Lucio Pegenor stared up at the decrepit ancient mansion. It had a commanding view of the city, set back as it was on Bald’s Knoll, away from the rest of the town. Duke Sercio, his uncle, certainly did like his privacy. A small wood bridge was the only way across the shift flowing icy Channel Run which separated the hill and the town, and it was across this bridge that the band of young men now traveled.

The path was well cobbled but unmaintained, a theme which also applied to the mansion. It was one of the largest houses in the city. Passed down from one duke to another and it was clear that there initially had been no love lost between the original king and his brother who had made it, for it to be located so far from the palace.

It was a green tiled thing, with tan bricks, most likely imported. It sat looming over the creek valley, its twin coned spires with tall windows like eyes staring out. Regardless of its original construction, it was clear that no handyman had tended to it in a while. Vines twisted up the sides and the trees a top the hill surrounding the house were gnarled and misshapen.

Lucio sighed and nudged Bellarion, his horse, onward. The group was quiet as they ascended the slope towards their goal. The duke, Sercio Pegenor, was suspected of the most vile act of necromancy, a fact corroborated by several of his servants who had fled from his house, claiming he had gone mad. Lucio shivered, an early winter. Matters of family were the duty of the family.

Before Varius, his father, had gone campaigning against their southern neighbor, he tasked Lucio with governing the city and upholding the family name. A further task was added as Lucio had turned to leave, one, while not unexpected had been frank from a father who never had time for his son. Varius had reminded Lucio that if he should die, Lucio would have to take the throne. These responsibilities and more weighed heavily upon the young man’s head as he guided his team.

“Our father is a great man Lucio” Marcius said, seeing the frown on Lucio’s face. “I am sure these allegations are false,” he said with a small pained smile, bringing his horse up beside Lucio’s. Lucio checked that none of the men were listening.

“I don’t know what to think. In talking to Counselor Barthus, he said that he had talked to at least seven servants all of whom said they saw similar things, odd men bringing strange vials and books, Sercio’s curiosity with the old graveyard behind the hill, it all adds up. Add to that Lady Demora’s testimony that she hasn’t seen her brother in nearly five years, and that the only social even she’s seen him at was the King’s Feast that long ago… It seems to fit Marcius.” Lucio said, frown returning.

His own memories of his uncle were of a gaunt troubled man who spoke little and ate less. Lucio remembered that King’s Feast. Some diplomats had knowingly scheduled talks for that day and had refused to change the date, thus, his father was busy talking with the foreign dignitaries and expected Lucio and Marcius to entertain the other nobles in his stead, along with aunt Demora.

It had been a dreadfully boring affair, very formal, almost no one talked near the end. Lucio had especially remembered one moment from the evening. His father had just returned to the table and it was clear that the talks with the Alizanites had not gone well, and as Lucio was making sure everything was getting cleaned up properly, he recalled his father remarking that his wife’s death was taking its toll on the diplomatic relations between the two countries. That was the kind of man his father was, he said nothing about loss or sorrow, only that it was straining diplomatic relations. From those days forward, what little Lucio had seen of his father dimmed to nothing. The king had a country to run.

Marissa, his mother had died when he was only ten, leaving their father distraught as soon as he heard when he returned from the north. He had remembered a caring face and soft words, but being a marriage of political necessity her tie was spent mostly convincing her father, the king of Alizan not to take what few town they had left in the south. It had been mostly Nana, a servant who he remembered from his childhood, and Marcius, having to be punished for misbehaving.

Thus, most of his time from when he was old enough was spent learning the art of war, and of running a nation from the old arms master and counselor Barthus respectively.

Now those skills would go to use. Although as regent, second to the king, he was authorized to use force, even against the nobles when upholding Centralia’s laws, it would have been unheard of.

He suspected that Sercio indeed was learning magic, not an illegal act, but one frowned upon on all levels of society. The great purges conducted by his great grandfather had been conducted for a reason. Magic wielders were chaotic…so, most definitely magic, but necromancy? Surely not.

The three countries had obliterated the last necromancer and his army with force so vast, none had seen it’s like again. The battle mages burned the necromancer’s land so surely, nothing could ever grow there again. Who would study such forbidden knowledge knowing that it would invoke such a response?

Lucio shook himself from his thoughts as he approached the mansion. The stained glass windows at the front were clouded from lack of cleaning, one even was broken. Not a good sign. They approached the house cautiously. The double front door loomed over them, its evergreen paint peeling away from the engravings, the hinges visibly rusted. They dismounted and tied up the horses.

