

Yvanthryl, Seat of the Union - 3000 Years Ago, Pralayehena: The Day of Dissolution

Ink dripped from the vaulted stone above the sky, pouring over the city in a fine mist of darkness. A deep orange glow simmered over the horizon, shrouded in the thick fog of storm clouds bleeding into torch smoke. There was a young inkworker, who huddled behind the remains of her laboratory roof with three children she did not know. A dark-haired boy had his eyes squeezed shut, torn arms wrapped around his knees. Another tried to peek over the crumbling wall. The inkworker grabbed her by the ink-spattered skirt of her dress and wrenched her to the ground. An explosion rang in the distance; the room shook, and dull flakes of rosin fluttered through the air. The dark-haired boy began to whimper. Ink pulsed faintly around them, between its usual black and a muted crimson. Holding the children close, the Inkworker peered out through a shattered window.

Ink ran along the rooves of the pale, rosin-brick flats that lined the street, where the people of the Union cowered inside. The road ended in a bridge which reached over the Achreyon River, a wide canal of ink which formed the eastern border of the Union's Citadel. Dust and cinderash trembled across the stone-paved road as the sound of metal and fury marched nearer.

They were Prydeshah, thousands crossing the bridge barefoot, their feeble arms carried chipped spears and torches dripping with burning oil. Dark skin flecked with ink flickered in the torchlight, beaten and bruised. Their eyes burned with a growing rage, fixed upon the Alchemical Senate at the heart of the Citadel.

Trailing behind the soldiers with chunks of rubble in their ink-stained fingers, were sickly civilians afflicted with the Withering. The inkworker's breath caught as she stared at them, sickly thin, cradling small children in their arms, monstrous tendrils of black writhed across their skin. The inkworker looked away, for it was her people, her council, which had condemned them. *And where was the council?* she wondered. It was as though the alchemists had vanished. One of the children tugged at the inkworker's arm.

"Are they here?" he asked with a quavering voice, "Will they come to kill us?" The inkworker winced, then shook her head. But as she glanced back at the invading army, her blood turned cold.

There were five Dreadknights which strode between the soldiers. Angry lines in steel carved strange patterns across the edges of their deep-bronze armour, jagged plates interlocking to form a seamless suit. As she watched, the unnatural metal seemed to emanate a faint purple mist which drifted upwards and dissipated into the air. Each had a ribbon of the same strange metal coiled at their waist, joined to a handle which was clipped onto the armour. One Knight lifted the limp figure of a Union guardsman with a single hand and hurled him into a building. He crunched through the wall. The Prydeshah just watched with weary eyes. The ink around them flashed red, as the inkworker suppressed an urge to vomit. The third child sobbed softly, his pale face buried into her tunic.

There was movement outside, as a man in gleaming robes materialised on the road to oppose the advancing army. *An alchemist?* The inkworker watched, stifling her hopes as the man approached the Knights, with a smirk crawling across his face in the torchlight. He stopped midway, shoulders slouched and lethargically raised one palm.

The light melted, forming into a blazing inferno at his fingertips. Around him stone liquefied and earth burned. The alchemist flicked his wrist, sending a torrent of fire toward the soldiers. The first Knight moved with an inhuman swiftness, striding forward through the firestorm. He grasped the handle at his hip, and as he raised his arm the long metal coil unravelled into a thin, flexible blade. In one fluid motion, he brought down the urumi and cleaved the sorcerer in two. His body hit the ground. The flames dissipated, revealing the Knight who rewound his blade, armour unblemished. *Blotted useless alchemists*, the inkworker thought. She clenched her fists as ink moved with her anger, flowing into her palms. Atramen, the inkworkers called it, the foundation of the universe. The Dreadknight held up a hand. A group of soldiers split from the army and began to search the nearby buildings.

As the soldiers stepped through the splintered door of her laboratory, the inkworker stepped in front of the children. The ink around her felt her anger, pulsing a deep blue. And trembled in response.

Far above the city, a silhouette of a man hung in the air. His lip curled in satisfaction as his armies rampaged across the city, liberating his people. He never wanted for violence, for this power, but they had forced his hand. He

was prophesied. Forged by pain and betrayal, he was One Who Would Rebuild the World. A Vengeful God.

Divine.

