again.

It seemed you showed grief the same way, if you knew what was good for you.

‘So can I come? To the palace, I mean?’

‘Aye, I suppose so,’ I said. ‘Half the city will be there, mind, and I don’t know we’ll get anywhere near her, but aye. You can come if you want.’

‘Thanks, Papa,’ he said, and showed me a grin that I hadn’t seen on his face for far too long.

A thought struck me just then.

‘Billy,’ I said, ‘listen to me for a moment. I don’t know exactly how it will be, at the palace. I might just be out in the crowd with everyone else but I might not, you understand. If I have to go inside and talk to some people, people that I work with, then you keep absolutely quiet, do you

understand me? Luka will be coming as well, and if we get separated then you stick with Luka and you come back here and wait for me. Will you do that for me?’

‘Yes, Papa,’ he said. ‘Is there going to be trouble?’

I thought of Iagin, and how he must have spent his day.

There will be no unrest.

‘No,’ I said. ‘No, I don’t think so, but there’s going to be a fuck of a lot of people and that’s always a danger in itself. You stick with Luka, you both hear me?’

‘Aye, boss,’ Luka said.

‘Yes, Papa,’ Billy said again, and I nodded.

I was probably worrying about nothing, of course, but then parents do that where their children are concerned and Billy was my son in every way that mattered. Luka would look after him, I knew that. Anne would be coming as well, but I wanted her with me.

If there *was* trouble, I definitely wanted Anne with me. The right person for the right job, always, and Bloody Anne was a fucking force of nature in a close-quarters fight.

That was how she had earned her name in the first place, back in Messia.

*

Sunset saw us standing in the parade ground before the palace, along with half of fucking Dannsburg. If Ailsa was there then I had no idea where, but no doubt she was. Inside the palace somewhere, I could only assume. I could have got in there myself, of course, but not with Billy and probably not with Anne or Luka, either. The crush of the crowd was overpowering, and Billy and Anne and me were actually holding hands to keep together as the surge of humanity moved around us like a living thing. Luka just *was*, beside me, his bulk like an immovable rock in the swirling tide of people.

The keening and wailing of the afternoon had died away to a low murmur of expectation, but the great banners that flew all across the city were standing at half-staff and there wasn’t a man, woman or child in that crowd without a black sash or armband of mourning. The death of a queen was a serious thing, and even more so when no one could ever be sure who was watching them.

‘What’s happening, Papa?’ Billy asked beside me, having to raise his voice to make himself heard.

‘The Prince Regent is about to show himself, to assure us everything will be all right,’ I said, as much for the benefit of those around me as anything else.

The Queen’s Men have no uniform or insignia, and as far as those around me were concerned I was just another reasonably wealthy-looking member of the general public. No one gave me a second look, standing there holding hands with my son. If Anne drew any stares, and perhaps she did in her men’s coat and britches, then the long scar on her face and the daggers at her belt were enough to tell folk to be wise and hold their peace about it. My bodyguard, perhaps they thought, some mercenary from the war years. Those were common enough among the middle classes in those days.

‘When?’ Billy said, obviously growing bored and restless.

I glanced up towards the balcony just as a great number of footmen with lanterns in their hands emerged through the tall glass doors and spread out behind the colonnaded stone rail.

‘About now, would be my guess.’

True enough, the newly announced Prince Regent strode out a moment later, in the immaculate crimson and white dress uniform of a cavalry general. His chest was a constellation of medals that I couldn’t possibly imagine had been earned in combat, and he wore a wide black sash of mourning across the whole affair. At his side was the Princess Crown Royal.

The little girl was swathed in black from head to toe, in a huge gown of midnight silk brocade. Her blonde hair was covered with a black silk cap, making her look like something between a nun and a wealthy child’s porcelain doll. Even at that distance the effect was strangely disturbing.

‘That the princess?’ Anne rasped in my ear, and I nodded. ‘Fuck, she looks like a handful.’

Odious child, I remembered Ailsa saying, although to me she just looked like a sad and overwhelmed little girl.

‘Aye, perhaps,’ I replied, keeping my voice low. ‘We’ll have to see, I suppose.’

The Prince Regent was speaking now, giving some address that no one more than twenty yards deep in the crowd could possibly have heard. I realised it didn’t matter in the slightest what he was saying, anyway. He was there, that was all that mattered; he was seen, and he was addressing the

crowd, and he looked the part. Those who couldn't hear, which was virtually everyone, would be told tomorrow what he had said. If that didn't match the words heard by those at the front then what did it matter? The truth is so easily drowned by the words of the majority that it counts for little, in my experience.

The prince spoke for a good long while, and I've no idea what he said. Once he was done the crowd erupted in cheers, and the Princess Crown Royal stepped forwards to the rail of the balcony. I thought her father startled somewhat when she did that, but she didn't speak and even if she had, no one would have heard her over the cheering anyway. She just stood there, her pale hands resting on the stone balustrade, staring out over the crowd.

I cheered as loud as I could and Anne and Luka followed my example, encouraging those around us into a greater frenzy of adoration for what remained of the royal family. That was how succession was handled, in Dannsburg.

After that there was nothing more, and the Prince Regent waved to the crowd once more and then turned and put a tentative hand on his daughter's shoulder and led her back inside the palace. The footmen followed and took the lanterns with them, and with that, it was over.

'Well, that's done,' Anne said beside me, and it seemed she had no more words to say on the subject.

It was a mummer's show, pure and simple, but I had come to realise and even accept the necessity of such things. People were leaving all around us, the human tide flowing thick and slow as treacle towards the parade ground gates. It would take hours for those closest to the palace to get out, I was sure, and if there wasn't at least one fight along the way it would be a miracle. When you cram that many people together in one place, whatever the occasion, there always is. A jostled shoulder, the wrong foot trod on in the crush, that was all it took. I tightened my grip on Billy's hand and looked around me.

Three of the Palace Guard were working their way slowly through the crowds towards us, and I didn't think that was an accident.

'Just keep still,' I said, for all that I made it sound easier than it was.

Luka's bulk helped, to be sure, and Anne's sharp elbows and sharper looks helped clear a small space around us, but all the same we struggled to hold our place in the crush. The three guardsmen reached us in the end, and

I saw that the one who led them was the sergeant who had been guarding the private gate that morning.

That guard sergeant is on my payroll, Ailsa had told me.

‘Mr Piety?’ he asked me, making it sound like a question, but I was sure he remembered me. Ailsa had introduced us for a reason, after all.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘These are with me.’

He frowned at Anne and Luka and Billy, and shook his head.

‘You’re invited, but only you and one other. Lady Ailsa wants you.’

Billy’s head snapped up at that, and the look of hope in his eyes drove sense from my head. I’d wanted Anne with me, of course I had. I’d said before we left the inn that if this happened, then Billy was to stay with Luka and Anne was to come with me, but he’d heard now and I was struggling to find a way to refuse him.

I want to see Mama.

I knew he did, the poor lad, and I found that I didn’t have it in me to say no. I had lost my own ma so young, and I didn’t want Billy to have to go through the same pain of loss that I had.

I had no idea what was about to happen and I’d wanted Anne’s daggers with me in case it was anything ill, but it came to me then that Billy was even more dangerous than Anne was.

In his way he was, anyway.

‘Aye,’ I said at last, and squeezed the lad’s hand. ‘Me and our Billy here, then. She’ll want to see him, I’m sure.’

I had no idea if that was true, of course, but Billy smiled fit to burst and I could only pray that it was.

‘Should we wait?’ Luka asked.

‘No,’ I said. ‘You two head back. If . . . well, Leonov will know how to get to me, if need be.’

Luka just nodded at that. Leonov was Iagin’s right-hand man in Grachyev’s organisation, and he was almost certainly on the payroll of the Queen’s Men. I don’t know what I thought I was expecting to happen, but I was fast coming to learn that within our family of spies and torturers and assassins it was well to build your own support network as fast as possible and trust your actual colleagues as little as you could get away with.

I squeezed Anne’s arm, bid her goodnight and let the guard sergeant and his men clear a path through the crowd for Billy and me.

We headed for the palace, and whatever was awaiting us within.

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Chapter 12

It took a while to get there even with the three guardsmen forging through the crowd ahead of us, but once we were in sight of the nearest entrance another three came forward into the press of bodies to help clear the way. I was aware of heads turning in the crowd to watch us pass, obviously wondering who we might be. I was well dressed but not conspicuously so, and Billy was much the same. We could have been any reasonably well-to-do merchant and his son, but no more than that. But middling merchants don't get invited into the palace, do they? It seemed that the affair could have been handled a sight more subtly than it had been, but perhaps that was the point. Perhaps the Queen's Men liked to keep the populace always in doubt, always wondering if the middling merchant *they* knew might be someone with hidden connections, someone they had to watch and worry about. In all honesty it wouldn't have surprised me, in Dannsburg.

At last we were ushered inside and a set of heavy doors swung closed behind us, shutting out the constant noise of the crowd. It was cool and quiet in the marble hall within, and there Ailsa was waiting for us.

'Mama!' Billy exclaimed.

He broke free of my hand and ran to her, and wrapped his arms around her in a great hug. It came to me then that he was slightly taller than her, now.

'Hello, Billy,' Ailsa said, and she returned his hug with a warmth that I desperately wanted to believe was genuine.

'I missed you, Mama,' Billy said, his face buried in her neck as he held her.

'I've missed you too,' she said, but she was looking at me over his shoulder as she said it and I wondered exactly how to take that.

Don't be a fool, I told myself.

'Ailsa,' I said, giving her a nod.

She stepped back from Billy's embrace, but allowed him to continue holding her hand like a lad half his age might have done. He had perhaps fifteen or so years to him by then, no one was really sure, but we were the

only parents he had known since he had escaped the horrors of Messia as a ragged orphan child. I knew it meant a lot to him, to have a family again. It meant a lot to me too. The war had hurt Billy, I knew that as well, hurt him in the mind where it didn't show. In some ways he was much younger than his years, and I knew I had to remember that. If he could take some comfort from holding Ailsa's hand and calling her Ma then I wished him well of it.

'Come, Tomas,' she said. 'You are expected.'

I'd had a feeling that I might be.

Ailsa led me deeper into the palace, Billy still clinging to her hand as we walked. There were Palace Guard everywhere but they paid us no mind, their eyes seeming to look straight through us as though we didn't exist. Perhaps it was best, for a guardsman, to pretend never to see the comings and goings of the Queen's Men. It was certainly safer, I was sure. Word had no doubt got around about the six of their number who had simply disappeared one night and not been seen again. Soldiers gossip like no one else, after all, but beyond that there was no reaction to our presence.

Dannsburg, I had to remind myself, was nothing at all like Ellinburg. Dannsburg was like nowhere else I had even heard of, and the palace was the strangest place of all.

We ascended a sweeping stair and walked the length of a corridor, the stone underfoot giving way to smooth polished wood and then thick carpets. We were nearing the private apartments of the royal family, I realised, and still not a single guard moved to intercept us. Ailsa's face was obviously known by everyone in the palace by then and I suspected mine would be soon too. She stopped and opened a door that led into a well-appointed study. I had been expecting to find the Prince Regent sitting there behind the desk, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Lord Vogel was waiting for us instead.

'Come in, both of you,' he said. 'And who's this young man?'

If I have to talk to some people, people that I work with, then you keep absolutely quiet, do you understand me?

Billy had obviously remembered my words and he said nothing, although I knew very well that Vogel already knew *exactly* who he was. Lord Vogel knew everything; I had already made my peace with that fact, for all that I didn't like it.

'This is my son, Billy,' I said. 'Our son.'

Ailsa nodded shortly, but said nothing.

‘The child magician,’ Vogel said. ‘The magician’s bane, to be precise. Aren’t you, boy?’

Addressed directly, Billy had no choice but to answer.

‘What does that mean?’ he asked.

‘Means you killed a magus,’ I said. ‘Last year, Billy. You remember.’

‘Yes, Papa,’ he said.

‘Yes indeed,’ said Vogel. ‘Welcome to the royal palace, young Billy.’

Billy shuffled his feet and drew a bit closer to Ailsa, and said nothing.

‘Billy, this is Lord Vogel, the Lord Chief Judiciar,’ Ailsa said. ‘He’s a very important man.’

Billy looked up at Vogel then, and for an awful moment I was worried he was going to make one of his prophetic announcements. That, I thought, could have been very unfortunate.

‘It went well, I thought,’ I said, to cut him off. ‘I’m sure the Prince Regent said what was required of him.’

Vogel’s thin lips twitched at that.

‘And what exactly is it you suppose he said, Tomas?’

‘I have no idea,’ I said, ‘and I know it doesn’t matter in the slightest.’

‘Quite,’ Vogel said, and now his mouth formed the razorblade smile that I would forever associate with him.

‘What was the princess doing out there?’ Ailsa asked.

‘The gods only know,’ Vogel snapped at her. ‘It should have been *you* on that balcony with him, not the princess.’

‘We agreed to have no presence on the balcony,’ she said. ‘There’s only so far I can stretch my influence before people begin to question how I have risen so high when I am only a knight.’

‘Yes,’ Vogel said. ‘That’s quite the position you put us in, Ailsa, as you well know. We could have had you married to a duke by now, and then nobody would be questioning anything.’

Ailsa stiffened as though he had slapped her.

‘I did what had to be done at the time to achieve the objective.’

‘Oh, didn’t you just,’ Vogel said, and his cold eyes flickered towards Billy and me as he said it. ‘We adapt and move on, Ailsa, it’s what we do. As for what His Highness thought he was doing bringing the princess out there, I have no idea. He was very clearly told that this evening was about *him*, not his royal daughter. The child is not yet of age, after all, and of a delicate disposition, as you well know.’

I wondered what he meant by that, but right then didn't seem like a good time to ask.

'If I may, sir,' I ventured, 'I'm not sure why I'm here. What do you need from me?'

'I want you to go and see the Prince Regent,' Vogel said. 'Talk to him, man to man. I would do it myself but he seems somewhat . . . reticent, shall we say, in my company. He needs some spine putting in him, Tomas, if he's to be any sort of regent at all. You were a soldier, and a priest, you should know the right sort of thing to say. The boy can stay here with Ailsa and myself while you're about it.'

That was that, then. I wasn't happy about it, but Ailsa caught my eye and gave me a tiny nod to say that it was all right, or at least that I didn't have a choice. Vogel's orders weren't to be questioned, I knew that much by now, and certainly not to his face.

'Aye, sir,' I had to say, and that was done.

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A footman led me down another corridor to a door I recognised as the one that led to the Prince Regent's private drawing room. Two guardsmen were stationed outside that door, and from inside the room I could hear someone sobbing.

The man was grieving for his dead wife, I reminded myself, but in truth it had been a month and more since the queen's death. Surely, I thought then, the prince had had nothing to do *but* grieve while he was under house arrest during that time. It seemed to my mind that he should at least be beginning to get over it by then, but of course at that point in my life I hadn't lost anyone I had truly loved since my ma died, and I had been very young then. Looking back on it, perhaps I was wrong. No, fuck it. I *was* wrong, and I will admit that now. I didn't know it at the time, but grief can take years to work its way out. I didn't know that then, but I would come to learn it through the pain and sorrow of the years that followed.

Anyway, once again I was struck with the thought that something within the palace wasn't right. The footman knocked sharply on the door then opened it without waiting for an answer, and ushered me inside.

The Prince Regent was alone apart from four of the Palace Guard, the men standing like statues against the wall while he wept. He was sitting slumped in a chair with the jacket of his magnificent crimson dress uniform

open over his undershirt, his medals hanging sad and dishevelled from his drooping lapels.

I cleared my throat, and he looked up at me with red-rimmed eyes.

‘Your Highness,’ I said. ‘My deepest sympathies for your loss.’

‘My loss,’ he repeated, his snot-choked voice sounding hollow. ‘Yes. Thank you, Father Tomas. Will you join me?’

He waved a limp hand at the silver tray on the table beside him that held three brandy bottles, each half empty, and a number of glasses.

‘Aye, my thanks,’ I said.

I walked towards the chair opposite him and stopped for a moment to regard the four guardsmen.

‘You know who I am?’ I asked them.

‘Yes, sir,’ their sergeant said.

‘Good,’ I said. ‘You’re dismissed. I wish to speak to the Prince Regent in private.’

‘Sir, we have our orders.’

I looked at him then, the way I might have looked at a business owner in the Stink who didn’t want to pay his taxes. That wasn’t the look of a Queen’s Man. That was the look of the devil Tomas Piety, and I knew it brooked no argument.

‘I’m giving you new orders,’ I said, and my voice dropped into the flat tone that promised harsh justice to come if it wasn’t obeyed. ‘Fuck off, the lot of you.’

They went, and that was wise of them.

‘What do you want, Tomas?’ the prince asked once we were finally alone.

‘Vogel sent me,’ I admitted, seeing no reason to lie to him about it.

‘You’re worried about the regency, aren’t you?’

‘The regency?’ His head lifted then and he looked at me, and for a moment I thought he was going to laugh. ‘Oh yes, Tomas, I’m terrified of sitting on a throne and being told what to do and say by your lady wife while living the most privileged life in the realm. How absolutely *bloody awful* !’

He shouted that last at me, then grabbed up one of the brandy bottles from the table and gulped from its neck like a madman. Like my brother would have done.

I waited a moment until he started to choke and go red in the face, then I took the bottle from his hand and put it back on the table. I poured myself a glass from one of the other bottles, and sipped from it while I waited for him to get himself back under control.

‘What, then?’ I asked, once he had wiped the tears from his eyes. ‘There’s obviously something.’

‘You’ve absolutely no idea, have you? Gods, you must be new here.’

‘I’m not from Dannsburg,’ I said. ‘Until recently I was the lord governor of Ellinburg, away to the east. Before that I was a soldier, and I was a priest. Whatever you’re not telling me, I’d lay odds I heard worse during the war.’

‘The war,’ the prince said, and he shook his head as he lifted up the sides of his loose jacket to display his medals. ‘Look at this lot, Tomas. Look at all this *shit*. You think I was ever in a war?’

‘I wouldn’t know, Highness,’ I said.

‘Of course I bloody wasn’t,’ he sneered. ‘Wars were for my father, and my brother, and they both died there. It’s all for show. It’s all just cheap gilding on a brass candlestick like everything else. That’s all this regency is too, I know that. My dear late wife was a queen, but I’ll never be a king.’

‘You don’t have to be, sir,’ I said, trying to reassure him. It seemed to me that the Prince Regent was a deeply insecure man without his regal wife beside him. ‘You just have to look like one. We will do the rest. A year, maybe two, then your daughter can take the throne in her own right, and—’

Apparently that was exactly the wrong thing to say.

The Prince Regent lurched to his feet with a bellow of rage and snatched up his bottle again. He swayed there for a moment, one side of his great waxed moustache drooping where he’d rubbed it, then he turned and hurled the bottle across the room and into the fireplace. The glass shattered and blue flames leaped in the grate as the brandy caught, filling the room with the stink of burning spirits.

‘My fucking *daughter!*’ he screamed at me, then his knees buckled and he sagged back into his chair like a broken man.

‘Highness,’ I reminded him quietly, ‘I am a priest. If there’s something you wish to confess in confidence before the gods, Our Lady will hear your words.’

The prince looked at me for a long moment, then he slumped off his chair and onto his knees in front of me, and he bowed his head.

He began to talk, and I to listen.

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Chapter 13

It was late by the time I left the Prince Regent's chambers. A liveried aide informed me that Ailsa had taken Billy back to the Bountiful Harvest some time ago, and that I had a visitor waiting downstairs for me. I just nodded at her and let her lead me down to a ground-floor antechamber. I didn't know where Vogel was, and in all truth I was glad of that. I had no desire to see him again that night. The prince's words were still turning around and around in my head, and I was struggling to think about anything else.

'Tomas,' Anne said as she got up from her chair in the small room they had put her in. 'Is everything all right?'

I wondered how the fuck she had got into the palace, until I remembered what I had said to Fat Luka about Leonov knowing how to reach me if need be. She had obviously got worried when Ailsa had brought Billy back without me, and decided to come and find me for herself, whatever Ailsa must have said about it. I wondered how hard she'd had to lean on Luka and he in turn on Leonov to make that happen, but it didn't matter. She was there, and that was the main thing.

Bloody Anne was the best second a man could want. She would never leave me behind enemy walls, I knew that. Even then, for all that I worked for them at the time, I think that my instincts were telling me that the grand institutions of Dannsburg, the palace and the house of law, consisted mostly of enemy walls.

'Aye, all's well, Anne,' I said after a moment, although it absolutely wasn't. 'Thank you for coming. I appreciate it.'

She gave me a short nod, and held her peace.

I turned to the aide, who was still waiting at my elbow. 'Perhaps you could show us out,' I said, having no clear idea where in the vast palace we were by then.

She led us down a long corridor to a door that let out onto the wide space of the now empty parade ground, and all the way there Anne kept quiet as she marched at my side. She could tell something was wrong, I knew she could, but Anne always had known when to keep her mouth shut.

Eventually we were ushered out into the cool night air, and we crossed the parade ground together in silence until we reached the gates. A pair of uniformed sentries let us out onto the street.

‘I want a drink,’ I said. ‘Right now.’

Anne just nodded in understanding and together we walked away from the palace, heading south towards the river. No one of quality went south of the river in Dannsburg, Ailsa had told me once, and that was good. That was exactly what I wanted that night. Not the Bountiful Harvest, not Ailsa or Luka or even Billy. I wanted to find the sort of filthy sink tavern that felt like home and get drunk with my best friend Bloody Anne, like old times, like when we had been in the army together. Like back in the war, when I’d still understood the world and how it worked. I know it comes to something when wartime makes more sense than peace does, but we had understood the world then. Now, perhaps, I was living in a different world to the one we had known under the cannon’s roar.

We crossed the bridge together, and once we were on the far side in the dark squalor of the bad part of town, Anne finally spoke.

‘What the fuck happened?’ she asked.

‘Let’s get a bottle,’ I said, ‘and I’ll tell you.’

We found a tavern, not one Leonov frequented, and went inside. It was still crowded despite the late hour and we were too richly dressed for that side of the river, but I had the Weeping Women at my hips and Anne had her daggers, and the looks on our faces brooked no argument that night. This wasn’t the Stink, no, and we weren’t known here, but hard folk recognise their own kind anywhere. We were left alone, and I bought us a bottle of cheap brandy and carried it and a couple of chipped glasses over to an empty table in the corner of the room, away from the fire, where it was less crowded. I poured for us both, then looked at Anne over the rim of my glass.

‘The Prince Regent said a confession to me tonight,’ I told her, keeping my voice low.

‘Oh?’ Anne said. ‘What was that, then?’

A priest wouldn’t normally speak of a man’s confession, of course, but the prince was no one I knew and I thought this was important. This was business.

‘He’s terrified of his own daughter,’ I said, and waited while Anne took that in.

‘The princess?’

‘Aye. Well, not of *her* as such, I suppose, but certainly of her becoming queen. She’s mad as a shithouse rat, according to him. Her maids have a lot of accidents. Burns, mostly. Bad ones. One of them had to have her arm taken off at the elbow by the palace surgeon recently, and no adequate explanation for it. Apparently it’s becoming hard to hide, and understandably so. He’s scared of what she might do, with the power of a queen. But then the Old Man doesn’t seem to trust him at all, so Lady only knows if it’s true or not.’

‘That’s not good,’ Anne said, knowing I meant Vogel.

‘No, it fucking ain’t. If the Old Man doesn’t trust the regent then we’ve got a fucking problem brewing. He’s got the arse with Ailsa for marrying me too, that much was clear enough.’

‘Do *you* think she’s mad?’

‘How the fuck would I know, Bloody Anne? I’ve never been within so much as a hundred feet of her, never mind spoken to her. Ailsa doesn’t have any love for the girl, that’s plain enough.’

Anne grunted and swallowed her brandy, and I remembered how little love *she* had for Ailsa. Ailsa’s opinion wasn’t one that Anne would value, I knew that much.

‘You’re still supposed to be getting knighted at some point, aren’t you?’ she asked.

‘Aye, I suppose so,’ I said. ‘When someone can be bothered to get around to it, anyway.’

‘Well, you’ll be meeting the princess then, won’t you?’

I must admit I hadn’t thought of that. At least then I could form my own opinion on the matter.

‘I suppose I will,’ I said. ‘There’s something to look forward to.’

Anne refilled our glasses, a thoughtful look on her face.

‘Are they really mad, do you think?’ she asked after a moment.

‘Who?’

‘Shithouse rats.’

I snorted laughter and drained my glass. This was what I needed, a night of drinking and talking horseshit with my best friend, as far away from the Queen’s Men as I could get.

*

Of course, in Dannsburg that was never very far at all.

Leonov and a couple of his boys came and scraped us out of the tavern sometime before dawn, and we were driven back to the Bountiful Harvest in the back of a dray cart. I have to confess I don't remember much of the journey. We had been halfway through our third bottle by the time he arrived.

I woke in the early afternoon. When I dragged my sore head out of bed and looked at the pile of discarded clothes on the floor, I saw there was sick down the sleeve of my coat. I wasn't even sure if it was mine or Anne's.

At least I had plenty of other clothes now, having kept a local tailor busy day and night since our arrival. I had a piss into the pot and a wash at the basin, then got dressed and headed downstairs. I found Fat Luka waiting for me.

'You're in the shit with your wife,' he said by way of greeting.

'I dare say I am, and not for the first time,' I said. 'Is she still here?'

'No, boss.'

I nodded, glad of that if little enough else.

'Aye, well, that's good. What else?'

Luka shrugged. 'Billy's sulking that Ailsa went away again, but she promised she'd see him again when she could. Anne was puking in the stable yard, last I saw her. Oh, and the state funeral for the queen has been announced for three days' time. We'll have to go, I suppose.'

'We will. How's the mood on the streets?'

'Well enough, from what I hear,' he said. 'The prince gave quite the stirring speech last night, apparently. Everyone seems to love him.'

'That's good to know.'

I had thought they might, once Iagin's whisperers got their story spread around. That was how government was done in Dannsburg.

'Well, I say everyone,' Luka went on, 'but perhaps not quite. Word is the house of magicians has been stirring up trouble with the governing council, but quite what sort of trouble I haven't been able to find out. Sounds like they aren't best happy about something, anyway.'

'They usually aren't,' I said. 'Tell me, Fat Luka, what do people think of the Princess Crown Royal?'

He blinked at me. 'Well, she's going to be queen in a couple of years, isn't she? She's . . . I don't know, actually. It's like she's some sort of goddess, real but like she's not real, if you see what I mean. You don't hear folk talk about her, as such.'

‘Maybe you might encourage a few people to start talking about her,’ I said. ‘I want to get a feel for opinions.’

‘You won’t get an honest opinion in this city, boss,’ he said. ‘Whatever they might think of her, no one’s going to dare speak ill of their future queen, are they?’

I sighed. I supposed they wouldn’t, at that. Not in Dannsburg they wouldn’t.

I had to admit I couldn’t really blame them.

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Chapter 14

I had never seen a state funeral before.

Half the city was draped in black for the occasion, and even the lowest commoner seemed to have found enough dark cloth to fashion a mourning armband at the very least. Even the route the funeral procession would take through the city had been hung with black banners. I was dressed all in black myself, and so was Ailsa beside me. As Queen's Men we were among the most honoured mourners, already seated within the echoing vastness of the Grand High Temple of All Gods. It dwarfed Ellinburg's Great Temple, looming on the far side of the castle hill near the north wall of the city. Iagin and Ilse were there as well, although seated apart from us so as not to draw attention to our group. As man and wife it was only natural for Ailsa and me to sit together, and I found that I was glad of that.

Lamps burned everywhere, in long lines along the top of each row of pews. When I married Ailsa in the Great Temple in Ellinburg the place had been full of candles, but that was for weddings. For the flame of love. Funerals meant lamps, to light the deceased's way into the grey lands, and it seemed a queen's funeral meant a very great number of lamps indeed.

Lord Vogel was there, of course, in the front row of pews beside the Prince Regent and the Princess Crown Royal. On his other side was the older man who had been with Ailsa at the trial of Lady Lan Delanov, and again I wondered who he was. I leaned close to Ailsa to murmur in her ear.

'Who's that beside the Old Man?' I asked her.

'First Councillor Aleksander Lan Letskov,' she whispered back. 'He's the presiding head of the governing council.'

'Is he with the family?'

'No, absolutely not.'

'I saw you with him, at the trial.'

'Yes,' she said. 'We like to keep him close, where we can see him.'

She turned away to make an end to the conversation, and I sighed and sat back to wait until the drummers took up their slow beat.

The heralds came first, looking incongruously colourful with the red and white royal arms on the tabards they wore over their mourning black.

Behind them walked the assembled nobility, in full-length black mourning cloaks and hoods, and behind them came a procession of magicians with their midnight-blue robes crossed by black sashes. Behind those came more heralds carrying banners showing the royal arms, and then the funeral bier itself with its bearers flanked by martial knights with the scabbards of their heavy war swords wrapped in black silk, and then yet more heralds and knights to bring up the rear.

The queen had been dead for well over a month, and it seemed that the embalming had failed horribly. The corpse had been packed in a barrel of salt to preserve it, so Iagin had told me the previous day, but some moisture must have got into it somewhere. There had been no way the resulting mess could be seen if we expected anyone to believe the queen had only been dead for a few days, so the casket was closed and a wax effigy of Her Majesty had been fashioned and dressed and laid atop the embroidered purple velvet pall that covered the bier. I had never set eyes on the queen and I had no idea if it was a good likeness, but I hoped not. If it was, our late queen had not been a handsome woman.

The highest priests in the capital were officiating, and it seemed to me that they competed with one another to see who could give the longest and dullest eulogy possible. The afternoon wore on in grinding tedium as we sweltered in the heat of the lamps, until my patience was worn thin and my arse was numb on the wooden pew.

Then it happened.

Arch High Priest Rantanen was finally intoning the closing litany of the gods' graces in his most solemn and ponderous voice when the Princess Crown Royal finally snapped.

The entire congregation were kneeling for this last litany, but suddenly the princess was on her feet and shrieking as she hurled hymnals and lamps and anything else she could reach at the wax effigy of her mother.

The Arch High Priest stammered to a stop as the first thrown lamp crashed onto the stone floor beneath the bier and exploded. I saw the Prince Regent reach up from his kneeling position to try and calm his daughter.

She punched him in the eye with the viciousness of a street urchin, sending him reeling back into Lord Vogel, then she snatched up another lamp and launched it at the bier with a deranged howl. It trailed a streamer of smoke behind it until it landed on the velvet pall that covered the casket, and broke.

That velvet was old and dry and dusty, and it began to burn as the flaming lamp oil spread across it. I heard a shocked gasp from those around me, all but drowned out by the princess' continued screaming. Vogel was on his feet now, pushing the Prince Regent unceremoniously out of his way as he reached for the howling demon the princess had become.

'Oh, my gods,' Ailsa whispered.

I turned my eyes from Vogel's attempts to restrain the princess, and I saw what she meant. The wax effigy of the queen was now blazing like a candle, melting and running as the flames jumped to catch in one of the overhanging banners.

The heat of the burning effigy combined with the fire already raging on the floor beneath the bier set the coffin alight between them. I could hear someone yelling for water, someone else for sand, but in the Grand High Temple there were neither. Some fool tore down a banner and attempted to smother the fire, which resulted in both the banner and his clothes catching alight as well.

Lord Vogel had the Princess Crown Royal in his arms now, holding her tight as she kicked and flailed and screamed. Again the Prince Regent tried to intervene, and his daughter kicked him in the face hard enough to bring bright blood from his nose. Behind us people were streaming out of the temple as the flames began to spread with astonishing speed, licking up the altar cloth and threatening to engulf the rest of the heraldry that hung perilously close to the blaze.

The coffin was fully burning now, and I could smell the rotted meat stench of the queen cooking inside it. The look on Ailsa's face told me that she could too. Vogel and five of the Palace Guard bundled the princess away from the fire and towards the great doors, the Prince Regent hurrying behind them with a silk pocket square clutched to his bloody nose. At the last moment the princess managed to twist her head away from the smothering hand Vogel had been holding over her mouth.

'*Burn!*' she shrieked, loud enough for everyone in the congregation to hear her words. 'Burn, you *witch!*'

There was fucking uproar.

Shouted protestations, denials, horror. I heard the word *witch* far more times than could possibly be good.

'We should leave,' Ailsa said, and I found that I couldn't agree more.

I had never seen a state funeral before, and I never expected to see another one.

I didn't know it at the time, but I was wrong about that.

*

Vogel's rage was apocalyptic, as might have been expected.

He stalked the length of the Prince Regent's drawing room, his hands clasped tightly behind his back and his white hair in uncharacteristic disarray. Ailsa and I were both there, and Iagin and the Prince Regent himself. The Princess Crown Royal had been confined to her rooms and restrained by four burly nuns until her doctor could be summoned to administer enough poppy wine to put her to sleep.

All pretence of hiding it was over now.

There was quite obviously something very wrong with the Princess Crown Royal.

'What,' Vogel snarled through gritted teeth, 'the *fuck* am I supposed to do with this?'

'My Lord Judiciar,' the Prince Regent began, 'my daughter is prone to . . . outbursts. Fits, you might say. She—'

'I know that!' Vogel roared at him. 'She set her own mother's coffin on fire. She called our beloved queen a *witch* in the plain hearing of everyone in this city who *fucking* matters! Why was she there, you *cretin*? Your one fucking job is to keep her calm and away from stressful situations. First the balcony, and now this? You stupid cunt! You didn't think her own mother's funeral might be *fucking stressful* ?'

I had never seen Lord Vogel lose his temper before. I wouldn't have believed him capable of it, in fact, but I suppose everyone has a limit to their patience. Vogel had quite obviously reached his.

'I . . . yes, Lord Vogel,' the prince whispered.

This Prince Regent, this man who was king in all but name, was plainly terrified of the Provost Marshal. He knew where the power in the room truly lay, there could be no doubt about that. Vogel took a deep breath and calmed himself.

'Who controls the princess' medication?' he demanded.

'Her what?' the prince said, looking confused.

'Her chief tutor, a Master Edric Nyman,' Ailsa said.

Vogel just nodded. 'Arrest him. I want to know if he is simply incompetent or if someone bribed him to allow this to happen, and if so I

want to know who that was. Tell Ilse to find out. Either way, we don't need to see him again.'

'Yes, sir,' Ailsa said.

'You've been *drugging* my daughter?' the prince blustered, and I thought he looked genuinely appalled at the notion.

'Yes, we have been for years,' Ailsa said. 'It appears we haven't been drugging her quite enough.'

I shook my head and said nothing.

'The princess was overcome with grief for her beloved mother,' Iagin said, obviously thinking out loud the same way Ailsa did sometimes. 'She's young, and has never known loss or hardship in her life. The queen's sudden and unexpected death hit her hard. Young girls are so fragile at that age, after all. The fire was an accident, an overturned lamp. I'm sure we can find someone to blame for that easily enough. Most of the people who actually saw it will listen when we tell them what really happened, and we can deal with any dissenting voices afterwards. I'll take care of it.'

Vogel just nodded. 'Good,' he said.

'There's Lan Letskov,' Ailsa said. 'He won't let us tell him what he saw, you know he won't.'

'He won't talk, though,' Iagin said.

'Perhaps not, but he will know and he will remember.'

'We can't remove him, not yet,' Vogel said. 'It's too soon. Subtlety, Ailsa, always.'

I saw an unmistakable curl of distaste cross her lips before she smoothed her expression.

'You'll want me to see him,' she said, and I could hear a note of resignation in her voice.

'You know very well that he thinks he's in love with you.'

That startled me, but I forced myself to hold my peace.

'Yes, well,' Ailsa said, and turned away.

My weapons are gold and lace, and paints and powders.

Ailsa had told me that, once, but I didn't think I'd ever really understood quite what she meant until that moment.

'Give him a chance to accept our side of things,' Vogel went on. 'If he won't, well. There it is.'

And the dagger, when it's needed. You can hide a dagger very well indeed, behind enough lace.

She definitely could. I knew that from personal experience.

‘What about the magicians who were there in the procession?’ I asked.
‘They won’t swallow your horseshit, and you can’t make *them* disappear, however much you might want to.’

Vogel turned to look at me then, and his smile made me feel cold.

‘Ah, yes,’ he said. ‘I have a job for you, Tomas.’

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Chapter 15

The next afternoon found me paying a call on the house of magicians. Me, and Billy. We had Bloody Anne with us, of course, and Oliver and Emil and a couple of Iagin's strong-arm men as well, but it was Billy who was the important one. Billy, who the previous year had torn the learned magus Absolom Greuv inside out with the power of his cunning.

There were two of the Guard of the Magi on the door, wearing full armour and closed great helms. Blue surcoats hung over their armour, embroidered with the white seven-pointed star of the house of magicians, and they had heavy war swords at their belts and halberds in their hands. The Guard of the Magi were the private army of the house of magicians, and I knew their numbers and their very existence worried the Queen's Men a great deal. There was no love lost between the house of law and the house of magicians, and I suspected there never had been.

Fat Luka had sent a messenger that morning, so at least I was expected. The two guards snapped to attention when I climbed down from my carriage with Anne and Billy behind me. The other men stayed ahorse, their hands never very far from the hilts of their weapons.

'I'm Father Tomas Piety,' I told the armoured men. 'I'm expected.'

'Yes, sir,' one said, his voice muffled by his helmet. 'The boy will have to wait out here.'

The magi had no magic, we had proved that the previous year, but they had soldiers and I had no idea what else inside their house and I wasn't taking any chances.

'Absolutely not,' I said.

They didn't like it but they knew who I was and where I had come from, and so had no choice in the face of what amounted to a royal command. They let Billy and Anne in with me, where we were met in the high-ceilinged and galleried marble hall by an attendant in the blue and white velvet livery of the house. The white sigil of the house of magicians was embroidered over his heart.

He blinked at the sight of Billy and Anne but he said nothing about it, and that was wise of him.

‘Archmagus Nikolai Reiter will see you now,’ he said.

He showed us into an anteroom, where the archmagus was waiting for us behind a wide desk. I supposed I was honoured, to be received by one of his elevated status. He was a handsome man with perhaps fifty or so years to him, pale and clean-shaven and with his hair beginning to grey at the temples. He wore the midnight-blue robes of his order.

He stood as we entered, and extended his hand to me across the table. That surprised me, I had to allow. I shook it, and gave him a nod of respect.

‘Father Tomas,’ he said. ‘I understand you come from our colleagues at the house of law.’

‘Aye, I do,’ I said. ‘These are Bloody Anne and my son, Billy.’

He nodded to Anne, and waved us into chairs as he resumed his seat behind the desk. He gave the lad a long look.

‘Billy, yes,’ he said. ‘I’ve heard of you.’

I bet you have, I thought.

‘Archmagus Reiter, you say,’ I said. ‘I met a Lady Reiter once, at a social function last year. Any relation?’

His eyes narrowed slightly as though he was trying to work out if I was making fun of him. The Lady Reiter I had met was a courtesan, apparently, which Ailsa had explained to me was another way of saying ‘very expensive whore’.

‘My cousin,’ he said. ‘We have as little as possible to do with one another.’

‘Aye, well,’ I said. ‘Family can be difficult sometimes, I know that.’

‘Indeed,’ he said.

He fell silent as the liveried attendant returned and served us tea in shallow bowls, then withdrew with a bow. The archmagus lifted his tea and inhaled the scent of the leaves for a moment, regarding me over the rim of the bowl.

‘Your “family” in particular, Tomas, have been extremely difficult since Dieter Vogel became Provost Marshal,’ he said.

‘Before my time,’ I said. ‘I assume you were at the queen’s funeral?’

‘Of course,’ he said, and pushed a hand back through his hair with a sigh. ‘I am the presiding head of the house of magicians, after all. I suppose you’re here to tell me what we *really* saw.’

This man Nikolai Reiter struck me as a reasonable enough fellow, greatly unlike the late and unlamented magus Absolom Greuv, who had

been a complete arse. I wasn't going to insult his intelligence by trying to dress this up as anything other than what it was.

'Aye, that's about the lay of it,' I said. 'There was an accident, you see. A novice priest upset a lamp and it started a fire, and the poor princess was overcome with grief that the dignity of her beloved mother's funeral was so disrupted. She's a young girl, and she became quite distraught. Very unfortunate, to be sure, but quite understandable. It's nothing that needs mentioning ever again. Do I make myself clear, Archmagus?'

'Oh, it's perfectly clear, thank you, Father Tomas,' he said. 'It's just Vogel suppressing information again, the same way he seeks to suppress knowledge and learning in every place he can find it. The same way he would like to suppress *us*, if he thought he could get away with it.'

I sipped my tea and thought about that for a moment.

I oppose anything that the magicians want, Vogel had said to me the previous year. *In truth I wish someone would rid me of them, and that cursed university too.*

Perhaps the archmagus spoke the truth, but that was none of my affair.

'I'm not here to discuss house politics, Archmagus,' I said. 'Just so long as you and your learned colleagues all remember what you saw. I wouldn't like for Billy and me to have to come back and remind anyone.'

'Spare me your threats,' he said, and I could hear the bitterness in his voice. 'I heard you. Accident, young girl distraught with grief, so on and so forth. It makes no difference, does it? The public will have already heard your story, and there's no advantage to anyone trying to gainsay it.'

'Exactly that,' I said. 'I'm glad we understand each other, Archmagus.'

'Oh, I understand you, Tomas,' he said. 'Whether *you* understand the manner of man you're working for is another matter.'

'I serve the crown,' I said.

'And how does it serve the crown to seek to prevent learning?' the archmagus shot back at me. 'How would it serve the crown to abolish the house of magicians?'

'It wouldn't,' I said honestly, and thought perhaps it might be time to smooth the waters between us. 'No one is looking to do that, Archmagus. Without the alchemy of your magicians to make blasting powder, where would we be if it were ever to come to war again?'

He blinked at me, and I thought perhaps I had surprised him there.

'I . . . hadn't realised you grasped that,' he said.

I had only had a short time as governor of Ellinburg and in the end I hadn't managed to read many of the books in the governor's library, but I had made sure that the treatise on the house of magicians was one of the first I took down from the dusty shelves. No magicians, no blasting powder. I grasped that well enough.

'I read it,' I said. 'In a book. I serve who I serve, Archmagus, but I am not an ignorant thug, whatever you may think.'

'I see that you are not,' Reiter said.

I understood that, so obviously Vogel must have done too. No, he wasn't looking to do away with the magicians entirely but I would have bet gold he was looking to control them, as he did everything else. They had far too much power and autonomy for Vogel's liking, and that displeased him, and displeasing Lord Vogel was very, very unhealthy.

I wondered if the archmagus grasped *that*?

*

Iagin was waiting for me when we got back to the Bountiful Harvest.

'How did it go with our learned friends?' he asked me.

I shrugged. 'They'll do what they're told.'

He gave Billy a sidelong glance, and nodded.

'I'm sure they will.'

Don't bring your insane pet magician to any more meetings, Iagin had told me once. I thought Billy gave him the fear, and that was good. I liked Iagin well enough, but I still wasn't sure how much I could trust him. I thought on the words Archmagus Nikolai Reiter had said to me, and decided to keep them to myself.

I *thought* I understood what sort of man Vogel was, but perhaps I was wrong. The devil himself in the service of the crown, I had thought him. He had shown me nothing to change my mind about that, but perhaps there was more to it. Perhaps there was something I was missing, but I knew Iagin wasn't the right person to have that conversation with.

I didn't think anyone was.

Sometimes a leader has to keep his own counsel and no other. The captain had taught me that, back in the war, and he had been right then and he was right now.

'What brings you here, anyway?' I asked him. 'Won't Grachyev be getting lonely?'

Iagin snorted. 'That prancing idiot thinks I'm visiting my sick mother,' he said. 'He's so deep into his mummer's show of being a gangster he even treated me to a speech about how important family is. Honestly, Tomas, I know you really were a gangster back in Ellinburg but tell me you weren't as much of a prick as he is.'

'No, not as such,' I said.

'Didn't think so. Anyway, here it is. The Old Man wants you sworn in properly once a couple of the others come home, and that means you have to get knighted first.'

'Aye, I know,' I said. 'When?'

'That's the thing,' Iagin said. 'He wants it done day after tomorrow.'

'Gods, really? What state is . . . our mutual friend in?'

'She's drugged up to the eyeballs, according to Ailsa, but she reckons it'll be all right. There ain't a lot to it really. It just has to be done, and more important, it has to be *seen* to be done and by the right people, then all will be well.'

I thought of how the Princess Crown Royal had been the previous day, and wondered whether I truly wanted her holding a sword near my neck. Lord Vogel wanted it done, though, and Lord Vogel got what he wanted. That was a fundamental fact of life, in Dannsburg.

'Aye, well, if the Old Man wants it doing then there it is,' I said. 'What am I supposed to wear?'

'Who cares? Something decent, obviously, but beyond that it doesn't matter. It's a civil knighthood not a martial one. No one will expect you in a dress uniform.'

I was glad about that. Conscript soldiers didn't get dress uniforms, and my priest's robes were both tatty and in a chest in my bedroom in Ellinburg, hundreds of miles away.

'Well and good,' I said. 'Can I bring Billy and Anne?'

Iagin shrugged. 'Can't see why not. The more folk that see it done the better, in truth.'

'Aye,' I said.

I wanted Billy there, and not just for protection this time.

I was going to be knighted.

Me, a bricklayer's son from the Stink, was going to be knighted by the Princess Crown Royal. Never mind that she was drugged out of her mind and quite possibly insane, nor that it was only a formality so that I could be

sworn in to the most feared and hated organisation in the country. I was going to be knighted, and I wanted my son and my best friend there to see it.

More than anything in the world I wanted my ma to be there to see that, but even Our Lady can't raise the dead.

I turned away from Iagin then, before he could see the tears in my eyes.

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Chapter 16

Two days later I was in the palace for my investiture.

I was wearing my very best mourning clothes, and so were Anne and Billy. We were in the throne room itself, with some hundred or so other folk all in black. Most of the governing council were there too, so I was told, and a great number of nobles and courtiers and other folk whose purpose in this world completely escaped me.

The Princess Crown Royal was up on the dais, seated on the famous Rose Throne that had been her mother's. Massive red banners hung vertically behind her from the high ceiling, bearing the white rose of the royal house and providing almost the only colour in the room. The outsized golden chair made the princess look more than ever like a porcelain doll, and once again she wore a heavy black brocade mourning gown and a black satin cap that covered her blonde hair. Both gown and cap were heavily sewn with black pearls.

Her royal father the Prince Regent was beside her on the dais, wearing another dress uniform with a broad black sash across the breast, but no medals that day. I wondered idly if Vogel had taken them away from him as a punishment. If so, it occurred to me, he didn't know the Prince Regent half so well as he thought he did. The prince sat in the same smaller throne that had been his as Prince Consort, but it was he who ruled there now.

On the face of it, anyway.

Ailsa stood at his right shoulder, slightly behind him, and as the audiences wore on she frequently leaned forward to whisper some word or other in his ear. Whether they were her words or Vogel's didn't matter; the prince was quite obviously being told what to say by the Queen's Men. Ailsa looked like a visiting Alarian queen herself, standing at his shoulder in a magnificent black silk gown that put my fine coat and doublet to shame. I watched her as the time slowly passed, and I swallowed with a dry throat.

Lady, but she was beautiful.

Fool, fool, I told myself.

Billy tugged on my sleeve. 'Papa, that's the princess up there, isn't it?'

‘Aye,’ I said, wondering who the fuck else he thought it might be. ‘That’s Her Highness the Princess Crown Royal, in the throne next to the Prince Regent. You saw her on the balcony, you remember.’

‘She’s got the cunning in her,’ Billy said.

I turned and stared at him. Billy could see the cunning in those who had it, I knew that, but this shocked me all the same.

‘Are you sure, lad?’

‘Yes, Papa,’ he said. ‘Maybe she doesn’t know it, but she has. I *know* she has. I couldn’t see before, not from that distance, but I can see it now. And she’s very, very strong.’

When Billy knew a thing in that way he was always right. Except for the time when he hadn’t been, of course, the time that had cost Captain Rogan his life and Cutter half his face. I swallowed again. I didn’t want to think about that, or what it might mean.

‘Aye, well,’ I said. ‘That’s good to know, Billy. Thank you.’

Her maids have a lot of accidents. Burns, mostly. Bad ones. Apparently it’s becoming hard to hide.

I wondered what that might mean. I thought back to the funeral, and how fast the fire had spread and how hot it had burned, hot enough to make the coffin catch alight and roast the queen’s foul remains inside. I had thought that was strange at the time, but with the uproar of the guests and the princess screaming and the magicians watching and everything else to worry about, I had put it out of my mind. Now that he said it, though, it made sense. I wondered if she *did* know she had the cunning.

Burn, you witch, the princess had screamed at her mother’s coffin.

I thought perhaps she did, or that she at least suspected. Perhaps she had inherited the cunning from her mother, and resented it. The cunning was low magic, sorcery, no different to witchcraft in anything but name. That was something to be feared, maybe even something to be hated. That wasn’t a thing for princesses. It *certainly* wasn’t something for a queen.

I was still thinking on that, and wondering whether I should tell anyone or not, when a herald called my name.

‘Father Tomas Piety of Ellinburg,’ he announced me to the assembled people.

I bowed and walked slowly towards the dais the way Ailsa had instructed me to, my left hand held behind my back and my right down against my thigh in a way that symbolised how I wasn’t reaching for the

sword that I wasn't wearing anyway. I felt something of a fool, but apparently this was how it should be done.

There was a curious gilded stool below the dais, square and carved, with four stout, short legs, topped with red velvet and with a raised rail on its right side. This was the Knighting Stool, so Ailsa had told me, and she too had knelt there once.

The Prince Regent stood when I approached, and our eyes met. It had only been a few days since he had been weeping drunkenly on his knees in front of me, only a few days since he had confessed his terror at the thought of his daughter taking the throne, but of course we both pretended otherwise.

'Father Tomas,' the prince said, 'you are to receive the accolade of the most holy Order of the Knights of the Rose Throne, before the gods and all those here gathered. Have you undertaken to accept the accolade of knighthood that has been offered to you?'

'I have, Your Highness,' I said.

'And have you prayed to the gods that you will find favour in their eyes?'

'I have.'

I was supposed to have stood a prayer vigil all the previous night, of course, but that was between me and Our Lady and I knew She wouldn't take it ill that I hadn't bothered. All the same, I tried to look weary and sleepless as I placed my right knee on the velvet top of the stool and my right hand on the rail, as I had been instructed to do.

'You have been deemed fit for this high estate by your peers, and have indicated your willingness to accept this honour from the crown. Do you now swear by all that you hold sacred before the gods that you will honour and defend your queen and her regent, the Rose Throne and the realm?'

'I do so swear,' I said.

The Prince Regent stepped aside and a liveried aide came forwards carrying a long velvet pillow on which was balanced the thin-bladed ceremonial Knighting Sword.

'I am but the regent of the Rose Throne,' the prince said, as custom apparently dictated. 'I call now upon my most royal daughter, Her Highness the Princess Crown Royal, to bestow the sacred and holy Order of the Knights of the Rose Throne upon this man who kneels before her.'

Nothing happened.

The prince cleared his throat.

My head was bowed how it was supposed to be, my left leg bent under me as I balanced on the strange stool, but I chanced a look up towards the thrones. The Princess Crown Royal appeared to be awake, but her eyes were glassy and she was staring a thousand yards into the distance in that way Jochan did when the battle shock was on him.

I was aware of Ailsa moving behind the regent's throne. She bent and whispered to the young princess. Someone in the crowd coughed in obvious embarrassment.

A moment later the princess slipped off her throne and Ailsa caught her arm to steady her as she swayed on her feet. She was quite plainly drugged to the point of insensibility. She tottered forwards, Ailsa all but holding her up, and reached out a hand for the sword. Her small, pale fingers curled around the hilt and she lifted it and laid the flat of the blade against my right shoulder with almost exquisite care.

A hush descended over the throne room as the sword rose again, and then it fell against my left shoulder, and it was done. I heard more than one held breath being released and I thought one of them may have been Ailsa's.

The princess replaced the sword on its velvet pillow and stood there staring blankly into the crowd of assembled courtiers. Ailsa took her arm once more and led her back to her throne, and I rose. The Prince Regent presented me with the medal of the Knights of the Rose Throne, and I don't think I had ever felt more proud in my life at that time. If only my ma could have seen this.

I drew a shuddering breath and took the traditional three steps backwards before I stopped and bowed low to the dais. Suddenly the princess seemed to come to life. Her head jerked up and she pointed into the crowd with an unsteady hand.

Towards Billy.

'That boy, he shines,' she said.

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. Ailsa cleared her throat and whispered in the princess' ear until she glazed over again and the awful moment passed. For then, anyway.

With that, it was over, and I turned and walked back to my place in the crowd.

Look at me, Ma, I thought. I'm a knight.

*

There was a reception afterwards.

Of course there fucking was.

At least Ailsa had joined us by then, in one of the minor ballrooms where the affair was to be held. Billy was clutching her hand and staring around him with wide eyes at the towering gilt mirrors and glittering chandeliers, while Ailsa and Anne did their level best to ignore each other. As was her way, Anne had flat refused to wear a dress for even this most formal of royal occasions, and although her coat and britches and doublet were every bit as fine as mine, I think Ailsa took exception to them.

That wasn't my concern, though. Anne could wear what she liked, to my mind. I was more worried about the princess than Ailsa's thoughts on suitable attire for ladies at court. I touched my wife on the arm.

'Is she in any fit state for this?' I whispered. 'I thought at one point she was going to fall over and stab me with that fucking sword.'

'She might well have done if I hadn't been holding her up,' Ailsa whispered back. 'I've had her doctors administer a mild stimulant. I can but hope, Tomas.'

I narrowed my eyes at the obvious worry in Ailsa's voice, but said no more on it. A moment later Ailsa squeezed my hand and nodded to the doors of the ballroom, and I turned to see Lord Vogel stride into the room. He hadn't been at court for my investiture, so far as I knew, but I was sure he was a busy man. He joined us a moment later.

