



COVENANT *of* BLOOD

~ BOOK 1 ~
OF THE THAYRIA CYCLE

H. R. VAN ADEL

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HELLEBAARD

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This one is for the boys

It's for the girls too, a little bit, but mostly it's for the boys

PROLOGUE

NO. 18 GARRISON COMPANY

SARASINIAN OCCUPIED AHRENIA

NEAR HERENA

Goraric stumbled over yet another tree root. “Shit,” he muttered, almost dropping his spear. “Fucking goat tracks. We should build proper roads out here.”

Beside him, Ostolaza snorted. “Nah. Waste of time.”

“How d’you reckon?”

“Because there’s nothing out here worth building a road to?”

“That’s not true.” Goraric wiped away a bead of sweat as it ran down his nose. “And it’d make our lives easier at times like this, wouldn’t it?”

“Times like this happen once a year, mate. Not worth the effort.”

“Oh I dunno,” said Goraric, peering into the forest. Northern trees were something else. Harder than iron, knitted tighter than a shield wall, and with twisty little pathways and hidden alcoves that harboured all manner of threats. He shivered. And it was

cold in the woods, too. Far colder than seemed natural. "Reckon some decent roads would improve things no end."

Ostolaza shrugged again. "Nah. Lot o' work for no real gain."

"Well it wouldn't hurt to thin all this shit out a bit, surely?"

"Can't say I don't agree with you there, mate. Forest like this is an ambusher's wet dream." He gestured around them. "Them Ahren could be hiding anywhere out there, just waiting."

Goraric looked at Ostolaza. "*Them Ahren?* What's that supposed to mean, exactly?"

"Nothing," said Ostolaza with a grimace. "I meant the forest folk, that's all," he added hastily. "Not you and yours. You're all right."

"We're *all right?* Wow, thanks."

"Look, I didn't mean anything by it..."

"And this *isn't* an ambusher's wet dream, by the way," said Goraric, wanting to get back to their original topic. "Our scouts would find 'em first."

"Scouts?" Ostolaza gestured around them. "In this? Nah. Forest is too thick, mate. They'd get lost."

Never mind the tree roots, this time Goraric nearly tripped over his own feet. "What? You saying we don't have scouts out?"

"Yep."

"You're fuckin' with me, right?"

"Nope." Ostolaza shook his head.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

Goraric's face fell. "We got a van *and* a rear out, but. I know for a fact we do."

"Yeah, but so what? Fat lot o' good they'll be, brother. Might give us a moment's warning if they come up against something nasty, maybe, but no more than that."

"That can't be right..."

"Think I'm fuckin' with ya?" asked Ostolaza, rubbing his chin. "I'm really not, mate. And it's actually our sides I'd be more worried about. I mean, with no scouts we got no way to screen 'em, eh? We'd never see a flank attack coming. And if the enemy

attacked from *both* sides, which of course they would... You know what I'm saying? We couldn't even form up properly 'cause we just don't have the room. We're walking two or three abreast on this track here, all strung out an' whatnot, so..."

"Shit," said Goraric, seeing the ambush unfold in his mind's eye. He could almost feel the enemy bursting from their hiding places, practically hear the din of combat and the cries of dying men. "It would be a slaughter." This line of conversation had been a mistake; now he wouldn't even be able to look at shadows without imagining them hiding some mortal danger. He shivered and tried to shrug deeper into his coat. Was it just him, or had the forest somehow grown even colder?

"Yep."

"That's not good."

"Nope."

"Soldier Goraric!" shouted Sergeant Maximo from somewhere down their column.

Goraric straightened, readying himself for what was coming. "Yes, sergeant?"

"Shut the fuck up!"

"Yes, sergeant!" Hmm, that wasn't so bad. He'd been expecting a bit more than a mild dressing-down.

Maximo raised his voice so the entire company could hear. "This area is completely pacified. There will be no ambush today or any other day. And even if there was, we would fight and we would bloody well win. We are soldiers of the Sarasinian League! We fight, we win! Every. Fucking. Time. Say it, all of you! We fight, we win!"

"We fight, we win!" shouted the men.

"*Bullshit!*" bellowed Maximo. "Louder! We fight, we win!"

"We fight, we win!"

"*Pathetic!* Use your fucking balls! We fight, we win!"

"*We fight, we win!*"

"*Again!*"

"*We fight, we win!*"

"Better!" Maximo actually sounded pleased. A few moments went by. "Soldier Goraric!"

Goraric's heart sank. "Yes, sergeant?"

"You have extra duties for two months."

"Yes, sergeant!" And he swore as well, albeit internally.

"You stupid cock hole!"

"Yes, sergeant!"

"And you'll wear a woman's dress until further notice."

"Yes, sergeant!" He swore internally again.

"Soldier Ostolaza?"

"Yes, sergeant?" shouted Ostolaza.

"The same goes for you."

"Yes, sergeant!"

"Dickhead."

"Yes, sergeant!"

"Balezentis!" roared Maximo. "Where are you?"

Balezentis raised his spear. "Here, sergeant!"

"Five lashes, corporal, and you're demoted too, since you can't seem to keep your men's lips from flapping worse than a fucking sewing circle."

"Yes, sergeant!"

"Flog bag." Maximo looked around. "Abbadessa!" he barked, even though the man was no more than a few paces from him. "You're the new unit leader. Congratulations, corporal. Don't fuck up and you'll keep your stripes."

"Yes, Sergeant!" yelled Abbadessa. "I won't!"

"Yeah," said Maximo with a grunt. "We'll see."

Goraric glanced back over his shoulder. Lieutenant Clopius seemed preoccupied with scanning the forest, but he saw Captain Lamela reward Maximo's efforts with a perfunctory nod. He looked away again before either of them noticed him—he was in enough trouble as it was.

The company marched in silence from then on, if the *tramp tromp tramp* of a hundred and six pairs of boots pummelling the earth could be called silence. Goraric was still wondering where

he was going to find a dress when a flock of birds suddenly took to the air.

"Fuck!" muttered someone.

"Halt!" bellowed Lamela, drawing his sword. *"Shield wall! Ready arms!"*

Men dropped into fighting stances, shields overlapping and weapons poised to strike. The forest was still, however, and it stayed that way. Not a leaf rustled; there wasn't even the slightest breeze. Goraric's heart pounded against his ribcage so hard he was sure everyone could hear it.

"Shoulder arms, forward march!" cried Lamela, and the company set off again.

An hour or two later, the van came back to report having reached the end of the track. When the company finally swapped the gloomy forest for daylight, Goraric felt his spirits lift and gave silent thanks to Owic for the wide patch of wet, black earth that greeted them. Flies buzzed, and the stink of rotting vegetables made him want to pinch his nose. On the other side of the patch, Ahren villagers were loading turnips into a cart. It was a bit late in the season for harvesting, he'd have thought, but then again he'd never been much of a farmer. No doubt they knew their business better than he did.

"Rally!" bawled Lamela. *"Shield wall!"*

The company echoed his orders. A wall of shields sprang up, thirty men across, armour and spear points gleaming in the sun.

"Ready arms!"

The villagers ran for their weapons and gathered around their turnip cart. They outnumbered the company, but with nothing but rough spun clothes and shoddy spears, Goraric doubted they posed any real threat. He picked out a few vaguely familiar faces and prayed that no one would recognise him. Few folk from these parts joined Sarasinian units; he just wasn't in the mood for being called a traitor or otherwise further insulted.

After conferring with Clopius, Lamela strode over to the villagers, his empty right palm raised to show he came in peace.

Goraric noticed how he still kept a firm grip on his shield with his left, though. One should never be too trusting.

"Does anyone here speak Sarasinian?" asked the captain.

There was no reply.

"I asked," said Lamela, louder, "if anyone here speaks Sarasinian? Anyone at all?"

Still no reply.

"No? No one? Fetch someone who does, then. Eh? Fetch someone for me to talk to before things get nasty!"

The villagers shrugged their shoulders and muttered amongst themselves. A young boy peeled away from the crowd, presumably given the task of bringing someone to translate for the captain. Goraric shook his head. He could have translated for him, the fool. Had the man forgotten or had he overlooked him on purpose?

"You really should learn to speak our language," Lamela told the Ahren. "It would make things easier for us all, don't you think?" But they just stood there, looking at him with barely concealed revulsion. He returned their glares for a while, then spat and rejoined his men.

They waited on a patch of grass near the villagers' turnip cart. His comrades grumbled, but Goraric was content to bask in the light and warmth of early spring. Nine tenths of soldiering was waiting around for orders anyway, so you may as well make the most of it. He found a turnip on the ground. Someone had pared away the greens, and it tasted less like a vegetable and more like a stick. He threw it away.

Eventually a woman appeared. She was no ordinary villager, for she wore a white, flowing dress and a belt of golden discs cinched tightly about her waist. Young, slender and auburn-haired, and with an intricate mask of black leather that covered her nose and mouth, she strode across the clearing as straight-backed as a queen. The soldiers of Number Eighteen Garrison Company immediately perked up. They murmured their

appreciation as she drew near, and someone even let out a raucous catcall that drew laughter.

Goraric blinked. In addition to her finery, the woman wore a mantle of smoky silver that emitted a low hum as it writhed and coiled about her shoulders. "Owic protect us," he said, swallowing. A witch! He felt as if his bowels were about to open.

The witch ignored the farmers, making directly for the company. Lamela intercepted her, and Goraric was horrified when a thin tendril of not-smoke uncoiled lazily toward him. The captain obviously couldn't see it, because otherwise he'd have run screaming in the opposite direction. He looked around him. Was everyone else blind to it as well?

"Do you speak Sarasinian?" Lamela asked her.

"I do," said the witch, casting an eye over the company.

"Do you have a name?"

"Yes. What do you want, captain?"

"Straight to the point, eh?" The captain grinned. "Fair enough. As I'm sure you know, we've come for the tribute."

"Tribute?"

"Ah," said Lamela, craning his neck in an attempt to make eye contact with her. He failed. "Trib-ute?" He spoke slowly and deliberately, as if speaking to a stupid child. "You know? Trib-ute? The tax? Mon-ey?"

"I know what 'tribute' means, captain." She sounded bored.

"Well, good!" said Lamela, slapping his shield with his free hand. "Good! That'll make things a bit easier then, eh? So, whom do I talk to about it? Is there a chief or a headman around here, or what?"

"You can speak to me."

Lamela grunted. "You? Really? *You* have authority here?"

"I do."

Goraric saw the witch's eyes flicker toward the tree line behind the company. Lamela must have too, since he paused to glance over his shoulder. He soon turned to face her again, so there can't have been anything interesting going on back there. Just to be sure, though, he took a quick look himself. Nothing.

Lamela squinted. "I didn't know you Ahren had woman chiefs."

"I venture there's much you don't know about us, captain."

She was a bold one, this witch. Goraric's unease grew. He sensed that she was dangerous, but Lamela and his company weren't exactly harmless either. If she were a match for a hundred spears he didn't know, but if so, he hoped Lamela didn't force a confrontation.

"All right," said Lamela, shrugging. At least her words hadn't provoked him to anger. "Well, we're here for the annual tribute, so let's get on with it, then." He turned and wagged his fingers. Number Eighteen's accountant, Camius, scurried over to hold open his ledger of dog-eared pages. The captain gave the thing a hasty glance. "It says here that last year... your, er, people... paid us a dozen milk cows."

"Did they indeed?"

"Yes," said Lamela, scrutinising the ledger. "It's written here quite clearly—last year they paid a dozen milk cows."

"And?"

"Well it's a new tax year, isn't it? Time to pay again. I wouldn't be here otherwise, would I?"

The witch turned to address the villagers. Goraric struggled a little with her dialect, but understood enough to know she was asking about the previous tax year. He watched, entranced, as her magic twisted and crackled around her. "Can you not see that?" he asked Ostolaza.

"See what?" asked Ostolaza, looking at him sideways.

"Nothing." So, he was the only one who could see it? Why? What did that mean, exactly? A thousand other questions sprang to mind, but with no way of finding answers, his options were limited. Better to just pretend he couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. One word about witches or magic would almost certainly cause panic amongst the men. To say nothing of how the witch might react.

"Your records are correct," the witch told Lamela.

"Oh, and thank you so much for that." The captain's voice was heavy with sarcasm. "We're expecting the same again this year, obviously."

"You're not the tax collectors they dealt with last year."

"So?"

"So, they don't see why they should have to give *you* anything."

Lamela threw back his head and laughed. "It doesn't matter! We're Sarasinians and you're not. You're our subjects, remember? It doesn't matter if it's my company out here or some other one. You pay what you owe. That's how this whole tribute thing works."

"These people don't recognise your men, captain," said the witch, shaking her head. "And they especially don't like that purple shield of yours."

The commander looked at his shield. "So? Did you not hear what I fucking said just now? I don't care what they like or don't like. Not my concern! They must pay."

"Or?"

Lamela bristled. "Or?! Let me tell you something, lady—I am Captain Depietro Lamela, and no one refuses me anything. I'll take my dozen cows *and* whatever else I want. Say no to me and I swear by the gods I'll kill your men and take this fucking turnip cart for myself. Then I'll find your village—it can't be far—and burn it to the ground, and then I'll take all the women and boys back to sell in the slave markets in Herena!"

No reply.

"Go on, tell that to your people!"

The witch did as she was told. The villagers reacted with anger. Lamela, no doubt very aware of how far he was from the safety of his company, seemed to be bracing for a fight. Goraric wondered if the people, emboldened by the presence of their witch, would give him one.

Luckily, nothing happened. Though clearly pissed off, no one seemed inclined to violence at least, and Lamela gave his company no orders. The witch seemed content to let her people

vent. It was as if she were hearing them, but not actually listening.

"They don't like it, eh?" said Lamela, not trying to disguise his delight.

"One moment, captain," said the witch. She turned to address the crowd, which fell silent as soon as she opened her mouth. Lamela shamelessly ogled her arse while she spoke.

As before, Goraric didn't catch every word, but he got the gist of her message: she was asking for their patience and continued trust. He wondered what that meant. From what he could make of her tone, it certainly sounded suspicious. He looked around, half expecting to see a warband creeping up behind them, but there was nothing except trees.

"So?" Lamela's hand brushed the hilt of his sword. "What's it to be?"

The witch turned back to him. "You can have your milk cows."

Goraric's unease grew. The witch was up to no good, he could feel it. Should he say something to Lamela? What, though? Not to trust her? He doubted the captain needed such advice. No, better to say nothing. And he was in enough trouble for talking out of turn already.

"Good," said Lamela, nodding. "Sensible. I'll take them. And something else."

"Something else?"

"Absolutely!" he said with a boyish grin. "More words with you." His tongue brushed the corner of his mouth as his eyes lingered on her narrow hips. "I fear I haven't introduced myself properly, and you never told me your name."

"Mm."

"You do have a name, don't you?"

"Of course."

"Then what is it?" He reached for her hand but she evaded him. Goraric thought he saw one of the villagers wince at his failed effort. "Fair enough, but the least you could do is look at me. Or are you so shy?"

The witch shook her head. "No."

"No? What do you mean?"

"Where I'm from, captain, it's considered unseemly to stare too long at a member of the opposite sex unless you're married to them."

"Pfft. Can't say as I see the harm in it myself."

"No doubt."

"But you do have a name?"

The witch nodded. "I already said I did."

"Well then what is it? Or is it considered unseemly to tell me?"

"Not particularly."

"So then, out with it." The captain's tone said he was growing tired of their verbal sparring.

"It's considered unseemly of you to ask."

Lamela made a braying sound. "Fuck me. You Ahren certainly have strange customs, don't you?"

"Strange to you, perhaps."

"Oh, they're strange all right. And this little mask of yours, then?" asked Lamela, pointing. "Your muzzle? What's that about, eh? I thought they were just for warriors."

The witch shook her head. "Not always."

"But only fighters wear them, yes? So, you're a fighter, then?" He gestured at her in a way that suggested he found the idea of a warrior woman amusing. "Little slip of a thing like you? What weapon do you favour? No, don't tell me... great axe? I bet it's the great axe, isn't it?" He chuckled at his own joke.

"I'm no fighter."

"Then what are you?"

The witch finally lifted her chin and met the captain's gaze. "Something else."

Goraric's mouth fell open as her magic flared.

* * *

"Unh," said Lamela, blinking. He could feel the barbarian woman's mind sliding around inside his skull. Instinct said to

resist, to push her out, but the attempt hurt so badly it made him want to throw up. His vision swam.

His mother cooing softly in the darkness, urging him to sleep.

The older boys ambushing him, and how he'd pretended to hand over the knife. The look on the leader's face as the blade disappeared into his guts.

The soft, salty lips of the first girl he ever kissed.

Becoming a soldier, and swinging a sword in anger.

His promotion to captain.

Laughing on his wedding day, even if the prospect of bedding his new bride made his knees shake harder than they ever had in the shield wall.

Overwhelming joy at the birth of his son.

Tears falling as he laid flowers on his wife's grave. The plague had taken her a week before he got back from campaign. He'd wept like a baby, and didn't care who saw.

Watching the whore take her last breath. He hadn't meant to hurt her. It was almost as if someone else had been controlling his hands.

He looked up at the barbarian woman. Up? Not down, though she was shorter by a head? How was that even possible? But the thought died as quickly as it surfaced, gone back into his skull as if it had never existed. Her blue eyes reminded him of... something. He almost remembered what. He tried to reflect on that, but then abruptly lost his train of thought.

"Depietro!"

"Huh?" said Lamela, spinning around. Who amongst his men had the balls to call him by his first name? But there was no one there—the Eighteenth had apparently vanished! He turned back, expecting to see the woman and the barbarians, but they weren't there either. He suppressed a rising wave of panic. Even the forest and the stinking turnip patch seemed to have disappeared, replaced by a grassy hill surrounded by meadowlands. What in the name of fuck was going on?

"Depietro!"

The voice was softer this time, as if coming from a long way away. From his vantage point on the hill, he could make out a city in the distance. A great city with a wide, paved road leading to it. A city not like any place he'd seen before. The buildings were foreign and definitely not Sarasinian. There was no one for miles around, either. Very strange, because no matter the country, a road like that should be thick with travellers at this time of day.

Come to think of it, the air was oddly stagnant. He felt no breeze on his cheek, nor could he hear birds chirruping or insects humming in the grass. "Am I dreaming?" he asked aloud. Yes. Yes, that must be it! He was dreaming. That made sense. And it made some of his worry leave him, too.

"Depietro!"

The voice again. It seemed to be coming from the other side of the hill. He clambered to the top and there, on the opposite slope about halfway down, he saw something jutting out of the ground. He hurried to the spot and started digging with his fingers. The work was slow, and the more dirt he scooped away the faster his heart beat. Finally he lifted an old helm out of the hill, half rusted, with a skull embedded between its hinged cheek pieces. He found a maker's mark stamped into the iron, and it was one he knew well. He took off his own helm so he could compare the two side by side.

"Depietro!" screamed the skull. This time the voice was his!

"Waah!" he cried, flinching. He recoiled in horror, tripping over his boots and nearly rolling down the hill. "It's just a dream. It's just a dream!"

* * *

Goraric broke into a cold sweat. The witch obviously had Lamela under some sort of spell. He said as much to Ostolaza.

But Ostolaza didn't reply. He just stood there, every bit glassy-eyed and unresponsive as the captain.

"Oh shit," said Goraric, looking around. The witch had ensorcelled *the entire company*! He looked again for the warband

that must surely be encircling them by now, and again he didn't find it. And then it hit him—the witch hardly needed warriors. Even farmers with sticks could make short work of defenceless enemies. He thought about running for the forest and leaving his companions to their fate. But before he could do anything, Lamela and everyone else apparently snapped back to reality.

“Did you say something?” asked Ostolaza, tapping his arm.

“Uh,” said Goraric, not sure how to reply. He couldn't remember. “Maybe? No? I dunno...”

“What the fu—?” said the captain, blinking.

“Your cows,” said the witch. She spoke calmly, nothing in her bearing suggesting anything unusual was afoot, nor had been. “They're here.”

But like Goraric, Lamela seemed to know better. He looked about, bewildered. “What? Where did I—?”

“Breathe, captain.”

“But I was—? I saw—?”

“Forget it. Breathe.”

“Huh?”

“Relax,” she said. Her voice was gentle, entrancing. Perhaps infused with magic. “Forget, captain. Breathe.”

“Yes,” said Lamela, inhaling deeply. “Of course.”

“Just breathe, and then ask me about the tribute.”

“Ah, yes,” said Lamela, and he took another breath. “So, about the tribute, then? What—?”

“Over there.” The witch pointed.

The villagers parted to reveal nine of the saddest, skinniest looking cows Goraric had ever seen. Not twelve as requested. Just nine! And they were so old they looked more like oversized goats. He scanned the witch's face. Her eyes twinkled—was she smiling beneath that mask?

“What's the meaning of this?” asked Lamela, looking at the animals with distaste.

“Is there a problem, captain?”

“Yes. There is.” He showed her his teeth and put a hand on the hilt of his sword. “How old are these beasts? You don't think you

can palm these scrawny things off on me do you, whore? And there are only nine of them, not twelve as agreed! What do you have to say for yourself?"

The witch was unperturbed. "You wanted cows, Depietro, and this was the best these people could do. Take them and get gone."

"How dare you?" Lamela was practically shaking with anger. "*How dare you?*"

"Oh no," said Goraric as Lamela reached for his blade. But a mere gesture from the witch and everyone was seized again by her magic. Well, at least everyone except for him. "Shit!"

"How dare I?" purred the witch, pressing her palm against Lamela's cheek. "If only you knew what I dared, Depietro."

"Uhh," said Lamela, his voice languid, eyes vacant.

The witch smiled, and Goraric's heart nearly gave out when she looked past the captain and directly at him. He almost filled his pants when she winked out of existence only to reappear in front of him a moment later, her hand now cradling *his* jaw.

"My, my," murmured the witch. "How very interesting."

Goraric's fear vanished, replaced by a firestorm of lust. The little soldier in his breeches stiffened, standing more firmly to attention than he had in recent memory. It was actually quite painful.

"Goraric of Herena." She traced a finger down his chin, staring at him with fascination. "At first I thought you were a null. But you're more than that, aren't you? My word, look at you..."

He wasn't sure what to say to that. Was it a bad thing that he had not succumbed to her power? It was hard to think when his blood was practically igniting under her touch.

"You were so well hidden I almost didn't see you. But now we know each other. Is it not so?"

"Yes, lady."

"Yes." Her voice was like a summer breeze. "Go on, Goraric. Say my name."

"Malyred," he whispered. He hadn't heard the name before today, of that he was certain. And yet as soon as it left his lips it

was as if he had always known her. Which was certainly something of a puzzle...

Malyred took off her mask, leaving him awestruck by her beauty. "Yes," she breathed as she moved in closer. "Such power. You'll do nicely."

Goraric smiled. He looked down at himself, surprised to see that he was already naked. He stepped into her embrace. Her lips parted as she stood on her toes and craned her neck to kiss him. He closed his eyes. All he knew was that if he died at this exact moment, he would die a happy man.

"Eh?" said Goraric, startled awake. He didn't recall dozing off, yet he was lying on the ground with his cloak bundled under his head.

"Welcome back." That from Ostolaza, a dopey grin stretching from one ear to the other.

He sat up. "What?"

Ostolaza pointed at his nose. "You're bleeding."

"Huh?" Goraric wiped at himself with the back of his hand. Sure enough, it came away red. "What happened?"

"You fuckin' passed out on us there, mate."

"Did I? I don't remember..."

"Went down like a tree under the axe. Must have banged your nose or something."

Goraric got to his feet. "Really? I don't even..." He half-remembered having been recently afraid of something, then looked around for the captain.

Clopius hurried over to where Lamela was standing. "I'm sorry, sir," he said, "but are we still here for a reason?"

"Yeah. That girl that was here, lieutenant?" asked Lamela irritably. "The one with the mask and the white dress? Where did she go?"

Mention of a mask and white dress tugged at Goraric's memory. There was something very important he appeared to have forgotten.

"What do you mean?" asked Clopius. "She... er, left a good while back with the farmers, sir. After we gave her a tax receipt for the cows..."

Lamela scowled. "She left? Fuck it! And all those farmers? Where did they get to?"

"Well, they left with her, sir. As I, uh, just told you."

"I see."

"Are you all right, sir?"

Lamela ignored the question. "Well, where are the cows, then?"

"The cows? Why, they're here, sir," said Clopius, pointing. Under his breath he added, "Right in front of you."

Lamela looked at the cows. "*That's* what they gave us?"

"Er, yes sir. Correct."

"But they're..."

"Sir?"

"Well, look at them! There are only nine of them. And they look like they're at death's door!"

"But, sir, you said they were fine?"

"Did I?" Lamela stared at Clopius as if the man had just sprouted a second head. "Did I? And why would I have done that?"

Clopius grasped the captain's arm. "Uncle? Is everything all right?"

Lamela looked blankly at Clopius for a moment, and then suddenly his face lit up in recognition. "Occidio, it's you!"

"Occidio?" Clopius took a half step backward. "No. Occidio's dead, uncle. He died last year, remember? It's me, Clopius."

"Clopius?"

Clopius glanced at the company, and Goraric thought he did a poor job of concealing his embarrassment. "You seem confused, uncle, and it's getting dark. We need to go back. Would, er... would you like me to take over for you?"

That seemed to bring Lamela to his senses. His eyes narrowed to slits. "What? Speak no more, lieutenant, lest you forget your place!"

Clopius stood to attention, staring beyond the captain's shoulder. "Sir!"

A drop of blood leaked out of Lamela's nose. He wiped it away. "The company will march back to camp! *Now!*"

An hour or two before dusk, the van reported finding a friendly company about a mile or so down the track. The men of the Eighteenth were soon to be deeply unimpressed by what they saw.

"Who are they?" hissed Ostolaza. "The fuck are they doing?"

Goraric looked around. "I know, right?" There were spearmen scattered all over the place. Most sat on their arses in the dust, chatting, while others poked around the forest. "They're supposed to be formed up. Why aren't they?"

"Yeah," muttered Ostolaza. "Lounging around like they're on a fucking picnic."

Goraric shook his head. "Fuck me. And we're the ones who get punished for a bit of idle talk?"

Ostolaza pointed. "Look at that dipshit over there. What's he doing? Picking flowers?"

Lamela had almost certainly overheard them. He offered no comment, although Goraric could tell by the look on his face that he was every bit as appalled as they were. He shouldered his way through a cluster of soldiers to reveal their commander, a sweaty little Sarasinian everyone knew well—Giandelone, captain of Number Twenty-one Garrison Company.

"Giandelone?" asked Lamela.

"Lamela!" Giandelone looked up. A sergeant writhed at his feet, a pair of bloody hands clamped to his groin. The dirt and leaves around him were spattered red. "Thank fuck you're here!"

"What are you doing?" asked Lamela. "What's going on?"

The other captain grimaced and rolled his eyes. "What isn't going on? Problems, man. I tell you, nothing but problems! I'm in a world of shit!" He pointed.

Goraric saw three little girls huddled together, sobbing. He could have put a name to each of them. A fourth lay nearby, her

throat laid open, sightless eyes fixed on something far above the forest canopy. He knew her as well. "Oh no..."

Lamela made a face. "Locals?"

Giandelone smoothed his hair down with a hand. It came away glistening with sweat. "Yep, yep."

"What happened?"

Giandelone sighed. For a moment, Goraric wasn't sure he was even going to reply. Finally though, he sighed again and words began to tumble out of his mouth. "Well, we were out there today, you know, collecting tax. Same as you. Ended up at one of those miserable villages made out of sticks and mud or whatever the fuck."

"Where was this?"

"North of here," said Giandelone with a careless shrug. "The name escapes me. Place had a really big timber hall."

"There are lots of places out here matching that description, man." Lamela folded his arms. "You'll have to be a bit more specific than that."

"Huh? Oh, I dunno... it was on a hill with a lot of big grey boulders 'round it. That help?"

Lamela rubbed his chin as he pondered. "Big grey boulders? It wasn't the one that's owned by those two brothers was it—Engund's Tor?"

Goraric's blood turned to ice at the mention of the name. He knew it was coming, of course, had known as soon as he'd recognised the girls. His home. His clan.

"Yes!" said Giandelone. "Yes! Engund's Tor. I think that was it! Why? You know it?"

Lamela nodded. "Yeah, I know it. What happened?"

"Well! We marched up there, demanded payment of taxes and whatnot... you know, the usual. They didn't like it, but what else is new, eh?" Giandelone laughed and flicked sweat off his brow. "Said they'd already paid. Yesterday or the day before, or something like that. Couldn't get their story straight. Didn't have a tax receipt, either."

"And?"

"So they had to be lying, eh? Well, we went back and forth on the issue for a bit. Pushed 'em around some to show we meant business. Eventually this big chief showed up. Said they couldn't pay in coin but suggested maybe they could give us a few horses instead."

"And?"

"Well, the ledger said last year they paid in silver. Not horses."

Lamela scratched his head, impatient. "All right. And?"

"So I was expecting fucking silver, wasn't I? The ledger said silver, not fucking horses."

"So what did you do?"

Giandelone shrugged as if the answer were obvious. "I demanded silver, of course. They wouldn't budge. Eventually the big chief lost his temper and everything went south."

"Shitfight?"

"Hah! As if! Slaughter, more like."

Goraric felt as if he'd been hit by an ox-cart. Slaughter? Of his people? He suppressed a cry.

"Casualties?" asked Lamela.

"Not on our side." Giandelone puffed up his chest. "But plenty on theirs."

Goraric wanted to scream, his grip tightening around his spear as he imagined shunting its point into the gap below the captain's breastplate.

"Right," said Lamela. "So, then what happened?"

"We killed the chief and his men. Tossed the dead and wounded into the big hall, along with a few families for good measure. Then we burned it."

Goraric's knees gave out, and he'd have met the ground if not for Ostolaza's timely intervention. The man raised an eyebrow at him, but didn't say anything. Goraric murmured his thanks and waved him away. Here in the midst of enemies, he'd keep a tight rein on his emotions. Showing his Ahren sympathies now would be a potentially fatal mistake, and he would not die at the hands of ghouls like Lamela and Giandelone.

"You burned down the hall?" Lamela's mouth fell open. "With people inside?"

Giandelone gestured as if it wasn't nearly as bad as it sounded. "Oh, I was a tad punitive I suppose, but there's not much I can do about it now, eh? Anyway, we searched the place beforehand, of course. Had quite a bit of coin as it turned out, the fucking liars! Took all the horses we could find. A few pack animals, too." He paused, gesturing at the girls. "And them."

Lamela chewed his lip. "I see."

"So, then we took off. Been on the march since then. We stopped here to take a little break. The men's blood was still hot and it seemed to me like we all deserved a bit of light entertainment. Eh? So I made an executive decision, and..."

"He doesn't look good," said Lamela, nodding at the sergeant on the ground.

"No," said Giandelone. "Dick's practically hanging by a thread."