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Solyn, Alokya Province, Kingdom of Threscya

Ink dripped from the sky. A small droplet splashed onto Ivo's shoulder, staining her physician's tunic. Muttering a curse, she snapped her notebook shut and quickly wrapped it in its cloth covering. The sky was darkening as wisps of ink vapour gathered, though Ivo suspected it would not rain for hours yet. She turned to her side where Ferren sat cross-legged with her eyes closed and fingers laced together, on the ledge of the ancient deepwell that stood at the middle of the town square. Though built from pure marblite, the well was simple in design and faded grey with time. Long pipes reached into the cavity at its centre, pumping the gleaming, copper-coloured moltar into a wide circular basin built around the well.

One side of the square was marked by the rosin posts of the town wall, a gate shut at its centre and a watchtower to one side, hastily cobbled-together after the attack only days before. Opposite the gate at the other side of the forum was the church, which also functioned as a town hall, beside it was a decently sized tavern. Workshops lined either side, blacksmiths and rosinsmiths, curving around the square until they reached the wall. Ivo supposed that once there might have been an inkworkery among them. Between the buildings were small alleyways that went further into the town. A pack of children had swarmed the well, watching the two of them in anticipation.

Some older townsfolk had too gathered around the town square, milling about the tavern, watching them. They kept their distance. Slumped between the shadows, many were already unnaturally thin after months of reduced rations from the capital. Now, as if the Divine himself had smote them with misfortune, a contingent of Threscya deserters from the north-western front had been harassing Solyn and the towns of the Upper Basin for the past week. Though as always, the common people were eager to turn their disapproving glares and whispers towards the latest oddity, a desperate attempt to bury their fear.

"Ferren," Ivo gave her a gentle nudge, "shall we try again tomorrow?"

Ferren's eyes fluttered open as she set her legs down. Twisting around to the basin, she filled a cupped hand with moltar and drank slowly. The children exchanged glances amongst themselves.

“I supposed we might,” Ferren replied, rising to her feet. As she stepped forward, her legs wobbled, unsteady from hours of unuse. Ivo quickly pulled an arm around her waist. Ferren paused, one hand placed against the marblite ledge. She looked at Ivo for a moment, then frowned, head tilted. Then she raised a palm to Ivo’s face. Ivo’s breath caught as she stared back into Ferren’s electric blue eyes, dark brown skin glowing in the evening light. Her body tensed and her gaze flicked away, tracing a bead of ink as it rolled along the side of Ferren’s neck. *What was she thinking?* Ivo panicked, *not here!* She fought the urge to twist out of Ferren’s grip, to scan over the crowd, see who had noticed.

“Ivo?” she asked, gently turning Ivo’s face back towards her, “say something?” Ferren’s eyes were bright and earnest. Stop thinking about them, Ivo thought.

“Your eyes are pretty,” she muttered. She placed her hand around Ferren’s own and the ink splashed on her shirt pulsed orange. Ferren’s thumb brushed against Ivo’s cheek, lingering for a moment and she gave Ivo a quick smile.

Ferren stepped away. She swept both her hands upwards and the air began to shimmer just centimetres above them. Ivo’s eyes went wide. *It worked!* Ferren held her hands in the air, and the distortion grew until the air parted, as though it were a veil opening a gateway to another world and a small vacuum formed between her fingers. From up close, Ivo could see the faint warping of light in a thin, oval shape around the void, though the children stared blankly, some inching closer in confusion.

Ferren’s breaths were shallow as she struggled to maintain the vacuum, then her hands dropped. Wind rushed through what was once empty space, swirling around the deepwell and towards their audience. The children erupted into cheers, laughing as the breeze washed over them. A few of the other townsfolk gaped for a moment before composing themselves. This was something new, for they had only seen Ferren weave with Generation beforehand.

She held up one hand, this time concentrating the vacuum into a small sphere of warped space that hung above her palm. One young boy, hesitant, reached out with a finger, then darted backwards in a panic as the void collapsed into another burst of wind. The air ruffled through his hair and the children broke out into giggles. As the children begged Ferren to show them more, the other

townsfolk traded whispers, intrigue seeping through their characteristic sternness. For a moment, it seemed they had truly forgotten about the dread that loomed over the town.