'Ailsa, perhaps Billy and Anne would care to see the formal gardens from the far window,' he said, pointedly dismissing the lot of them.

Ailsa took the hint and led Anne and Billy away across the rapidly filling ballroom. Vogel caught the eye of a footman and lifted two glasses of brandy from the man's silver tray before scaring him off with a look. He passed me a glass and touched his lightly to it.

'Congratulations, Sir Tomas,' he said.

'My thanks, Lord Chief Judiciar,' I could only reply.

He leaned closer to me. 'You did well with our learned friends,' he murmured. 'Archmagus Reiter assures me that there is no need for further discussion on the subject of funerals.'

The archmagus had taken my threats to heart, I saw, and that was wise of him.

'Aye, that's good.'

A fanfare of trumpets sounded then, and I turned to see the Princess Crown Royal being led into the room between two of the burly nuns who seemed to attend her everywhere. Her eyes were huge in her face and she had a jittery, nervous look about her now that had been entirely absent when she knighted me.

Vogel's hand tightened on his glass until his knuckles went white.

'Doctors,' he hissed, in the way one might have said 'traitors'.

'A mild stimulant, Ailsa told me,' I said.

'That's what we told the fools,' Vogel said. 'Gods be good! You'll have to speak to her, having just been knighted. There's no way around it. If her *idiot* father had only kept her away from the funeral. Once more we must adapt and move on.'

After a time Lord Vogel took me by the elbow and led me through the crowd. The nuns saw us coming and steered their young charge towards us so that I could be formally presented to the princess at last.

'Your Highness,' Lord Vogel said. 'May I present Sir Tomas of Ellinburg.'

I looked down at her, at this child-woman with pupils like tea bowls, and I bowed low.

'Your Highness,' I said.

'Sir Tomas,' she said, reciting perfectly tutored words. She spoke as though in a slow dream, although I noticed a slight tremor in her hands. I thought perhaps the two different drugs she had been given might not be entirely agreeing with each other. 'A pleasure to make your acquaintance. Have we been introduced before?'

She had already forgotten knighting me not two hours earlier, I realised.

'No, but I saw you once before, Highness,' I said. 'At a reception you gave in the previous summer. You had perhaps eleven years then.'

'What an honour for you,' she said. 'Did I look divine?'

I swallowed, and couldn't help but feel some pity for this unwell little girl.

'If I may, Highness, it seemed to me that you must have been in a great deal of discomfort. The weight of the gown and the headdress seemed . . . excessive, for one so young.'

'Beauty is pain, Sir Tomas,' she said, 'and pain . . . is beauty. When I come into my crown I shall have monuments to beauty built throughout the

land. Beautiful . . . suffering. I remember you. You were with the shining boy. My mother shone, you know. She shone like a star.'

She turned and swept away without another word, her nuns trailing helplessly in her wake.

She's got the cunning in her. She's very, very strong.

Was this what the country faced? An insane witch-queen on the throne, building monuments to pain and suffering throughout the land. It didn't bear thinking about. I could only watch with mounting dread as she made her way across the ballroom towards where Billy stood at the windows with Ailsa and Anne.

'Oh gods,' I said, as I saw them turn to face her and offer bows and curtseys.

Anne bowed, I noticed, the same as Billy did, while Ailsa spread her skirts and dropped a low curtsy.

'Ailsa will handle it,' Vogel said, but I noticed that he couldn't drag his gaze away either and I knew that meant he was every bit as worried as I was.

Words were exchanged, and I don't know exactly what was said, but after a minute or two the princess departed with her retinue in tow. All the same she had taken Billy aside, away from Anne and Ailsa, who were kept occupied by the nuns, and she had spoken to him for longer than she had me. I didn't think that was a good thing.

Once we had finally been able to leave and were safely in our carriage and on our way back to the Bountiful Harvest, I asked him what she had said.

'She asked me who I was,' Billy said, 'and I told her I was master William Piety, as Mama taught me was the proper way to introduce myself to the highborn. My name's Billy, though, so I don't know why, but that's what I told her.'

'Aye, well done, lad,' I said. 'And what did she say to that?'

'Nothing, at first,' he said. 'Then she told me that I shone.'

'Do cunning people shine, Billy?' I asked him. 'When you look at them, I mean?'

'Yes,' he said, and looked embarrassed for a moment. 'That's how I know.'

'And she shines too, does she? The princess, I mean?'

‘Yes, Da, she shines bright as the sun. Like I said, she’s very, very strong. Stronger than Mina, even. Sorry. Papa, I mean.’

‘Ah, call me what you like, lad,’ I said. ‘When your ma’s not around to tell us both off for it, anyway. You did well with the princess, and I’m proud of you.’

‘Thanks, Da,’ Billy said, and he gave me a grin that left me no option but to hug him.

I thought about the Princess Crown Royal, and what might happen when she came into her crown.

Stronger than Mina, even. It really didn’t bear thinking about one little bit.

I could only hope that whatever the Queen’s Men were drugging her with, they had a fucking lot of it.

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Chapter 17

A month passed in Dannsburg, and I began to notice a pattern to what we were doing. Lord Vogel signed the arrest warrants seemingly at random, rooting out corruption here and sedition there, but I came to see that there was nothing random about it at all.

The matter of the queen's death was done with now, I had thought, that first time I went to the palace with Ailsa.

I had been wrong about that.

Of course, I had written to Jochan shortly after we took up lodgings at the Bountiful Harvest, to let him know where I was. That week his first report arrived by messenger from Ellinburg.

Tomas,

I hope city life is treating you well, that you're behaving yourself and haven't ended up fucking a duchess or anything daft. All in Ellinburg shocked to hear the news of the queen's death, which reached us last week. Schulz led a memorial service at the Great Temple, but few attended from our streets. Abingon is too raw a wound, I think, for many to mourn the woman who sent us there.

Enaid is doing well. She's had to break some heads but no more than expected, and the peace holds as well as such things ever do. The nights grow easier. Hanne and the baby are well, and Yoseph too. We make a strange family, but it seems to work. I feel easier in myself, and the terrors come less often.

Return safe, brother.

Jochan

I looked at the letter for a long time, picturing Jochan and Hanne and Cutter sitting down to dinner together as a family, although I had no idea if they actually did or not. It was unconventional, certainly, but if it was helping to bring my tormented brother some peace from the battle shock then that was well and good, to my mind. I penned a brief reply assuring him that I was well, and left it at that. I had work to do.

Anne and me were busy to begin with, but the second week after I received my knighthood, another Queen's Man arrived in the city. He had

come from Drathburg. He was a short, sandy-haired, unassuming fellow by the name of Konrad. I didn't know him, but he soon proved that he knew how the work was done.

We were in the council offices of the palace that afternoon, Bloody Anne and Konrad and me. None of us knew our way around that part of the vast building, but Ailsa had drawn me a roughly sketched map which I had to keep checking as we walked down corridor after corridor. The guards ignored us, knowing who we were by then and no doubt being able to guess what we were about.

I could hear raised voices from behind a door, and once more I checked the map in my hand. This was the room we wanted. I held up a hand to tell the others to be still, and tucked the map back into my pouch. I put one hand on the hilt of Remorse and reached out and opened the door with the other.

A man and a woman were sitting on opposite sides of a wide desk, having a heated argument. The man looked up as the door opened.

'I said we weren't to be disturbed,' he snapped, before he realised that I wasn't whoever he had expected me to be.

'That's very unfortunate,' I said, and I took the Queen's Warrant out of my pouch and showed it to him.

He went white.

The woman was staring at me over her shoulder now, and her eyes widened when she saw what was in my hand.

'Oh gods,' she whispered.

'We might as well be,' Konrad said as he stepped into the room after me and closed the door behind him, leaving Bloody Anne to watch the corridor and see that we weren't interrupted.

'Konrad?' she faltered, taking him in for the first time. 'I . . . I thought you were in Drathburg.'

'I was,' he said. 'I came back. This is Tomas.'

'What do you want?' the man demanded.

'You, to come with us,' I said.

'We've done nothing,' the woman said, ignoring me and addressing Konrad, who she seemed to know. 'I'm a loyal subject of the crown, you of all people know that!'

'No one said you weren't,' I said. 'We just want you to come with us.'

'Konrad?'

‘A loyal subject of the crown wouldn’t question an order given under the Queen’s Warrant now, would she?’ he said. ‘Get up.’

The woman rose unsteadily to her feet and I could see she was pure terrified.

So she should be.

Do what your father says or the Queen’s Men will come and take you away.

I wondered if anyone had said that to her when *she* was a child, as my ma had to me. If so, I wondered if she had ever thought it might actually happen one day. Her voice was educated, her clothes fashionable and obviously expensive. I very much doubted that she had thought anything of the sort could ever happen to her.

‘I loved the queen and I love our Prince Regent,’ the woman said, defiant now as she met Konrad’s stare, ‘but I cannot love the Queen’s Men. They took my brother away from me!’

Perhaps I had been wrong, then. Perhaps she had good reason to fear the Queen’s Men. She was a loyal subject of the crown, so she said, and in truth I had no reason to doubt her words. But perhaps she thought less well of the house of law, and of the Queen’s Men.

These days, that was a dangerous opinion to hold.

*

‘She seemed to know you, that council woman,’ I said to Konrad once we were back in the house of law with brandies in our hands. ‘Lady Dennan, I mean.’

‘Mmmm,’ Konrad said. ‘She would do. I’m the brother she spoke of.’

‘You what?’

He shrugged. ‘She’s my sister. I haven’t seen her in fifteen years. She took a seat on the governing council and I took the Queen’s Warrant and a posting to Drathburg. We foreswear all family ties when we take the oath, as you well know.’

I *hadn’t* known that, still not having been formally sworn into the Queen’s Men myself. That would have to wait until the one from Varnburg finally arrived, apparently, not that I much cared. It would keep. Still, Ailsa had retained a relationship with her own parents, albeit a strained one, so perhaps it didn’t matter as much as all that. Perhaps it was one of those things you were made to swear but not truly expected to believe in, one of those things people like Konrad could use as an excuse for their behaviour

when it suited them. The oath of loyalty to the crown that us conscript soldiers had been made to swear after we had been unwillingly forced into the army had worked much like that. I looked at Konrad, and I thought that was probably the case. I have to allow, I already disliked him even then.

‘I see,’ I said.

Not half an hour past I had watched this man I was having a drink with send his own sister down to the cells.

I swallowed brandy and tried not to think about it. The fellow we had arrested with her had been difficult, until eventually I’d had to have Bloody Anne march him out of the palace with his arm twisted to breaking point behind his back and the tip of one of her daggers pressed into the base of his spine. I had no idea who he was – the arrest warrant had been for Lady Dennen, and for anyone she’d had with her. Perhaps he was innocent, I wouldn’t know.

By that point I knew it really didn’t matter one way or the other.

Vogel was purging the palace, that much had become clear to me. Although nobody had come out and actually said as much, it didn’t take a great degree of cleverness to see what was happening.

Lady Lan Delanov’s confession and subsequent trial had been enough to exonerate the Prince Regent and the Princess Crown Royal, and therefore ensure the succession, but that was all. Vogel had taken the opportunity to have a couple of highly placed nuisances removed while he was about it, but he hadn’t stopped there.

Now anyone who had ever so much as breathed a word against the throne or its servants was being gradually removed on one pretext or another. So too, I thought, was everyone who appeared to be close to the Prince Regent. New faces filled their roles, loyal faces, and that loyalty was first and foremost to the house of law.

That was well and good, I supposed, but I couldn’t see how it was the most important thing we should be doing. Not by a long way.

I looked over Konrad’s shoulder at Bloody Anne, who was busy pouring herself another drink from one of the bottles on the side table. We were in what I could only think of as the sergeant’s mess, although the Queen’s Men had no notion of rank. Those who carried the warrant seemed to have the social standing of colonels, from what I could tell of how Dannsburg society worked, but the facilities here were more suited to common soldiers than high-ranking officers. Lord Vogel didn’t believe in

luxury or comfort. Not unless he was using it to lure the unwary into a trap, anyway, as he had at the dinner party he had thrown the previous year where Lord Lan Andronikov had disappeared.

‘I’ll have another with you,’ I said, to get Anne’s attention.

She looked up at me and nodded, a small nod that said she knew I wanted to talk but not in front of Konrad. Bloody Anne and me knew each other so well it was like we could read each other’s minds, sometimes. We couldn’t, of course – neither of us knew anything of the cunning, nor much wanted to – but at times like that it almost felt like it.

‘I need to see the Old Man,’ Konrad said, and I thought perhaps he had taken the hint.

He put his glass down and left the room, leaving the two of us alone together.

‘Lady’s sake, Tomas,’ Anne said, once the door was closed behind him. ‘Who is that cunt?’

I shrugged. ‘A Queen’s Man,’ I said.

‘He arrested his own sister.’

‘Aye, apparently so.’

‘And is that what you want, Tomas? To be part of this, to be someone like him?’

I sighed and took the drink she offered me.

‘It’s what I’ve got, Anne,’ I said. ‘I’ve got a war to prevent, and this is the only way I’ll ever have power enough to stand a chance of doing it.’

‘What if it was your brother, Tomas?’ she asked, and her eyes were hard as they met mine. ‘What if they ordered you to arrest Jochan?’

‘You know I’d never fucking do that,’ I said.

‘Wouldn’t you?’

‘No, I wouldn’t,’ I snapped at her. ‘My loyalty is to family first and it always will be, whatever oath they make me swear. And what about you, Bloody Anne?’

‘What about me?’

‘Your Rosie,’ I said, and I could feel myself getting angry with her now even though I didn’t want to. ‘Your woman. She worked for the Queen’s Men long before either of us knew her. What if I fell out of Vogel’s favour? What if your Rosie came to you one night and said, “We have to arrest Tomas,” what would you do then?’

Anne studied me for a long moment, then she drained her glass and turned away.

‘Oi,’ I said. ‘I want an answer to that.’

‘Tomas,’ Anne said, her back still turned to me. ‘Don’t do this.’

‘Don’t do what, ask awkward questions you don’t want to think about the answers to?’

‘Fuck your questions,’ Anne growled. ‘Don’t do *this*. The Queen’s Men, I mean. Just . . . just don’t.’

‘Bit fucking late for that,’ I said. ‘This is what I am, now.’

‘Aye,’ Anne said. ‘It looks like it is.’

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Chapter 18

Arguing with Bloody Anne had left a sour taste in my mouth, and I hadn't wanted to go back to the Bountiful Harvest that night. Anne was my conscience in a way, as I have written before, and her words had discomforted me more than I truly wanted to admit to myself. When I left the house of law I went out into the city instead, alone. That would have been unthinkable in Ellinburg, where I had been the city governor, of course, but here it was different.

It was dark by then but still the streets of Dannsburg had more City Guard on them than I had ever seen before, and crime was virtually non-existent. North of the river it was, anyway, and no one seemed to much care what happened south of it. I pulled my cloak around me and walked, lost in thought. I remember casting a baleful glance at the closed doors of a Skanian merchant's premises as I passed, but that was all.

I was so deep in my thoughts I almost walked into a detachment of four of the Guard before I even saw them.

Stupid, I told myself, but it was done by then. Their corporal looked at me with hard eyes.

'You're out late,' he said.

That wasn't a crime in itself, not yet, but I thought it might not be much longer before it became one.

'Aye,' I said. 'What of it?'

'You don't sound like Dannsburg,' he said. 'Where are you from?'

'The east,' I said. 'Ellinburg.'

'Oh, yes? And why's that, then? What are you doing here? No, don't tell me. I think I'd better take you to the guardroom. You can explain yourself to the custody sergeant.'

I opened the Queen's Warrant, and I held it up so all of them could see it.

'I really don't think you did,' I said. 'Your custody sergeant won't want to see me, I assure you.'

The corporal visibly paled in the light of the lamp that hung from the wall above his head. He snapped to attention and saluted me, and his

startled men did the same.

‘I . . . I’m sorry, sir,’ he stammered. ‘I didn’t know you.’

‘No, of course you didn’t,’ I said. ‘No one does. That’s how this works, Corporal. That’s the whole point.’

‘Sir.’

I put the warrant back in my pouch and I looked at him for a long moment, and I knew I was putting the fear of Our Lady into him. That was good. I held his gaze until he swallowed and looked away. I knew he was thinking of the house of law, and what he had no doubt heard was inside it. Whatever the rumours said, I would have bet good coin it wasn’t half as bad as the truth.

‘On your way,’ I said at last, and the guardsmen all but fled.

I stood under the lamp for a moment and took a slow breath.

Is that what you want, Tomas? To be part of this?

I had to allow that perhaps it was.

Respect, power, authority. Those are the levers that move me.

*

I walked for a long time, and I didn’t know where I was going until I was nearly there.

Ailsa’s house was much like the one I had in Ellinburg, although larger and set back from the street with walls around it. There were guards on the gates even at this hour, but I recognised Brandt from the time I had spent living there the previous year. He was the boss of her household guard, and he was attached to the Queen’s Men himself. Of course, he recognised me too.

If he was surprised to see me arrive on foot and not in a carriage or a horse he had sense enough not to mention it, and that was wise of him.

‘Evening, sir,’ he said as I approached the gates, but he didn’t open them.

‘Is she in?’ I asked him.

Brandt’s eyes narrowed as he looked at me.

‘I wasn’t told to expect visitors,’ he said.

‘That’s because I’m not expected,’ I said.

‘It’s late.’

‘I’m her husband.’

I was, at that, not that it meant much any more.

If it had ever meant anything.

‘Sir,’ he had to say, and he opened the gate and let me through into the grounds of the house.

I gave him a nod, and one of the others escorted me to the front door, where he rang a bell to summon a footman.

‘A visitor for her ladyship,’ the guard said.

The footman’s eyes widened as he too obviously recognised me, although I didn’t recall his face.

‘Mr Piety,’ he said, and gave me a short bow.

‘It’s Sir Tomas, now,’ I corrected him.

‘My apologies, m’lord.’

He ushered me into the house and showed me across the hall to the drawing room, although I knew the way. I had lived in that house for the best part of six months, after all.

The footman opened the drawing room door and uttered a discreet cough.

‘Sir Tomas, ma’am,’ he said.

Ailsa looked up from her seat beside the fire, a hoop of embroidery in her hands and the lamp on the table beside her burning bright. Her lady’s maid was seated on a low stool at her feet. It was a different girl, I noticed, but then I had never learned the last one’s name anyway.

‘Hello, Tomas,’ she said, and if she was surprised to see me, her face gave nothing away. ‘Won’t you come in?’

‘My thanks,’ I said, feeling something of a fool.

I had no idea what I thought I was doing there. Ailsa was my wife in name only, I knew that, and I had no real right to be in her house.

‘Oh, sit down,’ she said. ‘You know where the brandy is, if you want one. Leave us, Tilly.’

I did want one. I waited for Ailsa’s maid to leave the room, then poured myself a glass and took a chair across from her. I sat staring into the amber spirit, not meeting her eyes. She worked at her embroidery in silence, giving me the time I needed to put my words in order. Her needle moved through the fabric that was stretched over her hoop, stitch after stitch after stitch.

‘What are we doing, Ailsa?’ I asked, eventually. I had to be careful here, I knew. Anything I said to her could and probably would make its way to Vogel’s ears. ‘Someone sent that assassin. Why are we still arresting our

own people in our own city, when we should be worrying about the Skanians? We should be worrying about preventing a war we can't win!'

Ailsa put her embroidery down in her lap and looked at me.

'The house of law is capable of doing more than one thing at once, Tomas,' she said. 'The part that you and Konrad are doing is to ensure security in the city, and especially in the palace. If there was one assassin there could be another, and we *cannot* allow any threat to the princess.'

'No, of course not,' I said. 'Lady Dennan, though, Konrad's sister. What the fuck is she supposed to have done?'

'I have no idea,' Ailsa said, 'but Lord Vogel does not sign arrest warrants for no reason. At this moment the entire governing council is under suspicion. Someone in Dannsburg must have made common cause with the Skanians, and it is our job to find out who.'

'So down to Ilse she goes, then, is that it?'

'Is there something you're having difficulty understanding, Tomas?' Ailsa asked me, her voice turning cold. 'We are the Queen's Men. The City Guard may arrest people in public, but when it needs to be done quietly and out of sight, that is our job. When hard questions need to be asked in the dark, that is our job. We are the Secret Guard, if you will. This is what we are *for*.'

'Aye, I know that,' I said, and I decided that I had already said more than was wise. 'I'm not questioning my orders. I'm just worried, that's all. Maybe it's the soldier in me, but I can't get my mind off the Skanian threat. I remember what you told me about them, and about what will happen to us if it comes to war.'

Ailsa smiled at me then, and I thought perhaps I had rescued the conversation just in time.

'It won't come to war,' she reassured me. 'We just need to root out the collaborators, make it impossible for them to send another assassin.'

'Aye,' I said. 'Aye, that's good. I worry of a night, that's all. Bad dreams. Sorry, I . . . I know I shouldn't be here.'

'It's all right,' Ailsa said. 'I know the war left you . . . well, yes. There it is. I'm glad you still feel you can bring your concerns to me, Tomas.'

Good, that was saved, then. Ailsa would perhaps report that her battle-shocked husband was having nightmares about another war, but no more than that. I thought that had probably been expected anyway. One thing was clear as day to me, though.

She wasn't telling me the truth.

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Chapter 19

Root out the collaborators, my arse, I thought as I walked slowly back towards the Bountiful Harvest. What we were really doing was removing the Prince Regent's support network, one person at a time. Vogel was working his way through the old guard on the governing council, finding reasons to arrest anyone who still respected the prince. I thought I understood why.

I couldn't shake the fear of war from my mind, whatever Ailsa had told me. A country at war needs strong and stable leadership above all else, and if we didn't have that in the Prince Regent then by Our Lady's name we had to make it *look* like we did. A united and loyal governing council would go a long way to achieving that.

I was met at the end of the road by Fat Luka. He had Oliver and Emil with him, and all three of them were mailed and wearing swords. I stared at them in surprise. Luka was red in the face, and he had obviously been hurrying.

'There you are,' he said, bending over as he tried to catch his breath. 'Thank the Lady for that!'

'How the fuck did you know where I was?'

'Brandt sent a runner to the Harvest to tell me,' Luka said. 'Lady's sake, boss, you shouldn't be out on your own.'

'Why not? I'm a fucking Queen's Man, Fat Luka. We as good as own this city.'

'Aye, you're a Queen's Man,' Luka said, lowering his voice so the lads wouldn't hear. 'You're a Queen's Man who disappeared six of the Palace Guard not so long past. You think they didn't have mates? You think soldiers don't gossip? You can fight, I know that, but not half a dozen armed off-duty guardsmen, you can't. No one can, not on their own. What the fuck do you think would have happened if they'd been following you? Your Queen's Warrant won't stop a knife in the back and that's all there is to it.'

I blinked at him in surprise. Fat Luka was giving me a telling. I wouldn't normally have let that pass, but this time I had to allow that he

was right. I hadn't even fucking thought about it, and that shamed me. The Queen's Warrant made me untouchable in law, that was true enough, but perhaps I had got to thinking it made me invulnerable too. That, as Luka so clearly pointed out, was absolutely not the case.

'Aye,' I said, after a long moment. 'Aye, you're right. Thank you, Luka. I'll be more careful in future.'

Luka nodded. 'Good. Look, boss, Anne said . . . well, it ain't my place, I know, but you and Bloody Anne didn't ought to be falling out of each other's favour. Not now, not here of all places. This city might look safe but it fucking *ain't*, and we need to stand together.'

Again, I had to admit he was right. Luka was nobody's fool, after all.

'I mark you, Luka,' I said. 'I mark you, and I'll make it right with Anne.'

He nodded, and together we started back towards the Bountiful Harvest.
I'll make it right with Anne.

I wondered exactly how the fuck I was going to do that.

*

Brandy was usually a good place to start.

Luka had gone to eat with Oliver and Emil, but I hadn't been hungry. I went into the common room to buy a bottle as a peace offering, and there I found Rosie doing the same thing. She gave me a level look as I walked up to stand beside her at the bar.

'Where's Anne?' I asked her.

'In our room,' Rosie said. 'She's got the arse with you and no mistake.'

'Aye, I dare say she has,' I said. 'She tell you why?'

'Yes.'

Rosie got a hard look about her then that said she wasn't any happier with me than Anne was.

'Maybe we ought to talk, the three of us,' I suggested.

Rosie shrugged. 'You're buying, then.'

That was fair, I supposed. I took two bottles of brandy from the innkeeper on my account and followed Rosie up the wooden stairs to the floor where our rooms were. Her and Anne had a room at the end of the corridor. She pushed the door open and coughed to tell Anne she wasn't alone.

'Boss is here,' she said.

Bloody Anne was lying on the bed with her boots off, her grimy bare feet pointed at me and a sour look on her face. There were spare clothes hanging in the open armoire, Rosie's kirtles and shifts and some of Anne's britches, and one of them had stretched a line of freshly washed linens under the window to dry. It seemed Anne even wore men's smallclothes, which was something I hadn't ever really given any thought to. I lifted a bottle in my hand and raised my eyebrows.

'Are we still friends?' I asked her.

Anne glared at me for a moment, then snorted laughter and sat up. 'If you stop looking at my fucking knickers, aye,' she said.

I kicked the door shut behind me while Rosie went and got some glasses off a tray on the cupboard.

'I'm sorry, Anne,' I said. I opened a bottle and poured for us all, then lifted a glass to her. 'I shouldn't have said what I did. That was ill done of me, and I apologise.'

'Aye, well,' Anne said. 'Might be I started it. It's this fucking city, Tomas. I don't understand how it works, and I don't like it.'

I nodded, and took a drink. 'I thought I understood it, but perhaps I was wrong about that. Fat Luka had some hard words to say to me earlier too, about things I'd never even thought about.'

'We're all strangers here,' Anne agreed.

'I'm not,' Rosie said. 'I was born in Dannsburg. South of the river, of course. I'm no noble lady, you ought to know that much, but I know how to get shit done here.'

I thought of the cart Rosie had arranged to come to the barracks, and the quiet boys she had found to take the wet bundles away with them.

'I noticed that,' I said.

'Then why ain't you making more use of me?' Rosie demanded. She sounded . . . I don't know. Not angry, exactly. Almost hurt, in truth. 'I worked for Ailsa before you, and for another man before her. I've been an agent of the Queen's Men since I had thirteen years to me, and I've never had a boss didn't trust me before. Why don't you?'

I sighed, and turned to look at her. I was there to make things right between us all, and it seemed that perhaps that meant being honest with her.

'I do trust you, Rosie,' I said. 'I trust you to work for the Queen's Men, but I don't know you. Not really I don't, and that makes it hard for me to trust you to work for *me*. Do you see the difference?'

‘No,’ she said.

‘I do,’ Anne said. ‘You run your own crew here, don’t you, Tomas, just like you did back in Ellinburg, and you maybe don’t trust all the other Queen’s Men as much as you’d like. Is that about the lay of things?’

I nodded. Anne had been in charge of the Pious Men long enough to understand how that sort of business worked, I realised. She trusted Florence Cooper, was even friends with her, but not enough to name her as her second. This was the same thing, to my mind, and it seemed she saw it the same way. She was a shrewd woman, was Bloody Anne. Very shrewd indeed.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘Rosie, you worked for Ailsa before me and now you work for me, but Ailsa’s still here. The one before her got himself killed, I know that, so she never had to worry on this, but I do. If it came to it, where does your loyalty lie? Who do you stand with, me or Ailsa? Or is it Vogel?’

Rosie looked at me for a long moment, and her face set into a hard mask that either meant she was back to having the arse with me or she was trying not to cry, and right then I wasn’t sure which it was.

‘Ailsa was all right to me,’ she said, ‘but I only worked for her a couple of years. The *one before her*, as you call him, his name was Heinrich. He pulled me out of a whorehouse south of the river when I only had eleven years to me, and he took me in and he taught me my letters and how to figure accounts. He taught me how to read and how to write and how to understand things, and he fed me and clothed me and he never laid a hand on me, not in that way he didn’t. He was a good man. He was . . . he was the closest thing to a da I’ve ever had.

‘When my thirteenth year came and he started finding me little jobs to do – people to follow and people to listen to – I did them and I was glad to do it because everyone has to work and it was better than sucking cocks. It took me a while, but I worked my way to it in the end – who he must be, and who he must work for. When he got sent to Ellinburg I went with him willingly, and I did what he wanted when we got there. All I’ve ever known is whoring and spying, and I know which one I prefer. Vogel I’ve never even fucking met, and I never expect to. The likes of him don’t talk to *whores*, do they?’

‘You’re not a whore,’ Anne said quietly, and she reached out and put her arms around Rosie.

I turned away and poured myself another brandy, and I could hear Rosie crying into Anne's shoulder, crying for her stolen childhood and the man she had thought of as her da.

There we had something in common, I thought.

'I'm all right,' Rosie said, after a moment, and she choked back snot to say that she meant it. 'I know Heinrich's gone, and I've made my peace with that as best I can. But you listen to me, Mr Piety, and you understand how this works in my head: I'm Anne's woman now, and I stand with *her*. As long as she stands with you, then so do I.'

I couldn't ask for more than that, I supposed.

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Chapter 20

A coach came in from Varnburg a few days later, and it brought a woman to the house of law. Her name was Sabine, and she must have had almost seventy years to her if she had a day. She was still striking for all that, tall and lean with long iron-grey hair that she wore pinned back from her sharp face with a pair of black combs.

We were introduced by Iagin in what I had come to think of as the mess.

‘Tomas, what a pleasure,’ she said.

Her voice was like a whip, and the hand she extended to me was thin and pale, with the long nails lacquered the same glossy black as her combs. The effect was something like the talons of a bird of prey. Her black mourning gown was very tightly laced around her narrow waist, and looked extremely uncomfortable. In truth I thought she looked how Ilse *should* have done, and didn’t.

‘Good to meet you,’ I said.

I didn’t know if I was supposed to kiss her hand or not, so I opted for giving it a brusque shake instead. She wore several ornate silver and black rings on that hand, and at least one of them dug sharply into my finger as I did so.

‘A soldier’s handshake,’ she said, and smiled. ‘I can feel the swordsman’s calluses on your palm. Iagin, dear, might I trouble you for some wine? I’ve had a very long journey.’

And a very slow one, I thought. Varnburg was a long way, aye, but it wasn’t *that* fucking far. This Sabine certainly hadn’t troubled herself to hurry at Vogel’s summons. That was interesting in itself.

Iagin poured dark wine for her into a tall goblet, and I noticed the way her fingers lingered on his hand as she took it from him. He cleared his throat and turned away to busy himself with the brandy bottle, quite obviously feeling uncomfortable in her presence.

‘Did you have a good journey?’ I asked her, feeling like I should say something to fill the silence.

‘I don’t recognise your accent,’ she said, completely ignoring my question. ‘Where are you from, Tomas?’

‘Ellinburg,’ I said.

‘Oh, how very intriguing.’

She sipped her wine, her grey eyes holding my gaze over the glass. In her hand, the wine looked like blood.

‘Here,’ Iagin grunted, and passed me a brandy.

Something about Sabine was clearly putting him on edge. I was starting to feel the same way, although I couldn’t have said exactly why.

‘I suppose I should present myself upstairs,’ Sabine said after a moment. She put her barely touched wine down on a table and smiled. ‘I’ll be seeing you both, I’m sure. Until then.’

She turned and stalked out of the room, the tall heels of her glossy black shoes clicking on the wooden floor as though they were tipped with steel. Perhaps they were, at that.

‘Fuck,’ Iagin muttered, once the door was closed behind her. ‘I’d been starting to hope she wasn’t coming.’

‘Striking lady,’ I said, for want of anything better.

He snorted and drained his brandy. ‘Aye, well, she’ll try to seduce you, that’s for sure,’ he said. ‘She always does. I don’t know how your tastes run, Tomas, but don’t even fucking think about it. She’s untouchable.’

‘I wasn’t thinking about it,’ I said. ‘But why’s that, then?’

‘You don’t know? Actually, I suppose you wouldn’t – I don’t think Ailsa does either, come to that. It was before her time.’

I shook my head. ‘Know what?’

He met my eyes.

‘She’s the Old Man’s wife.’

I remembered the dinner Vogel had thrown the previous summer, and the empty place where the hostess should have been seated. *He always hosts alone*, Ailsa had told me. *His table is always an odd number with a vacant place setting laid at the foot. I don’t know precisely why.*

Perhaps she didn’t know, at that. Even Ailsa didn’t know everything, and I took some comfort from that thought.

‘I see,’ I said.

‘No, you don’t,’ Iagin said. ‘Sabine was Provost Marshal once, twenty years and more ago. It was her who swore me into the service, not the Old Man.’

‘What happened?’

He shrugged and poured himself another brandy.

‘Buggered if I know. They were already married back then, and he was one of her Queen’s Men. She left him, I know that much, put him in charge and fucked off to Varnburg to run the operation on the coast. I don’t think he ever really made his peace with that. You’ve seen how he hosts dinner?’

‘Aye,’ I said.

‘Well, there it is. Watch yourself around her, that’s all I’m saying, and watch the Old Man’s mood too. Seeing her again isn’t likely to put him in a good humour.’

I supposed it wouldn’t, at that.

*

I managed to avoid Vogel and everyone else for the next two days, until a messenger came to the Bountiful Harvest and brought a summons with her.

‘Tomorrow,’ I told Anne and Luka, after I’d sent the messenger on her way. ‘I’m being sworn in. Properly, I mean, not like that bollocks with the knighthood.’

‘Do you want us there?’ Anne asked.

I shook my head. ‘No,’ I said. ‘I mean, I do, but I can’t have you, apparently. This is a family thing. Strictly only Queen’s Men, which is why we had to wait for Sabine. There have to be enough witnesses, so Ailsa told me.’

Anne nodded. ‘Like when we swore Desh into the Pious Men.’

‘Aye, something like that, I expect,’ I said.

I wished she hadn’t reminded me of that. I had made Desh up to the table the previous year, in a traditional Ellinburg gang ritual. He’d been found dead in an alley a matter of weeks later. No, I didn’t want to think about Desh right then.

Not ever.

That put me in a sour mood for the rest of the day, and I slept poorly that night. I had no idea what the morning would bring beyond what little Ailsa had told me, so I hadn’t dared drink too much the evening before. Trying to sleep when you’re sober and have things on your mind is never easy, and I spent a restless night dreaming about solemn rituals and blood oaths and the way that Desh had died.

The next morning was overcast and grey, and the sky matched my mood. I shaved and got dressed, then ate a sullen breakfast that I didn’t want, alone in the private dining room of the inn.

Ailsa came to collect me herself, in her carriage with Brandt and three of her household guard around her. I was pleased to see her, in truth, and that morning I think I felt a little of what Desh must have felt on the day we swore him into the Pious Men. I was nervous, I realised, foolish as that may sound. A gang initiation was one thing, but what did formally joining the Queen's Men entail?

I still had no idea.

'It's all right,' Ailsa said quietly, once the carriage was underway. 'It's just an oath you have to swear, dressed up with some ritual and mummerly in the name of tradition. I can't tell you what, exactly, but there's nothing to truly fear in it.'

'Aye,' I said, and took a breath to steady myself. 'Tell me something, Ailsa. Do you know Sabine?'

'The woman from Varnburg? No, not at all. Heinrich, my predecessor in Ellinburg, stood witness when I was initiated. I was only introduced to her yesterday.'

'Iagin told me something about her, and I don't know if it's true or not.'

'And what was that?'

I glanced at her. I had only brought the matter up to change the subject, but now I wondered if I should tell her or not. Ailsa was very close to Vogel, I knew, and she probably told him everything any one of us said in her hearing. That was the same way I'd had Fat Luka watch the other Pious Men for me, I realised suddenly, and tell me who had said what. Perhaps Vogel and me weren't so very different in the way we did business after all. That was an interesting thought, but one for another time. Either way, I thought she needed to know.

'Iagin said she's the Old Man's wife,' I said at last.

Ailsa's face stayed very still.

'Did he, now?'

'Aye,' I said, and I wondered if perhaps I might have just made a mistake.

If I had got Iagin in the shit with Vogel then I would have to tell him, I realised, and risk losing the only one of the Queen's Men I truly thought of as an ally. Apart from Ailsa herself, of course.

'How extraordinary,' Ailsa said. 'It's not impossible, I suppose. They're of an age, give or take. You remember how he hosts dinners, I'm sure, and

he's never actually said that his wife was dead, for all that I had assumed she must be. Well, this is going to be interesting.'

'Aye,' I said again, and decided against telling her the other thing that Iagin had told me about Sabine.

If she had truly been Provost Marshal before Vogel then there had to be a good reason why she wasn't any more, and I was absolutely certain the Old Man wouldn't want anyone poking at that particular sore.

We passed the rest of the journey to the house of law in silence, but I could almost hear Ailsa's mind working as she thought over what I had told her. I could only hope that hadn't been foolish of me.

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Chapter 21

Once we were within the house of law, Ailsa left me with a pair of stone-faced attendants. I watched her glide away down a corridor without a word or so much as a backwards glance, and could only assume that the mummery and ritual she had spoken of was about to begin.

The attendants took the Weeping Women from me, and I knew better than to protest. That done, a black silk hood was placed over my head and laced tight behind my neck. The thing made it difficult to breathe and impossible to see, and I gave thanks to Our Lady that I'd had the sense not to get drunk the previous night, however much I had wanted to. Being led down unfamiliar corridors in choking darkness was bad enough as it was, without enduring it with a brandy headache as well.

We went down a long stair, below ground but not into the reeking embrace of the cells. This was some other undercroft of the house of law, then, nowhere I had been before. Our footsteps echoed on stone in a way that told me the passage we walked down was narrow and low-ceilinged. I thought of the sappers' tunnels at Abington, and forced the memory away with all the ruthlessness I could muster.

Breathe, I thought. *Just breathe*.

Lady, but that was easier said than done.

Just breathe.

I've never cared for enclosed spaces, and after Abington I cared for them a great deal less than I had done before. I could almost feel the rock above my head crumbling, showering grit on my shoulders with every muffled roar of the cannon. The memories loomed like pregnant horrors in the darkness, swollen with the ghosts of the dead. I thought I could hear the men's picks working somewhere ahead of me, never knowing if at any moment we might break through into one of the enemy's counter-tunnels and be forced to meet them knife to knife in the stifling darkness.

There just wasn't enough fucking air to breathe, and the hood was sucking against my mouth as I struggled in the confinement. My palms were sweating, and I was having to fight very hard not to panic. Confinement. The tunnels. Oh, in Our Lady's name, no. I remembered the

time when our sappers *had* breached an enemy tunnel. We had gone at them in the stifling sweaty darkness even as they came at us. Knives, knives in both hands and grit and earth showering us with every barrage as we tore and hacked at each other in the confined space. Stab and hack and pray and scream, that was tunnel warfare. Burrowing animals, tearing each other to pieces in the darkness.

Battle shock, it's just battle shock. Breathe, damn you!

A door banged open in front of me.

'Let him come forth,' said a voice, and I recognised it as Vogel's.

I was pushed stumbling into the room, and the door slammed shut behind me. There was utter silence other than my own ragged breathing and the pounding of my heart.

Breathe!

The darkness was total in the confines of the hood. I took another step, unsteady on my feet until I felt a hand on my arm. Something dug into the back of my wrist, the sharpness of a silver ring.

Sabine, I thought.

'Sit him.'

I was turned around by thin, cold hands, then pushed into a chair. Hard wood met the arse of my britches with a slap that surprised me; the seat of the chair was higher than I would have expected, and once I was seated my feet barely touched the floor. It was purposefully designed to be disorientating, I realised, like everything else.

Metal scraped on metal, a harsh shriek in the dark.

'You have the shears, Mother Ruin?'

'Always, Father Secrets.' That was Sabine's voice, I was sure of it.

'Speak unto those assembled of the purpose of the shears.'

'Shears *cut*. Sever the ties, sever the bonds. Sever the flesh, should the word be denied.' Hands grasped my shoulders suddenly, making me startle. 'Sever the tongue, should secrets be told, pierce the eyes, should the word be denied.'

I swallowed.

Mummery, I told myself. *It's just some mummery in the name of tradition.*

No doubt that was true. All the same I suddenly needed to piss very badly indeed, and I've no shame in admitting that.

‘And shall this one deny the word? I shall hear the counsel of the Knights of the Rose Throne. What say you, Mother Ruin?’

Again the scream of uncoiled metal on metal, and in my mind I could see a pair of monstrous shears opening around the sides of my neck ready to snip off my head like the boggart with its long, twisted fingers.

That’s just in stories, stupid stories for children. The boggart isn’t real.

No, of course it wasn’t, but Vogel and Sabine and the rest of the Queen’s Men very much were, and in that moment I was utterly at their mercy.

There’s nothing to truly fear in it.

‘I think not, Father Secrets,’ she said. ‘Mother Ruin has looked into his eyes, and thought him faithful. I will stand by him.’

I remembered how Sabine had stared at me over her glass of wine like blood, and I wondered if that had been a part of this strange test. Perhaps she had some sort of second sight, like my Billy had. That was a horrifying thought.

It’s just mummery. Breathe, damn you!

‘Sister Deceit, what say you?’

‘He will not, Father Secrets.’ I startled as I realised that was Ailsa speaking. ‘I stand by him, as his wife within the family.’

‘Brother Betrayal, what say you?’

‘He will do his part,’ said Konrad. ‘I have seen him work, and I stand by him.’

‘Brother Truth?’

‘He’s all right by me,’ said Iagin. ‘I’ll stand.’

‘Sister Torment?’

‘I rather like him, actually,’ said Ilse. ‘I stand with him.’

‘Understand this, Sir Tomas.’ That was Vogel again, and now his voice was sharp with command. ‘When Mother Ruin cuts the ties that bind your hood she cuts *all* ties. You foreswear family and business and place and home and past and love, in service of the Rose Throne. Only one love remains, that which you have made within the family. Bow your head to Mother Ruin and accept your place as a Knight of the Rose Throne, or remain forever in the darkness. What say you?’

I would have bet a gold crown to a clipped copper that if I had refused him at that point, my ‘forever’ could have been measured in seconds.

‘Aye, Father Secrets,’ I said, getting a feel for the way this game was to be played. It really wasn’t so very different to the sort of gang rituals I was used to, and again that surprised me. ‘I bow my head.’

I leaned forward, and I felt a sharp tug at the back of my neck. Sabine’s shears, in truth far smaller than I had imagined them to be in my fear, cut through the ties at the back of my hood until she was able to lift it clear of my head.

Flickering torchlight lit the room from flaming sconces on the stone walls, making smoke drift above those gathered around the table. Torches make for shit lights, by and large, which is probably why someone invented lamps, but they’re nothing if not dramatic. Vogel sat at the table’s head, opposite me, and he wore a long black mask of stiffened leather shaped to make him look like the devil I had first thought him to be. Ailsa sat at his right hand and Iagin at his left, with Ilse beside him. Konrad was beside Ailsa, and both he and Ilse had a vacant chair beside them. Every one of the Queen’s Men was masked, although theirs were plain, smooth and faceless and somehow all the more horrifying for it. I was at the foot of the table in what was obviously Sabine’s rightful place.

‘Stand,’ she hissed in my ear, and I did as I was told.

The others remained seated but now all those blank, emotionless masks turned to face me. The silence stretched until I wanted to scream just to fill it.

Breathe, just breathe . . .

At last Vogel stood, his chair scraping on the bare stone floor as he shoved it away. Sabine was still behind me and I couldn’t see her, but I wasn’t prepared to bet she didn’t have a weapon of some sort held very close to my back.

‘Mother Ruin and those of the family here gathered have spoken for you, and sworn to stand with you,’ Vogel said. ‘You will repeat the words of the Royal Oath after me, and it shall bind you forevermore, heart and soul and life and death, to the service of the Rose Throne. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, Father Secrets,’ I said.

Vogel spoke the words of the oath then, and I repeated them after him.

‘I, Sir Tomas of Ellinburg, do solemnly and sincerely declare and affirm that I will serve Our Sovereign Lady Her Majesty the Queen or her regent in the office of a Knight of the Rose Throne, without favour or affection, malice or ill will; and that I will foreswear all past ties of family or business

or home, save those made within the embrace of the Knights of the Rose Throne; that I will to the full extent of the power vested in me cause the peace to be kept and preserved, and prevent all offences against the person and properties of Her Majesty and those of the Rose Throne; and that I will to the best of my skill and knowledge discharge all the duties thereof faithfully according to law and the word of the Provost Marshal. So do I swear.'

'So does he swear before the family,' murmured the assembled Queen's Men, 'and may the word never be denied.'

'So do you swear before Mother Ruin,' Sabine said from behind me, 'and may the word never be denied.'

'So do you swear before Father Secrets,' said Vogel, 'and may the word never be denied.'

He looked up at me then, and I could feel the razor of his smile opening behind his mask.

'Choose a seat at the table,' he said.

The only two vacant seats were beside Konrad and Ilse. I took the one beside Ilse, as much so as I didn't have to look at her as anything else.

'Good choice,' she murmured as I sat, and I wondered what that meant.

Vogel reached up then and removed his mask, and the others began to do the same. I chanced a look at Sabine, and saw that her mask was a mirror image of the one Vogel himself had worn, her devil no less hideous than his own.

'Welcome to the family,' she said.

She placed her mask on the table and took her place at its foot, in a normal chair now and not the strange high seat I had been pushed into. Now she sat in the seat that was forever vacant at Vogel's dinner table, the hostess' seat, the place reserved for the matriarch of a household. She might not be Provost Marshal any more, but she quite clearly stood higher than any of the rest of them save Vogel himself. The rest of *us*, I corrected myself. I was a Queen's Man in truth now, and I knew there could never be any going back on that. It was widely known that the only way to leave the service of the Queen's Men was in death.

'It just remains to give you a name,' Ailsa said.

Vogel looked at me for a long moment, then showed me the razor edge of his smile once more.

'Brother Blade,' he said.

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Chapter 22

‘I haven’t been so fucking scared since we tried to undermine the walls at Abington,’ I confessed to Anne, and threw back another brandy.

‘What was it like?’

I looked at her, and shook my head.

‘Get knighted and take the oath and you’ll find out,’ I said, and immediately regretted it. ‘I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you, Bloody Anne. It’s a private thing, a family thing. You understand that, don’t you?’

‘Aye,’ she said. ‘I can respect that.’

I nodded and poured her another brandy, emptying the bottle. We were alone in the private dining room of the Bountiful Harvest, Fat Luka and Rosie having both retired some hours before. Billy was with Ailsa, and I still wasn’t sure how I felt about that, but the lad had been so pleased to be invited to her house for supper that again I hadn’t been able to find it in me to refuse him.

Sister Deceit.

No, I wouldn’t believe that. If she didn’t want to see him then she could easily have avoided it, and she had nothing to gain from it save his company.

All the same, there was reason to the names we had. I had seen that well enough.

Ailsa was the false face, the one who worked behind her veils of gold and lace. Konrad, who had sent his own sister to the cells, and Our Lady only knew who else before her, was Brother Betrayal. That made sense enough. Iagin, the one who sold our stories on the streets with his smiles and promises, was Brother Truth, for the truth we wanted people to hear, and Sister Torment for the torturer spoke for itself. Vogel was Father Secrets for all the things he heard and kept to himself, and I the soldier was now Brother Blade.

Mother Ruin, though, that I struggled with. There was a tale behind that name, I was sure, although I doubted I would ever hear what it was.

‘Did they hurt you?’

I blinked, Anne’s voice disturbing my thoughts.

‘No, no, not really. They just frightened the piss out of me. It’s part of it, I suppose, the same way I cut Desh’s hand while you lot all glared at him like death come calling and waited to see if he’d blink. To see if the man will back down, show fear, any of the things we don’t want. It’s not really much different.’

‘Don’t you think it should be?’

I shrugged, and reached for another bottle.

‘I don’t know, Bloody Anne. The more I see of how it is, working for the crown, the more it looks just the same as what I’m used to.’

‘These aren’t gangsters, Tomas.’

‘Aren’t they? I’m struggling to see much of a difference, save we’ve the law on our side, and that only because we fucking write it.’

‘Aye, well, I wouldn’t know,’ Anne said. She drained her glass and thumped it down on the table. ‘I’m going to bed, Rosie will be waiting up for me.’

I nodded and watched her go, then sat and stared into my glass for a long time. I was right, I knew I was, whatever Bloody Anne might think on the matter. She hadn’t been there, and I had. The Queen’s Men worked *exactly* like an underworld crew did, and I wasn’t sure what that meant. Perhaps it didn’t mean anything, but they were certainly nothing like I had ever imagined a secret order of the knighthood to be.

Oh, what would I know? I thought. What does a poor commoner like me know about knights and nobles?

I downed my drink and stood up, and made my way somewhat unsteadily through to the common room of the inn. The innkeeper caught my attention just as I was about to start up the stairs.

‘Oh, Sir Tomas?’ he called. ‘I have a letter for you.’

I held out a hand and he passed me the folded and sealed paper, and I carried it up to my room with me. Once there I examined the seal. Some arms I didn’t recognise were sunk deep into thick red wax. I broke it with my thumbnail and unfolded the paper.

It was a society invitation, I realised, the first one I had ever received addressed purely to me and not simply including me as Ailsa’s husband. It was amazing the difference a knighthood made.

Look at me, Ma, I thought. I’m invited to a ball in Dannsburg.

*

‘Oh gods be good, really?’ Ailsa said. ‘Give it to me.’

I frowned and passed her the invitation. It had been pure chance that I happened to encounter her in the house of law the next morning, but as it turned out Our Lady had been smiling on me that day.

I don't even want to think what would have happened had I been foolish enough to accept that invitation, which, truth be told, I probably would have done otherwise. I greatly dislike balls and society functions even to this day, but something about receiving that invitation in my own name had spoken to my vanity and my pride. Perhaps it had been intended to, I really wouldn't know.

'No, absolutely not,' Ailsa said as she folded the invitation and tucked it into her pouch. 'The *idiot!*'

'Who is he anyway, this Baron Lan Drunov?'

'No one of any real consequence,' Ailsa said. 'He's quite wealthy but not enough to make up for only being a baron, and no longer young enough to still hope to make a better place for himself in society through a fortunate marriage. No, I think Baron Lan Drunov will remain a bachelor for the rest of his life, which I imagine can now be counted in days.'

I blinked at her in surprise. 'What? Why?'

'A ball, Tomas? A *ball* ? The city is in mourning for our beloved queen and will remain so for quite some time. To throw a ball now, nameday or not, is *utter* idiocy!'

'I see,' I said, and suddenly I did.

In Dannsburg, you show respect to the crown.

Perhaps this Baron Lan Drunov never got that note, but somehow I doubted it.

'He's trying to make himself look big,' I said, and laughed. 'Only a baron, as you say, and not quite wealthy enough to make up for it, but if he throws the only social function there fucking is this month then he thinks all the people he wishes he could mix with every day will come just for something for do. The tit's probably invited the fucking Princess Crown Royal.'

I was joking, of course, but the colour visibly drained from Ailsa's face.

'Oh, my gods,' she whispered. 'You might be right.'

She grabbed my arm and almost dragged me down the corridor and up a flight of stairs to the floor where Vogel's office was. She knocked once and went in without waiting to be asked.

‘My apologies, Provost Marshal,’ she said as Vogel looked up at us from the stacks of neatly ordered papers on his desk, ‘but I think this might be important.’

She took the invitation out of her pouch and handed it to him.

Vogel scanned the now slightly crumpled paper, and looked up at me. His eyes narrowed.

‘Have you sent a response?’

‘No, sir,’ I said. ‘Not yet.’

‘Good,’ Vogel said. ‘Do you know who else is invited?’

Ailsa cleared her throat. ‘Not yet, sir, but Tomas said, in jest I admit, that Lan Drunov might have sent an invitation to the palace. I fear he may be right.’

I saw Vogel’s jaw twitch, but no more than that.

‘I see,’ he said, after a moment. ‘Well, we have a day ahead of ourselves, if so.’

He dismissed us then, and the two of us took lunch together in the mess at the house of law. I couldn’t help but keep stealing glances at Ailsa while we were eating, remembering the time we had lived together as man and wife in Ellinburg.

Lady, but she was beautiful.

Fool, fool.

‘Did you have a pleasant time with Billy last night?’ I asked at last, for want of anything else to say.

Ailsa smiled at me, that special smile that I thought only I ever saw. The one that actually looked genuine.

I wished I could tell for sure.

Sister Deceit.

Fucking fool.

‘Oh, I did,’ she said. ‘He’s grown so tall, Tomas!’

‘Aye,’ I said, ‘that he has.’

He’d grown gaunt and tight in the face too, the same way Mina had, and overly bright in the eyes, but it seemed Ailsa wasn’t going to mention that.

I wondered if she had even noticed.

The conversation faltered then, until the door opened and Iagin walked in.

‘Seems you were right, Tomas,’ he said. ‘That fucking idiot sent an invitation to the palace.’

‘Oh dear,’ Ailsa said.

‘Right, so she’s not happy, then,’ I said. ‘What’s the word from the Old Man, Iagin?’

‘We arrest him tonight. Our little princess has a new toy she wants to play with.’

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Chapter 23

Arresting the likes of Baron Lan Drunov was our bread and beer by then, and I won't record the details of it here. Suffice to say we broke into his house that night, Iagin and me and Bloody Anne and some of our boys, and we dragged him out of his bed and back to the house of law with us. The interesting thing happened two days later, in the early evening.

Our little princess has a new toy she wants to play with, Iagin had told me, and I soon learned what he meant. Apparently the crown had some time ago commissioned the construction of a massive new siege cannon, larger than any we had used at Abington. Quite why, or how anyone was paying for it, were questions best not asked. All the same, I was given to understand that the monstrous thing was now complete and awaiting its first live firing.

Perhaps I was being naïve, but I didn't see it coming at the time.