Lamela pointed at the dead girl. "And would I be right in assuming she was responsible for that?"

"Yep, yep."

"You fucked up," said Lamela, shaking his head. "You do realise that, don't you?"

Giandelone's eyes went very wide. "Oh no, don't say that! Don't say that!"

"Well, what would you have me say? Good job?"

"Ah, shit. Shit!" moaned Giandelone, covering his face with his hands. "What should I do, then, eh? Fuck!"

Lamela rubbed his chin. "Well," he said slowly, "for right now, how about you calm the fuck down?"

Giandelone glared. "That's easy for you to say!"

"Look, there's no point in getting worked up about it."

"Again, easy for you to say! What if the Tor folk go to Herena to complain?"

"They probably will, but so what? We own the courts. All you have to do is spend a little money and whisper in the right ears."

"I don't have the sort of funds to buy a verdict, Lamela."

"Well, even if the case went to trial, it'd be their word against yours. Still not bad."

"Hmm."

"Because you could argue... well, that subjects of the League refused to pay their lawfully levied taxes..."

"Yes," said Giandelone, a hopeful look on his face as he peered over his fingers at Lamela. "Yes! I *could* say that!"

"...and then attacked you. Attacked you, leaving you no choice but to defend yourself..."

"Yes! That's true!"

"...and in doing so, one of your sergeants was wounded..."

"Yes, yes!" shouted Giandelone, his good humour fully restored. He took his hands away from his face and gestured at the sergeant in question. "He's right here, wounded!"

Goraric raged silently, every fibre of him wanting to spill the man's blood. What were his chances of taking down both commanders before anyone knew what was happening? Probably not good. He might be able to kill Giandelone, but not Lamela as well. And needless to say, he didn't have the guts to make a move, and never would. So he just stood there, hating that fact.

"Ha! Yes. I love it!" said Giandelone. "My word against theirs, and there's no real evidence against me!"

Lamela tossed his head in the direction of the Tor girls. "Except for them, maybe."

Goraric almost missed the implication. His anger gave way to fear as he realised the girls would die. Even killing both commanders wouldn't alter their fate, not unless he also managed to slaughter two whole companies along with them. But the gods aside, who possessed that kind of power? He felt useless. Worse than useless.

"Why?" asked Lamela. "Why in fuck's name did you take them?"

Giandelone spat. "Spoils of war. My right, is it not?"

Lamela shook his head. "Taking goods is one thing, but people? No. You went too far."

"Well, shit! I had no idea."

"Think you're still in Romelia or something, do you? No. We can't just do whatever we want up here. These are Riva's people."

"The League is the League..."

"No, man. It isn't."

Giandelone wrung his hands, a gesture Goraric thought entirely unworthy of a man. "Damn it! What should I do?"

"What I'd do, brother," said Lamela, "is *cut* my losses."

"Eh? What's that supposed to mean?"

Lamela took out the knife on Giandelone's belt, wrapped the man's fingers around the handle and murmured something in his ear. A look of uncertainty passed over his features as he listened, but finally he nodded and knelt beside his injured sergeant. The man was shivering now, the front of his trousers glistening with new blood.

"Easy now," said Giandelone, and then stuck the knife into the side of the sergeant's neck. The man struggled as blood gushed out.

"Augh." Goraric gasped in horror. He wasn't the only one. But this was the Sarasinian way, and no one complained.

Giandelone sawed until the blade's edge scraped against bone. "We'll take him back with us," he said so everyone could hear. "And when they ask what happened we'll tell them some barbarian did it." He stood up, grunting with satisfaction at a job well done. His knife hand was so thick with gore it was impossible to tell his individual fingers apart.

"Eighteen Garrison Company!" bellowed Lamela, turning away. "Rally! Prepare to move out!"

Goraric shuffled away with the rest of the men, catching a glimpse through shields and spears of Giandelone looming over the girls. He wanted nothing more than to help them, but how? He dressed the line, his spirit sinking, and as the order to march was given, he closed his eyes and begged Owic to forgive him. He put one foot in front of the other and hoped no one noticed his tears.

The girls' screams echoed in his ears long after their lips fell silent.

1

LORD RIVA

THE SARASINIAN 5th ARMY

SARASINIAN OCCUPIED AHRENIA

NEAR GILLENDUM

Riva watched men loading the last of the portable battlements onto wagons. The bustling wooden citadel of the previous night was gone, replaced by an expanse of churned soil the colour of shit. It had been a decent grazing paddock until yesterday, but now there wasn't a patch of green as far as a man could fire an arrow. He'd seen it all a hundred times before, of course, but somehow his almost child-like sense of wonder at the spectacle never waned. Only Sarasinians and their allies sheltered in huge mobile fortresses. Other peoples looked on with envy, for they either didn't know how to build them or couldn't make them work. Not that the Sarasinians truly needed such things: no had bested their field armies in over a generation. Small wonder they had the world by the balls.

The rattle and stomp of spearmen broke his reverie. Sarasinian main-forcers were pushing forward, a column of purple and steel that went on for a mile and more. A scar-faced troop captain barked orders to salute him. The men obeyed, but without enthusiasm. Riva acknowledged them with the barest toss of his head before giving them his back. It was still more than they deserved.

He returned to his marquee to find Istome waiting near the entry. His bodyguard was lolling about, though as soon as he appeared they all stood to attention and pretended they hadn't been gawping at Istome's bare legs. He wanted to laugh but settled on a small, inward smile instead. General Virgilio was always saying that he should stop being too familiar around subordinates. He should strive to keep up appearances.

"Good morning, my lord," said Pyrian, bowing and hauling aside the marquee's entry flap in one fluid motion.

"Morning Pyrian," said Riva as he entered. Istome followed, stepping twice on the heels of his slippers. He winced, but refrained from commenting. She was improving, though.

A pair of attendants came to remove his silks. Another pair brought his war gear. He shrugged into his habergeon, grunting as the links settled on his shoulders. He raised his arms to allow a padded leather belt to be fastened around his waist. His black brigandine followed, then greaves and vambraces. He took a few moments to admire the brigandine in his bronze mirror. A recent purchase, its innermost layers were of hardened steel. The new metal was costly to the point of extravagance, but it was a beautiful piece of armour of which he was inordinately proud.

"Your blade, Lord Riva." Pyrian extended his sword belt with both hands. Riva unsheathed the weapon and brought the edge up to his face. Seeing no flecks of rust along its length, he slid it back into the scabbard and Pyrian fastened the belt around his waist. He gave his dagger a cursory glance, and he waved his gauntlets, shield, spear and helmet away. Someone would bring them should the need arise.

"Very good, Pyrian," said Riva, his dressing ritual complete.

"A pleasure, my lord." Pyrian bowed low. "As always."

Istome poured his wine. No sooner had he put the cup to his lips, however, than a messenger arrived to say that his presence was required in the general's tent. He thought about handing the wine back, but instead he drained it in three gulps and tossed the empty cup aside. "Let's go," he told her.

"Of course," said Istome.

Virgilio's attendants ushered them into the command tent. Istome veered off, vanishing behind a scarlet curtain. The general's people thought her presence intrusive and unnecessary, but at least they knew better than to voice their objections. Their obvious discomfort warmed his heart.

Virgilio greeted him perfunctorily, gesturing at an empty chair opposite him at his conference table. An impressively weighty piece, that table. The top was a wooden slab as thick as a man's thigh, scored and dark with age. He wasn't sure of its history, but it looked like something out of a blacksmith's shop. The general himself seemed not to care that it clashed with everything else he owned.

"I was just looking at those tallies you wanted me to look at," said Virgilio, his rheumy eyes passing over a scrap of parchment in his hand. More were arranged in careful piles on the tabletop.

"Oh yes?"

"Mm. And they're as bad as described."

"Yes," said Riva, nodding. "They are."

The general grunted. "So you really *weren't* exaggerating, eh? You had me convinced you were, you know."

"No." Riva leaned back in his chair. "I wasn't. Any advice?"

Virgilio seemed not to hear. Riva waited, and was about to repeat the question when the general looked up and said, "Eh?"

"I wanted your advice," said Riva, indicating the bits of parchment. "On the tallies. Any ideas about what I should do, you know, to rectify things?"

"No," said the general, shaking his head. "No, not really."

Riva raised an eyebrow. "Nothing?"

The general tossed the parchment aside and glanced up. "Yes. Nothing."

"I see," said Riva. "It's just that I thought you might--"

"Dear boy." Virgilio's eyes crinkled in amusement. "You seem ill at ease. Why? You didn't think I'd be angry with you, did you? Were you expecting harsh words from me or something? Over tallies?"

Riva shook his head. "Well no, not harsh words exactly, but let's face it--these figures aren't what you could call impressive."

"Oh indeed! They're not."

"Which is why I was hoping for some advice on how to turn things around."

"Oh, I understand, dear boy," said Virgilio, bestowing a fatherly smile on him. "Really I do. But I wouldn't worry about it too much. These are lean times."

"Yes, they are, but--"

Virgilio held up a hand. "Let's not make a big thing out of this, eh? Trust me, Riva, when I say that tax revenues are down everywhere. It's not just you. Bad harvests. Corruption. Unrest. Oh yes, everyone's struggling. Those poor bastards in the western provinces, especially. You certainly wouldn't want to be in their shoes now, would you?"

"No. Not particularly."

"My word, you would not! Nasty business, insurgency. Bloody Romelians! Thank the gods none of your holdings are anywhere near that lot. Be grateful. And Eusebio's happy with you, and that's all you need to worry about. Believe me, of all the things that keep him awake at night, you are not one of them."

Riva nodded. "Well I suppose that's something."

"It is indeed. Better to banish thoughts of tallies from your mind."

"Very well."

"And better still to focus on the task at hand. I need you to be with me in the here and now. You understand me? We have a war to prosecute, do we not?"

"We do," said Riva, smoothing down his moustache with a finger and thumb.

Virgilio sniffed. "Besides, there's really not a lot you can do about it from afar. Your regent brother is handling things in your stead, is he not? Concern yourself with matters of rule upon your return."

"Very well."

"I will say one final thing on the subject, though."

"Which is?"

"You're an honest man, my dear Riva."

Riva made a face. "Am I?"

"Indeed, you are. However else they could be described," said Virgilio, thumping the parchments on the table for emphasis, "these tallies reflect your honesty. Some of the other governors—nearly all of them to tell you the truth, although you did not hear it from me—keep two sets of figures. I think you know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

"I do."

"But not you."

"No."

"Why not?"

Riva shrugged. "Why would I? It wouldn't be right."

"Exactly!" cried Virgilio. "See? As I just said—and as I've always said—you're an honest man. A *fundamentally* honest man. That's rare, Riva. Oh, you don't know how rare! I've always known it, everyone knows it, and that includes Eusebio. It is, of course, why he holds you in such high esteem."

Riva frowned. "Well, he still holds my eldest hostage, doesn't he? Few other governors enjoy such incentive to keep on the straight and narrow." Though he didn't want to, he pictured Wes in the Bastion. How many years had separated them now? Twelve? But no more, not if everything went according to plan in the coming weeks...

"Hostage?" Virgilio cackled. "Hostage? Oh dear! You fiend! Oh, you do have quite the sense of humour, don't you? Dry as ever. I never know when you're kidding."

"Hmm," said Riva. He hadn't been. The Sarasinian Assembly had demanded he hand over the boy a week ahead of his fifth birthday. He'd known better than to refuse, of course. Never mind that it had marked the beginning of the end of his relationship with his wife...

"I do have some news of young Wes to share with you, by the way." The general's voice trailed off as Istome reappeared clutching a silver tray. She now wore a gown of sheer fabric, a flimsy thing that left nothing to the imagination.

"She's really something," said Riva, suppressing a smirk as she placed the tray on the table. "Don't you think?"

"Oh my," murmured Virgilio. He took Istome by the wrist and gestured for her to turn around. She obliged him, smiling her practiced coy smile. "Breathtaking. This must be the pretty thing everyone's talking about, eh? The one you've been deliberately hiding from me for so long?"

"I," said Riva, shaking his head, "have been doing no such thing."

"What is she? A mix of some sort, yes? She's Ahren, definitely, but what else?"

Riva shook his head. "Nothing else. Just Ahren."

"Really? Look at her... that bosom, the curve of her hip. And not a blemish in sight! She's magnificent. Pure Ahren, though? Are you sure?"

"I am indeed."

"Where did you get her?"

"She's from Cired," said Riva. "If my source can be believed."

"The islands? Truly? Ah, now, wait a moment... That's odd..."

"What is?"

Virgilio looked the girl up and down, his brow wrinkling. "Where's her mark, Riva? For the life of me I can't see it."

Riva chose not to answer straight away, instead letting the silence build until it verged on awkward. "Well, I suppose that's because she doesn't have one."

Virgilio stared at him. "What? No mark? Why ever not?"

"Because she's not a slave." Riva paused again. "She's my second wife."

The general's mouth fell open, and he flung Istome's hand away as if she were cursed. "What? You can't be-!"

Riva shook his head. "Serious? No, I'm not."

Virgilio closed his eyes, sagged back against his chair and slapped his knee. "Oh!" he cried, hooting with delight. "Oh no, you got me again!" He pointed an accusing finger and laughed until tears ran down both cheeks. "You got me again, didn't you? Ah, you slay me!"

"Heh," said Riva, his lips turning up slightly at the corners.

Virgilio sighed. "I just noticed the mark there on her thigh. Ha! Second wife indeed! Oh dear, that *was* a good one..."

"Heh," said Riva again, waiting for the general to compose himself again. Istome reached for a pitcher on the tray, but then paused and gave him a questioning look. He nodded, after which she took the pitcher and poured its contents into two goblets of opaque green glass.

Virgilio seemed to have difficulty concentrating on anything except Istome. It wasn't his fault, of course, for in addition to the most enticing hips, she had tits enough for three women. "What's her name, anyway?" he asked.

"Istome."

"Well," said Virgilio, at last managing to tear his gaze away from her, "back to what I was saying a moment ago. I wanted to congratulate you." He reached for the nearest goblet and took a tentative sip.

"Congratulate me?" Riva dismissed Istome with a gesture. "What for?"

Virgilio watched the girl leave. "Eh? Oh, on your firstborn, of course. You know, your hostage, as you put it?"

"What of him?"

"Ah. So, you've not had word from him recently, I take it?"

"No." Riva frowned. "I have not." Not for years.

"Ah, I see. Well, that's boys for you. I rarely hear from mine either, and they're a lot older than yours. My daughters are

another story, of course. They write all the time—too often if you ask me. And always complaining. But the boys? Not a word!”

Riva’s frown deepened. “What news do you have of my son, lord?”

“Mm,” said the general, shrugging. “Nothing specific. Just that he’s well and happy, that’s all.”

“You’d think he’d write to tell *me* every now and again.”

“Oh?” Virgilio’s eyebrows went up. “Like you used to write to your father?”

“I... uh,” said Riva, and they both knew he’d been bested. “I suppose you have a point.”

Virgilio waved a hand. “Ah, well. He’s distracted by his training, no doubt, and his friends. And probably by the city’s myriad delights as well. He’s a fine boy, and life there seems to suit him as much as it suited you.”

“And so... you’re congratulating me on that?”

“Yes. And why not? Why not congratulate you on having such a fine boy? He’s a credit to you, truly. Doing very well in the Bastion, too, apparently. Just like his old man...”

Riva bowed his head, remembering. Wes hadn’t been the only hostage in the family. “The Bastion. Ha. Seems like a lifetime since I was there. Another lifetime.”

“I know how you feel, Riva. Although it practically *is* a lifetime for me. You’re only thirty-six. Still a pup.”

“Mm.” Riva reached for the other goblet on the tray. He took a sip, paused, and then drank it in one go. He set it back down with a thump that sent a sliver of glass skittering over the edge of the table.

“Glass,” said the general, following its path with his eyes. “Remarkable stuff, but so delicate. Actually, that reminds me. Now, if I should fall today—”

“Ugh, no,” said Riva. “Not this again.”

“I should have you whipped for impertinence. Why not indulge me a little?”

“Perhaps because I indulge you every other day, lord? And also because I’m sure you have many years ahead of you yet?”

"I don't." Virgilio's tone was melancholic. "I really don't. I can feel it."

"Oh, come on!" said Riva, laughing. "You? You're vigorous enough for a man half your age."

Virgilio shot him an expression that was a cross between a scowl and a smirk. "I take back what I said before about your honesty. The truth is I don't have long, Riva. I realise how odd it must sound, but I can *feel* it."

Riva rolled his eyes. "This is a silly topic. Not worth discussing."

"I will say, though," said Virgilio, ignoring him, "there's a small part of me that doesn't mind so much. I've grown weary of this shell. Old age can be cruel, Riva. A burden."

"Mm."

"I mean, look at me! Ugh. I'm fat and skinny at the same time. I can't seem to digest anything properly anymore. I have to get up at least a dozen times a night to piss. And for what? I barely drink past sunset." The general's voice became a whisper. "Oh, and just between you and me, the sword on your belt gets heavier while the one under it gets lighter..."

Riva grimaced. "I... could have done without knowing that."

Virgilio jabbed the air with a finger. "Mark my words, you'll see for yourself one day." He wiped a hand over his mostly bald and liver-spotted pate. "I caught my reflection in a mirror the other day, you know. And just for a moment, I honestly didn't recognise the wrinkled old bastard staring back at me. Did you know I used to have actual hair and not this wispy white shit?" He tore a few strands free and threw them away in disgust. "Ugh, let's change the subject."

"Gladly. I don't even know why you keep bringing it up."

"Hm. So, I meant to ask you earlier—what do you think of the title 'Guardian of the Greater North'?"

"Well it's not exactly original, is it?"

"No indeed. But that's the Assembly for you, eh? A truly unimaginative lot. When I turned sixty-five they gifted me with the title *The Old Lion*. I mean, really? What was wrong with *The*

Lion? Talk about a slap in the face! What will they call me should I live to turn eighty, eh? I shudder to think.”

Riva chuckled. “I think whoever came up with my title has a very keen sense of irony.”

Virgilio drummed on the table with his fingers. “You sound bitter, Riva.”

“Probably because I am. *Guardian of the Greater North?* I’ll be guardian of no such thing. Right now, I’m barely even the governor of Herena. I’m little more than a puppet and everyone knows it.”

“We’re both puppets, Riva. Me, you, and everyone else besides! That’s what life in the League has become, though. And Eusebio’s Assembly openly mocks all its little puppets, or at least that’s how it seems. Having said that, you can’t be completely ungrateful for this particular opportunity though, can you? I mean, it goes completely against policy to allow—”

“Ah yes, that old chestnut—to allow an Ahren barbarian like me to lead an army against my own kind?”

Virgilio adjusted his robes. “*You* said it, Riva. Not me.”

Riva sniffed. “Well, plenty have said it before me. And anyway, how *were* you going to finish your sentence, exactly?”

Virgilio held up both hands. “Calm yourself, dear boy! All I meant to say was that you’ve been given an unprecedented opportunity despite the distinctly... xenophobic... climate prevailing in the capital of late. Need I remind you, though, that Eusebio has unwavering faith in your commitment to the League? Unwavering! And that’s the thing we don’t want to lose sight of here. Beyond that, very little else matters.”

“Really? Because I always got the distinct impression that he’d like to see me fail out here.”

“No,” said Virgilio, shaking his head. “That might be true for certain other members of the Assembly I could name, but not Eusebio.”

“You don’t think he’d like something to happen to me so he could put Wes in my place?”

Virgilio laughed. "No, I don't. I don't see how it would benefit him in the slightest. Tell me, though, when did it become all about you? What about me? What about the sons of the hundreds of other Sarasinian houses here with us? We're all in this together, are we not? We're here to expand the northern frontier, and we're of little use to the League if we can't do that."

"Expand it so someone else can rule it, you mean? And all the while everyone pretends that as the *Guardian of the Greater North*, I'm the boss?"

Virgilio's gesture of finality told Riva that he had pushed his point too far. For a while, neither man spoke.

At last Riva stood up. "Well, at any rate we should probably get back to the business of warlording, then." He peered at the refreshments on the tray before slapping a few dark grapes and a thin wedge of cheese into his mouth.

"Yes." Virgilio grunted as he stood up. "I'll lead again today then, shall I? The army will be yours tomorrow." He offered the back of his hand, which Riva kissed and pressed to his forehead.

"As you wish, of course," said Riva. He turned on his heel and left, but not before Istome reappeared with a curious smile playing about her lips. He wondered what secrets she'd managed to uncover this time.

2

BENE

THE UNIVERSITY OF GERICH ASSET RECOVERY TEAM

EASTERN RENDEROS

They'd been trudging through the seemingly endless rocky knolls for a few weeks, but to Bene it felt more like years. To say it was hard country was an understatement. He longed to see civilisation again, even if it came in the form of a few crude huts butted up against one another. Because as far as he could make out, that was about as civilised as Renderos got. Still, it was better than nothing.

At least their journey hadn't been without its highlights. They were travelling through a wild land unchanged by the passage of centuries. He couldn't find half the villages they'd visited on any of his maps, and their inhabitants were fascinating, if backward. The great wide open in between was harsh, but it was also starkly beautiful. Everyone had marvelled, many times, at the mysterious flickering lights in the night sky that were neither stars nor meteors. And no one would ever forget the sweet, clear

water from the spring they'd stumbled across just a few days ago. He'd never tasted anything so fresh and pure in his life!

Lately, though, certain things were getting on his nerves. A party of nearly three hundred was nothing short of a logistical nightmare. They had too many wagons and not enough drivers. Illness and injury were taking their toll, and he was beginning to suspect not every case was genuine. Equipment that was difficult to replace had broken down or gone missing. Horses were succumbing to the hostile environment. Bandits were shadowing them, waiting for an opening. They were no closer to hunting down the fugitive and her stolen object. And now, perhaps worst of all, his ex-girlfriend Khela had practically fucked Colonel Tonneson in public.

Bene glanced at Magister Roaoo. "So," said Roaoo, his jaw tight with anger. "This is just a little picnic in the barbaricum for you then, is it?"

"Sorry," said Khela. She emerged from Tonneson's tent, her breath coming white in the frigid morning air. "We didn't think anyone would miss us."

"Oh, is that so?" asked Roaoo. "How could we, when you scream at the top of your lungs when you climax?"

Bene snorted, trying to hold in his laughter. It was funny hearing the usually taciturn magister making a joke. Not that anyone else was laughing. And actually, there wasn't much for him to laugh at either, not when you considered that mere moments ago the girl he loved had had Tonneson's dick in her. And he'd probably been giving it to her from behind, too, with those meaty hands of his around her hips. Just picturing it made him sick with envy. Nothing funny about any of that. Why did Roaoo even want him here again?

"Uh." Khela started to say something else, blushed furiously instead, then closed her mouth.

Tonneson popped his head out of the tent's entry flap, sweaty, bare-chested and apparently unconcerned by all the fuss. "Aw, come on, professor," he said. "We're consenting adults. It's not like we were doing anything wrong."

"Don't speak too soon, Tonneson." Roaoo's face darkened. "You were supposed to be on patrol this morning, were you not?"

"No, professor."

"Hmm. That's funny, because I double-checked the rota and sure enough, your name was there. Both times. However, I did not see Khela's name in the 'assigned task' section."

As Khela stifled an indignant cry, Bene tried again not to picture her and Tonneson together. And failed.

The colonel was unmoved. "That can't be right, surely? I don't think I'm on the rota until this afternoon..."

Roaoo shook his head. "You must have misheard me Tonneson, so let me rephrase. Your name was definitely on the rota, and the task assigned was 'patrol.' And while I think you could argue that you were indeed conducting a patrol of sorts just now, it was not the kind this expedition needs. Not by a long shot."

Despite his misery, Bene struggled not to lose it. Now *that* was comedy gold. The magister was truly on fire today! Ah, not that it made him feel any better about the situation, of course.

Confusion and fear displaced the smug look on Tonneson's face. "What? But I made the rota myself and I—"

Roaoo held up a hand. "But nothing, Tonneson. You know, I saw this coming. Really, I did. I should have nipped this in the bud a few weeks ago when I first noticed my commander of soldiers and my research assistant making eyes at each other. It was truly remiss of me not to say something at the time, because I had a feeling it wouldn't lead to anything good. And it seems I was right."

"Sir," said Tonneson. "I didn't—"

Roaoo's eyes bulged in fury. "Put some clothes on and get out, will you? Show a little respect!"

"Yessir," said Tonneson, ducking back inside the tent.

Roaoo looked Khela up and down as they waited. She shrank under his piercing gaze. Bene, wondering yet again why Roaoo needed him here, avoided looking at either of them.

“Good,” said Roaoo when Tonneson emerged fully dressed. “That’s much, much better. Now, let me make one thing clear to you, won’t you? While I don’t particularly care that the two of you are fucking, I find your lack of discretion... well, slightly unsettling, to be honest. Then again, maybe it’s what all the kids are into these days, and I’m just old and out of touch. It’s possible. On the other hand, what I do care about is our mission. If it were to fail because you’re too distracted to do your job–”

“Sir,” said Tonneson, holding up a finger. “I’m afraid I must object to that on the grounds–”

“Let me finish!” shouted Roaoo, his eyes nearly exploding out of his skull. “Don’t interrupt! If this mission were to fail because you’re too distracted to do your job properly–say, by putting booty duty before actual duty, for instance–well, the result would be that, at the very least, your career as a commander would be finished. Finished! At worst, well... let’s just say it would be better for you if you were to spend the rest of your life on the run. Am I making myself clear?”

Bene looked away so his smile wouldn’t betray him. He hadn’t expected the magister to ever utter a phrase like *booty duty*.

“Yes, sir.” Tonneson was doing his best to maintain eye contact with Roaoo, but clearly finding it a seriously unnerving task.

Roaoo pointed at Khela. “The same goes for you. Since you’re not the leader of the Scouts, I highly doubt the Warden Master would actually hang you. Mind you, by the time he was done with you, you’d probably wish he had.”

“Magister,” said Khela, “please let me just say I’m very, very sorry for–”

Roaoo waved her words away. “Whatever it is you have to say, I don’t care to hear it. Just go.”

“Yes, sir.” She slunk away with her head bowed. Bene tried to catch her eye as she passed, but she wasn’t having it.

“I’ll say one thing for you, Colonel Tonneson,” said Roaoo. “You do surprise me.”

Tonneson looked up. “Sir?”

"I said, you surprise me. This was decidedly unprofessional. I expected better from you. Tell me, what were you thinking?"

"I... well, I suppose I wasn't, professor."

"Hmm. Well, my advice would be to start thinking, eh? And maybe do it sooner rather than later?"

"Yes, professor."

Roao straightened. "Yes. And about that—it's *magister*, actually."

"Uh, sir?"

"I said, it's *magister*," said Roao, pursing his lips as he held out his arms to better show off his grey robes of office. "Do I look like a mere professor to you?"

"No, sir," said Tonneson, but it seemed to Bene that he was only agreeing for the sake of it, and didn't really understand the point Roao was trying to make.

Roao put his arms behind his back and drew himself up to his full height. "Hmm. Tell me, is a captain higher in rank than a colonel, Tonneson?"

Tonneson seemed baffled by the question. "Uh, no sir. Of course not."

"Of course not." Roao was patronising at the best of times, but now he managed to reach a level of arrogance that Bene had not thought possible. He was starting to feel sorry for Tonneson, even though he'd never liked him. And, as of this morning, disliked him more than he could say. "I suppose that's probably why you never hear me address you as *Captain Tonneson*, isn't it?"

"Er, yes. Sir."

"A professor is to a magister what a captain is to a colonel. Don't make the mistake of calling me a professor again."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me something else, Tonneson? Where does your lack of respect for me come from, exactly? Is it because I don't wear a sword on my belt, like you? Is it because I'm old, and not all battle-hardened and hulking and barrel-chested, like you?"

"No, sir."

“Meaning?”

Tonneson hesitated. “Meaning I’ve no lack of respect for you, sir.”

“And yet, Tonneson,” said Roaoo, scoffing, “of this I remain utterly unconvinced. I’m not a member of your vaunted Scouts, so I know I don’t count for much in your estimation. I know how you see us *mere civilians*. But you know what? It doesn’t matter, *Colonel* Tonneson, because your troop is but a part of *my* university. An important part, to be sure, but a subordinate one. I am in charge here, not you. Do we understand each other?”

“Yes, sir.”

Roaoo sighed. “Well,” he said, his shoulders sagging, “that’s it. Lecture over. I thought I would enjoy it you know, Tonneson. Pulling rank on you? But there’s surprisingly little pleasure to be had in trying to cow you. Oh, and I had plans to write you up and everything. But what’s the point? Go. You’re dismissed.”

Tonneson seemed to share Bene’s surprise. All that build-up, only to go essentially nowhere? What about punishment? Not even a whipping? How was he supposed to learn from his mistake? “You’re not going to write me up?”

Roaoo shook his head. “No. Not this time.”

It took a few moments, but Tonneson actually smiled. Smiled! And it wasn’t the cynical smirk Bene had expected to see on his stupid, ridiculously handsome face, but an apparently genuine expression of gratitude. Could it be that Roaoo’s words had actually gotten through to him?

“I... I don’t know what to say, sir,” said the colonel, “except thank you, er, of course. I’m sorry to have let you down, and I promise I won’t ever do it again.”

“That was a terrible attempt at an apology,” said Roaoo. “But it will have to suffice. Go, then. Get moving. I believe your outriders are due back any moment.”

“Yes, sir.” Tonneson walked stiffly past Roaoo, sparing Bene only the most cursory of glances.

“You can go as well,” Roaoo told Bene, but to his surprise, the magister was the one who walked away.

"Yes, magister," said Bene. He still didn't understand why in fuck's name had the man had insisted he be there. It would probably take him weeks to process everything! Months! Ugh, and for right now in his head, Khela lay on her back, legs open with the colonel atop her. They were still poised like that as he made his way back to the main part of the camp, trying to suppress the ugly image, and all the while trailing Tonneson while still keeping a polite amount of distance between them. He had absolutely nothing to say to the man. Come to think of it, he wasn't sure he had all that much to say to his ex-girlfriend either.

Khela was already in the camp's nerve centre, needlessly adjusting and re-adjusting her horse's saddle to an audience of sniggering soldiers. As Tonneson drew near, someone started to slow clap him. The beginning of a rousing cheer went up, too, but there must have been something ominous in the colonel's expression because the playful mood instantly evaporated. Before he could even say a word, men scattered like cockroaches.

Bene found a barrel and sat on it, thinking it would make a good spot from which to oversee the morning's events. Tonneson met his eye again for the briefest moment, but the man's face was unreadable. He wondered if his own face was as expressionless. Or could Tonneson see how hurt he was? Hurt, and resentful. He spat. Actually, no. Fuck that noise—he was pissed. But not at the colonel. He was annoyed at himself for still pining for Khela. They hadn't been a thing for ages, and with good reason. Shit, even when they'd been going out, their relationship had been rocky at best, and in fact most of the time he'd considered the girl a colossal pain in the arse. Yeah, he reckoned Tonneson was welcome to her.