Ferren grinned at her, and Ivo's heart melted. Weeks upon weeks digging through her father's archives, studying, theorising, practicing together. And in that smile, Ivo knew their efforts had paid off. Each alchemical ability was triggered by an emotion, and it seemed that Ferren's second catalyst was an affection of some sort. Ivo would need more tests to decipher all that the power was capable of.

"No, no, tomorrow." Ferren's musical laughter filled the dead air around the square as she promised the eager children. "I need to practice." She shoed them off and approached Ivo, taking her hand again.

There was a metallic groan in the distance as the town gates swung open. The two of them turned to investigate, then froze as a Dreadknight strode through the open gateway. He wore his strange armour, helmet tucked under one arm as his other hand drummed on the pommel of his urumi. The town's Herald walked beside him in a white military jacket, his shorter legs hastening to keep up with the Knight. The Heralds were high ranking missionaries, most had been sent out into the weeds to reinvigorate worship of the Divine amongst the rural populace. Herald Armen however, had stayed. Upon witness of the sorry state of the Upper Basin, he had all but taken charge of governance in Solyn, and for some rare long years the townsfolk had eaten well.

The Knight and Herald had stopped just past the gates, so Ivo crept closer, pulling Ferren along behind her. They snuck around an unused wooden cart, staying near the buildings that lined the square.

"Ivo, what are you-" Ivo clasped a hand over Ferren's mouth and dragged her into an alleyway within earshot of the Knight. She peeked around the wall.

"Double payment. Have it ready," the Knight snapped in a thin voice. Herald Armen's face went slightly pale. Ivo frowned. The Knights were already paid generously by the Divine. The old Herald folded his trembling arms behind his back, matching the Knight with a steely gaze.

“Then I expect you will deliver these men to face justice,” the Herald said, “there are civilians among them”. Ivo and Ferren exchanged a questioning look. A contemptuous scowl crawled across the Dreadknight’s face.

“They will face justice through my blade,” he spat. He leant closer, his armoured frame looming over the Herald.

“Do not preach mercy to me, when you yourself have barred them access to your wells,” the Knight said. He stepped back, then smirked at the old man.

“And rightfully so,” he continued, a note of glee seeping into his words, “The Hanlen are traitors and so are these spinless turncoats who have thrown their lot in with them. You will be rid of them within the week.” He placed a hand on the Herald’s shoulder.

“Justice, under His light,” he said.

“Under His light,” the Herald replied, his head bowed. The Knight placed his helmet over his head and left towards the gates. As he walked away, Herald Armen’s eyes were distant, though Ivo thought his figure seemed to loosen. She turned back to Ferren who stared at her in shock, the same wordless dread hanging between them.

“Divine help you two learn to stop eavesdropping,” Herald Armen said, standing at the opening of the alley. Their heads snapped around to meet his gaze.

“Father, I-” Ferren started. The Herald’s face was thin and haggard as he looked at Ivo. There were marks of ink on his jacket and his fingers fiddled with a button on one sleeve.

“Wyrn is expecting supplies, Ivo,” Armen said. “He does wish that his apprentice would take her duties more seriously”. The reflexive retort died in Ivo’s mouth as Ferren gently squeezed her arm. Ferren let out a short breath.

“You abandoned them to the Withering?” Ferren asked, a faint quaver in her voice. Armen’s eyes flicked over to Ferren, then away again. He sighed.

“I assure you, dear,” Armen said, “there is nothing you might say, which I have not already considered myself.” He held her stare for a moment, then turned

swiftly and left them behind in the alley. *Blot his considerations*, Ivo thought as she leapt to chase after him. Only Ferren pulled her back, fingers still wrapped around Ivo's arm. There was an unusual hardness to Ferren's gaze.

"I'll talk to him," she said. She took Ivo's hand in hers again, and as though assuring herself she said, "He will listen, he will see reason." Ivo hoped she was right. Ferren tried a reassuring smile.

"Go gather those herbs for Wyrn," Ferren said, "he might sway Father if I cannot."

"Can he?"

Ferren shrugged.

"Maybe I should seek out the Dreadknight," Ivo said.

"Then what? Talk him down?" Ferren asked, bewildered. "Men of power tend not to heed the concerns of the rabble." She was quoting Karo Deshar. Of course, she was. An inkworker scholar from the Founding Years of the empire as it recovered from the Pralayehena, though he was executed when his words grew too critical of the newly re-established order under the Divine.