At sundown that day we were outside the city walls, on what is now called Cannon Hill, to the north of the city. The hill had some other name in those days, but I can't remember what it was. Half the fucking court was there, and Ailsa and Iagin and Konrad and me.

The cannon was truly enormous, and I knew it had taken a great number of men and oxen to drag the thing up there onto the hilltop that morning. It had a barrel diameter of twenty inches or more, and it must have been fifteen feet long at least. The barrel was made from great bars of iron hooped with black iron rings, all fused together into one huge mass of hatred and destruction. I couldn't even imagine what it must have weighed, much less cost.

It would have been almost impossible to move under battlefield conditions and it was utterly stupid, but it seemed that the Princess Crown Royal was well pleased with it. She was seated under a black silk canopy atop tiers of hastily constructed wooden benches, commanding a view along the length of the cannon and out into the open farmland beyond.

'Lady's sake, Ailsa,' I whispered to her, 'this is ridiculous.'

'It's Her Highness' will,' Ailsa said, and turned away to make an end of it.

Her Highness' will, I thought. That was all it took, to move this many men and beasts, drovers and carpenters and soldiers and all the other people who must have been sweating blood for the last two days to make this mummer's show happen because Her Highness fucking *willed* it.

That was what royalty could do, even with only twelve years to them.

'Tomas,' Iagin said, appearing at my elbow. 'Come on, let's get a drink.'

There were tents all around the tiers of raised seating, taverners and vintners and folk who were cooking meat on sticks over open fires to sell to the assembled crowd of nobility. Pedlars always appear from nowhere at any event like this, like flies around a carcass. I let Iagin lead me to a tavern tent where we bought mugs of strong beer for a few coppers.

'I'm seeing it, Iagin,' I murmured to him, 'but I still don't quite believe it.'

'What part are you struggling with?'

'The cost of it all,' I admitted. 'The sheer fucking waste.'

'The Old Man thinks it's worth it.'

'Aye, to keep Her Highness happy, perhaps. What does her royal father the Prince Regent make of all this, I wonder?'

'He's not here,' Iagin said, and I frowned for a moment before I realised he was right.

'No, he ain't, is he? Shouldn't he be?'

Iagin's huge moustache twitched as he smirked at me. 'Should he? That would depend on who you ask.'

I supposed it would, at that.

'Aye, well,' I said, and took a swallow of my beer. 'How long?'

'Not long,' Iagin said. 'We ought to take our seats.'

I followed him to the tiers of benches, and we climbed up half a dozen or so rows to find our places beside Ailsa.

'Where's the Old Man?' I asked, as Iagin took a drink and wiped beer from his huge moustache with the back of his hand.

'With the princess,' Ailsa said. 'With the Prince Regent deciding not to join her, he thought she would benefit from a fatherly arm to lean on.'

'This was her fucking idea,' Iagin muttered, but I didn't think Ailsa heard him.

Had the Prince Regent truly decided not to join her, I wondered, or had he been prevented from doing so? He might be back under house arrest

again, for all I knew. By that point it really wouldn't have surprised me to learn that he was.

The sun was setting by then, and before I had finished my beer a fanfare of trumpets sounded. We all turned and craned our necks to look up at the royal box, where the Princess Crown Royal was now up on her feet. Lord Vogel was standing beside her, I noted, wearing the most severe mourning clothes a man could commission. He rested a hand on the princess' shoulder as she spoke in a voice that quivered with the drugs coursing through her young veins.

'My loyal subjects,' she began, 'a time of change is a difficult thing. The death of Her Majesty our royal mother has shocked the realm, but it is my duty and my honour to assure all those here gathered that the crown remains resolute in the face of our enemies. I assure you all, the Rose Throne stands like a rock in the tempest, unassailable and unbreakable.'

I looked up at her, standing there with Vogel's hand resting on her shoulder in a fatherly manner, and I wondered if the little lass had ever known a time of change before in her life. Probably not, I thought.

'And so,' the princess went on, 'in memory of my beloved late mother and in celebration of her noble martial prowess, this evening you, my most loyal courtiers, shall be the first to witness the awesome power of our new cannon. This weapon was my mother's dream, and it stands today as her legacy and her eternal gift to our great nation that remains forever above all others!'

'Good speech,' I murmured.

'It ought to be,' Iagin whispered in my ear. 'I wrote it myself. Her Highness has a good memory for words, I have to give her that.'

I nodded. I hadn't really thought she was speaking her own phrases.

'Before we begin, there is just *one* more thing,' the princess said, and the sudden venom in her voice was plain to hear. 'Bring him forth.'

'Oh gods, she's gone off-script,' Iagin whispered.

Baron Lan Drunov was brought out between two of the Palace Guard, their usual red surcoats replaced with black ones on which the white rose of the royal house stood out stark as moonlight. The poor bastard was still in the same now-stained nightshirt he had been wearing when we dragged him out of his house two days ago, and his bare feet were wet and dirty from the muddy grass underfoot.

A hush descended over the assembled nobles and hangers-on. Even the taverners ceased crying their wares, and I thought that was wise of them. It seemed the cannon itself had been prepared and loaded before we arrived, and had simply been waiting for this moment.

‘This man, the Baron Lan Drunov, has disgraced the dignity of my royal mother, our late and beloved queen,’ the princess continued, and her voice carried like the bolt from a crossbow in the sudden quiet, far louder than it had any natural right to be. ‘In this time of solemn mourning he has sought to hold a ball, for his own aggrandisement and benefit. The Rose Throne is not amused.’

A wooden frame was dragged forward and erected around the gaping maw of the cannon, and the guards tied Lan Drunov to it so that his back was against that awful circle of death.

I swallowed.

I had seen something like this once before, at Abington, but never at anything like this scale. A cannon a quarter of the size would have done the same job, an eighth the size even, but it seemed that the crown had a statement to make.

It made no difference, I knew. There’s a stage at which the thing is guaranteed, and any more is just wastage, unnecessary and pointless. I looked at the massive cannon, and it seemed to me then that the Princess Crown Royal had elevated pointless wastage almost to an art form.

‘For such disrespect to my royal mother’s memory,’ the princess went on, her voice rising in a spitting fury until she was almost screaming the words, ‘I have decreed that the Baron Lan Drunov be wiped from this earth leaving *no trace*, not even his *hair*! *Obliterate him!*’

The princess resumed her seat then with Vogel’s assistance, and we turned our attention back to the imposing bulk of the cannon. The nightmare played out exactly how might be expected, from there. His lands, title and fortune would be forfeit to the crown after this, of course. Those formally executed are expunged from the records, as opposed to the traitors who simply disappear, and their heirs inherit nothing. The public execution of wealthy criminals, dissenters and idiots was a powerful tool of statecraft, everyone knew that. It was also a very fine source of income for the crown’s coffers.

Our little princess has a new toy she wants to play with.

That was probably closer to the truth. The first was cruel but calculated, nonetheless. That was basically business, simply on a greater scale. This, though, this was sheer wilfulness, wild and unpredictable.

I knew which I would rather face.

Once the baron was secured, the guards withdrew and the cannon crew stepped up, and they too wore black tabards instead of the usual red of the army. I winced as the crew chief lit his long firing pole from a proffered torch, and touched it to the top of the cannon where the priming powder had been laid in the bowl.

It caught with a flash, and a moment later the cannon fired.

The noise was like nothing I had ever heard before, like all the guns of Abington firing at once, fit to shatter the sky. Flame and smoke roared, like dragons and death and destruction. I had known it was coming and yet still I wanted to throw myself under the benches, to tear at the ground with my hands and dig myself a hole to hide in like a terrified animal. Anything to get away from the noise, the smoke, the concussive blast of hot air that washed over us.

Not again! Lady have mercy, not again!

Baron Lan Drunov was red mist in the air, and it was done.

Breathe, just breathe.

Think. Think of anything else, anything at all.

Dannsborg, you're in Dannsborg.

Not Abington, that's done.

That's done, and you survived it.

Breathe!

The cost of this, in time and gold, manpower and powder, was staggering. The sheer waste of it, to blast a single fool into pieces. To do what Billy or Mina could have done with a thought, with a gesture.

That wasn't the point, I realised. The point was that with enough money and men and foundries and powder, they *could* do it. The arts of the cannon foundry coupled with the alchemical mixing of the blasting powder and the gold to pay for it all could reproduce the effects of magic. I thought of the house of magicians then, of their vast wealth and great learning, and I wondered what they might truly be capable of. It was no wonder Vogel wanted them under his thumb.

Think of that, think of anything.

Anything but Abington.

Anything but that.
Please, anything but that.

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Chapter 24

It was late when we returned to the house of law, and some quirk of Our Lady's sense of humour contrived to place me alone in the mess with Sabine. She hadn't been up there on the hill with us, so far as I had noticed anyway, but it was plain that she knew what had taken place that night.

'How did you find Her Highness' demonstration, Tomas?' she asked me, a smile playing across her thin lips as she regarded me over the rim of her wine glass.

We were standing beside the table that served as an open bar, and her pale fingers were wrapped around the stem of the glass in her hand in a way that drew attention to her long, black-lacquered nails.

'Wasteful,' I said, before I'd had time to think better of it. 'I've never seen so expensive an execution.'

'We don't have executions here,' she said, and I remembered Ailsa saying much the same thing to me once before. 'Not for traitors, we don't. The gallows are for street scum, for vagrants and murderers and petty thieves. People whose peers might be discouraged by such things, yes; those we hang in public. Political enemies, however, no. Martyrdom can be a powerful thing, Tomas, and we strongly discourage it. We *prevent* it, in fact. Those whose deaths might become a rallying flag to others never truly die, not really. They just disappear. And then there are the third type: the *fools*. Baron Lan Drunov was a fool, and he was given a fool's death. An amusement, you might call it. Were you not entertained?'

I remembered the Lord Lan Yetrov and his bear pit, and his idea of what people found entertaining.

'Not particularly,' I said.

Sabine laughed then, and that surprised me.

'I like you, Tomas,' she said. 'You are an honest man, and honest men are rare creatures indeed in the house of law. Come, sit with me.'

She'll try to seduce you, Iagin had warned me. *She always does*.

'Aye, if you want,' I said, but I was wary as I followed her from the table with its bottles and glasses and over to the end of the room that was set with couches and chairs.

I took a chair, and she settled on a couch across from me. There was a low table between us, but still she felt too close for comfort. She kicked her feet up onto the fabric beside her, showing me the tall heels of her shoes and a flash of pale ankle below her black skirts.

Don't even fucking think about it. She's untouchable.

She was fucking alarming, as far as I was concerned, and I was thinking about anything *but* that. I don't think I had ever missed Ailsa so much in my life as I did at that moment, but she was away with Vogel going over whatever plots they were putting together between them.

Mother Ruin.

Again I wondered where that name had come from. If I ever found out, I was sure I wouldn't like the answer.

'Would you like me to read your cards?' she asked suddenly.

'My what?' I said.

'Your cards, Tomas. Your future.'

She reached into the pouch she wore at her overly tight belt and withdrew a black velvet drawstring bag. Her long-nailed fingers dipped into it and pinched out a fat deck of cards.

Too fat a deck, to my mind. The packs that normal folk played their gambling games with held fifty or so cards, but hers looked to be eighty with ease. That could only mean one thing.

'Witch cards,' I whispered.

'There's no witchcraft in painted pasteboard, but call it what you will.'

'You're a cunning woman?'

She laughed at that, and tipped her glass of wine like blood into her mouth in one long smooth swallow. She set the glass down on the table in front of her and raised one finely shaped eyebrow.

'And if I were?'

I shrugged. 'There's no shame in it. My own lad has the cunning in him, and his woman too. It's a surprise, that's all.'

'Oh, Tomas,' she said, and laughed again. 'I'm no cunning woman, at least not in the way you mean it. Let me draw for you?'

'If you want.'

She shuffled the pack of cards in her hands, her long nails clacking against the stiff pasteboard as she rapidly flicked five cards face down onto the table between us. She looked up into my eyes then, and reached out to turn the first card over.

It was the Ten of Swords, and the image on it depicted a man face down on the ground with ten long blades buried in his back.

‘Oh dear,’ she said.

The door opened then, and Iagin and Ailsa came in together. I glanced over, and caught the flash of alarm that crossed Iagin’s face before he smothered it.

‘Tomas, there you fucking are!’ he exclaimed, as though he had been searching high and low for me. He hadn’t been, of course, or the mess would have been the first place he would have looked. ‘Come on, I need you.’

‘Aye, well,’ I said, and got to my feet.

‘Take it,’ Sabine said, and she held the card out to me between her long-nailed finger and thumb. ‘Keep it with you, Tomas, and think on what it means.’

I blinked at her, but I took it to be polite if nothing else.

‘My thanks,’ I said, although I didn’t understand.

The picture on the card was grim enough, but what it meant beyond that was a mystery to me. If it meant anything at all, of course.

I tucked the card into my pouch and turned and followed Iagin out of the room. As the door closed behind us I could hear Ailsa speaking to Sabine, but my already bad ears were still deadened by the earlier detonation of the cannon and I couldn’t catch her words.

Once we were in the corridor, Iagin turned to me and blew out a breath that made his heavy moustache lift over his mouth for a moment.

‘Fucking *blood*, Tomas, don’t *do* that!’ he said.

‘Do what, talk to Sabine?’

‘Do *anything* to her, or with her, or even be in the same fucking room with her if you can help it,’ he said. ‘She’s poison, Tomas, don’t you grasp that? She’s fucking *ruin*.’

Mother Ruin.

‘Aye, I gathered that,’ I said. ‘Why, though? What does that even mean?’

‘Oh, fucking *fuck*, not now,’ Iagin snapped. ‘Just take my bloody word for it, will you?’

He sighed, and pushed a hand back through his thinning grey hair. I didn’t know if hearing that monster of a cannon going off had affected him the same way it had me, but I didn’t discount the idea. He was of an age to

have fought in the war before mine, in Aunt Enaid's war, and they'd had cannon then too. Either way, he clearly wasn't quite himself.

'Sorry,' he said, after a moment. 'I just . . . well.'

'Aye, it's been a long day,' I said.

'Fucking right it has,' he said. 'I want a drink, and I'm not having it in there with those two. Anyway, I need to show my face to that fucking tit Grachyev. You want to come?'

I looked at him, and I realised how badly he wanted me to say yes.

'Aye, why not?'

*

I had thought we might end up in some midden south of the river that night, but we didn't. Grachyev owned nearly every tavern and inn in Dannsburg, of course, including the one I was staying at myself. Iagin led me to a place called the Horn of Plenty, which turned out to be something between an inn and the sort of brothel where you could spend the whole night if you paid your girl enough.

It was very fancy, to my eyes, almost respectable, and although the women there all wore the bawd's knot, which meant they were licensed, they called themselves hostesses not whores. Apparently that was different, and it cost more. That put them somewhere between the sort of whores I ran back in Ellinburg and courtesans like Lady Reiter, so far as I could see, and that made sense. Part of me started wondering if it was something we could set up back home, before I remembered that I didn't have time to do that sort of business any more. Maybe I'd send Rosie and Bloody Anne over there one night, though, and see what they thought of the idea.

'Come through to the back,' Iagin said.

I followed him across the common room and past a hulking doorman, who nodded respectfully to him as we passed. He led me into a plushly furnished suite of rooms that obviously weren't open to the public.

Grachyev was in there, reclining on a red velvet couch with a fat sheaf of papers in his hands. He was a heavyset man with some fifty or so years to him, with dark hair and pockmarked cheeks and a large gold ring set with a black stone on the third finger of his right hand, and he was an utter tit.

He looked up from his papers as we came in, and Iagin gave him an insincere bow.

'Boss,' he said. 'You remember Tomas Piety, from Ellinburg?'

‘Mr Piety,’ Grachyev said, raising himself from his padded velvet couch to shake my hand. ‘Good to see you again.’

‘Mr Grachyev, it’s an honour,’ I lied, and I returned his grip with a nod of respect that I didn’t feel.

He was no one, of course, not really. Iagin ran Grachyev’s organisation in Vogel’s name and no doubt funnelled most of the money into the coffers of the house of law. Grachyev himself was just a figurehead, and a completely ignorant one at that. He had no fucking idea, and for that I could almost feel sorry for him.

Almost, but not truly. Grachyev was a fool, and I have no time for fools.

Still, that night I drank with one, and we made merry like any group of friendly businessmen would. Iagin and I at least were drinking away the memory of what we had witnessed that night, and I think Grachyev was just pleased to be among what he thought of as the right sort of people. I was Iagin’s guest and I’d met Grachyev before, and those things meant that I didn’t have to spend a copper penny in the Horn of Plenty that night. There was no charge for a friend of Mr Grachyev’s, that was plain enough. I drank the very best brandy with them both that night, probably more of it than I should have done. I was offered the company of a hostess on the house too, but I declined. I’ll run whores, aye, but I can’t make myself want to lie down with one.

I mean no disrespect to the profession, of course, but to my mind closeness with a woman is a good deal more important than fucking is, and you can’t feel that with someone you don’t know. I thought of Ailsa then, and I wondered how close we still really were.

Not so close as I would like, I thought, as I swallowed my brandy and poured myself another.

Fool, I told myself. *Drunken, fucking fool.*

Chapter 25

It was very late when I returned to the Bountiful Harvest, beginning to get light in truth, but as I had expected, the lamp was still burning in Billy's room. I paused outside for a long time, my fingers tracing the shape of the card in my pouch.

Should I truly do this? Should I give credence to a stupid superstition that probably meant nothing?

Mother Ruin.

She had got that name from *somewhere*, after all. Eventually I tapped on his door and went in. He was awake, as I had expected.

'What is it, Papa?' he asked me.

'Do you know the witch cards, Billy?' I asked him.

He shrugged, and he got that sulky way about him then that lads that age often get when they want to be good at a thing and aren't.

'Old Kurt taught me some,' he said. 'I don't know them as well as Mina does. Mina's better, but you didn't let her come with us.'

'Aye, well, no, I didn't,' I said. 'All the same, Billy, can you read a card? It was the first one dealt for me, but then we were interrupted so that's all I've got. Can you read a card like that?'

'Suppose,' he said, and he held his hand out for it. 'I can try, anyway.'

I fished in my pouch and produced the now slightly creased pasteboard that was painted with the image of a fallen man with ten long blades buried in his back.

'Here,' I said, and passed it to him. 'What do you make of that, then?'

'The Ten of Swords, Papa?' Billy asked me. 'The Ten of Swords means back-stabbing and treachery. It means defeat and betrayal, ruin and endings and loss. Is that what we're here for?'

'I hope not, lad,' I said. 'I really fucking hope not.'

I sighed, and looked at the boy. He had been sitting up in his bed when I came in, his book and his quill and ink beside him on the night table next to the burning lamp, and he didn't look like he had slept at all. He was showing little interest in his formal schooling, so his tutor had told me, but at the cunning he worked tirelessly. His face was thin and drawn, his eyes

overly bright in the shadowed hollows that surrounded them. He really didn't look well at all.

'Are you all right, Billy?' I asked him.

He looked down at his blankets for a long moment without speaking.

'I miss Mina,' he said at last.

'I know, son,' I said. 'It's a hard thing, to be separated from someone you . . . well. There it is.'

'Love, Da,' he said, and he met my eyes. 'The word is *love*. It won't kill you to say it.'

It was like Billy could see into my soul, sometimes, and I still wasn't comfortable with that. Not at all I wasn't.

'Aye, you're right. Someone you love, then.'

'Like you love Mama,' he said.

That was the voice of Billy the Seer, Billy who was always right when he said a thing. I swallowed, and for a moment I felt cold down to my boots. Did I love Ailsa, truly? Was that what he was telling me?

Fool.

Of course I didn't, not after what she had done. Forcing me into the service of the crown, bombing the Wheels and killing hundreds of innocent people in the process, deserting me when my usefulness to her was over but I needed her the most. How could I love her after that? I had sobered up a bit since I left the Horn of Plenty, and I knew that was a fool's thinking.

Aye, that's exactly what it was.

Fucking, fucking fool.

I held Billy's gaze for a moment, then I had to look away.

My eyes were stinging with tears and I didn't want him to see them.

*

Drink always makes me maudlin. I know that from long experience, and I had to allow I'd had a fair bit to drink at the Horn of Plenty that night.

All the same, when I woke late the next morning my thoughts were still of Ailsa. We *were* close, in our way. We had never been physically intimate as man and wife, no, but we understood each other and we respected each other, and when the pressures of business weren't in the way, I liked to think that we enjoyed each other's company. I enjoyed *her* company, I knew that much anyway. She had done things that had hurt me, aye, but then I had once tried to fucking strangle her so I reckoned we were even on that score.

I lay there in my bed for a long time, staring at the beams that crossed the low ceiling of my room and thinking about Ailsa while I waited for my brandy headache to abate. Eventually there was a knock on the door, and a moment later Bloody Anne came into my room with a mug of small beer in one hand and a plate bearing black bread and salt pork in the other.

‘It’s time you got up,’ she said. ‘There’s work to do.’

I pinched the bridge of my nose between finger and thumb, and sat up in my blankets.

‘What work?’

Anne put my breakfast down on the low table beside the bed, and I grunted my thanks. I wanted a piss before I did anything else, but I wasn’t doing that in front of her if I could help it. We weren’t in the army any more.

‘What do you think?’ she growled. ‘There’s another warrant come from the house of law for you, Tomas. More arrests, more deaths. It’s what we do now, apparently.’

With that she turned and stalked out of the room, and closed the door behind her.

Anne wasn’t easy with what we were doing here, I knew. She had made that plain enough, and I understood it, but all the same it saddened me to see that look on her face. Like she felt she didn’t know me any more. Was I so very changed from how I had been in the war, when we had become firm friends?

I thought on what I had seen the evening before. I had watched a man be blown apart on the whim of a mad princess, and I had taken it in my stride as simply part of my job. Perhaps I had changed some, at that.

I got up and had a piss and a wash, then sat down to my breakfast.

I found I could take no joy in it.

Eventually I got dressed and went downstairs to find Rosie waiting for me in my office. She was sitting at the table with a mug of small beer at her elbow, going through a pile of papers.

‘What’s the lay of things?’ I asked her. ‘Anne said there’s work.’

‘Aye, there is,’ Rosie said. ‘This came for you.’

She passed me a document, and I recognised Vogel’s spidery signature at the bottom before I even looked at the rest of it. Rosie had already opened the sealed letter, of course, but I found that I was happy enough with that. I needed someone who could sift the great volume of paperwork

that came with being a Queen's Man, and only trouble me with the things that actually mattered. Rosie would keep my secrets as she had kept Ailsa's before me and Heinrich's before that.

I looked at the document, and what I saw didn't surprise me.

It was a death warrant like Anne had said, of course it was.

Another one.

I scanned the page for a moment before my tired eyes picked out the key name.

'Arch High Priest Rantanen,' I said, and for a moment I couldn't quite believe what I was seeing, much less saying. 'The highest fucking priest in the country. He conducted the queen's own funeral, for Our Lady's sake.'

'You're not quite awake yet, are you?' Rosie said.

I shook my head and sat down at the table, still staring at the paper in my hand.

'Apparently not,' I said.

'He conducted Her Majesty's funeral,' Rosie said, echoing my words. 'I weren't there, but I still know what happened. Too many people know what happened, Mr Piety. The common folk listen to a High Priest, and folk repeat what a High Priest says. Folk listen even harder to the *Arch* High Priest, and many of them believe a man that holy ain't even capable of lying, so if *he* says a thing then it's true. Best if he doesn't say anything more about it, wouldn't you agree?'

'Aye,' I had to say.

Again I wondered if Anne truly knew what sort of woman she had fallen in love with. Rosie was as common as me, not an aristocrat like Ailsa, but she was every bit as deep in the Queen's Men as my own lady wife was. Rosie understood business the way it was done in Dannsburg better than I did myself, I realised. I knew she had been right, before. I *should* be making better use of her than I had been.

'How the fuck are we going to do this, then?' I asked her.

She looked surprised that I had asked, and perhaps pleased about it too. All the same, she shook her head.

'It's going to be a bugger of a job, Mr Piety,' she admitted. 'There's no getting to him in that fucking temple, that's for sure. The place is guarded almost as hard as the house of law is.'

'Rosie,' I said, 'seeing as we're plotting the murder of the Arch High Priest together, I reckon you can call me Tomas now.'

That made her laugh, and she raised her mug of beer to me before she took a swallow.

‘Aye, good,’ she said. ‘You’re maybe starting to trust me at last, aren’t you?’

‘I am,’ I said, and I meant it.

She nodded, and showed me a smile that said she appreciated it.

‘Well, I’ve got some questions out on the streets already. I still know some of the working girls in Dannsburg from back when I was a kid. Those of them who are still alive, anyway. There ain’t no priest so holy he doesn’t like his cock sucked now and again, in my experience, and someone’s bound to know something. Luka’s on it as well, greasing palms around the taverns and baths and gambling houses like he does. Between us we’ll find out where this bugger goes and what he likes to do when he ain’t in the temple, you mark me on that, Tomas.’

I did, I realised. Rosie was a skilled, experienced spy, and I marked her very well indeed.

I just hoped that Bloody Anne did as well.

Chapter 26

We went two nights later.

Some of Rosie's working girls knew one of the Grand High Temple's junior priests, as it turned out. One of them knew him very well indeed, and she knew what he liked and how to make him talk. He gave up his boss in the end, as many men will when they find themselves faced with a saucy wink and a promise and a pretty face.

People are so fucking weak, in my experience, and everyone has a lever that moves them. Father Braun was moved by sex, and that was cheap enough in Dannsburg. That a man of stature like him could be moved by something so base and easily obtained was disgraceful, but priests are only human, after all. I of all people should know that.

Braun told Rosie's friend that Arch High Priest Rantanen actually *was* celibate, much to her surprise, but apparently he had a shocking weakness for gambling. Worse than that, and utterly inexcusable to my mind, he was shit at it. The Grand High Temple of All Gods itself was in debt to the tune of some hundred and thirty thousand gold crowns, so we heard, and all due to the weaknesses of its Arch High Priest.

Of course, he could hardly frequent the public gambling houses of the city. A man in his position had to be *seen* to be holy, and it wouldn't have done for any of his highborn congregation to have recognised him in whatever gaming rooms they themselves might frequent. No, the Arch High Priest had to find private tables to play at, and naturally Fat Luka had already discovered where those tables were. That was what I paid him for, after all.

That was the night when I began to fully appreciate how the power of the Queen's Men really worked, in Dannsburg.

It's a thing that has to be understood, I think, that the great unwashed masses have the potential to carry the power in any centre of population. They might not have the money, no, or the influence in politics, but there are a fucking *lot* of them. I remembered when I had been arrested in Ellinburg the previous year, and how hundreds of common folk from my streets had come to watch me be released the next morning. That could

have gone another way, of course. If I *hadn't* been released, there would have been a riot up there on Trader's Row. A riot that could well have brought down Governor Hauer right there and then.

I remembered the battle of the Stink, and how *that* had ended once I had the massed population behind me.

Aye, the common folk had power through their sheer weight of numbers, but only if they had someone to lead them. When I became the governor of Ellinburg I had shown them the other side of that coin and no fucking mistake. I oppressed them with an iron boot because the crown had told me to, and they had no one left to stand up and tell me 'no'. *That* was how business worked.

This was no different, I realised. In Dannsburg the Queen's Men had the biggest iron boot anyone had ever seen, and they had it pressed to the throat of the general population until any and everyone bowed down at the mere sight of the Queen's Warrant. Without credible leaders, the working classes were easy pickings for the insidious power of the Queen's Men.

The key to every door in Dannsburg.

It was that, all right. There was no one in Dannsburg who would refuse the authority of the Queen's Warrant. No one save for traitors, anyway, and traitors could be killed on sight.

That was a self-fulfilling prophecy, of course. Obey, or die.

That was the power of a god indeed.

Vogel was removing those potential leaders one by one, and he wasn't finished yet. By then I was prepared to go along with anything, absolutely *anything* to unite the country and stop the coming war.

Fucking, fucking fool.

*

The place was called the Spring of Mercy, and it was a public baths.

I had Bloody Anne and Oliver and Emil with me that night, and we were dressed in our best finery but we wore our weapons out in plain sight. The Spring of Mercy was owned by Grachyev, because of course it fucking was. I had cleared this with Iagin in advance, and we were expected.

That was good.

The place was in a rich part of the city, facing onto a grand square with fountains and a stone plinth that held a great bronze statue of some cavalry general on a rearing horse. I had no idea who he was, or had been, but the thing was impressive, nonetheless. The bath house itself was no less

impressive, with a wide façade faced with columns that supported a heavy portico over the double doors of the entrance.

There were two men on those doors, ushers or attendants or whatever you were supposed to call them in polite society, but guards are guards and they were quite plainly that. They were Grachyev's men, though, or more likely Iagin's, and we were waved inside without a second thought.

We walked in like gangsters, like we owned the fucking place, all swagger and weapons and attitude. In business as well as in battle, an approach always has to be tailored to the terrain, to the place and the time, the job or the mission at hand.

This was the right approach for the right time.

There were hostesses here too, pretty ones and lots of them, and boys that I supposed you'd call hosts. Footmen holding trays of drinks sweated through their fancy livery in the steaming humidity.

The Spring of Mercy was frequented by the very rich and the very nervous, and, looking back on it after what we found in there, I realised that these were people who knew they were doing awful wrong and yet who still tittered to each other about it behind their towels and their wine glasses.

They were cunts, the lot of them.

The bath house itself was a small part of the business, I discovered, but even so there were people there who really didn't want to be seen. Although we strode past the steaming green marble pools with their cavorting naked bodies without a glance, I knew there were folk in there who would be begging their political contacts for clemency and anonymity the next morning.

The Queen's Men don't officially exist, no, but *everyone* who matters in Dannsburg knows one when they see one. In Dannsburg the Queen's Men are the big bad wolf that will fucking eat you up, and there's no joking about that.

Heads turned to watch us as we marched through the bathing rooms. I heard sudden hushed and urgent conversations, but I let it pass. The baths and the whores and who was fucking who weren't important. It was the gaming rooms I was interested in, and they were at the back of the building. There was a huge, stone-faced man on the door between the baths and the back room, and perhaps he hadn't got the note about what was happening that night.

Not that he could read anyway, I was sure.

‘Let us in,’ I said.

‘Who the fuck are you?’

‘My name is Tomas Piety,’ I said.

‘So what?’ he said.

He looked like he was going to make something of it, of me and my cadre of heavily armed thugs wanting to come through his door, but if he truly didn’t recognise us then he was only doing his job and I could respect that. He had the look of a veteran about him, and I would have hated to have to kill him over something that wasn’t his fault.

Of course, I *didn’t* have to.

‘Perhaps someone failed to give you our descriptions,’ I said. ‘I am Tomas Piety, from Ellinburg, and this is my second, Bloody Anne. We’re those friends of Iagin’s you were told to expect, and told to welcome. I don’t feel welcome.’

‘Iagin’s . . . oh, shit. Sorry, boss,’ the man said, as realisation dawned on him who we were.

He stepped smartly aside and held the door open for us.

Connections, power, influence. Those open doors too, and with a lot less alarm being caused than waving the warrant about when it wasn’t absolutely necessary.

Me and Bloody Anne and Emil and Oliver walked in there with all the authority of Mr Grachyev’s name, and that underwritten by the power of what I carried in my pouch.

Perhaps I had been feeling slow that night, I don’t know, but I didn’t see it coming.

I had thought it passing strange, I’ll admit, that there should be a gaming room hidden behind a public baths in a city where gambling houses were perfectly legal. There was a reason for that, of course, but it wasn’t anything I had expected. I hadn’t expected it because I hadn’t really given it any thought, and that was a failure on my part. I promised myself then that I wouldn’t make that mistake again.

Up until that moment I had just assumed that Arch High Priest Rantanen liked to bet on cards like the other rich folk did, but it seemed I was wrong about that. There was a reason this place was secret. Gambling houses might be perfectly legal in Dannsburg, but slavery very much wasn’t.

It was horrendous.

Slave pits, that was what confronted me in the back room of the Spring of Mercy.

If ever a place was misnamed, this was it. There was no mercy here. The smell was foul but still there were twelve richly dressed patrons in there, lounging on couches with drinks or poppy pipes in their hands as they watched two poor, naked, filth-caked wretches beat each other to death with their bare hands in the circle of Hell below them.

I'd never seen the like before but I'd heard tell of it, during the war. I'd heard it in the sort of tall stories that soldiers tell each other, when they're trying to drown out the horrors of the day with tales of even worse things that someone they said they knew had seen once, somewhere they had never been.

All those old soldiers' stories came back to me then, and I realised that some of them were true after all. I knew how this worked.

The pit-fighters fought to the death, and the winner got to eat.

It was as fucking simple as that.

These poor bastards were starved to the point of madness and then offered food, if they would just kill each other for it.

Hunger can drive people to obscene extremes. I had seen that in the war. I had seen it in Messia, and I had seen it again when we finally broke the siege of Abington and saw the horrors that had been going on within the walls of the city. They were eating their own dead in Abington before the end, and we had heard tales of children being killed for meat by the starving soldiers. Tall tales, perhaps, but you never could know for sure. After what we had seen in Abington, I could honestly have believed it.

Here in the Spring of Mercy those hellish conditions were being recreated, on purpose, for the entertainment of the sort of people I wanted to stamp on until my boots were wet.

They had bloodthirsty smiles on their faces, those rich men and women, and sometimes someone called out a new bet or perhaps a word of encouragement to the fighter they had backed. It reminded me in a way of Lord Lan Yetrov's bear pit, but for all his faults Lan Yetrov had at least seemed to care for his prize bear, if not for his own wife. The slaves here obviously weren't treated half so well as that bear had been. It reminded me of the bear pit, and of Messia, and of the burning rubble of Abington.

I didn't want to remember any of those things.

Something happened to me then, happened in my mind, and I don't know what it was. I'm no doctor, and I'm no philosopher either, but I know *something* happened even if I can't put words to what it was.

The fighting pit was open at the top and the couches were arranged around its upper edge, but beyond it I saw the caged top of the other pit, where the slaves . . . no. No, I can't bring myself to write 'lived', because they didn't, not really. Where they clung to existence, perhaps, in conditions worse than any I had seen even at Abington.

There were fifty men at least crammed into a space not twenty feet across, sitting in a reeking mud of their own shit and piss. No one seemed to have noticed us come in, so intent were they on their vile sport, so I took a moment to survey the faces of the patrons.

After a moment, I saw him.

There he was, the Arch High Priest Rantanen, the holiest man in the land.

He was masturbating under his robes with a glass of wine in his free hand as he watched one of the men in the pit drive his thumbs into the other's eyes so hard that one of them burst in a squirt of jelly and clear fluid.

'Oh, jolly good show!' shouted a tall fellow with perhaps twenty-five years to him, with long oiled ringlets of hair sticking to the sides of his sweaty neck. 'Blind the dirty bastard, and I'll throw you half a loaf!'

I think I wasn't quite of sound mind, right then. I walked straight up behind the tall man's couch, and I found that I had Mercy in my hand. That seemed appropriate to me, given the name of the place we were in, so I stabbed the cunt through the neck.

That got their fucking attention all right; had them off their couches and shouting in moments.

'Sit down!' Bloody Anne roared in her best sergeant's voice, and that stilled them where they were.

Even the men in the pit stopped fighting for a moment, to see what the commotion was.

I held up the Queen's Warrant in my hand, Mercy still dripping red in the other. The man I had stabbed slumped sideways off his couch and hit the floor like a sack of wet shit.

'My name is Tomas Piety,' I said, 'and you're under arrest. The fucking lot of you.'

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Chapter 27

I'm not made quite right in the head, I know I'm not.

I never have been, and as my aunt had once told me, there was no blaming the war for it. I've always been that way. There's a thing people have in their minds, a thing that makes them able to care about people they don't know.

I haven't got that bit.

The cold devil my da left me with has no love in its heart, and there's nothing to be done about it. I am the man that I am. Even so, something in me changed that night. I stood there, in that dark place, and I found that I *did* care. I cared about those poor, filthy wretches, caked in their own shit and the shame of what they had done to keep from starving.

I didn't know them, no, but something in my memories of the horror of Abington made me feel like I understood them. Maybe I saw myself in them, or at least what I could have become. We had eaten rats to survive in the siege lines, and on the other side of the walls men had supposedly eaten children. As I have said, they had certainly been eating corpses, we saw proof enough of that when the city fell. Would I have been any different, if I had been on the other side?

No, of course not.

People are what they are, and the human survival instinct is very strong. When it comes to it, right down to the extreme, there's *nothing* you won't do to survive.

Nothing at all, and you're fooling yourself if you think otherwise.

No, I didn't think badly of those men who had murdered each other with their bare hands for a crust of stale bread. I would have done the same thing, in their position.

Anyone would.

These others, though, these rich men and women who had put them in that position for their own entertainment, to watch them fight and debase themselves in their manufactured desperation, those I thought very ill of indeed.

‘You,’ I said, pointing to an older man in the livery of the house. He was the only one there who wasn’t obviously a guest or a footman. He had no tray of drinks or poppy pipes in his hands, so he must be the one in charge of the operation. ‘Come here.’

He swallowed and took a step towards me, the colour draining from his face as he saw the look in my eyes.

‘Tomas,’ Anne said, but I ignored her.

‘Right here,’ I said, pointing to a spot on the ground in front of me.

He took another step, then another, until he was where I wanted him.

‘Keys,’ I said.

He reached into his pouch and produced a pair of heavy iron keys joined on a thick metal ring, and he held them out to me. I just stared at him until Anne reached out and took them.

‘Open the cage,’ I told her.

‘Tomas, are you sure?’

‘Do what I fucking tell you,’ I said quietly, never taking my eyes off the man in front of me.

I heard Anne move away, heard the sound of the key in the lock then the squeal of rusty hinges as she lifted back a section of the cage that covered the slave pit. The slaves roared their hatred, clambering over each other in a futile attempt to reach the surface.

‘Oliver, Emil,’ I said. ‘Take this cunt and throw him in that cage.’

The man before me broke, all at once.

‘No, *please!*’ he screamed. ‘You can’t *do* that!’ ‘I am a Queen’s Man,’ I said, my voice taking on the flat tone of murder and justice. ‘I can do anything.’

Oliver and Emil took an arm each and dragged the pleading man away, kicking and thrashing helplessly in their grasp. I watched them drag him all the way to the lip of the open cage, where Bloody Anne stood with an unreadable look on her face. I watched them throw him in, and then I turned away.

The sounds alone were enough to tell me what was happening down there.

‘Arch High Priest Rantanen, come here,’ I said.

The priest lurched up off his couch and tried to run.

‘Anne,’ I said.

She drew and threw with the fluid grace of a hunting cat, and the dagger slammed into the back of his meaty thigh and dropped him to the flagstones with a thud, his hamstring severed. I walked slowly towards him, until I was standing over his prone form.

‘I have a death warrant in your name,’ I said. ‘I want everyone here to understand that. That’s the only reason I’m here, because of you. If it wasn’t for you, you disgusting piece of shit, I wouldn’t be here at all. If it wasn’t for you, all these other disgusting pieces of shit would have continued to get away with it. So, I thank you for that.’

He twisted on the ground and looked up at me through his pain, trying to understand my words.

‘I thank you,’ I said again, ‘and for that I give you Mercy.’

I raised Mercy and rammed her into his crotch, thrust her up into his bowels and twisted the blade savagely as I ripped it free in a spray of dark blood.

He shrieked like a butchered lamb as blood and reeking filth gushed out of him onto the ground. It would take him a long, agonising time to die from a wound like that.

Good.

There were only four of us and still ten patrons and three footmen in there with us, but they were utterly paralysed with terror. The Queen’s Men had come for them at last, and they knew they had nowhere to run to.

I found myself remembering an old childhood rhyme, from when I was very little:

*Here comes the boggart to snip off your head,
Here comes a Queen’s Man,
And you’re better off dead.*

There was a truth in that, I realised that night.

‘Line them up against the wall,’ I told Oliver.

He and Emil did as I said and they went meekly enough, these rich folk and their complicit servants, and no one gave us any trouble. They simply didn’t dare. They were dead folk walking, all of them, and I could see that they knew that. The only thing still in their power to affect was how painful the manner of their dying would be, and I thought that they understood that too.

‘You’ve three choices,’ I said. ‘The house of law, the pit, or my blade. Choose.’

A stunned silence fell.

‘There’s thirteen of us, you fools!’ a richly dressed and clearly panicked woman cried. ‘Rush them!’

Anne stepped forward and hammered a dagger into the woman’s throat without a moment’s hesitation.

She dropped to the floor at Anne’s feet, and there was no more talk of rushing us.

‘Don’t you know who I am?’ an older man blustered, his face red with wine and fury and fear.

‘Aye, I do,’ I said, although I didn’t have the faintest idea, ‘and I don’t give a fuck.’

‘I have influence within the palace! I demand a fair trial!’

‘House of law, then,’ I said. ‘That’s your choice. What about you?’

The man next to him quailed, perhaps wiser than his fellow, and shook his head. I gave him Mercy through the chest.

‘How about you?’

No one chose the pit, and that was wise of them. Six of them in all requested the house of law, seeking to misplace their faith in the courts. The others I killed where they stood. That was how I did justice that night, and I didn’t think it unfair.

I sent Emil to speak to the stone-faced man on the door, explain who we really were and set him to send a runner to the house of law for guardsmen and manacles, and for food and clothes and blankets for the slaves. I had only been expecting to arrest the Arch High Priest at a card table, and I was hopelessly unprepared for what I had found instead.

I had fifty men, innocent so far as I was concerned, to be freed and cared for.

And then what?

Turned out onto the streets, where they would be hanged for vagrancy.

Those were the times we lived in.

*

I led them out in the end.

There wasn’t a soul left in the bath house by then, which was no surprise. The place was soon full of guardsmen and shouting, and the filthy slaves were fed and doused one at a time in the pools of the public baths until they were at least half presentable. The water was black by the time it was done.

I left Arch High Priest Rantanen beside the empty slave pit, mewling and dying in his own filth where he belonged. Anne had retrieved her dagger from the back of his leg and I supposed someone would dispose of the body later, but it wouldn't be me.

Fuck him.

'M'lord,' a voice said beside me. 'Give me a moment?'

I turned to see a naked slave, a huge man even thin as he was, the wasted muscles of his once-massive chest and shoulders looking like dried meat under his pale, greyish skin. He was bearded like they all were, red haired and taller even than Simple Sam was, back in Ellinburg. Before his starvation he must have been truly enormous.

'What is it?'

He looked at me for a long moment, then he bowed his head and went down on one knee at my feet.

'I would swear my service to you,' he said. 'I'm a soldier, and I can see that you are too. You're the sort of man I could follow. I'm still strong, and that's because I got to eat most days. You know why.'

He had killed a lot of men with his bare hands, that was what he was telling me. I looked down at him, looking for the sort of madness you might expect to find in a man who had been through that, but I didn't see it. He was simply telling me what had happened, and trusting that I would understand why he had done what he had.

And I did.

As I have written, I would have done the same thing.

'What's your name?' I asked him.

He shrugged. 'Don't matter,' he said. 'I had a name once, but here they called me Beast, because I was one. I embraced it, and I became it. I'm just Beast, now.'

'You're a soldier,' I said. 'How did it come to this?'

'I came back from Abington, same as you did,' he said. 'I was a stoker, before the war, ever since I were a lad. In one of the big foundries. An honest working man. I shovelled coal into the furnaces all day, and I got big and strong doing it. Then I went off to war, and when I came back I found I didn't have the stomach for helping to make cannon no more. The war did bad things to my head, I don't have to tell you about that. It did to us all. I didn't know how to do nothing else. My wife had taken up with another man while I was off fighting and she'd left the city, and taken our children

with her. Our house was gone, so I found myself out on the streets. Three offences and you'll hang for vagrancy, but not if you get picked up by some priest who says he'll take you in and feed you. He brought me here, and you know the rest.'

I clenched my teeth, and strained my damaged ears until I could hear the Arch High Priest's dying screams coming from the back room. Right then I wished I had given him to Ilse instead.

'Aye,' I said, after a moment. 'Might be I could use a strong man who knows his way around a fight. You understand that I'm a Queen's Man?'

Beast nodded. 'I know,' he said. 'I can live with that. The gods know I've lived with worse.'

'Well and good,' I said, and I beckoned Bloody Anne over.

'Problem?' she asked, her hand on the hilt of one of her daggers.

I shook my head. 'This is Beast,' I said. 'He's just joined our crew. Beast, this is Bloody Anne, and she's my sergeant and my second. You'll do what she tells you.'

Beast got to his feet and looked Anne slowly up and down, and for a moment I thought there might be trouble. Then a great grin split his red-bearded face.

'I know you,' he said, and he started to laugh. 'You're the Bloody Sergeant! I've fucking heard of you! Even in my regiment, we'd heard of you.'

'Aye, maybe you have,' Anne said, and there was almost a blush of colour on her cheeks. 'That's done with, though. This is what we do now.'

'Aye,' he said. 'I'll do what I'm told, Sarge.'

'Call me Anne,' she said. 'Come on, let's find you some clothes.'

That was how a man called Beast came to work for the Queen's Men.

Chapter 28

I wanted a fucking word with Iagin.

The Spring of Mercy was owned by Grachyev, and that meant Iagin must know all about it. I had thought better of him, but it seemed perhaps I had been wrong about that. I slept poorly that night, thinking on those things, and on Beast's story, and what I had seen. Very poorly indeed, twisting in my sweaty blankets in an endless nightmare of the war. Of the war, and of what could have come afterwards.

If things had been different for my brother and me, I knew, it could have been either of us out on those streets. It could have been one of us picked up and lured into that pit by false promises and simple hunger. People may revere the *idea* of heroic veterans, but they very seldom have the time or the charity for the broken, battle-shocked men and women that are the reality of what war produces. I had seen too many heroes starve and freeze to death in doorways to think otherwise.

I found Iagin at the house of law the next morning. I found him in the mess, and I found him *hard*.

He was up against a wall with my hand around his throat and the point of Remorse pressed into his stomach before I knew what I was doing. The look on his face told me he could see I wasn't fucking around.

'Slaves?' I hissed in his face. 'Fucking pit fights at the Spring of Mercy, Iagin? *Really?*'

'What the living piss are you talking about?' he asked, and to his credit there was neither guilt nor fear on his grizzled face. 'What slaves? The Spring of Mercy is a bath house and a brothel with a gaming room out the back, I told you that.'

'Aye, you did,' I said quietly, and a thought struck me. 'Have you ever *seen* that gaming room, Iagin?'

He frowned for a moment.

'No,' he said at last. 'Grachyev owns every tavern and inn and whorehouse in the whole fucking city, just about. I've not been in every one of them; I haven't got the fucking time to hold his hand every minute of the day and do this as well. What *are* you talking about, Tomas?'

I took a moment to think on it, then I let him go.

‘You really don’t know, do you?’

‘I know you’d better have a fucking good reason for what you just did,’ he growled at me as he rubbed his neck where I had grabbed him, but there was no mistaking the curiosity on his face. ‘I don’t let just anyone do that to me and get away with it.’

I took a breath, then I sat down and told him what I had found at the Spring of Mercy the night before. Before I was done talking, Iagin had poured brandy for us both and joined me at the table. It was only an hour past dawn, but right then I didn’t care. I took the glass and drank, and I was glad of it.

‘I had absolutely no idea,’ he said when I was done, and I believed him.

‘No,’ I said, and realised that I was fighting tears. ‘No, I never really thought that you did. I . . . I’m sorry. There was this man, a soldier, and he was . . .’

I found I didn’t have the words in me. That was Beast’s story to tell if he chose to, not mine, and I wouldn’t shame him with it even in private.

‘Aye,’ Iagin said, cutting me off to spare me from myself. He was a good man, was Iagin, and I could tell that he understood these things. I would have bet gold that he was a veteran himself. ‘A lot of men came home from the war and found they didn’t have a place in the world any more. If someone has been preying on them, then I want to know who it is.’

‘I already know that,’ I said. ‘It was that excuse of an Arch High Priest, who’s no longer among the living, and it was your fucking friend Grachyev too. He might be only a pretend gangster, Iagin, but he’s been pulling at least one trick behind your back and maybe more. He knew *all* about that place, he must have done. There’s no way someone could have been running those pits in his business without him knowing about it.’

Iagin slammed a hand down on the table between us, making our glasses of breakfast brandy jump and slosh.

‘Cunt!’ he said.

That about summed it up, to my mind.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘You up for paying him a visit?’

‘Oh, yes.’

*

Iagin strolled into the Horn of Plenty like he owned the place, which of course he effectively did, and I was right behind him, and Anne and Emil

and Beast were right behind me.

Beast looked a lot better for another bath and a shave and some proper clothes that actually fitted him. He'd had a haircut too, and enough food to feed a family for a week, but he still had a hungry, haunted look about him. I thought he probably always would, after what he had been through.

'Is the boss in?' Iagin asked the man at the front counter.

'Aye,' he said, 'but it's a bit fucking early for him. I'll tell him you came by, once he surfaces.'

'No,' Iagin said, and his tone gave the man pause. 'You won't. You'll point me to his room and then you'll keep your fucking mouth shut.'

'Top of the stairs,' the man said, and he swallowed. The look on Iagin's face told him all he needed to know about which way the wind was blowing that morning. 'The royal suite. It'll be locked, but here's a key.'

Iagin nodded and took it, and up we went behind him. Anne directed Emil to stay there with the man on the desk, to make *sure* he kept his mouth shut.

We went up two flights of wooden steps, past the hostesses' rooms, and up to another landing where the royal suite apparently took up most of the top floor. There was little enough there for royalty, I was sure, but it was certainly fancier than any other whorehouse I had ever been inside. The door was fine carved oak, secured with a big iron lock. Iagin slotted the key and it turned with a click, and he threw the door open.

A massive bed dominated the room, canopied and curtained and wide enough to sleep eight with comfort. The curtains were drawn back and I could see there were only three in there, white and brown and black bodies entwined in the morning sun that streamed through gaps in the closed shutters.

The white was Grachyev, naked and pale like a slug. The other two were obviously hostesses. All of them were sound asleep and snoring, passed out on wine or brandy or poppy resin. I didn't know which, and I really didn't much care.

'Get the women out of here,' I said, and Anne stepped forward without hesitation and gave each of them a hard slap across the face.

'Fuck off,' she told them, as their eyes opened in groggy indignation. 'Right now. I fucking mean it.'

They fled, naked and uncaring. Anyone waking up to see that much fury on Anne's scarred face above them would have done the same.

That just left Grachyev, then. He rolled over into the warm place left by one of the fleeing whores and let out a slow fart.

‘Wake him up, Beast,’ I said.

Beast walked over to the massive bed and stood there for a moment looking down at Grachyev. I had explained to him on the way there who this man was, and what he had done. Beast took a long breath, then he punched Grachyev in the balls, as hard as he could.

Grachyev woke with a strangled gasp, sat bolt upright in the bed and vomited explosively all over his bare chest and stomach. He rolled over onto his side with both hands clamped to his crotch, sobbing pathetically.

‘Good one,’ Anne said, with a nod of approval.

We waited a moment for Grachyev to get himself under some semblance of control.

‘Morning, boss,’ Iagin said, his voice flat and emotionless.

Grachyev threw up some more, then crawled to a dry bit of the bed and attempted to cover himself with one of the many quilts that were strewn across it.

‘What . . . what is this?’ he wheezed. ‘Iagin? *Piety*? I . . . I have no quarrel with Ellinburg!’

‘Perhaps not,’ I said, ‘but I have a fucking quarrel with *you*, Mr Grachyev. My friend Beast here has a bigger one.’

Grachyev blinked at Beast, and it was clear that he had absolutely no idea who he was.

‘I don’t understand,’ he said, his voice coming out in a pitiful whine that made me want to stab him right there and then. ‘We . . . we are all businessmen, here.’

‘No,’ I said, ‘we’re not. You *think* you’re a businessman, but you ain’t one. Iagin and me, we’re Queen’s Men.’

I gave him a moment to take that in, watched the storm of emotions that crossed his face as he thought on what I had just said.

Disbelief, fear, denial, anger.

Terror.

‘You . . . you *can’t* be.’

‘I’ve been taking you for a cunt for a very long time,’ Iagin explained, and his tone was almost kindly. ‘But it seems you tried to do the same thing to me. I’m not having that, you see.’

‘The Spring of Mercy,’ I explained. ‘I went there, last night. I didn’t like what I found out the back. I didn’t like it one fucking little bit.’

‘It . . . it serves a need,’ Grachyev said. ‘A gap in the market. There are people, *important* people, who—’

‘I know there were,’ I said. ‘I killed most of them last night, and by now the rest of them are in the house of law and are probably fucking *wishing* that I had.’

‘You’re a fucking puppet, Grachyev,’ Iagin said. ‘You always have been. If you had just danced on your strings like you were supposed to, you could have kept being a big man for the rest of your life, rich and protected. You fucking idiot. Now I’ve got to start all over again with some other prick.’

‘We can negotiate,’ Grachyev said. ‘Let’s do business. Let us find our way to a mutually beneficial arrangement. I can be quiet. I understand how business is done.’

I shook my head slowly.

‘No,’ I said. ‘You really don’t.’

This pointless asshole had no fucking *idea* how business was done. He might be able to trot out the right words when it suited him, but he was no more of a gangster than Hanne was.

‘Iagin, please.’

‘No,’ Iagin said. ‘You’re done.’

‘Beast,’ I said.

That was all he needed to hear.

Beast was a long way from recovered to his former strength but he was still the man who had got to eat more days than not, back in the pits. He was the man who had survived, through sheer determination and bloody ruthlessness. Beast had beaten Lady only knew how many men to death with his bare hands, and now he took the three steps he needed towards Grachyev’s bed, and he started.

He started his road to recovery right there, at the bedside of the man who had sent him to Hell. I honestly thought I could see Our Lady smiling down on him, in that moment.

He was one of Hers, and no mistake.

He was one of *us*.

