

PETER MCLEAN

WAR FOR THE ROSE THRONE BOOK IV



PRIEST
OF
CROWNS

Priest of Crowns

Peter McLean

War for The Rose Throne Book IV



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Also by Peter McLean

War for the Rose Throne

Priest of Bones

Priest of Lies

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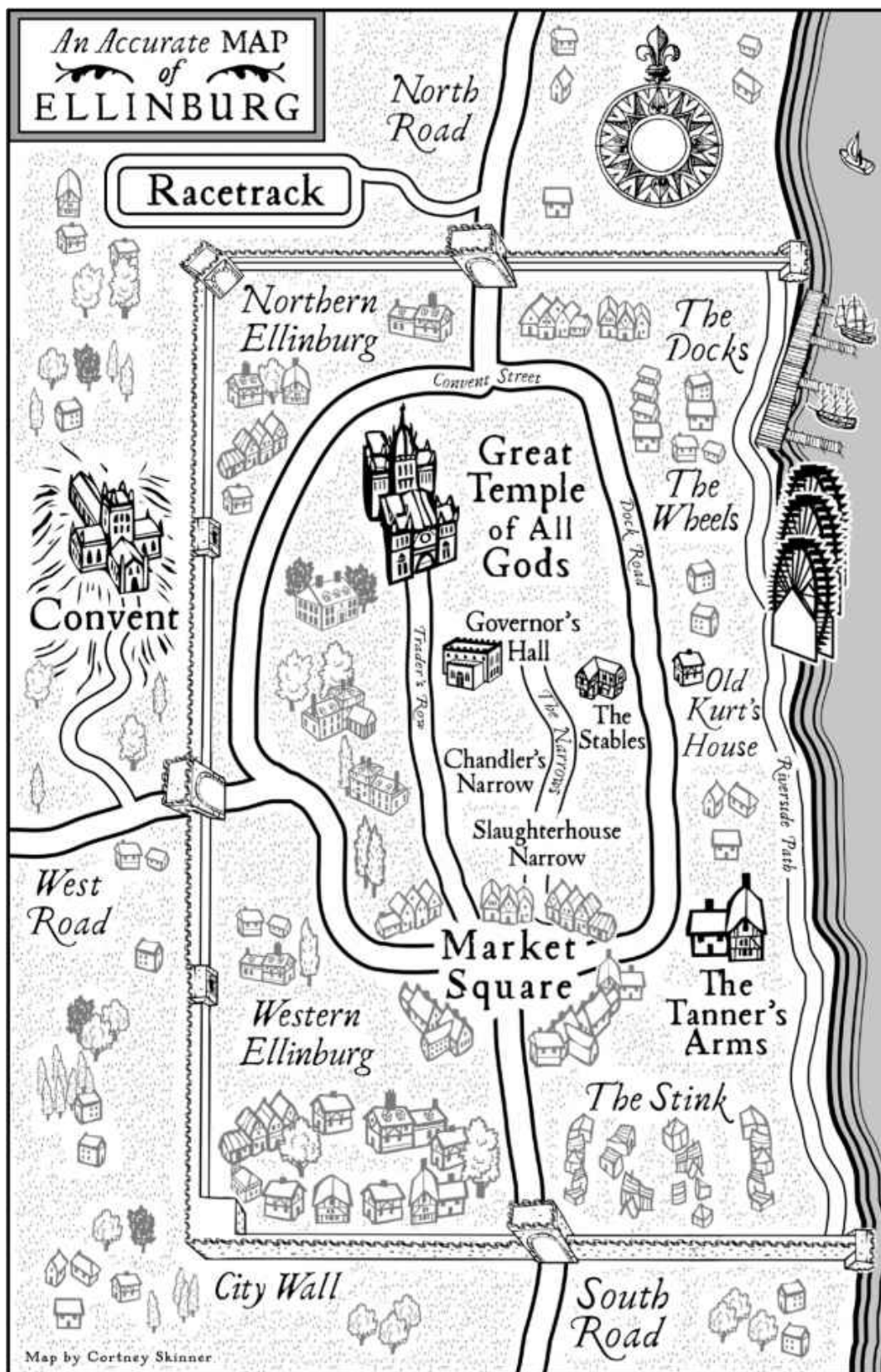
For Diane,
But you knew that.

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This and no other is the root from which a tyrant springs;
when he first appears he is a protector.

Plato

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Dramatis Personae

The Piety Family

Tomas Piety: A Queen's Man known as Brother Blade.

Formerly a gangster and army priest. Your narrator.

Ailsa Piety: His estranged wife, and a Queen's Man known as Sister Deceit.

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

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

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

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

The Pious Men

Bloody Anne: Head of the Pious Men, enforcer for the Queen's 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.

Sir Eland: A false knight but a loyal follower. Underboss of the Golden Chains.

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

Simple Sam: A slow lad but a faithful one.

Stefan: A soldier. There was little more to be said about Stefan.

Hari: Tavernkeeper 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: An agent of the Queen's Men, and secretary to Tomas. Bloody Anne's woman.

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

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

Nikash Bakshi: Head of the Alarian Kings.

Terrible Timy: A quiet woman in the Alarian Kings.

Andre Kotov: Head of the Northern Sons.

The Learned Magus Konstantin Zlatkov: A magus of the house of magicians in Ellinburg.

Captain Miller: Captain of the City Guard. A reliable if unimaginative man.

Sven Hendensen: A White Shadow of Skania.

Nikolai Klevankov: An undertaker.

Doc Cordin: Doctor to the Pious Men.

Salo: A steward.

Notable People in Dannsburg

His Royal Highness Crown Prince Marcus: Formerly if briefly the Grand Duke of Varnburg. A lad of ten years.

The Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg: Marcus' mother.

Dieter Vogel: Prince Regent, Lord Chief Judicial and Provost Marshal of the Queen's Men, known as Father Secrets.

First Councillor Markova: Presiding head of the governing council.

Archmagus Ritenkov: Head of the House of Magicians.

Iagin: A Queen's Man known as Brother Truth.

Ilse: A Queen's Man known as Sister Torment.

Konrad: A Queen's Man known as Brother Betrayal.

Sabine: A Queen's Man known as Mother Ruin, the estranged wife of Dieter Vogel.

Leonov: An underboss, extremely good with a crossbow.

Beast: An enforcer in Tomas' employment.

Mr and Mrs Shapoor: Ailsa's parents.

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

Major Bakrylov: A war hero, from a certain point of view, in the employment of the Queen's Men.

Sister Galina: A nun.

Kreov: A charitable young man.

Jack: An orphan.

Part One

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Chapter 1

Praise be to Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows, and blessed be the Ascended Martyr.

Those were the words on the lips of the faithful: Blessed be the Ascended Martyr, and woe betide you if you thought otherwise.

A gibbet stood now in the gallows square beneath the castle walls, its current crow-pecked occupant there a week or more. A sign hanging from that cage was painted with the single word that had become a death sentence in Dannsburg in those days.

Unbeliever.

‘Did we do him?’ Bloody Anne asked, her voice quiet in the crowded square.

I could only shrug. We might have done, I supposed, although there was little enough of the man’s face left to recognise since the crows had been at his flesh. Who knew? It didn’t really matter, truth be told. He was dead, and that was all there was to it.

Unbeliever. That accusation was just another weapon in the arsenal of the Queen’s Men by then, along with Collaborator, Traitor, Queenkiller: death sentences, all of them, in a city where death was as cheap as sex and sour wine.

Those were the times we lived in.

‘Aye, well,’ I said after a moment. I paused to spit at the ground beneath the gibbet as was only proper. ‘We should get back.’

We had Oliver and Beast with us for muscle, of course, and I’d brought my adopted son Billy along, just to get him out of his room at our inn for a while. Even so, curfew was

coming soon and it wouldn't do to be out past that without a full complement of the crew and some official business to be about.

The Provost Marshal walked a thin line, and I thought he knew it. After the Princess Crown Royal's spectacular self-immolation on the balcony of the royal palace, word had spread fast that she had ascended to the heavens to lead her nation to victory from her new divinity. Word had *been* spread, anyway, and any who doubted it . . . well.

Unbeliever.

That was the word on the streets of Dannsburg, and it boded well for no one.

There had been no state funeral for the Princess Crown Royal: she was the Ascended Martyr, after all, a living saint, which apparently meant she wasn't actually dead, for all that I had seen her burn down to her tiny skeleton. That made little sense to me, but I supposed it was a theological matter and I was merely an army priest grown too large for himself in this insane new world. What would I know of such things?

I had seen a theocracy before, in Messia, but only once we had blasted and starved it into surrender. I had certainly never lived under one, and had never expected to. It seemed I had been wrong about that.

As a priest of Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows my word carried more weight than ever among the common people now, and I thought Lord Vogel knew that. I thought it worried him, too. He didn't fully trust me even then, I was sure of it, and he was right not to.

That evening I was wearing a new set of robes, complete with the heavy black cowl that marked the chosen of Our Lady. I could see the respectful looks the common people gave me as they passed us in the square. Whoever was watching us on behalf of the house of law could see those looks just as well. I didn't know who that was, but I knew fucking well there would be someone. There always was

someone watching, and always someone to watch the watcher: such were the ways of the Queen's Men.

Oh, there was no way Vogel knew what I had discovered about him, or what I suspected – I would have been swinging up there in a gibbet next to the unfortunate unbeliever if he had, I knew that well enough. But he guessed there was *something*, for all that he was my boss and the most powerful man in the country. Seated as he was on the Prince Regent's throne, there was some friction in our relationship.

I looked at Anne, driving that thought from my mind. 'How's Rosie?' I asked her.

Anne hawked and spat under the gibbet as I had done, and Billy copied her.

'I don't like it, Da,' he said.

I could only agree: I didn't fucking like it either, but there we were. I glanced at Anne. There was an angry set to her shoulders and I liked that even less.

'Let's go back to the inn, and I'll tell you,' she said at last.

Together we made our way back to our lodgings at the Bountiful Harvest, Oliver and Beast flanking us to keep the jostling crowd away. I was starting to wish I hadn't asked her the question.

The Bountiful Harvest was very respectable and very expensive, in a good part of the city, and given how much I had paid the innkeeper the previous year, I reckoned I all but owned it. Aye, his establishment had been bombed for his trouble on my account, but I had made that right with him with gold, so no real harm done. No one had been killed, anyway, and that was good.

The innkeeper dipped his head respectfully to me and Anne. 'Evening, Sir Tomas,' he said, and I acknowledged him with a lazy wave of my hand.

So help me, I had grown into this role as knight and courtier, but I supposed it wasn't so very different to what I

had known before back in Ellinburg. Always act like you own the place, I had found, was a fine strategy in any business.

Billy went off up to his room to study his books, and I followed Anne across the crowded common room. Once we were alone in the private dining room that served as my office I repeated the question.

‘How do you think she is?’ Anne growled.

‘It’s part of her job, Anne,’ I reminded her.

Anne turned on me then, and unconsciously, her hands fell close to the hilts of her daggers.

‘You put my woman back in a *whorehouse*,’ she snarled at me. ‘How the fuck do you *think* she is, Tomas Piety?’

‘She’s a spy, Anne,’ I said, ‘and that’s what she’s doing now: *spying*, not whoring.’

‘She grew up in a fucking whorehouse,’ Anne reminded me. ‘She was sucking cocks when she had barely nine years to her. Heinrich pulled her out – and then he put her straight back into another one in Ellinburg because he needed a spy there. I pulled her out again – *we* did – and now she’s *right fucking back there again!*’

Anne was purely furious, and I took a step back despite myself. The long scar on her face twisted the corner of her mouth into a snarl of rage, and the look in her eyes was murder.

‘She’s not working, Anne,’ I assured her again. ‘Not that sort of work, anyway. I made *lagin* promise me.’

‘Don’t matter, does it?’ Anne said. ‘She’s back there – back in some stinking stew with the drugs and the violent punters and the other girls’ misery and split lips and pox and vomit. After everything she’s done for you, Tomas, you make her do *this*.’

‘She’s tougher than you give her credit for,’ I tried, and I remembered Rosie and how she had looked at me when I told her what I needed. Her eyes had been hard as nails.

‘Aye, Tomas, if that’s what you need me to do,’ she had said, and that had been all she had made of it.

‘She’s tough, aye,’ Anne said now, her gaze boring into mine. ‘She’s tough the way scar tissue is, covering the pain of an old wound. Don’t mean she’s never been hurt.’

I choked back an emotion I couldn’t afford to have at that moment and glared right back at her, remembering the misery of her own past, and of mine.

‘Who hasn’t?’ I demanded. ‘Who fucking hasn’t?’

Anne met my glare for a long moment, then looked away. I had her there, and I could see that she knew it.

‘Aye, well, that’s as may be,’ she conceded eventually.

Rosie was her woman and she loved her, I understood that, but we were all in the service of the Queen’s Men and we all served the crown in our own way, each as we were best able. Spying and whoring were what Rosie did best, after all, although I swore then that if Iagin did actually have her whoring, I would break his neck myself. He had promised me that she wouldn’t be, and I had believed him, but Iagin was a Queen’s Man and the promises of the Queen’s Men were made of smoke: of *could* and *might* and *possibly*. I knew that from bitter experience. I liked Iagin well enough, but liking a man and trusting him ain’t necessarily the same thing. I liked Major Bakrylov, for Our Lady’s sake, but the gods only knew I didn’t trust *him*.

It had been the major’s idea, in a way.

Major Bakrylov wasn’t one to frequent stews, what with him not liking women in that way, but one of his captains very much was, and he liked one stew in particular. The Warm Welcome had once been owned by Mr Grachyev and was now of course effectively owned by Iagin – all of Grachyev’s businesses were since we’d unleashed Beast and had him beat Grachyev to death in his own bed the previous year. That was done with, though, and Iagin had taken over Grachyev’s empire smoothly and with no arguments. In truth, it had been his all along, of course, and Grachyev only a front to hide the doings of the Queen’s Men. I guessed Leonov and his strong-arm boys might have

had something to do with the ease of Iagin's takeover, but that was his business and so long as it got done it was nothing I needed to concern myself with.

Anyway, the point was, this captain of Bakrylov's liked this stew very much indeed, and as it turned out, so did the newly installed Archmagus Ritenkov of the house of magicians. Of course, it wasn't the back-alley midden Anne made it sound like; in Dannsburg, some of the whorehouses were almost palatial, and that included this one. Much like the Horn of Plenty, where Grachyev had met his end, this place had hostesses, not whores, and a bed for the night was almost as expensive as The Royal Inn, just outside the palace gates. That was where visiting dignitaries who didn't warrant accommodation in the palace itself lodged, and its prices were legendary. I didn't think Rosie would be facing pox and vomit in The Warm Welcome, and any client who attempted to hurt his girls would be likely to be found floating in the river the next morning. I knew that wasn't the point, though: Anne didn't like her woman being there and I could understand that, but it needed doing all the same.

Archmagus Ritenkov was an unknown quantity, and the house of law didn't like unknowns. The truce that had been drawn up between us and the house of magicians after the civil unrest of the previous year was in the house of law's favour to the point of blackmail, but it wasn't watertight.

That civil unrest had been of our own making, of course, but that mattered little to the Provost Marshal. Details mattered very little indeed to a man who had to find the time to be Lord Chief Judiciar and the Provost Marshal of the Queen's Men and sit the Prince Regent's throne at the same time. Lord Vogel painted his vision with a broad brush in those days, and it was up to his Knights of the Rose Throne to take care of the details. That was Ailsa and me, Ilse and Konrad, Iagin and Sabine.

Sister Deceit and Brother Blade, Sister Torment and Brother Betrayal, Brother Truth and Mother Ruin, the Knights

of the Rose Throne, under the word of Father Secrets: Dieter Vogel himself.

Between us we fucking ran Dannsburg, and by extension, the country itself – to Our Lady with the governing council; most of them were in our pay anyway, whether they knew it or not, ours through bribes or blackmail or straight out having them on the payroll. We manipulated them in ways that ensured they never agreed anything we didn't want them to; they spent most of their days in endless arguments about things that usually didn't even matter. The ruling Crown Prince, formerly and briefly the Grand Duke of Varnburg, was a lad with ten years to him, and Dieter Vogel, the Lord Chief Judiciar, was his regent under the emergency powers granted to him by a law he had almost certainly written himself.

He would remain so until a two-thirds majority of the governing council elected one of their own to assume the position, and we had enough influence in the council to ensure that would never happen. That lot couldn't even vote a two-thirds majority on what to have for dinner – and that was exactly how the Provost Marshal wanted it.

I was officially a member of the governing council myself, of course. I was Councillor Sir Tomas Piety of the North Ward, legally entitled to sit upon the bench and cast my vote in matters of state. And that night I had business in a whorehouse.

*

I alighted from my carriage outside The Warm Welcome shortly before midnight, Anne and Beast and Emil beside me. It was long after curfew by then, but everyone knew curfew only truly applied to the working classes. As well as Anne, I had a carriage and a coachman and two heavily armed footmen clinging to the backboard, so even if the City Guard didn't know me, I was obviously *someone*, and in

Dannsbury in those days, that was good enough. Being out after curfew was punishable with a fine brutal enough to send any commoner straight to debtor's gaol, but 'punishable with a fine' means 'legal for rich people' and it always has done, so there were no concerns there. It was only gold, after all, and I could draw on more of that than I knew what to do with. The house of law was nothing if not rich.

If it came to it, I carried the Queen's Warrant, and that was an official licence to do absolutely anything, with the full unconditional backing and funding of the crown. That was the power of a god indeed, in Dannsbury.

'I hate this fucking place,' Anne said.

'It's not so bad,' I assured her. 'Iagin looks after his girls.'

'She's not *one of his girls*,' Anne growled. 'She's *my* woman and she shouldn't be here. She shouldn't be having to do this.'

'She isn't,' I assured Anne, and I prayed to Our Lady that was true.

Our Lady didn't answer payers, I knew that, but I thought this time I was right. Rosie was there to spy on Archmagus Ritenkov, that was all, and that was in Iagin's interests as much as it was in mine, after all. He had promised me he had set Rosie up above his working girls, as the madam of the house.

'Evening,' the man behind the desk said as we entered. 'Is m'Lord looking for company tonight?'

'Aye, perhaps,' I said, giving him a long look up and down.

He was clean and well-dressed, smooth-shaved and almost respectable-looking, but even so, he had the look of a veteran about him. Of course he had. Almost every man who had between twenty-two and fifty years to him was a veteran, and a good number of women too. The last war wasn't so very long ago, after all, and only old men and beardless youths hadn't fought. They, and the women who had stayed behind, had worked the factories and the fields

and kept the nation from collapsing. I could see the look of Abington in the man's eyes as he met my gaze and I thought we understood each other. I wasn't wearing my priest's robes that night but I shrugged my cloak back from my shoulders to let him see the Weeping Women at my belt, the beautifully crafted twin short swords that I had named Remorse and Mercy.

Anne stood at my shoulder and said nothing, and the brothel-keeper, looking from me to her, obviously took her for my bodyguard. I was dressed as a rich merchant despite the blades nestled in their finely tooled leather scabbards hanging heavy on my hips. In those days most merchants employed hard veterans as personal guards. One look at Bloody Anne was enough to tell a man she was that and more, and not to be trifled with.

'How do m'Lord's tastes run? I can offer you the company of—'

'I'd rather speak to the lady of the house,' I interrupted. 'No offence, you understand, but I'd value a woman's opinion.'

The man just shrugged and rang the small silver handbell that stood on the counter. He was obviously there for muscle more than business anyway, and didn't look like he had taken my words ill.

Rosie swept out of a side room and greeted us in the reception hall. The bawd's knot was proudly displayed on her left shoulder in yellow cord and her working smile was plastered across her face. She wore a gown far too fine for a common hostess, however much they charged, and she kept her chin tilted at a haughty angle that implied status and demanded respect. All the same, when she saw Anne she wiggled her hips in that way she had, and tossed a lock of bright red hair back from her face.

'How can The Warm Welcome entertain you, m'Lord?' she asked, and I could feel the eyes of the man behind the front desk on her. 'Maybe you, ma'am? Maybe both of you? Our

house is very accommodating, just you ask anyone. I can find you a fine brown Alarian, a blonde Skanian, a dark southerner – just you tell Madame Rosie what you're looking for and I'll see you're happy.'

'Rosie—' Anne started, but I cut her off with a look.

'Rosie sounds like just who we're looking for,' I said. 'Both of us, if you'd be that accommodating?'

'Oh, an *excellent* choice,' she said.

'That costs double,' the prick behind the counter said, but I knew he must be one of Iagin's men, so I put up with him.

He had a job to do, and I supposed I couldn't begrudge him that. I dropped three silver marks down on the counter in front of him, more than it should have been, but I would never have shamed Rosie by coming anywhere close to underpaying. His eyebrows rose, but I waved my hand dismissively and turned away. I was dressed richly, after all, like someone who could easily afford it, which, in truth, I could. Anne looked like my bodyguard, aye, but many rich men have strange sexual habits and what was a brothel-keeper to say about it if he thought I wanted her to join in? Fuck him, he would take my silver and hold his peace about it if he knew what was good for him.

We followed Rosie up the creaking wooden staircase to her room.

As soon as the door closed behind us she was in Anne's arms.

Chapter 2

‘Lady, but I’ve missed you,’ Rosie said, when they were done kissing. ‘Are you well?’

‘I’m the one should be asking you that,’ Anne said, and I thought she sounded a mite choked up. ‘I hate you being here.’

‘It’s fine,’ Rosie said, but she took a slight step back and smoothed her dress to avoid meeting Anne’s eyes. ‘I’m working, that’s all. Doing my job, like Tomas wanted.’

I took a breath, let it out slowly.

‘What news about our mutual friend?’ I asked, to avoid asking the other question that none of us wanted to hear the answer to. Neither of us needed to know exactly what work she had been doing, unless she felt the need to tell us. I offered up a silent prayer to Our Lady that she didn’t, for Anne’s sake.

‘He’s a regular,’ Rosie said. ‘Always sees the same girl. Maira, her name is – an Alarian lass. He’s daft for her.’

‘How does he treat her?’ Anne asked.

‘Well enough. Never hurts her, pays on time and tips well. As customers go, he’s about as good as they get.’

‘Anything we can use?’

Rosie shook her head. ‘Nothing special,’ she said. ‘He just likes to fuck and have his cock sucked, like most men do. Nothing out of the ordinary.’

I grimaced for a moment in irritation. I had been hoping for some strangeness or perversion, something we could use against him for blackmail, but we were out of luck there. The new archmagus was a widower and had no children, and there was no shame in visiting a stew, not in Dannsburg, there wasn’t. If all he wanted was what

everyone else did, then there was nothing to be made of it. I supposed that was good, in a way. This Archmagus Ritenkov might well be a man I needed to make a friend of in the fullness of time, but I kept that thought to myself. That was in Our Lady's hands.

'Well, there it is then,' I said. 'I dare say the Old Man won't be happy, but if he's got nothing to hide, then he hasn't and that's all there is to it.'

'Maira thinks he's quite sweet, actually,' Rosie said. 'Silly girl, but then, she's only young.'

'How young?' I asked, seizing on that.

'Nineteen years to her,' Rosie said, and that was no use to me either. 'It's no good, Tomas. He's lonely, that's all. There's no harm in it.'

'Aye, it seems not,' I had to admit.

I sighed, and thought of the newly founded house of magicians that had appeared in Ellinburg the previous year. It sounded like this man Ritenkov was someone I needed to meet, and I said as much.

'Not here, though,' I said before Rosie could suggest it. 'He doesn't need to know that I've had him under observation, or how much I know about him.'

'If you want to meet him, then just have him arrested – that usually does the trick,' Anne said, and I didn't need to strain to catch the edge in her voice.

Bloody Anne wasn't easy with what we did in the Queen's Men, I knew that much, and she was growing less and less easy with it as time passed. I wondered what that would mean in the times to come. She was my best friend, my right hand. She was a soldier and she had become a gangster and a businesswoman and an enforcer for the Queen's Men, but she was no spy and she never would be. I glanced at Rosie and caught a hint of the same thought crossing her flinty eyes. Rosie was a spy to her bones, and a fucking good one at that.

I gave her the ghost of a smile before I replied, 'No, Anne, there's no need for that. I have an old acquaintance in Dannsburg, a wealthy patron of the university and a friend of the house of magicians. I am sure she can be prevailed upon to arrange an introduction.'

*

'You remember Lady Lan Yetrov, don't you, Luka?' I asked him once we were safely back at the Bountiful Harvest.

We had passed a patrol of the city guard on our way back, ten men in polished half-armour with clubs in their hands and swords at their sides. Their surcoats would have showed the red and white of the royal arms, had there been light enough to see. Since the port city of Varnburg closed its harbour to trade with Skania, there was a desperate shortage of lamp oil, which came from the great whales the Skanians hunted in their frozen northern oceans. Now much of the city lay shrouded in darkness after sunset.

Their corporal had looked at my rich carriage and looked away, and nothing had been said of curfew or of fines. As we passed them, I saw they were leading three vagrants in manacles behind them. Homelessness was a crime in Dannsburg, worse even than being poor and out after curfew. Three offences and they'd swing for it. I wondered what dawn would bring for those men, and thought of the gallows square.

'Aye, 'course I do,' Luka said, bringing me back to myself.

He had investigated her the previous winter on my instruction, and discovered that since her husband's unfortunate death, she had become a patron of the university. To my surprise, she was using her newly inherited wealth to invest heavily in academia and learning. There's a thing I've noticed about people, especially rich people: the face they present in public is often very different to their true selves. Lady Lan Yetrov had been, on the surface, a

shallow socialite with little on her mind but diamonds and society balls and gossip.

A pointless, insipid little social climber, I remembered Ailsa had called her once, but it appeared she had been mistaken about that. Even my lioness could be wrong upon occasion, I realised, and I took cold comfort from that thought.

‘Good,’ I said. ‘I want to meet her again. Nothing conspicuous, you understand – no invitations that might be intercepted, just a chance encounter somewhere. Find out when the next social engagement she’s attending is, and get me invited too.’

‘I can do that,’ Luka said.

I knew he could, or I wouldn’t have fucking asked. As little as a year ago it would have been impossible, of course, but now I was both a knight and a member of the governing council. Ridiculous as it might seem, Tomas Piety, the bricklayer’s son from the slums of Ellinburg, was a man of society in Dannsburg now.

I took a sip of my brandy, then asked, ‘What’s the lay of things south of the river?’

Luka had a woman by then, a widow from the south of the city, and he was quite taken with her. He had certainly been spending a fair bit of his time in that part of Dannsburg, the part where Ailsa had once told me decent folk didn’t go.

He puffed his cheeks out and sighed. ‘Getting rougher,’ he said. ‘The City Guard don’t cross the river if they can help it. In Grachyev’s day his crew kept the peace, such as it was, but not so much these days. I have to watch my step there, I’ll allow.’

I grunted and poured us both another brandy. ‘I ain’t on top of things, then?’

‘He’s a busy man,’ Luka said. ‘The Old Man’s got him working round the clock trying to keep this new cult he started in some sort of check, and I’m not sure he’s managing it.’

I wasn't sure that he was, either.

Praise be to Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows, and blessed be the Ascended Martyr.

I might have been the first to speak those exact words, building on Sister Galina's religious ecstasy when the Princess Crown Royal burned to ashes before our eyes, but it had been Iagin who had seized on them.

That is fucking perfect, he had said, but I wondered if he still agreed. Zealots might have their uses but they were a bastard to control, as the house of law was fast learning.

If we are to have war, then let it be a holy war, Vogel had said. *Nobody fights like the zealot, after all.*

Aye, Provost Marshal, and nobody is a bigger pain in the balls, either. The new cult, the Martyr's Disciples, was proving to be somewhat problematic for the house of law, for all that it was of our own making. I had to allow that made me smile.

'What?' Luka asked.

'Oh, nothing,' I said. 'I was just thinking I might take a stroll south of the river tomorrow night, see how it is for myself.'

Luka grunted. 'Aye, well, that's your business, boss. Take a couple of the lads with you if you do, though, eh? There's no Guard there, as I say, and I don't think your Queen's Warrant will be impressing anyone either.'

That was interesting, I thought. 'Why's that then?'

'You can't have forgotten what your friend Bakrylov did last year,' Luka said. 'Leading a cavalry charge against peaceful protestors on the city streets? The Coronation Massacre, the common folk are calling it. There's bad feeling, to speak lightly of it.'

I remembered it well. Major Bakrylov had led a mass charge of the army and the Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg's Sea Guard against a mostly unarmed protest of students and supporters of the house of magicians. They had clashed on Coronation Avenue in the stately heart of

the city near the palace itself, and it had been a massacre indeed. Vogel had ordered that charge himself.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘I remember.’

‘Martyrs were made that night, in the eyes of the common people.’

‘Don’t use that word,’ I cautioned him. ‘The Ascended Martyr rather takes precedence.’

‘Not with everyone she don’t,’ Luka said. ‘Remember how many people she killed from the royal balcony when she ascended to Heaven or whatever the fuck it was she’s supposed to have done? Not everyone is exactly feeling worshipful, Tomas.’

I met his eyes for a long moment. Looking back on what had happened, I could see how they wouldn’t be. That was an interesting thought.

‘The common people always have the greatest love for the royal family,’ Luka went on. ‘I’ve never really understood that, but there it is. There were people’s husbands, wives, mothers, sons in the square that night and a lot of them never came back home again on account of the precious Ascended Martyr.’

‘I’m definitely taking a walk tomorrow night,’ I said, and even then I could feel the beginning of an idea forming in the back of my mind.

Gods help me, what was I thinking?

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Chapter 3

I went the next evening. I'd allowed Anne the night off to be with Rosie, but I had Beast and Emil with me and I didn't think I'd come to any harm. Once we'd crossed the bridge I soon began to see what Fat Luka had been talking about. I didn't see any violence but I could feel it in the air, that sense of pervading danger that all soldiers soon develop. They do if they want to stay alive, anyway, but that wasn't the only thing making me uncomfortable.

I confess I felt something of a fool, but these things happen. I had been drinking beer rather than brandy before we left, wanting to keep a clear head for the night. I seldom drink beer in any quantity, and the simple fact of it was that I badly needed a piss.

'Stop here for a moment,' I told the lads as we passed the mouth of an alley. 'There's something I need to do.'

They nodded in understanding and I walked a few paces into the dark alley while they guarded its mouth. I was about to unlace when I felt a hand grab my arm from a shadowy doorway.

'Give me your purse, you old cunt.'

I turned to look at him. Barely fourteen by my reckoning, with a pitted, rusty blade in his hand. I looked at him, and in that moment I understood him, for I had been him once, in a way. I feigned fear, reached into the folds of my cloak as though doing as he said and closed my hand in a reverse grip around the hilt of Remorse. I punched my arm forward as hard as I could and smashed the pommel of the sword straight into the bridge of the lad's nose. He cried out as it broke with a wet crunch and the blade in his hand clattered to the ground.

I had him by the throat a moment later, and was shoving him backwards into the wall of the alley, my blade pressed into his crotch in the killing place even as Beast stormed towards us in a murderous fury. He was a red-haired giant, close to seven feet tall, and I could tell he was putting the fear of Our Lady into the lad before he'd even reached us.

'There's a thing you have to understand about us old cunts,' I said as I looked the lad in the eyes. 'We were once young cunts like you, full of piss and vinegar, but now we're tired and we ain't got the energy for a long fight any more. That means we're going to fight dirty and end it fast.'

'I never meant—' the lad snuffled, blood streaming from his nose, then his eyes widened as I tightened my grip on his throat and Remorse threatened to take his manhood before he'd probably ever used it.

'Aye, you did,' I said, 'but I know why. Who do you work for?'

'Kreov,' he whispered.

'And who is Kreov, and where do I find him?'

'He's my boss,' he said. 'Please, I ain't got no choice but to rob if I want to pay my taxes. There's crews springing up every few streets south of the river since Grachyev went, and Kreov runs ours. He'll be at the Dripping Bucket, that's his base.'

There were crews springing up every few streets, were there? That was something I hadn't known, and I reckoned Luka hadn't either. It was only natural with the power gap Grachyev had left behind him, I supposed, and Lady knew Iagin had been too busy recently to do anything about it.

'Hold him,' I told Beast, who yanked the snivelling youth away from me and pushed him back up against the wall.

I don't know what he expected, probably my sword through the chest, but he looked extremely relieved and more than a bit surprised when all I did was take the piss I still needed.

‘Take me there,’ I said once I was done. ‘I want a word with this Kreov of yours.’

The lad led us round the corner and across an unlit road. I heard shouting in the distance, the sound of breaking glass and running feet, but we weren’t bothered again. With Emil looming beside me and Beast half-dragging the broken-nosed lad at his side, it was hardly surprising.

The Dripping Bucket was about as appealing as the name suggested: a ramshackle, run-down tavern with a crudely painted sign hanging at an angle in the darkness. One of the windows was boarded up and the place smelled of piss and stale beer in equal measure.

Emil shoved the door open and the lad pointed a shaky hand to a table at the back of the common room.

‘That’s Kreov,’ he said.

This Kreov had less than twenty years to him, for Our Lady’s sake. He was too young to be a veteran, and none of the other boys in the room looked old enough even to shave. I walked in there like the devil Tomas Piety, with his still-bleeding knifeman held between Beast and Emil, and Kreov all but fucking soiled himself.

‘I want a word with you,’ I said, taking the chair opposite him at his table without waiting to be invited.

Beast turned and growled at one of Kreov’s lads who had made a move towards us, and the boy suddenly thought better of it.

‘And who the fuck are you?’ Kreov said, trying to sound tough and failing miserably.

‘My name is Tomas Piety,’ I said. ‘I am a businessman and a veteran, and so are my men. You, on the other hand, are barely past childhood and it looks like most of your crew have to get up for school in the morning. What the fuck do you think you’re playing at?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Sending these lads out to rob and steal? They’re too fucking young for that.’

‘I don’t hurt my boys,’ he protested. ‘It’s you who’s beaten the shit out of Jack here.’

I had to allow that perhaps he had a point there. ‘I don’t take kindly to people pointing knives at me,’ I said. ‘ “No choice but to rob if I want to pay my taxes”, that’s what he told me. You’re extorting children, and I’m not having it.’

Kreov sighed and gave the lad, Jack, a withering look. ‘We seem to have a misunderstanding here, Mr Piety,’ he said. ‘I’m not extorting anyone. These lads are all orphans. There’s a lot of them in Dannsburg since the war and the plague. They’d be on the streets if it wasn’t for the Bucket, and sooner or later they’d be hanged for vagrancy. Yes, I ask for a contribution, to keep bread and beer on the table for us all, but no more than that. I’ll give you “taxes”, Jack, you little shit. I’ve told you before about pretending to be a bloody gangster. It’s not big and it’s not clever.’

‘They live here?’ I asked, and this time I took a proper look around the room. I had been so intent on making my entrance that I hadn’t noticed the bedrolls by the fire, or the line of drying laundry hung above it.

‘Aye,’ Kreov said. ‘My ma owned this tavern, ever since I was in swaddling. Da never came back from the war. When she died of plague a few years back I kept it – I was almost a man grown by then, so I thought, why not? I’ve been doing this ever since.’

‘It appears I owe you an apology,’ I said, ‘but you might want to have a word with your crew about how they gather their contributions. Burglary would be a mite safer option than trying to rob veterans in alleyways.’

‘I thought you was just some old drunk,’ Jack muttered in his defence.

‘Idiot,’ Kreov told him. ‘Go and get cleaned up, and see if Rob can pull your hooter straight before it sticks that way.’

‘Here,’ I said, and tossed Jack a silver mark. ‘By way of apology for your nose.’

His eyes widened in astonishment. That was a fuck of a lot of money for an orphan lad like Jack, but I felt I owed it to him. He put me in mind of my Billy, truth be told, and how he could've ended up if we hadn't found him living feral in the ruins of Messia during the war. It looked like perhaps I had misjudged how things were south of the river. It came to something, I thought, when the City Guard were hanging people for vagrancy and a young man I'd taken for a cheap thug was running a fucking orphanage.

Those were the times we lived in.

*

'Ascended murderess more like,' I heard someone say; a woman's voice. 'My husband and my boys were in that square and she cooked them all like the Godsdays roast.'

'You be quiet with that, Nettie!'

I glanced in the direction of the words, but it could have been any one of a gaggle of goodwives and widows huddled around a table over their tin cups of cheap wine, stained linen bonnets obscuring most of their faces. We were in another tavern, a real one this time, and the mood was ugly.

The place was called the Skanian's Head, and that wasn't a tavern name I had seen before. There are only so many names to go around, after all – a trade's arms, the white this, the green that. I owned the Tanner's Arms in Ellinburg, after all. Almost all of them were named for colours or trades, but this was something new, and I didn't think it was anything good. The crudely painted sign outside depicted the severed head of a man with long blond hair. To my mind, that said a lot. The place was a low, crude two-storey building with a flat roof and a cheaply made copy of the royal flag, the grubby white rose on its crimson field, hanging from an upstairs window.

Sentiment was strong here: the Coronation Massacre was the main topic of conversation, and the ascension of the

Princess Crown Royal and what that had meant – and what those things had cost these people, the family members they had lost.

‘I don’t like this, boss,’ Emil murmured at my side.

‘Blend in,’ I told him and Beast. ‘Try to look common – you shouldn’t find that too difficult.’

Truth be told, it was me who was struggling with that. I had dressed down for the evening’s adventure as best I could, but I didn’t own the right sort of clothes to properly blend into a place like this any more. The irony wasn’t lost on me: I, Tomas Piety, could no longer look like I belonged in the sort of place I had grown up in. Again I wondered exactly what I had become in the service of the crown.

We made our way to the bar and I ordered beer for the three of us. The tapman, an unshaven fellow with perhaps fifty years to him, was heavy of gut, with a surly expression on his ruddy face.

‘Ain’t seen you in here before,’ he said.

‘That’s because I ain’t been in here before,’ I said, and slapped a few coppers down on the bar for the beers.

‘Whose place is this? Which crew?’

His eyes narrowed as he took the measure of me. ‘Like that, is it?’

‘It might be.’

‘Well, this place belongs to Stoyanov, and you’re a fool if you’re looking to muscle in.’

‘Didn’t say I was.’

‘That’s wise of you. These are Stoyanov’s streets now. If I send a runner, I can have ten of his lads here in five minutes, so you bear that in mind.’

I took a sip of my beer and said nothing. He obviously thought me a rival businessman looking to expand into his boss’ territory, and that was good. That was what I wanted. He was a fool to give away their strength so easily, but then, he was a taverner, not a gangster, so I supposed it was no surprise that he didn’t know any better.

‘Any trouble?’ I asked him, and pushed a silver mark across the counter into his surprised hand. ‘Any rivals?’

‘Yeah, there’s rivals,’ he said, ‘course there is. Everyone’s trying to set up crews here since Grachyev crossed the river. Marinova, for one – she’s a hard bitch and no mistake. She runs the streets east of here, and I heard tell she was looking to expand. Her and Stoyanov have called the knives since the riots.’

‘I think I’d like to hear more about that,’ I said quietly, and slipped him another mark.

‘It’s been bloody on these streets, and the Massacre’s only made things worse. There’s tensions high on both sides.’

‘Oh?’

‘People who hold staunch that the fucking Skanians did for our queen, like my patrons here. We’re a stronghold of patriotism here at the Head. Then there’s others who believe it was the magicians who killed Her Majesty – they think Bakrylov the Butcher was in the fucking right. Can you believe that? Can you fucking believe any loyal Dannsburg man supports that cunt, and after what he did in the war too? But they do, mark my words. Their sort ain’t welcome in the Head, I can tell you.’

‘I’ve fought Skanians myself,’ I said, as much to keep him on side as anything else.

‘Good on you,’ the tapman enthused, and poured me a brandy on the house to show me what he thought of that.

‘Pale bastards.’

My two silver marks had paid for the drink a hundred times over and more, but that wasn’t the point. I was getting a very good picture of the way the wind was blowing south of the river that night, and those were coins well spent indeed.

‘So what do folk say of the Ascended Martyr?’ I asked him, in a low voice. ‘I heard some hard words on my way across your tavern.’

He blinked and looked at me once more. 'Who did you say you were, again?' he asked me.

'I didn't.'

'You're no gangster, are you?'

'I have been,' I told him truthfully. 'I've been a soldier, too, and a priest, and other things beside. Now I'm a man who asked you a question.'

I picked up the brandy he had given me and drank it, giving him the time he needed. I could feel him weighing up his options. In Dannsburg everyone is watched, and there are eyes and ears and whisperers on every street corner. The Queen's Men didn't officially exist, but everyone was terrified of them anyway, and with good reason. Once again I found myself remembering the 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.*

I could see he was beginning to suspect, so I took another silver mark out of my purse and walked it slowly across the back of my knuckles where he could see it. A taverner in a place like this didn't make three silver marks in a month and we both knew it.

'I can be your friend,' I said, and I glanced to my left where Beast loomed like a monster from a children's story, like the very boggart itself, 'or I can be your enemy. Your choice.'

He paused for a moment, then poured another free brandy and set it down in front of me.

'I like having friends better than enemies,' he said at last, and that was wise of him.

'Aye, don't we all,' I said, and slid the coin across the counter. 'So tell me.'

‘It’s complicated, and people get their thoughts mixed up, I reckon,’ he said. ‘I hear all sorts, here in the Head. There’s folks who say she’s our rightful queen in the nation’s time of need but fighting the Skanians is too much for any mortal ruler so she was called up to Heaven to be a little goddess at Our Lady’s knee, and that I can hold with. Others say if that’s true, then her mother Her Majesty the Queen was a goddess too and we ought to be worshipping her if we’re truly loyal, but that’s a reach for me. If she was a goddess, how did them Skanian cunts manage to murder her, eh? Don’t make no sense to me, that one, but there’s some who’ll go to the knife over it. Then there’s the other buggers who say bad things, and if that was Nettie the Dip you overheard, then I’m throwing her out for good and all. They say the princess was a *witch* and got what was coming for them as practise witchcraft. Well, I won’t stand for that talk in the Head. I won’t stand for that at all. We’re good loyal subjects of the crown in here, all of us.’

‘I don’t know who it was,’ I lied, but it didn’t matter. What mattered was the depth of feeling, of reverence, even, I was hearing about the royal family. For all I didn’t share the sentiment, that might be very useful indeed in the times to come. There’s a thing I have thought before, and it came back to me then as I stared at the taverner’s ruddy face: the great unwashed masses have the potential to carry the power in any centre of population. They might not have the money or the influence in politics, but there are a fucking *lot* of them.

That, I thought, may one day be very, very important. Knight and councillor I may be, but I realised then that I would be a fool to distance myself from the common people. So much was still in the balance, so much unknown, but I knew one thing.

Inspired, organised, they could be a fucking army.

Chapter 4

The next morning I had to report the state of things south of the river to Lord Vogel. I was conflicted in doing so, knowing and suspecting what I did about him, but he was still my boss and that was all there was to it. More to the point, I wanted to see what his reaction would be.

I took a carriage from the Bountiful Harvest to the house of law, Bloody Anne beside me on the bench and Stefan and Emil in their slightly preposterous footmen's livery clinging to the backboard. Anyone who took those two for anything other than soldiers was all but blind, but I supposed it was all part of the image, the public face I had to present. I was a knight and a sitting member of the governing council, but it was patently obvious that I was more than that, and there was no real benefit to me in hiding it any more. If I projected a certain aura that made people fear me, then that was well and good, to my mind.

The carriage rattled through streets bustling with the early morning trade, the last of the nightsoil carts returning to their middens even as the first draymen and butchers and farmers of the day arrived with their carts of produce. We were delayed at a crossroads while a shepherd drove his sheep towards the market square, his dogs and boys harrying the flock in the right direction.

'What do you reckon he'll make of it?' Anne asked. 'About how the common people feel, I mean. About the princess.'

'I'm not sure I'll tell him about their opinions of the princess,' I confessed. 'I'll judge that one at the time. The rest of it? I don't know, Anne. It was the Skanians who killed the queen to start with, but then he changed his mind when

it suited him and decided he wanted the people to think it was the magicians instead. He's . . . I don't know.'

'Full of shit?' Anne suggested, and I snorted laughter. 'You suspect something, don't you?'

'Aye Anne, I do,' I said, 'but I can't tell you what. Not yet – not until I'm sure. I could be wrong, and if I am, I don't want you to hang alongside me if I get put to the question.'

'Gods,' Anne whispered, and all the levity was gone from her tone. Anne knew me better than anyone, better even than my own brother did. 'You actually mean that, don't you?'

I coughed and stared out of the window of the carriage, watching the squat stone mass of the house of law draw ever closer. Now wasn't the time to have this conversation with her. I didn't honestly know if it ever would be.

When the carriage drew up outside the house of law, the home of the Queen's Men, we alighted together, Anne and me, and I presented myself to the hulking guards in their polished half armour and crimson and white surcoats. My face was well known by then, of course, and Anne's too; they all knew her as my second.

'Morning, Sir Tomas,' one of them said, and opened a sally port in the great iron-bound door for us to enter.

I strode through, the Weeping Women hanging at my hips. The wearing of weapons was forbidden in the house of law, but of course that didn't apply to the Queen's Men. Nothing did. We were above the law, that was the whole point of it. We were utterly untouchable: Ailsa had told me that once and it was true, I had discovered – but only to a point. Amongst the common people, in the face of the City Guard, before the governing council, even, aye, that we were. In the house of law, though? Before the Provost Marshal? No.

No, I might be able to enter the place wearing my swords, but Dieter Vogel's word was absolute law, and at this time more than at any other. I doubted if any one man in the history of the realm had ever before held so much power. He

only had to say the word and I would hang, as I had warned Anne. I had suspicions, aye, but precious little proof, and I knew I had to be fucking careful what I said, even to her.

We walked up the stairs to the sergeants' mess and we shared a drink despite the early hour. I felt like I needed one.

Ailsa's words came back to me again, making me think of her as I sipped the brandy that it was too early to be drinking. My estranged wife – my handler, I supposed, before I was sworn into the Queen's Men myself. Sister Deceit, mistress of the false face. Lady, but she was beautiful. Fool that I was, I loved her, for all that I knew my feelings weren't returned. Or at least, not entirely, and not in that way, anyway, although we had grown a good deal closer since my return to Dannsburg the previous year. I remembered the Princess Crown Royal's immolation on the balcony of the royal palace and how my first instinct had been to throw myself at Ailsa the moment before the tall windows imploded, to bear her to the carpet and cover her with my body as razor shards of glass hurtled across the room. I'd wanted to protect her. Aye, fool I might be, but I loved my wife. Our marriage may have been a sham of convenience, but my feelings for her were not.

I sighed and put my empty glass down on the table. 'Wait for me here,' I said to Anne. 'I'll see the Old Man alone.'

'Aye, Tomas,' Anne said. 'The gods only know that suits me.'

I left her idling by the window, cleaning her nails with the point of one of her daggers, and headed up to Vogel's office.

I rapped once on the door and barely waited for the muffled 'Come' from within before I pushed it open.

'Provost Marshal,' I greeted him, and gave him a short bow of respect.

He looked up from the mound of paperwork piled on his plainly made desk. He was a tall, lean man with some sixty or so years to him, his thick white hair swept back from his

high forehead, and as usual he wore a plain black coat and sober doublet that betrayed nothing of the immense wealth and power at his command. Vogel didn't need fancy clothes to tell you who he was. One look into his eyes was enough. Lord Vogel was as close to a devil walking as I ever wanted to see, a man made of razors and hate.

'What do you have to tell me, Tomas?'

'I went south of the river last night, after hearing certain things from a man in my employ.'

'Oh?' Vogel said. 'And what did you see there?'

'There's conflict amongst the common people,' I told him. 'Some are saying the magicians killed our noble queen, while the majority still swear that the Skanians did. There are factions, and tempers are running high. There are hard feelings about Major Bakrylov, too, and about what he did. The Coronation Massacre, they're calling it, and nobody's forgotten it. It's all ready to turn to violence, if you ask me.'

'I don't want more riots,' Vogel said. 'Not after last time.'

'You knew there would be riots last time,' I said. 'You started them, for Our Lady's sake.'

'Of course I did,' Vogel said, and he showed me the thin razorblade of his smile.

'Why?'

'Because I wanted there to be riots, you fool. Honestly, I thought more of your intellect than this. What better way to thin the herd? Imagine *caring*, Tomas. Imagine being the sort of person to rise up against your rightful rulers. What better way to thin the herd of undesirables than to see who is prepared to riot?'

And then send in the army to murder the lot of them, I thought, but I didn't say it.

I didn't say a lot of things, in that moment. Vogel was taking me for a cunt and I didn't care for it. I met his eyes and held his stare for a long moment. Who did this prick think he was, truly? Lord Chief Judicial, Provost Marshal, Prince Regent – and so fucking what? He was still human,

just a man like any other. He sat down on the pot to take a shit in the morning the same as the rest of us, and he would do well to remember that.

‘That’s . . . insightful,’ I said eventually. ‘Thank you, Provost Marshal.’

‘Mmmm,’ Vogel said, and that could have meant anything at all. ‘Keep an eye on them, Tomas. The common people. You know how to mingle, to walk amongst them. There must be no more riots.’

He dismissed me with a wave, like a fucking servant, and I turned away before I said something I would have truly regretted. Oh, I would keep an eye on them all right, but not in the way Vogel wanted.

Imagine caring.

Aye, Provost Marshal. Imagine that.

*

‘How did you get on with that little task I set you?’ I asked Fat Luka that afternoon, once Anne and me were safely back at the Bountiful Harvest.

We were in the common room, mugs of good beer and plates of steaming food in front of us, and Billy was too busy with his to pay our conversation much mind. I swear that lad was always hungry, but then, growing boys usually are. I couldn’t say I really wanted mine. Truth be told, my brief encounter with Lord Vogel had left a bad taste in my mouth. It had, however, reinforced my assurance that I was set on the right path.

‘Lady Lan Yetrov? Aye,’ Luka said, ‘she’s attending a reception tomorrow night at the house of one Lord Dimitov, a minor aristocrat who has apparently recently inherited a huge fortune from a distant cousin. He’s keen to show off his new-found wealth to society, of course, so he’s throwing a party. Here’s your invitation.’

He passed me a stiff card decorated in gold foil embossed with the rather fanciful-looking arms of House Dimitov. I wondered if he had commissioned those arms last week. New money was largely frowned upon by the old noble houses, I had learned, but money was money nonetheless. Gold, power, influence: those are the levers that move the world.

‘Have you sent my acceptance?’

‘Naturally.’

I nodded. ‘Good. You’ve done well, Luka.’

He shrugged. ‘This stuff is my bread and beer, Tomas,’ he said. ‘I think you already knew that when you set me to watch over the Pious Men when we first came back to Ellinburg.’

He had a point there, I had to allow. I had known Luka since we’d been boys in school together. His formal education might be sorely lacking, even compared to mine, but he had always been clever. He had been clever in the war, too, a natural scout and spy. What I hadn’t known then was that he had worked for the Queen’s Men even before we were conscripted, paid by them to spy on me while they paid me to spy on the city governor.

The Queen’s Men played a lengthy and complicated game, I had long since come to realise, and everyone was watched by someone. The Queen’s Men themselves were perhaps watched the very hardest of all. I pushed the thought away and looked at him.

‘Aye, perhaps I did,’ I said, and turned to Anne, seated beside me. ‘How would you like to accompany me to a society party, my Lady?’

‘Not in the fucking slightest,’ she said.

I looked at her, sitting there in her man’s coat and doublet and britches, and had to take her point. I had made Anne wear a fine lady’s dress once before, the night we had taken back the Golden Chains, and while she had proved to be a surprisingly good actress, she had complained bitterly that

she couldn't fight properly in a dress and therefore had no use for them. That hadn't stopped her killing a man that night, I remembered, but I supposed that was neither here nor there. I wouldn't make her do a thing she didn't want to do unless it really mattered, and in this case, it didn't.

'Can I come, Da?' Billy piped up, but I had to shake my head.

'Society parties are very boring, lad,' I said. 'It's just a lot of old people standing around talking. I don't think you'd enjoy it. Anne, you sure I can't persuade you?'

'Aye,' she said, 'completely sure. It's just a lot of old people standing around talking, why would I want to go to that?'

I had to give her that, I supposed.

'Looks like I'll be attending alone, then,' I said. 'I can hardly ask Ailsa.'

In fact I probably could have done and she might even have said yes, but I didn't want her hearing the conversation I was planning to have with Lady Lan Yetrov. I didn't trust her quite *that* much. Not yet, anyway.

'You could take Rosie,' Anne suggested, and my heart went out to her. I knew she wasn't easy with the work Rosie did for the Queen's Men, and it meant a lot to me that she had suggested it.

'A knight and member of the governing council, publicly married but estranged from his wife, arriving at a society reception with a known harlot?' Luka mused. 'It depends how much attention you want to attract, Tomas.'

'A little scandal does the soul good, Luka,' I said, and poured myself a brandy from the bottle on the table between us. 'I would hate for people to forget about me, after all.'

'I take it "respectability" isn't part of your re-election platform, then?' Anne said with a smirk.

'Absolutely not,' I said.

My re-election, when anybody could be bothered to arrange another election, would be built on a solid foundation of bribery and blackmail, same as it had no doubt been the first time. I hadn't even known I was standing for election until Vogel congratulated me on winning the seat of the North Ward. I had never even *been* to the North Ward, for Our Lady's sake, not that it mattered. Democracy in Dannsburg in those days was a very thin veneer indeed, and few even tried to hide the fact. Only the gentry and officers got to vote in any case, so you might as well just give the contested seat to the candidate with the most money and save everyone the effort. No one cared what the common folk said.

No one ever does, until they finally rise in fire and violence.

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Chapter 5

The night of Lord Dimitov's reception arrived and I was waiting for Rosie in the common room of the Bountiful Harvest in one of my better outfits. She looked quite extraordinary in the gown I had bought for her: the crushed green silk set off her red hair so perfectly. She wore the bawd's knot displayed proudly on her shoulder in yellow cord.

'Isn't the knot a bit much?' Anne asked as Rosie joined us.

I shook my head, thinking back to what Vogel had told me before my first appearance on the governing council. *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.*

I had made an impression that day all right, and I was about to do it again.

'If you want to cause a scandal, cause a big one,' I said.

'Oh, we'll do that all right, Tomas,' Rosie said, and gave me a saucy smile before she went to embrace Anne.

They kissed, and I swallowed my brandy. Rosie had eyes for no one but Anne and everyone knew it, so I would look a fool: a newly made knight consorting with a harlot who loved only women. People would think me weak – and that was the whole point.

I needed a way in with Archmagus Ritenkov and the Lady Lan Yetrov could give me that, but after that I would be on my own. The head of the house of magicians was a very powerful man, and once we had met and had the conversation I wanted to have with him I knew he would look for ways to put pressure on me. He had no idea I was a Queen's Man, of course, but I was a member of the governing council and he would use any chance to further

the interests of the house of magicians. If he thought Rosie might be that leverage, well and good, especially as nothing could have been further from the truth. I cared about her, of course I did – she was Anne’s woman and my secretary and primary spy – but if I could make him think I loved her, I would have him at a disadvantage, and that was what I wanted.

We left once Anne and Rosie finally put each other down.

The hired carriage took us across the city to the modest estate of Lord Dimitov. Not even a ‘Lan’ in his name, and yet there were carriages bearing the sigils of the great and the good of Dannsburg society crowded onto the small driveway in front of his house. I’d had Fat Luka spend the day digging into his family history in the public records of the Great Library and Luka had discovered he was a baronet at best, and that only if you believed his grandfather’s somewhat dubious claims to legitimacy – indeed, two weeks ago Dimitov was effectively a nobody, and he would have stayed that way had not his late cousin been a vastly successful merchant with a huge fortune and no other heirs. It was truly amazing what a sudden injection of several tens of thousands of gold crowns into a man’s accounts could do for his social standing.

‘Well, we’re here, then,’ I said to Rosie as the carriage rocked to a halt outside the stables.

‘Aye,’ she said, and looked at me. ‘How much sauce do you want?’

‘Not too much,’ I said. ‘You’re wearing the knot; that’s enough to tell everyone what we want to say. Act the lady, like you’re playing up above your station. I want to annoy people, and that ought to do the trick.’

‘I can do that,’ she said. ‘Why, though? What are you up to, Tomas?’

‘I want to be remembered,’ I said. ‘I want to be the married knight and councillor who brought a high-class

harlot to a society occasion and didn't give a fuck what anyone thought about it.'

Rosie just shrugged, but I knew what I was doing. I was beginning to play the game. It would be all over the news sheets by the morning, and there was nothing the common people liked better than that sort of gossip. Oh I'd watch the common people all right, Provost Marshal, and I was going to make fucking sure that they watched *me*.

I thumped on the roof of the carriage and a moment later Beast jumped down from the backboard and opened the door for us. I climbed out and offered Rosie my arm and she let me hand her down like she was a duchess. I suppose all whores learn to become good actresses in time, but Rosie truly excelled at it. That was a big part of what made her such a superb spy, of course.

'My thanks, Sir Tomas,' she said, even though there was nobody who mattered in earshot.

She was already in character, her chin tilted at precisely the right angle that said 'up-jumped tart who thinks she's fooling anyone'. That was perfect, exactly what I wanted.

'Come on then,' I said, and led her towards the no-doubt hired-for-the-night footmen who waited outside the doors of Dimitov's modest house with silver trays of wine in their hands.

I say 'modest', but I mean that in the relative sense. It was modest compared to Ailsa's house in Dannsburg, and a positive hovel compared to the Lan Yetrov estate, but still far finer than the house Ailsa and me had lived in back in Ellinburg. It's funny how your judgement changes once you become accustomed to a thing, but there it is. By Dannsburg standards it was the house of low-to-middling gentry, no more than that. Now he had come into his fortune I didn't think Lord Dimitov would be living there for very much longer.

We were shown inside, tall glasses of wine in our hands, and all across the hall I saw heads swivel to watch us, the

ladies' fans fluttering as if to conceal hastily whispered conversations. The reaction of the men ranged from a flushing of faces to envious gazes, and one gentleman I didn't know even raised his glass to me in a mocking salute that I thought was at least half heartfelt. I had blatantly brought a harlot to a society reception and it looked like nobody really knew what to do with that.

I allowed myself a small smile as I watched the room with satisfaction. Nobody there would be forgetting Councillor Sir Tomas Piety of the North Ward any time soon, and that was exactly what I wanted.

'We should mingle,' I murmured to Rosie. I hadn't been completely sure she would know how to conduct herself in society, but it appeared that she did. I had been betting that Heinrich, her original handler in the Queen's Men, had seen to her social education in the same way that Ailsa had seen to mine. This setting was as alien to my nature as I knew it was to Rosie's, but the Queen's Men mould their tools to the shape of their requirements and we had both received the grounding we needed.

I worked my way around the room with Rosie on my arm like it was nothing out of the ordinary, ignoring sideways glances as I exchanged pleasantries with the few people I had at least a passing acquaintance with. I was, it had to be said, extremely pleased to spot Major Bakrylov standing close to an artfully arranged display of iced fruit, and I steered Rosie towards him, smiling when his face split into a grin of recognition.

'Sir Tomas!' he exclaimed, and reached out to shake me enthusiastically by the hand.

'Major,' I said, and turned to Rosie. 'My dear, may I present Major Bakrylov of the Queen's Own Fifth. Major, this is my companion for the evening, Madame Rosie of The Warm Welcome.'

'Your *companion*?' Bakrylov whispered. 'I say, Piety, this is a bit much even for you. You're a married man, remember?'

‘We are estranged,’ I said, loud enough to be overheard. ‘Madame Rosie is a comfort to me in these difficult times.’

‘Well, whatever makes you happy, I suppose,’ he said.

‘Is Lady Reiter not with you this evening, Major?’ I asked, casting around for the expensive courtesan he usually hired to accompany him to social events. The major didn’t like women in that way, and while that wasn’t illegal and there wasn’t any shame to it in Dannsburg, in high society it was expected that gentlemen and ladies came in pairs.

He cleared his throat. ‘The Lady Reiter felt it necessary to retire to the country last year.’

I could only nod in understanding. *After the house of law had her cousin, Archmagus Nikolai Reiter, hanged for treason*, he meant, and I could see how that could make even a courtesan’s social position untenable.

‘I hope she will live out her life happily there,’ I said.

Best she never comes back, I meant, and I knew the major understood my words.

‘Let us speak of happier things,’ he said brightly, and snagged two glasses of brandy from a passing footman’s tray.

He passed one to me, ignoring Rosie completely. I must admit that irritated me, but Rosie was perfectly capable of looking after herself and a moment later had availed herself of a fresh glass of wine of her own.

‘Do let’s,’ she said, meeting the major’s eyes with her iron stare.

It pleased me to see the look of discomfort on his face, however fleeting, before he retreated behind his usual armour of mockery and levity.

‘What in the world are we to make of Lord Dimitov?’ he asked me, his eyes twinkling in the light of the conspicuously expensive number of lamps as he raised his glass to his lips. ‘I mean, who *is* he?’

‘Oh don’t give me that,’ I said, giving him a look. ‘You know how things work in Dannsburg. Who was I, even a year

ago? Who were *you*, before the war? Look at us, without a Lan to share between us, judging anyone in society. It's ridiculous. The aristocracy is fading: new money, *merchant* money, is the future.'

He smiled then, his real smile, not the mocking sneer he usually deployed. 'I really do like you, Piety,' he murmured, before he turned away to clink glasses with the Marquess of Drathburg.

Defiance, we like that, he had said to me once, and I still wondered exactly who *we* were in that context.

There are factions, even within the Queen's Men.

That was a thought indeed, but one for another day. I left the major to his marquess and scanned the room, Rosie clinging to my arm and fighting off the looks we were getting with looks of her own that could have killed at ten paces. She flicked open a feathered fan I hadn't known she had with her and held it coquettishly in front of her, playing her part to the hilt. Rosie was born to this life of deception and guile, I had to allow, and I found myself very glad she was part of my crew.

At last I spotted the woman I was looking for, glittering with diamonds and wearing a gown of shimmering black Alarian silk that must have cost more than a working man made in a year. The Lady Leonora Lan Yetrov, famous society beauty and fabulously rich widow. Her husband, the Lord Lan Yetrov, had died in a tragic accident involving his own prize bear a couple of years ago, and in the process made his wife into one of the richest women in Dannsburg. I have to confess I may have had something to do with that. Nobody would beat or rape Lady Lan Yetrov ever again, on account of what I had done. I could only hope she remembered that.

In fact, I was rather counting on it.

I touched Rosie on the arm to draw her attention and we made our way through the crowd towards where Lady Lan Yetrov was standing surrounded by admirers, as was only to

be expected. The eligible younger sons of the nobility were each vying to secure one of the most advantageous marriages imaginable. I strongly suspected they would all be out of luck. I very much doubted Lady Lan Yetrov would ever take another husband.

‘My Lady,’ I said, once I had reached her circle. ‘A pleasure to see you again.’

‘Sir Tomas,’ she said. The warm look she gave me earned me the immediate hatred of every one of her admirers. ‘May I congratulate you on your recent elevation.’

I bowed in acknowledgement. She completely ignored Rosie, but that was only to be expected and I knew Rosie wouldn’t take it ill. In truth, I was insulting our host by bringing her at all, but I couldn’t give a fuck about that. Whatever I had said to Bakrylov, Dimitov was no one.

‘I wondered if we might talk,’ I said, and Lady Lan Yetrov gestured flirtatiously with her fan.

‘By all means,’ she said.

I let her guide me to a couch in a secluded area under the curving staircase and we sat together with Rosie perched on the arm beside me. I could imagine the scandalmongers in the assembled group having a field-day with this, but again, so what? If the Lady Lan Yetrov was unconcerned with her reputation – and with her money she was untouchable anyway – then that was well and good. I certainly didn’t care about mine. Quite the opposite, in fact.

‘How can I help you, Sir Tomas?’

‘I hear you are very close to the university and the house of magicians these days,’ I said.

Her eyes narrowed, and I reminded myself that beneath the paint and powder, the diamonds and expensive gown, there was the mind of a very intelligent woman.

‘And I hear *you* are very close to the house of law,’ she murmured.

I know you are a Queen’s Man, she was saying, and that was interesting. If she knew that, or at least suspected it,

then I would bet gold that Archmagus Ritenkov did too.

‘You’re well informed,’ I said.

‘One has to be in Dannsburg these days,’ she replied, and took a very small sip of her wine.

‘My Lady,’ I said, ‘I would like to think I can call you a friend.’

Her expression took on a bitter edge. ‘I am very greatly in your debt, Sir Tomas, and I will never forget that. However, things between the house of law and the house of magicians remain – ah, somewhat strained, shall we say.’

‘They do,’ I said, ‘and I am keen to heal that rift. I, for one, would like to be a friend of the house of magicians.’

‘You, perhaps, but not your house,’ she said. ‘And why might that be?’

I wondered exactly how much I could trust her. ‘Lady Lan Yetrov,’ I began, but she interrupted me.

‘Lan Yetrova,’ she corrected me, and smiled. ‘I have re-invented myself in my own image, you might say, since my . . . tragic widowhood. I will never again be *owned*.’

I remembered the last time I had seen her smile, the way the blood from her split lip had trickled across her teeth and turned that smile the colour of murder and vengeance.

Release the bear.

‘Aye, a tragedy,’ I said.

‘Indeed,’ she said. ‘And I repeat the question: why might that be?’

‘You’re right, I’m acting alone in this,’ I said, ‘but as a member of the governing council I feel that the bad feeling between the two great houses can only be to the detriment of the realm. I would very much like to meet Archmagus Ritenkov, in an informal way. I think we have things to discuss.’

Lady Lan Yetrova, meeting my eyes, looked at me over her glass for a long moment.

‘I’m sure that can be arranged,’ she said.

As I had been hoping, the archmagus was also at Dimitov's reception – it seemed most of Dannsburg society were crammed into his house that night, which made me wonder just how large this inheritance of his was. Perhaps he was on his way to becoming somebody after all.

'My thanks,' I said.

'Wait here. I'll see if I can find him.'

I watched Lady Lan Yetrova rise and sail gracefully across the crowded room, and a moment later a short, angry-looking man confronted me. Our host, I realised.

'Councillor Piety, how dare you?' demanded Lord Dimitov. I didn't rise, simply looked at him. 'My Lord?'

'Many gentlemen consult with courtesans. I am a man of the world and I understand that, sir, but to bring a brazen harlot wearing the bawd's knot into my house? You insult me, sir.'

'Until recently you were absolutely nobody,' I observed, completely ignoring his outrage. 'Nobodies don't draw our attention, as a rule. However, you have suddenly come into a very great deal of money and a considerable social elevation, and thus a nobody becomes a somebody. I think we'll be keeping a close eye on you from now on, Lord Dimitov.'

He went pale all at once. 'We . . . Oh. Oh gods.'

I smiled. He didn't need to see the Warrant to know exactly what I meant. The Queen's Men didn't officially exist, but everyone who mattered in Dannsburg knew one when they saw one, and Lord Dimitov mattered now.

'You owe my companion an apology,' I said.

Dimitov faced Rosie and swallowed. 'Forgive me, madam. I . . . spoke in haste.'

Rosie sniffed and made a dismissive gesture with her fan. I waved Lord Dimitov away, and he all but fled in his own house.

Lady Lan Yetrova returned shortly at the side of a tall man in a midnight-blue robe, his closely cropped silver beard

catching the light of the ostentatious lamps. I stood to greet him.

‘Archmagus,’ she said, with respect, ‘may I present Councillor Sir Tomas Piety of the North Ward.’

He turned to regard me. ‘Councillor,’ he said, and extended his hand.

I took it, and gave it a brusque shake. ‘Archmagus,’ I returned. ‘I wondered if we might talk.’

‘By all means,’ he said.

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Chapter 6

Dannsborg had a higher rate of literacy than was to be found in Ellinburg, what with the University and the generally wealthier population. North of the river, that was, anyway. When people can read, they want something *to* read, of course, and printed books remained a luxury, even for the wealthy. The news sheets, on the other hand, cheaply printed on basement presses, were very popular. And I was all over them the next morning.

COUNCILLOR PIETY'S BALL BAWD!

It must have been a quiet day if that was the headline, but people do love a society scandal. I bought a sheet from a street seller for a couple of coppers on my way to the market place, and with Emil and Beast flanking me as I walked, I scanned the piece, a wry smile crossing my face as I did so. I had caused quite the sensation the previous night, and my private conversation with Lady Lan Yetrova had not gone unnoticed. Apparently she was a controversial figure these days, this rich, beautiful, widowed socialite who appeared to have no interest in taking another husband. Her support of the university and the house of magicians made her immediately suspect to some, of course, but to others she was a paragon of modern Dannsborg virtue.

People are strange, and easily led, and their opinions quite obviously depended in the main on which news sheet they read. I picked up a few on our walk and discovered that while some were calling my actions scandalous, others named me a hero of the common man, unafraid to buck tradition and stuffy establishment.

One of us!

One of them actually said that, above a poorly printed etching of me with Rosie on my arm, her bawd's knot comically exaggerated for effect. On the whole, I thought my evening had been a great success, and that was even without my conversation with Archmagus Ritenkov.

I steered the lads to a tea shop I knew and we took a table in the corner while the serving boy brought us three steaming bowls. Beast and Emil would have been happier with a tavern and small beer, I was sure, but this was the place I wanted to be that morning. I sat back in my seat and listened to the hubbub of conversation. Most of the voices were male, but not all of them.

'Oi, look!'

'Is that 'im?'

'Where?'

'There! It is, isn't it?'

'Looks like it.'

'Dirty bugger.'

'Bollocks. He only did what we all do. He just don't feel the need to hide it.'

'Aye, well, good for 'im, I says.'

'I always liked 'im.'

'I didn't, but I sort of do now.'

'Shhhh, 'e'll hear you!'

'So what? I'm only saying what I thinks,' and the man's voice rose. 'Good on yer, Councillor!'

I raised my bowl of tea in acknowledgement, and allowed myself a slow smile. It was working. I prayed to Our Lady that I would never need it, never have to rely on the support of the common people, but it was good to know I had it, nonetheless.

'What do you think *he* made of the Massacre?'

'Fucking shocking, I reckon.'

'Or maybe he ordered it. I hear he's tight with the house of law, same as the Butcher is.'

That one was in a lower voice. My hearing had been damaged by cannon at Abington, but I heard it anyway, and I thought perhaps I had been meant to. I turned to look at the man who had spoken, and he quickly looked down into his own bowl of tea. The common people had most definitely not forgotten Major Bakrylov or what he had done.

The Coronation Massacre was fresh in people's minds, of course it was: the army charging peaceful demonstrators, an avalanche of cavalry horses and flashing sabres in the heart of Dannsburg. Not the City Guard, even, but the fucking *army*.

Aye, Major Bakrylov was a war hero – among the upper classes he was, anyway, and there I thought Vogel had miscalculated. Bakrylov the Bear, he had called him, but among the working classes, many of whom had been conscript soldiers like me, he was remembered as Bakrylov the Butcher: the war criminal. The man who had sent three thousand of their fellows to their deaths in less than half an hour.

Vogel had been a solidier himself, at Krathzgrad, I had discovered, in Aunt Enaid's war, but he had gone straight in as a captain. Sabine's money and influence had seen to his commission, I was sure, and he'd been a major soon enough once the Grand Duke of Drathburg's son and heir had been mysteriously murdered in his tent by an enemy assassin. The Grand Duke himself had died leading a cavalry charge, and that had left his younger son Wilhelm to inherit the dutchy and his dead brother's betrothal to our late queen. Wilhelm had gone on to become Prince Consort and, very briefly before his alleged suicide, Prince Regent.

Vogel had never eaten rats in the siege lines like the rest of us at Abington. He had never gone hungry. He had never seen a comrade nailed to the city gates, or if he had, he would never have cared. But I couldn't help but think what he *had* done in the service of his wife.

Sabine – Mother Ruin – the former Provost Marshal of the Queen's Men. How much of what had happened at Krathzgrad had been happenstance, how much her orders, how much Vogel's ambition? Whatever the answers, I knew by then that the Queen's Men played a very long game indeed. All the same, Vogel's idea of a war hero was not mine, and nor was it that of the common people.

I finished my tea and got to my feet, and a woman got up then and looked at me.

'Councillor Piety,' she said.

I turned to her. 'Good morning,' I said.

'What does your wife say about you taking whores to balls?'

'One whore, to one ball. I'm not a degenerate,' I corrected her, and got a smattering of laughter for my efforts. 'My wife and I are estranged, and what I do is my own affair.'

'Too fucking right!' a man shouted, and another smacked him across the back of his head with an open hand.

'Shut it! You want *your* wife to hear that?'

I could feel a brawl in the making, so we left the place then and strode out into the marketplace as the voices continued to rise behind us.

'What *are* you doing, boss?' Emil asked me quietly as we walked.

'Enjoying myself,' I said, and I found that it was true.

I was used to being a public figure, of course, as I had been back in Ellinburg, but acting the respectable gentleman had been chafing at me. I found I much preferred to be a disreputable gentleman.

*

When I returned to the Bountiful Harvest some time before noon, Fat Luka was waiting for me in the common room. He made a face that said he wanted to talk to me in private,

and I followed him through the early lunchtime crowd to the door at the back, which he swiftly unlocked.

'These came, boss,' he said, once we were alone in the private dining room, and he held out two letters to me, both obviously already opened. Without Rosie to keep my secrets, Luka had been filling in, although he was nowhere near as well-educated as she was.

I looked at the two notes, and read Aunt Enaid's letter to Anne first.

My dear Anne,

There have been no notable troubles. Some light skirmishes with the Northern Sons, that's all. Nothing the City Guard have felt the need to get involved in. My mace has had some exercise, but nothing to brag of. I know you'll show this to Tomas, so assure him all is well at home. I have it under control.

*Your loving little sister,
Enaid*

I put it aside, and picked up Jochan's private note to me.

Brother,

We've battles on the streets. We beat them back, but it's been fucking hard. Aunt Enaid fought like a demon to keep them off our streets, and she hasn't lost her touch. Black Billy's wounded but he's strong, Doc Cordin says he'll live. Think we're winning. Bastard Skanian cunts seem to be as intent on hurting the house of magicians as they are us, which is queer. My friend in the magicians is a closer friend than he ever was since we stood for them in battle on Trader's Row, and that's good. I think you should meet him, when you can return.

Oh, and Old Kurt has come back from wherever he went. He's not caused trouble yet but I thought you should know.

*Hope to see you soon,
Jochan*

‘Has Anne already seen this?’ I asked, holding up Enaid’s letter.

‘Aye. She’s in the bath house now, but she read it while you were out taking tea,’ Luka said, and I breathed a sigh of relief. At least now the broken seal wouldn’t have to be explained. I really didn’t want Anne to think I would read her mail without her consent, although of course I would. She might be my best friend, but that sort of thing was my bread and beer now.

All the same, the news interested me. Aunt Enaid painted a far rosier picture of events at home than Jochan did, and I thought I knew why. The last time I had left her in charge for any length of time, when Jochan and me had been conscripted and dragged off to war in the south, she had lost all the Pious Men’s businesses to what had turned out to be Skanian-backed forces. She was obviously determined not to let that happen again, and fearful of even letting on that it might. I could understand that, although I was disappointed that she felt she couldn’t be entirely honest with Anne and therefore, by extension, with me.

From what Jochan said, things were rough, and if the Northern Sons had risen again, well, that was only to be expected, but the part about their hostility to the newly formed Ellinburg branch of the house of magicians surprised me. Perhaps their Skanian backers knew the truth about what went on in that house, about the alchemical mixing of blasting powder? I supposed it was possible.

Old Kurt had come back at the same time the Skanians had roused the Sons against us again, and that really *was* interesting. I had long wondered where Old Kurt had gone and what he had done after I had become governor of Ellinburg and put down the workers’ uprising he had instigated. I felt now might be a good time to find out.

I could do with leaving Dannsburg for a while anyway. Things between Vogel and me remained a little strained, and Ailsa was so busy at the palace since the Princess Crown Royal had become the Ascended Martyr that I barely saw her, much as I would have liked to spend more time in her company. It had affected us all, of course, but I think it had shaken her more – quite why, I couldn't have said, but there it was.

I sat down at the table and pulled an ink pot and quill towards me. I looked at Luka. 'Get me some paper, then have someone bring me a jug of beer. I've letters to write.'

Luka passed me the paper I wanted, then left the room, and I got to work.

I wrote first to Lord Vogel.

Uncle,

I have intelligence from home that the adversary are rising once more. I will return there at once and mobilise my strength in the city to put a stop to it. Our mutual friend from our sister house poses no threat to the crown, to my mind. Rest easy on that account. I shall write of what I find in the provinces once I have assessed the situation.

*Your loyal nephew,
Tomas*

I wondered what he would make of that, but put it from my mind and took up the pen once more to write to Ailsa.

My dearest wife,

Pay no mind to the news sheets, I beg you. It was a false face, no more than that, and I have my reasons. Be assured I was simply with Rosie in her official capacity, and no cause for concern there, as well you know. I have to return to Ellinburg for a time, but I will write when I can.

Your loving husband,

Tomas

Then to Ailsa's father, who I had discovered had once been a Queen's Man himself, although she didn't know it.

Honoured Sasura,

I must leave the city for a while on a matter of business. If I could ask of you a favour in my absence, look to the Lady Lan Yetrova at the university. You may recall her: we met at your house one day and discussed a piece of business concerning her late husband. I beg you to aid her in any way you can. It could be vitally important.

*Your respectful son by law,
Tomas*

And lastly to Lady Lan Yetrova herself.

My Lady,

It was a pleasure to see you once more at Lord Dimitov's reception. My conversation with the archmagus was most fruitful, and I thank you greatly for the introduction. I am no longer the same man you knew two years ago, and my position has greatly advanced in the intervening time.

I have opened a line of credit for the house of magicians against the coffers of the house of law, being now in a position to do so, but obviously this must be kept secret. My superiors would not approve, but I am certain I serve the best interests of the realm.

My request of the archmagus, which he was happy to agree to, concerned the research and development of new blasting powder weapons. If there is anything you and the scholars of the university can do to assist in this work, then I urge you to do so, and know that the funding will be provided. It is not your money I seek, I assure you, but your expertise. I implore you to understand that this work

could be pivotal in the defence of the crown against our adversaries.

*Your respectful admirer,
Tomas Piety*

That letter might be flat out telling her I was a Queen's Man, of course, but the Lady Leonora Lan Yetrova was a very, very clever woman and she had shown me at Lord Dimitov's reception that she had already found her way to that knowledge. In any case, I thought it needed to be said so we each knew where we stood. She would help me or she wouldn't, and the rest was in Our Lady's hands.

Anne came in then, a jug of beer in one hand and two tankards in the other, and sat at the table to pour for us both while I penned a final note to Jochan to tell him to have Salo reopen my house in Ellinburg and expect our return within the next ten days.

That done, I looked up at Anne as I lifted my beer. 'Morning,' I said.

'It's the first hour of the afternoon,' Anne said, and took a drink. 'Have you eaten anything yet today?'

I frowned, then shook my head. 'I've been busy.'

'You were busy last night,' she observed dryly.

'It was just work, Anne,' I said. 'I asked you to accompany me first, remember?'

She smirked, making the long, puckered scar that ran from the corner of her left eye down to the tip of her jaw twist and writhe. 'I'm just twisting your balls,' she said. 'I know my Rosie.'