“I take it your uncle doesn’t entertain much” Antonio, the youngest of the group said, as they returned to the front door.

“Quiet!” Marcius said sternly.

“Marcius is right, he could be listening in on us as we speak. Now, I don’t know what to expect in there,” Lucio said, viewing the group of men they had put together, “but I want you all to keep your mouths shut. Family business is family business. And it might be that this is all a big misunderstanding. But to be safe… everyone stay alert,” he said turning to face the door.

After a moment of silence Lucio knocked on the giant entrance way. It produced a hollow sound the echoed through the mansion. There was no response.

“Have you tried it? Is it even locked?” Antonio asked from behind him.

Lucio turned and raised his eyebrows, daring Antonio to speak again. However, he did test the door and much to his surprise, it gave.

A conflict. It was obviously impolite to enter unbidden into a noble’s home. Any one of the lesser nobles would have gossiped about it for weeks if it had been their house. However, matters could be serious, and without any answer for a good couple of minutes, Lucio pushed harder on the door.

The rusted hinges produced an unpleasant grating sound as the monstrous portal scraped inward against the stone floor. He winced, but soon the door was open. He stepped into the foyer.

A staircase shot up to his right going to a small landing above him. The interior was also painted dark green and with the windows clouded over, it was practically black indoors. The only light came from the occasional candle sconces on the wall. So someone was home.

A sudden movement on the landing directed his attention upwards, but whoever it was, exited through one of the many hallways before Lucio could get a look at him.

“Sercio Pegenor, it is I, Lucio. Marcius is here also. I need to have a word with you.” Lucio shouted at the second floor, but his voice met only silence. A vague twinge of uneasiness hit Lucio and he turned and motioned for the rest of the men to enter.

“This hallway here leads to the great hall. It is where the Duke would normally meet visitors. We should wait there.” Lucio said, pointing to a stone hallway that led into the interior of the mansion.

“This place has been unused for years” Marcius said quietly as they started through the hall, running his finger along the wall. There’s dust coating everything. “This fits with the stories from his servants. Apparently our uncle has retreated to his studies and library in the basement and has left the rest of the house abandoned. He has also cut the size of his staff. Those were his only servants.”

“Seven to run a house this large? They must have cooked too! Gods, the palace is not much larger than this and we have a veritable army.” Marcius commented.

They entered into the great hall. Once this place had been used for entertainment, its towering three story ceiling of heavy timber soared above them. On the second floor another landing circled its way around the edge of the massive room, ending in another staircase near another set of doors. In the center of the room were several tables, towards which the band directed themselves. There was no covering on any of the table, nor any place settings. The place smelled of must and mildew from lack of cleaning.

Lucio looked around. Through the pale light let in by the two story stained windows lining the right hand side of the hall, Lucio could see several doorways, one of which was open. Lucio could see the kitchen through its doors. The candles were unlit there, and it was clear no one could work in such gloom.

“Sercio Pegenor, it is I, Lucio, your nephew. We are in the great hall.” Lucio shouted. A cold breeze caught him from somewhere and he shivered again. Gods damn him, why can’t this be simple?

“Lucio, I don’t think he can hear us. Perhaps if we went down to his study…” Marcius started before a sudden voice silenced him from above.

Sercio Pegenor, Duke of Centralia stood on the landing above them, holding the railing firmly in both his hands. His memories of the man were unchanged, a gaunt man, a deep frown creased atop his brow highlighting his sharp features. The candle light cast shadows across his face burying half of it in darkness. He wore a long robe with a tall collar, black except for vague poisonous green highlights on the shoulders and the arms.

“That will not be necessary.” The older man said, his deep voice boomed. “Lucio, Marcius, nephews, it has been a long time. To what do I owe this honor?” He didn’t say more, but his eyes darted quickly to each of the men assembled in Lucio’s group.

The question lingered in the air while Lucio tried to find the right words to respond. He had not expected for Sercio to meet them in person, and despite his training, never had achieved the skill with words that his father apparently had.

“Uncle, I must talk with you on a matter of great importance. To say it truthfully, there are… worries, about your condition. Several of your servants were found outside the palace saying you dismissed them. Demora was concerned and sent me to meet with you,” he lied.