"Fine." Ivo gave Ferren an exasperated look. "What shall I do then?"

"Nothing!" Ferren said. "Don't do anything rash. We have time."

"I suppose so." Ivo muttered. She left Ferren with a quick smile and headed towards the town gates.

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The cinderash trail wound deeper into the forest, cutting through a vast sea of towering kelp stalks that swayed in the breeze. Between the stalks grew thin blades of shoal grass which reached past Ivo's knees and patches of brown algae growing in flat, webbed shapes over the stone crags that rose out from the earth. As Ivo travelled deeper into the kelp forest, there were flecks of plankton which began to drift with the winds. Little splotches of ink still marked every stalk and algae, not yet faded since the last inkstorm. Still, the air was sharp and clear, carrying with it a faint whisper of salt and metal. A small fish burst from a cluster of kelp, darting through the air towards another clump across the trail, and then the world was still again.

Through gaps between the leaves branching from the kelp stalks, Ivo could see the orange flames of the Great Drakhon dull over the horizon, as the light from the solitary supervent waned with its daily cycle. These vents were natural openings in the stone ceiling through which moltar would flow, and among them those vents of colossal size would provide immense light and heat to the surrounding land. There were stories of lands far off beyond the span of the Threscyan empire, beyond the all-encompassing reach of the Divine, of kingdoms lit by three or four drakhon, perhaps more. In the Ters Ilystra, there was one.

A flash of red caught Ivo's attention and she knelt beside a stalk of kelp. Brushing the aside shoal grass at its base, she noticed the dark red tendrils protruding from its exterior, thick and stubby like fingers, like they were worms eating through the stalk from the inside. She pulled a short hunting knife from her belt and grabbed several of the bloodroots, bending them downwards. With the blade, she prised them apart from the base of the kelp stalk. She dropped the roots into a fish scale pouch, one by one, counting them as they fell when a high-pitched shriek split through the thicket of weeds. Ivo froze, eyes darting around as she moved to her feet. A faint breeze rustled through the leaves, and a pulse of dull red rippled through the ink nearby.

Ivo held the knife level in the air. *Keep it close to the body, she thought, hands up, guard the face.* Two panicked shouts echoed and distance, and she heard a distant rustling as footsteps trampled away through the undergrowth. She waited for a moment and let a few more pass by.

The voices had come from further up, as had that pulse of ink, somewhere off the forest trail and leading even further away from Solyn. Ivo hesitated, sheathing the knife. *Someone's hurt*, she told herself. She sighed as she stepped off the cinder path. Ferren would have surely advised against this. *Ah well*.

As she pushed through a tangle of kelp, she reached a small glade. There was a shallow pit dug in the centre with the barest sliver of moltar flickering within, and patches of crushed grass where people must have slept. There were also a few dozen corpses. Ivo stared at them. *How had he found them so quickly?* Bodies in identical white uniforms were littered about the clearing, hacked to pieces as though torn apart by the ravenous fury of some feral beast. Sand and cinderash covered the earth, drenched in blood, that even now continued to seep from the bodies. Only, Ivo noticed with a growing dread, that some of the corpses weren't wearing uniforms.

There was a woman whose body lay neatly in three pieces, each beside the other. Ivo approached her, swallowing bile. She had been wearing a frayed blue dress, hemmed with the stitched outline of a seven petaled flower that Ivo could not recognise. Around her shoulders was a heavy coat woven from some mixture of plant fibres. Her complexion was too, strange. Neither as dark as the light brown of those who hail from Toheren, like Ivo herself, nor as ghostly pale as the Threscyans. *Hanlen*, she realised. She had never met them herself, not with their secession from the empire a at least a decade before she was born. She stepped back. Something had caught her eye. Ivo had a feeling that she knew exactly what it was, but some morbid impulse compelled her hands to gently shift the woman's body to the side.

Her heart dropped. Underneath was a severed arm, too small, too little. Ivo snapped her eyes shut. Years training as a physician had steeled her stomach to weather any slew of ghastly sights, yet the sheer carnage on display... she had not even thought it possible. She turned away and just started walking. Somewhere, anywhere else.

Though there were not nearly as many amongst the dead as she had expected to find. As she scanned the clearing, she noticed slight impressions left in the ash, perhaps footprints, trailing away from the massacre. *Many of them must have escaped*, she thought.