I thought of how Rosie had been at Lord Dimitov's reception, what a marvellous actress she was, and I wondered if that was really true. I *thought* it was, but who could ever be sure in this world of lies we moved in? I had written my letters and I hadn't told a single lie in any of them, but the truth a Queen's Man tells you may not be the truth you think you hear.

‘Aye, well that’s good,’ I said.

Anne raised her tankard and took a long drink, then put it down on the table and looked at me. ‘So, what’s the lay of things?’

‘We’ve had letters from home,’ I said. I pushed Jochan’s letter across the table towards her and waited until she had read it.

‘I’ll fucking kill her,’ Anne growled.

‘No,’ I said, ‘you won’t. Enaid’s doing her best. Jochan said as much, and all she’s really hiding from you is how hard she’s worked to do it.’

‘Aye, perhaps,’ Anne allowed after a moment. ‘What are you going to do, Tomas?’

‘Pull Rosie back out of that whorehouse and sack Billy’s tutor,’ I said. ‘We’re going home.’

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Chapter 7

We were on the road the next day, Anne and Rosie and Oliver and Billy and Beast and me. I left Fat Luka in Dannsburg to mind my operation and Emil to mind him, and I thought that would be enough. We rode rather than suffer the slow progress of carriages, but the weather was kind and our journey passed as well as a week in the saddle ever can. I'd had Billy the Boy take riding lessons in Dannsburg in addition to his schoolwork, and for all that he hadn't liked it at the time, he could at least sit the saddle more comfortably now, as well as keep up with the rest of us.

By the time we sighted the West Gate of Ellinburg I think we were all grateful to see it, even if the stench of the river and the tanneries was already reaching us. Old Reekie, the city was called by some, and the name was well earned. Ellinburg was an industrial hub, powered by the great waterwheels that lined the polluted horror of the river, and it stank to high heaven. Tanneries, dyers and mills pumped their waste into that water night and day, but the trade they brought in made the city one of the richest in the realm. For a select few, anyway. The owners of those tanneries and factories were wealthy, aye. The poor souls who laboured in them very much were not, but such is the way of the world.

We reached the West Gate at last, and the detachment of City Guard on duty there admitted us without comment. Their sergeant obviously recognised me from my time as the city governor, and gave me a respectful salute as we passed.

'Welcome back to the city, sir,' she said.

I couldn't remember her name but I reined in my horse to return her salute. 'Thank you, Sergeant,' I said. 'What's the

lay of things in the city?’

‘Aye, well,’ she said, and I guessed she might be wondering how much she was allowed to tell me now I wasn’t governor any more. ‘We’ve been busy, and no mistake. Ellinburg has always been rough, I don’t have to tell you that, but these last months have been bloody. The Pious Men and the Northern Sons are in open war on the streets again, and there just ain’t enough of us to do much about it. Governor Schulz does what she can, of course, but it’s tough. You’ll watch your step and keep your men close, if you’re wise.’

I thanked her for her words. The City Guard of Ellinburg had suffered heavy losses in the hostilities that had seen me oust Governor Hauer and eventually replace him on Ailsa’s orders, and in my brief term as governor I had struggled to secure the crown funding to replace them. It looked like Schulz was faring no better since she had taken over from me.

If the Guard were prepared to admit things were that bad, then they were far worse and that was all there was to it. I glanced across at Anne and caught her eye, and I could see she was thinking the same thing. Once we were well out of earshot of the guards on the gate she nudged her horse closer to mine so we could talk quietly.

‘I don’t like this, Tomas,’ she said. ‘I’ve got a bad feeling.’

‘Aye, me too,’ I admitted. ‘Feels a sight safer than Dannsburg, mind.’

Anne snorted. ‘That’s not fucking hard.’

She had a point there, I had to allow.

We rode across the west side of the city to the market square and then down through the Narrows and into the Stink. The Stink was home; I had been born and raised there, for all that I no longer truly felt like I belonged. The all-pervading stench that enveloped Ellinburg was so much worse there, downriver from the tanneries and factories of the Wheels. It was like a living thing, a miasma that clogged

your nose and throat and turned your stomach, threatening to make you vomit at any moment. I had almost forgotten just how bad it was, and from the faces of the others, I could tell I wasn't the only one.

Only Beast, who to the best of my knowledge had never been to Ellinburg before, looked impassive. After what he had lived through, I supposed that was only natural, but thinking on the things that a man can harden his senses to, well, that gave me pause all the same. After you have lived in a slave pit caked in shit, your own and that of fifty other men, for the gods only knew how long, I thought you could probably take anything in your stride. He had grown his beard back in on the road, and the thick red hair on his face made him look like some sort of huge demon. Apt, I thought, for a man who had lived in Hell.

I was thinking I'd never want find out what it was like to live as Beast had done – then I realised I already had, at Abington. It's amazing what you can normalise after a time: not just the constant filth and the endless hunger, but the roar of the cannon, day and night, which sets the ground shaking beneath your feet, and the choking, burning clouds of smoke from the blasting powder. Men and women – *friends* – were dying every minute of wounds and fever and the bloody flux. War was death and damnation, living and dying and killing in every assault on the walls.

'Tomas, are you all right?'

I felt Anne's hand on my arm and realised just how badly my hands were shaking on the reins. *Battle shock*. It never really leaves you, and in my experience, the strangest things can set it off. Abington was four years and more behind me, but at the same time I felt that I would never leave there. I feared I would carry Abington with me to the grave, for all that I prayed that wasn't true. Surely I would be free of it one day?

Wouldn't I? I really didn't know.

‘Aye,’ I said, although I wasn’t. ‘Aye, I’m well, Anne. Well enough to face my aunt, anyway.’

We rode through the Stink to the Tanner’s Arms, the stronghold and headquarters of the Pious Men. I owned the tavern, but it was Anne’s base now, not mine. The Pious Men had their table in the big back room, and that was where Aunt Enaid would be. We tied our horses to the hitching rail and walked inside. Simple Sam had the door, and his face lit up in a great smile when he saw us.

‘Mr Piety! Anne!’ he exclaimed. ‘Fucking hell, who’s this?’

Beast was bigger even than Sam was, if not by all that much. He grinned at Sam and extended a massive hand.

‘I’m Beast,’ he said.

‘Beast, this is Sam,’ I said as they shook. ‘He’s a good lad. Been with me since the war.’

‘Aye,’ Beast said, and he and Sam exchanged a look that said they had both been there and they both understood, and they didn’t need to talk of it.

‘Your auntie’s at the table,’ Sam said.

I paused for a moment, remembering Jochan’s letter, and swallowed. ‘Sam,’ I said, ‘this door belongs to Black Billy. Where . . . How is he?’

Sam puffed his cheeks out in an exaggerated sigh. ‘He’s getting there,’ he said. ‘He took a nasty wound fighting those Northern Sons of bitches last month, but Doc Cordin stitched him up good and tight. Doc reckons he’ll live, if the rot don’t set in.’

‘Aye, well,’ I said, and not finding other words, ‘I’ll pray for him.’

Our Lady didn’t answer prayers, I knew that, but Sam didn’t and he smiled at my words.

‘I’d appreciate that, Mr Piety. I like Billy. He’s my mate.’

‘I know, Sam,’ I said, and clapped him on the shoulder as I passed.

‘I don’t want to be here, I want to go home,’ Billy whined. ‘I want to see Mina.’

‘I know, lad,’ I said, ‘and we will. I just need to see my aunt first.’

I suppose I could have sent him straight to the house with a guard, but Beast didn’t know the way and I wasn’t sure I trusted Oliver quite as much as I did the others. He had done nothing to make me suspect him of disloyalty, but nothing to make me *not*, either. Oliver was a hired man with a blade. He wasn’t a Pious Man and he wasn’t part of the crew, part of the cadre of veterans I had served with in the war. I would have trusted any one of *them* with my son’s life without a second thought – not just Bloody Anne, but Simple Sam and Black Billy, Sir Eland and Brak and even Cookpot, for all that he wasn’t really a Pious Man any more. Even so, I knew Cookpot would have taken a crossbow bolt for my Billy. These were men from my regiment: staunch soldiers indeed. We had been through Hell together, and each and every one of us would have killed or died for any other. But Oliver – well, I couldn’t have said.

It’s a thing that has to be understood about hired blades: they’re in it for the money, and you don’t get paid if you’re dead. They will fight for you, aye, but they probably won’t die for you. Oliver had been with me for a good while, as had Emil, who was also a hired man, but . . . Aye, *but*. There was only so far I could bring myself to trust any mercenary, so no, Oliver wasn’t escorting Billy back to the house off Trader’s Row, so Billy would just have to wait to see his woman. I put his safety before his desires every time, because the gods only knew no boy in his teen years would ever do that for himself.

‘Come on,’ I said, and led the way to the bar.

Hari looked as surprised to see me as Sam had and quickly lined up glasses of brandy on the bar for us, with a beer for Billy. The lad had yet to develop a taste for spirits, but then, he only had some sixteen or so years to him – although no one was really sure of his age, least of all him.

‘Sir Tomas,’ Hari said, looking a little awestruck. ‘It’s an honour to have you in my tavern.’

‘Oh fuck off with that,’ I said. ‘For one, it’s my tavern, not yours, and for two it’s not so long ago that I was telling you not to pull that shard of flashstone out of your leg if you didn’t want to bleed to death. So all things considered, I reckon you can just call me Tomas.’

Hari snorted laughter and refilled my brandy glass, which I appeared to have already drained.

‘Aye, well,’ he said. ‘You know how things are, and the times move on, boss. I hear you’re something in the government now?’

‘Something,’ I acknowledged. ‘Nothing that matters.’

Truth be told, the Governing Council *didn’t* matter. It should have done, but it just didn’t. Every election was rigged and most of the councillors were under the thumb of the house of law one way or another: the entire thing was a complete farce designed to let the Queen’s Men do whatever the fuck we liked. I swallowed my brandy and tried not to think about it.

‘Is my aunt in?’ I asked.

‘Aye, she’s at the table,’ Hari said.

I gestured for a refill, then carried it with me through to the back room. I left the others at the bar, Billy and Oliver chatting with Hari while Beast and Sam sat down to an arm-wrestling competition with Anne watching on approvingly. My money would have been on Beast, had I had the time to watch too, but I had work to do.

I found my aunt sitting in her chair to the right hand of the head of the table; that was where Anne always used to sit when she had been my second. She was going over a pile of papers, but looked up at me when I entered, meeting my gaze with her single eye.

‘Tomas Piety,’ she said.

She’d never been one to be overly emotional, my aunt.

‘Auntie,’ I said. I took a seat, but not at the head of the table, as that was Anne’s place now, and sipped my drink. ‘What’s the lay of things in Ellinburg, then?’

‘You’re the fucking Queen’s Man,’ she said. ‘You probably know better than I do.’

My aunt wasn’t easy with the path I had taken in my life and she had never tried to hide that fact, but all the same I made myself take her words in my stride.

‘I’ve heard conflicting reports,’ I said, and held her gaze. ‘Some say it’s under control. Some say otherwise.’

‘Your fucking brother,’ Enaid said at once. I didn’t have to remind myself that she was nobody’s fool as she added, ‘He’s been sending you reports of his own, hasn’t he?’

‘Of course he has,’ I said. ‘As you say, he’s my brother. Things haven’t been quite as easy here as you’ve been telling Anne, have they, my dear aunt?’

She sighed and scratched beneath the leather patch that covered her missing eye. ‘Aye, perhaps not,’ she admitted after a moment.

I sat back in my chair and looked at her. She was a strong, heavily built woman somewhere past her sixtieth year. As well as the patch over her right eye, she had a limp from a broken ankle that had never quite healed properly back in *her* war, at Krathzgrad, the war before mine, where she had served under Lord Vogel, then, her captain.

‘Hmmm,’ I said, and swirled my drink in my glass, making the silence stretch until she felt the need to fill it.

‘I won’t lose the streets a second time, Tomas,’ she said at last, and I knew I had been right.

‘Anne’s back home with me,’ I said, ‘and Oliver and Emil, and my Billy too. And a new lad, Beast. He’s part of my crew in the service, not a Pious Man, but he all but worships Anne and I know he’ll fight alongside the Pious Men when it comes to it. How’s Black Billy? Really, I mean?’

‘He was in a bad way for a while, I won’t lie to you about that,’ Enaid said, ‘but the Doc’s hopeful now. That girl of

yours, that Mina, who's been living in your house and pining for Billy the Boy. She . . . she came to see him. Hari went and asked her to, and she came. He won't own to it, I'm sure, Tomas, but he's got it into his head that your lad did something to save his life when he was wounded before and he thinks she's . . . you know. Like the lad is. So he went and fetched her and she came and sat with Black Billy, and . . . and he got a lot better. Truth be told he shouldn't have done, not with a wound like that, but he did. I don't want to ask, Tomas. If it's really witchcraft, I don't want to know.'

I blinked at her in surprise.

'You know what they can both do,' I said. 'You were there at the battle of the Stink. You saw them both fight.'

'Aye, well, maybe that's different,' Enaid said, and I struggled with her thinking there. 'War magic is just fighting, you know what I mean? We all fight, however we can. But making them well as should be dying? That's different. That's against Our Lady's will, surely?'

'Is it? Perhaps Our Lady sends these cunning folk to save those She isn't yet ready to receive into the grey lands. Perhaps it *is* Her will.'

That was a philosophical question, I knew, and I was no philosopher, but then, neither was my aunt.

'Perhaps,' she said. 'You're the priest, Tomas: you tell me.'

'I think I just did,' I said, and drained my glass to make an end of it.

'Aye, well,' Enaid said.

I stood. 'Give your report to Anne. She's your boss now, not me.'

I walked back into the bar and touched Anne on the arm. Beast had beaten Sam at the arm wrestling, as I had expected, and they were now enthusiastically drinking and jesting together.

'Go and talk to my aunt,' I told her. 'Get the truth of things out of her, Anne, but don't be too hard on her. She's been doing her best, I have no doubt about that.'

‘And where are you going?’

‘Me? I’m going home. This is your place now, not mine. Billy wants to see his woman, and I want my bed.’

*

We rode back across Ellinburg, Billy and Oliver and Beast and me, up through the Narrows to Trader’s Row. There wasn’t any trouble, for all that we passed only a single patrol of City Guard on a route where I would have expected to see four or five. It looked like they really were as stretched as the sergeant at the gate had told me. Of course, word wouldn’t have got round yet that Anne and me were back in the city, and it was barely dusk by then anyway. Even so, I was tired. It had been a long week on the road and I wanted to be anywhere but in a saddle.

We drew up at my house, brightly lit from within in welcome, and my steward Salo greeted us enthusiastically at the door while the grooms led our horses away to the stables to be tended to.

‘It’s good to see you, Sir Tomas,’ Salo said, bowing low.

‘Aye, you too, Salo,’ I said. He was a good man, and had served me well these last few years.

Billy pushed eagerly past him without a word and went into the house shouting Mina’s name.

Salo showed me a rare smile. ‘Young Master Billy sounds glad to be home, sir.’

‘That he is,’ I agreed, and returned his smile. ‘Has the lass been well?’

‘Oh she’s no trouble,’ Salo assured me. ‘Miss Mina has mostly been at her books while you’ve been away.’

Miss Mina, indeed. She was a foul-mouthed street urchin rescued from the gutter as a young child by Old Kurt, and one of the most powerful cunning women I had ever heard tell of. I think only the Princess Crown Royal herself could have bested Mina in a battle of the cunning, before her fiery

ascension to glory. Billy loved her, though, and I had to admit I was fond of the girl myself. She had saved my life, after all, and never mind that she had also betrayed me to Old Kurt. I had forgiven her for that, I reminded myself, and I stood by it. I understood her reasons at the time, and what Kurt meant to her.

‘That’s good,’ I said. ‘Is—?’

‘There’s a hot bath waiting in your room and food and brandy when you’re ready for it,’ Salo assured me.

‘Thank you,’ I said, and I meant it.

I still hadn’t entirely grasped the idea of how to live in a big house with servants at that point, but I had long since realised that I liked it. Salo was an extremely good steward: he knew me well enough to know what I would want and when I would want it, and to make sure that it would be there when I did. The man was worth his weight in gold for that alone, and I made a mental note to increase his wages. He was already well paid for his position, but just the immediate presence of that hot bath was enough to earn him a raise. I was getting too old to spend days on end on horseback, and I needed it.

Later, bathed and fed and with a glass of brandy in my hand, I made my way to the drawing room. Billy and Mina were there, snuggled up together on the settle holding hands. They had a glow about them that told me they had already attended to their most urgent business, and I couldn’t blame them for that. I wasn’t so old that I had forgotten what it was like to be their age, after all.

‘Hello Mina,’ I said as I took a seat.

I had changed into a loose robe, comfortable after the hardship of the road, and when she looked at me in surprise, it occurred to me that she had probably never seen me in anything other than formal clothes before. But Ailsa wasn’t there any more and I would wear what the fuck I liked in my own home. If it made me look less distant, then well and good. She was Billy’s woman and he was my son in every

way that mattered, and I wanted her to see me as his da, not some figure of the authority she so obviously hated.

‘Mr Piety,’ she said, and she rose and dropped me a clumsy curtsey. ‘I want to thank you – for letting me stay in your house, I mean. I’d have been out on the streets after we left the governor’s hall otherwise. I . . . I haven’t got anyone else.’

I gave her a nod. I didn’t like to do this, especially not in front of Billy, but I knew I had to. ‘You’re very welcome, Mina,’ I said, ‘but that isn’t strictly true, is it? You’ve got Old Kurt, after all. I hear he’s back in Ellinburg.’

Mina flushed and looked at the fire that was cracking merrily in the grate. ‘So they say,’ she said shortly.

‘You haven’t been in touch with him?’

‘No,’ she said, and she turned and looked at me then. ‘Not since . . . you know what I did.’

‘Aye, I do,’ I said. ‘You warned him we were coming, to that factory that was on strike. That we were going to put down his workers’ uprising. You warned him, and he ran away and left those working men to face the consequences on their own. I know that, because you owned to it and I respect you for that, and I forgave you. But now he’s back.’

‘Aye, he is,’ Mina said, ‘or so I hear, anyway. I haven’t seen him.’

‘Why not? He all but raised you, as I understand it.’

‘He did,’ Mina said, ‘but I can’t say as I love him. He raised me from a little one and he taught me my letters and how to work the cunning and he never touched me, not in a bad way, but he wasn’t my da – not in the way you’re Billy’s da, anyway. And I’m with Billy now, and you’re his da and you and Old Kurt stand on the opposite sides of something, so . . . so it didn’t seem right. I didn’t want to see you kill Kurt, but that’s about it, if you take my meaning.’

The cynical side of me thought about Kurt’s hovel and about the big house we were sitting in and the servants at our beck and call and I heard *I know which side the bread is*

battered, but I honestly didn't think that was it. She really did love Billy, any fool could see that, and she seemed to respect me as his father even though I wasn't, not really.

'I heard you went to see Black Billy,' I said, changing the subject.

'I did,' she admitted. 'Hari came to the house and he asked me to – he almost begged me, truth be told. He told me how my Billy had healed him when he'd been dying of a wound, and could I do the same for his friend? Well, I didn't rightly know. Old Kurt, he taught me hurting things, not healing things, saying that was what I was best at. That and mind things.'

'Mind things? What are "mind things", Mina?'

'I don't rightly understand it myself, Mr Piety,' she confessed. 'Going away and coming back – seeing things in people's heads – I don't know. I didn't like it really, but apparently I can do it. He never taught me much healing, but poor Black Billy . . . he was so torn by the knife, like a shawl caught on a nail and all coming unravelled, you know? I didn't really know what to do with him but I like to knit, and to play cat's cradle with *my* Billy. Funny how they've got the same name, isn't it, and him a grown man and so dark and my Billy so young and so pale. So I did my best, and it was like I was playing cat's cradle on my own, or maybe with Black Billy's innards. I sort of . . . well, knitted him back together. I don't really know how to tell you about it. It's hard, the cunning. It's something we can do, but . . .'

She stuttered to a halt, and Billy put his hand over hers.

'It's hard to talk about, Da,' he explained. 'To people who can't, I mean. There aren't the words. We just . . . I don't know. We just *do* it, you understand? Doesn't mean we really know how.'

'Aye lad,' I said, 'I do. I can respect that.'

I understood what they were trying to tell me, at any rate. The cunning was hard to talk about to people who didn't have it in the same way that the war was hard to talk about

with folk who hadn't been there. That made perfect sense to me, and right then I wished I hadn't questioned her quite so hard.

'That's all I can tell you, Mr Piety,' Mina said.

'Thank you,' I said. 'And thank you for helping Billy. He's a good man, and a valued member of the crew. I'd hate to lose him.'

'Hari said . . .' she started, and faltered.

'What?'

'He said he hardly knew him, but he was his best friend. That made me sad, sad for Billy and Hari both. Do they really have no one?'

I thought of the two men, both conscript soldiers with no wives or children I had ever heard them speak of. Hari ran the Tanner's Arms and Black Billy had always had the door there, so they had probably spent more time in each other's company than anyone else's for the last few years. It wasn't anything I had ever given any thought to, but now that she said it, I wasn't really surprised.

'Perhaps not,' I said.

I got up and turned away to pour myself another brandy, and I found that there was grit in my eyes.

Chapter 8

I spent a couple of days recovering from the journey, and I make no apologies for that. I was no longer as young as I had once been, after all, and the long days in the saddle had taken their toll. I visited my barber Ernst on Trader's Row and had a haircut and a shave, commissioned some new clothes and a set of priest's robes from Pawl the tailor, all the things a gentleman of means would be expected to do. It was partly a performance, for the eyes of what passed for society in Ellinburg, I will allow, but I found that I actually wanted those things too.

I was no longer the same man I had been when I ruled the Stink from the Tanner's Arms, and over the last year or so I had finally come to accept that. I knew I belonged in Dannsburg more than I did here now.

The time passed pleasantly enough, and on the afternoon of the third day Jochan came to visit. Billy and Mina had gone to market with Cook, with Beast to mind them, so I was alone. Salo showed my brother through to the drawing room where I was taking my ease by the fire with a book in my hand, but when I saw him I set it down and rose to embrace him.

'Gods, it's good to see you, Tomas,' he said. 'I'd have come sooner but I've been busy catching Anne up with what's really been happening while you've been away. Our aunt is being a little shy with the truth.'

'So I gathered,' I said. 'How's Billy?'

'On the mend, thank the Lady,' Jochan said. 'Truth be told, he shouldn't be, though. That was a killing wound and no mistake, but I'll take it and be grateful. Your Mina saved his life and that's all there is to it.'

‘She’s a good girl,’ I said.

I crossed to the cupboard and poured brandy for us both.

I passed one to Jochan. ‘How’s the family?’ I asked him as I regained my seat.

Jochan knew I was including Cutter in that, and he smiled. ‘Hanne’s well enough, and little Enaid is getting bigger every day. Yoseph’s fully regained his strength now, and he’s been an asset in the battles we’ve had with the Northern Sons. He . . . he gets me through a lot of tough times. You know how things are between us.’

‘You know I don’t have a problem with that, so long as Hanne is taken care of.’

‘Aye, I do,’ Jochan said. ‘That means a lot to me, Tomas.’

I put my hand over his for a moment. I knew my brother’s heart belonged to the bearded Messiah, for all that he was married with a child, and that was his business. My brother had been through enough in his life without me making trouble over something that was none of my concern. He looked after Hanne and she looked to have made her peace with the situation, and that was good.

‘So, tell me about the Northern Sons,’ I said.

Jochan had barely started to speak when he was interrupted by a knock at the door, followed by Salo’s polite cough.

I looked up in irritation. ‘What is it?’

‘I’m sorry, Sir Tomas, but there’s a messenger from the governor’s hall. Governor Schulz invites you to visit at your very earliest convenience. The man is quite agitated, if I may say so. What shall I tell him?’

I was tempted to tell him to fuck off, truth be told. I hadn’t seen my brother in months and I was enjoying his company. That said, the governor knew who I was and that meant she wouldn’t send for me unless it was extremely important. I gave Jochan an apologetic look.

‘Duty calls,’ I said. ‘Stay, if you want. Have another drink. I don’t know how long I’ll be, mind.’

‘No, I’ll head off,’ Jochan said. ‘See my daughter for a bit.’

We embraced again, and I had a footman bring me my coat and the Weeping Women. With the twin swords buckled around my waist I stepped out into the hall. The governor’s messenger was a thin man of the sort of nondescript appearance that said he was probably one of her spies.

‘I’ll come now,’ I told him, and together we walked the few hundred yards from my house to the governor’s hall.

I was admitted by the detachment of City Guard on duty at the door, all of whom of course used to work for me. No one tried to take my weapons from me, which pleased me. I was obviously still respected here, and that was good. The messenger rather unnecessarily showed me up the stairs to what had once been my own study, and knocked at the door.

‘Come!’ Schulz called from within.

I entered the room and nodded to the woman behind the desk. ‘Governor Schulz,’ I said. ‘To what do I owe so urgent an invitation?’

‘Thank you for coming so swiftly, Sir Tomas,’ Schulz said, and she rose and dipped me a small curtsy. ‘A matter has arisen that I feel requires the, ah, guidance of the house of law.’

I find myself suddenly beyond my ability and I need a Queen’s Man to tell me what to do, that’s what she was telling me. For all that I could find little enough to like in Governor Schulz, she had struck me as efficient and capable, so I could only assume something big had happened.

‘Oh? And what’s that, then?’

She poured for us both from a crystal decanter on the cupboard and returned to her seat. I cradled my glass of wine, which I didn’t much care for at the best of times, and looked at her in silence until she answered the question.

‘A man came yesterday to the governor’s hall, begging an audience – a commoner called Kurt. Captain Miller vouched

for him, said you would know who he was.'

I remembered that Miller had been terrified of the old cunning man the last time our paths had crossed and I could understand that. Old Kurt could certainly be unsettling, especially to those who didn't know him well. I remembered the first time I had ridden into the Wheels after the bombings Ailsa had orchestrated on our wedding day. I remembered seeing Old Kurt standing at the end of the alley between Dock Road and the river path. He had lifted a dead rat by its tail and held it up towards me, and the look on his face had been unreadable. I wondered then if he had cursed me in some way, and if perhaps that curse was about to come home to roost.

'Aye, I know Old Kurt,' I said. 'He's a cunning man and a troublemaker. He was behind a lot of the workers' unrest I faced when I was governor here before you. What did he want, and what does this have to do with the house of law?'

If the governor had interrupted my pleasant afternoon with my brother just on account of Old Kurt giving her the fear then I would have taken it ill, but it turned out there was more to it than that.

'He wanted the opportunity to introduce me to another man,' Schulz went on, and faltered. She took a sip of her wine while she put her words together. 'He returned here first thing this morning, with this other man. I have been . . . hosting them both, ever since.'

Keeping them prisoner, that meant, and I wondered why.

'And who is the other man?'

'I don't know,' Schulz confessed. 'He *says* he's an emissary from Skania, but of course I have only his word for that. His, and this Kurt's, and I don't trust *him* as far as I can spit.'

'You'd be wise not to,' I agreed. 'What do you want from me?'

'I'll be honest with you, Sir Tomas,' she said, 'international diplomatic relations are a little above the head of a

provincial city governor. I serve the house of law but I don't carry the warrant, or have anything like your authority. I don't feel qualified to deal with this. If he truly is who he says, then I could be risking starting a war if I do the wrong thing. I can't have that on my conscience.'

But you can have it on mine, I thought, but of course she could. She knew I was a Queen's Man and this sort of shit was supposedly what we were for. In practice, our purpose was somewhat different, but obviously Schulz didn't know that – nobody did outside the governing council, possibly, and the house of law.

'Aye, that's fair,' I said. 'I'll speak to Old Kurt first.'

The governor rose from behind her desk. 'If you'll follow me, I have them downstairs. Not in the cells, obviously, but in private interview rooms.'

Interrogation rooms, she meant. I wondered if perhaps Schulz was forgetting that I had done her job before her. I knew exactly how the governor's hall worked: the 'interview rooms' were where people were threatened, beaten and screamed at by the City Guard before they were dragged down to the cells in the basement to await their sentencing, which usually meant their hanging. I had to allow that I didn't miss living in the governor's apartments. The walls were thick and the floors were sturdy, but they weren't soundproof. It was like a miniature version of the house of law itself, I realised suddenly, and that wasn't a thought that had ever occurred to me before. I had only been governor of Ellinburg for a few months but I didn't look back on that time with any degree of fondness.

We walked down the stairs together to find Captain Miller waiting there for us in the main hall. He gave Governor Schulz a crisp salute and me a long look. I had been his boss, of course, and it had been me who had promoted him from sergeant to the Captain of the City Guard when his superior, Captain Rogan, had fallen to the Skanian magician who burned him to a crisp. I wasn't his boss any more, but I

could see how much he was wondering exactly who I was now, and why I was there. He wasn't an imaginative man, but he must have had some idea that was probably fairly close to the truth. Schulz herself was clearly deferring to me, which probably told him all he needed to know.

'Captain, please escort Sir Tomas to the interview room where the man called Kurt is taking his leisure,' she said.

Miller's eyes widened slightly at her use of my title: that was news to him, obviously, and again he looked at me with something between suspicion and fear. He was a solid, bluff man, stout in the belly, a career soldier who had retired into the City Guard, as so many did. He probably remembered the warrant I had shown him and the rest of Rogan's loyalist guardsmen when I had recruited them to my cause against Governor Hauer, but whether he had truly understood what it meant at the time was debatable. He clearly did now, though. A Queen's Man arriving to arrest a corrupt governor was one thing: that fitted the narrative of what we were supposed to be for. One turning up to do his boss' job for her, though, interviewing mysterious foreigners in locked rooms? That was probably quite another.

'Captain,' I said. 'Good to see you again.'

'Aye,' he faltered. 'Sir.'

Captain Miller had clearly never expected to see me again in his life, and something in his eyes told me he wasn't entirely pleased to be proved wrong.

I showed him a smile, and he swallowed before clearing his throat. 'This way, sir.'

I followed the captain down a long corridor to number three of the six infamous interview rooms. He banged on the door, which was opened from within by a young uniformed guardsman, who saluted the captain and gave me a bewildered look. I didn't recognise him, and he obviously didn't know me either.

'Sir Tomas would like to speak to our guest,' Captain Miller said.

The guardsman looked dubious as he admitted me to the room, then closed and bolted the door behind me. He took up position against the wall while I looked at Old Kurt.

He was seated on a rough wooden chair behind a scarred and stained table. One hand was manacled to the heavy iron ring bolted to its surface. The table and chair themselves were bolted to the stone floor, I knew, and no man in the realm could have torn them loose. In the governor's hall, interviews were taken seriously.

'I might have known it would be you,' Old Kurt said. 'Turned Queen's Man then, have you? Can't say I'm surprised, not after you married that bloody awful woman. I know what you did, the pair of you.'

We bombed the Wheels into Hell itself, that Godsday afternoon.

I knew Old Kurt had never forgiven me for that, and was never likely to. Truth be told, I couldn't blame him, for all that it had been more Ailsa's doing than mine.

'I'm not here to talk about that,' I said.

'I bet you're not,' Kurt spat. 'You'll never be here to talk about *that*, will you?'

I took my time seating myself in the other chair across the table from him, the one that wasn't bolted down, letting the silence stretch to emphasise the degree to which I was ignoring the question. When I was as comfortable as one can get in a chair in an interview room, I met his eyes.

Kurt looked terrible. He seemed to have aged ten years since I had last seen him, and his paper-thin skin was sagging in folds from the prominent bones of his skull. His eyes were over-bright, almost feverish, and I was uncomfortably reminded of how Billy and Mina appeared now: the same look as the Princess Crown Royal had had about her before she ascended to Heaven on a pillar of flame and murderous lightning.

The cunning was not a benign mistress, I thought, for all that Old Kurt must have been well past his eightieth year.

‘What the fuck are you up to?’ I asked him.

If my sudden bluntness surprised him he gave no sign of it.

‘I’ve been away,’ he said.

‘You ran away.’

‘Maybe I did,’ he said. ‘Maybe an old man didn’t want to face a horde of thugs in hobnailed boots claiming to uphold a law they wrote themselves.’

‘The City Guard don’t write the laws, you fool.’

‘But I’d bet gold the Queen’s Men do,’ he countered. ‘One way or another they do, and don’t you try to tell me otherwise, Tomas Piety.’

I didn’t try to tell him otherwise, largely because he was absolutely right. I just sat and stared at him until he started talking again.

‘Do you know where I went? I went to Varnburg and I took a ship. I took a ship to Skania, to find out what’s going on for myself.’

‘Oh did you, aye? So how did you get back again then? The ports have been closed to Skanian ships since then, and trade with them is now illegal. There are no merchantmen of ours calling in the north.’

‘But pirates and smugglers come and go as they please,’ Old Kurt countered. ‘Once I showed them I could bring fair winds to their sails I was welcome enough aboard, and my friend with me. He’s a special envoy of the King of Skania.’

‘So he’s a spy, then,’ I said.

‘Well, they could hardly send a fucking ambassador, could they?’ Kurt snapped. ‘Not when your lot all but declared war last year.’

I had to allow he had a point there.

‘That was a misunderstanding,’ I said. ‘And why’s he here now? Why send yet another spy, when their bastards are already here and pulling the strings of the Northern Sons? Oh, I know why they come here, Old Kurt. Varnburg is closed and heavily defended, but they can come around the coast

and sail up the river to Ellinburg just fine, can't they? Just like your smuggler did, I'll warrant. Aye, they can come up that river and settle themselves in *my* city and bribe and blackmail folk until they've got a crew behind them, just like Bloodhands did with the Gutcutters. As you'll no doubt remember, I wasn't having it then, and I'm not having it now.'

'They're not,' Old Kurt said.

That stopped me dead, and I took a moment before I looked at him once more. 'What do you mean, they're not? They fucking well have and are.'

'*Someone* did, aye,' Kurt said. 'Someone still is, as you say. But not the Skanians. At least, not on the king's orders, they ain't.'

'How the fuck would you know that? Do you seriously expect me to believe that a specimen like you got an audience with the king of fucking anywhere? Don't mock me, Old Kurt, I don't care for it.'

'Not as such, no,' he admitted. 'All the same, Tomas, do you really think they don't have people like you in Skania? I think everywhere has. Theirs are called the White Shadows, but a Queen's Man is a Queen's Man, whether they have a king or a queen on the throne, or no throne at all and an elected senate like they have in Kastavia. Everywhere has fucking people like you, and they came to find me. In Skania they treat their cunning folk a fucking sight better than we do here, that's for sure. Mages, they call them, and they give them robes and silver circlets for their long hair, and they pay them respect.'

I had never even heard of Kastavia and I had no idea what a senate might be, but all the same, the rest of his words struck a chord of truth with me. I had wondered before if the Skanian magicians we had faced and killed had simply been cunning folk by another name, and since meeting our own magicians I'd become convinced of it. I looked at Old Kurt for a long moment, weighing his words.

Follow the money, a voice whispered in the back of my mind. *Who stands to gain?*

Not Kurt, from what I could see. They might have offered him gold, I had to allow, but Old Kurt had never much cared about money. He could have made himself rich decades ago with what he could do, but he never had. No, Kurt didn't care about money, beyond what he needed to live. Before he left Ellinburg he had still been living in the same rat-infested hovel in the Wheels that he had lived in when I had been a boy, and he'd been happy enough there. No, Old Kurt wasn't moved by gold. He cared about the common people, working people: equality, and rights for people who don't have any. Those were the levers that moved Old Kurt.

'What's Skania like, then?' I asked him. 'I'm surprised you're so keen on the place. They keep slaves in Skania, so I hear.'

'So you were told,' Kurt corrected me, 'and I'll ask you, told by who? And what did she stand to gain from it?'

He was right about that: it had been Ailsa who had told me that, of course, when she had first recruited me to the side of the Queen's Men, and I hadn't questioned her. I hadn't questioned her about anything, mind, overawed as I had been by her beauty and her position, but now I did wonder: who stood to gain? Certainly Ailsa and the Queen's Men had won my support and that of my crew, vital resources in the proxy war they had been fighting against Skania on the streets of Ellinburg.

Although, had they? If what Old Kurt was telling me was true, then we hadn't been fighting the Skanians at all, for all that they'd had Skanian men and women behind them. So *who*, and *why*?

I couldn't find my way to an easy answer to that.

Chapter 9

I left Old Kurt then.

‘You didn’t hear a word of that,’ I cautioned the nervous-looking young guardsman as he opened the door for me, and he swallowed and nodded.

To my surprise, Governor Schulz was waiting for me herself, having sent Miller off to attend to his duties.

‘Well?’ she asked, an anxious look on her face.

I grunted. ‘A grotty old man spun me a yarn,’ I said. ‘It’s not the first time he’s done that.’

‘What do I do with him?’

‘Keep holding him for now. I want to speak to the other one.’

‘I thought you might,’ she said.

‘Aye and you were right, but not now. There’s someone I want to talk to first. Hold them until I come back tomorrow.’

‘Overnight?’

‘Overnight usually falls between “now” and “tomorrow”, Governor, so aye.’

‘But if he’s really who he says he is—’

‘He isn’t,’ I cut her off. ‘Not exactly, anyway. He may or may not come from the King of Skania, but even if he does, he’s no more an official emissary of the throne than I am, if you take my meaning.’

I could see that she took my meaning well enough. ‘Ah,’ she said.

‘He’ll endure a night in the cells if he’s halfway fit for the job. Don’t mistreat them, either of them, and see that they get a hot meal, but for Our Lady’s sake, don’t let either of them go.’

‘From what I hear, the man Kurt could leave if he wanted to, and I dare say there would be nothing the Guard could do to stop him.’

‘Perhaps not,’ I said, ‘but I don’t believe that he will try to escape. If he blasts his way out of here with the cunning he’ll have burned whatever shaky bridge he has built to me and he knows it. I don’t think he’ll risk that. I think it’s probably safe to trust him, this one time at least.’

Could and might and possibly, those were the promises of the Queen’s Men.

I met Governor Schulz’s eyes and knew she was thinking exactly that. I didn’t trust Kurt himself a spit, but I did trust him to put his interests before his comfort. I thought he would endure a night in custody just as well as this supposed Skanian White Shadow would.

I left the governor’s hall and walked the short distance home. Jochan had left, which was a shame, but I rounded up Stefan and had him ride with me down to the Stink to the Tanner’s Arms. I wanted a word with my aunt, and with Anne too, if she was there.

She wasn’t, but Jochan was, propping the bar up and drinking brandy, talking loudly and drunkenly to Mika.

I’ll head off. See my daughter for a bit.

Needless to say, his infant daughter wasn’t there any more than his wife was. My brother hadn’t changed so much as all that, I realised. I loved him, in my way, but Jochan was a liability and probably always would be.

Aunt Enaid was at my old table in the corner, talking to her man Brak. It pained me to see the way his left arm rested stiffly on the table, the muscles withered away to little more than skin and bone. He’d taken a bad wound to the shoulder a couple of years ago and never really regained the use of the limb. I knew Aunt Enaid loved him dearly, although I doubted she would ever have admitted it out loud, probably even to him. I could see it, though, in the

way she looked at him, in the rare smile that played around her lips while he was talking.

I cleared my throat as I approached. 'Mind if I join you?'

'Evening, boss,' Brak said, and once more I had to correct him.

'It's just Tomas now,' I said.

'You'll always be the boss here one way or another and you fucking know it,' Enaid growled, but she pushed a chair out for me, nonetheless.

She was right, of course. The Pious Men were an important part of my assets as a Queen's Man, and there was no denying it. I certainly wasn't about to let such a useful resource slip away from me.

'I wanted to talk to you, Auntie,' I said, 'about the Northern Sons.'

I was interrupted by Jochan, who had apparently felt the urge to join us.

'Proper fucking family reunion,' he said as he swayed into a chair, and laughed. 'Just like old times, eh, Tomas?'

'Something like that,' I said, although it wasn't. The time Jochan and me had lived as boys in Enaid's house hadn't been exactly what you'd call happy, although it had been a sight better than what had come before. 'Since you're here as well, let's talk business. Who have you actually been fighting?'

'Sons of bitches,' Jochan said, and laughed again.

'Aye, the Northern Sons,' Enaid said. 'They've a new boss now, since you two did for Bloodhands, but it's the same crew by and large.'

'But Ellinburg men? You haven't seen any Skanians?'

'Not as such, no,' she said. 'No magicians, anyway, thank the Lady. We'd have been sorely pressed without young Billy if we had.'

'There's always Mina,' I reminded her, 'but that's interesting. We've always assumed the Skanians were

behind the Sons because Bloodhands said so, and because of those magicians. But what if they aren't?

'Then it's some other cunt,' Jochan pointed out. 'So what?'

'There was that man you arrested alongside Hauer,' my aunt reminded me. 'Didn't you say he was some sort of Skanian agent?'

'I said that's what he told me,' I said. 'Don't necessarily make it true, does it?'

'Where are you going with this, Tomas?'

I sipped my drink and didn't answer. I wasn't sure yet, but I knew one thing.

In the morning I was going to have a conversation with a White Shadow.

*

I returned to the governor's hall the next morning, and was promptly admitted and shown into Schulz's study.

'Sir Tomas,' she greeted me, rising from behind her desk to drop me a respectful curtsy.

I returned it with a nod that reinforced how much higher than her I stood in the Queen's Men. Seize the position of power, always, and never let it go: my captain had told me that back in the war, and he had been right then and he was right now.

'Have the Skanian released from his cell and put in an interview room,' I said. 'I'll speak to him there.'

She rang a bell to summon her assistant and relayed my instructions. That done, she folded her hands on the wide desk and looked at me.

'Will you take tea, Sir Tomas?'

'Thank you, no,' I said. 'What is it? You've something on your mind, I can tell.'

'It's just . . . I feel like I'm involved in something I don't understand.' She held my gaze for a moment, then looked away.

I had no idea what she was expecting. Reassurance, from a Queen's Man? Pretty lies to make her feel better? Perhaps even, laughably, an actual explanation? I had thought better of her than that.

'That's because you are,' I said, and if that was somewhat blunt, then I make no apologies for it.

She flushed and cleared her throat. 'Yes, well.'

I rose and went to open the door.

'I can't help you if I don't know what's going on,' Schulz said.

I turned and looked at her. 'I'll tell you what you need to know when and if I need you to know it,' I said. 'That's how this works, Governor. To do any more would be to put your life in unnecessary danger, and neither of us would want that, now, would we?'

She paled under my stare, and once again I turned away, leaving her to think on what I had said. I made my way silently down the stairs and along the corridor that led to the interview rooms, where I found a guardsman at his post, idly picking his nails with the point of his dagger in the way that Bloody Anne was wont to do.

'The Skanian,' I said, 'which room is he in?'

The man glanced up at me and snapped to attention, obviously recognising me. I could only assume he had worked for me, but I didn't recognise his face.

'Room four, m'Lord,' he said, and hurried ahead of me to show me the way and unlock the door.

The room was the same one Old Kurt had been in the previous day, but the man manacled to the table couldn't have been more different. He had perhaps forty years to him, only slightly older than I was myself, and long blond hair bound back from his high, pale forehead. His clothes were somewhat grubby and rumpled from a night in the cells, but obviously very fine for all of that. He looked up and met my eyes, and I immediately felt that we understood each other. I turned to the burly guardswoman who was

stationed against the wall by the door. This one I *did* recognise. She had been one of Rogan's originals, and had marched with us the night we arrested Hauer.

'Leave us,' I said.

'Sir, I'm not allowed to leave the room with a prisoner in it.'

'He's chained to a table that weighs more than you and me combined, and that bolted to the floor,' I said. 'I don't think he's going to hurt me, do you?'

'No, but you . . .' She faltered, and I knew what she was going to say and I admired the spine of her for saying it.

'You might hurt *him*. Sir.'

'Aye,' I said. 'I might, and that would be entirely my prerogative. Now fuck off and leave us alone.'

She coughed, but she knew who I was and what I carried in my pouch and after a moment she went out, closing the heavy door behind her. I sat down and looked at this Skanian agent, this supposed White Shadow, a Queen's Man in all but name in his own country.

'My name is Tomas Piety,' I said.

He nodded shortly. 'Sven Hendensen,' he replied.

'And what, Sven Hendensen, are you doing in my fucking city? You're a long way from Skania and no mistake, and getting here can't have been easy.'

'I am mostly here to speak to you, or at least to someone like you.'

'Oh?'

'It is good to finally meet you, Sir Tomas.'

I blinked at him, and he showed me a small smile.

'Of course I know who you are,' he said. 'We have our spies in your capital city the same as you have yours in ours. Such is the nature of diplomacy, and the discourse of kings and queens.'

'Of course,' I said carefully.

We had spies in the capital of Skania? I supposed it made sense, thinking about it, but I had never heard any talk of it,

even in the house of law. I wondered then what else Lord Vogel, Father Secrets, kept only to himself.

‘You are a Queen’s Man in your country, and I am a White Shadow in mine. We are really not so very different to each other, when all is said and done.’

‘One of us is manacled to a table in a room with a man with two swords and no reason to love him,’ I pointed out, ‘and the other isn’t. That’s quite the difference, to my mind.’

Hendensen just smirked at that. ‘I’m not new to this work of ours, Sir Tomas. You’re not going to scare me.’

Part of me wanted to take that as a challenge, but I knew that would have been both vain and foolish. On the outside chance that what Old Kurt had told me had even a nodding acquaintance with the truth, then I needed to talk to this man, and if possible build the beginnings of a trust between us.

‘Why do they call you White Shadows?’ I asked. ‘Sounds like a contradiction to me.’

The man laughed.

‘Oh, it comes from an old legend in my country, a fable for children, really,’ he said. ‘The White Shadows are ice trolls from the far north who are said to come under cover of heavy snowstorms and abduct people from their beds and their pastures, and those people are never seen again. They make people disappear, if you follow my meaning. Utter nonsense, of course, but there it is. These things stick, and become tradition in time.’

*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, and I knew what he meant. The boggart was no more real than his ice trolls were, but as children we had all been terrified of it, nonetheless. It was

natural, I supposed, for foolish childhood horrors to come to represent very real adult fears, whatever they may be.

‘I see,’ I said.

Hendensen lifted his right hand the few inches his manacle allowed him and rattled the chain slowly.

‘Do you trust me so little, even here in your stronghold?’

‘Aye,’ I said bluntly. ‘I’ve met Skanians before. I’ve seen your magicians work terrible horrors on the streets of this city.’

‘If I was a magician, do you really think I would still be here?’

‘Probably,’ I said. ‘Old Kurt is. You want to talk, so talk.’

‘I’m not a magician,’ he said, and for some reason I found I believed him.

If I came to doubt that, I could always have Billy or Mina come and look at him. If he had the cunning then he would shine, to their eyes, and they would know at once. All the same, I doubted it. There are different types of folk in this world. There are the studious, academic types who populated the house of magicians and the university in Dannsburg. There are bluff, hard-labouring commoners, and there are criminals and soldiers and lords and nobles, washerwomen and farmers, bakers and farriers and whores. And then there are people like Ailsa and Iagin and Konrad, people like me, who do other things. Hendensen, I was sure, was people like us. There was something in his face, in his eyes, in his utter lack of fear, that told me that in his country at least he too was above the law. A man who is utterly untouchable develops a certain attitude, after a while. I know I had, and I could see it reflected back at me in Hendensen’s steely gaze. Of course, he *wasn’t* in his country now and none of that applied any more, but some habits are hard to break. That, or he was even more like me than I had initially thought.

When in a strange environment, always act like you own the place.

That was a long-standing principle of mine, and this man certainly looked as though he felt the same way.

‘So,’ I said, ‘I’ll ask you again. Why the fuck are you in my city?’

‘To talk some bloody sense into you,’ he replied at once, and I found that I appreciated his blunt honesty. ‘You, and your whole organisation. Oh, our nations are not great friends and I won’t try to coat that in honey, but on a purely economic level we both value the trade between us, if nothing else. We have keenly felt the loss of revenue from the whale-oil trade, as I dare say you have felt the loss of the oil itself, and the shortages of good broadcloth and brandy in Skania are already making themselves felt. Let me make this very plain, Sir Tomas – and I don’t want you to take offence at what I am about to say – but I assure you His Majesty the King does not seek war. Wars are extremely expensive, and if I may speak bluntly, this country is too poor to be worth the cost of invading. Why would we? Your industry is primitive, your resources so limited you even import iron. Your government is corrupt, and your treatment of magicians frankly appalling. His Majesty simply doesn’t want you or the almighty pain in the arse it would be to bring you into the empire, and that’s all there is to it.’

He had a point there, I had to allow. Our late queen may have won the war in the south but in truth, it was only just, and she had all but beggared the realm to do it. I looked at Hendensen across the table and couldn’t help but smile. This, I thought, could potentially be the start of a beautiful friendship.

Well, if I didn’t end up having to cut his throat.

‘The thing is,’ I said slowly, ‘you murdered our fucking queen, and there we have a problem.’

Hendensen gave me a long, level look. ‘Who the fuck gave you that idea?’ he asked eventually. ‘I don’t know how much you know about royal families, Sir Tomas, but your queen was second cousin to our king. It tends to work like that,

after enough political marriages. No, His Majesty had probably never met her and I'm sure he bore her no great familial love, but all the same, there was absolutely no motive for him to have her assassinated. As I have said, and as we are speaking as two like-minded men of business rather than diplomats, your country is a midden we simply do not want. Get that into your head, and this conversation will become a lot easier.'

Our country was a midden, was it? I sat back in my seat and regarded this Skanian version of a Queen's Man. He was richly dressed, aye, but no more so than I was. But then, walk out of the doors of the governor's hall and down the narrows to the Stink and what would you see? Walk down to Fisher's Gate by the river and look into the grey, hungry, diseased faces of the common folk you would find there, and ask how wealthy our nation was. Was it different in Skania? Perhaps it was – I wouldn't know – but that wasn't what I had been told.

'What about your slaves?' I asked him. 'You keep slaves in Skania, so I hear.'

He met my eyes for a moment, then looked away. 'Once, yes – but that was a very long time ago,' he said. 'That time is three, four hundred years behind us. And thralls were not slaves, exactly – it's a fine distinction, I'll grant you, and not something we as a nation are proud of, but I assure you those times are gone. There are no slaves in Skania, Sir Tomas.'

They keep slaves in Skania, Tomas, did you know that? Do you have any idea what it is like, to be a Skanian slave? If we fail here, you could well find out.

Ailsa had said that to me once, but now I had to wonder. Our Lady only knew that the words of the Queen's Men and the truth were at best distant acquaintances, and we had barely known each other then. Had she been lying to me? Or perhaps she had been lied to herself and believed it? I

didn't know, but the longer I looked into the eyes of Sven Hendensen, the more I began to think that she had.

Had I been played like a puppet? For so long? I had only this man's word, and he was nobody I knew, and he had a vested interest in making me believe him. But *someone* was lying, there could be no mistake about that – in fact, I suspected that a *lot* of people were lying, and about different things and for different reasons. But who, and why, I honestly couldn't have said.

I sat back in my hard wooden chair and pinched the bridge of my nose between finger and thumb. I wanted a brandy very badly indeed.

'That's very interesting, Mr Hendensen,' I said at last.

'So you believe me?'

I snorted. 'No, not in the slightest. But I'll consider it.'

'So in the meantime I'm your prisoner?'

'You are the prisoner of the Governor of Ellinburg, as a suspected foreign spy,' I said. 'I'm not even officially here.'

'Of course you aren't,' he said, and he inclined his head to me in a way that said he understood how this worked. 'I'll take my repose in the cells, then.'

I looked at him. 'You do that,' I said.

Chapter 10

When Ailsa had told me that they kept slaves in Skania, I hadn't doubted her, but now I wondered if they truly did. I remembered what they had told us in the army about Messia, on the long march to the south, and how that hadn't been true either. Of course, in war the enemy are always portrayed as baby-eating monsters, and no doubt the Messian conscripts had been told similar lies about us. We were all just men, in the end, men who had no personal quarrel with each other, forced into our respective armies and sent out to kill and die for kings and queens most of us had never so much as set eyes on.

That was war, and so was this: a different sort of war, perhaps, but a war, nonetheless. Lies had replaced cannon, aye, and there were fewer soldiers on the field, but this action was no less deadly.

I could be risking starting a war if I do the wrong thing, Schulz had said, and she'd been right, and now so could I. War was the very thing I was trying to prevent, of course, but how could I know what the right thing to do was? Part of me wanted to believe Hendensen, and as I rode slowly down into the Stink and looked about me I could see what he meant: it *was* a midden. But Dannsburg was rich – northern Dannsburg was, anyway, or at least the quarter where the nobility had their mansions. The streets south of the river where Kreov and Jack and Luka's woman lived were no better than this, truth be told.

I took a lungful of reeking air, turned and spat into the gutter.

We had fought Skanians, I knew we had. Their magicians with their long white hair and silver circlets were especially

hard to forget, after all – but then, a man is not a nation. Were there factions in Skania, too, as I had been told there were within the Queen's Men?

And what *did* that mean, anyway? *What* factions? I didn't much like Konrad, true, and Ilse made me feel physically sick, but that was about it. What was I missing?

Oh, very good, old boy. Defiance, we like that.

Major Bakrylov wasn't even a Queen's Man, for Our Lady's sake, so what would he know about anything?

There was just too much going on in my head for comfort. Who had killed the Princess Crown Royal's doctor, for one thing? That was still bothering me, I had to allow: Dr Almanov being killed on account of his assumed gambling debts just seemed too neat, too convenient. His death had been the ultimate cause of the princess' breakdown and the eruption of her cunning that had destroyed her. That had placed the ten-year-old Grand Duke Marcus on the throne as Crown Prince, thus removing the disastrous prospect of the princess ever becoming queen – and ensuring Lord Vogel at least another three years of regency.

Would he truly have done that, I asked myself? He had certainly been behind the Prince Regent's 'suicide', I was in no doubt about that at all, but as for the rest, to do so he would have had to have known how strong a cunning woman the princess was, and I didn't think he'd known she had it in her at all. Ailsa certainly hadn't, not until I told her what Billy had said after the day he had been summoned to the palace to play shining games with her. But then, we had all been at the queen's state funeral and seen what we had seen. If I had realised that fire couldn't have been natural, then perhaps Lord Vogel had too.

Now I was asking myself hard questions, I started thinking about who had really bombed my inn back in Dannsburg. Konrad had found some magus and made a scapegoat of him, but I didn't imagine he had bothered to present any proof; if he had, I guessed it would have been thin to the

point of non-existence. Pinning the blame on the house of magicians had served the interests of the house of law in every way. *Of course* the man had confessed, once Ilse had got her knives into him. Anyone fucking would. That didn't make it true though, did it?

True, I was fast coming to understand, was a very fluid concept in the house of law.

Who stands to gain? Always ask that question in any matter of business. Who benefitted from the princess' death? Vogel, obviously, but then there was also the Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg, whose son, suddenly and most unexpectedly, would now become king in a few short years.

I thought of the duchess, of her dry eyes and stoic pragmatism in the face of the news of her husband's death. For the Grand Duke to die with his only son still so young could have proved disastrous for the House of Varnburg, but now their position had advanced considerably. The Grand Duke had been first cousin to Her Majesty the Queen, and with him and the Princess Crown Royal both dead, that left his son, young Marcus, the legal heir to the throne. That was standing to gain with bells on it, to my mind.

I realised suddenly that my horse had stopped moving. We were outside the Tanner's Arms already, and I had been so lost in thought that I had no memory of the last ten or fifteen minutes' ride.

Stupid, I told myself. I was no longer governor or gangster in Ellinburg but I had been both of those things before, and I had no doubt some in the city still bore me ill will – maybe not here in the Stink, perhaps, where I had been all but a prince myself, but that wasn't the point. I shouldn't have to remind myself that I was a soldier first and foremost, and I gave myself a swift mental bollocking for drifting off while out in public.

I swung down from the saddle and hitched my horse, then pushed open the tavern's door. Simple Sam was on door

duty, but today I was pleased and surprised to see Black Billy beside him, albeit sitting in a chair with his club resting in his lap.

‘Mr Piety,’ Sam said, inclining his head to me in greeting.

‘Hello, Sam, lad,’ I said, and looked at Billy. He obviously wasn’t back to fighting fit but he was out of his sick bed and from what I had heard, that was miracle enough. ‘How are you, Billy?’

‘I’m alive,’ he said, ‘and I give thanks to Our Lady for that. Have a fucking look at this, boss.’

He set his club aside and reached down to tug his shirt out of his britches. He pulled it up over his round but muscular brown belly to show me a fresh scar that must have been well over a foot long, running diagonally from his belt to just below his right nipple.

‘Fuck me,’ I couldn’t help but say.

‘Aye, I know,’ Billy said. ‘Lady knows I should be dead, but I ain’t, and I reckon I’ve your Mina to thank for that. Her and Doc Cordin, of course, but without her doing whatever she did I don’t reckon the Doc could have put me back together again. That was a killing wound and no mistake, and I knew it as soon as I took it. I remember thinking “I’m done” when I went down, then I woke up here and your lass and Hari were both with me, and the doc fussing around with bowls of hot water and all the towels were soaking red with my blood. I was in and out for a bit, I don’t know – a few days, maybe – but every time I opened my eyes your Mina was still there. I . . . I owe her, boss. Owe her my life. I want to make that right with her, somehow. When I can, like.’

‘Aye, I know,’ I said, and I put my hand on his shoulder. ‘But don’t let debts weigh on you, Billy. Mina would do that for any of the Pious Men, and so would my Billy. We’re family, you know that.’

‘Are we still?’ he asked me, and I felt a lead weight sink into the pit of my stomach. ‘Things have changed, ain’t

they? You're not even our boss any more. Not as such, anyway.'

'No,' I had to allow. 'No, Billy, I'm not. Anne's the boss here now and my aunt is her second, and Our Lady has chosen a different path for me. You're all still Pious Men though, and Pious Men stand together.'

'That's just it,' Billy said. 'You said "you're all still Pious Men", not, "we're all". You're something else now, ain't you?'

'You know I took the Queen's Warrant,' I told him. 'I told you all, before the second battle of the Stink. I took you all in that back room and I showed you, and I brought half the City Guard to our side and we fucking won, didn't we?'

'That we did,' Billy allowed, and he looked at me for a long moment. 'We still work for you really, though, don't we? Anne goes off to Dannsburg with you when you need her, after all. If you ever need a battle company, well, we're it, ain't we?'

I met his eyes. Some of the Pious Men were a sight brighter than Sam was and I wasn't going to insult his intelligence by lying to him. 'Aye, Billy,' I said, 'that's about the lay of it.'

He shoved his shirt tails back into his britches. 'Thought so,' he said. 'I'm not complaining, mind. I just like to know where I stand.'

'I won't compel anyone to fight, if it comes to it,' I assured him. 'We were all of us conscripted once and Lady only knows we remember how that felt. I wouldn't do that to any of you. If it ever comes right down to the knife I'll ask for help, yes, but I'll force no man to fight for me who doesn't want to.'

Billy looked at me for a long time. 'I don't think you'll want for volunteers,' he said.

‘This still feels wrong,’ Bloody Anne said.

She was sitting at the head of the long table in the back room of the Tanner’s Arms, and I was seated at her left hand. The chair to her right belonged to my aunt now, not to me. Truth be told, having abdicated as leader of the Pious Men and effectively resigned from the crew, I shouldn’t really be sitting at that table at all.

‘Things change, Anne,’ I reminded her. ‘This is how it is now.’

We’d had lunch together in the common room earlier and now we were alone in the room.

‘Aye, I know,’ she said, and sighed. ‘Want a drink?’

I nodded and she got up and fetched a bottle of brandy and two glasses, and poured for us both. That done, she sat back in her chair at the head of the table and looked at me.

She might be sitting at the head of the table and me at her left hand, but she poured for me and not the other way around. That was how the Queen’s Men worked: in the shadows, in the background, on the hand sinister, but always holding the power in any given situation.

Fucking *always*.

‘What’s on your mind, Tomas?’ she asked me. ‘I can see something is. What do you need?’

‘To talk,’ I confessed. ‘Maybe just to think out loud. You know me better than anyone, and I respect your opinion and your insight. Listen to me for a while?’

Anne took a sip of her drink. ‘Aye, of course,’ she said.

‘Remember the road to Messia?’ I asked her, and she nodded. Of course she did; I didn’t think any of us would ever forget it. ‘You remember what we were told; the Messians were demon-worshipping witches, right? That Messia was an evil place, where dark things were done in the names of their dark gods. Simple words for simple folk. We were doing the will of *our* gods, razing their walls and sacking their city, weren’t we?’

‘So they said,’ Anne said, and I gave her a wry smile.

‘I wonder what the Messian soldiers were told about us.’

‘That we were godless heathens, I would imagine, and that they were doing their gods’ will by manning the walls to keep us out.’

‘Aye, something like that I expect,’ I said. ‘They held to different gods in Messia, I’ll allow, but I’d wager theirs were no more strange or cruel than ours are, whatever we were told. They were ruled by their priests, not a king, and from what Cutter told me, they ruled with an iron fist, but the Queen’s Men are no different. On balance, I don’t think we had much quarrel with Messia, save that it was of strategic importance on the road to Abington.’

‘Perhaps,’ Anne said, and drained her glass. She paused to refill it and top mine up before she met my eyes. ‘Messia was four and more years ago. What’s this got to do with anything now, Tomas?’

‘It got me thinking, that’s all,’ I said. ‘About what we’re told and how we’re told it, and how we believe some things just because they seem to be true. Is that because they are, or because we want them to be? Because they fit our existing ideas of how things are, or should be? Are those the things we’re more inclined to believe, rather than something that would challenge our views? An uncomfortable truth is an unwelcome one, by and large, and most people will chose comfort every time.’

‘The comfort of knowing they were right, aye,’ Anne said. ‘That’s what we were doing in Dannsburg, wasn’t it, when the queen died? Telling people what they wanted to hear, so every time we changed what had happened, it didn’t matter because the new reason was the one people wanted to hear at the time. It was an attack of the heart, then it was the Skanians, then it was the magicians, and then it was the Skanians again, and hardly any fucker questioned any of it. Is that where you’re going with this?’

I knocked my drink back and met her eyes. ‘What if it wasn’t any of them?’ I said.

‘It was fucking someone,’ Anne said.

‘Aye, that it was.’

I let the silence grow between us, waiting to see what Anne would say when she inevitably felt the need to fill it. To my surprise, she didn’t. She poured us both another drink, and sat back in her chair with it cradled in her hands, and said nothing at all. She was looking at me with an expression I recognised all too well. That was the look of Tomas Piety on her scarred face and no mistake.

I held her stare for a moment, then couldn’t help but laugh.

‘Fuck,’ I said, ‘perhaps I taught you a little *too* well.’

Anne snorted and swallowed brandy. ‘You gave me the Pious Men and I aim to keep them,’ she said. ‘This is what I do now. My blades are yours when you need me, Tomas, and the crew behind me, but what you’re talking about . . . that’s not me. That’s not what I do. Politics and betrayals and false flags – that’s Queen’s Men business and I’m not that and I never will be. You want to talk about that, go and talk to someone else.’

She wasn’t joking. ‘Aye, well,’ I said. ‘I just wanted to talk a thing over with my best friend.’

‘And you’ve done that, and I reckon that’s all she owes you,’ Anne said. ‘Now, we can sit here and get drunk and talk about women and war and old times, or you can leave. I’ve no appetite for the conversation you want to have.’

Friendship and loyalty, those were the levers that moved Bloody Anne, but I was beginning to think perhaps I had pulled those levers one time too many. The look she was giving me had little humour in it and she meant what she said. Anne wasn’t easy with her involvement in the Queen’s Men; she hadn’t been for some time. I had to be careful not to push her too far.

‘Perhaps I’ll be off,’ I said, ‘head back home and have dinner with Billy and Mina later.’

Anne gave me a cool smile. ‘You do that,’ she said.

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Chapter 11

I left the Tanner's Arms and found I was strangely grateful to do so. It really wasn't my place any more, and the words I had exchanged with Anne had left a sour taste in my mouth. Black Billy had also made me realise how much I didn't belong there now. That hadn't been his intent, I knew, and I didn't take ill against him for what he had said, but it had made me think all the same.

If you ever need a battle company we're it, ain't we?

That was exactly the size of the matter, I had to allow. Ailsa had been the same. She'd first recruited me to her side and brought the Pious Men under her control through me, then used us in her covert proxy war against the Skanian-backed forces in the city. If they *had* been backed by the Skanians, of course. By *some* Skanians, aye, their magicians were proof enough of that, but in what capacity? Ailsa had thought them official agents of the Skanian crown and I had no reason to think she had been lying about that, but all the same, that didn't mean she had been right.

Had she been lying to me, or had someone in the house of law been lying to her? I really didn't know.

What I *did* know was that I wanted another drink. I'd had a few with Anne, but that had gone sour and I didn't want to return to my house to drink alone. One place I knew I would always find brandy and company was with my brother, so I turned my horse towards his house and gave her a gentle nudge of encouragement.

Hanne's maid opened the door to me and dropped me a nervous curtsey as she showed me inside. Hanne was in the parlour with little Enaid, who was crawling enthusiastically around the floor after a large one-eyed black cat that they

seemed to have acquired from somewhere since I had last been here. The beast butted the child affectionately on the cheek and purred, then looked up at me and hissed loudly.

‘Oh, don’t mind him, Mr Piety,’ Hanne said, rising from her chair to offer me a crude curtsy. ‘He’s just an old mouser Jochan found in the alley and took in, but Enaid loves him so.’

I smiled. ‘You don’t need to curtsy to me, Hanne. I’m your brother-by-law these days, not your employer – and for the love of the gods, please, call me Tomas.’

Hanne blushed bright red. She had been my undercook not so long ago, at the big house off Trader’s Row, before my brother had accidentally got her in the family way and felt obliged to marry her. To have gone so swiftly from a junior servant to a member of the family was something she was obviously still struggling with. She knew who I was and what I did, to an extent at least, and the poor woman was clearly terrified of me.

‘That . . . that’s very kind of you, sir,’ she said. ‘Your brother’s in his study with Yoseph, and I’m sure it’s him you’re wanting, not me . . .’ Her voice trailed off.

I nodded and turned to leave her. They had no footman to escort me – Jochan liked formality even less than I did, and I couldn’t fault him there. I was struck by Hanne using Cutter’s given name rather than simply referring to him as my brother’s ‘friend’, and I thought that some progress had been made there. It wasn’t a family situation I had any experience of, but if it worked for them, well and good.

I tapped on the door and waited for Jochan’s muffled admittance before I pushed it open. He was sprawled on the settle with a glass of brandy in his hand, and Cutter was, rather surprisingly, doing a handstand in the middle of the room.

‘Told you I could,’ he said, proceeding to do upside-down push-ups while my brother watched, laughing.

‘Fucking look at this, Tomas,’ he said, turning his head to gesture me in. ‘This ain’t natural, but my Yoseph can do it all the same.’

‘Aye,’ I had to allow, ‘he can indeed.’

Cutter flipped back to his feet in a fighting stance and mimed a flurry of knife-fighting moves with his empty hands. He wasn’t wearing his patch and the ruin of his face was truly hard to look at.

‘Cutter,’ I said, in greeting.

‘Boss,’ he acknowledged, and went to join Jochan on the settle.

‘What can I do for you, Tomas?’ Jochan asked as I helped myself to a chair.

‘I just wanted a drink and some company,’ I said.

‘An actual honest-to-the-gods social call?’ my brother asked. ‘Fuck a nun, I never thought I’d see the day.’

‘Aye, well,’ I said. ‘Perhaps not quite.’

Jochan filled a glass with brandy and put it in my hand. ‘I should have fucking known,’ he said. ‘What do you want?’

It pained me some to hear that tone in my brother’s voice, but I supposed it was no more than I deserved. It was business all the time with me – it always fucking was; that was the life of a Queen’s Man. There was no time in the service of the crown to just *be*; even time spent with your own family always had some angle, something you needed or wanted. I took a drink and looked at Cutter.

‘What did they tell you about us, before the war?’

Cutter snorted. ‘I was in prison, remember? And judged too mad even to be called up to fight.’

‘You weren’t mad and you know it, so don’t give me that,’ I said. ‘You must have heard something – what the conscripts were being told, if nothing else.’

‘Aye, well,’ he said. ‘The priests said you were demons. Mind, in Messia anyone set against our gods was a demon. Wasn’t true, any fool could see that. Thing is, in Messia you didn’t say what you saw. You said whatever the priests said,

if you knew what was good for you, and you acted like you believed it. Maybe some folk did, I wouldn't know, but not me.'

'Aye, I can imagine,' I said, and I could at that.

It wasn't so very different in Dannsburg by the time I had left the city.

Praise be to Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows, and blessed be the Ascended Martyr.

Unbeliever.

There was power in religion, and in its ability to manipulate the common people. That was a thought, and no mistake. I wondered then how much my being a priest had influenced the Queen's Men's decision to bring me into the fold. How far back did plans truly go?

I didn't know, but I knew I wanted another brandy.

I got up and went to the cupboard, took down the open bottle and poured for the three of us.

'So, you've got a fucking cat now, then?' I said to my brother, to lighten the mood.

He laughed and sloshed brandy into his mouth. 'Aye,' he said, 'found the fucking thing in the alley, eating out of the midden heap. I thought little Enaid might like it, and I was right. It spent the first few days hiding under the dresser, but once it realised we'd feed it and wouldn't hurt it, things worked out. The daft animal craps on the floor and chews Hanne's knitting, but Enaid loves it and we haven't had a rat in the kitchen in weeks. Why not, eh? It's no different to a farm or a ship. Cats have their uses.'

'I dare say they have,' I said, and laughed.

Cats, I thought. Cats hunt in the night. Cats get rid of vermin.

Aye, they have fleas and they're as like to bite and scratch you as anything else, but cats have their uses indeed: on ships and farms, as Jochan had said, they're a necessity.

Perhaps the Queen's Men are the cats of Dannsburg, I thought. We get rid of vermin in the night and no mistake.

‘You know what,’ Jochan went on, ‘every time it catches a rat, it always saves some for me. The arse end, usually, and I dare say to a cat that’s the best bit. It’s like it’s paying its fucking taxes for living here, bringing me a nice juicy bit of rat steak.’

‘We should get one for the Tanner’s,’ I said. ‘It might improve Hari’s fucking cooking.’

Jochan laughed at that, and refilled our glasses. ‘Fuck, aye,’ he said, ‘that man could burn fucking water.’

‘Best thing to do with the water in this city,’ Cutter said, and Jochan laughed and threw an arm around his shoulders.

‘Missing beautiful Messia, are you?’ he said, but we could both tell he was only joking. ‘The scenic ruins, the sweet scent of smoke and blasting powder?’

‘Messia can fuck off and you know it,’ Cutter said. ‘Don’t make Ellinburg less of a shithole.’

‘You saw Abington,’ Jochan said, in the rough way of soldiers making light of memories too painful to speak of seriously. ‘*That* was a fucking shithole!’

I snorted laughter and sloshed more brandy into our glasses.

‘Fucking shithole?’ I said. ‘Brother dearest, if you ever shit out anything half as vile as Abington you’d best get yourself to a doctor and quick.’

We laughed and clinked glasses, and Cutter poured again.

This was what I had wanted, a carefree afternoon drinking with my brother and talking about stupid things that didn’t matter, but one thing stuck in my mind.

He’d found that cat eating out of the midden heap in the alley.

Your country is a midden we simply do not want.

And I could see the truth in that.

Eventually I did go home to have dinner with Billy and Mina, as I had told Anne I would, but I found I could take little joy in the meal. The youngsters were absorbed in each other, and I found the footmen rubbing my patience raw with their over-attentive service at table. I made a mental note to speak to Salo about it, see if we could make dinners somewhat less formal now that my lady wife no longer resided in the house. Ailsa had expected this sort of thing, of course, but then, she had been born to it.

Never mind the months she had lived in a single bare room above the Tanner's Arms and played the simple barmaid: she was Sister Deceit, after all, the mistress of the false face. I was just thinking on that, toying with my food while Billy giggled at something Mina had whispered to him, when the realisation hit me.

False flags.

That was what Anne had said and only now was I hearing her. Sometimes, back in the war, a patrol might go out disguised as the enemy to get in amongst their ranks and assassinate an important senior officer. Working under a false flag, they had called that in the army. It was an ugly thing, a treacherous thing, and it was a dangerous thing, too. Get caught under a false flag and you were like to be burned alive as a spy. But sometimes . . . sometimes it worked. It was a gamble, but then, everything in life is when it comes down to it.

And it came to me then as I slowly watched my food go cold before me, Lord Vogel was nothing if not a gambler: a very well prepared one. He had seen the Grand Duke of Drathburg, father of an eldest son betrothed to the then-Princess Crown Royal, later to become our queen, killed in battle. The eldest son, by all accounts a brilliant officer and strong natural leader, had subsequently been murdered in his tent by a supposed enemy assassin, and that had pushed the weaker second son, Wilhelm, into the position of Prince Consort. When the queen died, Wilhelm assumed the

regency and promptly committed suicide, leaving the way clear for Vogel as Lord Chief Judiciar to attain the regent's throne in his place through a decree of law Vogel had written himself. With Doctor Almanov murdered, the current Princess Crown Royal had been unmedicated, and as a result, she had lost control of her cunning and destroyed herself. Her direct successor, the Grand Duke of Varnburg, having recently disappeared, was succeeded by his ten-year-old son, who suddenly became the heir to the throne.

The groundwork had been laid at Krathzgrad, triggered by the almost certainly accidental death of the Grand Duke of Drathburg – but I would have bet good solid gold that every step since had been carefully orchestrated, and over *decades*.

But the plan only worked, I realised, if the queen died before her daughter achieved her age of majority, and that had to happen at exactly the right time so Vogel could install the Prince Consort as a weak regent he knew would be easy to manipulate, giving him time to get rid of the Grand Duke of Varnburg and position the Duke's too-young son as heir-in-waiting – leaving himself as the only option to assume the regency. If he'd left it any longer, the Princess Crown Royal would have passed her thirteenth name day and taken the throne in her own right upon her mother's death, never mind that she was barking mad.

Timing was everything – and that meant Vogel had always planned to remove the Princess Crown Royal well before she came of age. I wondered, had he killed her doctor to ensure she went insane so he could remove her as unfit to rule, and simply found that the result was somewhat more spectacular than he had planned? Or had that been down to the Dowager Grand Duchess, in order to place her son on the throne and ensure the legacy of the House of Varnburg?

Either were possible, but there was one thing suddenly, glaringly clear.

There was a very real, horrible possibility that Vogel had assassinated the queen himself.

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Chapter 12

‘Mr Piety, are you quite well?’ Mina asked me, her voice cutting through my thoughts.

I blinked at her for a moment. ‘Aye,’ I said at last. ‘Too much brandy with my brother this afternoon, that’s all. Don’t let your Billy become as big a drinker as I am, girl. No good will come of it.’

‘I don’t even like brandy,’ Billy said.

‘Give it time, lad. You will.’

He smirked in a way that said he had sixteen years to him and therefore knew absolutely everything about himself and the world around him, but that was normal for lads of that age. I was nearing my fortieth year and the older I got, the more I realised how little I knew about anything.

Had Vogel killed the queen himself? Was it not the Skanians at all? I had spent the last three years worrying about what would happen if the Skanians invaded. *If* they did. Was it truly the Skanians we faced, or a threat closer to home? I had my suspicions now, but absolutely no proof of *anything* whatsoever – and without hard proof, there was nothing I could do to move against Vogel without ending up under Ilse’s knives, and Our Lady knew I didn’t want that. I could still have been wrong, after all.

I like to think I’m not a coward, but I’m not a martyr either.

Someone killed the queen and you don’t know who, so the whole royal household is under suspicion.

I had said that once, but now I was wondering if Vogel had known the killer all along and was just playing out the game, going through the motions of what was expected. Killing a troublesome regent was one thing – but the queen herself? That, to my mind, was quite another.

If I was right, then Lord Vogel was effectively making himself king . . . and if that was the case, was he really any worse than the alternative? Was he a worse choice than the quite clearly insane Princess Crown Royal, a witch-queen who would have built monuments to pain and suffering across the land?

No . . .

I blinked, and pressed my fingertips against my eyelids until I saw strange shapes swirling in the darkness, making as much sense as anything else. It came to me that it didn't really matter who ruled the country so long as they were capable. There was nothing inherently special about 'royal' blood, after all: kings and queens were just people, the same as the rest of us, and the royal dynasty had changed often enough in the past, and usually without the country falling apart. One Great House took over from another and the world kept turning. Who was I to have an opinion about who sat the Rose Throne? I'm a slum lad from Ellinburg, that's all, elevated to Dannelsburg society through accident and the malicious design of the Queen's Men. Common folk like me didn't understand the finer points of royal succession and I didn't expect that we ever would.

'Da?' Billy asked. 'Mina's right, you really don't look well.'

I realised I had knocked my glass over at some point because wine was soaking into the fine linen tablecloth. I don't even like wine overmuch, but I still drank it with dinner because Ailsa had told me you were supposed to, and that was so fucking ridiculous that it made me laugh. I laughed for far too long, and when I realised what I was doing I found it was hard to stop. I swept the glass off the table to shatter on the floor and put my head in my hands.

Battle shock, it's just battle shock, I told myself, but I wasn't sure that was truly the case. Truth be told, I didn't know *what* it was. I was drunk, aye, but that was nothing new. I felt . . . I don't know, overwhelmed? Absolutely out of my depth. Governor Schulz had brought the matter of the

Skanian White Shadow to me because I was the Queen's Man in her city and would therefore know what to do about him and how to deal with it, but Our Lady's own truth was that I didn't have a fucking clue.

My chest felt too tight, like I couldn't breathe properly. I pressed my face into my hands and hauled in a breath, then another. Billy was at my side, and I was aware of a worried footman calling for Salo. My dinner was a congealing horror of grease and cold meat that I couldn't look at. It looked like wounds.

I gulped, trying not to vomit, and lurched to my feet. I shoved the footman away and staggered to the cupboard, where I took down a brandy bottle and drank from the neck like my brother would have done. The room tilted horribly and I clutched the cupboard door to keep from falling.

'I'm going to bed,' I said, and I realised how thick my voice sounded. I wondered, in all truth, how much longer I could keep this up for.

The footman took my elbow and helped me into the hall, and then Salo was there with my valet. Between them they half-carried me up the stairs to my bedroom and put me to bed.

I lay there in the darkened chamber, the room spinning around me as my head throbbed. I was sweating freely into my sheets, and if I hadn't known better I would have thought I had been poisoned. It wasn't that, I knew. I hadn't eaten or drunk with anyone that day who I didn't completely trust. It was something in my mind, I suspected, some sort of mental attack or breakdown. Everything was too much - too big to face, too strange, too far beyond my understanding and my world-view. What did I know of kings and queens and international diplomacy? How the living fuck had this become *my* problem? What was I supposed to do with it? I hugged the pillow beside me, the one I so fervently wished was Ailsa's, but she was hundreds of miles away in Dannsburg. She would have known what to do, I

was absolutely sure of that, but I really, *really* didn't. I shivered and sweated and clutched her pillow until I eventually fell into a very uneasy sleep.