The first blow smashed Grachyev’s jaw, stunning him. The second fractured his eye socket. The third shattered it, forcing bone fragments into

his eyeball. The fourth pulped it beyond saving. The eye fell out of the ruin of his skull, dangling from a twisted rope of gristle. Beast punched again and again until his head was black and unrecognisable. Grachyev flopped feebly on the bed, and blood ran from his ears as he mewled like a newborn.

Anne turned away, and she threw open the shutters and stood staring out of the window into the yard behind the inn while Beast worked. She was my conscience, because Lady only knew I didn't have one of my own any more. I watched Beast work, and beside me Iagin did the same without flinching. We were cut from the same cloth, Iagin and me, I realised. I wondered where he had been in *his* war, and what he had seen there, and what he had done. I knew he would never, ever tell me.

Beast started on Grachyev's body, caving ribs into organs until his breath came in bursts of bloody, dying froth.

He didn't stop until his fists were red and dripping, and it was over. That was how justice was done, in those times we lived in.

Chapter 29

In the house of law, it is hard to tell whether a person is crying and screaming with fear, or pain, or madness. Sometimes it's all three at once. The first of the men I had arrested at the Spring of Mercy, the one who had been so sure that I must know who he was, had apparently been a member of the governing council and the closest political ally of the First Councillor.

He wasn't any more, not since the night a week ago at the Spring of Mercy when he had disappeared.

Lord Vogel was well pleased with that.

'Councillor Hristokov has been most informative,' Vogel said to me in his office that evening. 'He has given us a great deal of names, under Ilse's questioning.'

I was sure he had. Under Ilse's questioning he had probably given us the names of everyone he had ever fucking met, just to make her stop.

'Aye,' I said, for want of anything better to say.

'Oh, I know, Tomas,' Vogel said, and he smiled in a way that I couldn't find it in me to trust. 'You're bored, aren't you? Constant arrest warrants are a waste of your skills. Don't worry, I'll give them to Konrad. He likes nothing better than sending people down to the cells, and he likes it all the more when they are people he knows.'

Brother Betrayal, I thought.

'Aye, well,' I said. 'I'm not like that.'

'No, I know you're not,' Vogel said. 'Each of my Queen's Men have their own special skills, and I can make better use of you than this. You, Tomas, are justice walking; punisher and protector both. You are Brother Blade, after all, and your blade is double-edged.'

'What do you have in mind?'

'There's a young boy of ten years,' Vogel said. 'A cousin of the royal house. He's the son of the Grand Duke of Varnburg, who you may have met at court. The duke is the Prince Regent's oldest friend and has lived in Dannsburg for many years, but the boy remains at home in the Sea Keep with his mother and a cadre of tutors and guards.'

I actually hadn't met him, so far as I knew, but I remembered what Ailsa had told me of the Grand Duke of Varnburg. He was the queen's cousin and next in the line of succession after the Princess Crown Royal. *He is a . . . difficult man*, she had said.

'Sabine's just come from Varnburg,' I said, before I had time to think better of it.

Vogel looked at me for a long moment without speaking.

'She has,' he said at last.

I decided it was probably best to withhold any more opinions on that subject. All the same, I could see where this was going. Vogel wanted the boy as a hostage to encourage the duke to become somewhat *less* difficult, that was plain enough.

'And you want this little boy kidnapped, do you?' I asked, already dreading the answer.

'Absolutely not,' Vogel said, which was both a relief and something of a surprise. 'Quite the opposite, in fact. I want him protected, Tomas. I want him protected at all costs, and brought here safely to the capital. Varnburg is too far north for comfort. The Skanian trade ships dock there, and who can tell when there may be assassins hidden among their crews? This little boy, you see, is next in the line of succession after our own beloved Princess Crown Royal.'

I frowned at that, thinking on what Ailsa had told me about the order of succession. 'Surely that would be his father the Grand Duke, the queen's own cousin?'

'No. Well, yes, at this precise moment. Not by the time you return with the boy.'

I met Vogel's soulless eyes, and I understood. This was a further consolidation of power, of undermining the prince's support in the palace. The Grand Duke was the Prince Regent's oldest friend, apparently, and right then that was a very unhealthy thing to be. With him and Hristokov both gone, First Councillor Lan Letskov and the Prince Regent would both be nothing but powerless figureheads, and Vogel's newly united and loyal governing council could rule as they saw fit.

'Go to Varnburg. Attend to the boy, tell him of his father's sudden and tragic passing from an attack of the heart, and that he is Grand Duke now. You have a son yourself, you'll know the right sort of thing to say. I've

noticed that you are good with young people, Tomas, in a way that the majority of my Queen's Men are not.'

I thought of Konrad, of Sabine and Ilse, and I had to allow that he was probably right about that.

'Take the two women in your service with you,' Vogel continued. 'The boy is used to the company of women, his mother and tutors and so forth. They may help put him at his ease.'

Neither Anne nor Rosie were exactly what you might call motherly, but I'd work with what I had. Rosie might manage sisterly at a push, I supposed, and that gave me an idea.

'Yes, sir,' I said. 'My Billy too. Another lad will do the young duke good.'

Vogel waved a hand in a way that said he wasn't interested in details, just results.

'Whatever you think is best,' he said, and with that I was dismissed.

*

'Where?' Anne said blankly when I told them.

'Varnburg,' Rosie said, repeating my earlier words. 'It's north and west of here, on the coast. A port city, but more than that I don't know, and I don't know a soul there either. We'll be going in blind, Tomas, and I don't like that.'

'No, nor do I,' I said, 'but it's where we've been sent. What do we know of this Sea Keep?'

Rosie spread her hands helplessly.

'It's the seat of the Duchy of Varnburg,' she said. 'Other than that, fuck all, I'm afraid.'

Beast cleared his throat. The huge man had barely left Anne's side since that day at the Spring of Mercy, and he was standing behind her chair now like a bodyguard with his head almost brushing the ceiling of the Bountiful Harvest's private dining room. He was rapidly beginning to regain his truly impressive bulk. He had been eating like a horse ever since he had been freed, and had taken up lifting heavy barrels and sacks of grain in the stable yard of the inn whenever he had the chance. I thought he was probably already stronger than me and Jochan combined.

'Something on your mind?' I asked him.

'My wife was from Varnburg, sir,' he said. 'We visited her family there a time or two, her mam and da and that. I know my way around the place.'

Might be I could help.'

'Aye,' I said. 'I reckon you could, at that. All right, you're coming.'

'When do we leave?' Anne asked.

'Tomorrow,' I said. 'Lord Vogel isn't a man you keep waiting when he sets you a task.'

'It's a long way,' Rosie said. 'Three weeks at least by carriage, probably more like four. That's if the weather holds fair, and the year isn't getting any younger. I'll organise what we need for the road.'

I nodded and let her get on with it. Rosie knew what she was about. Riding would have been quicker than a carriage, of course, but we could scarcely expect a grief-stricken ten-year-old Grand Duke to travel so far ahorse in late autumn weather and Rosie had seen that. I was fast coming to realise that she was very, very good at this.

The year was beginning to turn by then, as Rosie said, and her point about hoping the weather held was a good one. If it didn't we could be a month and more getting to Varnburg and even longer returning, and I didn't want that. I offered up a silent prayer to Our Lady for fair travelling, knowing as I did it that it was futile. Our Lady didn't answer prayers, after all.

If She had, I wouldn't have been in this situation in the first place.

*

Our Lady and the Stormlord were both kind, or more likely indifferent, and the weather stayed fine and dry as our carriage made its slow way through the countryside on the long road to Varnburg. The land was streaked with the rich colours of autumn now, the harvest long since brought in, and everywhere around us ploughmen toiled to turn their fields in preparation for the late planting. The journey took us weeks and I'll not record the details here, save for one thing.

There was a night we stopped at a country inn at the crossroads of a little market town, our great carriage looking out of place in a yard crowded with simple carts and wains. This was farming country after all, and although the common room of the inn was warm and the food hearty, it was plain our faces didn't fit there.

I had left Fat Luka behind to mind my affairs in Dannsburg, and Oliver and Emil to mind him, so it was Anne and Rosie, young Billy and Beast and our coachman and me that sat down in a room filled with ruddy-faced farmers and their sons and daughters and wives. We were too well dressed

for that company and we had come in a carriage, and while the threat wasn't open it was there nonetheless, simmering under a surface tension of people who had worked their hands raw on the ploughs all day. I could understand hard work, coming from the Stink as I had, but I am a city man born and bred and I've never worked the land a day in my life.

After a while it became uncomfortably apparent that our clothes and our carriage weren't the real problem. Anne and Rosie were visibly together, and why not? In Dannsburg and even Ellinburg no one gave them a second look for that, but here? Here perhaps it was different, as it had been in the village where Anne grew up. Rosie's bright-red hair and the yellow cord knotted on her shoulder were drawing stares that I didn't like. The three farmers at the next table to us were becoming increasingly loud in their derision, one older man and two burly youths who might have been his younger brothers or eldest sons.

'It's like the fucking city air makes people forget what they've got between their legs and what it's for,' one said, loud enough to be overheard, and I saw Anne stiffen in irritation.

'Aye,' said his fellow. 'Women are supposed to lie with men, not each other, it's only right. It's what the Harvest Maiden intended. I've said it over and over again. T'ain't right, otherwise.'

'Give it a rest now, boys,' the older farmer said. 'You're just flogging a dead whore.'

He smirked to say he had misspoken on purpose, and the two young men with him snorted laughter.

Anne wasn't laughing, and neither was I.

'Is that supposed to be fucking funny?' Anne rasped as she turned in her chair to face them, her voice dropping into the low tone of danger to come.

That, I thought, had been a very unwise thing to say in front of Bloody Anne. I thought about telling her to be calm, and decided against it. Why the fuck should she be calm, in the face of that?

'It's just a jest,' the man said, but I could tell he had read the look on her face and not liked what he had seen there.

His face flushed, darkening to the colour of salted gammon as the room fell silent around us.

'You make jokes about dead whores?' Anne whispered.

'Anne, love, I've heard worse,' Rosie started, reaching out to put a restraining hand on her arm, but Anne shrugged her off and rose to her feet.

‘Da,’ Billy started, but I cut him off.

‘Hush now, lad,’ I said. ‘Not yet. Not at all, if we can help it. Not here.’

The last thing we needed was the boy unleashing his cunning for all to see in a place like this. Witchcraft, they’d have called that, I had no doubt, and then we’d have had the whole town to face instead of just a handful of drunken farmers.

‘Come outside with me,’ Anne said to the red-faced man. ‘Come outside and explain your fucking *jest*.’

He stood up and so did his two friends, and I rose too and then Beast got to his feet beside me and that put a stop to that right then.

‘This is between my friend and yours,’ I said. ‘Best not interfere, lads.’

Beast folded his huge arms in front of his chest and treated them to a glare, and they sat down again and stared into their mugs of beer, not meeting his eyes.

‘Outside,’ Anne said. ‘Now.’

The farmer touched the knife at his belt and spat on the floor, and he marched purposefully out of the inn into the yard where the shithouse was. He had balls, I had to give him that. I wondered how much longer he was likely to keep them.

I had long since learned that Bloody Anne fought her own battles and that I should leave her to it if I knew what was good for me. I slowly regained my seat and picked up my brandy glass, but I didn’t drink. The farmer’s two friends or brothers or sons were still casting dirty glances my way when they thought I wasn’t looking, but it seemed the sheer size of Beast was enough to dissuade them from doing anything more. That was wise of them.

A minute or two later Bloody Anne stalked back into the inn and sat down at our table. She picked up her brandy and knocked it back in a single swallow, and Rosie poured her another in silence from the bottle we shared. The two farmers at the next table got up and hurried out into the yard.

They didn’t come back again.

‘That’s done, then,’ Anne said. ‘He ain’t dead, before you ask, but he won’t be walking any time soon.’

I saw the smile on Rosie’s face, and I admired it. There was pride in that smile, and there was love too.

‘Good,’ I said, and left it at that.

‘Can I ask you something, boss?’ Beast said.

‘Aye, course,’ I said, and swallowed my brandy. ‘What’s on your mind?’

‘That warrant of yours ain’t magic, is it?’

‘No, Beast, it’s not,’ I said. ‘It’s a symbol of royal authority, and that’s powerful enough, but that’s all it is. There’s no magic in it.’

He nodded thoughtfully. ‘Didn’t think so,’ he said after a moment. ‘So if that had gone bad, out here in the country where you’ve no City Guard to back you up . . . it wouldn’t have turned out well for us, would it?’

‘We’d have had a fight on our hands, aye,’ I said.

‘There must be forty of the fuckers in here,’ Beast said.

‘I didn’t say we’d have won,’ I said.

Beast blew his cheeks out in a sigh, and I poured him another drink.

‘This is dangerous work we do,’ I reminded him. ‘I don’t believe I promised you otherwise when you joined us.’

‘Perhaps not,’ he said, and took a sip of his brandy. ‘I’m not a coward, boss, I just want to understand how this works, that’s all.’

‘Aye, that’s fair,’ I said. ‘I’m no magician, Beast, but if it ever all looks like it’s going down the shithouse, you remember one thing – Billy here is.’

Beast turned and stared at the boy, his eyes widening in his scarred face.

‘Your lad?’

‘Aye,’ I said, and Billy flushed slightly at the attention. ‘Billy is a cunning man the likes of which even the house of magicians fears.’

‘Fuck,’ Beast said, and I found I could only agree with him about that.

‘We ought to go to bed,’ Rosie said, and Anne nodded and swallowed her second brandy before she stood.

‘Aye, let’s do that,’ she said.

They walked away from the table and up the stairs together holding hands, and no one said a fucking word about it.

Chapter 30

I had thirty-seven, maybe thirty-eight years to me at the time, and I had never seen the sea before.

Varnburg was magnificent. The city was walled, the harbour fortified with great arms of stone that reached out into the bay and sheltered the various tall ships and little boats that bobbed calmly at their moorings within its comforting embrace. Beyond, the sea was a wild animal of greys and greens and white. A fierce wind was blowing from the north and the water hurled itself against the harbour walls, throwing great plumes of foaming spray twenty feet and more into the air. It was very, very cold.

We were standing on the high cliffs within the city itself, looking down past the round towers with their bristling cannon that guarded this vital port from the constant threat of invasion, and over the roofs of the dockside wharves and warehouses. The smell of salt was strong, the air singing with a freshness that I had never known before in my life. We were so far from the piss-reek of Ellinburg's tanneries and the death stench of Abington that I could have wept for joy.

'Thought you'd want to see it, boss,' Beast said quietly beside me, and all I could do was nod.

'It's incredible,' Anne said quietly, and on instinct I reached out and took her hand.

She squeezed my fingers in her callused palm for a moment, and I knew we were feeling the same emotions. After how we had both grown up – in different places and different ways, perhaps, but with no happier an outcome – after all we had been through together in Messia and in Abington, the sea was a revelation.

It was cleansing, somehow. Awe-inspiring. Wondrous.

It went on forever, stretching out to the distant curve of the horizon where the sky met the endless water in a haze of silver light. The waves rushed in, rolling curls of foam chasing each other one after another after another like it would never end, like the very edge of the world.

'What's out there, Papa?' Billy asked me.

‘I have no idea,’ I said, and I smiled at him. ‘Sea monsters, perhaps. Strange lands, stranger gods. It could be anything, lad.’

‘Skania is out there, beyond the horizon,’ Rosie said.

I gave her a look. Aye, she was right, of course she was, but couldn’t she let me have this one moment of wonder with my son? No, no, of course she couldn’t. We were Queen’s Men, and wonder is a luxury not permitted to us. We deal in facts and suspicions, not wonder and joy. There is no place for joy in the Queen’s Men.

‘Aye,’ I said, and I swallowed the bitterness in my heart with the salt tang of the air. ‘We’ve work to do.’

Anne let go of my hand at once, and I felt the loss of her touch as keenly as a pang of guilt. That moment was over, just another thing the Queen’s Men had taken away from me. I turned to Beast.

‘I need to find the Grand Duke,’ I said. ‘His son, I mean. The heir. His boy.’

I was babbling, I realised, falling over my words in a fast-failing attempt to keep from weeping. My first sight of the sea had affected me in a way I hadn’t expected. To have that wonder taken away from me so soon had hurt, and I won’t lie about that. I could have stood there for hours just watching it, but life isn’t always what we want it to be and my cold devil knew that better than most. That devil hardened my heart now and I turned my back on the magnificent vista and looked up into the city itself, at the stout stone buildings and the distant spire of their Great Temple of All Gods.

‘Well, sir,’ Beast said, ‘I know I told you I knew the city, and I do, but I ain’t the sort to have mixed with dukes. I know where to get good food, where to find a bed without too many lice in the mattress, and which taverns don’t water their beer, but I’ve never found no duke’s son before.’

‘The Sea Keep,’ Rosie said at once, and pointed up across the wide esplanade where we were standing to the heights of a great square stone building that was flying the royal standard. ‘That’s where he’ll be, Tomas.’

The huge red and white banner snapped and cracked in the wind, so obvious I felt something of a fool for not having noticed it myself. The majesty of the sea had stolen my senses, I am ashamed to admit, and diverted my attention away from the real things that mattered in the real world. Joy has no place in the life of a Queen’s Man, I should have realised

that by then. I stamped on my emotions with all the ruthlessness I could muster and gave Rosie a nod.

‘Aye,’ I said, ‘of course. Come on, then, let’s get this done.’

We made our way through streets that thronged with people of all colours and creeds, surrounded by conversations in a dozen languages that I didn’t know. I saw dusky Alarians, blond Skanians, and men and women darker of skin than Black Billy was. From Varnburg our country mostly exported wool and broadcloth, leather goods and wine and brandy, and we imported silk and salt and lamp oil, spices and hemp and tea, along with iron to meet the growing demands of our foundries. That much at least I had learned from the books in the library of the governor’s hall back in Ellinburg. There were merchants in the streets from perhaps as many as twenty countries I didn’t even know the names of, if not more.

I am not an educated man, and although my brief time in school had at least taught me how to read and write and figure simple accounts, I knew little of history and nothing at all of geography, and that shamed me now. I resolved then that when I had the time, if I ever had the time, I would remedy that. I thought of the great library in Dannsburg, and the university, and all the knowledge they must contain. I thought I might enrol Billy there as a student, when he was older. As the son of a wealthy knight he had no need of a trade, of course, and would live the life of a gentleman, but to my mind a gentleman should know certain things. I didn’t, and I wouldn’t have my son carry that same shame. No, I would see him educated one way or another. All the same, such thoughts did nothing but remind me how much Lord Vogel seemed to hate those noble institutions of learning and want to shut them down.

I wondered why that was.

Ill-informed and ignorant people are easier to suppress and control.

Ailsa had told me that once, and I dare say she had the right of it.

‘They’ll know us there,’ Rosie said, breaking my train of thought. ‘They’ll know the Queen’s Warrant, at least. The Sea Keep holds to the queen’s peace.’

‘Aye, that’s good,’ I said, but I was beginning to wonder if it truly was.

*

We presented ourselves at the gates of the Sea Keep at dusk, Anne and Rosie and me. We had left Beast and Billy and our coachman at the inn Beast had found for us close to the city gates. A sliding hatch in the door

opened, and the narrowed eyes that looked out were about as welcoming as you might expect. One did not call at the door of a duchess uninvited, after all. I said nothing, just held up the Queen's Warrant and let the guardswoman on the other side of the great oak-and-iron doors stare at it until the realisation sank in.

The Queen's Men had come to her door, and no good ever comes of that.

At last the sally port opened, and the guardswoman offered a stiff bow as we filed inside.

'My lord,' she said, her voice cracking in a dry mouth.

The Queen's Warrant conveys fear wherever it is shown, and that's a thing that has long interested me. If you've done nothing wrong then you have nothing to fear, but everyone fears the Queen's Men. Does that mean that everyone is hiding some wrong or another? I doubted it, but what would I know? That was a philosophical question, and I knew little of philosophy. What I did know was that I was now standing in the great hall of the Sea Keep of Varnburg with Bloody Anne and Rosie at my side. That was all the crew I needed that night, and that meant it worked and in Our Lady's name fuck *why* it did, it just did and I would take that and be thankful for it. Results were what mattered, not the how and the why of it. That wasn't my problem. I'm just a soldier, and I follow my orders.

I was just following orders.

*

The lad was in floods of tears, and that was only to be expected.

'I'm sorry, Your Grace,' I said, in the private family drawing room I had been reluctantly shown into. 'Your father suffered an attack of the heart. It was very quick, and he would have felt no pain.'

'Your Grace is my father, not me,' the boy managed through streams of snot. 'He's . . . he's my *papa*!'

He broke down once more, and I cleared my throat and sat forward on the plush red velvet couch I had been ushered to by a terrified-looking footman. Anne and Rosie were waiting in the great hall while servants and messengers hurried back and forth. There were Queen's Men in the Sea Keep, and all was in turmoil and disarray.

'I know, son,' I said. 'I know, and it's a hard thing, but there it is. You are the Grand Duke of Varnburg now, and you are needed in the capital.'

The newly made Dowager Duchess of Varnburg was dry-eyed, her expression murderous behind her expensively made eyeglasses. Their gold half-moon rims shone in the lamplight as she stared at me over the finely ground lenses. She had some forty years to her, I supposed, although something in her manner made her seem much older.

‘Sir Tomas,’ she said in a voice cold enough to have frozen the sea itself. ‘Marcus is not *your* son, as I am quite sure you are aware. He is *mine*. I will thank you to address him in the style he has so suddenly inherited.’

‘Of course, Lady Varnburg,’ I said, and bowed my head. ‘My apologies, Your Grace.’

The lad waved my words away and blew a great bubble of snot from his left nostril as he sobbed, somewhat robbing himself of his noble countenance. The tutor who had brought him into the room produced a silk-and-lace handkerchief from her sleeve and handed it to him, and he blew his nose into it with all the dignity of a cart horse. The price of that handkerchief could have fed a family in the Stink for a week at least, I was sure.

Perhaps Varnburg wasn’t so very different from the capital, when all was said and done.

‘You absolutely cannot take my son away from me,’ the Dowager Duchess pronounced. ‘I will not allow it. He is only ten.’

‘With all respect, my lady,’ I said, ‘I can and I will. I have the Queen’s Warrant.’

‘And I have three hundred guardsmen loyal to the Duchy of Varnburg. How many men did *you* bring with you, Sir Tomas?’

Her face was like granite, and I had to agree that she made a strong argument. All the same, I was acting on Lord Vogel’s orders and I knew very well that failure wasn’t an option.

‘Let’s start again,’ I said, spreading my hands in what I could only hope was a conciliatory gesture. ‘I mean no threat or ill by my words, but here are the facts of the matter. Young as he is, your son is now the Grand Duke of Varnburg, as his father was before him. He is needed at court, to represent his duchy and his people. Surely you understand that.’

‘I understand that a Queen’s Man is trying to take my son away from me,’ the duchess said. ‘I remember the last Queen’s Man who came calling at the Sea Keep, that *woman*!’

Sabine, I thought. Oh, in Our Lady's name, what legacy had she left behind her?

'I know nothing of that,' I said.

The duchess cleared her throat and looked into the fire that crackled and spat in the great stone hearth, and for a moment there was almost an expression on her face.

She'll try to seduce you, Iagin had said. She always does.

I wondered what exactly had happened when Sabine came calling on the Grand Duchess of Varnburg, and decided that I really didn't need to know.

After a moment the duchess reached out and took a sip from the tall glass of dark wine on the table in front of her.

Wine like blood, I thought. Mother Ruin.

'You wish to take my son away from me,' she said, her voice somehow becoming even colder. 'I will not permit it. However, I am not a fool, Sir Tomas. I understand that if I eject you from the Sea Keep and send you home with your tail between your legs, soldiers will come from Dannsburg. If I have you murdered and your body dumped in the harbour, soldiers will come from Dannsburg. If you simply suffer some misfortune on the road home through no action of mine, soldiers will *still* come from Dannsburg. That is the reality of how the provinces are ruled from the capital. Very well, if it must be so then it shall. Marcus will go to court, but you will *not* take my son away from me. I am coming with you.'

I hadn't been expecting that.

'It's a long way,' I said.

'I have carriages and coachmen,' she responded.

'The roads can be dangerous.'

'I have guardsmen, as I may have mentioned. We will have an armed escort, as befits my son's new status. A large one.'

I looked at the Dowager Duchess of Varnburg, and for the first time in a long while I felt like I might have met my match. She had a great deal in common with Ailsa, it suddenly occurred to me, although her dark hair was streaked with grey in a way that Ailsa would never have allowed and there was no paint or powder on her face, so far as I could tell. All the same, there was a singleness of purpose and an iron will about her that very strongly put me in mind of my lioness. This one was protecting her cub and

no mistake, and I could see she was prepared to go to war to do it if she had to.

‘Aye,’ I said at last. ‘That’s fair.’

‘It was not a request, Sir Tomas,’ she said. ‘It was a statement of fact. I am coming with you.’

Well, that was something to look forward to.

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Chapter 31

I was sad to leave Varnburg behind, and wished I could have spent more time there. I will never forget my first sight of the sea. That aside, the journey back to Dannsburg was a trial. The Dowager Duchess had brought fifty men of the Sea Guard with her, far more than I was comfortable with, but there was little enough that I could do about it. As Beast had said, the Queen's Warrant had no magic to it and it worked only as long as everyone agreed that it did, and then in truth only when it was backed up by the power of the City Guard or the army.

Out here on these country roads, where there were no guardsmen and no witnesses, it worked purely on loyalty and fear of consequences. If the Dowager Duchess had ordered me murdered I would have died on that road, Billy or no Billy, and all the wrath of Lord Vogel and the army of Dannsburg wouldn't have brought me back to life again after the fact. But as a Queen's Man there *would* have been consequences to my death, brutal and bloody ones, and the duchess obviously understood that. Lord Vogel's reach and power was well understood by the aristocracy, and no one had the appetite to test him. That was wise of them, and it certainly served my own primary interest of surviving the journey home. Even so, I don't think either Beast or Bloody Anne slept more than three hours a night each for all the four weeks it took us to return to Dannsburg in the worsening weather. They took turns in standing guard over me every night, and I owed them both a great debt of gratitude for that.

It was a lesson to me, it has to be said, in just how much fear the Queen's Men inspired that no one even attempted to kill me, for all that I knew they must want to.

Anne was dozing on the bench of our carriage beside me that afternoon as our coachman led us ponderously behind the ridiculously ornate conveyance of the Grand Duke, drawn by eight beautiful grey horses and flanked by mounted Sea Guard with tall spears held upright at their stirrups. Rain was falling outside again, threatening to turn into sleet at any moment and churn the road into mush beneath our wheels. The young Grand Duke and his mother stayed within their own coach, and I offered up a silent

prayer of thanks to Our Lady for that. Billy had worked hard in the evenings to build a friendship with Marcus, as I had intended him to do, and he frequently rode in the Grand Duke's carriage with the lad and his obviously disapproving mother. That she allowed it at all proved that Billy's company was helping her son through his grief, and that was good.

'We're coming back to that town,' Rosie said from the bench across from me, jolting me from my reverie. 'Jordan's Field, where Anne had her fight with that arsehole and his jokes about dead whores.'

We were, I realised. I was slightly surprised that she had remembered the name of the place, but of course she had. It seemed to me that Rosie never forgot anything. I nodded to her in understanding.

'We've fifty armed men with us now,' I said. 'I don't think we'll have any trouble this time.'

'Aye, I know,' she said, and she looked up at me with a hard expression in her eyes. 'I want to burn the place to the fucking ground.'

She had a passion about her that I had never seen before. Rosie took most things in her stride, but it seemed that this was different. *Burn it to the cuntin' ground*, I had told Billy, that night two years ago when we had stormed the Stables and rescued those underage boy whores, but that had been different. That had been personal. Perhaps for her this was too, in its way, but I knew I couldn't allow that. Not when we were on official business I couldn't. Things had changed since the Stables. Too many things had changed, and not all of them to my liking.

I looked at her for a long moment, then I shook my head.

'No,' I said at last. 'No, I can't have that. I know you want to, Rosie, and I understand why, but we can't do that.'

'You've got the Queen's Warrant,' she spat at me. 'You can do fucking anything.'

'Aye, I can,' I had to agree, 'but that doesn't mean that I should. Would Heinrich have done that?'

'Don't you use his name against me,' Rosie said, but I could see the doubt in her eyes.

'He wouldn't have, Rosie, and you know he wouldn't,' I said. 'The power of the Queen's Warrant is to be used sparingly, and only when it's needed. All the Queen's Men know that. Would burning a market town truly change the minds of country folk on a matter most of them don't even understand? Of course it fucking wouldn't, and Heinrich would have seen

that as well as I do. We'd end up blade to blade with our own countrymen, and for what?'

'For my life,' Rosie said quietly. 'For my and Anne's right to live our fucking lives.'

'Aye,' I said. 'I know, Rosie. I know, but it's not something that's in my power to change. We'll be back in Dannsburg soon enough.'

'So that's it, is it? We're allowed to exist in the cities, but woe fucking betide us if we venture outside them?'

'That's not . . .' I started, but perhaps it was. Perhaps that was what the world was like for Rosie and Anne, Cutter and my brother and all those like them. I had to admit that I really didn't know, and for the best of me I couldn't see my way to ever understanding something I was so far away from. 'I don't know, Rosie. Our Lady doesn't much care who anyone lies with, so long as both are willing, but they hold to other gods out in the countryside. The Harvest Maiden, mostly.'

'The Harvest Maiden is a goddess of fertility and love,' Rosie said. 'Doesn't say nowhere in the scriptures love between who and who.'

I could only shrug. Anne's village had held to her Stone Father, who I didn't know, and apparently He had very much cared about such things. To my mind that only meant He had too much time on His hands and couldn't be much of a god worth knowing, but what would I know? I was an unwilling army priest of the fucking death goddess, for Our Lady's sake, and pastoral ministry wasn't really one of my skills.

'You know she loves you,' I said.

Anne's eyes opened then, and she smiled at Rosie across the carriage in a way that said she had been awake for the last few minutes at least.

'I do,' she said.

*

Little enough else happened on our journey home, until the night Billy burned the inn down. Lady's sake, I could have done without that.

We had only been a few days' travel from Dannsburg at that point, so close I was already making plans for my return and how the fuck I was going to explain the Dowager Duchess to Lord Vogel. Billy and Marcus, the young Grand Duke of Varnburg, were firm friends by then. I could tell that Marcus, starved of the company of his peers throughout his sheltered aristocratic upbringing, looked up to Billy. Billy was five years his senior, and he had been a soldier after a fashion. He had fought in a war, anyway,

and in the way of young lads he had told Marcus all about that in the tedium of the carriage rides and the dull evenings in roadside inns. He boasted of it, of course he did, and had made a performance of showing the lad the evil little knives he carried, and how to hold them the way Cutter had taught him. He had barely fifteen years to him, so far as anyone knew, and I remembered well enough what I had been like at that age. Billy was young for his age too, as I have written, and I could see he soaked up the young duke's adoration.

Oh, aye, Marcus looked up to Billy and Billy loved every moment of it, and I could understand that. What I couldn't understand was what the fuck had gone through Billy's head the night he took it upon himself to show Marcus the cunning.

The two lads had been up in Marcus' room in the inn, and perhaps Billy had had more beer than he was accustomed to. Most of us were drinking in the common room and the Dowager Duchess had retired to her bed complaining of one of her frequent headaches that were a transparent excuse not to mix with the rest of us. That was well and good, as I hardly craved her company any more than she did mine.

All was well until the screaming started, and the smell of smoke began to fill the common room. By the time everyone was up off their arses and moving, it was too late. The top floor of the inn was ablaze, the fire well into the thatch and nothing to be done about it by then but run. The lads came pounding down the stairs safe and well, if sooty, thank Our Lady, and the duchess and her maids were hot on their heels as the burning rafters began to fall in above their heads.

We spent an uncomfortable night in our carriage that had been hastily moved to the village green while the inn blazed and fell in with a great shower of sparks. Billy was with us, being quite clearly no longer welcome in the duchess' carriage with his terrified young friend.

'What the fuck did you do?' I asked him quietly.

'I just wanted to show him, Papa,' Billy said. 'Wanted to show him the cunning. What I can do.'

'Aye, you can set fires,' I said. 'You can fucking well put them out too. I've seen you do it. What happened?'

'I . . . I couldn't,' Billy said, and he started to cry. 'It got away from me. Should have set it in the grate, not . . . not there. I don't know. It was too much. It just got away from me. I'm sorry, Papa!'

I glared at him.

‘I should box your ears for showing off, Billy Piety,’ I told him, but of course I didn’t really mean it. I’d have no more hit my Billy than I would have done my own ma. ‘Don’t *ever* fucking do that again. Oh, come here, lad.’

I pulled him into an embrace, and held him as he shivered and wept into my shoulder, and across the green the inn burned to the ground.

I’d had fifteen gold crowns with me and I gave them all to the innkeeper to make it right with him. That was far too much, as no one had actually died, but that wasn’t the point. The point was that I had failed. I had failed as the father of a truly extraordinary lad, and if that cost me gold then so be it.

I deserved it, and let that be a lesson.

*

Coming back to Dannsburg was depressing. I missed the sea, but most of all I found the oppressive presence of the City Guard almost overwhelming. They were everywhere, and even the Dowager Duchess of Varnburg struggled to get her guardsmen admitted to the city. Grand Duchess she might be, but it was only when I threatened the senior captain of the gate with the authority of the house of law that we were finally allowed through, with much bowing and apologising. That was the power of the Queen’s Men, in Dannsburg at least.

Security in the capital was obviously much tighter than it had been when I left, and it seemed that a great deal could change in two months. I abandoned the duchess to make her own arrangements in the city for her entourage, and reported to the house of law at once. That wasn’t optional, I knew that.

Lord Vogel was not best pleased by her presence, to speak lightly of it. ‘The Grand Duchess?’

He glared at me across his desk, his pale eyes unblinking.

‘There was no way around it, sir,’ I said. ‘Not unless we wanted to send in the army and take Varnburg by force. I made the decision that putting up with the duchess was preferable to civil war.’

‘Only just, I assure you,’ Vogel said. ‘You did the right thing, Tomas, but it’s blasted inconvenient. That woman is a pain in the arse.’

I almost laughed, to hear the great and feared Lord Vogel speak like that, but I managed to restrain myself. I didn’t think laughing at Vogel was

what you might call a good idea.

‘Yes, sir,’ I said instead, and changed the subject. ‘If I may, it seems security has been very much tightened while I’ve been away these last two months.’

‘Yes, I need to talk to you about that,’ Vogel said. ‘Something is about to happen, and when it does we will need every one of those extra guardsmen. I have only waited this long because I wanted you back in the city before I act. I’ll speak to you all in the morning, but I suggest you get a good night’s sleep tonight, Tomas. You’re going to be busy for the next few weeks.’

With that I was dismissed, and I left his office and closed the door behind me.

I walked down the corridor and saw Iagin’s office door was open. He was sitting at his desk behind a huge pile of papers, his pen scratching furiously across the sheet before him. I knocked on the open door and waited until his head came up.

‘Tomas, you’re back,’ he said, rather unnecessarily. ‘Good, the Old Man’s been getting impatient. You brought the boy with you, I take it?’

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘And his mother, sadly.’

Iagin’s huge moustache twitched as he tried not to laugh.

‘I’d say I’m surprised, but I’m not,’ he said. ‘That bloody woman is almost impossible to gainsay.’

‘I noticed,’ I said. ‘What’s the Old Man up to?’

Iagin shrugged. ‘He doesn’t tell me everything,’ he said. ‘I dare say we’ll find out in the morning.’

I supposed we would, at that.

That done I returned to my rooms at the Bountiful Harvest and had an early supper with Fat Luka and Bloody Anne and the others. Luka was full of tales from the last two months, of how the City Guard had been increasing in numbers almost by the week. There wasn’t quite a curfew, not yet, but hard questions were being asked of anyone out after dark and it seemed that disappearances were at an all-time high.

There was a storm coming, anyone could see that.

I lingered in the private dining room with Bloody Anne once the others had retired for the night, and regarded her over the rim of my brandy glass.

‘What do you think is going on?’ I asked her.

She shrugged.

‘How the fuck do I know? You’re the Queen’s Man, Tomas. You tell me.’

Aye, I was the Queen’s Man but Anne was shrewder than perhaps she knew herself, and I valued her opinion.

‘I don’t know,’ I said, ‘but there’s something. Vogel said a thing was about to happen, and that we’d need every one of those guardsmen. He can’t be expecting a Skanian attack or there’d be soldiers on the streets and cannon on the walls, so it’s not that. What, then?’

‘You want my honest opinion?’ Anne asked, and poured herself another glass from the bottle on the table between us. ‘Unofficially, I mean. I don’t want to disappear.’

‘Everything between us is unofficial, Anne, you know that,’ I said.

She looked at me for a long moment, and I wondered if she truly *did* still know that. There was a thought to make a man uncomfortable at night. Queen’s Man I might be but she was my best friend and I very much hoped she never lost sight of that.

I prayed that *I* didn’t.

‘Aye, well,’ she said. ‘The way I see it is this: he knows a thing will happen but he hasn’t told any of you what that thing is going to be. That sounds to me like it’s going to be a thing of his own making.’

I nodded slowly. She had a fucking good point there, I had to allow. If Vogel had intelligence on an external threat we would all be working round the clock already, but we weren’t. All those extra guardsmen he knew would be needed had to be there for a reason, and as Anne said, the only thing that made sense was that it was a reason he had planned himself.

There was a storm coming all right.

I just wished I knew what the fuck it was.

Chapter 32

The storm broke the next day.

Vogel called a staff meeting that morning as he had told me he planned to, and there he gave his strangest orders yet.

We were in the mess in the house of law, where the Old Man seldom went. We all had steaming bowls of tea in our hands, save for Iagin, who was already on the brandy, and Vogel himself, who took nothing.

‘Have it put about,’ Vogel said to Iagin, ‘that new evidence has come to light. I want the people to know that we now believe that Her Majesty our late queen’s death was not natural, but an assassination by result of foul witchcraft. State that the queen’s death was caused by magic. Say that publicly and loudly and in the name of the house of law. Somewhat more quietly, say that the Skanians have strong magicians and are not our allies, but specify no further than that. Even quieter than that, you might remind the people that the house of magicians is also hostile to the house of law and therefore to the throne.’

Iagin and me looked at each other, but we held our peace. Ailsa didn’t so much as blink.

‘Yes, sir,’ Iagin said after a moment.

We were all there, all the Queen’s Men save Sabine. She hadn’t joined us, I noticed.

‘Iagin, Konrad, Tomas,’ Vogel went on, ‘prepare yourselves and your street-level operations. Ilse, you may need to hire assistants. This time there *will* be unrest. A great deal of it. It must be . . . managed.’

Not suppressed this time, I noticed. *Managed*. What the fuck did that mean?

Holding my peace went to the whores in one long rush. This would cause fucking chaos on those streets outside the house of law, and the Old Man knew it.

‘But we said she died of an attack of the heart, we can’t change that now,’ I protested.

Ailsa hissed a warning to keep quiet, but Vogel and I both ignored her.

‘Of course we can,’ Vogel said. ‘We said Her Majesty had died. Now we are reminding people *how* she died, and by whose hand. You have to understand, Tomas, that those most prone to misinformation are those most inclined to want to believe it. They *want* someone to blame. Nobody likes accidents, or illnesses. There’s no revenge to be taken for an accident, for a sickness. Give them this much . . .’

‘And they’ll come to believe it,’ Iagin finished for him. ‘If they hear it enough times in enough places from enough people, everyone will come to believe it. Trust me, Tomas, I know how to do this shit.’

I nodded slowly. I thought that he did, at that. Lies upon lies upon lies, until the common man came to doubt his own recollection of what he had heard and what he thought he knew had happened. I could see how this would play out.

The queen had been murdered. The queen had always been murdered, they knew that. They weren’t fools, not them. They had never trusted those pale northern Skanian bastards and their allies in the house of magicians. Oh, no, not them, they hadn’t been taken in, they were cleverer than that. Cleverer than their fellows, who had been fooled by the evil foreigners.

This was, when you boiled it right down to its bones, exactly how Fat Luka had spread the word I wanted heard around the streets of the Stink. That was something to think on, but another time.

‘And if anyone questions it?’ I asked. ‘If anyone is foolish enough to remember different?’

‘Ah,’ Lord Vogel said, and he showed us his razorblade smile. ‘You might mention that the Prince Regent has been trying to suppress this information. It could be suggested that in order to protect the reputations of those in charge of palace security, many of whom have recently disappeared thanks to the rigour of the house of law, not to mention his friends in the house of magicians, a false rumour had been circulated that the queen’s death was natural. Which it absolutely was not.’

That was how it was done, I knew that. That was how history was changed, just like it was back in the Stink.

It was just a matter of scale, that was all.

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It didn’t take long. I had never for a moment thought that it would, in a city like Dannsburg.

I was abroad in the city that afternoon, walking the streets with Oliver and Emil and Beast as a bodyguard, watching and listening as Lord Vogel had told me to. Already I could see the signs. A Skanian merchant's shop had a window boarded up where someone had obviously smashed it. Another had 'Queenkiller' daubed across his closed and bolted door in cheap white paint.

The atmosphere on the streets was hostile, there was no other word for it. I was richly dressed and I had three big men behind me and I was obviously not foreign, and even *I* felt it. Anyone with fair hair was drawing looks that promised violence, I noticed. So quickly had Vogel's artificial prejudices taken root among the general population. It came to me after a while that I could hear shouting from a street or so away, the sounds of the sort of civil disturbance that was almost unheard of in Dannsburg.

Here we fucking go, I thought. Here come the riots.

The commotion was coming from the grand square at the end of the next street. I led my crew down a connecting road into the broad open space, and there it was happening. There was a carriage, its wood lacquered in dark blue with gold accents on the coachwork, and it was surrounded. The carriage bore the white seven-pointed star crest of the house of magicians on its doors, a crest that a week ago, a *day* ago, would have accorded it respect and space in the crowded streets. Today it had been waylaid by an angry mob.

'Bastards!' a grey-haired woman shouted, and she hurled a cobble which smashed into the ornate coachwork and broke off a section of gilded moulding.

'Queenkillers!' a man called out, and the chant was taken up by the angry mob.

'Queenkiller!'

'Fuck, should we do something?' Oliver murmured beside me.

'Absolutely not,' I said. 'This is a matter for the City Guard.'

'Queenkiller!'

'What fucking City Guard?' Emil said.

'Hold your peace, the pair of you,' I snapped.

'Queenkiller! Queenkiller!' the mob roared, and cobbles and rotten fruit and vegetables rained down on the carriage.

I oppose anything the magicians want, I remembered Vogel saying to me the previous year. In truth I wish someone would rid me of them.

I could see what he was doing, and by Our Lady's name it was already working. Dieter Vogel was, I knew, a very, very dangerous man, but all the same I was impressed. The City Guard seemed to be absent from that one square, for all that they thronged the streets in the rest of the northern reaches of the city. I watched in horrified fascination as the mob overran the magician's valiantly battling coachman and footmen, bearing them to the ground and kicking them senseless until there was blood on the cobbles. Eventually someone tore open the door of the carriage.

A moment later a pale older man in the flowing blue robes of his order was dragged out and manhandled through the crowd to their ringleader, the woman who had cast the first stone. She must have had almost seventy years to her, with long, filthy iron-grey hair hanging loose and wild around her thin face. She was dressed in the plain worn woollen kirtle of a common goodwife, but she commanded the mob like a general presiding over a battlefield.

Whoever the magus was, I imagined he greatly regretted setting forth on his business that day without a cadre of the heavily armed and armoured Guard of the Magi around him. Magicians didn't usually travel under guard, of course, having no need to do so as respected members of society. How quickly things can change, in a city like Dannsburg. In a city suddenly convinced that their queen had been murdered by magic, things can change very quickly indeed for a magician, and not for the better.

'Bring me rope!' the woman screamed, and from somewhere in the crowd rope was swiftly brought.

There was a great bronze statue in the centre of that square, as there are in so many of the grand squares of Dannsburg. This one was of a noble warrior in an old-fashioned army uniform standing with a spear in his hands, the shaft thrust out to ward off the queen's enemies. Someone hurled an end of the rope over that spear, and a moment later the other end was around the magician's neck.

'Where the fuck are the Guard?' Emil asked. 'Boss, are you sure we shouldn't—'

'Completely sure,' I said. 'Hold, Emil.'

I could tell he didn't like it either and nor did Oliver, but they did as they were told. Beast was impassive beside me, just watching with an unreadable expression on his face. After everything he had been through, I couldn't begin to imagine what it would take to trouble Beast's conscience.

If he still had one at all, of course. I honestly wouldn't have blamed him if he hadn't. I felt I understood Beast, in a way. After Abingon, and Messia, and what I had done when I'd had only twelve years to me, I felt he was something of a kindred spirit.

But then I had murdered my own father, after all. Perhaps we belonged in the Queen's Men, Beast and me. Where else would have had us?

I gritted my teeth as two men in the crowd tightened the noose around the magician's neck. Then the mob were hauling on the rope and cheering as he was dragged choking into the air. A lynching on the streets, and barely three hours after the word had been spread. That was what the Queen's Men and the mob's fury could do, when Lord Vogel crooked his finger.

The magician kicked and flailed, and the mob jeered. More hands took the rope and hoisted him higher, until his head was knocking against the statue's spear some twenty feet and more above the cobbles. He was purple in the face now, hands clutched impotently to the hemp closing off his throat. Lynching is a slow death, not like a hanging with its sharp drop which is an almost instant transition to the grey lands.

Lynching is akin to torture, and it's an ugly thing.

'Do some fucking magic!' someone called, and the crowd laughed.

'Good enough to kill the queen, good enough to save yourself,' someone else jeered.

'Useless cunt, can't even do that!'

'Queenkiller! Queenkiller!'

The obvious contradiction was completely lost on them, I noticed. Mob mentality is a strange thing, as I believe I have written of before. The notion of a magic strong enough to assassinate a queen but not to save a man from his own lynching was plainly ridiculous, but that didn't matter to them.

None of it did. The narrative had been given to them, by Iagin and his network of voices. By Brother Truth. That was the truth they had heard, and they ate it up like fresh bread. Logic, reason, those are things a mob cannot, will not, hear.

'Queenkiller!'

The magician voided himself, shit falling from under his robes to splatter onto the baying crowd below. I knew then that he was dying, but the mob's fury was not.

'Dirty bastard!'

'Queenkiller!'

‘Hoist him!’

‘Fucking Queenkiller!’

The magus gave a last kick and hung lifeless from the rope, his body twisting in the wind. It was done, and over. And just beginning.

That was when the City Guard finally appeared. The mob began to scatter as guardsmen waded into them with clubs in their hands, knocking people down indiscriminately around them.

The grey-haired woman stood among them, and she paused for a moment to meet my eyes.

I gave Sabine a nod before she vanished into the crowd.

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Chapter 33

After Sabine kindled that first spark, the wildfire took hold. Dannsburg was like a barrel of powder, as Ailsa's father had told me the previous year, just waiting for a spark to set it off. Well, now that spark had been struck and no mistake.

Even Vogel's newly expanded City Guard were hard pressed to keep the queen's peace on the streets, but he seemed well enough pleased despite that.

'There was a riot outside the house of magicians today,' Iagin told me, three nights later in the mess at the house of law. 'Two of the Guard of the Magi were killed. The Old Man's rubbing his hands together, I can tell you.'

I thought of the Guard of the Magi with their plate armour and great helms, their halberds and heavy war swords.

'How many of the populace died?' I asked him.

He frowned. 'I didn't see a final body count,' he admitted after a moment. 'Twenty, maybe. I don't know.'

I swallowed my brandy and poured another. Vogel spent the lives of the common folk like copper pennies to get to his enemies in the house of magicians, and he seemed to think nothing of it.

'And the Skanian merchants still in the city, and their families?'

'Four lynchings so far, that I know of. Seven shops burned down. Most of them have already fled the city walls, although where they'll go is anyone's guess. Their only ships back home sail from Varnburg, and they won't be welcome at the city gates there.'

I sighed and turned to look at him. They would starve outside the walls of Varnburg, we both knew that. It seemed Lord Vogel had reached some sort of accord with the Dowager Duchess, and a messenger had already been sent to her city's governor with orders to admit no Skanian refugees nor accept their ships into her harbour. Iagin's face was composed, his heavy moustache unruffled, but there was something in his face that made me think perhaps he was troubled by what we were doing. The lines seemed

deeper around his unblinking blue eyes, the creases more pronounced on his broad forehead.

‘I saw Sabine in the crowd, that first day, urging them on,’ I said. ‘She’s good at this sort of thing.’

‘Aye, that she is,’ Iagin said, and swallowed his brandy. ‘Mother Ruin. I’m going back to my office, I’ve got work to do.’

He was halfway to the door when I spoke.

‘Iagin,’ I said, and he stopped and turned to look at me.

‘What?’

He looked irritated now, and I thought better of it.

‘Nothing,’ I said. ‘Let me know if you need any help.’

‘I’ve got this under control,’ he said, and clumped off down the corridor.

Too soon, I told myself, and immediately wondered for what. What exactly was I thinking?

There are factions, Tomas, even within the Queen’s Men.

Ailsa had told me that the previous year, and I still wasn’t sure what she had meant by it, but I thought Iagin had the makings of an ally should I ever need one. The three of us, I thought, might stand against Ilse and Konrad and Sabine if it came to it.

If it comes to what, you fucking fool?

I pinched the bridge of my nose between finger and thumb and let out a long sigh. This world of intrigues wasn’t my natural environment. I was a soldier and businessman, for Our Lady’s sake. Politics was a foreign country to me, and I would have been quite happy for it to stay that way, but it seemed that wasn’t going to be the case.

Rosie had told me that morning that I had a social engagement to attend at the palace tomorrow. A formal introduction, she had called it, one that had to be witnessed by as much of Dannsburg high society as possible. Apparently that included me, ridiculous though that felt, but then I supposed I was a knight now. I was a knight, and more to the point I was a Queen’s Man. A proper one now, not just some poor fool Ailsa had given a battlefield promotion to when we had both half expected to die the next day. No, I was in the life for true now, and it was well known that the only way to leave the service of the Rose Throne was in death.

So, a formal introduction it was, the beginning of one of the slow social dances that could put arses on thrones in the fullness of time. The young

Grand Duke of Varnburg was to be introduced to the Princess Crown Royal as a suitor, with a view to betrothal, and I was to be there to witness it.

*

‘I have reached an accommodation with the Dowager Duchess of Varnburg,’ Lord Vogel told me quietly the next morning as we waited together in an anteroom at the palace, surrounded by the glittering heights of Dannsburg society.

I had thought as much. I recognised Lady Lan Yetrov, away in the crowd and glittering with diamonds, but I didn’t approach her. I wasn’t sure that she would want to see me again after the night I had fed her husband to his pet bear, despite the fact that I had set her free from years of violent domestic abuse in doing so. Perhaps she would remember that, and count me as a friend, but perhaps not. You never could tell, in Dannsburg.

‘Aye, so I see,’ I said. ‘You suggest that her boy could sit on the Prince Consort’s throne, and she promises to make no trouble over her husband’s unfortunate death nor give refuge to the Skanians in Varnburg, is that the lay of things?’

Vogel showed me the razor edge of his smile, and said nothing.

Could and might and possibly, such were the promises of the Queen’s Men.

I admired the duchess, for all that I didn’t know her or much care for her. She had been very quick to make the best of a bad situation, after all. She had seen the way the wind was blowing, and knowing it was futile to fight an impossible battle, she had reached the best agreement she could in order to not only protect her son and the future of the House of Varnburg, but actually advance their prospects while she was about it. She would have made a ferocious businesswoman.

We were eventually admitted to what I supposed you would call an informal drawing room, a great tapestried space full of gilded chairs with red velvet upholstery and pointless little tables that were too low to use for anything useful. I had brought Billy along for the experience, although he looked very bored. That couldn’t be helped. If he was to grow up to become a gentleman he needed to become accustomed to society life, and where better to start than at the top?

Footmen circulated with trays of wine and brandy, for all that it was not yet noon, but it seemed events for children were not to be held in the evening. The Grand Duke of Varnburg, young Marcus, fidgeted nervously

behind his mother's skirts as they waited in front of the huge fireplace. Billy waved at him and Marcus smiled shyly, but made no move to come and speak to him. I strongly suspected his mother had forbidden him from seeing Billy since the events at the inn, no doubt having judged him too dangerous for her precious son to mix with.

There had been muttered talk of witchcraft among the duchess' men during the last few tense days of our journey, and although no accusations had actually been brought, it was clear that Billy was strongly out of favour. That was a great shame, as I had seen obvious possibilities in my son being friends with the young Grand Duke, but it seemed Billy had thrown that into the shithouse when he burned that inn down. I tried not to take ill against him for it, reminding myself that he was young and inexperienced and foolish in the way of lads that age. It was my fault, I reminded myself yet again, not his. I sighed, and looked around the room.

The Dowager Duchess herself was wearing all black, severe mourning clothes as would only be expected after her husband's recent passing. Her son, however, had been presented in something resembling a dress uniform, complete with a crimson sash across his tightly fitted black jacket. It was ridiculous; he barely had ten years to him, after all.

'Who dreams this shit up?' Iagin muttered as he joined us, a glass of morning brandy in his hand.

'You, usually,' Vogel said, and that was the closest to a jest I think I ever heard him utter.

I coughed into my fist and held my peace, and a moment later I was rescued by the arrival of the Princess Crown Royal's entourage.

She was preceded into the room by a trio of heralds, who blew the first few bars of the national anthem through their curled brass horns, then three burly nuns and two black-garbed men, who I took to be tutors. Then came the Prince Regent with his daughter on his arm, and behind them came Ailsa.

I had barely seen her since my return from Varnburg, and once more I was struck by how truly beautiful she was. The time of mourning for the queen's death had begun to be gradually relaxed while I had been away from the city, and she wore a gown of shimmering green Alarian silk that made her look like some sea goddess from a distant shore.

Fool, fool, I thought, but those were the facts of how I felt and nothing I thought could change them.