There was a faint groan, and Ivo opened her eyes, following the sound to the other side of the clearing, where she found him. The Dreadknight hung in the air, strung up by his arms and legs between two kelp stalks with thick woven ropes. His helmet lay discarded at his feet. Ivo gasped. The Knight's urumi was wedged into his side, piercing through the seam between two plates of his armour. The Knight stirred, and as he regained his consciousness he glared at Ivo with his needling eyes.

"Took ya long enough," he sneered. Forcing a humourless laugh, he glanced at the wound in his side. His eyes lingered for a moment on the blood streaming from the gash in his armour. He stared back at her with a look of equal disgust and expectation. But Ivo's attention was fixated upon the deep purple cracks that branched from the wound, spreading about the armour like lightning. *How is that even possible?* she thought.

"So much for 'indestructible', heh?" he said. There was an edge in his voice as he spoke, a smug, self-satisfaction.

Ivo's grip tightened around the hilt of her hunting knife, her knuckles growing white. The faces of the dead echoed in her mind. She could almost imagine the sting of the whip sword as it swept through the air and bit into their flesh. She felt the pain carve through her body. *At least it must have been quick*, she thought. The ink around her flickered in a myriad of colour.

"Well go on then!" Impatience flashed behind the Knight's eyes. He nodded aggressively at his wound. "Get on with it! Can't ya see I'm blottin' bleeding out?"

Ivo flinched, subconsciously taking a step back from the venom in his voice. A faint scowl crept across her face. His face was gaunt and quite pale now, even for a Threscyan.

"Damned whorlet! Untie me!" he shrieked, spittle flying from his ink-stained lips. "Untie me now!" His flat face contorted into a pathetic mockery of a menacing snarl. The Knight thrashed against his bonds in vain. *Divine save me*, Ivo thought, holding back a huff of laughter. Even her little sister back home had thrown milder tantrums. The Knight tried to compose himself. He coughed and blood began to spill from his mouth. Releasing the hilt of her

knife, Ivo tried to hide her growing amusement. The Knight stared at her, a look of resignation on his face.

“Fuck you, fuck your fuckin’ village and fuck your fuckin’ little bandits” he said between raspy breaths. “You’re all the same, the lot of ya.”

Ivo bristled, and the Knight chuckled darkly. He spoke with ice in his words.

“All the same. Uneducated-” He took a shaky breath. “-backwater weedeaters, flinging blotted ink back and forth into each other’s faces.”

“What would you know about us, you thickskull?” Ivo demanded. He ignored her.

“Divine knows, I should behead the lot of ya and be done with it,” he said. “But no, I’ll be headin’ off with the money. Mercy, an’ all that. You scum can deal with the rest of those traitors and turncoats yourselves. Prove your own worth for once.”

He coughed again, a thick tongue tracing over his cracked lips. Blood dripped down his chin and he swore, panting with glazed eyes.

“Alright you whorlet,” he said, “you’ve- you’ve had your fun.” He spat out more blood. Ivo stared at him, her face a mask of emptiness. She had grown up hearing stories of the Dreadknights.

“Cut me down now, girl.” His voice quavered slightly, with a note of urgency.

On the day of Pralayehena, the Divine had arrived to free the old world from the Great Naga, and the Dreadknights fought beside him, His chosen warriors.

“Cut- cut me down!”

Dreadknights were supposed to be honourable warriors. But in this creature’s gleeful bloodlust, his arrogance, she saw now an obvious truth. The Divine’s own creations were no better than He ever was. Ivo turned her back towards him.

“No, No! Don’t-” He broke out into a fit of sputters. “Please.”

Then the Knight’s head drooped, and he was still.

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Ferren hated it when Ivo was late. To be particular, she despised impunctuality of all kinds. But in Ivo's case the aforementioned lateness likely meant she was caught up in something stupid or reckless. She was pacing around Wyrn's clinic, alternating between helping him prepare simple medicines and scanning the street through the window across the room. There was a journal with half-finished sketches and schematics for a hydraulic network to pump moltar from the deepwell straight to homes around Solyn. It was a half-baked personal project of hers since none of the other fools around town had any sense or care for fluid mechanics.