A very slight smile crept its way across Sercio’s face as he started walking down the landing, talking as he did so. “I am glad to hear that she still remembers me,” a sudden laugh rasping from his uncle. “As for the servants, that is correct. I found them not to my liking. I was being disturbed constantly, no time to work, no time at all with all of them scurrying about, asking for orders…worrying about the house, and me I suppose.” He continued, now coming down the staircase.

Lucio shot a look to Marcius, who signaled Belthius, his second and the rest of the men to stand at attention, the proper greeting for a noble. Lucio bent slightly, a small bow towards Sercio as he was closer, Marcius following suit although more awkwardly. Theoretically, the duke was slightly below Lucio in terms of status, so it would have been customary for him to return the bow, but Sercio merely approached them.

“Oh, I do dislike formality.” The duke said, waving his hand in dismissal. He stood near Lucio and looked him over. “Yes, it has been a long time… You have your mother’s features.” He said, apropos of nothing.

“Is there a place we can talk more comfortably? I really must discuss some things with you.” Lucio insisted sternly. Sercio’s frown reappeared but he gestured at one of the doors behind him. “There is a small study through here.” He glanced at Lucio’s men uneasily. “Must they come also?”

“No, I don’t think that will be necessary. Marcius, you come with me. The rest stay here.” Lucio said, but signaled Belthius and the rest to follow him anyway. Another signal warned them to be discrete about it.

Sercio took them through a rotting doorway, through a similar hall to the one they had passed through on the way in. In front of them was an ornate door and a small vestibule. “Through here” The duke said, entering the room first, which was also a breach of tradition. Lucio entered after him and as the door closed, he caught a glance of the rest of the men following silently behind him, stationing themselves around in an adjacent hallway.

“I will be frank.” The duke said as Lucio entered the study. “Let’s skip the social prattling and get to business. I know why you are here.” He said, positioning himself on a black velvet armchair, one hand grasping the chair, the other pointing accusingly at Lucio. “I know Demora didn’t send you. And you came here with eight armed men. You must think I’m daft.” He spat the last word out. “This is about the magic isn’t it? Its no crime to practice magic in Centralia.” He reminded Lucio, who had seated himself on a matching velvet chair, opposite his uncle.

“No Sercio, it is not.” He said, purposefully using his name. He must be shown who’s in charge here. “But necromancy is.” He added softly, tilting his head up to stare forcefully at the old man.

Sercio recoiled from the word and he sneered, “you think I’m mad? You think I would practice such vile acts? My boy you are…”

Lucio didn’t let him finish, Lucio rose from his chair slowly as he responded. “We have several witnesses and ledgers made from your scribe describing the books and interesting people you have been accustoming yourself with. *The Pale Art,* he said, that was the real interesting one. Tell me uncle,” Lucio stabbed with emphasis on the word, “the last copy of that black tome was thought to be destroyed centuries ago, wherever did you find a copy?”

Sercio’s eyes widened in anger, his brow furrowed as he stood from his chair, forcing it backwards in one swift motion. It hit against the wall with a hollow sound. “How dare you! You insolent child!” He spat.

Perhaps he had reached a bit too far with his last comment, but the proof had been there. “…perhaps I have been rash uncle.” He said, pacing somewhat. “Servants have been known to tell tales. It wouldn’t be unheard of for one to bribe the others as a conspiracy. They have much to gain, especially if they are foreign spies wishing to discredit you. You have just to swear to me that their words are false.” He said, coming to a stop, and waiting for the duke’s reply, staring at the man, trying to gauge his thinking.

To his surprise, the anger faded somewhat. The duke looked behind him at the chair before pausing for a moment. “I know you don’t know me well, nephew. I can only imagine what it is like to run this country while your father is away. “The man said, somewhat conciliatory. Lucio made to cut him off, but Sercio raised his hand to continue. I have always been an honest man, ill-suited one might say, for the rigors of politics. I admit to learning magic. But I have my reasons; I have spent the last seven years…” Sercio began, gesturing emphatically.

“Ill-suited? I think not.” Lucio countered with a bit of a laugh, shaking his head. “You seem to have missed my point, so I will be clear. Swear to me that the allegations against you are false, and you can meet the man in court to solve this treason.” He said, suddenly firm again. “If they are false… ” He added quietly, staring back at his uncle, hands in his pockets almost casually.

“I… There are things about this family you weren’t told, that much is clear. Your father has been hiding secrets from…” Sercio began, rubbing his hands together, the frown deepening.