Sergeant Styler came over to stand next to the colonel. "First lot's coming in now, sir," he said. "Four men."

"Four, sergeant?" asked Tonneson. "I don't hear a thing. How fast are they moving?"

"Doesn't sound like they're in a hurry, sir."

"Can you tell who they are, exactly?"

Styler shook his head. "I'd only be guessing at that, sir."

"But you know there are four of them?"

"I'd be willing to bet money on it."

"No doubt." Tonneson laughed. "And I'd be a fool to take that bet. You have a gift, sergeant. A fucking gift!"

Styler's expression was blank. "Sir."

But it seemed that the sergeant did indeed have a gift, because two pairs of rangy horsemen soon rode into camp. Each had matted hair and dark circles under their eyes, but one of them—Gansen—looked particularly haggard. Tonneson halted him. "Anything to report, trooper?"

"No sir," said Gansen. "Nothing."

"Did you get any sleep before your patrol?"

Gansen shook his head. "Uh, no. Not really, sir. I got stuck with back-to-back shifts for some reason."

Bene stifled a giggle. "Oh yeah? For some reason, eh?" he muttered under his breath.

Tonneson nodded. "Well there was, uh, a mistake on the rota. Tell you what, trooper—you can join the wagons until midday and use the time to catch up, eh?"

Gansen perked up immediately. "Really? I'm off until midday?"

"That's correct, trooper. Go and sleep. In fact, that's an order."

"Yes, sir." Gansen beamed. "Thank you, sir!" He dismounted and led his horse away. Styler followed him, the two chatting as they walked.

Bene studied Tonneson. The man glanced around in what he probably thought was a casual way, but Bene wasn't fooled. He was looking for Khela, obviously unaware of the fact that she'd already left. Then he brought a hand to his face as if he were smoothing his moustache, but surreptitiously sniffed his middle finger instead. A very specific image of the two of them together formed in Bene's mind, and he was again seething with envy. Fuck it! Hadn't he just decided he was done with all that shit?

"Rider!" shouted Styler, breaking off his conversation with Gansen.

"Did you say *rider*?" asked Tonneson. "Singular?"

"Yes sir. Pretty sure it's just the one."

Tonneson spat. "Shit. That can't be good."

A few moments before it came into view, the thump of hooves announced the arrival of a big stallion. He was foaming at the mouth and snorting as a trooper named Russek, flushed and excited, brought him to a stop. "Tracks to the northwest, sir!" he shouted. "They're fresh. It could be the fugitive! It could be *her*!"

Bene jumped off his barrel, all thoughts of Khela leaving his head.

"Move out!" bellowed Tonneson. "Northwest! Go! Go! Go! Everyone, move out!" Dozens of outriders mounted up and thundered out of the camp.

Bene could feel their anticipation. So, they might finally catch the fugitive and go the fuck home again? It was a tantalising notion on a thousand levels. "Aw, fuck yeah!"

Tonneson caught Russek before the man could disappear. "Wait a moment, soldier! You were with Poths, weren't you? Where is he? And why didn't you sound the horn?"

"We did sound the horn, sir," said Russek. "We must have sounded it a dozen times at least. We thought we might be too far out for anyone to hear, though, so we decided I should come back. Poths is still out there."

"*What?*" Tonneson's eyes went hard. "You left him alone? Out there? With *her*?"

Russek swallowed. "Alone? Wha-? No! No sir, of course not! I only left when one of the other teams caught up to us. Pothy's horse threw a shoe, so he stayed with them. And I was right behind the others that just got here, so I could tell you what we saw..."

The colonel relaxed. "Ah. Well, good. That's fine, trooper. Good."

"I would never have left a mate alone out there, sir. Never."

Tonneson waved a hand as if brushing away the idea. "No, no. Of course. I know that."

"Is it really *her*, do you think?" asked Bene, walking over to join the conversation.

"I'm not certain of it, sir," said Russek, looking down at him from the saddle, "but Poths thought the tracks were probably hers."

"Truly?" That from Roaoo. Bene had known he was coming over, but Tonneson hadn't. He tried to keep his expression neutral even though the sight of the blood suddenly rising in the colonel's cheeks delighted him.

"Yes, sir," said Russek to the magister.

"How can he be sure?"

"He's a good tracker, sir. Probably one of the best we got."

"Really?"

"Yes, sir. In my estimation, of course."

Roaoo pursed his lips. "And in your estimation who are, say, our regiment's top three trackers?"

"Top three?" Russek's brow furrowed as he mulled the question over. "Um, well, Poths, of course. And Eckols, he's definitely up there. The top spot though, I'd have to say, would go to Sergeant Hassing. Incredible tracker. Easily the best we've got by a long shot."

Roaoo turned to Tonneson. "What do you think of that assessment?"

"I think it's a fair one, actually," said the colonel.

Roaoo pursed his lips. "Hmm. Very good. Well then, carry on." And he walked away with a thoughtful look on his face.

Bene wondered about Roaoo's sudden interest in trackers. Did he have a special assignment for Hassing, perhaps? Actually, he didn't give a toss. His stomach was gurgling, reminding him that he hadn't yet given it breakfast. He made for the chuckwagons, slowing only when he noticed Khela propped up against a box of supplies, writing furiously. Against his better judgement, he plopped his arse down next to hers.

"Hello Bene," said Khela, not looking at him.

He craned his neck to get a look at her parchment. "What are you working on? A new piece?"

"Sort of." Khela blew away some specks of dust that had settled in the margins. She cleared her throat. "So, tell me how this sounds, all right?"

"Yep," said Bene.

"Right. Here goes. 'Although the victim remains ambulant, both sight and mobility are drastically curtailed. Circulation and breathing appear to be arrested entirely. There is currently no evidence to support it, but notable scholars suggest these are all indicators of the 'life force' having been extracted, either partially or fully.'"

Bene snorted. "Sounds a bit like a girl I used to go out with."

"Ha ha," said Khela, rolling her eyes. "Very funny. I hope you don't mean me?"

"No, not you. And anyway, it sounds good. Roaaa is going to love it."

"Think so?" She sounded hopeful.

"Oh yeah. He really gets off on all that *life force extraction* stuff. So much so he'll probably read it one-handed, if you know what I mean."

Khela sighed. "Ugh. You know, Bene, I could do without your sarcasm right now. I've had a rough morning."

"I'll bet you did," said Bene, smirking.

"Fuck off." She shoved the parchment into a satchel with a lot more force than seemed necessary. "I just wanted to talk shop, but clearly that's not going to happen."

"Sorry."

"Are you, though?"

Bene grinned. "Actually, no. Not really."

"Oh, screw you!" hissed Khela, her lip twitching the way it always did when she was furious. "If you just came here to make fun of me, don't. Go away. Dealing with your jealousy's not something I could be bothered with at the moment."

"Dealing with my *what*?"

"You heard me."

Bene narrowed his eyes at her. "Did you say *jealousy*?"

"Yep."

“Well,” he said, folding his arms. “For your information, I’m not jealous.”

Khela’s eyebrows went up. “Oh yeah? Just be honest. If that’s even possible.”

“If that’s even poss–? Oh, and just what am I supposed to be jealous of, exactly?”

“Oh, come on, Bene! Like I have to say it.”

“Nope. I don’t get jealous.”

“Yeah, right. You get all funny when the soldiers so much as look at me. You must be livid now that I let their chief get a whole lot further, huh?”

“Nah,” said Bene, shrugging. “Frankly, I couldn’t care less about you and Tonneson.”

“Uh huh.”

“No. Really, I don’t care at all.”

“Really? I can see it in your eyes, Bene. Your jealousy is practically eating you alive.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Ugh. Whatever, Bene.” Khela turned to face the other way.

Neither of them said anything for a while. Bene should have just walked away, but he couldn’t seem to stop himself from opening his mouth again and making things a whole lot worse. “Eh, I’ll tell you something I’m *not* jealous of,” he said, unfolding his arms. “I’m not jealous of having never screamed, ‘Oh baby, you’re making my pussy clench!’ while fucking a dude in a tent while my boss and my ex are standing right outside.”

Khela spun to face him. “I knew it! Go on, then. Get it all out, Bene. You know you want to.”

“Seriously, though, what the fuck were you thinking? In the middle of the camp? In broad daylight? With Tonneson?” He realised too late that he’d more or less spat out the last word.

“You’re making it sound like it was out in the open for all to see! It wasn’t. We were alone, in a tent, and we didn’t think

anyone would care. And I wasn't thinking, was I? I mean, obviously I wasn't. Neither of us were."

"You're going to be the butt of a lot of jokes now, you know."

"Tell me something I don't know," said Khela, giving him a sour look.

"Yeah, you really messed up this time."

"Come on, Bene, it's not *that* bad. Anyway, it wasn't just me who messed up. Tonneson will be the butt of a lot of jokes, too."

"Actually no, he won't. Not really."

Khela's mouth fell open. "What do you mean, he won't?"

"I mean, he really won't," said Bene, shaking his head. "You don't know guys, obviously. Oh yeah, I mean maybe they will snigger behind his back a little, but not in the same way they'll be laughing about you. Actually, I'm pretty sure they'll think he's even more of a legend than they do now. But you? Eh, not so much."

"Oh, great!" said Khela, throwing her hands up. "That's just great. I should have known, huh? I guess that's just so fucking typical of men, isn't it?"

Bene grinned. "Heh. Yeah, it is."

"So, this all means... what? That I'm a slut to be mocked, but he's some kind of exemplar?"

"I guess. Basically, yeah..."

"That's bullshit. Why's it different for me?"

"Dunno," said Bene, shrugging. "It just is."

"No, really. Explain why it's different because I'm a girl? I mean, you're banging Orly and probably all the other chuckwagon whores, aren't you? Explain to me why no one's mocking you for that?" Khela gestured at Bene's crotch. "I'm surprised you haven't worn that thing down to a nub, by the way."

"Hey, why is this about me all of a sudden?" asked Bene, cocking his head to the side. "Huh? Are you jealous or something?"

"Jealous? Of you? No."

Bene laughed, but there was no mirth in it. He raised his eyebrow in an exaggerated way and waggled his head from side to side. "Oh yeah?" he said, doing his best to mimic her voice. "Just be honest. If that's possible."

"There's a big difference between feeling jealous and being cheated on."

Bene rolled his eyes. "Ugh, I knew it would come back to this if I hung around here long enough."

"Well, you started it!"

"I did not!"

"Sure. Whatever."

"Shit." Bene blew out his cheeks. "I cheated. Did you think I'd forgotten? Well, I hadn't! But why are you bringing it up now? What does it have to do with anything? And how many times have we been over it? You had every right to be angry. We even broke up because of it, remember? It was a reaaaally long time ago."

"It wasn't all that long ago, Bene."

"Well it seems like a long time ago."

"Yeah, but you cheated on me with *her*. The fucking fugitive."

"So?"

"So? You're kidding me, right?"

Bene made a face. "Oh, come on, Khel! Be fair. There's no way I could have known about her back then, could I?" He gestured around the camp. "I didn't know what she was going to do. I had no idea any of *this* was going to happen."

"What was the attraction, anyway? You never told me."

Bene nearly choked on his irritation. "Shit, Khel, we've been over this a thousand times at least. There *was* no real attraction. It just... I don't know, it just kinda happened. It didn't mean anything."

Khela exhaled forcefully. "Ugh. Such a cliché. And if you really believe that, then obviously I meant even less to you."

"Augh!" shouted Bene. "What the shit, Khel? I can't believe we're even talking about this. Again! It's ancient history. And I'm not going to defend what I did, even now. I was a dickhead. I said

I was sorry then and I meant it, but I don't see why I should have to keep on apologising. We're not even together, anyway, so..."

Khela looked the other way. "You still are a dickhead."

Bene took a deep breath. "Everybody's entitled to their opinion."

"Maybe you should just go."

"You know, I can't help but wonder why you're still so upset about this, why you even brought it up. It's not because you still have, I dunno, feelings... for me, is it?"

"No," said Khela, turning on him, eyes flashing. "Definitely not."

"So, what's the problem, then? If you've moved on, you've moved on. Or... are you not actually with Tonneson or something?"

"Why don't you mind your own business?"

"Well, I would," said Bene, trying on his best sardonic grin, "but it's a bit difficult given your penchant for spectators."

Khela's jaw dropped. "And so we're back to that again?"

Bene shrugged. "So, what's the attraction anyway? You never told me."

"Don't mock me."

"I'm serious."

"No, you're not. And I don't want to talk about this with you anymore, Bene. You should go. I'd actually like to get on with my work, if you don't mind."

"Aw, come on," said Bene, poking her with a finger. "What's the harm if neither of us is jealous of the other? Go on, tell me—what does he have that I don't? Is it because he's so fair and twice my size and he's got all those muscles and stuff? I mean, I can't really compete with all that, I guess."

"All right, fine," said Khela, a big fake smile plastered on her face. "You really wanna know, Bene?"

Bene hesitated. "Yes," he said, meaning no.

Khela put her hands together, and then pulled them slowly apart until there was nearly an arm's length of space in between.

"That," she said, arching an eyebrow, "is the attraction. Compared to him, you're hung like a mouse."

"Cheap shot," said Bene, swallowing the urge to spit in her face. "I thought you were better than that."

"What can I say? I've been taking lessons from the master."

"Yeah?" He got up, trying to think of something clever to say, something cutting. "All right. Well. I know people with bigger tits than yours. You'll come to regret this." He stood there for a few moments, analysing what had just come out of his mouth. As far as comebacks went, it wasn't exactly a zinger. In fact, it didn't even make sense. And though he'd have preferred not to leave right after uttering something so dumb, he did.

Khela laughed at his back, exultant. It made him feel even smaller.

3

ROSARIUS

SARASINIA

THE BASTION

Your first time in the Hole was the worst, or so everyone said. It certainly wasn't Rosarius's idea of a good time. The floor was covered in shit, which made him retch, and it was too dark to see anything. The shackles on his wrists fixed his arms to the ceiling, which was also so low he couldn't stand up straight. He sweated as he struggled to free himself, but succeeded only in tiring himself out. The key to getting through this, he thought, was to relax.

Relaxing didn't work. He felt around in the gloom with his feet, but there was nothing to sit on or lean against. Gods, but it was impossible to get comfortable. If he let his wrists take his weight, the shackles dug into his skin and the pain forced him back up. But stooping made his back ache. If he tried crouching to relieve the pressure, the burning in his thighs eventually forced him back to his original position. Cycling between crouching and standing didn't work, either—there was simply no respite from

the pain! He screamed in frustration. The Hole was fucking awful, much worse than he'd imagined. Whoever designed it had obviously put some thought into it, the cunning bastard. He chuckled, then laughed, and finally began howling. "I hope at least they got you too, Romelo," he yelled. "Prick. Fucker! Motherfucking fucker!" The sound bounced off the walls, hurting his ears.

He could almost touch the ground with his knees. He tried a few times, and on the last he lost his footing. The shackles bit so hard he nearly blacked out. The floor betrayed him, too, and the harder he worked to gain traction in the shit, the less he got. He dangled from the ceiling, grunting and swearing. By the time he found his feet again he was out of breath.

No sooner than the stinging in his wrists abated, his back began to spasm. He shut his eyes and screwed up his face. He crouched to soothe his aching muscles, but couldn't keep his legs from going white-hot from the effort. He thought about letting the shackles take his weight for a bit but wasn't sure his wrists could handle it. Oh, this fucking place was taxing him to the limit, and he'd only just arrived!

He lost his footing again. The shackles took another bite, and he screamed as waves of searing pain rippled up his arms. Getting back on his feet took every scrap of his remaining strength, but he managed it. He perched there for a while, a quivering, clammy mess. His back felt as if someone had scattered hot coals over it, and his thighs were on the verge of quitting on him for good. And was that blood oozing down the insides of his forearms? Shit. A man passed out when he reached a certain threshold of pain, didn't he? When could he look forward to that?

In the hours that surely followed, Rosarius knew true torment. He tried every trick he could think of to push through it, but nothing worked. Pleasant thoughts, for instance. Useless. For the briefest moment your imagination whisked you to a sunny beach or breezy mountaintop, but only for as long as it took for the pain to hammer its way in and drag you right back to reality. And

counting your breaths? Nope. The pain drove the tallies from your head. Pretending to be a rack of jerked venison hanging out to dry didn't work, either. All that did was remind you of food, and then of other things you also didn't have.

More time passed. He was dimly aware of slipping through a hideous realm of agony and into an almost agreeable state of numbness. His body still ached, but it was as if he were somehow feeling it second-hand. He couldn't decide if he were asleep or awake. And then something at the edge of this new consciousness prickled him. He focussed on it, and slowly became aware that he was pissing his trousers. It didn't bother him, though a small part of him argued that it probably should have.

Rosarius shut his eyes against a sudden, blinding light.

"Don't like the lamp eh, sir?" said a man. "It'll pass."

"Affn mmmmbf," said Rosarius. "Fmmmb nnnbmff."

Another man spoke. "What did he say?"

"Dunno," said the first man. "Let's just take him up."

"Nfff," said Rosarius as the pair fumbled at his restraints. He took a big breath as he hit the floor, and a big mouthful of shit with it. He gagged as he was hauled upright, then bright pain blossomed in every part of his body. He screamed for all he was worth.

"Sounds like a hungry cat," said one of the men.

"Yeah," said the other as they dragged him out of the cell. "Left or right?"

"Left," said the first man. "We're 'sposed to clean him up some 'fore he fronts the tribunal tomorrow."

Rosarius wasn't familiar with this particular room in the Old Keep. A tiled stone floor, most likely slate. No bars on the windows. No bookcases or carpets, either, which was unusual. No furniture aside from a table with three plush chairs behind it. His warders hung around, chatting with two pairs of guardsmen. None of them paid him any mind.

He turned his attention to the ugly wounds on his wrists. He pulled the skin from a blister, wincing as drops of reddish liquid slid down his arm. Those shackles had left a mark—he'd have some nice, heavy scars there in a week or two. Not that he cared. He was covered in scars, so what difference would a few more make?

Time passed. Still raw and worn out from his confinement, he lay down on the floor and went to sleep. The first rule of soldiering was that you never stood when you could sit, and if you could sleep, you slept. Darkness claimed him for a time, after which a warder prodded him awake. "Eh?" he asked, bleary eyed.

"Apologies, sir," said the warder. "But it's time."

Rosarius sat up and rubbed his eyes. Dannis and Tavaris looked down on him from behind the table, all silk gowns, painted nails, too-dark eyeliner and plucked eyebrows. "Oh, fuck off!" he said, scowling.

Dannis and Tavaris responded with hard looks.

"All stand for His Royal Highness, Prince Colton!" boomed a guard.

"His fucking what?" asked Rosarius, hugging his knees. He wasn't about to get up for anyone, least of all a prick like Colton. "Did you say *Royal Highness*?"

Dannis and Tavaris stood up together as Colton sashayed into the room wearing what appeared to be an evening dress encrusted with a staggering quantity of gems. He wedged himself between Dannis and Tavaris, and the three began a hugging ritual punctuated by air kisses and over-effusive greetings.

"All present," cried the guard, "be seated!"

As the trio sat and arranged their gowns carefully around their legs, Dannis spoke. "Before we proceed, my lord prince," he said, "it would be remiss of me not to comment on the truly magnificent garment that you are wearing today! Such workmanship! Oh, Bo, just look at how the stones come together with the neckline to accentuate our lord prince's striking facial features. What fabulous tones!"

"Oh my, yes, how right you are!" said Tavaris, clapping his hands. "Yes, my lord prince, it is indeed a truly marvellous piece. And the interplay of gold thread, even in this subdued lighting? It's simply magical! Magical! Pray tell us, from whom did you have it commissioned? Was it Quintin? Oh, it was, wasn't it? Yes, I bet it was Quintin!"

"It was indeed," said Colton. "I cannot fault your eye!"

"Wondrous!" squealed Dannis as he pressed one of Colton's outsized maunches to his cheek.

Rosarius looked around for a spare chair. It took longer than it should have for his brain to register that there wasn't one. He concluded that it was a deliberate slight against him.

"Hmm. Let's begin, shall we?" said Tavaris, flapping a hand at the warders. "Uh, you two prison... fellows. You are dismissed, actually." The men bowed and exited the room.

Colton spoke. "Good morning," he said, apparently addressing the tabletop. "A good morning to one and all."

Rosarius didn't say anything. Although it hurt, he stretched out on the floor on his back with his fingers steepled over his belly. If they wanted to play dumb games, he'd happily oblige them.

Colton frowned, finally looking at him. "You are," he said airily, "almost certainly wondering why I and my colleagues are present at this tribunal instead of the usual tired old faces."

"Nah," said Rosarius. "Actually, I couldn't give a shit."

Dannis went red with fury. "By the gods!" he shouted. "We will not put up with such discourtesy!"

"I have never before encountered such rudeness!" screamed Tavaris. "Such poor manners! Why, I've a mind to order you back to the dungeons at once!"

Rosarius couldn't help but grin at how easily he'd provoked them. Why stop, though? "It's a good day to die."

Dannis and Tavaris looked at Colton, who shook his head. "Er, yes. Well then, it seems I must remind you that we are here because Grand Magistrate Eusebio—my father no less—has willed

that we be here. Furthermore, he entrusted *me* to head this commission of enquiry, specifically."

Dannis smirked. "Indeed."

"I just said it was a good day to die," said Rosarius. "I mean, you said you wanted manners, didn't you? Well, I just gave you the proper Bastion greeting. Why haven't you replied as you should? Or have you forgotten where you are?"

"We know where we are." Tavaris eyed him coldly.

"Yeah, well I don't think you do," said Rosarius. He pointed at Colton. "By the way, was it just me, or did they just announce you as *Prince Colton*?" As Dannis's smile faded, he added, "Because I'm dying to know what that's all about."

Colton cleared his throat. "I heard no such thing," he said, giving sidelong glances at Dannis and Tavaris, who started squirming. "Perhaps you misheard?"

"I don't think I did," said Rosarius, sitting up. It pained him, but he refused to let it show. "So, Princey, has your daddy ended our great republic, or something? Huh? Are we an empire again, eh?"

Colton ignored him. "Let's proceed, shall we?"

"Sure. Why the fuck not?"

"Right then, to business!" Colton raised a finger. "Now, please understand that it is my fervent wish that this commission of enquiry should reflect," and here he brought his hands to rest on the shoulders of his companions, "our collective youthful energy and idealism. The old men that presided over these sorts of things until recently we have displaced—for the time being, at least. I thought them too dusty, rather uninteresting, and on the whole... well, unhelpfully reactive. And my father agreed. And so I think you will find this institution—by which I mean the Bastion, of course—better served by minds like ours. Minds, of course, that are inclined to proactive engagement."

"I've no idea what the shit you're on about," said Rosarius.

Colton continued to ignore him. "Assisting me with my task today," he said, peering down his nose, "are His Lordship Parm's Dannis, Esquire, and His Lordship Bo Tavaris, Esquire. Two very esteemed personages with whom I believe you are already well

acquainted. True? Together, we shall continue our quest to uncover the facts of a certain recent—and most unfortunate—event, one in which *you* played a significant part. Of course, I am sure that you need absolutely no reminder of the subject of the aforementioned enquiry. Yes or no?”

“Huh?” Rosarius had stopped listening a while ago, having discovered that if he sat slightly hunched and perfectly still, he could hardly feel any pain in his back and shoulders. The little finger in his left hand was still numb, though, and had been since yesterday. A worry, but hopefully it would soon resolve itself.

“I said,” said Colton, “that I am sure you need absolutely no reminder of the subject of the aforementioned enquiry?”

Rosarius shrugged.

“My lord prince!” screeched Tavaris, rising from his chair and causing both Colton and Dannis to jump in fright. “My lord prince is speaking of the events of last week!” He settled back into his seat, looking daggers at Rosarius.

In return, Rosarius eyed the man’s skinny neck. He licked his lips as he imagined blood spurting while the head rolled away. A pity that his sword was elsewhere...

“Don’t look at me like that,” said Tavaris.

“Just get the fuck on with whatever this is, then,” said Rosarius, hands balled into fists as he got to his feet. All he needed was an excuse to let them fly...

Colton managed to hold his composure, but Dannis and Tavaris recoiled in horror. A silence descended on the room.

“I said, get on with it!” shouted Rosarius. He was tired, his nerves were raw, and at this very moment he wanted nothing more out of life than to beat the living fuck out of whatever poor sap tipped him over the edge.

“By the gods!” screeched Tavaris. “We will not—!”

Colton interrupted the man with a gesture. “Very well,” he said, fingering a sheaf of parchments on the table in front of him. He paused on one in particular. “Your name is Lozano Rosarius, yes?”

"It is," said Rosarius, folding his arms and drawing himself up to his full height. "Lozano Iacanus Manismus of House Rosarius. What of it?"

Colton smiled thinly. "Actually, your name is not unknown to me, Lozano. For that reason, it came as a very great surprise when we heard that a week ago in this very city, you were involved in the... hmm... altercation... that you were."

Rosarius didn't reply, but instead started toward the pitcher and cup he'd just noticed on the table. How had he managed to miss that until now? Did it contain water or wine? Gods, he was so thirsty he didn't even care!

"Oh yes, yes," said Colton, beckoning him onward. "That was meant for you, actually. Forgive my neglect. You have my permission to help yourself."

"Do I?" asked Rosarius, limping over to the table with a scowl. "Do I really?" Like fuck he did! He grabbed the pitcher and tried to pour its contents out, but his shaky hands got more of it on his shoes than in the cup. Water. In the end he abandoned any notions of decorum and put the spout to his lips.

"I can't help but observe that you are trembling," said Colton. "Does this commission of enquiry make you nervous, perchance?"

Rosarius held up a mangled-looking wrist. "Nope," he said into his water. Some of it dribbled down his chin. "Been shaking like a motherfucker since I got out of the Hole. It comes and goes."

"Good grief." Dannis looked him up and down, his nose wrinkling in disgust.

"How uncouth!" said Tavaris. He was dabbing at his mouth with a lace handkerchief, looking ready to puke.

Rosarius edged closer to the table. He knew it wasn't just his potty mouth that was the source of their discomfort. The day before, the warders had given him a bucket of water and some fresh clothes, but despite his best efforts he was still encrusted with filth.

"Oh dear," said Dannis, waving a hand in front of his face. Tavaris paled and leaned back in his chair, pulling his handkerchief over his eyes.

Colton made a face and waved Rosarius away. "Yes, all right. Go now, please. You smell putrid. Go. You may take your vessel back to your place with you."

Rosarius grinned. He wasn't going anywhere. "Did you know that the Bastion's sewers run through the Hole? I hadn't really appreciated that fact until yesterday. The place is a toilet, basically."

"I see," said Colton. His eyes were beginning to water. "Right. Now if you'd be so kind as to stand back so we can get on with our business..."

"No," said Rosarius, moving closer to table until he practically butted up against it. "Not until you bring me a chair."

Dannis leapt to his feet. "Enough of this insolence! You will back up, Lozano, and you will back up now! Furthermore, you will frame your every utterance to our lord prince from now on using the correct appellation!"

Rosarius tossed the pitcher. It landed on the floor with a crack. "So, who are you again?"

Tavaris stood and gave Rosarius the hardest glare he could muster. "Your failure to address our lord prince by his title is galling to me as well, peasant! Were I you, I would do as I were told."

"Peasant?" asked Rosarius, reaching for the blade on his hip that wasn't there. "I'll make you eat that insult. This is the Bastion, remember? Just who the fuck do you think you're talking to?"

"Oh, dearie me," said Colton. "Dearie, dearie me!" He took his companions' hands and smiled. "It's quite all right, dear fellows! And let us not force this young gentleman to use the appellation, please. Why, if we were to insist on such strict protocol, we might find ourselves engaged in enquiry well past luncheon!"

"Very well, my lord prince," said Dannis, stroking Colton's hand as if it were a puppy.

"Your wish is our command," said Tavaris.

"Please do sit, dear fellows," said Colton. They sat, but neither seemed willing to let go of his hands. He looked at Rosarius. "Lozano dear, please find it in your heart to forgive my colleagues. I freely admit that they are a touch overzealous in their devotion to me, but no insult to you was intended. Of this I'm sure." He smiled at Dannis and Tavaris in turn, his eyes growing moist. "I do seem to inspire such love."

Dannis brought Colton's fingers to his lips. "There are no words, my sweet lord prince. No words." A tear slid down his face.

"I concur," whispered Tavaris, dabbing at his friend's cheek with his handkerchief. "No words."

"Fuck me," said Rosarius under his breath. How mad were these three? They were only here as a one-time thing, and thank fuck for that! Gods help the Bastion if they were here all the time.

Colton cleared his throat and looked at him. "Now, as I was saying, about a week ago you were involved in an altercation that resulted in the injury of several of your colleagues. What can you tell us about that? We wish a thorough account, so omit no detail, no matter how trivial it may seem."

"Yes," said Tavaris. "Tell us of the events of the night in question, Lozano."

Rosarius stared them down. "First, a chair."

Colton frowned. "Very well." To Dannis he said, "See to it that the gentleman is brought something suitable to sit on, please."

Dannis blinked. "You there!" he shouted at one of the guards. "I say, you there! You! Guardsman! Do fetch this man here something to sit on, will you? A chair!" He clapped his hands twice. "A chair, at once!"

The guard left the room, returning with a carved hall chair. Much to the chagrin of Dannis and Tavaris, Rosarius took it and sat with his legs spread.

"Now if you don't mind, Lozano," said Colton, "tell us what happened on the night in question. And again, I implore you,

please omit no detail. Tell us, no matter how trivial it may seem. We need to know everything.”

“What happened on the night in question?” asked Rosarius, clearing his throat. “Well, it all started months ago. You see, Romelo... er, that’s *Ales* Romelo of course, not his father the general—”

“We’ve no time for all that!” shouted Tavaris. “Get to the part about the fight!”

Rosarius looked at the man’s delicate features, imagined himself pummelling them with his fists. How many punches would it take to kill him? Not many, for those soft little cheekbones would probably cave in under the first blows. He smiled at the thought. “Yeah, well without the backstory, the fight doesn’t really make much sense.”

“I see,” said Colton, perhaps misinterpreting his grin as a gesture of co-operation. “Go on, then.”

“As I said, it all started some months ago. Romelo had mentioned in passing, er, to a group of us that is, that a certain student had insulted him...”

“And that student was...” Colton trailed off as he consulted his notes. “Ah, yes. It was Riva of Herena, was it not?”

“Yes,” said Rosarius, nodding. “Riva. And that’s Riva junior, of course, not senior. Wes Riva.”

Colton looked down at his notes again. “Wes, yes. Of course. Your clarification is acknowledged, Lozano, but wholly unnecessary. We know of whom you speak.”

Rosarius shrugged. “Right. Well anyway, we asked Romelo what he was on about, but he couldn’t really tell us. Couldn’t say how Riva had insulted him, exactly. He was drunk as shit and rambling on about Riva stealing things that didn’t belong to him. Of course, it was all bullsh—”

“Wait, what?” cried Dannis. “Explain the theft!”