Wyrn himself was seated up on a stool at his desk, reading from an apothecary's compendium and scrabbling indecipherable letters into a kelp-bound book. He unfolded a pair of gold-rimmed reading glasses and placed them onto his face. Ferren had tried reading over his shoulder, but all those obnoxious medical words made her head spin. And his handwriting was quite spectacularly abysmal. The physician was Threscyan, tall and middle-aged, with a neatly trimmed beard. He had been raised and educated in the 'mountain capital' of Orlenyth, then for some absurd reason, when his close friend Bavi had asked him to train his daughter in medicine, Wyrn had dragged Ivo with him out into the weeds for some first-hand experience. Which had worked out quite well, Ferren supposed, given that Ivo had met her.

"Now even a Dreadknight wouldn't just murder a girl for asking provocative questions, would he?" Ferren asked. She leant against his desk, folding her arms over its face. Without looking up from his journals, Wyrn shrugged. Ferren looked to the ceiling and groaned. Her last conversation with her adopted father had gone quite similarly to their short exchange in the alley, and so far, Wyrn had refused to help. He had chuckled when she asked. *You think anything will change that old bastard's mind?* he had said. Ferren really didn't know what to do right now, and she hated that. It was all the little annoyances piling upon each other, desperately trying to drown out her elation at their breakthrough earlier in the day. If only her adorable, and slightly dense girlfriend would hurry the fuck up.

"Ferren, girl," Wyrn said, "she might be reckless, but my student is no idiot."

Ferren made a half nod. With another quick peek through the window, she returned to her own workbench. She needed a distraction. Sliding a mortar holding half ground seeds and her pipe diagrams to the side, she placed her fingers onto the polished rosin surface of the desk. She channelled her fear; by now it was almost second nature. A small marble of rosin generated in the gap between her palm and the desk. She then pictured Ivo in her mind, Ferren's head on her shoulder as they sat by the river, and she opened a small void beside the marble. She tried to release it carefully, starting from where the vacuum and rosin ball touched, and the ball slowly began to roll into the empty space. The void collapsed. A tiny burst of wind rushed over her workbench and Ferren sucked air through her teeth in annoyance.

There was a rattle as the door to the clinic swung open a familiar figure walked in. *Finally!* Ferren felt herself begin to almost tear up with relief, though that would have been a bit overly dramatic. She rushed forward to either hug Ivo or shake her violently, she didn't know which. Wyrn however had frozen in place, staring slack jawed at the bundle in Ivo's hands. Shutting the door behind her, Ivo lingered awkwardly, holding that curious pile of bronze metal sheets held together by these woven ropes.

"Miss Avennar, have you gone completely insane?" Wyrn asked, rising from his seat. He turned to Ferren. "Go fetch Captain Beryen, we will meet at the church."

Oh! Ferren thought, as she remembered where she had last seen those scraps of metal. Specifically, who had been wearing them. *Oh, damned blotstains.* She gave Ivo a look which she hoped would communicate a severe level of disapproval.

"Now please, Ferren" Wyrn said. As she brushed past Ivo on her way out of the clinic, Ferren poked at Ivo's cheek and flashed her a quick smile. Then she was gone.

"So... um-" Ivo started.

"Girl, please put that down," Wyrn said. He pressed two fingers to his forehead and sighed into his hand. "I pray at least, that you have not worn the armour?"

Ivo shook her head, and there was an immediate relief on Wyrn's face. She dropped the bundle, and he knelt down to untie the ropes.

"So, what happened to him?" Wyrn asked. Ivo thought she could see a strange dread in his eyes.

"He died. From his wounds."

"And you didn't help?"

Ivo shuffled her feet uncomfortably. Wyrn stood and patted her shoulder.

"It's alright," he said. "I can imagine the horrors you must have seen left in his wake."

Ivo glumly nodded. Wyrn had the helmet in his hands, and he inspected the grey lines running along its surface.

"At least those poor Hanlen need to suffer no longer," Wyrn said. "How many of the soldiers still live?"

"Most of them might have escaped," Ivo said. "Some Hanlen did too."

"If only our problems had wholly eliminated each other," Wyrn sighed as he stared at the bronze helmet. Then he frowned. "But it has been three days since their molar reserves were exhausted. They'll be desperate now. Bolder too now that he's gone."