“I will ask you one last time uncle, clearly, no dodging. Are you a necromancer?” He said loudly, almost angrily, taking a step towards the duke.

“There are reasons for my actions!” The duke said, taking a step back.

“Did you exhume bodies from the graveyard? Did you obtain a copy of *The Pale Art?* Did,” Lucio paused, almost yelling now, approaching Sercio, eyes wide, “you raise a person from the dead in this very house?” Lucio said, barely a few steps from his uncle. He could feel the fear in the old man’s eyes, as he sought a way out of replying. “Did you uncle? By the power of Centralia and the family name of Pegenor I will have your answer!” Lucio commanded, hand on the grip of his sword.

“Yes!” Screamed the old man. “Yes, and I would do it a thousand times again!” He bellowed, the velvet chair flying from his hands, to splinter into pieces against the wall. There was a pause as both sides seemed to digest this sudden confession. A quiet change came over Sercio, a shadow darkened his face and he took a step back towards a doorway, all while keeping his eyes locked on Lucio.

“Men,” Lucio commanded, drawing his own sword from its scabbard and pointing it at the duke, “arrest this man!” The door flew off its hinges onto the floor with a splintering crash. Belthius, not the most subtle guard in Centralia, rushed in, axe drawn, with Marcius and the rest of his men following close behind.

“NO!” Yelled Sercio, “I will not waste seven years of my life to this!” He threw his hands above his head, and chaos exploded all around Lucio.

The door behind Sercio collapsed into splinters as several cloaked dark shapes sprang from the doorway. There was a clash of weapons, Lucio barely remembered drawing his sword as swords and axes rang against one another. The last thing he remembered was Sercio yelling at him, a sudden hand motion, with long gnarled fingers stretched out pointing at him. He remembered a feeling of weightlessness and then a sharp blow to the back of his head. Then everything went black.

He awoke in a dungeon, for that was the only word that could describe the place. Water seeped in from the moss covered stone walls. There was a dank smell of chemicals that burned Lucio’s nose as he struggled to get up. He was on a stone table, in an otherwise bleak room. There were chains on the table, but he had not been chained himself. The only light was from a bar covered window well, through which pale blue light radiated. Morning? How long had he been out?

A shape moved on the edge of his vision and he saw Sercio step into the room, the glow of candles behind him jumped onto the floor, fighting it out with the pale light from the window and eventually winning. “Ah, I see you’re up.” Sercio said coldly, closing the door behind him. “Villain!” Lucio shouted, taking two steps towards the duke, before he reached for a sword that wasn’t there.

“None of that.” Sercio said forcefully, waving his hand at Lucio as he advanced. Lucio found himself unable to move, his legs felt like they were stuck in stone, and his upper body lurched forward as his momentum was suddenly stalled.

“Now, I will forget your attempt against my life if you work with me. I have spent almost a decade of my life working towards this day, and not you nor any other force in the world will stop me!” He said with a voice of cold ice.

Lucio ignored his rants. “Where is Marcius? Where is my brother? Where are the rest of my men?” He yelled, glaring furiously at the man who was supposed to be his uncle.

Sercio sighed, “he is in the cell next to you. Through no fault of my own, or my…followers, he was wounded with an arrow in his chest. One of your guards was a bit over zealous with his bow, Antonio was it? Marcius is unconscious, and I am still healing him, as I did you. As for the rest of you men, I allowed them to leave the mansion. Unfortunately, they came back the next day with some rather unhappy followers. They are stationed outside this house as we speak, trying to find a way in through my enchantment, which of course is impossible.”

“Those things you set on us…they were undead. You are a necromancer! Why have you healed me? What do you want from me?” Lucio said, voice lowered as he saw the other man meant him no harm.

The old man was silent for a second. “Lucio, do you know what this is?” he said, producing a thin black rod, the size of a man’s leg. The object hovered in the air, before landing at Lucio’s feet.

Lucio gasped. “That is the Rod of the King! How can you have it? My father took it with him when he went to the south!”

Sercio shook his head. “I had not planned this, and I regret to tell you that your father, my brother, the king, is dead. Again, through no action of my own or of my men. I swear to you, on the family name. As far as my spies can inform me, it seems that Aramar finally got assassins into your Varius’s camp.”

Lucio’s head fell against his shoulders, his body held up only the magic that bound him. His father, dead? It couldn’t be! But yet there was the staff, inseparable from the king as long as he lived!