*

I woke some time in the middle of the morning, tangled in my blankets, feeling like I'd been kicked in the head by a horse. Sitting up, I scrubbed my hands over my rough cheeks, blinking in the shards of light finding their way through the gaps in the shutters. The house off Trader's Row had been grand in its day but it was old now, and compared to the mansions of Dannsburg that I had become accustomed to, it was showing its age.

I shook my head hopelessly. When I had first moved in here with Ailsa from my sparsely furnished room above the Tanner's Arms I had thought it a palace, but in truth it was nothing of the sort. The house of a middling gentleman, this would be in Dannsburg, an up-and-coming merchant, perhaps – certainly nowhere a knight would have lived, much less a member of the governing council. Although I hadn't thought it at the time, Ailsa had been quite restrained with her purchase – then I realised this was among the best of what was to be found in Ellinburg.

Your country is a midden we simply do not want.

No, I hadn't dreamed it, had I? He was right.

Oh, there were great estates and halls of marble to be found in Dannsburg, aye, in a small part of the city well away from where the majority of the population lived: the wealth of the nation, concentrated into a few square miles. I had liked Varnburg well enough, but that for the majesty of the sea, not the city itself. Varnburg was a working port city, its harbour bristling with cannon above the endless bustle and stink of wharfs and warehouses. There was no grandeur there save for the austere bastion of the Sea Keep, and the

majority of the city's trade wealth went to Dannsburg in taxes, the same as the proceeds of Ellinburg's industry did.

No, on balance I supposed if I had been a foreign king I wouldn't have bothered to invade us either. War is basically a business venture, when it comes right down to it, and Hendensen had the right of it: wars are expensive. In any matter of business, you have to balance what it will cost you against what you expect to get back from it. If your returns look to be higher than your expenses, then it might be worth doing. If they don't, then it definitely isn't. If you see a country a thousand miles away that will be a right bugger to get your army to, you don't bother to invade them. But if you find out they have massive resources of gold, then perhaps it becomes worth it and you raise the funds and do it anyway. If your neighbouring nation is easy to get to but well-armed and rich only in sheep and turnips, then why would you bother?

We had sheep and turnips and grapes, aye, but truth be told, little enough else. Even the iron mines to the west of the city were all but worked out, as Hendensen had pointed out. The more I thought about it, throbbing though my head was, the more I was inclined to believe the man's story.

I don't know what had happened to me the previous night. Battle shock is a strange thing and barely understood, even by doctors. The obvious things bring it on, of course: sudden loud noises, violence, grief. But there are other things too – pressure, disorientation, sudden changes in circumstances. I felt as though I was at the centre of a swirling vortex of all of those things, and in that moment I gave thanks to Our Lady that I was still as sane as I was.

I swung my bare feet out of the bed and sat there for a moment in my smallclothes, just staring at the motes of dust dancing in the beams of light stabbing through the shutters. I dreaded to think what Billy and Mina had made of my performance the previous night, never mind Salo and the servants. I dare say I wasn't the first dissolute master

Salo had served, but that wasn't the point. The children, at least, deserved better than to see me in that state.

I got up and took a piss into the pot, then forced myself to have a wash and a shave at the nightstand. That done, I dressed and made my way downstairs, although the time for breakfast had long since passed and I doubted I would be able to face luncheon when it was served in an hour or so.

To my extreme surprise, I found Bloody Anne waiting for me in the drawing room.

'Morning,' she said, looking up from the book she had been leafing through as she took her ease in my favourite chair.

Always act like you own the place.

As far as I knew, Bloody Anne was no great reader, having learned only over the last few years, but she set the volume aside as casually as any scholar as she rose to her feet. She had truly grown into her role as the head of the Pious Men, I realised, and I regretted the harsh words between us the previous day.

'Anne,' I said, somewhat nonplussed.

'Your steward let me in and told me to make myself at home,' she said. 'I hope that isn't a problem?'

'Anne, I . . . you know you're always welcome here.'

I didn't mean to be a cunt yesterday, that was what I was saying.

'I'm glad,' she said. 'I wasn't quite sure . . .'

Neither did I, she replied.

I took a step towards her and we clasped each other's wrists in the old way, shaking hands in the austere traditional greeting between boss and second as we had on the steps of the governor's hall when I had been released that first time with half the Stink turned out to witness it. Our relationship wasn't quite that any more, but in all honesty it might as well have been, and we both knew it.

Anne and me knew each other, and we both knew the other had apologised and that was enough. The matter was done with and behind us.

‘You look like a fucking corpse,’ Anne observed, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

I could always rely on Anne to be honest with me, and I valued that more than I could say.

‘I dare say I do,’ I said. ‘I had a bad night last night, and it wasn’t just on account of too much brandy.’

‘Too much . . . everything?’ Anne ventured.

‘Aye, that’s about the size of it,’ I said. I sighed and took a seat. ‘Do you ever feel like . . . I don’t know. Like the world has grown too big for you? Like you’re in a position you just don’t know what to do with?’

Anne looked at me for a long time before she spoke. ‘I was a shepherd,’ she said. ‘Then I was a pariah, cut above and below by Mother Groggan in the Stone Father’s name and ostracised from the village because of who I loved. Then I was a volunteer soldier, because even that was better than staying at home, and it turned out I was good at it, so they made me a sergeant. Then I met you and then I was a gangster, and now I’m the boss of the Pious Men and an enforcer for the fucking Queen’s Men. Do you seriously think I’ve never felt out of my depth, Tomas Piety?’

I supposed she had, at that. ‘Maybe you’re a good deal better at hiding it than I am,’ I said.

‘Rosie would say otherwise,’ Anne admitted. ‘The nights I’ve cried into her shoulder, Tomas. Gods, she’s been the only thing that’s kept me going sometimes.’

‘We all need someone,’ I agreed, and again I thought of Ailsa.

This would all have been so much easier, so much more possible, if I’d had her there by my side, telling me what to do. I simply didn’t understand this sort of shit and I knew that she did, but she was back in Dannsburg doing what she

did best and I was on my own now. I didn't have Ailsa, but I *did* have Anne.

'Aye, we do,' she said, and she pinched the bridge of her nose and rubbed at her eyes. 'Everyone needs someone, Tomas.'

I couldn't argue with that.

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Chapter 13

Once I had come back to life somewhat, I bade Anne farewell and once more walked the short distance to the governor's hall. Schulz was in a meeting, apparently, so while I waited, Captain Miller hosted me in the downstairs office. I could sense the man's unease as I looked at him over the rim of the bowl of tea he had somewhat reluctantly brought for me.

'I don't bite, Captain,' I said after a while. 'I'm still the same man you used to work for.'

Miller cleared his throat. 'If I may, sir, I'm not sure that you are. You've been away a long time, after all.'

'I've been in Dannsburg,' I said.

'Exactly.'

He met my eyes, and I could see that Miller had a greater understanding of the world than I would have given him credit for.

'Aye, well,' I said, and drank my tea in silence.

Eventually the governor's meeting ended. Through the open door of the office I could see a blue-robed magician being shown down the stairs and out of the governor's hall. That was interesting, I had to allow.

'I'll take you up,' Miller said, but I waved him away.

'I know the way, Captain.'

I climbed the great stair alone and strolled down the corridor to Schulz's study, where I entered without knocking. She looked up from her desk with a start, barely relaxing when she saw it was me standing in her doorway.

'Sir Tomas,' she said, and rose to curtsy.

'Governor,' I replied. 'I have reached a decision about your prisoners.'

‘Oh?’ She waved me to the chair I had been about to take regardless. ‘That’s good.’

‘Let the cunning man go,’ I said. ‘I’ll take him with me, in fact. He’s grotty and a nuisance but in truth he’s done nothing wrong beyond make an introduction. He can walk free.’

She nodded. ‘And the Skanian?’

‘That’s a different matter,’ I said. ‘I have reason to believe some of his story, but by no means all of it yet. Release him from the cells, but host him as a guest. One of the diplomatic suites, I think.’

‘I’m to keep him, then?’

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘Keep him as an honoured foreign visitor, Governor, and afford him every comfort, but under no circumstances let him leave the building – or send any letters.’

She nodded slowly. ‘So he’s a diplomat, but not a trusted one?’

‘He’s no more a diplomat than I am, I told you that,’ I said. ‘He’s someone like me in his own country, and that makes him both useful and extremely dangerous. As I say, treat him with respect and courtesy but keep him here and don’t let him out of someone’s sight.’

‘I understand,’ Schulz said, and if she was at all uncomfortable at being elevated from provincial to international affairs, then she managed to hide it well.

A petty career bureaucrat I had thought her once, but now I wondered. *How ambitious are you, Governor Schulz?*

Knowing a persons’ ambitions could be as useful as knowing the levers that moved them, and I wondered if Schulz could be moved by the furthering of her career. I thought that perhaps she could.

‘You met with one of the house of magicians, before me,’ I said, abruptly changing the subject.

‘I . . . yes. Yes, I did. I’m sorry, Sir Tomas. If any of my staff had had the wit to tell me you were waiting I would of

course have cut our meeting short.'

I waved a hand. 'Don't fawn, Governor, I don't care for it,' I said. 'If my business is ever important enough to warrant interrupting a prearranged meeting I will simply walk through that door. What did he want?'

Schulz blinked for a moment, but I could tell she knew I was speaking the absolute truth. The Queen's Men wait on no one, when it matters.

'Protection,' Schulz said. 'The house of magicians is new to Ellinburg, as I'm sure you know, Sir Tomas, and it seems the ability of my City Guard to protect their guildhall is failing to meet their expectations.'

'The City Guard of Dannsburg are better equipped, better trained, and considerably more numerous,' I told her. 'I can see where he might find things here lacking. I myself have noticed there are far fewer of the guard on the streets that I would expect.'

Schulz spread her hands helplessly. 'We're at less than half strength,' she admitted.

The half of the City Guard that Captain Rogan had brought to my cause during the final days of Governor Hauer's reign had butchered the other half in a pitched battle on Trader's Row, I knew that much. I had been there, after all.

'And you can't get funding to replace them?'

'Funding, no, although I could re-direct some tax money and bury it in the accounts if I had to,' she admitted, and there she showed me she was a more astute governor than I had ever been. 'The problem is finding recruits: a man or woman pressed into the City Guard will never be of use, and would almost certainly turn to corruption the first chance they got. The simple fact of it is, I can't find any volunteers. No one wants to serve, and that's all there is to it.'

I sighed in understanding. Most of the current City Guard were veterans of the last war, and a few of the older hands served in the one before it. Many soldiers retired into the guard, but the war was four years done now and any who

hadn't already joined up had gone back to their old trades or found new ones, or died in the gutter from disease or a blade.

On the streets where I had grown up, no child had aspired to a career in the City Guard, and any who had would have likely been thrown into the river by their peers. There was no love for the guard on most of the streets of Ellinburg, and certainly not in the Stink or the Wheels. Boys went into their fathers' trade or took an apprenticeship or a factory job, and girls got married and raised children or worked in the mills and factories with the unskilled men. That was just how it was in Ellinburg in those days.

'I confess, I don't see an answer to it,' Schulz said.

I hadn't seen an answer to it when I had been governor before her either, so I held my peace about that.

'Who are the magicians worried about?' I asked instead. 'Who do they think they need protection *from*?'

'A street gang,' Schulz said. 'They call themselves the Northern Sons and they control most of the west side of the city. They have a long-running feud with the Pious Men in the east, as I'm sure you are aware, but they have also developed a hatred of the newly founded house of magicians. There have been attacks, and a few months ago someone set off an explosive outside their guildhall on Trader's Row. The magicians accused the Northern Sons, but we could find no hard proof of who it had been.'

'And where were the City Guard in all this?'

'In all honesty, in a ring of steel around the governor's hall and the houses of the nobility. I simply do not have the manpower to root out a street gang spread across the entire western half of the city, nor the resources to find out who their members are.'

She met my eyes, and I knew what she was begging me to do. *You control the Pious Men*, that was what she was saying to me. *Do something!*

‘Give me Old Kurt,’ I said, ‘and I’ll see what I can do. It might be I could get rid of these Northern Sons for you.’

Could and *might* and *possibly*, such were the promises of the Queen’s Men.

*

I left the governor’s hall with Old Kurt in my personal custody a short time later and steered him towards my house.

‘Oh, now I get invited to the big house, is that the lay of it, Tomas Piety?’ Kurt sneered, and he spat into the gutter in front of a horrified gentlewoman on her way back from market with her maid and two housemen laden down with fresh produce. ‘Now that you want something, Old Kurt’s welcome, eh?’

‘Behave,’ I told him. ‘I’m not a child any more, Old Kurt.’

‘No, you ain’t are you? Now you’re the big bad wolf, aren’t you, Tomas? The Boggart come walking.’

‘You be quiet with that in public,’ I snarled, hurrying him down the road to my house and all but shoving him through the door into the hall.

Stefan had the duty there, and his loaded crossbow swung up to cover the old man until he saw me enter behind him.

‘Oh gawds,’ Old Kurt exclaimed, feigning frailness.

‘Shut up,’ I told him. ‘Stefan, this is Old Kurt and you’re not to believe a word he says about anything, ever. If he tells you the water’s wet, expect a bucket of sand. We’ll be in my study. You might send young Billy to us, if you’d be so kind.’

I led Kurt across the hall and into my study, where I waved him into one of the chairs facing my imposing desk.

‘Will you take brandy?’ I asked him.

It was only an hour past noon and I had yet to eat anything that day, but I found that I wanted one all the same.

‘If you’re buying, I’m drinking,’ Kurt said, and smirked in that way that reminded me just how much I didn’t like him, for all Old Kurt had been good to me when I had been a boy. He had stood up for me when my own da had looked the other way, and that was probably the only reason I tolerated him at all. That – and because now I had a feeling I might need him before too much longer.

I went to the cupboard, poured for us both and handed him a glass of brandy before sitting behind my desk and facing him across the expanse of polished wood.

‘Oh, ain’t you the big man now, Tomas Piety?’ Kurt said, venom dripping from his voice. ‘I remember you squatting in that alley, mixing lime mortar for your da while he worked on my door. Poor little Tomas, all on his own, being bullied by the Wheels boys while his da told him to be a man and stand up for himself.’

‘They had four years on me at least,’ I said, and I hated myself for the defensive tone in my voice.

‘It happens,’ he said.

I had been bullied, by those boys and by my da both, and it had never happened since. Not since I had made things right with my da with a lump hammer and a long drop from his bedroom window to the cobbles below.

I will not be bullied, not ever. Not after that. Never again.

‘It has never happened again.’ I met Old Kurt’s eyes, and I think he got that message loud and clear. He knew when he had pushed the boundaries of my tolerance. The lump in his throat worked as he swallowed brandy, and no more was said on the matter.

‘What am I doing here, then?’ he asked me. ‘You’ve not invited me to your beautiful home out of kindness for a poor old man, I know that much.’

I snorted. Old Kurt was truly horrible, there was no other way of looking at it, but he had his uses and I intended to exploit them as ruthlessly as I could.

‘I’m of a mind to believe your man Hendensen,’ I said, and I could see that surprised him. ‘To an extent, anyway. I think the prospect of a Skanian invasion unlikely.’

Kurt raised his arms to the ceiling in an exaggerated parody of religious worship. ‘Lady’s blessing, he sees the light,’ he said.

‘Don’t blaspheme in my house,’ I snapped at him. ‘I think *invasion* unlikely. I think hostility almost a foregone conclusion.’

‘Why? What the fuck makes you think that?’

‘The Princess Crown Royal all but declared war on Skania in her final address to the people.’

‘I shouldn’t worry too much about that,’ Kurt said. ‘The White Shadows have their spies in Dannsburg, of course they have. They just about managed to convince the king that it was only the ranting of your insane princess before she burned herself up and tore down half the city doing it. Just about, mind, and that with a good deal of exaggeration and embellishment. Aye, don’t think you’re the only ones who lie to your monarchs and councils. His Majesty was ready to send his fleet to take Varnburg by force and war be damned, so I reckon you owe them for that. Trust me, Tomas, the White Shadows don’t want war any more than you do. War is expensive and war is bad for business, and what are any of you if not *businessmen*?’

He had a point there, I had to allow: the Queen’s Men were nothing but gangsters with the law on our side, and I had no reason to believe these White Shadows would be any different in their own country.

‘There’s the Northern Sons,’ I said. ‘They didn’t even exist three years ago, and now they control half the city. The Blue Bloods are exterminated and the Sons own their streets now, and that all since what happened in the Wheels and the end of the Gutcutters. They had Skanian magicians, and unless I’m very much mistaken they’ll have more, and soon.’

They want to destroy the new house of magicians in Ellinburg, and I think they'll have foreign aid to do it.'

'After *what happened* in the Wheels?' Kurt sneered, and I should have known he'd want to rake over that again. '*What happened* is you and your bitch wife bombed the Wheels into Hell itself! You confessed that to me of your own mouth, Tomas Piety, and don't think I've forgiven you for it. How many people died that Godsdays afternoon? Fucking *hundreds!*'

I didn't answer him: he had the right of it, and I couldn't argue with him there. I *had* confessed it to him, for all that I should never have done so. That had been after the matter of the crippled Yan Wainwright and his mute son, and what had happened when he had come calling at the Tanner's Arms. Kurt had taken the boy in, I remembered, after his father drowned himself in the river. The lad had been clutching the gold crown I had given him.

'What happened to Wainwright's son?' I asked.

'Like you care,' Kurt muttered, but he might have softened somewhat when he saw the look on my face. 'I left him in Skania with a couple of coopers looking to adopt a lad. I reckon they'll care for him and teach him their trade, even if he don't never talk again.'

'Aye, maybe that's best,' I said, reaching for the brandy bottle to refill both our glasses.

'Best for you, I know,' Kurt said, his words landing sharp as knives, and any softness was gone like the early mist on a summer morning. 'Out of sight, out of mind. No reason for Tomas Piety to feel guilty that way, is there? Gold paid for blood and the child out of sight, and what's a few lives? Collateral damage, isn't that what they called it in your precious army? A woman burned alive, a man crushed and crippled and suicidal, a boy sent mute by the horror of what he'd seen. Collateral damage, as long as the objective is met. Oh, don't you look at me like that, Tomas. I was a soldier too, in *my* war. In your aunt's war, perhaps - I lose

track, there's been so fucking many. Ain't many people in Ellinburg don't have blood on their hands, one way or another. We've all been to war. Feels like we've *always* been at war, all our fucking lives. I know all about *collateral damage*, you little cunt.'

I opened my mouth to speak, but just then the door opened and Stefan showed Billy into the room.

'Your son, boss,' he said.

I smiled in welcome at Billy, for all that I no longer felt like smiling. I had all but forgotten that I had asked for him to join us, and now felt like a very bad time. All the same, he was there now, so I beckoned him into the room and indicated that he should take a chair beside my guest.

'Billy, you remember Old Kurt,' I said. Of course he did.

Billy took his seat and looked solemnly at the old man, and Kurt regarded him in turn.

'A boy shines brighter than he used to, don't he?' Old Kurt said, and I thought there was something accusing in his tone as he looked at the lad. 'I wonder how that comes to be, Billy Piety.'

'Mina taught me a thing,' Billy said.

'Mina?' Old Kurt said, and turned to spit into the grate to show what he thought of that. 'I remember her.'

'She's my woman now.'

'I'll allow that she did me a good turn the other year, but you're a brave lad or a fool lying down with *her*,' he said.

'She's poison, boy. She's fucking possessed.'

'You said that about me, once,' Billy said, and his voice took on the cold, flat tone of justice that he had learned from me. 'Remember the rats, Old Kurt?'

'Oo-er,' Kurt muttered, and I swore he shifted his chair to get a little more distance between himself and the lad.

Billy gave him the fear and no mistake, and after the story of the rats, that didn't surprise me one little bit. Billy got that look about him then, the look he got when he knew a

thing was so. He looked at Old Kurt for a long moment, then nodded, as though in judgement.

‘You’ll die this month,’ he said, and in that moment I knew he spoke the truth. When Billy said a thing would happen, he was always right, except for the one time he hadn’t been and Captain Rogan had died and Cutter had lost half his face for it, though I thought I knew why that was.

‘You fuck off with that!’ Old Kurt snapped, and forked the sign of the evil eye at Billy.

‘It’s true,’ Billy said. ‘Our Lady talks to me. She tells me things. She’ll claim you, Old Kurt, and soon.’

‘The boy’s a fucking devil,’ Old Kurt said, and he got up from his chair and thumped his empty glass down on the table on his way to the door.

‘He is holy,’ I reminded Kurt, but I knew we would never agree on that point.

By then I wasn’t even sure I still believed it myself.

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Chapter 14

‘Why did you tell Old Kurt he’s going to die, Billy?’ I asked him, once the old man had fled from my house.

‘Because it’s true,’ Billy said.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose between finger and thumb. ‘Aye, that’s as may be,’ I said, ‘but why did you tell him? That’s not always a thing people want to know.’

‘I don’t like him,’ Billy said, and I supposed that was honest enough.

I didn’t like him either, but I knew Old Kurt could be useful, and I thought he might be very useful indeed in the times that were to come.

‘You’ll fight alongside him, though, won’t you Billy? If I need you to?’

‘Yes, Papa,’ Billy said. ‘Me and Mina, we both will. Who are we going to be fighting?’

‘Skanians again, unless I’m very much mistaken,’ I said. ‘Their magicians don’t like our magicians, and I think we’re about to come to blood over it.’

Billy just nodded, and I knew the thought didn’t scare him. Billy had killed magicians before, and so had Mina.

I was interrupted then by a tap on the door, and when I called, ‘Come,’ Salo stepped into the room looking somewhat embarrassed.

‘What is it?’ I asked him.

‘There’s a . . . a lady, asking to see you sir,’ he said. ‘She gives her name as Rosie.’

I took some small enjoyment from his discomfort. I had no doubt she would be wearing the bawd’s knot that let her go almost anywhere unchallenged, but what Salo was making of it, I had no idea.

‘Show her in,’ I said, and then took pity on him. ‘It’s just business, Salo. She works for me.’

He nodded, looking somewhat relieved. He was as loyal to Ailsa as he was to me, of course, and I didn’t want him getting the wrong idea and taking ill at me over it.

Rosie entered the study a moment later, and Salo coughed discreetly and closed the door behind her. No doubt Billy’s presence in the room with me gave him some reassurance, and that was good.

‘What is it?’ I asked her as I waved her to a chair.

‘Anne sent me,’ Rosie said. ‘The Northern Sons have made their move.’

‘Fuck – where have they hit us?’

‘That’s just the thing,’ she said, ‘they haven’t. They’ve hit the Alarian Kings instead.’

I blinked in surprise. The Alarian Kings were the only other crew of any consequence left in Ellinburg since the Blue Bloods and the Gutcutters had been wiped out and the Head-hunters and Flower Girls absorbed into the Pious Men, and they had remained largely neutral during the recent hostilities between the Pious Men and the Sons. I had no fucking love for them, not since they had killed Desh, but although at the time I had taken that as a declaration of their siding with the Sons and the Skanians, there had been no further evidence of it since. I could only surmise that Desh had said the wrong thing to the wrong person in his negotiations with them, and no more to be read into it than that. Ever since then they had stayed out of the matter, as far as I knew.

‘And what does Bloody Anne say to that?’

‘I don’t know,’ Rosie said, and she looked at me for a moment. ‘She’s asking your advice, Tomas. Do we let the Sons and Kings kill each other and save us the job, or do we take a side?’

‘Not with the fucking Sons we don’t,’ I said at once. ‘The Kings . . . aye, I can see both sides of the matter. A dead

enemy is a dead enemy and well and good, but if the Sons wipe out the Kings, which in time they almost certainly will, then they'll take their streets and have more of the city than we do. That'll put us at a disadvantage when we do eventually have to have it out with the Sons. No, better to seize the moment now and make common cause with the Kings.'

'That's what I told her,' Rosie said, 'but she kept going on about someone called Desh, and how the Kings were the scum of the earth.'

'Aye, well,' I said, 'it's true enough they're no friends of mine, but in business you often have to weigh two evils in your hands and chose the lighter one. Tell Anne that, Rosie. Tell her my advice is to make common cause with the Alarian Kings. Tell her also to beware the Sons. Expect there to be more magicians. Billy and Mina will fight, when they're needed, and I think Old Kurt will too.'

'That's good,' Rosie said. 'We'll show those queen-killing Skanian bastards, eh, Tomas?'

I met her eyes and said nothing, since I strongly suspected that Vogel had had the queen murdered himself and the whole search for her assassin, the suspicion of the royal household, the torture and deaths of who knew how many people, had been nothing but mummery for the sake of appearances.

I remembered my sasura's words from the previous year: *Do not trust Dieter Vogel. Ever.*

He'd had the right of that, I was absolutely sure of it.

'Do you want a brandy while you're here?'

Rosie nodded, and as I rose to my feet to serve her I felt myself sway on my heels.

'Gods, Tomas,' Rosie said, and then she was up and easing me back into my seat. 'Have you eaten anything today?'

I hadn't, I realised, and already I had the best part of half a bottle inside me. 'I wasn't hungry,' I said, and I could feel Billy looking at me.

‘For the love of the gods,’ Rosie muttered, and rang the silver handbell on my desk to summon a footman.

‘Sir Tomas requires food and tea,’ she said, putting on her best lady’s voice.

The footman bowed and hurried from the room, and barely ten minutes later she was all but forcing me to eat bacon and black bread while a bowl of tea steamed beside my elbow.

‘I know everything is difficult at the moment,’ Rosie said, her voice so low I doubted Billy could hear her, ‘but it doesn’t serve the crown for you to drink yourself to death. Gods be good, Tomas, I had enough of this with Heinrich. I don’t need it with you as well.’

I grunted, and forced myself to drink the tea. It was brewed in haste and too weak, but I swallowed it anyway, before finishing the food. She was absolutely right and I knew I had to accept that.

‘Now,’ she said when I was done, ‘think on what you told me: make common cause with the Alarian Kings. Is that still the answer?’

I nodded. ‘Aye,’ I said, ‘I wasn’t that drunk. I knew what I was saying. Tell Anne to side with the Kings against the Northern Sons.’

‘Well and good,’ Rosie said. ‘So that’s what we’ll do.’

She left us then, and as I settled back into the chair behind my desk I saw Billy was still looking at me, and I’ll admit I wasn’t sure how to read his expression.

*

It was around the third hour of the next afternoon and I was beginning to contemplate my first brandy of the day when the house was rocked by the concussive blast of a distant explosion.

I was in the hall a moment later, where I found Stefan at the open front door with his crossbow pressed tight to his

shoulder.

‘What is it?’ I demanded.

I realised I wasn’t wearing my swords, being in my own house, much less my leather and mail, and I felt suddenly as though I was naked on the battlefield with the cannon roaring behind me and a cavalry charge bearing down on me. Gods, the thunder of the charge, shaking the earth beneath my feet—

Battle shock, it’s just battle shock, I told myself, forcing myself to breathe normally and to still the shaking of my hands.

‘I don’t know, boss,’ Stefan said. ‘There’s smoke rising on Trader’s Row, but it’s not anywhere near here. I can see City Guardsmen running from the governor’s hall—’

‘The house of magicians?’

‘Aye, could be. Could be the spicers’ guild too – hard to tell from here.’

The chances of anyone wanting to bomb the guild of spicers was vanishingly small and I dismissed that idea from my head at once. Stefan was a capable soldier but he wasn’t an imaginative man, it had to be said. It looked like the Northern Sons had taken the initiative.

Once upon a time I would have been in leather and mail by now, and charging out onto those streets with ten armed men at my back, but I knew that wasn’t who I was any more. Instead, I made my way upstairs and knocked on Billy’s door.

‘You in there, lad?’

Mina opened the door and gave me a shy smile. ‘He wanted to go to market with Cook. I think he’s buying me a present. There was a shawl I saw that I liked, but I’ll act surprised when he gives it to me anyway. What was that bang?’

They had a room each, of course, for the sake of propriety, but they slept in the same bed every night and I wasn’t going to take issue with that. Youngsters in love are going to

fuck and that's all there is to it, and to my mind I'd rather they did it under my roof where I knew they were safe than forbid it and make them sneak off to do it somewhere else where they probably wouldn't be.

'That bang was a bomb going off, Mina,' I said, 'and I think it went off at the house of magicians. They might be important friends, and I know those who wish them ill are anything but. I'm going to go and take a look, and see if I can help. I wanted to ask Billy to come with me, but—'

'I'll come,' Mina interrupted me. 'I'm as good as Billy – better, at some things.'

'Aye, that you are, lass,' I said. 'If you're willing, I'd appreciate it.'

'Any time,' Mina said, and busied herself with putting on her cloak and outdoor shoes.

'I'll meet you in the hall in a few minutes,' I told her and hurried to get my priest's robe from the armoire. I couldn't rightly have said why, but I felt that it suited me more now than leather and mail. Mind, though I had no intention of fighting unless I had to, all the same, I buckled the Weeping Women over my coat and drew the robe closed over them. Better to have them and not want them than to want them and not have them, I told myself.

Garbed in the black folds of my deception I walked down the stairs and found Mina, with Stefan in mail and leather beside her. That was fitting: Stefan was a soldier to the bone and I don't think he had it in him to be anything else.

I gave him a nod of respect. 'You're coming with us then.'

'course I am, boss,' he said, and I appreciated that more than I could have said.

I *wasn't* his boss any more, not really. He was a Pious Man, not one of my crew in the Queen's Men, but still he stood guard-duty at my house. The lines between my two operations were extremely blurred, but I found that worked to my advantage so I would take it and be grateful, and ask no more questions.

‘Right then,’ I said, and opened the front door. ‘With me.’

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Chapter 15

Trader's Row was in chaos, as I had expected. There was a gaping hole in the front of the new house of magicians, which was on fire. The City Guard were milling around in the smoke and flames and confusion while white-robed acolytes of the magicians passed buckets from the public well in a human chain in an attempt to quell the blaze. There were hostile faces in the crowd – I spotted at least one man I knew to be a member of the Northern Sons. I fixed my eyes on him, and I knew he recognised me but he didn't look like he was quite sure where from, garbed in my priest's robes as I was. A moment later a brown arm snaked around the man's neck from behind and then a blade burst out of his chest in a spray of bright blood.

'Alarian Kings!' someone roared, and the violence erupted.

The Alarians were everywhere in the crowd, guessing the Sons would have come to gloat over the aftermath of their work. They liked curved swords, did the Alarians, a sort of sabre they called a talwar, weapons designed more for cutting than stabbing, and they were laying about themselves with merciless ferocity.

The City Guard waded in, but in moments it had become a full-blown Ellinburg riot. I reached out to pull Mina back to my side. Billy would never have forgiven me, had I let anything happen to her, I knew.

Light flashed, and I saw a Northern Son stab out a hand and hurl lightning into one of the Kings. He went down in a smoking heap, and the Son pushed his hood back to reveal his long blond hair.

I gasped. 'Magician!'

The Skanians were back, and in force.

‘I can take him,’ Mina said.

‘Be careful, lass,’ I urged. I didn’t want to risk her coming to harm, but without Billy, we needed her. Of course, I was being a fool about that: Mina was stronger in the cunning than Billy was – so was it because she was a girl that I feared for her? That was stupid of me, if it was so. Anne was a woman, for Our Lady’s sake. There are few in this world I would fear to face blade to blade, but Bloody Anne was first among them.

Mina had already shrugged my hand off and was raising her hands.

Across the way from us, another of the Alarian Kings went down. He had been kicked to the cobbles, a lad with no more than twenty years to him, and a Northern Son was raising his boot to stamp on his face. The lad was too young to have been a veteran and the fear was plain to see in his eyes.

‘Oh no you won’t,’ Mina said. ‘You sheep-fucking pederast cum-gargling inbred pigdog.’

Something burst out of her hands, though as Our Lady is my witness, I have no idea what it was. All I know is that it hurtled across the space between us and hit the Northern Son in the chest, and he detonated like he’d eaten a pound of blasting powder and washed it down with a lit taper.

Mina couldn’t work the cunning unless she spoke obscenities while she did it, I remembered. No one knew why; it was just how it worked in her head, and I could respect that. I certainly respected the results she could achieve. The Northern Son was red paste on the wall behind where he had been standing, and already the Alarian King he had been about to stamp on was back on his feet and laying about him with his blade.

That got the magician’s attention and no mistake. He rounded on Mina, on this girl with perhaps seventeen or so years to her, and he sneered. That, I thought, was very

unwise of him. He nodded his head sharply and the ground beneath Mina's feet burst into flame. The fire raged up her body for an instant, a fraction of a second, doing no more than scorch her cloak, then she shook her head firmly and it died.

'No,' she said, and her voice, flat and cold and terrible, carried even over the noise of the fighting. 'I won't burn. *You* burn, you maggot-ridden unwanted foetus left in the midden heap, you shameful secret of a syphilitic doxy.'

The Skanian magician screamed. Flames were bursting out of his mouth and nose and eyes and he collapsed, shrieking, as she literally cooked his brain in his skull.

All around us was mayhem and chaos, and then the Pious Men waded in.

I saw Simple Sam's club rise and fall, and Mika's deft shortsword punched through a man's side. Florence Cooper was there with some of her crew too, Jutta, and some other Flower Girls up from the Wheels. And there was a tearing mess of violence right in the middle of the street: my brother, at the heart of that, his axe a whirlwind of killing fury. When it was done, Bloody Anne herself stood up with a triumphant roar, her daggers running red in her hands and a great spray of crimson blood across her face. She was a fucking force of nature in a close-quarters fight, was Anne; that was how she had earned her name in the first place. Beast was right behind her and I watched as he picked two men up and rammed their heads together hard enough to smash their skulls to mush. He threw them down and bellowed like a primal animal, like the apex killer he was.

I saw our own magicians cowering in doorways, obviously wondering what fuck they had unleashed by doing nothing more than trying to exist in this miserable city. The City Guard were attempting to fight a containment action, but they hadn't had the numbers until the Pious Men effectively sided with them. Anne knew the way I wanted the wind to blow in Ellinburg, so the Pious Men fought alongside the

guard, and if they weren't exactly on the side of the Kings, then they definitely weren't against them either.

The crowd jostled around me, a blur of faces and noise and voices, and I don't know what I did, for the battle shock was on me hard from the explosion and the sudden unexpected violence. My hands were shaking and there was something in them, but I didn't know what.

Instinct.

Movement.

And resistance, suddenly yielding. There was shouting, and I knew some of it was coming from me.

Something wet on my hand. I saw Oliver go down, and heard Stefan below in rage.

Turn.

Push.

I remembered the press of pikes at Messia, the chaos and confusion, and in the close confines of the street I pushed and pushed. This was Messia all over again. Somewhere I was aware of my brother roaring his warcry, and another flash of light that must have been Mina.

'Leprous reeking filthy fucking . . .'

A shriek, a weight, dragging on my arm before I ripped it away in a hot spray. My hand was sticky. Sweat was streaming into my eyes. Everything was a blur of chaos and horror and memory, the line between *then* and *now* so blurred I couldn't see it any more.

Kick out. Push. Parry and cut and stab and hack.

I could almost hear the cannon bellow, feel the ground shake beneath me as distant walls fell, years and miles away.

A boiling confusion of shouting meant nothing to me.

Hell. We were in Hell.

'Oliver's gone!'

'Look out!'

'Cunt!'

'They're running—'

‘Hold the line! No pursuit! Hold the *fucking* line!’

That was Anne, that last one, and I knew it was over. Evidently the Sons had realised they had no friends in this fight and had begun to withdraw.

‘Fucking hell,’ I heard Anne say, and I realised she was at my side and I had no idea how much time had passed or where she had come from or how long she had been there.

‘Aye,’ I had to allow.

I hadn’t come to fight but I found that my swords were in my hands and dripping red and I supposed I must have done, for all that I had no real memory of it. My right hand was covered in blood, the hilt of Mercy sticky in my palm. So I had killed at least one man, probably more, and I honestly had no recollection of it. I was a soldier, a killer, I knew that. I had done things in Abingon and in Messia that I never wanted to think of again, but at least at the time I had been aware of doing them. Now?

No.

I had killed, and I had absolutely no memory of it at all. Perhaps it was just the brain’s defensive mechanism, shutting down the parts of memory it knew you wouldn’t want to keep. I had no idea if that was right, but if it could do that, I fucking wished it could have done it when I’d been twelve.

‘Are you all right?’ Anne asked.

I turned to my second and looked at her, at the blood splashed across her scarred face. ‘Are you?’

‘Fuck no,’ she admitted.

‘No,’ I could only agree. ‘Tanner’s?’

‘Tanner’s,’ she said, and that was settled then.

*

Lady, but we got drunk. We all did. After that afternoon, after the explosion on Trader’s Row and the murderous violence that followed it, we got very drunk indeed in the

Tanner's Arms. I'd had Stefan take Mina back to the house, of course, but whether Billy had managed to bring a surprise gift of a shawl to her would have to remain a mystery. I hoped he had. She had more than earned it that crimson afternoon.

I wiped sweat from my eyes and downed another brandy even as Jochan started to pour again for the table. I was with him and Anne, Mika and Beast, and I could tell all of us but Beast were suffering bad with the battle shock. Even Anne, who rarely showed any sign that it touched her at all, was shaking by the time we got to the tavern.

'Fuck a nun,' Jochan said at last. 'That was a fight and then some.'

'Aye,' I said. 'The unexpected ones always are.'

'Not that unexpected, mind,' Anne said. 'We were already in the area, waiting. After what you told Rosie, I'd made a connection with the Kings. Their own spies knew the Sons were planning something on Trader's Row today, just not exactly what. Didn't you wonder how so many of us got there so quick?'

In truth, I hadn't, and that made me question myself: was I losing my touch so badly that it hadn't even crossed my mind? Perhaps I just depended on Anne so much – took her for granted perhaps – that I simply assumed the Pious Men would always be there when I needed them. That was a fool's thinking and no mistake. Too much brandy, perhaps, as Rosie had scolded me for, or simply the hubris that inevitably came with being a Queen's Man. That, and the afternoon had dissolved into a blur. I wasn't quite sure when I had lost the connection between *then* and *now*, when I had ceased to be able to tell the difference between Ellinburg and Messia. When the killing started, I supposed.

I drank, and tried not to think about it.

'Aye, well,' I said, and raised my glass. 'To Oliver. He was a hired man but a good one. He died well.'

‘No one fucking dies well,’ Jochan muttered. ‘Dying is ugly and it hurts, and it hurts those it leaves behind.’

‘I don’t think Oliver left anyone behind,’ Anne said. ‘He never spoke of it, if he did.’

‘He told me once his ma died in the plague years,’ I said, remembering. ‘I don’t think he had anyone else.’

Most of us didn’t, in those days.

We re-filled our glasses and drank to Oliver’s memory, but in truth he had been a hired blade, not a Pious Man, and none of us had known him well. I would give him a proper funeral, not see him thrown into a mass paupers’ grave outside the city walls, but whether anyone but us would turn up remained to be seen.

‘Your lass is an absolute fucking demon,’ Jochan said. ‘I don’t think I’ve seen even Billy the Boy do *that* before.’

I *had* seen Billy do that before, but that had been to kill an assassin who had been about to take my life. Mina’s battle-cunning was more . . . I don’t know, more *casual* than Billy’s, in a way. Like it didn’t matter to her. I knew she had grown up hard on the streets, but then, so had Billy himself, harder maybe even than she had, living as an orphan in the ruins of Messia. I wondered about the girl.

She’s poison, boy. She’s fucking possessed. Old Kurt had said that, but then, he used to say similar things about my Billy, too. Old Kurt’s definition of possessed generally meant ‘stronger in the cunning than I am’, it seemed to me, and that told me nothing. I wondered what he would have made of the late Princess Crown Royal. *A devil walking*, he’d have called her, of that I had no doubt, and I wondered if he would really have been wrong.

Beauty is pain, and pain is beauty. I remembered the princess saying that to me, once.

Her maids have a lot of accidents, Ailsa had told me. *Burns, mostly. Bad ones.*

And the Princess Crown Royal had said, *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. No, it never works.

Her on the throne? Aye, that would have been the rule of a devil and no mistake.

‘Tomas?’ Anne asked.

I blinked and looked at her. ‘Sorry, what?’

‘I said, do you know Nikash Bakshi?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Who’s that?’

Anne gave me an exasperated look. ‘The head of the Alarian Kings? I was just telling you about him.’

‘Fuck, were you?’ I had to ask. ‘Sorry, my mind wandered.’ My mind was wandering a sight too often these days, as far as I was concerned.

‘Wandering into the bottle with mine,’ Jochan slurred, and laughed.

That was exactly what I was worried about. ‘Anyway, no,’ I said, ‘I’ve never met him.’

‘I had a sit-down with him yesterday afternoon,’ Anne said. ‘After what you told Rosie, I got it done quick. The Northern Sons have hurt the Kings more than a little and I think he was keen to forge any sort of alliance he could.’

That made sense. ‘What did you make of him?’

Anne shrugged. ‘He’s a businessman, like you’d expect. A gangster, in truth, but half of fucking Ellinburg are from what I’ve seen. The Kings deal mostly in smuggling, which is why I suppose we’ve had little enough to do with them until now. They rule their own streets with an iron fist, and they’ve long had a business agreement with the Flower Girls to let them bring their smuggled goods down from the docks through the Wheels and onto their own streets.’

‘Have they now?’ I asked, and I wondered when exactly Florence Cooper had been planning to mention that to Anne or me.

‘Aye,’ Anne said. ‘I’ve had words with Florence about that, you mark me, Tomas. There’ll be a quarter of that tariff

coming to the Pious Men from now on and don't you worry on that account.'

I wondered how that conversation had gone. I took in the look on Anne's scarred face, and hard as she might be, I doubted Florence Cooper had enjoyed that piece of business negotiation one little bit.

You didn't fuck with Bloody Anne, not if you knew what was good for you, and you most *definitely* didn't try to cheat her. That, I thought, had been unwise of Florence. It might have been an agreement forged long before the Flower Girls had come to do fealty to the Pious Men, I was sure, but a lie by omission was still a lie. I knew what I thought about that. I doubted Anne thought any different.

'Well done,' I said, and Anne raised her glass in acknowledgement.

'Oh, stop talking business,' Jochan roared, oblivious to the heads swivelling to look at him across the common room. 'Anne gave Cooper a black eye - so what? We've fought and killed today so let's just fucking drink!'

'There's civilians in here,' Anne reminded him, and I caught the sharp edge in her voice. 'People from our own streets.'

'They fucking know who we are,' Jochan said, and I have to admit I agreed with him there.

'It's part of the mystique, Anne,' I said. 'It's why people drink in here. To rub shoulders with the great and terrible Pious Men. To curry favour, too, aye, but you're looked up to. You're the boss here, now. If I was a prince in this town, now you're a queen. Own it. Live it. The people expect certain things of a businessman, and a businesswoman even more so. Ma Aditi ran the Gutcutters down in the Wheels and she was an empress in her quarter. You need to be the same here.'

'Ma Aditi was a revolting bitch,' Anne said.

'Aye she was, and she was an enemy we bested,' I reminded her. 'Don't mean you can't be better. Bloody Anne

should be a legend in Ellinburg.'

'She certainly was back in the army,' Beast said, and that was the first sentence he had spoken since we'd sat down together. 'Even in my regiment we'd heard of the bloody sergeant.'

'Most of that was horseshit,' Anne said. ' "She eats men's balls with her breakfast beer"? Fuck off. I'd rather eat earwigs than men's balls.'

'It doesn't matter, Anne,' I told her. 'It builds a legend, and that can carry you a long way in business. Where do you think the devil Tomas Piety came from? Other people's tall stories, that's where. I cut Ma Aditi's head off and fucked her corpse, so I heard. So what if it's horseshit? When you best someone, they're more likely to make you out to be more than you are so they don't themselves look weak for losing to you. You can capitalise on that, you mark me there.'

Anne looked at me. 'Aye, I mark you, Tomas,' she said after a long pause.

'Good,' my brother shouted. 'Can we have another fucking drink now please?'

I had to allow that we could. I thought we had earned it.

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Chapter 16

Needless to say, I woke up still in the Tanner's Arms. Someone had had the decency to throw a blanket over me at least, and that had been good of them. The noble Knight of the Rose Throne Sir Tomas Piety woke up with his head on a sticky table in a stinking tavern in the slums of Ellinburg and very seriously considered puking. What the fuck would Ailsa have said if she had been there to see that?

Nothing good, I was sure.

I sat up and scrubbed my palms over my cheeks, feeling thoroughly vile. Flashes of memory came back to me like cannon-fire at night. The Northern Son exploding. The Skanian magician catching fire from the inside of his head. Oliver dying.

Fuck's sake, Oliver. I closed my eyes and squeezed the bridge of my nose between finger and thumb. I had only known him for a couple of years, but he'd been in Dannsburg with me. Only a few days ago I had been thinking how he probably wouldn't die for me, but yesterday he had done just that.

'It was your time to cross the river, and Our Lady forgives you your crimes, Oliver,' I said aloud. 'She welcomes you into Her embrace in the grey lands. In Our Lady's name.'

Someone groaned, and I sat up enough to look around the room. Beast was curled in front of the banked fire like a great bear, snoring softly, but there was another figure slumped over the next table to mine, his hand still curled around an overturned brandy bottle. I couldn't see his face, but I recognised my brother's wild hair. Anne and Mika had obviously crawled up the rickety wooden stairs to their respective rooms at some point, and Simple Sam usually

slept by the fire in the kitchen. Fuck knew where everyone else was, but I doubted any of them had been in a fit state to find their way back to their own homes last night.

‘Are y’awake?’ Jochan slurred, without lifting his head from the table. From his voice it sounded like he was still very drunk.

‘Aye,’ I said, although in truth I felt like I was in some sort of indeterminate state between life and death. ‘So they tell me, anyway.’

‘I didn’t dream it, did I?’

‘No, brother,’ I said gently. ‘You didn’t. Oliver’s gone.’

‘Fuck,’ Jochan muttered. He shoved the empty bottle away from him and it rolled off the table and hit the floor with a thud.

It didn’t break, so I supposed that was something.

That was us, in a way. The Piety boys: an empty, overturned brandy bottle, dropped on the floor, but unbroken, despite everything. Just about, anyway.

I got up, feeling somewhat unsteady, and made my way over to his table. I sat down opposite him, reached out and put my hand over his and sighed.

‘This is the life of a Queen’s Man, is it?’ he asked me. ‘Fucking glamorous, Tomas.’

‘Something like that,’ I said. Somehow I couldn’t imagine Sabine ever woke up in this sort of state, or even lagin for that matter. I knew for a fact my lady wife didn’t.

Eventually Jochan pried his head off the table and looked at me.

‘What do we do now?’

‘I’m going to see the governor when I can walk straight,’ I said. ‘That cunt who said the Skanians weren’t fighting us has got some questions to answer. Then we’re going to do what we always do. We’re going to fight.’

‘Fucking right,’ Jochan said. ‘The Sons have got to go. No more fucking treaties. This time we need to wipe them out,

and take their streets too. We've the Kings on our side now, for all that I don't care for them. We can do this.'

'We can *probably* do this,' I corrected him. 'I wouldn't say this to any of the rest of the crew save Anne, but it depends on how many fucking magicians the Skanians have sent. We've only got Billy and Mina and they're both young and inexperienced, strong though they are. If the Skanians send a real battlefield mage . . .'

'There's Old Kurt,' Jochan said, and he sounded like he was sobering up fast now the talk had turned to the prospect of violence.

That, it had to be allowed, was his second favourite pastime after drinking.

'There is,' I said, 'although Lady knows whether we can rely on him. He's no friend of mine, Jochan.'

'The old fucker's not so bad,' Jochan said, but of course, I knew Kurt better than my brother did. He *was* so bad, to my mind, but it might be that we had no choice.

I stood up and took stock of things. Aside from the way my head felt, my robes, coat, shirt and britches all had bloodstains on them, and I still hadn't made a firm decision on whether or not to throw up. I thought perhaps the governor's hall would have to wait a few hours.

'I'm going home,' I said. 'Tell Anne I'll be back later, when she surfaces.'

'Aye,' Jochan said, and put his head back on the table.

Whether he would remember or not was anyone's guess, but I left him to it and slipped out of the Tanner's Arms and into the street. It was surprisingly early, barely dawn, but it's hard to get a good night's sleep slumped face-down across a table. I didn't think I'd done that since I had been in the army.

The morning air was cold and damp. I pulled my soiled robes around me, shivering, but at least the chill was clearing my head some. I would have to walk home, I realised. I had run on foot to the chaos on Trader's Row, and

while I didn't remember how we had got to the Tanner's after the riot, it certainly hadn't been on a horse. I pulled my cowl up over my head to help me remain anonymous and set off towards the Narrows.

The Stink was largely deserted that early. I passed a tired-looking street scrub on her way home after the night's business, but she didn't bother trying to solicit me – I wasn't sure if that was on account of my priestly garb, or the bloodstains on it, or simply testament to just how exhausted she was. She had barely twenty years to her, if I was any judge, but she looked twice that.

'Oi,' I said, and she turned a wary gaze in my direction.

She wasn't licensed – scrubs never were, so she didn't wear the knot. Even so, there was no mistaking the look.

I fished in my pouch and produced a silver penny. 'Many of the Guard about this morning?'

She snatched for the coin but I held it out of reach until I had an answer.

'Nah,' she said after a moment. 'Not down here, anyway. Never are, these days. Maybe a patrol up on the Row, if you go near the governor's hall or the guilds. Not otherwise.'

'My thanks,' I said, and tossed her the coin.

She caught it deftly and made it disappear into her clothes, then looked at me for a moment. 'Not like a priest to be worrying about meeting the Guard,' she said.

I pushed my cowl back from my face and looked at her. These had been my streets once, and although I didn't recognise her, I thought she might know me, and there I wasn't disappointed.

'Mr Piety! I told my lad you'd come home to us in the end.'

Oh, I had been a prince on these streets and no mistake, and these people had looked to me for protection and justice even as they handed over their taxes, but that was done with now.

I shook my head. 'I'm just visiting,' I said. 'Bloody Anne is boss round here now.'

‘Aye, I heard,’ the woman said. ‘She never ousted you, did she?’

I laughed. ‘Anne is my best friend,’ I said. ‘I put her in charge of the Pious Men when I became city governor and then had to leave the city on business.’

‘So you’re government now?’

I paused and regarded her for a moment, wondering why she would ask a question like that. ‘What did you say your name was?’

She turned and ran, lifting her already hitched skirts to sprint. I watched after her, but let her go. Truth be told, I was in no state for running that morning, but all the same I wondered whose spy she was. I supposed it didn’t really matter. I hadn’t told her anything that wasn’t already common knowledge.

I turned into Carpenter’s Narrow. The scrub had been right; I saw no City Guard as I climbed the winding steps between the workshops and tenements, and it wasn’t until I emerged onto Trader’s Row that I saw anyone at all. The first farmers and fishmongers of the day were making their way to the market square, and a nightsoil cart rumbled past dragging its stench through the air behind it like a rancid brown banner.

Another fine Ellinburg morning, I thought as the drizzle began to fall.

When I finally reached my house I decided to allow myself a couple of hours’ sleep in a real bed, then a much-needed bath before I faced the day.

*

It was past noon when I woke and rang for a footman to bring me food and small beer and hot water for the big wooden tub in front of the fire. Once I had eaten and soaked and scrubbed the blood and filth from my face and hair, I dressed, and as I did so, I caught sight of my sheets. My bed

looked like someone had died in it – but for all that, I didn't have a wound on me beyond scrapes and bruises and a torn fingernail that was annoying me more than it had any right to.

I wondered again exactly what I had done the previous day, and just how bloody the fighting had been. In truth, I was glad I couldn't remember, but it worried me all the same. Lapses of memory were usually a sign that battle shock was getting worse, not better.

I had to admit that, feeling as I did, having servants was not as bad as I had first thought. I could only imagine the state Anne and Jochan, Sam and Beast and the others must be in, let alone having to fend for themselves in the rather basic surroundings of the Tanner's. Perhaps the life of a Queen's Man did have some advantages after all.

I made my way down the stairs and onto the street around the second hour of the afternoon. My robes were with the washerwoman, so I was just wearing a cloak over my coat and doublet like everyone else. I made a mental note to have Pawl the tailor make me up a spare set of robes. I headed down the Row to Ernst the barber's shop and had a haircut and a shave, and once that was done I felt ready to face the business of the day.

Trader's Row was busy by then. A gaggle of masons outside the house of magicians were shoring up the damage from yesterday's explosion. Already a new front door and window frames were in place, and red-faced carpenters' apprentices were sweating as they cleared away their masters' saw dogs and tools into the waiting carts. The glazing and masonry work would take longer, I knew, and no doubt cost much more, but I supposed that the house of magicians could probably afford it.

The guild of masons were notoriously expensive, and thinking on that made me wonder how the work on the city walls of Dannsburg was progressing – and how much it had cost so far. Between that and repairing the damage to the

royal palace and the great buildings on the Royal Mall that the Princess Crown Royal had destroyed, the guild of masons must be doing very well indeed in the capital at the moment.

I put the thought from my mind and made my way to the governor's hall.

Schulz saw me at once, and that didn't surprise me one little bit.

'It won't do,' I said as I stepped into her study, before she could so much as open her mouth. 'A bombing on the streets – open gang warfare on Trader's Row. It won't stand, Governor. What will the guilds say? Why should they pay their taxes when the City Guard can't even keep the peace on their own front doorsteps? What would *Dannsborg* say?'

She paled at the mention of Dannsborg, as I had expected. No provincial city governor wanted to think of their masters in the capital, or the sort of 'help' that would be provided by the Queen's Men should control of their city start to slip from their grasp.

She spread her hands in a helpless gesture that I found extremely irritating. 'I have the manpower that I have, Sir Tomas.'

'Then deploy it better,' I snarled at her. 'Factory owners and nobles can afford to hire their own security. They'll complain about it, but quite frankly, fuck them. The guilds are the centre of wealth in this city, and that money is the source of your tax revenue to the crown. Fail to provide that, Governor, and I'll be calling here in far more than an advisory capacity. I can assure you of that.'

She swallowed at the snarling face of the Queen's Men I was showing her, and her hand trembled somewhat as she lifted the bowl of tea from her desk to her lips and took a sip. 'I will have Captain Miller reconsider the patrol patterns,' she assured me.

Truth be told, I couldn't have given a fuck about the guilds, or taxes, or the patrol patterns of the City Guard. I

had just wanted to put her on the defensive, so that she would obey my next instruction without question.

‘Another thing,’ I said. ‘That Skanian emissary you have in a diplomatic suite? Fuck that. Throw him back in the cells.’

‘May I ask why?’ she asked. ‘I have found Mr Hendensen quite pleasant company at dinner.’

Dear gods, she had been *dining* with him? Schulz might have been an efficient bureaucrat but she was a long way from understanding the world of the Queen’s Men.

‘Because I fucking said so,’ I snapped at her. ‘While he’s down there on bread and water and not enjoying your company at the fucking dinner table, you might ask him where the Skanian magicians are coming from, and why he’s told me so much fucking *horseshit*!’

I was shouting in her face, I realised, and I made myself take a step back. This wasn’t how Ailsa would have gone about it, I knew, but Iagin might very well have done the same. Of course, Konrad would probably have knifed her already. We were all different, us Queen’s Men, each with our own approaches and styles, but we all served the Rose Throne in our way.

‘I . . . yes, Sir Tomas,’ she said helplessly.

What else could she do?

Chapter 17

Nikash Bakshi was a strongly built man with perhaps thirty years to him. He was sitting in the back room of the Tanner's Arms with Bloody Anne and Aunt Enaid and me that evening, and his second beside him. Out in the Tavern were six or seven of the Alarian Kings, with six or seven of the Pious Men, watching each other. Anne had brokered an alliance, aye, but it was a fairly uneasy one as yet, with no one quite trusting anyone else. For one, the loss of Desh was still at the front of the minds of the Pious Men.

Bakshi gave me a curious look. 'Madame Anne, Auntie Enaid,' he said, dipping his head to each. He had a thick Alarian accent but he spoke respectfully enough. Alarians traditionally called their elders auntie or uncle, and I knew he meant no over-familiarity with his words. 'I greet you both. And this fine gentleman, who I do not know.'

Oh, he knew I was Tomas Piety, no doubt of that. What he meant was, 'What are you doing here when you don't run the Pious Men any more?'

'My name is Sir Tomas,' I said, and inclined my head to him in respect. 'I am here as Anne's advisor.'

'Hmmm,' Bakshi said. 'Her advisor from where, Sir Tomas? From the capital, I am thinking.'

Of course he would have his spies on our streets, the same as Anne had hers on his, and I thought of the street scrub I had spoken to the previous morning.

So you're government now?

Aye, well. Something like that, I had to allow. I showed him a thin smile and said nothing.

'It's in both our interests to do away with the Northern Sons,' Anne said, her voice rasping in the shadows of the

dimly lit, windowless room. 'And more to the point, with their Skanian backers.'

'The foreign witches,' Bakshi said, and his lips quirked in bitter amusement. 'One lot of unwelcome foreigners in Ellinburg is enough for you, I am sure.'

'It's not like that,' Anne assured him.

'I have been called *tea monkey* on my own streets,' Bakshi said.

'Not by me,' she said, 'and I'll wager not by any of my crew. Tomas' own wife is—'

'Oh, some of your best friends are Alarian, eh?' he challenged me.

I had to admit I had no real answer to that.

'Perhaps we should start again,' I said, and spread my hands. 'The Sons control the majority of the west side of Ellinburg, the Alarian Kings a far smaller portion and a little of the north. The east belongs to the Pious Men and their vassal gangs, the Flower Girls and the Headhunters. I dare say the Kings would like to expand their territory, but currently lack the strength to tackle the Sons in open battle. The Pious Men not only have that strength, but also magicians of their own.'

Bakshi's eyes narrowed. 'You offer a lot,' he said. 'You would risk a lot, and for why?'

I realised I had effectively taken over the negotiation from Anne and perhaps that made her feel small, but I knew it had needed to be done. She had been going about it not exactly in the wrong way, but certainly not in the best way either.

'Political reasons,' I said, seeing no benefit in lying to him about it.

Quite the opposite in fact. Bakshi was obviously pleased with himself; he thought he had found out who I was, and if I let him carry on thinking he was right, then already I had something I could use.

‘I knew it,’ he said. ‘Once a governor, always government.’

‘You were right,’ I said, ‘I do come from the capital. The crown has no quarrel with Alaria and very much values the trade and friendship between our countries, but we have reasons to want the Skanians out of Ellinburg – and the rest of the country. The Port at Varnburg is already closed to their ships, and their merchants have been ejected from Dannsburg.’

He laughed, and when he spoke next it was in an Ellinburg accent every bit as strong as my own. ‘You value the friendship between our countries? I was born in Ellinburg, you fucking idiot. I’ve never set foot in Alaria in my life.’

So he had been putting on his heavy Alarian accent to begin with. I felt a flash of irritation.

‘As was Desh,’ Anne said, and she failed to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

‘Aye, I wondered when that would come up,’ he said.

‘Right about now,’ I said, although I really wished she hadn’t mentioned it. ‘Why, Bakshi? We had no quarrel with the Kings.’

‘You sought to recruit us, bring us under your thumb as a vassal gang like the Flower Girls, not to make a treaty with us. I was insulted.’

I thought on it for a moment and had to allow he had a point there. ‘You had no streets left,’ I pointed out. ‘I thought you would welcome a merger.’

‘An alliance, perhaps,’ he said. ‘A take-over, no. Understand me now, Tomas Piety. That is not on the table and never will be. The Alarian Kings are not for sale.’

I met his eyes and saw the strength of purpose in his stare. Nikash Bakshi was not a man to be trifled with, I could see that now, and I had obviously underestimated him before. It had cost Desh his life and I would have to live with that on my conscience. Sometimes a leader has to make hard decisions, and the simple fact of the matter is that

sometimes, inevitably, the decision will be the wrong one. Wrong decisions have consequences, always, and this was no different.

I forced down the wash of grief and self-loathing and forced myself to keep my expression neutral. 'Then let us discuss an alliance,' I said, and he nodded.

Two hours later the Pious Men and the Alarian Kings were officially allied factions, and Anne and Bakshi shook on it, for all that it had been me who brokered that deal. There were appearances to be kept up, after all.

That was how business was done in Ellinburg.

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Now that we were all friends, the drinking had started. Out in the tavern, our men and theirs had gone from giving each other wary looks to sharing beer and dice and tall tales, and that was well and good. At the table in the back room, we were talking strategy over brandy.

His streets being so much closer to those of the Sons than ours were, Bakshi had a far better idea of who they actually were and where they lived and congregated than we did.

'I still don't see how we can hit them other than an all-out assault that will cost us most of our men,' Bakshi said. 'I have no answer to their magicians. I know you say you have, but two children and possibly an old man, if we're lucky? You'll forgive my scepticism, Sir Tomas.'

I smiled. 'The world moves on, Mr Bakshi,' I said, 'and there are other magics in it now. You leave that to me.'

He still looked perplexed as he and his men took their leave of us shortly afterwards. I ignored Anne's equally quizzical look and went to find my brother.

Mercifully, he wasn't too drunk yet, and I took him aside to say, 'Your pet magician – I want a sit-down with him, as soon as possible. Tomorrow, if you can arrange it.'

‘After we came to the defence of their guildhall yesterday I could probably have him here tonight,’ Jochan said. ‘The magicians owe us and they know it.’

I frowned slightly at that. The magicians I had known were largely aloof and somewhat arrogant, but of course, that was in Dannsburg, where they had been the second most important faction in the city – well, at least before the house of law crushed them with its iron boot. I thought of Archmagus Ritenkov and how different he had been to his predecessor, almost deferential, in fact, and that still in Dannsburg. These magicians in Ellinburg, where they had no political influence and knew no one and had no friends save us, aye, I thought they would be a different matter indeed. Magicians were studious men, after all, men of learning and discourse, not violence.

‘Aye, well and good,’ I said. ‘Send a runner then, and see if he’ll come when you crook your finger. It’ll be a good sign if he does.’

Jochan went to speak to Hari about arranging for one of his boys to run the message to the house of magicians, while I took a brandy and went and sat at my old table in the corner, where Simple Sam still stood guard like he always had, although I took care not to sit in Anne’s seat.

I was taking over again, I knew I was, and of course she knew it too. Bloody Anne was no one’s fool and I dare say my aunt could see it too, but I couldn’t help that. There was too much at stake and Anne was still too inexperienced a leader to leave this in her hands.

Ailsa had done the same to me, I knew, when Pious Men business had become crown business, and at the time I had felt so out of my depth that I had in truth been glad of it, however much it had chafed at me at the time. I was in my wife’s position now, I knew, and the realisation was a strange one: I was a Queen’s Man in truth at last, and I wasn’t quite sure how I felt about that.

Anne came and joined me a few minutes later, my brother and our aunt in tow, and they took seats at the table. When Simple Sam moved to stand between us and everyone else, his massive arms folded across his barrel chest, I saw Beast give him a nod of approval from across the room. Those two were already firm friends, and it pleased me to see it.

Black Billy was by the door, still sitting but he looked stronger today, and again, that was good. Oliver's loss was a shame, but these were the core of the crew, those of us who had lived through Abington, whether together or not. Jochan's original men and mine had been in different regiments, aye, but folk who have been through Hell together tend to stay together. As I have written, the Pious Men were as close-skirted as any family and a good deal more so than some.

Anne took a sip of brandy and looked at me for a long moment. Oh aye, she could see what was happening, all right, and I could only hope I hadn't offended her by taking over the earlier negotiations with Bakshi.

'What are you up to, Tomas?' she asked after a moment. 'What does "other magics" mean? The witchcraft we have to suffer is bad enough. I don't want to see more of it on our streets.'

'The cunning isn't witchcraft, Anne,' I had to tell her for the I-don't-know-how-manyth time. I bit back my irritation at doing so and added, 'And neither is blasting powder.'

'We haven't got any fucking blasting powder,' she snapped. 'This would be a sight easier if we had, but we haven't, and that's all there is to it.'

I met Jochan's eyes, and I'm ashamed to admit it but we both sniggered like the schoolboys we had once been. I felt so close to my brother in that moment, closer than I think I had in years, and it warmed my soul.

'I reckon we soon will have,' he said.

'Aye,' I said. 'Our magicians ain't like the Skanian ones, I've told you that. They scry the stars and do mathematics

and debate philosophy, but more to the point, they practise *alchemy*. They fucking *make* blasting powder, Anne, that's the main point of them. And they owe us a debt now – and one of them is a drinking companion of my brother's.'

Anne and Enaid both blinked in surprise, and I realised that perhaps my poor drunkard of a brother could keep a secret when it mattered after all.

'Really?' Anne asked, looking at Jochan in genuine surprise.

'You Dannsburg types aren't the only ones who can work in the shadows,' he said, and laughed. 'I've been grooming this prick for months, on Tomas' orders.'

'Were you ever going to tell me?' Anne asked, and I could detect a sharp edge to her words.

'Not until you needed to know,' I said, and that was Our Lady's own truth. 'It might not have worked. It *still* might not work, but after yesterday, I'm a lot more confident than I was. It will cost, and I dare say it will cost a very great deal, but I have gold and I can always get more if we need it. The house of law has very deep coffers indeed.'

'And is hundreds of miles away,' Anne pointed out.

'The banks, Anne,' I said. 'There's a bank on Trader's Row. If I show them the Queen's Warrant and sign and seal some paperwork, I can draw as much as I want, within reason. They'll be repaid by the house of law once the relevant letters and drafts have been exchanged by messenger with Dannsburg.'

The full and unconditional backing and funding of the crown.

Ailsa had told me that, and although I had never actually put it to the test, I believed her. A requisition under the Queen's Warrant was one from the crown itself, and effectively it could not be refused.

'So we can get bombs, then?' Enaid asked, bringing us back to the matter at hand. 'Flashstones?'

'Aye, I think so,' I said.

Flashstones might be illegal outside of the army, but they were manufactured by the house of magicians and I was absolutely sure the new house here in Ellinburg would have been making some, if only for their own protection. A flashstone is like a hollow cannonball packed with blasting powder and nails: there's a fuse sticking out of it that you light, and then you throw the whole thing into a confined space, or you prop it up against a door and run like fuck. Most of us had used them in the war, and we'd been on the receiving end of them too. They were evil things.

The Northern Sons had magicians, but I doubted they had much left in the way of blasting weapons, rare and illegal as they were. The one they had detonated yesterday might very well have been the only one they had. If what Jochan had told me about this magician was true, I might be able to get enough of the things to bomb each and every one of their homes in a single night.

Shock and awe, that was how I wanted it done: one night of terror and explosions ripping through Western Ellinburg that would bring the Northern Sons to their fucking knees.

I was done playing.

My aunt met my eyes and I could see that she knew I was deadly serious.

'This isn't going to be the Wheels all over again, is it?' she asked. 'That was too many civilians dead, Tomas Piety, and I think you know it.'

'Aye, well,' I said, and I felt the unfamiliar hand of shame brush my sleeve. 'That was more Ailsa's doing than mine.'

'Are you so different from her now?'

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. My aunt had always been able to see to the core of me, and I confess I didn't like it, not one little bit, but there was little enough I could do about it.

'It needs doing,' I said. 'I am . . . more restrained than Ailsa was, but we have the same motives. The good of the realm comes first, Auntie; it always has and it always will.'

‘And fuck anyone who gets in the way, eh, Tomas?’ Anne said, and her flat tone told me she wasn’t joking.

‘There won’t be another Yan Wainwright,’ I assured her. ‘Bakshi knows where these cunts live. We target their houses, and only theirs, and we’ll use flashstones, not whole barrels of powder this time. Pinpoint bombing.’

‘And they don’t have families, these men? I know they’re our enemies, but their children aren’t.’

I thought then of the Archmagus Nikolai Reiter, and how at the time I had been prepared to blow his house up in the middle of the night for a crime he hadn’t even committed.

I have children, Sir Tomas. Four of them.

I had been glad then that I changed my mind, I had to allow. I pinched the bridge of my nose between finger and thumb and looked away, then swallowed my brandy in a single draught. This wasn’t the time to be showing indecision, not in front of Anne and the rest of them. We needed rid of the Northern Sons and their Skanian magicians and that was all there was to it. Archmagus Reiter had swung from the hangman’s rope in the end anyway, and his wife and children had been left penniless on the streets, where they had probably already been hanged for vagrancy. What fucking difference did it make, in the end? It would probably have been kinder to have blown them up in their sleep, have them know nothing about it, than what they’d likely ended up suffering.

Simple Sam turned to the table and coughed. ‘Man to see you, boss,’ he said, and he was addressing me not Anne.

We were going to have a problem with this sooner or later, I knew, but matters of protocol would have to wait for another time. ‘Oh, aye?’ I said.

‘The learned magus Konstantin Zlatkov,’ Sam said, pronouncing the title and name very carefully.

Zlatkov was an uncommon name. I wondered if it came from lands east of ours across the sea, but I knew very little of geography and I couldn’t be sure. All the same, the man

wore the familiar blue velvet robes of his order with the seven-pointed star insignia of the house of magicians embroidered in white over his heart. Seeing the hem of his robe caked in filth and horseshit, I thought idly that long robes were even less suited to the streets of Ellinburg than they were to Dannsburg.

He was youngish, perhaps thirty or so years to him, and almost completely chinless. He greeted my brother enthusiastically, and gratefully accepted a brandy from him.

‘Jochan!’ he exclaimed, sounding like he was genuinely pleased to see him. ‘I and my house owe you all a great deal of thanks for the assistance yesterday, but what prompts this so sudden invitation?’

Jochan made a sweeping gesture that encompassed our whole table. ‘Meet the family,’ he said, and the magus went pale.

Chapter 18

‘Good evening,’ I said, in the flat voice that I had perfected over so many years of intimidating people for a living.

‘Please, take a seat.’

‘But you’re–’ he started.

‘Yes, I am,’ I said.

He must have known me from Dannsburg, and that was no real surprise. I was the Queen’s Man who had brought Billy the Magician’s Bane to their door, after all, and unleashed him to tear the learned magus Absolom Greuv inside out, quite literally, on their own front doorstep.

I held his gaze until he paled even further and looked away.

‘I’m also a friend of the house of magicians,’ I continued. ‘These days I am, anyway. Right now, back in Dannsburg, your Archmagus Ritenkov is doing me a favour. Here in Ellinburg, I’m doing him one by keeping you lot alive. That’s what I believe you might call a reciprocal agreement, I think.’

‘I . . . suppose it is,’ Zlatkov said in a faltering voice. He sank down into the chair he had been offered at the table and gulped his brandy. Oh, he knew who I was and which house I served, all right. I have to admit I had been rather banking on that.

‘Good,’ I said. ‘Then it’s your turn to reciprocate.’

He sighed and gave Jochan what I could only think of as something of a hurt look. ‘What do you want?’

So I told him.

‘*Flashstones?*’ he whispered. ‘Flashstones are illegal!’

‘Most things worth having are, in these times we live in,’ I said. ‘I know blasting powder comes from the house of

magicians, and I can't imagine you and your learned friends have been idle since you've been in Ellinburg.'

'All the same, I can't just—?'

'Why not? It's in your own interests, after all.'

'But . . . but what would you *do* with flashstones?'

'Kill the people who are trying to kill you and us,' I said.

'You have the weapons, but not the skill or the spine to use them. We lack the weapons, but we are all veterans here. We'll do what needs to be done.'

The learned magus looked around the table at the scarred, emotionless faces staring back at him.

I knew what he was seeing: Criminals. Uncouth thugs. Hardened soldiers. Heartless killers.

Bloody Anne. Simple Sam. Jochan. Even my aunt.

He wasn't wrong about any of them.

And then there was me, the Queen's Man.

'But it will be obvious that the weapons came from us,' he protested. 'The governor if no one else will know what we do. The City Guard—'

'Won't be a problem,' I interrupted him yet again.

The man was a pusillanimous mouse, to my mind, and I found myself tiring of him already.

'But . . .'

'Put it this way,' I said, and met his eyes with a hard stare.

'Do what I ask, or when the Sons come again, we won't be there, and neither will the Kings.'

He swallowed hard, but I could see that he knew I meant it.

'I . . . will see what I can do,' he managed.

'You'll fucking do what my brother tells you, that's what you'll do,' Jochan growled at him. 'You told me yourself you're in charge of explosive production. No fucking excuses, Konstantin.'

'Oh gods, did I?' the man all but whimpered, and I wondered exactly how drunk Jochan had got him for him to give *that* up to a virtual stranger. Every man has levers that

move him, and every man has his weaknesses too. It was quite plain that Konstantin Zlatkov's was drink.

'How . . . how many do you want?'

'As many as you can get,' I said. 'Fifteen, minimum, and preferably twenty.'

'I *can't*,' he protested. 'We don't have them – ten, perhaps, at best.'

I leaned forward across the table and looked him right in the eyes. 'Everything there is, by tomorrow night. Don't hold back on me, Zlatkov.'

'No, no I wouldn't,' he assured me, 'but I can't do the impossible.'

That was only fair, I supposed. 'Bring them here,' I told him, 'by tomorrow night. And I'm sure I don't need to say this, but don't tell a fucking soul. I'd bet gold that the Sons have a spy in your house.'

'How would they?' he said, looking appalled at the prospect.

'We had you,' Jochan told him. 'You just didn't know it.'

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The magician fled as soon as we concluded our brief and somewhat one-sided business negotiation. Those were always the best kind, as far as I was concerned. I lingered at the Tanner's long enough to have a couple more drinks with Anne and my brother, but I didn't want another long night, and returned home shortly before midnight.

Billy and Mina had retired so I stayed in the drawing room for just a brief nightcap before I too took myself off to my bed. That being the case, I actually felt quite refreshed when I woke sometime late the next morning. I had missed breakfast again, of course, but in truth, I was more grateful for the uninterrupted sleep. If all went to plan, I would be getting little enough that night.

I found Mina sitting at her books in the drawing room. There was no sign of Billy, but I assumed he had crept off to market with Cook again on some mischief of his own.

‘Morning, Mr Piety,’ Mina said as she looked up at me from beneath the long blonde hair falling across her forehead.

‘Morning,’ I said, and took a seat. I rang the small silver handbell to summon a footman. There was work to be done and drinking liquor of any kind would keep until it was finished – even small beer might be too much, given the night ahead I was expecting. I held my peace until the footman reappeared and presented me with a steaming bowl of aromatic tea, which I took gratefully. I held it up to blow steam from the bowl, then took a cautious sip.

‘Tell me, Mina,’ I said a moment later, making her look up from the book in her lap once more. ‘If I asked you to do a thing for me, would you do it?’

‘Yes,’ she said, and there was no hesitation in her voice. ‘You’re the only reason I’m not on the streets, Mr Piety. I know I’m with Billy, but you didn’t have to let me stay here when you and him went away, but you did. I know I wronged you over Old Kurt, and I’m grateful you forgave me for that and let me stay living here. I’ve come to think of you almost as a da myself, and I don’t reckon there’s anything I wouldn’t do for you, save to hurt Billy.’

I smiled. ‘I’d hardly ask you to do that,’ I said, and she flushed.

‘I know,’ she said. ‘So my answer is yes. What do you want me to do?’

‘Look after Billy, first and foremost,’ I said. ‘We’ll be fighting tonight, if all goes well: fighting the Northern Sons and their Skanian magicians. Billy will come with us, to fight the magicians, and I’d ask you to come with us too and see him safe. I’ll ask Old Kurt as well, but Our Lady only knows what his answer will be, or whether I can trust him. So here’s the thing, Mina. I want you to keep Billy safe from the Skanians, if you can, but more than anything, I want you to

watch Kurt if he does join us. I want you to keep Billy safe from *him*, and me as well, for that matter. You know him better than I do, and I don't know how much I can trust him.'

'I'd look after my Billy with my last breath,' Mina said fervently, and young though she was, I could tell she meant it. 'I'll come out fighting with you if that's what you want, Mr Piety, but for what it's worth, I reckon you can trust Old Kurt. I know you and him stood on opposite sides of the workers' uprising, but I don't think he holds with these foreign magicians, or what they're doing.'

In truth, I didn't think he did either, but he had made common cause with Sven Hendensen, and Lady knew I didn't think I could trust the White Shadow either. I was out of my depth, but I also knew who my assets were and when it was time to deploy them. Mina was definitely an asset, and it was high time I started making better use of her.

'That's appreciated Mina, thank you,' I said.

She bobbed her head and looked a little embarrassed, and I sipped my tea and stared into the fire to let her know she could go back to her book.

I've come to think of you almost as a da myself.

That was something I hadn't known, I had to allow, and it made me feel warm inside. I had never realised that I wanted children until I had adopted Billy, and by the sounds of things, now effectively Mina as well. I had never even had a steady woman before the war, just a string of acquaintances and companions, and then the camp followers in the army, and then Ailsa. I was married to Ailsa, aye, but barring an act of the gods, there would never be a child between us, as we hadn't so much as lain down together and I couldn't imagine that we ever would. So I didn't think I would ever be a natural father, but Billy was my son in every way that mattered, and he and Mina were so in love she was all but my daughter-by-law, and I wondered how I hadn't seen that until now.

‘Mina,’ I said, and faltered as she looked up at me.

‘Yes?’

‘If . . . if you want to call me Da you can, you understand?’

She looked at me for a long, silent moment. ‘No thank you,’ she said, ‘but I appreciate the offer.’

Fool.

I had no idea what had happened to her own parents, or what her father had been like. The gods only knew ‘Da’ was a difficult word for me, with its connotations of what *my da* had done to me and to Jochan.

‘Sorry,’ I said at once, ‘I didn’t mean . . .’

‘I know,’ she said, ‘it’s all right. I’d just . . . rather you were Mr Piety.’

I nodded, and looked away. I could respect that.

We ate a slightly uncomfortable lunch together, with minimal conversation. I had taken to being Billy’s adopted father easily enough. He was a boy in his teen years and I had been one of those myself once, and not quite so very long ago as he probably supposed. I knew what that was like, but I had no idea what it was like to be Mina. I had obviously said the wrong thing, but I wasn’t quite sure why. I could only go along with her wishes and hope she hadn’t taken too ill against me for my words.

Billy came home sometime in the middle of the afternoon while I was reading in the drawing room and trying not to think about how much I wanted a brandy. To my surprise, he had Old Kurt with him.

I looked at the two of them in confusion as the footman discreetly withdrew, closing the door behind him. My servants obviously had no idea what to do with Old Kurt, but they had to be used to the procession of ruffians and oddities who were my most regular callers.

‘What’s this then, lad?’ I asked.

‘We’ll fight tonight,’ Billy said. ‘You’ll want Old Kurt to help. He will.’

That was the voice of Billy the Seer, Billy who was never wrong when he knew a thing.

Except for the time he had been, of course – the time I didn't want to think about, right after he and Mina had feasted on the strength of a Skanian magician, and neither of them had been quite the same ever since. No, I didn't want to think about that one little bit.

I looked at the old man instead, and I saw the quiet despair in his eyes.

'That right, Old Kurt?' I asked him. 'You'll fight for me? For the crown?'

'I fought for the crown once before, boy, in *my* war,' he said. 'One more time, eh? Once more upon the walls, until the fortress falls, as the old song goes.'

With his age, thinking about it, *his* war had to have been the one *before* my aunt's, not hers, and I couldn't even have said where that had been fought, or against who.