It was growing darker outside. Wyrn set the helmet down on his desk. He grabbed an enormous amphora from beside his desk and poured some molar into a cast iron bowl at its centre. The warm light from the liquid quickly filled the room and softened the chill in the air.

"Why won't Armen just give it to them?" Ivo asked, gesturing at the amphora. She picked up the urumi from the bundle, still coiled and clipped to a bronze belt. *Slaughter*, whispered a chorus of sound that came from the weapon's hilt, the word echoing, reverberating through the bones of her arm and into her skull. Ivo yelped, as she dropped the blade, and it clattered against the pile of metal. She grasped her forearm with her other hand. It felt wrong. A prickling feeling lingered, like something had just crawled through her skin. Wyrn frowned and he took her arm, though there was nothing to see.

“What was it?” he asked.

“There was a voice,” Ivo said. “No. Voices. Hundreds of them.”

He reached down and picked up the whip sword before Ivo could stop him. But nothing happened. He looked worried, as he placed the sword beside the helmet.

“It is as I thought,” Wyrn said, “the Achreyon arms have bonded to you.”

“Bonded? Bonded how? What does that even-” Wyrn held up a hand.

“Save your questions for the Herald, girl,” he said. “Armen is far more knowledgeable than I, in matters of the arcane.” He began to gather up the armour. Ivo scowled.

“I didn’t ask for any of this blotted bonding,” she said.

“And yet you made the choice to let that Knight die.” Wyrn met her eyes with a piercing stare. “However justified that choice may be, we are now faced with its consequences.”

“Then I become a Dreadknight?” she asked.

“Do not even consider such a thing,” Wyrn said. His words were firm though with a note of desperation.

“They used to be heroes, Wyrn,” she said, “why shouldn’t someone with real morals try to use that power for something good?”

“Please, Ivo! You have not yet seen the worst of a Dreadknight’s capabilities.” Wyrn looked past her as he spoke. “The Achreyon arms bring out the worst qualities in a person. Never touch it again. You must wait for the Herald to sort this matter through.”

Her eyes lingered on the helmet, its purple mist wafting into the air. Ivo shrugged. Better not to mess with something she barely understood. *At least for now*, she thought. Wyrn pulled a long coat over himself and hoisted the bundle of the Achreyon arms over one shoulder. Tucking the helmet under one arm, he grasped the urumi in the other. There was a weariness to his expression as he regarded the weapon, a pained familiarity. Wyrn muttered

some words to the whip sword that Ivo could not hear. His gaze hardened for the slightest moment. Then he straightened and nodded to himself.

He seems far too accustomed with that thing for a simple physician, Ivo thought. But she kept such thoughts to herself as they headed outside.-

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There were six others gathered about the church dais as Wyrn and Ivo entered. Their quarrelling voices carried over the pews, echoing through the empty nave. A fading daylight reached inwards through the arched windows, around long shadows cast by pillars along the sides of the hall. The Herald was leaning against his pulpit. To his either side was Tires, a senior rosinsmith, and Captain Beryen of the town guard, engaged in animated conversation. Dysel, an overseer at the Basin Quarry stood nearby, scratching figures into a scrap of paper with a chalk pencil, and the tavernkeeper, Phare, watched them from behind the Herald, arms crossed against her chest. Ferren sat away from them on the steps of the dais, her head in her hands, though her eyes had shot upwards as she heard the church doors creak open. Footsteps clacked down the aisle as Wyrn and Ivo neared the church sanctuary.

A simple tone altar stood behind the pulpit, and above it a marblite carving jutted out from the wall. The statue sat cross-legged on a lotus flower, four heads at its neck, each sporting a peaceful expression with eyes closed as though it were sleeping. The head facing forward looked south towards the Drakhon and the rest in all other cardinal directions. Six arms sprouted from its back with two folded against his lap, two clasped above his head as though in prayer and two held out to the side, a chakram in one and trident in the other. The Divine. Or so they said, for none but his closest servants had seen him in flesh in recent years.

Ferren leapt to her feet and placed a hand each on Wyrn's and Ivo's arm.

"Oh, please talk some sense into them," she said, shaking her head. "Their bickering will turn me as mad as a wraith!"

Ivo glanced at Wyrn who moved to the altar with the Achreyon arms bundled in his hands, drawing everyone's attention. *It seems Ferren had not thought to prepare them*, Ivo thought, amused. He set the arms down atop the dais, and their looks quickly changed from curiosity to complete terror. The three other men around the Herald burst into commotion.