“I…But…But what purpose do you have for me?” He said, not quite crying.

“Nephew, you are the king of Centralia now. I must say, I hate formalities, but sometimes they carry much more weight then just social status. There are magics bound quite strongly to this rod and to the line of succession. Your great great grandfather had it made after his half-brother tried to obtain the throne as you may recall from your history lessons. To put it simply, since I am after you in the line of succession, even if I were the slice the head from your shoulders right now, I could not pick up, and neither could Marcius. We would have to be ordained by the counsel of elders, and I cannot wait for that!” He said, punctuating each syllable.

“Today is Saturnalia, the start of winter as well as a full moon. These things have significance to my art, and the final piece of the puzzle is that staff, which I cannot hold, which must be held, over the grave.”

“Which grave?” Lucio asked, unsure of the direction this discussion had taken, and still shocked to hear of the death of his father.

“Why your mother’s of course…I didn’t know how to tell you; I tried earlier. I owe you an explanation.”

“My mother’s? You keep your filthy hands off my mother’s grave you heretic!”

“Let…please let me explain. It has been such a long time.” Sercio motioned towards the door that he had entered and it creaked open, inviting Lucio to follow him. The magic holding him collapsed, and he staggered forward. Surprisingly, Sercio ran forward and caught him. Lucio was too surprised to respond and when he regained his composure, forestalled his rage against the man. After all, Sercio had shown he was fully capable of tossing him about like a doll, and Lucio had no weapon. It was better to follow the madman for now.

They walked into the next room. It was a similarly constructed dungeon room, although much larger, with tables full of alchemical equipment, strange hovering lights, and to his horror, in the center of the room, what was clearly a dead body, chained down to the stone altar upon which it rested. Lucio could have sworn the body moved a bit.

“Well I had to practice on something. I was hardly going to get it wrong, not after so much has been invested in this.” He pulled a chair out of somewhere and half directed, half forced Lucio into it. The strength had gone out of Lucio’s body, and he didn’t know if he could have resisted even if he had wanted to.

Sercio spirited another chair form somewhere and sat facing him, his face suddenly grave. “This may be hard for you to hear, but your father never loved Marissa and likewise her to him. Their marriage was of political necessity.” He waited for Lucio’s exclamation.

“I guess I always knew that. But truthfully, it was only of political contrivance? What about… what about me and Marcius?” Lucio asked, softly.

A grim look took Sercio’s face. “The king had to have heirs, and better two than one. Purely politics. One heir could easily disappear in the night, or die to disease or the like. But let me explain the full story, perhaps you will understand my actions?” His uncle said, almost pleadingly.

“I will listen to your story. But first, I believe you truly can’t lie can you? Allow me three questions, ones no sane man would answer and I will listen.” Lucio wagered.

“I agree, if it will convince you. I made an unbreakable oath of truth to obtain my powers. I cannot lie and I will answer your questions.”

“First,” began Lucio, surprised Sercio agreed to his terms, and rushing to come up with questions which truly, no sane man would answer. “How many people have you killed and how did you do it?”

“Technically two questions, but I will answer.” The duke said, his head tossed back, and a sadness came to his voice as he spoke. “I killed the head bodyguard to the Alizanite king in one on one combat with a poisoned sword; that was truly a blow to Centralian honor. Through inaction during the same campaign I let Akatur’s wife, the queen and mother to Aramar, die to two northern assassins. I never told anyone but your father. I ran down a small child by accident in a border town near the north. Varius agreed to cover it up for me. Finally, I killed three of my servants through magic after they saw what I was learning by ripping their head from their shoulders with magic; *The Pale Art* does not teach subtlety. Their bodies where the first that I reanimated.”

A surge of bile threatened Lucio as the other man’s confession came out. Sercio looked pained, as if Lucio were drawing poison out from him, and he gripped the arms on the chair, a practice Lucio had seen him do earlier.

“I believe you.” Lucio said, gasping. “Second, what is your greatest regret?” Battle boasts and killings were tolerable topics among soldiers he reasoned, personal flaws were not.

“That I was not born first to the throne. I always despised your father’s cold demeanor and ruthless efficiency with matters of state. I believe I would have made a better king. Perhaps the Northern Alliance and Alizan would not be at our throats fi it had been so. But infinitely more important, it would have been me married to Marissa, rather than your father as it almost was.”