This country has twice the mouths it can feed already; that's why we're always at bloody war. My aunt had said that to me once, and it had been true then and it was true now. Our glorious martial history, much celebrated in Dannsburg, was little but bloodshed and hardship. I could see the fatalism in Kurt's expression: he didn't expect to live to see the dawn.

You'll die this month.

Billy had said that to him, and I could see that the old bugger believed it. He had to have some eighty years or more to him by then, which meant he had already lived a far longer life than most men in Ellinburg got. I was sure that when the time came to stare into Our Lady's cold eyes, that would be a very small consolation indeed.

'I appreciate it,' I said, but all the same I was glad Mina had agreed to watch him.

I couldn't bring myself to trust Old Kurt. If he thought he was going to die anyway, then might he go all-in to take me with him? I really didn't know. I knew he had been fond of

me, in his way, when I had been a lad, but he didn't hold with the path I had taken growing up, or of the life I had made for myself with the Pious Men. Most of all, I knew he had never forgiven me for the bombing of the Wheels, and that was what worried me the most.

I remembered when I had ridden into the Wheels after that Godsdays afternoon, and how Old Kurt had held his dead rat up by its tail and looked at me. I suppressed a shiver. Since I had known Billy, and then Mina, I had made my peace with the cunning, or at least, I thought I had. All the same, there was something about Old Kurt that still made my skin crawl.

Witchcraft.

No, not that: that was Bloody Anne speaking, and that was nothing but the superstition of shepherds up in the rocky villages where she had grown up, where folk who held to their Stone Father had seen her cut above and below for no more than who she was. That wasn't right and I wasn't having it.

All the same though, Old Kurt gave me the fear and there was no way around that.

I was glad when a footman entered the room to tell me that there was a runner from the Tanner's Arms.

Footmen of the sort I employed were used to messengers in livery bearing calling cards, and I wondered what mine made of the ragged urchin boy he reluctantly showed into the room. It was just some Stink lad Hari or Mika had found and promised a silver penny to run a folded piece of paper up from the Tanner's Arms to one of the big houses. The lad's bare feet were filthy on my Alarian rug – Ailsa would have pitched a fit, I had no doubt, but not me; I couldn't find it in me to care. I had been a barefoot urchin once myself, after all.

I took the proffered note and opened it. It wasn't sealed, but obviously the lad couldn't read, so that hardly mattered. They were Anne's words, but I recognised Rosie's hand.

*My dearest big brother,
What we asked for is on its way. Only ten, but better
than nothing. We'll sharpen the blades for the rest. Let me
know if we have the support we hoped for.
Your loving little sister,
Anne*

I looked at the lad, a waif with some eight or nine years to him. 'Can you remember a simple message?' I didn't want to entrust anything to writing.

'Aye, boss,' he said, and I couldn't help but smile. This one had grown up on the same streets as I had and no mistake.

'It was a lady gave you this?'

He nodded.

'Go back to her. Tell her yes, and that I'll see her at the Tanner's before sunset. Tell her to give you another penny, and Tomas said so.'

His eyes lit up in a great smile of joy and he all but pelted from the house to deliver his message and claim his extra coin.

I looked at Old Kurt and Billy and Mina. 'We're heading to the Tanner's Arms,' I told them. 'We've ten flashstones and we're going to use them and use them well, but these fuckers have twenty known addresses in western Ellinburg, and probably more we've not yet found. Tonight we're going into battle.'

'Aye, Tomas,' Kurt said, and the look on his face was death and despair.

Chapter 19

We made it to the Tanner's Arms shortly after the cart of flashstones did, me and the three cunning folk and Stefan. Anne was in the stableyard, supervising the unloading. I found my brother in the common room, grinding his axe. Hari had had the sense to close to the public that evening and the place had the feel of an army muster tent as all around us men donned leather and mail and sharpened weapons and checked harnesses.

Florence Cooper was there, the shiner Anne had given her already paling to a dull purple smudge around her eye. I hoped Florence wasn't going to become trouble, but if she did, she would be Anne's problem and not mine.

I walked into the yard as Anne was snapping at one of the carters as he fumbled a crate. 'Careful, you fucking idiot! Set it down there – no, *there*, you fool.'

'Evening,' I said as I joined her.

'Tomas,' she said. 'Your man in the magicians came through for us, I have to give him that. Ten flashstones.'

'I wanted fifteen, ideally twenty—'

'Ten flashstones is a sight better than none,' Anne said, and I found I had to agree with her there.

'Aye, it is,' I said, 'and he's Jochan's man not mine. You remember that, Bloody Anne. I know you don't hold my brother in high regard, but he did this for me all by himself and he didn't fuck it up, so I'd ask you not to forget that.'

She nodded. 'He did, although it was you who conducted the negotiation. It usually is.'

Did I detect resentment in her tone? I remembered the sit-down with Nikash Bakshi, and how I had had to take over to

save it. Perhaps she *did* resent that, but surely she could see it had been for the best?

‘When are the Kings getting here?’ I asked her, to change the subject.

‘They’re not. We’re meeting them there,’ Anne said. ‘They’re in the west of Ellinburg themselves, so it seemed stupid for them to walk halfway across the city just to walk back again with us, and you never know when the City Guard might bother to put in an appearance.’

That made sense on the face of it, but it made me frown all the same: Bakshi knew where we were going, and when, and there was still the chance he might sell us out to the Sons. It was a thin chance, I thought, but it was there, nonetheless.

‘Did you tell them the route we’re taking?’ I asked.

‘No, of fucking course not,’ Anne snapped. ‘Look, Tomas, I know I’m not the gang leader you were yet, but I fucking will be one day, and I’m not stupid. I don’t trust him *that* much.’

I nodded slowly. ‘Good,’ I said. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound like I was doubting you. It’s just that this is important.’

‘You didn’t *sound* like you were doubting me, you *were* doubting me, Tomas Piety,’ she said. ‘It’s all right, it’s understandable, but call it what it is.’

‘Aye,’ I said, after a moment. ‘Aye, that’s fair. I’m sorry, Anne.’

She sighed and rubbed a hand over her face, then glanced at the carters again. ‘No, *there*,’ she barked in her best sergeant’s voice, and the men hurried to obey.

They were of an age to have been veterans, and I dare say they knew a sergeant when they heard one.

‘When do we go?’ I asked her.

Anne looked at me for a long moment. ‘Are you sure you want to come?’ she asked. ‘I don’t remember your lady wife accompanying *us* on any operations, before our positions changed.’

‘Maybe not,’ I said, ‘but I’m not her. And she helped hold the Tanner’s with a crossbow in her hands when the Gutcutters attacked us, remember?’

I can work a crossbow, if it comes to it, I remembered she had said, and I didn’t doubt it for one moment.

‘Aye,’ Anne grudgingly admitted. ‘I suppose she did at that.’

Anne had never liked Ailsa, I knew, and it was entirely mutual. It saddened me that my best friend and my wife effectively hated each other, but there it was and there was nothing I could do about it.

‘Of course I’m coming,’ I said.

I was wearing leather and mail of my own under my cloak that night, for what felt like the first time in a long while, and I had the Weeping Women buckled around my waist. Their familiar weight was comforting on my hips. I hadn’t had them in the war, having only looted them from the body of a dead colonel after the last battle of Abington, but they had served me faithfully ever since. Back in the war I’d had a spear and an axe and a dagger like everyone else, and been grateful for them. Truth be told, on the battlefield a spear is more use than a pair of shortswords anyway, even ones as fine as Remorse and Mercy, but in the confines of a back alley, not so much.

Tonight it was time for alley work and no mistake.

*

We made our way to the west of the city as discreetly as we could, skirting a long path around Trader’s Row via Dock Road and Convent Street, and we met none of the City Guard on our way. I hadn’t told Governor Schulz to concentrate her strength around the guilds out of civic duty after all. I wanted them out of my way, and now they were and that was good.

There were perhaps fifteen of us all told, and ten of them were lugging a heavy flashstone under their cloaks. The things weren't that big, but each one had almost the weight of a cannonball, and no one save perhaps Beast or Sam would have wanted to have been carrying more than one. Anne had a long match cord coiled over her shoulder, the sort the cannon crew bosses had used to discharge their monstrous weapons during the war, and a fresh tinder-box for when it was time to light it. We might not have been sappers like the company that Ailsa had lent me who had blown the Wheels into Hell on our wedding day, but we weren't complete strangers to blasting weapons. We all had a fair idea of what to do with them.

We trekked back south down the curving sweep of Convent Street towards the West Gate until we reached the appointed courtyard, when Anne shot me a quizzical look. There was a low whisper from an alley a moment later, then I caught sight of a brown face watching us.

The man raised his hand in greeting, and I nodded in return. Nikash Bakshi strode into the yard a moment later, and I felt a surge of relief. It looked like the Kings hadn't betrayed us after all.

'Mr Piety,' he greeted me quietly.

'Mr Bakshi,' I said in return, and we briefly clasped hands, palm to palm, as equals.

Respect, that was the lever that moved Nikash Bakshi, and I could understand that. I wasn't so very different myself, after all.

He had perhaps ten or eleven men with him, and a couple of hard-looking women. One of them especially looked fierce, for all that she couldn't have stood more than five feet tall. She wasn't Alarian herself, but she wore a cross-belt supporting no fewer than eight throwing knives, and she had a compact crossbow in her hand.

'Who's your quiet man?' Bakshi asked me, and of course I knew what he meant.

Quiet man, that was an expression from the war, from Abington. The quiet men were the ones who went first out of the trenches and dealt with the enemy sentries, nice and quiet. They were the throat-slitters, men like Cutter. I knew then that Bakshi was a veteran, and that he knew the work and what it meant.

‘Him,’ I said, and looked at Cutter, standing by Jochan’s side.

Bakshi looked at him, taking in his eyepatch and his scarred face, and he gave him a nod of respect.

‘This is Timy,’ he said, indicating the short woman with the knives. ‘You’ll work well together. Terrible Timy, we call her, and you don’t fuck with her if you know what’s good for you.’

Cutter looked her up and down, obviously judging her equipment and her poise and the general feel that fighting people come to be able to read from each other.

‘I’m Cutter,’ he said.

Timy regarded him for a long moment. ‘You’ve the look of Messia about you,’ she said, and she didn’t say it like she thought that was a good thing.

‘Aye,’ he admitted. ‘I was a Sacred Blade, a lifetime ago.’

She turned and spat on the cobbles beside his boot. ‘Fucking figures.’

‘Are we going to have a problem here?’ I asked.

‘I’m Messian too,’ she said. ‘We didn’t have no love for the Sacred Blades where I come from.’

‘But you respect them?’ Bakshi said. ‘In combat, I mean?’

‘There’s few better,’ Timy admitted, although I could see it pained her to do it. ‘They’re still cunts, though.’

‘Then I’m a cunt,’ Cutter said, and it didn’t sound like cared one way or another about it. ‘But I’m a cunt on your side, if you’ll stand beside me. You’re a Resadien, aren’t you?’

‘I was,’ Terrible Timy admitted. ‘Once. When we still existed.’

‘A what?’ I said.

I knew we had more pressing business to attend to than Messian history, but if I was about to send these two out on business together I had to be reasonably sure they weren’t going to try to kill each other.

‘The Resadiens were the resistance in Messia, once,’ Timy said. ‘We tried to stop it – the priests’ rise to power. Katherine Resad was our patron, our rallying call. When she was arrested, the city erupted in violence. Then your lot turned up and started shooting at us.’

We’d had a reason to attack Messia, I was sure we had, but right then it seemed far away and more than a bit thin. It was a staging post on the way to Abington, and in all honesty, save for plunder, there had been little more to it than that. I hadn’t known they’d had such internal problems of their own before our cannon opened up on them.

‘We need to get on with this if we’re doing it,’ Bakshi said, and he was right.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘Stone carriers, to your destinations. Anne, light the match. You’ll follow them, one by one. I want a rolling pattern of explosions across the west side of the city. The rest of you, get to where you’ve been told to be. When the Sons start piling out of their front doors, fucking stab them.’

‘What about their magicians?’ Billy asked me, and him and Mina and Old Kurt had been so quiet I had almost forgotten they were there.

‘That’s your work, lad,’ I told him, ‘yours and Mina’s and Kurt’s. I don’t understand the cunning and I don’t pretend to, but you do whatever you think you need to. Just kill the cunts.’

‘We can do that,’ Billy said.

Chapter 20

They could, at that.

Lightning stabbed down the street ahead of us, lighting the looming grey tenement blocks with a staccato white light.

'Festering anal fistula,' Mina muttered as she advanced, and in front of us another explosion rocked the sky.

The Skanian magician fell like a puppet who'd had his strings cut.

Western Ellinburg was blowing up before our eyes. Bloody Anne and her crew of bombers were doing their job and no mistake. Each flashstone was enough to take out a house, just about, and where we didn't have enough flashstones for each house then we had people outside the others, to catch folk as they ran out into the street. There was a good deal of stabbing and slashing, of folk being cut down in their nightclothes.

Was that right, I asked myself? The objective of battle is to kill the enemy, that's not fucking complicated, but in civil matters it's perhaps harder to tell who is the enemy and who isn't. We'd only bombed houses we knew for sure belonged to Northern Sons, obviously, but could we be sure no civilians were on the street? The odds were low and I imagined most of them were wisely hiding under their beds, but was I absolutely sure? Of course not.

Another bomb went off, and I saw a Skanian magician facing down Old Kurt. Lightning flashed between them as each met the other's strength and battled it. Kurt looked strained, but given his age, that was hardly surprising. Billy and Mina were in the next street by then and he was on his own. I could smell the burnt taint in the air where their

cunning met and duelled. I rammed Remorse into a man's side, kicked him off the blade and looked for Jochan. He was in the thick of the fighting, of course he was, and beyond him I could see Cutter and Bakshi's Terrible Timy slip into a house and disappear from view.

Kurt swore and did something that made the Skanian stumble backwards into the mouth of an alley. Something dark rose up behind him and I heard the sound of skittering and squealing.

A moment later a great tide of rats burst out of the alley and swarmed over the foreign magician. They weren't natural, anyone could see that, but the rat had been Old Kurt's totem since I had been a small boy. Every week he had nailed a fresh one to his door, and no one could have rightly said why he did it.

The Skanian screamed as the beasts bit and tore at him and all I could see was teeth and claws and somehow obscenely naked tails. Fire burst from him in an attempt to clear a space between him and the horde of vermin, but they continued to pour out of the impenetrable darkness of the alley until he finally went down under a mound of furry, biting hatred.

'Kill!' Old Kurt screeched, like he was commanding the rats himself, and perhaps he was.

I was reminded of a phrase I had heard in the army, from a grizzled sergeant with some sixty years to him. He'd been a professional soldier, not a conscript, and I think we all feared him to some extent.

Be very wary of an old man in a young man's game.

He'd had the right of that, I had to allow, and he had survived Abingon and marched home to tell of it. Old Kurt had eighty and more years to him and he was still alive, and I was very wary of him indeed.

The vermin boiled and heaved in a great thrashing mass on the ground where the cobbles were running red with the Skanian's blood.

He was dead and it was done, and Old Kurt turned a fierce look on me. 'I did it, Tomas,' he said. 'The lad said I never could, but I did. I spoke to the Rat King, and He answered, and that's a thing to be told for the ages.'

He looked quite deranged to my eyes, and I had no idea what he was talking about. 'That's good,' I said, having no better response.

'No it ain't, you stupid boy,' Kurt said, and he laughed in a way that made me think he had come unhinged. 'Mean's the Rat King's *real*, that does, when all these years, I thought I made Him up – a personal totem. "Thought form", we call that, but I *spoke* to Him. How can I have spoken with a god I made up? It ain't right!'

It certainly didn't sound right to me, but I also knew that Old Kurt's eyes were bulging in his head and he was clutching his chest like a man having an attack of the heart. He collapsed to his knees, blood bubbling up out of his open mouth and streaming down over his pointed, ratty chin.

'Our Lady,' he quavered, his voice thick and choked. 'Our Lady's grace, please, Tomas!'

I crossed swiftly to his side and placed a hand on his sweat-slick forehead. 'It's your time to cross the river, and Our Lady forgives you your crimes, Old Kurt, and She welcomes you into Her embrace in the grey lands,' I said. 'In Our Lady's name.'

'In Our Lady's na—'

He stopped – then shrieked, and blood fountained out of his mouth, splattering across the arm of my coat. I stepped back sharply as the front of his stained, shabby coat bulged – then found myself choking back vomit as he fell to the ground, bursting open to reveal the gore-slick head of a monstrous rat ripping its way free of the cavity. The thing kept coming, squealing and kicking and clawing its way out through shattered ribs and tatters of flesh, until it was out. It stood on Old Kurt's corpse for a moment and its gaze met mine. I felt a horrible intelligence in those pitch-black eyes –

but a moment later it leapt off the body and hurtled into the darkness of the alley.

I didn't see it again.

I sagged against the wall behind me and ran a hand over my face. Had it been real? Had that really just happened? I had no idea, and I didn't think anyone else had been watching to see. It reminded me horribly of how the Princess Crown Royal had died, her cunning rising up and overwhelming her. She had been all about fire and power and command, and Old Kurt had apparently had his personal god, his Rat King, and those had been the things that had killed them. Was that how it always worked, this terrible power? Did your own obsession eventually overwhelm you? I went cold with fear for Billy and Mina. The cunning was not a power to trust, that was abundantly plain.

There is an old saying in Ellinburg.

You always have to pay the dancer, in the end.

There were consequences for every action, *always*. Everything has a price.

I shoved myself away from the wall and hurried down the road towards the fighting, wanting to leave Old Kurt's ruptured corpse as far behind me as possible. I saw Jochan's axe glitter in the moonlight as he cleaved a man's head in two.

I spotted Cutter and Timy climbing out of an upstairs window, each with a bloody knife between their teeth, scurrying down the guttering like rats themselves. Timy's crossbow was gone, I noticed, and three of her throwing knives. Bloody Anne and Florence Cooper were fighting back to back, giving good account of themselves, but this wasn't just about the killing. I wanted the head of the Northern Sons.

His name was Andre Kotov, and they called him the Cat. I had no fucking idea why, but that was beside the point. It

was time to settle this. I had to know if Hendensen was telling me any semblance of the truth or not.

‘Anne!’ I shouted over the fighting. ‘Remember we need Kotov alive!’

‘He ain’t here,’ she shouted back. ‘Cutter says his house was deserted.’

I swore and ducked as a woman sprinted past me, laying about her with an improvised club, a barrel stave with a nail hammered through one end. She was no one, just a panicked civilian, and I let her go. Taking stock of the situation, it looked like we had hurt the Sons badly and that was good, but without Kotov, I had to consider the mission a failure.

‘Fuck,’ I said – and a house exploded right behind me.

I felt my feet leave the ground and tucked into a ball, bracing my shoulders as I landed and rolled, but even so, I could feel my palms tearing open on the debris littering the cobbled street. I had memorised which houses we were bombing, obviously, and had taken care not to be near any of them during the fighting. Besides which, all our flashstones had to have been used up by then. I rolled onto my front and came up on my knees in time to see my Billy backing out of the shattered ruin with a tall, older man in pursuit.

‘Little *brat*,’ the man said, and fire flickered around his upraised hands.

Like all of them, the magician wore his pale hair long and bound with a silver clasp, which I assumed must be a uniform or caste marker in Skania. Billy threw something invisible at the magician, maybe the same thing that Mina had used to make the last one explode, but this one just gestured and nothing happened.

‘Oh no you don’t,’ the Skanian said. ‘I’m going to hurt you, little boy.’

I realised with a cold dread that my worst fears had been realised: this one was a real battlefield mage, and however

strong Billy might be, he didn't have the technical skill to defeat such a one.

'I *hate* you!' Billy snarled, and I could hear he meant it.

I didn't think I had ever seen Billy truly *hate* before, not even when he had burned the Stables to the ground at my order. That had been my hatred, sure enough, but I don't think it had been his. He had disapproved, of course he had, as anyone decent would have, but all the same, he had been following instructions then, not . . . *this*.

Fire roared out of him, encompassing the Skanian magician in a howling inferno that brought the rest of the house to the ground in ashes and spread to those either side.

The Skanian mage strolled out of the flames, laughing, and I could see his cloak wasn't even singed.

'*Magefire?*' he asked, his tone mocking. 'Are you fucking serious? That's for apprentices.'

Anne raised her crossbow and sent a bolt flying towards his heart, but he had barely to twitch his fingers to send it careering away into a wall.

'You, later,' he said, with the towering arrogance of a man who thinks himself untouchable. 'The brat first.'

'No,' Billy said. '*I won't.*'

'Oh, I assure you, you absolutely will.'

Billy screamed. He was on his knees a moment later, and I had no idea what was happening. Sparks of lightning were dancing all over his body – I couldn't imagine how much it must have been hurting the poor lad. I judged the angles, wondering how I could get behind the Skanian, but Cutter was already doing it, I saw, and Timy was on the other flank. They were the quiet folk all right, and it looked like they had already learned how to work together. Past political differences aside, those two were cut from the same cloth.

The magician raised a hand with a casualness that was deeply infuriating and threw both of them back ten or fifteen feet to slam into the nearest wall.

‘I said, *later*,’ he pronounced. ‘Don’t pester me when I’m having fun. Your turn will come; be patient for a few minutes more.’

Billy howled, and inside, I did too. For the life of me I couldn’t see what the fuck I could do about my boy’s impending death.

I caught a flicker of movement from within the burning ruin of the house, something pale, creeping low. A moment later the words reached me.

‘Suppurating pus wounded raped goat,’ the voice said, ‘you dog-fucking necrophiliac offal maggot-infested sucking chest wound.’

She built up her power with each obscenity, each degree of vileness. There was, I had to allow, something very, very wrong with Mina, but all the same, her power was immense. The battlemage turned to face her as a wash of sheer *light* came out of her, consuming him until he wailed. Freed from the Skanian’s grip, Billy rose up and raised his own hands, and lightning slashed into the mage’s back, tearing his spine from his body in one hideously gory moment.

‘Feast,’ Mina said.

‘*Feast*,’ Billy repeated, and my blood ran cold.

They stood over the wreckage of the Skanian battlemage and in the flickering light and shadow of the burning houses, I would swear to Our Lady that their eyes *glowed*. I had never in my life seen two children look more like devils from Hell.

After a moment I was aware of Bloody Anne standing at my shoulder.

‘Are you seriously going to try and tell me this is normal?’ she rasped.

‘No,’ I had to allow. ‘No, Anne, it’s not normal. It’s not normal one little bit – but we might need it all the same.’

‘So where the fuck was Andre Kotov?’ I demanded.

We were in the back room of the Tanner’s, and drinking hard. I’d had Billy and Mina escorted back to my house by Stefan and Beast, while I sat with Bloody Anne and Nikash Bakshi, Florence Cooper, Jochan, Cutter and Terrible Timy.

The Messiah woman had somehow worked her way into the inner circle, I wasn’t really sure how, but Cutter vouched for her, so I could accept that. I would respect Cutter’s judgement on anyone when it came to their ability to kill.

‘He should have been there,’ Bakshi agreed. ‘He was supposed to have been at home tonight.’

‘Says who?’ I asked. ‘Every man has a night out now and again.’

Bakshi looked at me for a long moment and I could see him thinking it through. Who on his crew had told him what, and when? We always have doubts – you have to, when you’re a boss. Sometimes betrayal is inevitable; Boris had taught me that well enough. I had enacted the Rite of the Betrayer on Boris and now I wondered if Bakshi knew what that was. He was Ellinburg born and bred, so I thought that he probably did.

‘I’ll find out,’ he said. ‘You mark me, Tomas Piety, I will most definitely find out.’

‘I’ll hold a dagger when you do, if you want,’ I offered, and he nodded to me in respect. He knew what I meant, all right.

The Betrayer was a difficult thing. It was an ugly rite, and even when it needed to be done, not all of a man’s crew would necessarily be willing to participate. I knew Cookpot hadn’t been, when we had judged Boris, but I had made him, and perhaps that had been harsh of me, but he was still sort of a Pious Man and it was his duty. We had all served together, after all, and that made it personal. If Boris had been a stranger, a new man who had just betrayed the Pious Men, then perhaps I would have left Cookpot out of it, but Boris had been part of our original unit back in the war,

and that was a bond stronger than family. To betray *that* was unforgivable.

We had to find Kotov. That was absolutely paramount. After the night's bloody action, there were a lot fewer Northern Sons than there had been, but I was sure they were far from wiped out, and the fact that they'd had a proper battlemage was worrying. Even Billy and Mina between them had struggled to defeat him, and now we had lost Old Kurt, they were all we had left.

I hadn't told anyone about Kurt beyond that he was dead, and I don't think anyone else had seen the manner of his dying. Was the Rat King now a lesser god stalking the alleys of western Ellinburg, or had that just been the delusion of a crazy old man and a hallucination brought on by battle shock? I had no idea – personal gods, totems, thought forms, these were philosophical matters, and I had no time for such things.

Bakshi and Timy left us shortly after that. Florence Cooper and Anne went through to the common room to find a game of dice and Cutter wandered after them, leaving me alone with my brother, who was already very, very drunk.

'So Old Kurt's dead then – and for what?' he demanded, and slammed down another brandy.

'For the work we do,' I said. 'For the realm. For the crown.'

'That's what you are now, Tomas,' Jochan snarled at me. 'A shill for the fucking crown. We went to war for your queen, you fucking Queen's Man cunt, and where did that get us? Fucking *ruined!* There's not a man or woman among us not broken by your precious queen. You remember Abington, Tomas: battle and killing and loss and grief. *Fucking* Abington – and now you say we have to do it again? Well, I say fuck you!'

My brother and I parted on bad terms that night, and I will never forgive myself for that.

Chapter 21

Anne came to the house the next day, and I didn't think the call was entirely social. Billy and Mina were in the drawing room with me when Anne came in, but she refused my offer of brandy and instead drew me back out into the hall.

'Look at him, Tomas,' Anne said once the door was closed behind us. '*Look* at him. The witchcraft is killing him, can't you see that?'

'No,' I said, 'it isn't. The lad's just tired, that's all. Everyone is.'

'Horseshit,' she muttered.

'And it's cunning, Anne, not witchcraft,' I said, although I wasn't sure I knew what the difference was by then, or even if there was one.

'Don't fucking give me that,' Anne snapped at me. 'He looks like a corpse, Tomas. What the fuck was that all about anyway? "Feast"? That's not . . . that's just not fucking *right*.'

'Maybe it isn't,' I said quietly, 'but it's not something I understand, and even more so, it's not something I know what to do about. Priest I may be, but the cunning is as far outside of my understanding as it is yours.'

'I'm starting to think / understand it better than you do,' Anne said. 'It's killing them and that's all there is to it. What really happened to Old Kurt last night? Did a Skanian get him like you said, or did he go out like the princess did?'

I sighed. There was no pulling the wool over Anne's eyes. She was a very shrewd woman and no mistake, and she knew me all too well.

'Not really either,' I admitted, 'but it wasn't a Skanian. Kurt defeated the one he was fighting, and then . . . I don't

know. I don't know, Bloody Anne, truth be told. I saw a thing, but it wasn't what happened to the Princess Crown Royal. I must have dreamed it, I think, because what I thought I saw couldn't possibly have happened.'

'Are you sure about that? I'm starting to think that with the cunning *anything* is possible, and little of it good.'

'It'll be all right,' I said, but I was a long way past believing that myself and I knew I wasn't fooling her one little bit.

'Their faces look like skulls, both of them,' Anne said bluntly. 'Their eyes are too bright. Last night, Tomas, their eyes were *glowing*.'

'Reflection of the firelight from the burning house,' I lied automatically before I even thought about it.

That was lakin talking and no mistake: that was the voice of Brother Truth, named for the truth we wanted people to hear. It was horseshit, in other words, but the sort of horseshit that most people could be made to believe if they heard it enough times from enough people and in the right places, because they *wanted* to believe it, because it was better than the truth.

Bloody Anne wasn't most people.

'Oh fuck off was it,' she said, and I could see from the set of her jaw that she wasn't joking. 'You know what they did.'

'No,' I said, and I let out a long breath. 'No, Anne, that's the point. I *don't* know what they did, and that scares me every bit as much as it does you. I have to live with them under my roof, for Our Lady's sake.'

My words surprised even me, but I realised that I meant them. Billy and Mina gave me the fear, and I had finally just admitted that.

Anne looked at me for a long moment, then wiped a hand across her face. 'Aye, I suppose you do,' she said. 'I'd never really thought about it like that before.'

'I love my Billy,' I said.

'I know - I know, Tomas, and I'd never try to drive a wedge between you and the boy, but since he met Mina . . .'

‘He loves her, Anne, and there’s the problem. It’s mutual too – you only have to look at them to see that.’

‘I know,’ Anne repeated, and we shared a helpless look.

There was something very wrong with Mina, that was undeniable, but what to do about it when she and my adopted son were so plainly in love? Little enough, I thought, unless I wanted to force Billy to choose between me and her. He would choose her in a heartbeat, I had no doubts about that, and in truth, I respected him for it. She was his woman and therefore she came first, and that was how it should be. *But . . .*

Aye, but.

‘I don’t know what to do, Anne,’ I admitted.

After a moment, she said, ‘They’re young. Maybe it won’t last. First love often doesn’t. Maybe the problem will solve itself in a year or two.’

‘Maybe,’ I said, and changed the subject. Billy and Mina were on my mind enough as it was, and I couldn’t say I wanted to discuss them further, not even with Anne. ‘What brings you here, anyway?’

‘We’re making another attempt on Andre Kotov tonight. I thought you’d want to know.’

‘I do want to know,’ I assured her. ‘Do we actually know where he is this time?’

‘Thanks to Bakshi’s spies, we know where he is *now*,’ Anne said, and the ghost of a smile twitched her lips. ‘As luck would have it, Rosie is doing charitable work with one of the free schools this morning. She’s taking a group of children from the Stink on an educational tour of Ellinburg’s historic landmarks as we speak, and they’re currently in the vicinity of where Kotov is, looking at old walls or statues or some shit. When he moves, they’ll move with him to look at different walls, and each time they move, one of those children will come running to the Tanner’s to tell me where they are now.’

I smiled. It was a good idea, I had to allow. 'Those poor children must be bored out of their minds,' I said.

'They're getting a silver penny apiece for their trouble,' Anne said, and I laughed.

'If I'd got a silver penny a day to go to school I'd be a sight better educated than I am,' I admitted. A silver penny was a good deal of money to a child from the slums of the Stink.

Anne's plan was a good one. I was surprised to know Rosie had ties to the free schools, the ones paid for by the city to take in the poorest children, but on reflection, it made sense. Children often went unnoticed, which made them an excellent choice for runners and messengers and listeners, and Rosie herself was reasonably approachable so far as gangsters and whores went. She was also literate, which was more than a lot of people were, so it made sense that Heinrich had made those connections for her when he had been her handler in the city before Ailsa, although I had to allow it was the first I had heard of it. I had discovered Rosie to be more useful than I had used to give her credit for, and I wouldn't forget that. Not all of the assets of a Queen's Man were fighting folk, although even there, I knew Rosie could give good account of herself with a crossbow.

'Aye, well,' Anne said, 'I never even had the option. I only learned to read last year because Rosie made me.'

Ah, education was a precious thing, and it was only available in the cities – and even then, only for children whose families were secure enough that they weren't sent straight out to work the moment they were able. Down on Fisher's Gate and Net Mender's Row, in the poorest part of the Stink, children started work when they had five years to them, sewing nets or picking oakum; education was a distant dream for such as they. I'd only had had a few years of school myself, enough to teach me to read and write and figure simple accounts, then Da had wanted me to apprentice to him as a bricklayer and that had been the end

of that. Jochan had had even less, since I killed Da and Aunt Enaid had taken us in.

I shook my head to chase the memories away. Living with Aunt Enaid had been fucking horrible. I had grown up knowing she hated me, with endless scoldings and beatings, and never understood why. It was only the previous year I had discovered that she had always known I'd killed my da, her brother – but not why. Well she did now and no mistake. A long and particularly emotional afternoon in my study had started with her hurling a glass at my head and ended with us crying in each other's arms. Families are strange and complicated things, often hiding darker secrets than we would care to admit.

Auntie hadn't been as awful to Jochan as she had to me, admittedly, but even so, when we reached our late teen years and realised we could make money from intimidating people, and occasionally from hurting them, he had moved out of her house as fast as I had. Once I had enough money to inform the then-owner of the Tanner's Arms that I was buying his tavern out from under him – whether he liked it or not – the Pious Men had been born, and we hadn't looked back.

Ancient history now, I knew, and I realised Anne was looking at me, waiting for me to say something. My mind had been wandering again, I realised, and whether it was as a result of brandy or battle shock, I couldn't have said.

'Where are we staging from?' I asked her. 'I assume he's in the west of the city?'

'Aye,' Anne said. 'We're meeting tonight at a tavern of Bakshi's called The Elephant. It's off Convent Street, a few narrows away from the West Gate.'

'How long is Rosie keeping her educational tour of old brickwork going?'

'As long as it takes,' Anne assured me, getting up to leave.

When I went back into the drawing room, Mina had disappeared off somewhere and Billy was sitting staring at a book in a way that told me he wasn't really reading it. Anne was right. He really did look appalling.

'What's wrong, lad?' I asked him, half-dreading the answer.

'Old Kurt died,' he said quietly.

'Aye, lad, I'm afraid he did. He was very old, and he died fighting. He won, though, even so. It was just his time to cross the river, that's all.'

Billy sniffed back a tear, and that moved me. 'Papa . . .' he started, and I smiled.

'That's Ailsa's word, not mine,' I said. 'You know you can call me Da if you'd rather.'

'I would,' he said, and there was a sad look in his eyes then. 'I ain't had a da since mine went up on the wall at Messia with a spear in his hands and never came back.'

'Aye,' I said quietly, not wanting to scare him quiet with questions. Billy had never spoken to me of this before, of his life before we found him after the sack, living like a feral animal in the ruins of Messia. It didn't surprise me, all the same: that was what it was like, to live in a city under siege.

'He was a potter,' Billy went on. 'He was no soldier, just a potter, but they forced him up on that wall with all the other men and he died there, the same as everyone else's da did. I've thought . . . I've thought a few times that it might even have been you or Anne who killed him, but I like to think it wasn't.'

I swallowed. Billy's da had been a potter and I had been a bricklayer before I became a businessman. We were neither of us soldiers, that was for sure. Not then, anyway, but I had survived Messia and Billy's da hadn't and by the end of it I had become a soldier whether I liked it or not.

'I'd like to think it wasn't, too,' I said. I reached out and took Billy's hand in mine. He hugged me then, and he wept.

*

We went that night, Anne and Beast and Jochan and Cutter, Florence Cooper and Jutta and a couple of their Flower Girls, Simple Sam and Billy the Boy and Mina. We took the same route, and again we met none of the City Guard on our trek, for all that it took us the long way around the jutting crag with the Great Temple of All Gods standing on it at the top of Trader's Row. We eventually circled round Convent Street into Bakshi's territory and I followed Anne's directions to The Elephant.

It wasn't so different to the Tanner's Arms, in truth, just a slum tavern where the local people knew it was safe to drink, because they had already paid their protection to the gangster who owned it – to *their* gangster, their local boss.

I'd always thought that strange, truth be told. I'd have paid protection to no cunt, and that was how I had become a gangster in my own right. Except . . . Aye, *except*. Wasn't that what I was ultimately doing now with Lord Vogel? Paying him protection through favours and nasty little jobs, things I didn't want to do but did anyway, to keep my position as a Queen's Man?

Fuck, I really didn't know, and asking myself pissy little questions didn't help. I slammed my brandy glass back down on the bar in The Elephant and gestured for another. The barman hurried to refill my glass, but no coin changed hands: Bakshi had made it well known who we were when we arrived, and no Pious Man paid for a drink that night.

'I thought we didn't drink before we went into battle?' Anne said from beside me as I downed another brandy.

'What the fuck does it matter?' I said. 'Billy pulled that cunt's spine out of his back while he was still alive. I don't think the usual rules apply any more, do you? What use is a shieldwall against someone who can call lightning?'

'What use is a drunk?' Anne asked, and her words were like a bucket of cold water to the face.

‘Gods, Anne,’ I said, and turned to look at her. ‘I can’t lie to you, last night gave me the fucking fear.’

Anne snorted. ‘Which part of it – Billy pulling that man’s spine out, or the way he said “feast”?’

‘All of it,’ I confessed, ‘but mostly the way Old Kurt died.’

‘You still haven’t told me about that.’

So I did. I told her what I had seen, or at least, what I thought I’d seen: the giant rat that had burst out of Kurt’s chest when he fell. She sat and listened in silence, and I couldn’t have said whether she believed me or not. I thought she probably believed that I *thought* I had seen it, but whether it had been real or not was anyone’s guess.

‘I fucking hate witchcraft,’ was all she said when I was done.

For once I didn’t bother to correct her. That *had* been witchcraft, if it had happened at all. I found myself wondering what Old Kurt had been, and what exactly he had taught my Billy before the lad outpaced him.

My thoughts were interrupted when Bakshi joined us at the bar. He was in mail and leather, same as we were, and he looked keen to get started.

‘Right,’ he announced. ‘My crew are ready.’

I nudged Anne. ‘Prep the company, sergeant,’ I told her.

She turned to the assembled Pious Men. ‘Oi!’ she roared. ‘No more fucking drinking. Muster in battle order.’

There were muttered grumbles, but by and large, everyone did what they were told – well, all except Jochan, but that was only to be expected. He had never done what I told him either. Even I pushed my glass aside, got to my feet and cinched my sword belt a little tighter around my waist.

‘Do we have a definite on Kotov’s location?’ I asked.

Bakshi nodded. ‘He’s back at home now,’ he said. ‘He’ll have men in the house, of course, and probably guards outside, too, if he’s got enough soldiers left. After last night he’d be a fool not to.’

‘Any sightings of magicians?’

‘Nothing confirmed,’ Bakshi said, ‘but I’m not making any assumptions on that front.’

‘Aye,’ I agreed. I wasn’t making any assumptions either.

I looked at the crew and my eyes found Billy and Mina at their table.

‘Everyone remember, I need Kotov *alive*. Anyone else is fair game. You two, hang back,’ I told them. ‘Only engage if we meet any magicians – otherwise, leave it to the soldiers.’

I knew they understood. They were both far too valuable to risk to a stray blade in the thick of combat. There were twenty of us in all, with Bakshi’s strength added to ours, and we slipped out of The Elephant in silence and into the darkness of the street. I looked to the Alarian and he gestured with his hand, pointing the way to Andre Kotov’s house.

The Alarian Kings and the Pious Men: there was an alliance I never thought to see. I thought history was being made in Ellinburg that night.

Chapter 22

History being made? Aye, it was that all right, and when the fuck has history ever been made of anything good?

We scouted Andre Kotov's street, and as Bakshi had predicted, there were guards positioned in the alleys around his house. Cutter and Timy went in ahead of the rest of us, our quiet men. Throats slit in alleys were bread and beer to the pair of them and they had neutralised at least half of the sentries before any of the Sons knew anything was wrong.

'Alexi, where are you?' someone eventually called out in a hushed whisper, and was met only with silence. 'Fuck. Stoyan?'

A man stepped out of an alley into the moonlight of the street and beside me, Anne's crossbow thumped without hesitation. When he dropped with a bolt through his chest, three more young men emerged from the shadows with blades in their hands and shocked expressions on their face.

'Quick, before they can reload!' one shouted, and the fools charged without knowing our numbers or disposition. They were all too young to be veterans and clearly didn't know any better. I thought after last night's massacre Kotov was probably having to scrape the bottom of the barrel of talent at his disposal. Beast and Sam and Jochan and Florence and her Flower Girls fell on them and made red slaughter of the work right there in the middle of the road. This was gang territory, little different to the Stink, in truth, and the civilians knew when to close their shutters and lock their doors and see nothing. Lady knew there was little enough chance of the City Guard happening by in those days.

Our men were as quiet as they could be, but even so, there was enough noise that I knew the men in Kotov's house must have heard it and would be waiting for us. I eyed the sturdy oak front door, wishing we had saved one of our precious flashstones for a future breaching operation. I should have thought of that last night and hadn't, and that was a failing on my part. Our strategy had been good, but it's logistics that win wars. All generals know that, but as I have written before, I wasn't a general. That was something I would have to learn, I supposed, but one crisis at a time.

Beast looked at me and I could tell he knew what I was thinking. He lifted one of the corpses like it was a rag doll and hurled the dead man through the downstairs window. The glass shattered and the leading bent – and Sam picked up another corpse and used this one like a battering ram, holding the man by the collar of his coat and the back of his belt and swinging him. Beast grabbed another and the two of them swung those dead men head-first into the shutters until their skulls were jelly and there was a big enough hole to climb through.

They went storming into the house like monsters from a children's story.

'Go, go!' Anne urged her team, and they swarmed in after the big lads.

I followed at the rear with the cunning children, keeping them in reserve in case we ran into another magician. I would have been surprised if Kotov had one in his house, but I couldn't rule out the possibility.

Mina swore as she snagged her skirt on a shard of broken lead and across the room, a porcelain vase exploded all by itself.

'Sorry,' she said. 'It just happens sometimes, when I say those things.'

'Perhaps try not to say those things unless you mean to, Mina,' I suggested.

‘Old Kurt used to tell me that,’ she replied. ‘I dropped a hot kettle on my foot once and nearly burned his house down with what I said, until he came down the stairs and snuffed out the fire with the cunning.’

‘Do you miss him, Mina?’ I asked, remembering my conversation with Billy the previous day.

I could hear fighting in the house, but that was gang business, Pious Men and Alarian Kings business, not work for the Queen’s Men. Once upon a time I would have been in the thick of it, but not any more. Things had changed, and now my job was to protect and direct my most useful assets, and to my mind, that was these two.

‘No, not really,’ she said. ‘Like I said, he was all right to me but he wasn’t my da.’

‘I miss him,’ Billy said. ‘He wasn’t my da either, Tomas is that now, but . . . I don’t know. He *believed* in me, you know? He understood me, when no one else did.’

He had the right of it, did Billy. I certainly hadn’t understood him that first time I had found him floating in the air over Hari, and nor had Anne. Kurt had, and I supposed I would always be grateful to the old bugger for that, if nothing else.

Someone screamed, somewhere up in the house, and I heard the unmistakable sound of a body hitting the ground from a height. Kotov’s house had a gallery, then, the same as mine had, and someone had just been thrown off it.

‘Excuse me a moment,’ I said, and I crossed the room and opened the door.

I stepped out into the hall and saw a man sprawled on the hall floor and Jutta, Florence Cooper’s second in the Flower Girls up there, on the carved wooden gallery.

‘I’ve got it,’ I told her, and I drew Remorse and stabbed the prone body through the heart without a moment’s hesitation.

He was an enemy and no one I knew, so fuck him. Kotov was the only one who mattered, the only one I wanted alive.

The rest I would happily feed to the war machine if it got me what I wanted.

‘Fuck!’

Jochan and Anne and Beast and Sam came charging down the stairs, but Jutta simply jumped from the gallery, tucking her head under, rolling and jumping to her feet with a skill I would never have known she had.

Only one thing could have put that much of the fear into my crew.

‘Billy! Mina!’ I shouted, and they were there within a heartbeat.

The magician launched a lightning bolt that fried one of Florence’s Flower Girls where she stood, and I realised to my shame that I didn’t even know her name.

‘Decaying, reeking—’ Mina started as her hands came up, but Billy was faster, throwing up a hand – and the gallery collapsed under the magician, sending him plummeting to the flagstone floor of the hall. I think the fall broke his back, but by then it was irrelevant.

‘Fuck you, you witch!’ Jochan roared, and his axe rose and fell, rose and fell.

The magician was mincemeat by the time the crossbow bolt hit my brother in the back.

He lurched forward, a shocked expression on his face, and the axe tumbled from his fingers to clatter on the floor.

I saw the man on the edge of the broken gallery with the weapon in his hands, frantically trying to reload.

‘Kill!’ I screamed, and Mina obliterated him with little more than a look.

I hurried to my brother’s side, and fell to my knees beside him.

‘Jochan!’ I said. *‘Oh fuck oh Lady no, Jochan!’*

He slumped onto his side and looked up at me. The crossbow bolt had punched clean through his mail and was buried in him to the fletchings.

‘Tomas,’ he said. ‘I don’t . . . I can’t feel my legs, Tomas.’

I clasped his hands in mine. 'Brother,' I said. 'Fuck, no – Billy, fucking *do* something!'

'I'm *trying*,' Billy said, and there were tears streaming down his face. 'I *can't*. It's . . . it's too much. I can't do it.'

'Try, lad,' I urged, and I knew I was pushing him and I knew I didn't understand the cunning and I knew that was unfair, and I didn't fucking care about any of that. *Life* isn't fucking fair. My brother was dying before my eyes, and I realised I was crying. 'Please! Mina, Billy, fucking anyone. Save my little brother's life. *Please!*'

'I *can't*,' Billy said. 'It's through his lung, Da. I just can't.'

Jochan coughed bloody foam and I wrapped my arms around him and sobbed as I had once done when we had been children, when he had crawled from Da's bed to mine and wept in my arms for what Da had done to him.

'I love you, brother,' I whispered into his hair.

'I can see the walls, Tomas,' he said, and I knew he was back in Abingon.

My poor, poor brother would never leave Abingon.

I remembered the march to that terrible place, through the deserts that lay beyond Messia. As I laid a hand on my brother's fevered brow, I remembered the burning sun, the tearing thirst of that march. We had been down to a few mouthfuls of water a day, delirious with thirst, as Jochan was delirious now. We were dead men walking, but still we had walked, driven by duty, and by the simple animal desire to stay alive. We had made it, in the end, from one Hell to another.

'Once we marched to Abingon, and we survived,' I said to my brother now, clutching his hand as I spoke, and there were tears running down my face. 'Do it again, Jochan, one more time. Please, I beg you, brother. March again to Abingon.'

I held him and I sobbed, but Jochan's war was finally over. He was gone.

My little brother was dead.

*

‘I’ve got him, boss,’ Cutter said, as he and Timy came down the servants’ stair and into the hall with Andre Kotov between them.

He paused for a moment to take in the scene before him, Jochan dead on the floor with a crossbow bolt in his back and me hugging him to my chest and crying, and he broke. He broke, did Cutter, and he broke hard.

I barely registered it, truth be told, for my own grief was overwhelming. I vaguely remember Cutter on his knees beside me, his tears falling hot and wet on the backs of my hands where I held my brother’s body to my chest. I was dimly aware of Anne shouting orders, of Kotov being taken away, but it didn’t matter.

None of it mattered, for my brother was dead.

My poor, poor little brother.

Oh Jochan, I am so, so sorry.

For everything.

*

I don’t know how I got home. Anne must have taken me, I supposed, as the next thing I was really aware of was sitting in my drawing room crying, and Anne sat there with me and we were alone.

‘I sent the youngsters to bed,’ she said when I looked at her.

The bout of battle shock that had swept over me must have been savage. I had no memory whatsoever of leaving Kotov’s house, or coming home, or what I had said and done in that time. Even my memory of what had happened before was choppy, fragmented, a series of fractured scenes of shock and pain.

I choked back another sob. ‘Where’s Jochan now?’ I asked.

‘Cutter took his body to Doc Cordin to have the bolt cut out and the wound stitched. He . . . he didn’t want Hanne to have to see her husband like that.’

I swallowed hard. Even in his own grief for his lover, Cutter had thought of Hanne, of Jochan’s wife.

Anne rose and poured two brandies from the bottle on the cupboard. When she put one in my hand, I gripped the glass hard, and stared at it.

‘Tomas, I’m so sorry,’ Anne said.

‘He was a soldier,’ I said. ‘He died fighting. We all know that could happen to any of us, at any moment. What pains me so much is that he never really got to live first. Jochan never really recovered from what . . . from our father’s death, and then there was the war, of course.’

‘Aye,’ Anne said.

I had almost told her about Da in that moment, but I caught myself in time. I think Anne knew something had happened when we had been children, and that was enough. No one knew the details except my aunt, and I had only told her last year. It wasn’t something I wanted people to know. I thought about Aunt Enaid, and the realisation hit me.

‘Oh gods,’ I said, and drained my brandy in one long swallow. ‘I have to go and tell Enaid. Will you come with me? Please?’

‘Of course I will,’ Anne said, ‘but it must be three hours past midnight by now. Don’t you think you should leave it until the morning?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘she can’t hear this from anyone but me, Anne. She’d never forgive me. Who else is here?’

‘Beast and Sam,’ Anne said. ‘I put them in the kitchen while you . . . you know. Came back to yourself.’

I nodded. ‘Go and round them up. Tell them I’m all right, and I don’t want a fuss.’

‘Aye,’ Anne said.

I poured and drank another brandy. I wasn't all right – of course I wasn't, but I'd just have to deal with it, for my aunt's sake, if nothing else. I wasn't wearing my swords, I realised, and I wondered why not. I heard the heavy clump of boots in the hall and opened the drawing room door.

Simple Sam met my eyes and gave me a nod of respect.

'Sam, lad,' I said, and he put his hand on my shoulder for a moment and gave it a gentle squeeze.

Beast didn't seem to know where to look. He shuffled his feet nervously.

'It's all right,' I told him.

'I know how it is, boss, I've been there,' he said, and I cleared my throat.

'Aye, well. Anne, what happened to my fucking swords?'

'Here,' she said, and held the belt out to me. 'I took them off you, to start with. I didn't know what . . . I didn't want you hurting yourself – or me, for that matter.'

Gods, the battle shock must have been bad if *that* had crossed her mind.

'Thank you,' I said, and I meant it.

I buckled the Weeping Women back around my waist.

'Right, come on,' I said. 'Let's get this over with.'

*

Beast had to pound on my aunt's front door several times before I eventually saw the glow of a lamp upstairs through a gap in the shutters. A minute or so later the front door opened and there was Aunt Enaid, wearing her eye-patch and a linen nightdress. She had a burning lamp in one hand and her mace in the other.

'Tomas, at this fucking hour? Someone had better be—' She hesitated, taking in my red-rimmed eyes and Anne's grim expression and the carefully blank looks on the faces of our two minders. 'Fuck, someone is, aren't they? Come in.'

We followed my aunt into her parlour and she set the lamp and her mace down on a table before fixing me with her single eye.

‘Who’s dead?’ she asked simply, but by then I think she knew.

I had quite obviously been crying, and I doubt I would have wept real tears for anyone else in the crew except Anne or Billy, and Anne was standing right there beside me.

‘Auntie . . .’ I started, and choked.

‘No,’ Enaid said. ‘No . . .’

‘It’s Jochan,’ I said. ‘I’m so sorry, Auntie. It was business – a crossbow. We did everything we could, but . . . it was quick, at least.’

‘My little Jochan,’ Enaid said, and her hard face just crumbled. ‘Not my poor little Jochan. Don’t you take him away from me too, you fucking *monster*, Tomas! Don’t you *dare* do that!’

She was howling and sobbing and beating my chest with her hands, and all I could do was wrap my arms around her as my own tears fell into her hair. The others discreetly left the room.

Jochan had only had eight years to him the night he and I turned up on her doorstep and said ‘Da’s dead.’ She took us in, and despite everything that had happened since, despite the months Jochan had spent locked in Enaid’s cellar, judged too mad to be allowed out to see his own infant daughter, to her I thought he would always be that helpless eight-year-old child. She had taken to him far more than she ever had to me.

Outside in the hall I could hear voices, Anne explaining to Brak why we were there and what all the noise was about. Aunt Enaid was still crying uncontrollably into my shoulder, and there was nothing I could do but hold her and share her pain and her loss and her grief.

Enaid had really loved Jochan, I knew, and grief has for ever been the price we pay for love.

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Chapter 23

I had to pay my respects to Hanne the next morning, and that was no easier. Whether she had really loved Jochan or not was hard to say, but she was obviously distraught to be left a widow, and so young – and with a baby to look after as well. Of course she knew Jochan had married her because he had got her in the family way and felt obliged, and obviously she knew all about him and Cutter, even if she pretended not to for the sake of appearances, but he had been good to her in his way and she'd been provided for. I guessed she had no idea where she stood in the world now, or how she would keep herself and her child.

That at least was something I could do for my brother.

'I'll see you're all right, Hanne,' I assured her. 'You're family: you're my sister-by-law and you're raising my niece; I won't ever see you on the street. The house is paid for, and I will arrange for a pension. You won't go without, or have to work.'

The house of law can pay for that, I thought. It would be easy enough to arrange with the bank in Ellinburg, and it was the fucking least they could do.

'I'll go without my husband, though, won't I?' she sniffed.

'Aye, well . . .' I had to say. 'This is harsh work we do, and Jochan understood that. All soldiers do.'

She wiped the tears away and cradled her child in her lap, but she wouldn't meet my eyes. I left her there, a widow with barely twenty-four years to her. Even in the leanest times of hardship and deprivation there is one thing Ellinburg has never lacked for, and that is widows.

I took my leave, knowing when I wasn't welcome, and I made my way to the Tanner's Arms with Beast and Sam still

in tow. I needed to speak to Anne, and I wanted to speak to Andre Kotov even more.

Beast pushed the door of the tavern open for me and I stepped inside with my black priest's robes swirling around my feet and dripping from the morning rain. Only then did it occur to me that I had no idea what Hanne must have made of me: her terrifying brother-by-law come calling dressed in the garb of a priest of the death goddess to pay his respects for her husband's murder. That had been thoughtless of me, I had to own, but he had been my own fucking brother, for Our Lady's sake, and in any case, I was who I was.

Black Billy saw me and immediately got up from his chair behind the door and inclined his head in respect. 'Tomas,' he said, 'I'm sorry for what happened.'

I swallowed and put my hand briefly on his shoulder as I passed, but it was too soon, too raw, for camaraderie. We had all lost loved ones in battle back in the war and I knew Billy understood, that he wouldn't think ill of me for not replying. I choked back snot as I walked to the bar.

Hari put a brandy in front of me without waiting to be asked.

'Where's Anne?'

'Out the back,' Hari said. 'Not at the table. She's got Kotov in the small storeroom, and . . . Cutter's there. They're asking him questions.' He swallowed.

I knew Cutter frightened the piss out of Hari at the best of times, and this was a very long way from those. 'So long as he's still alive,' was all I said, and I sipped my brandy.

'Aye, I think so,' Hari said as he drew tankards of beer for Beast and Sam from one of the barrels. 'Dead men don't usually scream that loud.'

'Well and good,' I said.

Mika joined me a moment later, and he too touched me lightly on the shoulder and nodded his head in respect.

'Boss,' he started, 'I . . .'

I shook my head, not needing him to say anything more, and he looked grateful, in truth. None of them knew what to say, and I understood that. I don't think I knew what I *wanted* them to say. I was grieving, yes, but I hadn't worked my own way through what had happened yet, so how could I know what I wanted from those around me? Not tears, for Our Lady's sake; that was the *last* thing I wanted – I had shed enough of those myself following my visit to my aunt's house. Respect for the dead, yes, but grief? I wasn't sure. I hadn't lost anyone I truly loved since my ma died, and I had been very young then. I had an emptiness inside me, and I didn't really know what to do with it. I was already feeling the lack of Jochan keenly, but I had no idea how to respond to it.

It wasn't even as though we'd been that close as adults. We had been as boys, of course – we'd both lost our ma, although Jochan had been too young to really remember her, and there was Da and what had happened to us both – and then Aunt Enaid, and living in her house, and starting the Pious Men together. Those had been heady days and no mistake.

We'd been wild youths together in the slums of Ellinburg, where we'd felt like young kings, what with all the money we'd made and the girls we'd fucked – until the war came. We'd been in different regiments, and we hadn't seen each other for those three long years of nerve-shredding destruction and bloodshed, neither knowing if the other was even still alive. I have written of how we met again on the long road home from the war, and of the rest of it: of his drinking and his rages and his battle shock, his unpredictable violence, his madness, even the time he tore a man's throat out with his teeth and ate it.

My brother had been a very troubled man, there was no denying that, but I had never stopped loving him, in my way. Jochan would have a grand funeral, I decided, a proper gangster's funeral at the Great Temple of All Gods. Hanne

would be treated like a duchess and everyone would pay their respects to her. Would I weep in public for my brother then?

I drank my brandy, and found I had no answer to that.

I set my glass down on the bar next to Mika's. He had been standing beside me in companionable silence all that time – sometimes that's just what you need, a silent companion, someone you know and trust who's just *there*. You don't want them to talk and they know that so they don't, but you do want them to just fucking *be* there, and Mika had been. I appreciated that more than I thought he would ever know.

'Thank you,' I said softly, and I walked away.

I crossed the common room and opened the door to the corridor that led to the back rooms. Ignoring the room where the Pious Men had their table, I instead opened another door into what had originally been the store room where I had once kept my hoarded fortune, safely bricked up behind a false wall – I had broken into it myself and used my hard-won money to rebuild the Wheels after the bombing. What was left was now secure in the bank and in truth almost indistinguishable from the vast fortune of the house of law.

The room was bare now, the casks of salt pork and pickled fish long since gone. Andre Kotov was sitting on the stone floor, his hands manacled to a great eyebolt secured to the wall behind him. He looked up at me as I entered with the cowl of my priest's robe pulled up over my head.

'Tomas Piety,' he said. 'I thought you weren't in charge here any more.'

'I'm not,' I said. 'I'm just a priest of Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows, following my holy calling. Bloody Anne runs the streets here these days.'

Anne was right there in the room, with Cutter beside her glowering like Our Lady's own avatar of vengeance, but even so, Kotov laughed.

‘Aye, and I was born fucking yesterday,’ he said. ‘You’re still in charge, Piety, any cunt can see that.’

‘I don’t like your tone,’ I informed him.

‘I don’t like your fucking face,’ he said.

I kicked him. I know, it wasn’t chivalrous or fair or right or any of that, and I didn’t care. I had just lost my little brother to one of this asshole’s men and I kicked him in the face and I didn’t feel bad about it at *all*.

‘I want to know things,’ I said as he spat blood and teeth. ‘I want to know who you really work for. I know you have Skanian backing, but I want names. Who’s really funding the Northern Sons?’

‘Suck my cock,’ Kotov said.

I looked at Cutter. ‘Start flaying him,’ I said. ‘Send me a runner when he’s ready to talk.’

‘I can do that,’ Cutter said, and I was absolutely sure that he could at that.

I had meant it more as a threat than a literal instruction, but Cutter took me at my word. As I left the room, Anne at my side, he was taking his wicked little knives from his belt.

‘Fuck but Cutter gives me the fear,’ Anne muttered as we entered the common room.

‘Aye, well,’ I said, ‘Cutter is the man he is. He has his uses, that can’t be denied.’

‘He had last night,’ Anne agreed, ‘him and that Terrible Timy between them. Quiet folk are always to be respected, but this? This isn’t right, Tomas.’

‘My brother being dead isn’t fucking right,’ I snapped, and she had no answer to that.

‘I don’t hold with torture,’ was all she could say.

‘He only has to answer the question and we’ll stop,’ I said. ‘I don’t hold with torturing people for the fucking fun of it, that I’ll allow, but I need an answer.’

‘Why?’ Anne said. ‘Why is it so fucking important, Tomas?’

I looked at her for a long moment. ‘Because I have a suspicion, Anne, and I need to be absolutely sure I’m right –

or not.'

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I spent that afternoon with the undertaker, making arrangements for Jochan. Hanne wasn't in any state to do it, and anyway, I wanted it done properly. Perhaps she would have preferred a small, quiet affair like their wedding had been, but I wouldn't, and that was all there was to it. He had been my brother a damn sight longer than he had been her husband, and that meant I got what I wanted. I was Tomas Piety and this was Ellinburg, and that meant that I got what / *fucking wanted*.

I took a slow breath, fighting to steady the shaking of my hands.

Battle shock, it's just battle shock.

Breathe.

Just breathe.

'A bronze casket, The Great Temple of All Gods,' the undertaker repeated. 'This Coinsday afternoon?'

'Aye,' I said.

He was a thin man by the name of Nikolai Klevankov, with some fifty or so years to him. I had worked with him before – if there's one person a businessman needs to know in his city, it's a discreet undertaker. Obviously there would be a wake after the funeral, a big one, and Coinsday was the best time for what I wanted.

He eyed my robes and pursed his lips. 'Will you be officiating?'

'Fuck no,' I said. 'Pay one of the temple priests. I'm not conducting my own brother's funeral.'

He cleared his throat. 'You realise this will be . . . costly.'

'I dare say it will,' I said flatly. 'Not as costly as a brother's life.'

'Of course,' Klevankov said, and coughed slightly again. 'If I may be so bold . . .'

I slapped four gold crowns down on the desk in front of him and his eyes widened.

‘Perhaps not quite *that* costly.’

‘I don’t care,’ I said. ‘Spend it. I want lamps, a temple full of them. The bronze casket, as I have said. Black drapes – black horses for the hearse, with black plumes on their heads. Spend money – make a statement. A Piety has died in this city and that is a momentous event.’

‘I . . . yes, Father Tomas,’ he said.

‘It’s Sir Tomas now,’ I corrected him.

‘Ah,’ he said, and I could tell he understood. He knew who I had been before, of course. He was an undertaker, for fuck’s sake: of course he knew who the former head of the Pious Men was. I had sent enough bodies his way over the years; the ones that hadn’t ended up buried in plague pits or fed to someone’s pigs, anyway. While he didn’t know exactly who I was *now*, it was obvious my status had very definitely changed in the few years since I’d last had cause to do business with him.

He cleared his throat and looked up at me. ‘May I ask you something?’ he said.

I looked at him for a long moment. ‘You can ask,’ I said. ‘There’s no saying whether I’ll answer or not.’

He sighed. ‘This may sound selfish,’ he confessed, ‘but . . . the violence, Sir Tomas. The gang in-fighting. Will it end soon? Only I’m rushed off my feet as it is and wondering if I need to take on another ‘prentice boy.’

His question was so unexpected, so staggeringly self-centred, that I actually laughed at him despite the disgust I felt. ‘It ended last night,’ I assured him. ‘You have my word on that.’

‘Ah,’ he said again.

Kotov had been down to the dregs of his fighting men last night, that had been plain enough to see, and Billy and Jochan between them had killed what I was sure was his last

magician. Now that he was in Anne's custody, the Northern Sons had to all intents and purposes ceased to exist.

I leaned forward across the desk and fixed Klevankov with a look. 'Listen to me,' I said, 'and listen well. My brother died helping to end that violence. He died a hero, protecting people like you. He *will* have a hero's funeral, is that absolutely fucking clear?'

The undertaker swallowed. 'Completely clear, Sir Tomas. Thank you for your continued custom.'

I got to my feet and looked down at him and I resisted the urge to spit on his desk, but only just.

I turned and left his establishment before I did something he would have regretted. Outside, Beast and Sam were waiting for me. The two of them seemed to have appointed themselves my personal bodyguard and I couldn't have asked for better. Sam might not be the best fighter in the crew, but he was competent enough, and he was almost as big as Beast. The two of them together looming at my shoulders made a statement and no mistake.

'Where to now, boss?' Sam asked.

'The Chains,' I said. 'I need to speak to Sir Eland.'

Sam led the way down Trader's Row. People gave us uneasy looks as we passed, quickly getting out of our way. Priest's cowl or not, a lot of people still recognised the devil Tomas Piety when they saw him, and I dare say word of Jochan's death had already spread. No one wanted to meet my eyes, and that was probably wise of them. I was in no mood for nonsense that day.

We turned into the side street where the Golden Chains stood and Sam banged on the closed front door.

'Get off, we don't open until dusk,' a muffled voice called.

'Pious, in Our Lady's name,' I said.

The small hatch in the door slid back and an eye appeared – and widened in shock as it saw my face. I heard the heavy bar being lifted, the sound of bolts being drawn back and the key turning in the lock. A moment later the door opened

and a frightened-looking lad with longish hair and overly tight britches stood there staring at me.

‘Mr Piety!’ he exclaimed.

He had perhaps eighteen years to him; I didn’t think it was the same one I remembered from before, but that didn’t really surprise me. Sir Eland liked lads, everyone knew that, but he had never taken up with any one lad in particular, and they came and went.

‘Is Sir Eland up yet?’ I asked.

The Chains stayed open until dawn, just about, and I wouldn’t have taken ill against him if he hadn’t been, but the lad nodded.

‘Just about,’ he said. ‘Come on, come through.’

Why Eland had his fancy boy opening the door, I had no idea; maybe the lad had simply been nearest when Sam had knocked. There were certainly plenty of guards about, as was only to be expected. The Golden Chains was a gambling house and poppy den, though in truth, the gambling tables were little more than a front. Now the centre of Ellinburg’s poppy business, it was one of my most profitable ventures.

We followed the lad down the corridor to the main gaming room, where Sir Eland was sitting at a table with a mug of small beer and a plate containing the remains of his belated breakfast in front of him.

‘Elly!’ the boy hissed in a sharp whisper.

Sir Eland looked up and got to his feet. ‘Sir Tomas,’ he said, and I wondered who had caught him up with my recent elevation.

‘Sir Eland,’ I said, and he laughed.

‘Aye, but your knighthood is fucking real, isn’t it? Congratulations, boss.’

I smiled. Sir Eland the False Knight, that was what we had called him back in the army, for he was no more a knight than Hanne was, but he’d been playing out his mummer’s show for so long he might as well have been. It was certainly convincing, anyway.

‘Have you heard?’ I asked him, and at my words and expression, his face fell.

‘Oh fuck, no,’ he said. ‘Who?’

I gestured for him to sit, and I took the chair across from him. He and Jochan had been friends, I knew.

‘It’s the life we chose, Eland. We all knew going in to it that we might never come out again. You have to remember that.’

‘Who?’ he repeated.

‘Jochan,’ I said. ‘It pains me to say so, but Jochan fell to the Northern Sons last night.’

‘Cunts!’ Eland snarled. ‘When do we hit them?’

I shook my head slowly. ‘We already have,’ I said. ‘We finished them last night, and their boss is currently Anne and Cutter’s guest at the Tanner’s Arms. I doubt he’s enjoying that a great deal.’

‘Oh gods, Cutter,’ Eland said. He had known about Jochan and Cutter, of course he had. I thought most of the crew did, by then. ‘How is he?’

‘About how you’d expect,’ I said. ‘The funeral is this Coinsday at the Great Temple of All Gods. I’d . . . I’d like you to be there.’

‘Of course,’ Sir Eland said at once. ‘We’ll all be there, Tomas – all the Pious Men. You know that. The Pious Men stand together come what may.’

And that was exactly what I had wanted to hear.

Chapter 24

They were, as well. When Coinsday came around, at the appointed hour, every member of the Pious Men was there, even Cookpot and Hari, for all that they weren't really Pious Men any more, and Beast, who hadn't even known Jochan. I was touched by the gesture, from Beast especially. They were all in black coats and doublets, the same as I was, and Hanne and Rosie and my aunt were in black kirtles. Anne and I clasped wrists on the temple steps in the old way, then I looked at my aunt.

Her face was drawn, her single eye dry, but red around the edges. Brak held her hand with his good arm, almost holding her up, and she leaned on her stick with her other. For the first time in my life, I thought Aunt Enaid looked frail.

The temple doors slowly swung open and within, a single drummer marked a slow, sonorous beat. The Great Temple of All Gods was full of lamps, at no doubt monstrous cost given the sky-high price of oil, but I didn't give a fuck about that. Lamps in the temple were to light the deceased's way into the grey lands, and I wanted Jochan to walk a clear and well-lit path into Our Lady's arms. I wouldn't see my brother lose his way in the mist on his journey to his final resting place at Her side. She would welcome him, I was sure. He had always been one of Hers and no mistake.

We took our places in the front rows of pews, and behind us the Great Temple of All Gods began to fill. The Flower Girls were there, and the Headhunters, and Pawl the Tailor and Ernst the barber, the learned magus Konstantin Zlatkov, and Doc Cordin and all the working girls from the house on Chandler's Narrow, and half the Stink beside.

A Piety had died in Ellinburg, and nobody from our streets would see that go unmarked.

The casket stood in front of the altar, open, of course. Jochan lay there dressed in his best clothes, his eyes peacefully closed, and I felt myself well up with tears. He didn't look like he was sleeping – corpses never do. That's just a comforting lie people tell each other, to mask the pain and the grief. He looked dead, and there was no way around that.

My little brother was dead.

I realised there was a tear running down my cheek, and I felt Anne reach out from her seat beside me on the front pew and take my hand. She didn't speak and I didn't want her to. She just squeezed my hand, and that was what I wanted. Just . . . I don't know. Human contact of some kind, to know that someone understood I was hurting. The knowledge that someone fucking *cared*.

The priest stood behind a lectern in front of the altar, sombre in his black robes. I don't remember his name, but it wasn't Father Goodman who had officiated at my wedding with Ailsa, where Jochan had stood as my Closest Man. I was glad about that, for some reason I couldn't quite define.

'Faithful of the gods,' the priest proclaimed, 'today we come together in this temple so that the most holy ones may join us in bidding a last farewell to our brother, our husband, our friend, Jochan Piety. The lamps light his way, and Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows awaits him in the grey lands. The souls of the virtuous are in Her hands. No torment shall ever touch them. In the eyes of the unwise, they did appear to die young, their going looked like a disaster, their leaving us, like annihilation; but now they are in peace. The gods have put them to the test, and proved them worthy to be with Her for ever.'

I stopped listening as he read from the scriptures. Priest I may be, but I'm not a religious man, by and large, and for

all that I had loved him, Jochan was about as virtuous as an alley cat and everyone gathered there knew it.

Along the pew from me, Hanne was openly sobbing behind her black widow's veil, and I couldn't even bring myself to look at Cutter.

The service was a trial, I have to allow, and it was mostly Anne gripping my hand beside me that got me through it. I couldn't help but wonder what funerals were really *for*. The dead were still dead and would know nothing of it, and the gods only knew no one enjoyed them. Perhaps they were supposed to bring peace to the bereaved, but I found little peace in the priest's endless prating.

'There is a season for everything, a time for every occupation under Heaven,' the priest droned on. 'A time for giving birth, a time for dying; a time for planting, and, under the Harvest Maiden's eye, a time for reaping. A time for killing, a time for healing; a time for building. A time for knocking down. A time for tears, a time for laughter; a time for mourning, a time for dancing. Now is the time of dying.'

Taking comfort from the thought that it would soon be a time for drinking, I waited for it to be over.

Eventually the priest finished his final reading, and closed the big book of scripture on the lectern before him. 'I invite Madame Hanne Piety to say her farewells,' he said.

Hanne got up on visibly shaking legs and made her way alone to the casket, still sobbing. Her maid was at home looking after little Enaid, and she didn't have anyone else since her da had died the previous year while we had been out of the city. She faltered, helpless in her grief, and I wasn't having that. She was a Piety now, and I wouldn't see her out there alone and looking weak in front of all those people. I have to confess, more than that, I wouldn't have anyone *e/se* see it either. There were certain expectations to be met, after all. As Jochan's elder brother I would have been called next anyway, so I got up and went to her.

I took her trembling arm. 'It's all right, Hanne,' I said quietly. 'I'm here.'

I'm here.

I knew what she would read into those words, not reassurance but threat. *You married into the Piety family and now I'm here and I always will be*, that was what she heard, and perhaps that was good. Jochan might be gone but little Enaid was my niece, after all, and she would be raised to be a Piety. I would see to it.

Hanne sniffed and nodded, and allowed me to walk her to the casket. She bent and placed a chaste kiss on Jochan's closed lips, then stepped back.

'Goodbye, my love,' she said, and her voice broke and she choked back another sob.

'I invite Father Sir Tomas Piety to say his farewells,' the priest said.

I looked down at my brother. My poor, poor little brother, who had known no peace since he'd had eight years to him and da had started on him. A tear fell from my eye and landed on Jochan's cheek and ran down it as though he too was weeping.

'Goodnight, brother,' I whispered. I leaned down and kissed him as Hanne had done, and my hands were shaking something fierce.

'Miss, ah, Bloody Anne?' the priest said.

I don't think Anne even had a family name, and if she did then neither I nor the priest had the faintest idea what it was. She stood, and I led a helplessly weeping Hanne back to our pew while she went next in her place as the head of the Pious Men. In a normal family funeral, our aunt would have gone next, of course, but the Pious Men *weren't* a normal family and even this priest understood that. Wife first, of course, but then the order of the crew took precedence and that was just how it worked. Enaid would be called next – as Anne's second, not as Jochan's aunt – then Florence Cooper and Mika and Sir Eland as her underbosses,

then *their* seconds, then the rest of them. That was how it worked, in the gangs of Ellinburg.

We were families, but not in the way normal families work.

You foreswear family and business and place and home and past and love, in service of the Rose Throne.

I remembered swearing that as part of my vow on formally joining the Queen's Men, and once again the similarity struck me: the Queen's Men were gangsters, pure and simple.

Even then, even before I had proof, I knew.

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Once it was finally over we retired to the Tanner's Arms. Of course we did.

I don't think Hanne really wanted to be there, but it wasn't optional. She was the newly made widow of a major businessman in Ellinburg, and her brother-by-law had been the head of that business and was now . . . well, obviously something else, even if no one outside of the family was quite sure exactly what. It was something of a difficult point with the common people, that I had gone from being the beloved prince of their streets to the hated governor of their city and was now back on their streets again in a different capacity that they didn't understand. I wished I'd had Fat Luka there with me, truth be told, to decipher the rumours and spread the ones I wanted spread about who I was now, but he was in Dannelsburg and there was nothing I could do about that.

Even so, the tavern was packed to bursting point and Hari and Mika were serving beers out in the streets. I was reminded of the last time this had happened, after my wedding. At least I knew the City Guard wouldn't be storming the place that day and trying to drag me away in manacles. Those days were behind me. I was Tomas Piety

the Queen's Man, and if I wanted to celebrate my brother's life, then I fucking well would.

I was already quite drunk, and so were most of the rest. Cutter was absolutely cunted, and I had never seen that before. He wasn't a big drinker as a rule, but it looked like today all he wanted was to seek oblivion in a brandy bottle. I could understand that. He had lost the man he loved, and my heart hurt for him.

I joined Anne at the bar and leaned close to speak to her over the noise. 'How are you and Cutter getting on with our mutual friend?' I asked her.

She gestured for me to follow her to her corner table that Simple Sam was keeping free for her despite the crush of people in the tavern, and we sat together, away from listening ears.

'Badly,' Anne said shortly. 'He won't say a fucking word.'

'What, even after Cutter has been at him?'

'Aye,' Anne said, and her expression was grim. 'I don't hold with it, Tomas, truly I don't. Torture is an ugly thing.'

'It's a tool in our arsenal, Anne, no more than that,' I said.

'It doesn't even work.'

I knew that wasn't true. Ilse had taught me that much, at least. Torture, ugly thing though it might be, very much *did* work. If it wasn't working on this man then I wanted to know why.

'Why not?' I snarled, and Anne shifted back in her seat a little.

'Let's talk business tomorrow, when we're both sober,' she said.

When *you're* sober, I knew she meant, and I had to allow she had a point there. I really wasn't any more, but then neither was anyone else in the Tanner's or the street outside, except Sam and possibly Anne herself. I turned and scanned the room, and I was surprised to see the learned magus Konstantin Zlatkov playing dice with Black Billy at his table by the door. I had spotted him earlier at the funeral,

but hadn't expected him to come all the way down to the Stink for the wake.

'Excuse me,' I said to Anne, and I got up and made my way across the packed tavern to their table.

I put my hand softly on Zlatkov's shoulder, making him all but jump out of his robes.

'Thank you,' I said, when he turned and looked up at me with startled, frightened eyes.

'Sir Tomas!' he exclaimed, and I gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze that was half reassuring, half threatening.

'For doing what I asked, and bringing me what I asked for,' I said. 'But mostly for coming to the funeral, and for being here tonight. Jochan would have appreciated that.'

'I only . . . wanted to pay my respects,' Zlatkov said.

'I understand that, and I appreciate it too,' I said, and I leaned closer to speak into his ear. 'If I needed more of what you so kindly provided me with before, you'd sell them to me, wouldn't you? You'd make sure you had them made and ready, in case I needed them in a hurry? I can rely on you for that, can't I, Zlatkov?'

'I . . . but why? You've beaten the Northern Sons now. Why would you need *more*?'

'I don't know if I do, yet,' I said, 'but if I do, *when* I do, you'll have them for me, won't you? You're a friend of the Pious Men, aren't you? The same way I'm a friend of your archmagus, back in Dannsburg.'

Zlatkov swallowed, and I could see he knew just how thin the ice was under his feet.

'Such things are costly, very costly,' he said. 'I would need funds on account.'

'Of course you would,' I said. 'Thirty, how much?'

'*Thirty?*' he echoed, like he thought I had lost my mind.

'Quieter,' I cautioned, as I noticed a couple of heads in the crowd turn to seek out the source of his outburst.

'Do you have any idea what blasting powder costs?'

'No, and I don't give a fuck,' I said. 'Thirty. How much?'

‘You’d be talking nearly three crowns!’

I reminded myself that the house of magicians, especially the newly founded Ellinburg branch, had nowhere near the money that the house of law did.

‘My brother’s funeral cost more than that,’ I said, and his eyes widened. ‘Get them made. I’ll pay, whether I need them or not.’

Black Billy glared at him across the table and flexed his impressive arms. ‘The boss asked you a favour,’ he said. ‘Today of all days, you’d be wise not to disappoint him.’

‘I . . . yes, Sir Tomas,’ Zlatkov replied helplessly.

I could find nothing within me to make me respect the man, but he certainly had his uses. Thirty flashstones was an arsenal indeed, and I thought it was increasingly likely I *would* need them. To be absolutely sure, though, I had to make Kotov talk, and there it seemed Cutter was failing me.

I wondered if perhaps we were going about this the wrong way.

I thought of Ilse, and of poor Lady Lan Delanov in her brightly lit cell with her eyelids removed, broken by sleep deprivation.

There was more than one type of torture, after all, and pain alone obviously wasn’t always enough.

Chapter 25

I returned to the Tanner's Arms the next afternoon, once I had recovered from the previous night's drinking. Black Billy let me in, and pointed to the back when I enquired after Anne and Cutter.

'They're doing what needs to be done, boss,' he said. 'I don't care for it, but there it is.'

'Aye,' I said. I remembered Abington, and how Black Billy had helped me ask questions that time we had captured an enemy spy in our lines. He might not like it but he wasn't above breaking kneecaps with his club when it needed doing, any more than I had been above squeezing the resultant shattered mess in my hand and asking my questions. 'Going to see the priest' had meant a thing, back in the war, and it was nothing good. I had stolen that from the old Ellinburg euphemism 'going to see the widow' and I had made it my own. That meant you had been arrested and it was bad, and you'd probably hang for whatever it was you'd done. 'Going to see the priest' meant you were going to be screaming, and soon. Even then, even back in Abington, I had been building my legend. I think I have been doing that my entire life, truth be told.

The legend of the devil Tomas Piety.

'Going to see the priest' was a thing men feared, even our own men, and more than one attempted deserter had been threatened with it by the captain. I wasn't a natural torturer like Ilse was, and I took no pleasure from it, but that didn't mean I wasn't capable of it. I could tell Billy remembered that every bit as well as I did.

'Well, we're none of us saints of the temple,' he said.

‘That we aren’t, Billy,’ I said, my priest’s robes swirling around my ankles as I walked away from him across the tavern. ‘That we most definitely are not.’

I entered the corridor behind the common room and followed the sounds of screaming to the small storeroom. I went in without knocking, and Bloody Anne only took her hands off the hilts of her daggers when she saw it was me.