“There was no theft. It was just Romelo talking out of his arse. As usual.”

Tavaris thumped the table with a fist. "I believe my colleague asked you to explain why this Wes person was stealing things. Ales said he was a thief, did he not?"

"He did, but--"

"So, elaborate."

"There's not really anything to tell," said Rosarius. "Riva's not a thief. Never was."

"But you just said that Ales said he was!" shouted Tavaris.

"In what way," said Dannis, "does taking something that doesn't belong to one *not* make one a thief?"

Rosarius shook his head. "Just because Romelo said Riva was stealing things doesn't make it true. All you need to know about Romelo is that he's melodramatic as fuck. Actually, that doesn't even begin to describe him. He's the biggest fucking diva you've ever met. He goes hysterical at the drop of a hat. And if you say or do anything he doesn't agree with, he flies into a rage. That's what happened with Riva. He did something Romelo didn't like, and Romelo took exception to it. Took it personally, even though it had nothing to do with him. From then on, he was obsessed with what he called 'getting even' with Riva. It was... bizarre."

"I see," said Colton. "So, you mean to argue that Wes is not a thief, then?"

"Right. And I believe I've said it a few times now. You should just let me explain the situation to you and seek clarification later. Look, this whole thing came about because Riva was seeing this girl from the city, all right? A citizen, I mean. She wasn't from a noble house or anything, but her father had money. Now, for some reason, Romelo didn't approve of them being together. He kept calling Riva *that Ahren barbarian*, you know, and that sort of thing. Saying stuff about how *his kind* had no business consorting with southern women."

"Ah," said Colton, nodding. "I see."

Rosarius scoffed. "So that's where all this talk of Riva being a thief came from. This girl spread her legs for him, and Romelo twists it so he's stealing her. All because she's southern and he's northern. How fucking stupid is that?"

"So, Wes did not *take* anything that actually belonged to mister Ales, then? No personal property of any kind?"

"Right." Rosarius spread his hands. "And what's also nuts is Romelo trying to set himself up as some sort of guardian of female virtue. He doesn't even like girls."

"Hmm," said Tavaris, wrinkling his nose. "Unlikely."

"Excuse me?" asked Rosarius.

"I said it's unlikely," said Tavaris, sniffing. "By which I mean that your story makes no sense at all. You say they were fighting over a woman? I say it's unlikely. I mean, women are things of little value, are they not? Things that may be had anywhere, by anyone. Therefore, they hardly need be fought over, do they?"

"Absolutely," said Dannis. "I concur. It sounds completely idiotic to my ears as well. To squabble over a woman? It would be like squabbling over a rock in a quarry."

"That's a shit analogy," said Rosarius. "And you're missing the point. It was never about the girl, or even about girls in general. It was about Romelo's blind hatred for Riva. Riva, who didn't even do anything wrong! It's insane. *He's* insane."

"You are aware," said Tavaris, "that the man you are speaking of so rudely is of noble birth, are you not?"

Rosarius stared. "Your point being?"

Tavaris looked down his nose at him. "What I mean to say is, do you really think it prudent to insult your betters?"

"Romelo's hardly my better," said Rosarius, laughing. "He's my cousin."

Dannis and Tavaris exchanged glances. Worried glances.

"It's true," said Colton. "They are indeed cousins."

Rosarius laughed again, even though it sent a fresh ripple of pain through his body. They had no idea who he was! Good. Now that he had them off balance, it was time to press the advantage. If he could goad them into insulting him again, he would challenge them. Or perhaps he could make them angry enough to challenge him? Either way was fine so long as it satisfied his bloodlust. "You two have no fucking idea who you're talking to," he said. "Do you?"

"Hmm," said Colton, squeezing their hands. His expression said he knew they were walking a dangerous path. "We graciously concede the point. Upon reflection, it strikes me that for a man to argue with another about a woman is not entirely without precedent. I mean, there are many old tales of friends falling out over a lady." He paused. "So I gather from all this that Ales and Wes were love rivals, yes?"

Rosarius concealed his disappointment at Colton having thwarted him so easily. But then again, his plan hadn't exactly been a sophisticated one. "Love rivals? Haven't you been listening? No part of this is about girls. Anyway, Romelo likes boys exclusively. And little ones, too. It's fucking disgust--"

"Hmm," said Colton loudly, cutting him off. "Hmm. Well one thing's for certain, and it's that Ales has certainly complained about Wes a lot these past few months. In fact, I have in my possession a number of missives he wrote to the Bastion's administrators about him."

"So? What does that have to do with anything?"

"Well, to quote him, 'I believe that Ahren barbarians have no business--'"

"Yeah, yeah," said Rosarius, holding up a hand. "I'll just finish that sentence for you, eh? I'll bet it goes something like 'Ahren barbarians have no business training at the Bastion?' Or is it 'Ahren barbarians have no business being in Sarasinia?' Is that it? If I've heard that bullshit once, I've heard it a hundred times."

"I find myself quite in agreement with those sentiments, though," said Dannis.

"Yes indeed," said Tavaris. "As do I. Sarasinia, after all, is for Sarasinians."

Dannis snorted. "I mean, it's implied in the name!"

Colton rubbed his chin. "Am I correct in assuming that you, Lozano, do not agree with this?"

"You *are* correct," said Rosarius. "I couldn't agree less if I tried."

Colton stared at him. "Then why did you take part in the altercation on the night in question? And on your cousin's side, no less?"

"An excellent question, my lord prince!" exclaimed Tavaris.

"Oh, you have him there, my lord prince!" shouted Dannis, thumping the table with both hands. "See how his face flushes with guilt! See how he squirms under your scrutiny!"

Rosarius considered the question. "Well—"

Tavaris let out a shriek of triumph and leapt to his feet. "Aha! You have him! He's finished! Guilty!"

Colton motioned for silence. "Let Lozano speak, please."

"Hmf," said Tavaris, sitting down.

"Romelo is family," said Rosarius. "Riva isn't. When he told me that Riva had slighted him, I took it at face value. I didn't ask questions. I only felt obligated to come to his defence, so that's what I did. My time in the Hole made me see things in a whole new light, though, I have to say. For one, it made me realise how truly full of shit Romelo is. Friends of mine got hurt because of him, and because of me. I should never have acted on that cunt's behalf, family or not."

"Gods above, but this man's mouth needs to be washed out," said Dannis. "Must we *really* be subjected to such foul language?"

"Indeed." Tavaris wagged his head. "I, too, object to the foulness of this man's words."

"I do concur," said Colton. "But regardless, let's move on." He referred to his parchment again. "On the night of the altercation, Lozano, several students were indeed badly injured, just as you've said. I would like to know how that happened, exactly."

Rosarius took a deep breath. "Right. Well, some weeks ago Romelo started having Riva followed. Apparently, he wanted to be kept informed of Riva's comings and goings. And I mean as in all the time, night and day. I think that gives you some idea of just how obsessed he'd become." He shook his head. "The signs were there, even then. But I ignored them..."

"Yes, yes, we acknowledge your thoughts on the matter," said Colton. "Moving on. Now, I understand that on the night in

question, Ales posted you and one or two others around the city as spies?"

"As spies?" asked Rosarius, frowning. "No. No, where did you get that idea? We weren't there as spies. We were there to corral Riva, to try to funnel him toward this alley where Romelo was waiting. And there were a lot of us, too, not just one or two. My squad alone had at least a dozen in it. Maybe more."

Colton looked confused. "I'm sorry, but did you say that your squad alone contained a dozen members?"

"Yes. At least."

"And how many squads were there?"

"I dunno. Four, maybe?"

"Four?" Colton's eyebrows went up so high they were lost under his fringe. "So, as many as *fifty* students may have been involved in this? The reports I have here mention nothing of such numbers..."

"Then they're wrong," said Rosarius. "Wait—can I ask how many students went to the Hole after we were arrested?"

Tavaris yawned. "Oh dear. This *is* getting tedious, isn't it?"

"Rather," said Dannis. "My lord prince, do we *really* need to hear all these silly details? I mean, what does it matter how many students took part?"

"Oh, I must say, I quite agree with Parms on this, my lord prince," said Tavaris, stretching his arms in what seemed like an exaggerated way.

"Thank you, Bo-Bo dear," said Dannis.

"Welcome, dear. Oh, and this investigation has gone on long enough, don't you think?" said Tavaris, yawning. "It's very boring, and I can think of a hundred far more exciting things we could do with our time." He looked meaningfully at Colton's lap.

"What the fuck is going on here?" asked Rosarius, narrowing his eyes. They were obviously trying to cover something up. "How many students went to the Hole besides me? More importantly, who didn't go? Did Romelo go? Tell me that Romelo went to the Hole as well!"

"I move to terminate this investigation," said Dannis. "Immediately."

Tavaris winked at him. "Seconded."

Colton looked at his companions, shocked. "Oh dear. I simply cannot believe the two of you!"

"My lord prince?" Dannis looked frightened.

"We are conducting an investigation," said Colton, "into an episode in which noble sons of this great city were grievously injured and could easily have lost their lives. In fact, some may yet lose their lives! Some of the individuals involved come from very important Sarasinian families! There are provincial families involved too, granted, but we cannot merely ignore them, can we? No! No, no, no! This is an event that, though apparently trivial to you, has the potential to send shockwaves throughout our entire dominion. Lo! We must remember that the eyes of the world are upon us, just as we must remember that we are expected to do our utmost to uncover the truth of the matter. Ours is a lofty task indeed. The ramifications—not only of what has happened but how we are seen to respond to it—why, they simply boggle the mind! No, I cannot emphasise enough how serious this is, my dear fellows. So, please, I urge us to complete our duties with due diligence!"

Tavaris and Dannis cringed like dogs about to be whipped. "Oh, my lord prince," said Tavaris, his voice on the edge of breaking. "Pray forgive us."

"Absolutely, my lord prince," said Dannis. "Forgive us, even though I know that we have surely given you just cause to chasten us so ferociously." He let out a sob.

Colton's face softened and he put his arms around the pair. "There, there," he said, pouting. "My dear, dear sweet brethren! Did I speak too harshly with you just now? Of a certainty, I did. There, I freely admit it. But can you not see that we are almost finished here? And I just know what a relief it will be to the public when they come to understand, as surely as we do in our heart of hearts, that there could not possibly have been a guilty party in this matter. It was all, quite obviously, an accident.

Nevertheless, before we deliver that final judgement, let us please allow this man to continue with his testimony."

Rosarius froze. Was he right in assuming that, unlike himself, his cousin had so far received no punishment? And likely wouldn't? "Did you just say," he said, mouth open, "that you think what happened was all just an *accident*?"

"Hmm?" said Colton, waving a hand. "Er, just... just go on with your tale please, Lozano. And skip ahead, too, if you don't mind, to the altercation itself."

"Yes," said Tavaris, mirroring Colton's gesture. "Just skip to the fight, please, Lozano."

"Then you're free to go back to your boarding house," said Dannis. "Or wherever. Let's get this over with, shall we?"

Rosarius sighed. "Whatever." The Hole had left him exhausted and aching, and he wasn't entirely sure if being around these idiots wasn't doing his head in. Better just to give them what they wanted, for good or ill. Whatever was going to happen was probably out of his hands anyway. "So, as I was saying, we had the job of trying to corral Riva. It took some doing, but we finally got him cornered in some back street. Romelo had made it clear we weren't to do anything until after he got there..."

"Anyway, when Romelo finally showed up, he made this rambling anti-foreigner speech that made no sense. I mean, we had at least a half dozen Ivarians with us, and others from the provinces! I was glad of that speech though, because it made me realise what an idiot he was. And his speech definitely pissed the Ivarians off. He tried to make another one, but it was just a repeat of the first. He was apoplectic by the end of it, raving about how Riva had to die for having the gall not to be born a Sarasinian. Oh, it was something else, that speech.

"So, we all stood there for ages, just looking at each other. The Ivarians were shaking their heads, saying they were leaving. I told Romelo in no uncertain terms we weren't going to kill Riva. A student by the name of Villasenor backed me up. Romelo wasn't happy about it, of course. He started screaming his head off about how Villasenor was a traitor to the Sarasinian cause, or

some shit. Then they started wrestling, and Romelo stabbed him in the arm. Swords came out, and then some of Riva's friends showed up. They must have gotten wind about what Romelo was doing and, well, anyway... talk about bad timing. Things got confusing. There were too many people there, too much happening. A lot of shouting. Tempers frayed. And then, of course, everything went to shit..."

Rosarius took a deep breath. "It was chaos. Total chaos. People were screaming and fighting. Benton... Ah, shit. I remember Benton going toe to toe with Milo. Milo opened him up from wrist to elbow, and then spun around and damn near took off Mora's entire hand. He came at me, too, like he didn't even know me. We were friends, or so I thought. I'll never forget his eyes... he just went fuckin' crazy! I fended him off, but I knew I was going to get hurt. Luckily some others came in at that point and he got distracted. And then I remember Beccera going around Benton..."

"And?" asked Colton.

Rosarius put his head in his hands. "Beccera... he got around Benton and ran him through. Or at least he tried to. His blade snapped off, I think, but it must have gone in deep." He looked up. "Shit. You don't know if he's all right, do you?"

"No, I don't," said Colton, shaking his head. "A number of the... injured combatants... have since returned to their homes."

"There must have been a few. What about Lucius? His face was cut, I think. Do you know if he's all right?"

"No," said Colton. "Please go on with your story, Lozano."

Rosarius shook his head. "That's it. That's all I remember. I can't... I mean, the rest is a blur. I can't really remember what happened after that, exactly. Not with any detail. All I know is that we all ended up getting arrested and taken to the Hole. And now I'm here, talking to you..."

Colton tapped the table with a finger. "That's it?"

"Yeah," said Rosarius with a sigh. "I guess that's it. Gods, it was all so fucking stupid. I can't even believe it actually happened. We were all friends and we turned on each other. And for what? Fucking Romelo."

"You know," said Colton, "your story is much the same as others we've heard. Mind you, your cousin Ales painted a totally different picture of events. Would you like to know what he said?"

Rosarius felt his anger rising. "I would."

"It's quite interesting, actually. He said that you, Wes, and others attacked him and his friends."

"He fuckin' said what?"

"Why? Do you find that... objectionable?"

"Of course I do!" shouted Rosarius, making a fist. "It's a complete fucking lie!"

"Oh, hardly!" shouted Dannis. "After all, the Romelo family is practically royalty!"

"Well said," said Tavaris, giving Rosarius a peevish look. "What would such a personage have to gain from lying? Oh, but you'd have us slander royalty, Lozano, is that it? Perhaps your spell in the dungeons has unbalanced you?"

"Royalty?" said Rosarius. "First I hear you calling Colton here a prince, and now you're saying House Romelo is royalty? What is this? Sarasinia is a fucking republic! Have you lost your fucking minds?"

"I think you have the right of it," said Colton, nodding at Tavaris. "Our dear friend Lozano here does indeed appear to have been affected adversely by his spell in the dungeons." He slapped the table with a hand. "And so, I do believe that brings us to the conclusion of our investigation! I shall have our final report drafted, naturally, but I think it's safe to say that, as we suspected from the outset, what happened was but a simple disagreement amongst hotheaded youths. And one that, regrettably, got somewhat out of hand. It's the very definition of the word 'accident' is it not? Boys will be boys, eh?"

Rosarius jumped to his feet, heedless of his squalling, protesting muscles. "Fuckin' what?"

Colton feigned deafness. "We are done here, Lozano," he said, standing up. "A small levy will be imposed upon the families of the individuals involved to compensate our fine city for

disturbing its peace. With the exception of the Romelo family, of course. You're free to go back to your studies. Good day."

"Good day," said Dannis and Tavaris together. They filed out of the room in Colton's wake, their noses pointed at the ceiling. The guards followed.

Rosarius stared after them. Good day? He'd just gotten out of the Hole for doing his cousin's dirty work. Dirty work that had gotten friends badly hurt. And gotten his family fined into the bargain? And Romelo's punishment for starting all the trouble was apparently... nothing? No. It would not stand. "What the fuck?" he screamed, hurling his chair across the room. It skidded and bounced off a wall. Ignoring the pain flaring in his arms and back, he went to retrieve it and dashed it against the floor until it broke apart. He did the same with each of the remaining chairs.

He paced around the room, livid. Oh, he wasn't done here yet—far from it! He jumped onto the table. It flexed and wobbled under his weight, but didn't crack down the middle like he'd hoped. With a roar, he leapt off and upended the thing. "Motherfucker!" he bellowed, kicking at the remnants of the broken chairs and sending them flying.

In his mind's eye, Romelo laughed at his efforts. "I'll fucking kill you, Romelo!" he screamed. Summoning the last of his strength, he grabbed the table by two legs and ran with the whole thing, using it as a battering ram against one of the doors. The door came away with only minor damage, but one of the table legs snapped off in his hands. He sagged to the ground, sore and spent. "I'll fucking kill you," he said, closing his eyes. "I'll fucking kill you."

GORARIC**NO. 18 GARRISON COMPANY****SARASINIAN OCCUPIED AHRENIA****HERENA**

It was dark in the barracks, and Goraric perched on his mattress, hoping that his comrades were asleep. He took a deep breath, then crept over to where Ostolaza lay snoring and put a hand under his pillow. It was a long while before his fingertips brushed against the man's coin purse, during which he ran the gamut of fear, sorrow, disappointment, anger and joy.

Fear, because he was terrified of being caught. Stealing from a fellow soldier carried a penalty of fifty lashes and branding with a hot iron. Few survived the ordeal.

Sorrow, because Ostolaza would soon figure out who'd taken his money. They were friends, and the guilt would stay with him for a long time. Perhaps forever.

Disappointment, because his behaviour was out of character. His mother hadn't raised him to be a petty criminal, had she? Apparently, yes.

Anger, because of what had happened in the forest. Nightmares troubled him ever since, and he was loath to spend another day in the company of men who thought the rape and murder of children mere sport.

Joy, because the purse was now his!

There was no need to count the money. He could tell by the weight that he didn't have anywhere near the amount he needed. He'd seen Ostolaza waving a drem about earlier—what had become of that? He looked to confirm that it definitely wasn't here with the rest of the coins. Shit! Nothing for it but to nab a few more purses...

Throughout his life, enough had happened to Goraric to suggest that he was a singularly lucky individual. He separated girls from their clothing without really trying, for instance. He often won at card games despite not knowing the rules of any of them. And the number of times he rolled four-of-a-kind to win at *Carry the Day*? Honestly, it beggared belief. So it didn't exactly come as a surprise when he eventually escaped the barracks, weighed down by the savings of many soon-to-be former comrades. His crowning achievement was pocketing Captain Lamela's small hoard of silver. He felt no great pride at stealing from his brothers in arms, but not a shred of regret about robbing the company commander.

Just after dawn, Goraric slipped out of the city and headed north. It would have been quicker to take the main road, but the way was heavily patrolled and he didn't want to run into anyone who might recognise him. He took the dirt track by the river instead. A mile or two later he still hadn't seen any soldiers, so he decided not to press his luck and took to the surrounding forest. Leaving a designated path carried risks of its own. He could be mugged. And killed. Or accused of banditry, perhaps. And killed. But no one challenged him for luckily he came across no souls in the

woods. The walk was not easy, though, and he left shreds of his clothes on thorny bushes.

Despite the profusion of growth, he did not lose his bearings. He soon lost sight of Herena's great land walls, though, and felt immediately better for it. A few more miles, and the sack containing his mail shirt and sword began to chafe his shoulder. Gritting his teeth, he persevered.

He reached the old temple around mid-morning. His uncle had brought him here for the first time when he was seven or eight. The entrance was designed so that casual passers-by would miss it, and even though he most likely hadn't been followed, he looked around to make sure he was alone before descending the stairs. On reaching the pit, he saw that someone had recently swept the flagstones. The old cistern was full of water, too, and there was even a new offering plate at the foot of Owic, whose stone features gleamed even in the darkness. He smiled at the thought of fellow devotees maintaining this sacred place.

Dumping his sack on the floor with a groan, he stretched his aching shoulder muscles before washing his face and hands three times in the cistern. Then he knelt before Owic and dropped a handful of sen into the offering plate. After a moment's hesitation, he took the sen out and replaced them with a drem. On this occasion, silver was a more fitting gift for a god than brass or bronze.

He bowed his head and closed his eyes. "Lord Owic," he whispered, "I profess myself Your humble disciple. I offer You, the Helmed One, Lord of Shields, this sacrifice." He paused, thinking. With the essential part of the rite complete, he thought about how best to phrase his appeal. "My lord, You know what I aim to do. You know that I do it in Your name. If it pleases You, grant me success." On reflection, it was a rather brief prayer. Surely that wouldn't be a problem, would it? He didn't think Owic would find his brevity offensive, but when it came to gods you could never really be certain of anything.

Worried about dallying too long, Goraric left the temple. His shoulder still troubled him, but his steps felt lighter—praise Owic

for small mercies! He walked until mid-afternoon, stopping every so often to take a swig from his water skin.

He reached the edge of the broad northern meadows an hour or so before the sun began its final descent. Though the land hereabouts was green, in reality it wasn't good for much. Few trees grew, and those that did barely reached the height of a man before collapsing. Things had been different in the past—or at least that was what he'd heard—but he knew little about it beyond that. Few tried to settle here, and most avoided the place. Almost everyone agreed that the land was cursed.

With Herena well behind him, he climbed a nearby hill to get a better sense of exactly where he was. He couldn't see it yet, but Engund's Tor was probably less than half a day away. The sun dipped behind a cloud, and as the daylight suddenly faded, so did his courage. Owic give him strength, but what seemed like a good idea yesterday now seemed foolish. Would they welcome him on the Tor?

He sat on the hill until full dark, paralysed by anxiety, and it was the middle of the night before he lay down to sleep. It took several more hours before he reached a state that lay frustratingly far from both sleep and wakefulness. And as it had every night since the murders in the forest, his mind tortured him with bad dreams.

5

BENE

THE UNIVERSITY OF GERICH ASSET RECOVERY TEAM

EASTERN RENDEROS

Not wanting to be anywhere near Khela for a while, Bene left camp with the last of the outgoing riders. He rode angrily for the first few miles, but the more distance he put between them, the better he began to feel. Fuck her, he thought, sucking in a fresh lungful of cold Renderosi air. While he probably did deserve some pushback for the way he'd carried on back there, she really had no call to insult him for the size of his penis.

He followed the soldier in front of him. Wherever the fuck they were, it was shrouded by fog. He was glad he wasn't in charge of navigating. Through a wall of dead grass taller than his horse, he saw the outline of thatched rooves. A village, maybe? He hoped the inhabitants had the sense to stay at home. Sometimes they got curious and tagged along, and Tonneson's lot didn't like that.

Standing orders were to warn the locals off, but if they refused, to give them steel. Nothing could get in the way of their mission.

Though he didn't want them to, his thoughts drifted back to Khela, to some of the other things she'd said. She'd accused him of being jealous. He'd denied it, of course, but only because he hadn't wanted to admit that she was right. He hated that she'd slept with Tonneson. The idea of sharing her made him feel ill. Curse his stupid brain for continuing to picture the pair of them with their groins locked together!

And curse his heart, too, for still harbouring feelings for the girl. So stupid that he'd only come to love her after they'd broken up. After he'd taken his shot and missed. She'd moved on. So what, though? Had he expected otherwise? She was her own person, capable of making her own decisions. So what if one of them had been to fuck Tonneson? Enough of that, though. He was starting to go around in circles. And anyway, what was the point of wasting mental energy on someone who probably wasn't thinking about him?

There was no more time to reflect. With the fog suddenly behind him and riders scattering, he had to decide which tracker team to join. He chose Hassing and Mulkern. He didn't know much about Mulkern except that he was just another trooper, but Hassing's reputation preceded him. More than once he'd heard about how the sergeant had a nose on him that would have made a sniffer dog jealous. And just this morning, the soldier Russek had proclaimed him the Scouts' best tracker.

Hassing led them swiftly away from the other teams, following what Bene had come to know as a *shepherds' trail*. It was one of many things the soldiers had taught him. The man dismounted once to read the spoor, though Bene had to admit that he still had no idea what that was, exactly. Sometimes the spoor was a twig. It could also be a rock or a patch of snow. When Bene looked at those things, he didn't see anything special. But Hassing did. And what he saw on this occasion caused him to leave the shepherds' trail and follow the myriad animal tracks snaking through the woods.

Somewhere around mid-morning, the sergeant found their quarry.

"There!" cried Hassing, pointing to the edge of a swamp. At first Bene wasn't sure what he was supposed to be looking at, so he just stared at the reeds and the glassy surface of the water, all brown and nasty-looking. But then he heard a strangled cry, after which a figure dashed out from behind some bushes and charged headlong into the bog.

Mulkern raised his crossbow and snapped off a bolt. The missile went wide and vanished in the muck. "Aw, fuck it!" he said, reloading.

Hassing steadied his horse. "Don't waste another shot. She's out of range." He put a horn to his lips and blew a long note.

"We going in after her, sarge?" asked Mulkern, an expectant look on his face.

"My word we are," said the sergeant, nodding.

The soldiers left the horses, shrugged out of their cloaks and ran into the swamp. Bene followed. Even though he didn't think he was all that out of shape, he was gasping for breath in an embarrassingly short time. He did his best to keep up, but lagged behind from the beginning.

On the other hand, he was perfectly positioned to watch the pursuit unfold. Desperation lent the girl some initial speed, but she tired quickly. She also wasted energy lumbering over mossy hummocks rather than dashing around them, and all the while the swampy ground sucked at her boots, slowing her pace.

Hassing and Mulkern sped along, predators after a prey that just wasn't up to the task of outrunning them. The sergeant got a hand on the girl, but then slipped and almost fell. She managed to spin away from his grasp, the hood of her cloak flying back and flapping against her shoulders as she pelted along. She cried out in terror. He lunged for her again but missed.

"Get her!" shouted Mulkern.

The girl panicked. In her confusion, she stopped, then doubled back. Mulkern went to tackle her, but she fended him off with one arm. As he pitched over, he reached out and slapped her ankle.

She tripped, landing in a pool of slimy water, arms flailing. She was still trying to get out when Hassing came flying and dropped square on top of her.

"Ha!" cried Mulkern, on his feet again and punching the air in victory. His celebration turned out to be premature, for the girl soon wriggled out from underneath the sergeant. "Oh shit!"

Bene had almost caught up to everyone by then, though he gasped and wheezed while stomping gracelessly through the water. He gaped at Hassing who was lying insensible with a trickle of blood running down his forehead. "She's going to get away!"

Mulkern moved to intercept her, but Hassing managed to recover his wits. "Ungh," he said to the girl as he grabbed her by her ankles and reeled her back into the pool with him. She fought, screaming and kicking and landing hard blows on his shoulders and jaw. He deflected her last with a forearm, then lunged and punched her full in the face.

"She out?" asked Mulkern as the sergeant pushed the girl's limp body out of the pool.

"Obviously," said Hassing, breathing hard. He was wet and covered in freezing bog muck.

Mulkern made a whistling noise at the girl's squashed nose and the blood sheeting her face. "You really fucked her up!"

"Yeah. Sound the horn, will you?"

Mulkern blew two lengthy notes. "How long?"

The sergeant looked at him. "Until what?"

"Until she wakes up?"

Hassing pointed. "She's already starting to come around."

"Oh shit! What if she... you know?"

"Just relax, trooper."

"I mean, really, what if she's got that thing and she-?"

"Calm down."

"But she could be-? What if she turns us into-?"

Hassing fixed Mulkern with a stony glare. "I'll not say it again, trooper. Breathe. And stop fingering your crossbow like that, will you? She hasn't turned me, if that's what you're worried about."

"Right," said Mulkern, sighing in relief. "Right."

"Mm."

"Do you think it's really *her*?"

"Dunno yet," said Hassing, rubbing his jaw. He uncoiled a length of rope.

"It isn't," said Bene, still out of breath. He felt worse than terrible, and was dangerously close to losing his breakfast. "It's not her."

Hassing said nothing as he bent to the task of securing the girl's arms.

Mulkern looked startled. "No?"

Bene sucked in air like he was trying to win some kind of breathing contest. "No. I'd know. It isn't her."

"Really?"

Bene pointed at the girl's tight brown curls. "Yeah," he said between breaths. "Hair's all wrong. Wrong colour and everything. Not only that, but—"

"We still have to take her in," said Hassing as he removed her backpack and cloak and tossed them aside. "Heads up."

"Yes, sergeant." Though he wasn't happy about being cut off by a man who was technically his inferior, Bene let it go. Roaoo always said that if he rode out with the soldiers, he was to assume the rank of private.

"Let's start checking her gear then," said Mulkern, reaching for the backpack. He spilled the contents on the ground and began rummaging around. There was a water skin, strips of jerked meat, and a leather pouch containing a few pieces of pyrite and some charred cloth wrapped in bark.

"Go through these carefully," said Hassing, tossing Bene a muddy fur-lined coat and shirt. "Check for hidden pockets." Then he began taking off the girl's trousers.

"No problem," said Bene. He couldn't help but notice the speed with which the man stripped the girl to the waist. She had small, firm breasts and dark skin. Much darker than the girl they wanted.

"What's the thing supposed to look like, again?" asked Mulkern. "Heavy, length of a finger, dull. And what else?"

Hassing gave him an annoyed look. "You're kidding me, right? *Heavy, dull, metallic. The length of your index finger.*"

"Oh right," said Mulkern. "Yeah. Well, there's nothing like that here." He shoved the girl's belongings aside and watched the sergeant go about his business. "Hasn't got much in the way of tits, eh?" he said, pointing. He smirked at Bene, who smirked back. Hassing pursed his lips but didn't reply.

"Uungh," said the girl, not yet fully conscious. Hassing took off her trousers and flung them aside, leaving her naked apart from her boots and gloves.

"Woah," said Mulkern. "Look at the size of that hedge! It's like you didn't even take her pants off!" Bene couldn't help but laugh.

"Mm," said Hassing, not really listening. He removed the girl's gloves and boots and upended them. Nothing fell out. Then he removed his own right glove and took a breath.

Mulkern screwed up his face. "Oh no, sergeant. You really gonna do it?"

"Orders are orders." As Hassing's fingers disappeared up between the girl's legs, it seemed to Bene as if she suddenly regained complete consciousness. She screamed and struggled, and Mulkern had to jump in to help hold her down. The sergeant completed his task, then flipped her onto her belly and began a second investigation. This time the girl howled like an injured animal.

"Oh," said Bene, wincing at the sight. "Oh. Geez." He'd known it was coming, of course, but hadn't expected the reality of it to be so... confronting. And he wasn't even the recipient! No one was holding his naked body down and putting their finger all... in him... like that. "That was, uh, something," he said when it was over.

Mulkern pursed his lips. "She couldn't have swallowed the fucking thing, could she?"