‘It’s Mama!’ Billy whispered, and I had to put a hand on his arm to stop him running to her and causing a spectacle in front of half the court.

The Princess Crown Royal herself looked much as I remembered her, a tiny porcelain doll dressed up as a woman in a dark silk gown. Her eyes were wide with the drugs that coursed through her, but she allowed herself to be led forward by her father until she was standing before the young Grand Duke and his formidable mother.

He bowed deeply, as he had no doubt been coached to do, and in turn the Dowager Duchess dropped a low curtsy. The princess herself smiled at them both, and said nothing. Her face looked blank, vacant, as though she had absolutely no idea where she was or why she was there. I dare say she hadn’t, at that.

Ailsa leaned past the Prince Regent to whisper something in her ear, and after a moment she dipped a tiny curtsy of respect to her potential future husband.

‘Your Grace,’ she said, enunciating the words extremely carefully like an adult who was very, very drunk and trying hard to hide it. ‘It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.’

‘Highness,’ the boy said, repeating words obviously much rehearsed under his mother’s critical eye. ‘You are every bit as beautiful as I had been told.’

‘It hurts,’ she said, quietly but unfortunately still loud enough to be heard by the whole room. ‘Beauty is pain, Your Grace, and pain is beauty.’

Little Marcus looked up at his mother in obvious confusion.

They were off-script already, and the poor lad clearly had no idea what to say in response to that.

‘Such is the curse of womanhood,’ Ailsa said smoothly. ‘One becomes accustomed to it, Highness, in time. All ladies do.’

‘Yes, precisely,’ the duchess said, but I could see her looking murder at Ailsa for all of that.

The Prince Regent cleared his throat, obviously uncomfortable with this women’s talk that he couldn’t possibly understand.

‘Come, young Marcus,’ he said, ‘walk with me. If you wish to court my daughter we should get to know each other, what? Tell me, do you enjoy country pursuits? When I was your age I had a magnificent falcon which . . .’

They passed out of my hearing. I couldn't imagine the poor lad wished anything less than to court the Princess Crown Royal, but at his mother's urging he allowed himself to be swept off by the Prince Regent and two of the tutors.

'The tutors are ours,' Vogel murmured at my side. 'He won't say anything too stupid.'

'Such as, "Don't fucking do it, you idiot child",' Iagin whispered, and I almost snorted brandy out of my nose. I didn't think Vogel had heard him.

I fucking *hoped* he hadn't, anyway.

There was definitely something going on, even then.

There are factions, Tomas.

I put that from my mind and returned my attention to Ailsa. She was talking to the duchess, obviously treating her as a social equal. That was interesting in itself, that the inexplicably knighted daughter of an immigrant Alarian merchant of no noble heritage whatsoever should be so accepted by a grand duchess, but again this spoke of how the hierarchy worked in Dannsburg. There was the aristocracy, yes, with all its traditions of peerage and titles and orders of succession.

And then there were the Queen's Men.

It's a thing that has to be understood, a thing that I have written of before, that we don't officially exist. The Queen's Men are a fiction, a fairy tale to frighten little children with. *Do what your father says or the Queen's Men will take you away.*

Except we're not. We are very real indeed, and *everyone* who matters in Dannsburg knows that. The Dowager Duchess of Varnburg knew that very well indeed, I could tell.

Soldiers will come from Dannsburg.

I could see then that she knew *exactly* who Ailsa was, and what game she was playing. She knew the rules, I think, did the duchess, and she knew how the game was played.

'Talk to her,' Vogel murmured in my ear. 'Nothing threatening. Just remind her that you are here too.'

'Aye, sir,' I had to reply, and I made my way through the crowd towards them with a fresh brandy in my hand and Billy clinging to my side.

Ailsa saw me coming and welcomed me with a smile that I wish I could have believed.

‘Your Grace, may I present my husband, Sir Tomas, and our son,’ she said, as she reached out and took Billy’s hand in hers.

The Dowager Duchess looked at me and Billy like one might look at a dog that had just shat on her finest Alarian carpet.

‘We’ve met,’ she said coldly.

I gave her a short bow, the bow one gave to a social equal. I was beginning to learn how to play this game, and may Our Lady forgive me for that. That would have been a staggering insult from anyone else of my social standing, a mere knight, but I knew I could get away with it, and truth be told, I revelled in that knowledge. She knew that I carried the warrant, and that changed everything. I had shown her that in the Sea Keep, and there was nothing she could do about it, however much it humiliated her.

The fact that I was a *mere* knight still made my head spin. I was the son of a bricklayer from the Stink in Ellinburg, for Our Lady’s sake. Knighthood was not something that would ordinarily have ever been remotely within my grasp, and yet now I was important enough to insult the Grand Duchess of Varnburg and get away with it?

Look at me, Ma. What do you think of this?

She would have boxed my ears and no mistake. Deliberately humiliating a grand lady? Oh, I knew very well what my ma would have thought of that and it wouldn’t have been anything good, but I had my reasons.

‘Lady Varnburg,’ I said. ‘I trust you and your men have settled well into the city?’

I haven’t forgotten your fifty guardsmen, that was what I was telling her. She knew too that it was in my power to summon enough of the army to exterminate her fifty guardsmen in a single night should I choose to do so. The Queen’s Men are not to be taken lightly, and it is our duty to remind the aristocracy of that every chance we get. The equilibrium is a delicate thing, after all, and we must always make sure the scales weigh on our side. All the same, that had been ill done of me and I knew it, but sometimes that was how things worked. That was how the nation managed its balance of power, and I had come to understand that.

‘Well enough, Sir Tomas,’ she said. ‘Dannsburg is much as I remember it, but it will be forever the city where my beloved husband died.’

‘Aye, my condolences for your loss once again,’ I said. ‘Although, all being well, it may also become the city in which your son becomes the Prince Consort of the Rose Throne.’

‘Mmmm,’ she said, and looked pointedly from me to Ailsa and back again. ‘And whose decision would that be, may I ask?’

‘The Princess Crown Royal is an independent young woman,’ Ailsa said. ‘Headstrong, as girls that age often are. We can but pray to the gods that your son retains her favour.’

Pray to the Queen’s Men that you retain our favour, she was saying. That message was plain enough.

The Queen’s Men all but ruled Dannsburg in those days, and from the look on the Dowager Duchess’ face I could see that she knew it too. She nodded slowly, and raised her untouched glass of wine to Ailsa.

‘I do so pray,’ she was forced to say.

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Chapter 34

The next morning saw me in the Prince Regent's private chambers with Ailsa and Lord Vogel. The atmosphere in the formal drawing room was strained, to speak lightly of it.

'I don't like it, Vogel,' the prince said, stalking back and forth in front of the fireplace while the four guards stationed against the walls looked on impassively.

I still wasn't sure that he had grasped that they weren't there for his protection, but ours. Not protection from *him*, as such, as he was about as threatening as a drunken weasel, but from who he might see and what he might say to them. It had been them who had prevented the elder Grand Duke of Varnburg from visiting him during his period of official house arrest, after all. He was still under tacit house arrest even now, I supposed, although I doubted he was possessed of enough imagination to grasp that either.

'What is it that you don't like, Highness?' Vogel asked.

I could sense the thin veneer of respect covering the razorblades of his personality, and wondered just *how* thin it had grown.

'He's nearly three years her junior, and only a grand duke of our own country. Couldn't we at least have managed a crown prince, secured a foreign alliance *somewhere*?'

'No,' Vogel said coldly. 'We couldn't. Your daughter is . . . not easily sold.'

'Sold?' the Prince Regent shouted, and he rounded on Vogel with a look of fury on his face. 'No one is *selling* my daughter!'

'Oh, don't be so naïve,' Vogel said. 'What exactly do you think a political marriage *is*? Your daughter either marries upwards, to a crown prince destined to be a king who will take her as his queen in some foreign land where you will probably never see her again and quite possibly end up at war with her in a few years' time, or she marries down to a duke who will become her prince consort when she assumes her mother's throne in her own right. The line of waiting foreign crown princes is vanishingly short to the point of non-existence. We only have Varnburg because he is

barely ten years old and his mother is desperate to hold onto her seat, but his duchy is *exceptionally* wealthy. Be thankful, Highness, that we have this. It will play well to the populace, at least, and do the royal treasury a world of good that it sorely needs.'

'Young love,' I said, Billy and Mina in my mind as I thought aloud. 'It always plays well. Everyone likes the ideal of it. A princess and a grand duke, betrothed as children, rising to rule the nation together. It's like something from the stories, from the theatre. The people will accept it. The people will *love* it, in truth.'

'Absolutely,' Vogel said.

'Highness,' Ailsa said, and she smiled in that way she had that always seemed to get through to him. 'You were the son of the Grand Duke of Drathburg, as I recall. The *second* son. When your father and elder brother both fell at Krathzgrad . . . yes, well. You became the heir. You inherited everything.'

'I inherited my father's seat and fortune, and my brother's betrothed. Yes, I am well aware of that, thank you, Lady Ailsa.'

Krathzgrad had been where my aunt had fought in her war, if I remembered it right. I had heard tales of it at her knee as a child, many of them no doubt grown very tall indeed in the telling. Of course, our noble Prince Regent would have been too young to fight then, but I hadn't known that both his father and his elder brother had gone to the grey lands in Aunt Enaid's war. Perhaps sometimes the nobility really did lead from the front of the charge. Or they had in those days, anyway; I had seen little enough of it at Abington, to be sure.

'A political marriage,' Ailsa went on. 'You learned to love her, I have no doubt.'

'Of course I did,' the prince snapped. 'Her Majesty my wife was the love of my life.'

I looked at the bleak expression in his eyes, and somehow I doubted that she had been anything of the sort. Still, that was none of my business, of course.

'Well, there we are, then,' Ailsa said.

The Prince Regent ignored her and turned a hard eye on Vogel.

'No more bullshit,' he said, and I was surprised by his bluntness. Perhaps he had finally grown a spine after all, I thought, and I wondered how wise that was. 'That *utter* shit with Lan Drunov and the cannon. No

more of that. Stop bloody indulging her, Vogel. She's not well, you know she isn't, and you encouraging her excesses is only making her worse. No more, I mean it.'

Vogel gave him a look.

'Public displays of power are an important tool of statecraft,' he said. 'A statesman would understand that. I wonder where we might find one of those, in these troubled times? Ailsa, any suggestions?'

'There is First Councillor Lan Letskov, sir,' she said. 'He is perhaps not as pliable as we might like, but all the same we have a degree of influence over him.'

You know very well he thinks he's in love with you.

I swallowed, and tried not to think about that. Why the fuck the notion bothered me I had no idea, but it did all the same.

'Quite,' Vogel said, and the venom in his voice was unmistakable. 'No one is irreplaceable. Highness.'

That made me fucking sit up straight. Listening to Vogel's words it was plain that the Prince Regent's life was under threat, and as I thought back to the confession he had said to me in the spring it became clear why.

He knew too much.

He knew just how unwell the Princess Crown Royal was, and worse than that, he didn't seem to want to help us hide it. Vogel was telling him just how thin the ice under his feet was. Suddenly I understood all too well.

Removing the Grand Duke and bringing his son to the capital hadn't been anything to do with the succession or his supposed difficultness, I realised, but about the regency itself. If anything should happen to the Prince Regent then the Grand Duke, the queen's own cousin, would have been the obvious replacement, and Vogel didn't want that to happen. Not one little bit he didn't, so the duke tragically passed away and his young son assumed his title, lands and fortune but, being even younger than the princess, could never become regent.

The prince's days were numbered, that was what Lord Vogel had been telling me even then. Only now was I hearing him, and that shamed me. With hindsight he had been telling me loud and fucking clear at the time. I wondered if I would ever fully adjust to this life, to become a Queen's Man in thought and instinct as well as simply murderous deed. I wondered if I was truly capable of it.

I couldn't honestly have said which I wanted the answer to be.

‘Your words skirt treachery, Lord Vogel,’ the prince said.

‘My words,’ Vogel said, ‘are intended to batter some sense into your head. *Someone* needs to rule the country. *Someone* needs to show leadership. If you are not capable of being that person, then I will find someone else. Is that absolutely clear, Highness?’

‘No,’ the prince said, and he drew himself up to his full height. His magnificent waxed moustache quivered as his upper lip shook with anger. ‘Enough, Vogel! *Enough!* No one is irreplaceable, as you just said. I am the regent of the Rose Throne, and that makes me the commanding officer in chief of the army. I will raze the house of law to the *ground* if you cross me one more time!’

He was spitting fury now, his face crimson with a rage I would never have believed him capable of.

Lord Vogel looked at the Prince Regent for a long time, and I could almost feel the temperature in the room dropping. No one spoke to the Provost Marshal like that.

No one.

Not princes, not warlords.

Not kings.

Fucking *no one*.

‘As you say, Highness,’ Vogel said, his voice as soft as silk.

I could feel it in my bones, and from the look on her face I could see that Ailsa felt it too.

This was not going to end well.

*

It didn’t.

It didn’t end well at all. Bloody Anne woke me early the next morning, and this time she had neither small beer nor black bread in her hands when she pushed her way into my bedroom.

‘Get up,’ she said, with no preamble whatsoever. ‘Rosie needs you in the office.’

My office was still the private dining room of the Bountiful Harvest, of course. By then I could have commandeered office space in the house of law itself the same as Iagin and Konrad did, but I didn’t want to. Ailsa didn’t keep an office there either, I had noticed, preferring to run her operation from her own home. From what I had seen of the Queen’s Men, there was a lot to be said for keeping one’s own business separate from the

central hub as much as possible. We all ran our own crews, after all, and that autonomy was part of our strength.

‘What is it?’ I asked her as I struggled out of bed and into my clothes.

I had to stand and take a piss into the pot before I was any use to anyone, but despite what I had thought before, there was no real embarrassment to that in what sounded like an actual emergency. We might not be in the army any more but we were both soldiers, when all was said and done, and soldiers think little of such things. I could hear the continuing sound of the riots outside the windows of the inn, supporters of the house of magicians and the house of law still going at each other in the dawn hours.

‘I think it’s something to do with the Prince Regent,’ Anne said as I laced my britches and turned to face her.

‘What about him?’ I asked.

Anne’s scar twisted as she sucked her teeth before she responded.

‘Go talk to Rosie,’ she said. ‘I don’t rightly know, and I don’t want to. This is Queen’s Men business, and I’m not that.’

No, she wasn’t. Bloody Anne was my chief enforcer, but I would never make her a Queen’s Man. I loved her as a brother, in my way, and I would never do that to her.

I wouldn’t do that to anyone I cared about, for all that Ailsa had done it to me.

I finished getting dressed and buckled the Weeping Women around my waist over my coat then hurried downstairs to the private dining room. Rosie was waiting for me in her accustomed seat at my left hand at the head of the table, a mountain of papers in front of her.

‘What is it?’ I asked her.

‘Get to the palace,’ she said, without looking up. ‘Right now. Vogel’s orders.’

I was on a hastily saddled horse ten minutes later, and broke into a canter down the wide mall that led up to the palace gates as people scattered in our wake. Fuck not using the main gate; Ailsa’s side entrance would have added a quarter of an hour to my journey and this quite plainly wouldn’t wait. There was a building on fire not a quarter of a mile away, and in the distance I could hear the sound of the City Guard clashing with the supporters of the house of magicians.

‘I’m Sir Tomas,’ I said to the gate guards. ‘Ailsa is expecting me.’

I was inside a moment later, and no questions were asked. I left my horse with a waiting groom and headed in through the door I had been taken through on the night the queen's death was announced. There was a liveried attendant there quite plainly waiting for me, and she led me through the labyrinth of passages and stairs to the royal apartments.

Ailsa was waiting for me outside the Prince Regent's drawing room.

'What is it?' I asked her.

'He took his own life last night,' she said.

'You fucking what?'

She pushed the door open, and I saw what she meant. His Royal Highness Prince Wilhelm was hanging from a rope tied around the chains of one of the chandeliers, and there was an overturned table on the floor that he had apparently jumped off. His face was purple, and it was plain to see that he had soiled his white cavalry britches in his death throes. There was no dignity there, no heroic taking of poison or falling on his sword like some hero from one of the great tragedies at the theatre. The Prince Regent had jumped off a table and shat himself, and that would forever be his legacy.

I could almost feel the ground shifting under my feet. It was too fucking early in the morning to deal with this, but it seemed that I would have to.

'Iagin is already spreading the word,' Ailsa said. 'A terrible tragedy and a great loss, no doubt brought about by malign magics in the face of which our great nation must come together in unity.'

Malign magics.

He couldn't have done.

Oh gods.

I thought then of the witch card Sabine had given me, the Ten of Swords, and what Billy had said it meant.

The Ten of Swords means back-stabbing and treachery. It means defeat and betrayal, ruin and endings and loss.

Oh gods.

Oh, by Our Lady. He just couldn't have done.

But he had. He very clearly had, overturned table or not. There was no other plausible explanation for it. Treachery indeed.

Lord Vogel had disappeared the fucking Prince Regent.

I wondered whose hands had tied the noose and forced his head into it, and I thought of Konrad.

Oh, fucking, fucking, *fuck!*

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Chapter 35

Once, when I had about seven or eight years to me, my da had taken me and Jochan to see a travelling menagerie that had set up camp near the racetrack outside Ellinburg. That had been where I had seen the lioness that Ailsa so reminded me of. I remembered something else I had seen there too. On one of the wagons, there had been a cage full of wild, hairy, almost-men. Apes, I think the menagerie's barkers had called them, but unlike the lions, I had never seen one depicted in heraldry and I hadn't really been sure *what* they were. I remembered how the barkers had baited them, poking them with long goads through the bars of their cage until they screamed and beat their chests and hurled their own shit at each other and the laughing crowd gathered beyond the bars.

I had never seen a public meeting of the governing council before, but it very much put me in mind of those creatures in the menagerie.

It was a tiresome affair even in these extraordinary times, although there were things of interest to note. First Councillor Aleksander Lan Letskov, presiding head of the council, seemed to me like a man under siege. For all that he was supposedly the foremost voice, Vogel had replaced so many of his underlings with sycophants loyal only to the house of law that he was outvoted and shouted down at every turn.

'But I must assume the role of regent at once,' he said. 'Someone has to run the country since our Prince Wilhelm's unfortunate suicide, after all, and although he is the rightful next in line of succession, the Grand Duke is a child of ten years. The Lady Ailsa will support me, and she is not without influence in the house of law.'

You know very well that he thinks he's in love with you.

'No, she won't!' someone hooted. 'She's Vogel's creature to the core. You're on your own, Lan Letskov.'

Jeers followed, and I have to admit I felt sorry for the man. I knew how it felt, after all, to think Ailsa loved you.

Fool, fool.

'Why should it be you, First Councillor Lan Letskov?' a dark-haired woman demanded. 'Heading a council and leading a nation are very

different things.'

She was right about that, I had to allow, but I also knew she was on our payroll. The governing council was least two-thirds in the pay of the house of law by then, and First Councillor Aleksander Lan Letskov was struggling.

He was struggling very badly indeed, if that council meeting I witnessed was anything to go by. They weren't literally flinging their shit at him but they might as well have been, by that point.

'I have been presiding head of this council for nine years,' Lan Letskov protested. 'If I know anything—'

'If *you* knew anything, the fucking queen would still be alive, and her fool of a husband beside her,' a florid-faced man cut in. 'You have presided over a disaster, Lan Letskov.'

'Events have taken a downward turn, I agree,' he began, before he was shouted down in a chorus of boos and derision.

I looked sideways along the public gallery of the grand council hall where I sat as an anonymous civilian. There were barely a score of citizens there, among benches built to seat a hundred or more, but none of them looked happy with what they were seeing.

'A *downward turn*? Spare me, Lan Letskov, I swear my stays have split from laughter,' the dark-haired woman said.

She wasn't laughing. Councillor Markova, I remembered, that was her name. She was one of Vogel's personal agents, a strongly built woman with not yet forty years to her but with a face that brooked no nonsense.

'That's a bloody euphemism and a half,' the red-faced man said. 'Events have taken a fucking face-first dive into the shithouse and you know it, Lan Letskov.'

'Councillor Lan Drashkov, I must caution you against your language!' Lan Letskov scolded him. 'This is a most formal place of government business, and twice now you have profaned it with your coarseness.'

'Fuck off,' Lan Drashkov said, to a gale of laughter from his fellow councillors and the public gallery alike.

He was one of Iagin's, apparently, and that didn't surprise me one little bit.

'What is to be done, my fellow councillors?' Councillor Markova said, standing and addressing the room with a stern gravitas that put both men to shame. 'The country has no monarch, and now we have no regent either. I

propose that perhaps a woman seated on the regent's throne would be more in keeping with our national values, and—'

'Oh, of course you fucking do!' Lan Drashkov shouted. 'Any chance to advance yourself, you'll take, won't you? What absolute horseshit! We need a man's firm hand on the tiller. I myself—'

Shouting broke out between the other councillors as they all hurried to propose themselves for the most powerful seat of office in the country. Or what they thought was, anyway. The Lord Chief Judiciar, otherwise known as the Provost Marshal of the Queen's Men, effectively outranked everyone but the monarch themselves, whether they knew it or not.

I suspected that a worrying majority of them did not. This was just chaos, fools vying for a power they could never truly have.

A country at war needs strong and stable leadership above all else, and if we didn't have that then by Our Lady's name we had to make it look like we did. I remembered thinking that, not so very long ago. *A united and loyal governing council would go a long way to achieving that.*

It seemed I had never been so wrong.

Most of those arguing in the council meeting were ours, of course. Arguing among themselves, strange as that may seem. They were sowing dissent and disorder to a tune of Vogel's calling, I realised. It seemed that was what the Queen's Men did now, and I wasn't easy with it.

In the interim, so I was told, there was legal precedent for how to proceed. Why didn't that fucking surprise me?

I left the council hall building shortly afterwards, when the council went into recess for what would no doubt be a very argumentative lunch. I had had enough of them by then, so I returned to the house of law to find Ailsa and see the lay of things.

'The statutes of law are very clear on the matter,' she explained to me in the mess that afternoon, when I had finished telling her about the council meeting I had witnessed. 'In the event of the rightful monarch being underage and there being no surviving eligible regent of royal descent, the power of authority automatically passes in the interim to the office of the Lord Chief Judiciar as the next most senior official in the land until the governing council pass a two-thirds majority vote on which of their number should assume the role. It's not complicated really.'

No, I thought, *it really isn't, is it?* Except getting that mob to achieve a two-thirds majority vote on what to have for dinner would have been

virtually impossible, never mind on which of their number to seat upon the regent's throne.

'What about the Dowager Grand Duchess?' I asked. 'Doesn't she count?'

'No,' Ailsa said. 'She's of foreign birth, and therefore completely ineligible. The law really is very clear indeed on this, Tomas.'

'Aye,' I had to say, for want of anything better. In the house of law there was always someone listening, whether you could see them or not. 'Tell me, when was that law passed?'

'Oh, perhaps three years ago,' she said. 'I don't really know, offhand.'

Three years ago. Yes, I could believe that. I was starting to form a suspicion in my mind, and I didn't like it. I didn't like it one little bit. Someone had thought this through in exacting detail, including how to keep the duchess out of the picture. Of course they fucking had.

'Oh, don't look so glum, Tomas,' Ailsa said. 'Normality will resume soon enough, I'm sure.'

'I'm sure it will,' I said, although I was no longer sure I knew what normality even looked like any more.

Nothing like it used to, I was sure. There had been another riot that morning, so Rosie had told me, another magician lynched. The Guard of the Magi were mobilised in force now, Konrad had reported in his daily dispatches to the Queen's Men, forming patrols of their own who exchanged hard eyes with the City Guard wherever their paths crossed. There had been no violent clashes between them yet, but all agreed that they couldn't be far away. Curfew was being very seriously discussed in that afternoon's sitting of the governing council, and from what I had heard its implementation was almost a foregone conclusion. Martial law was coming to Dannsburg and it was coming fast.

Vogel had made his move, and it had worked. I only hoped he could do what needed to be done to halt the Skanian threat before it came to the exchange of cannon between us, but at what cost to liberty?

*

I attended court the next morning, on Rosie's advice, and I found that Ailsa and Iagin and Konrad were there ahead of me. We congregated together, in an oasis of space in the busy throne room.

The throne room was full almost to capacity, as was only to be expected given the recent tragic news. No one wore mourning clothes for the Prince

Regent, I noticed, but then of course he was officially a suicide and that wasn't a thing to be mourned. Suicides weren't something to grieve over, in Our Lady's eyes, as the person had journeyed to the grey lands of their own choice and so She welcomed them with open arms.

So said the doctrine of the temple, anyway. To my mind if someone I cared about took their own life I would grieve for them the same, probably even more, than if they had died of disease or been murdered or fallen in battle, and there I had a point of difference with Our Lady's doctrine.

If someone close to me took their life, I would always ask myself, should I have known? Should I have seen it coming, and done something to help, something to stop them? Would that even have been my right to do, if their minds were made up? Would that be in accordance with Our Lady's plan for that person, or contrary to it? That was a theological question, I supposed, and priest though I may be I was hardly schooled in theology. The army hadn't much cared about that, when they had needed a new priest to hear the confessions of their superstitious soldiers.

The point was that no one was mourning the Prince Regent, and that was quite obviously deliberate. He would have a state funeral, of course, but it would be nothing like the scale of that held in honour of the late queen. The sooner he was forgotten the better, in Vogel's eyes. That message was plain enough, and in the court of Dannsburg woe betide any who failed to hear it.

That aside, the business of court continued almost as normal.

Almost.

The Princess Crown Royal sat on her throne staring into space in a drugged stupor as she always did, but instead of the Prince Regent sitting on the consort's throne with Ailsa whispering in his ear, there sat Lord Vogel.

The Lord Chief Judiciar sat on the regent's throne, in his rightful place by law. The Provost Marshal of the Queen's Men, in his place taken through political manoeuvring and manipulation, misinformation and outright lies.

The new Prince Regent.

And no one whispered in his ear. No one at all.

Vogel ruled there in truth now, and there could be no more doubt about it.

Part Two

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Chapter 36

Dannsburg looked a lot less grand as winter hit, and turned the skies to an ashen grey by day and a moonlit vista by night, robbed of the usual city streetlights due to the shortage of oil. Lamp oil came from Skania, where the great whales were hunted, and all trade with Skania was suspended now that their ships were banned from Varnburg's docks. Prices were becoming astronomical, far too high for the city to pay just to light the streets. Even at the state funeral of Prince Wilhelm that I had been forced to sit through, there had been far fewer lamps in the Grand High Temple of All Gods than I had been expecting, much to the evident displeasure of the new Arch High Priest.

The trees that lined the wide avenues were leafless skeletal hands scratching at the heavens, and a bitter wind whipped through their branches and down the dark, fire-filled streets. Riots were rampant. The supporters of the house of magicians and the house of law clashed on an almost daily basis, and the City Guard were overwhelmed trying to keep the peace.

'Lady's sake, Tomas,' Anne said as she slammed down another brandy and poured refills for us both. 'What the fuck is going on?'

'Change, Anne,' I said, and I lifted my glass and looked at her through the dark amber spirit. 'It happens. We usually don't like it, but it happens all the same. Change is a constant we can't stop, much as we might like to.'

We were sitting in my unofficial office at the back of the Bountiful Harvest that I had claimed as a Queen's Man. I had recently given the innkeeper another five gold crowns, and asked for a rug to keep the chill off the wooden floor. A magnificent Alarian carpet had appeared with his compliments the very next day, so at least my feet were warm if nothing else.

Anne had the seat at my right hand, where she had always sat when she was my second in the Pious Men before I became governor of Ellinburg. The Pious Men were Anne's now, so far as I was concerned, and I had made my peace with that. Not that I could afford to let her return to Ellinburg to lead them. Change, as I say. It's something we all have to make our peace

with, in time. It's seldom pleasant and never easy, but it's a fact of life and nothing to be done about that.

'Change, aye, and not for the better. I had this from your aunt yesterday.'

She took a folded letter out of her pouch and passed it to me.

My esteemed big sister,

I hope this letter finds you well. There are new arrivals in Ellinburg, come from where you are now. Men in blue robes who call themselves magicians, although I have no idea if that is true or not. They bring a great deal of gold to our streets and that is a good thing, but they have taken a guildhall on Trader's Row and posted guards outside, and no one knows what they do within. The people are uneasy. I thought you should know.

Your little sister,

Enaid

I nodded slowly. Jochan had already told me, in one of *his* reports. I didn't show those to Anne, not wanting to share some of the more personal news Jochan told me about his life.

'Doesn't surprise me,' I said. 'With things how they are here, it's only natural for the magicians to want to protect their knowledge and as many of their number as can slip out of Dannsburg. As the nearest major city, Ellinburg was the obvious place for them to go.'

'I don't want fucking magicians on my streets, in my city,' Anne growled.

I pinched the bridge of my nose between finger and thumb in irritation.

'They just call themselves that, Anne,' I said. 'The magi have no magic, you know that as well as I do.'

'That's not the point,' Anne said. 'Who knows what they get up to in that house of magicians of theirs? I don't trust them.'

'Alchemy, mostly,' I told her. 'The making of blasting powder, which is their most useful talent. Other than that, I think they just stare at the stars and do . . . I don't know. Debate philosophy or some bollocks, probably.'

Anne just grunted, her brow creasing in thought. Maybe she wanted to go back to Ellinburg and see for herself, but I couldn't allow it.

With Vogel's grip on Dannsburg turned into a stranglehold, I was too busy to be without Anne now. She was my chief enforcer, my strong right arm. I had Oliver and Emil and Beast for simple muscle, yes, but Bloody Anne was a force of nature with a keen tactical mind, and I wouldn't be

without her for anything. She was clever too, if uneducated, but then clever and educated are very different things. Either way, I valued her opinions. Those four, and Luka running intelligence and Rosie as my secretary, were my core operation. And Billy, of course. Billy was my secret weapon, the winning card I kept tucked up my sleeve for when I might need him. Not that that had turned out well with my plans for the young Grand Duke of Varnburg, I had to allow.

I was becoming more and more worried about Billy, truth be told. He was young, and I could tell that his prolonged separation from Mina was troubling him. I had proposed finding him a different tutor, perhaps one who would challenge him more, but he had given me a look that told me all I needed to know about his opinions on that. Academic learning was never going to be a pleasure for Billy, I knew that, no more than it had been for me. Nonetheless he continued to fill the great black tome Old Kurt had given him, fill it with incomprehensible notes of his own making on the cunning and what he was . . . I don't know. Teaching himself, I suppose. Discovering, perhaps.

In my darkest moments, I found myself dreading to think what he had discovered now. I remembered the tale of the rats, and how he had given Old Kurt the fear. Billy was no ordinary boy, and that was Our Lady's honest truth.

Still, the gears of the complex machine that was the Queen's Men kept turning. We were all busy with surveillance and arrest warrants, all save for Sabine anyway. She was still active in the city, stirring up hatred against the house of magicians. From what I had seen on the streets of Dannsburg, it was working well enough.

Mother Ruin.

Oh, she was that all right. Sabine was a rabble-rouser who could give Old Kurt lessons in how it was done, I had seen that much. She was one who could tell people not to sleep with a foot out of the blankets or the boggart would get them, that there was a Skanian under the bed and best report their neighbours for anything suspicious, and they would believe her. There was something about Mother Ruin that made folk follow her.

'Aye, alchemy and bollocks sounds about right,' Anne said at last, but she had taken her good time about it and that wasn't like her.

Sober, Anne had always been taciturn and terse, but I knew from experience that she was a talkative drunk. She was drunk now, but all the

same getting words out of her was much harder than it should have been. I wondered why that was.

‘What’s on your mind?’ I asked her, and refilled her glass.

‘What’s on my mind?’ Anne said, and with those words she seemed to come to life. ‘There’s martial law in our own fucking capital city, that’s what’s on my mind, Tomas. Folk need a permit to be on the streets after dark, and even during the day the Guard want to know your business, and where you’re going and why, and who you’re seeing when you get there.’

‘These are troubled times,’ I said, knowing even as I spoke that those troubles had been manufactured by the very house I served.

‘Aye, they are,’ she snapped. ‘There are constant fucking street skirmishes between the City Guard and the Guard of the Magi, and the people themselves are splitting into factions. Say your neighbour went to the university. Now you’re questioning why, and what she learned there, and what she intends to do with that knowledge. Use the library? What for? That’s not to be trusted, is it? You should have learned a trade and stuck to it like normal people. Been to the theatre recently? That’s cause for suspicion too now, apparently. What’s that for, and what do they say there? Anyone with any learning to them, any possible ties to the house of magicians, is starting to fear for their safety in the face of the mob. So what do they do? They band together, of course they do. It’s only fucking natural, isn’t it? So now we’ve two mobs instead of one. We’re on the brink of fucking civil war, that’s what’s *on my mind* !’

‘It won’t come to that,’ I assured her, although I was nowhere near as confident as I forced myself to sound.

‘What about the Skanians?’ Anne demanded, and as she reached for the brandy bottle it seemed she had well and truly found her voice again. ‘Why aren’t we hearing about them these days? We’re just fighting each other, and no one’s talking about the real threat any more.’

I remembered saying something similar to Ailsa myself, back in the summer.

‘Aye, well,’ I said, and I took the bottle from her hand and poured myself another as well. ‘I’ve my own thoughts about that. Official line is, the Skanians are backing the house of magicians.’

Anne gave me a level look.

‘And you believe that, do you?’ she asked.

I drank, and I didn’t answer her.

How could I?

*

I most definitely had thoughts about that, but vanishingly few people I dared share them with. It was too soon to go to Ailsa with my suspicions, not without a shred of proof, and for all that I liked Iagin I wasn't sure I trusted him *that* much. There was one man, though, one old pirate who I knew instinctively I could trust with my life. I fucking well hoped I could anyway, because that was exactly what I was about to do.

I had Rosie pen a letter to Ailsa's father, who had done me the great honour of allowing me to call him Sasura. That was an Alarian word, one which was like calling someone Da but when it was your wife's father and not your own. It was sort of their way of saying father-by-law but more intimate than that, more like you were actually part of the family by blood and not just by marriage. I had been deeply touched by that. He was a man I respected, and more to the point he was a man who had done business in Dannsburg for over forty years and lived to tell the tales of it. That had to be worth something.

My esteemed sasura,

My separation from your respected daughter pains me, and I regret that you and I have not had the opportunity to speak since my return to Dannsburg, but matters of business have been and remain most pressing. However, there is something on which I would welcome your counsel. If you have it in your heart to forgive me even a little bit, I would be very grateful for some of your time to discuss this matter with you in private.

Your most respectful son-by-law,

Tomas

I folded and sealed the letter and gave it to Fat Luka and told him to have one of his runners get it to Ailsa's father without anyone noticing. I wondered what sort of reception it was likely to get. Ailsa's parents had no idea what she did, or so she believed anyway, and if that was true then it stood to reason that Sasura didn't know what *I* did either. I was just a gangster from Ellinburg, as far as he was concerned, a businessman who his daughter had rather inexplicably married the year before last. Still, we had got on extremely well, and it seemed we had more than a little in common where business was concerned.

I was a pirate and a smuggler, I remembered him telling me, and that still made me smile. He was the sort of man I wished my own da had been,

and no mistake.

It doesn't do to dwell on such things, I know, but it made me wonder all the same. A man like him had fathered my lioness in riches and privilege in the heart of the capital city, and an utter shit like my da had fathered me in the slums of Ellinburg. Our lives couldn't have been more different growing up, and yet here we were together. We were both Queen's Men, after all, and married to each other as well, for what that was worth.

Perhaps the crown doesn't see class and education, only ability and innate talent. Or perhaps the Queen's Men only see opportunity in the moment, and seize it when it presents itself. I knew which I thought was more likely, but that was a thought for another day. It made me think of something else, though.

'Oh, Luka?' I said, as he was heading out of the door of my office with the letter in his hand. 'One more thing.'

'Boss?'

'You remember the Lady Lan Yetrov, don't you?'

'That poor cow whose husband used to batter her? That cunt you fed to his own bear, I mean. Her?'

'Yes, her,' I said.

'Aye, I remember,' he said, although that was obvious now.

'You might find out what she's doing these days,' I said. 'I think that might be an acquaintance worth renewing.'

I had made the Lady Leonora Lan Yetrov a staggeringly rich widow, after all, and in doing so had rescued her from her hellish marriage. From what little I had seen of her, under the veneer of diamonds and society that she hid behind, she struck me as an educated and, I suspected, very intelligent woman.

And she was enormously in my debt.

Seeing opportunity in the moment was a big part of being a Queen's Man, after all, and I thought I saw an opportunity in her.

Opportunities indeed. I waited for Luka to leave, then took out the letter I had received from Jochan and not shown to Anne.

Tomas,

You won't fucking believe this. We've only got a house of magicians in Ellinburg now. Enaid's probably told Anne already, but she won't know this bit. Because I had an idea, and I haven't told her yet and won't until I know I was right. The gods only know what's happening there in Dannsburg but

these magicians, they seem scared. I made a point of approaching one, asking for his counsel and wisdom and all that, and I bought him a few drinks. Well, you know me, I can drink, and this bloke couldn't. I got him proper shitfaced, and he told me all about blasting powder and how they're making stores of it here in Ellinburg, in case they need it. I reckon they could be persuaded to sell it. To us. To the Pious Men.

Anyway, I thought you'd want to know. Stay safe, Dannsburg sounds bad.

Jochan

That Jochan had managed to have an idea by himself that wasn't idiotic told me that his mental state was steadily improving, and I laid the credit for that squarely at Cutter and Hanne's feet. Between them, and with the child, they seemed to have achieved the seemingly impossible and made my poor brother happy, and I gave thanks for that.

I penned a reply thanking him for the news, and telling him to keep it absolutely to himself. I didn't even want Enaid and Anne knowing about this. Not yet.

Opportunities, as I say.

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Chapter 37

Two days later I received another letter.

My beloved son-by-law,

I would be overjoyed to see you, but times are delicate. On Queensday afternoon my wife will be out with her friends, and I think that would be the best and perhaps only time for us to meet. I bear you no ill will for the marital difficulties between you and my daughter, but I fear her mother feels differently. It would go badly for us both if she knew I was receiving you in our house. Come to me two hours after noon on Queensday and we will talk and drink brandy together like gentlemen, and I will offer you what counsel I can, but for the love of the Many-Headed God, do not tell my daughter of our meeting, should you happen to speak to her.

With my greatest regards,

Your sasura

I folded the letter, and nodded with satisfaction.

Then I unfolded it and read it again, and reread it, and I frowned.

Do not tell my daughter of our meeting, should you happen to speak to her.

If we were completely estranged, as he was supposed to think we were, why the fuck *would* I happen to speak to her? Ailsa was convinced her parents thought she was just a courtier, but I had to wonder. She had to have won her knighthood *somehow*, after all, and that wasn't something that usually happened to the daughters of immigrant Alarian merchants, however much money their fathers had managed to make in Dannsburg. My sasura was a very shrewd man indeed, for all that he tried to hide it behind whiskers and brandy fumes, and I wondered if perhaps he suspected more about her life than he let on. It honestly wouldn't have surprised me.

In Dannsburg everyone is watched, and perhaps none so much as the Queen's Men themselves. As I have written, *everyone* who matters knows one when they see one. I had been very publicly knighted not so long ago myself, and I doubted that Sasura had failed to hear of that. For all his pretence of being a wealthy retired merchant, tired and sleepy in his study with a glass of brandy always at his elbow, I thought the old pirate probably

had a fair idea of which way the wind was blowing in Dannsburg in those days.

Which was precisely why I wanted to speak to him, of course. Ailsa's father was a wise man, a man I respected, and more importantly than that, he was a connected one.

I was depending on it, the same way I was depending on Lady Lan Yetrov honouring her unspoken debt to me. I was reasonably sure that she would, to be fair – at least to an extent – but Ailsa's father was a different matter. I held an uncharacteristic affection towards him, but I knew that if the dice fell bad in the future his loyalty would be first and foremost to his wife and daughter. How could it be otherwise? Sasura was a family man, and I could respect that.

He wouldn't be the man I thought him if he didn't put his own daughter first, but then I wasn't actually going against Ailsa in this. I just wasn't involving her in it. That was a different thing, to my mind, but we would see if Sasura saw it the same way. I knew he didn't involve *his* family in his own business dealings, to the extent that even Ailsa at least pretended to believe he had never been anything other than an honest merchant, but I supposed we would see about that. Whether she *truly* believed it was another matter, of course, but on the carriage ride home from that first brandy afternoon in his study I thought I had seen a tiny glimpse of a wounded little girl in her face when I had mentioned her father's past.

Wounded childhood was something I understood all too well, and I remember how I had wanted to take her in my arms in the back of that carriage, drunk as I had been at the time.

I hadn't dared.

Fool, fucking fool.

She would probably have stabbed me if I had tried it, but I had seen the need in her eyes, nonetheless. Not for romance, no, but for simple human comfort. Somehow that had been so much sadder. Sometimes we all just need a little comfort, and are denied it by circumstance and the harshness of the worlds we build around us.

The Queen's Men denied us everything.

Hearts of steel, that was what Vogel wanted. Stone lionesses and iron tigers. There was no place for feelings in the Queen's Men. I'm not what you'd call a caring man, I have to allow. I haven't got that bit, after all, and

perhaps that was what they saw in me in the first place. All the same, there came a point where you just . . . I don't know.

I didn't know then, and I don't know now, quite how to phrase it.

I mean, I don't care about people I don't know. I never have done, and I've written of that before. Except . . . except sometimes I do. Take Beast, as an example. I had cared about him, and I have given him a job when he asked me for one.

But then I could see that Beast was useful. Would I have cared about someone who wasn't?

I really didn't know.

Was that the kind of man I was, one who would take in someone useful and overlook another who at first glance might appear not to be? Again, I honestly didn't know. I had cared about the Lady Lan Yetrov, I supposed, and I hadn't known her, but I'd had reason enough to hate her husband. But then a good part of why I had hated him had to do with how he treated her, and she had been no one I knew. I could tie my head in knots trying to untangle that one.

Perhaps I *did* care, in my way. Perhaps I was just broken from what my da had done to me, and to Jochan, and from what the war had done to us both. Perhaps I was hiding my wounds behind a wall of callousness, I really couldn't have said. That was a philosophical question, I supposed, and in those days I had a vanishingly small interest in philosophy.

I poured myself another brandy and tried not to think about it.

*

The bomb went off outside the Bountiful Harvest shortly after dawn.

I was barely out of bed, still standing shaving at the nightstand in my smallclothes when the flashstone's percussive blast blew out the ground floor front windows of the inn. I got into my clothes as quickly as I ever had for any army drill I could remember, and reached the top of the stairs with Remorse and Mercy buckled over my untucked shirt just in time to meet Bloody Anne coming the other way down the corridor.

'I don't know,' I said, before she could ask.

She was already in full leather and mail, and that put me to shame. The woman was a born soldier.

'What is it, Da?' Billy asked, sticking his head out of his door as Anne thundered past.

‘Fucking terrorists,’ Anne growled as she shouldered past me and charged down the stairs.

‘Nothing, lad,’ I said at the same time. ‘Go back in your room and keep your head down.’

I shot a look over my shoulder in time to see Rosie standing in her shift in their bedroom doorway, a loaded crossbow in her hands.

‘I’ll cover the street from our window,’ she said.

I nodded my thanks and followed Anne at a run.

The common room of the inn was full of smoke, the floor littered with broken glass from the shattered windows that crunched beneath my boots as I ran across it towards the charred hole where the door had been. No one was injured that I could see, but the day was young and the place had been empty at that hour anyway. This attack hadn’t been intended to hurt people so much as to send a message. Anne kicked the blackened wreckage of the front door aside and stormed out into the street with her blades in her hands, and I followed with Remorse drawn.

There was no one in sight.

No one at all. Curfew didn’t lift for the best part of an hour yet, and the streets were deserted. Whoever had lit the fuse of that flashstone was long gone.

‘Fuck,’ Anne growled, and spat on the cobbles to show what she thought of that.

I lowered Remorse and ran my free hand over my face, pinching the last of the sleep from my weary eyes.

‘A warning,’ I said. ‘The house of magicians knows who we are, and now they know where we’re staying too.’

I looked up, and saw Rosie leaning out of her and Anne’s open bedroom window with the crossbow held tight to her shoulder.

‘Stand down,’ I called up to her, and Anne nodded to tell her all was well.

We met the innkeeper on our way back inside. He was only half dressed, white-faced and quivering, his hands visibly shaking as he surveyed the damage to his common room.

‘What happened, Sir Tomas?’ he asked me.

‘A terror attack,’ I said, and it spoke of the situation in Dannsburg in those days that he just nodded, accepting the facts of it without further

question. ‘Nobody hurt, no real harm done. I’ll pay for the damage. Take it out of my account.’

It had happened because of me, so that seemed only fair to my mind. I could always claim it back from the house of law, after all. Vogel paid extremely well, and he had even deeper pockets when it came to operational expenses.

‘My . . . my thanks, Sir Tomas,’ the man said.

He swallowed and scurried behind the bar to pour himself a no doubt much-needed brandy, which he swallowed in a single gulp. After a moment to recover himself he poured again for Anne and me. We took them and drank with thanks, for all that it was barely past dawn.

All was well.

Was it fuck. The house of magicians knew I was a Queen’s Man, of course they did, but now it seemed they had found out where I lived, and more than that, they had finally found the balls to act on that information and send me a message.

We can hurt you, if we want to, that message had said.

Well, fuck you very much.

I could hurt them too.

And I intended to.

*

By noon I was in the house of law, and I was having an argument with the master of munitions. The house of law had a truly terrifying stockpile of explosives, and it wasn’t like I wanted to requisition the lot, after all. Just enough.

Just enough to make my fucking point.

Fat Luka had already told me where the archmagus Nikolai Reiter lived. Of course he knew, because he was Luka. Knowing things like that was what Luka was for.

These fuckers had let off a bomb outside the inn where I slept. Where my son slept.

I wasn’t having that.

I was not having that one little fucking bit, as the house of law’s master of munitions was gradually beginning to grasp. He was a heavyset man in the late autumn of his life, and at some point his left arm had been taken off at the elbow. I wondered if he had lost it in battle, in Aunt Enaid’s war, perhaps, or had simply blown it off in an accident with one of his own

creations. The more he defied me, the less I cared what life had done to him.

‘You need Lord Vogel’s signature,’ he said for the sixth time. ‘I’m not giving you military explosives just because someone spoiled your bloody breakfast.’

I lost my patience at that. I leaned over the desk in front of him, glaring at him in the midday sunlight that streamed through the grimy office windows.

‘You know bloody well who I am,’ I said. ‘How does the queen’s signature suit you?’

‘We haven’t got a fucking queen,’ he said.

That, to me, sounded like treasonous talk. Oh, isn’t it funny how definitions can twist to suit us at the time? He was absolutely right, of course, we *didn’t* have a fucking queen, but that was beside the point and a Queen’s Man was the *last* person who was likely to agree with his interpretation of the current political situation. And he worked in the house of law? No, I wasn’t putting up with that. Sometimes stupidity is a worse crime even than treason, and even less forgivable. I drew Remorse and levelled her at his throat.

‘I would be extremely careful, were I you, what I said next,’ I cautioned him. ‘If I may give you a little counsel – anything other than “Yes, Sir Tomas” would be very fucking unwise.’

I left the house of law twenty minutes later with a cart and enough explosives to start a war.

Chapter 38

I had the afternoon free, as I wasn't due to see Sasura until the next day. I spent that afternoon very pleasantly, with Emil and Oliver and Beast. Just four friends out for a stroll through the quiet streets of a smart residential part of Dannsburg, in the vicinity of the archmagus Nikolai Reiter's townhouse.

'No guards, that I can see,' Oliver murmured as we rounded the corner of the neat, iron railing-enclosed public garden in the centre of the square that the four-storey terraced house faced onto. 'It's well-to-do, aye, but quite modest by Dannsburg standards. Especially for an archmagus.'

It was, at that. The Reiters weren't a wealthy family, after all. His cousin wouldn't have been working as a fancy whore if they had been.

'Aye,' I said, after a moment. 'It is.'

I had to admit I was having doubts, now that we were there. Nikolai Reiter had struck me as a decent enough man when I met with him at the house of magicians back in the spring, after the queen's funeral. I had gone to the house of law to requisition explosives full of anger and righteous indignation, ready to blow up his entire house and everyone in it, but now that I was there looking at the modest, middle-class dwelling I wasn't so sure. There was no saying the bomber had even been acting on Reiter's instructions. It was just that he was the head of the house of magicians and the only still-living magician I had ever met, and so naturally I had hung the blame at his door. Had this been Absolom Greuv's residence I wouldn't have hesitated for a moment, but then of course Billy had already killed him in a public and really quite spectacular fashion. The more I thought about it, and about what I knew of Nikolai Reiter, the more I began to doubt myself.

I had been lashing out, acting like a fool and a berserker. I was thinking like my brother, I realised suddenly, and that gave me pause. That wasn't my way. I was a businessman, first and foremost, and it seemed I needed to remind myself of that. A frontal assault wasn't always the best way to achieve the objective; I had learned that much in the army even if Jochan hadn't.

Before I knew it I was halfway to Reiter's front door.

‘Boss!’ Emil hissed, but I waved him back and bade them wait for me. I lifted the heavy brass knocker and rapped on the door.

A maid opened the door a moment later, and gave me a quizzical look. I was well dressed, as was my way in those days, but there was no mistaking Remorse and Mercy at my hips. The wearing of swords was still in fashion in Dannsburg, aye, but turning up uninvited at a gentleman’s door very much was not.

‘Good day, m’lord?’ she said, obviously unsure of my status.

‘I need to see the archmagus,’ I said. ‘Is he in?’

‘I . . . I would have to enquire, m’lord,’ the maid said. ‘Who should I say is calling?’

‘Sir Tomas,’ I said, and left it at that.

There was no need to show her the warrant. The learned magus would know who that was, if he was actually in, and if so he would admit me at once – and if he wasn’t, there was no need to put the fear into this poor maid for no fault of her own. Obviously one should have left a calling card, or received an invitation, but it was this or set off a bomb on his doorstep at midnight so I hoped he would forgive a minor breach of etiquette. If he genuinely wasn’t there then the maid would say so, and I would believe her. Reiter wasn’t a coward, I had established that at our first meeting. I respected him, for all that we currently stood on opposite sides of the matter.

She retreated into the hall and I waited politely on the doorstep, aware of my three men watching from where they lounged against the black iron railings that framed the garden at the centre of the square. I was glad to have them there, but by Our Lady they were obvious. There was no hiding Beast, that was for certain, and I could almost feel the archmagus’ neighbours twitching their curtains and wondering what manner of man had come calling on him. No gentleman, surely, would have friends who looked like those three.

The maid returned a couple of minutes later, and ushered me into a clean and well-polished if narrow hallway. She dipped me a curtsey and led me to a door that opened into Archmagus Reiter’s study.

He smiled at her as she held the door open for me.

‘Thank you, Tissia,’ he said. ‘Tea for my guest and myself, please.’

The door closed behind me.

‘Archmagus,’ I said.

‘Sir Tomas,’ he replied. ‘To what do I owe this most unexpected visit?’

Yes, I had made a social gaffe coming unannounced, I knew that well enough, and he had no reason to point it out save to remind me that he was more highly placed in Dannsburg society than I was. But then I was a knight and Queen’s Man and he was neither of those things, so fuck him, house of magicians or not.

All the same there was an innocence in his eyes that I wasn’t sure whether or not I believed. I decided to be honest with him. That had worked the last time we spoke, and in my experience what had worked once would work again.

‘I had a choice,’ I said. ‘I had a choice between coming to speak to you unannounced, or blowing your house up tonight. I thought perhaps we’d talk.’

‘I . . . I am glad you chose to talk,’ he said, going a little pale. ‘Why, may I ask, were you considering blowing up my home? I have children, Sir Tomas. Four of them.’

‘And I have a young son,’ I said, ‘and yet someone bombed my inn this morning.’

‘Not me,’ Archmagus Reiter assured me.

I looked into his eyes, and I believed him.

‘Aye,’ I said, after a long moment. ‘I didn’t truly think so. But someone did, and I think you know who that was.’

Nikolai Reiter sat back in his seat and ran a hand over his face. The maid came back in just then and set a tea tray down on the desk between us, and left without speaking. After a moment I reached forward and took a bowl, and inhaled the vapours while the magician put his answer together in his head.

After a long moment he picked up his own tea and looked at me through the aromatic steam that rose from his bowl.

‘Perhaps,’ he said, ‘but then our houses aren’t really on speaking terms at the moment, are they, Sir Tomas? Why would I tell you even if I did?’

After his mention of four children I didn’t like to press the point, but I knew I had to.

‘I was going to blow your house up,’ I reminded him. ‘I still could.’

‘Could you, knowing there are children living under this roof?’ he countered, and I had to admit he had me there. ‘I have no doubt that you’re a ruthless man, Sir Tomas, but I don’t think you are an evil one.’

Lord Vogel might want heartless iron tigers but I wasn't that, at least not where children were concerned. Konrad might well have been but I wasn't, and it was obvious that Reiter had come to that conclusion by himself. He was a shrewd fellow, and I think that he had, at least to a degree, got the measure of me.

'Perhaps not,' I admitted, 'but you'll have to leave this house eventually. A crossbow bolt from an alley, a dagger in a crowd. A cunning lad, from absolutely fucking anywhere. There are a lot of ways to die, Reiter.'

'And there are a lot of ways to live, Piety,' he countered. 'There are a lot of ways to not be Dieter Vogel's lapdog. Will you choose one of them?'

'Will you give up the bombers?' I asked him, putting the full force of my blunt Ellinburg accent into the question. 'Because finding them is my fucking job. Who bombed my inn this morning?'

'I honestly have no idea,' Reiter said, and for all that it pained me, I believed him again.

He was innocent, to my mind, and curse it to Our Lady's name but I couldn't help but actually like the fellow. Truth be told, I would have far preferred things if he had been my boss instead of Vogel, but that was not the hand Our Lady had dealt me in this life.