‘Afternoon,’ I said.

‘Tomas,’ she acknowledged me.

Anne was the only one of the crew who never used any of my titles, and for a moment that irked me, until I remembered her holding my hand in the temple yesterday while I wept my way through my brother’s funeral. What the fuck was wrong with me?

Did I need respect that badly, to expect my only real friend to bow and scrape to me like everyone else did? No, of course not, and yet for a moment there I had noticed that she hadn’t. It was ridiculous, I knew that. I was the son of a fucking bricklayer, for Our Lady’s sake. What did I need titles and formality for? Perhaps *because* I was the son of a bricklayer from the slums of Ellinburg, I realised, suddenly thrust into Dannsburg high society. I was deeply insecure, I knew that well enough, playing a part that wasn’t at all me and yet at the same time increasingly very much *was*. I think, in those days, I had no idea who I really was.

Commoner, criminal, soldier, businessman, city governor, knight, Queen’s Man. Could anyone truly be all those things at once?

No, no, they couldn’t. Some of them were mutually exclusive and no mistake, and yet I was or had been all of those things at some point. It was no wonder I was losing touch with myself, with who I really was: losing touch with my roots in order to become something different, something new. When I looked in the glass to shave in the morning I still saw the face of Tomas Piety, but I wasn’t sure I really knew who that was any more.

Kotov howled again, and I saw Cutter had taken me at my word. I dreaded to think how he must be feeling after the state he had been in last night, but he wasn't letting a no-doubt pounding head keep him from the work of slowly peeling Kotov's left hand. It was almost down to the bone in a few places, and there was a gory bucket on the floor beside the knifeman where he flicked each strip of skin as it came free.

'Are you ready to answer my questions?' I asked as I stood looming over the wailing man.

'Fuck you!' Kotov screamed, but there was a mute appeal in his eyes that I wasn't sure I understood. 'Fuck you, cunt! I won't talk. *I won't talk!*'

Tears streamed from his eyes.

I frowned and caught Cutter's eye. 'Walk with me for a moment,' I said, and nodded towards the door.

Cutter put his skinning knife down on the table and wiped his bloody hands on an already sodden red rag, then followed me out into the corridor.

'Why not?' I asked, once the door was closed behind us. 'He must be in impossible agony by now.'

'Oh, he is,' Cutter assured me, and he blew out his cheeks in a long sigh that told me he wasn't enjoying the work any more than Anne was. Cutter was a highly trained and ruthless killer, but he wasn't a monster; he didn't hurt people for the fun of it, I knew that much about him. 'Truth be told, I don't know, boss. He *wants* to talk, believe you me, but he won't.'

'Why the fuck not?' I snapped. 'I can't even imagine how much he's suffering, after what you've done to him. What does he have to gain from staying silent?'

Follow the money. Who benefits?

No one in this case, or not that I could see, anyway. His gang were all but exterminated, and he was putting himself through Hell for no better reason than to piss me off. It made no sense.

‘Nothing,’ Cutter said, confirming my thoughts. ‘It’s like he *can’t* talk. I’m sure he wants to, but it’s like his mind is locked, somehow. His eyes are pleading, begging me to stop, but he can’t answer a simple fucking question. And I mean *can’t*, not won’t. I don’t know. Some Skanian witchcraft, perhaps, something someone’s done to his mind. The poor cunt, he’s got nowhere to turn, and I’ve sent him to Hell.’

‘Aye, perhaps,’ I said, and a thought came to me. ‘All right, stop hurting him. I’ve got a better idea.’

‘What’s that then?’

‘I want someone else to have a go at him.’

‘You think I don’t know what I’m doing?’ Cutter challenged me. ‘I might not like it but that doesn’t mean I don’t know how it’s done. If I can’t make him talk, then no cunt can.’

‘I don’t doubt you, Cutter,’ I assured him, ‘and I don’t doubt your skills one little bit. I just think perhaps that’s not the right approach with Kotov.’

‘Then what the fuck is? I want justice for Jochan every bit as much as you do!’

‘I know,’ I said, ‘and I think I know how to get it. Fight magic with magic.’

Cutter glared at me for a moment with his single eye. ‘Aye, perhaps,’ he agreed in the end. ‘Whatever gets it done.’

Revenge, that was the lever that moved Cutter now.

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

Ilse had told me that, in her own private Hell under the house of law, and I *had* remembered it.

Mind things.

Oh yes, now I thought I had a fair idea how to go about this.

I returned to the house off Trader's Row in the early evening, and I asked Salo to bring Mina to me in the drawing room. I sat there with a glass of brandy in my hand, thinking back on what she had told me.

Old Kurt taught me hurting things, not healing things, saying that was what I was best at. That and mind things. Going away and coming back. Seeing things in people's heads. I don't know. I didn't like it really, but apparently I can do it.

I didn't really know what that had meant, but if Cutter was right, if Kotov couldn't talk because of some Skanian witchcraft done to his mind, then Mina might be the person most likely to break it. To break his mind, perhaps, as Ilse had said, but if it got me what I wanted to know, then that was a price I was willing to pay, and fuck what was left of him after she had done her work.

'Mr Piety,' Mina said as she came into the drawing room, and of course she had Billy with her, for all that I would rather she had come alone. 'You wanted me?'

'Good evening Mina,' I said. 'Billy, lad.'

'Da,' Billy said, and he gave me a nod of respect that told me he knew this was business and not a family matter.

Billy had been in my crew in the war before he became family, after all; the lad understood the difference.

'You told me something once, Mina,' I said. 'You told me Old Kurt taught you mind things, and I don't think I rightly understood what you meant.'

'I'm not sure I understand it myself,' the girl confessed. 'It's just . . . something I can do.'

'Can you help me with a thing, Mina?' I asked her, and she shrugged.

'Might be,' she said. 'Depends what it is. I can try, anyway.'

'There's a man,' I said. 'Anne and Cutter have him at the Tanner's Arms. I want to talk to him, to ask him some questions, but he doesn't want to talk to me.'

‘Have you tried hurting him, Da?’ Billy asked at once, and there was a hint of eagerness in his voice that I wasn’t sure I liked the sound of.

‘Aye, lad, I have,’ I said. ‘Cutter has, anyway, and he’s better at that sort of thing than I am any day of the week. It isn’t working. The thing is, Mina, I think he *does* want to talk to me. He wants to do whatever it takes to make Cutter stop hurting him. Any sane man would, but it’s like he can’t, do you understand me? We think the Skanians did something to him, to his mind, to make it so that he can’t talk. D’you think you might be able to undo that, whatever it was they did?’

Mina frowned as she thought it over for a moment.

‘Yes,’ she said, after a long pause. ‘If you don’t care about him. No, if you want him still usable at the end of it.’

‘I don’t give a fuck about him,’ I said, and that was Our Lady’s honest truth. ‘I want to know who he works for, and more importantly who *they* work for. I want to know who’s really behind the Skanian trouble in our country. I’ve got a Skanian version of me called Hendensen in the cells of the governor’s hall who swears blind it’s not being done on their king’s orders, and I’m half inclined to believe him. But if it *isn’t* the Skanian government behind this, then I need to know who it fucking is. Can you find that out for me, Mina?’

Her long blonde hair fell forward over her eyes before she flicked it away with a toss of her head. ‘I don’t know that I can make him talk, but I can find an answer to a question,’ she said. ‘If you don’t need him back afterwards, that is.’

No, no I didn’t need Andre Kotov back afterwards in the slightest.

‘Tomorrow, then,’ I said.

Chapter 26

The next morning found me in the Tanner's Arms with Mina at my side. Billy had insisted on coming too, of course, being reluctant to let her out of his sight, but today was about her and Andre Kotov.

We sat at a table together nursing mugs of small beer, although we had already had breakfast. We were waiting for Cutter to make his way down from the house on Slaughterhouse Narrow. He was still working, despite being half out of his mind with grief. I remembered what I had seen in Cutter's cellar in that house, the punching bags and the dummies for knife practise, for that was how he spent his spare time. Cutter was burning with a need for revenge, a simmering hatred that I would have to keep a close eye on. That hatred could be used, I knew, but it could also turn around and bite me if I wasn't careful. Cutter had been my brother's man to the core, in every way – with Jochan gone, could I rely on him to be faithful to the Pious Men? To me?

I honestly wasn't sure. The former Sacred Blade was my quiet man, but was he really? He had originally been on the other side, after all, and had only joined Jochan's crew in the war to be close to my brother. Now that Jochan was gone, did I still command his loyalty? I supposed we would have to see about that.

Anne came down from her room over the bar and joined us, accepting a tankard from Hari with a grunt. 'What's this then?' she asked, looking at Billy and Mina.

I told her of my conversation with Cutter the previous day, and what Mina had said.

'More witchcraft,' Anne said at last, and swiped her hand across her scarred lip to wipe away beer.

‘It’s interrogation, Anne,’ I said. ‘We did the same back in the army, but that way, well, it just isn’t working this time – or the method we’ve been using isn’t working, anyway, and Lady only knows none of us like it. I think we should let Mina have a go.’

Anne glared at Mina across the table and Mina looked right back at her, and I could tell there was no love lost between them. Anne was a scarred, ferocious veteran and Mina was a lass with barely seventeen years to her, but there was no fear on her young face.

None whatsoever.

I couldn’t imagine Mina being afraid of anyone, ever, and that in itself gave me pause. I wondered on the nature of the cunning folk, and of cunning children in particular.

Feast.

These children slept beneath my roof of a night, for Our Lady’s sake.

Evil children . . . but no, I thought then. No, I wouldn’t believe that. My Billy was a good lad, I knew that, and if he loved Mina and Mina loved him back, which I firmly believed she did, then she was all right by me. I didn’t understand them, I would admit that, but that didn’t mean I had to fear them. Understanding something and accepting it don’t have to be the same thing, to my mind. They would do what they did, and so long as they cared for each other and most importantly stayed on my side, that was well and good. That was, when all was said and done, all that fucking mattered.

Cutter arrived eventually, his eyes bloodshot with drink and sleeplessness. He walked into a tavern fallen silent, even Black Billy turning his eyes away as Cutter passed. Everyone knew what Cutter had lost, felt the depth of his grief. There was no one in the crew who didn’t fear Cutter to some extent, and that was fucking wise of them. I knew I did.

‘Cutter,’ I said, looking up at him as he reached our table.

‘You’ve brought your little witch girl, then,’ Cutter said.

‘Aye, if you like.’

He glared at Mina, and she turned to look at him. She met his stare, and there was a very long silence.

‘Hello,’ she said.

Cutter went a bit pale. Mina continued to hold his gaze, until he clapped a hand to his forehead and turned away.

‘Fuck off!’ he shouted, and I didn’t think I had ever heard Cutter shout before. ‘Fuck off with that, you little bitch!’

‘You remember, don’t you?’ Mina said.

‘Fuck off!’

‘Oh, I can feel you remembering. The cells. The darkness, the hunger. Waiting to die. That little piece of glass. You killed them all, didn’t you, when the doors opened? Yes, even that little old woman. You remember.’

‘Fuck off fuck off fuck *off*!’ Cutter all but screamed, and he rounded on her with both his wicked knives in his hands. ‘That *little old woman* boiled her own fucking baby grandson alive and ate him! She deserved it!’

I got to my feet fast, my hands on the hilts of the Weeping Women. ‘Stop it, Mina,’ I snapped, although I had no real idea what she had been doing. ‘Cutter, calm down.’

‘Stand down, soldier!’ Anne roared at him in her best sergeant’s voice, on her feet beside me.

‘Fuck’s sake,’ Cutter muttered, and stamped his way to the bar where he demanded brandy despite it being barely an hour past dawn.

I turned on Mina and gave her a look.

‘I was just practising,’ she said. ‘It’s been a long time.’

‘Well, don’t practise on Cutter,’ I told her. ‘That won’t end well for anyone.’

‘Yes, Mr Piety,’ she muttered to the surface of the table.

‘Come through to the back with me,’ I told her. ‘You too, Anne.’

I didn’t know if Cutter would join us or not, but after Mina’s impromptu demonstration of what she could do I

doubted it. That wasn't a problem; from what I had just seen I was reasonably sure we wouldn't need him anyway.

Billy tagged along as well, holding Mina's hand, and while I wished he hadn't, I supposed there was no real harm in it. He had seen worse than a flayed hand before, I knew, young though he was. We all had.

'In here,' Anne told the youngsters, and opened the door to the small storeroom.

Kotov was semi-conscious, and while he had obviously been fed and given water he looked delirious to me. I supposed that was hardly surprising, considering what Cutter had done to him. He had been up to the wrist by the time I told him to stop, and I couldn't even imagine how the manacle felt against the man's raw flesh and exposed nerves. Flies buzzed around the horror of his hand.

'Kotov,' I said, my voice flat and cold with threat.

Whether this worked or not, Andre Kotov was not leaving that room alive. My brother was dead and I laid the blame for that squarely at this man's feet. It had been obvious we had won as soon as the magician fell. If he had just surrendered then, Jochan would still be alive.

I took that very ill indeed.

'Fuck you, Piety,' he whispered, his eyes flickering half open, but I could see the agony in them.

I was more convinced than ever that Cutter's theory was correct. No one could remain defiant in the face of such suffering, I didn't believe it for a moment. Something had to have been done to lock the man's mind to prevent him from talking, however desperate he must be to make it stop.

'This is Mina,' I explained, ushering her forwards. 'She's here to put an end to this mummer's farce.'

Kotov sneered. 'I didn't break for your pet torturer,' he said, and I could hear the note of despair in his voice. 'I'm hardly going to break for this little girl.'

'Now that's where I think you're wrong,' I said. 'Mina.'

She nodded and took another step forward, and she reached out and put her right hand on his forehead. That's when I saw a thing that didn't happen. It was like Kurt and the Rat King, in a way, but this time I *knew* it didn't happen as there were no wounds afterwards, but I swear on Our Lady's name I saw it anyway. Mina's fingers grew, and her bitten-down nails extended into talons and dug into Kotov's head. Slowly, slowly, her fingers sank into his skull, and he shrieked.

'You remember the question I want an answer to, don't you Mina?' I asked quietly, and she nodded.

'It's not very nice in here, is it Mr Kotov?' she whispered. 'You've done some very nasty things – had some done to you in turn, yes? Oh yes. Oh, look at *this!*'

His shrieks turned into blubbering wails and tears streamed down his cheeks. 'Stop it, stop it, stop it,' he pleaded, but Mina's face remained expressionless.

'He never begged before,' Anne said, 'not even when Cutter was peeling him. Lady's sake, Tomas, what the fuck is she *doing* to him?'

'Asking questions,' I said, and let that be an end to it.

'Oh dear,' Mina said. 'Oh, that must have hurt *very* badly. Do you remember?'

'*Stop!*' Kotov howled, and now the tears that streaked down his cheeks were bloody and there was dark wetness running from his ears.

'Oh, *there* it is,' she said. 'I can see what they did, now. We don't need *this* any more, do we?'

Her hand twitched, fingers stabbing deeper into the man's mind, and he made the most inhuman sound I have ever heard come from a man's throat. I couldn't shake the thought that Mina was literally tearing his mind apart to get to what I wanted her to find.

Kotov soiled himself, the smell unmistakable in the close confines of the small storeroom. I was reminded uncomfortably of what lay below the house of law and how I

was effectively recreating it here. Ilse had disgusted me, but was I truly any different now? That was a thought to make a man uncomfortable and no mistake.

‘I’m a mercenary, not a soldier!’ Kotov screamed suddenly. ‘I work for a captain in Skania you’d never have heard of. We were hired, the fighters, our cadre of mages, all of us – to cause disruption, chaos in any way we could – destabilise your country, weaken it until order collapses. Here, Dannsburg, everywhere. It’s all a put-up job!’

‘And who hired your captain?’ I asked, but he had already answered my question.

‘Dieter Vogel,’ he sobbed. ‘We were hired by Dieter Vogel! Your own Lord Chief Judiciar, who now sits on a fucking throne. Worked, didn’t it?’

More blood poured from his ears and he started to drool.

‘That’s enough, Mina,’ I said.

She slowly withdrew her talons from the man’s skull and then it was just a young girl’s hand again, slightly grubby, her nails unkept, and there were no holes in Kotov’s head.

It hadn’t happened. It *couldn’t* have happened.

Kotov was shaking violently now, rocking back and forth and whimpering to himself as he sat in a puddle of his own shit. His mouth hung slack and a long string of bloody drool stretched down to his chest and stained his doublet. His eyes were completely vacant.

‘I did tell you this would happen,’ Mina said, and I nodded silently.

‘I know,’ I said.

I drew my sword and gave him Mercy through the chest.

*

Dieter Vogel, the Lord Chief Judiciar. The Provost Marshal of the Queen’s Men. The man charged with protecting the queen and the nation, had murdered one and taken over the

other, through false flags and misinformation and the use of foreign mercenaries.

I wished I could have said I was surprised, but Kotov had only confirmed the suspicion I had long held. At least now I knew for sure. There was no way he had been lying to me, not after what Mina had just done to him.

‘Did she get your precious answer for you?’ Cutter demanded when we returned to the common room of the Tanner’s Arms.

‘Aye, she did,’ I said, and I could see in his face that he knew I wasn’t easy with how she had done it.

Mina gave me the fear, and that was all there was to it. No one so young should be able to do what she had just done. No cunt at all should, truth be told, whatever their age. It was just wrong. Anne had a sour look on her face too, but Billy was beaming at his woman. He actually looked proud of her.

‘Will you show me how to—?’ he started, but I cut him off.

‘No,’ I said, and I meant it. ‘No, Billy, she won’t. Will you, Mina? There are some things you don’t want to be able to do, lad, and that was one of them.’

Mina looked so drawn, her already thin face pinched and gaunt, her eyes shadowed by dark circles. I wondered what getting answers to my questions had cost her – too much, to my mind. The cunning was not a power to be trusted, I believed that to my bones, but I thought that Billy had yet to grasp that fact.

I accepted a brandy from Hari and sat at the corner table to let it sink in.

There’s an old saying in business: follow the money. Who betrayed me? Follow the money. Who benefits? Follow the money. Who benefited from this, from causing civil unrest and destabilising the country? Whichever way I turned it around in my head, I kept coming back to the same answer. Dieter Vogel.

I remembered how I'd thought that the palace was ridiculous, that it would be impossible to defend. I had thought of how threats of war brought assassins long before they brought soldiers. If I had known that, I remembered thinking, why the fuck hadn't Vogel? But of course he had. That assassin had been his, and there was no longer any doubt in my mind about that. No, Kotov hadn't been lying to me. Ultimately, Vogel benefitted from everything. He wanted to be fucking king.

Dieter Vogel had killed the queen.

He had orchestrated the whole thing - the unrest, the Skanian gang backing, the bombing of the Bountiful Harvest, *everything*.

Effectively, Dieter Vogel had killed my brother.

I'd not see that devil on the Rose Throne, whatever it took.

I remembered how I had thought that no sane man would ever cross Vogel, or show him anything but the greatest of respect. Well I was about to fucking cross him, and then some. Was I no longer sane, then? Perhaps not, I didn't really know. But I knew one thing.

I was going to war.

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Chapter 27

‘Are we all going to Dannsburg, Mr Piety?’ asked Simple Sam, once I had finished telling them.

‘Yes, Sam lad, that we are,’ I said. ‘And when we get there, the Pious Men are going to make a fucking entrance.’

Sam gave me a short nod like that was all there was to it, and to him perhaps it was. He wasn’t an imaginative lad, our Sam, but he was willing and capable and above all loyal, and I would take that and give thanks to Our Lady for it.

We were in the back room of the Tanner’s Arms, at the table where the Pious Men gathered, and although Anne had the seat at its head that was her place now, all eyes were turned on me.

‘War again?’ Black Billy asked me. ‘Really, boss?’

‘Aye, really,’ I said. ‘A different sort of war perhaps, Billy, but war nonetheless. We have to stop this.’

‘Why?’ Anne countered. ‘We were doing this to stop the Skanians invading us. If that was all horseshit like you say now, if they were never fucking going to anyway, then why is this our problem? Why have hundreds of people died to stop an invasion that was never fucking coming anyway?’

Anne was purely furious, I could tell, and I took a deep breath before I answered her. There was no good to come from us falling out now.

‘He’s a traitor,’ I said simply. ‘He murdered the fucking queen.’

‘So what? I didn’t give a *shit* about the queen!’ Anne shouted, and all around the table men stilled, their expressions wary as they watched their two bosses well on their way to violence between them.

‘Truth be told, neither did I,’ I said calmly, ‘but consider this, Anne: Vogel has brought about violence that has killed hundreds, probably *thousands* of our fellow countrymen. His actions almost certainly got Heinrich killed, and deprived Rosie of the closest thing to a da she’s ever known. He all but wiped out the house of magicians and therefore the university and the great library, and all the knowledge and learning they represent. He took my brother away from me. You expect me to sit back and let that happen? What happens in a year or two, when Crown Prince Marcus comes in reach of his age of majority? Do you honestly think Vogel will ever give up that throne, now he sits upon it? Will he *fuck*. That little boy will die, sure as the sun will rise tomorrow. Sure as the Princess Crown Royal did once her doctor had been disappeared. Do you think that was an accident, Bloody Anne? Fucking *do* you? Because. *I. Do. Not!*’

I was on my feet, I realised, my fists balled on the table in front of me and shaking something fierce, and I was all but screaming in her face in front of everyone.

Anne just looked at me, and at the rest of the crew.

‘Get out, the lot of you,’ she said, and she never raised her voice. ‘Me and Sir Tomas have some business to discuss.’

That was the first time I ever heard her use my title, and it brought me crashing down to earth in a haze of battle shock and brandy. I regained my seat and composed myself as the Pious Men filed silently out of the room, leaving me and Anne alone together at the table.

‘Why should I do this?’ Anne asked me, once they were gone. ‘Why the fuck should I march the Pious Men to Dannsburg for you, Tomas? You put me in charge, and I take that seriously. These are *my* men now, not yours. How the fuck has he even been getting away with this?’

I just shrugged. ‘If you pluck a chicken one feather at a time, people don’t notice it,’ I said.

‘Even so, why should we fight for the Queen’s Men?’

‘Not for the Queen’s Men,’ I said. ‘Against them, if anything. Some of them, anyway. Against Vogel.’

‘Some of them? He’s the fucking Provost Marshal.’

There are factions, Tomas.

‘Aye, he is,’ I started, and faltered.

Defiance, we like that.

‘So?’

‘So I don’t think all of them are quite as devoted to him as he thinks they are,’ I said. ‘I think . . . I don’t know. Not yet, not until I get back to the city and start asking questions. Very discreet, very careful questions, you understand. I’ll have to play the game a bit longer. We can hardly mount a direct assault on the house of law – we’d be massacred. Without allies we would, anyway, but I think there might be some of those to be made, in time. I’ll go back to work and play the faithful Queen’s Man, and we’ll tuck the Pious Men away somewhere south of the river until we’re ready.’

‘And I ask you again,’ Anne said, ‘why the fuck should I?’

‘For justice, for the realm. For revenge, if nothing else. For Jochan, who’d still be alive if not for Vogel. For Rosie, who’d still have a da.’

‘Don’t you use Rosie against me,’ Anne said. ‘That’s just not fair, Tomas.’

‘What the fuck does “fair” have to do with it?’ I snarled. ‘Was it fair, what Mother Groggan did to you? Was it fair, what my da did to me, and to Jochan? When the *fuck* has “fair” ever had anything to do with anything in this world, Bloody Anne?’

‘Your da?’ she asked, and I realised I had finally slipped.

‘Fuck,’ I muttered, and downed what was left of my brandy. ‘You don’t want to know about that. Forget I said anything.’

It wasn’t something I wanted to talk about, or to remember yet again. It wasn’t something I wanted anyone to know about me. First people knew, then they thought

they understood, then they pitied. I didn't want anyone's fucking pity, and least of all Anne's. I'd only had twelve years to me, for Our Lady's sake. I had done my best to protect my brother, for all that I had left it too late. I had left it too late because I had been a coward, and now Jochan was dead and I could never, ever make it right with him. That chance had been taken away from me, and it had been taken away by Dieter Vogel.

I looked up at Anne and met her eyes, and I realised I was weeping and I didn't care.

'I am going to kill that cunt and that's all there is to it,' I said. 'You're either with me or you aren't.'

Of course she was with me.

She wasn't happy about it, no, but in the end she agreed. I had been rather banking on that, I had to allow, but if I hadn't been able to persuade her then I would have gone back to Dannsburg on my own if I had to and done the thing anyway or died trying. There were no two ways about it any more; Vogel had to die.

'There's a thing I wanted to ask you,' Anne said quietly, once we were friends again and back in the common room, seated at her corner table with Simple Sam standing guard to keep folk away. 'A favour, really.'

I poured brandy for us both from the bottle we shared and lifted my glass.

'What's that then?'

'I've a mind to ask Rosie to marry me,' Anne confessed, and I could see a faint blush of colour in her cheeks. 'If she says yes, would . . . would you marry us? I'd want it to be you, if you understand.'

I swallowed brandy and smiled at her, a real smile that I actually meant, not the cold smirk that I showed most people.

'Of course she'll say yes,' I said, 'and of course I will. It won't be official in the eyes of the law, you understand, but I'll do it, and gladly.'

‘Thank you,’ Anne said, and the look on her face almost made me start weeping again.

‘I’d be honoured,’ I said, ‘but why? Why now, I mean? We’re about to ride back into battle.’

‘Because of exactly that,’ Anne said. ‘I . . . I don’t know. I’ve got a bad feeling, Tomas. Like I’ve pushed my luck one time too many already. Messia, Abingon, everything that’s come afterwards. If my time comes to cross the river, I want to die married to the woman I love.’

‘Aye,’ I said, ‘I can respect that. When are you going to ask her?’

Anne showed me a shy smile that was so unlike her I had to blink to make sure I wasn’t still seeing things. ‘Last night,’ she said, and her the colour rose in her cheeks. ‘You’re right, she said yes.’

‘Fuck me, congratulations!’ I said, and I rose and leaned over the table and pulled Anne into a rough embrace.

We slapped each other’s backs like any comrades would have done, and I regained my seat and poured for us both again.

‘Can you be my Closest Man and my priest at the same time?’ Anne asked, once we had toasted her betrothal.

‘Not really,’ I said, ‘not by the letter of the scripture anyway, but fuck it. If I marry you in the chapel of Our Lady in the Great Temple and not at the main altar, then I reckon I can do it however I want. Our Lady doesn’t give much of a shit about that sort of thing.’

‘No, I can’t imagine She does,’ Anne said, and we clinked our glasses together and laughed.

Even in the shadow of my brother’s death that was a happy evening, me and my best friend toasting her impending wedding.

We needed to be on the road to Dannsburg soon, so the date for Anne and Rosie's wedding was set for that coming Coinsday: a wedding, a party, a day to recover from it, and then we would ride.

'It's most irregular, Father Tomas,' the high priest of the Great Temple of All Gods told me the next morning when I made my petition for use of the chapel of Our Lady within his temple on Coinsday morning. 'Two women, getting married to each other. It won't be legal, you understand.'

We were in his vestry off the main building of the temple, he seated behind his broad oak desk and me standing before it, my black priest's robes hanging open around me and my sword belt bucked over my coat beneath them. Unusual attire for most priests, to be sure, but not for a son of Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows. Those of us who celebrate the Lady of Death seldom go unarmed.

The high priest was Father Goodman, who had married Ailsa and me. He had obviously risen within the ranks of the priesthood in the intervening years, although, if the words of the Chandler's Narrow girls were to be believed, Father Goodman was anything but celibate.

'It's not illegal either,' I pointed out.

'Well, technically, no,' he had to admit, 'but what's the point if it isn't binding?'

'They love each other,' I said.

'And no doubt that's very nice for them both, I'm sure,' the high priest said, somewhat prissily to my mind, 'but I still don't see why—'

I lost my patience, and I found that I had Remorse in my hand. 'You don't have to fucking see,' I said as I levelled the blade at his throat. 'You don't have to understand it, or even care for it. You just have to let other people live their fucking lives the way that they want to, do you understand me? I am a priest of Our Lady and I want to use Her chapel in your temple for a private ceremony, and that is quite within my rights to request. I'm not a high priest like you, nor as well

versed in scripture, but remind me, Father, of everything that Our Lady has to say on the subject of intimate relations?’

‘Lie with whom thou wilt, so long as both be willing,’ he recited numbly. ‘That, um, that’s all of it.’

‘Aye, that sounds about right,’ I said. ‘Do you have a problem with that, Father? With Our Lady’s holy word?’

‘The Harvest Maiden, on the other hand, has quite a lot to say on the subject,’ he attempted.

‘Do I look like a fucking *farmer*?’ I snapped at him. ‘We hold to Our Lady in my family, and it’s Her word we listen to. So I ask you again, *do you have a problem with that?*’

He had gone almost cross-eyed as he tried to watch the point of my sword, and he shook his head, just a tiny amount. He remembered my wedding day, I was sure, remembered celebrating my union with Ailsa while Our Lady stalked the streets of the Wheels as they burned, that Godsdag afternoon.

Oh yes, Father Goodman knew who I was. He remembered the devil Tomas Piety and no mistake.

‘No, Father,’ he eventually replied, and that was wise of him.

Very wise indeed.

‘Aye, well, that’s settled then,’ I said, and slowly slid Remorse back into her scabbard.

‘We’ll have to publish the banns, of course,’ he said. ‘This Coinsdag morning is far too soon for—’

‘You already did,’ I said, and I dropped three silver marks on the desk in front of him.

He gave a weary sigh, but nonetheless swept them discreetly into his palm and made them disappear. I honestly don’t think there was a soul in Ellinburg who wasn’t corrupt to some degree, and not even a high priest was any exception.

‘Very well. Their names, for the book of retrospective banns?’

‘Bloody Anne, and Rosie of Chandler’s Narrow.’

His eyebrows rose, and I thought he paled slightly. ‘Not a family name between them?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘But Rosie remembers you well enough, Father Goodman. All the Chandler’s Narrow girls do, and they’ll all be here on the day, I’m sure. So there’s no need for any complications or delays, is there?’

Gold, power, influence, those may be the levers that move the world, but sometimes simple threats and intimidation do it just as well.

Father Goodman was moved by threats.

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Chapter 28

Coinsday rolled around and we were all ready at the appointed hour outside the Great Temple of All Gods. The morning was bright and dry and the sun shone down on us as we waited. Bloody Anne was a little rough around the edges, as we had given her a grand send-off in the Tanner's Arms the night before, as befitted any groom on the night before their wedding. At least she had finally stopped throwing up, and she looked quite fine in her new coat and doublet.

'Bastard,' she whispered to me, but she gave my arm a squeeze to say she didn't mean it. 'Did you *have* to let me drink that much last night?'

'I don't believe I held you down and poured the brandy into your mouth, Anne,' I said, and winked at her.

I was playing the Closest Man and I could see she appreciated it, but I was wearing my formal priest's robes and would soon be officiating over her wedding. I wondered if Anne had ever in her life thought she would be getting married. Certainly in the village where she had grown up it would have been utterly impossible for her to marry another woman, but here in Ellinburg, social norms were more flexible, and in Dannsburg they were positively fluid. In Dannsburg acceptability was driven by money and status, the same as everything else was. If Major Bakrylov had arrived at a social function with a husband on his arm, I doubt anyone would have said a word, to his face at least, and if they had, they would have found themselves facing the major in the duelling circle, and that, I thought, probably wouldn't have ended well for them.

I remembered the Coronation Massacre all too well, and Major Bakrylov in the thick of the fighting on his rearing horse as his sabre rose and fell. No, I didn't think anyone would ever mock the major for who he chose to lie down with. And why should they?

Lie with whom thou wilt, so long as both be willing, those were Our Lady's only words on the subject, and that was good enough for me.

After a moment the doors to the temple opened and we filed inside. All the Pious Men were there, and the Flower Girls, a few of the Headhunters and a good half of the Alarian Kings. Even Hanne had come, for all that I dare say she hadn't wanted to, and my aunt and Brak. I thought Enaid's presence might have a good deal to do with Hanne's, but I held my peace about that. Aunt Enaid was the grand matriarch of the Piety family and she always had been and always would be, and that was all there was to be said about that. Widow though she might be, Hanne had married into our family and was now as subject to Enaid's influence as the rest of us were.

I spotted Nikash Bakshi in the crowd and gave him a respectful nod which he returned with a smile. With the Northern Sons gone I thought the peace between the Pious Men and Alarian Kings would hold, and that was good. Weddings build alliances, not just between the newlyweds and their families but between those guests who come to celebrate, too. Weddings are good for business, and that has been known by royalty and businessmen alike since time beyond remembering.

We were ushered to the shrine of Our Lady and into the chapel behind it, and took our places while we waited for the bride and her entourage to arrive. The chapel was small, and some of the Alarian Kings and our vassal crews were standing at the back to leave half of the front pews free for Rosie's ladies. I gave Anne's arm another squeeze as her Closest Man, then took my place in front of the altar as her

priest. Beast stood up to take my place at her side. Candles burned along the length of the pews, the symbol of weddings, for the flame of love.

A few minutes later the drummers took up their beat, and then Rosie entered the chapel on Sir Eland's arm in his place as her acting father. They didn't know each other all that well, but he had once saved her life, and those of all the Chandler's Narrow girls, when he had made his heroic stand in the doorway against the Gutcutters. I was glad she had asked him. I knew how much he must have appreciated that.

She wore a shimmering gown of white silk that must have cost a pretty penny, and bright sunlight streaming in through the tall, narrow windows made her glow like a goddess. It was a nice day for it, I had to allow.

I waited for her and Sir Eland to reach the altar while the Chandler's Narrow girls who had accompanied her followed in their wake and took their places in the front pews, the yellow cord bawd's knot proudly displayed on every shoulder. Rosie stopped the requisite five paces away from Anne and dropped her a low curtsy. Anne bowed respectfully to her in turn, and again to Sir Eland in his place as her father. Eland brought Rosie to Anne's side in front of me where I stood waiting with my back to the altar. The forms obeyed, Eland and Beast took two steps backwards then, as I would also have done had I been at Anne's side in my place as her Closest Man, but a man can't truly be two things at once, however much he might have wanted to be.

I had had enough of trying to be two things at once; Queen's Man and boss of the Pious Men, for all that I had handed that mantle on to Anne. *Enough*, I told myself. It was enough. I was a Queen's Man in truth now, and the Pious Men belonged to Anne. She had sworn them to my service in what was to come, and that would do for me.

'Faithful of the gods,' I proclaimed, 'you have come together in this temple so that the most holy ones may seal

and strengthen your love in the presence of the temple's ministry and this community. The gods most abundantly bless this love. Let them now bear witness so that you may assume the duties of marriage in mutual and lasting fidelity. And so, in the presence of the gods, I ask you to state your intentions unto one another. Rosie and Anne, have you come here freely and without reservation to give yourselves to each other in marriage?'

'I have,' Rosie said.

'I have,' Anne repeated.

'Will you love and honour each other as wife and wife for the rest of your lives?'

'I will,' Rosie said, and again Anne repeated her.

I skipped over the line about receiving children from the gods, but I don't think anyone noticed. Truth be told, this was the first wedding I had ever conducted, but I had made myself learn the words. In the army my business had been far more concerned with confession and funerals, and my priestly duties had been somewhat limited since I had returned from war.

'Since it is your intention to enter into marriage,' I said, 'join your hands, and declare your consent before the gods and this temple.'

Anne reached out and took Rosie's hand in hers.

'I, Anne,' she said, 'take you, Rosie, to be my wife. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad. I will love you and honour you for all the days of my life, for I am an honourable woman, as no one here gathered will deny.'

'I, Rosie, take you, Anne, to be my wife. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad. I will love you and honour you all for the days of my life, for I am an honourable woman, as no one here gathered will deny.'

I recited the words of the holy wedding ceremony in the small, intimate chapel of Our Lady, as Father Goodman had when he had married Ailsa and me in the echoing vastness of the main nave of the Great Temple, and they answered in

the right way and in the right places, and the sun shone, and nothing exploded and no one died. More to the point, they truly meant the vows they spoke. Their wedding and mine couldn't have been more different.

'You have declared your consent within the temple,' I finally concluded. 'May the gods in their goodness strengthen your consent and fill you both with their blessings. Who the gods have joined, no one may divide. May you both walk in righteousness until the end of your days.'

It was done. I had conducted my first wedding ceremony, and Anne and Rosie were married in Our Lady's eyes.

*

The party we had afterwards was legendary. I had offered to host it in the Golden Chains, but both Anne and Rosie were more comfortable with the rough camaraderie of the Tanner's Arms, so that was where it was held.

We all piled back there when it was done, Rosie still in her magnificent silk dress held aloft on the shoulders of the Chandler's Narrow girls to stop her skirt dragging in the shit of the gutters, and we must have made a fine old precession through the streets of Ellinburg. I had been the city governor a year or so ago, after all, and now I was processing in the street at the head of what many would see as a whore's wedding. There were certainly enough yellow knots on display, but there was also Bloody Anne striding at my side and who in Ellinburg didn't know the head of the Pious Men when they saw her?

People turned out to cheer and throw tribute, or they hid and pretended they hadn't seen us pass. Either was fine with me, and it was with Anne as well. The only thing I wouldn't have tolerated was disrespect, but we encountered none of that.

In Ellinburg, in those days, no one would show disrespect to the Pious Men. That was the legacy Jochan and me and our aunt had built, and I had handed to Anne in her turn as my second and my successor.

I clapped her on the shoulder as we walked, and smiled when she winked at me. 'So,' I said, 'how does it feel to be a married woman?'

'Fucking brilliant,' Anne said, and she smiled in a way that said she truly meant it. 'Thank you for today. For being my priest, I mean. That . . . that meant a lot to me, Tomas.'

Her sincerity made me uncomfortable so I made a joke of it, and perhaps that was a mistake: a common mistake amongst soldiers, perhaps, but a mistake, nonetheless.

'Ah well, we stand together through each other's troubles,' I said, and Anne gave me a look that made me immediately regret my words.

It was too late to take them back by then as we had reached the Tanner's Arms and Black Billy was unlocking the door of the closed tavern and ushering us all inside, and Hari hurried behind the bar and went straight to work.

We drank.

What else can I say? We drank, and sang, and told each other tall tales, tales of the war and of our wild childhoods growing up before we were conscripted, of who we had robbed and who we had fucked. The laughter was raucous and constant. Hanne looked absolutely lost in the crowd of rough faces, until Aunt Enaid took her to one side and sat her down for a talk.

A talk about what it was to be a Piety woman, perhaps. I had no idea. I couldn't shake off the fact that Hanne was raising my niece, Jochan's daughter. Little Enaid would grow up in this family, in this life, and I wondered what that would do to her, how she would turn out, who she would marry and how she would raise *her* children, if she bore them. So long as my aunt remained the matriarch of the family I supposed she would probably turn out all right, but I knew then that

Hanne would never truly be one of us. Most widows of businessmen like us were hard bitches intent on holding on to their husbands' power, but not her. Hanne just looked young and lost and broken.

The night wore on and we had fun, and that's really all I can remember about it. We all got monumentally drunk, and eventually Anne led her not-so-blushing bride up the stairs to her room above the tavern and we all toasted them on their first night together as a married couple. They were so happy, and we were all happy for them.

It was good, to be happy for them. I sat there alone at the corner table once Anne had gone up, with Simple Sam still guarding it. For one last time I felt like the head of the Pious Men, but I was done with that life, I knew that now, and Dannsburg was calling.

I'm not a general, Anne; I never have been. I'm just a fucking soldier, and I do what I'm told.

I remembered saying that to her once, but now I *was* a fucking general. I gave the orders, and the order was to march to war. But that would wait until we'd had our fun, and a day to recover from it. We all deserve a little happiness.

That was a happy night indeed, and I cherish the memory of it.

It was just about the last happy night there was.

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Interlude

It is only a dream.

*I know that, even as I live it. It is only a dream. Again.
Every fucking night, the same.*

The cannon roar, and all is smoke and fire and noise.

*The wall shivers with impact, blasting shards of stone into
our faces. Dust fills the air, choking us as a section
collapses. A breach, slender as hope.*

Charge!

*The stench of shit and blood and rot, the air thick with
flies. My hands are sweaty on the haft of my spear. I cling to
it, my only hope. My bowels are like water, part disease and
part sheer animal fear. The scream of air as a cannonball
hurtles overhead.*

Charge!

*We rush the breach. Most of our company die, cut down
by the withering volley of arrows. Father Freeman, our
company priest, takes one through the neck. He is across
the river and with Our Lady now.*

*We press the attack to the push of spears, are driven
back.*

*The captain sounds the retreat despite Kant's protests.
Today is not the day we will breach the wall.*

*Our company priest is dead, and I wonder who will replace
him in Our Lady's service.*

*It's only a dream, but still I wake drenched in sweat, biting
back a scream. In my dreams the guns still bellow their
furious defiance, and I truly think they always will do.*

*I have already fought one war for the Rose Throne and
now it seems I am about to fight another, albeit of a
different kind.*

Gods be good, will this torment never end?

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Part Two

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Chapter 29

We came to the walls of Dannsburg in the early morning mist of the following Tradesday. The journey had taken us well over a week, but that was hardly surprising, what with the waggon. The waggon was very important, and more to the point, what was in it.

When I say *we*, I mean it, for almost all of us were there. Anne was there at my side, of course, and her new wife Rosie, with Mina and Billy, and Beast and Sir Eland in the surcoat that bore his false arms. Behind them rode Black Billy and Simple Sam and Florence Cooper and Jutta and all the rest of them, Stefan and Cutter. Brak and Hari had stayed behind in Ellinburg with my aunt, not really being fighting men any more, and Will the Wencher was minding Chandlers Narrow and the Golden Chains both with a few hired men, but that was all. Everyone else had come.

I thought the peace with the Alarian Kings would hold in Ellinburg and I was betting the future of the Pious Men on it, taking that much of their strength out of the city, but by then, well, it honestly didn't really matter. I would sacrifice all the businesses of the Pious Men to save the realm, if that was what it took, and I think Anne understood that. Whether she was easy with that decision was perhaps a different thing, but they were there and that was all that was truly important.

I'd told Governor Schulz to release Sven Hendensen from the cells before we left Ellinburg and to return him to a diplomatic suite in the governor's hall. Kotov had confirmed his story, after all, and after what Mina had done to him, I was confident that he had been telling the truth. All the same, I didn't want a self-confessed Skanian White Shadow

loose in my city when I wasn't there to keep an eye on him and that was all there was to it. I'd worry about what to do with him later. If there was a later.

I looked at the city walls as they emerged from the morning mist, and I could see the spiderweb of scaffolding with hundreds of masons and labourers swarming over it, shoring up our defences against an invasion that was never going to come. I wondered how much I had cost the treasury with that motion in the governing council, and realised I didn't care. It had been voted through, which meant Vogel had wanted it to be, so there wouldn't be any problems there. I suppose the work had needed doing anyway, so that at least was good.

On the long road from Ellinburg I had pondered the fact that I would have to return to my old life as a loyal Queen's Man as though I knew nothing, if only for a while. As I had told Anne, there was no possibility of carrying out a frontal assault on the house of law with just the crew we had, even with thirty flashstones. The place was a fucking fortress: it would have been suicide. I would have to find allies, and I would have to be very fucking careful in doing it. Also, I had another plan, one that I thought I just might get away with. As the captain had always said, back in the war, what worked once would work again. I could only pray he was right.

'Fucking hell,' Anne said, and pointed to the imposing stone bulk of the East Gate that we were approaching. 'That's new.'

It was, at that. Heads on spikes never truly go out of fashion, and it looked like they were very much back in favour in Dannsburg now. The battlements of the gatehouse tower were lined with them, one atop every merlon.

'Who are they, Da?' Billy asked, startled out of his silence by the sight.

'Unbelievers,' Anne rasped, and I knew she was right.

In a way, anyway. No doubt that had been the sentence on their death warrants. In truth, they were inconveniences – nuisances the house of law had wanted rid of, and they would have used the word that had become a death sentence in Dannsburg in those days.

Unbeliever.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘There are those who doubt the divinity of the Ascended Martyr, or at least have been accused of doing so. That’s an . . . unwise opinion to hold.’

‘You mean the princess?’ Billy asked.

I could tell he was about to say something truly fucking unwise right then, and in the hearing of the two City Guard who were riding out from the gatehouse to meet our party.

‘Aye, lad, Our Holy Lady, the Ascended Martyr.’

‘Blessed be her name,’ Anne interjected, and I could have kissed her for her quick wits.

‘Good morning,’ the Guard Captain said as he reined up, and I could see his gaze sweeping the length of our column.

There were a lot of us, I had to allow, and we looked like what we were: soldiers, hard folk – mercenaries, perhaps, and come to his city. He looked at me, at the head of the line, and his eyes narrowed in hesitant recognition.

‘Do I know you?’ he asked.

‘Aye, if you read the gossip sheets,’ I said. ‘Councillor Sir Tomas Piety of the North Ward. These are my associates.’

‘Oh, you’re the one who brought that whore to some ball, aren’t you?’ he said, and grinned at me, although he obviously didn’t recognise Rosie in her travelling clothes. The etching really hadn’t been all that good, after all. ‘You’re up for re-election soon, too, aye? “Associates”, aye. Got you, Councillor. For what it’s worth you’ve got my vote.’

‘My thanks,’ I said, and reached out to shake his hand in the way that people expect politicians to do.

If he wanted to think my crew simply thugs hired to ensure my re-election, well and good, and it saved me having to show the warrant to get us into the city. I didn’t

want to draw the attention that would cause if I could possibly avoid it.

We were ushered swiftly through the gatehouse tunnel that led under the walls, and there wasn't so much as a mention of the gate tax. Not for Councillor Sir Tomas Piety of the North Ward there wasn't, sitting a horse in his black robes as a priest of Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows. Even without the warrant, I held a position of considerable privilege in Dannsburg now, and I intended to make the absolute most of it. What's the point of privilege if you don't milk it for every drop it has to give, after all?

Once within the walls we reined up.

'What's the plan, Tomas?' Anne asked me. 'Where are we going?'

'Obviously the Bountiful Harvest is compromised,' I said. 'Vogel knows that's my base of operations, so I need somewhere else, somewhere he *doesn't* know. Some midden south of the river, where folk know people like us. And I know just the place. You and me and Rosie are going to go back to the Bountiful Harvest with the cunning children and act like nothing's changed, but we can hardly turn up there with this lot, and the waggon even less so. Beast, you remember the way to the Dripping Bucket, don't you?'

'That lad Kreov's place?' he asked. 'Aye, boss, I reckon I can find it again.'

I passed him a golden crown. 'Take the crew there, and give this to Kreov. Tell him Tomas Piety's men are moving in with his orphans for a while. I don't think he'll argue, but if he does then give him a slap – *don't* kill him, mind. He does good work with those young folk.'

'I reckon he does, at that,' Beast said. 'What about the waggon?'

'Take that too. The Bucket has a stableyard; tuck it in there and don't let any cunt anywhere near it. Once the crew are settled, come back to Anne and me in the Harvest,

in case we need you. Florence, you'll be in charge and I'm making Black Billy your second for this operation. Just sit tight until I send word.'

'Aye, boss,' she said.

If Jutta took ill against me for putting Billy over her, that was tough, but we had all been soldiers and were used to the sudden whims of officers. If she was half the woman I thought she was, she would accept it and just get on and follow her orders. Part of me struggled to trust Florence Cooper, but here she was on strange streets where she knew no one and I doubted we would have a problem, but if we did, Black Billy was her second and I knew he would keep her loyal if it came to it.

I really hoped it wouldn't.

Anne gave her a hard look. 'I'm counting on you, Flo,' she said. 'It won't just be a fucking black eye, the next time you cross me.'

'Yes, Sarge,' Florence said, and I thought she meant it.

She looked up to Anne, I knew, and respected and perhaps even feared her more than she ever would me. Florence Cooper was an extremely astute businesswoman, and I think she had worked her way to the realisation that I don't like hurting women if I can help it. Anne, on the other hand, had absolutely no compunctions there and Florence grasped that fact too.

The Bloody Sergeant was well named indeed.

I watched for a moment as the armed column made its way south towards the bridge, the big waggon swaying above the thick tide of foot traffic and carts and sedan chairs that soon swallowed them up.

'Well,' Rosie said, once the five of us were alone, her and Anne and me, Billy and Mina. 'Back into the belly of the beast, then.'

'Aye, something like that,' I said.

'What does that mean?' Mina asked. 'What beast?'

‘Da’s work,’ Billy said at once, and for a moment he sat a little taller in his saddle.

He was showing off for his woman, I knew, playing the spy and the one who knew more than she did, but that was all it was. He was young, I reminded myself, and he hadn’t seen half of the realities of what went on in the house of law. For a lad who had never met Ilse or Sabine, I supposed the work probably looked quite glamorous, and not the absolute horror that it actually was.

‘Have you ever been to Dannsburg before, Mina?’ I asked her, although I couldn’t imagine that she had.

‘No,’ she said, her over-bright eyes large in her skeletal face as she looked around her. ‘It’s rich.’

‘Some of it is, aye,’ I agreed. ‘Most of it is just as poor as the Stink, and that’s where the others have gone. Not us, though. We live well here.’

‘Can I share a room with Billy?’

‘Aye, lass,’ I said, and honestly, fuck propriety. ‘That you can.’ They were both past their age of majority, so why the fuck not? They could even have been married by now in any number of country villages.

‘Thanks, Da,’ Billy said, and he beamed at me.

‘Just remember there’s work to be done, so try to get *some* sleep,’ Anne said, and Rosie smirked and reached out from her saddle to nudge her new wife.

I cleared my throat. ‘Come on, this way,’ I said, and turned my horse towards the Bountiful Harvest.

*

Fat Luka was pleased to see us for certain, and Emil too – not to mention the landlord, whose face lit up like a lamp when I put another three gold crowns down on the counter in front of him to renew our acquaintance.

‘You’ve brought the cunning lass, then,’ Luka said, once me and him and Anne were alone in the private dining

room.

Rosie had gone to bed, and Billy had wasted no time in taking Mina upstairs to show her his room, as he put it. After a week and more on the road with no privacy I could hardly blame the lad.

‘Aye,’ I said, and grinned in a way I knew he wouldn’t believe. ‘Billy was missing her.’

Luka frowned. ‘Is there something I need to know?’

He poured brandy for the three of us and sat back in his chair with a curious look on his face. I opened my mouth to speak, then paused. I hadn’t sent word ahead of our coming, not daring to trust what I had discovered to a letter, however vaguely it might be written, and in that moment I was glad of it. I hated to think of it, but just then I wondered if I could truly trust Fat Luka with this. He had worked for the Queen’s Men before he had ever worked for me, I had learned, even if I hadn’t known it at the time. He had been in Dannsburg for a good long time without me, too. If Vogel had turned him, then telling him what I had uncovered would be fucking suicide.

‘You know how lads in their teen years are,’ I said. ‘I seem to recall we used to be a pair of them ourselves, Fat Luka.’

‘That we did,’ he said, and grinned, but I could see that he knew there was something I wasn’t telling him.

I was quite plainly working my way around the edges of something, and Luka was nobody’s fool. I didn’t like it. I counted Luka one of the vanishingly small circle of people I would call a real friend, but . . . aye. Fucking *but*. Was he, still? I had been back in fucking Dannsburg barely three hours and already I was doubting a man I had known since I had been in school with him. This city was poison and no mistake

That means you’re keeping it together, I told myself, and I could hear Aunt Enaid’s voice in the thought. *This is Dannsburg, where you can trust no cunt at all. You*

remember that, Tomas Piety, and you'll maybe keep your head attached to your bastard neck.

Aye, I reckoned my aunt had the right of that. I could feel Anne's eyes on me from the other side of the table, but she held her peace and said nothing.

'You remember that Katherine you used to chase round the Stink when we were lads?' I asked, steering the conversation away from the here and now, and why Mina was upstairs in Billy's room. 'Daft for her you were, you stupid cunt. Billy's the same with his Mina.'

Luka snorted. 'Billy's done better than I ever did,' he admitted. 'Never got more than a snog off her, I didn't.'

'That's not what you said at the time,' I said, and both of us laughed.

Anne just rolled her eyes.

Boys in their teen years lie like no other, and mostly to each other. Oh aye, by thirteen everyone's had a fuck, and by sixteen everyone's killed a man. Have you bollocks, my son. If farmers ever run short of horseshit to fertilise their crops they should collect what comes out of the mouths of lads in their teen years, and that's Our Lady's honest truth.

'If you two have quite finished measuring cocks,' Anne said, 'what's the lay of things in the city, Fat Luka?'

'Aye, well,' Luka said, and he took a long swallow of his brandy while he put his answer together in his head.

Again, I wondered how much I could trust him.

'It's been difficult, and I won't lie to you about that,' he started.

Oh, won't you, Fat Luka?

'In what way?' I said.

'This new cult, the Martyr's Disciples,' he said, and for all that we were just the three of us alone in the private dining room he lowered his voice. 'I know we started it, *you* started it, in truth, even if sort of by accident, but it's got away from us. Honestly, boss, even Iagin is struggling to control them now. It's fucking out of hand. The common people have

latched onto it, by and large, although there's those who very much haven't. It's come to knives on the streets more than a few times, south of the river. Too many people died when she *ascended*, and there was the Coronation Massacre, of course. Don't think anyone's forgotten *that*, cos they haven't. Most of the common folk still all but worship the royal family, but there's cracks for sure. Your Major Bakrylov is a very divisive figure.'

I remembered the Skanian's Head, and the words I had heard there.

'How so?'

'Well, there's some say he's a hero, like the house of law has put about, and some who were actually there back in Abington who say he's a war criminal. Some say the Coronation Massacre was an atrocity and he should hang for it, and some say he was keeping the peace. Some people, and I don't know who, mind, say perhaps Lord Vogel ordered that charge. Some people, and again I wouldn't know who, lay the blame for the Coronation Massacre squarely at Lord Vogel's feet. Some people whisper that if a man is capable of that, what else might he have done?'

I looked at Fat Luka for a long time, and again I wondered what we were working our way around the edges of here. I had thought Luka worked for me and that was all there was to it, but now I was no longer so sure.

This was Dannsburg, and who knew who the fuck you could trust?

Chapter 30

I had to present myself to the house of law the next morning, of course, to keep up my pretence of still being a loyal Queen's Man. I won't lie, it wasn't easy. I sat in my carriage for a good few minutes before I got out, looking up at the imposing stone building with the huge royal standards flying from the heights. I couldn't help but think about what I knew was beneath that building. Ilse was down there, down in the darkness, with whichever poor bastards she was doing Our Lady only knew what to in the name of Vogel's justice. I swallowed sour spit and looked away. I didn't want to think about Ilse.

I couldn't put it off for ever, though, and eventually I alighted from the carriage and presented myself to the guards on the doors. They wore the polished steel half-armour of the City Guard under the red and white surcoats bearing the royal arms, but I knew these two directly served the house of law. There was a vanishingly small distinction between the two, in those days, anyway.

'Sir Tomas,' one of them greeted me, dipping his head in a nod.

The Queen's Men didn't go in for saluting any more than they did ranks or insignia and I knew he meant no disrespect. He reached for the keys on his belt with no questions asked. The Queen's Men don't officially exist, and supposedly, no one knows who we are, and yet there are so many guardsmen and secretaries and clerks within the house of law who see us regularly, so *of course* they know. And you can't tell me they don't gossip with families and friends and drinking acquaintances. Which made me wonder just how many people in Dannsburg knew that Councillor

Tomas Piety of the North Ward was a Queen's Man, and I realised it was probably far more than it should have been. No system is perfect, after all. It occurred to me that I might be able to use that.

'Morning,' I said, and waited while he opened the sally port in the great oak and iron double doors.

I stepped through and breathed in that familiar dry atmosphere. The house of law smelled of dust and paper, dry old ledgers and endless letters and notes, beeswax candles and lamp oil – above ground it did, at least. In Ilse's world below, it smelled of pain and suffering, blood and shit, rotting wounds and the bad breath of old screams.

I breathed in, taking a moment to steady myself before I made my way up the grand staircase towards Lord Vogel's office. I had to be *utterly* convincing. Vogel was like a fucking snake, like he could taste a lie in the air with the tip of his tongue. One wrong word, one wrong *look*, even, and he would have me. Then down to Ilse I would go, and Councillor Sir Tomas Piety of the North Ward would simply have disappeared and that would be the end of the matter.

The mess was empty at that early hour, and Iagin's office door was closed, but when I rounded the turn at the end of the corridor and tapped on Vogel's door, I heard movement.

'Come,' he said from within, the word slightly muffled by the thick oak, and I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

He was, as ever, seated behind the perpetual mound of paperwork that covered his plainly made desk. That volume of papers would have suffocated me – and these were just the really important things that his secretaries would have already sifted to separate the wheat from the chaff. With his three roles as Lord Chief Judiciar, Provost Marshal of the Queen's Men and Prince Regent, I thought Lord Vogel must probably be working eighteen hours a day.

The bastard looked good on it, mind. His thick white hair was swept neatly back from his high forehead, and as

always, he wore a plain black coat and sober doublet, clean and pressed, which would have been suitable for absolutely any social situation short of a tavern brawl. I couldn't imagine Lord Vogel had ever been involved in a tavern brawl in his life, not even back when he had been in the army at Krathzgrad. He had gone straight in as a commissioned officer, a captain, and very soon after promoted to major. No, I thought Lord Vogel had always been the sort of man who had other people to fight his battles for him.

People like Ilse and Iagin, Konrad and Ailsa, and me.

'Tomas,' he said as his gaze rose from the papers before him to meet my eyes. 'Welcome back after your so-sudden departure from the city.'

'I received word of a Skanian uprising in Ellinburg, sir, as I stated in my letter,' I said, all but standing to attention as I spoke. Habit is a funny thing, and there was something about Vogel that made me feel like a simple army priest once more, giving my report to the general. 'It has now been suppressed and the enemy neutralised.'

He nodded shortly, but said nothing for a long time.

At last, he asked, 'And the house of magicians in Ellinburg?'

'Is still there, sir,' I said, 'but it suffered in the violence. It was bombed by the Skanians.'

I was absolutely sure he already knew that, but if I could make the damage sound worse than it had been, then well and good. I thought again of the mountain of reports on his desk. I couldn't imagine how he ever found the time to read any of them in great detail.

'I have a spy inside the house of magicians now,' I went on. 'They are very scared, and keep themselves to themselves.'

That was true enough, if not perhaps in the way I made it sound. The Learned Magus Konstantin Zlatkov was very scared all right, but of me now, not the Northern Sons or the Skanians. That part I thought Vogel *didn't* know, as I hadn't

been arrested yet. I hadn't told him a single lie, and that was good. When the words you say are true, however you may be twisting them to suit your listener's expectations, you sound infinitely more convincing than any liar ever will.

'You've done well,' Vogel said at last, his expression giving away none of the irritation I guessed he must be feeling, knowing he *wanted* those streets to burn, for all that he could hardly say as much to me. *Destabilise the country*, that was what Kotov said he had been hired to do. Well, my Lord Provost Marshal, two can play that fucking game.

*

My interview with Vogel mercifully over, I took myself to the mess for a brandy to settle my nerves. To my surprise I found Ailsa there, taking breakfast alone. She looked up from her table when I entered and met my eyes.

'Tomas,' she said, and rose to her feet. 'Gods, Tomas, where have you *been*?'

'Ellinburg,' I said. 'I did write and tell you I was going.'

'Yes, and you made me a laughing stock in the gossip sheets as well,' she snapped, and then her expression softened. 'Oh, that's no matter, I suppose. How did you fare?'

'Jochan's dead,' I said simply – and to my astonishment, she got up and wrapped me in an embrace.

'Oh Tomas, I'm so sorry,' she said.

'Aye,' I managed, and I found I was fighting back tears.

I held her for a moment, probably the most intimate contact we had ever had, before she gently pulled away.

'It's good to have you back,' she said quietly.

'I didn't expect to see you here,' I said. 'I thought you'd still be at the palace. How has it been?'

'Awful,' she admitted, and her frankness astonished me. She shot a look at the door, open to the corridor, and I

walked over and quietly closed it before pouring myself a brandy and taking a seat at the table with her.

‘In what way?’

‘The cult of the Martyr’s Disciples,’ she said. ‘They’re absolutely out of control. Our late queen is a goddess too, apparently. The royal family have become deities in the eyes of most of the common people. Unbelievers are being lynched every day.’

I frowned, remembering the talk I had heard in the Skanian’s Head before I had left the city. *Others say if that’s true, then her mother Her Majesty the Queen was a goddess too and we ought to be worshiping her if we’re truly loyal.*

I supposed it wasn’t so far of a reach from that to the divinity of royalty in general, when you thought about it, but I didn’t want to talk about that.

‘I rather thought those were our doing?’ I said instead.

‘Well, obviously some of them are,’ she said, ‘but by no means all of them. Konrad and I are rushed off their feet just trying to stop this thing we created from overwhelming us.’

‘And where’s Sabine in all this?’

‘She’s busy babysitting the Crown Prince, and more to the point, keeping a close eye on his mother. The Duchess is going to be trouble sooner or later if we’re not careful.’

‘Then best we *be* careful,’ I said. ‘What about the Skanians?’

It felt wrong to be playing this fencing match with my own wife when I already knew the truth, but I had to know how the land lay in Dannsburg.

‘There are precious few of them left,’ she said. ‘Varnburg has kept the harbour closed and I think between the City Guard and the populace themselves, practically every Skanian has been driven out of Dannsburg. Where they’ll go is anyone’s guess, but I imagine a good number have starved on the roads by now. Their kind will find no friends in the countryside, that’s for sure.’

She said it in such a staggeringly matter-of-fact fashion it almost took my breath away.

‘Ailsa, most of them are just merchants,’ I said.

‘Be that as it may, Tomas, there will be those among them who are not.’

She was right, I knew, but not in the way she made it sound. Some of them *were* simple merchants, but others were Lord Vogel’s mercenaries, hired abroad to come here and fuck up his own country to ease his ascent to power. With his position now all but assured, he had obviously been perfectly happy to throw the lot of them to the wolves.

Why didn’t that surprise me?

‘Aye, I suppose so,’ I forced myself to say. I looked at her, my wife, sitting across the table from me. My beautiful wife, who had just given me the first genuine hug I had ever had from her. Perhaps the news of Jochan’s death had truly moved her – but of course I couldn’t know that for sure.

For Our Lady’s sake, I was starting to doubt everyone. First Luka, and now Ailsa? I had to get a grip on myself. My battle shock was getting worse, not better, and I had to accept that was a fact.

‘Where are you staying, now that you’re back in Dannsburg?’ Ailsa asked, jolting me out of my thoughts.

‘I’m still at the Bountiful Harvest,’ I told her. ‘I’ve all but bought that place with the amount I’ve paid that bloody innkeeper by now, but he looks after me well enough. I’ve never felt the urge to take an office here.’

‘No, nor have I,’ Ailsa said. ‘I much prefer to run my affairs from my own house, and there I think you’ve chosen wisely.’

‘Isn’t it wrong though?’ I couldn’t help but ask. ‘We all work together, but we don’t trust each other enough to even have our offices in the same building? That can’t be right, Ailsa.’

She raised her right shoulder in a dismissive half-shrug. ‘We’re the Queen’s Men,’ she said, and that could have meant anything. ‘Look, Tomas, I . . . If you want to move

back into my house you can, I want you to know that. Your old room, of course. I know our marriage was purely one of appearance, but . . . well. There it is. The offer stands.'

That kicked my feet out from under me and no mistake.

'Thank you,' I managed at last. 'I appreciate that offer and I'll think on it, but I have a number of my people at the Bountiful Harvest with me and we work best in close proximity.'

'Of course,' Ailsa said, and she smoothed her skirts as though wishing she had never broached the subject.

I wished she hadn't either, as she had caught me off-guard and made me come up with a response I hadn't had time to think about, but part of me was glad, too. Very glad indeed.

Fool, fool.

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Chapter 31

Iagin came to find me at the Bountiful Harvest that evening. He had Leonov and a couple of other lads with him, but only as an escort for the streets. He swaggered in there like he owned the place – which he effectively did, now – and the innkeeper showed him into the private dining room without so much as asking my leave. Iagin waved Leonov and the others away at the door and walked in alone. There is always a pecking order, and in the taverns and inns of Dannsburg, Iagin outranked me.

‘Sir Tomas, you have a visitor,’ the innkeeper said, and he did at least have the good grace to sound apologetic about it as Iagin sauntered in.

‘Tomas,’ he said.

I was alone in there with Rosie, who had been taking me through the day’s paperwork, but I could tell he wanted to talk in private, or as close to private as one could ever get in Dannsburg.

I gave Rosie a look.

She took the hint and left us, and then I was alone with my fellow Queen’s Man: with Brother Truth.

‘It’s good to see you again,’ I said.

‘What the *fuck* are you up to, Tomas?’ Iagin demanded, the moment the door had closed behind Rosie. ‘We aren’t ready to move yet!’

‘*We*? What are you talking about, man? Move in what way?’

‘Don’t give me that old fuck! Why else would you have your whole fucking force camped out at the miserable bloody Dripping Bucket?’

I gaped at him. ‘How—?’ I started, but he cut me off.

‘Kreov is one of my informants, you stupid cunt. His urchins are very useful when I want folk watched. I know you’ve got a battle company holed up at his place, and a waggon full of I’ll-pretend-I-don’t-know-what. So what are you fucking up to?’

‘Nothing,’ I lied, so wrongfooted that I knew I didn’t have a prayer of him believing me. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about – I went home to settle some unrest, and now I’m back.’

‘I know you’ve worked it out,’ he went on, ignoring my lies completely. ‘You must have done – you think you’re so fucking clever? That you’re the only one who has? There are *factions*, Tomas – Bakrylov fucking told you that himself, I know he did, so he’s a stupid cunt too. Don’t you *dare* fuck this up for us! We’re not *ready*. We need explosives, at the very least, and I can hardly go requisitioning them from the house of fucking law without the Old Man hearing of it, can I?’

So: Iagin did know. He knew, and more to the point, it sounded like there was a more than even chance that he was on my side. I rolled the dice and gambled that I was right.

‘I’ve got explosives,’ I said. ‘Thirty flashstones.’

‘Not enough,’ he said at once. ‘Not nearly enough.’

I thought of Lady Lan Yetrova, and of Archmagus Ritenkov. ‘It’s a start, but I think I can do better,’ I said.

Iagin sucked his teeth for a moment, then blew out a breath that lifted his heavy white moustache from his lip for a moment. ‘Fucking *blood*, Tomas, why the fuck didn’t you come to me?’

‘I didn’t know you knew,’ I said. ‘I didn’t know I *could*. And even if I had, I wouldn’t have known if I could trust you. How the fuck do you know you can trust *me*, for that matter?’

‘Luka,’ Iagin said shortly. ‘He says you’re worried that Vogel turned him while you were away. Well he hasn’t, but I have – well, not even turned him, really. It was me Luka was

working for before the war, not Heinrich. He was watching you watch Governor Hauer on *my* payroll, and he's been on it ever since.'

'Are you *fucking* shitting me?' I shouted at him, and I found I was on my feet with my fists clenched.

Once again I pictured Luka's thick neck with my hands around it, and I wanted to squeeze and *squeeze* until his head came off. I had thought him a friend, a real one, and all this time he had been reporting to *lagin*? I should have listened to myself the first time – I should have fucking *known* I couldn't trust him. I had known him since we were boys in school together, penniless urchins from the slums of the Stink, but at the end of the day, so what? So *fucking* what? I had known him thirty years and more, but why should that mean I could trust him? Trust has to be fucking earned in this world, and that is Our Lady's own truth.

My hands were shaking, likely a combination of battle shock and simple rage, so I poured a brandy and drank it straight down, and I didn't offer *lagin* one. I didn't trust myself to speak to him in that moment.

'Tomas,' *lagin* said, and he spread his hands in a conciliatory gesture, 'this is Dannsburg. *Everyone* is watched, and there is always someone to watch the watchers. Surely you've grasped that by now.'

I felt the brandy burning its way down my throat, working its magic as my hands gradually stilled and my thoughts cleared. 'Aye, perhaps,' I admitted, 'but for Our Lady's sake, *lagin*, you're talking about treason.'

'And you've come back to the city fucking *equipped* for treason! How the fuck is it different?'

'You're a Queen's Man,' I said. 'A real one, I mean.'

'So are you,' *lagin* reminded me, and I felt a lead weight settle in my stomach. 'A *real one*, I mean. You're as real as any of the rest of us are.'

I had always regarded my place in the Queen's Men as some sort of charade, a role in a mummers' show, but of

course it really wasn't. I had taken the warrant and sworn the oath and I was a Queen's Man in truth, every bit as much as Iagin and Konrad and Ilse were. I wasn't sure I had absolutely accepted the fact, not until that moment.

'You're right,' I admitted, and I lifted the brandy bottle towards him as a peace offering. 'You're right. I just . . . It's a lot to take in, is all.'

'Aye,' Iagin said, and I refilled my glass and this time poured for him as well.

'So, us and Bakrylov,' I said. 'Is there anyone else?'

Iagin sucked his teeth for a moment, as if he was deciding just how far to trust me. 'Possibly Ilse,' he said, and quickly held a hand up to stop me speaking. 'I know – trust me, Tomas, I do know. I know what you think of her and her methods and I can't say I feel any differently, but I need every ally I can get. I hope I can count you among them.'

I looked at him for a long moment. 'It does appear we've common cause,' I said slowly, 'but I warn you now, Iagin, if we do this, it's war. I'm not playing.'

'Neither am I,' Iagin assured me. 'I've got Bakrylov working on some people in the army. I want cannon, if we can get them. Soldiers, at the least.'

I frowned. 'What good is a company or two of rebel soldiers when Vogel can command the entire fucking army? *Think*, Iagin. I know you were a soldier yourself once, but not everything is a frontal assault. You were at Krathzgrad?' With his age, I assumed as much.

'Aye,' he confirmed.

'That was a siege, the same as Abington was, I understand that – but we can hardly lay siege to the house of law in the middle of the fucking capital city with a castle full of soldiers a mile or so behind us. It would be suicide.'

Iagin sighed. 'I know that,' he said, 'and that's why I haven't, if that's not fucking obvious.'

'I was at Messia,' I said slowly. 'We didn't starve them out there, not like at Abington and Krathzgrad. The generals

decided there wasn't time, for whatever reason. So we took the walls by assault and carried the fight into the city, and that's a whole other type of warfare. We went street by street, knives in the dark: quiet men and sudden bombings. That's a thing I understand, and so do my crew, and my quiet man more than any other.'

'We don't have the men for that sort of action,' Iagin started.

I felt a cold smile twist my lips. 'Give me a month or so,' I said. 'We fucking well will have.'

Look at me Ma: I'm a traitor to the realm.

*

I started that night, and I started at the Skanian's Head.

I strolled into that miserable flat-roofed tavern south of the river with Beast and Sam at my shoulders, and I walked in like I owned the fucking place. I felt eyes on us, and a gradual lull in the conversation as we passed, but no more than that. Hard folk were no strangers to these streets, after all. People were still talking as we walked towards the bar, mostly groups of women, the goodwives and widows in their greying kirtles and stained linen bonnets who sat hunched over their cups of wine and ale. I caught snatches of their words as we passed.

'... sort of miss Nettie.'

'I don't.'

'Didn't go to her funeral, then?'

'No I most certainly did not.'

'I did. Not many there, though.'

'Unbeliever.'

'You hush with that. She wasn't.'

'Yes she was.'

I heard a chair scrape back as though violence was about to be done, then the sound was lost in the noise of four men arguing over a game of dice at another table.

‘Cheating fuckster!’

‘You shut your mouth, Fat Al, or I’ll shove my boot in it.’

‘You and whose *fucking* army?’

Glass broke and I heard the thump of a punch landing, but we were past them now and standing at the bar. I was pleased to see the same slab-bellied, unshaven taverner who had been there the last time. He looked up, and I met his eyes with a cold stare.

‘Good evening,’ I said, and on either side of me Beast and Sam loomed like his worst nightmares come calling.

‘Remember me?’

‘Aye,’ he said, ‘although I forget your name.’

‘There’s a reason for that,’ I said, as he well knew, and I slid a silver mark across the scarred counter into his grasping hand. ‘Beers, and a little moment of your time.’

I was dressed in the shabbiest clothes I had been able to find and I didn’t think he would recognise Councillor Sir Tomas Piety from a single poorly done etching in the gossip sheets several months ago. He did remember me, though, and he suspected he knew who I was, I could see that. He glanced around the people in the tavern, most of who were now engrossed in watching the fight that had broken out over the dice game, then filled tankards of frankly disgusting-looking beer for the three of us, then leaned forward over the counter towards me.

‘What can I do for you?’

‘You might remember we had a conversation once, and silver changed hands,’ I said. ‘I know you hate Skanians, and as I told you, I’ve fought them myself.’

He waited for me to work my way around to my point. ‘That’s true enough,’ he said, when I had been silent long enough to make him speak. ‘Pale bastards. Can’t trust them. Fucking queenkillers.’

‘You know what a mercenary is?’ I asked him.

‘‘course I fucking do.’

‘You know what a false flag is?’

He blinked at me, but from the expression on his face I could see very well that he did. 'Aye,' he said slowly, obviously wondering where I was going with this.

'That's a thing people need to know,' I said. 'What a false flag is, I mean. I don't reckon people who didn't serve would have the first idea, but I'll wager that you did.'

'I served,' he said, and his chest swelled with pride as he said it. 'Bit old for the front line, I'll grant you, but I was in the reserves. I stood garrison at Messina, I did.'

Oh, Lady's Grace, that was just what I needed: a rear-echelon warrior who had never seen a day's combat in his life, but no doubt still drank for free on the back of his war stories. I knew his type all too well.

'Well done - and thank you,' I said, despite that. 'I went on ahead to Abington, as did these two fine lads with me.'

He swallowed as I reminded him of Beast and Sam's presence, and I could tell he knew the type of men we must be: the sort who had fought at the front in the bloodiest war in living memory, and come home to tell of it.

'I'll drink to that,' he said, and poured a round of brandies for us all.

I picked up my glass - cheap stuff, but infinitely better than the beer had been - and stared into the drink for a moment before I spoke again, deliberately dragging out the silence to put him on edge. 'Well now,' I said. 'A heroic old soldier like you, I reckon folks might listen to a man like that. You know what you're talking about when it comes to war, don't you?'

He at least had the good grace to flush under his greying stubble. 'More than some,' he said.

'That's good enough,' I said. 'You might do a thing for me. You might talk about false flags, maybe a tale of something you did in the war - maybe something about uncovering enemies who weren't who you thought they were, that sort of thing. Get the idea into people's heads that that's a thing that happens, if you get my meaning.'

'I do,' he said, and after a moment he asked, 'but why?'

'Not all Skanians come from Skania,' I said, and pushed another mark across the counter.

He looked at it for a long moment, then looked up at me again. 'But you come from the house of law,' he said, so quietly I could barely hear him. 'Don't you?'

I swallowed my brandy, put the glass down on the bar and left his midden of a tavern without giving him an answer.

It had begun.

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Chapter 32

I woke the next morning thinking of Sister Galina – not in *that* way, obviously, but she was on my mind all the same. She had been one of the Princess Crown Royal's attendant nuns, and before that, she had been a soldier. An absolutely fanatical devotee of Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows, she had been the first one to call the princess *Martyr*. As I lay in my bed at the Bountiful Harvest, staring up at the dusty beams above my head, I found myself acutely interested in finding out where Sister Galina was now.

I wondered how best to find out. With young Crown Prince Marcus now the heir to the throne, she was quite possibly still at the palace, serving as one of his tutors as she had for the princess. If so, that meant Ailsa would know about it, but that would be telling her I was interested in the nun and I didn't think I wanted her to know that just yet. I thought it over while I washed and shaved and came to a decision. That done, I dressed and headed down to breakfast.

I found Fat Luka in the common room busying himself with a plate of bacon and black bread, and I found my eyes inexorably drawn to his neck.

It was me Luka was working for before the war, not Heinrich.

I sat down opposite him and signalled the serving boy for food and small beer.

'Morning, boss,' Luka said, around a mouthful of food.

I bit back irritation and said, 'There's something I need you to do for me.'

'Oh aye? What's that then?'

'There was a nun at the palace last year, a Sister Galina – one of the princess' tutors or minders or whatever the fuck

they were. I want to know if she's still there, and if not, then where she is now.'

Luka frowned slightly. 'Well, I can try,' he said, 'but I'm low on connections inside the fucking royal palace. You'd be better off asking Ailsa.'

'I don't *want* to ask Ailsa,' I hissed at him. 'Which is why I'm fucking asking you.'

'Aye, all right, boss, I was just saying,' Luka said. His look of wide-eyed innocence was almost enough to make me lunge for his throat right there across the breakfast table.

'If you call me *boss* one more time when I know *fucking* well you're working for Iagin, I swear I am going to stab you where you sit, Fat Luka, and that is a promise in Our Lady's name.'

Luka went pale. 'It's just – look, Tomas, you've been away and it was just me and Emil here, and this city ain't fucking safe, you know it isn't. Iagin came to me, and I . . . well, you know, I—'

'Worked for him before,' I finished for him. 'Yes, I know. Have been working for him all along, probably.'

'I ain't, I promise,' Luka said. 'I lost contact with him when we went off to war, and that's Our Lady's own truth. But with you gone, and him here, well . . .'

I found I no longer wanted my breakfast. I drained my mug and thumped it down on the table. 'Find that nun,' I said, and stood up. 'Today.'

I turned my back on Luka and stalked into the private dining room, pausing only to collect another mug of beer from the bar on my way. I found Rosie seated at the left of the head of the table, going through my day's papers.

'Morning,' she said, without looking up.

'Aye, it is,' I snapped.

Seeing my mood, Rosie kept quiet as I took my place. She was opening one letter after another, scanning the contents and putting them in one of four piles. I knew her system by then. One pile, by far the tallest, was governing council

business which she would almost certainly attend to herself later in the day. The gods only knew I didn't care about any of that crap. The second was pointless shit that we didn't need to know about at all and the third was social invitations. The fourth was for the things that actually mattered, that needed bringing to my attention. Most mornings there were only three piles. There was only one thing in that pile so far, a neatly folded letter addressed in beautiful handwriting.

I frowned at it. I wondered what it was, but she hadn't thrust it at me the moment I entered the room, so I knew it wasn't from Vogel or the palace, at least. I sipped my small beer and watched her work, marvelling at how quickly she read. I could manage well enough myself, but it took work; sometimes I found myself having to sound out a word like a child to decipher what it meant. Rosie read fluently, and once again I was reminded how fiercely intelligent she was, despite her poor start in life. Heinrich had taught her well and no mistake.

'Where's Anne?' I asked, once she had tossed the final letter on the pointless shit pile and paused for a sip of her own breakfast beer.

'Out,' Rosie said. 'I don't rightly know where, truth be told. She's probably gone to keep an eye on that Cooper bitch.'

Rosie and Florence Cooper didn't get on, to speak lightly of it. I thought it partly jealousy on Rosie's part, that Anne and Florence were friends, and partly prudence. I only half trusted Florence myself, after all.

'Aye, no doubt,' I said, and picked up the single letter that made up the pile of things that actually mattered. 'What's that then?'