Hassing held up one of his palms. "*The length of your index finger?* I doubt it, but who knows? We'll take her back and let

Roaaa deal with her." He pointed to a spot behind the trooper. "I think I dropped my crossbow around there somewhere. Find it for me, will you?"

Mulkern left and came back with the sergeant's weapon. "Should I sound the horn again?" he asked, handing it over.

"Yeah," said Hassing. "Twice this time." The girl was shivering, so he helped her sit up and put her cloak around her shoulders. He returned the supplies to her backpack, then cleaned and reloaded his crossbow.

They all sat in silence, Bene and the soldiers crouching and alert, the girl huddled with her knees to her chest. Blood dripped down her face. An answering call was heard, miles away, after which Mulkern blew the horn again.

They waited. "Hey," said the trooper, a note of panic in his voice. "Hey! I'm pretty sure I didn't have this spot on my arm before..."

Bene looked at Mulkern's arm but didn't see anything out of the ordinary. He shrugged. "Nah. It's nothing."

The words did little to alleviate the man's worry. "So I'm not turning, then?"

"No. It's not *her*, remember?"

"Try to keep it together, son," said Hassing without so much as glancing in Mulkern's direction. "You're fine."

More time passed. Despite the cold, a cloud of mosquitoes descended. As Bene slapped and shooed them away, Mulkern blew the horn again. The soldiers seemed to sense something happening to the north, well beyond the marsh. He couldn't see anything, though, not unless you counted rocks and trees.

"Is that Hoyt?" asked Mulkern.

Hassing grunted. "And Tod."

"Wow," said Bene. He could make out some indistinct shapes moving a long way off, sort of, but that was it. If he hadn't known where to look, he'd have almost certainly missed them. "You guys have keen eyes."

"All right," said Hassing, getting up. "Let's go." He hauled the girl to her feet and led her by the elbow.

Soldier Tod was the first to greet them. "You two look like a couple o' bog monsters," he said, grinning at Hassing and Mulkern's mucky leathers. He turned to Bene. "How you doing, sir?"

"I'm all right," said Bene.

Hoyt peered at the wound on Hassing's forehead. "She gave you a bit o' trouble, looks like."

The sergeant shrugged. "It's nothing."

"Brought her down all by himself," said Mulkern.

"Not true," said Hassing, pressing his lips into a flat line. "It was a team effort."

"So?" asked Hoyt. "Is it *her*?"

Hassing shook his head. "No. Another decoy, most likely."

Hoyt made a face. "Fuck. That sucks."

"So," said Mulkern tiredly, "do we need to go back for the horses now or what?"

Tod shook his head. "Nah. We got Judsen and Alec waiting down the track with spares."

"Fuck yeah!" said Mulkern, making a fist. "Fuck yeah! I fuckin' love the Scouts!"

"Quit the chatter," said Hassing. "Let's get where we need to go, shall we?"

Troopers Judsen and Alec were indeed awaiting them with spare horses. The pair were so well camouflaged that if they hadn't stepped out onto the track when they did, Bene probably have walked right past. Still, he tried to play it cool and pretend he hadn't flinched at the sight of them.

"For you, sergeant," said Judsen, handing Hassing the reins to Brown Becca. "The honour's all yours."

Brown Becca was the sergeant's favourite, Bene knew. She was a solid mare, an Ivorian, and the kind that could take both a rider and passenger without flipping the fuck out. Which, as far as horses went, was comparatively rare. The man almost smiled as he took her into his care.

They untied the girl, only to clap iron shackles on her wrists and ankles before putting her on top of the horse. Bene noticed how well she sat sidesaddle. Probably a decent rider, which meant they'd really have to keep an eye on her. He gawped at the dark legs poking out from beneath her coat, and tried not to dwell on the fact that she was otherwise naked. Hassing must have seen him looking because when he got up behind her in the saddle, he closed her coat and tied it shut with a leather strap.

Tonneson was the first to meet them when they finally made it back to camp. He looked from the girl's bloodied face to Hassing's and back again. "Is it her?" he asked.

"No sir," said Hassing, shaking his head. "We're inclined to think not."

Tonneson frowned. "Ah. Well, Roaoo is waiting for you in his tent regardless. Take her there directly, please. Best not to keep him waiting."

"Sir."

Tonneson pointed at Mulkern. "And you go with him."

Mulkern straightened in the saddle. "Yes, sir."

Stablehands came for the horses. Hassing dismounted, helped his captive down, and led her away. Bene followed with Mulkern.

Khela let them into Roaoo's tent. Bene noted the effort she put into not looking at him, and he retaliated in kind. One of these days he'd be the bigger man and stop playing silly games. But not today.

"Ah, and there you are," said Roaoo, emerging from behind his writing desk as they entered. "Sergeant, trooper." He offered Bene no greeting aside from a curt nod, but that was nothing new.

"Magister," said Hassing and Mulkern in unison.

Roaoo went to the girl, pushing aside hair that had fallen down past her forehead. He frowned at her broken nose. "Give me something to clean her up with, will you?" he asked of no one in particular.

"Here sir," said Khela, bringing him a piece of cloth that she doused with water from a pitcher on Roaoo's desk.

"Unh!" said the girl as Roaoo took the cloth and dabbed at the blood on her face. She flinched and jerked her head away.

"It's not *her*," said Khela.

Roaoo nodded. "No. It's not."

"Definitely not her," said Bene, annoyed that Khela had beaten him to the punch. "I was there when they took her, you know."

Roaoo gave Bene a withering look. "Thank you," he said, "for belabouring the point."

"Well..." said Bene, but then he broke off. Not only did he not know how to complete the sentence, he didn't want to back answer the magister. Only fools did that.

"You may go," Roaoo told Khela. No doubt he knew that if he let her stay, she and Bene would start bickering. That, and she wasn't actually needed. She didn't look pleased about being asked to leave, and Bene made sure to catch her eye and grin as she departed. Antagonising her wasn't as satisfying as he'd hoped, but he couldn't help himself.

The magister waited until Khela was gone before taking Mulkern and Bene into a corner of the tent. "So, what happened?"

Mulkern swallowed. "The girl was hiding in the forest a few miles west of here, sir, probably heading for Akwie."

"I see," said Roaoo. "Actually, it's pronounced *Okwei*. Do try to get it right. All right, so then what happened?"

"The sergeant and I ran her down. We searched her. The clothes and bag are the target's, we think, but--"

Roaoo rubbed his chin. "But she doesn't have the object on her?"

"No, sir. Not that we could find, anyway."

"And you're certain of this?"

"Yes, sir." Mulkern glanced at Hassing and swallowed again before turning his eyes back to Roaoo. "The sergeant was as, uh, well... he was as thorough as you ordered us to be, sir."

Roao looked Bene up and down. "And you accompanied them into the swamp, did you? What say you of this trooper's account?"

"I'd say it's about right," said Bene, nodding. "I can't really add anything to it."

"Very well," said Roao. Then he turned and went back to where Hassing waited with their captive.

"Oh boy," whispered Bene. "This is going to be something."

Mulkern grunted. "Yeah. I'm sure."

Roao began his interrogation with surprisingly little preamble. "Pay close attention to my words, please," he told the girl. "I have questions and you have answers. I'm looking for someone that I suspect you met recently. Do you understand me?"

The girl turned her face away.

"Here it comes," murmured Bene.

"What's your name?" Roao asked the girl.

She shook her head.

At a nod from Roao, Hassing traded places with him and forced the girl onto her knees. The sergeant knelt so he was about eye level with her, and without warning, jammed his fingers into her face.

"What's your name?" Hassing hissed as he squeezed her nose. She shrieked and tried to wriggle away, but he held her fast. Her irons rattled as she struggled. "Tell me your name."

The girl burst into tears, but said nothing.

Mulkern coughed and looked down at his feet. "Come on," he muttered under his breath. "Just tell him."

"Damn it!" shouted Roao. "Save yourself the trouble, girl! Give us your name!"

Hassing let go of the girl's head. She started panting when he came at her again, as if steeling herself for another bout of pain. In the moment before his fingers made contact again, she screamed a word.

"What?" asked Roao, motioning at Hassing to move aside. "What did you say?"

"Agbo!" screamed the girl. "Agbo! My name is Agbo! Please don't hurt me anymore!"

Hassing stood up and took a pace backward.

"Agbo?" Roaoo moved to stand in front of her. "Your name's Agbo?"

"Yes," said the girl, nodding. "Yes. Please don't hurt me anymore! I'll talk, I'll talk."

Roaoo turned and said, "Trooper Mulkern, go and fetch Agbo something to eat, will you?"

"Yes, sir." Mulkern sounded relieved as he hurried away.

"Sit, Agbo," said Roaoo in a soft voice. He brought a chair and helped the girl down onto it. "Sit. Are you thirsty? Would you like some water?"

"You don't understand!" bawled Agbo, tears streaming down her face. "Now she's going to kill them!"

"Get these restraints off her, will you sergeant?" asked Roaoo. After Hassing removed his leather strap from around Agbo's coat and unshackled her, the magister brought a cup of water that she downed almost in one gulp. "Now, you said *she*? What do you mean by that?"

Agbo hesitated. "A woman."

Roaoo's voice was gentle. "What woman?"

"A woman I met in the forest."

"Who?"

"I don't know her." Agbo, shook her head. "I never met her before."

Roaoo nodded. "All right. You said she's going to kill *them*? Who do you mean? Who is she going to kill?"

Agbo hesitated again before answering. "My family."

"Why's that, Agbo?"

"She said she'd kill them if I told anyone I met her."

"Ah. And how will this... person... do that, exactly? How would she even know you told anyone about her?"

Agbo began bawling. "I don't know! She said she'd know if I told. Ooh, I shouldn't be talking! I shouldn't be talking! Now I've killed them..."

Roao put both hands on her shoulders. "No, Agbo. No. It's not true. You've done no such thing."

"Yes, I have!"

"No," said Roao, cupping her chin with his right hand. "No, you haven't. Now, listen to me. We already know who she is, this woman you met. She's a criminal. Do you hear me? A criminal. We're hunting her down."

The girl seemed confused by this new information. "I—"

"Where are you from, Agbo?"

Agbo hesitated again before answering. "Mumolo."

Roao stepped away, letting go of her. "That's where you're from? Mumolo?"

"Yes."

"Hmm. And this woman, then? She didn't call herself anything?"

"Huh?"

"The woman you met. She didn't give you a name at all, did she? Or a title, maybe?"

"No."

"I see. What did she look like?"

Agbo shook her head. "It's hard to say. I was scared to look at her, mostly. She was filthy, I can tell you that much."

"Try to remember in detail, if you can." Roao pursed his lips. "Would you say she was she pretty or ugly?"

"Pretty, I think. I remember thinking she had a pretty face under all the dirt. And I also remember her eyes..."

"Her eyes? What about them?"

Bene saw Agbo's expression shift. For the tiniest moment, the tension in her shoulders vanished and she looked... serene? Perhaps even... spellbound? Not a word he was comfortable using, and definitely not one to utter in front of a man as rational as the magister, either. Roao seemed to notice the change in her as well, though what he made of it Bene couldn't say.

"They were green," said Agbo quietly. "So green. I remember... she had the most beautiful eyes I ever saw in my life."

"And her hair? What colour was her hair? Was it blonde, brown, black?"

"Black. She had black hair. And her skin was brown like mine, though not so dark."

"Good, good," said Roaoo, apparently pleased with the progress he was making. "Thank you, Agbo. That's wonderful. Now think back... how did you first meet? Can you remember?"

Agbo looked up at him. "Do you think my family's safe?"

The magister gave her a sympathetic look. "To be honest," he said, running his hands down the front of his robe, "I cannot say for certain, child. But rest assured that nothing you say to me now could cause them any harm. You have to trust me on this, all right? I am not lying to you, I swear."

Agbo nodded. "All right."

"So, how did you come to meet her?"

"The dog."

"Oh?"

"One of our dogs went missing. I went out looking for him. I thought he might be in the forest, so I went there hoping to find him. I was calling his name when, I don't know... this woman, she just jumped out of the trees at me. I tried to get away, but she... I don't know. For some reason I just couldn't run. She hurt me. She-!"

"It's all right," said Roaoo, patting her shoulder. "Slow down, take it easy."

Agbo's eyes widened. Her voice, when it came again, dropped to a whisper. "She was a witch. She said she could do *magic*."

Roaoo went very still. "Really?"

"Uh huh."

"What kind of... magic?"

"I don't know. She said she'd kill my family with magic unless I did what she wanted."

"And what did she want?"

Agbo grimaced. "My clothes. She wanted my clothes. I gave them to her. She made me put on hers, too, then she handed me a pack and told me to take the road to Okwei."

“Okwei? Why? Why did she want you to go there?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t say. All she said was that I had to be there by week’s end. And not to speak to anyone or else she would kill my family.”

“I see. And so you took the road to Okwei?”

“Yes.” Agbo might have said more, but in that moment Mulkern returned with a bowl of soup and half a loaf of bread. Roaoo gestured and Mulkern handed her the food. She dropped the bread in her lap and put the bowl to her lips. Liquid spilled over the sides and onto her coat, but she didn’t seem to care.

“So, you took the road to Okwei?” asked Roaoo.

Agbo nodded. “Yes,” she said around a mouthful of soup. “I did. But it wasn’t safe. I hid in the forest whenever I saw anyone coming. Which was a lot. I spent days on that road, running and hiding.” She gestured at Mulkern and Hassing. “Until they found me.”

Roaoo began pacing. “As I think I mentioned before,” he said, “this isn’t the first time she’s done this. You are not her first victim. You were intended as a decoy, a distraction to throw us off her trail. So, when did you first meet her?”

“I don’t know exactly. Three days ago, maybe? Or four.”

“When? Morning or evening?”

“In the morning.”

“How early?”

“It would have been a little bit after dawn.”

“And where? Where was this? In Mumolo itself?”

Agbo shook her head. “No. Just outside. It’s a... we have a big farm on the outskirts of town.”

“We? You mean your family?”

Agbo nodded. “Yes.”

“Where outside of town? In what direction?”

“North. North, but not so far. Just a few miles.”

“All right. Now, you said that the woman forced you to exchange clothing? Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“What were you wearing? Trousers, belt, shirt?”

"Yes. All that. My mantle, too."

"What were your clothes made of? Wool or cotton?"

"No, no. Wool."

"What colour?"

"Green? The mantle was brown though, I think. I had my hat with me too because I remember it was raining out when I went to look for the dog."

Roao smiled. "Very good, Agbo. Now, did she say anything else that you remember?"

"No, not really. I mean, I don't think so. She took my clothes, she told me to go to Okwei and to stay on the road and not talk to anyone. And she said never to come back."

"I see."

Agbo began sobbing. "I keep asking myself why."

"What do you mean, why?"

"Well, why me? Why did she pick me?"

"Ah," said Roao, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Yes, well I suppose it's normal to ask these sorts of questions after something like this. There was no rhyme or reason to it though, I don't think. You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Agbo shrugged off his words. "Why didn't I fight back? She wasn't very big. I could have fought back. If I had, maybe I could have stopped her, and I wouldn't be here now. And none of this would have happened."

"No," said Roao, shaking his head. "No. The one thing you mustn't do is blame yourself. This happened because it happened, not because of anything you did or did not do. Had you tried to fight her, she would have killed you. You are here today because you kept your head, Agbo."

"I... suppose. And I felt paralysed the whole time. Do you think it was the magic?"

"Do you?"

Agbo nodded. "Yes. Something about her was off. She felt... I dunno, *wrong*."

"Wrong?"

"Yes. She felt so *wrong*. Almost... out of place. It was the magic. It was... I don't know... flowing out of her."

That got Roaoo's attention. "You could *see* the magic?"

"Yes." Agbo bobbed her head. "The air was heavy with it. That's why when she said she could kill my family, I believed her."

"Can you describe it? Anything. Anything you mentioned—the magic, its flowing, the *wrongness*?"

"I don't know," said Agbo, screwing up her face. "I mean, when she was standing there it was almost like it was, I don't know, swirling all around her. It was swirling, flowing like water. But of course it wasn't water. It was like nothing I've ever seen. It was evil. Evil and *wrong*."

"Evil?"

"Uh huh. It was disgusting. It made me sick to my stomach to be near it."

"So you could see the magic as well as feel it? Incredible!"

Bene listened, amazed by what he was hearing. Another piece of the puzzle had fallen into their laps. He wondered if Khela were outside, eavesdropping. He knew her well enough to know there was no chance she wasn't standing out there right now with her ear practically glued to the tent wall. What would she make of Agbo's words? And what would she make of Agbo herself?

When he spoke next, Roaoo's voice was almost a murmur. "Did the magic... speak to you? Did you hear a voice at all? Like a gentle whispering, perhaps?"

"No, I don't think so. No. Or if I did, I don't remember it."

"And did you feel anything odd prior to meeting her, prior to her arrival? Anything weird?"

"Weird? How do you mean?"

Roaoo knelt beside the girl. "Before she came along, did you feel anything? Did you feel a sense of dread or unease, for example? Had you woken up feeling as if something about the world was unusual? Like it was strange or off in some way?"

"Well, I don't know. No, I don't think so. Not really..."

"Hmm," said Roaoo, rubbing his chin. "Just answer one more question for me, my dear, and then I'll leave you be for the moment." He paused. "Can you still feel *her*? At this exact moment, can you feel the magic?"

"Can I still feel it? Now?"

"Yes. Are you able to sense her, at this very moment, even though she is far away?"

Agbo shook her head. "I... no, I don't think so."

"So you cannot *feel* her now? Nothing at all?"

"No. Should I be able to, though? I mean—"

Roaoo stood up and shook his head. "No, no. It's quite all right. Forget it. You should rest now, my dear. You've been through a great deal, and it's time to rest. I feel compelled to say, though, that despite everything that has happened to you, you have done marvellously well. Marvellously well indeed."

Agbo looked into her bowl of soup, but instead of taking another sip she asked, "So, my family? Do you think they're all right?"

"Sergeant," Roaoo said to Hassing, "please ask Ghislaine to come as soon as she can."

"Sir." Hassing left the tent.

Roaoo peered at Agbo. "He did a rather good job on your nose, you know. I think Ghislaine has greater skill, personally, but he didn't do a bad job at all."

The girl brought a hand to her face as if to touch it, but then stopped. "What do you mean?"

"He was fixing it," said Roaoo with a faint smile. "Not torturing you. It was a sneaky trick to play, though, and one that I really must apologise for."

Fresh tears flowed down Agbo's cheeks. "I want to go home."

Roaoo nodded. "And very shortly, you shall." A pause. "Your name means 'morning rose' doesn't it?"

Agbo sobbed. "I just want to go home."

"I'm pretty sure that's what it means. Oh. Unless, it's 'morning flower' perhaps? I forget. And yes, you can go home. As a matter of fact, we'll be making for Mumolo as soon as possible."

Agbo looked up, her eyes shining with hope and disbelief.
“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you! Oh, thank you!”

“Yes,” said Roaoo. Then he looked at the ground and said,
“Well I’m not sure you should be thanking me just yet.”

An excerpt from an early draft of *The Forbidden History of Sarasinia*, by Junnius the Scholar

According to legend, the world's first city-state, Alda, was founded in the year 1000, Red Age, by two brothers named Dorin and Sarasin. The eldest of the brothers, Dorin, was the more serious and capable of the pair, and it was his vision that Alda should become a great republic. Such was his talent and authority that within a mere decade of its founding, perhaps, not only was Alda a fully-fledged republic, it was growing wealthy and prosperous through trade.

Ever the jealous sibling, Sarasin bided his time. When the stars turned in his favour, he attacked his brother, triggering a bloody civil war. For several years Dorin led his Aldanian loyalists against his brother's followers, who had taken to calling themselves Sarasinians. Neither side held an advantage over the other, but then one night Dorin died in his sleep. Many suspected treachery, and perhaps there was. But the truth is that we cannot say exactly how the great man was laid low. Bereft of their commander, the Aldanians lost heart and surrendered.

Now, it should be noted that Dorin (despite centuries of propaganda asserting the opposite) had been a kind and virtuous ruler. His brother was neither. After proclaiming himself king, Sarasin embarked on a program of slaughter. The streets of Alda – swiftly renamed Sarasinia – ran with the blood of Dorin's followers. Some escaped, later to carve out holdings in distant Renderos that today we call Kanosh. Sarasin depleted the remainder until only seven or eight thousand remained. These unfortunates were enslaved, forced to adopt distinctive orange robes (orange was Dorin's favourite colour, and consequently despised by Sarasin), and thereafter referred to by the pejorative term 'Dorin'. To this day their descendants are still slaves, still referred to as Dorin, and

still made to wear orange garments of a style not worn by anyone else since Alda's earliest days. Merely touching a weapon carries the death penalty for these people, too, for Sarasin lived in abject fear of their rebellion until his dying day.

We Sarasinians have always regarded breeding with the Dorin as abhorrent, and permitted them to beget children only amongst themselves. This means, of course, that the Dorin are in fact racially pure Aldanians. It is laughable that we Sarasinians, whose ancestors have undeniably shared blood, often liberally, with every race in the League, make such vociferous claims to racial purity. These assertions have no basis in fact, made only because we have forgotten our history. If the Dorin find the irony amusing I do not know, for it is said that no member of their pitiable race has laughed in centuries.

Author's notes: for the final version, don't forget to add that Sarasin's rule was characterised by cruelty and his love of wine and debauchery. Indeed, the name 'Sarasinia' probably only survives because one of his many concubines managed to shit out a decent heir, ho ho!

6

ROSARIUS

SARASINIA

THE BASTION

Rosarius's classmates were not happy. Phalanx training had started at daybreak, and now it was near dusk. In all that time they hadn't stopped for so much as a sip of water or a bite to eat. Each student looked dirtier and more dishevelled than the next, all them complaining about having no time to hit the baths and rest up before the start of evening classes.

Drillmaster Minten didn't look like he was going to dismiss them anytime soon, however. He strode up and down the practice arena, his boots squelching in the mud. "Shield wall!" he yelled, signalling to the waiting archers. "Brace yourselves!"

Rosarius saw a blur of arrows take to the air in a lazy arc, then swiftly drop. One narrowly missed him, spinning sideways and clattering against his neighbour's helmet. The rest bounced off shields and armour in a rapid series of dull thuds.

"Terrible!" shouted Minten. "Fortunately for you lot, this is just training. The arrows are padded. If they weren't, your shields would be bristling with them, no? And as we all saw, more than a

few found the appalling gaps in your sorry excuse for defence too, didn't they? Think your mail will save you, do you? It won't. So, what's the lesson here?"

No one said anything.

A dark look crossed Minten's face. He quit pacing and planted his feet. "We've been over this time and again all year!" he roared, open-mouthed, white teeth contrasting against skin the colour of coal. "The lesson is this: keep your fucking shield up, that's what! Repeat it after me, you flaccid little bitches! Keep your fucking shield up!"

"Keep your fucking shield up!" shouted the students together.

"Bullshit!" Minten waved a fist at them. "I can hardly hear you!"

"Keep your fucking shield up!"

The drillmaster spat. *"You sound like little girls! Use your fucking balls!"*

"Keep your fucking shield up!"

"Again!"

"Keep your fucking shield up!"

"Again!"

"Keep your fucking shield up!"

Minten snorted, then went back to his pacing. "It's one thing to say it," he said, "and another to do it. It might help to remember that your lives are *literally* in each other's hands, no? Your shield is keeping the man on your left alive. The man on your right is keeping *you* alive. If you neglect your shield brother and cover only yourself, you'll create gaps. And when you create gaps, the enemy gets through and you all start dying. A phalanx is more than just the sum of its parts, gentlemen. It is not just a bunch of men with spears. Questions?"

No one said anything.

Minten grunted. "I should fucking hope not, not this late in our training. Now, keeping your shield up is hard. You think I don't see your bony little girl arms struggling under the weight? Of course, I don't have this fucking problem." He slapped his meaty bicep to emphasise the point. "Conditioning. If you want arms

like mine, you'll wear your shield on your arm the whole fucking day, every day. You hear me? Anyway, get them up, right now! Up high and proud, just like your cock when a pretty slut lifts her skirt for you! Show me! *Up!*"

The students obeyed.

"Appalling," said Minten. "Fucking terrible. You're soft as turds. Typical aristocrats! I gotta tell you, if any one of you useless girl-armed fuckers takes an arrow in the face or drops his shield even once today, I'll fucking make you regret it. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir!" shouted the students.

"Yeah, well we'll see." Minten spat. "All right. Now, take a good look around you. Anybody want to take a guess where we are? That's right—we're in lovely Romelia. A lot of action happening over there now, as I'm sure you all know—fucking rebels everywhere. Take note of the terrain. It rains a lot in Romelia, a good deal more than it does here. The ground is flat, which is nice for us, but rain makes things slippery, which is not.

"Now, in a real fight we'd probably find ourselves butted up against other phalanxes, and we might even have some horses or something on the flanks. Behind us, we'd have archers or slingers, maybe both. Obviously, this is training so today we're unsupported." He gestured at the archers again, and they loosed two volleys in quick succession. Both times, arrows bounced against shields and fell away into the mud.

"Not too bad," said Minten, sounding like he actually meant it. "In a real fight, though, you'll have taken casualties. For the sake of training let's pretend you did, no?" He counted out six of the phalanx's fifty members. "You're all wounded and can't fight. Move back to the rear rank and reform the phalanx. *Shield wall!*"

Having drilled all day, the students were tired, and that tiredness now got the better of them. Stumbling in the mud, they blundered into each other, and their formation rapidly lost cohesion.

"Shit," said Rosarius when the drillmaster ordered the archers to fire. Arrows poured in. Shields turned most of them, but some

hit helmets and mail coats. One or two even found exposed flesh, though did no serious harm. The students swore.

So did Minten. "Fuck me!" he screamed. "If you show your backs to the enemy, you fucking idiots, you'll get arrows in them! What happened to your phalanx? What happened to your shields? I don't think you've been listening to a fucking thing I've been saying, no? Try again! *Shield wall!*"

Minten signalled to the archers as the students were still shuffling around and trying to get their shields to overlap. Arrows fell, but all were met with shields.

"Thank fuck," muttered Rosarius.

"Good!" shouted the drillmaster. "Good. Now, let's move on. We are, of course, an infantry unit. We can't just stand around like whores out of work, no? It would make the troops on the other side *very* happy if we were to do that. They'd loose arrows at us until we had no one left. If we don't advance and start killing, the battle is as good as lost, no? So, with that in mind, let's advance on the enemy until I say stop. Remember to keep your shields up. *Advance!*"

The phalanx lurched forward, the students doing their best to stay in battle array in the sticky mud. The archers fired on them continuously, and as the distance between the two sides shrank to some twenty paces or so, arrows hit shields with such force that shafts began to crack and splinter.

In the front rank, Rosarius grit his teeth through the storm of missiles. A few came in low and hit his shins, which made him very glad of his greaves. The student behind him voiced those same thoughts, and others chuckled darkly.

"Fuck this bullshit training," muttered someone. "And fuck Minten. Stupid black asshole."

"It's really his black asshole you'd like to fuck, isn't it?" said someone else. The comment drew an indignant rebuttal and sniggers all round.

Rosarius's shield-mate nudged him with his elbow and grinned, but Rosarius didn't respond. He was more focussed on keeping his shield up, and not with what anyone thought of

Minten. He had nothing against the man. If you wanted to learn the art of fighting in formation, the drillmaster was as good a teacher as you were likely to find.

"Right," said Minten as the latest barrage ended. "Here we are. We've slogged through the wet Romelian terrain. We've survived hail after hail of deadly arrows. We're getting closer to the enemy shield wall, no? We're eager to get in there and tear them apart, but before we can do that, we'll have to deal with something else. That something else is spears, because it's about now the first spears will come."

Rosarius looked up. The archers had put away their bows, and without warning, hurled training spears at the phalanx. "Motherfucker!" he yelled as they struck, a cacophonous salvo that rattled shields and glanced off helmets. Fortunately, it ended almost as soon as it had begun.

"Don't forget!" yelled Minten. "Don't forget this is only training. Not one of these flimsy twigs has a sharp bit of iron on the end of it. Now, I can't truly prepare you for just how much the real thing is going to fuck you guys up. Maybe this will give you some idea, though." He gave a signal and another rain of missiles began.

The second attack went on longer than the first. Staves slammed into Rosarius's shield in quick succession, and he winced at the pain they sent through the boards and into his wrist and forearm. The entire phalanx swore viciously. He didn't look back to confirm it, but Rosarius guessed from the scattered moans that some of his classmates had been hurt.

"You fucking weaklings!" Minten was seriously unhappy. "That was horseshit! Your wall is a disgrace! Half of you stupid cunts aren't protecting the man on your left! You've got gaps everywhere! And stop whining like little bitches. You're barely even bleeding! Pick yourselves up, you sons of whores, and for the last fucking time *keep your motherfucking shields up!* You are supposed to be a fucking fighting unit! Again! *Shield wall!*"

The students did a bad job of reforming the wall, and it set Minten off like nothing else. He found a fallen stave and stalked

up and down the front rank with it, battering at shields and bellowing. The students responded the only way they could— by closing ranks and tightening up their formation.

Minten went on until the stave splintered in his hands. He tossed it away. “As I said,” he said, only slightly out of breath, “in a real fight, the spears will have points. That being the case, a lot of you would probably now have one stuck in your shields. Some will even have punched clean through them. You’re going to find it difficult to keep your shield up with all the extra weight, and doubly so if you’ve got a point staring at you through your forearm, no? Another thing you might come across is a javelin with a barbed shaft that bends when it hits your shield. You will *not* be able to pull that kind of weapon out, and it *will* hinder your ability to keep your shield up.

“If you’re ever in a situation where you can’t raise your shield, you’re damn near useless to the phalanx. In which case, you must move to the back and let someone else take your place. If you’re lucky, a spare shield will be brought to you. Though I wouldn’t exactly count on it, no?

“For the sake of training, let’s assume the first rank has fallen to enemy spears. On my command, that rank will filter back to the rear, moving through the others in an orderly fashion. Then reform. *Shield wall!*”

More staves flew as the phalanx shifted, though the students were careful to present nothing except solid wooden walls to the front. Rosarius dropped back to the rearmost rank where he found himself standing beside a familiar face.

“Hey stranger,” said the face, grinning as it poked out from beneath its conical helmet.

“Romelo,” said Rosarius without giving him a second glance.

“So, cousin,” said Romelo brightly. “We’re going whoring later. You should come.”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“Not interested.”

“Oh. Well, we can get some girls as well. You know, for you.”

"No."

"Why not?"

"Why the fuck do you think?"

His cousin finally seemed to understand. "Ah, you still mad about that business in the city?"

Rosarius sneered. "That business in the city? Is that what you just called it? *That business in the city*? You told Colton that *I* attacked *you* in the street for no fucking reason!"

"What?" Romelo did a piss poor job of feigning outrage. "I did not! I never said that!"

"Bullshit! You fucking liar. And why didn't you get sent to the Hole because of what *you* started? Huh? You piece of shit!"