Fuck.

*

'Get your little rats out on the street and turn them loose,' I told Fat Luka when I returned to the Bountiful Harvest from the archmagus' house. 'I want to know who bombed my fucking inn. Grease palms, spend all the money you need to. That's what it's fucking for, and the house of law has more than enough of it.'

'Aye, boss,' Luka said, 'but if it wasn't Reiter I'd lay odds it was one of his fellows.'

'So would I,' I said, 'but I want to know which one. I want to know who, and where they live and what they do outside the house of magicians, and more to the point I want to know who they live *with*.'

I had been ready to blow up Archmagus Nikolai Reiter's house, and it had never crossed my mind that he might have children, or even a wife, for that matter. That shamed me, I had to allow, and it wasn't a mistake I would make again. It's a thing I have noticed about myself, about powerful people in general. We might see an enemy, and move against them, but we seldom

see those around them. Their wives or husbands, their mothers or fathers or children.

No one is ever simply an enemy, a lone faceless thing to be fought and killed. That was what was drilled into us in the army, to be sure, but that didn't make it true. Every enemy soldier in any conflict has a family back home, people who love them and depend on them, but the army doesn't want you thinking of the enemy's family when you ram a spear through his guts. No, just advance, and kill and kill and kill again. They're enemies, so fuck them. Form the shield wall and push and stab and push and stab, and trample the bloody corpses beneath your boots.

They're not people, just enemies. Fuck them all, no consequences. There are no weeping widows, no lost, homeless orphans. Just enemies. Push and stab and push and stab as the cannons roar and the skies darken with smoke and blood.

'Boss? Are you feeling all right?'

Luka's words came to me through the haze of battle shock, and I realised that my hands were shaking badly where they rested on the table in the private dining room of the Bountiful Harvest.

'Aye,' I said, and hid my hands beneath the table as quickly as I could without making it too obvious. 'Aye, I'm well, Luka.'

Breathe, I thought. Just breathe.

I wasn't well, I knew that. I had been planning to kill four children that night, even if I hadn't known it at the time. I wasn't well at all. I don't think I would ever have been able to forgive myself if I had gone through with my original mad plan of revenge against the house of magicians.

I was too deep in the Queen's Men for my own health, I realised, but right then I couldn't see my way clear of it.

'Aye, that's good,' Luka said. 'If you say so.'

He didn't believe me, I could see that plain enough in his fleshy face, and he was fucking right not to.

I *wasn't* all right, and the battle shock was only part of it. Everything was falling apart, I could see that plain as day.

Ailsa's words came back to me again: *Ill-informed and ignorant people are easier to suppress and control.*

She had told me that when she forced the governorship of Ellinburg on me, and now the thought sent a shiver down my spine. I knew what Lord Vogel was doing. I remembered Sabine inciting the violence at the lynching

I had witnessed, and I had no doubt at all that it had been on his orders. Vogel had instigated war against the house of magicians and the university and all the wealth of knowledge and learning that they stood for.

I could see what he was doing, and I didn't like it one little fucking bit.

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Chapter 39

The next afternoon saw me at Sasura's house. Queensday afternoon was bright and sunny, if cold, and my carriage drew up at the gates of his estate with the light of the low winter sun stabbing through the windows and into my eyes. The guards on the gates exchanged hard looks with my footmen, and I couldn't help thinking how much Dannsburg had changed since the previous year. The place had always been full of eyes and ears, suspicions and informers, but now it seemed everyone looked at everyone else with an open hostility and that was new.

The tensions between the house of law and house of magicians had the population at boiling point. Students of the university had been rioting in the streets just that morning, in solidarity with their colleagues at the house of magicians. The Guard had been sent in, I knew that much, but not what the outcome had been.

'I'm Sir Tomas,' I said to the man who came to the window of my carriage with his hand on the hilt of his sword. 'I'm expected.'

He consulted a paper for a moment, then nodded.

'That you are, sir,' he allowed, and motioned to his men to open the gates.

Ailsa's parents were simply retired merchants, so far as society was concerned anyway, and even *their* security was like this. None of their wealthy neighbours thought anything of it, of course, because theirs was even stricter. That was what Dannsburg had come to, in those days.

We were ushered through the gates into the grassy expanse at the front of the grand old house, and I left Oliver and Emil with the coachman and allowed myself to be escorted alone to the front door. The house was crawling with ivy and still had windows in the old style, the little leaded diamonds of glass in the casements. Here, perhaps alone in all of Dannsburg, I felt I was truly safe. A footman admitted me at the door and showed me down the hall to Sasura's study.

The footman knocked, and opened the door at a muffled response from within.

'Your guest, sir,' he said.

I stepped past him into the comfortable room with its magnificent Alarian carpet, and I bowed low to my father-by-law as was only respectful. Sasura took two steps forward and swept me into an embrace as the footman closed the door behind me.

‘Tomas, it is good to see you,’ he said.

‘And you, Sasura,’ I replied, and I meant it.

Whatever differences there might be between Ailsa and me, her father was a man I had the greatest of respect for. He was Alarian, obviously, with some seventy or more years to him. His longish white hair was pulled back from his brow in a severe topknot, the way I remembered it, and his magnificent white beard and great curling moustache were still reassuringly the same. As ever he was dressed in the Dannsburg style, in a fine doublet and coat.

‘Brandy!’ he announced with a broad grin. ‘I know you are a man who enjoys brandy in the afternoon, a man after my own heart.’

‘My thanks,’ I said, and he opened the finely carved cupboard that contained a great number of glasses and bottles.

Brandy was my sasura’s passion, one he had allowed himself to indulge greatly since his retirement. He poured for us both, and took one of the comfortable chairs away from his imposing desk while waving me into another.

‘So,’ he said after he had taken a generous sip of his drink. ‘What can I do for you, my beloved son-by-law? I would be overjoyed to think this is purely a social call, but I feel I know you well enough by now that somehow I doubt that.’

‘Aye, well,’ I said, and I looked at him over my glass. ‘Not entirely, I have to allow. Tell me, Sasura, what do you know of the house of magicians and their power in Dannsburg?’

He drank again, and took his time before he answered.

‘I know they are greatly out of favour with the house of law. There is talk, albeit unsubstantiated to the best of my knowledge, that they somehow had something to do with the death of our beloved queen. That they are in league with the Skanian menace, no less. There have been riots in the streets, and there have been lynchings. These are things that you already know, I am sure.’

I nodded. They would have been rather hard to miss, after all.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘And I know the magicians and their supporters are fighting back. Their Guard of the Magi have had more than one scuffle with the City Guard, and some of the riots are turning into pitched battles between supporters of the two houses.’

Sasura shrugged. ‘Such is the nature of mobs,’ he said. ‘It is sad, but the human animal is essentially tribal. Those who support the magicians and the university find themselves at odds with the common folk who support the house of law. It is to be expected.’

‘Someone bombed my inn yesterday morning,’ I said.

He startled at that, and I could tell that was something he hadn’t known. Of course the accusations against the house of magicians were almost certainly horseshit, I knew that, and that wasn’t why I was there at all. We had started those rumours ourselves, for Our Lady’s sake, for all that that didn’t mean they hadn’t bombed my inn in retaliation. That wasn’t what I was interested in.

‘By the Many-Headed God!’ he swore. ‘Was anyone hurt?’

‘No, thank Our Lady,’ I replied, ‘but I think it was only a warning, this time. Do you think the magicians would have done that?’

‘There have been lynchings,’ he repeated idly, sipping his brandy as he spoke, ‘but I doubt they would resort to random acts of public terrorism in retribution. They have no reason to target you in particular, a simple businessman from Ellinburg, now have they?’

His eyebrow raised slightly when he said it, and I felt a lead weight begin to form in my stomach. Sasura was a very shrewd man, as I have written, which was a big part of why I liked him so much. Ailsa was adamant her parents had no idea what she did, and therefore by extension no idea what *I* did, but I was truly beginning to doubt that. I swallowed my brandy and looked at my father-by-law with a new respect, and I began to wonder if once again we were working our way around the edges of something here.

‘It would seem unlikely on the surface of it, I agree,’ I said.

‘It would,’ he replied, and reached for the brandy.

He refilled my glass, emptying the bottle, then stood and turned away to get a fresh one from the cupboard. That way his back was almost completely turned to me when he spoke.

‘Tomas,’ he said quietly. ‘If I say two words to you now, all I need you to do is to say whether you know what I mean or not. If not, we will never

speak of this again, is that agreed?’

‘Aye, Sasura,’ I said, frowning at his back. ‘That’s clear enough. Say your words.’

‘Mother Ruin,’ he almost whispered.

I choked on my brandy, and I suppose that told him all he needed to know.

‘Yes,’ I said, once I had my breath.

He took his time opening the new brandy bottle and filling his glass. At length he turned to face me, and he gave me a grave look.

‘So Ailsa gave you the Queen’s Warrant, then,’ he said. ‘I had suspected it, but I couldn’t know for sure. I still remember when Sabine gave me mine.’

I looked back at him, and felt my hands trying to shake. Of all the ways I had seen this afternoon going, this had never been one of them. My sasura had been a Queen’s Man? He couldn’t have been. He wasn’t now, that was for certain, or Ailsa and me would both have known of it.

‘I don’t understand,’ I said, after a long pause that probably made me look something of a fool.

‘Sabine,’ he said. ‘You’ve met her, yes?’

‘Aye,’ I said carefully, completely unsure how to proceed with this unexpected conversation.

‘What I tell you now, I have to ask you on your honour and our family ties that this stays utterly between you and me. My daughter can never know of this, or may the Many-Headed God forbid, my wife.’

‘I understand,’ I said. ‘On my honour, Sasura. On our family, I swear it.’

He looked at me for a long moment, then he nodded slowly and sat down again.

‘Sabine seduced me,’ he said. ‘Oh, long ago. Not so long after I moved my business from Alaria to Dannsburg, in fact. Before Ailsa was born. I was a very successful young smuggler whose ships ran the poppy winds, and the Queen’s Men wanted the poppy trade. Of course they did, and Sabine was Provost Marshal in those days. To my shame I was a married man, but . . . oh, Tomas, oh, you should have seen her in those days. I was weak. She seduced me, and then she recruited me. I carried the warrant and I fucked Sabine for ten years, and my wife never knew of any of it. Then she met Dieter Vogel, and she recruited him. They were in love within weeks, and she left me for him. Vogel didn’t want me around after that, for

all that I accepted her decision, and he talked her around to his way of thinking. I think I am possibly the only Queen's Man in history to have been allowed to retire honourably, under an oath of silence and a pending death warrant should I ever break it. But since you too carry the Queen's Warrant, well . . . There it is. That is my secret, and my eternal shame. I hope that you can forgive me.'

I wasn't sure that I could, in that moment.

'Ailsa truly doesn't know?'

'Truly,' he said. 'It would break her heart to know that I was ever unfaithful to her honoured mother, and even more so to learn how she in her turn earned her current position.'

I stared at him.

'You put her forward for the job? For *this*? You introduced her to the Queen's Men, fucking seriously?'

I was angry with him now. I didn't want to be, but I found I couldn't help myself. I loved the old man, in my way, but to push your own daughter into a life like this wasn't something I could imagine any father doing in his right mind.

'She was perfect for it, Tomas,' he said. 'A born actress and diplomat. That was what we were, in those days. Now . . . now I think it may be different. Since Vogel became Provost Marshal I think the Queen's Men are a different type of organisation to the one I once served. I have many regrets in life, but choosing my daughter's path without her knowledge is chief among them.'

'Oh, it's different now,' I said, in a flat tone. 'We are spies and killers and torturers. We lie to our own people, and set them against one another to forward the political agenda that best suits us. *That's* the life you introduced your daughter to.'

I gave him a hard look that I regret to this day.

My sasura began to weep, and I immediately felt like an utter shit. The gods only knew he had done what he had thought was best for his daughter's future at the time. He had found a way for her to achieve a knighthood and a position at court and in society, to better her social standing in Dannsburg far above anything she could have hoped for as a second-generation immigrant with no noble blood.

But just look how *that* had turned out.

‘I didn’t know,’ he said. ‘Vogel had only just taken over when Ailsa came of age. I thought she could have the life that I had wanted. I didn’t know what he would turn the service into.’

I gulped my brandy and poured us both another, and Sasura drank gratefully with tears streaking down his face and into his beard.

‘You didn’t know,’ I said after a long moment, and I sighed. ‘No, of course you didn’t. I understand that and I apologise, Sasura. I’m sure it was a fine life once, the honour and the glamour of protecting the realm from within the shadows. The knighthood, and the social position that comes with it. But now . . . now it’s something else, and even I am only just coming to see exactly what.’

‘I thank you, my son-by-law,’ Sasura said, and he wiped his face with a silk pocket square and poured more brandy, his hand trembling slightly as he did so.

I found I didn’t have it in me to hold what he had done against him. His relations with his wife forty and more years ago were his own business and nothing I needed to know about, and I thought he’d truly only had Ailsa’s best interests at heart when he had proposed her to whoever had inducted her into the Queen’s Men and arranged for her to be given her knighthood. We drank together in companionable silence for a few minutes until he had composed himself, and then I ventured the question I really wanted to hear the answer to.

‘Why did Sabine stand down as Provost Marshal?’ I asked him.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I had retired by then. Something between her and Vogel, I can only assume. I have spent the last thirty years trying to put the matter behind me. All I know is this: do not trust Dieter Vogel. Ever.’

I met his tear-filled eyes, and swallowed my brandy.

That, I thought, sounded like extremely fucking good advice.

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I had to report the bombing to Lord Vogel, of course. I went that evening, after my meeting with Sasura. I had probably drunk too much brandy for that to be what you might call an entirely good idea, but it needed doing and after what Ailsa’s father had told me I was feeling far from well disposed toward the Provost Marshal that night. Even less so than usual.

‘Yesterday morning?’ he said, as he narrowed his eyes at me across his desk in his austere office in the house of law. ‘And you only tell me now,

Tomas?’

‘I’ve been making my own enquiries, Provost Marshal,’ I said, ‘but so far I have not uncovered any leads. My investigation focused on Archmagus Nikolai Reiter, but I have now satisfied myself of his innocence.’

‘Hmmm,’ Vogel said, and that could have meant absolutely anything.

He looked at me for a long time, and once more I felt myself going cold down to my boots. There was just something about Vogel, something utterly soulless that could have sucked the heart out of the most passionate of men. I wondered what my brother would have made of him, and decided that no good could ever come out of *that* meeting. He frightened the living fuck out of me, that was for certain, and I’ve no shame in admitting that.

There are few men in the world I would fear to face with swords, as I have written before. I fear the things I can’t see. Disease, and magic, those I fear.

There’s another thing I can’t see, though, and that’s power.

Dieter Vogel was the most powerful man in the country at that moment, and I was well aware that he could do absolutely fucking anything he liked and the law be damned. *That* I feared, and I’ve no shame in admitting that either, but that doesn’t mean that I liked it.

‘I’m asking for guidance, sir,’ I said after a moment.

I hated myself for it, for sounding weak in front of him, but he had a way of making you need to say *something* just to fill the silence. That was a skill I had used myself in the back rooms of Ellinburg, I had to allow, but he could have given me lessons in it. He looked up at me, and he showed me the cutting edge of his razorblade smile. What he said was not what I had been expecting to hear.

‘Your operation in Dannsburg is obviously compromised,’ he said. ‘The magicians know who you are; we knew that would be a consequence of sending you to them, and it is possible that they have learned where you live. But even if it wasn’t them who struck at your base of operations, then all the same *someone* did, and that doesn’t help us in any way. I’ll have to put Konrad on it now, I suppose. Take some leave, Tomas. You’ve earned it after that business with the Arch High Priest, anyway. Go back to Ellinburg for a while and oversee things in your own city. Go tomorrow, before the winter snows come and close the roads. Governor Schulz is a trusted ally of the house of law but she doesn’t carry the warrant, and she would benefit

from the guidance of someone who does. Leave somebody of yours here; I'll send for you if I need you back.'

Go away, that was what he was telling me. He was telling me that I had fucked up, and he was giving my problems to Konrad to un-fuck until he needed me for something he was sure I wouldn't fuck up again.

Or was he?

Perhaps he was worried that I was starting to lift rocks that he didn't want lifting, and looking at what was underneath them.

Assume we know everything, and you'll never be caught out in a lie that might hang you.

Did he know where I had been that afternoon, and who I had spoken to? Now that I knew who Sasura had once been, that seemed more and more likely. There was no way he wasn't watched, and I remembered how concerned he had seemed to be about his own footmen eavesdropping on his conversations the first time I had met him. That made a lot more sense, now that I knew the details of his past in the Queen's Men.

I could only hope I hadn't got the old rogue in trouble by going to his house, but then we were family now so I supposed that could be explained away to a point. Even so, if Vogel even suspected what he had told me it was no wonder I was being effectively kicked out of the city in disgrace.

I knew one thing, though: if Vogel ever learned that I was starting to suspect what I was, I would swing from the hangman's rope.

There was no doubt about that at all.

Chapter 40

We were on the road the next morning, Bloody Anne and Rosie and me, Billy and Oliver and Emil. I had left Fat Luka at the Bountiful Harvest to mind my affairs in Dannsburg, and Beast to mind him. I didn't think any of us were that sorry to be leaving the capital by then, and the bombing of the inn had made it an even easier decision to make than it would have been anyway.

'I can see Mina again!' Billy had exclaimed when I told them we were going home, and I saw the wry smile cross Anne's face and make her long scar twitch with amusement.

It would be well to stay away from their bedroom door of a night for the first few weeks, I thought. Young love was a powerful thing, after all. I remembered some lasses I had known when I was a young lad growing up in the Stink, and I knew just how he felt. Even so, that only made me think of the Princess Crown Royal and the young Grand Duke of Varnburg, and their betrothal, which had been publicly announced the morning we left the city.

We had departed a scene of celebration, a carefully orchestrated display of public joy and patriotism. There had only been two bombings that morning, that I heard of, and barely twenty of the common folk dead. That was counted as a good day, in those times we lived in.

No, on balance I wasn't sorry to be leaving Dannsburg at all.

We rode for Ellinburg, and every mile we put between us and Dannsburg felt like a cleansing. It was a long journey and I won't record the details of it here, as truthfully nothing of great note happened on the road, but suffice it to say that nine days later we rode into Ellinburg as the early winter sleet was starting to turn into snow. We had sent Emil ahead on our fastest horse to let our people know we were coming, so when I returned to the house off Trader's Row I was welcomed by Salo and Cook with open arms. The fire was burning in the drawing room, there was brandy on a tray and hot food and hot baths both waiting, vying for my immediate attention after the long ride. I very much needed both. Probably it was the soldier in me, but I chose the food first. Billy chose Mina.

He had thrown himself into Mina's arms the moment he was through the door, and I hadn't seen either of them since. It didn't take a great degree of cleverness to know what they were doing, filthy from the road though he was.

That made me smile. Anne and Rosie had taken themselves off to Chandler's Narrow to have some time together, and Oliver and Emil had headed down to the Tanner's Arms to see the other lads and pay their respects to my aunt. All seemed well, but of course it fucking well wasn't.

No, no, it was very much not well at all.

I put my knife down for a moment and rubbed my temples, and took another sip of brandy. I was alone in the small dining room save for a single footman who insisted on hovering over my left shoulder even though I had sent the other servants out of the room at the first opportunity I had got. This wasn't Ailsa's household now but mine, and formality made me deeply uncomfortable. It still does, to be fair, even now. I think it's something you have to grow up with, to ever be truly comfortable with, and eating outnumbered by servants is something I greatly dislike.

'My lord, are you well?' the footman asked.

To my shame I had absolutely no idea what his name was. Salo had changed some of the staff while I had been in the capital, as was his prerogative as my steward, and I had never seen this man who was watching me eat before in my life.

'Aye,' I said after a moment. 'Rich food, that's all. It's a struggle for the stomach after a week and more on hard rations while travelling.'

The food was rich, at that. Cook had obviously been unsure whether I would be returning alone or with my lady wife, and she had prepared a meal far more to Ailsa's tastes than mine. I watched the thick sauce congealing on my meat, and found my appetite had quite deserted me.

'You finish this if you want it,' I said to the plainly astonished footman, and rose to my feet. 'I'm going to take a bath.'

The bathwater was tepid by then, but I decided it would do. Otherwise the maids would have had to heat more water in the kitchen and the housemen lug it up two flights of stairs in buckets to the wooden tub that had been brought up to my bedroom, and I didn't want that. I really wasn't easy living with servants, being waited on hand and foot. Not without Ailsa, anyway. That had been her world, not mine. I honestly had no idea why I had a valet at all, other than because Ailsa had said that I should, but to

dismiss the man now and take his job away when he had done nothing wrong seemed harsh, so I resolved to keep him on even though his purpose utterly escaped me.

Without my lady wife there by my side to guide me, I simply didn't know how to live in a big house with servants. It had been different at the governor's hall. There I had been too busy to worry about such things, and with the constant comings and goings of messengers and officials and the City Guard, it had felt more like an army camp than a residence anyway, and I was used to those. This was different.

This felt like wealthy, upper-class civilian life, and I didn't know how to live that.

I settled into the lukewarm bathwater and sighed as I felt the grime of the road begin to lift from my skin. Was that what I was now, a wealthy knight with no idea of how to be one? No, no, of course I wasn't. I was a Queen's Man, and I always would be. Unlike my sasura, I would never be allowed an honourable discharge. No one was, except for him and his rather exceptional circumstances. I had just been hung on the wall, as it were, like a sword hung over the fireplace after the war, put away until you needed to use it again. Until next time.

Brother Blade.

For some reason I thought then of the ancient sword that hung over the fireplace in Old Kurt's hovel down in the Wheels. The sword of a king, or so he said anyway. That was so much horseshit, I was sure, but I had believed it when I was a little lad. Ah, memories. Childhood memories, to be sure. Memories of a more innocent time, when I had still believed in the romantic stories of kings and queens and valiant knights in shining armour. When I had still believed in happy endings.

Vogel hadn't let me go, I knew that much.

He never, ever fucking would.

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I took my leisure the next day, recovering from the long ride, but that evening I rode down to the Tanner's Arms. I knew the Pious Men weren't my crew any more, but nonetheless I needed to see them. Ellinburg was my home, after all, and I had founded the Pious Men there. Well, me and my brother had together, I supposed, but to my mind they had always been my operation. Jochan was more brawn than brain and I didn't think even he would have disputed that.

Riding down the road to the Tanner's felt like old times, like coming home. Now I wasn't the city governor any more, or even the head of the Pious Men, I could finally go out alone, without guards crowded around me. I could have been any mounted traveller with his hooded cloak pulled close around him against the encroaching winter cold. There were already flakes of snow in the air and almost everyone I passed was cowed. No one gave me a second look, and that was the whole point. That was how the Queen's Men worked. Everyone who matters in Dannsburg might know one when they see one, but even there, that's a vanishingly small percentage of the population. No other fucker does. In Ellinburg I could be completely anonymous, and I found that I liked it.

I hitched my horse to the public rail outside the Tanner's and pushed the door open, and stepped into home.

I could almost have wept, in that moment. Simple Sam was standing in front of my old table, his massive arms crossed in front of his barrel chest, keeping people away from Bloody Anne, who was sitting in my old seat and having an earnest conversation with my aunt. Hari was behind the bar, off his stick now and hopefully healed at last, and Jochan was roaring drunk and telling war stories to a group of customers gathered around him by the fireplace.

I pushed my hood back and met Sam's gaze, and saw his eyes widen in shock.

'Boss!' he said.

It hurt, but I had to shake my head.

'I'm not the boss here any more, Sam, lad,' I said. 'Anne is, you know that. I'll talk to her when she's done, if she's the time to see me.'

It was important that I didn't do anything to undermine Bloody Anne. I had put her in charge of the Pious Men when I became governor of Ellinburg and I had no mind to change that now I was back, as my presence here was surely only temporary. I was a Queen's Man now, and nothing could ever go back to how it had been before. Change, as I had told her. My world had changed beyond all recognition, and there was no coming back from that.

I knew that, and I needed the Pious Men to understand it too.

I gave Sam a pat on the arm and walked over to the bar. Hari looked astonished to see me too, but he was possessed of slightly more wit than Sam was and he simply nodded a greeting.

‘Mr Piety,’ he said, the brandy bottle already in his hand. ‘Usual?’

‘Aye,’ I said, ‘although you can call me Tomas now. Sir Tomas, if you’re feeling formal, although I couldn’t give a fuck either way. I’m not your boss any more.’

‘You’re a *knight*?’ Hari blurted, and immediately looked like he wished he hadn’t. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound like it couldn’t happen and that. Just a surprise, if you know what I mean.’

‘Oh, I do, Hari,’ I said, and I picked up my glass of brandy and stared into it. ‘It is very definitely a surprise.’

I swallowed the brandy in one long gulp and put the glass back down on the bar for Hari to fill again. My brother still hadn’t noticed me. I had to speak to him, I supposed, but in a way I wasn’t sure that I wanted to. Our relationship had become what you might call strained before I went to Dannsburg, and I wasn’t sure if Cutter even still lived. He had done back in the spring, when I said my farewells, but injuries like that can have a lasting ill-effect. I supposed he must do, as Jochan would surely have said something in his letters if not, but then again, you could never be sure. Some things can be too painful to commit to paper, I of all people should know that. If Cutter had gone to the grey lands while I was away then I doubted that Jochan would have any love left for me in his heart. He had his wife and child, aye, but I knew his heart truly belonged to his Yoseph. My brother was a complicated and conflicted man.

A few minutes later Sam came over and touched my shoulder.

‘She’ll see you, boss,’ he said. ‘Mr Piety, I mean.’

‘Call me Tomas,’ I said, and clapped him on the shoulder to tell him that all was well between us.

Sam was a good lad, if a little slow of wit. I followed him back to the corner table that had always been where I had held my court, and I gave Bloody Anne a nod.

‘Mind if I join you?’ I asked.

‘For the Lady’s sake, Tomas,’ Anne said, and kicked a chair out from under the table for me to sit on. ‘This is ridiculous. You’re the fucking king here, and you’re doing me honour when I’m no cunt’s idea of a princess.’

‘No, Anne, I’m not,’ I said as I sat down opposite her. ‘I told all the Pious Men that I took the warrant, and then I became the fucking city governor, and then I left the city for the best part of a year. I’m not their king any more, and I don’t have the time to be. I passed the crown to you,

so see that you wear it well. What did my aunt have to say for herself ? What's the lay of things in the city?'

Anne blew out her cheeks as she sighed, making her scar writhe across her face. 'Well enough, to be fair, apart from the fucking magicians turning up, although they don't seem to be actually bothering anyone, from what Enaid tells me,' she said. 'The peace with the new Northern Sons has held, by and large, and it seems that business has been good. She's had to break a few heads to keep it that way, aye, but you know your aunt.'

I did at that. Aunt Enaid had probably been more terrifying as head of the Pious Men than Anne herself, but she wasn't the sort of leader I wanted running the crew long-term. I had stepped back, aye, but I had also become a Queen's Man. We controlled our assets strategically with a view to their potential future deployment, the same way Iagin had controlled Grachyev's crew. The same way Ailsa had controlled me, in the beginning. Our Lady help me, I was truly becoming one of those people.

I thought of a moment in some possible future where I gave Anne the Queen's Warrant, as Ailsa had to me, and I felt my hands tremble on the table. No, I thought. As Our Lady was my witness, I would never do that to my best friend.

I promised myself again, I would never do that to Anne.

It might sound grand, I know, to those who have never experienced such a thing. Ailsa had told me once that the Queen's Warrant was an official license to do absolutely anything, with the full and unconditional backing and funding of the crown. It meant you were above the law, that you were utterly untouchable.

Aye, it meant that.

It also meant you were at Lord Vogel's beck and call, night and day, obliged to do whatever he said, however fucking hideous it might be. It meant you fed people to the horror beneath the house of law who called herself Ilse. It meant hangings, and disappearances, and knives in the dark. It meant riots and lynchings on the streets of Dannsburg, because they suited Lord Vogel's agenda. It meant a Prince Regent found swinging from a chandelier with shit-stained britches, and a devil on the regent's throne holding the leash of an insane witch-queen.

No, no, I would never involve Anne in that more than I already had. That wasn't something you did to someone you loved. Ailsa had done it to me, aye, and that told me all I needed to know about our marriage. I

couldn't . . . I *still* couldn't shake my infatuation with her, but by then I had accepted that she did not love me the way I did her. Or at all, in fact.

I swallowed brandy and pushed that thought into the broken strongbox in the back of my mind with all the other things I didn't want to think about, and I showed Anne a wry grin that I didn't feel.

'Is she still fucking Brak?' I asked, for want of anything else to say.

'Who, your aunt? Aye, far as I know. They're still living together so I assume so. His shoulder never truly healed, though, so he's barely got the use of his left arm even now.'

'I don't think it's his arm she's interested in,' I said, and Anne snorted laughter.

This was what I needed, I realised, not maudlin thoughts about my wife but coarse soldiers' banter with my best friend.

She made some jest then; I don't remember what but I'm sure it was a good deal cruder than mine had been, and I threw my head back and laughed loud, and that was when Jochan finally noticed me.

'Fuck a nun, Tomas Piety!' he roared.

He was across the common room in six running steps, and a moment later he had dragged me out of my chair and hauled me into an embrace that frankly astonished me.

'Brother,' I said, returning his hug as best I could as he all but lifted me off my feet.

I thought of Konrad and his sister, and guessed that few Queen's Men ever received so enthusiastic a welcome from their siblings. All the same, I knew Jochan was still not of sound mind and never had been, even before the war. According to my aunt neither had I, but after what our da had done to the pair of us I supposed that was hardly surprising. He was clearly better than he had been, though, and I would take that and be thankful for it.

'How are you?' I asked him when he finally put me down. 'I trust Hanne and the baby are well?'

'Aye, aye,' he assured me. 'Hanne's a good lass, keeps my house and that. Good cook, too. And the baby's not such a baby no more. We named her Enaid, did I ever tell you that?'

I smiled. He hadn't, but it didn't surprise me. As the younger, Jochan had always been more of our aunt's boy than me after she took us in. He had only had eight years to him then, after all. After Ma died. After I killed Da. I didn't want to think of that then, though.

‘That’s a fine name,’ I said, and clapped him on the arm. ‘Will you drink with me, brother?’

‘Is Our Lady death’s face?’ he asked, and laughed at his own joke. ‘Aye, what do you think?’

I tossed Hari a silver penny for a bottle of brandy, and retreated to a quiet table with it and my brother. I needn’t have paid if I hadn’t wanted to, of course, not in the Tanner’s Arms, but I wanted to make my new status as plain as I could. I wasn’t even a Pious Man any more, not really, but this lot would continue to think of me that way unless I showed them otherwise, and as I have written, I didn’t want to do anything to undermine Anne’s position as their new boss.

I sat down opposite Jochan and poured for us both, and raised my glass to him.

‘To family,’ I said.

‘Family,’ he replied, and he clinked his glass against mine then tipped its contents down his throat in a single swallow.

I almost didn’t dare ask, but I knew I had to.

‘How’s Cutter?’ I said.

Jochan’s face softened in a way I didn’t think I had ever seen it do before.

‘Yoseph’s well enough,’ he said, after a pause. ‘He doesn’t come out much any more, not that he ever really did, but he’s well set up in the house on Slaughterhouse Narrow. He wears a patch, in public, and the scars give him a certain menace, I suppose. He’s still working. The sort of customers he gets at that boarding-house have seen worse than burns before, and in the other type of work no one ever fucking sees him coming anyway. Billy and Mina saved his life, Tomas, after what that Skanian cunt did to him. I’ll never forget that.’

‘And you and he are still . . .’

Jochan met my stare for a moment, then he poured himself another brandy and slammed it down in one swallow.

‘Aye,’ he said. ‘Aye, Tomas, we are. Do you have a fucking problem with that?’

I shook my head.

‘Not in the slightest,’ I said. ‘Our Lady doesn’t much care who we lie with, so long as both are willing. There’s Hanne, though.’

Jochan nodded slowly, and I think my acceptance took some of the tension out of his shoulders. It hadn't been uncommon in the war for a man to lie down with a comrade or a camp follower between the tents, when they got the opportunity. Not all such couplings had been between men and women, and no one thought much of it. When you truly didn't expect to live to see the next dawn, who could honestly give a shit about who someone else chose to fuck? Our Lady certainly had better things to worry about, and so had most of us.

'Aye, there is,' he allowed. 'She's a good lass, Tomas, but I married her because I got her in the family way and I felt obliged. I like her well enough but I can't rightly say that I love her. She pretends not to know about Yoseph and me and I pretend not to know that she does, and it seems to work in its way. She doesn't want for anything, and I don't beat her or anything like that.'

'No,' I said, and put a hand on his arm. 'No, brother, I never thought for a moment that you did.'

Jochan was a violent man, I knew that, violent and unpredictable, but after our shared childhood I knew that he held wife-beaters in the same contempt that I did. His reaction to what Grieg had done that night in Chandler's Narrow was enough to reassure me of that.

My brother was a good man, in his way, and I loved him in mine.
Aye, I loved my brother.

Chapter 41

The next day I received a letter from Fat Luka. It couldn't have been written more than a day or two after we left Dannsburg, by my estimation. He had no scribe or secretary to write his letters for him in the way that I had had Rosie, and I struggled to decipher his childish, barely schooled writing.

Boss,

Found Lady Lan Yetrov like you wanted. Rich widow now, something at the university. Patron? Don't know what that means. She pays for stuff, and they all love her there. Deep in with magicians so she's keeping her fucking head down right now. Will try and get a sit-down with her when things calm down a bit. Pitched battle between City Guard and Guard of the Magi yesterday after the princess' betrothal was announced. Think the City Guard got the better of it but it was close, and hard to call. Iagin is spinning yarns all across the city about the magicians' treachery. Don't like the look of the weather.

Luka

The fool wrote so much in plain that I could only thank Our Lady that the letter hadn't been intercepted on the road, but I had to remind myself that Fat Luka wasn't a Queen's Man or even an educated man. He was clever, though.

I took his letter through to my study, and sat down behind my desk to pen a reply.

Luka,

I fear the weather in Dannsburg is worsening and will continue to do so. Save the Lady for the summer, and don't trouble her now. If the winter storms in the city become severe enough to cause concern for your safety, I advise you and your friend to forge out onto the West Road, however bad the conditions appear. Spend the gold I left you, shelter in a village if you need to until the road opens and you are able to return home.

Do not, my dear friend, disappear in that city.

Tomas

The fucking *last* thing I wanted at the moment was Luka associating with a known patron of the university, and therefore by association an ally of the house of magicians. For one thing he was my friend, and I didn't want to see him hauled down to the cells and Ilse, but for another I really, *really* didn't want Vogel finding out I had asked Luka to make contact with the Lady Lan Yetrov.

That, I thought, wouldn't have been good for anyone's health.

I sealed the letter and rang a bell to summon a footman to fetch a houseboy and give him a silver mark to pay a messenger to ride it to Dannsburg, all the while frustrated that there wasn't some centralised way to send letters between cities. A wagon full of sacks of mail would have been a great deal more cost effective than messengers riding a two-week round trip to deliver a single letter, but then I supposed that while so many people still couldn't read and write there was no demand for it. Perhaps the university could change that. Perhaps one day we could have a university in every city, even in Ellinburg, but I supposed that was a thought for another day.

I sat back behind my desk and stared up at the ceiling, trying to imagine the Lady Lan Yetrov as a patron of the university. I had always suspected she was a lot more intelligent than was suggested by the vapid society front she had presented in her abusive husband's presence, no doubt at his insistence, but still I had never suspected her passions leaned towards academia. Music or the arts, perhaps, but this was a surprise, nonetheless.

I was still gazing up at my moulded plaster ceiling rose when a footman rapped on the study door.

'My lord, your—' he began, before he was shoved aside by a familiar figure leaning heavily on a stick.

'Aunt,' she said, and closed the door in his face.

'Auntie,' I said, and rose to give Aunt Enaid the short bow of familial respect.

'Oh, fuck off with your knighthood and your Dannsburg airs and graces, Tomas Piety,' she said, and lowered herself into one of the chairs across from my desk without waiting to be asked. 'What the living holy fuck do you think you're doing?'

Ah, yes, my aunt was here to see me and no mistake.

'In what way, Auntie?' I asked, as I sat once more.

She may have had well over sixty years to her but all the same I was grateful for the expanse of oak between us. My aunt had been good with a mace during her war, and I could still remember the switchings she had dealt out in my youth. She might be fat now but she was still strong with it, and there was no doubt about that.

I rose once more and crossed to the cupboard, where I poured glasses of brandy for us both. She said nothing as I put hers before her and retreated behind my desk with mine. And 'retreated' was how it felt, as well. This woman had been almost my mother since I'd had only twelve years to me, and although she wasn't my ma I felt I owed her a similar level of respect.

'In what way,' she mused, as she did when she was working up to delivering the sort of bollocking that could have come from the very gods themselves. 'Let me think about that for a moment, Tomas Piety. You take the crown's gold in secret. You allow the Pious Men to become an instrument of the Queen's Men. You get my Brak crippled. You take the Queen's Warrant and you fucking *become* a Queen's Man. Then you go a step further and you overthrow the governor, and you spend the blood of Stink men and women to do it. You become the fucking governor of Ellinburg yourself. At least you have the brains to put Anne in charge of the Pious Men, I'll give you that much, but little enough else. You lead a charge of the City Guard against your own people, working people, and some of them from our own streets. Then, mercifully, you fuck off to Dannsburg to go play Queen's Man in the royal court, but you take Anne with you so she has to put *me* in charge. I'm too fucking old for this, Tomas, but I do my best and at least she didn't give it to that Cooper bitch, who would never have given it back again afterwards. You chose well enough there with Anne, I'll allow, and that I can forgive, but I can't forgive this: You. *Fucking*. Came. Back!'

I ducked as the brandy glass flew past my ear to shatter against the wall behind me.

'How *could* you?' my aunt demanded. 'How do you fucking *dare* show your face in Ellinburg again?'

My aunt's single eye was weeping, I realised, and that was a thing I had never seen before in my life. I wouldn't have thought it possible, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.

I had made my aunt cry, and I didn't think she was capable of it.

‘Auntie,’ I said, and found myself faltering. I knew I had to be very, *very* fucking careful how I put this. ‘I’ve been . . . not kicked out of the Queen’s Men, or I’d be dead and in an unmarked grave somewhere outside the walls of Dannsburg, but I’m certainly in disfavour at the moment. There are things going on . . . I can’t talk about a lot of it. I’m sorry and I truly mean that, but I have to ask you to believe me on the strength of our family ties.’

I was quoting Sasura, of course, but sadly family ties don’t work quite the same way in Ellinburg as they do in Alaria. That had been exactly the wrong thing to say, and I knew it the moment the words left my mouth.

‘You talk to me of family ties?’ Aunt Enaid asked softly, and for the first time since I was a small boy I feared her in that moment. ‘You devil-possessed monster, Tomas Piety, you dare to talk to *me* of “family ties” when I know fucking well you killed my own brother? Oh, yes, and don’t you *dare* look at me like that. I know. I’ve always known. I took you and your brother in because you were blood and he was an innocent, but I’ve *always* known that you murdered your da, you little shit!’

The dam broke inside me, the dam that had held back the pain for twenty-five years and more. *I* broke, and I broke hard. The floodwaters of repressed misery almost sent me to my knees.

‘And do you know *why*?’ I roared at her, on my feet and leaning over the desk to shout in her face and *fuck* the servants, gossip. This had been a long time coming, I think, looking back on it, and something inside me just shattered in that moment. ‘Do you *fucking* know why your evil *cunt* of a brother needed killing? Do you know what he did to me, and to Jochan? Because if you did, old woman, if you did and you kept your peace about it, I swear to Our Lady I will fucking kill you where you sit!’

I can’t.

I can’t recount my conversation with my aunt after that. I wrote it down once before, what Da did to me and to Jochan, and I’m not doing it again. I just fucking can’t.

Suffice it to say that the conversation ended with us both in tears. Of course she hadn’t fucking known, and it had been so cruelly wrong of me to even think that she might have done and let him get away with it. I hoped she would forgive me for that, in time.

‘I’m so, so sorry, Tomas,’ she said, when she was done sobbing into my shoulder.

We had our arms around each other in a comforting hug, and I couldn't even remember the last time that had happened.

If it ever had.

'Aye,' I said at last. 'So am I.'

*

My aunt's visit hit me hard, and I won't lie about that. We had finally cleared the air between us, I suppose that was something, but all the same she had reopened old wounds once more. The pain of what Da had done would never leave me, I knew that, and it would never leave Jochan either. She stayed for a while after we both had ourselves under control again, and we got drunk together and talked of happier things, of her war and mine. Even war was happier than the memories of what had happened in that house.

'I remember this one cunt I served under,' Enaid said as she knocked back another brandy from the fresh glass I had brought her to replace the one she had thrown at my head and broken. 'Captain Vogel, his name was, and he was a nasty piece of work. Tortured the enemy prisoners on the slightest pretext, and we all knew he did it for fucking fun. I was only a corporal, mind, but this bastard missed no one. I'll always remember him.'

I sat very still, my brandy forgotten in my hand.

'You were at Krathzgrad, weren't you?' I asked her, although I knew she had been. 'Was that there, when you knew him?'

Aunt Enaid frowned at me. 'Aye,' she said. 'How in the world did you know that?'

'Do you remember the Grand Duke of Drathburg, and his son? They both fell at Krathzgrad, so I've heard.'

'The duke was our general,' she said. 'Never met him, of course. I was only a corporal, as I say, and I didn't get to mix with the likes of him. His heir was a major; never met him either but by all accounts he was magnificent. He was betrothed to the future queen and set to rule the nation with her in due course. It was like something out of the stories. He was Captain Vogel's commanding officer, if I remember it right.'

I was absolutely sure she remembered it right.

'How did they die?' I asked. 'The duke and his son?'

'The duke fell in battle,' she said. 'Heroic charge, leading from the front and all that. Got blown across the river and into Our Lady's arms by a cannon for his trouble, and he's a big part of why they don't do that any

more. The major's death was a strange one, though. An enemy assassin got into his tent one night and slit his throat while he slept. We never did catch the bastard, and the whole camp was in mourning for a week. Imagine if he was still alive today, and ruling as the regent from the Prince Consort's throne where he was supposed to have been? I'd wager the situation in Dannsburg wouldn't be how you say it is now, Tomas, if *he* had ended up on the consort's throne and not his halfwit little brother. Vogel got promoted into his position and that was the last I saw of the bastard, and well rid of him. Our next captain was called Royce, and he had been one of the sergeants before he was promoted. Decent old bugger, he was, liked to play dice and . . .'

But I had stopped listening by then. Had this been going on for so long, in Vogel's mind at least? Had he seen the opportunity in the duke's death and murdered his son in his tent one night, to force the younger, weaker Wilhelm into inheriting his betrothal to the then-Princess Crown Royal, our late monarch?

Could anyone truly play a game so long, and see it through to conclusion over *decades*?

I honestly didn't know, but I thought that if anyone could then that person was Dieter Vogel. Or Sabine. She would have been the Provost Marshal back then, of course.

Mother Ruin.

I pinched the bridge of my nose between my finger and thumb, and tried to keep my hands from shaking.

'When was Krathzgrad, exactly?' I asked her. 'I know I should know this, but we didn't really cover history in what little schooling I had.'

'History?' she snorted. 'This was *my life*, lad. I'm still fucking here so how can my life be "history"? Anyway, not so very long ago. A little under forty years. Thirty-eight, maybe thirty-nine years ago. Just before you were born, in fact. Your da fought in that war too, did you know that?'

I hadn't, and I didn't care and I didn't want to hear him mentioned any more that night, or ever again, for that matter. Whatever my da had done in Aunt Enaid's war, whatever he had been through, none of it excused what he had done afterwards.

Nothing did.

That didn't matter, though. Krathzgrad had been less than forty years ago. Vogel must have already been Sabine's lover by then, from what

Sasura had told me. He had already been a Queen's Man, and yet had been serving at the front with the army and had been a direct subordinate of the man betrothed to the Princess Crown Royal. How very fucking convenient.

What in Our Lady's name had I uncovered?

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Chapter 42

A few weeks after my return to Ellinburg I was invited to the governor's hall. Not summoned, mind, nor arrested, as Hauer had done whenever he wanted me.

Invited.

I was shown into Governor Schulz's office, and she rose to her feet and gave me a stiff bow.

'Sir Tomas,' she said. 'Thank you for coming.'

I had thought perhaps that she hadn't fully known who I was the first and only time we had met, when I handed the governorship of Ellinburg over to her. Many people serve the house of law, of course, whether they know that they do or not, but very few of us carry the Queen's Warrant. It was clear that Schulz knew now all right, and I could see the quiet fear behind her calm grey eyes.

I inclined my head to her, but chose not to bow in return.

'Governor,' I said. 'To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?'

'Sir Tomas,' she said, and spread her hands. 'Forgive me if I was perhaps brusque with you when we last spoke. I fear my . . . *our* superiors in the house of law failed to mention one or two key facts to me. I meant no disrespect.'

'None was taken,' I assured her. 'We both serve the same house, Governor, after all.'

'Yes, quite,' she said. 'Will you take brandy?'

'Aye,' I said, and seated myself in one of the chairs across the desk from her without waiting to be asked.

In matters like this, of hierarchy and respect, it is best to assert yourself early and firmly. Governor Schulz walked to the cupboard and poured for us both herself rather than ringing for a footman to do it, and once more she bowed slightly as she put the glass in my hand.

'My thanks,' I said. 'So, I ask you again: why am I here?'

'I have received a message for you,' she said. 'It came with a military patrol from the capital so is written in plain, but our master in Dannsburg had no address for you. Shall I read it to you?'

‘I would be grateful,’ I said.

She took a small key from her pouch and unlocked a drawer in her desk, and removed a folded paper. Holding it close to the light of her desk lamp, she cleared her throat and began.

‘Tomas, it begins,’ she said. ‘You need fear no more bombings in Dannsburg. Archmagus Reiter may have been innocent, as you told the Old Man, but his house very much is not. The learned magus Alexei Volkov confessed his crimes to Ilse, eventually, and has entered Our Lady’s embrace, as is only to be expected. I do not share your optimistic view of Reiter, but there it is. The matter is done with. Hopefully Governor Schulz brings this message to you. The house of law would appreciate a correspondence address by return. Konrad.’

‘I see,’ I said. ‘Thank you, Governor.’

I gave her my address off Trader’s Row to send back to the house of law, and she dutifully wrote it down. She swallowed brandy, and paused for a moment before she met my eyes.

‘Bombings?’ she asked at last. ‘Are things so bad in the capital?’

I met her gaze, wondering how much I could trust her. Little enough, I supposed, but I was already sure I could trust her more than I could Konrad.

Brother Betrayal.

‘There is civil unrest,’ I admitted, but I stopped short of saying that we had started it ourselves. ‘It has come to light that the queen was assassinated by the Skanians. The house of magicians is possibly implicated. Things are . . . difficult, at the moment, in Dannsburg.’

‘Assassinated?’

Of course, when Schulz had left Dannsburg the queen’s death was still officially secret, and no doubt she had been told some horseshit about an attack of the heart the same as the rest of the populace to begin with. She had obviously heard no further news since, stuck out here in Ellinburg, and that didn’t surprise me.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘You’ll look to your walls, if you’re wise, Governor, and keep a close eye on the magicians who have come to Ellinburg. I fear war is brewing once more, and who knows who we can trust?’

‘May the gods save us,’ Schulz whispered, and I found I could only agree with her about that.

*

Other than my invitation to the governor's hall, things were quiet for the weeks after my aunt's visit. I actually spent time with her out of choice, now that the air that had been dirty between us for the best part of thirty years was finally clear. She was still an old harridan and she always would be, but she no longer looked at me with the thinly veiled hatred that I had become so accustomed to that I had almost stopped seeing it. I saw Jochan and Cutter too, and Bloody Anne and Rosie, entertaining them separately at my big house off Trader's Row. We got drunk and made merry together like we hadn't a care in the world, and that was good.

'What about the magicians, then?' Jochan asked me that night, after dinner at my house.

He'd been true to his word and not brought the matter up with Enaid or Anne, although it was obvious that he'd told Cutter. They were so close by then I supposed that had been inevitable, but I trusted Cutter to hold his peace about it.

'Keep an eye on them,' I told him. 'If you can forge a bond with the one you went drinking with, do it. I want these people kept friendly. Very friendly, if you can manage it.'

'I can try,' my brother said. 'Fellow certainly seemed to like a drink, for all that he couldn't hold it. Why, though? Do you seriously think we might need blasting powder?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'Not yet, certainly, but who knows? It's better to have a thing and not need it than to need it and not have it.'

Jochan grinned at me and poured himself another brandy.

'Aye, well, you're setting me a task to go out drinking and that's well and good. The right man for the right job, eh, Tomas?'

Even Cutter laughed at that, and I returned my brother's grin. That was a good night, and it made me happy to see my brother so relaxed, so content. It had been a long time since I had last seen him like that.

A very long time.

Life was good, for those few brief weeks I was allowed before the next letter came from Dannsburg.

It came to the house this time. It was from Vogel, and nothing good ever came from *his* desk.

My beloved nephew Tomas,

I have an opportunity for you, one I think you will excel at. I invite you to return home with all speed, to take up your new position. This will

greatly further the interests of the family, and be to all of our benefit.

Your Uncle,

V.

An opportunity. I dreaded to fucking think, but it obviously wasn't optional. When Vogel *invited* you to do something it was a direct order and no mistake. I sent out houseboys to round up Bloody Anne and Rosie, Oliver and Emil, and bring them to the house. I thought this time I would let Billy stay behind with Mina as the two of them had been inseparable since our return to Ellinburg. I didn't want to take that away from him again, and in Dannsburg I had enough power now that I thought I could manage without him for a while.

Once the five of us were assembled in my study I told them the news. Anne's look was stoic, resigned even, and the soldiers said nothing, but Rosie had something on her mind, to speak lightly of it.

'In this weather?' she asked. 'The West Road must have a foot of snow on it by now, if not more, Tomas.'

'Aye, I dare say it has,' I said. 'Too much for carriages, anyway. Looks like we're riding.'

'What's so fucking urgent?' she demanded, and I wondered if she had ever spoken to Ailsa like this when she had been *her* secretary.

I looked into Rosie's flinty eyes, and thought that yes, she probably had. She had a spine, that one, I have to give her that.

'Lord Vogel has crooked his finger,' I said, 'and so we must ride.'

'Must we, really, Tomas?' Anne said.

There was a look about her then, a look that told me she was more the head of the Pious Men now than she had ever been before. Bloody Anne had grown into her role, grown into the leadership position as I had hoped she would when I sat her at the head of that table. Using her as an enforcer seemed almost a waste of her talents, but she was the best I had and I didn't want to be without her now. But then I had Beast waiting for me in Dannsburg, and he had the makings of an enforcer like none other. I met her eyes, and I decided to give her the choice.

'You don't have to come, Anne,' I said. 'It's not been so very long since we came back, after all. You must be neck-deep in Pious Men business, and I know you're worried about the magicians. I know that and I respect it and I support it. But I need Rosie, and she works for me. She *does* have to come.'

‘Then so do I,’ Anne said, and she didn’t hesitate for a single second.

The look Rosie gave her then was pure love. It melted my heart to see it and I wished I could have left them both behind in Ellinburg to just *be*, but I truly did need Rosie with me. She kept my secrets very well, and I didn’t see how any Queen’s Man could operate in Dannsburg without a good secretary. Rosie was superb at what she did, and she still understood the city and how it worked far better than I did.

‘I’m with you, boss,’ Oliver said, and Emil nodded his assent.

Those two were little more than hired muscle, but they had both been with me a good while now and had proved their loyalty numerous times. In my old life I would have been thinking it was time to make them up to the table as Pious Men, but that was done. They were mine now, part of my crew in the Queen’s Men, and Anne wasn’t having them any more than she was having Fat Luka back.

I assumed she grasped that, but I wouldn’t have been prepared to bet gold on it. Luka had worked for the Queen’s Men long before he had been a Pious Man, I had learned, but I didn’t think Anne knew that. Either way, my mind was made up on the matter and I was keeping him.

I nodded at them, and felt pleased with the crew I had surrounded myself with.

‘Good,’ I said. ‘Anne, you’ve the rest of today to settle your affairs. You’ll have to put my aunt back in charge, for all that she won’t like it, but give her my apologies and tell her it’s an order and she’s doing it anyway. We ride at first light tomorrow, and you’ll pack warm clothes for the road if you’re wise.’

Once they were gone I called Billy into the drawing room and told him that I was going away again.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘Mina told me. She knows things, sometimes.’

I swallowed, and looked at him. I loved Billy but I still wasn’t easy with the cunning under my roof.

‘Aye, well,’ I said. ‘You don’t have to come this time, lad. You can stay here with your woman, and all is well.’

‘No,’ Billy said, in that way he had about him when his mind was made up. ‘I’ll be coming too.’

‘I thought perhaps you’d want to stay here, with Mina?’

‘I do,’ Billy confessed, ‘but she says it’s important. When Mina says a thing is important then it is.’

I sighed and crossed to the cupboard to pour myself a brandy, and I turned and looked at the lad. His eyes really were too bright, shining like gems set in the skull that his tight, drawn face so closely resembled.

‘Aye, son,’ I had to say. ‘If that’s what you want, then you can come.’

‘It isn’t,’ he said. ‘It isn’t what I want at *all*. But Mina says it’s important, so I’ll do it. For her.’

I supposed there wasn’t much I could say to that.

*

The ride back to Dannsburg was cold and miserable, and it took us ten frozen days in the worsening snows, but we made it in the end. We had left the bulk of our newly acquired things at the Bountiful Harvest when we returned to Ellinburg so at least everyone had clean, dry clothes waiting for them to change into once we were back in our rooms and had bathed and generally thawed ourselves out. I gave the innkeeper another couple of gold crowns to top my account up, but I knew by then that he would never kick us out or re-rent our rooms, however long I might be away. I had just about bought his inn, by then, and I considered it coin well spent.