'I don't rightly know,' Rosie said, 'but it's family, so you'd better see it for yourself.'

She passed me the letter, and I took another mouthful, then set down the tankard before I unfolded it and began to read.

My beloved son-by-law,

A noble widow of our mutual acquaintance wishes to speak with you, but in private and away from her place of patronage. May I suggest my house this Queensday afternoon, when I know my wife will be out with her friends?

I look forward to seeing you again.

With my greatest regards,

Your sasura

I refolded the letter and tucked it into my pouch.

‘Write back and tell him I’ll be there,’ I said. ‘Anything else I need to know about?’

‘It appears that First Councillor Markova is becoming increasingly resistant to some of the demands of the house of law, but other than that no,’ she said.

‘Which demands?’

‘Continued payments to the guild of masons, mostly,’ Rosie told me. ‘Apparently the work on the walls is considerably over budget already.’

For Our Lady’s sake, they couldn’t have been more than halfway through the job. Corruption was so endemic in Dannsburg there wasn’t even any way to tell who exactly was on the take – the guild of masons, their suppliers in the quarries, or the governing council themselves; it could have been any of them . . . or more likely, all of them.

‘Not my problem,’ I said.

‘That’s why it’s on the first pile,’ she said, and I surprised myself by laughing.

‘I was right then,’ I said. ‘The piles, and what they mean.’

Rosie winked at me. ‘I’m a simple woman, Tomas. I don’t like to over-complicate the work.’

Rosie was anything *but* a simple woman, I thought as I returned her smile. We worked well together, and I gave thanks to Our Lady for that. How any Queen’s Man could

hope to function in Dannsburg without a good secretary was utterly beyond me.

‘Aye, well, you’ve my thanks,’ I said. ‘Anything else I need to know about?’

Rosie paused for a moment, then raised a shoulder in a half-shrug. ‘Maybe,’ she said. ‘I don’t know if it matters or not, but the Martyr’s Disciples are proper out of hand. They’re holding a rally this afternoon outside the city walls to the north, at the foot of what folk have started calling Cannon Hill – where the princess executed that prick Lan Drunov with her new monster siege cannon, you remember.’

I didn’t think I’d ever forget it. ‘Aye, that I do,’ I said, and took a mouthful to take away the bad taste of the memory. ‘What of it?’

‘Well, nothing usually, I suppose,’ Rosie said, ‘only, folk are talking about it. A *lot* of folk are talking about it, too many to ignore. I think there could be thousands of people going.’

I frowned. That probably wasn’t good – but at the same time, it just might be.

‘And who’s organising this rally?’ I asked her.

‘I don’t rightly know,’ Rosie admitted. ‘I’ve heard talk of a woman folk call the Lady’s Daughter, but I’ve no idea who she is.’

I am a Daughter of Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows, and I should have been there.

Oh, I had a fair idea of who that was, all right, and I felt a slow smile spread across my face. ‘Remind me to give you a fucking pay rise,’ I said, and I turned away before Rosie could respond.

It was time to go and get into my priest’s robes and round up Sam and Beast. I had business that afternoon at a rally at the foot of Cannon Hill.

Chapter 33

We arrived there at about the third hour after noon and the crowd was already impressive. I had the big lads with me, and they both knew their jobs. Sam's was simply to flatten anyone who gave me any trouble, and I reckoned he could do that all right. Beast, for once, had a speaking part. I didn't think Sam would have been up to that, but I was sure that Beast was. The right man for the right job, always, and I try never to set a man a task beyond his capability. That serves no one, and me least of all, when they fail at it.

'Well now,' I said quietly as I surveyed the mass of people. They were almost exclusively common folk, as I had expected, rough sorts from south of the river mixed with tradesmen and servants and a few who looked like low-ranking merchants. There were even a few who might be off-duty guardsmen, and that really was interesting.

A sort of stage had been erected at the front of the field where the ground began to rise towards the heights of the hill – just two carts back to back with some planks between them and a cloth draped over, but it looked like it would serve. There was no grandeur here, no flags or pageantry, but the masses looked as rapt as they would have been at any royal display. I pulled up the hood of my cowl and slowly made my way deeper into the crowd with my lads flanking me. People made way for a priest of Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows, of course they did, especially when he had a monster looming at each shoulder.

'Blessing, Father?' someone said, and I turned to see a woman somewhere past her seventieth year looking at me with rapture in her eyes. 'My name's Dottie, I'm a seamstress.'

I reached out a hand to her and she bowed her head for me to place my palm on her wrinkled forehead.

'Our Lady go with you, daughter,' I said, and she thanked me and kissed my fingers before I could withdraw them. The blessing was a simple thing, as was most of Our Lady's doctrine. They told you their name and trade so that Our Lady would hear it and know them and stay Her hand that day.

It was as simple as that. Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows was the goddess of death, a thing that everyone faces in time. Her ministry was designed to be something that everyone could understand, however uneducated they might be.

Your country is a midden we simply do not want.

I shrugged that thought off as another man approached me.

'Are you with her, Father?' he asked, this burly fellow who looked to be a little older than me.

'Her?' I asked him, unsure who he meant.

'The Lady's Daughter,' he said. 'Do you know her?'

'Aye, I do believe we've met,' I said, and he grinned wide.

'I'm Tom,' he said. 'Tom the smith. Blessing, Father?'

'Our Lady go with you, my son.' Again I reached out and placed my hand on his head, and then there was another and another.

'Mikal, I'm a fletcher. Blessing, Father?'

I repeated the ritual, and he bowed his head and retreated into the crowd.

'Debra,' she said, a big strong woman who looked like trouble. 'They call me the Wolf. Blessing, Father?'

I blessed her too, but I could feel Simple Sam giving her the hard eye beside me. She hadn't named a trade, after all. This one was from south of the river and no mistake and I would have bet money she was someone's enforcer, but we weren't there for violence that day. No, I thought, if all went well, the violence would come later.

I could see more folk looking to me for blessing, but just then I was saved by the appearance of two men on the makeshift stage. They held trumpets, the sort the heralds had used in the army, and when they raised them to their lips they blew a mighty blast that demanded everyone's attention.

'She comes,' they bellowed in unison. 'Attend the word of the Chosen. She comes, the Lady's Daughter.'

I stood in rapt silence with everyone else, my eyes fixed on the stage. The men had drilled this, I realised, and that spoke of a greater level of organisation than I had been expecting. After a moment a figure ascended what I assumed must be a ladder I couldn't see behind the carts, and took up position between the two men. She was tall and she wore a heavy black habit pulled tight across the width of her broad shoulders in just the way I remembered. From her bearing any fool could see that she had been a soldier before she had been a nun.

Sister Galina took two steps forward to the front of the stage and raised her arms. 'Faithful of the Martyr,' she shouted, her voice carrying as well as any sergeant's, 'we come together today as the sons and daughters of Our Lady. Praise be to Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows, and blessed be the Ascended Martyr!'

I had coined that very phrase myself, in a hushed and reverent tone meant to calm those around me, but now Sister Galina spat the words like a furious war cry. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. I was beginning to hatch an idea, but the cold dread working its way up my spine told me that it was a very dangerous one.

'Praise be to Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows, and blessed be the Ascended Martyr,' replied upwards of a thousand mouths, some whispering, some shouting.

I looked around at the crowd and gauged the differing reactions. Some were expressing religious reverence, some

an open offer of violence, of riots to come. That was interesting, to speak lightly of it.

I thought Beast's turn in the public eye might be about to come around sooner than I had thought.

'We come together in reverence for our Ascended Martyr as Her disciples,' Sister Galina was saying, 'and in unity in our desire for revenge. The queenkillers must be punished! We have driven them from the city – but that is not enough! They must be harried on the roads, driven against the unforgiving walls of Varnburg and *exterminated!*'

'What about the fucking magicians?' someone called from the crowd.

'Forget the magicians,' Sister Galina cried. 'That was but a misdirection. Our true enemies lie to the north. It is the pale men of Skania we must face.'

'That's not what the house of law said,' someone else put in, and I could feel the tide beginning to turn around Sister Galina's feet. If she didn't rescue this soon, she would lose them, I knew.

'The magicians are *nothing*,' she spat, and that was a mistake.

It was, in fact, the very mistake I had wanted her to make. I nudged Beast.

'What about the Coronation Massacre, then?' Beast bellowed beside me. 'My wife fucking *died* in that! If it was nothing to do with the magicians – then why did *that* happen?'

Beast's wife had left him while he had been at war, of course, run away with some other man. He didn't even know where she was – or if she was even still alive – but no one needed to know that. He was a huge man and his voice carried well, which was really what I needed from him just then.

'I don't know who ordered—' Sister Galina started, and Beast shouted her down.

‘The fucking house of law,’ he bellowed, ‘it must have been! No one else has the authority!’

No way could I come out and tell the people what had happened, not if I wanted to live to see the dawn, but Beast could certainly sow some seeds of uncertainty on my behalf.

I shushed him, very loudly and conspicuously, and people turned to stare.

I had been thinking on just how many people knew who the Queen’s Men actually were, and how it was undoubtably more that it should be, and that had given me an idea. Beast had said his words and I was making it very obvious that I wanted him to shut up. More than one person in that crowd was bound to know who I really was, and that should set them to wondering why.

All being well, that word would spread like wildfire.

‘Forgive me, Sister,’ I said. I didn’t shout, for I had learned in the chambers of the governing council how to make my voice carry when I wanted to. ‘And forgive my man who spoke so out of turn. The loss of his wife is still very raw, as I am sure you understand. The touch of Our Lady’s hand is not always gentle.’

‘Father Tomas?’ Sister Galina faltered, her eyes widening as she recognised me.

‘Aye,’ I said.

‘Father Tomas is returned to us!’ she proclaimed to the heavens. ‘The Ascended Martyr’s own priest and prophet! Oh, blessed day!’

Quite where she had got *that* notion from, I had no fucking idea. Sister Galina was either completely unhinged or extremely quick to grasp the next deception that would advantage her, and right then I really wasn’t quite sure which one it was.

‘Please,’ I said, ‘continue.’

‘I would speak with you, Father,’ she said instead, and once more raised her voice. ‘I must seek spiritual guidance from my priest and confessor, as any pious sister must. I bid

you disperse, until the next time we gather in Our Lady's name. Blessed be the Martyr!'

'Blessed be!' returned a few hundred mouths, but by no means all of them. There was some frustrated muttering in the crowd at having their rally cut short, but there were as many devout faces and murmurs of understanding. I thought some of those there gathered truly were religious fanatics, while others were no doubt just looking for another excuse to riot and loot and burn. Mobs are a strange thing, as I have written before, and controlling them is almost impossible.

Almost – but perhaps not quite.

As the crowd thinned, people making their way back towards the North Gate and into the city, I strolled towards the carts with Sam and Beast still at my shoulders. Sister Galina awaited me there, surrounded by her two trumpeters and half a dozen other folk who were obviously her core supporters. I wasn't her priest and I had never been her confessor, much less any sort of prophet, but that didn't appear to matter.

'Father,' she said as I approached, and she knelt and bowed her head. 'My name is Sister Galina, daughter of Our Lady. Blessing, Father?'

I reached out and put my hand on her forehead. 'Our Lady go with you, daughter,' I said, and she shivered with joy to be taken into the Lady's Blessing.

She clutched my hand to her cheek for a moment, and gazed up at me. 'Praise be to Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows, and blessed be the Ascended Martyr,' she whispered.

'Blessed be,' I replied.

For any other lady it would only have been polite to offer a hand to help her off her knees, but Sister Galina, a powerfully built woman, was already standing once more before I had finished forming the thought.

I thought again of the levers that move people. Sister Galina was moved by religious fervour, I had established

that the year before, and as I looked at her now I wondered exactly where that fervour had taken her. Away from her senses, I suspected.

I cast a sidelong glance at her people, and at mine. I would have to improvise, I knew, but in the army I had learned enough scripture and doctrine to get by.

‘Sister,’ I said, ‘I would speak with you in private. The spirit of Our Lady compels me.’

Sister Galina’s eyes went wide. ‘Of course, Father,’ she said at once. ‘Let us walk together.’ She looked at her gathered heralds and henchmen and told them, ‘We will walk alone.’

‘You too, lads,’ I said.

Sam frowned, but he knew I was wearing my swords under my priest’s robes, and big as she was, Sister Galina wasn’t visibly armed. After a moment he judged it safe, and gave me a nod. We started to walk up the hill together, this insane nun and me, and neither of us spoke until we reached the summit.

The grass had largely recovered since the tiered wooden seating had been taken down and the monstrous cannon dragged back down the hill and back into the castle, where it would probably remain forever unused, but there were scorched and blackened patches all around that I thought might possibly stay like that for years to come.

Could and might and possibly, those were the promises of the Queen’s Men. The thought came to me unbidden, and my lips quirked in wry appreciation.

‘Father?’ Galina asked. ‘Something amuses you?’

‘Oh, just a stray thought,’ I said. ‘I wasn’t laughing at you.’

‘I had never thought that you were,’ Sister Galina said. ‘I do Our Lady’s work, in Her name and that of the holy Ascended Martyr.’

‘Aye, you do,’ I agreed, and held her gaze. We were absolutely alone on the hilltop, and for the first time since I had been back in Dannsburg I could be completely and

utterly sure no one could overhear our conversation. 'But you're doing it wrong.'

'I—' she started, and her mouth was hanging open in outraged confusion, but I held up a hand to stop her.

'Listen to me,' I said. 'We are not having this conversation. We have never had this conversation, and I will deny under oath in a court of law that it ever happened. You know me only as a priest, is that absolutely understood?'

'Yes, Father,' she said, but the frown lines between her eyes deepened until her eyebrows almost met. 'What is this?'

'This is me being a Queen's Man,' I said, and I took the Queen's Warrant out of my pouch and I showed it to her.

Sister Galina's eyes opened very wide indeed as she took in what I held in my hand: the thick piece of folded leather that contained the ornate seal, a white-gold rose set upon a golden crown to represent the royal arms. The utter and undeniable authority of the Rose Throne itself.

The power of a god, in Dannsburg.

Her hand flew to her mouth and she suppressed a gasp.

'You understand, Sister?' I asked. 'You remember at the palace, the day the princess ascended? Those people I was with, they weren't royal advisors or councillors or whoever you thought them to be. No, they were Queen's Men too, all of them. Lord Vogel, the Lord Chief Judiciar, is the *head* of the Queen's Men.'

'Why . . . why are you telling me this?' Sister Galina whispered. 'I could hang simply for knowing what you just told me.'

'Aye, you could,' I said, 'and that isn't right. A lot of things aren't right, but the worst of them is the deception you have been sold. There is a rift in the Queen's Men, and this is why I have come to you as the most faithful daughter of Our Lady in the city. I am about to entrust you with a great and terrible secret, Sister, and I must trust you to use your

judgement about what to do with that knowledge in Our Lady's name.'

I was making it up as I went along now, appealing to her fanaticism and counting on her utter devotion to the royal house. From what I had heard in the Skanian's Head, I thought I was probably on the right lines.

'Go on,' she said.

I sat down on the grass instead, facing towards the city spread out below us in the hazy sunshine of late afternoon, and she sat down on my left. A moment later she took my left hand in both of hers and clutched it, and I knew I had been right.

'You preach that the Skanians killed our beloved queen, and I see why you believe that, but trust me when I say it is an utter falsehood.'

'It can't be,' she protested. 'Everything that has happened since—'

'Was engineered by the house of law,' I told her. 'Who sits the throne now?'

'Well, Crown Prince Marcus is of the royal house, and in three or four years he will—'

'No,' I interrupted her again. 'Who sits the throne *now*?'

'Lord Vogel,' she whispered, and I could see her putting the pieces together in her head.

'Aye,' I said. 'Lord Vogel. A man born in Skania may have held the knife that killed the queen, but he was a mercenary in the pay of our very own Lord Chief Judiciar. And then the princess' doctor was killed, and . . .'

Fuck, I hadn't really thought this bit through. Sister Galina was so wrapped up in religious extremism of largely her own invention that I could only lean into it and hope for the best.

' . . . that forced her ascension,' I finished. 'With the princess ascended from this mortal plane, Vogel could put young Prince Marcus on the throne and assure himself of three more years of regency at least – but ask yourself this, Sister. Do you think that innocent child, that holy *royal* child,

will be allowed to live to see his thirteenth nameday?
Because I do not.'

'*Regicide?*' Sister Galina whispered. 'Then it's no wonder the princess had to ascend to Heaven – not to fight Skania, but to avenge her divine mother!'

I blinked at her. I supposed it made a sort of sense from her point of view. Either way, I didn't give a fuck *why* she believed me, just so long as she did.

'Exactly that,' I said, and squeezed her hand in mine. 'Tell me Sister, are you loyal? I don't doubt your devotion to Our Lady, never that, but are you loyal to the Rose Throne and the true royal house?'

'Yes!' Sister Galina almost shouted, before she gathered herself. 'Yes, Father, of course!'

'And your followers, of whom there are gratifyingly many?'

'Of course,' she said again, although she sounded slightly less sure this time and I thought that was wise of her. She wasn't so deluded to think that no one would be just out for what they could get.

'You didn't hear any of this from me,' I reminded her. 'My name is not to be mentioned. I am your priest and confessor and no more than that. I have to continue to operate within the house of law, for the time being at least. You understand that, don't you, Sister?'

'Of course, Father,' she said.

I looked out across the vista of the city. I could see the tall spire of the Grand High Temple of All Gods, and the battlements of the castle atop its hill. Beyond that I could see the squat stone bulk of the house of law, flying its huge royal standards. I pointed, and Sister Galina followed the direction of my finger.

'There is your queenkiller,' I said. 'Right there. What you choose to do with that knowledge is your business, and only Our Lady can judge you for your actions.'

Chapter 34

I left Sister Galina there on top of Cannon Hill, weeping as her world view collapsed around her. She would aid me or she wouldn't, and that was in Our Lady's hands. There was no more to be done here.

I met up with Beast and Sam at the foot of the hill, and for all that Sister Galina's people gave me the hard eye, they could see she was standing on the hilltop staring out at the city, so they knew I hadn't stabbed her, at least.

'We're done here,' I told the lads, and together we started back towards the North Gate on foot.

'Did I do all right, boss?' Beast asked me when we were out of the hearing of Galina's crew. 'I mean, I'm no actor, like.'

'You did perfectly,' I assured him. 'If a man sounds like an actor, then he's failed. You sounded real, and that's what I wanted.'

'Still don't know why,' Sam muttered.

'Wait and see, Sam lad,' I said. 'It might come to nothing, but I doubt it. I think we set something in motion here this afternoon.'

'Still don't know what,' Sam said, and I smiled.

'I know,' I said. 'Just trust me.'

'I do, boss,' he said, and I knew he meant it and that was good enough for me.

Sam might not have been the brightest of the Pious Men but he was loyal to his bones and that meant more to me than anything else. I trusted Simple Sam with my life, and had done repeatedly, both in the war and since.

I reached up to clap him on the shoulder. 'Come on,' I said, 'back to the Harvest and the brandy's on me. You've

both done well today.'

It was Farmsday, which meant that tomorrow, Queensday, was my meeting with Lady Lan Yetrova at my sasura's house. I wasn't sure quite how that was going to go, and I had to admit that with that coming up and after the afternoon spent with Sister Galina, an evening of drinking with the lads felt quite appealing.

I didn't get it, of course. No sooner had we returned to the Bountiful Harvest than I was collared by Leonov, who had been propping the bar up in the common room while he waited for me.

'The boss wants a word,' he said.

Leonov had been one of Grachyev's underbosses, and I was pretty sure he was Iagin's right-hand man in the Queen's Men. I met his eyes. I couldn't say I was keen on Iagin sending an underling to summon me, to put it mildly.

'Does he now?' I said. 'Perhaps I'm busy.'

'Perhaps you are,' Leonov agreed mildly, and smiled at me. 'Perhaps I'll go back and tell the boss you don't want his help, then. Perhaps you'd rather go it alone, and end up hanging.'

I sighed. He had me there, I had to admit. Iagin was obviously already set on his own path, and this was his city, not mine. He knew Dannsburg better than I ever would, and he was considerably better connected than me.

'All right,' I said. 'Give me a moment.'

I turned away and gave Sam and Beast two silver marks apiece. 'You've done well, both of you,' I told them. 'I'd love to stay and drink with you, but it appears I have more business to attend to today.'

'Do you want us to come with you?' Sam asked at once, and I smiled at him.

'No lad,' I said. 'This is the friendly kind. You and Beast take the night off.'

I turned back to Leonov and met his eyes. *The friendly kind*. I hoped I was right about that.

‘Come on then,’ I said, and he turned and led the way out of the Bountiful Harvest to the street where a carriage was waiting. I climbed aboard with him and sat back against the padded leather bench as it started to move.

‘I take it we’re not going to the house of law?’ I said.

‘Gods, no,’ Leonov said. ‘I’ve never set foot in there in my fucking life and I like it that way just fine.’

‘Aye, that’s wise of you,’ I said.

The carriage picked up speed and I soon worked out that we were heading to the Horn of Plenty, which had been one of Grachyev’s favourite whorehouses.

‘Iagin turning into his old boss, then, is he?’ I asked.

Leonov snorted. ‘Grachyev was never Iagin’s boss and you know it,’ he said.

Of course I did, but I had wanted to know if *he* did. That meant Leonov was fully in Iagin’s pay and not just one of Grachyev’s men who had accepted the regime change. That was good to know, and I allowed myself to relax somewhat.

‘What news from the streets?’ I asked him.

‘There’s already rioting south of the river,’ Leonov told me, ‘and I’ll wager you know why. The Martyr’s Disciples seem to have got it into their heads to take against the Prince Regent.’

‘Have they now?’ I said, and he gave me a sideways look.

‘Save it for Iagin,’ he advised.

I looked out of the carriage window and said nothing. Sister Galina had apparently wasted no time and I wondered if that was truly a good thing or not. That was a gamble I had made and no mistake. In the short term, yes, I thought the cult could be used to good advantage, but after that? Our Lady only knew.

The carriage rocked to a halt outside the Horn of Plenty and Leonov and two armed footmen escorted me into the establishment. We were hastily shown through to the private suite of rooms that Grachyev had used as his office. The first time I had seen him there he had been reclining on

a red velvet couch, but that was gone now and Iagin was instead seated behind a newly installed desk.

He looked up when we entered. 'Tomas,' he said.

'Iagin,' I replied, 'thank you for the kind if unexpected invitation.'

I wasn't sure what game we were playing here, but Iagin just lifted his chin and that was enough to send Leonov's footmen out of the room, although Leonov himself stayed, and closed the door behind them.

'What is this?' I asked him.

Iagin sighed with resignation. 'You taking over, by the fucking looks of it,' he said. 'Three months I've been trying to find a way to have a private conversation with that mad fucking nun, and you've done it in a day.'

'I'm a priest,' I said simply, and I spread my hands. 'You remember the day the Princess Crown Royal died, and what Sister Galina said? She all but fucking worships me.'

'She's not reliable.'

'Who fucking is, in this city? She has followers, Iagin, and a lot more of them than I expected. I had to seize the moment when it presented itself.'

'Aye, well, it seems you did that all right,' he said. 'There's riots all along Factory Way and six of the City Guard dead already that I know of. They're screaming "queenkiller" at every guardsman they see, the way I hear it.'

I sucked my teeth for a moment and met his eyes. 'They were always going to be unstable allies,' I said, 'but what choice do we have?'

'This was it?' Iagin snarled at me. '*This* was your big plan? Whip up a bunch of religious maniacs into a mob and hope for the fucking best? I thought you were cleverer than that, Tomas.'

I took the seat opposite him without being asked and met his hostile glare with one of my own. 'You're coming close to insulting me,' I said. 'They're a fucking distraction, no more than that, but there are a lot of them and numbers always

count, even if they aren't doing anything much effective. I'm speaking to the real solution tomorrow.'

'Oh, aye, and who's that then, the boggart itself?'

I held my peace for a long moment, watching him.

'We'll see,' I said eventually. 'It might not work. They might say no. It's all on a knife-edge at the moment.'

'Lady's blood, Tomas, do you not grasp how *dangerous* this is?' Iagin whispered. 'If we start this and can't finish it . . .'

'Aye,' I said. 'I know. My brother died, Iagin. Back in Ellinburg. My brother was killed by Skanian mercenaries, or by men in their pay, who in turn were paid by fucking Dieter Vogel. There's never been any invasion coming – it's all just smoke and fucking mirrors to enable that cunt to usurp the throne.'

'I know,' Iagin said, and sighed. 'I didn't know about your brother. I'm sorry to hear it, Tomas, truly I am, but you can't let your loss and grief cloud your judgement. Galina is as mad as a shithouse rat.'

'I know she is,' I said, 'and I'm of a mind to give her thirty flashstones.'

Iagin looked like he was about to have an attack of the heart. 'You're fucking *what?*'

'We can't fucking use them, can we? Not unless we formally declare against the house of law and then we're going to have to defeat the entire City Guard *and* the army between us. That's not going to happen, Iagin. We have to keep the Old Man thinking we're on his side. As soon as he realises we're not, we've fucking had it – you have to see that.'

'So, what – you give military weapons to untrained lunatics and hope for the best?'

I shook my head. 'There were veterans in that crowd,' I said. 'Serving guardsmen, unless I'm very much mistaken, and Sister Galina was a soldier herself. She might be

deluded, but I don't think she's a fool. She won't waste them in the wrong hands.'

'And what if they fuck it up? Then we've got nothing.'

'I haven't decided yet,' I told him. 'It depends how tomorrow goes. If those thirty stones turn out to be all we have, then no, we'll keep them, but if not – I'm giving them to Galina.'

'To do *what* with?'

'Whatever she fucking likes. Vogel hired mercenaries to cause violence and unrest at random, to destabilise the country. I can do that too, and better than that, I can get them to do it for free.'

Iagin looked at me for a long moment, and I knew I had him. Iagin, who had been sworn into the Queen's Men by Sabine herself. Iagin, who had served the Queen's Men almost his entire life. Iagin: always serving, always being told what to do.

Strong leadership, that was the lever that moved Iagin.

*

The next day was Queensday, and come the afternoon I was in my carriage on my way to Sasura's house. The conversation of the previous night was still turning round and round in my head as the carriage rocked and jolted across the streets of Dannsburg. I was as certain as I could ever be that Iagin was on my side – but who else did we have? Had he managed to turn Ilse? I had no idea.

Konrad was a lost cause, I was sure of that, and in any case, I could never bring myself to trust that cunt, no matter what he might say. He had sent his own sister down to the cells, after all, and I knew I could never see past that. The bastard had even looked pleased to be doing it.

And what of Sabine? She and Vogel were husband and wife, or at least had been, once, but they had been estranged for so long that Ailsa hadn't even known she

existed until last year. But then, Vogel trusted her enough to have her standing over the Dowager Grand Duchess, so that didn't help me. Would it be possible to turn her against the husband she had walked away from all those years ago? I had no way of guessing, but one thing I did know was that I was following this line of thought purely to keep my mind away from the one person I really didn't want to think about. Ailsa.

Gods, if I couldn't trust her then I might as well just give up. She had been the one to bring me into the Queen's Men in the first place, after all, but I was acutely aware that Iagin hadn't so much as mentioned her in any of our conversations. Perhaps he thought it was too delicate, to bring up the matter of my own wife. I didn't know. She had invited me to move back into her house with her, after all.

I had to admit that I was sorely tempted on that front. I knew Ailsa and me were probably never going to lie down together as man and wife, not in that way, but I missed her, nonetheless. She was wonderful company when she wanted to be, and we had enjoyed spending time together. Hadn't we? I thought we did, anyway. Perhaps I was wrong, but I knew Billy loved her as his ma and I wouldn't take that away from him.

My reverie was disturbed when the carriage arrived at the gates of Sasura's house and I heard my coachman exchanging words with the guards. I was expected, of course, and a moment later the gates opened and the carriage rolled smoothly onto the grassed area in front of the house and creaked to a halt. Sam got down to open the door and hand me down, and I was met by one of Sasura's footmen.

'Sir Tomas.' He greeted me with a stiff bow.

I let him lead the way to the front door and show me into Sasura's study.

My father-by-law looked up at me when I entered, and he smiled widely behind his impressive beard and great curling

moustaches. He rose from behind the desk, waved away my bow and swept me into an embrace.

‘Ah, it is good to see you again, my son-by-law,’ he said.

The old pirate never seemed to change. He was an Alarian gentleman somewhere in his seventieth years, and he wore his longish white hair pulled back from his brow in a severe topknot. He always dressed in the Dannsburg style, in a fine doublet and coat much like my own, although I remembered his wife still favoured clothes of Alarian cut. Still, Ailsa’s mother hated me with a passion, and it was of no affair of mine what she wore.

‘Sasura, I’ve missed you,’ I said as I returned his embrace.

He clapped me on the back and took a step back. ‘Will you take brandy with me, Tomas?’ he asked.

‘Always,’ I said, and he grinned and took a bottle down from the well-stocked cupboard.

‘I know I can rely on you to drink with me,’ he said. We each took one of the large, comfortable chairs away from the desk while we waited for Lady Lan Yetrova to arrive.

‘How have you faired with our noble lady and her learned friends?’ I asked him, once I had taken a sip of my drink.

‘Oh, well enough, I think,’ Sasura said. ‘Your money, their skill and my knowledge appear to have combined to produce something quite remarkable. However, the lady has some . . . reservations, let us say.’

Considering I had effectively asked her and Archmagus Ritenkov to invent new weapons for me, I could see how she might have.

‘Your knowledge?’

‘Oh, I dabbled a little with alchemy when I was a young man, before I went to sea. It is very popular in Alaria, a hobby for gentlemen. My father had a bad heart, you see, and I stole some of his medicine to see what would happen if—’

We were interrupted by a footman’s brusque knock on the study door, and then Lady Lan Yetrova was being ushered

respectfully into the room. We both rose and bowed to her, and she returned our respects with a smile.

‘Mr Shapoor, thank you for receiving me in your lovely home,’ she said. ‘Sir Tomas, an honour to see you again.’

‘The honour is mine, my Lady,’ I assured her.

‘Can I offer you refreshment?’ Sasura asked, and Lady Lan Yetrova inclined her head.

‘I find these days that I rather enjoy brandy,’ she said, and met my eyes. ‘Now that I am allowed it.’

She was still acknowledging her debt to me, then, and that was good, but there was clearly something on her mind, nonetheless. Sasura poured for her and refreshed our glasses while he was up, then once more took his seat.

‘You mentioned that you wished to speak with my son-by-law?’ he said, after the silence had stretched a moment or so too long.

‘Indeed,’ the lady said, and now when she met my gaze her eyes were like chips of ice. ‘My friends at the house of magicians have great learning, and it seems your father-by-law is a man of unexpected talents too. Combine them, with my funding and the line of credit you so kindly made available to this endeavour, and we have had quite remarkable success. Really, Sir Tomas, *quite* remarkable.’

‘That’s good,’ I said, wondering where she was going with this.

‘Imagine a cylinder about the size of your forearm with the explosive power of an entire barrel of blasting powder. It is not . . . *entirely* stable, I will grant you, and it requires careful storage and handling, but its practical applications are, as I say, quite remarkable.’

‘I’m sure they are,’ I said, and I couldn’t stop the slow smile from spreading across my face.

Now we were talking.

‘There is just one thing I need to know, Sir Tomas.’

‘Oh?’

‘If I make this substance available to you, what exactly do you plan to do with it?’

I held her gaze for a long moment before I spoke. ‘Well now, Lady Lan Yetrova, I intend to bring down the government.’

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Chapter 35

I suppose it wasn't really surprising that she wanted time to think about that. The house of magicians and the house of law had a bitter and bloody history between them and I was sure Lady Lan Yetrova had no love whatsoever for Lord Vogel, but I was proposing straight-out treason and there was no other way of looking at it. I knew I was taking Our Lady's own chance trusting her, but having developed the stuff in secret at my request, she had to know that if I was going to hang then she would be swinging beside me, however rich she might be.

Lady Lan Yetrova had finished her drink and left Sasura's house shortly after my revelation. I stayed another hour or so to spend time with my father-by-law before I too took my leave.

'May the Many-Headed God watch over you, Tomas,' he blessed me before I left, and once again we embraced.

I didn't know the Many-Headed God of the Alarian faith, but right then I would take all the blessings I could get and be grateful for them. I told the coachman to return me to the Bountiful Harvest. The streets were busy that afternoon – Queensday was the principal market day in Dannsburg, and I supposed that was why my sasura's wife was always out with her friends on a Queensday afternoon, although I couldn't imagine what that haughty, stern woman might do for fun. Kick people, probably, I thought, and then decided that perhaps I shouldn't have any more brandy for a while.

I arrived back at the Bountiful Harvest with that resolution fast withering on the vine, only to be met by Rosie with a crumpled paper clutched tight in her hand.

‘No you don’t,’ she said, thrusting the paper into my hand. ‘House of law, right now. He’s called an emergency meeting and you’re already late.’

Fuck!

‘Aye, right,’ I said, turning on my heel, and I headed straight back to the stableyard with Sam on my heels. ‘There’s no rest for the wicked, Sam, lad.’

‘No boss,’ Sam said, although I would have been astonished if he recognised the quote from the scriptures.

I whistled the coachman back from where he was evidently on his way to the shithouse in the yard, and sorry, but he’d just have to fucking hold it.

‘House of law,’ I said. ‘Fast.’

‘Yes boss,’ he muttered, and within moments the carriage was rolling again.

It couldn’t have taken us more than ten or fifteen minutes to reach the house of law, but by the time we did I was *very* late for the emergency meeting I hadn’t even known had been called. Vogel gave me a cold glare when I finally walked into his office.

‘Apologies, sir, I was out on a matter of business when your summons came,’ I explained, which did nothing to change his expression. Ailsa and Iagin were already there, and so was Sabine, reclining lazily in one of the staggeringly uncomfortable visitors’ chairs like it was a silk divan. The woman was like a cat, I thought, able to be completely at her ease absolutely anywhere. A particularly vicious cat, I couldn’t help but add.

All the same, Our Lady was kind, for Konrad was even later than I was. By the time he finally appeared, Vogel looked ready to stab someone.

‘Sir,’ Konrad said as he walked in, and offered no excuse whatsoever.

‘Thank you for finally joining us,’ Vogel said coldly.

Ilse wasn’t there, I noticed, but she did appear to work to slightly different rules than the rest of us. She rarely left her

own private Hell in the dungeons, and I'd never known her be sent out on operational assignments.

She seldom leaves the house of law, I remembered Iagin telling me once. *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 was sure that was true, but all the same, the thought made me shudder. I still didn't know whether Iagin had succeeded in bringing Ilse over to our cause or not. Part of me hoped not, as I really didn't want to have to work with her, but the wiser part prayed that he had, as I would far rather have her with me than against me. Ilse gave me the fear and I won't lie about that, but she wasn't there that Queensday afternoon and I found I was glad about that.

'Come *on*, Dieter, what's this about?' Sabine asked as she idly fanned herself with an ornate creation of carved bone and black silk.

I couldn't really see from where I was standing but I had a sudden fancy that there were blades set in the tips of the spines of that fan. It really wouldn't have surprised me if there had been, I have to allow.

'Something has come to light,' Vogel said, and I knew immediately that he was about to tell us some utter and total horseshit of his own creation as though it was new intelligence uncovered that very day. 'It appears that the death of Doctor Almanov was no accident.'

'No shit,' I couldn't help but reply. 'In my experience a man seldom brutally stabs himself in the stomach several times by accident.'

I saw Iagin's moustache twitch as he tried not to laugh, and Ailsa shot me the look wives have no doubt been giving their husbands since marriage was first invented.

Shut the fuck up, you fool, that look said, but it was said now and no taking it back. I really had drunk a little too much brandy with Sasura that afternoon to be having this meeting with Vogel now, I realised.

Lord Vogel turned his razorblade stare on me for a long, cold moment. 'I mean, *Sir* Tomas,' he said, enunciating my title very clearly to put me in my place, 'that it was no random act of violence from his creditors. He was deliberately murdered, to ensure the death of our beloved Princess Crown Royal for want of her medication.'

'Oh my – who would do something so awful?' Sabine asked, and even as she said it, she sounded so bored it was perfectly obvious that she had known what he was about to say.

I had at first thought Sabine no actress, but I had discovered the exact opposite was true. I had seen her in the guise of a common gutter whore, inciting mob violence on the streets of Dannsburg the previous year. Yes, Mother Ruin was a *consummate* actress, so the fact that her performance just now was so poor was obviously designed to send a message – but to who?

It felt like she was telling me, *You do know this is horseshit, don't you?* – but I had no way to be sure. Perhaps she was speaking to Iagin, who she had initiated into the Queen's Men herself, or even to Konrad. I really didn't know who was on which side here . . .

'Who benefited?' Vogel replied. 'Follow the money, Sabine.'

'Mmmm,' she said, and she snapped her fan shut and slowly tapped her blood-red lips with the folded spines. 'Who suddenly found her young son elevated from a very precarious position as an under-age Grand Duke and onto the throne of the Crown Prince, I wonder?'

My heart sank. I had half-expected this, of course, but not quite so soon. When Rosie had presented me with the urgent summons, I thought this meeting would be about the sudden rioting south of the river, but apparently that sort of thing had become normal enough in Dannsburg that it was simply a matter for the City Guard and nothing we had to concern ourselves with.

No, this was something much bigger: the next – and perhaps final – move in Vogel’s game.

‘You’re talking about the Grand Duchess of Varnburg,’ I said.

‘Oh, I very much am, Tomas,’ Vogel said. ‘The Dowager Grand Duchess, recently widowed and with the only heir to her dutchy not yet of the age of majority, feared losing everything. Doctor Almanov was her own man, let us not forget, or at least one she recommended for the role when the princess’ last doctor . . . well, there it is. Almanov was put in position, the Grand Duchess established herself in the city, and her son was formally betrothed to the princess, even though he was far too young.’

‘Her Sea Guard rode with Major Bakrylov’s cavalry in the Coronation Massacre,’ I reminded him.

He didn’t need reminding, of course, but I wasn’t going to make this any easier for the bastard than I had to.

‘Of course,’ Vogel snapped, and now his irritation was plain to see. ‘So she cemented her alliance with the throne and the house of law, but by then it was too late: Almanov was already in sole charge of the princess’ medication. Having established how dependant our poor Martyr was on her carefully prescribed drugs, the Grand Duchess had the doctor murdered, and managed to hide the fact until the damage was done. We all witnessed what became of *that*, after all.’

We had indeed – and the Royal Mall was still being rebuilt as a result of it.

‘So what do we do about it?’ I asked, but I was sure I knew the answer.

‘Oh, what do you think, Tomas?’ Sabine said, and laughed. ‘I’ve spent enough time with that wretched woman to be absolutely certain of this.’

Vogel turned his stare on me, and on Konrad. ‘I’ve a job for you both,’ he said. ‘Arrest the Dowager Grand Duchess

of Varnburg for murder, regicide and high treason. There will be a *very* public trial.'

I swallowed. There weren't usually trials for traitors in Dannsburg; they just disappeared, and were never seen again. But for a grand duchess, and one accused of regicide at that? If – *when* – she was found guilty, the entire Duchy of Varnburg and all its lands and fortune would be forfeit to the crown. Her son had been too young to inherit his father's title and holdings, after all, so at present everything legally belonged to the Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg.

'What about the Sea Guard?' Konrad asked. 'She has fifty armed men at least.'

'It's taken care of,' Vogel assured him. 'Major Bakrylov has assured me of a hundred of the Queen's Own Fifth. The Sea Guard won't be a problem. Just get it done.'

Which left me with one very obvious question. 'And where does that leave Crown Prince Marcus?'

'Tomas, do you seriously think I would harm a royal child?' I met his eyes, and I didn't reply.

*

That evening, while I was waiting for it to be time for the operation, a messenger came to the Bountiful Harvest. He was a thin, weasel-eyed man I had never seen before in my life, but he obviously knew me by sight, for he sidled up to me where I stood at the bar talking to Anne, and he presented me with a sealed letter.

'Read it in private,' he said. 'Your eyes only, Sir Tomas.'

He turned away without another word, leaving me and Anne looking at each other in bewilderment.

'No idea,' I said, before she could ask.

The letter wasn't addressed, and was obviously intended to be put straight into my hand. I turned it over to see it was sealed with black wax that bore an image I didn't recognise, a ruined tower.

‘Go on, the suspense is killing you,’ Anne said. ‘I’ll wait here.’

I nodded and slipped into the private dining room, and on some instinct, locked the door behind me. I sat at the table and carefully broke the seal, and spread the letter out before me.

My dear Tomas,

You’ve worked it out, haven’t you? I thought you would, in time. He has always had designs on the throne, and that’s why I left him all those years ago. I couldn’t bring myself to arrest him as I should have done, so I ran away to Varnburg and in the process left him free to assume the Provost Marshal’s seat and the power to follow his dreams. I took the name Mother Ruin after that, for the ruin I have caused in giving him the warrant, and I have still not forgiven myself. I will not betray you, Tomas, but neither will I aid you. I still love him, in my way. Be very, very careful.

S.

I sat and studied the note, struggling to put my thoughts together on the matter. Why would Sabine write to me, and more to the point, why would she do it now? How much could I trust her, really?

Mother Ruin.

Very little, I suspected, but why tell me she knew my suspicions, confirm them, in fact, if she meant to betray me? Perhaps she wanted to atone, somehow, for the damage she had done by making Vogel her successor? Or perhaps it was all fucking horseshit, designed to lure me into a trap. A letter like that gave me well and truly enough rope to hang myself with, and perhaps that was what she was trying to do. I really didn’t know. I read the letter again, then very deliberately, I burned it, every single scrap, and swept the ashes into the hearth.

I didn't tell Anne what it had said.

*

I hated working with Konrad. Truth be told, I hated everything about Konrad, up to and including his continued mortal existence, but Vogel had set us this task and there was little enough to be done about it for now. We had met up with him and Major Bakrylov an hour ago, and I had Bloody Anne and Sam, Beast and Sir Eland with me to watch my fucking back. I didn't trust that cunt further than I could spit, and that was probably being generous about the matter. Konrad himself had come alone, I noticed, apparently trusting in the soldiers to protect him. It was perhaps the third hour of the morning and now we were hiding in an alley while the major led a hundred soldiers down the street towards the huge, sprawling house that the Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg had leased to billet her Sea Guard.

They even had a fucking cannon, for Our Lady's sake.

Not a siege cannon, obviously, but a cannon, nonetheless: one of the mobile field pieces we had used to break up cavalry charges. The great draft horses drew the gun carriage up to the end of the street facing the gates of the house and the cannon crew busied themselves positioning it. Setting off a cannon on the streets of Dannsburg in the middle of the night was the utter and total opposite of the Queen's Men's usual subtlety, but I supposed that was the whole point: the downfall of the Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg was to be a very public event indeed, and nothing was more public than artillery being used on the streets of the capital city.

'They'll blow the gates, use the cannon to breach the house, and charge,' Konrad whispered to me, although I knew the plan as well as he did. 'Once the Sea Guard are done with, we move in and arrest the duchess.'

I gave him a short nod, and turned away. For now I had to work with the man, but I'd be fucked if I was going to be courteous to him. I met Bloody Anne's eyes and she tilted her head to indicate she wanted to talk.

We walked a few yards away from Konrad and the others before I let her speak.

'What exactly is this poor woman supposed to have done?' Anne asked me in a low voice.

'Indirectly murdered the Princess Crown Royal,' I said.

Anne hissed in irritation. 'What has she *actually* done, Tomas?'

'Fuck all, so far as I know,' I said, 'although I doubt she's entirely innocent one way or another. None of the nobility ever fucking are. Her son has gone from being about to lose his duchy to becoming heir to the throne, and I won't believe she didn't make a deal or two to see that happen. That sham of a betrothal, for one. The Coronation Massacre, for another. She has blood on her hands for that, if nothing else.'

'We've *all* got fucking blood on our hands, Tomas,' Anne replied. 'Why are you still going along with this shit? I thought—'

I shushed her, and leaned close to whisper in her ear. 'It's happening,' I said, 'but I can't move too soon. If the Old Man gets suspicious now, we're *all* done for. I have to play this out.'

'So a woman has to die?' Anne challenged me.

'Anne,' I said, and I was trying to make her see the size of the problem and I felt like I was failing at it, 'a *lot* of people will have to die, whatever we do. It's just the way it is, and no way around it that I can see. Sometimes you have to weigh two evils in your hands and choose the lighter one.'

'I'm not sure I believe that,' Anne said. 'And what about the Crown Prince? You know fucking well he's in that house with his mother and not safe in the palace, where he should be. He only has ten years to him, Tomas.'

‘He wouldn’t be remotely safe in the fucking palace and the duchess knows it, and that’s exactly *why* he’s in that house, where she can watch over him,’ I said.

Which had of course enabled Sabine to watch over the pair of them, which had been exactly what the house of law had wanted.

‘So what happens to *him* tonight? Because I swear to Our Lady, Tomas, if—’

Just then one of Bakrylov’s sappers set off the charge of powder that blew the gates of the duchess’ house across the river and into the grey lands.

‘Cannon crew!’ Bakrylov shouted. ‘Fire!’

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Chapter 36

The cannon was already primed and loaded, and on his command, the gun-crew officer lit his long firing pole from the smouldering match cord that he held over his shoulder and touched it to the priming pan.

There was a bright flash, then the cannon bucked and roared with a great bellow of flame and a huge cloud of choking, acrid smoke. It was like Abington all over again, but in the heat of action I felt strangely numb. The battle shock would come later, I was sure, but just then the most natural thing in the world was the major's cry of '*Charge!*'

Charge, aye. How many times had I heard that command, back in the war? And how many times had I done just that, charging blindly into the clouds of dust from falling walls with a spear clutched in my sweating hands, into the mist of blood from vapourised men and horses, never knowing when the return fire would come. And all the while, arrows whispering past your face, quick and silent as death.

Contact, and hack and stab and push and push and push.

There's no choice: '*Charge—!*'

And you go.

No choice at all.

Put your trust in Our Lady and just fucking *go!*

Charge, and pray and kill. Kill and kill and kill, and no thought beyond that. It's them or you. They're not people, they don't have families, they don't matter – enemies, just enemies. That was what the army had drilled into us: charge, push and push and push.

Kill, kill, kill . . .

I felt Bloody Anne's hand on my shoulder. 'It's all right, Tomas,' she said softly. 'It's not us, not this time.'

I blinked the tears of war from my eyes and looked across the street at the house. There was a gaping hole in the façade and a huge cloud of dust and smoke in the air. Bakrylov's soldiers were storming the house in good order and there were blue-surcoated Sea Guard down all across the lawn and it wasn't Abington and I wasn't going to die in this assault on the walls and that was good.

I reached up to my shoulder and put my hand over Anne's, and I let out a slow breath.

'When do we go, boss?' Sir Eland asked me, and I saw that he had his heavy war sword already in his hands.

'When shit stops blowing up,' I said.

Bakrylov was army, and so were his men. They had flashstones, of course they did, authorised by his general, and that no doubt done under the warrant of the house of law, the same as the cannon must have been. I watched as an upstairs window detonated in a flash of fire and exploding shards of glass and lead. The Sea Guard were trying to rally, but they were out-numbered two to one at least, and the major had blasting weapons and they didn't, and it was a fucking massacre.

There were lamps burning behind the shutters of the houses behind us, and of course folk were watching and wondering what in the name of the gods was making that much noise in the middle of the night. I imagined the veterans amongst them were either hiding under their beds or arming themselves for battle, while the civilians were just staring in idiotic fascination. Either way, there was no way of hiding what was happening, and I was sure that was exactly how Lord Vogel wanted it. He was going to haul the Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg up on a very public charge of murder and regicide, and then claim her entire duchy in the name of the throne, and the more people who saw that happen the better, as far as he was concerned.

Aye, Vogel was going to do that. Or more to the point, apparently / was.

‘Right,’ I said, when the fighting seemed to have died down some. ‘Anne, Eland, with me. Sam, Beast, stay here and keep Konrad safe.’

‘I’m coming with you,’ Konrad said, but Sam and Beast were looming either side of him now and he looked to have lost something of his usual cocky demeanour.

‘No,’ I said, ‘you’re not. If this all goes to the whores, someone needs to witness it, and get word back to the house of law and the Old Man.’

‘Then I should be the one to arrest the duchess,’ he protested. ‘You can wait out here an—’

‘I’m the one who thought to bring enforcers,’ I said, ‘so you’re staying here.’

‘Let’s have a seat. It might be a little while,’ Beast said, and he almost pushed Konrad down onto the kerb before sitting down himself, very close.

Sam remained standing. He was right behind Konrad, and I don’t think the message could have been clearer if I had been screaming it in the man’s face.

I set off with Anne and Sir Eland on my flanks.

‘What are you doing?’ Anne asked me as we passed through the twisted wreckage of the front gates and into the grounds of the house.

‘You know what I’m doing,’ I said, ‘or at least I hope you do. Because if you don’t, Bloody Anne, then you don’t know me at *all*.’

‘I know Father Tomas, the army priest and businessman,’ Anne said. ‘He’s my best friend. Sir Tomas, the Queen’s Man, though? I’m not sure how well I know him.’

‘I’m the same man I always was,’ I assured her, although even I knew that wasn’t entirely true.

I thought some of the tension drained from her shoulders and that was good, even if nothing else was. We made our way into the house through the shattered hole in the wall, and found a corporal waiting for us. He gave me a stiff

salute as I entered what was left of a handsomely appointed drawing room.

‘All done sir,’ he said. ‘The major said to go on up.’

‘Aye, well and good,’ I said. ‘Thank you, Corporal.’

The drawing room door was open, although the cannon ball had gone through that wall and the one on the far side of the hall too, before finally coming to rest in a dining room amongst a pile of shattered kindling and shards of porcelain that had probably once been a bone-china dinner service on a fine oak dresser. Another soldier was waiting at the bottom of the sweeping stair to show us the way up. She stepped over the bodies of three of the Sea Guard and I followed, with Anne and Eland behind me.

Major Bakrylov, waiting at the top, snapped a smart salute when I reached the landing.

‘Mission accomplished, Sir Tomas,’ he said, and there was none of his usual mockery now that he was working. ‘The subject is in the main suite at the end of the landing. She has her son with her.’

I had given the major strict instructions that the grand duchess and the crown prince were to be confined but not hurt in any way, or even spoken to, if it could possibly be avoided.

‘Any of the Sea Guard left?’ I asked.

Bakrylov shook his head. ‘No, sir. Complete annihilation. They fought to the last man.’

I thanked him, and made my way towards the door he had indicated. True to his word, there were four more Sea Guard on the floor outside the duchess’ door. They had obviously sold their lives dearly, for the bodies had been hacked to pieces. I offered up a silent prayer to commend their souls to Our Lady. They had done nothing wrong, to my mind, and had fought to the last to do their duty as they saw it. I could respect that.

I knocked on the door. ‘Lady Varnburg?’ I called out. ‘It’s Sir Tomas, from the house of law.’

Silence for a moment, then came a resigned voice from within, 'You'll come in whether I invite you or not, won't you? So come in, then.'

I opened the door and stepped into the room. Anne followed, and I motioned Sir Eland to wait outside and ensure we weren't disturbed.

The Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg was in her nightgown, which was hardly surprising, given the hour, and poor Crown Prince Marcus was in his nightshirt beside her, crying silently. She had a protective arm tightly around him as they sat together on the edge of her bed. In her other hand, she held a dagger.

'That's close enough,' she said, her eyes like flint as she glared at us both.

'My Lady,' I started, but she shook her head and moved the dagger a little closer to her son's neck.

'I will kill him with my own hand before I let you drag him down to the depths of the house of law,' she promised me. 'It would be a kindness. Any mother would do the same.'

I wasn't sure that they would, but that was between her and Our Lady. Prince Marcus' slow snivelling turned into racking sobs as his mother held him tighter still and pressed the blade to his neck.

'I'm not here for that,' I said.

Lady Varnburg looked up at me with an expression of deep suspicion on her face. 'Your soldiers have blasted their way into my house with a cannon and massacred my Sea Guard,' she said, a simple statement of fact. 'What in the world else would you be doing?'

'I'm arresting you for the murder of Doctor Almanov and, by extension, for the regicide of the Princess Crown Royal,' I said. 'But I'm not here for your son.'

'You can't tell me Vogel means to let him keep the throne,' she said. 'Why arrest me, if he did? That ghastly woman has barely let my son out of her sight for months, and she made

it very plain that we weren't to leave this house. I've seen this night coming for a very long time.'

'No, of course he doesn't,' I said, and even though the door was closed and I knew Sir Eland was guarding it I lowered my voice just the same. 'I know you are innocent, my Lady. I have to arrest you anyway, you understand that, but I swear on the holy name of Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows as Her priest that I will see no harm come to your son so long as I still draw breath. Lord Vogel and me find ourselves on the opposite side of this matter, this and many others, but I am not killing an innocent child, no matter who orders it. I have few enough lines I won't cross, I'll allow, but that is one of them.'

The duchess blinked at me for a long moment, then let go of Marcus long enough to pick up her eyeglasses from the nightstand and balance them on the bridge of her thin nose. She regarded me through the finely ground lenses. The dagger in her hand returned to her son's neck.

'I do not like you, Sir Tomas,' she said eventually. 'I disliked you from the first moment you walked into the Sea Keep and started trying to give me orders. You are a rude and cruel man, and you serve an evil master, and yet . . . yet I do not think you are yourself evil. Not entirely, anyway. I remember your own son: an awful, common child and a suspected witch, and yet it was apparent on the road from Varnburg that you love him as a true noble father would.'

'That I do,' I said.

Again she was silent for a long moment.

'You can guarantee that my son will live?'

Despite myself I respected the Grand Duchess, although I couldn't have said I liked her either, and I wouldn't insult her intelligence by lying to her.

'No,' I said. 'I am committing treason here, in the eyes of the house of law. I can't even guarantee that I will live to see the end of the week. But I promise you this: your son will outlive me, even if it be only by seconds. Prince Marcus

will live while I still draw breath, although I cannot promise for how long that will be.'

'I suppose I can't ask for more than that,' she said slowly. 'And me? I'm done for, I assume.'

Again, I told her the truth. 'Aye,' I said. 'That's not in my power to change. You played the game of politics, my Lady, and you lost.'

The grand duchess sighed, and stared down into her lap for a long moment. Eventually she took the dagger away from Prince Marcus' throat and tossed it onto the bed.

'So be it,' she said.

'Thank you for sparing him,' I said. 'Anne, I need you and Sir Eland to take Prince Marcus to – to where Sir Eland is staying. Introduce him to your host, and make him blend in. He needs to stay there, and I'd like you there with him. Do not, under any circumstances, let him out of sight of someone trusted, not for a single moment. Full protective custody around the clock, you understand me? Vogel will be looking for him if I can't convince him the lad's dead.'

I could have kicked myself. I had almost named the Dripping Bucket and Kreov in front of the grand duchess, and that would have been a disaster. She was likely going to be tortured and Ilse would break her, obviously. Ilse broke everyone in the end and that was a simple fact of life, but the grand duchess couldn't give up what she didn't know.

'Aye,' Anne said simply.

'Good. Go out through the gardens – I'm sure there must be a back entrance somewhere. I don't want to risk our friend seeing him being taken away. Prince Marcus was accidentally killed in the fighting and that's to be the end of it.'

'There's a gate behind the maze,' the grand duchess said quietly. 'The groundsmen use it. It leads onto an alley which leads onto a street. I don't know which one – only the servants use that path – but I'm sure you can find your way.'

Anne gave her a look, but said nothing.

The grand duchess reached out and hugged her crying son for a long moment, then sat back and held him at arm's-length. 'My dearest,' she said, 'these people are . . . are friends. Go with them, and do what they say, however demeaning it may be. They will keep you safe, and that is all that matters.'

'When will I see you again, Mama?' the boy asked, and I swallowed.

The look on the face of the Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg was unreadable, her complexion ashen.

We all knew that he never, ever would. Those were the times we lived in.

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Chapter 37

I led the Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg out of her house in manacles, surrounded by soldiers of the Queen's Own Fifth. Major Bakrylov himself walked beside me as we picked our way over the broken, bloody corpses of the massacred Sea Guard to cross the front lawn of the grand house.

Perhaps Lady Varnburg wished she had brought more than fifty men with her to Dannsburg, but in all honesty, it would have made no difference. The entire Sea Guard of Varnburg had been . . . what had she told me? Three hundred soldiers, perhaps. In Dannsburg they would have been facing the entire fucking army. She could have brought every man of them and the outcome would have been no different, save that more of her men would have died.

The dukes and feudal lords maintained their own militias for local security, as was entirely their right to do, but if they thought that might, in any way, ever, *ever* enable them to fight the government, then they were very sorely mistaken. Lady Varnburg had fifty men with swords and lances. Major Bakrylov of the Queen's Own Fifth had brought a hundred men, blasting weapons and a cannon. A fucking *cannon*, for Our Lady's sake, on the streets of Dannsburg. The feudal militias were outclassed by the army by an entire order of magnitude, and they always would be. So Dannsburg maintained its stranglehold over the provinces: with force and punitive taxes.

That was just how the world worked, and little enough to be done about it. Little enough to be done at the moment, anyway. Even then, I think I was beginning to consider the

future, to think beyond how things *were* to how they *might be*.

I'm not a general, Anne, I never have been. I'm just a fucking soldier, and I do what I'm told.

I remembered telling her that and at the time it had been true. But now? Now even Iagin seemed to be taking orders from me, or at least strong suggestions . . . so perhaps that had changed. I thought that perhaps *I* had changed. A general has to be always two or three moves ahead of the game. Tactics and strategy are different things, after all. Tactics win skirmishes, strategies win battles.

And logistics win wars.

I thought again about what Lady Lan Yetrova had told me she and her magicians had made, and about what I had stashed in the back of a waggon in the stableyard behind the Dripping Bucket. If I could secure the fruits of the magicians' labours, then I could give the flashstones to Sister Galina to wreak havoc with as she willed, and still be better armed and better prepared than I had ever been before. I had Crown Prince Marcus in protective custody, and even now Bloody Anne and Sir Eland were spiriting him away to a place hardly anyone except Iagin even knew existed.

And what of Major Bakrylov and his soldiers?

There are factions, even within the Queen's Men.

Oh, very good, old boy. Defiance, we like that.

I thought I could be reasonably sure that the major was on our side. Iagin certainly thought he was, and that was good, but this was too serious to take anyone else's word for anything.

I was brought back to the here and now by Konrad getting in my face as soon as the major and me led the Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg out through the shattered remains of her gates.

'Bring the waggon,' I said, before the cunt had the chance to say anything. 'It's done. I've got her.'

‘Where is her son?’ Konrad demanded at once.

‘Dead,’ I said shortly, and I turned away, making an end to it.

I didn’t owe that prick anything.

*

I did, unfortunately, owe Vogel an explanation, though. I’d barely had time to wash and eat, and bed was but a distant dream, when a messenger came to summon me to the house of law. I swallowed the last of my breakfast beer and stepped out of the Bountiful Harvest into the sharp dawn sunlight. I reluctantly climbed into the waiting carriage. I’d had no sleep at all last night, and I felt my head nodding as the carriage rocked and jolted its way down the street.

I dislike carriages. For all that they may look grand, they are uncomfortable and slow. I much prefer to ride, but of course, as a member of the governing council I could hardly be seen ahorse like some commoner. Oh no, that would never have done, would it? Dannsburg etiquette was a fine and complicated thing, and although I was happy to break it on occasion to make a point, as I had at Lord Dimitov’s reception, it was, by and large, best to keep up appearances as they were expected and not draw *too* much attention. Scandal was a fine tool, like a surgeon’s scalpel, to be used occasionally and deliberately and no more than that.

Fuck, how ridiculous, to care so much what people you had never met might think.

I snorted to myself and the messenger gave me a strange look, but I ignored her and looked out of the window as the carriage drew up outside the house of law. The boy from the slums of Ellinburg really had changed, I realised, and I thought back on what Anne had said to me the previous night.

I know Father Tomas, the army priest. He’s my best friend. Sir Tomas, the Queen’s Man, though? I’m not sure how well I

know him.

Perhaps she had a point there, but that thought would keep for later. Vogel was waiting for me, and he very much would not.

Iagin was already in Vogel's office when I walked in, and he gave me a nod in greeting.

'Tomas,' Vogel said as he looked up at me from his desk.

'Sir,' I said. 'It's done. The grand duchess is in the cells.'

'Good,' Vogel said, and held my gaze. 'And what of Crown Prince Marcus? Where is he?'

'Dead, sir,' I lied. 'An accidental casualty of the initial attack.'

'How the *fuck* did that happen?' Vogel demanded. 'What cretin allowed the heir to the throne to be killed in what should have been a simple arrest?'

I kept my face very still. 'Whoever authorised using a cannon against a residential property in what should have been a simple arrest,' I said, knowing damn well that must have been Vogel himself.

No one else in Dannsburg had that sort of authority and I knew it. I was very careful not to look at Iagin.

'It was the third hour of the blasted morning – he should have been abed!' Vogel snapped, ignoring my barb.

Perhaps I had been foolish, but I hadn't slept in far too long and I had just sent an innocent woman to her death, and I was in no mood for him that morning.

'Well he wasn't, sir,' I said.

Vogel glared at me. 'I need a body, at least.'

'Well, I'm sorry, but you can't have one. He was downstairs. The cannonball must have hit him dead-on. He's paste.'

Vogel hissed in irritation. 'Very well, then a wax effigy for the state funeral, the same as we did for the queen. That will have to suffice, I suppose.'

Iagin spoke for the first time. 'My Lord, if I may, who even needs to know he's dead? He was too young to be doing

state appearances – he was even still living with his mother instead of in the palace. Give me a few months and I can make the people forget he ever even existed.'

That suited Vogel, of course, but it suited me too. Trying to put Prince Marcus back on the throne after his public state funeral might have proved too much even for Iagin's skills at misinformation.

'Yes, I suppose so,' Vogel said. 'Very well, we continue on regardless. He was nothing but a figurehead anyway.'

'Aye sir,' I said; agreeing with his order allowed me to carry out my own wishes. 'Is there anything else pressing today? Only I haven't slept.'

Vogel gave me a look, then waved me away with a flick of his hand. 'Rest, Tomas,' he said. 'You've done well.'

That last sounded grudging to me, but it was of no matter. I was well past needing to be in Lord Vogel's good books. I gave him a short bow and left the room, and Iagin followed after me.

'I'm going your way,' Iagin said. 'Could I beg a ride in your carriage?'

'By all means,' I said. All horseshit, obviously, but he had more sense than to try to talk to me in the house of law, where you could never be sure there wasn't someone listening.

Once we were moving he leaned close to me and in a low voice, so the coachman couldn't overhear, asked, 'The boy's not really dead, is he?'

'No, of course not,' I said. 'I've got him tucked away somewhere safe.'

Iagin nodded, and he did me the professional courtesy of not asking where. He knew how things worked, and what the rules and the realities were, and I respected him for that. Kreov would probably tell him anyway, I knew that, but that couldn't be helped. There was nowhere else I could have hidden the lad.

‘Good,’ was all he said about that. ‘How did you get on with your friend the other day?’

‘They’re thinking about it,’ I said. ‘That’s only fair, given what I’m asking.’

What *I’m* asking, not what *we’re* asking.

That phrasing was quite deliberate on my part, and Iagin possibly hadn’t even noticed. He was fast coming to the acceptance that I was his boss and not the other way around, and that was good. A lot of it was in the language, and whether people would accept it or not. In the army the chain of command is rigidly defined, set out in tables of organisation with clear lines of responsibility and who answers to who, but in business it’s a far more fluid thing: the flow of respect and deference is organic, and subject to change upon the turn of any major event. There, the Queen’s Men worked far more like gangsters than soldiers, I had noticed.

‘Aye, I suppose so,’ Iagin had to allow. ‘Have they actually got something for us, though, if you can bring them around?’

I looked at him and showed him a slow smile. ‘Oh yes,’ I said. ‘I haven’t seen it yet, admittedly, but by the sounds of things they very much have.’

‘This wouldn’t have anything to do with the mysterious drain on the house of law’s treasury that I’ve been covering up for the last few months, would it?’

‘It might have,’ I admitted, and he gave me a look.

‘You bugger, Piety, I fucking *knew* that was you,’ he said, and I could see he was trying to hide a smile. ‘That’s how I knew you were on-side. You’ve got enough money of your own that you wouldn’t have been embezzling, so you had to be up to something unofficial.’

‘You should have come to me,’ I said, playing his own words back.

‘Why would you have trusted me?’ he asked, and I laughed at the stupid game we were playing.

‘It’s time we were straight with each other,’ I said, glad of the privacy the noisy carriage afforded us. ‘I’m going to kill Vogel, and I’m going to put Prince Marcus back on the throne.’

‘Why?’ Iagin asked me. ‘Killing Vogel I get, and the gods know he deserves it, but why Marcus?’

‘Why not? He’s the next in line, and more to the point, who the fuck else is going to do it? The gods only know I don’t want to be king, Iagin, but someone has to be.’

He met my eyes for a long moment. ‘Right answer,’ he said, and I knew that it was.

Nobody would fight to replace one usurper with another, after all. Hold up a rightful heir as a figurehead, though, a banner to rally behind, and you would bring people flocking to your side. Iagin knew the thoughts of the common people even better than I did, and how to manipulate them, and I knew we were of one mind here. Prince Marcus had to be our battle flag, poor lad.

‘What will Vogel do now?’ I asked him.

‘Carry on like nothing’s fucking happened, all being well,’ Iagin said. ‘I think I bought us some time, there. He’s happy sitting the regent’s throne, and he thinks that if I really can make the people forget about Marcus, then he can just have himself crowned sooner or later and no one will think anything of it. Truth be told, he’d probably be right if I wanted to help him do that, but I fucking well don’t.’

‘No,’ I said, ‘neither do I. Tell me, where does Sabine stand in this?’

Iagin rubbed his moustache and shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ he admitted. ‘She sent me a very strange letter last night, saying that she knew I’d worked it out and she wouldn’t betray me, but wouldn’t help either.’

‘Fuck me,’ I said. ‘She sent the same letter to me.’

‘So she knows about us both, and probably that we’re working together,’ Iagin said. ‘That . . . that is not fucking good.’

It wasn't, I had to allow. Our lives effectively hung on the balance of Mother Ruin's will, and I didn't like that one little bit.

'Is there any way we can get rid of her?' I asked.

Iagin shook his head. 'Realistically, no. I suppose we *could* remove her, but she's Vogel's own fucking wife. Estranged they might be, but if anything happened to her, he would tear the city down brick by brick to find out who did it.'

'So we have to trust her, is that what you're saying? We have to trust Mother Ruin not to betray us? Say that out loud and see how wise it sounds, Iagin.'

'I know, I know,' he said.

But he didn't have an answer to that either, and by then we were back at the Bountiful Harvest anyway and it was almost time for lunch. I could feel my lost night's sleep weighing down on me like a cannon on my shoulders. Lady's truth, but I wasn't getting any younger, and I couldn't take sleepless nights in my stride any more, the way I had in my youth.

I stepped down from the carriage and looked up at him. 'I'd invite you to eat with me, but in all honesty I'm fucked,' I said. 'I need to go to bed. Take the carriage to wherever you're really going, and just send it back afterwards.'

'Aye, Tomas,' Iagin said, and in that moment he sounded exactly like Bloody Anne.

A friend, yes, but a subordinate too.

I had him.

Chapter 38

I'm an absolute bastard, aren't I?

Whoever's reading these memoirs, I know that's what you're thinking. Tomas fucking Piety, user and abuser. Is there anyone he truly cares about, anyone he won't use to further his own ends?

Aye, actually there fucking was, and it was my son Billy.

I had only meant to have a nap to get myself together but I slept not only through the afternoon but the night as well, that's just how exhausted I was. I woke sometime around dawn and found it was Godsdays morning. I had spent half of Coinsday at the house of law in a daze of sleep deprivation and the rest of it actually asleep, and the disorientation was giving me a headache. It took me a moment to get myself together and accept that it was time for breakfast and not the dinner that I had obviously slept through the evening before. Gods, but I was hungry.

I got up, pissed into the pot, had a wash and a shave and got dressed, then paused. Was this really the right thing to do?

I thought it was. Anne was at the Dripping Bucket now, watching over Crown Prince Marcus, and Rosie and Luka could reach me easily enough by messenger when they needed to. Dannsburg wasn't *that* big, after all. There wasn't really any need for me to still be living at the Bountiful Harvest.

I left my room, walked down the corridor, and tapped on Billy's door. 'Are you in there, lad?'

A moment later Mina opened the door, and she looked at me. Her eyes were too big and too bright, and her skin was stretched taut over the bones of her skull. Her lips were too

thin, which made her teeth look too big. Combined, the effect was fucking alarming. There was no hiding it any more, there was something badly wrong with her.

I looked at this young girl, standing there in her long linen nightshirt, and I shivered.

‘Hello,’ she said.

‘Is Billy awake?’ I asked her, trying to hide my discomfort.

‘I think so,’ she said.

‘Aye, Da,’ I heard from inside the darkened room, then I heard his feet moving on the bare boards and he opened the shutters a little to let some light in. ‘What is it?’

I swallowed. If anything, Billy looked even worse than she did. He was barely sixteen, perhaps seventeen at the most, and he was starting to lose his hair. There was a distinct bald spot on the back of his head, and I had never noticed that before.

Feast.

I suppressed a shudder. Perhaps he was just losing his hair early, as some lads did. Back in the army, I had known a man who had gone almost completely bald by his twentieth year, and no one thought anything of it. It was just one of those things, like scars and battle shock – the legacy of soldiers. No one paid any mind to that sort of thing, but these were children and they looked like corpses walking.

‘Billy, lad,’ I said, ‘I was wondering . . .’ I tailed off as he turned to look at me.

‘What is it, Da?’

He had called me Da, and fuck what he looked like. That was all that really mattered, wasn’t it? That he thought of me as his da the same way I thought of him as my own son.

‘Your ma has invited us to move back into her house. Your old room back in your ma’s house, you remember? And I’m sure she won’t mind you bringing Mina with you. What do you say?’

Truth be told, I wasn’t sure about that at all, but I thought Ailsa could be persuaded to accept Mina if it meant she got

Billy too. I could see how Mina was hard to like, for all that she was respectful enough, but I knew Ailsa loved our Billy. Didn't I?

Ailsa was Sister Deceit, after all. It was very, very hard to know what Ailsa thought or felt about anyone. Including me. *Especially* me.

Lady's sake, I had to be honest with myself about this. Whether Ailsa wanted Billy back or not was ultimately about whether she wanted *me* back or not. Not that she had ever really had me in the first place, I supposed, but we were at least legally man and wife.

My daughter is a complicated woman, Tomas.

My sasura had told me that once, and I still wasn't sure what he had meant by it.

Yes, I had publicly shamed her in the news sheets with my stupid stunt with Rosie at Lord Dimitov's house, but then, she had abandoned me in Ellinburg when I had needed her the most, so I reckoned we were even on that score.

I scrubbed a hand over my face and waited for him to say something.

He didn't.

He just looked at me for a long, long time, until I began to find his stare disconcerting. I had a feeling there was something Billy wanted to say and was forcing himself not to. That wasn't like him. He usually just blurted out his prophetic announcements or messages from Our Lady or whatever the fuck they were, no matter who was listening and what they might think. But not now he wasn't, and that made me more uneasy than I could have said.

I have to confess I cracked before he did.

'Aye, well,' I said at last. 'Think on it, lad.'

'Oh, I will,' Billy promised me, and I really didn't know how to take that.

I gave it up for a bad job and went down to the common room to find Rosie and some breakfast.

She was already there with Luka, and they were both busying themselves over bacon and eggs and fresh crusty bread. I waved over a serving girl and ordered the same, and small beer to wash it down.

‘Morning,’ Rosie said as I took my seat.

‘Tomas,’ Luka said, but he was still reticent around me after the bollocking I had given him and I did no more than grunt in return.

‘Any news that matters?’ I asked Rosie.

She looked up at me from under a fall of thick red hair and slowly blinked once.

That meant ‘yes, but I can’t talk about it in the open room’, I knew that. I nodded shortly and took my breakfast as it was delivered, picked up a stack of the morning’s news sheets, and fell on the food like a starving urchin.

That was done in short order, and washed down with another mug of small beer, before I began to leaf through the news sheets. The arrest of the Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg was all over the front pages, of course. We had used a fucking cannon, for Our Lady’s sake, and deployed a hundred soldiers on the streets of the capital city. The entire Sea Guard had been massacred, down to the last man. In all, nearly eighty people had died that night. There was no way it *wasn’t* going to be in the headlines.

Regicide! screamed one paper.

Arch-Traitor arrested! shouted another.

Only one called it an outrage and blamed the overreach of the Queen’s Men. I thought Konrad would soon be paying a visit to whoever had printed that one. I knew it wouldn’t take long to find out who that was.

I put the news sheets down and followed Rosie into the private dining room that served as my office.

‘What is it?’ I asked her.

‘First Councillor Markova has a meeting with Lord Vogel at noon,’ she said. ‘At her insistence.’

I raised an eyebrow.

‘*Her* insistence?’

‘Aye.’

‘Fuck,’ I said.

No one *insisted* on a meeting with Lord Vogel, save perhaps a real monarch, and we hadn’t had one of those since the queen had died. I thought First Councillor Markova might be starting to dangerously over-estimate her authority.

‘It’s at the house of law, obviously.’ Rosie said. ‘I’m amazed she even managed to get the meeting, but he was never going to go to her now, was he?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Vogel sends summons, he doesn’t answer them.’

‘Yes, quite,’ Rosie agreed. ‘What do you think she wants, Tomas?’

‘I don’t know,’ I admitted. ‘I’m sure she wants the guild of masons putting back in their place, but she was hardly likely to force a meeting over that. From what I saw in the sheets, I’ll warrant it’s more likely something to do with the grand duchess.’

‘She doesn’t want to poke *that*,’ Rosie said. ‘Is she stupid or something?’

I shook my head. ‘First Councillor Markova is anything but stupid,’ I said, ‘but she is rigid – a moral woman, and not exactly flexible.’

‘She was on our payroll,’ Rosie pointed out.

‘Aye,’ I said, ‘but consider this, Rosie. A moral woman, a patriot, offered the opportunity to serve her country and support her queen? Why *wouldn’t* she take our coin to do what she thought was right anyway? It’s only now, when we do something she *doesn’t* think is right, that things become difficult for her. And by now it’s too late.’

Rosie said slowly, ‘This is how he does it, isn’t it? Makes them believe in the government, makes them think they can do no wrong, and then when they actually *do* wrong, people find themselves excusing it so they don’t look like fools.’

‘Aye, sometimes,’ I said. ‘Sometimes he’s just blackmailing folk, and others will simply take a bribe for the money and fuck their conscience, but that’s how it works for some people, yes. But not Markova. She’ll want to have her say.’

‘And how will he take that?’

I looked at Rosie and shook my head. ‘I need to go to the house of law,’ I said.

*

I was glad I had, as well. To my surprise, Lord Vogel was in the mess, where he very seldom went, taking tea with Konrad.

I poured myself a brandy and joined them. Aye, it was only the eleventh hour of the morning by then, but fuck it. I was all over the place with my sleep, and if I wanted a brandy, then I was having one. Neither of them said anything about it, at least.

‘Good morning, Tomas,’ Vogel said, and from the way his gaze lingered on my brandy glass for a moment, I thought perhaps he was saying something, but by then I didn’t give a shit what he thought.

I lifted the glass to my mouth and took a sip. ‘Good morning, Provost Marshal.’

‘I’m glad you’re here, actually,’ he said. ‘I have a most unprecedented meeting with First Councillor Markova in an hour, and I want you to be there. I know you grew close to her on the governing council.’

I had, he was right. We had found a friendship of sorts, bonding over our work and a shared interest in the ownership and breeding of racehorses.

‘Aye, I can do that,’ I said.

‘Good of you,’ Vogel said dryly, and I could feel Konrad watching me out of the corner of his eye.

I knew I should take greater care how I spoke to Vogel, but I've never been one to bow and scrape to those who think themselves my betters. It was a wonder I had ever managed to advance myself in the army, but I think the captain had made allowances for my attitude because he had badly needed a replacement priest, and I was the only man in our company who was even remotely suited for the role.

'What does Markova want to see you about?' I asked, to fill the silence as much as anything.

'What do you think?' he snapped. 'The grand duchess, of course.'

'Aye, obviously,' I replied, 'but what does she *want*? What's it to her that we arrested a woman she's probably never even met?'

Vogel stared into his tea for a moment. 'First Councillor Markova is burdened by a conscience, Tomas, and a somewhat slavish adherence to the law as it is written. Neither of these things are useful, or conducive to the smooth transaction of our business. I know you yourself put her forward for First Councillor when I was trying to give the job to you, and in all honesty, up until now she has actually done a better job than you would ever have done, as you predicted she would. Now, though? Now she presents a problem.'

'I see,' I said.

Markova would no doubt be wanting to see evidence, and reasonable grounds for arrest, and other inconvenient things that the house of law simply didn't have. Arresting a grand duchess was quite something, even for the house of law, but when she was also the mother of the heir to the throne? That was quite another, and even *that* was without anyone knowing that Vogel thought said heir had been accidentally killed in the process and was covering up his death. Markova wouldn't know that, of course, but she was bound to ask after his safety if nothing else, and possibly even demand to see him.

I realised just what a difficult position I had put Lord Vogel in, and I sipped brandy to hide my smile.
Fuck him.

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Chapter 39

By noon I was in Vogel's office with him and Konrad and Iagin. Even Sabine had shown her face, and I didn't know what to make of that. Ailsa and Ilse were the only Queen's Men absent, although I knew Ailsa was busy at the palace and Ilse seldom left her little Hell in the undercroft of the house of law.

First Councillor Markova was shown in just as the great clocktower in the market square was striking twelve. A noon meeting meant noon, to Vogel's mind, and not a minute earlier or later. Konrad and Iagin and I all stood to bow to her as she entered the room.

Vogel didn't. He remained seated behind his desk, and merely raised his head to look up at her in acknowledgement of her presence. Sabine ignored her altogether. I wondered what she had been like during her time as Provost Marshal, and the only word I could come up with was 'terrifying'.

It was all about power, as I have written. In the same way I had spoken to Iagin in the carriage, framing it in terms of what I wanted, so Vogel greeted the most powerful woman in the realm as though he was doing her a favour by seeing her at all. I have noted before that he could have given me lessons in intimidation and I dare say he still could have done, but one thing had changed.

I didn't give a fuck what he thought any more. I had set myself against him, even if he didn't know it yet. I was done with him.

I will not be bullied, not ever.

Never again. Not after my da.

Never.

That was a thing the Provost Marshal didn't know, but sooner or later he would come to learn it, and I vowed that in Our Lady's name.

'My Lord Chief Judiciar,' First Councillor Markova greeted him, using the formal title that she officially knew him by, although I was sure she must have known he was also the Provost Marshal of the dreaded Queen's Men. 'I must protest.'

'Oh?' Vogel asked, meeting her eyes with a frosty stare. 'And what exactly is it that you feel you must protest against, First Councillor?'

'The arrest of the Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg,' Markova said, and I could see the colour rising in her cheeks as she started to get angry. 'The use of military force on the streets of the city. This was the jurisdiction of the City Guard, but you sent in the army without the prior authorisation of the governing council. That is against the law!'