Romelo shook his head. "Look, it didn't happen like you think..."

"Then how did it happen?"

"Well, I mean, I kinda get why you're mad, Rosy. And I suppose I did sort of tell Colton a few tiny fibs, but--"

"You know what? Stop talking. I don't give a fuck."

"But you asked me to explain!"

Rosarius waved him away. "So I did, but now I regret it. People got hurt because of you. Friends."

"Ah, look. Shit happens, eh? I can't help it if--"

"*Shit happens*? You started a fucking feud with Riva over nothing, sucked half the Bastion into it, and then pinned the blame on other people when it all went to buggery? You don't get to do all that, avoid all consequence, and then say *shit happens*, Romelo! Fuck you!"

Romelo seemed baffled. "Fuck *me*?"

"Yeah, fuck you, Romelo. You're dead to me. Fuck off."

"I'm dead to you? Is that what you just said to me?"

"Yeah. I did."

"I'm dead to you? Really? Is that how you talk to family?"

Rosarius took out his practice sword and showed its point to his cousin. "Is what you did what you *do* to family?" He hefted the blade. "I've half a mind to fuck you up!"

"But I didn't do anything!"

“Shut up. I’m done with you.”

“Oh no you aren’t,” said Romelo, lashing out suddenly with his shield. “What’s your fucking problem?”

Rosarius caught the blow on his own shield. “You are. Now, fuck off.”

Romelo lunged again, but overbalanced and fell into the muck. “Augh!” he cried.

Rosarius laughed and was about to give his cousin a kick in the chops for good measure, but stopped when he saw the drillmaster coming their way. And the man looked mightily pissed. A sea of heads swivelled around, but snapped back when Minten growled at them to stay the fuck in formation and to keep their fucking eyes to the front.

Romelo had let go of his shield and was still struggling to pick himself up when Minten descended on him.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, student?” asked the drillmaster, pointing at the shield.

“He pushed me,” said Romelo, giving Rosarius a baleful look, “for no reason.”

Minten dismissed the accusation with a contemptuous wave of his hand. “As if I give a shit! Why is your fucking shield not buckled to your arm?”

Romelo shrugged. “It’s stuck in the mud. I couldn’t get up without taking it off.”

Minten shoved his nose up against Romelo’s. “Your shield is your life, boy,” he growled. “It comes off when it’s a pile of splinters or the battle is over! *Pick. It. Up!*”

Romelo bent to obey, muttering under his breath.

Minten grabbed him by his mail shirt and drew eye to eye with him. “What did you say?”

“I said it won’t budge,” said Romelo, on the verge of tears.

“Just shut your little bitch mouth and pick it up.”

After a lot of fucking around, Romelo finally managed to get his shield out of the mud and back on his arm.

Minten gave him a scornful look. “That was the most fucking pathetic thing I’ve seen all day. Up to the front rank, both of you.

Rosarius, you're on the left and Romelo, you can have the commander's position. And the next time you drop your shield, dickhead, I'll shove the thing so far up your fucking arse even you won't enjoy it. *Move!*"

Rosarius and Romelo marched to the front, and Minten walked away until he stood clear of the phalanx. "Oh yeah," he said, "and that means extra cleaning duties for everyone, by the way. You can all thank fucking Romelo the Shield Dropper later."

The students let out a collective groan.

Minten straightened. "Now, what was I saying? Oh yeah, that's right—I was saying how you poor bastards on the sides of the phalanx are probably thinking what a bad idea it is to be on the sides of a phalanx. You're more exposed there, no? Yes, you are, and the enemy knows it, too. He *will* send death of every shape and colour your way because he knows it's where you're most vulnerable. Now, you might be thinking to yourself, 'Well, fuck that! I'll just avoid that problem by staying well away from the sides.' *Well, fuck you!* The edge of the phalanx is a place of fucking honour! It's not the front rank—where a true warrior belongs—but it's still pretty fucking special." Minten paused to smile at Romelo, only there was nothing friendly about it.

"Oh, and one final thing before we get to the good stuff. On the battlefield, a phalanx has a nasty habit of twisting to the right. Do you know why? It's because everyone forgets their training and tries to hide not just behind his own shield, but also behind the shield of the man on his right. A phalanx that twists to the right is a phalanx full of fucking cowards. Be a coward on the battlefield and you die! It's like I keep saying: a shield wall is more than just a bunch of guys with spears. You protect each other, and thus you protect yourself. When you stand and fight as one, you will win." He spat. "Now get ready, because here comes the moment of truth. Behold!"

Rosarius looked over his shield to see an enemy phalanx formed up ahead of them. Their ranks were perfectly straight and their commander stood at the front, resplendent in a shining

steel breastplate and purple-crested helm. "Gods," he said to himself.

"Mark! Time!" shouted the commander.

"*Haruuh!*" replied his men, and they marched on the spot in perfect unison, heavy boots tramping out a slow cadence.

"Halt! Wall!"

"*Haruuh!*" and they stopped, every shield snapping into place and every practice spear held rock steady and pointed forward.

"Fuck me," said someone.

Rosarius stood awestruck, felt his pulse quickening. One glance down the ragged front line of his own phalanx, however, was all it took to snatch him back to reality. He had no doubt they were all about to learn a hard lesson. He felt them shifting in anticipation, readying themselves for the trial to come. Nothing to be done apart from test the grip on your shield and get on with it. "Let's go!" he heard himself shouting. "Let's go!"

The enemy commander screamed, "Advance!" and his men rolled forward. Rosarius stole a final glance down his own front line again, wondering why he wasn't hearing orders. He looked at the commander's position, belatedly recalling that Minten had put Romelo in charge. And sure enough, he saw his cousin staring back at him, eyes burning and face twisted in hatred.

The drillmaster's mouth opened one final time. "*Prepare to get fucked!*"

LORD RIVA**THE SARASINIAN 5th ARMY****GREATER AHRENIA**

The Fifth was marching through enemy territory now, having crossed some days prior into what the old maps called *Magnos Ahrenia*. When they were still on the unpaved road between Herena and Gillendum, Riva had considered the army's advance of eight miles a day modest at best. Now, with Gillendum behind them and nothing but trees in front, they were managing only three or four.

They had met no resistance so far; the place was more or less free of folk. The terrain was the enemy here, an abundance of woods and rocky defiles that, combined with generally awful weather, brought progress to an interminable crawl. The sheer profusion of growth turned spearmen into lumberjacks. And carpenters, too, for on several occasions they'd had to bridge otherwise inaccessible cliffs. Virgilio's men worked quickly and efficiently, though, he had to admit. All Sarasinian armies, as Istome liked to say, were essentially giant bands of engineers,

albeit lethal ones. Their efforts would afford a quicker return journey, even if the enemy couldn't be trusted to leave their structures intact. A swifter return to Herena, and the sparing of his ears from the interminable *crump crump* of axes felling timber dawn to dusk.

Oh yes, the novelty of campaigning had indeed worn thin. Every day was the same: wake, eat, pack up camp, march. Followed by unpacking, setting up camp, eating, sleeping. The business of war was exciting in theory but monotonously wearisome in practice. There was no action, only tedium. With nothing to chronicle in his journal except to say, again, how the days bled into one another until they all seemed like the same day, it didn't make for interesting reading. He'd largely given up, and even stopped consulting his calendar. It was Istome who had reminded him yesterday how they were already two days into a new month, and cautioned him against growing lax in giving the gods their due.

The appearance of dark clouds that morning, however, brought the prospect of relief from the sameness of each day. A fog swept through the forest, reducing visibility to almost nothing. Judging it an auspicious moment, and remembering Istome's warning, he went out to make an offering. Perhaps the gods accepted it, for a rain shower drenched everything soon after and made the forest too damp and dangerous for the work crews. Virgilio recalled them, and to his delight the gathering clouds went from dark grey to an ominous greenish black that poured out a deluge of water and ice.

He was almost delirious with glee when Virgilio agreed to an early encampment, and spent most of the rest of the day lounging in bed with Istome's copy of *On Philosophism* open on his knees. He couldn't say he absorbed much of it, what with hail pounding on his canvas roof and the text itself running to long-winded and dry. Regardless, he believed he was making some headway before Istome appeared with wine.

"Are you a philosopher yet?" asked Istome.

"Have been for some time now, I think," said Riva. "You?"

Istome laughed. "Only since birth."

They discussed the book up until he inadvertently nudged her breast with an elbow. Her lips found his at that point, and *On Philosophism* was pushed aside, temporarily forgotten.

Virgilio summoned him for their nightly discussion in his quarters. Riva didn't see the point of it, especially since nothing had happened that day. The local terrain had not changed, nor was there anything urgent to discuss regarding the army's supplies, morale, notable incidents within the ranks, or anything else. Nevertheless, he went.

"Are you enjoying the weather?" asked Virgilio.

"I am," said Riva. He reached for the pitcher of Sarasinian red that always seemed to be on the general's table. Now that he thought about it, he was getting through quite a lot of wine these days. He took a sip, followed quickly by another. A very good vintage. Still, he should probably start cutting back. Another sip. Mmm. Beginning tomorrow.

Virgilio nodded. "It's a break from the usual routine, eh? Hard work, this, isn't it? I think if someone had foretold that I'd spend my life slogging from one end of the League to the other and back every few years, I'd probably have given soldiering a miss."

"Not so much as a warband in sight."

"Indeed," said Virgilio with a sigh. "Did you know that I once went an entire campaign without poking anyone with a spear? It was my first one, actually."

"Where was this? Not up here?"

"No, no. I didn't come up here until much later in my career. My first campaign was out near Ortga. In those days, there were still Ahren clans out that way. And they were causing all kinds of headaches, too, as you can imagine."

"So you didn't get to fight?"

"No. Indeed, I did not. It's more than a bit ironic you know, when a man spends years training to fight, waiting to fight, wanting to fight, only to spend a few days actually fighting. And I wanted to fight, of course. I longed for it more than anything in

the world. I was young and stupid, after all." Virgilio started to say something else but then trailed off, a faraway look in his eyes.

"You mentioned Ortga?" said Riva, waving a hand in front of the man's face.

The general blinked. "Eh? Oh, yes. Ortga. My first campaign was out that way. Did I mention that? The League was fending off a full-blown Ahren invasion, you know. We must have had four armies in the field, which was some thirty percent of the League's available forces. Or some ridiculous number, at least. But it was only mine, naturally, that saw almost no action whatsoever. We were just labour. If we weren't building roads it was fortifications. I spent two years hauling stones and lumber. You've no idea how I resented it at the time."

"Oh no," said Riva, savouring his wine. "I do have some idea, I think. I spent most of my youth holed up in Herena because my old man didn't want me dying in what he called *pointless raids*. I used to ask him why he'd even sent me to the Bastion if I never got to fight."

Virgilio shook a finger in admonition. "If you'd been killed, what then? Gods know none of your brothers were fit to wear your father's mantle. Not a one! Still aren't. He was wise, your father, and you'd do best not to speak ill of him."

Riva grimaced. "I should have known you'd take his side."

"No doubt! Anyway, enough of this. How was yesterday? You did well. Are you ready to lead again tomorrow?"

"I am, if that's what you wish."

"I do," said Virgilio, shifting in his seat. "Tell me something, Riva—what's all this business between you and Amulius about, then?"

Amulius. Riva had known that the topic was bound to come up sooner or later. The Old Lion might be getting dodderly in his dotage, and perhaps even a touch forgetful at times, but he didn't miss a trick. "You heard about that, did you? I wasn't going to say anything."

"Oh, I heard all right. Out with it, then—what's the problem, exactly?"

Riva scowled. "The man himself. He's been a thorn in my side from the very beginning."

"Insubordinate?"

"Very. He has a habit of dragging his feet, especially when I'm the one giving the orders."

"Malingering?" said Virgilio, clenching and unclenching his jaw. "Unacceptable. I will deal with him."

"If you do," said Riva, holding up a hand, "it'll look like I can't handle him myself. I don't want that."

Virgilio nodded. "Yes," he said. "I suppose that's true. Your main problem, I think, is that Amulius is Old Blood. He thinks he should be in charge of the Fifth. It galls him, you know, that he never made general. He hates that he has to take orders from me, but he especially hates that he must take orders from *you*."

"Old Blood!" Riva made a fist. "Do you want to know what I think of that lot?"

Istome, from her position on the far side of the marquee, coughed lightly. It went unnoticed, it seemed, by the general.

"Best be careful, dear boy," said Virgilio, lowering his voice. "I think it would be better if you kept your thoughts on such matters to yourself."

"Very well," said Riva, though he said it more to Istome than Virgilio. "There's something else I should mention. I've also noticed that Amulius passes to me what information he must, but nothing more. I have his reports on mundane things like supplies and troop movements and so on. But there are a few... rather interesting... things he's been leaving out."

"Oh? Such as?"

"Well, it seems he enjoys playing his officers off against one another, making them compete for his favour. There's bad blood between them because of it."

Virgilio pursed his lips. "Yes. That has not escaped my attention either."

"He treats his underlings poorly, and they have a tendency to take out their frustration on *their* underlings. Shit rolls downhill,

as they say. It's unprofessional, though, and it's not good for morale either."

"Has morale suffered as a result, do you think?"

"Not yet," said Riva, shaking his head. "The men are still in high spirits, I agree. But I would rather their minds be on their duty and not on negotiating the webs of intrigue Amulius seems bent on weaving around them."

Virgilio rubbed his chin. "I take your point. He knows no better, I suspect. He's a politician first and a warrior second, so I can't say his behaviour comes as a surprise. No doubt he thinks it all quite normal. Is that all?"

"No. I've also come to know that he sent men to raid a settlement."

"But he's not authorised to—"

"No, he isn't. And he kept a good portion of the takings for himself, too, apparently."

"When was this?" snapped Virgilio, sitting up.

"A week or so ago, I think. Just before we crossed into Greater Ahrenia."

"This is not acceptable! I'm assuming you have proof?"

"I do, of course. Witnesses."

"Witnesses to the raids?"

Riva paused. "Regrettably, no. Not to the raids themselves. I do have witnesses to the fact that certain of his men left the column by day and returned after dark, though. And I've witnesses to certain spoils of war being passed around that did not reach our coffers."

"Amulius, that fuck!" hissed Virgilio, a fleck of spittle flying from his mouth. "Write down some names for me, will you? The takers of these spoils of war in particular—I'll make them talk!"

"Amulius has likely bought them off..."

"They'll talk," said Virgilio, thumping the table. "Just write the names down."

"Also..."

Virgilio stared at him, mouth open. "Gods above! There's more?"

"Yes. I've had word that a delegation from the followers' camp has been asking for a meeting with me."

"Oh? What sort of delegation?"

"A group from Engund's Tor."

"Torsmen? Ah, yes. I daresay because of that mishap with the tax collectors we heard about?"

"The same," said Riva, nodding. "Although since they've come this far, I think they see it as more than a mere mishap, Lord Virgilio."

"What does this have to do with Amulius?"

"Apparently he's been intercepting their messages to me."

"Why would he do that?" The general paused. "Do you think he is tied to the business on the Tor somehow?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Really though," said Virgilio, his brows knitted together in thought. "I doubt it."

"I tend to agree. He's probably just being obstructive because he can."

"So? Go to the followers' camp and meet with them. It's a simple enough matter. No doubt they're looking for some boon, and I say give it to them and settle the matter. Perhaps you can also look into doing something about that banker fellow while you're there. Leonf. The man seems to think he's in charge of the place."

Riva opened his mouth to reply, but a messenger came up, saluted, and handed Virgilio a leather satchel. The general took out some parchments and began to read.

"News?" asked Riva.

Virgilio dismissed the messenger with a wave of his hand. "Indeed. Some of our scouts have gone missing. And a small foraging party." He looked at Riva. "You know what this means, of course?"

"I do," said Riva, watching the general toss the parchments on the table. "It means the Ahren host is not far away."

"Indeed it does."

"Your orders?"

Virgilio shook his head. "No, dear boy. You tell me."

"Recall the foragers and make sure no more are sent out. Triple the number of scouts, and have our engineers find a suitable site to offer battle. We need to get out of the forest as soon as we possibly can."

"Good."

"On the day," said Riva with a mischievous wink, "I wonder if it will be my turn to command or yours?"

Virgilio chuckled. "So you'd rob an old man of his final glory then, would you?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Riva, drawing out the words. "I might..."

"You wouldn't! Besides, I want you in the centre."

Riva took a deep breath. "About that—I have a favour to ask of you."

"What favour?"

"I don't want the centre. I want my Herenians on the right flank."

"The right flank?" asked Virgilio, confused. "Why in the world would you want—?" But then it finally dawned on him, and he smiled. "Ah. Of course. Because of Amulius, yes?"

Riva gave a solemn nod over the top of his goblet. "I will *not* be stuck behind his purple shields. Or any other, for that matter."

"There will be other battles, you know."

"I do know," said Riva, leaning forward in his seat. "But I don't care. I will *not* have my men standing behind purple shields."

The general drummed his fingers on the table. "And I know you well enough to know there will be no dissuading you." He considered the matter for a moment longer and then asked, "Who would you put in your stead, then?"

"The Sarasinian veterans."

"Behind the youngsters?" A short pause. "Very well. I see no issue with that. Take the right then, if that's what you wish."

"Thank you," said Riva. To his surprise, the old man reached over the table and touched his shoulder in an obvious, if somewhat awkward, paternal gesture. He contrived a very strong

interest in the parchments on the table to cover his embarrassment. "Sir."

The general grinned. "Amulius will have no objection either, I'm sure."

Riva didn't miss the joke, but didn't want to acknowledge it either. "I wouldn't care if he did. It's only fair that we Herenians are on the front line. I don't want Amulius claiming *he* did all the fighting while *we* sat on our hands."

"Is that your main motivation, then? Outmanoeuvring Amulius?"

"No. Actually there's more to it than that."

Virgilio gave him a sceptical look. "Really?"

"Yes. Of course there is. My men and I are more than capable of fighting in the front line, are we not? It's the least we deserve. It's not the centre, but in the old days the right flank was the most honourable position, so—"

Virgilio cut him off with the wave of a hand. "It's done, Riva. I've already granted you your favour."

"Very well."

"Actually, you just reminded me of something. Tell me what you know of the Battle of Ilyrae."

Riva took a quick draught of wine. "Ilyrae? Why?"

"You'll see."

"Well, it just seems rather... random. Don't you think?"

Virgilio shook his head. "Not at all. Perhaps you'll recognise how it relates to our current situation once you do as you're told. Now, recite."

"But I don't see how—"

"Stop stalling, Riva. Recite! It's an order."

Riva grinned. "Suddenly it feels like I'm right back at the Bastion."

Virgilio's voice went up an octave. "The Battle of Ilyrae, Riva! Recite!"

"Very well," said Riva, clearing his throat as he thought back to his studies. It had been a long time, and yet his memory was

clear. "The battle took place outside the city of Ilyrae, in Khizia. It was the year three hundred and ninety-nine, Red Age."

"Good. What precipitated the conflict?"

"The Destroyer had begun his invasion of Khizia the year before. The Khizians and their allies had a huge store of provisions in Ilyrae. They intended to use it in repelling the invasion over the coming weeks. In an unfortunate turn of events, however, the city was left virtually undefended. Or fortunately, I suppose, if you were to take the Destroyer's point of view..."

"Because?"

"Because he took the city. Easily."

"Correct. And what happened next?"

"The Khizians continued with their plans, undeterred by the setback. With the hope of re-taking Ilyrae, they put together a force that outnumbered the Destroyer's by more than two to one."

"What was the name of the Khizian ruler?"

Riva had to think about it. "Emperor Iganma."

"Indeed. And what do we know of the emperor's character, his flaws?"

"It's said that he was proud and overconfident. He was also prone to disregarding good advice."

"True. What was the name of Iganma's chief advisor?"

"Ianapred the Cacan."

"Correct. And what counsel did he offer his master?"

Riva paused again, trying to remember the details. "Ianapred cautioned the emperor against facing the Destroyer on the plains around the city."

"Why? Why did he do that?"

"It was because he had faced the Destroyer in battle once before, in his native land. He knew from bitter experience that cavalry was one of his greatest strengths, and he was deeply concerned he would use them to outmanoeuvre his master's forces in the open."

"And how was his advice received?"

“Poorly. Iganma was too headstrong for his own good. He was convinced that weight of numbers alone would dictate the outcome of the conflict. Worse, he had taken the loss of Ilyrae personally. To his way of thinking, his prestige was damaged by what had happened, and he wanted to restore it by taking the city back as soon as possible. So, he marched his forces to Ilyrae in haste. As he drew near, the Destroyer came out to meet him.”

“So he did.” Virgilio finished his wine. “How did the battle unfold?”

Riva chuckled. “Ah, well, Iganma should have listened to his advisor. Nevertheless, he put his best troops in the centre, copying the Destroyer. As soon as he gave the order, they rushed forward. It seems they expected to simply roll over the enemy and finish the battle quickly. And indeed, the Destroyer’s centre immediately fell back. Iganma’s men cheered, thinking the battle won, and broke ranks in pursuit.

“When Iganma heard his soldiers celebrating, he assumed it was because they’d punched through the enemy line. He diverted men from the wings and ordered them to charge the centre in support. He was so certain he’d won the battle that he even committed his reserve. It’s said he leapt into the fray personally as well.

“Unfortunately for him, he had been deceived. Too late he realised that the Destroyer’s centre had neither fled nor been pushed back, but had retreated in good order. While his men were in disarray, Jevad’s centre again moved forward. His flanks held, and his cavalry swept, unopposed, to occupy the ground behind Iganma’s forces.

“The Khizians were surrounded and butchered to a man. By the end of the day, over fifty thousand of them lay dead, Iganma and Ianapred included. The Destroyer lost only a few hundred spearmen. He immediately abandoned Ilyrae and marched on the Khizian capital. It surrendered without a fight. The Destroyer, as was his wont, burned it to the ground. By the end of the season, all of Khizia was conquered. Her allies, Cacia and Therene, fell the following spring.”

"A fine retelling, Riva," said Virgilio with a smile as he refilled their goblets. "Very good."

"Thank you, lord."

"What would you have done in Iganma's place?"

"In his place?" asked Riva, noting that the general had filled his own goblet almost to the top, but hadn't shown him the same generosity. "Well, I wouldn't have left Ilyrae undefended, for one. I would have holed up there, I think, and fortified it against the Destroyer."

Virgilio nodded. "He was a master of siege craft, though."

"He was a master of everything. Why, what would you have done?"

"The same as you, I suppose. Or maybe I would have tried to lure him into the foothills around Ilyrae, perhaps, where his mounted troops wouldn't have been of much use."

"You said the battle related to our present situation. How?"

"No," said Virgilio with a shake of his head. "Pretend I asked *you* the question instead."

"Well," said Riva, drawing out the word as he pondered the Fifth's current situation. "Just like poor old Iganma did, I suspect the Ahren believe that superior numbers will be the deciding factor. Our forces are more like the Destroyer's. They're smaller, but better disciplined, better equipped, and better led."

"True enough. How would you defeat us?"

"I think I would probably try to keep us confined to the forest, and not let us reach open ground where we can form up. Use hit and run tactics instead of pushing for a decisive outcome. All the better to wear us down. Only after exhausting us would I think about set piece battles."

"A sound strategy." Virgilio looked pleased.

"The Ahren won't do that, though. They'll let us reach the plains because they won't be able to easily marshal their numbers anywhere that isn't flat. It's a poor strategy given that we're masters of the spear wall. But that's all they know."

“And if the Ahren generals realise their mistake tomorrow? If they adopted your hit and run strategy in the coming days, how would you counter?”

“I’d probably think about placing our marching base somewhere inconvenient for them. Give the impression that we mean to stay. It would most likely draw them in so we could crush them...”

“What if it didn’t?”

Riva shook his head. “Then I really don’t know.”

“Wouldn’t it be better for them to let us continue,” said Virgilio, “to the banks of the Asfour? Our line of supply is already cut, and drawing us out so far would do much to deplete our stores.”

Riva thought about it. “I doubt they have enough food to stay in the field for more than a few days. Bordis is not so far from here. It’s a staging point, but not fortified, and probably not well-supplied either. They can’t hold it. They’ll want to beat us before we take it for ourselves.”

“Bordis is nothing,” said Virgilio, wrinkling his nose. “A town of no import. Remember, I brought up Ilyrae for a reason.”

“What of it? Jevad’s success there relied on sneaky cavalry tactics. Do you think the Ahren capable of the same?”

“Perhaps. They have the means, after all.”

“It’s not their way. They’ve horses enough, I agree, but they’ll fight shield and spear in hand, face to face. Or not at all.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

“I’m not. I know the Ahren mindset because I’m one of them, remember? We’re stubborn, and we follow our customs slavishly. They dictate that a man meets his foes head on, not charging around his back like a coward.”

Virgilio smiled. “You’d make a half-decent warlord, Riva. It’s a shame you’ll never get to be one.”

Riva wasn’t sure what to say to that, so he put his lips to his goblet and drank.

The general didn't wait for him to reply anyway. "I feel a little uncomfortable to be saying this, Riva, but I'll go ahead and just say it."

"Say what?"

Virgilio shook his head. "I've often wished you had been born a southerner, that's all. And never more so than at this very moment. You deserve more than the League will ever permit you, dear boy. A great deal more."

Riva stole a glance at Istome in time to catch her furtive smile. "It's enough for me that you think so."

The general took another sip of wine and murmured in appreciation. When he put his goblet back down, a single red drop splashed onto the table.

BENE**THE UNIVERSITY OF GERICH ASSET RECOVERY TEAM****EASTERN RENDEROS**

There was still a nip in the air to chill the hands and cheeks, but Bene didn't mind. It looked like the beginning of a beautiful day. The weather was starting to come good, and after a particularly bitter winter, it felt as if spring had finally arrived.

He looked over to where Khela sat in the wagon directly ahead of his. She hadn't come good yet, unfortunately. Although they'd stopped speaking to each other only recently, it felt as if many silent months had passed between them. What if she never said another word to him? For all his tough talk about how much he didn't want or need her, he actually found himself missing her company, their playful banter and inside jokes. To say nothing of the odd nights when they were friends with benefits. He especially tried not to think about *those*.

He'd done his best to keep busy. He was a regular on patrols with the soldiers now, and he reckoned he had gone up in their estimation because of it. His research on wights was going well,

too. He probably had at least half his thesis done. Just a rough draft, of course, but still. So, all that was good. Yeah, come to think of it, he'd actually been a lot more productive without Khela there to... distract him? Wow. Was that what she was to him? A roadblock?

"Stop thinking about her," he whispered to himself. "You're making it worse." It was a tall order, though, when you were bouncing along in the back of a cart trying to kill time. He looked around, wondering what else could he do. It would've been nice to add to his research notes or scribble in his diary, but it was too bumpy. That and it made him nauseous. Reading was out, too, for the same reasons. He didn't really feel like striking up a conversation with any of his cart mates either, so that was also out. Riding wasn't an option since he was currently quite saddle sore from recent days. So, yeah, nothing to do but kick back and try not to think about Khela.

Damien Barls sat on his haunches not too far away, muttering to himself. An odd little fellow, that Barls. Stunted and skinny, eternally unkempt and smelling as if he'd shat himself. Which he probably had, because he seemed stupid enough not to know you were supposed to pull your pants down ahead of dropping a load. Normally he felt sorry for people who were obviously touched in the head, but Bene couldn't bring himself to think that way about Barls because on top of everything else, the man also had the vilest personality of anyone he had ever met. A few moments in his company made you wonder how he'd even made it past childhood. For his looks alone, his mother would have been justified in drowning him in a bucket.

"I fucken hate the army," Barls said to no one in particular. Add to the list of his peculiarities that he was always talking to himself. "The worst part, by far, is everyone tellin' me what to do. No end o' that from the moment I fucken signed on! It's all 'do this, Barls,' an' when I fucken finish it up, it's 'do that, Barls.' No fucken letup all the livelong day."

Bene glanced around. No one else seemed to be paying him the slightest bit of attention.

"Fucken hate havin' to be awake the whole day." Barls spat noisily over the side of the wagon. "If I'd a-known it was goin' to be like that, I woulda fucken never 'ave joined up. Pointless fucken busywork! Fucken cleanin' an' polishin' shit what's already fucken clean an' polished to begin wiv. Shit!"

With nothing better to do, Bene decided to count the number of times Barls used the word 'fuck.'

"The worst fucken part," said Barls, "by far, is I hardly git any fucken time to meself. The only spare moments I git are at night when I'm too fucken tired to ack-shully enjoy 'em. Ooh, 'an I fucken hate bein' away from the city, too. Worst part o' the army by far. Sleepin' under the fucken stars! Fuck orff! Fucken hate the outdoors."

"Seven," said Bene. He wasn't sure whether to be impressed or appalled.

But Barls was merely warming up. "An' then," he said, "an' then, o' course, there's the fucken wagons. Lumbering pieces o' fucken shit! Nuthin' moves slower, nuthin' breaks down oftener! An' who hasta fucken fix 'em when that happens? Eh? Eh? Yeah, fucken me, that's who! I shouldn' hafta fucken do that shit day-in, day-out, should I? Eh? Aw, fuck, any time now this fucken thing'll stop and I'll hafta fucken git out and fucken fix it!" He kicked the side of the offending machine with the heel of his boot. "Fucken hate ya, bitch-fuck wagon. Yer the worst part o' the army, by fucken far."

"Twelve," said Bene. "A new record." A lot of people found the word offensive, but he'd always kinda liked it. Something about the way Barls said it, though, was forcing him to reconsider his opinion. In fact, if he had to listen to Barls for too long, he would probably even start hating it.

He half-expected the little man to go on with his anti-army rant, but instead he glanced sideways at Orly. She was sitting up the back of the cart, chatting with the other chuckwagon girls. Nearly everything she said caused peals of female laughter.

"Yer the best fucken thing about the army!" Barls called out to her, pointing. "By far! Yor me gurl, Orls. Yor me guuurl!"

Orly looked at Barls. He smiled at her in a knowing way. She rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to her friends.

"Bitch," Barls muttered. "Next time I git 'er alone, I'm gunna fucken point out how disrespec-ful she is. Might even tell 'er ta fuck right off."

Bene exhaled. He wondered, and not for the first time, how someone so cracked had managed to land a job at the University of Gerich. Who had said yes to him? How had he convinced them that he could be anything but a liability?

"Bitch might be playin' hard to git today, but come payday she'll doff 'er clothes and git 'tween me armpits." Barls sniggered. "Yeh! Then we'll be two privates playin' wiv each other's privates! Haaah! Seriously though, till then, screw 'er." He turned and tried to spit over the side of the wagon again, only this time his phlegm barely made it past his lips. "Fuck you, Orly." He wiped off his chin with his sleeve. "I's gonna fucken propose to ya an' all, but now I'm not."

When Barls suddenly turned to face him, Bene didn't look away. He stared right back into those dull, vacant eyes, wondering what was going on in the little brain behind them. At the same time, though, he didn't want to actually know. In any case, it took him far too long to figure out that Barls's attention wasn't fixed on him, but on the wagon ahead. On Khela.