Luka had been both pleased and surprised to see us, and that alone told me that he hadn’t known about Vogel’s letter.

‘Didn’t think I’d see you before the spring, boss,’ he said.

‘Aye, well,’ I said, as we shared brandy in the common room that evening, seated before a blazing fire that was slowly beginning to warm me up again at last. I thought I had forgotten what it felt like to be warm, on the road. ‘The Old Man has an “opportunity” for me, apparently.’

‘That doesn’t sound good,’ Luka said, and I couldn’t help but smile.

We were both remembering life in the army, I knew, and what an ‘opportunity’ had meant then too. Never volunteer for anything, that was the first rule of being a soldier who wanted to stay alive, and ‘opportunities’ were seldom good.

‘Can’t see I’ve any choice,’ I said, and Luka nodded sympathetically.

‘Remember at Messia, when the captain told us he had an opportunity for someone to win a medal for a daring night scouting mission?’ Luka asked me. ‘Fuck wanting a medal, but still. “Petrik, you just volunteered,” he said. Never fucking saw Petrik again, did we?’

‘No,’ I said quietly, although that wasn’t strictly true.

I *had* seen Petrik again, the next morning when I had been rostered for the dawn patrol with Anne and Kant and Brak and a couple of the other

lads. He had been crucified on the city gates, great roofing spikes driven through his wrists and ankles pinning him to the thick oak the same way I had nailed Borys to the table for the Rite of the Betrayer, back in Ellinburg. The poor bastard had still been half alive, until Bloody Anne put a mercy bolt from her crossbow through his forehead and ended it. It's funny how the crimes of one war become the justice of another, but those were the times we lived in.

'What is it, anyway?' Luka asked.

I could only shrug.

'Don't know until I speak to him, but he can wait till the morning for all of me. Travelling at this time of year, we've all narrowly avoided frostbite. I'm not going out in the cold again tonight. He can fucking well wait until I've warmed up and had a proper kip in a real bed.'

Luka looked at me then, and I saw the calculating expression on his face. Luka was a very, very clever man, I had to remind myself. I thought perhaps I should watch what I said about the Provost Marshal in front of Fat Luka. I included him in the very small circle of people I called real friends, but all the same I had to wonder. He had worked for the Queen's Men since before the war, I reminded myself, and they had paid him to watch me while they had paid me to watch Governor Hauer. I had to wonder how much I could truly trust him, especially in Dannsburg.

That was a sobering thought.

I *thought* I could trust him. I was sure I could trust him, for Our Lady's sake. And yet . . . aye, and yet. This was Dannsburg, where no one trusted anyone and the eyes and ears of the Queen's Men were everywhere. It wasn't Luka's city the way it was Rosie's, no. He was Ellinburg born the same as me. We had even been at school together, after all. But he had worked for the Queen's Men before he worked for me, and worked for them *while* he worked for me, and he had never said anything of it. I suppose that meant he was trustworthy as an agent, one who could keep a cover and not betray his employer, but . . . but. Aye, fucking *but*. Who was his fucking employer now? Me, or Vogel? I only wished I could know for sure.

I looked at Fat Luka, and I smiled and poured us both another drink. I had to admit to myself that I really didn't know. Suspicion on suspicion, and I had only been back in Dannsburg for twelve hours, if that. This city was poison and no mistake. It was ruin and I could feel what it was doing to me, but right then I couldn't see my way clear of it.

I hated to admit it but Dannsburg was starting to feel more like home than Ellinburg did. Aye, that first night I had walked into the Tanner's Arms I thought I had come home, but the changed dynamics of the Pious Men and the furious argument I had had with my aunt the next day when we almost came to violence between us made me question that. I had given up my position in Ellinburg and I had done it willingly, in the service of the Queen's Men. I couldn't be two things at once, I realised, and if I was to be a Queen's Man in truth then, although it pained me to admit it, Dannsburg had to be where I set my heart.

Dannsбург, the city of lies and whispers and treachery. Aye, that probably suited me better than the blunt honesty of Ellinburg, these days. Was that Our Lady's plan for me? Would I always be torn between the two, and longing for Varnburg and the clean majesty of the sea that I could never have? That was a philosophical question, I supposed, and I was too drunk for philosophy.

'You got a woman yet?' I asked Fat Luka, to steer the conversation away from the painful places I didn't want to go.

Of course he had, some widow from south of the river whose name I don't remember, and then I had to listen to an hour's worth of lewd bedtime stories that I didn't really want to hear, but it was better than thinking about the other thing.

About what Lord Vogel was going to tell me the next morning.

Chapter 43

I reported to Vogel's office the next morning, and what he told me wasn't what I had been expecting to hear.

I don't know *what* I had been expecting, but it wasn't this. I suppose I had been steeling myself for some assignment of violence, someone else to arrest or kill. I was Brother Blade, after all, but then he had Konrad to do that sort of thing for him now and I knew that Konrad took far more delight in that kind of work than I ever could. No, this was something different. Something I would never have seen coming in a thousand years.

'You have been voted into a seat on the governing council, Sir Tomas,' he said, and he showed me his razor smile. 'Congratulations, Councillor.'

I could only stare at him.

'Fucking how?' I could only say. 'I never even stood for election. I don't know *how* to stand for election to be on the governing council.'

'Of course you did,' he said smoothly. 'Iagin saw to that shortly after Councillor Yanakov unfortunately passed away, and his sudden death naturally triggered an election in the North Ward of the city. You stood, on a platform of staunch support of the house of law and stern opposition to the insidious sedition of the house of magicians, and you won by a landslide. Congratulations, as I say. Your first sitting of the council is tomorrow morning. Wear something formal.'

I remembered the meeting of the governing council that I had attended, the beleaguered First Councillor Aleksander Lan Letskov, and the stern Councillor Markova and florid-faced Councillor Lan Drashkov, who were both obviously ours. I remembered how the council had reminded me of that travelling menagerie's apes flinging their own shit at each other, and I wondered. Oh, how I wondered.

Was this Vogel putting me in a position of power to further the aims of the Queen's Men, or simply trying to get rid of me?

No, if he wanted to get rid of me he would just have me disappeared, I knew that well enough. Although, could he? Like all the Queen's Men, I ran my own operation like an independent crew and my security was top drawer. Anyone who wanted to stab me in my sleep would have to get

through Beast and Bloody Anne and – most of all – Billy first, and I wasn't sure even Cutter could have done that unaided.

The Queen's Men were fucking gangsters and there was no other way to look at it, once you saw the truth of the thing. Our country was basically *run* by gangsters. That was a thing to understand. The governing council was a thin veneer of constitutional rule, to be sure, but we had no queen, our Prince Regent was also the head of the Queen's Men, even if no one officially knew that, and the Princess Crown Royal was barking fucking mad.

Those were the times we lived in.

'Aye,' I could only say. 'My thanks, Provost Marshal.'

I stood and offered him a stiff bow of respect that I actually felt, in that moment. Respect for the sheer audacity of getting away with it all, to be sure, but nonetheless respect should be paid where it's due.

'Of course, there will be policy decisions to be made, votes to be cast,' Vogel said. 'I'll let you know your opinion when you need to have one. Do try to make an impression on your first day, though, won't you, Tomas? They don't have to like you, but they *do* have to remember you. Be outrageous, if you need to be, but make an impression. The city wall, I think. We owe the guild of masons a favour, and they will reciprocate in kind. The major guilds can be most appreciative of government contracts, after all.'

And there it went. There went the respect, straight out of the fucking door. He'd tell me my opinion, would he? He didn't know me half as well as he thought he did if he thought *that* was ever going to happen, and there he lost me. But all the same, and much as I loathed to admit it, he made a good point there. The city walls were in a shocking state, and with war brewing that needed to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

'Of course, sir,' I said, and I'm not sure I managed to keep the bitterness out of my voice as much as I probably should have done.

Vogel met my eyes for one long, cold moment, then nodded. With that I was dismissed, and I left his office in the house of law and wandered down to the mess, where I found Ailsa deep in conversation with Konrad. They broke off when they saw me, and Ailsa rose to her feet and smiled in a way that left me feeling deeply confused for the rest of the day.

'Husband,' she said. 'It is good to see you.'

‘My lady wife,’ I returned, and we embraced briefly and, on her side at least I am sure, entirely without passion.

‘I have business,’ Konrad said tactfully, and left us to it.

Alone together, Ailsa looked at me and raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow.

‘I had thought you would be away longer,’ she said.

I thought you were in disgrace, that was what she meant, but her words showed me that perhaps Vogel didn’t tell her everything after all.

‘The Old Man summoned me home,’ I said. ‘I’m on the governing council now, apparently.’

‘Oh, yes, of course, Yanakov’s seat. Yes, I remember Iagin saying something about that. Good luck.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Just that you’re in for an awful lot of very long, very boring meetings. Watching Markova and Lan Drashkov bite chunks out of each other might keep you entertained for a while, I suppose, but that’s about the only thing that will.’

‘I had rather thought they were both ours,’ I said.

‘Oh, they are,’ Ailsa said, ‘but neither of them know that and they absolutely loathe each other. That was Iagin’s idea, that one. We feed each of them misinformation about the other and stir their hatred to a melting point when it suits us. That is usually enough to prevent the council from getting in our way by ever actually deciding anything we don’t want them to, or gods forbid acting on it if they do.’

I poured myself a brandy from one of the bottles on the cupboard, for all that it wasn’t yet noon.

‘Then why the fuck am I joining the council, if we already own most of them and we don’t want them doing anything anyway?’

‘Well, in part to prevent anyone awkward from winning Yanakov’s seat and spoiling things for us, of course,’ Ailsa said, ‘but beyond that I would have thought it was obvious, Brother Blade. Lord Vogel wants one of them killed, and sitting members of the governing council are notoriously difficult to get close to unless one is *also* a councillor. We might own the majority of the councillors but only in the sense of bribes and blackmail. None of them carry the warrant, save for you.’

Her use of my secret name within the Knights of the Rose Throne made me wince slightly, I have to allow, and for a moment I didn’t even really

know why. Because it reminded me that such names existed, I realised then, and of what hers was.

Sister Deceit.

That was Ailsa, that was the woman I had been forced to marry. Sister Deceit, the mistress of the false face. Could I ever truly trust her? By Our Lady I wanted to, but . . . but. This was Dannsburg, as I have written, and I just didn't know any more.

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My first meeting of the governing council was what I suppose you could call an experience. I didn't know how anything worked, for one thing, but for all that the system was steeped in centuries-old traditions it was soon plain that not everyone respected them. Lan Drashkov certainly didn't, as I had observed at the council meeting I had watched from the public gallery, and I decided that if he could get away with a bluff, blunt approach to formality then so could I.

Dressed in my most formal clothes, I took my seat on the padded benches of green leather that lined the official chamber of the public council hall and waited for First Councillor Aleksander Lan Letskov to call the meeting to order. I saw Councillor Markova looking at me, and I inclined my head to her as a colleague. She gave me a nod of respect in return that told me she had a fair idea of who I was, and I wondered exactly how much Vogel had told her. She was one of his, I remembered, on his direct payroll, not like most of the rest of them, who were on Iagin's general one. I thought that out of her and Lan Drashkov, she was almost certainly the more dangerous. Of the others I had no idea who was on our payroll and who wasn't, and I supposed that was probably for the best. This had to look convincing, and the less we knew of each other the better.

I could see the wisdom in that, but still I felt adrift on strange waters.

Lan Letskov appeared on the First Councillor's dais at last, and rapped a gavel on the podium before him to cease the muttering between those assembled in the grand council chamber.

'Come to order,' he said. 'This meeting of the governing council is now in session. Our first item of business is the maintenance of the East Gate. The current estimate from the guild of masons is a sum of . . .'

I stopped listening to him, having no interest in how much maintaining the East Gate was likely to cost the crown. There was a fucking war brewing, for Our Lady's sake. It would be approved and done, however

much it cost; there wasn't even a decision to be made there, to my mind. I let my eyes wander, scanning the public gallery. I was, it had to be said, extremely surprised to see Bloody Anne up there, watching me with Rosie seated beside her. Anne was wearing a man's coat and doublet, as was her way, and Rosie looked a fine lady beside her in a green gown that I hadn't seen before. It went well with her red hair, and I could only assume it had been a gift from Anne. I didn't pay her *that* much, for all that I could draw coin from the coffers of the house of law as I pleased.

I had told Anne of my appointment when I got back from my meeting with Vogel the previous day. Of course I had – it might have been horseshit but I was still proud of it, in a way, much as I had been of my knighthood. Of course I had wanted to tell her. If I couldn't tell my ma about this then I wanted to tell my best friend instead. I wanted *someone* to be proud of me, and I make no apology for that. I am only human, after all. We had toasted my supposed elevation last night with a bottle of brandy that I was beginning to regret as I sat there in the stuffy, dusty confines of the council hall, but I had never expected her to come and watch.

'It's too much,' I heard someone protest. 'The masons must think we are fools.'

'Outrageous,' someone else complained. 'For that money we could—'

'But since our late queen's assassination by the Skanians, security must surely—'

'The magicians killed the queen, not the Skanians.'

'No, they didn't!'

'Yes, they did!'

'Idiot!'

'Collaborator!'

In Our Lady's name, this was even worse than I had been expecting it to be. I didn't know how much of the dissent was orchestrated by the house of law and how much was simply human stupidity, but I saw my opportunity right there.

Try to make an impression on your first day, Vogel had said. They don't have to like you, but they do have to remember you. The city wall, I think.

Oh, I would make them remember me all right. I rose to my feet and cleared my throat.

'The governing council recognises Sir Tomas Piety, councillor for the North Ward,' First Councillor Lan Letskov announced.

‘First fucking day and he’s got to make a speech,’ Lan Drashkov scoffed, deliberately loud enough to be heard, but I ignored him.

I could only assume he had seen Markova and me exchange nods and had immediately taken me for her ally, and therefore his enemy. Oh, what fun this role was going to be.

‘My ladies, my lords, my fellow councillors,’ I said, taking hold of the lapels of my coat as I had seen important people do when making a speech. I have no idea why, it just seemed to be something that folk did. ‘It seems to me that maintenance of the East Gate is the least of our concerns in these troubled times we live in.’

I paused a moment to wait for the ‘hear hears’ of those opposed to the work and the boos of those in favour of it to finish echoing around the chamber, then I continued.

‘Indeed, it is such an obvious requirement that I am surprised we feel the need to even discuss it. Masons are master craftsmen and must be paid their due. There’s no debate to be had here.’

Again I paused, to allow the two sides of buffoons to reverse their previous opinions of me. I was having fun already, and I was only just starting.

‘War,’ I said, and I paused again to let the word hang ominously in the air. ‘I am a soldier. I have seen war. I was at Messia, and I was at Abington, and I rode home to tell the tales of it. I have seen city walls, walls far mightier than ours, crumble into dust before the relentless onslaught of the cannon.’

They knew I was a knight, of course, and with those words now they thought me the martial sort that they supposed led cavalry charges. That lent me gravitas when speaking of matters of war, and more to the point it deflected any suspicions that I might have been the *other* sort of knight, the sort who made up the Queen’s Men. Also, for many of them the only cannon they had ever seen fired was probably that monstrosity the Princess Crown Royal had unleashed atop Cannon Hill, the day she had vaporised the Baron Lan Drunov. They feared cannon well enough after that, and with good reason. I spoke, and they believed me to be noble born and a war hero both, although I was neither of those things.

I told them no lies, but as Our Lady is my witness, I’m good at this shit, if I say so myself.

I deliberately didn't speak to them of siege. Those who have not fought, as most of these almost certainly hadn't, always assume that cities are taken through frontal assault. They thought the reality was the thunder of cannon and the charge of armoured lances, a day or two of heroic violence that they could romanticise and admire from a safe distance. They didn't want to hear about the weapons of starvation and disease. They didn't want to hear about the grinding months of attrition and tedium and slow suffering, of hunger and the bloody flux, for all that nine times out of ten those are the true takers of cities.

'Sir Tomas, I—' someone protested, but I cut him down with a soldier's glare.

Be outrageous, if you need to be, but make an impression.

Oh, I could be outrageous when I wanted to be.

'Our walls are *shit!*' I proclaimed, earning a startled raising of eyebrows from First Councillor Lan Letskov. 'If the Skanians come in force, as they may well do in the wake of the assassination of our noble queen, our walls will fall and *we will die*. I propose a requisition of one million gold crowns from the treasury, to be paid to the guild of masons to expand our fortifications, strengthen our walls, and *make our country great again!*'

I had to shout those last words over the increasing uproar, but one thing was for certain: they would fucking well remember me now, all right.

Chapter 44

‘A million gold crowns?’ Anne laughed, when we were back in the Bountiful Harvest that afternoon with brandies in our hands. ‘Does the treasury even *have* a million gold crowns?’

‘How the fuck would I know?’ I said, and clinked my glass against hers. ‘Make them remember you, the Old Man said, and I reckon I did that this morning.’

‘Aye, I should think you did, and then some,’ Anne said. ‘They’ll remember you as the madman who wants to beggar the realm on his first day in office, to build walls against a threat half of them don’t even believe exists.’

‘Aye, well, more fool them,’ I said.

I knew the story that the magicians had killed the queen was utter horseshit, and I knew Vogel had only come up with it to seize an opportunity to hurt his political rivals in the house of magicians and deflect attention away from how woefully unprepared for another war we really were.

I remembered the Skanians that the Pious Men had fought in Ellinburg, and Bloodhands and his attempt to infiltrate my city. More than anything I remembered their magicians, who very much *did* know magic even if ours apparently didn’t. If the Skanians invaded with our defences in their current state we were just fucked and there was no other way to look at it. If I was truly a councillor now, if there was any way in Our Lady’s name I could get that funding, I realised I would do it. I had been making it up as I went along in the council chamber, simply wanting to say something outrageous enough to make sure they remembered me, but the more I thought about it, the more I knew I was right. If I had the power to make this happen now, then I fucking well would.

We needed to be funding the military, building defences, recruiting troops. If Skania came at us now it would be Abington all over again. Ailsa had told me that shortly after I first met her, and she had been right then and she was right now. It would be Abington again but this time we would be on

the losing side, and I wouldn't see that happen. Not on my watch, I wouldn't.

I *couldn't* see that happen, not again.

For Our Lady's sake, not again. Never again.

My hand shook hard enough that I spilled brandy on the table, and Anne looked at me with sudden concern.

'Tomas?' she said, gently putting her hard, callused hand over mine. 'It's all right, Tomas. I'm here.'

'Aye,' I said, and took a shaky breath. 'Aye, I know you are, Anne, and I thank you for it. I had a . . . a bad moment, that's all. They come and go.'

'I know,' she said, and she reached for the bottle and topped up my spilled drink. 'It's been a big day. Your first day as a member of the governing council, and you gave a speech I don't think anyone will forget in a hurry.'

'I hope they won't,' I said, and I meant it.

I didn't want this job, none of it. The Queen's Men or the governing fucking council or any of it, but if I was stuck with it, then I was going to try my hardest to do some good with it. I wanted . . . I don't know. I don't know what it was, what had changed, but I felt in that moment that if a man is given power at a national level then he should use it to save lives, not take them. I very, very much doubted Lord Vogel would have agreed with me, but that was just another item to chalk up on the increasingly long list of points on which we differed.

While we fought a common enemy in the Skanians I supposed that was just something I had to accept.

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I had an unexpected visitor that evening, a man I had almost forgotten about.

Major Bakrylov of the Queen's Own Fifth was a young fellow with maybe twenty-seven or so years to him, and he wore a dark-red coat cut in the military style and the customary bristling side whiskers of a cavalry officer. He had tried to seduce me at a dinner Lord Vogel had thrown, the dinner where Lord Lan Andronikov had disappeared, but he was a decent enough fellow for all that. He liked to gamble, I remembered, and he could lose a bet and laugh about it afterwards, which was more than most men could. I had taken a gold crown off him at Lan Yetrov's bear bait, and he

had thought nothing of it. He was also, I was reasonably certain, on the payroll of the Queen's Men.

'Major, a pleasure to see you,' I said, when Rosie showed him into my office in the private dining room of the Bountiful Harvest, and I found I actually meant it.

I liked the man, for all that I knew what he had done in the war.

'Sir Tomas,' he said. 'My congratulations on your recent considerable social elevation.'

I wasn't sure if he was referring to the knighthood or my appointment to the governing council, or perhaps both, but that didn't matter. What he *really* meant was, 'You are senior to me in the Queen's Men.'

I nodded in return, and waved him to a seat and offered him the brandy bottle that stood on the table beside my glass.

'To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?' I asked him as he poured himself a generous measure.

'Oh, I know, I know,' he said. 'I shouldn't have come uninvited. I should have left a calling card, and all that old-fashioned shit like our parents did, but come on, Piety. Us old soldiers have to stick together, and all that.'

Like our parents did? We couldn't have grown up more differently, Bakrylov and me.

'Aye,' I said. 'Something like that. It's not slipped your mind that I'm married and don't care for men in that way, has it, Major Bakrylov? I wouldn't want us to have another embarrassing misunderstanding.'

I still didn't know if he truly preferred men or if that had just been a clever ruse to distract me from Lan Andronikov's murder that night, but I supposed that was beside the point.

'Oh, don't play the fool, man,' he said, and knocked back his brandy with a flick of the wrist. 'That was merely a bit of fun; you're far too old for me anyway. I wondered if you fancied a night out gambling?'

I blinked at him in surprise. Not at the too old, as I had ten years on him at least, but at the sudden social invitation. There had to be a reason for this, but I couldn't for the life of me think what it might be.

The major met my eyes, and I had the distinct sense that there was something he wanted to talk to me about away from anyone else who had anything to do with the family, even my own crew.

‘I must admit it’s been a while since I had a game of cards,’ I said at last.

I confess I prefer dice to cards, common though that might make me, but very early in our marriage Ailsa had informed me that all gentlemen played cards. Dice were for conscripts and criminals, apparently, which was probably why I preferred them, on account of having been both of those things. Still, she had made me learn cards, and I’d found that I had quite the knack for it.

‘Oh, do say yes, old boy,’ he said, and I could tell this wasn’t another unwanted advance. There was definitely something he wanted to tell me in the utmost confidence.

‘Aye, why not?’

We went off out together, the major and me with Oliver and Emil along for muscle. Bakrylov took us maybe two or three streets away from the inn to a gaming house he knew. We were breaking curfew, of course we were, but then we were two wealthy gentlemen with bodyguards, and although it would never be admitted in public, it was widely known that curfew truly only applied to the working classes and anyone who might possibly be suspected of supporting the house of magicians. I had the Queen’s Warrant in my pouch, if it came to it, and I suspected that Bakrylov knew that. Either way, our privilege protected us from the City Guard, and we weren’t challenged on the streets.

The place was called the Jolly Joker, and it was a fine old place indeed. The main room was warmly lit by two blazing fireplaces and numerous lamps and candelabras, and bards played at either end of the long space. The multiple tables were busy with richly dressed clientele with cards in their hands, stacks of wooden counters on the tables in front of them and glasses of wine and brandy set before them. I wondered if this place had belonged to Grachyev, and therefore now to Iagin, and decided that it almost certainly had.

If Bakrylov wanted to get away from the family he had picked the wrong place, but he obviously wasn’t high up enough in the pecking order of the Queen’s Men to know that. That told me something, in itself.

We found an empty table and ordered drinks, and although Bakrylov busied his hands shuffling the cards, he seemed in no hurry to deal them. I waited until the serving girl brought us a bottle and glasses, my two men standing impassively behind our chairs. I was sure no one there knew who I

was, but Oliver and Emil looked the part between them and it was obvious I was *someone*, and Bakrylov was clearly a cavalry officer. I suspected most people thought him my guest and not the other way around, but that was well enough. I've always found it best, when in an unfamiliar environment, to act like you own the place. It's truly astonishing how many people fall for that, and ask no questions. Either way we were left alone, and that was good.

'What's on your mind?' I asked once the serving girl had left us, gratefully clutching the silver penny I had given her for a tip.

'Perhaps I just wanted your company, old boy,' Bakrylov said, and raised a teasing eyebrow.

'No,' I said. 'I've told you that's not going to happen, and you're not a fool. You don't even want it to happen, for Our Lady's sake. You're not here for that, so what is it?'

He poured brandy for us both and swallowed his, then looked at me across the card table with a truly serious look on his face for probably the first time since I had met him.

'I am a war hero,' he said, and there was no hint of boast in his voice. Quite the opposite, if anything. 'I took the west gate at Abingon with barely six hundred men, everyone in the city knows *that* story. Lord Vogel has made sure of it. I got a fucking medal for it, don't you know?'

'Aye,' I said carefully. 'I know.'

I knew that story too, everyone did. I had been there, after all, although mercifully in a different regiment. I don't think I would still be alive to record these memoirs if I had been cavalry. Major Bakrylov had assumed command of his regiment after their colonel fell; he had given them the order to storm the gate. He'd had barely six hundred men after he had taken it, to be sure – when he gave the order to charge, he'd had over three thousand.

I met the major's eyes then, and I realised that he had never forgiven himself for that.

'What is it you're looking for, Bakrylov?' I asked him. 'Forgiveness? A priest? Because I'm that, aye, and I'll hear your confession if that's what you want to give, but I reckon Our Lady knows your name well enough already. You sent two and a half thousand and more of our countrymen's souls across the river to Her in the space of barely half an hour, and the gods only know how many of the enemy's.'

‘Bakrylov the Bear, that’s what Vogel called me,’ he said, in a low voice. ‘I was presented with my medal by Her Majesty the Queen herself, but I knew those were Vogel’s words she spoke. And do you know what the common soldiers called me?’

‘Aye, I do,’ I said, and in that moment I couldn’t keep the bitterness out of my voice. I had kept my peace about it at Vogel’s dinner for political purposes, but I knew this was different now. I looked at him for a moment and I realised that he wanted me to say it. *Needed* me to say it, perhaps, however much it hurt him. ‘Bakrylov the Butcher.’

He hurled his brandy glass onto the floor and put his head in his hands, both elbows braced on the card table as he sobbed into his palms. I didn’t really know what to do with that. The war affected all of us who fought, but was I truly expected to comfort Bakrylov the Butcher? I thought him a decent enough fellow, as Dannsburg society people went, but that didn’t mean I could truly see past what he had done in the war.

‘I didn’t know what else to do,’ he said after a while, once a footman had come over to reprimand him for the broken glass and Emil had chased him away again with a savage glare that resulted in the serving girl bringing a fresh glass and no more said about it. ‘The colonel was dead, and his last orders had been to take the gate whatever it cost. So I . . . I took the gate. I couldn’t see any other way to do it. I was only following my orders. But Bakrylov the Bear? Fuck off! I didn’t even ride in the charge. I wanted to, but the colonel’s adjutant said I had to stay with the command post, had to . . .’

He hiccupped incoherently through his sobs, and I filled the replacement glass and pushed it across the table to him.

‘Drink that and pull yourself together, man,’ I said. ‘People are staring.’

They were as well. In fact, a man I didn’t know was making his way towards our table even then, a worried look on his face.

‘It’s battle shock, isn’t it?’ he said as he approached. ‘Oh, don’t worry, I’m a doctor. I’ve seen this before. Too many times before.’

I looked up at him. He had somewhere around sixty years to him, with grey whiskers and thinning hair that he combed straight back over his bald spot.

‘Who the fuck are you?’ I asked.

‘Doctor Almanov,’ he said. ‘I work at the palace, Sir Tomas. I recognised you, and I felt obliged to help your friend.’

If you work at the palace and recognise me then you must know fucking well who I am and what I do, I thought, but I didn't say it. Such were the webs the Queen's Men spun. Always someone watching, and always someone to watch the watcher.

'My thanks,' I made myself say instead, and I held my peace while the doctor checked Bakrylov's pulse and his temperature and did all manner of other things that are no fucking help whatsoever to a man suffering a bout of battle shock. Not much is, save for friends and patience and understanding. Bakrylov seemed to have none of those on hand, and for that I felt sorry for him. The other great helper of course is brandy, which I relied on heavily myself. There at least he was taken care of, in my company.

'It's all right, Major,' I said to him eventually, for all that it made my guts clench to do so. 'Our Lady has heard your confession, and She forgives you your actions. In the end you were only following orders, as you say. In Our Lady's name.'

It didn't have to be fucking true, did it? It just had to *sound* like I meant it, and if there's one thing I'm good at, it's sounding like I mean it. That was a large part of why the captain had made me a priest in the first place. Bakrylov put his head on the table and wept, and his shoulders shook as Doctor Almanov met my gaze above the major's shuddering form.

'What is it you do at the palace, exactly?' I asked him. 'I don't think I recall seeing you there.'

'Oh, I'm quite new to the palace,' he said, 'but I came very highly recommended from the Grand Duchess of Varnburg. I'm the Princess Crown Royal's new personal physician.'

Very highly recommended. Aye, I was sure he was at that.

By the Dowager Duchess of Varnburg.

There couldn't possibly be anything wrong with that, could there?

Chapter 45

It didn't take very long for the ice to form between Lord Vogel and me, and it didn't surprise me one little bit when it happened. Vogel summoned me to his office one morning, a few weeks later, and Ailsa and Iagin were already there waiting when I arrived. I had attended three or perhaps four meetings of the governing council by then. I can't truly remember now but it was only on the days when I really couldn't get out of it, although after my somewhat conspicuous entrance to the council chamber I had maintained a fairly low profile. Most of the debate had been around the ever-growing civil unrest in the city, and I wanted no part of that. Even so it was enough that I was known, a real councillor like all the others.

Councillor Lan Drashkov quite publicly hated me, but that was just politics and I didn't take it personally. He worked for the house of law himself anyway, although I had no idea if he knew that I did. Or even if he knew that *he* did, for that matter. In truth, I doubted it. Many of the recipients of our bribes and blackmail had no idea where they really came from.

I had become casually close with Councillor Markova over the last few weeks, and we had enjoyed spending some social time dining together outside the council chambers, discussing matters of policy and our shared interest in the ownership of racehorses. She understood the technicalities of horse breeding, which was more than I did, and I learned a lot from her. In truth I liked the woman.

Such only served to make Lan Drashkov hate the both of us even more, of course, and that in turn ensured we both voted against any motion he put before the council, however sensible it might be. The only time all three of us voted the same way had been when my motion to rebuild the city walls was put before the council, and I knew fucking well that was Vogel's doing. The motion passed, of course, as at least two thirds of the council were to some degree in the pay of the house of law by then. I had received a very handsome gift from the guild of masons for my proposal and their subsequent contract, which swelled my coffers nicely. I could only imagine how much more handsome Lord Vogel's had been, for making sure it got

voted through. That was how government worked, in those times we lived in.

The whole system was fucking ridiculous, I realised, and could never work. Lady's Grace, it wasn't *supposed* to work. That was the whole point of it. The governing council was the stranglehold the house of law maintained over the country, a veneer of democracy that ensured nothing could ever get decided that the house of law didn't *want* to be decided.

I stepped into Lord Vogel's office and gave him a short bow.

'What can I do for you, Provost Marshal?' I asked him.

He gave me a look then, and for a moment I wondered if perhaps I had overstepped the mark, but I thought *fuck it*.

I had phrased the question as though I was considering doing him a favour rather than preparing to receive his orders, and I knew that wouldn't be lost on him. That was the first feint in my long, drawn-out fencing match with Dieter Vogel, and I will record it here as the point at which things began to change between us.

I was beginning to dig my heels in even then. I may not be an educated man but I like to think that I'm not a fool, either. There's another thing that has to be understood about me too: I will not be bullied.

Not fucking ever.

Not since my da, never again. Back down to a bully once and you'll never stop doing it, my da had taught me that well enough. Never again. Vogel intimidated people for a fucking living. As Our Lady is my witness I will admit that he had intimidated *me*, to begin with, but I was done with that now. He was just a man the same as any other, and fuck how important he thought he was. I wasn't having it, not from anyone.

Powerful people have power over you only for as long as you believe that they do. Then the day comes when you realise that they are just people, and everyone can die the same way. In a world where you can do absolutely anything, why would you fear anyone? Your only restraint is your own conscience, and I didn't really have one of those. That was the bit I was missing, after all.

No, I was done.

I was done with it all, but I knew I would have to play Vogel's game for a while yet before I could begin to extricate myself from the web of the Queen's Men.

‘How good of you to ask, Tomas,’ Vogel said, and the frozen razorblade of his smile was the coldest I think I had ever seen it. ‘If it would suit you, I would very much like to make you the second most powerful man in the country.’

That threw me, I had to allow. I blinked and looked at him, and still his soulless eyes bored into mine.

‘If that suits you, of course,’ he said.

‘You want me to . . .’

‘Remove First Councillor Aleksander Lan Letskov and assume his place as presiding head of the governing council, yes,’ Vogel said.

‘You want me to arrest him, or . . . not?’

‘What in the gods’ names for?’ Vogel snapped, and in that moment he was the Provost Marshal again. ‘He disappears, and you are voted presiding head of the council. That will be expensive, but it can be taken care of easily enough. This isn’t difficult, Tomas.’

‘I would be most grateful if you did, Tomas,’ Ailsa said.

You know he thinks he’s in love with you.

Aye, I dare say Ailsa would be glad to see the back of Aleksander Lan Letskov every bit as much as Lord Vogel would, albeit for completely different reasons.

The man had done nothing to me, save to probably try to fuck my wife. Which was more than I had ever done, I had to admit. I paused for a moment and massaged the bridge of my nose between finger and thumb. Me, the First Councillor? It was ridiculous. I had only been *on* the governing council for a matter of weeks, for Our Lady’s sake, but of course that didn’t matter. I was officially a member, and any member of the council could be elected to the podium by a majority vote of their peers. With two-thirds or more of them taking the house of law’s coin they would vote the way they were told to, and he had more than enough support to carry the vote in a landslide. I could be the presiding head of the governing council within weeks. The second most powerful man in the country, as Vogel said.

I supposed there could be worse outcomes.

Respect, power, authority. Those are the levers that move me.

‘No,’ I said.

Vogel stared at me, and that stare could have frozen a cannon mid-fire.

‘No?’ he said.

‘Let Markova have it. She’s one of ours, isn’t she? She’s welcome to it, and with my blessing. I’m more use to you out on the streets than I would be stuck in the council chamber every day, and Markova will make a much better job of it than I would. I’ll get rid of Lan Letskov for you, but I’m not going to waste my time heading the governing council. That’s a job for a career bureaucrat, not a soldier.’

He was a subtle and clever man, was Dieter Vogel. He was much cleverer than me, I have no doubt, but in this he had fucked up, and he had fucked up very badly.

If there’s one thing I truly understand, it’s how to move people. The first thing I do upon meeting someone new of any importance is to work out their levers, and it seemed that Vogel thought the same. Find the levers that move a person and you can make them do anything, and to his credit he had found mine. However, the thing that has to be understood is that I had been doing this for so long that I knew when I was being moved in turn. Being bullied. I could feel my levers being pulled, and I wasn’t having it.

Oh, no, not one little bit I was not.

This cunt thought he knew me, and he thought he could buy me with promises of power and influence that would keep me out from under his feet and away from the things he didn’t want me looking at, and he was wrong on both counts.

I wasn’t going to let that pass. I would get rid of Aleksander Lan Letskov if he needed me to, but after that we were done as far as I was concerned.

I was done with being Lord Vogel’s fucking puppet.

*

First Councillor Aleksander Lan Letskov was considerably wealthier than Archmagus Nikolai Reiter, for all that the latter was the head of the house of magicians. It seemed that the archmagus drew a good deal less coin from the coffers of his house than some of his opposite numbers did from theirs, although of course Lan Letskov was a hereditary aristocrat and had probably inherited the majority of his wealth, as such people usually did.

I stood across the street from the gates of his estate that night, hiding in the shadowed doorway of a closed bank with Oliver and Emil beside me, and I watched the movements of his house guard. No, I decided then, this wasn’t going to work. I had managed a frontal assault on Lord Lan Yetrov’s

estate the previous year because Fat Luka had bought his head man and most of his staff, and I had secured the support of his wife in advance. That wasn't going to work here, I could see that. The Lan Letskov estate was like a fortress, and even with Bloody Anne and Beast and help from Iagin's crew, I simply didn't have the manpower to take it by force. I could have unleashed Billy against them, of course, but that would have been like bringing a cannon to a tavern brawl. No, even a Queen's Man had to maintain a veneer of plausibility, and that would never have done. There was only so much that could be covered up by Iagin's words, after all.

It looked like I would have to do this the old-fashioned way, then, the gangster way, and simply swagger it out afterwards. And I could do that, I realised suddenly.

The Queen's Warrant is an official license to do absolutely anything, with the full and unconditional backing and funding of the crown. It means that I am above the law. I am utterly untouchable.

Ailsa had told me that, and I knew then that I needed to heed those words. I am *utterly* untouchable, those were the words I needed to remember. Fuck taking his house by force, I realised, when I could see him in the chambers of the governing council tomorrow through the simple act of turning up for once. That wasn't something I was in the habit of doing, but I believed I could make an exception on this occasion. I carried the Queen's Warrant and there was nothing I couldn't do in Dannsburg, however fucking outrageous it might seem.

All the same, we couldn't just murder people in the street. Some degree of subterfuge had to be maintained, but I had the perfect cover to do it. Lord Vogel had seen to that.

'No, fuck this,' I said. 'It's not going to happen. We can't take them in open battle.'

'What are you going to do, then, boss?' Oliver asked.

'I'll see him at work in the morning,' I said.

Ailsa had as good as told me this was going to happen, of course.

Lord Vogel wants one of them killed, and sitting members of the governing council are notoriously difficult to get close to unless one is also a councillor, she had told me.

I realised then what she had meant, and what Vogel had been doing all along. I had been placed on the governing council purely to kill First Councillor Lan Letskov, and to replace him as the house of law's puppet.

Well, the latter wasn't going to happen but we would have to see about the former, I supposed.

Anyway, I spent a fitful night thinking on it, and what it would mean for the future. Aleksander Lan Letskov had done me no harm save to fall in love with my wife, and fool that I was, I had to allow that I had done the same thing. All the same, by the time I finally fell asleep I knew what had to be done. It was for the greater good, I told myself, and I hold to that now. With war looming it was imperative that the governing council stood with us, and was led by one of our people.

After the morning's session of the council, which consisted mostly of back and forth arguing over the terms of the guild of masons' contract for the rebuilding of the city walls and a conspicuous ignoring of the civil unrest that still raged in the city, First Councillor Lan Letskov adjourned the meeting. He was a man past his sixtieth year, after all, and by then he seemed to be in quite some need.

I followed him to the privy.

'My lord First Councillor,' I said to his back as he relieved himself with a groan of satisfaction into one of the bowls.

He half turned to face me, his cock in his hands, a look of horror on his face as I drew Remorse.

'Sir Tomas, no. If you want the podium that badly, then . . .'

'Dieter Vogel sends his regards,' I said, and I rammed Remorse through his chest.

He crumpled at my feet, and with that I supposed it was done.

The First Councillor was dead, and no one would ever question why or how. That was simply how Dannsburg worked. Vogel would manipulate the vote to see Markova elected into his position, and no one would argue with that either.

I thought about that, as I watched First Councillor Lan Letskov's blood pool around him on the privy floor. That was how much power Vogel already had, and I didn't think I was at all comfortable with it.

I wiped Remorse clean on Lan Letskov's coat and sheathed her at my side. I lingered in the privy to take a piss myself, because as every soldier knows you should never turn down the opportunity to eat, sleep or take a piss, as you never know when the chance may come again. That done, I returned to my seat in the council chamber. By then Beast and Oliver would have used my name and the notes of permission I had signed for them to get

inside the council building and spirit Lan Letskov's body away. I sat and awaited the First Councillor's return as though nothing had happened. He had disappeared, and that was all there was to it.

If there's one thing the Queen's Men teach you, it's sheer audacity. The knowledge that you can do a thing, *anything*, and there will be no repercussions, is something it takes a while to get used to.

But by then I think I was starting to.

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Chapter 46

Bakrylov came to see me again the next morning.

I hadn't been expecting his visit, and if I'm honest I wasn't really in any fit state to receive him. I had drunk myself into oblivion the night before, after I had assassinated First Councillor Lan Letskov in broad daylight and walked away from it as though nothing had happened, which of course it officially hadn't. He had disappeared, and nothing more needed to be said about that.

Such was the life of the Queen's Men.

'Bakrylov,' I greeted him in the common room of the Bountiful Harvest, and if I looked half as rough as I felt then he did a good job of hiding his reaction.

'Sir Tomas,' he said, and sketched me a bow that I thought half mocking and half sincere.

Mocking was Major Bakrylov's normal demeanour, so I didn't take it ill. If anything, the sincere half could be considered a compliment, coming from him.

I forced down a gulp of small beer and tried not to throw up on his boots.

'What do you want?' I asked, and if that was somewhat blunt then he didn't react to it.

I am a blunt man, after all, knight and councillor though I may have been, and I think Bakrylov was used to that by then.

'There's been another riot,' he said. 'Another of the learned magi was lynched last night, his carriage overrun by an angry mob on its return from one of the city's finer brothels.'

'So?'

'So I've been put in charge of stopping it,' he said. 'Curfew obviously isn't working, so something more drastic is required. I thought I ought to let you know that we both serve the same house, Sir Tomas. Although I don't carry the warrant, I've been around long enough to know how this works. Plans within plans, and nobody knows what anybody else is doing save the

Old Man himself. I don't want you thinking me an enemy of the people and planting one of your blades in my back.'

'I'd guessed, and I wouldn't do that,' I said, and realised that I meant it. 'Not without a direct order, anyway. Why, though? Why you?'

'I'm a war hero,' Bakrylov said once more. 'People trust in heroes. They understand heroes, or at least they think they do. No one understands the magi, so no one trusts them. Simple people can easily be made to distrust learning, and fear of the unknown is a powerful tool. So the Old Man told me, and I dare say he's right.'

Ill-informed and ignorant people are easier to suppress and control.

'But you're army, not City Guard,' I said. 'Or is this some sort of undercover mission?'

'No, absolutely not,' Bakrylov said. 'What's the use of a hero in disguise? This is the complete opposite of undercover. Vogel has used his legal authority as Lord Chief Judiciar and publicly sent in the army to quell the unrest.'

I paused for a moment to let the implications of that sink in.

Vogel had sent in the army.

In Dannsburg itself.

In Our Lady's name, civil wars had been started by less.

'The army,' I said, and for a moment I was honestly lost for words.

'He's sent in the *army*?'

To stop riots that we had started ourselves, but of course I had no way of knowing if Bakrylov knew that so I didn't say it.

'Yes,' Bakrylov said. 'We will be putting down any and all unrest from the house of magicians until peace and civil order is restored to Dannsburg.'

Of course it was the house of magicians they would be targeting, and never mind those who had carried out the lynchings and started the riots. The house of magicians was the rival of the house of law, that was known well enough, so it would be against them that the army's wrath would be turned.

I found a new appreciation of Lord Vogel's skills as I realised exactly what he had done here. He had used the queen's death at the hands of the Skanians to implicate his greatest political rivals in the atrocity, and then created enough civil unrest to give him just cause to bring in the army and exterminate them.

That was one thing, I supposed, but I would much prefer the army to be on the walls of Varnburg and Dannsburg awaiting the imminent Skanian threat. That, to me, was more important than the house of magicians and their university and their theatre, but it seemed the house of law thought differently about that.

‘Gods, you look terrible,’ Bakrylov said, unexpectedly. ‘Late night?’

‘I suppose it was,’ I said, although I didn’t even remember going to bed so had no idea what time it had been.

‘Mmmm,’ he said, and that could have meant anything.

‘What?’ I snapped.

‘I hear they are holding elections for a new presiding head of the governing council,’ he said. ‘It seems that First Councillor Lan Letskov has disappeared. But you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you, Sir Tomas?’

‘I am seldom at the council,’ I said.

‘You were there yesterday.’

‘What if I was?’ I snarled at him. I felt like shit, and this war criminal lording it over me was the last thing I needed right then. ‘I carry the Queen’s Warrant, Bakrylov. What if I fucking was?’

He laughed, and surprised me by clapping me on the shoulder.

‘Oh, very good, old boy,’ he said. ‘Defiance, we like that.’

We like that? I looked at him, and narrowed my eyes. Exactly who was he speaking for here?

There are factions, even within the Queen’s Men.

I wondered then exactly how deep into the whole circus Major Bakrylov truly was.

*

I went out with Bakrylov again that night, partly to make up for my harsh words and partly because I was intrigued by what he had said that morning. Factions indeed, and I wanted to know whose side he was truly on.

I didn’t find out, as he was wearing his armour of mockery and jest once more and didn’t open up to me at all. I could tell after five minutes back in the Jolly Joker that I would get no serious words out of him that night, whatever I said.

For all of that, we had a pleasant enough evening together, and once more I saw Doctor Almanov in there, playing cards with a table of men who

I didn't know. I watched him out of casual interest, having given up on getting anything but mirth from the major, and it seemed to me that he was losing heavily. The good doctor was sweating in his brocade coat, and although I couldn't see well from where I was sitting, I thought a couple of his opponents at the card table had the look of the sort of men you wouldn't want to owe money to if you valued your kneecaps. Men from south of the river, I was sure, remembering when Ailsa had told me that, in one of the many dressings-down she had subjected me to when we still lived together as husband and wife.

We didn't stay out late, as I found I had no appetite for it with the major being as frivolous as he was, and I had council business the next morning anyway.

With Lan Letskov's disappearance now common knowledge among the members of the governing council, a vote was to be held for his successor. Aye, it had been barely a day since he had vanished, but this was Dannsburg and everyone on the council knew what that meant. No one was under any illusion that he would be coming back again, for all that none of them would have dared to say anything about it.

I sat on the green leather bench the next morning with my fellow councillors around me, and watched and waited as Speaker Ivankova formally proposed the election of a new First Councillor. Her motion was carried almost unanimously, as I had never doubted that it would be.

'I propose myself,' Lan Drashkov announced at once, to the surprise of absolutely nobody.

Judging from the polite yet restrained smattering of applause, his support was vanishingly small. I could see that he knew it too, and he regained his seat with his face flushed even redder than usual.

I too rose to my feet, and cleared my throat.

'I propose Councillor Markova,' I said.

The applause I received was thunderous, and that told me all I needed to know about the amount the house of law had expended in bribes to make this happen. Markova herself turned and nodded to me, then stood and faced the Speaker.

'Seconded,' she said.

'Thirded!' shouted a man from the back benches.

'Fourthed,' called out a woman from my left.

No one so much as seconded Lan Drashkov's proposal, so at least we were spared the farce of a formal election. Councillor Markova was the new presiding head of the governing council, and that was it.

So simply was Lord Vogel's will done, through the exercise of no more than gold and influence. So simply were the reins of power placed in the hands of the house of law.

Gold, power, influence.

The levers that moved the world.

*

I saw Ailsa afterwards, in the mess at the house of law.

'It's done,' I said, when she raised her eyebrows.

We were alone in there, and I could tell that she felt safe enough to ask the question.

'Why did you turn him down, Tomas? It's not often a Queen's Man turns down an offer of advancement from the Provost Marshal himself.'

'For the reasons I gave him,' I said carefully. 'Being First Councillor isn't something I know how to do, Ailsa. I was flattered by the offer, aye, but I think Markova will serve us better in that post than I could ever have done. I put the interests of the house of law before my own, always.'

That was utter horseshit, of course, and I suspected that she knew it was, but it was the only right answer I could have given when there was always the prospect of someone listening at the door, or from some concealed space behind the walls. You never could tell, in the house of law. Or most places in Dannsburg, for that matter.

'Yes, well,' she said. 'I hope you're right, Tomas.'

'She's an intelligent woman,' I said, 'and she knows which side her bread is buttered on. I don't think Markova will let us down.'

'For what it's worth, nor do I,' Ailsa admitted.

She looked troubled, though, and after I had poured us both a drink I said as much.

'What's on your mind?' I asked her.

Ailsa sighed and took a sip of the wine I had given her.

'I'm worried about Her Highness,' she admitted after a moment. 'She keeps demanding to see "the shining boy", and nobody has the faintest idea what she's talking about. All she says is, "I want that boy, the one who shines." She talks nonsense a lot of the time, of course, but this seems to matter to her and she rages when we have to gainsay her through simple

lack of understanding. Two footmen were badly burned last week, in some strange accident involving a lamp.'

'She means Billy,' I said, before I could think better of it.

'Billy? *Our* Billy?' Ailsa said, and I could see the utter confusion on her face. That wasn't a thing I had seen before.

I could have kicked myself, but it was done now, I supposed.

'Aye, our Billy. He says she's a cunning woman, although he's not sure if she knows she is or not,' I had to explain, 'and I think he's right. You remember the fire at the queen's funeral? That wasn't natural, it *can't* have been. Back when I received my knighthood she told the entire court that he shone, and Billy says she does too and that's how the cunning folk know each other.'

I could tell that this revelation had shaken Ailsa, but after a moment she took it in her stride. Adapt and move on, that was what the Queen's Men did, and Ailsa was a Queen's Man to the core.

'Gods be good, I had completely forgotten about that,' Ailsa said. 'In all truth she says so many mad things that I scarce take notice any more.'

'Aye, well, there it is,' I said. 'It's Billy she wants.'

'Well,' she said, and took a sip of her drink. 'If she wants Billy then I suppose we must arrange an introduction.'

I wasn't sure that I liked it but I supposed we probably must, at that.

Chapter 47

It was arranged for the following day, such was the princess' insistence. I had explained it to Billy that night, back at the Bountiful Harvest.

'I'll see her if she wants me to,' Billy had said, 'but I'm with Mina now so she'd better not get any silly ideas. Anyway, I thought you said she was getting married?'

'She is betrothed to the young Grand Duke of Varnburg,' I said, 'but betrothals can be broken. By princesses they can, anyway. You have to understand, lad, she isn't going to be quite like any other girls you may have known. She has grown up very differently to normal people. Truth be told, I have no idea why she wants to see you, but it could be that. If so, she might promise you things. She might offer to make you a prince. She might offer you a throne.'

'I don't want to be a prince,' Billy said at once, and he got a hurt look on his face as he said it. 'I don't want a stupid throne. I want Mina.'

'Good,' I said. 'That's good, Billy. It's made me very proud, to hear you say that.'

I gave him a hug then, and he grinned at me to say that all was well.

Now it was morning, and Billy and me were in an anteroom of the palace waiting for an audience with the Princess Crown Royal herself. I had no idea how this was going to go, and had it been up to me I would have had Bloody Anne there beside me. Of course, it *hadn't* been up to me. Ailsa had arranged this introduction, and Ailsa and Anne were far from what you might call friends. The invitation to the audience with Her Highness had been for Billy and me only and no one else, and even so I had been somewhat surprised to be included myself. I could only suppose that Ailsa felt that she owed me that much, at least, as Billy's adoptive father and legal guardian.

She could have been there herself, of course, as his adoptive mother, but she wasn't.

Fool, fool.

Of course she wasn't. Ailsa was a busy woman, and what did she care that the heir to the throne appeared to be trying to court her son? I felt the

bitterness swell in my chest for a moment, but then I remembered how horrified she had looked when I told her that the princess' 'shining boy' was our own son, Billy. I wished I could know where I stood with Ailsa, me and Billy both.

Fucking fool.

'Sir Tomas?'

The voice snapped me out of my thoughts, and I looked up to see a nun standing in the doorway. She was a strong-looking woman with some thirty or so years to her. She was tall, and her habit pulled tight across the width of her shoulders. That one had been a soldier before she was a nun, I would have bet gold on it.

'Aye,' I said. 'And this is my son, Billy.'

'Good,' the nun said, and nodded to Billy. 'My name is Sister Galina. Come with me.'

We followed her out of the anteroom and onto one of the many staircases that seemed to worm their way through the palace like the roots of old trees.

'Tell me, Sister,' I said. 'You have the look and the age of a veteran about you. Were you at Abington?'

'Messia,' she said, without turning to look at me. 'I was assigned to the garrison there, after the city fell, and I missed the final battles of the war.'

'I was at Messia too,' I said, feeling the need to build some sort of bridge between us. 'Missing Abington . . . aye. You should thank the gods for your good fortune.'

'I do no such thing!' Sister Galina snapped, and turned on the stair to glare at me. 'I am a Daughter of Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows, and I should have been there. I *wanted* to be there, but the army said it was not to be. It was my *holy duty* to be at Abington, to see Our Lady's will be done!'

'And I am a priest of Our Lady,' I told the nun, and I watched her face flush as I spoke. 'I was there. I saw Our Lady's will be done enough for all of us, trust me on that. I waded through rivers of blood at Abington, for Our Lady.'

'Forgive me, Father,' she whispered. 'I didn't know you.'

'Think nothing of it,' I said. 'Our Lady respects your service, and She thanks you for it.'

I just had to *sound* like I meant it, after all. Sister Galina curtsied deep to me, there on the stairs, and then she led us up to the Princess Crown

Royal's personal apartments. She was mine now, I knew that. That was how it was done.

The levers that move people. Sister Galina was moved by religious fervour.

At last we reached the door that led into the princess' residence, where Ailsa had left me that time before when she went in to speak to Her Highness and ended up slapping her. There were guards outside now as there had been then, but I had no way of knowing if they were the same ones.

Sister Galina rapped on the door and pushed it open without waiting for a reply, and I thought that in itself said a lot. The Princess Crown Royal was technically the ruling monarch of the country, but of course due to her age she was nothing of the sort.

She was subject to her regent, and her regent just happened to be Dieter Vogel. Vogel, publicly the Lord Chief Judiciar and secretly the Provost Marshal of the Queen's Men. I gave Sister Galina a sideways glance, and I wondered how much of that she understood. Did we even have *nuns* on our payroll? It wouldn't honestly have surprised me.