Sercio’s gaze met Lucio’s. “It is hard to believe, but there was a time when the relations between Alizan and Centralia were almost amenable. Marissa and I were to be married with the grace of Akatur after his wife died. He wanted no more war. I have no proof, but I believe his son killed him out of rage. The marriage had to go forward, or else the two nations would indeed have gone to war again. But the king’s brother would not do. It had to be Varius. It always had to be Varius.”

“We met sometimes in the garden while Varius was away to the north or south on diplomatic missions, but your mother was loyal, even if it was only a political marriage, and the brief pleasure she got from those meetings, I believe was dwarfed by the guilt she felt when Varius returned. For all I know, it was that, as much as the sickness that finally killed her.” He got softer as his explanation went on, until Lucio finally realized that the other man was choking back tears.

He waited a moment for the other man to regain himself before pressing the last question. “You claim to love my mother, and for all I know, you mean it. What will you do if you cannot raise her?”

“Cannot raise her…that, that is unimaginable. All my work, gone. I have debased myself to the lowest depths of hell for her, for love. To think that I would do all that and then get nothing…”

“Imagine!” Lucio said somewhat stronger, plans forming in his head. “The possibility remains that you will not be able to. From what I know of necromancy, it is an art with its own minutia. What will you do if you fail? Will you kill me out of rage? Will you take the throne for yourself?”

The horribleness of the question pounded at Sercio until it finally extracted the answer, the only answer which Lucio knew Sercio would have to admit. “I…There would be no reason for anything. No goal. Nothing that mattered. I would… I would take my own life.”

Silence filled the room. An uncomfortable stillness and sorrow that seemed to seep from Sercio. He had been forced along this path, by himself. No external hand had moved him. A sudden clarity of thought overtook Lucio. Gears turned in his head as he watched the old man cry quietly to himself. Perhaps he had inherited something from his father, his cold blooded reason. Gods knew Centralia needed a strong king. Perhaps it was time to do away with the old superstitions and constraints. Encroached on by both the Northern Alliance and Alizan, it was time to stem the tide, and if this ancient art could help him achieve that? By gods, he would ring the man dry of tears.

They marched out of the mansion. It was time. Marcius was still recovering in his cell, and Sercio would not have taken him even if he could. He had not the time to explain the situation to his younger brother, nor the assurance that he wouldn’t do something rash, like kill Sercio. Although Marissa was Marcius’s mother also, Lucio would just have to ask forgiveness, or if it worked, the question was void, he could just wait till Marcius was stable before reuniting the two.

A cold winter breeze cut through them as they strode out from the dungeons at the bottom of the hill near sundown. Sercio had apparently had tunnels dug to the cemetery itself, but the grave they wanted was in the royal mausoleum, separate from the rest. With them were three cloak wrapped figures, presumably Sercio’s former servants. Their damned cloaks whipping in the breeze prohibited Lucio from seeing what they truly looked like, but after the second attempt he realized he probably didn’t want to know.

They snaked their way through the corpse of trees that separated the grounds of the mansion and the graveyard, the gnarled trees, devoid of leaves swaying skeletal in the icy wind. It was overcast and as they made their way through the twisted, rusted metal gates to the cemetery, Lucio was sure there was a storm coming. The ceremony had to be done at precisely midnight. Doing so would be during the strongest conditions for necromancy. Any time else, Sercio warned him, he would not be able to break the seal placed on the tomb by the royal magister.

One of the former servants carried a torch, and as what was left of the sun went down, casting horrendous flickering shadows on the frozen ground. Lucio realized that this was a point of no return. He stood at the gates and looked back at the capital. Its bright lights and obsession with formality, its people, lords and peasants alike would soon revile him if they knew what he was about to do, what he was about to allow happen. They could never know. None of them. He had plans, plans for Centralia and its two fickle neighbors. One night of spooky shadows would not stop him, he scoffed.

They trudged through the now whipping cutting wind towards the royal mausoleum and Sercio brought out the book. It was much larger than Lucio had anticipated, covered from front to back with what looked like human hair and fingernails, bound in dark red cracked leather from what animal Lucio had no intention of figuring out.

Here was the grave. Lucio remembered the ceremony. The pallbearers struggling with the massive coffin, the magister frowning slightly as it went into the ground. Mostly he remembered the crushing sadness and empty condolences. The realization that he was never going to see those loving eyes nor gentle touch again. No words of encouragement, no lullabies to sing him to sleep. Everything came back, all the memories that he had hidden away for so long, repressed behind an iron wall of duty. He was paralyzed for a while, while Sercio readied the ritual. Finally he steadied himself somewhat.