'Then change the law,' Vogel said. 'Or rip it up, I really don't care. I've done it now.'

'And where is the Crown Prince, now?'

'Who?' Vogel asked.

A very cold silence fell over the room, and I could see from the look on First Councillor Markova's face that she had realised, perhaps for the first time, that she was staring at a true apex predator.

Oh yes, the presiding head of the governing council had suddenly found herself well and truly out of her depth, in dark and shark-infested waters. Such was the world of the Queen's Men. I knew that, but I wondered if Markova truly had when she had begun to take Vogel's coin.

Serving the crown, serving the realm as an agent of a secret government body, how romantic must that have sounded to the staunch patriot I was sure she thought herself? But when the realities of it came home to roost, well. There it was.

This was the world of the Queen's Men, as First Councillor Markova was fast coming to realise. She had risen too high too fast to possibly believe she had done it on her own merits. She must have known that the house of law had been behind her landslide election win – that / had been, in fact, although perhaps she hadn't grasped that particular detail, I had to allow. All the same, her support in the governing council had been overwhelming, and her challengers non-existent. Of course there had to be a reason for that – and that reason had been the house of law.

'No,' she protested. 'No, Lord Vogel, it won't stand! Due process of law must be upheld, even in extreme circumstances. What are we as a nation if any branch of the government can act at will outside of due process? There must be checks and balances. No one is above the law!'

'The Queen's Men are, that's the whole point of us,' he said. He looked at Konrad. 'I've heard enough.'

Konrad rose and drew his blade and he had rammed it into her side before I could so much as move to stop him. I heard the crunch as it punched through her stays. Her eyes opened very wide for a moment, and then she crumpled at his feet with the blood pooling around her on the smoothly sanded boards of Vogel's office floor.

First Councillor Markova died where she had stood, and the rule of law died with her.

'The governing council—' I began, but Vogel silenced me with a withering look.

'I am disbanding the governing council with immediate effect,' he said. 'Their usefulness is at an end. The looming threat of war grants all executive power to the throne. In this time of extreme peril, and with no eligible monarch, the Regent must be free to govern unimpeded by petty bureaucrats.'

His face was impassive, giving nothing away, but I knew what was happening here.

‘Isn’t that skirting treason?’ I asked him, wanting to provoke the answer.

‘History is written by the victors, Tomas,’ he said. ‘It’s only treason if you lose.’

I felt Sabine’s touch, light as spiders on the back of my wrist.

‘Don’t you see, Tomas?’ she purred. ‘It really doesn’t matter any more.’

I supposed it didn’t, at that.

I was too late. Vogel’s coup was complete.

*

I couldn’t get fucking drunk enough. I swear to Our Lady, there was no amount of brandy that could have taken away the look in First Councillor Markova’s eyes as Konrad’s blade punched through her side. Shock, fear, shame, perhaps the final realisation of what she had been part of. I didn’t really have the words to describe the manner of her dying. This was a woman who had genuinely believed she had been doing the right thing, and had been most suddenly and brutally murdered by the very people she thought she had been serving.

And I had effectively put her in the job that got her killed.

I banged down another brandy and shouted for Beast.

‘What’s up boss?’ he asked.

‘Round up Sam,’ I said. ‘We’re going out.’

Beast gave me a dubious look. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Do what I tell you,’ I snarled, and he went and found Sam.

Together we left the Bountiful Harvest and headed south on foot, towards the river. The cold night air was working wonders sobering me up, which I was grateful for, but I was still a little unsteady on my feet when we pushed our way into the Skanian’s Head.

The place was quieter than usual, what with it being Godsdag evening and folk having to get up and work the

next morning. I made my way to the bar and caught the taverner's eye.

'It's you again,' he observed, which wasn't helpful in any way.

'Shut it,' I said, and flicked a silver mark across the counter. 'I want to speak to Sister Galina.'

'Who?' he asked.

I just wasn't in the mood. I lunged over the bar and grabbed the man by the front of his stained apron, and dragged him half over the counter. Beast had hold of him in a moment, one massive arm wrapped around the man's thick neck in a stranglehold.

I heard commotion behind us, the hushed, excited conversations of watching patrons, but Sam turned to face them, crossing his own bulging arms over his barrel chest, and we weren't disturbed.

'I said,' I told him, 'I want to speak to Sister Galina. You know fucking well who that is, and you'll know where to find her. Now, you send one of your boys to find her and bring her to me, or Beast here is going to start breaking your fingers. Tell her Father Tomas wants her. She'll come.'

Beast gave the man's neck a final squeeze to make my point, then let him go.

He staggered back and took a great wheezing breath, rubbing at his bruised throat as he did so. 'J-Jack,' he called out, his voice hoarse. 'C'mere.'

A lad came out of the kitchens wearing an apron, and I was surprised to see it was the orphan boy of Kreov's who had tried to rob me. It looked like he had decided that an honest job was the safest way of making his contribution to the Dripping Bucket's coffers, and that was good. His eyes widened when he saw me: he clearly hadn't forgotten the man who had broken his nose in an alley and then calmly taken a piss in front of him.

'What is it?'

‘Go and find the Lady’s Daughter,’ the taverner said quietly. ‘Tell her Father Tomas wants her at the Head, right now.’

‘Aye, right you are,’ Jack said, and he gave me and Beast another wary look as he retreated back into the kitchens. Shortly after came the bang of a door closing.

‘Wise move,’ I told the taverner. ‘We’ll have brandy while we’re waiting.’

He poured for the three of us, and was wise enough not to attempt to charge me for it. It was only about twenty minutes before Jack returned and told me that the nun was waiting for me in the kitchen.

The thought that a midden like the Skanian’s Head had a kitchen and therefore presumably sold food made me feel a bit ill, truth be told, but I turned towards the door.

‘Stay here,’ I told the lads, when they made to follow me. ‘She won’t hurt me.’

I didn’t think she would, anyway, and I wanted to talk to her in private.

I ducked through the low doorway and into a kitchen that stank of boiled cabbage and rot. A rat skittered away from my boots as I entered, but I ignored it. Sister Galina was sitting at the stained wooden table, but when I entered she stood up and dipped me a low curtsy.

‘Blessing, Father?’ she said. ‘My name is Sister Galina, daughter of Our Lady.’

I reached out and put my hand on her forehead.

‘Our Lady go with you, daughter,’ I said.

She smiled.

‘Thank you, Father. What can I do for you?’

‘There have been riots,’ I said. ‘Unrest.’

‘Of course, Father. After what you told me . . . I couldn’t keep that knowledge to myself. I have been preaching the Gospel of the Martyr to the people, and now that they know why she truly ascended, now they know of her divine mother’s murder at the hands of the one she should have

been able to trust the most, they are angry. They *rage*, Father, rage against the house of law and everything it stands for!’

I met her eyes and held her gaze for a long time. I was taking a gamble here, I knew, and if Lady Lan Yetrova turned me down, Iagin would kill me for this, but I honestly didn’t think that she would. Not since the arrest of the grand duchess.

‘They rage very ineffectually,’ I told her. ‘What use is rioting south of the river, when no one who matters cares what happens here? Go north, cause trouble in the wealthy streets. Burn things down, blow things up. Make a *noise*, Sister, in the Martyr’s holy name.’

‘I wish that we could, Father,’ she said, ‘but although I have many strong men in my flock, we have precious little in the way of weapons.’

‘Well now,’ I said, and I smiled at her, ‘I can help with that. Come with me, and I will bestow Our Lady’s gifts upon you.’

‘Our Lady’s gifts? I don’t understand, Father.’

‘Sister Galina, how would you and your flock like thirty flashstones?’

Her eyes grew very wide indeed. ‘*Thirty?*’

‘Aye,’ I said.

‘With thirty flashstones we could destroy the house of law itself!’

‘No,’ I said, ‘you couldn’t, I’m afraid. It’s the strongest building in Dannsburg except for the castle itself. What you *could* do, though, is to make just about every noble in the city very unhappy indeed. Can you imagine the chaos that even ten bombed mansions would cause for Lord Vogel and the governing council? Three flashstones will be enough to ruin the grandest house, I would have thought. Just one thing: neither the Lan Yetrova estate nor the Shapoor houses are to be touched: the Lady Lan Yetrova and the Shapoors are allies.’

I very much hoped that was true. It *had* to be true, or I was done.

Sister Galina's eyes gleamed with palpable excitement. 'Yes, Father,' she said, 'I understand. We shall do Our Lady's work in the name of the Ascended Martyr. Blessed be Her name!'

I inclined my head. 'Blessed be,' I said.

We were out the back door and into the alley five minutes later, with Sam and Beast behind us. I led the way to the Dripping Bucket, and knocked on the closed front door. Eyes appeared at the hatch and a moment later, the door was open and Sir Eland was clapping me on the shoulder.

'Evening, boss,' he said, and then his eyes took in the nun beside me and he looked a question at me.

'This is Sister Galina,' I said. 'She's a friend.'

'Sister,' Eland said, and there was something close to respect in his tone.

He let us into the inn that was an orphanage, and I saw that things had changed some since I had last been there.

That gold crown I had given Beast to give to Kreov had obviously been spent well, and there were proper bunks now for the orphans to sleep in, and by the looks of it, enough for most of the Pious Men too. The place was crowded, aye, but the fire burned bright and it was warm and the air held the lingering smell of bacon and fresh bread, and that was good.

I found Anne and Black Billy playing cards at a table at the back of the room.

'Anne,' I said, 'this is Sister Galina. She's on our side. Is the waggon still loaded?'

'Aye, Tomas,' Anne said, her frown deepening as she looked from me to the nun and back again. 'Why?'

'Because I'm giving that waggon and everything in it to Sister Galina and her loyal flock of faithful believers. She knows, Anne. I told her. And she knows what the right thing to do is. Where's our young friend?'

‘Upstairs with Flo,’ Anne said.

She stood up and put a hand on my shoulder, and gently but firmly steered me away from the others.

‘Can you trust her with him?’ I asked, before she could speak.

‘Aye,’ Anne said. ‘I know Flo’s a hard bitch, Tomas, but she’s good with the children. She had a little one of her own, before the plague took him off to Our Lady. That’s why she volunteered, did you know that? Anyway, she’s doing a good job. Most of the orphans like her, and even Marcus is starting to trust her, even if he does keep asking when he can see his Mama.’

‘You know she’s probably already dead,’ I said, but Anne changed the subject.

‘What the fuck are you doing, giving all our blasting weapons to some nun?’

‘Causing a distraction,’ I said. ‘A diversionary attack, so they won’t see the real one coming.’

‘You’re going to start a fucking civil war if you’re not careful, Tomas Piety.’

‘No,’ I said, ‘I’m not. I’m going to start a fucking revolution.’

Chapter 40

The moment of truth came the next morning in the form of an invitation from the Lady Lan Yetrova, inviting me to visit her at the Lan Yetrova Summer House and Gardens out in the countryside, some fifteen miles from the city. I had never heard of the place, and when I showed the invitation to Luka, he looked as bewildered as I felt.

‘I know some of the stupidly rich folk have more than one house,’ he said. ‘They keep their palaces in the city for functions and entertaining, and then have somewhere else out in the country where they can go riding and hawking and hunting and all the other pointless shit rich folk do because they don’t have to work and need to fill their time somehow. Some sort of cottage or something, I suppose.’

‘I suppose,’ I agreed. ‘I’ll see when I get there, no doubt.’

I took Beast and Sam with me for the road, and Rosie as well. I wasn’t quite sure why, but Lady Lan Yetrova had met her before, and I wasn’t sure what we would be walking into. I just had a feeling that I might want her with me.

The four of us rode rather than suffer the trials of travelling by carriage, and so made the journey in a little over three hours. I hadn’t wanted to push the horses, in case we might need to come back in a hurry. As we crested a rise and looked down over an expanse of woodland, Sam shaded his eyes with a hand and pointed into the distance.

‘The fuck’s that huge building?’ he asked.

I shook my head slowly. Unless I was very much mistaken, the huge building we could see, set in extensive parkland with a lake behind it and a long, sweeping drive leading to it from the gatehouse about half a mile further down the road, was the Lan Yetrova Summer House and Gardens.

‘Some sort of cottage’, indeed.

I knew the Lord Lan Yetrov had been rich, but this was something else – and Lady Lan Yetrova had inherited the whole lot when I fed her loathsome abusive husband to his own bear. She wasn’t going to say no to me, was she?

I realised that it was all too possible that she might.

Aye, she owed me, but so what? What is a debt to someone so staggeringly wealthy – if she didn’t honour it, what the fuck was I going to do about it? A hundred flashstones wouldn’t have brought this place down, and never mind the weapons of her own she might have since spending the summer deep in research with the magicians and the university. I was entirely at her mercy here, and I knew it.

Last night I had given our entire stock of blasting weapons to a mad nun because I had been drunk and wanted to make a gesture, and a boast. Lady’s sake, I was losing my grip. I think First Councillor Markova’s murder and the guilt I felt over it had been the final straw. On top of Jochan’s death – on top of everything – that had just about broken me.

So here I was, utterly at the mercy of a woman so staggeringly rich I could barely comprehend it. I wondered if anything had exploded in Dannsburg yet, and laughed despite myself.

I felt Rosie’s eyes on me, appraising. ‘Are you all right, Tomas?’ she asked me.

‘Aye,’ I said, and wiped a tear from my eye.

Hold it together, I told myself. It’s just battle shock. Don’t let them see it. Don’t let anyone see it. Bury it. Bury it deep, and fight on.

‘Really?’

‘Aye,’ I said again. ‘It’s just something Luka said, before we left. That rich people have places in the countryside, like some sort of cottage. Fucking look at it, Rosie. Some sort of cottage!’

I laughed again, and I blinked back the tears and nudged my horse back into a walk.

‘That’s her *house*?’ Sam asked, as he finally grasped the situation. ‘What, all of it, like?’

‘Aye, Sam, lad,’ I said. ‘That’s her house. That’s her *spare* house, if you like. The fancy one’s back in Dannsburg.’

‘Well fuck,’ he said, and that was a pretty accurate assessment, to my mind.

I thought of Jack and the other orphans crammed together in the Dripping Bucket, and that only because of Kreov’s generosity and enterprising nature. If not for him, they would have been on the streets, where they would long since have been hanged for vagrancy. I thought of that, and I thought of how Lady Lan Yetrova and people liked her lived.

I’m going to start a fucking revolution.

I wasn’t, of course; I was going to put the rightful heir back on the throne and do everything in my power to restore order to the bloody country, but I realised in that moment just how easy it would have been. Perhaps revolution would have been the moral choice, but it wasn’t the practical one, and I am ever the pragmatist. Revolutions bring chaos, and chaos is bad for business – not just my sort of business, but everyone’s. Farmers, weavers, smiths, carpenters, fishermen: everyone needs a certain stability in which to work and trade, and revolution would have taken that away in a heartbeat. I had to return the country to prosperity, and that first and foremost meant keeping us out of any more fucking wars.

But to do that, I knew I had to cause at least a little chaos, a controlled form of violence, to remove Vogel. It was the difference between the war sword and the surgeon’s knife, I told myself, and I held that that was true.

We walked our horses the last half a mile or so to the gatehouse, where five armed men in the livery of House Lan Yetrova barred the way with suspicious frowns on their

faces. I showed my invitation, complete with the lady's own personal seal, and we were somewhat grudgingly admitted. After Luka's talk of nobles riding and hunting and hawking I had rather foolishly assumed that arriving a horse rather than in a carriage would be perfectly acceptable, but it seemed I had been wrong about that.

Fuck it, what did it matter? She would say yes or she wouldn't, and I supposed our manner of transportation would have little enough to do with her decision. One of the men on the gate blew three ascending notes on a trumpet, obviously a signal of visitors approaching, and by the time we had made our way up the drive to the front of the huge grand house there were footmen waiting with drinks, and grooms to take our horses to the stables.

I dismounted and accepted a tall glass of wine that I didn't want, and sipped it to be polite. A moment later a very tall, very thin steward descended the steps that led up to the grand front doors and offered me an elaborate bow.

'Sir Tomas,' he said, his accent like perfect Dannsburg cut-glass, 'welcome to the Lan Yetrova Summer House and Gardens.'

'My thanks,' I said, handing my somehow already empty wine glass to a hovering footman. 'I thank your Lady for her kind invitation, and would be grateful if you could show my secretary and me into her presence. My men, of course, would be pleased to take refreshment below stairs.'

'Of course,' the steward said, although he eyed Sam and Beast with a good deal of mistrust. 'Please, follow me, sir. Madam.'

Rosie wasn't wearing the knot that day, obviously, and she was doing a fine job of acting the secretary to a respected member of the governing council – the governing council that had probably been dissolved by now, to be sure, but word of that wouldn't have reached this far yet. As far as the steward was concerned, I was Sir Tomas Piety, councillor for the North Ward, come calling on her ladyship

at her personal invitation. I was sure there was nothing unusual in that, and if the fact that we had ridden rather than come in a carriage was unconventional, it was well known from the news sheets that Councillor Sir Tomas Piety was something of an unconventional gentleman.

The steward led us into the grand house with its towering hall and huge, branching staircase. I had been expecting to suffer the formality of drawing rooms and footmen and guarded conversations, but instead, he took us all the way through the vast house to a garden room facing the lake. There was the Lady Lan Yetrova, sitting at a desk covered with papers, in a room that was more window than wall. The view over the lake was truly magnificent. There were books everywhere, piled on settles and open on tables, many with handwritten notes tucked into them and sticking out from between their pages, and I could smell the tinge of hot wax that told me she had recently sealed a letter.

The steward cleared his throat. 'Sir Tomas Piety, ma'am, and his secretary.'

Lady Lan Yetrova looked up from her work and smiled, and waved vaguely towards one of the settles that was covered in books. 'Good to see you, Sir Tomas, and thank you for coming,' she said. 'Please, make yourselves comfortable. Oh you can move those, it's fine – don't disturb my notes!'

That last was snapped at Rosie, who had been about to lift a pile of handwritten sheets from between the pages of an open book.

'Just close the book over them, dear,' she went on, still writing as she spoke. 'Yes, well done. You can be assured, Sir Tomas, that in my garden room we can speak in absolute confidence. One moment.'

Rosie gave me a look that told me she didn't appreciate being spoken to like a child or some sort of trained dog, but I had to ignore it. The social system was what it was. Without the Queen's Warrant, I would have been so far below Lady Lan Yetrova that I couldn't imagine I would ever

have been invited to the Lan Yetrova Summer House and Gardens, Councillor for the North Ward or not. And my secretary? Not a chance.

Eventually Lady Lan Yetrova put down her pen and turned to face us. She met my eyes and was silent for a moment.

‘The Grand Duchess of Varnburg has been arrested for regicide,’ she said, as if this was something I could have somehow failed to notice. ‘Her son is the heir to the throne, and no one I have spoken to knows where he is, so I can only assume his current position is no better than hers. Lord Vogel deployed the army – deployed cannon even – on the streets of the capital against the property of one of the oldest, richest and most noble houses in the country, and he appears to have got away with it. If the governing council said anything, I don’t know what it was. First Councillor Markova seems to have disappeared.’

‘Markova’s dead,’ I said bluntly. ‘Vogel had her murdered, right in front of me. He thinks the heir is dead too. He’s not – I’ve got him in protective custody, and I won’t give him up, whatever happens.’

I thought I had the measure of Lady Lan Yetrova. She was part of the old order, the true aristocracy. She wanted things to stay as they had always been, and why wouldn’t she? The gods only knew she had done well out of that order, although at a monstrous personal cost that I was sure she had never known she was agreeing to pay when she had married her cunt of a husband. The status quo, that was the lever that moved her.

‘I’m very glad to hear that, Sir Tomas,’ she said. ‘The last thing this country can bear now is civil war or revolution.’

‘I agree,’ I said, although part of me thought a revolution was what it badly needed.

Not now, though: things were too fragile. Revolution now would only bring famine and bloodshed and, inevitably, another war. No, that had to be avoided at all costs, I knew.

‘Before we proceed, there is something you need to understand,’ she went on. ‘My head of security is *very* thorough. She is a former Sacred Blade of Messia, as your own quiet man is.’

She caught my sudden start and laughed. ‘Oh yes, Sir Tomas, I know the term, and I know all about Cutter, and about him and your brother. I’m sorry for your loss, by the way. You have to understand that I have more money than I could ever know what to do with, and if there’s one thing that money is good for, it’s finding things out. I *adore* knowledge. I know I look like a vapid socialite with no care beyond gemstones and gowns, but I can assure you that is entirely a false face. I know you, because I have taken the time and invested a substantial amount of gold to find out all about you. I know who you are married to, and why you are estranged. I know you are a Queen’s Man, and that your secretary is a former whore who is now a very accomplished spy. You did very well at Lord Dimitov’s party, by the way, my dear.

‘I know your adopted son is a witch, and so is his young lady friend. I know the woman called Bloody Anne is your best friend in the world. I know all these people, Sir Tomas, and I know where they sleep at night, and I will tell you this: you are alone with me, and you are armed, and if you wished to, you could kill me. But if you do, every single one of those people will die – everyone you care about, everyone you love, even your poor, half-blind aunt in Ellinburg and her crippled lover. I have left *very* strict instructions. Do you understand me?’

I had thought I had the measure of Lady Lan Yetrova, and it turned out I had been very, *very* wrong. The woman was a fucking shark and no mistake.

Release the bear.

‘Aye,’ I said calmly, ‘I understand you very well, but I can assure you I have no intention of killing you. I’m not entirely sure why you thought I might?’

‘Because you are a Queen’s Man, and you asked me to commit what amounts to treason,’ she said. ‘Why in the world should I have taken you at face-value?’

I had to concede that was a fair point. I am a blunt man, I’ll allow, and I was still unused to this world of false faces and lies and constant deceptions.

‘But you did it anyway,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Yes, I did. Partly because I thought you might actually be telling me the truth, and partly for the advancement of science. As a result, we have discovered something truly remarkable, Sir Tomas.’

Now we were finally getting somewhere. ‘Is that why we’re out here in the middle of nowhere instead of in the city with normal people?’ I asked her. ‘So no one can hear the explosions?’

‘Oh yes,’ she said, her eyes gleaming.

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Chapter 41

We rode out across the beautiful natural parkland that formed the grounds of the Lan Yetrova Summer House and Gardens, and deep into the woodland beyond. We were, I was assured, still on her land. The Lady Lan Yetrova reined up at the edge of a deep pit that I would have taken for a quarry if the walls hadn't been so blackened with soot.

'What's this then?' I had to ask.

'This is, as you said earlier, exactly why we're in the middle of nowhere,' she said. 'I thought a little demonstration might be in order.'

We weren't alone. There were people down in the pit, militia in the livery of the House of Lan Yetrova, but someone was riding towards us and he wore the distinctive blue and white of the house of magicians. Behind him came another rider, a stern-looking woman in the formal black robes of the university. She kicked her horse into a trot and overtook the magician, who was a poor rider.

She reined up before her ladyship and announced, 'The latest batch is ready to test. I think this one is a little more stable – we managed to bring it all the way out here in a cart without any accidents, at any rate.'

'Good, horses cost money,' Lady Lan Yetrova said.

I blinked, wondering what she meant, until I saw the look of disgust on Rosie's face.

'Shall we—?'

'Yes, yes,' the magician said as he finally joined us. 'Show her Ladyship what we have achieved. I think this mixture is even better.'

'Observe, Sir Tomas,' Lady Lan Yetrova said.

I watched two serving men lift a crate down from the back of a parked waggon and carefully carry it down the curving path that led to the bottom of the quarry or pit or whatever it was. They were carrying it oh-so-carefully, as though it contained a sleeping baby they were desperate not to wake.

‘What the fuck?’ I couldn’t help but say aloud.

‘It’s like they think it’ll bite them,’ Rosie observed.

I didn’t think she had said a single word in Lady Lan Yetrova’s house, but being out here in the woodland seemed to have loosened her tongue.

‘Oh, it may well do,’ Lady Lan Yetrova said. ‘If one of them were to turn an ankle and fall, it would probably blow.’

‘What, all by itself?’ I asked. ‘Without a flame?’

‘Yes, quite possibly. It’s hard to tell.’

‘Fuck me . . .’

Eventually the two men managed to nurse the crate down to the bottom of the pit, then they retreated rapidly as the Lan Yetrova militia men opened it and removed a number of long wax cylinders. Each one was about the size of my forearm.

‘You’ll like this,’ Lady Lan Yetrova promised me.

She wasn’t wrong.

The militia men slowly and carefully inserted the cylinders into a series of holes cut in the wall of the rockface. Each one trailed a long fuse behind it, like the wick of a candle. Once all the cylinders were in place, one of the men bent and twisted the fuses together into a single cord, then all but one of them hurried back up the ramp that led up out of the quarry.

Once they were clear, the last man stepped forward, a smouldering match cord over one shoulder.

‘That’s Alexi,’ the Lady Lan Yetrova told me. ‘He’s the fastest runner in my household guard.’

‘Nice for him,’ I said, wondering what that had to do with anything. After all, the ramp wasn’t all that long or all that steep, curving as it did around the wall of the pit, and you

didn't have to be all that far away from blasting powder when it went off.

'He's going to light the fuses, and then run like all the devils of Hell are after him,' she explained. 'We, meanwhile, are going to withdraw to a considerable distance.'

'Then we won't be able to see,' I pointed out.

Lady Lan Yetrova showed me a small smile. 'Oh, I assure you, Sir Tomas, we absolutely will. Come.'

She turned her horse and rode back into the woods, and Rosie and I followed her for what felt to me like an excessive distance.

'Clear!' I heard someone bellow, and then came the sound of Alexi scrambling up the slope and crashing his way into the trees.

Nothing happened for another second or two – and then the world exploded.

The noise was indescribable. My jaw dropped open as shattered rock hurled itself a hundred feet or more into the air and a massive cloud of dust rose out of the pit, choking us, even as far away as we were.

'Cover!' someone shouted, and I ducked instinctively.

Even where we were it was raining gravel, and closer to the blast, there were great chunks of stone smashing into the wet loam of the woodland floor. I coughed, holding a hand over my mouth to stop me from breathing in powdered rock dust. A whole barrel of powder couldn't have done that, not even three or four of them. It was truly staggering – *jaw-dropping*.

It was, to all intents and purposes, magic.

'I . . .' I started, and faltered to a stop.

Lady Lan Yetrova laughed. 'I thought you would be pleased,' she said.

'I am very, very impressed,' I told her, quite truthfully.

'It is impressive,' Rosie allowed, 'but in its present form, it's purely a demolition explosive. Would it be possible to cut the fuse short, light it and throw it?'

Lady Lan Yetrova blinked in surprise, but I didn't, for I had been thinking exactly the same thing myself.

'Um . . .' the magician said, and he was obviously nonplussed by the question.

The woman from the university wasn't. 'In theory, yes,' she said. 'It's possible, but probably extremely unwise. The compound is unstable, as I said – any sudden shock or blow can set it off, even without the fuse being lit, and it degrades fast. It sweats, you might say, when left undisturbed for any length of time, and in so doing becomes even *more* unstable. It would be a very foolish or very brave person who picked up a stick and threw it.'

'Mmmm,' I said, musing on the fact that I wasn't short of those qualities. 'How much of it is there?'

'A great deal,' Lady Lan Yetrova said, 'although very little of the latest batch so far. Some of the older attempts are less stable, less explosive, more volatile. Some of them are already beginning to *sweat*, as my learned friend so eloquently puts it.'

'We can turn them, pack them in sand, try to stabilise them somehow,' the woman from the university said.

She hadn't told me her name, and I was certain that was deliberate. I couldn't blame her for that sensible precaution.

Gods, what was I going to do with this stuff? The magicians' breakthrough was truly astonishing, but it did present me with more problems. I had to get it into the city, for one thing, and then I had to store it somewhere – was I really going to store what sounded like several waggon-loads of extremely unstable high explosives in the yard of an orphanage, for Our Lady's sake? No, I knew that was out of the question.

'Do that,' I said, and turned back to Lady Lan Yetrova. 'You've worked a miracle, and I thank you,' I said. 'I need to return to the city and make enquiries. Obviously I'll take it, and with my thanks, but I have to find somewhere to put it before I can bring it into Dannsburg.'

‘Choose carefully,’ she said. ‘It’s not something I would recommend you store in your own cellar.’

‘No,’ I said, thinking again of the massive explosion we had just witnessed. ‘I’ll send word.’

‘Write to the city house,’ she said. ‘I’ll be returning myself tomorrow.’

‘Aye, well and good,’ I said.

We rode back to the vast house then, and Lady Lan Yetrova sent one of her footmen to summon Sam and Beast from the kitchens to escort Rosie and me on the road back to Dannsburg. Rosie hadn’t spoken again, but she had a troubled look on her face, and once we were finally out through the gatehouse and on the road home, I said as much.

‘Lady’s sake, Tomas,’ she said. ‘That stuff is the work of devils. You remember what happened when you bombed the Wheels! You unleash *that* shit on Dannsburg and it will make your wedding day look like a garden party.’

‘You’re the one who wants to throw it at people,’ I reminded her.

‘An academic question,’ Rosie said. ‘I just wanted to know if it would be possible, that’s all. The answer sounded like a definite “maybe, but don’t if you don’t want to blow yourself up”, so we’re not much the wiser there.’

‘Ah, it’s new,’ I said, and took a hand off the reins to rub my eyes. ‘New things are unknowns, Rosie, and have to be tested. I’m sure the first cannon must have blown up as often as they worked, but now look at them. One day we might even have miniature cannon that a man can hold in his hands and fire from his shoulder.’

‘What a ghastly thought,’ she said.

She was right, it was, but all the same I could see it happening sooner or later. Perhaps not in my lifetime, but I thought it would be inevitable in the end. So long as there are men and women and politics, we will be looking for new ways to kill each other, and you can mark me on that.

We rode back to Dannsburg mostly in silence after that. I think Beast and Sam were reeling at their exposure to what *real* wealth looked like, the unimaginable amount of gold that someone like Lady Lan Yetrova had at her command, and Rosie and me were both reliving the truly shocking explosion we had witnessed. That what amounted to a few large candles could wreak so much havoc was astonishing. You would have needed barrels and barrels of powder to achieve that, and barrels of powder are large and heavy and difficult to conceal, whereas this stuff wasn't. It did sound like it was dangerous to use, though, and even to transport. *Powerful but unpredictable, I thought, much like the cunning.*

I had thought before that with enough gold and expertise, the house of magicians could recreate the power of magic, and it appeared that I had been right about that, but perhaps not quite in the way I had expected. They could achieve the same results, yes, but with similar pitfalls and drawbacks too. That was an interesting thought, but one for another day. Right then, I had to find a way to store this monstrous stuff the university and the house of magicians had made for me. *I* could get it into the city without any trouble, of course; simply showing the Queen's Warrant to whoever was on the gate would have let me get *anything* into the city uninspected. The problem was what I did with it after that.

And there I thought I might have an idea.

As soon as we were back at the Bountiful Harvest I retired to the private dining room to pen a letter.

My esteemed Sasura,

I know you were a merchant for many years, and I know also that old habits die hard. Although you are now retired, I would be surprised if you no longer maintain a warehouse or two by the docks on the river. If this is the case, I would very much like to rent space for one or

perhaps two waggons in one of them for a little while. If this is something you could accommodate, I would be very much in your debt.

*Your most respectful son-by-law,
Tomas*

A merchant, indeed. The man had been a pirate and a smuggler, and last year, to my astonishment, I had discovered that he had also been a Queen's Man himself, and no less than Sabine's lover before she had met Vogel. For all that he was retired now, I would be very surprised if he wasn't still carrying on some sort of illicit business in the city. Dannsburg wasn't as industrial as Ellinburg but it imported a lot of goods, brought down the river on low barges that could slip beneath the bridges. The western reach of the river was lined with docks and warehouses all along the south bank, and I would have bet gold that Sasura owned at least one of them. The Shapoors lived very well indeed, after all, and his money had to be coming from somewhere. I thought he would help me if he could.

I sealed the letter and gave it to Luka to give to one of his messengers to run over to the Sharpoores' house. It was late by then, and I knew I wouldn't get an answer before the next morning, so I sat back in my seat with a sigh, and thought over the events of the day. Billy still hadn't given me an answer about moving back to Ailsa's house, and that told me that most likely, he didn't want to. I wasn't quite sure why, but he was past his age of majority and almost a man grown, and he and Mina could always stay in the Harvest with Luka and Rosie without me if they wanted to. I realised then just how much I wanted to take her up on her offer.

Fool, I told myself again, but there had been *something* . . . I don't know. There had been something in the way she had asked me.

Look, Tomas, I . . . if you want to move back into my house you can, I want you to know that. Your old room, of course. I know our marriage was purely one of appearance, but . . . well. There it is.

It wasn't quite a plea; she would never have done that, but it had felt like an appeal – like there was more to it that she couldn't bring herself to say. Or had she just wanted me to think that?

Sister Deceit.

I know, I know. The wisest of men have been made fools by the right woman, after all. I might know little of history but I had heard some of the old tales, of Aecharias and Meledia and the war their love spawned. Gods, everyone knew that one; the most famous of the great classical tragedies was regularly performed at the theatre.

Was Ailsa to be Meledia to my Aecharias?

Fuck off and get over yourself, Tomas Piety, I told myself.

I was no king, and I had no magic sword. I wasn't Aecharias and I knew it. I was just a man with a thing I had to do, and absolutely no idea how I was going to do it.

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Chapter 42

Come the dawn, I received a letter while I was taking breakfast with Rosie and Luka in the common room of the Bountiful Harvest. I recognised Sasura's handwriting and had the messenger wait while I read it then and there, even cracking the seal with my thumbnail without waiting until we were in the office.

My dear Tomas,

It seems you know me better than my own wife does, who truly believes me to be retired. Indeed, I have warehouses, and goods that move through them, but what is this rent that you speak of? What is mine is yours, my dear son-by-law. If you wish to hide waggons, then by all means I can help you. I will come to see you this afternoon, if you are free, to discuss this.

With my warmest regards,

Your sasura

'Rosie, pen and paper, please,' I said.

She left her breakfast and hurried into the private dining room, and came back a moment later with what I had asked for, and sand and sealing wax and a candle. I penned a swift reply to express my thanks, and say that I would be at the Bountiful Harvest all afternoon. I could only hope that was true, that I wouldn't get a sudden summons from Vogel that fucked it up, but it was the best I could do. I folded the letter while Rosie heated the wax, and I sealed it with my official signet of the governing council. Mind, that meant little enough these days since Vogel had done away with the institution, but people were already rioting in the streets

about that. The messenger took it and left, and I went back to my breakfast.

From the news sheets that morning, I could see Sister Galina had taken my advice to heart. Although there were no reports of bombings as yet, there had been a massive riot outside the council chamber building yesterday, with the common folk protesting the dissolution of the governing council. The City Guard had been sent in, of course, but it sounded like the rioters had given as good as they got.

I wondered how much I could rely on Sister Galina, and quickly realised that of course I couldn't: she was as mad as the Maiden's Hare, that was plainly apparent. But in truth, it didn't matter: so long as she and her flock continued to cause trouble, and I was quite sure they would, then all was well. As I had told Anne, she was nothing but a diversionary tactic, something to keep the guard busy, something for the house of law to be looking at that wasn't me and Iagin. That was key now, to my mind.

If I was to bring Lady Yetrova's wonderful, terrifying candles into the city, conceal them, and eventually use them, then I needed the house of law to be looking at anyone *but* me. Was I throwing Sister Galina and her people to the wolves to do it? Perhaps – but they had organised themselves and been causing trouble before I ever made contact with her, so what difference did it make? I may have perhaps accelerated her downfall, but I had by no means instigated it. No, she had done that herself when she first set out to protest against the rule of law. No one did that in Dannsburg and survived for long, and that was a simple fact of life. Protesting achieved fuck-all other than getting you arrested and killed. The only way to fight the house of law was violent action, I had long since decided that. Shock and awe, that was the only way. What had worked once would work again, the captain had always told me, and he'd been right then and he was right now.

‘Tomas?’ I was aware of Rosie’s voice, but it took me a moment to register that her hand was on mine. ‘Tomas, are you all right?’

‘What?’ I asked, and pushed her hand away, probably more vigorously than was needed. ‘Of course I fucking am.’

She leaned close to whisper to me, ‘You’re shaking like you have the palsy, and there’s sweat running down your face. You are *not* all right.’

I took a deep breath and realised that she was right. My face was wet, and I could hardly control my hands.

Battle shock, it’s just battle shock.

Breathe.

Just breathe.

I gradually got myself under control, and wiped a hand over my face to clear the sweat. ‘Too much to drink last night,’ I said, although, in truth, for me I had had very little. ‘Breakfast is always a struggle after a big night.’

Rosie gave me a look that told me she knew that was horseshit, but she held her peace about it. ‘Right you are,’ she said.

I took a long, slow breath and swallowed my small beer. ‘Luka,’ I said, and he looked up at me. ‘I want you to do something for me.’

‘What’s that then, boss?’

‘Speak to our friend the nun and ask her what the fucking hold-up is,’ I said, and I gestured to the pile of smudged news sheets on the table beside me. ‘I was expecting headlines that I’m not seeing.’

‘Aye, boss,’ Luka said.

I needed things to start exploding good and proper, and soon.

*

My luck held and I received no summons from the house of law, so I was still in the Bountiful Harvest when my sasura

came calling that afternoon. He walked in alone, dressed like any wealthy merchant, and unlike my crew, he blended in perfectly with the clientele of the affluent inn. He ordered a bottle of brandy and brought it and a tray of glasses to the table where I sat with Rosie.

‘Ah, Tomas,’ he said, and his face split into a broad grin. ‘I hope you are not again publicly shaming my daughter.’

‘She’s my secretary,’ I said, and introduced Rosie. ‘Rosie, this is Mr Shapoor, my father-by-law.’

‘Pleasure, sir, I’m sure,’ Rosie said, playing her part as well as ever.

Sasura immediately dismissed her as merely a servant. He had been a Queen’s Man himself, and obviously knew the value of a good secretary as much as I did, but he was playing a part, same as she was: just a retired merchant, him, just my drunken old father-by-law come to pay me a social call, and nothing to remark on there.

He opened the bottle of brandy with a satisfying pop of the cork and poured for the three of us. I lifted my glass to him and he clinked his against it, while Rosie nursed hers and sat in a demure, respectful silence. She really was good at this shit, I had to allow.

‘So, Tomas,’ Sasura said once we had both taken a sip of our drinks, ‘I believe you wished to discuss the matter of warehouses.’

‘Aye, Sasura,’ I said. ‘I have a need to store a waggon, perhaps two, in the immediate future.’

‘I can’t see how there would be any difficulty with that,’ he said.

I leaned close across the table to speak quietly to him. ‘The thing is,’ I said, ‘it wouldn’t do for you to have anything in that warehouse that you would grieve to lose.’

‘Ah,’ he said after a moment, and took another sip of his brandy. ‘It is still unstable, then?’

He cut straight to the heart of the matter, and I appreciated that. ‘So I’m told, aye,’ I said. ‘Quite *how*

unstable, I don't know, but it certainly doesn't sound like it's entirely safe.'

'I see,' he said after a moment. 'Give me a day to have some things moved around, and I can provide an otherwise empty building.'

I nodded in gratitude, and I wondered just how many warehouses the old pirate was still operating. Quite possibly he was even still running ships, for all I knew, for all that he no longer sailed them himself.

'My thanks, Sasura,' I said. 'I am very, very grateful for your help.'

He smiled and refilled our glasses. 'I think I know what you are doing, Tomas,' he said, 'and anything I can do to help in that endeavour I will do gladly and without remorse. Sometimes when a man is a devil walking, there is no other answer.'

I met his eyes and realised he knew *exactly* what I was doing: that I was set to kill Vogel, and he was on my side. Again I raised my glass to him and again we drank together, only now it was as conspirators in high treason.

'Forgive me sir,' Rosie said, 'but I need to go and prepare a letter to our mutual friend.'

'Aye, do that,' I said, and she finished her brandy and left us there while she went to tell Lady Lan Yetrova, and that was good.

'Tell me, Tomas,' Sasura asked me once she had left us, 'how are things between you and my daughter?'

'Truth be told, I don't know, Sasura,' I said. 'She invited me to move back into her house, but our son has his own woman now and he seems . . . reticent.'

'Ah, Billy, my grandson,' Sasura said, and his eyes twinkled as he smiled. 'Young men, once they find a love of their own . . . I remember it well. I think a mother is every boy's first love, but once he finds his own woman, that relationship can become strained, yes? Tell me, Ailsa does not like Billy's young lady, does she?'

‘Not particularly,’ I said, and I had to admit that was probably entirely mutual.

He laughed. ‘Oh yes, I remember my own mother when I first met Punam, my dear lady wife. Oh dear me, no, she was *that tart*, who was not good enough for my mother, whereas to Punam, my mother was *that harridan* who was so cruel to her. Oh, Tomas, it is truly the way of the world. Billy is old enough to make his own way, is he not? If you wish to go back to Ailsa, then I urge you to do so. She is a complicated woman, as I have told you, and she can be difficult in her way, but I think she is missing you.’

I nodded slowly, wondering exactly how much Ailsa had confided in her father since she had returned to Dannsburg. I *wanted* it to be true, of course I did, and he had a point about Billy. The lad had sixteen or so years to him, at a guess, and Mina was a little older: old enough in Our Lady’s eyes to marry, if they so chose.

‘Aye, thank you, Sasura,’ I said. ‘I’ll think on it.’

I was about to say something else when my train of thought was broken by the dull, concussive blast of a distant explosion. The windows rattled in their casements and the common room of the inn fell into a shocked silence that let us hear the sounds of falling debris from several streets away. A moment later, rapid conversation broke out again, almost drowning the sound of the blowing whistles and running feet of the City Guard.

It looked like Luka had got my message to Sister Galina.

Chapter 43

My sasura left the Bountiful Harvest as soon as we judged it safe for him to do so, worried that his wife would be fearing for his safety. With him gone, I summoned Fat Luka and looked the question at him.

‘Aye, that was her,’ he said in a low voice. ‘I don’t know where, exactly, but she promised me a hit this afternoon.’

I nodded. ‘That’s good, Luka,’ I said. ‘You’ve done well.’

Truth be told, it didn’t matter where – the more random the bombings, the better it suited me. I wanted to keep the house of law on its toes, with Konrad and Vogel and Sabine trying to second-guess where the next attack would come, and why. If there was truly no pattern, that would make their job all the harder. They would be looking for a plan, a rationale, and with Sister Galina I knew there would be none. Simple chaos in the name of the Ascended Martyr, that was what I wanted and that was what the mad nun would give me.

Blessed be the Martyr.

‘Are you feeling all right?’ Luka asked me quietly, and I realised my damned hands were shaking again.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘Touch of battle shock, that’s all. You know how it is when the explosions start.’

‘Yeah, I do,’ Luka said, and he spoke the truth.

He had been there too, of course, at Abington with Bloody Anne and Black Billy and Sir Eland and the rest of us. I was far from the only one in our crew who suffered from the battle shock, although with what I had been through before the war, I think now that I had it worse than most of them except Cookpot, who had been truly broken by it.

Cookpot was still safely back in Ellinburg as he wasn't a Pious Man any more, not really, and that was on account of just how bad his battle shock was. I didn't think Cookpot would ever live a normal life again, not after what the war had done to him. That broke my heart, but it was the reality of what war did to the men and women who fought, what it had done to Cookpot and my own poor brother.

That was what was driving me, I think: the need – the *vital* need – to stop it happening again. Even if the Skanian threat wasn't real, I knew that under Vogel's rule the country would see another war within a year, two at the most. I was still just about young enough to be called up once more myself, and I wouldn't – I *couldn't* – go through that again.

I just fucking couldn't.

'It stops now,' I said aloud, and I was aware of Luka giving me a look.

'I don't think it ever really stops, Tomas,' he said, and I realised he thought I was talking about battle shock.

'No, perhaps not,' I said, 'but we can only try. That's the lesson we learn in this life, I think, Luka. That we can only try.'

I heard the dull rumble of another explosion, further away this time, and more distant whistles and shouts and running feet.

The innkeeper was at our table a moment later. 'What's happening, Sir Tomas?' he asked me, as he had once before when his own establishment had been bombed.

'I don't know,' I answered, and there I told him no lie. 'It sounds like explosions, but nowhere near here, so none of our concern.'

'For the gods' sakes,' he said, 'explosions on the streets of the capital city, again? You're a member of the governing council, Sir Tomas – can't you *do* something?'

I straightened in my chair and looked him dead in the eye. 'There is no governing council any more,' I told him. 'The

Lord Chief Judicial dissolved it, didn't you hear? There is now only the rule of the Prince Regent.'

'But . . . but the Prince Regent *is* the Lord Chief Judicial,' he said, as though he had only now worked it out.

I wondered just how many other members of the general public were this fucking stupid, and found myself realising with a sinking feeling that the answer was probably most of them. No, not stupid, perhaps; that was being harsh, but unobservant, nonetheless. The common people were so wrapped up in the minutiae of their own lives, of making a living and putting food on the table and keeping a roof over their heads, that they had no time to observe the bigger picture unfolding around them. They didn't see the upheavals and shifts in government until they were personally affected, and by then it was always far too late.

'Aye,' I said. 'That he is.'

'But . . .' the innkeeper said, and I could see the colour draining from his face as he worked it out for himself.

'Tell me,' I said, 'you're a prominent local businessman and a gentleman of letters. Do you perchance know a printer of news sheets?'

Of course he did, and ten minutes later I had a name and an address for Fat Luka.

'Find this prick,' I said. 'Tell him the full story, and get him to print it.'

'You'll start riots,' Luka warned me, and I nodded.

'Good,' I said.

'People will die,' Luka said.

'People are always dying, Luka. People die every fucking day. Let them die *for* something.'

'But—'

'Vogel murdered the queen,' I hissed into his ear. 'Vogel murdered the princess' doctor and arrested the Grand Duchess of Varnburg for it to frame her for the death of the Princess Crown Royal. The people need to know that, Luka. I *want* the people to know that.'

Luka swallowed. 'Boss, if you get caught . . .'

'Aye. I know.'

'If I leak this and the house of law finds out where it came from, then—'

'I said I *know*, Fat Luka. I know, and I don't fucking care any more. Get it printed.'

Luka blew out a long breath. 'Aye, boss.'

'Oh, and Luka? If you're harbouring any thoughts of betraying me to Iagin, forget them. He's with me in this matter.'

'Fuck me,' Luka said, and his eyes got very wide in his round face. 'I mean, I wasn't, but . . . fuck me. Who else knows?'

'I don't think you need an answer to that,' I said.

Truth be told, I didn't know myself, but I'd be buggered if I was telling Luka that. I *hoped* Iagin had brought Ilse to our side, for all that I didn't care for her, but I had no way of knowing. Sabine had declared herself neutral, if that could be believed, and I didn't know whether it could. Konrad was obviously Vogel's creature, and I didn't have the first clue where Ailsa stood on the matter – or if she even knew there *was* a matter.

I sighed and poured myself another brandy, then looked up at Luka.

'Are you still here?'

He hurried to his feet and set off on the task I had given him.

The afternoon wore on into the evening and I dined alone at my table in the common room with more news sheets to occupy me as I spooned beef stew and dumplings into my mouth. It was almost dark when Rosie came to me, and she had a look on her face.

'Can I see you?' she asked, and I knew that meant she wanted me in the office and not out in the common room where I probably shouldn't have had that last conversation with Luka anyway.

‘Aye, of course,’ I said.

I followed her back into the private dining room and pushed the door shut behind me with an elbow. I had my glass of brandy in one hand and the bottle in the other. Rosie’s look intensified, but she held her peace about that, if nothing else.

‘What is it?’ I asked as I took a seat at the table.

‘This,’ she said, and pushed a paper towards me.

It was a summons from the house of law for the following morning, to attend the closed trial of the Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg for high treason and regicide. Her public execution in the castle yard had been set for the afternoon, which would have told anyone but a complete halfwit what a pointless charade the trial was. It was a sentencing and nothing else, and her fate was a foregone conclusion.

‘They won’t hang her, surely,’ I said. ‘Not a grand duchess.’

Hangings were for paupers and commoners and vagrants, after all. The highborn usually just disappeared, or were made examples of like the Baron Lan Drunov, who had died atop Cannon Hill.

‘No,’ Rosie agreed. ‘Royalty are beheaded.’

I took a moment to let that sink in. Seriously? It happened often enough that there was protocol for it?

‘And then what happens?’

‘Her duchy, lands and fortune pass to the crown by default. Even if he still lived, her son would be disinherited and declared illegitimate. With her husband already dead, it is the end of the House of Varnburg.’

The Duchy of Varnburg was the richest in the kingdom, with its mighty harbour and all the trade and tax levies it brought in. With that in the possession of the crown, Vogel would have advanced his position significantly. I had thought that was the case, but to have it confirmed in so matter of fact a way was truly chilling.

‘Fuck a nun,’ I whispered softly, in honour of my brother’s memory.

Rosie knew very well that Prince Marcus still lived and was hiding at the Dripping Bucket, of course she did, but she was explaining the point of law to me and I could only take in, in detached appreciation, just what Vogel had managed to achieve here. Through tactical murders and skilful manipulation of laws he had written himself, he had made himself almost completely untouchable.

‘Tomorrow morning,’ Rosie said again. ‘I think you need to be there, and that means I think you need to put that bottle down and go to bed now.’

I had enough of this with Heinrich. I don’t need it with you as well.

I remembered her telling me that once before, and the thought didn’t make me feel proud of myself, to speak lightly of it.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘Perhaps I’ll do that.’

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I woke early the next morning, feeling more refreshed than usual for Rosie giving me a telling and making me put the bottle down. Washed, dressed and shaved, I had a swift breakfast and made my way to the house of law with Sam and Beast as escort. I could hear angry shouts on the streets, and breaking glass, and all the sounds that heralded a coming riot. It seemed the morning news sheets had come out, then.

Within the house of law, all was as it usually was, except that the small closed court was considerably less well attended than I ever remembered it. There were no members of the governing council there except me, because of course there *was* no governing council any more. Lan Letskov was dead, and Hristokov and Markova, and so many more of them. The rest had slunk away to their

manors and manses. Now there was no one in the room who was not either a Queen's Man or in the direct pay of the house of law. I wondered whether there was any point whatsoever to the proceedings beyond Vogel being able to honestly say that the Dowager Grand Duchess had been tried and found guilty by a court of law, and I decided that there wasn't. It *was* a court of law, of course: he was the Lord Chief Judiciar, after all, and naturally, he was the presiding judge.

I looked up when the grand duchess was brought in, and I was pleased to see that at least she didn't look to have been tortured. I supposed they wanted her to look haughty and regal when she went to the executioner's block, to play well to the commons. The aristocrat who had grown too big for her part and grasped for the throne for her son. She met my eyes for a brief moment, and I gave her a tiny nod.

Your son is alive and safe, that was what I was telling her, and I knew that was all she truly cared about. She would go to the headsman's axe and do it gladly to protect her son's life, I realised. The Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg and I would never have been friends in this life, but I couldn't help but respect her. I was about to witness a mother bear dying to defend her cub, and my heart went out to her.

I don't remember the details of the trial and I won't record them here. As the time of her execution had already been set for that afternoon, the entire thing was a complete farce anyway.

Her death was Vogel's will, and Vogel had made himself untouchable.

Almost.

The legal system couldn't get near him, as to all intents and purposes he *was* the legal system. The governing council couldn't stop him, as he had used those very laws to dissolve it. The Queen's Men couldn't or wouldn't do anything about him, as he was the boss of the Queen's Men.

There was nothing the monarch could do, because in all but name, he *was* the monarch.

The only thing he hadn't been able to legislate against was a madman with fanatically loyal followers and an absolute shitload of high explosives.

That would be me.

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Chapter 44

It was time to get those explosives into the city and no mistake. First, though, I had an execution to sit through.

The afternoon rolled around and I found myself in the castle yard with Bloody Anne at my side. It was raining, which made it even more of a pain in the arse than it would have been anyway, but I was glad to have Anne with me. Sir Eland had the watch over young Prince Marcus, so she had told me, and I knew he would die before he let anyone near that lad. I remembered how he had held the door in the house at Chandler's Narrow, and the grievous wounds he had suffered to do it. That had been in his shirtsleeves. Today Eland would be in his harness, and I doubted a whole detachment of the City Guard could have got past him. It's a thing that has to be understood: that a man in full armour is virtually invulnerable to anything short of a cannon. Normal people like us, in leather and mail, no: pretty much anything pointed will go through mail with enough force behind it. But plate was a different matter altogether.

Eland might be nothing but a pretend martial knight, but he was equipped like a real one, and he fought like a demon when the rage was on him. I wouldn't have wanted to face him in his harness, and that was Our Lady's own truth.

'What is this fucking city coming to?' Anne asked me quietly as we took our places on the benches. 'What has she really done, Tomas?'

'Fuck all,' I said. 'I told you that already. It doesn't change the lay of things though, does it? This is politics. This is what politics fucking looks like, when you boil it right down to the gristle. At the end of the day, politics looks like killing.'

'And there's nothing you can do to stop it?'

I turned and looked at her, and I think the expression on my face probably said more than my words ever could.

‘No, Anne, there isn’t,’ I said. ‘She knew that, when I made a promise to her. I have fulfilled that promise and she knows I have, and that is enough for her and for me both. She knew what she was doing when she first set her foot on the path that leads towards thrones. She played the game and she lost, and she understands that. At least this way she hasn’t lost *everything*.’

Her life for her son’s, that was what I was telling her, and after a moment, Anne nodded. She wasn’t a mother, obviously, but I think she understood something of what the grand duchess was thinking. Anne would have died to save Rosie, of that I was sure, and this was the same thing. To be prepared to lay down your own life to save that of someone you love is the greatest love of all. It is perhaps the very *definition* of what love is, and I knew Anne understood that.

‘Aye, perhaps,’ Anne allowed after a moment, ‘but I don’t like this.’

‘Do you fucking think that I do?’

The block was there, in the middle of the castle yard, and that yard surrounded in a ring of steel by armoured soldiers. There would be no rescue for the Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg, even if any of her men had still been alive to attempt it. Beside the block stood the headsman in his traditional black garb, with the black mask covering his face. It was horseshit; everyone saw the hangman’s face under his black cap, so what made the headsman any different? Was it that he executed nobles and royalty, rather than common criminals? I had no idea. ‘Tradition’ is a word that often means ‘performative horseshit’, I have found, but it was easier to just accept it and carry on with your day than waste any time thinking on the matter.

‘Here she comes,’ Anne muttered, and around us in the crowd I could hear a tide of whispered comments that all amounted to the same thing.

The Dowager Grand Duchess of Varnburg was led into the yard from a narrow tunnel in the walls that obviously led to a stairwell down to the dungeons, and she was dressed in rich finery. This was no Lady Lan Delanov, maimed and ruined and barefoot in her shift for all to see and scorn. This was no mere lady-in-waiting but the grand lady of a royal house, convicted of the greatest crimes there were.

High treason.

Regicide.

Degrading her would actually have been counter-productive, I realised. The point being made here was that she was one of the highest nobles in the land and even *she* was not above the law. That sent a very clear message to each and every one of the noble houses. No one was safe. Absolutely no one.

Except the man my eyes were fixed on, of course. Lord Vogel sat across the yard from us in a sheltered balcony, wearing the formal black robes of the Lord Chief Judiciar. *That* man was above the law in every way that mattered.

I meant to change that.

'Bring her forth,' Vogel said, and just then, somewhere in the distance, something exploded.

Sister Galina had a fine sense of timing, and the story I had planted in the morning news sheets had the population dangerously divided over whether they believed it or not. Dannsburg was on the point of boiling over, and that was what I wanted.

Chaos. Riots. Destruction.

While the people fought each other in the streets and my mad nun and her followers blew shit up on a whim, no one was looking at me or *lugin*. And those murderous candles were coming through the city gates tomorrow night.

'Proceed,' Vogel said, raising his voice over the low murmur of conversation that had broken out in the crowd at the sound of the distant bomb going off.

And that was the point; the bomb *was* distant. It wasn't on *their* doorstep, so it didn't matter. The crowd were surprisingly undisturbed by it, until you realised that point: it sounded like it had come from south of the river, and of course no one who mattered cared what happened *there*. When it started happening on their own doorsteps, they would care very much indeed, and by then it would be far too fucking late to stop.

By then, it wouldn't just be flashstones.

The dowager grand duchess was led towards the block, and there Konrad waited beside the headsman. He was attired as a clerk of law, which he may even have been for all I knew, and he looked to the grand duchess as she gracefully removed her eyeglasses.

'You have been tried before a court of law and found guilty of all charges by the Lord Chief Judiciar himself,' he said. 'Do you have any last words?'

Lady Varnburg knelt before the headsman's block and looked out into the crowd. 'I have not come here to preach,' she said. 'I have come here to die. And die I shall, but I do not think that I die in vain. Even now, you can hear the explosions on the streets. Enough is enough, Lord Vogel. The people are rising, and your time is come.'

'We'll see about that,' Vogel said, and gestured with a dismissive flick of his hand. 'Headsman, do your work.'

Lady Varnburg held Vogel's gaze for one defiant moment, then bent forward and laid her neck upon the block. She had too much dignity to allow herself to be forced, and so went willingly to death to save her son's life.

I had heard the term 'nobility' my entire life, but never before did I think I had seen it actually demonstrated.

The headsman's axe rose and fell, and it was done.

The evening was punctuated by the sounds of rioting and distant explosions. Sister Galina's operation was so disorganised that I didn't even think the two were connected. She was bombing the great houses of the nobility, as I had suggested, while I thought the riots were in the main a spontaneous reaction to what the news sheets had printed that morning. Lord Vogel was very much out of favour with a general public who by and large had placed their faith in the Ascended Martyr, and at least half of whom now believed in her late mother's divinity too.

I would have very much liked to have been in the Skanian's Head that night, to hear the ever-changing narrative of their ultra-nationalist clientele, but sadly, that wasn't to be. Instead, I sat in the private dining room of the Bountiful Harvest, penning a letter to Lady Lan Yetrova.

My Lady,

I thank you again for the gift of your wonderful discovery. I will accept it with all my thanks, but I feel it will need my personal attention to take forward. I propose meeting your waggons in Dannsmere, and bringing them into the city myself. Midnight tomorrow at the village green would seem a good time.

I await your reply,

Your most respectful servant,

Sir Tomas Piety

As a mere knight I ranked well below her in the social hierarchy, of course, but the phrasing of the letter was about right, as far as I knew. Dannsmere was a village a short distance downriver from Dannsburg itself, and it lay between the Lan Yetrova country estate and the city. It was only about an hour's ride from Dannsburg, if that, and if we could pick the waggons up there and bring them to the gates around the third hour when the City Guard were only

half awake and actually expecting the Queen's Men to be out doing covert things, then so much the better, and the less likely they were to ask awkward questions. The fact that the most questionable actions of the Queen's Men happened in broad daylight and involved no showing of the warrant whatsoever was another matter indeed. If I appeared at the gates in the middle of the night with a waggon or two and the Queen's Warrant in my hand and said 'let me in' they would, and no questions asked.

That was just how business worked in Dannsburg, and that was good.

I had Luka give the letter to a messenger to run over to the Lan Yetrova house, and sat back in my chair in the private dining room. Billy was in the room with me, and he had been pulling distractedly at his bottom lip as he watched me work.

'What's on your mind, son?' I asked him once Luka had left us.

'Something's not right, Da,' Billy said. 'I don't know what.'

I snorted and took a sip of my brandy. 'A fucking lot of things aren't right, son,' I told him. 'The world over, I dare say, and in this city in particular.'

'No, it's . . . I don't know,' Billy said. 'I don't *know*, Da, and that's part of what's not right. I *should* know. I always used to know things, and now I don't. Not like I used to.'

'You knew Old Kurt was going to die, and he did,' I said.

'Yes, but I didn't know about the last magician at the governor's hall, did I? You can ask Cutter about that.'

I could hear the bitterness in Billy's voice, and I noticed that when he mentioned Cutter's name he took one of the wicked little knives the Messian assassin had given him from its sheath at his belt and started playing with it, flipping it from a forward to a reverse grip and back again. He did it over and over again, without looking, like he wasn't even really aware of the action.

He's drilled that thousands of times, until it's become second nature, I thought, and not for the first time I wondered exactly what Cutter had been teaching Billy in the house on Slaughterhouse Narrow.

'Well, knowing things like that isn't normal, lad, you understand that. Maybe it's no bad thing.'

'It's normal for *me*,' Billy protested. 'I could always do it and now I can't, and I don't know why.'

I looked at him, at his gaunt face and thinning hair and over-bright eyes, and I thought that perhaps I did.

Feast.

Billy's second sight had only started to fail him since the first time Mina showed him how to steal another magician's strength, and that had been when their health had begun to deteriorate too. It didn't take a cunning man to see that the two things were probably connected. I had fucking known no good could come of that, and I was worried that I had been right. The lad was trembling as though he was feverish, and a bead of sweat was making its slow way down his forehead.

'Billy, lad,' I said, 'when a boy grows into becoming a man, his body changes, you know that well enough. Perhaps for the cunning folk, their minds do too. I wouldn't know, but I would try not to worry about it.'

'Aye, perhaps,' Billy said, and flipped his knife once more before he slipped it deftly back into its sheath. 'But I don't like it, Da. I don't like not knowing what's going to happen.'

'No, son,' I said. 'None of us do.'

Chapter 45

The Lady Lan Yetrova sent her agreement the next morning, so the following night I found myself in Dannsmere with Anne and Beast and Sam and Black Billy. The place was a small, pleasant village on the north bank of the river. The water was already beginning to widen here as it made its way towards the sea, and I could hear gentle waves lapping against the bank in the darkness.

It was past the eleventh hour when we arrived, and fully dark by then. Anne held a shuttered lantern that let us find our way to the village green, and there we sat and waited. Ten, perhaps fifteen minutes later, the waggons arrived. We heard them before we saw them, the creak of harness and poorly greased axles, the slow clop of the hooves of the heavy draft horses. There were two waggons, as the lady's letter had told me to expect, and two men on the box of each one and a few men riding alongside to guard them; I assumed they were members of the Lady Lan Yetrova's household militia in plain clothes.

The lady herself hadn't come, of course, but I had never expected her to.

'Good evening,' I said quietly as their lead rider reined up next to me.

They had four spare horses with them, I saw in the dim glow of their own shuttered lanterns, so it was obvious that this was as far as the drovers were going.

'You're Sir Tomas, then,' he said.

'Aye,' I said.

'Well, her Ladyship sends her regards and wishes you the favour of the gods,' he said. 'With this stuff, you're going to need it.'

I could tell from the look on his face that he had the utmost respect for his cargo. There was sweat on his brow despite the evening cool, and I wondered again just how unstable the magicians' candles might be.

'Please return my thanks and fondest regards,' I said, and he dipped his head and turned his horse away without another word.

His drovers dismounted from their waggons and hauled themselves up onto the spare mounts, and with that, it was done. I could hear the sound of the horses leaving into the darkness at a sedate walk.

'Beast, Billy,' I said. Both of them could drive a waggon, and that was why they were there. Sam and Anne were with me purely as enforcers, should they be needed, but given the lateness of the hour and the prosperous sleepiness of Dannsmere, I didn't expect they would be – that was why I had chosen the place, after all.

'Come on, girls,' I heard Black Billy murmur as he flicked his reins, and a moment later the waggons were rolling on their way towards the city.

Sam and Anne led the boys' horses behind their own, and I rode at the head of our little convoy. It took us a couple of hours or so to make the return journey, and it was, as I had predicted, roughly the third hour of the morning by then. The city was quiet, the riots having died down, and the gate guards look exhausted.

I reined up in front of their sergeant.

'The fuck?' he mumbled as he looked up at me, his unshaven chin jutting from beneath the rim of his helmet, and I realised that he was not only half asleep but drunk as well.

'Passage into the city, if it please you, Sergeant,' I said. 'Myself, and two waggons with outriders.'

He blinked and looked at me again. It was dark, lamp oil still being prohibitively expensive in Dannsburg, and the

burning torch his corporal held gave off more smoke than light.

‘And who are you, then? It’s late for a merchant to be rolling up to the city gates.’

Fuck it.

You should use it sparingly, Tomas, but it is there to be used when necessary. Ailsa had told me that when she had first given me the Queen’s Warrant, and it was late and I was tired and honestly, a man like this would actually *expect* the Queen’s Men to be up to no good in the small hours of the morning. I took it out of my pouch and showed it to him, reasonably confident that he couldn’t really see my face in the piss-poor light anyway.

‘This is who I am,’ I said.

He coughed like he was about to swallow his tongue. ‘Right you are, sir,’ he managed after a moment, and signalled his crew to open the gates.

I gave him a nod, and no more needed to be said, not about him being drunk on duty, or about me bringing waggons full of he had no idea what into the city at the third hour of the morning.

As I have written, that was just how it worked in Dannsburg at that time, and it worked in my favour, so honestly, I didn’t give a fuck. With the gate passed, we drove the waggons south to the nearest bridge and into the dockland area. I found my sasura’s warehouse with little trouble. There was a single night watchman on duty, a jowly fellow in a thick leather jerkin with a shortsword on one hip and a club on the other, and the look of a veteran about him.

He squinted up at us in a way that told me his eyesight wasn’t all it might have been.

‘I’m Sir Tomas,’ I said, by way of introduction.

‘Aye, boss said you’d be along,’ he said. ‘Come on then.’

He whistled softly, and two lads emerged from the shadows to open the warehouse doors. They both had

crossbows and shortswords, I noticed, and neither of them looked short-sighted at all. Sasura's business was clearly very much still in operation, and again, I felt my admiration for that old pirate increasing. He might be retired so far as his wife and daughter were concerned, but he was obviously still trading in some capacity or other, even if he no longer sailed the seas himself. I wondered exactly what came up the river in the barges to his warehouses, and decided it was probably better if I didn't know.

Beast and Billy drove their waggons into the otherwise empty warehouse and stepped down from their boxes.

'We'll see to your draft horses,' the watchman said, and I noticed a slight slur in his voice that I didn't think was down to drink. 'There's a stable out the back. Don't you worry about that. They'll be well, lovely beasts that they are.'

'See that you look after them well indeed,' I said. 'They're not actually mine.'

The watchman half-shrugged a shoulder. 'I love horses,' he said. 'Wouldn't never not look after one left in my care.'

'Aye, well,' I could only reply, and I was struck by just how much he reminded me of Cookpot, back in Ellinburg. 'That's good. My thanks.'

He nodded at me again, and wandered back off to his post. It seemed to me that the man had the battle shock very badly indeed, but of course, that was none of my business. He was old to have fought in my war, but much too young to have been in the one before that. I thought it must have been the hardest for the very youngest and very oldest to be conscripted. The gods only knew it had been bad enough for me, but the young were too naïve and inexperienced to understand what was happening to them, the old too tired and physically worn down by twenty and more years of labour to be able to cope with it.

The legacy that war left would last them the rest of their lives, and that was Our Lady's own truth.

‘Right,’ I said to the crew. ‘It’s stashed, so that’s done. I dare say her Ladyship will send someone for her horses in due course.’

‘Can we go to bed now?’ Anne asked, and made a point of rubbing her eyes as she said it. ‘I know you don’t ever seem to need to fucking sleep, Tomas, but I do.’

Truth be told, I was dead on my feet, but it would have shown weakness to admit it.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘I reckon we can, at that.’

I rode back over the river to the Bountiful Harvest with Sam and Beast, while Anne and Billy headed to the Dripping Bucket and the constant vigil held over Crown Prince Marcus. Quite how he was coping, living in squalor with orphans after growing up in the Sea Keep of Varnburg, I didn’t know, but it was definitely better than the alternative. The alternative would have been a mysterious disappearance and Konrad’s knife, after all.

*

The next morning I was back in the warehouse to inspect the waggons. I had Cutter with me – my quiet man was the closest thing to a sapper I had, and he had worked with Captain Larn’s army sappers before when we had bombed the Wheels. He knew the work, how it was done.

‘What is this stuff?’ Cutter asked, gingerly lifting the lid of one of the crates and looking at the cylinders inside.

‘Something new,’ I said. ‘I don’t think it has a name, but I’ve come to think of them as magicians’ candles.’

‘And they explode, do they?’

‘Oh yes,’ I said. ‘One of those candles is a barrel of powder at least, perhaps more.’

Cutter gave me a very dubious look. ‘I don’t see how,’ he said.

‘No, nor do I,’ I admitted, ‘but then, we’re neither of us magicians. I’ve seen them demonstrated and it’s true,

believe me. Unlike powder, though, apparently they're a bit prone to going off by themselves, so whatever you do don't drop one, or drop anything on top of one. That's why there's fuck all else in this warehouse.'

Cutter snorted. 'Boss, there must be a couple of hundred of your candles on these two waggons – there not being anything else in this warehouse is neither here nor there. If one blew and set the others off, which I think it would, there wouldn't be much of anything left in *any* of the warehouses.'

He had a point there, I allowed. 'Aye, right you are,' I said, and I imagined I had probably gone a bit pale in the face as I said it. 'Best we do this soon, then.'

'And what is it exactly that we're going to do?'

'Well now,' I said. 'We're going to blow up the house of law.'

Cutter met my gaze with his single eye, and slowly shook his head. 'No, I'm afraid you ain't,' he said. 'It don't work like that, not on such a strong building. To blow up the house of law, these things would have to be inside it, preferably underneath it, and I don't see how you can make that happen. You're hardly going to be smuggling them in a couple at a time down your britches, are you? No, you won't bring the building down letting explosives off outside it. The blast goes the easiest way, and outside, that's anywhere *except* through the walls. You'd fuck the place up and no mistake, but you wouldn't bring it down.'

I sucked my teeth for a moment. I had to admit that was something I hadn't known. I thought of Ilse for a moment, and wondered if Iagin really had brought her to our side. If I could get the candles into her dungeons, directly beneath the house of law . . .

I opened my mouth to speak, but Cutter held up a finger to stop me.

'Even if you *could* get them into an undercroft,' he said, 'whoever had to light the fuses would never get out alive.'

There just wouldn't be time, not in a building that size. It would be a suicide mission.'

'No, fuck that,' I said at once, and scratched my chin as I stared at the open crate of magicians' candles. 'What do you suggest?'

Cutter puffed his cheeks out in thought. 'Your best bet is a breaching charge and an assault,' he said. 'A waggon full of this stuff pressed up against an outside wall won't bring the building down, but it would still blow a good-sized hole in the side. Then we'd have to do it the old-fashioned way. I'm assuming it's not specifically the building you want to kill, but someone in it?'

'Aye, it is,' I said.

'Right you are then,' Cutter said. 'You find a way to get one of these waggons up nice and snug to the house of law without anyone thinking it too strange, and have the crew waiting. Light the charges and run like fuck, and when it blows, we storm the breach and find who wants killing – bit like we did at Abington when we took the keep, only this time we've no engineers and no sappers. I'll do my best, but I could use some experienced help setting it up.'

'Aye,' I said. 'I reckon Major Bakrylov can find me someone who knows his way around explosives. How dangerous is it going to be? Lighting the fuses, I mean?'

'Very,' Cutter said, and gave me a long look. 'I'll do it.'

'Why?' I asked him.

After Jochan's death I was surprised Cutter was still even in my crew, never mind prepared to risk his life for me.

'In the last two years I've lost half my face and the only person I truly loved in this world,' he said. 'I don't honestly give much of a fuck if I live or die at this point, to speak bluntly of it. I'll do it because you're Jochan's brother and I know he loved you. He never told me the whole of it, but I think I know what happened when you were boys, enough of it, anyway – and don't worry, I won't ever say anything to anyone. I'll do it for him, for his memory and his love of you.'

I'll do it to atone for not being able to save him. I should have took that fucking bolt, not him. So let this be . . . let this be my eulogy for Jochan, in smoke and fire. He'd have liked that, I think.'

'Aye,' I said softly. 'I think he would, at that.'

'Right then,' Cutter said. 'That's settled. You get me and a waggon full of this shit up against the walls of the house of law, and I'll make you a breach. The rest is up to you and Anne and the lads.'

'Deal,' I said, and we grasped each other's wrists and shook on it.

Cutter had just volunteered to be a hero and that was well and good, but the slight issue was that the house of law was constantly surrounded by soldiers and the City Guard, and that presented what you might call a major fucking problem. I was going to need a distraction.

A big one.

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Chapter 46

‘Breach the house of law and storm it?’ Anne echoed in disbelief once I told her what I had agreed with Cutter. ‘Have you finally lost your mind, Tomas?’

‘It’s the only way to get Vogel,’ I said.

‘We’ll never get anywhere near it,’ she protested. ‘He’ll see us coming a mile off.’

‘Not if we give him something else to look at, he won’t.’

‘Like what?’

‘His city blowing up,’ I said. ‘Cutter reckons one waggon of the candles will be enough to blow the wall, which gives us everything that’s on the second one to cause the mother of all distractions.’

‘Just how many men do you think I’ve got?’ Anne demanded. ‘We’ll need the whole crew for the attack, and that’s still not going to be anywhere near enough. How am I supposed to be letting off bombs all over the city at the same time?’

‘We’ll have Iagin’s men too,’ I reminded her. ‘Leonov and his crew: they know what they’re doing.’

‘Aye, perhaps,’ Anne said, ‘but I still don’t see how we can be letting off bombs at the same time.’

‘Aye, well, that’s because we can’t. But Sister Galina’s men can.’

‘You are *not* giving those fucking things to her,’ Anne said, and I could tell that she meant it.

‘No,’ I agreed, ‘I’m not. We’ll be setting them – but any fool can light a fuse when the time comes.’

Anne sucked her teeth and took a swig of her brandy. The Dripping Bucket was crowded and noisy, but Black Billy was

doing a fine job of keeping people away from our conversation.

‘And you trust her mob, do you?’

‘No, Anne, I don’t,’ I said, ‘but I don’t see that I’ve got a better option.’

Anne sighed and downed the rest of her drink. She was silent for a long minute as she thought it over, but she surely had to see that if there had been another choice, I would have taken it and been glad of it.

‘Perhaps not,’ she finally agreed. ‘When?’

‘Soon,’ I said. ‘I need to speak to Sister Galina, get it arranged, and we’ll need a couple of nights to get the charges hidden around the city, but no longer than it has to be. I don’t like sitting on that stuff, it’s not safe.’

‘None of this is *safe*,’ Anne snapped, and I could tell in that moment just how far I had stretched our friendship and her loyalty to get to this point. Anne was close to being done with me, I could tell, and the thought saddened me greatly.

‘Aye,’ I said, for want of anything better.

‘You’re absolutely convinced this needs doing at all?’ Anne asked. ‘I know you’re a politician now, apparently, but speaking for myself, I don’t actually give a fuck who sits on the throne. I don’t even know what the last queen looked like, Tomas. It just doesn’t matter to normal people, do you grasp that? I’ll allow that the Princess Crown Royal was mad as a shithouse rat and would have been a disaster, but Vogel? I’ve never spoken to the man, but is he honestly any worse than anyone else? Than *you*?’

‘I’m not trying to make myself the king,’ I said. ‘Lady’s sake, Anne, is that what you think? I don’t want to be the fucking king! I just know what will happen if *he* is. Look how he hangs on to power, how he moves the people. It’s by giving them a common enemy, uniting them through making them feel better than anyone different – giving them someone to hate. With him on the throne we’ll be at war

again within a year or two, and it won't even matter who with. Do you want to go to war again, Anne? Because I know I fucking don't.'

This was, I realised, almost the same argument Ailsa had used to bring me around to her way of thinking when she had first recruited me. I held Anne's gaze, but inside, I found myself appalled at just how much of a Queen's Man I had truly become – no, not *appalled*, that was the wrong word for it. I *should* have been, but somehow I wasn't, and that told me all I needed to know.

Anne rubbed her eyes for a moment, then looked at me across the table. 'You win,' she said. 'We're doing it.'

*

Runners were dispatched, and a couple of hours later I was again meeting with Sister Galina in the squalid kitchens of the Skanian's Head. That was another place I had as good as bought with the amount of money I had given the taverner, but I was spending Vogel's coin out from under his nose while Iagin cooked the books to cover it up, so I didn't much give a shit about that.

'Blessing, Father?' she said as she dropped me a curtsey. 'My name is Sister Galina, daughter of Our Lady.'

If we had to go through this charade every time we met, well, it was a small enough price to pay for her support.

I smiled and put my hand on her forehead. 'Our Lady go with you, daughter,' I said.

She smiled back up at me, and rose from her curtsey. 'Thank you, Father. What do you need?'

'Soldiers,' I said bluntly. 'You remember what I told you about the Prince Regent, and how he murdered our divine queen? Well I'm doing something about it, but I need help. I need loyal, *devout* help. I need people prepared to fight, in the name of the Holy Martyr.'

'Blessed be her name,' Sister Galina said automatically.

‘Praise be to Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows, and blessed be the Ascended Martyr,’ I said.

Sister Galina clutched her hands to her chest in a gesture of rapture and I thought perhaps she was once again seeing the Princess Crown Royal’s flaming immolation on the balcony of the palace.

‘Blessed be,’ she whispered. ‘Anything, Father. Tell me what you require of the faithful.’

‘Two nights from now,’ I said, ‘there will be bombs set all around the city: a new type of bomb. These are a gift from the Martyr herself to aid us on her path of vengeance, a gift designed to help us aid her in her holy crusade to avenge her divine mother. When the times comes, I will need people prepared to light the fuses. What say you, Sister? Will you and your people join me, your priest and prophet, in the holy crusade?’

I was spouting *utter* horseshit and I knew it, making it up as I went along, but it looked to be having the desired effect. Tears sprang to Sister Galina’s eyes and she nodded with a fervour that I found truly unsettling. I wasn’t blind to the reality of the situation: if we won, I would eventually have to work out what to do with these lunatics – but that was a problem for another day. The ‘if’ in that thought was doing a lot of heavy lifting, I knew, and I decided I wouldn’t worry about what might happen later until I was sure I would *have* a later. At that moment, that was anything but a given.

‘Father, I would do *everything* for the holy crusade,’ Sister Galina said, and just so easily, she adopted the new words I had literally just thought up.

That was how it was done: it was all in the phrasing. The right choice of words can normalise the most insane of ideas, and fast. These are the levers that move people, as I have written.

‘It makes me glad to hear you say that, daughter,’ I said. ‘Let me have an address where you can be reached. You will

have a map with the locations marked on it, and the times that the fuses are to be lit. We will do the rest, I promise you. In the Martyr's name.'

'We will rain down fire and destruction in her holy name,' Sister Galina promised me. 'Blessed be the Martyr and her holy crusade!'

'Blessed be,' I said.

I looked at Sister Galina then, and I wondered exactly what the fuck I had unleashed.

When I returned to the Dripping Bucket, I found Bloody Anne holding court at her table. She waved away Sir Eland and Kreov and Black Billy when I walked in, so I could speak to her in private.

'And?' she asked me, without preamble.

'Aye, it's arranged,' I said. 'Two nights from now. We'll need to be ready. I want the charges set in strategic places, and none too near the house of law – the aim is to draw the City Guard as far away from there as possible. We'll choose noble houses, obviously, and the castle, or as close to it as anyone can get. The Grand High Temple of All Gods, for definite. The theatre, too. Fuck south of the river: we need to hit the places the great and the good actually care about. Just not the house of magicians, library or the university – I can't do that to her. Nor her house either, obviously, nor Ailsa's or her father's.'