"Best fucken thing about the army by far," said Barls to whoever was paying him any mind, which was in actuality probably still only Bene. "Reckon she's me soul's mate an' me one true love. Sight of that blonde bitch makes me 'eart soar. And to be sure, me fucken cock along wiv it!"

Bene chuckled. Khela would be charmed, he was sure.

"Yeh. Easily the most lush-us creature I 'ave ever laid me eyes on," said Barls with a moan. "No matter how grimy everyone else gits on the road, bitch always smells like flowers."

It was actually a fair observation, thought Bene. Despite the rigours of travel and its inherent lack of bathing opportunities, Khela somehow always managed to smell wonderful.

“Long blonde hair around a fucken perfect face. Fucken gorgeous! Tiny little body, too, but with tits out to there. Eh? Holy shit, but she got *massive* fucken cans, that gurl! Tight, round arse as well, of a sort what makes a grown man... what? Crack a fat, definitely. Fucken brilliant arse. All firm an’ round when she’s standin’ still, but then it gits all wobbly an’ shit when she walks. Man, that’s hot as fuck!”

To Bene’s horror and disbelief, Barls thrust a hand into his trousers, all the while looking around to make sure no one was watching him. Funnily enough, no one was. It was as if the man were invisible. All thoughts of counting curses left Bene’s head. Public masturbation was just gross.

“Auugh,” said Barls after a few moments.

Bene averted his eyes, too disgusted for words.

“One day ya’ll be mine, Khela,” said Barls. “I know in me ‘eart of ‘earts we’ll end up togevvver.” Then he shut his eyes and droned, “She will be mine, she will be mine, she will be mine, she will be mine, she will be mine.”

Bene stuck out his tongue. The little man was even nuttier than he could have imagined. Totally insane. He probably wasn’t a threat to Khela—after all, she had a hundred soldiers looking out for her—but that didn’t mean Bene wasn’t going to keep an eye on him anyway. No, this defective creature’s aberrant behaviour would be overlooked until it became dangerous, at which point he might have to be removed.

Barls jumped up. “I know,” he said, peering over the side of the wagon. “I’ll give ‘er a gift o’ flowers. It’s a well-knowned fact bitches fucken love that shit. Yeh, when I work up the nerve to introduce meself, I’m gunna give ‘er a big bunch o’ fucken flowers. Like, twenny of ‘em. Then after a bit o’ sweet-talk, the bitch’ll give up ‘er own little bud to me. Haaah! Fucken genius!”

Barls scanned the roadside, presumably on the lookout for flowers. Eventually his eyes fell on a plant with violet petals on it. He was about to scramble over the side of the wagon to nab the thing when a soldier came riding alongside, cutting off his exit.

That same man also lifted his arse out of his saddle and farted loudly.

"Phwoar!" said Hanne, the farter. "Mark that one!"

"Yeah," said Barls, dismayed as Khela's intended gift slowly disappeared from view. "Good one."

"Good one?" asked Hanne. "Merely good? For a moment there, I thought I was gonna hafta take a trip to the seamstress."

Barls stared at him. "Huh?"

"You know," said Hanne, grinning proudly, "on account o' tha force o' me fart nearly takin' the arse outta' me breeches an' all? Haaah!"

Bene snorted. Hanne was a match for Barls in manners, but that was where their similarities ended. For reasons he couldn't fathom, the man was drawn to Barls. A lot of Tonneson's men seemed to be. It was almost as if they'd made him a mascot of sorts.

"Oh," said Barls, still distracted by the loss of his flower. Bene was quite sure it had been a weed.

"I swear, some of the cart 'orses flinched it was so loud!"

"Yeah."

"Hello?" said Hanne, reaching over to wave a hand in front of Barls's face. "Hello? Is anyone at home? Hello?"

Barls shot him a look of annoyance. "What?"

"What's wrong, little buddy? Something up?"

"No." Barls let his gaze wander back to Khela. "Nuthin'."

Hanne tossed his head in the direction Barls was looking. "Ah," he said, nodding. "I getcha. So, you talked to 'er yet or what?"

"Keep yer voice down, will ya?" said Barls, checking to see if Orly hadn't overheard. Bene looked too, but the girl was preoccupied with entertaining her circle of friends.

"Well?" asked Hanne. "You talked to 'er yet or what?"

Barls shook his head. "Nah."

"Why not?"

"Dunno. Time's not right yet, I guess?"

Hanne clicked his tongue. "Yep. Sure, fair enough. Timing's important."

“How kin a gurl like that even exist?”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“In all me life,” said Barls, shaking his head again, “I never seen an arse like hers. Same goes for them tits, really, but it’s ‘er arse what gets me ever-y fucken time.”

Hanne nodded slowly. “Yep. She’s got quite the arse, I do agree with you.”

“With some guys,” said Barls, “it’s all about the tits. It’s butts what really gets me goin’ though. I’m a butt boy, I guess you could say. I heard a story once about these two great civili... civili-zay... civili-zay shums? No, wait. Umpires! These two umpires what went to war over this one bitch this one time. You wiv me? It was in the old days, you know, like maybe twenny years ago.

“So this one umpire, they stole this bitch, right? Reckon she was a princess or somethin’ I think. An’ so to git ‘er back again, the other umpire launched, like, twenny fucken boats an’ shit. Maybe more! Each one of ‘em had, like, twenny warriors inside an’ shit. They was like, war boats. Yeah, then they had some big fucken battles an’ shit. She must ‘ave been somethin’ to look at, eh?

“But anyway, there was blood an’ bodies an’ shit an’ whatnot piled up to the clouds, just about. All over this one fucken bitch! She was a princess or somethin’. Or a queen, maybe. I dunno. I didn’t never believe a word of it, though, not really. Then one day I looked over an’ saw the fucken turd cutter on Khela, an’ I thought to m’self, yeah. Yeah! Yeah, I thought, now I believe it. Fuuuck.”

“No two ways about it,” said Hanne. “She is fuckable.”

Barls grunted. “Yeh. Top tits. Like pillows.” He seemed about ready to thrust his hand down his pants again, but after a couple of hasty glances at Hanne he apparently thought better of it. “Yeh.”

Hanne leaned over in a conspiratorial way. “I’ve heard tell she’s really, really dirty, too.”

“Yeh?”

"Yeah," said Hanne, licking his lips. "But not just *dirty* dirty. I mean full-on fuckin' *filthy* dirty."

Barls started to go red. "Yeh?"

"Oh, yeah. You know she fucked the boss, right?"

"Magister Roaaa?"

Hanne laughed. "No, no. Not the big boss. My boss. Colonel Tonneson."

At the mention of Tonneson, Bene's mood began to sour. He hadn't thought about him and Khela much over the past day or so. But now the images of them together were all coming back again...

"Yeah, nah," said Barls, shaking his head. "Heard the rumours. Don't think it really happened, but."

"Ha, ha! More 'n just rumours, mate," said Hanne with a wink. "I know a guy says he saw Big T assaultin' the rear guard."

"Who's Big T?"

"Y'know... Tonneson? The colonel? Boss of the Scouts?"

Barls nodded. "Oh yeah. Knew who ya meant, o' course."

"Yeah."

"But what does *rear guard* mean?"

"Rear guard? Y'know?" said Hanne, leering. "Her rear. Her starfish. Haw, he was pokin' that starfish like there was no tomorrow. Apparently."

"Starfish?" asked Barls, baffled.

"Yeah, yeah, you know?" said Hanne, pointing at his own butt. "Starfish. Her chocolate starfish."

"Huh? No?"

"Yeah ya do! You know. Her date?"

"Her date?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sayin' she likes it in the ol' date... you know?"

"Whut?" asked Barls, making a face. "Speak plain. Yer just confusin' me!"

"Up the dumper, pal," said Hanne, blowing out his cheeks in frustration. "In the arse!"

Barls looked horrified. "Whuut?"

Hanne laughed. "Look, I dunno if I can make it any clearer than I have, chum."

"I know!" shouted Barls, his cheeks going bright with anger. "I know. I got it, all right? I'm not stupid, y'know!" Then, as the realisation of what Hanne was saying actually did dawn on him, he went even redder. He clenched his fists. "Fucken fuuuuuck!" he screamed.

The sudden outburst had everyone in the wagon staring openly at Barls. Bene wondered if he shouldn't say something, maybe suggest that he go and find some place to cool off. And he might even tell Hanne to take a hike, what with his complete bullshit story about Khela. Did he have nothing better to do with his time?

"All right," said Hanne, raising a finger at the little man. "That's enough, eh? Calm down, will ya?"

"Yeah," said Barls, sulking.

"Just take it easy."

"Yeah."

Hanne waited until everyone went back to what they were doing. He spat. "She's not my type, mind you."

Barls looked up. "Huh?"

"Khela. Your girl? Not my type at all."

"Really? How come?"

"All right," said Hanne, clearing his throat. "Lemme set the scene for ya, eh? Picture this, if you can, in yer mind's eye..."

"You mean, like, imagine?"

"Yeah."

"Like, wiv me mind?"

"Yeah."

"Do I hafta, like, close me eyes an' stuff?"

Hanne looked at him and frowned. "No. You don't."

"I reckon it would make it easier if I did, but..."

"Fine." Hanne took a deep breath. "Go ahead."

"All right," said Barls, closing his eyes. "Ready."

"All right. Now, imagine you're on a desert island. Are you picturing it?"

Barls nodded. "Yep."

"Now on this island," said Hanne slowly, "you 'ave everything you need to live, and live well. Food, drink, girls, the lot. Maybe it doesn't 'ave *every* luxury a man could want. I mean, you don't live in a mansion or nothin', an' you're not eatin' meat every day, but you know... life's passably good. And, well, when all's said an' done the island's yours, eh? You own it, no one's botherin' you, 'an you're happy enough livin' there. Things are all right, ya know?"

"Yeh," said Barls.

"Ya with me?"

"Yeh," said Barls again.

"All right. Now off in the distance, you can kinda make out a whole 'nother island. Everyone's always in yer face about how it's much, much better than your island. And, well, it is. It has *everythin'* a man could want an' much, much more. An' when I say *everythin'*, I mean *everythin'*. It's a fuckin' paradise, if ya will. Livin' there, you wouldn't want for nuthin'!"

"Sounds good."

"Yeah," said Hanne. "It does, doesn't it? An' ya might get there someday, maybe, but it's a long ways away and it's protected. You'd 'ave to swim through an ocean o' shit filled with monsters to reach it. The chances of reachin' it alive are pretty slim. Slim to none, actually. Swimmin' through shit ain't doable for one thing, and even if it was, those monsters don't take no prisoners. It's certain death. So ya think to yerself, nahhh."

Barls shook his head. "I don't get it."

Bene thought he did get it, stupid as it was. At least it was preferable to listening to all that stuff about Khela's... appetites.

"Open your eyes," said Hanne.

Barls did no such thing. "Huh?"

"I said, open your eyes!"

"All right," said Barls, opening his eyes. "What now?"

Hanne looked at him. "You really don't get it?"

"Nope."

"Life," said Hanne in a way that suggested it should be obvious. "I'm talkin' about life, o' course! Life! Do ya get it now?"

"No."

"It's a metaphor. The first island represents the life you got now."

Barls thought about it. "Does it, though?"

"Well... I dunno. You sayin' yer not happy with what ya got?"

"I 'aven't got shit," said Barls, shaking his head. "So no, I'm not happy."

"Well, then I dunno," said Hanne with a shrug. "Individual experiences vary, I guess? Well, I'm happy with what I got, at least, so for me it's a good metaphor. It works."

"Yeah. All right. An' what about the swimmin' in shit an' stuff? An' the monsters? Because I know monsters are real. But is the ocean really made of shit? Thought it was more like, ya know, water?"

"Wow," muttered Bene. "Just wow." It was turning out to be a real meeting of minds, the discussion between these two.

"Ah," said Hanne. "All that's just another metaphor, o' course. Represents the life you want. It's about man's struggle to better 'imself."

"Better 'imself?"

Hanne nodded. "Yeah, yeah. You know how we're always strugglin' to get more money so we can get a better horse, or get better clothes? Or get better food? Well, there's really no point in strivin' to get the very best all the time, eh? Not if it just ain't possible. I mean, we ain't all born kings."

"Yeh," said Barls, scratching his head, "all right, but how is this about Khela?"

"Oh, it is. Can't you see? We *are* talking about Khela, just in a roundabout kinda way. See, as far as the likes o' you and me are concerned, she's on that far island."

Barls looked hurt. "This isn't your way o' tellin' me to give up 'cause I'll never get 'er, is it?"

Hanne gave Barls a sympathetic look. "No..."

"Cause I will get 'er," said Barls, making fists. "I will!"

"Not sayin' you won't son, but--"

"You won't," muttered Bene to himself. He'd have the little weirdo killed before he could even lay a finger on Khela.

"Everyone's always sayin' how easy she is," whined Barls. "If that's true, how could I not at least get a turn?"

"I know that's what they say about her an' all," said Hanne, "but she doesn't open them legs o' hers to just anyone. Oh, no. You hafta be on her island first."

Barls looked mystified. "She's got one, too?"

"Yeah. Course she does! Everyone does. Or do you still not get it?"

"Then what--?"

Hanne shifted in his saddle. "Look, mate, think of the island thing as just my way o' saying how a man should be happy enough with his lot not to go off tryin' to rope unicorns."

"Oh. I think I get it now."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," said Barls, nodding. "I got a question, though. I mean, are there like, I dunno, stepping stone islands... or something? Like, I said before how I wasn't happy wiv what I had right now, right? Is it possible I might get a better island later on? Like, not the amazin' paradise one or anythin', because like ya said, it might be reachin' too far. But what about a better one than the one I got now at least?"

"Oh yeah," said Hanne, rubbing his chin. "Yeah. Absolutely. It's a good point, actually. It's often less about being satisfied with what you've got and more about not reaching too far. You know, not getting greedy?"

Barls actually seemed to think about that. "So what've you got, exactly? Who's on your island? You got a wife?"

"Nah. Not anymore. It's just me now, really. Just me on me own. Oh no, that's not strictly true, I s'pose. Truth be told, I got a girl or two who takes a ferry from the mainland over to my island every now an' again."

"Ah," said Barls. "I getcha. Whores, right?"

"Nah," said Hanne. He shook his head. "Nah. I don't do whores."

"How come?"

"Well now I got nothin' against the profession, generally speakin', but it's just that I think a lot o' the practitioners just ain't very nice people."

Barls stared off into the distance. "I like whores."

Hanne looked at him. "You ever been to Sohe?"

"Nope, can't say I have."

"It's where I'm from, Sohe. Rough town. Some of the meanest, ugliest whores you've ever seen in ya life. One time, this real ugly slut tried to stick me with a knife even though I gave 'er no cause. So, call it unfair, but me experiences in Sohe kinda shaped how I see the rest of 'em."

"Hmm."

Hanne held up a hand. "Let me clarify. Now, I don't care so much what a girl looks like if she's givin' it up for free. But no one should 'ave to pay money to pork a fugly one, right? Goes against all o' me principles, that does."

"Yeh," said Barls, nodding. "I can't argue wiv yer take on whores." He waited until Hanne turned to spit before reaching into his trousers again. The soldier turned back sooner than expected, though, and caught him mid-stroke.

"Yuck," muttered Bene.

"What are ya doing?" asked Hanne, giving Barls a suspicious look. "Not havin' a tamper, are ya?"

Barls blushed. "Nah. Nah, o'course not. It's just... real itchy down there."

"Crabs?"

"Nah. More like these little tiny, I dunno... insects?"

"Huh? Sounds like crabs to me, bud."

"Nah, can't be. I saw one up close an' it didn't have the nippers."

"Huh?"

"You know?" said Barls, making scissor-like gestures with his hands. "Those little nippers they have? It didn't have 'em. Plus, we're nowhere near the sea."

Bene nearly choked on his laughter. "What?"

"What?" asked Hanne, eyeing Bene briefly before giving Barls his full attention again. "Look, if ya wanna get rid of 'em, mate, go see Ghislaine. And if you don't wanna get 'em again, start trimmin' the hair on yer nads. The little fuckers only love long pubes."

"Yeah?"

"Yep. On the night a'fore I leave for field assignments, I trim everythin' down to stubble. Then again every two weeks or so after."

"I just might try that..."

"Just don't cut yer nads off in the process, eh?" said Hanne, holding up a finger in warning.

Bene stood up. He was picturing a man with gigantic mud crabs nesting in his pubic hair and it was the funniest thing ever. He couldn't contain himself. Giggling, he jumped over the side of the wagon and ran to catch up with the one Khela was riding. It was high time he swallowed his pride and apologised, and if Barls's crab story wasn't an in with her, he didn't know what was. She'd probably get a kick out of hearing about that whole island thing, too.

ROSARIUS**SARASINIA****THE BASTION**

Rosarius made it to the dining hall later than usual, and was unsurprised to find it full of students and the dull roar of chatter. He spotted the regular gang and made a beeline for their table. "It's a good day to die, brothers," he said.

"Indeed it is, brother," came their scattered replies. "May we die with honour."

Andreas nudged a bowl and spoon toward him. "Oats and water. Again."

"Thanks," said Rosarius. He took a seat, cradling the bowl with one arm and spooning its contents into his mouth with the other. "My favourite." It definitely wasn't.

Andreas smiled at his sarcasm. "It's got oil in it, too."

"Great. Even better." He grimaced as he swallowed.

Borrego plopped down his gigantic, bald-headed frame with a grunt. "It's a good day to die, brothers," he said, looking at each of them in turn.

“Indeed, brother,” said Andreas, shuffling aside to make room for him.

“Indeed it is,” murmured Alanso and Carranza together. “May we die with honour.”

“A good day to die with you, too, brother,” said Rosarius. “You’re late today as well, huh?”

“Mhm,” said Borrego, looking at the bowls on the table with distaste. The glance he gave Rosarius wasn’t much different. “So, you’re deigning to talk to us again, are you?”

Rosarius stared back. “Yeah.” He’d grown bitter since getting out of the Hole, his encounter with Colton, Dannis and Tavaris all he could think about. He’d taken it personally, and that had been a mistake. So had ignoring his closest companions in favour of feeling sorry for himself.

Borrego nodded. “Good. About time you got over yourself. We all went to the Hole, you know. Not just you.”

“Yeah. I know.” To everyone at the table he said, “Look, I actually wanted to say something to all of you. I ignored you guys for a bit, and I, uh...”

“No,” said Borrego. “Don’t finish that sentence, Rosy. Better just to forget it and move on, eh?” The others murmured their agreement.

“All right,” said Rosarius, feeling at once relieved, grateful for such easy friendship, and silly for opening his mouth. Maybe it would have been better to have just sat down with them and not said anything?

Andreas slid a bowl across the table at Borrego. “Gruel?”

“What is this shit?” asked Borrego.

“Gruel,” said Andreas.

“Don’t be a smart arse.” Borrego pinned him with a glare. “I meant, why is this all we ever get now?”

“Ah,” said Alanso. “So as usual, you weren’t paying attention in class. Well then, you are hereby presented with the Bastion’s method of readying us gentlemen for the culinary delights that await us in the field.”

Borrego frowned. “This is what we get in the field?”

"Yeah, pretty much," said Andreas. "Just be grateful the kitchens are still churning it out. In another week they won't be."

"And why's that?"

"They're shutting down for a bit so we can all experience the joys of life as an ordinary grunt," said Carranza.

Borrego made a face. "They're shutting down the kitchens? What the fuck?"

"It's not a new thing, brother. Grunts have to grind and cook their own grain on the march, of course, so they're giving us the opportunity to experience what it's like first-hand..."

"Well I had no idea!" said Borrego, bashing the table with a fist. "But that's bullshit, though. We're officers, not grunts. We won't have to grind and cook shit, so what's the point?"

"We're not officers yet," said Andreas, "and the point, brother, is what you seem to be missing. You see, this is an exercise in what they call *character building*."

"It's a fuckin' pain in the arse," said Borrego.

"Exactly," said Carranza. "Same difference."

Everyone chuckled except Borrego, who continued to fume. "Well, fuck that!" he shouted. "You think I'm going to just sit by and take this? Well I'm not, because--"

He was interrupted by a jarring crash a kitchen girl stumbled, upending an entire tray of bowls and spoons onto the floor. The entire hall stopped to jeer her clumsiness, causing her face to turn a deep shade of crimson. Then, as she bent to the task of cleaning up, every eye devoured the sight of her arse straining against the fabric of her long skirt. The jeers turned into wild cheers and catcalling.

"Any moment now," said Alanso when the cheering went on a little too long. To his evident satisfaction, the peal of a brass bell cut through the racket right after the words left his mouth. The bell sounded a second time, only louder and carrying a distinct note of annoyance.

"Heads up," said Borrego. "Minten's pissed." He wasn't wrong. The drillmaster sat at the instructors' table at the head of the hall

with his arms folded. When the bell rang a third time, the cheering abruptly ceased and everyone went back to eating.

Rosarius kept his eye on the kitchen girl. He slapped Borrego's shoulder with the back of his hand when he noticed one of the sub-juniors leaving his place and edging toward her. "Hey," he said, pointing. "Look."

As the girl stacked her bowls, the boy approached with a single dirty spoon clutched in both hands. He held it out to her, trembling, his upper lip caught between his teeth. The girl stopped what she was doing and smiled, pushing a stray hair across her brow. The boy opened his mouth as if to say something, but no words came out. His face reddened, and he looked down at the toes of his boots before turning and beating a hasty retreat.

"Haah!" said Alanso. "Found the one guy in this entire place who hasn't fucked her yet!" Everyone at the table guffawed except Rosarius, who just smiled and crammed another spoonful of oats into his mouth.

"Oh yeah," said Borrego. "I know that one. I tumbled her last year in the laundry. On a big pile of dirty sheets, if I remember correctly. Clit was so big she could've ploughed *me*!"

"Yikes," said Rosarius. But even he chortled along with the others.

"How much?" asked Andreas.

Borrego slid his left hand all the way down his right forearm and slapped his bicep. "How much did I serve her? About this much, if you must know."

"Yeah, right," said Andreas, rolling his eyes. "I meant how much did she charge you?"

"Charge? Hey, I'll have you know that when the little slut saw the size of my dong, she hoisted her rump for free!"

"Ah," said Alanso. "So it was a sympathy fuck, then?"

"Fah!" Borrego gave him the finger.

"She's not much to look at," said Carranza. "Got a sort of Dorin look about her, don't you think?"

"Nah," said Alanso. "She's not Dorin. Not wearing an orange dress, is she?"

"Whatever she is," said Farias, "I'd keep your cock out of her." He brandished his spoon in a way that said his was the final word on the subject.

"Huh, why's that?" asked Andreas.

"Since when do *you* keep your cock out of anything?" That from Carranza.

Farias nodded. "Oh, I freely admit I fucked her a time or two," he said around a mouthful of food. He pointed his spoon first at the girl and then at his crotch. "Gave me the pants rabbits something fierce. My woman and I passed 'em back and forth for fuck knows how long. Worst case I ever had."

"How'd you get rid of them?" asked Andreas.

"Orpiment, of course," said Farias with a shrug. "Got it from my aunt."

Borrego stopped chewing. "You showed your dick to your aunt?"

"She's a fucking doctor!" cried Farias. "She looks at dicks all day long, probably. So what if one of them happened to be mine?"

"He's right though," said Alanso. "Those kitchen girls aren't clean." He turned to Farias. "On a, uh, completely unrelated matter, I should probably get your aunt's address..."

The others laughed, and Andreas giggled so hard he almost spat out his oats.

"I know someone who doesn't fuck the kitchen girls," said Carranza, slapping Rosarius on the back.

"Maybe he does," said Farias, "only he doesn't bleat about it like the rest of us?"

Borrego turned to Rosarius. "You don't fuck 'em? Why not?"

Rosarius grinned. "Oh, I dunno... maybe it's because everyone who does needs a pox doctor? Your cock can't rot if you don't get it wet."

Andreas looked at him as if he'd gone crazy. "That's no excuse, brother. You're not... uh? You know? Are you?"

Everyone looked at Rosarius expectantly. He kept them waiting, finishing off his gruel at leisure. "Not what?"

"You know," said Andreas, his voice a whisper. "Into boys?"

Rosarius shook his head. "No, brother. Can't say that I am."

"So," said Carranza, "when was the last time you got your dick wet, then?"

"I dunno." Rosarius had to think about it. Months. Many months. "I guess it *has* been a while."

"We need to remedy that then, brother," said Borrego.

"We do," said Carranza.

"Yeah," said Rosarius, shrugging. "All right. Why not?"

"It's settled then," said Borrego. "Tonight we're all going out to wet our dicks." He looked about for something to raise a toast with, and finding nothing better than his bowl of gruel, toasted with that. The others followed his example.

"Oh hey," said Alanso. "Speaking of dicks, have you heard the news? Word is a couple of new teachers will be joining the Bastion."

Rosarius wiped off his chin. "New teachers? Who?"

"I believe we all know them," said Alanso, looking out of the corner of his eye at Rosarius. "They were on that committee thing a couple of months back, after all that shit with Romelo. Those two *intimates* of Colton's."

"Fucking what?" said Rosarius, almost too shocked for words. The idea was preposterous. "Dannis and Tavaris? That had better not be true."

"Those two pillow biters?" asked Borrego. "Bullshit."

"I think you'll find they're really coming back," said Alanso, nodding. "Heard they liked it here and were asking to return as instructors."

"That doesn't make sense," said Andreas. "They're not teachers, are they? Where'd you hear all this, anyway?"

Alanso shrugged. "They weren't actual members of our disciplinary committee either, and yet that didn't seem to stop them, eh? And I heard it through the grapevine."

“Dannis and Tavaris,” said Borrego, his voice rising, “will teach here over my dead fucking body.”

“Hey, look,” said Alanso. “Don’t slay the messenger. I’m just telling you what I heard, all right?”

“Well anyway, let’s go,” said Carranza. “We don’t want to be late for class.”

“Mhm,” said Rosarius, nodding. Concerning news, but maybe Alanso’s source of information was wrong? He was almost on his feet when a hand appeared on his shoulder and shoved him back down onto the bench. Another slapped him around the ear, hard. His mind was still trying to process what was happening when his cousin leaned in to give him a sickly grin.

“Well, well!” said Romelo, his eyes gleaming with spite. “If it isn’t my cousin and my very, *very* best friend.” He squeezed Rosarius’s shoulder so forcefully it almost popped. “I’d like to have a quiet word with you, if that’s all right. The rest of you can fuck off.”

A cold silence settled over the table. Romelo hadn’t come alone. A handful of his flunkies fanned out behind him, arms crossed or fingers brushing knife hilts.

Romelo leered. “Bye bye, gentlemen,” he said, waving in an exaggerated way at Rosarius’s friends. “Yes, that’s right! Off you go now!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Rosarius saw Borrego set his jaw.

“Did you not hear me?” Romelo was annoyed that no one was doing what he wanted. “I told you all to fuck off. So, all of you, fuck off!”

“Urgh,” said Borrego, surging to his feet. He went for the nearest of Romelo’s companions, grabbing him by the hair and burying his forehead in his face with a sickening crunch. The man hit the floor like a sack of flour.

The mess hall let out a collective gasp, every eye fixed on this new spectacle.

“Holy shit!” said Alanso.

“Fuck!” said Carranza.

“Woo!” screamed Borrego, laughing. “Come on!” He seized another of Romelo’s men and knocked him out with a brutal blow to the side of the head.

“Holy shit!” said Alanso.

“Fuck!” said Carranza.

“Come on!” screamed Borrego again. He howled wordlessly as he went for a third victim, but that man turned and fled in the face of his rage.

Romelo’s gleeful expression disappeared, replaced by one of raw fear. What remained of his bodyguard melted away, and he stood rooted to the spot, oblivious to the fact that there was another danger literally right under his nose.

“Muuurgh!” bellowed Rosarius as he leapt to his feet and drove an elbow into his cousin’s face.

“Holy shitballs!” said Alanso.

“Fuck me!” said Carranza.

Romelo staggered backward, cradling his nose in both hands. Blood dribbled through his fingers and onto the floor. “Aw, fuck!” he said in a muffled voice. “Aw, fuck!” One hand dropped to the knife on his belt.

Rosarius slapped Romelo’s hand away, then slipped around behind him and grabbed a handful of his hair. “Nice plan, cousin,” he said, wrenching his head upward and exposing his neck. “Didn’t quite pan out, though, did it?” He reached down to pull Romelo’s blade from its sheath.

“I’m going to...” said Romelo, grinning even as he snorted blood, “going to... fucking kill you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. You’re dead.”

Rosarius laid the edge of the knife against his cousin’s cheek. “Not if I kill you first.”

Romelo went still, his courage wilting. “Ulch.”

“How’s the steel against your skin, cousin?” Rosarius ground his teeth in fury. “Cold?” He shaved away part of Romelo’s left sideburn. “Ooo, a sharp blade. Colour me impressed.”

“Don’t,” said Romelo, his voice quavering.

"Hush now."

"J-just lemme go, all right?"

"Sorry cousin," said Rosarius as he took off Romelo's left eyebrow. "Too late for that."

"Kill him," said Borrego. "We went to the Hole because of that prick."

"No! Don't!" cried Romelo. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I-I'll leave you alone from now on. You'll never hear from me again! I swear!"

"If only I could believe that," said Rosarius.

"I swear!"

"Shut the fuck up and hold still."

"No! Wait! What are you-?"

"Do you want to lose an eye? Quit squirming, or you will."

Romelo closed his eyes as Rosarius pared away his other eyebrow. He made a mess of it, too, nicking him in several places.

"Agh!" wailed Romelo. "I really am going to fucking kill you!"

Rosarius smiled. "Yeah. See? Now that sounds more like you."

"Kill him," said Borrego, insistent. "Open his fucking neck right up."

"Think I should?"

"Don't," said Romelo. "Please don't."

Rosarius paused as if seriously pondering the idea. "Yeah. Think I'm gonna do it. So long, Romes." His cousin's eyes went wide as he drew the blade across his neck in one quick motion.

Romelo staggered away clutching at his throat, numb with terror. "Aagh!" he squealed. "Aagh! Aagh! Aaaghh!" He bumped into the table a couple of times and did an odd little dance before his knees gave way.

Rosarius grinned as Borrego shoved his cousin face first into the stone floor.

"Aaugh! Aaugh! Aaugh!" screamed Romelo, his legs thrashing. "Augh! Augh!"

The dining hall was in uproar. Hundreds of students were on their feet, some leaving because they didn't want any part of what was happening, others hastening toward the fracas to get a better look.

Minten left the instructors' table, sending students careening as he shoved them out of his path. Junior tutors Norval and Onarius followed in his wake.

"Hurgh!" said Romelo, still flailing around on the floor.

"Idiots!" cried Minten. He gave Rosarius an incredulous look. "What have you done?"