There was a storm coming, the first flakes were falling through the air as Sercio began the ritual. He had the book pointed toward the grave. And he flipped to a specific page and started chanting. The words were horrible; they were like snakes that slithered just around Lucio’s ears. One moment he was sure he understood what was being said, the next minute it was gibberish. Through it all, the winter gale rose in intensity, flakes now falling all around them, blanketing the ground in ghastly white.

Sercio, with a open hand up to the sky, the other on the book and a look that could chill molten steel, screamed out suddenly in a frenzy of words, raising his voice to a hoarse yell, which persisted for the duration of the ceremony. The ground shook and the sky opened above them. Nameless horror descended upon Lucio as he gazed up at the unreal moon above him. Never had he seen it so large, and so…cold.

A break in the clouds spilled that cold empty light on them, and Lucio stifled a yell himself. It was actually cold, burning cold all around him. Sercio still screaming his words, gestured behind him to Lucio, who realized it was time for his involvement in this affair. The Rod of Kings floated before him. And for a moment Lucio considered not taking it. The moon hung in front of them, the grave bleached. Sercio eyes wildly staring questioning why Lucio was not moving. A chill unlike anything Lucio had ever felt before touched his skin, burning it searing the flesh, although no physical sign showed of the assault.

He gridded his teeth together and grabbed the rod. The metal was blazingly cold but Lucio did not hesitate this time. Under the light of the full moon, on the first of winter, reading from the book of the dead, Lucio Pegenor outstretched the Rod of Kings and pointed it towards his mother’s grave.

There was a flash of light, so intense and sudden that the afterimage burned in Lucio’s eyes. Amidst the blistering cold, a crack, like the snapping of a limb was heard, instant and terrible that reverberated through the graveyard, and in that instant, the seal of kings was broken.

Sercio finished the ritual by closing the book simply and examining the grave. He motioned to the servants and they heaved aside the heavy lid on the coffin. She lay under it. Her hair was black like midnight, her eyes closed in eternal sleep. She was pale, and Lucio was suddenly hit by how young she looked. The magister prided himself on the seal of the coffin, no time passed for his mother in her death. She couldn’t have been more than ten years older than him.

He nodded to Sercio, and he rose her. Lucio’s hand suddenly burned red hot, and the staff dropped to the ground and rolled away from him. He barely even noticed.

She screamed as her eyes shot open, here hands grasping air as they shot from the coffin. Sercio ran to her and lifted her out of the hole and threw a heavy blanket over her.

“Wha…where am I?” Marissa asked. Words forming slowly, as she looked around wildly. “Sercio, is that you?! My god you look so…old. Where am I? What has happened? Who is this man? Who are those cloaked figures?” She said, crying out into the night. Lucio stared and watched.

“Oh Marissa, my love, you’re back! My gods I never thought I would see you again. Its been so long too long. I…” he suddenly straightened. “Marissa. You have been dead for seven years.”

The figure on the ground drew back in horror. “Dead? That’s impossible. I…I remember everything, but its winter now, how is it winter? It was just summer a day ago.” She looked around horror growing apparent on her face. “We’re in the cemetery… This, this is where royalty are buried. I…” She looked abruptly at Lucio. “Why do I know that face? Are you…”

“Mother,” he said, holding back tears, “its me, its Lucio! Its Lucio, your son!” he went to embrace her, but she recoiled at his advancement.

She rose slowly to her feet and looked accusingly at Sercio. “You will tell me the truth; how did this come to be?”

“My love, I… you died. It was sickness they said. The doctors and magisters came and went for days, but on the seventh they said that nothing could save you, short of…” He stopped realizing what he was about to say, “I have been learning. All these years Marissa, I have spent waiting for you, preparing! You have been my sole reason for living. I have…I gained the knowledge to save you.” He said awkwardly.

A look recognition and revultion suddenly dawned on Marissa’s face. “Gods below. Sercio, what have you done? And Lucio, that is the Rod of Kings. You were part of this?” She said looking at him, hoping for some sort of denial.

“Mother, me and Marcius missed you so much. He’s recovering but I am sure he would love to see you.”

“Marcius” Marissa repeated. “Lucio, you’ve grown. But the rod!” Another look of alarm. “My husband, the king is dead then!”

Lucio looked at Sercio. “Yes, my love. By no act of either of ours. Just today in fact.”