"What is the meaning"-

"How"-

“Curséd artefacts!” Dysel said. The overseer crossed his second and third fingers and held his palm over his heart. Phare chuckled to herself as she looked at Ivo. Armen was gazing at the altar, a slight frown growing on his face.

“The damn fool got himself killed.” Wyrn said, “Ivo was thoughtful enough to haul these back before the traitors got a hold of them”.

“Perhaps their theft might have been the intended outcome,” Armen muttered to himself, lacing his fingers together. “Did she touch the metal?” he asked Wyrn.

“She carried the arms back to Solyn,” he replied, “I believe she is already bonded.”

Ivo flashed Wyrn another glance. He nodded.

“I heard these... voices,” she said.

Armen closed his eyes, still turned towards the altar and muttered a short prayer. *Great*. Tirin cursed out loud, though everyone else looked back in confusion. The Herald turned back around, one hand steadying himself against the pulpit.

“We will send for agents from Sel Amaryn,” he said, “they will set things in order.”

“Are you insane?” Tirin interjected, “Solyn doesn’t need to deal with those lunatic alchemists”. He froze, quickly glancing towards the steps of the dais. “Excepting our dear Ferren, of course.” Ferren huffed in mock offence.

“What is this about? What is the girl’s part in all of this?” Dysel asked. Captain Beryen nodded to Armen.

“Through touch, her mind has formed a connection with the arms,” the Herald said, “a bond which cannot so easily be undone.”

“Then sever the connection,” Beryen said. “I am sure the girl wants no part in this mess.” He looked towards Ivo who shrugged.

“He speaks the truth Armen,” Wyrn said, “the Divine’s methods are often needlessly harsh. We should address this matter ourselves.” He held up the helmet. “Bury the armour. It shall never spread evil again.”

Armen shot him a furious look. “These are holy artifacts! We cannot desecrate them further!” Phare snorted and the Herald glared at her. “And there is no hiding of the arms.” he continued. “They already know of what has transpired. All we can do is show repentance, and He shall show mercy.”

“And what if there is no mercy?” Wyrn asked. “Just as there has been none for so many who slighted the Divine?”

Armen met his eyes. “There will.”

Wyrn shook his head. “Stains upon you Armen!” he said, slamming the helmet down onto the altar. A metallic ringing echoed through the hall, as the congregated stared at the Herald in blank silence. “I will not satisfy your insanity.”

Phare was nodding, though the others muttered between themselves. Ferren glanced between Wyrn and Armen anxiously. Wyrn stepped off the dais and turned to Ivo.

“Come along, girl,” he said, waving her towards the doors. *Is he just leaving? Just like that?* she thought, as she looked back at Armen. He had picked up the helmet and approached her with it in his hands. Wyrn stopped at the doors.

“Ivo,” he said.

“There is no hiding from this burden, child,” Armen said. He nodded towards the helm. “Face it.”

“Ivo!” Wyrn called. His tone grew more insistent. Ivo eyed the dark bronze crown of the helmet.

“What happens if I touch it again?” she asked the Herald.

“You would witness the mind of God,” he said. Ivo crossed her arms and frowned.

“I do not well enjoy the thought of a warmongering deity whispering into my head.”

“Warmongering? He-” Armen sighed. “There may be a remedy for your concerns.”

Ivo stared at him, waiting. He continued.

“The Divine makes choice of his Dreadknights very carefully. Even the deaths of every knight are always orchestrated such that only a suitable candidate would pry the armour off their corpse. Every one to wear the arms must be both a ruthless killer and unquestioningly loyal to His will.”

Beryen laughed out loud. “Go on Ivo,” he said, grinning, “tell him about your ‘ruthless talent’ with a sword then?”

Ivo thought of that beast of a man she had abandoned in the forest, strung up between stalks of kelp, the colour draining from his long-darkened eyes.

She smiled sweetly. “No,” she said, “I don’t suppose I am the bloodthirsty killer that the Divine needs.”

Armen held out the Achreyon helm. “Then confront His voice,” the Herald said, “and take charge of the power invested within.”

Ivo had to admit to herself, she was curious what their reclusive ‘god emperor’ might say, if they were to meet face to face.