Another nun was there waiting to receive her, and she nodded to Sister Galina and gave her what amounted to a very small curtsy. I knew little about nuns, but it seemed they had a form of hierarchy of their own. Almost all organisations do, in my experience, whatever they may be.

'Sister,' she said. 'Her Highness will join you in her drawing room, and she is very much looking forward to receiving her visitor. And his father, of course, as is only proper under the circumstances.'

'Of course,' Sister Galina said.

The circumstances were of course extremely fucking awkward. The Princess Crown Royal was publicly betrothed to the Grand Duke of Varnburg, young as he was, and yet here she was receiving the much older son of a provincial knight, and in her personal chambers, no less. I had to be there to act as chaperone and protector of propriety every bit as much as these nuns did. Even so, I dreaded to think what the Dowager Grand Duchess was going to say about this if she ever got wind of their meeting.

We were shown into a magnificent drawing room, even more opulent than the late Prince Consort's had been. I wondered if this had been the room in which Ailsa had slapped the Princess Crown Royal.

‘Do please take a seat,’ Sister Galina said, and she waved Billy and me into chairs beside which were set low tables laden with sweetmeats and jugs of fruit juice and bottles of wine and brandy, plates and glasses. ‘Please, help yourself to the comforts offered.’

I poured myself a glass of brandy and sipped it slowly. Billy took nothing, for all that he wasn’t usually one to turn down food. The lad was nervous, I realised, and under the circumstances I could hardly blame him.

She entered a moment later, on the arm of yet another nun. The Princess Crown Royal wore a dark-red gown, somewhat less formal than those I had seen her in before, and black lace gloves. Even so, I could see the blistered burns on her fingers as she extended one hand towards the nuns. Billy and I both stood and bowed to her as protocol dictated, but neither of us spoke. Sister Galina hastily poured a glass of fruit juice and put it in the princess’ waiting hand before giving her a low curtsy.

‘Highness,’ she all but whispered, and I could hear the reverence in her tone.

‘He shines,’ the princess said, and a slow smile curved her painted doll’s mouth. ‘This boy, he shines.’

It came to me then that she was looking at Billy in the way that twelve-year-old girls often look at fifteen-year-old lads, and I didn’t like it. Her betrothed had only ten years to him, so I doubted she had ever looked at *him* like that. I didn’t like it one little bit, or what it might portend.

‘Highness,’ I said, and bowed once more. ‘It is an honour to see you again.’

‘Sir . . . Tomas,’ she said, and I was surprised that she had remembered my name. Or perhaps she had been reminded of it just before the meeting, of course, which I supposed was much more likely. ‘A pleasure.’

She turned back to Billy then, ignoring me completely, and cocked her head to one side as she studied him.

‘Your Highness,’ Billy said awkwardly.

He plainly didn’t know what to say, and there I felt for him. I had to admit that I didn’t either. Neither of us were used to being in the apartments of princesses.

‘Will you play shining games with me?’ she asked suddenly. ‘I have no real friends, and my maids are so fragile I fear I keep breaking them. I am only trying to make them pretty, but it never works.’

‘If you like,’ Billy said, and suddenly he grinned. ‘Do you know how to draw with the lights?’

‘Lights?’ the princess asked. ‘I don’t know what you mean, boy.’

‘It’s easy,’ Billy said. ‘You just do this. I often do this, to keep myself amused when I can’t sleep at night.’

He looked towards the fireplace, and a mote of light began to dance in the cold grate. It was followed a moment later by a second and then a third and then more, until there were a score or more dancing points of light floating in the shadows. They slowly changed colour from white to red to blue to green, swirling and dancing in an intricate pattern.

The princess clapped her gloved, burned hands in delight.

‘More!’ she demanded.

Billy concentrated until he had conjured maybe a hundred or more specks of light. He began to make shapes out of them, human figures and fabulous beasts, forever changing colour and shifting in an endless dance. Two of the figures began to fight, and the princess squealed with joy.

‘You try,’ Billy said.

She dropped her untouched glass of fruit juice on the floor and fixed him with a savage stare.

‘Me?’ she demanded. ‘How can *I* try? This is witchcraft. It is wicked and it is entertaining, but do you dare suggest that *I* am a witch, boy? I am a *princess!*’

‘You shine,’ Billy said flatly, as sticky juice soaked into the priceless Alarian carpet beneath the princess’ velvet slippers.

‘Oh, I do,’ she said, and the rage left her as quickly as it had come. ‘Sometimes I shine so bright I keep myself awake at night. Bright at night, that rhymes. Bright at night. If the doctor is late with my medicine I shine so bright I can hardly see for the light. That rhymes. Bright light. But that is different. I shine because I am a queen. I struggle to contain it all. Sometimes I feel like I will shine so bright it will consume me. My mother shone like a star, and *she* was a queen and now she is dead. That is what queens do. We shine and then we die.’

I swallowed, and glanced at Billy. He had a deeply concerned look on his too-tight face now, and he was looking at her. I got the distinct impression he was really *looking* at her, with the cunning. I had no understanding of what was going on, but Billy’s expression alone was enough to tell me that it was nothing good.

‘How do you play shining games, Highness?’ I asked her.

She turned and looked at me, and for a moment I thought that it may have been a mistake to speak.

Then she laughed.

‘Like a queen,’ she said. ‘Queens give commands, and things happen. Fire, *light!*’ she said, and flames leaped suddenly in the grate. ‘You see? To shine is to command. It is a thing for queens.’

‘And for boys, it seems,’ I said.

‘No,’ she snapped. ‘Boys should not shine. That is why yours interested me so much. Why does he shine?’

Because he’s got the cunning in him, I wanted to say, but I could already see how unwise that would be. *Because he’s a witch or possessed by a devil, and oh, by the way, so are you.* No, no, that really wouldn’t have been anything I would call fucking wise at all.

‘I don’t know, Highness,’ I said. ‘Priest I may be, but that is a question for mystics, and I’m not that. He just . . . does.’

‘Yes,’ she said, and nodded slowly as though I had disclosed some great philosophical revelation to her. ‘Sometimes things just are. Mother was, and now she is not, but my doctors just are. If I break one, another will appear and there will still be a doctor because doctors just are. Yes. Some things just . . . are.’

She sank into a chair, and her chin slowly drooped against her chest. Billy looked at me, and I shrugged. The princess made a noise, a half-formed word, perhaps, but I had no idea what, if anything, she was trying to say.

She seemed to be getting sleepier by the moment, and I thought perhaps she was entering into the next cycle of the drugged rhythm of her life. Was she ever truly herself, I wondered, between the timed cocktails of stimulants and narcotics she was being force-fed? For a moment I felt pity for this sad, insane little girl, until I remembered the tales of her maids and the horrific burns some of them had supposedly suffered at her blistered hands.

Beauty is pain, and pain is beauty.

She had told me that once, I remembered.

I am only trying to make them pretty.

Oh gods.

Chapter 48

We left the palace as soon after that as I could manage to get us away. I waited until my carriage was rolling, then turned and looked at Billy on the bench beside me.

‘What did you make of that, then?’ I asked him.

‘She’s very ill, Papa,’ Billy said.

‘How do you mean, lad?’

‘She’s not healthy, in mind or body. There’s something about her that’s just not quite right,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what it is, but it isn’t right. She’s got the cunning in her, like I said, and she’s very, very strong, but it’s . . . wrong. I don’t know. It’s *wrong*. It’s like . . . I don’t know how to explain it. I don’t know.’

‘Take your time, son,’ I said, as the carriage rumbled through the gates of the side entrance to the palace and onto the streets of Dannsburg, taking us back towards the Bountiful Harvest. ‘Explain it to me like I know nothing at all about the cunning, because in all honesty I don’t.’

‘We shine,’ Billy said. ‘I told you that. All cunning folk shine, if only to each other. It’s something inside us, something that’s part of us. Something we just *do*. But the princess, it’s more like . . . I don’t know. It’s more like something she *is*. There’s too much of her, if that makes sense. It’s hard to put into words, but she’s *wrong*. She shouldn’t be like that. After . . . after the fight, in Ellinburg, when Mina and me stole the strength of that Skanian magician, we got a bit like that. You remember when I told you there wouldn’t be any more magicians but there was one, and Cutter lost his face over it? It was that. I was . . . I was *wrong*, for a while. Me and Mina both were. We still are, a bit. Like there’s too much of us, if that makes sense. It’s all right, but it’s . . . I don’t know. Hard to control, sometimes. When I made the lights for the princess I wanted to fill the room with them. I wanted to fill the whole *city* with them. And I could have done, I think, if I’d let myself. It’s too *much*!’

He put his head in his hands, clutching his skull as though it was about to burst.

‘It’s all right, lad,’ I said, and gently pried one of his hands away from his head and held it the way Anne did with me when the battle shock came down on me.

I didn’t really know what else to do. Billy looked like he had battle shock right then, and I supposed that having too much of the cunning in you could do that to anyone. He had been in the war as well, I had to remind myself, even young as he had been then. Billy had been the half-feral orphan we had found in the ruins of Messia, starving and desperate, who had begged to join our regiment and go on to Abingon with us. It was no wonder he wasn’t quite right in the head, but then none of us really were. Nobody would be, after what we had been through.

Billy squeezed my hand for a moment then turned and looked at me.

‘I’m glad they’re drugging her,’ he said. ‘Don’t let them stop. Please, Papa, don’t ever let them stop.’

*

I took Billy back to the Bountiful Harvest and sent him up to his room to rest, and for once he did what he was told and went to bed. I think his encounter with the Princess Crown Royal had left him more drained and disturbed than he would ever have admitted, and when I walked past his door half an hour later after having a wash and changing my clothes, I heard his soft snores floating out into the corridor from inside. Billy slept lightly and seldom, and it was testament to how exhausted he was that he was obviously sound asleep in broad daylight with the inn alive and clattering and banging around him.

I left him to it and went back down to the stables, and had my coachman drive me to Ailsa’s street and wait across the road from her gates. I could have ridden, of course, but something about turning up a horse instead of in a carriage always made me feel conspicuous in her moneyed neighbourhood. I really was becoming a Dannsburg gentleman, I realised, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. I didn’t ever want to lose sight of where I had come from, but I was also a Queen’s Man and there were certain standards to be upheld.

I remembered Sabine, inciting a riot with her long, filthy iron-grey hair hanging loose and wild around her face, and I wondered about that. The Queen’s Men have no uniform or insignia, and perhaps they have no prescribed look either. Perhaps we present whatever false face is required at the time, and adapt and move on.

Sister Deceit.

I looked at Ailsa's house, and shook my head. Ailsa wasn't Sabine, I knew that, but did I really want to take this to her? I knew I had to take it to *someone*, and I would far rather speak to Ailsa than Vogel any day of the week. Either way, this was a thing the house of law needed to know.

I thumped on the roof to tell the coachman to proceed once more, and he drove his team of four to the gates of Ailsa's residence. One of the gate guards came over to the side window with his hand on the hilt of his sword. He was young, and I didn't recognise him.

'Help you?' he asked.

I looked around for Brandt, but he wasn't there that day.

'Let me in,' I said. 'I'm her husband.'

'And I'm the fucking king of Skania,' he said, giving Oliver and Emil the hard eye at the backboard of the carriage where there should have been liveried footmen.

I may have had the carriage, I may have had the clothes, but I still *sounded* like a commoner from the Stink and there was nothing to be done about that. My accent was so strongly Ellinburg that no one in the capital would ever truly mistake me for a noble, and I found myself tiring of the reactions that brought.

'Her parlour is the second door on the left off the hall, where she sits and works at her embroidery hoop,' I said. 'Her bedroom is on the third floor at the end of the corridor. It has lilac-painted walls and a big mirror on the washstand. She keeps her underthings in the third drawer of the armoire, and she sleeps naked.'

I was making that last bit up, of course, having not the faintest idea what, if anything, my lady wife wore to bed or where she kept her smallclothes, but then of course he wouldn't know either. The rest of it was true enough, although I had only set foot in her bedroom once and that only to talk. It had the desired effect, though, and a hot blush crawled up the young guard's face. Ailsa was an extremely attractive woman, after all, and I couldn't think he had failed to notice that.

'I can't just—' he started, but I cut him off with a look.

'I'm her husband,' I said again. 'What more do you want to know, how she likes to fuck?'

He went crimson. I glared at him until he stepped back and nodded sharply to the men on the gates, and a moment later my carriage swept into

the grassy expanse before the house.

I stepped down and marched to the front door as two of her men hurried to catch up with me. I went in without knocking.

‘Sir!’ the startled footman in the hall said, but I pushed past him and into the drawing room without a word.

‘Tomas, what a pleasant surprise,’ Ailsa exclaimed, and sharply waved the footman away. ‘He’s my husband, for the gods’ sakes. Leave us alone.’

The door closed, and she gave me the most extraordinary look.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘but I need to speak to you.’

‘Yes, yes, evidently,’ Ailsa said. ‘Whatever is it, Tomas, that causes you to barge in here unannounced in the middle of the afternoon?’

So I told her. I told her about the princess and about Billy, and about our visit to the palace. I told her what they had said to each other, and most of all I told her what Billy had told me in the carriage on our way back to the Bountiful Harvest.

‘Gods be good,’ Ailsa said, when I was done.

She surprised me by pouring herself a brandy, which she hardly ever did. She offered me one too, and I accepted it gratefully.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘I think she frightened the piss out of him, and Billy isn’t one to get the fear easily.’

‘No, no, he isn’t,’ Ailsa mused as she sipped her brandy and stared into the fire. ‘Billy is more likely to *give* people the fear than to suffer from it.’

That, I had to allow, was the goddess’ honest truth.

‘I don’t know what to do with it,’ I confessed. ‘I just thought the house of law should know.’

‘Oh, yes, absolutely,’ Ailsa said, and she smiled at me.

That was the special smile, the one I thought only I ever saw. That was the *real* Ailsa, Ailsa the barmaid. *My* Ailsa. That was Chandari Shapoor smiling at me, my sasura’s daughter, not Ailsa the Queen’s Man. Not Sister Deceit. That was the woman I had fallen in love with, the woman I had married. I smiled back, and sipped my brandy.

‘Well, there it is,’ I said. ‘So long as we keep her on her medication I suppose all will be well. I’m worried about Billy, though, and what he said about him and Mina.’

‘It sounds like he can control it,’ Ailsa said. ‘He’s a remarkably strong young man, Tomas, given what he has been through. I think he takes after his adoptive father, there.’

She met my eyes, and I felt warm inside. Fool I may have been, but I loved her.

‘Thank you,’ I said.

Ailsa fussed with one of the papers on the pile beside her chair for a moment.

‘Actually, Tomas, as you’re here,’ she said, and to my astonishment she sounded slightly nervous. ‘My father is coming to visit for tea on Queensday afternoon, while my mother is out with her friends. Well, I say tea, but he’ll no doubt drink my brandy cupboard dry while he’s here. Anyway, I wondered . . . I wondered whether you would like to join us? You and Billy, I mean. He is Papa’s grandson, after all. I thought perhaps it would be nice if they met. Oh, I know I should have sent a proper invitation, but we *are* married, and—’

‘I’d love to,’ I said, and I meant it.

Oh Lady, but I loved her.

*

I rode back to the Bountiful Harvest an hour or so later, my carriage rattling along the cobbled streets. I was dozing on the padded bench in the back of the carriage, my thoughts a confused mixture of Ailsa and Billy and the princess, of Skanian invasion and young love, when my coachman brought us to a jolting stop that jarred me awake just as we were about to turn onto Coronation Avenue, one of the main roads that cut through the heart of Dannsburg.

‘What is it?’ I asked the coachman, leaning out of the window to call up to him on his box.

‘Unrest, sir,’ he said. ‘Stay inside!’

I could hear Oliver and Emil talking urgently to each other on the backboard of the carriage. A moment later the protest marched past down the main road we had been about to turn onto, a great mob of robed students and other supporters of the house of magicians, many of them waving wooden placards with slogans painted on them. They were too far away from me for me to be able to read their words, but I doubted they were anything that it was wise to be saying in Dannsburg in those days. Just being out on the streets in any sort of force, showing any sort of dissent, was deeply fucking unwise in itself. To be protesting on behalf of the house of magicians or the university was lunacy bordering on suicide, and yet there they were.

A moment later a trumpet sounded, and then it seemed that the very earth itself began to shake under us.

The cavalry charge swept down Coronation Avenue and smashed into the marching students like the very hammer of the Stormlord Himself. The onslaught of men and horses was unstoppable, a tidal wave of martial-red cavalry twill and horseflesh that bore men and women to the ground and crushed them beneath their hooves. Sabres flashed bright in the low sun of late afternoon, blood spraying across the windows and doors of the townhouses that lined the avenue as the army carried out their bloody butchery right there in the heart of our own capital city. I counted some twenty blue uniforms of the Sea Guard among their number, and it seemed that Lord Vogel and the Dowager Duchess of Varnburg had cemented their alliance in blood.

A great grey charger reared, her rider brandishing his sabre high like one of the huge statues on the Royal Mall, and I recognised Major Bakrylov as his horse came down on some poor unfortunate bastard and his sabre rose and fell, rose and fell.

Civil order was being returned to Dannsburg.

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Chapter 49

We made it back to the Bountiful Harvest through the back streets in the end, my coachman navigating a path through the byways of Dannsburg that avoided the carnage taking place on Coronation Avenue.

‘What the fuck is going on out there?’ Anne demanded the moment I walked into the common room of the inn.

She was wearing her mail and leather, I noticed, and had obviously been ready to go out and wade into the chaos if she needed to.

‘It’s all right, Anne,’ I told her, although I was no longer remotely sure that it was. ‘The army has been sent in to restore order on the streets, that’s all.’

‘That’s *all*?’ Anne echoed. ‘The fucking *army*, Tomas?’

‘Those are the times we live in,’ I said.

‘Sir Tomas,’ the innkeeper said, looking pale and sweaty with understandable nerves. It wasn’t so very long since someone had bombed his establishment, after all. ‘What should we do?’

‘Have your boys lock the doors and the stable gates, and pour me a brandy,’ I said. ‘I dare say Anne will take one too.’

‘I will, at that,’ she said. ‘Lady’s sake, Tomas, what the *fuck* is going on?’

‘Dannsburg is going face-first into the shithouse, that’s what’s going on,’ I said quietly. ‘The Skanians murdered our queen, and no one seems to give a fuck about it when they can fight among themselves instead.’

‘I don’t think that’s quite true any more,’ Anne said. ‘I’ve seen anti-Skanian graffiti on the walls recently, a lot of it. I’ve heard talk too, about how they can’t be allowed to get away with the queen’s murder. About war, maybe.’

Of course she had. We had started that talk, and maybe it was agents of the Queen’s Men writing on walls as well. It honestly wouldn’t have surprised me at that point. I swallowed brandy and didn’t reply.

‘What are we going to do, Tomas?’ she asked.

‘Our jobs,’ I said.

And that was what we did, but in truth I'm not sure my heart was in the work. I was, it came to me, waiting for Queensday to come around. I had told Billy that he was going to meet Ailsa's father, his new grandfather, and he was almost bursting with excitement and impatience. If I'm completely honest, I didn't feel much different myself.

Thankfully we only had three days to wait, and in truth Anne and Rosie and Beast took care of most of the work between them anyway. Come Queensday afternoon our carriage took Billy and me to Ailsa's house. At least I was expected this time, so there was no fuss with the guards at the gate. Billy jumped down and all but ran across the grass to the front door, and I followed with a smile on my face.

He knew the way, of course, as we had both lived in that house with Ailsa one summer, and he was at the drawing room door by the time I managed to catch up with him. I put a restraining hand on his arm before he could fling the door open.

'Remember what I told you, lad,' I said. 'You're to show him the utmost respect. Older Alarians can be quite formal. Best behaviour, now.'

'Yes, Papa,' he said.

Sasura had never struck me as a particularly stern man, but I had no idea how he was around young people and I didn't want to risk Billy accidentally offending him. Of course, I needn't have worried about that.

'Tomas,' he greeted me with a broad smile when the footman opened the door and showed us inside. 'And this must be young Billy.'

'Grandfather,' Billy said, and he made the low bow of utmost respect that I had taught him.

'Oh, there is no need for that with me,' Sasura said, and he swept Billy into an embrace that made the lad grin from ear to ear. 'My grandson. Oh, at last, my grandson.'

I looked across the room to meet Ailsa's eyes, and I think hers were as wet as mine were.

We spent a pleasant afternoon there, I have to allow. Very pleasant indeed. Sasura and me both drank far too much brandy between us, and Ailsa indulged us with no scolding and Billy sat adoringly at his grandfather's feet and listened to his tall tales of heroism on the high seas.

After the way I had grown up, it had always been a dream of mine to be part of a proper family. Wife, son, grandfather. It was perfect. I smiled at Ailsa, now seated beside me on the settle while Billy in his turn regaled

Sasura with his tales of Messia and of Mina, of his short life and its many experiences, and Sasura endured it all with a patience that made me love the old man even more. Ailsa put her hand on mine, and I turned mine to hold hers, and we met each other's eyes.

Lady, but I loved her.

Eventually she got up and took Billy to the kitchens to find him something to eat, and I looked at my sasura and raised my glass to him.

'Thank you,' I said, once we were alone together. 'I know he's not your blood any more than he is mine, but this has meant the world to him. And to me. I appreciate it, Sasura.'

'As do I, my son-by-law,' Sasura said. 'I have longed for a grandson for a very long time. It seems Chandari has finally obliged me, and made an old man very happy.'

'She loves him as her own, I think,' I said.

Sasura looked at me then, and I thought a cloud crossed his face.

'My daughter is a complicated woman, Tomas,' he said.

I wondered what he meant by that, but just then we were interrupted by Ailsa returning with Billy and a plate of spiced pastries. We ate, and we made merry together, and the matter didn't come up again.

*

A week after the cavalry charge on Coronation Avenue the house of magicians effectively surrendered. They didn't have much choice, by that point, if they wanted to remain in existence at all. The army had all but exterminated the Guard of the Magi, and the remaining magicians weren't fighters. Archmagus Reiter himself sent a letter to the house of law offering terms.

Vogel smiled his razor smile as he showed it to me.

'He has omitted to offer one vital thing,' the Provost Marshal said. 'Himself.'

'Sir,' I said, and frowned as I scanned the contents of Reiter's letter. 'Is that really necessary? This gives us everything we want, and effectively places the house of magicians under the control of the house of law.'

'No, it doesn't give us quite everything,' Vogel said. 'I want an example. We may not execute traitors here, or make martyrs, but sometimes we do make examples. Of men like the archmagus, in particular. Arrest him.'

I sighed. I should have known it would come to this. Perhaps it would have been kinder to have blown his house up after all, rather than see him sent down to Ilse. I respected the archmagus, as I have written, and in truth I rather liked the man.

I will to the best of my skill and knowledge discharge all the duties thereof faithfully according to law and the word of the Provost Marshal.

Vogel's word was the law, I knew that well enough by then.

'Aye, sir,' I said.

We went that night, Beast and Bloody Anne and me, Oliver and Emil, and we ripped Archmagus Reiter out of his modest, middle-class townhouse while his children screamed and his wife wept and his servants hid. I hardened my heart to the work and I did it, as I had sworn an oath to do.

We delivered him to the house of law at about the third hour of the morning, where he was taken below by stone-faced guards. The date of his public execution was set for a week's time, on Coinsday at noon. It seemed the Provost Marshal was expecting a celebratory atmosphere. A nice family day out at the executions, then a night of drinking and merrymaking and say confession for it all in the morning. How very Dannsburg, I thought, and the thought was a bitter one.

Anne and me spent the intervening time mopping up pockets of resistance in the city, remaining groups of militant students and suchlike, and I won't record the details here. The work was bloody, and repetitive, and so routine by now that I found little of interest in it. Konrad seemed to be enjoying it greatly, however, and I found my dislike of the man deepening by the day.

When Coinsday came around I found myself under the walls of the castle, where the city gallows stood. There was a huge turnout of the general populace, as Iagin had promised there would be, and he and Ailsa and I sat together in the tiered wooden seating that was reserved for the nobility. I saw First Councillor Markova there, and we exchanged cordial nods, for all that I hadn't bothered attending council for weeks. I think she knew who I really was, by then, and what that meant I must have done, but she was wise and had never mentioned it. As I had said to Ailsa, she knew which side her bread was buttered on.

I craned my neck to look up at the royal box, where the Princess Crown Royal sat with Vogel at her side as her regent, her doll's face impassive. I

thought again of what Billy had told me about her, and I suppressed a shudder.

‘It’s a nice day,’ Ailsa said idly beside me.

It was, to be fair, and although it was still cold, there were the first signs of spring in the air. The great clock in the tower on the far side of the square said it was ten minutes before noon. The hangman was on the platform now, checking the mechanism of his trapdoor. He was a man in late middle age and he wore the customary black cap of his trade, and drab black clothes.

You could have passed him in the market and, without his cap, had no idea of how he made his way in the world. There was something sinister about that, I thought, about a man who earned his living through executing people and yet looked just like anyone else. It was the same way that Ilse had unsettled me when we first met, but then I supposed the same could be said of any one of the Queen’s Men. I thought of how I had torn Archmagus Reiter away from his family in the middle of the night and dragged him off to the house of law, and then gone drinking the next night and mixed with normal folk who never gave me a second glance. That was just how it worked, I supposed, how it had always worked, but just because something has always been a certain way doesn’t make it right.

I sighed and watched as the archmagus was led onto the platform. He didn’t look to have been tortured, which I supposed was something, but then we had no questions left to ask him. We were killing him for the sheer sake of it, as Lord Vogel had said, to make an example. Quite of what, or to who, I really couldn’t have said.

The gallows are for street scum, for vagrants and murderers and petty thieves.

I remembered Sabine telling me that. The deliberate insult, not just to the person of the archmagus, but to the entire house of magicians, was plain as day. Reiter wore his formal magician’s robes, and he kept his face impassive as the hangman put the noose around his neck and adjusted it.

Up in the royal box, the Princess Crown Royal rose to her feet.

‘Let this be a lesson,’ she said, her voice carrying well as the crowd fell silent. ‘I will have order in my city, I will have order in my realm, and I will have *vengeance on Skania* !’

‘What?’ Iagin whispered beside me. ‘What the fuck is she talking about? I didn’t write that!’

A great cheer erupted in the square.

‘Oh gods,’ Ailsa said. ‘I think she just declared war.’

The princess raised her hands and silence fell once more.

‘I shall address you all from the royal balcony, tomorrow at the third hour after noon. Now, in the name of the Rose Throne, let justice be done.’

The hangman pulled his lever, and Archmagus Reiter dropped to his death.

He, at least, would be spared what was to come.

*

Vogel summoned us all to the house of law immediately after the hanging, which was hardly surprising under the circumstances. I shared a carriage there with Ailsa, who was looking decidedly worried.

‘He’s going to be in an absolute fury,’ she said. ‘He doesn’t want war with Skania any more than anyone else does. Gods, Tomas, what are we going to *do*?’

‘Can’t we make it look like it didn’t happen, like the fire at the funeral?’

She shook her head sadly.

‘No, I’m afraid not,’ she said. ‘You heard the crowd’s reaction. We might not want war but the idiot people apparently very much do. It will be all over the city by now, and there will be tens of thousands of people under the balcony tomorrow, baying for blood in the name of national pride and the murder of their late queen. All they want is revenge, Tomas, and that ghastly child has just promised it to them.’

To my intense surprise, Vogel was not in a rage. I suppose he had realised there was simply no point. Instead he was planning already.

‘Damage limitation,’ he said, once we had assembled in his office.

‘Iagin, you need to start work on her speech immediately. Make sure no timescales are given. We need space to calm this down before we end up with a total catastrophe on our hands. We can even benefit from it, if we do this properly.’

‘I don’t see how,’ I said, before I could think better of it.

‘Simple manipulation,’ Vogel said. ‘If you want to unite your core supporters, you give them someone to be better than, someone to look down upon. But if you want to unite an entire nation, you give them someone to hate. Make sure that is the Skanians, Iagin.’

‘Aye, boss,’ Iagin said.

‘Ailsa, go to the palace and start preparations for tomorrow’s balcony appearance. Sabine, Tomas, Konrad, get out among the populace and gauge

the mood. I fear I know what you will find, but if there is *any* opposition to this then I want it encouraged.'

We got to work.

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Chapter 50

I had found no opposition at all in the jubilant taverns and inns I had visited the night before, and nor had I expected to. As Ailsa said, the people were in a nationalistic frenzy and their blood was up. So quickly had the horrors of the last war been put aside in the minds of those who had not fought.

The Princess Crown Royal was due to give her public address that afternoon, to tell her people to prepare to put the country on a war footing. The speech Iagin had written for her very carefully said no more than that, and that was good even if nothing else was.

‘She will be alone this time,’ Vogel said, addressing us all in the mess at the house of law. ‘Everything has been prepared, and her maids are dressing her hair as we speak.’

All except Ilse, anyway. She hadn’t joined us, but then she seldom did. Iagin frowned.

‘Alone? Is that wise, sir?’

Vogel made a dismissive gesture. ‘Her thirteenth nameday draws ever closer, and with it the time for her official coronation. She needs to be seen as a monarch in her own right. No longer can she hide in the shadow of her regent, in public at least. She has memorised the speech, of course?’

‘Aye,’ Iagin said, ‘it’s been drilled into her until she could recite it in her sleep. All the same, I think—’

‘Enough,’ Vogel cut him off. ‘She will be our queen soon enough, Iagin, the monarch to whom we are all sworn. The people need to see that, and get used to the idea. A simple prepared statement is not beyond her.’

‘If she can stay awake long enough,’ Ailsa murmured.

‘Mmmm,’ Vogel said. ‘Find her personal physician, Ailsa. This Doctor . . . Almanov, or whatever his name is. Have him take a look at her before she makes her appearance on the balcony. See if she needs her medicine adjusting beforehand.’

Ailsa nodded in assent. What more could any of us do than that?

See if she needs more drugs, or different drugs, or drugs to lessen the effects of the last lot of drugs we gave her, that was what he was saying. I

remembered my investiture, and the court reception that had followed. I remembered the queen's funeral, and what Billy had told me, and I thought of just how unstable the Princess Crown Royal truly was. The cocktail of drugs that kept her at least partially controllable seemed to be something her physicians made up on a daily basis, with success or failure a matter of luck as much as judgement.

She shines.

I pushed that thought away. I dreaded to think, truly I did, what would happen when she took the throne in her own right. If she dismissed her doctors, dismissed Vogel even, who could gainsay her? Who could say 'no' to a queen, in a city like Dannsburg?

No one.

I was only trying to make them pretty. Burn, you witch!

It didn't bear thinking about.

'Of course, my lord,' Ailsa said, and gave Vogel a respectful nod. 'Come with me, Tomas?'

She wanted to talk, I could see that.

'Aye, if you like,' I said.

I followed her out of the mess and down the corridor. She walked quickly, and I said nothing until we were halfway down a flight of stairs.

'Do you think—' I started, but she cut me off with a sharp look.

'We'll take my carriage,' she said. 'I dislike riding, as you know.'

'Aye,' I said, and only then did I notice the junior clerk standing close to his open office door.

One of Vogel's, perhaps, or maybe Iagin's. In Dannsburg the Queen's Men watched everyone. In the house of law the Queen's Men themselves were watched closer than anyone, and mostly by each other. I should know that well enough by now, I told myself. This was still Ailsa's element more than it was mine, even now. This world of intrigue and constant suspicions was a far cry from what I had known.

I was a soldier; I was used to sides and uniforms and knowing at a glance who was your friend and who wasn't. I was used to the harsh reality of the front line, where those behind you were your support and those before you your enemies, and it was as simple as that. In the house of law, that line could become very blurred indeed.

We headed down more stairs and out into the stable yard behind the great building, where Ailsa's carriage was waiting. Beast was waiting with

our horses, and I had him join Ailsa's footmen in clinging to the backboard of the carriage. I didn't know why, exactly, but perhaps some whisper of Our Lady's told me I wanted him with me.

I held my peace until we were inside and she had given orders to her coachman to take us to the side entrance to the palace.

'What is it?' I asked at last, when I was sure the noise of the horses' hooves on the cobbles and the creaking of the carriage's springs would cover the sound of my words.

'When did you last see Doctor Almanov?' Ailsa asked quietly.

I thought for a moment, and shrugged. I didn't often mix with the private physicians of members of the royal family, after all. I remembered seeing him at the Jolly Joker a few weeks ago, but that was all.

'I don't know,' I said. 'I'm not exactly close to him.'

'Well, I am, or at least in frequent contact with him if nothing else, for obvious reasons. And I can't remember when I last saw him either. With everything that's happened these last few weeks . . . well.'

'Aye, we've been busy,' I said, which was something of an understatement. 'What does it matter?'

'It probably doesn't,' she said. 'I'm sure I'm worrying about nothing. Do you know what the time is?'

'No,' I said. 'Some time past noon.'

My stomach said it was an hour or more past noon and I should eat something, but as was so often the way it seemed there wasn't time for that.

Ailsa murmured something non-committal, and craned her neck to look out of the window as we passed a clock tower.

'Gods be good, it's past the second hour of the afternoon,' she said. 'She's due on the balcony in less than an hour.'

It was no wonder I was hungry, then.

'What of it?' I asked.

'We must pray Almanov is at work in the palace where he should be,' she said. 'If the princess needs an adjustment to her medication before she appears in public she will need it *soon*.'

'Why wouldn't he be?'

'I don't know,' Ailsa snapped, and then let out a sigh. 'As I say, I'm sure I'm worrying about nothing.'

She was worried, I could tell. Worried about the Princess Crown Royal making her first solo address to the public, no doubt, not where this fool of

a doctor may or may not be. After the business with the house of magicians it was only natural to worry. About everything. Dannsburg was still unstable, the barrel of powder my sasura had spoken of, and I was sure the least thing could set the hostilities off again if we weren't very fucking careful about it.

We were admitted at the side gate after only a cursory stop, and the carriage rattled up the long drive to the stables by the palace's west wing. Minutes later we were in the administrative heart of the palace itself, and Ailsa led me and Beast through the maze of corridors at a pace that said she could have run through them blindfolded. I suspected that perhaps she could, at that. This was her domain, this world of politics and councils and aristocratic power. I might be a member of the governing council but that was a sham of convenience and we all knew it. After two flights of stairs and more turns and doors than I could count, she stopped and rapped on a door that looked the same as the last thirty or so we had passed.

'Doctor Almanov?' she called out. 'Doctor, are you in there? It's Ailsa.'

As ever with the Queen's Men, no family name was needed, no title. She was Ailsa, and in the royal palace of Dannsburg that was enough. There was no answer. She tried the handle and hissed in annoyance to find it locked.

'My picks are in my pouch, and I left the blasted thing in the carriage,' she muttered.

'Beast,' I said.

He kicked the door in without difficulty or hesitation, his massive boot smashing lock and frame alike as he almost took the thing off its hinges. Ailsa was a subtle woman, and sometimes the subtlety of lockpicks is called for. Sometimes, though, sometimes things just need kicking down. Every soldier knows that.

Beast surged through the shattered door like some monster from a children's tale, and I followed with Remorse in my hand. The room was empty. There was a desk and chair, and rows and rows of shelves lined with bottles and jars and beakers. There were phials in wooden racks, and a long, fire-scarred wooden bench covered in things that looked to my untrained eyes suspiciously like the tools of the alchemist's trade. There was no bed in there, though, and no sign of clothes or personal effects.

'Doesn't he live here?' I asked.

Ailsa shook her head in annoyance.

‘No, this is just where he works. Where he’s supposed to be, at this time of day.’

She ran a fingertip grimly over the wooden surface of the desk, and held it up to show me. Her rich brown skin was grey with dust.

‘Fuck, he hasn’t been here in days,’ I said. ‘Maybe longer.’

‘A week at least, I would say,’ she said. ‘The doctor is a very tidy man. Gods, Tomas.’

‘Where *does* he live?’ I asked her.

She gave me an address, and I cursed.

‘That’s halfway across the fucking city,’ I said. ‘I’ll go ahorse, your carriage is too slow. Beast, with me.’

We hurriedly retraced our steps to the stable yard, where I commandeered two fast horses and the grooms to saddle them. We were on our way ten minutes later.

I had a feeling this wouldn’t wait.

*

The doctor’s house was locked too, and for all that his front door was sturdier than that of his office, it still didn’t stop Beast for long. Some of the neighbours were no doubt already sending their sons and daughters running to bring the City Guard, but I didn’t care. I had the Queen’s Warrant and I could kick in any door in Dannsburg I fucking well liked.

It stank in that house.

If the doctor was truly a tidy man, as Ailsa had said, then something had gone horribly wrong. The hall of the modest townhouse was dusty, just as his office had been, and I could hear the buzzing of flies from upstairs.

‘Check the ground floor,’ I told Beast.

I drew Remorse anyway and headed cautiously up the stairs. The smell got worse as I climbed, and by the time I reached the landing the flies were thick in the air. The reek was coming from the door at the end of the corridor. I took a breath and pushed it open, but by then I was fairly sure I knew what I was going to find.

I was right.

Doctor Almanov was sprawled on his bed in his nightshirt, caked in black blood and flies. He was very, very dead, and by my reckoning had been for at least a week. He had been stabbed repeatedly, by the looks of things, and he had voided himself onto his mattress in the moment of his death. The combination of old shit and rotting flesh made me gag, and I

turned away before I vomited. It seemed the good doctor's gambling debts had finally caught up with him.

Beast was halfway up the stairs, his face completely impassive. The smell didn't seem to be bothering him, but after what he had been through in the slave pits before I found him I supposed that it probably wouldn't.

'Back door was unlocked,' he said. 'One of the windows onto the yard is smashed. I reckon someone broke in, boss.'

I nodded.

'Aye,' I said. 'Broke in and murdered the doctor. About a week ago, give or take.'

Beast grunted, but he didn't look like he much cared one way or the other. I dare say he didn't, at that, but right then I had other things on my mind. I could feel the blood drain from my face as I thought about it.

Doctor Almanov, the Princess Crown Royal's personal physician, had been dead for more than a week. So who had been administering the princess' medication in that time? Who had been making sure she stayed drugged for the last week?

The answer, of course, was no one.

No one at all.

I'm glad they're drugging her. Don't let them stop. Please, Papa, don't ever let them stop.

Oh gods.

She was due on the balcony any minute – she could already be up there by now, for all I knew.

'With me,' I said, and I shouldered past him and ran down the stairs. 'Now!'

I ran out of the front door and straight into six of the City Guard with weapons levelled.

'You're under arrest,' their sergeant said.

I simply did not have time to fuck around.

'Queen's Man,' I snarled at him, and Beast came out of the door behind me and punched him in the face at a full run, knocking him to the ground to land the message. I hastily untied my horse from the street's public hitching rail and climbed into the saddle, and only then did I think to show the warrant to the rest of the charging guardsmen. The sight of it stopped them in their tracks as though they had been poleaxed. 'Secure that house, on the order of the crown.'

I turned my horse and dug my heels in as Beast rode up beside me. I turned to look at him.

‘Did you ever ride in a charge, Beast?’ I asked him.

He frowned at me.

‘Aye, once, at Abington,’ he admitted. ‘Nearly shat myself with the fear, but I did it.’

‘Good,’ I said. ‘Do it again.’

I kicked my horse into a ruthless gallop, and after a moment I heard Beast pounding along behind me.

There wasn’t a moment to spare and I knew it.

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Chapter 51

We hurtled down the wide mall that led to the palace at the pace of a full cavalry charge. On any normal day someone would probably have been killed, but with half the city packed into the parade ground before the palace the streets were mercifully empty.

By the time we were a hundred yards from the gates I could tell we were too late. She was on the balcony already, a tiny child doll in a magnificent dress of martial crimson and patriotic white. It seemed the time for public mourning was finally over.

Now it was a time for war.

War, and the nation's end.

The parade ground in front of the palace was full to overflowing, and I could see there would be no getting in through that crowd.

'This way!' I shouted, and wrenched my horse around and into the road that led past the barracks of the Palace Guard and up to the side entrance to the palace. The poor beast was nearly spent, bloody at the bit and lather on her flanks, but desperate times call for desperate measures. I may be no cavalry officer but I can ride well enough when I have to. Beast was no more than an average horseman at best, though, and his poor mount was carrying a lot more weight than mine was. He was falling further and further behind with every stride, but I couldn't worry about that now. He would catch up with me or he wouldn't, and if he didn't then I would just have to do without him and those were the simple facts of it.

I reached the gatehouse with the Queen's Warrant already open in my hand, and barely slowed to a canter as I bore down on the shocked guardsmen who hurled the gates wide open before me in obvious confusion.

'The man behind me is with me,' I shouted as I passed them, but I didn't know if they caught my words and I didn't have time to care one way or the other.

I reached the stable yard at last and threw my reins to a groom before hastily dismounting. My poor horse was completely blown. I felt bad for what I had put her through, but she was a palace horse and we all served the crown, in our own way.

‘Look after her,’ I said, and hurried into the palace through the stable gate.

A startled footman snapped to attention when he saw me.

‘Ailsa,’ I said, still breathless from the effort of my insane, headlong charge. ‘Now.’

He took my meaning and led me hurriedly through the palace, up stairs and down corridors and through passages until I found myself being shown into somewhere I had never been before, a formal drawing room with tall windows that led out onto the royal balcony at the front of the palace. Ailsa was there, with Vogel and Iagin. She turned to look at me with a worried expression on her face.

I shook my head, and she winced in understanding.

I could hear the princess’ words coming in through the open glass doors.

‘. . . my mother’s memory, in this most difficult time of looming war,’ she was saying, and I recognised Iagin’s phrasing in her prepared speech. ‘Know that the Rose Throne stands resolute, a rock in the tempest that no foreign aggression will ever assail.’

Perhaps we had got away with it. Perhaps she didn’t need her medication as much as the house of law thought she did.

‘She’s on script,’ Iagin said approvingly.

‘So far,’ Vogel replied.

‘She’s off her medication,’ I said. ‘For a week at least.’

Iagin stared at me, a frown of concern crossing his face. Vogel didn’t even react, not so much as a blink.

‘We will fight them, as we fought in the south and were victorious,’ the princess went on. ‘Our great nation will stand, as it always has, until the end of time. Our solidarity is unshakeable, and our martial prowess unstoppable!’

Ailsa shot me a stricken look. She was obviously also praying all would be well, but after what I had told her Billy had said, I don’t think either of us really believed it even then.

‘The enemy,’ the princess pronounced, and now she was leaning forward with both hands gripping the ornate stone balustrade in front of her, ‘the subhuman *filth* of the Skanian animals will be crushed beneath the might of the Rose Throne’s cannon!’

‘Er . . .’ Iagin said. ‘Oh gods, she’s going her own way.’

‘My lord,’ Ailsa said.

‘I know,’ Vogel said, his mouth set in a hard, grim line.

‘Fire will rain from the sky upon them. I command it!’ the princess bellowed, and her voice carried far further across the hushed parade ground than any of us would have believed possible.

Her voice seemed to boom like thunder, a voice that couldn’t possibly have come from a twelve-year-old throat. A voice not even a sergeant like Bloody Anne could have carried. It was like listening to a living goddess. I could only imagine the uncontrolled cunning coursing through her young veins, boosting that voice into the roar that came from her savagely twisted lips. Overhead, storm clouds began to gather. A truly horrible thought struck me just then.

She shouldn’t be like that, Billy had told me. She’s wrong.

‘Am I not your queen? Cannot I command the fire and the lightning, if I but order it?’

There’s too much of her, Billy had said. She shouldn’t be like that. When Mina and me stole the strength of that Skanian magician, we got a bit like that.

I remembered how exhausted Billy had been after barely an hour in her company. The princess had had no training in the cunning whatsoever, but she obviously had considerable natural talent. What if stealing another magician’s strength was just something she was able to do?

She’s very, very strong.

She could have been stealing the strength of her royal mother for *years*, and not even known it. All that power, bottled up inside her with nowhere to go.

‘My lord, she hasn’t been medicated for—’

‘I said, *I know*,’ Vogel snarled, and Ailsa fell silent.

‘What the fuck do we do?’ Iagin asked.

‘I don’t think there’s anything we *can* do, unless you want to be the one who shoots our future queen in the back,’ Ailsa said quietly.

‘I am pain! I am suffering!’ the princess raged, and all along the tall buildings that lined the mall, windows shattered and blew in before the force of her inhuman voice.

The skies darkened overhead and thunder rolled in the distance.

‘I am *your queen*!’

The first bolt of lightning slammed down from the sky into the packed crowd, tearing people apart before our horrified eyes.

‘They will die!’ she howled, and a grand building collapsed in a huge cloud of choking dust. ‘*All shall worship me, or die screaming!*’

It was dark as dusk now as the heavens boiled with the force of her uncontrolled rage. The Princess Crown Royal was a cunning woman the like of which I had never even heard tell, and Billy wasn’t there to help us. I looked at her, and in honesty I was glad of that. I didn’t think even Billy and Mina between them could have stood against her in that moment, in the apotheosis of her madness.

‘Maggots!’ she shrieked. ‘Cowards! Throw yourselves at the enemy guns! Stop their barrels with your bodies if need be! Fight for your country, for your *queen!*’

The princess raised her hands, and in that awful moment all I could see was Mina. A blonde girl in her teen years, spitting obscenities and tearing men limb from limb with the cunning.

‘Get down!’ I yelled, battlefield instinct taking over my senses, and I threw myself at Ailsa and bore her to the carpet as Vogel and Iagin hastily took cover at my sudden word of command.

Our Lady be merciful, if anything happened to Ailsa I would never be able to live with myself. The tall glass windows exploded, hurling razor shards of broken glass across the room. I raised myself up enough to see out of the shattered hole where the windows had been a moment before.

Fire blazed from the princess’ hands, washing across the parade ground with a ferocity I had never seen from Billy even when he had burned the Stables. People were dying in their hundreds down there, and the panic in the packed space only led to more deaths as people trampled each other underfoot in their terrified stampede to get away from the horror their queen-in-waiting had become.

She raised her hands once more and lightning slashed from her fingers, lancing into the crowd and taking lives wherever it hit.

‘Defy me and perish!’ she screamed. ‘I am pain! I am—’

She stuttered, took a shuddering step forward and for a moment I thought someone had shot her after all. She looked . . . I don’t rightly know how to describe it. She looked *bright*.

Something . . . I don’t know. I don’t understand the cunning, or magic, or witchcraft, or whatever the fuck you want to call it. I’ve seen enough of

it to know that I fear it, but I don't understand it and I'm not sure I ever want to.

She turned to face us then, in that last awful moment, and I will never forget what I saw. There was light pouring out of her, out of her eyes and her mouth and even her fucking nostrils, blinding white lightning firelight like stars and cannon fire and . . . I don't know how to explain it.

She shone. She shone so bright even *I* could see it.

I don't know. I don't know *what* I saw, and I think I was the only one looking. Ailsa still had her face pressed to the floor under me, and Vogel was behind an overturned table, and I don't rightly remember where Iagin was. I dare say it doesn't matter. What I saw was this: I saw a princess, the Princess Crown Royal herself, who would have been our queen in a few short months, catch fire.

She threw her arms upwards and lightning and fire roared from her hands and blew a great chunk out of the façade of the royal palace. I couldn't have said for sure, but I would have bet gold that those had been the windows of her mother's own apartments.

Burn, you witch!

'I am pain!' the princess shrieked. '*Burn!*'

I stared as she too started to burn, immolating in a pyre of white flame. Her cunning had roared up out of wherever it came from and overwhelmed her, as Billy had warned that it might. It had unleashed itself on the unsuspecting and innocent populace below, and then it turned on her and consumed her utterly.

This was not a power to be trusted, that was clear enough.

Was this what the future held for my Billy, I had to ask myself? For Billy and Mina both? No, I thought, not if I could help it.

The princess turned slowly on the balcony, the flames eating through her and lighting her from within until the blackened skeleton could be clearly seen. Still she turned, fire and lightning lashing out in all directions from her unholy form, until at last the flame of life burned away and she collapsed onto the balcony, a tiny mummified corpse of charred misery.

There was pandemonium outside.

Sister Galina burst into the room while we were still watching the panicked populace trample each other in the parade ground below.

'Father Tomas, thank Our Lady I found you!' she panted. 'Did you see it? A miracle! Did you see our Holy Princess? She ascended, Father! She

ascended to Our Lady's Grace on a pillar of fire before our very eyes!'

There were tears streaming down her cheeks, and the fanatical gleam of religious ecstasy shone in her eyes as she sank to her knees before me and clutched my right hand in both of hers.

'Oh, blessed day! She martyred herself to lead our nation to a holy war from heaven itself! Blessed be the Ascended Martyr!'

'Praise be to Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows, and blessed be the Ascended Martyr,' I said, and Sister Galina broke down in floods of tears once more.

I just had to *sound* like I meant it, after all, and I could do that. That's why they made me a priest in the first place.

Iagin stared at me, and I met his eyes.

'That,' he said softly, 'is fucking perfect.'

*

'This is a crisis,' Vogel told us that evening, back in the house of law. 'The princess openly declared war, and then publicly immolated on her own royal balcony. We have no queen. Half the population are already holding her up as a martyr to the cause, an ascended saint, and the other half have simply given up. Those are the half we must turn. Bring them into the embrace of religion if that's what it takes, but we can have no defeatism in the city.'

I looked at the Provost Marshal, and I felt my stomach slowly turn over. Who, exactly, I wondered, had killed Doctor Almanov? Men he owed gambling money to, I had thought, but now I wasn't so sure. Vogel had actually told us to send for Almanov himself, and had seemed unsure of the man's name. Had that been an act? Had he told us to bring him a man he well knew was dead, to cover his tracks? Had he done that knowing it didn't matter, knowing we would be too late? The Princess Crown Royal was always going to have been a liability, and the thought of her on the throne had horrified me. I imagined it had horrified Lord Vogel just as much, but would he truly have risked starting a war just to remove her?

Aye, I thought, he probably would. He would, if it put him where he wanted to be.

'The Grand Duke,' I ventured.

'Yes, he is the Crown Prince now and we must seat him on the Rose Throne immediately, but he is ten years old, Tomas,' Vogel said. 'I am the regent of the crown, and it seems I must endure that burden for three more years, at least.'

At least, I thought. And then what will happen? A poisoning, a riding accident, a second cousin toddler on the throne with you as their regent?

This was never going to end, was it? Vogel would see an infant on the throne before he gave up that regency.

Dieter Vogel had claimed the Rose Throne, and it looked like there was nothing anyone could do to stop him.

I would fucking see about that.

‘My lord Provost Marshal,’ I started, but he cut me dead with a look.

‘We must use what we have, Tomas,’ Vogel said. ‘Adapt and move on. If we are to have war, then let it be a holy war. Nobody fights like the fanatic, the zealot, after all.’

I heard his words, but I wasn’t really listening. I would do anything in my power to stop the coming war, but now Vogel seemed to welcome it. I felt cold all the way to my boots as the battle shock came down on me like thunderclouds and despair.

War.

Abingon.

Disease and bad water, rotting wounds and the bloody flux. Soldiers dead in their thousands, bloated corpses and fattened crows. The endless, murderous thunder of the cannon firing night and day until the noise drives you so mad you don’t know your own name any more.

Our Lady save me, not again.

Please, not again.

No, I vowed then. No. I would not allow it to happen.

There are a lot of ways to not be Dieter Vogel’s lapdog, Archmagus Reiter had told me.

The Ten of Swords means back-stabbing and treachery, Billy had told me, *defeat and betrayal* – but he had never said whose defeat, nor who would be doing the betraying. Now, there was a thought.

Vogel met my eyes then, and showed me his razor smile.

‘Blessed be the Ascended Martyr,’ he said. ‘May She lead us to victory.’

There is a reckoning coming, Provost Marshal, I thought. *And when it comes, it will come hard.*

And that was a promise, in Our Lady’s name.

Tomas Piety will return in
PRIEST OF CROWNS
the final book in
The War for the Rose Throne series

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Acknowledgements

So here ends book three of the War for the Rose Throne, a quartet originally planned to be a trilogy. I owe a debt of gratitude to my wonderful editor Jo Fletcher of Jo Fletcher Books, for helping me reshape *Priest of Gallows* into a book in its own right and not just the first half of the book it was initially supposed to be. I'd also like to thank my copy-editor, Ian Critchley, for knowing all the grammar rules that I don't.

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Finally, and above all others, the greatest thanks are for Diane. I don't know how you put up with me sometimes. I really don't. Love you.

Peter McLean
Norfolk, UK
March 2021

About the Author



Peter McLean was born in London, the son of a bank manager and an English teacher, and went to school in the shadow of Norwich Cathedral, where he spent most of his time making up stories. He grew up alternating dingy nightclubs with studying martial arts and practical magic before settling to a career in corporate IT. His first novels were the noir urban fantasy Burned Man series. *Priest of Gallows* is the third in the War for the Rose Throne quartet, following *Priest of Bones* and *Priest of Lies*. The final book about Tomas Piety will be *Priest of Crowns*.

You will find Peter McLean on Instagram and Twitter ([@PeteMC666](#)), on Facebook ([@PeterMcLeanAuthor](#)) and at his website, <https://talonwraith.com>.

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And as Tomas is dragged into a web of political intrigue by the sinister Queen's Men, forced to work against the foreign infiltrators lurking in the backstreet taverns, brothels and gambling dens of the Stink, one thing becomes clear.

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'The poorer and more oppressed people are, the weaker they become – until they just refuse to take it any more. Then they will rise up, and the gods help their oppressors.'

When Tomas Piety and his Pious Men returned from the war, he just wanted to rebuild his crime empire and look after his people. But the sinister Queen's Men had different ideas and whether he likes it or not, he's now a spy as well.

While half the city of Ellinburg lies in ashes the webs of political intrigue are stretching out from the Queen's capital to pull Tomas in. Dannsburg is calling.

In Dannsburg the nobility fight with words, not blades, but the results are every bit as bloody. In this pit of beasts, Tomas must decide once and for all whether he is truly the people's champion . . . or just a priest of lies.

**And as Tomas Piety's power grows, the nobility
had better watch their backs . . .**

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