'I suppose not,' Anne said, although somewhat grudgingly, I thought.

'Anywhere else is fair game,' I pointed out. 'Make a map – it has to be very clear where each charge is set. We're trusting Galina's people not to fuck this up, and we're not dealing with professionals here.'

'We're dealing with fucking maniacs,' Anne said.

'Aye, I'm afraid we are,' I had to allow. 'I saw that tonight more than ever before, but they're what we've got.'

'At least one of them is going to blow themselves up, you do realise that, don't you, Tomas?'

‘Aye, I do,’ I said slowly, ‘and probably more than one. Truth be told, I’m counting on it. The more of them do that, the fewer of them I have to worry about later.’

That sounded harsh, I knew, but then, I am a harsh man and I make no apology for that. Allying myself to these fanatics was a very, very dangerous gamble, but I couldn’t see my way clear of it at the time. I hadn’t seen fit to mention to Sister Galina just how unstable the magicians’ candles were, or how powerful. In truth, I wanted as few of her men to survive the night as possible. She would send the veterans, the guardsmen, the *dangerous* ones – the ones I least wanted her to keep, obviously.

It was harsh, as I say, but that was the reality in those times we lived in.

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Chapter 47

The next morning I needed to bring lagin up to date on the plans, make sure he had Leonov and his crew lined up to support the assault at the right time. That meant I had to go to the house of law. To say I had mixed feelings about that was to speak lightly of it. I struggled with breakfast, fighting a sick knot of tension in my stomach as I tried to force down food and small beer, and I wasn't the only one. Billy was plainly very ill indeed. He was trembling and sweating at the table, and he had lost more hair even since I had last sat down with him. Mina looked little better, but she seemed well in herself, at least. Billy very much did not. I could see Beast and Sam were trying their best not to notice, and Rosie was looking at him curiously, but saying nothing.

'What's wrong, lad?' I asked him.

'Just don't feel well, Da,' he said, and wiped the back of his hand across his sweating brow. 'I think . . . I think I might go back to bed. May I be excused?'

'Aye, course, son,' I said. 'If you want your bed, then that's what's best for you. Go on, get off now.'

He got shakily to his feet, and I watched him make his way across the common room to the stairs, then turned to Mina.

'What the fuck's wrong with him?' I demanded.

'I don't rightly know, Mr Piety,' she confessed. 'Old Kurt taught me hurting things, not healing things, I told you that.'

'You healed Black Billy well enough, for all that he should have died,' I pointed out.

'Yes,' she said, 'but his body was torn and I could see what to do with that. Billy's isn't - believe me, if I knew how to

help him I'd be doing it.'

I could see the worry in her over-bright young eyes, and I nodded sympathetically.

'I know you would, lass,' I said, 'and I didn't mean to sound like I thought otherwise. I'm just worried about him, you understand?'

'Yes,' Mina said again. 'So am I.'

'Is it a sickness? I can pay for doctors and medicine, if that would help.'

'It wouldn't,' she said. 'It's not a sickness, not in the way you mean it anyway. It's the cunning – I think . . . well, I think perhaps it's got too much for him.'

'And how about you, Mina?' I had to ask. 'I don't mean to pry, and you seem well enough, but . . .'

'But I look like I've aged thirty years, don't I?' Mina said. 'I know, and I don't know why that should be. I . . . I'm scared, Mr Piety.'

I looked at her then, really looked at her, past her ghastly pallor and unnatural thinness and into her eyes, and I saw the terrified young girl sitting across the table from me and my heart went out to her.

'I don't know how to help,' I confessed, 'and I truly wish I did.'

'No,' Mina admitted, 'neither do I. I wish Old Kurt was still alive.'

Right then so did I, but he wasn't and that was all there was to it. Billy and Mina had found a thing that they could do, and they had never stopped to ask themselves whether they should – well, of course they hadn't, they were young. But now they had no one older and wiser who remotely understood them or what they could do. Kurt had lived eighty years and more before his cunning had consumed him, but I didn't think he had ever done the thing that Billy and Mina had. I thought perhaps the Princess Crown Royal had been doing it her entire life, and she had died before her thirteenth nameday.

Feast.

The cunning was a harsh mistress and no mistake. So few had it in them, and it seemed that only a few of those who did could understand *how* they did what they did, or what the consequences might be. That much I did know: for everything in life, there were always consequences, and the cunning was no exception. As they say in Ellinburg, you always have to pay the dancer in the end.

‘Rosie,’ I said, ‘could you pen a letter to Major Bakrylov at the castle for me and ask him out for a lunchtime drink? The Jolly Joker, I think, at noon.’

Involving the major would bring its own consequences, of course. I thought about Billy and Mina, and about Sister Galina and her mob of fanatics, about what I was planning, and what the consequences of *that* would be. I thought that this time *I* would have to bleed for the dancer.

*

The house of law looked more forbidding than ever that morning as my carriage drew up outside. I nodded cordially to the gate guards, but I made a point of noting the thickness of the wall as I passed through it and into the entrance hall. The place was virtually a castle and I could only pray that Cutter’s calculations would be at least roughly correct. He had only my estimates of the power of the magicians’ candles to work on, after all, and for all that he had a fair idea of what he was doing, he wasn’t a trained sapper.

Even then my carriage was being driven away to the enclosed stableyard behind the building, with Sam and Beast still on board to await my return. I had already decided that was where we would hit them: the outer wall encircling the yard wasn’t tall and could be easily climbed, provided I could get rid of the guards. I had to cling to a slim hope that the rear wall of the building wouldn’t be as thick

as the front – but even if I was wrong about that, there was no reason for it to be any thicker. Every waggon making a delivery to the house of law had its cargo unloaded in that yard, and in the chaos and confusion I was planning, I was hoping that I could get my waggon in without anyone having the time or inclination to worry about what it actually contained.

This is a thing that has to be understood: that although the house of law was immensely powerful, it wasn't actually all that efficient. I remembered how I had bullied explosives out of the master of munitions the previous year when I had wanted them, when I had been rather foolishly planning to blow up Archmagus Reiter's house. I had pointed a sword at the man and threatened him under the Queen's Warrant, and twenty minutes later I rode away into the city streets with a cart full of military explosives. The house of law was ruled by a hierarchy of fear, and in my experience that is a very poor way to run a business, but it had suited my needs perfectly. As one of only seven people in the realm to carry the warrant, I could do anything I liked, unless directly challenged by one of my peers or Vogel himself, and I thought those who weren't already on my side would be too busy when the time came to worry about a fucking goods delivery.

I put the thought away for later and made my way up the stairs. The mess was empty, so I carried on up to Iagin's office and knocked on the door.

'What?' he barked from inside.

I pushed the door open and looked in, and saw him at his desk looking harried. There was a mountain of paperwork in front of him that I didn't envy him one little bit, and again I found my appreciation of Rosie increasing. I really did need to give her that pay rise.

'Morning,' I said.

'Tomas,' he said, and swept a hand back through his thinning white hair. 'Have you seen all this shit?'

‘Aye,’ I said, although of course I hadn’t, because Rosie already had and must have decided that I didn’t need to.

I had no idea what any of it even was.

Iagin, as much as I liked and respected him, also wasn’t all that efficient. He didn’t even have a secretary, although I had no idea why not – perhaps he didn’t have anyone on his staff that he trusted that much.

‘What do you need?’ he asked me.

‘Breakfast,’ I said, ‘and I’m not in the mood for the mess this morning. Do you fancy joining me somewhere?’

I didn’t need to tell him I wanted to talk, and not in the house of law.

‘Aye, fuck it, why not?’ he said, and tossed a news sheet down on the pile of papers in front of him.

Stealing our country! the headline screamed, and I knew this must be the one I had reached. There was a very poor etching of Lord Vogel on the front page, a caricature that showed him with devils’ horns, holding a dagger over the white rose that represented queen and country.

Oh, they had really committed themselves to my story and no mistake. I wondered how much longer it would be before Konrad found them. I wondered how much longer it would have to be before I could find Konrad with my fucking sword. I felt my hand tremble, and realised that I wanted to stab him very badly indeed.

Soon, I consoled myself. Very soon.

Breathe. It’s just battle shock.

Breathe, and smile. You don’t know who’s watching.

‘Give me a moment,’ Iagin said, and he swept several of the papers including the news sheet into a drawer of his desk and locked it with the heavy clunk that spoke of a good lock. ‘Right, come on then. The Horn of Plenty does a fine breakfast.’

‘Sounds good to me,’ I said.

Look at me Ma, I’m conspiring to bring down the government.

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Chapter 48

‘Tomorrow night,’ I told Iagin. ‘Can I borrow Leonov and his lads?’

We were in the private room of the Horn of Plenty that Iagin had turned into his second office, and had just finished a surprisingly good second breakfast that I actually enjoyed this time.

‘Aye, course you can,’ Iagin said. ‘We’re in this together, Tomas – or at least I sincerely fucking hope we are.’

‘We are,’ I assured him. ‘There’s going to be quite the distraction tomorrow night, I assure you. Make sure you and your crew don’t get involved. The idea is to draw the City Guard away from the house of law so we can make our move.’

Iagin looked up from his mug of small beer and narrowed his eyes as he looked at me. ‘What sort of distraction?’

‘The explosive kind. Sister Galina and her folks will be helping to make that happen.’

‘Gods, I hope you know what you’re doing, involving that lot,’ he said.

‘I do,’ I assured him, although I absolutely didn’t. But strong leadership, always. Once the decision has been made you can never be seen to doubt it, as I have written of before. ‘Is Ilse onside?’

‘Aye,’ Iagin said.

That was good.

‘Right,’ I said. ‘Well, make sure she knows what’s happening and when.’

‘I will,’ Iagin said.

I realised that once again, I was giving him orders, and more to the point, he was accepting that, and without

complaint. That was even better.

‘Right,’ I said. ‘I need to go. I’ve got to see a man about a sapper.’

I ignored Iagin’s confused look and took my leave of the Horn of Plenty. It was around the eleventh hour of the morning by then, and I took my time making my way to the Jolly Joker. The establishment, a gambling house, was mostly only busy at night, but they kept the bar and a few tables open during the day for their most dedicated customers. I had been there a couple of times before the with major, and I knew he liked the place.

I had a little smile to myself as I wondered what gossip it must have started in the officers’ mess at the castle when a married knight and former member of the governing council had invited the notorious Major Bakrylov out for a lunchtime drink – but of course, I didn’t give a fuck. Soldiers gossip like no others, and I didn’t have the time or energy to care about it. In any event, I was the man who had brought a whore to a society ball, so I didn’t think anyone would put much past me.

‘Do you want us in with you, boss?’ Beast asked.

‘Aye, it wouldn’t hurt,’ I said. ‘I want to speak to the major in private, and you two looming ought to persuade anyone else against wanting to sit too close to our table.’

‘I can loom,’ Sam said, and I smiled.

He could, at that.

‘That you can, Sam lad,’ I said as I stepped down from the carriage. ‘That you most definitely can.’

I walked into the Jolly Joker like I owned the place, as was my way, with my two huge minders flanking me. The host, obviously recognising me, offered a nervous bow once he had hurried out from behind the bar to greet me.

‘Sir Tomas,’ he said, ‘how can I assist you? Are you looking for a game?’

‘I’m meeting a friend for a drink, that’s all,’ I said. ‘A table for four, if you would be so kind. Somewhere quiet.’

He quickly seated us at a table in a corner well away from the only two card tables that were in use.

‘Wine, brandy?’ he offered solicitously.

‘Brandy for me, a bottle and two glasses,’ I said, and looked a question at the lads.

‘Beer,’ Beast said, and Sam echoed him in almost the same breath.

‘Coming up,’ the man assured me, and hurried away.

I found it passing strange that he was quite so scared of me when I had only been in the place twice before in my life, and again I found myself wondering how many people truly knew the identities of the Queen’s Men. I was a member of the governing council, of course, but then, I had murdered First Councillor Lan Letskov with my own hand and I wasn’t sure that was still as much of a secret as the house of law seemed to think it was.

Our drinks came, and I sat and listened to Sam and Beast joking with each other until Major Bakrylov walked in a few minutes later. Although out of uniform, he was wearing his customary red coat cut in the military style, and his distinctive bristling side whiskers were enough to tell anyone that the dashing young man was a cavalry officer. I heard the conversation at the nearest card table falter to a stop as he walked past them.

‘. . . butcher,’ someone muttered.

The Coronation Massacre had definitely not been forgotten, and even on the moneyed streets north of the river there were clearly still those who thought ill of him for it.

I saw colour flush the major’s cheeks at the words, but he ignored them and took the vacant chair at our table.

‘Piety, old man, good to see you,’ he said, giving me a lazy smile.

I lifted the brandy bottle. ‘Drink?’

‘Gods, what do you think?’

I poured for us both and let him take a sip before I spoke. Beast and Sam were both silent now, each nursing his tankard and watching for trouble, although in the Jolly Joker at that time of day I didn't think there would be any.

Turned out I was wrong about that.

Major Bakrylov had barely raised the glass to his lips when one of the card players, clearly drunk, bawled 'Butcher!' at the top of his voice.

'Oh, for the love of the gods,' Bakrylov said, his hand going to the hilt of his sword as he made to rise.

I held up a hand to still him. 'Don't lower yourself,' I told the major. 'Gentlemen don't get into tavern brawls, do they?'

'I fucking do,' Sam said, and he got to his feet and scarcely a moment later Beast was up beside him.

'Aye, me too,' he said.

'My boys will take care of it,' I assured the major, who barked a laugh.

'Oh, Piety,' he said, 'now you're a knight and all that, I sometimes manage to forget the sort of businessman you really are.'

I snorted. 'Aye, well,' I said. 'You can take the boy out of the slums of Ellinburg . . .'

' . . . but you can't take the slums of Ellinburg out of the boy, I suppose,' the major finished for me, and raised his glass in a mock salute. 'I grew up wealthy, of course. The army made me a man. I'll wager it's simply life that made you one.'

'Something like that,' I said.

Beast had knocked the man to the floor and now Simple Sam put the boot in with a resounding thud. One of the fellow's companions swung a chair into Sam's back, but it looked like Sam barely felt it. He turned and slammed a straight right into that man's face that sent him crashing back into their table, scattering cards and glasses and counters everywhere.

‘You obviously wanted to speak to me about something,’ Bakrylov said, lowering his voice and letting the noise of the fight cover his words.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘The matter Iagin and I are pursuing will be coming to a conclusion tomorrow night. I wondered if you might lend me a sapper I can trust in the meantime?’

‘A *sapper*?’ Bakrylov echoed, struggling to keep his voice down. ‘We’re a cavalry regiment, man!’

‘But you’ll know someone,’ I said. ‘You had sappers when we took the grand duchess. Don’t tell me Iagin hasn’t had you trying to find sympathisers all across the army.’

In all honesty, I had no idea if he had or not, but it’s what I would have done in Iagin’s shoes – and as usual, he didn’t disappoint me.

‘Oh, very well,’ Bakrylov conceded. ‘I do have a tame sapper, as it happens. Well, not *tame*, as such; she’s a ferocious harridan, but she’s on the side of the cause.’

‘Blasting experience?’

‘Yes, absolutely.’

‘Cheating bastard!’ Sam roared, and he picked a man up and hurled him bodily out of the open door and into the street. A dagger tumbled from his limp fingers.

I knew how Sam thought: to his mind, you didn’t pull a knife in a fist-fight. That wasn’t fair. The man had crashed down onto the unforgiving cobbles outside, where he was lying still. The folks at the other table had already fled, their game abandoned, and Beast caved in the shouter’s last remaining friend with a body blow that would have floored a horse, and that was done.

They re-joined us at the table, Sam rather ostentatiously dusting his palms together as he swaggered back across the common room with a big grin on his face. He enjoyed a good punch-up, did Simple Sam. Beast just looked as though he had done a job of work and no more to be said about it. The host was there a moment later, wringing his hands nervously.

‘Sir Tomas, I—’ he started, but the major took a gold crown out of his pouch and put it on the table.

‘I think you’ll find that will more than cover the damage and the lost custom,’ he said, and waved the man away as though the money was nothing. ‘Now run along, old boy.’

To him it probably wasn’t, I thought. I remembered winning a crown from him at Lord Lan Yetrov’s bear-baiting a couple of years ago, and how he had thought nothing of it at all. Now he didn’t even raise an eyebrow as the host, looking stunned, took the coin and slowly backed away, leaving us to it.

‘When do you need her?’ Bakrylov asked me, the host and the fight already forgotten.

‘Soon as you can,’ I said. ‘I want her to meet my quiet man and work some things out between them. You know the Dripping Bucket, south of the river?’

‘Gods no, of course I don’t,’ the major said, and smirked to tell me what he thought of anywhere south of the river, ‘but I’m sure I can find a corporal who does.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘Send her there and have her ask for Cutter. Tell her to say Pious, in Our Lady’s Name, and that Tomas sent her.’

‘*Cutter*,’ the major echoed slowly. ‘I really do like you, Piety, old boy. You’re . . . unconventional.’

*

I didn’t know who Bakrylov’s sapper was but those words would get her in and I was sure she and Cutter would work it out between them. Sappers were demolition experts, after all, and if I could borrow the expertise of a military professional then I was absolutely going to do that. Always cheat, always win. The captain had told me that in the war and it had been true then and it was true now. More than ever, it was true now.

I returned to the Bountiful Harvest when I took my leave of the major and found Billy was still lying sick in his bed.

‘I don’t know what we’re going to do with him, boss,’ Luka said. ‘Anne’s got the crew ready to head out tonight to start leaving your little presents where they need to be left, and mapping it all for your mad nun and her lunatics, but when it all kicks off, we won’t be able to spare anyone to watch him. I’m assuming you’ll be wanting Mina with us?’

‘Fuck, yes,’ I said.

I didn’t *think* Vogel had a Skanian magician hidden in the house of law, but I certainly wouldn’t have put it past him and I *definitely* wasn’t prepared to gamble our lives on it. Truth be told, if either of them had been remotely healthy I would simply have had Billy and Mina blast our way in with the cunning and not even bothered with the magicians’ candles, but Mina looked weak as a kitten and I was beginning to seriously worry that Billy was actually dying.

Dying of *what*, of course, I had no idea, but when I went up to visit him, the lad really did look at death’s door. There was freshly shed hair on his pillow, and he had developed a running sore at the corner of his mouth that hurt just to look at.

Mina was sitting at his bedside, quietly weeping.

‘There’s really nothing you can do?’ I asked her.

‘I’m *trying*!’ she all but screamed at me, and I held my hands up defensively.

‘I know, lass, I know,’ I said. ‘I’m just . . . I’m worried, that’s all. Truth be told, I’m really scared for him.’

‘So am I,’ Mina whispered. ‘And you’ll want me to come and fight for you tomorrow night, won’t you?’

I swallowed. Sometimes a general has to make hard choices.

Now I *was* a fucking general, and there was no one to tell me what to do any more. The hard choices were mine and mine alone to make, and no one to blame but myself.

Being a general was bad enough.

Who the fuck would want to be a king?

'Aye, I will,' I said at last. 'Tomorrow night. It'll only be for a few hours, gods willing, but we have to go. We *all* have to go, Mina. There are few enough of us as it is. Even Luka will be fighting, and Rosie will support us with her crossbow. I need every able hand I can get and that's the simple fact of it.'

'He can't be left alone,' Mina said, and I had to agree.

'Aye, I can see that,' I said. 'I'll take him to his ma's. I'm sure Ailsa will look after him for a couple of days while he gets better.'

'And if he *doesn't*?'

I had no answer to that.

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Chapter 49

The next morning I arrived at Ailsa's house with Billy wrapped up in blankets beside me. I'd sent a note to her the night before explaining the situation, so we were expected at least, and the gate guards let the carriage in with no argument. Sam helped me lift Billy down and kept a steadying hand on the lad's shoulder as he shuffled painfully towards the front door.

Ailsa was there to meet us herself, with three footmen in attendance, and the look on her face was heartbreaking when she saw Billy. We had seen woefully little of each other since my return to Dannsburg, both of us being as wrapped up in our work as we were, and my heart went out to her as she took Billy in her arms and hugged him.

'Oh my poor darling boy,' she said.

'Mama,' Billy whispered, and he hugged her back as best he could.

'Take the poor child to his room,' Ailsa said to one of the footmen, and it gladdened my heart that she had kept Billy's room ready for him. 'Nurse is already there, waiting for him. Gods, Tomas, our poor boy!'

Perhaps she really did want us back, at that.

'Aye,' I said. 'I don't know what's wrong with him. No one does.'

'He's been seen by doctors, of course?'

'Of course,' I lied.

Mina had said it was pointless, that it was the cunning had sickened him, was perhaps killing him, but I didn't think I could tell Ailsa that. She loved Billy as her own son, but she understood the cunning even less than I did and I didn't think she would have accepted that as an answer.

‘Come into the drawing room, have a drink,’ she said. ‘My staff will look after your men.’

She seemed to have forgotten Sam’s name, and she didn’t know Beast at all, but I supposed that was hardly surprising. Ailsa the funny, flirty barmaid who had poured Sam’s beer in the Tanner’s Arms had been but one of her many false faces, and why should she remember it now that it had been discarded?

I followed her into the familiar comfort of her drawing room and sank onto the settle with a contented sigh as she poured me a brandy from a bottle on the cupboard and took a glass of wine for herself.

‘Tomas, the boy looks terrible,’ she said. ‘Why have you brought him to me? I mean I’ll have him gratefully and look after him as best I can, but . . . why now?’

‘I . . .’ I said, and I looked at her for a long moment.

Ailsa was looking distraught with worry for our son, and given the fucking state of him, that was no more than I would have expected.

‘What is it, Tomas?’ she prompted. ‘You can tell me anything, you know that.’

She showed me her smile then, her real smile, the sweet smile of Chandari Shapoor, the *real* Ailsa. The one I thought only I ever got to see.

‘Gods, Ailsa,’ I said. ‘There’s . . . there’s things happening. Don’t go into the city tonight. Stay here, and keep your household guard close around you.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ she said.

‘I’m talking about a usurper,’ I said quietly. ‘I’m talking about treason and armed rebellion. About taking back our country before it’s too fucking late.’

Her eyes grew very wide. ‘Tomas, no,’ she said. ‘You can’t possibly be trying to take the throne!’

‘Of course I’m fucking not,’ I snapped. ‘Lady’s sake, Ailsa, I don’t want the throne – I don’t know why anyone in their right mind would – but *someone* does. Someone means to

usurp the throne from the royal house and take over the country, and I mean to put a stop to it. So that's why I'll be busy tonight. I just need you to look after Billy, because I can't.'

'Of course,' she said, and smiled. 'What mother wouldn't?'

*

After I left Billy at Ailsa's house, I rode back to the Bountiful Harvest in the carriage. I ate a quick lunch, then went upstairs to get into my leather and mail. I put my priest's robes on over the top as well, so I wouldn't be conspicuous on the city streets, and buckled the Weeping Women back around my waist.

That done, I went down to the stables and had the boy saddle my horse, and rode south towards the bridge at a sedate pace.

'Blessing, Father?' a man called out. 'My name's Alik, and I'm a beggar.'

He was standing on the kerb, a decrepit-looking man somewhere around his fortieth year, leaning on a crutch. I nudged my horse over to him and reached down to put my hand on his greasy forehead.

'Our Lady go with you, my son,' I said, and I met his eyes.

I could see the madness of Abington in his gaze, and he was of an age to have been there. I reached into my pouch on instinct and gave him a silver mark. His eyes widening in astonishment, he looked up at me as if searching for an explanation.

'I was there too,' I said simply, and I rode away before he could respond.

If this happened, I thought, if I survived this night, I would do what I could. I was sick and tired of seeing veterans begging in the gutter, freezing in doorways, being led away by the Guard to be hanged for vagrancy. That wasn't right,

not after what they had been through for this country. What we had *all* been through. It wasn't *right*.

I felt my hands start to tremble on the reins and I forced myself to breathe deep and slow, the way Ailsa had taught me.

Battle shock. It's just battle shock.

It was fucking rage, that was what it was: rage at Vogel and the regime he had established, where keeping the streets looking presentable for the rich people was more important than the lives of heroes.

Fuck. That.

It stopped tonight. It stopped in fire and blood, in my rage and the Lady Lan Yetrova's. Enough. It was fucking *enough*.

I slowed my shuddering breath, steered my horse towards the bridge and rode over it and into the south side of the city to the warehouse.

Bakrylov's sapper was a short, fierce, dark-skinned, shaven-headed woman called Hawa, and that wasn't a name I'd ever heard before. She was working in the warehouse with Cutter, and she was entirely inside the waggon, amongst its lethal cargo.

'How's it going?' I asked them both.

'Don't disturb me, I'm working,' she snapped at me.

'Come over here out of her way and I'll tell you,' Cutter said.

As we walked away across the empty warehouse, out of her hearing, I said, 'Well? Has the major come through for us?'

'She knows the work,' Cutter said, and from him that was high praise indeed. 'What she's doing now is rigging all the fuses together into one long one, and I'd never have thought of that. I was just going to light one and assume it would set them all off, but apparently it might and it might not. So she's doing it properly. She's brought me an artilleryman's match cord, too, so I can have that lit and hidden down beside the waggon box before I go in. I'd

known cocking about with flint and tinder in the yard was going to be conspicuous, so that's one less worry if I don't have to do that. All I have to do is park the waggon, touch the match to the fuse, get over the wall and run like fuck. She's given me twenty seconds on the fuse; that'll be enough.'

All he had to do. Lady's sake, Cutter had balls of iron to be doing this. The right man for the right job, always.

'Aye, good,' I said. 'Shame about the horses, but I can't see a way around that. Did Anne get everything done last night?'

'There's bundles of these fucking things concealed all over the city, stuffed up drainpipes and hidden in alleys, and your mad nun has her map. Once Hawa finishes here we'll be as ready as we're going to get.'

'Thank you, Cutter,' I said. 'You've done well. I know Jochan would have been proud of you.'

Cutter's jaw tightened, and I could see he was struggling not to weep. I turned away to let him keep his dignity, and looked at the waggon. It was nondescript, very ordinary, with nothing to give a hint that it had come from House Lan Yetrova. The Lady Lan Yetrova was no fool, after all.

'Right,' Cutter said after a moment. 'I'd better go back and help or I'll be getting the sharp side of her tongue again.'

'Good luck,' I said.

After my conversation with Mina at the Bountiful Harvest yesterday afternoon I had paid a visit to the house of law and told the clerk of admissions that I had decided to claim an office in the building, that she was to expect a waggon full of my furniture, possessions and papers to arrive the following evening. The woman had simply made a note in her ledger and added it to the following day's instructions for the guard. Cutter wouldn't have any problems getting the waggon into the yard, I knew; it was whether he could get himself out again in time that worried me, but with

Hawa's bomb-rigging expertise I felt a lot more confident than I had before.

It will work, I told myself. Stop worrying, man. The distraction attack is all ready to go, the waggon is expected at the house of law, Leonov's boys are on side and Billy's safe with Ailsa. We can do this.

Of course we could. We were the fucking Pious Men. We had been through Hell together: if we could survive Abington, we could do anything.

I left Cutter and Hawa to their work and rode up to the Dripping Bucket. The sapper wouldn't be coming with us tonight, of course – that would have been asking too much of her and Major Bakrylov both – but Cutter had told me her contribution had already been invaluable. I left my horse with a couple of lads in the stableyard and went into the inn through the back door, where I found Sam and Beast waiting for me in the kitchen. Both were already in leather and mail, and they looked ready for a night's work.

'Where's Anne?' I asked them.

'Upstairs with Rosie,' Sam said, and he blushed. 'They ain't seen each other much recently, like.'

'Aye, I suppose not,' I said. 'Is Fat Luka here yet?'

'Yes, boss,' Luka said, and I turned to see him in the doorway that led to the common room, and he was mailed up too. 'Everyone is. Leonov and his boys are getting acquainted with them as don't know 'em. Black Billy is helping Sir Eland get into his armour. Mina's just sort of sitting there, but she came with me right enough when I told her it was time. We'll be a full battle company tonight, Captain.'

'Don't call me that,' I said.

There was only one captain, as far as I was concerned, and he had died of his wounds on the road home from Abington. I had learned more about leadership from that man than I had from any other in my life, and I wouldn't

presume to take his place even now. I would never be able to fill his shoes.

‘Aye, right you are, boss,’ Luka said, and I could see from his expression that he knew exactly what I meant.

We had been in the same company back in the war, after all, and everyone had respected the captain – perhaps not everyone had liked him, as such, but everyone had respected him. He had been a harsh man, perhaps, but a fair one: a true leader. I hoped my own leadership style would one day come close to emulating his. Williamsen, his name was, but to all of us he had just been the captain. I missed him, I had to allow. I wondered what he would have made of this, of what I was doing now. I hoped that he would have given me his blessing.

‘Right,’ I said, ‘let’s have something to eat while we’ve got the chance, and wait for shit to start blowing up.’

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Chapter 50

Shit started blowing up a couple of hours later, shortly after dusk.

‘It’s started!’ shouted Kreov’s girl, stationed in the north-facing garret where she had best view of the rest of the city.

A moment later I heard it: a reverberating *boom!* that shook the windows of the Dripping Bucket in their casements.

‘Right,’ I said, and got to my feet. I hadn’t been drinking – no one had, on my strict instruction – but Lady knew I wanted a brandy right then. I swallowed the thought and cinched my sword belt a notch tighter over my robes.

‘Is that us, then, Tomas?’ Anne asked.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘Let’s fucking do this. We need to be in position behind the house of law before Cutter gets there.’

We headed out of the Dripping Bucket and into the city on foot, me and the Pious men and Leonov’s crew, even Rosie with her crossbow and a loading crank and quiver of bolts. There were perhaps thirty of us, and that was all the strength I had in Dannsburg – that was all the strength I had in total, if truth be told: Thirty soldiers and a few hundred extremely unreliable lunatics, to bring down such a powerful regime. This had to work. The bombing campaign Sister Galina was starting had to draw the City Guard away from the house of law and keep the army high command penned up in the castle, or we were well and truly fucking done. We hurried down the street as another flash lit the night sky, followed by a deafening detonation. I could see flames in the distance, and great clouds of dust and smoke were obscuring what little moonlight there was.

‘We ringed the castle hill with bombs,’ Anne told me as we marched. ‘I can’t see any of the soldiers being able to get out tonight.’

‘Well and good,’ I said, ‘but there are enough City Guard on the streets to be a worry.’

‘I’m scared,’ Mina said from beside me, making me start, as I’d had no idea she was even there.

I rested a hand on her shoulder. ‘Aye, lass, we all are,’ I said. ‘Anyone with any sense would be.’

Again thunder split the sky, and somewhere to the west something went up like it had been hit by every cannon in Abington at once. I felt strangely calm. Perhaps it was Anne’s presence beside me, perhaps it was because I had planned this and so I knew what was coming, but the battle shock wasn’t troubling me even though the constant sound of explosions were now filling the air. It had been much the same at my wedding, I recalled. Battle shock is a strange and unpredictable thing, and it’s different for everyone. For me I think it was more about the fear of losing control than it was about the actual bangs and flashes. If I knew they were coming, they didn’t bother me half so bad as a surprise did. I hadn’t suffered the battle shock that Godsdan afternoon, and I wasn’t suffering it now.

‘Pick up the pace,’ I ordered, and we crossed the bridge at double time and headed into the alleys that would lead us to the rear of the house of law.

One thing Hawa hadn’t been able to be too precise about was just how far away from the wall of the loading yard we needed to be. She knew powder, aye, but she had never seen the magicians’ candles before, any more than anyone else had, so she could only make an educated guess. We needed to be close enough to get in fast once the bomb went off, but not so close that it blew us up along with the house of law. There was a low hill a couple of streets behind the stable yard, with a steep, narrow road that ran down to

the alley along the bottom of the wall; I had arranged with Cutter that we would meet him there.

He had twenty seconds from touching the match cord to the fuse, and we had both agreed he could be over the wall and make the distance in that time. The elevation would offer significant protection in itself, and I'd seen Cutter run like a demon when he needed to.

'Company, halt,' Anne snapped when we reached the place, and everyone immediately obeyed. The veterans knew a sergeant when they heard one, and even Mina and Rosie weren't going to argue with that tone.

Anne had a better battlefield voice of command than I ever would, and that was something I had always valued about her. A general can give the best orders in the world, but what use if no one can hear them? If I was to be their general, then I would take one good sergeant over ten colonels any day.

We formed up as yet another massive explosion blew a chunk of the castle hill a hundred feet and more into the air, spreading choking rock dust and smoke across the sky. Another moment and – *Wham!*

There went Lord Dimitov's house, where I had famously taken a whore to a ball. I knew he had already moved, but that wasn't the point: it could have been anyone's mansion. Anne had been careful to choose low-collateral damage targets, places where we could be as sure as you ever could that we weren't killing innocent people, but the idea was to spread terror and destruction across the city, to send the City Guard running to defend the places where there *were* people. And it was working.

'There they go,' Luka said, with a smug smile in his voice, and he was right, at that. The Guard were streaming away from the house of law, whole squads of them, riding and running afoot into the chaos of the northern reaches of the city. Even from our vantage point on the hill we could hear whistles blowing, the thunder of hooves and pounding feet.

‘Get ready. It should be right about now,’ I said.
Something else blew close by to the east, the flash
lighting the night sky enough for me to see . . . *oh fuck*.
Oh fuck no.
There must have been forty guardsmen in the yard behind
the house of law.
They were waiting, and it was a fucking trap.

*

Cutter’s waggon rolled through the heavy gates and they
closed behind him, and there wasn’t a thing we could do
about it from where we were.

‘Oh Lady, we’re done,’ Anne whispered. ‘Tomas, we are
fucking done.’

I could only watch in horror as Cutter steered the waggon
around the corner of the house of law, completely oblivious
to the waiting danger, and straight into a whole company of
the City Guard, who suddenly unshuttered their lanterns. He
reined up, and I couldn’t possibly hear from that distance
but I could only imagine the exchange of words.

‘You’re under arrest!’

‘Seize him, and search that waggon!’

I couldn’t hear a word of it, of course, but I knew from
previous experience that the conversation must have gone
something like that. I couldn’t hear a thing from where we
were, but there was nothing at all wrong with my eyesight. I
saw Cutter’s right hand dip down beside the waggon box
and lift something that glowed with a slow smoulder in the
gloom of lantern light, and I saw him touch it to the end of a
fuse. That done, he slowly stood and raised his hands.

Oh no.

Oh Lady no, not Cutter—

Twenty seconds.

The guard captain marched forward – and Cutter leapt at
him, his evil little knives reversed in his hands. He took the

captain's throat out with one and punched the other into a man's eye, ripping it free in a spray of viscous fluid. He dodged a sword-thrust and spun on the ball of one foot, his other lashing out to send a guardswoman crashing back into the side of the waggon. The fuse was burning beneath the tarpaulin that covered the cargo, although none of the guard knew that. Cutter was playing for time, drawing them in to him, and he made no attempt to escape, however futile it would have been.

Let this be my eulogy for Jochan, in smoke and fire.

Ten seconds.

I suddenly thought of how big the distant explosions had been. 'Anne,' I said, 'how many candles did you lay at a time?'

'Bundles of five,' she said.

Fuck! There must have been almost a hundred of the fucking things on that waggon behind the house of law.

Cutter was punching his blade into a guardsman's stomach when the first crossbow bolt hit him, making him stagger.

Five seconds.

'Fucking *run!*' I bellowed. '*Everyone!*' and sprinted into the alley behind the building we had been hiding beside.

Two seconds.

'*Down!*' Anne roared in her best sergeant's voice. '*Down and cover!*'

It blew – like every god in Heaven had roared at once. The sky over the entire city flashed red, then an almighty cloud of choking dust rose into the sky to obscure the light. The concussive blast drove the air out of my lungs – I felt like I'd been hit in the back with huge hammers. Every window in the building in front of us blew in with a crash.

I dragged in a breath. 'Stay down!' I shouted, or tried to. 'Cover your heads!'

Three seconds from detonation.

It began to rain rocks, great chunks of rubble, falling from the sky, crashing down onto streets and buildings. Even in the alley we were being showered with debris, and only Sir Eland in his virtually impregnable armour was safe from it.

‘Fuck!’ I heard one of Leonov’s lads shout as a razor-shard of flying glass laid his cheek open.

Eventually the debris ceased falling and I dragged myself to my feet, pulling Anne up behind me.

‘Go, go, go!’ she roared.

We ran into a massive cloud of dust with no idea what to expect ahead of us. The original plan had been to climb the wall of the yard and enter the house of law through the breach we had made, but the wall simply wasn’t there any more. Neither was a good chunk of the house of law. There was a gaping hole in the back of the building that was at least two storeys high, and a ragged crater in the ground where the waggon had been. Cutter, the company of City Guard and Lady Lan Yetrova’s poor beautiful draft horses were red paste on the shattered ground that we slipped and slithered across as we charged into what was left of the house of law.

It stank. It fucking absolutely stank, the stench of the smoke, of blood and shit and exploded guts. Smell can be one of the biggest triggers of battle shock of all, and when I heard someone vomiting behind me, that was enough to set me off. I puked even as I ran, turning my head as best I could to spit it away from me, as I pushed onwards into the breach. Kant would have been ahead of me, his mace crashing into heads and shoulders and balls, bludgeoning and forcing his way forward.

Bludgeon and force, that had been how Kant the Cunt had made his way in the world, but of course Kant was dead and gone at my hand and this was *now*, not *then*. This wasn’t Abington, for all that it fucking felt like it.

I knew I had to remember that fact, cling to it. This was *now*, and Abington was over and done. If I lost sight of that, I

would be done too, I knew, lost to the battle shock as my brother had been.

‘Anne!’ I shouted, unable to see more than a foot in front of me in the impenetrable stinking dust clawing at my eyes and clogging my nose and throat.

‘I’m here,’ she rasped beside me, pausing as she gave vent to a fit of racking coughs.

‘Eland!’

‘Aye, boss.’

‘Take point,’ I ordered him. In his full harness Sir Eland was virtually invulnerable, and he led the way through those halls of dust and blood.

‘Leonov, Florence – your squads clear the ground floor,’ I commanded, following Eland.

‘Left,’ I told him, once I had got my bearings in the huge building. ‘Up the stairs.’

At the top of the stair we ran into a small group of City Guard, patrol strength at best, but Eland simply charged them, bellowing behind his visor, and his heavy war sword did its work. I heard the scream of their weapons sliding off his armour, but he was in full plate and they were wasting their time. As I have written, an armoured knight amongst militia is like a god among men, and they stood no chance.

He was crimson from gorget to sabatons by the time it was done, but done it was and that was good.

I felt cold, and I knew what that meant. It meant that the moment was coming.

At last.

Chapter 51

‘Tomas, what the fuck do you think you’re doing?’ Konrad demanded as he burst out of an office in front of me with a blade in his hand. ‘You treacherous – oh!’

He took an unsteady step forward, looking up at me with a stricken expression on his face.

‘Don’t ask me, ask her,’ I said, as Ilse stepped out of the room behind him with a bloodied dagger in her hand.

Konrad collapsed to the floor and Ilse took a step forward to stand over him. Her blade had gone straight through the ribs of his back and into his heart with a surgical precision.

‘I think I owe you my thanks, Konrad,’ she said, and she smiled that motherly smile of hers that was so disturbing. ‘I remember the day you sent your own sister down to me. I think that was the day I made my decision. That was the day that I decided I really didn’t want to be associated with people like you any more.’

I had very conflicted opinions about Ilse, I had to allow. She had just killed Konrad and thus firmly declared for our side, and that was good, but I couldn’t shake the memory of what I had seen her do in the service of the house of law. I could still remember the sound of the wet pop of parting gristle as she cut the bone from the arm of the poor second houseman of the royal privy chamber. Nobody who could do that should be able to smile at you like your ma, but Ilse could.

‘There was a whole company waiting for us in the fucking loading yard,’ I said. ‘How the *fuck* did he know we were coming?’

‘Someone gave you up,’ Ilse said. ‘I don’t know who it came from, but Vogel received a tip-off that there was going

to be a terror campaign tonight. He called an emergency briefing, but nobody could find you and that raised suspicions that you might be involved. Once Konrad spotted that you had arranged for a waggon to make a delivery tonight it became obvious, and I'm afraid there was nothing I could do without revealing ourselves.'

I felt like I'd been punched in the guts. Could it have been I?

Could the Queen's Men's webs truly be that convoluted?

No, I thought. We both knew Lord Vogel, and he would have been signing his own death warrant along with mine if he had given me up at this point. It hadn't been I – so who?

Who had known? Between my crew and Galina's mob, probably more than a hundred people at least. It stood to reason that Vogel probably had a spy amongst the most apparently devout of her followers. I had been so wrapped up in planning the attack that I had never given that a fucking thought.

'Where's Vogel now?'

'In his office,' Ilse said. 'He knows he's lost. Most of the guardsmen he kept behind were in the yard when the bomb went off, and by now your men will have slaughtered the rest of them. No one expected your quiet man to blow himself up for you, Tomas. That was very impressive.'

'Aye, it was,' I said quietly, but I couldn't help thinking that if I had just fucking *thought* about it, about the risk of a leak in Galina's organisation, he wouldn't have had to do it.

How the fuck else we could have pulled this off I had no idea, but the thought pained me, nonetheless.

'Tomas, there you are,' I said as he climbed the stairs over the bodies of the guardsmen Sir Eland had massacred.

He had Sabine with him, and a shortsword in his hand.

'Hello, Tomas,' she said softly. 'You really did it, then. I never thought that you could. I didn't think it possible to stop him any more.'

I put a hand on the hilt my sword. 'Aye, I did,' I said. 'You can't remain neutral in this any longer, Mother Ruin. It's time to take a side.'

She smiled at me. 'Oh, I assure you I always choose the winning side. I assume you will be taking over as Provost Marshal?'

I looked a question at Iagin. 'Well I don't want to fucking do it,' he said, and smiled. 'You're the leader, Tomas. You're the obvious choice.'

'I ask only that I be allowed to return to Varnburg,' Sabine said. 'I miss the sea.'

I didn't want her here, that was for fucking certain, so I was more than happy to agree to that. 'That's fine by me,' I said. 'Right, come on. Let's do this. Eland, Anne, with us, please.'

I led them down the corridor to Vogel's office and opened the door without knocking. He was seated behind his desk, his hands spread on the surface, his expression calm as he stared into space. He looked up at me as I entered, and at Iagin and Ilse.

At Sabine.

He rose to his feet and took a few steps to stand before us. 'You too, Sabine?' he asked, but of course it wasn't a question.

She didn't speak.

'Dieter Vogel,' I said, 'I arrest you in the name of the crown.'

Vogel looked at me. 'To all intents and purposes, I *am* the crown.'

We would fucking see about that. I put my hand on the hilt of Remorse. 'Come with me, or die where you stand,' I said.

'You realise, Tomas, that you will go down in history as the greatest traitor this country has ever known.'

'No,' I said, 'I won't. It's only treason if you lose – you told me that yourself. And I've won. And history will think well of me, Lord Vogel, because I'm going to fucking write it.'

‘I’m sure a man of your high moral principles will want to ensure that I receive a fair and open trial,’ Vogel sneered.

‘Absolutely fucking not.’

With that, I drew Remorse and rammed her into his chest, and never before or since has killing a man felt so good.

Look at me Ma, I’m the Provost Marshal of the Queen’s Men.

*

All I wanted to do then was go and fetch Billy back from Ailsa’s and drink myself stupid until I was finally able to fall asleep, but at that precise moment absolutely no one was in charge of the country and that couldn’t be sustained.

Besides, it was somewhere around the fourth hour of the morning by then, and Lady willing, the lad was sound asleep anyway. At least the distant sound of explosions was finally dying down, and I supposed that was something.

I had Sam and Beast drag Vogel’s body out of the room and called a council of war. I felt a strange mixture of satisfaction and unease as I seated myself behind Vogel’s desk.

‘The City Guard will be returning soon, and we need to be in control when they do,’ I told Iagin. ‘Tell them there has been a regime change, but no more than that. The rule of law must be upheld.’

‘Aye, sir,’ he said.

‘First thing tomorrow morning, reinstate the governing council and have them elect someone we can trust as presiding head straight away,’ I went on. ‘Their first act is to vote me into the vacant post of Lord Chief Judiciar.’

Iagin looked at me for a long moment. ‘That effectively makes you the Prince Regent,’ he eventually pointed out.

‘Fuck that,’ I said. ‘I’m not a king – I don’t want to be a king. Find me a regent, as fast as possible. Invent one, if you have to. The daughter of a noble house, *any* noble house.

Young Prince Marcus will take the throne in time, but until then, anyone biddable will serve.'

'And until then?'

'Aye, well,' I said. 'I suppose I'll have to do it.'

'So you're the fucking Prince Regent now?' Anne rasped, and I could feel her eyes on me across the room, and I didn't like what I saw in them.

'Just for a little while,' I said. 'Lady willing, at least.'

'Do you really expect me to believe that?' Anne demanded, and she was shouting now. I saw Ilse give her a sidelong look. 'What the fuck have we done, Tomas Piety? We've blown up half the city to remove one usurper, and now you announce yourself as his fucking successor? Fucking *seriously*?'

'No, Anne,' I said. 'I'm a caretaker, no more than that. We've been keeping Prince Marcus safe and hidden for a reason. The people – and particularly the Martyr's Disciples – will never accept a usurper on the throne, but the Crown Prince has a legitimate claim.'

'And ten fucking years to him.'

'He'll be crowned, in time,' I assured her. 'When he's old enough.'

Anne glared at me, and I could see she was obviously biting back the words she had been about to say. 'I'm going back to the Harvest with my wife,' she said instead.

She turned on her heel and stalked out of the room, and I heard her calling Rosie's name.

'Go and get some rest,' I told the rest of them. 'Iagin, stay a moment if you will.'

He closed the door behind Sabine as she left the room, then turned to face me. 'So, what do I tell the officers of the City Guard, then? What do I tell the fucking generals of the army?'

'There was an attack on the house of law. That much is blatantly apparent, on account of the gaping fucking hole in the back of it. We'll need the guild of masons on that first

thing in the morning, obviously. Pull them off the work on the walls and make this the top priority, then they can get on with repairing whatever the fuck damage we did to the castle last night. Tell them that Provost Marshal Vogel was killed in the fighting – that he died a hero and a patriot. Tell them . . . tell them that he had already appointed me as his successor, and that I have now taken over in accordance with his wishes.’

‘Aye,’ Iagin said. ‘I can do that.’

‘Get something to the news sheets too,’ I said, ‘but it will have to be phrased somewhat differently.’

Iagin thought aloud as was his way when he was putting a story together in his head. ‘The Lord Chief Judiciar was tragically killed in a terrorist attack on the house of law,’ he said. ‘The perpetrators have been brought to justice and dealt with, but his loss is keenly felt and the nation mourns for him. The governing council will assemble first thing to appoint his successor. Councillor Sir Tomas Piety of the North Ward is a strong candidate and the firm favourite.’

I snorted. ‘You’re good at this shit,’ I said.

‘I know people, and I understand how they think,’ he said, and gave me a very long look before he spoke again. ‘You don’t really want me to find a regent, do you?’

Respect, power, authority. Those are the levers that move me.

‘Fuck no,’ I said, and he nodded slowly.

‘Didn’t think so.’

Chapter 52

I found Mina sitting on the stairs when I left Vogel's office – *my* office. She was staring into space and idly doodling with lights in the air to pass the time, the way that Billy had done the afternoon he had entertained the Princess Crown Royal in her personal apartments.

'Are you all right, lass?' I asked her.

'I'm worried about Billy,' she said. 'I came here tonight thinking I was going to have to fight, but I didn't. I could have stayed with him back at the Harvest.'

'Aye, but we didn't know that, did we?' I said. 'I'd rather have had you with me and not needed you than the other way around.'

She shrugged. 'I suppose,' she said. 'Is it very late?'

'Yes,' I said. 'It'll be getting light soon. 'We should get some sleep.'

'I don't sleep, much,' she said, and I remembered Billy telling me the very same thing once.

'Me neither,' I said. 'Not as much as I should, anyway.'

I sat down on the step beside her and she turned and looked at me.

'Are you going to be the king, now?'

'No,' I said. 'No, Mina, I'm not going to be king. I'm going to be Prince Regent for a little while, but Crown Prince Marcus will become king when he's old enough.'

'He's very young,' she said. 'Billy told me about him. Billy said he's wet.'

I couldn't help but laugh. I could see how a lad like Billy, street-hardened and battle-trained, would think that of a ten-year-old aristocrat who had never known anything

beyond the Sea Keep and his mother's skirts, but time would tell.

'He's the son of the Grand Duke of Varnburg,' I said. 'In theory, he's been trained to rule from birth.'

'But what if he hasn't?' Mina asked, and there was genuine curiosity in her voice. 'Why should he be a king, just because of who his da was?'

'That's a very good question, lass,' I said. 'That is a very good question indeed, and one I shall be thinking on over the next three years while I get rid of this mad cult. Now come on, let's go and find ourselves some guest bedrooms, and in the morning we can go and collect Billy from his ma's. Iagin will take care of things here.'

'You can trust Iagin,' Mina said, and in that moment she sounded just like Billy, making one of his prophetic announcements.

I gave her a sideways look. 'I should hope so,' I said.

'You can,' she said. 'I *know* you can.'

Billy might be losing his second sight, but it looked Mina was beginning to gain hers, and I didn't know why. I would never understand the cunning, not as long as I lived, and I knew that for Our Lady's own truth.

'Aye, good.'

'That woman,' Mina said. 'The one with the black fingernails. She shines.'

'Sabine?'

'Yes, I think so. The old one.'

'She's a cunning woman?'

'Yes,' Mina said.

Fuck me.

Oh Tomas, I'm no cunning woman, at least not in the way you mean it.

I remembered her telling me that, but of course she had been lying, hadn't she? Lying about that, as she had almost certainly been lying about everything else. *That* was how Vogel had known about the Princess Crown Royal's cunning,

and how close it had been to overcoming her. *That* had been why he had had Doctor Almanov killed, to force her self-destruction.

Because Sabine had fucking told him.

She had seen the Princess Crown Royal shine, and she had told him and explained to him what that meant.

I shook my head. Well, it was done now. Vogel was dead and Sabine sounded happy enough to return to Varnburg, and I supposed it no longer really mattered. I would let it go, I decided. It was done, and they had lost. Had she wanted to make herself queen? I didn't know, and as Our Lady was my witness, I was too tired to care. She had effectively surrendered, and I would take that and be glad of it.

I led Mina up another flight of stairs to a floor where I had heard there were guest rooms, although I had never been there before. The air stank of death and shit and smoke and dust, and I couldn't imagine either of us getting much of a rest there.

'Fuck, would you rather go back to the Harvest?' I asked her.

Foolish it might have been, but part of me had wanted to spend my first night as Provost Marshal sleeping in the house of law, now that I had finally taken it for my own, but the smell up there reminded me too much of the price we had paid to do it. Cutter. Those beautiful horses. The look on Anne's face.

'Yes, please,' Mina said.

'Aye, me too,' I said. 'All right, let's go and round up the crew.'

We retraced our steps and I swept up the rest of the lads who hadn't already accompanied Anne and Rosie back to the Bountiful Harvest or returned to the Dripping Bucket. Luka had been waiting for me at least, and so had Sam and Beast.

'Bedtime, lads,' I told them, and that got a laugh out of Sam. A shaky one, perhaps, after the night's events, but a

laugh, nonetheless. I led them down the stairs to the main hall, and there Iain was giving orders to the first of the City Guard to have returned. I saw a number of them turn and stare when they saw me, striding towards them in my billowing priest's robes that were grey with stone dust and stiff with drying blood.

'Provost Marshal,' a Guard Captain said, and gave me a respectful nod.

It was done. The house of law was mine.

The *country* was mine.

*

I managed to snatch a few hours' sleep in my room at the Bountiful Harvest, but all too soon Fat Luka was hammering on my door.

'You wanted waking at the eighth hour, boss,' he called.

'Aye,' I managed to groan as I rolled out of bed. 'Aye, I did. Thank you, Luka.'

I had done, to be fair, but by the time I had told him that I'd had half a bottle of brandy inside me and the sun had been starting to come up. If I'd had even three hours' sleep it was a miracle, but I wanted to collect Billy as soon as possible. If he was still no better, then I was calling for doctors, whatever Mina said on the matter.

Luka came into the room then, and he had a mug of small beer for me in his hand. For that alone I could have almost kissed him.

'Gods,' I said, once I had taken a long swallow. 'I'm getting too old for this.'

'Aren't we all?' Luka said. 'The lass is already dressed and sitting in the common room with her shoes and cloak on, waiting for you.'

'She wants her Billy back, I can understand that,' I said. I started pulling my clothes on. Shaving could fucking wait.

‘Boss . . .’ Luka said after a moment, and I could sense the hesitancy in his voice.

‘What?’

‘What fucking happened last night? Really, I mean, Tomas.’

‘I won,’ I said simply. ‘I won, Luka. I’m the Provost Marshal of the Queen’s Men now, and in a few days’ time I’ll be the Lord Chief Judiciar and the Prince Regent. I have, as you might say, well and truly fucking well won.’

‘Aye,’ Luka said. ‘That’s much what I thought. I . . . will you still need me?’

I looked at him in astonishment. ‘Luka, the fuck are you talking about? I know we’ve had our points of difference in the past, but you’re one of the most valuable members of my crew. As it happens, there was something I wanted to talk to you about.’

‘Oh?’

‘After last night, I find myself woefully short of Queen’s Men. Konrad’s dead, I’ve moved up, and Sabine is going back to hide in Varnburg and pray I never choose to investigate her. I wondered if you might take the warrant yourself? You’d be perfect for it.’

He would as well. Luka wasn’t an educated man but he was one of the shrewdest, most manipulative people I had ever met, and Lady knew he could fight when he had to as well.

‘Me?’ Luka asked. ‘The Queen’s Warrant? Are you serious, Tomas?’

‘I am,’ I assured him. ‘I want you by my side, with Ailsa and Iagin and Ilse and . . . and someone else, if they say yes.’

‘Yes sir,’ Luka said, and he didn’t have to think about it for a moment.

I thought Fat Luka might have been dreaming of this moment for years.

‘I don’t have a spare to hand or I’d give you the warrant right now,’ I said, ‘but consider yourself having received a brevet promotion to Queen’s Man.’

I regretted not taking Konrad’s warrant off his corpse when I’d had the chance, but at the time I’d had rather a lot on my mind.

‘Thank you,’ was all Luka could say, but I could see from the look in his eyes how much it meant to him.

‘Right,’ I said as I drained my mug and finished buckling my sword belt over my coat, ‘let’s go and fetch Billy before Mina has a fit.’

We made our way down to the common room, and there I found Anne and Rosie finishing breakfast together. I hadn’t even thought to eat anything, but found that I didn’t want to.

‘Morning,’ I said to Anne. ‘Me and Mina are going to fetch Billy back from Ailsa’s. I’d appreciate your company, if you want to come.’

Anne gave me a look, and I knew there was still bad feeling between us after last night and that saddened me. I saw Rosie give her a tiny nod, and after a moment Anne sighed and got to her feet.

‘Aye, if you want,’ she said. ‘I’ve had three hours sleep, after all, so I’m fresh as a fucking daisy.’

‘Aren’t we all,’ I said. ‘I just want to see the boy safe, then we can see to the business of the day.’

‘And what business is that then, Tomas?’ Anne snapped, and pinched the bridge of her nose between finger and thumb. ‘No, don’t answer that. It’s fine, I’m just tired.’

‘Aye, I know,’ I said. ‘So am I.’

We headed out back to the stableyard and waited while the grooms hitched the horses to my carriage, and then we were away to Ailsa’s house with Beast and Sam clinging to the backboard. The streets were almost deserted, which was hardly surprising after last night’s mayhem, and in the bright morning light the scars were plain to see. There was

still a miasma of dust hanging in the air, and as we headed north I could see great craters in the castle hill. We passed a once-grand building that was now nothing but a pile of rubble, and another that was still on fire.

‘A fine city you’ve taken over, Tomas,’ Anne observed dryly.

‘We’ll rebuild,’ I assured her, but already I was wondering exactly how the fuck the treasury was going to pay for it. That really was my problem now, I realised, and part of me began to wonder what I had done. I was on the way to getting everything I wanted, but at what cost?

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Chapter 53

Ailsa's house was deserted. She hadn't been bombed the night before, as her address was on the exclusion list, but her neighbour had been, and there was no one in sight – there wasn't even a guard on the gate. Beast hopped down from the back of the carriage and climbed over the gates to open them from the inside, and our coachman drove cautiously onto the expanse of grass in front of the house.

'The fuck's this?' Anne wondered aloud, and I could only shrug.

'I don't know,' I said, 'but I don't like it.'

There was *always* someone on Ailsa's gate, any time of the day or night, but this morning there wasn't.

'Mr Piety, what's wrong?' Mina asked. 'I want Billy.'

'Aye, lass, I know you do,' I said. 'I don't know, Anne – maybe Ailsa fled the city with her household guard to escape the bombings?'

'Does your wife really strike you as the *fleeing* type, Tomas?' Anne asked me.

I sighed and shook my head. The Lioness was made of stone and iron, after all, and I doubted she had ever run away from anyone or anything in her life. 'No, perhaps not,' I had to allow.

'Then something's wrong, isn't it?'

'She can't know exactly what happened last night, beyond the bombings; she might have gone to the house of law, or the palace.'

'With all her staff? There isn't even a fucking footman here or they'd have come out to greet us by now, or to chase us away. There is no cunt here, Tomas, and that's the sole fact of the matter.'

‘Then who’s looking after Billy?’ Mina demanded, and I had no answer for her.

I opened the carriage door. ‘Come on,’ I said. ‘Let’s find out.’

I jumped down to the turf and helped Mina down behind me, and Anne piled out of the other door and started giving orders.

‘Sam, Beast,’ she snapped. ‘Front and centre. Front door, and check the ground floor.’

The two huge men hurried to do her bidding, and I drew Remorse as a precaution as Mina huddled close to me.

‘Something’s not right,’ she said.

‘Aye, I know,’ I said quietly. ‘Stay with Anne. I’m going in with the lads. Anne, watch Mina.’

Anne shot me an irritated look that told me I had got that arse-about-face and forgotten the chain of command: it should have been her going in with the lads while I stayed outside where it was safe and watched Mina. She had the right of it, but Billy was my son and that made this personal, and at that precise moment? *Fuck* the chain of command.

I shook off the thought and hurried into the house after Beast and Sam.

It was silent as a grave in there, where normally there were always footsteps and bustle, clatter of silverware, the chatter of maids and the comings and goings of the housemen.

That morning there was nothing but the sound of Beast and Sam clumping around the large rooms.

‘Nothing, boss,’ Beast said as he emerged from the grand dining room.

‘Nope,’ Sam said, coming out of the small dining room, the one we had actually used.

I pushed open the door to the drawing room, calling, ‘Billy? Where are you, lad—?’

My heart all but stopped.

There he was, face down on the floor in a pool of blood on Ailsa's priceless Alarian carpet. The back of his white shirt was sodden from the wound under his left shoulder blade. It angled upwards, into the heart: a killing blow, right enough, one strike and he was done, cunning or not.

It was the same way Ilse had killed Konrad. My mouth filled with sour spit and the need to vomit. The sick, shaking need to weep.

My son.

I fell to my knees beside him, half blind with tears, my hands in his blood as I pulled his frail young corpse into my arms. I pulled him into my arms, and I sobbed, 'Not him as well – not my Billy . . .'

Not him as well. Not on top of Jochan, it just wasn't fair.

But nothing was fucking fair, I knew that. Nothing ever was.

My Billy.

I held him tight in a last embrace.

An embrace. That was how it had been done, I realised with sudden sick certainty. No stranger had crept up behind Cutter's protégé and stabbed him in the back, of course they hadn't, however ill he had been. This had been someone Billy trusted: someone he had loved. Someone who had taken him in their arms, and fucking knifed him.

Mina had been with me last night, and who else did Billy love?

I heard a wail behind me, and I turned with an animal snarl of grief and rage and hatred to see Mina standing in the doorway.

'Bitch!' she spat, and her voice was cold murder.

Her voice was murder and heartbreak and pure, utter certainty, and still it took me a moment through the clouds of grief and shock to grasp her meaning.

No, no, no.

You can hide a dagger very well indeed behind enough lace.

Or a mother's smile, I thought.

Oh by Our Lady's love, no—

Our Lady had no love in Her heart, I had to remind myself, but the cold devil in me had awakened then, and its fury was the killing knife of hopelessness and despair.

I had won, and to do so, I had lost everything.

I took one of Billy's tiny knives from his belt as a keepsake, and I said Our Lady's Grace over his pitiful little corpse.

The Ten of Swords means back-stabbing and treachery. It means defeat and betrayal, endings and loss.

So Sabine had had the right of it after all.

I knew what I had to do.

The captain's words came back to me from that long, tortuous march to Abington: *If you're going through Hell, walk like you own the place. Walk like the devil.*

Aye, I could do that.

*

Oh, I walked like the devil all right. I walked through Hell to the place I knew Ailsa must have gone: her parents' house. As my carriage drew up at the gates, sure enough, there was Brandt, the head of her household guard, with three of his men.

'Brandt,' I said as I climbed down from the carriage, and my voice fell into the flat tone of murder and justice.

'Sir Tomas,' he said. 'I . . . I know.'

'You know,' I echoed. 'What does that fucking mean, Brandt? What do you "know"? You know my wife murdered our son? You know Vogel is dead and I'm now the Provost Marshal of the Queen's Men? You know I'm here to kill her? What the fuck does "I know" mean? What do you fucking *know*, Brandt?'

I was screaming at him in the street, and I was only dimly aware of Anne and Beast and Sam beside me, of Mina

alighting from the carriage behind them. I was, I realised, very much not of sound mind in that moment.

‘I know what she did,’ Brandt admitted. ‘No one was told. She just . . . did it. The others are gone. The servants ran away, the rest of the guard have gone for sell-swords. There’s only us four left.’

‘Why?’ I snarled. ‘Why are you still here, loyal to a woman who would murder her own son?’

‘I’m loyal to the crown,’ Brandt said, ‘and she’s a Queen’s Man. I thought . . . she must have had a reason.’

She’s a Queen’s Man. She must have had a reason.

Such was the power of the warrant, such was the trust placed in those who carried it, that this man, who had always seemed a good man to me, had trusted that Ailsa must have had a good reason of national security to murder her own son. I would have said I couldn’t believe it, but in all honesty I could, in Dannsburg.

‘There’s no one else in the house?’ I asked.

He shook his head. ‘It’s locked up tight, but it’s just her and her da in there. The servants legged it last night when the bombs started. Don’t know where the wife is.’

I snorted back the snot of tears and spat it at the ground by his boot.

‘Sam, Beast,’ I said, ‘arrest these pieces of shit. We’ll get to the truth of their loyalties later.’

Ilse would, anyway. That was her job, after all. The right woman for the right job, always. That was what Ilse was for, and I wasn’t even sorry about that any longer. My son was dead.

I started towards the house, and I was aware of Anne following me.

‘No, Anne,’ I said. ‘No. This isn’t business, this is personal now. This is family. I need to do this on my own.’

She nodded in respect, and stepped back without a word. I knew *she* understood, at least.

The front door of the house was locked and barred, the heavy shutters closed, and I knew I wouldn't get in short of bringing blasting weapons.

But I didn't have to do that, though, did I?

'Mina,' I said.

'Yes,' she said. 'It's personal for me, too. She killed my Billy, didn't she?'

'Aye,' I said. 'She fucking well did.'

'Bitch!' Mina suddenly screamed. 'Do you hear me, bitch, you goat-fucking syphilitic whore? You will die for my Billy! I will tear your house down brick by brick and *ram them up your cunt!*'

The front door and half of the drawing room wall imploded in the face of the rage of Mina's cunning. I held up a hand to stay her and I stepped into the clouds of dust alone, my priest's robes swirling around my ankles in the eddies of the backdraft created by Mina's fury.

Brandt had said Ailsa's father was here, and that scared me.

'Sasura?' I called out, crossing the hall and pushing open the study door.

The old man was dead in his chair with his throat cut, an overturned bottle of brandy in his hand. The front of his doublet and crisp white shirt were sodden with dark blood and he had a blue tinge to his lips that told me he had been dead for some hours.

'Hello, Tomas.'

I whirled, and seeing her in the doorway with a loaded crossbow in her hands, I drew my swords and dived to my left – but the bow thumped and her bolt took me through my right forearm and into the wall. The pain and shock stunned me so that Remorse and Mercy tumbled from my hands. There was a mocking smile on her face as she approached me where I stood, pinned to the wall like an exotic butterfly in a gentleman's collection of curiosities.

‘You’re as bad as my father,’ she said, and her voice was cold as iron. ‘A moralistic do-gooder pretending to be a Queen’s Man. Oh yes, I know full well what he was. Did you really think that Vogel didn’t tell me, after all these years? I know how I got this job, and why, but I am not like my father and I am not like you.’

‘You killed your own father,’ I said, for all that I had done the very same thing when I’d had barely twelve years to me.

‘Oh, your precious Sasura?’ she sneered. ‘Yes, I very much did, Tomas. To you he was a lovely, feckless old man who told you tall stories of high adventure and got drunk with you in the afternoons. To me? To me he was the man who almost made my mother take her own life when she discovered his infidelity. Oh, he thought she didn’t know but she very much did, believe me. He was the man who drove me with an iron whip, telling me I wasn’t good enough, I was *never* good enough. “Acting lessons, Chandari, are very important.” And “A lady must always wear paint and powder, Chandari. You must learn to look like other people.” And even, “Don’t be yourself, Chandari, no one wants that. No one wants *you*.” And the scoldings, and the beatings, and always pushing and pushing and *pushing*.’

‘He was preparing you,’ I said, but she had dropped the spent crossbow and drawn her dagger, and I fell silent.

‘How could you turn traitor?’ she demanded. ‘I *know*, Tomas – I know it’s you behind that mad nun’s bombings. You think I don’t have people south of the river? You think I didn’t tell him what you told me yesterday morning? The realm comes first, *always*. Lord Vogel puts the welfare of the nation before everything. We need strong leadership on the throne – we need *him*. Oh, don’t look so surprised, Tomas. I knew you would fall for my “little girl lost” act in the carriage, that afternoon returning from my parents’ house the first time you met them. You think I cared about them? Spare me. My mother hated me, and I hated my father. You

play the big tough gangster, but all it took to turn your head was a pretty face and the hint of a sad childhood and you were putty in my hands. Even after everything between us, you still loved me, didn't you?

'Fool that I am, aye,' I admitted.

Fool, fool.

For as long as I had known her, I had never known which Ailsa I was going to get from one moment to the next – the sweet, funny, flirty one; the cold, flinty, aristocratic one; the vulnerable one with the shy smile, the one I thought of as *my* Ailsa, the *real* one, the one only I ever saw.

Fucking fool.

She wasn't fucking real. She was as much of a false face as the others had been.

Sister Deceit.

The lioness was truly made of stone and iron, and I didn't know her *at all*.

Dear gods, but she had played me for a cunt.

'Fool indeed,' she said. 'You can't defeat Lord Vogel. He is as close to a god as makes no difference in Dannsburg. I would die for him – I would kill for him, and I am about to do just that. You should be grateful I'm not giving you to Ilse.'

'You're my wife,' I whispered.

'I simply do not care,' she said, and her voice was winter's harm.

I remembered an exchange I had heard once. *Lady Ailsa will support me*, First Councillor Aleksander Lan Letskov had said.

No, she won't, someone had scoffed. *She's Vogel's creature to the core.*

Aye, she was Vogel's creature all right and that was Our Lady's own truth.

I still had Billy's little knife tucked through my belt. I let my left hand fall to my side as though in defeat as Ailsa advanced with her own dagger held ready to take my life, and I palmed the tiny weapon. I didn't hold it the way Billy

always had; I didn't know how. I just gripped it in my fist and punched it into her side, three times in quick succession, liver and lungs and armpit.

She doubled over and staggered backwards, a hand clutched to her side where her kirtle was fast turning crimson, and I reached up and wrenched the crossbow bolt out of the wall with a scream. The pain was horrible, but the wound wasn't in a killing place and it would have to wait. I bent, unsteady, and picked up Mercy with my left hand.

Even lionesses of stone and iron can die.

She had played me for a cunt and no mistake, but two can play that game.

'Ilse is mine,' I told her, 'and your god is already dead.'

Ailsa collapsed to her knees and her face crumpled.

I saw the blood was coming faster now.

Even gods can die – but could I truly kill my own wife?

She looked up at me, her hand clenched to the wound in her side and dark with blood. There was pink froth on her lips.

'If it makes it easier for you,' she whispered, 'I killed Billy myself. He was too dangerous to live. You can hide a dagger very well indeed behind a mother's love.'

She was right. That did make it a lot easier.

'May Our Lady forgive you,' I said, 'because I do not.'

I gave her Mercy, and that was more than she deserved.

Oh Sasura, I am so, so sorry.

Chapter 54

As the newly elected Lord Chief Judicial and therefore Prince Regent I had to appear on the palace balcony, of course, the same as the original Prince Regent had after the queen's death.

It was two weeks since I had murdered my wife.

My arm was still tightly wrapped in bandages under my robes, but the palace surgeon assured me that the wound was clean and I was unlikely to lose my hand. That was something, I supposed.

My son was still dead, and getting to keep my arm was in all honesty a very small consolation. I saw the world in shades of black and grey in those days, and there was no colour or joy in anything. There was only the job to be done, the tasks ahead of me, and the brandy bottle.

I stood upon the balcony as Prince Regent, with the young Crown Prince Marcus beside me in his tiny mockery of a dress uniform. He had taken some cleaning up after the time he had spent at the Dripping Bucket, but in all honesty, I thought it had done him good. Living amongst homeless street urchins had given him a new perspective that I thought would serve him well when he became king.

If he did.

I was wearing newly commissioned priest's robes, far finer than any I had ever owned before, and I found much favour with the Martyr's Disciples in the massed crowd below. Sister Galina's devotion to me had now entered the realm of the fanatical, and to her followers I was revered not just as a priest of Our Lady but now as the Prophet of the Ascended Martyr too.

I wasn't quite sure what to do with that, but I was determined to make the most of it anyway. This was a very delicate time, as a beginning always is, and I knew I had to embrace every supporter I had. I would worry about what to do with them later. The balcony appearance was a mummers' show, pure and simple, but I had come to accept the necessity of such things.

I gave a speech, though I can't remember what I said. Some horseshit Iagin had written about national unity and international friendship and putting the past behind us, about Our Lady's will and the blessing of the holy Ascended Martyr. It didn't matter what the fuck I said and I knew it. Hardly anyone could hear me anyway, and the next morning the news sheets would tell them what Iagin wanted them to have heard. The people cheered, and nothing blew up, and in Dannsburg in those days that was counted a good day.

When it was finally done, I raised a hand to the assembled masses in the parade ground under the half-derelict buildings that the Princess Crown Royal had destroyed from that same vantage and let them cheer for a minute or two, then turned and led Crown Prince Marcus into the formal drawing room behind the balcony.

Sister Galina was waiting there for us, and she dropped a low curtsey when we entered. I knew it was directed at me, not him.

'Come, Highness,' she said. 'Time for your lessons. Scripture again, I think. You're falling behind.'

She led him away with two of her burly nuns flanking him and a stern-looking tutor bringing up the rear. The prince shot me a stricken look over his shoulder, but I ignored him. He would adapt to this new world I had built or he wouldn't, and that was the reality of it. If he didn't, well then. There it was.

Bloody Anne was standing there, looking out of place in that drawing room. She was dressed well enough for the palace, had she been a man, in a fine coat and doublet and

well-tailored britches, although her scar stood out livid on her face and she was looking at me like daggers. Rosie was on her arm, dressed in a simple kirtle designed for riding. That surprised me, as I had become accustomed to seeing her in fine gowns.

‘Anne,’ I said.

‘Tomas.’

‘I’m glad you’re here,’ I said. ‘There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you.’

‘Oh, aye? And what’s that then, Tomas Piety?’

No, there would never be any *Your Highness* from Bloody Anne, for all that was my formal style now, and I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way. She was my best friend in the world, after all, and that would just have spoiled it. I might have been the Lord Chief Judiciar and the Prince Regent, but to her I would always be Tomas Piety, the man she had fought beside at Abington.

‘I want to offer you something,’ I said, and I reached into my pouch. ‘I want to offer you this.’

I held out a freshly minted Queen’s Warrant, the same as the one I had presented to an overjoyed Fat Luka a few days ago.

‘*What?*’ Anne said.

‘Join me,’ I said. ‘I’m in need of new Queen’s Men since the purge, and you’ve proved yourself capable more times than I can count over the last couple of years. Take the warrant, Anne, and serve the crown. You’ll be untouchable, above the law.’

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 had thought that once, true enough, but times had changed.

I was Provost Marshal now, and king in all but name, and everything was different.

Everything was fucking different, and I was struggling to cope with that as much as everyone else was.

Anne looked at the warrant in my hand for a long moment, and then she very deliberately spat on it.

‘You think I want *that*?’ she asked, and the tone in her voice was knives. ‘You’re wrong, Tomas. You think you know people, but you don’t. You know *yourself*, and you think you’re the centre of the world. You think everyone else thinks like you, wants what you want, but they fucking well don’t. I’m going home.’

‘And where’s home, for you? Your little sheep village, where Mother Groggan cut you in the Stone Father’s name?’

That was a low blow, I knew, but I couldn’t believe she had flat turned me down – turned her back on me.

My best friend had spat on the Queen’s Warrant and turned her back on me.

‘Ellinburg, of course,’ she said. ‘Back to what I know, to what I’ve got. Back to the world that makes some semblance of sense. You gave the Pious Men to me, and you don’t get to go back on that.’

Bloody Anne had her mind made up, and she was right about the Pious Men. Well, she could have Ellinburg; I had the whole fucking country.

I turned to Rosie. ‘What about you?’

Rosie looked at me and bit her lip, and I could see the fear in her eyes. ‘The only way to leave the crown’s service is in death,’ she said.

I shrugged. ‘So don’t leave.’

‘I’m Anne’s wife. My place is with her.’

‘Aye, it is,’ I said, and I relented. I owed Anne that much, at least. ‘I know that. Go with her, then – you’ve earned it. Both of you. You’ve the right of it, though, Rosie. You’re still part of the family. But I don’t reckon I’ll have need of you for a good long time.’

She held tightly to Anne’s arm, and I could see the gratitude in my best friend’s face.

'I still have to leave, Tomas,' Anne said. 'You know that.'
'I know,' I said, and I turned away.
And I didn't look back.

*

Within a month, I was sitting on the Prince Regent's throne with Crown Prince Marcus beside me seated on the Rose Throne itself. It was far too big for him, and I wondered if he would ever grow into it. I couldn't help but wonder what would happen if he didn't.

Outside the palace walls, the streets shone bright with lamps once more now that trade with Skania had resumed. It felt good to have returned the light to Dannsburg. There I had done good, at least.

So had I won? I didn't know. I'd won . . . *something*, I supposed, but I'd lost so much to do it that it didn't feel like a victory any more.

I could do things now, I knew that. The first thing I would do was repeal the fucking vagrancy laws. No more veterans would hang for the crime of being homeless, not in my country, they wouldn't. I owed Beast that much.

After that, I didn't know. The task ahead of me felt insurmountable, but then, it had when I had first become a businessman and set myself to putting the Stink to rights, too, and again when I had become Governor of Ellinburg. It was just a matter of scale, that was all. It always was. I had never thought I would leave Ellinburg behind me, but it appeared that I had.

Dannsburg was a place of poison and lies and betrayal. A place where I belonged.

How does violence prevent violence, Tomas? Bloody Anne had asked me that once. *How does that work?*

It doesn't, Anne. Violence doesn't prevent violence, but sometimes it changes nations.

I looked at the Skanian ambassador for a long moment, where she stood across the throne room with the newly promoted Colonel Bakrylov, then gave her a cordial nod. She dropped a short curtsy in return, and that was good. There would be no war with Skania, and there I had succeeded. The war for the Rose Throne had already been fought, between Dieter Vogel and me, and I had won.

Mina sat on a low gilded stool beside my throne, huddled in black robes of her own. I had pronounced her the First Priestess of the Ascended Martyr, and no one had argued with me. I thought that in time I might see her married to Crown Prince Marcus and thus cement the marriage of Church and State. The rule of law must be upheld, the rule of the law that I could now write myself.

I had won. My throat wanted to close up, a strangling sense of bitterness and grief and loss.

I had made peace with Skania and ended the hostilities that had been of our own making. I had calmed the violence in the city that had, again, been started by us.

How does violence prevent violence, Tomas?

It fucking doesn't. What it does is move pieces on the game board and make kings.

So that's me then. Tomas Piety. The bricklayer's 'prentice boy made good.

Look at me, Ma. I'm the power behind the throne. In time, I might be king. We would have to see about that, I supposed.

My best friend has deserted me.

My brother is dead. My wife is dead.

My son is dead.

I'm the king of the castle.

Look at me, Ma.

Please, look at me.

THE END

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Acknowledgements

So here at last ends *The War for the Rose Throne*, a quartet that was originally supposed to be a trilogy. I owe a debt of gratitude to my wonderful editor Jo Fletcher of Jo Fletcher Books for allowing *Priest of Crowns* to be a book in its own right, and thus giving me the space I needed to tell the story the way it wanted to be told.

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Finally, and above all others, the greatest thanks are for Diane. Here's to another twenty-five years. Love you.

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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 Crowns* is the fourth and final book in the War for the Rose Throne quartet, following *Priest of Bones*, *Priest of Lies* and *Priest of Gallows*.

You will find Peter McLean on Instagram and Twitter ([@PeteMC666](#)), on Facebook ([@PeterMcLeanAuthor](#)) and at his website, <https://talonwraith.com>.

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PRIEST OF BONES

'Sixty-five thousand battle-shocked, trained killers came home to no jobs, no food and the plague. What did Her Majesty think was going to happen?'

Tomas Piety takes his duties seriously: as a soldier, as a priest of Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows and as a leader of men. He has come home from the war to reclaim his family business, to provide for his men and to ensure the horrors of Abington can never happen in Ellinburg.

But things have changed: his crime empire has been stolen and the people of Ellinburg – *his* people – have run out of food and hope and places to hide. With his best friend Bloody Anne, his war-damaged brother Jochan and his new gang, the Pious Men, Tomas sets out to reclaim what was his.

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.

The war has just begun.


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PRIEST OF LIES

'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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PRIEST OF GALLOW'S

Gangster, soldier, priest. Queen's Man. Governor.

Tomas Piety has everything he ever wanted. In public he's a wealthy, highly respected businessman, happily married to a beautiful woman and governor of his home city of Ellinburg. In private, he's no longer a gang lord, head of the Pious Men, but one of the Queen's Men, invisible and officially non-existent, working in secret to protect his country.

The queen's sudden death sees him summoned back to the capital - where he discovers his boss, Dieter Vogel, Provost Marshal of the Queen's Men, is busy tightening his stranglehold on the country.

Just as he once fought for his Pious Men, Tomas must now bend all his wit and hard-won wisdom to protect his queen - even when he can't always tell if he's on the right side.

Tomas has started to ask himself, what is the price of power? And more importantly, is it one he is willing to pay?

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