“Today. It is a confluence then, a convergence in the flow of fate. ” Marissa said, “I take it many things have conspired today.” Sercio nodded

“How did my husband die?” Marissa asked, unwrapping the blanket from herself.

Sercio paused. He did not want to tell, Lucio realized, and for good reason, but Marissa was insistent.

“Sercio,” she said with a voice that could have bent iron, “how did my husband die?”

“It was your brother, Aramar. He sent assassins in the night.”

Another blow to Marissa, Lucio thought, her husband killed by her own brother. Gods, this wasn’t going well.

Marissa stepped back. “This is wrong.” She said, with growing dread, this is all wrong, all this death and violence. I was never meant to see any of it. Don’t you see? This is unnatural, this is heretical! I… “ She started shaking, her eyes widened as she looked at her hands. The seal broken, the seven years were starting to come back. Skin flaked and fell from her body as her bones cracked and splintered from years of neglect.

“No, I can fix this! I’ve done it before!” Sercio exclaimed.

But worse then the exterior damage was that harm they could not see. Marissa collapsed to her knees, coughing blood which then congealed instantly. She grasped her heart and shuddered, curling into a ball, white burial clothes amid the snow which lay unmelted on her lifeless skin. She let lose a blood curdling scream.

Lucio, could not act, he didn’t understand. Nothing was happening like it should have.

Sercio approached Marissa, hand out stretched. “I just need to use a simple spell, dear. My gods, I can heal you. I will heal you.”

“No!” came a muffled reply from the body. “I never would have done this. The dead are to remain dead. How, how can you live with yourself?” She said, looking at them in disgust. “This is wrong. I am… so ashamed of both of you” She said, tears freezing on her face, “But I can fix it. I will do what you have not the heart to admit.”

Sercio and Lucio lunged as one but it was too late. Marissa had curled around the Rod of Kings, in one sudden movement, thrust it into herself.

A choking gasp came from Sercio. Lucio collapsed to his knees as did Marissa’s corpse. Tears flowed wildly across Sercio’s face as he raised his hands. The ground trembled, gravestones cracked, but Marissa’s body lay still.

Sercio approached Marissa’s body and gazed in terror at the rod protruding through her heart. Frozen blood surrounded the wound. “I don’t believe it.” He finally said. “She did the one thing I can’t reverse. That damned rod has power you wouldn’t believe. I cannot bring her back from a wound caused by it.”

The ramifications of what he just said, hit him. “I can’t bring her back!” he wailed and went to grab the rod, presumably to inflict the same wound on himself. However, Lucio realized as he dropped the rod as soon as he touched it, Lucio was now the only one who could touch it.

Lucio felt strange. Liberated in some way. All his life he had learned formality and structure and how the world worked. Now this madness was thrust upon him, shattering everything he had known or held dear. All the gates had been opened, all the wounds had been seared. There was nothing left, no emotion left.

“Sercio,” he said coldly, walking over to his uncle’s prostrate body. “We had an arrangement. You succeeded in raising her. Now I know you have nothing. Join me then.”

The broken man looked up with tears trapped in his eyes. “What you have me do? What is worth doing?” He asked, glancing over to Marissa’s lifeless body.

Lucio distracted him by drawing the rod from his mother’s body, frozen blood still attached. “Why, one of the only things that mankind has a talent for.” He said, picking up the tome form its resting place near the grave.

With tome in one hand and rod in the other he turned to the duke. “Killing one another. We have just witnessed a confluence, like she said. What better way to usher in a new age, then the slaughter of enemies?”

“I don’t understand. Revenge on who? Who are we fighting?” Sercio, said finally looking at Lucio, rather than Marissa’s dead body.

“Centralia’s king was just killed by the man who denied you your marriage with Marissa, who ruined everything. Don’t you think a bit of revenge might be in order?” he said with a slight smile, reaching down a hand to his uncle.

Sercio looked back at him for a moment before returning the grin, grabbing his hand. “I do believe it is” The older man agreed. The two exited the cemetery, as the graves of a thousand Centralian men and women suddenly opened to the sky, bodies issuing from black mausoleums and sunken crypts.

“Yes,” Lucio said, looking at his new army. “There’s going to be some changes around here.”

Nations wept, carnage and blood thirst were the emblems of the fifth age, and through the shambling bodies and cries and flames of war, Lucio Pegenor stared, grin on his face.