"He's fine, sir," said Rosarius. He handed his cousin's blade over, handle first. "I only used the back edge to give him a scratch."

"You only used the-?" Minten snatched the knife with a scowl and tossed it onto the table. Peering down at Romelo, he said, "Boy! Get your hands away from your throat. Let me have a look at you."

"Huughh!" said Romelo.

Minten knelt beside him. "I said, get your hands away from your throat!"

"Haaaggh!"

"Fool boy!" yelled Minten, swatting Romelo's hands aside. "Get your fucking hands away from your throat!"

"Huurgh! Augh!"

"For fuck's sake, boy! Get your fucking hands away! I can't see your neck."

Romelo, apparently oblivious to anything beyond his own torment, ignored him. "Aaaaurgh!"

Minten grabbed Romelo's wrists and wrenched them apart. "Hey! Hey!"

"Aaurggh!"

Minten slapped Romelo hard across the face. "You're not hurt. He didn't cut you!"

"Aaurggh!" screamed Romelo. "Aaurggh! Leeuurgh!"

"You fucking idiot!" shouted Minten, slapping him again. "For fuck's sake, boy! There's nothing wrong with you! He didn't cut you!" Heedless of the blood, he took Romelo by the chin and forced him to look directly into his eyes. "Listen to me! Hey! He didn't cut you. You're fine. There's nothing wrong with your neck! You're fine!"

"Uuungh?" Romelo, it seemed, was finally beginning to understand.

"All the blood's coming from your nose, cockhead. Rosarius used the back edge of the knife to give you a scare, that's all."

Romelo began to relax. "Unnh?" He closed his eyes, and tears cut a path down his bloodied cheeks. Then a dark stain spread across his trousers and he started sobbing.

"Ugh," said Minten, standing up.

"Oh shit!" shouted someone. "He's pissed himself!"

Excited chatter spread through the hall. "Romelo pissed himself! He's pissed himself!"

Minten turned around. "All right!" he shouted. "That's enough! Get the fuck out, all of you!" He pointed at Rosarius and Borrego. "Not you two. You stay."

"Sir," said Rosarius, straightening. No one else moved.

Minten showed his teeth. "*You will all clear the fucking mess hall!*" he roared. "*Fucking move, you bastards!*"

Students bolted then, knocking over benches and sending bowls and spoons clattering to the floor.

"Be seeing you," said Carranza to Rosarius.

"Later," said Alanso.

"Good job," said Andreas, and he clapped Borrego on the shoulder. "And good luck."

"Nice work," muttered Farias to Rosarius. "Couldn't have done it better myself. See you around, brother."

The dining hall emptied within moments. A few instructors remained, still eating at their table as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. One of the students Borrego had hit needed help to walk, but the other lay unresponsive even with people slapping his cheeks and urging him to wake up.

"Fuck him," muttered Borrego, spitting on the floor. "I hope he's dead."

The drillmaster turned to Rosarius. "Why is it," he asked, "that barely a week goes by without there being some incident involving you and your fucking cousin?"

Rosarius had no answer, so he offered none.

Romelo whimpered. Minten looked down at him, shaking his head with obvious contempt. "So, who started it this time?"

"He did," said Rosarius.

"I believe you," said the instructor, turning back to face him. "So why don't you challenge the fucker and be done with it?"

"Would that I could, sir. But he's family. And I'd probably be charged with murder."

Minten nodded. "Yeah, well if the two of you keep this shit up, neither of you can expect to graduate. You do realise this, don't you?"

Rosarius sniffed. "*He* will, sir. *He'll* graduate no matter what."

"That's probably true." The drillmaster did not look happy about conceding the point. "But where does that leave you?"

"I don't know."

Minten nodded again. "All right," he said, looking at Romelo. "Enough of this, Romelo. Stand up!"

At first Romelo didn't move. Then he slowly got to his knees, and from there to his feet. With one hand clamped protectively around his throat and his face a bloodstained mess, he cut a pitiable figure indeed. But there was no mistaking the look of utter loathing in his eyes. "I'll get you," he whispered to Rosarius.

"Thanks for yet another warning," said Rosarius. "Next time I'll open your throat for real."

Romelo laughed even though it must have pained him. "You wouldn't dare."

"Try me."

Romelo turned on Minten, his eyes flashing. "Right! That's it!" he screamed. "I *demand* that he go straight to the Hole!" He indicated Borrego. "Him, too!"

"Done," said Minten. He turned to Rosarius. "Students Rosarius and Borrego, you're to go to the Hole pending further action. Instructors Norval and Onarius will escort you there."

"Sir," said Norval, taking Rosarius by the elbow. Onarius did the same with Borrego.

Rosarius opened his mouth to protest, but closed it again because he didn't want to give Romelo the satisfaction. "Sir," he said. He looked at Borrego, who simply shrugged.

Through bloody lips, Romelo smiled in triumph. "Good. Good. Finally!"

Minten turned to face him. "Oh? Think it's good, do you?"

"Yes," said Romelo, too smugly. "I do. And I also think it's good that you finally know your place, Minten."

The drillmaster looked him dead in the eyes. "What does *that* mean, student?"

Romelo's grin fell as he realised his mistake. "I, uh..."

"In addition to going to the Hole, student Romelo," said Minten, "you'll be flogged for insulting a superior. Five lashes."

"What? But you--? No, you can't!"

Minten rocked back and forth on his heels, savouring the moment. "It would be remiss of me, I think, not to add that it's about time you were introduced to the Hole. I'll even take you there myself, just to make sure you're installed properly, yes?"

Romelo stamped his feet. "No!" he wailed. "You can't! I won't go!"

"Be silent!"

"I will not!"

"So, another five lashes for insubordination, then? Fine. That's ten lashes all up, student Romelo, unless you want to keep running your fucking mouth and add some more?"

Romelo shook in silent fury.

Minten nodded at the junior instructors. "Walk on."

Onarius and Norval led Rosarius and Borrego off in the direction of the Hole. "Fucking good job on the eyebrows, Rosy, by the way," murmured Norval.

"He deserved it," said Rosarius.

"Fuckin' oath he did." Onarius chuckled. "Fuckin' oath."

Behind them, shepherded roughly by Minten, Romelo let out his grief. "You can't do this to me!" he screeched. "I can't go in the Hole! I can't! I'll bribe the guards to let me out!"

"I certainly appreciate you telling me in advance, student," said Minten.

Romelo let out a long sob. "My father will hear about this. He will! Just you wait and see! You can't do this to me! Wait! Hey, you need gold, right? How much do you want? I'll give you twenty if you don't put me in the Hole. No! Fifty! A hundred! I'll give you whatever you want!"

Minten laughed. "Stop wasting your breath, student. I think I'd *pay* a hundred gold to see you in the Hole."

"If it's any consolation," said Onarius to Borrego, "we don't think either of you deserve this."

"Yeah," said Norval.

"Never mind," said Borrego. He didn't seem at all perturbed. "It's not my first time."

"We appreciate the sentiment regardless," said Rosarius. He suppressed a shudder as the iron grate leading down to the Hole came into view. Forcing a smile, he added, "I'm just glad my cousin won't be getting out of this one."

10

GORARIC

SARASINIAN OCCUPIED AHRENIA

ENGUND'S TOR

Goraric eyed the Tor from about a half mile out. It was early morning, and too foggy by half, but that only meant a clear day ahead. The place was as lush as he remembered, green terraces with wide gashes of brown in between. Good farmland, if difficult to work, and still pretty despite the patch of blackened stubble the Sarasinians had left near the famous boulders. Hard to imagine never feasting in the great hall again. Harder still to imagine not seeing any of the people whose lives had been taken from them.

The Tor was home, he supposed, even though he'd given it his back years ago. Torsmen were a parochial lot, notorious for their disdain of outsiders. He'd never agreed with that sort of mindset, never really understood it. It was one thing to love where you came from, but to see everyone else as inferior? And to be only too willing to fight them over it? No. To be small-minded to that degree was idiotic. It was one of the many reasons he'd left.

His mother had been the main reason, of course.

Goraric felt a dagger of fear in his guts. When he'd joined the Sarasinian garrison in Herena, Mother had called him a traitor, told him he had forever lost the right to call himself a Torsman. Warned him against coming back. Ever. Hoping he wasn't making the mistake of his life, he took a deep breath and put one foot in front of the other. Onward. Besides, he'd only stay a few days before moving on. A few days at the most.

Under the watchful eye of a pair of guards, the Tor's slaves were out gathering sticks for kindling. Goraric spotted Kushran among them, recognising her despite not having seen her in, well, it felt like a lifetime ago.

"Hello Kushran," he said, going up to her.

Kushran's head snapped up. "Goraric?"

"How are you?" Despite her deep wrinkles and hair jutting out at odd angles, she was still striking. But there was no denying that his once smooth-skinned beauty had aged badly. She looked careworn, set upon. She probably had a brood of children now, too, fathered by every man on the Tor. His smile slipped.

One of the guards stepped forward as if to challenge him, a thin boy swathed in a comically large cloak. His companion, grey-bearded and not so ridiculously dressed, checked the lad by tapping him on the knee with the butt of his spear. The boy flashed them both angry looks but didn't say anything.

Goraric didn't recognise the older man. "Good morning, uncle," he said. Out here, that was what you called any man who looked as if he had more than a decade on you. And knowing how things worked on the Tor, there was a decent chance the fellow actually *was* his uncle. By way of reply, the man nodded curtly at spat on the ground.

He turned back to Kushran. "How are you?"

Kushran shrugged, unsmiling. "As good as can be expected, I guess." Though she already had a decent armful of sticks, she went back to the task of adding to them.

"Yeah," said Goraric.

"You back because of what happened here?" she asked, not looking at him. "Because of what the Sarasinians did?"

"Yes."

"Staying for good?" Was it just him, or did she sound hopeful?

"I don't think so." He shook his head. "No, probably not." Definitely not. By now, placards bearing his face would have been plastered all over Herena. And sooner or later the Sarasinians would come to the Tor looking for him. "No."

"I should tell you," said Kushran, glancing at the guards even though they were out of earshot and didn't even seem interested in their conversation. "You'll get no warm welcome here. Your mother blames you for what happened to those girls."

"What doesn't she blame me for, eh?" said Goraric, aiming for flippant but sounding bitter instead. "And anyway, I blame myself for what happened to those girls."

Kushran frowned. "Nay, Goraric. I know you well enough to know you would never—"

"Do you, though? It's been years since you and I—"

"I *do* know you," said Kushran over the top of him. "Enough to know you had no part in the killings. And nothing you say could convince me otherwise."

Goraric hung his head. "I was there, Kushran. I didn't even try to save them."

"Not the same thing." She tugged at Goraric's sleeve with her free hand to reveal the inside of his forearm. He didn't try to stop her. "Ah, yes. I see you're still at it," she said, running a finger over his wounds. Her hands were like leather, rougher than a smith's.

"Yes." Why deny the obvious?

"Still think your blood will soothe your little brother's spirit?" It might have been phrased as one, but it wasn't really a question.

"Well, actually this arm is for the new spirits," said Goraric. "I use the other one for him." He indicated his right arm.

"Oh, Goraric! Nay. Neither the girls nor your brother were your fault. Why can't you see that?"

"Because my mother—"

Kushran spat between his feet. "Fuck your mother."

"Well," he said, clearing his throat. Not an argument he wanted to have. "In any case I'm not staying long. I brought money. You know, to give to the families? To atone for the girls, for what I did." He caught her expression. "Or at least for what I failed to do..."

Kushran stared at the guards, who had since turned back to watch them. "Uh huh."

"And after that I had plans to go over the Asfour and begin anew."

"I see."

"To start a new life. You know, among the northern clans? One of them might take me in and—"

"Yes," said Kushran with a snort. "You know it *did* occur to me that might be what you meant!"

"Ah," he said. She was angry. He cleared his throat again. "And of course, I'll buy your freedom. I'll buy your freedom and we could take off together? I mean, I know it's been a while, but surely not so long that we couldn't—"

"Been a while?" Kushran looked as if she might fling her kindling at his head. "Six years, Goraric!" she hissed. "I waited six years for you to come back for me."

"I know..."

"But then I convinced myself we'd been children playing at being adults, and that I had no right to expect anything from you. And I came to *that* realisation six years ago. So don't think you can just swan in here now after *twelve years* and make everything right!"

"Kushran," said Goraric. "My love. I'm sorry." And he was. He'd left his promise to her unfulfilled, and for reasons he'd never been able to articulate. Had it really been twelve years? And he'd just left her here, waiting?

"You didn't even say goodbye."

"I—" Shit. He hadn't reckoned on feeling even worse about himself than he already did. Small wonder she was angry—how could he have been so heartless? He reached for her.

"I'm not your love." She pushed his arm away. "Never was, never will be. You should go."

"Kushran, please..." he said, but she went back to her work and wouldn't speak with him again. It hurt. He'd hurt her far more, though. She was right, too, of course. He didn't love her, and never had. Otherwise he wouldn't have skipped out on her twelve years ago without so much as a parting word, would he? No. What a sad, deluded prick he was. And of course it was far too late to ask for forgiveness. Stricken with grief, he turned away.

Word of Goraric's arrival spread quickly through the Tor. He hadn't expected anyone to meet him with good cheer, and they didn't. He endured their glares and the stony silence. Never mind. They'd almost certainly change their minds about him when they saw the money.

He found Mother's tiny fleapit of a house. He pushed the door open and stepped over the threshold, half-expecting an attack. The last time he'd been here the woman had barely missed his head with a skillet. "Hello?"

If the years hadn't been kind to Kushran, she'd gotten off lightly compared to his mother. The woman was a crone now, blotchy and bent and shrivelled. "You look like you spent the night under a hedge. Idiot boy," she said, glowering at him.

Idiot boy? A decade and more gone between them, and that was the best she could do for a greeting? Time had apparently softened her heart. "It's good to see you," he said. "And good to be back." Lies. She looked frightful, and the house reeked of piss and death.

"They all said you'd be back. I didn't think you would."

"Well, I had to. I--"

"Had to return to the scene of the crime?" Mother cackled. "Murderer."

"Don't call me that. I didn't kill those girls. I was there, but I didn't kill them."

"Is that so? And what about Lyglot, then?"

Goraric sighed. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same. "I didn't kill Lyglot."

Mother laughed, the sound of a rasp on wood. "You killed him, boy. I know you did."

He shook his head. "I didn't kill him."

"Then who did?"

"No one did. He just... died. He went to sleep and he just died."

"Bullshit!" screeched Mother. "My poor Lyglot! I knew I couldn't trust you. You were always jealous of him. He was no bastard, eh? Not like you."

Goraric sighed again. He wanted to remind her that children don't ask to be born, and that he was no exception. Was he to blame because his mother hadn't kept her legs shut when she should have? Had he asked his father to jam his cock in her? With 'no' being the answer to both questions, it seemed ridiculous that the accident of his birth should reflect so poorly on him. But he couldn't say any of that. Or wouldn't. "I didn't kill Lyglot."

Instead of continuing to harangue him, the old woman licked her lips. "Hm, hm. So, what have you brought for ol' Mother, then?"

This was unexpected. "Well," he said, wondering which of his things he could offer her. He put down the sack containing his sword, armour and stolen coin purses. Some of the money was his, though not more than a months' wages. Some he'd planned on donating to the poorer folk on the Tor, of course, but the bulk of it he'd earmarked as blood money. He patted himself down. His belt knife, maybe? Should he give that to her? It was a good one, and had seen him through some tough times. He was reluctant to give it away.

"I'll take the knife," said Mother, holding out her hand. The old cunt must have read his mind.

"Of course," said Goraric. It was a really good knife, and he cursed under his breath as he undid his belt so he could hand her the blade and scabbard together.

"I've a little something for you, too."

“Oh?” He heard Mother’s rasp-on-wood laughter again and turned, too late, at the sudden *clump clump* of boots behind him. He almost didn’t feel the blows, and as he grappled with his attackers on the ground, he saw the old woman already rifling through his belongings. Well, fuck. Coming back had been a really bad idea after all.

An excerpt from *The Origins of Kanosh*, translated from the surviving fragments of a 500-year-old manuscript

Kanosh was founded in Renderos by refugees from Alda in the year 953 in the so-called Red Age, following the loss of their city to Sarasinian rebels in 975. The first settlement was called New Alda [text unreadable]

In order to establish a foothold in the region, the first Kanoshians fought with great animosity against the native Renderosi. We are sure it would prove a subject fascinating to many, however our most reliable records from that era were destroyed during the Philosophy Wars, and the exclusively oral traditions of the indigenous inhabitants are of dubious faithfulness. [text unreadable] there is enough evidence to state with certainty that fighting was almost perennial for the first few decades.

[text unreadable] some Renderosi tribes were granted citizenship [text unreadable] widespread intermarriage, and though more or less imperialistic in nature, Kanosh appears remarkably inclusive even by the standards of our own Age. For example, we know that the Kanoshian rulers supported certain Renderosi towns against the tyrant Njenerukechi; that Kanosh intervened somewhere around the year 720 in the struggle against the Oglok prince, Rkwebe, who threatened the Rumenkawchu tribes with annihilation; and that for several centuries from 500 there was no aggressive expansion [text unreadable]

[text unreadable] something of Sarasinian intent. We know that a commander named Hanius invaded Kanosh in 580 but was defeated; that minor skirmishes occurred every now and again over the next century or so. We also know [text unreadable] when Gerich and most of Kanosh fell to the Sarasinians, but was refounded and became prosperous once more. Revival would have been impossible without the

contributions made by those who came to be known as the Philosophists [text unreadable]

[text unreadable] and following the destruction wrought by Jevad the Destroyer in 393, the Sarasinians were either unable or unwilling to mount further expeditions against Kanoshian holdings.

BENE

THE UNIVERSITY OF GERICH ASSET RECOVERY TEAM

EASTERN RENDEROS

Magister Roaoo held up a tiny spoon between his thumb and forefinger. "What is this?"

"Yet another trick question," said Bene.

Roaoo shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"All right then, I'll bite. It's a spoon. Really small one."

"How do you know?"

"Because it looks like one?"

"All right," said Roaoo, setting the spoon aside. "Let's agree that you have knowledge of the name of a thing. So, what does it *do*?"

"You eat with it."

Roaoo shook his head. "Think about it. I asked you what it *does*."

"I knew this was a trick question," said Bene with a frown.

"Um, it scoops up food?"

"Really? All by itself?"

Bene blew out his cheeks. "All right, then, I'll try to be more specific. A spoon is used, er, by people... as an aid to the uh, business of eating food..."

"And how do you know this?"

"I just do. Well, based on experience I guess."

"All right," said Roaoo, nodding. "So, you have knowledge of a thing's form, its function and a name given to it by its users. You're familiar with this thing through personal experience. It's reasonable to assume that without the benefit of said experience, you would lack knowledge of the thing. Or at least you might to some degree. And so if you had little or no knowledge of it, were you to stumble across it for the first time, you could only guess at its intended use. Yes? And it's also not unreasonable to assume that in trying to puzzle out its function, you might try to dig soil from the ground, for example. Or maybe use it to clean out the filth collecting in your ears."

"All right," said Bene. "Sure, I suppose that all sounds fairly reasonable."

"And you might never find out what its intended function is."

"True. I might not."

"Given that, does its maker's intent matter to you at all?"

Bene shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. It depends."

"It depends?" asked Roaoo. "On what does it depend?"

Khela raised a hand before Bene could answer. "What if I'm perfectly happy using my spoon as an ear cleaner and I don't care what its maker intended?"

"Do you have the right to do that?" asked Roaoo.

"I don't know. Maybe?"

"Or what if I use it to dig soil for a while," said Bene, "and then even after I find out its maker intended it for eating, I decide I don't want to use it for that? What if I'm happy keeping it as a soil scooper?"

Roaoo nodded. "But if you'd never met its maker, how would you know what it was really for?"

"Well, I guess—"

"But for argument's sake, let's say you do know." Roaoo brandished the spoon again. "It's intended for eating. In that case, is it your right to continue scooping soil with it, knowing it was not intended for such a thing? Or are you betraying the maker? Are you betraying the spoon?"

"The maker, maybe." Bene cocked his head to the side. "Can you even betray a spoon?"

"I don't know. Can you?"

"Magister?" asked Khela. "Is this your way of suggesting that *our* object could have more than one use?"

"Maybe," said Roaoo. "It's a possibility, but at this point we have no means of verifying it. I'm merely restating the obvious, which is that until recently we didn't know what it could do. Or indeed, what any of the Trench objects could do. We know *now* what this particular object can do, but we still have no idea how it works, nor do we know if it's being used as it was intended to be used."

"Ah," said Bene. "Now I see the purpose of this exercise. Well, what if *she's* using the object exactly as it was intended to be used? To kill?"

"And if not?"

"Do you think it makes a difference?"

"It's hard to say," said Roaoo with a shrug. "As far as we're concerned, perhaps not. But if it is used in the future to different effect, well..."

Bene nodded. "Like an even worse effect, maybe? Now *that's* a grim thought."

"Do you think it's likely?" asked Khela.

"I don't know," said Roaoo. "Now let's go back a few months, shall we? Before we left Kanosh, both of you had the opportunity to handle a number of Trench objects, did you not?"

"Yes," said Bene and Khela together.

"Did either of you *feel* anything when you held one for the first time?"

"No," said Bene.

"Not really," said Khela.

"*Not really?*" asked Roaoo, looking at Khela. "Does that mean you felt something?"

"No," said Khela. "I mean, I remember being very curious about the objects. As we all were. And the first time I held one in my hand I felt scared, I guess. But I can't say for sure that it—the object itself, I mean—actually *caused* me to feel that way. Not directly, anyway. It was probably just me spooking myself. I was a bit overawed and, you know, maybe kind of anticipating... I dunno... the worst? Does that make any sense?"

"Mm," said Roaoo. "Yes, it does. Many people do respond in such a way. And when you were trying to *interact* with it, what did you do exactly? Did your instincts tell you to do anything?"

"My instincts? Not really, no. I don't think so."

Bene considered the question before chiming in. "Same here. I can't say my instincts were of much help, to be honest. I just did what the tutors said to do. I tried imagining the objects as extensions of myself, or whatever. But that didn't work, so I just kind of, I dunno... aimed them at things and imagined flames coming out. And I imagined they could make me fly or become invisible. You know, that sort of stuff."

Roaoo nodded. "A common approach taken by first-timers, young men in particular. Anything else?"

"No. I dunno. I can't really remember. All I know is that whatever I did, it didn't work. They were just... things to me. Just things. Inanimate. Kinda seemed like paperweights, really."

Roaoo turned to Khela. "What about you? Is that how they seemed to you as well?"

"Yeah," said Khela. "I guess. I tried to relax and sort of... connect with them using my mind. You know, project thoughts at them and things like that? Positive, calming thoughts at first, but then negative thoughts when nothing happened. I even tried talking to them. But nothing worked. Like Bene said, it was like they were just things. Cold, lifeless lumps."

Roaoo nodded. "And after the group sessions, did either of you try the approaches suggested by other students?"

"Of course," said Bene.

"Yes," said Khela. "And we documented it all like we were supposed to."

"I know, I know," said Roaoo. "But no matter how many times I read the reports, I find myself at square one and asking myself the same question: what did *she* do? How did she manage to make that one object work?"

"We don't know," said Bene.

"You both knew her though, didn't you?" asked Roaoo. "After all, you were her friends, weren't you?"

"Well, I suppose we had a... history," said Bene, "of sorts."

Khela sniffed. "That would be one way to describe what you had with her."

Bene's face reddened. "Uh..."

"Go on," said the magister. "Spit it out, whatever it is."

"All right," said Bene, shifting in his seat. "Well this is more than embarrassing, but in the interest of full disclosure I'm just going to come right out and say it, all right? Yes, I was sleeping with our target. For a little while."

Roaoo's eyebrows went up. "Really?"

Bene nodded, then pointed to Khela. "And with her, too. I was only supposed to be sleeping with the one, though. With Khela, I mean. She kind of, uh, caught me with... er, you know..."

Khela rolled her eyes.

"What was she like?"

Bene giggled. "I'm assuming you mean personality wise, and not..." His smile faded when he saw that his attempt at humour had fallen flat. "Well, magister, she was a bit... I dunno. Black?"

"Black? Define black."

"Well, you know... down, depressed? She seemed really depressed. A lot. Most of the time, actually. But sometimes she could be the opposite. When she opened up, I mean."

Khela snorted.

Bene groaned. "*That* wasn't what I meant, Khela. At all."

"Why was she depressed?" asked Roaoo.

Bene thought about it. "I don't know. It was almost like she had this dark cloud, or something, constantly looming over her."

At first I thought it was because she didn't have any friends, but when I asked her about it one time she had absolutely no idea what I was talking about."

"Maybe," said Khela, "she was just sensitive about not having friends and didn't want to talk about it?"

"No," said Bene. "No, I don't think so. I got to know her pretty well, I think. And I really don't think she'd ever had many people in her life. She never really talked about others. Not once. I never heard her say anyone's name. Even me, now that I think about it. Heh, how about that—I just realised she never even called *me* by my name! It was almost as if other people didn't exist unless she needed them. I remember a few times when we were talking how she'd suddenly turn away from me. She used to go... blank. Like, stopped mid-sentence and just kinda went all catatonic. It was weird."

"Yeah," said Khela. "Actually, I do remember how she never once smiled or said hello to anyone. As Bene said, she would just go about her business as if the rest of us weren't even there. I always thought she was self-absorbed and rude."

"Oh, she *was* self-absorbed," said Bene. "Definitely. But at the same time, I'm not sure it ever really occurred to her that she *should* smile or say hello to other people. I mean, I don't think she meant to be rude. I don't think it was intentional at all. I just don't think she understood etiquette, or if she did, then maybe she didn't really see the need for it."

"In other words," said Khela, "rude."

Bene shook his head. "No. Not necessarily. She was different. She wasn't like anyone I've ever met. At first I thought she was just eccentric, but as time went by I realised there was more to it than that. She was truly brilliant in some ways. Like when it came to classwork, for example. She showed amazing insight on all kinds of topics. She was really good at lecturing, too." He paused, thinking. "But the thing is, she had no idea how to hold a conversation. Socially, she was awful. Thoroughly inept. Being around her was like being around a toddler. If she didn't get her way, she used to throw these huge temper tantrums. It was

embarrassing, and she had absolutely no qualms about doing it in public. Oh man, and I remember this one time in town when I told her off about something. I didn't think I was being all that harsh, either. But she hung her head, bit her lip and started bawling like a baby."

"That's interesting," said Roaoo.

"It's like she was some kind of idiot savant, honestly."

"An idiot savant?" The magister smiled. "That's food for thought. So, did you two ever discuss the Trench objects?"

"Not really. I tried to, but whenever I brought them up, she would either shut down or change the subject. I should have seen it for the red flag it was, but I was kinda distracted by other things."

"I'll bet you were," said Khela.

"Shut up," said Bene. He turned back to the magister. "One thing I did notice, though, was how she had every paper ever written about the Trench. And I remember she was especially interested in the more, um, colourful theories about objects. You know, the ones that suggest how certain people can interact with them on an extrasensory level?"

"Yeah, I can't take those theories seriously at all," said Khela.

"Why not?" asked Roaoo.

Khela shrugged. "I dunno. It just seems too weird."

"In her latest paper," said Bene, "Jeromi postulates that some ancient race made the objects. A race that possessed the requisite mental faculties for successful—"

"Postulates?" said Khela. "More like speculates. She doesn't have a lick of evidence."

Bene nodded. "That's true enough, at least for now. She also believes these ancients are long dead. The part I find interesting is that our target is definitely not ancient. Or at least I don't see how she could be. And yet she also has the necessary mental faculties to interact with the objects, doesn't she?"

"With *one* object, Bene. If it even works that way, which I have a hard time believing it does."

"But what if you're wrong? What if it does? And what if she's a descendant of those ancients? Like a throwback or something? It certainly would explain what happened, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, but—"

"No, let me finish, Khel. It would explain what happened, wouldn't it? I mean, we all got to study the one she stole, right? Before she ran off with it? We all played with it, touched it, directed thoughts at it, sang to it, or whatever. We did everything we could think of to make it do something, but nothing worked. The thing was just a rock for us, a paperweight. But when it was *her* turn, she picked it up and actually *used* it."

Khela held up a finger. "Used it to kill off half the faculty."

"Oh, and you reckon I'd somehow forgotten about that part, did you?"

"What do you think," said Roaoo, trying to forestall an argument, "about the possibility that she didn't do it of her own volition?"

"Huh," said Bene. "But she must have."

"How can you know that?"

"Well she's on the run from us, isn't she?"

"She is, of course." Roaoo looked at him. "And?"

"Then I don't get it."

"Think about it," said the magister, tapping the side of his own head. "Let's accept for the moment that Jeromi is correct in saying that human-object interaction does indeed take place on an extrasensory level. Why are we operating on the assumption that it's the human who's in control? Why not the other way around?"

"You're suggesting the object... took possession of her?" asked Khela.

"That is one possible explanation for her behaviour."

"That would be like the spoon scooping up food by itself," said Bene.

"Not quite," said Roaoo.

"But it's not all that far off, either."

"Mm. I'm not so sure, actually."

"Who would create such a thing?" asked Khela.

"That's just it," said Bene. "We don't know anything about its maker's intention, do we? Up until now we've assumed *she's* a maniac who knows exactly what she's doing. But she could be a victim of her object, compelled by it to kill. Or this could be an anomaly, or... or any number of things, really. We could be wrong about everything."

"One thing I know for sure, though," said Khela, "is that we should never have dug the wretched thing out of the ground."

"Do you actually believe that?" asked Roaoo.

"Yes. I really do."

The magister rubbed his chin. "Interesting. And you, Munning? What are your thoughts on the subject?"

"I disagree," said Bene. "Despite what happened, I think the objects should still be studied. But we should probably have more safeguards."

"Such as?"

Bene paused. "I have no idea."

"If we'd never dug the thing up, none of this would have happened," said Khela. "How's that for a safeguard?"

Roaoo peered at her. "I'm not sure whether your sense of certainty should be applauded or condemned," he said. "So then, answer me this, Rusen. Imagine that the position of Warden Master has just been bestowed upon you—would you call a halt to the excavation of the Trench?"

Khela didn't even hesitate. "Yes. I would. I'd not only call a halt, I'd seal the place as well. Permanently. I'd destroy our object, once recovered. I'd destroy it and every other one. Too many people have died because of the Trench. It's too dangerous to exist."

"And said with such conviction!" said Roaoo, chuckling. "What about you, Warden Master Munning? Are you of a similar mind?"

"No," said Bene. "I'm not."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, no. I think finding the object and returning it to Gerich has to take priority, of course it does. But I wouldn't

destroy it. And other than that, we should keep excavating the Trench and studying what we find. The show must go on."

"The show must go on?"

"Yeah. Pretty much."

"Make sure," said Roaoo, frowning, "not to utter that particular line in your acceptance speech when you take office."

"I, uh, won't?" said Bene with a shrug. "I mean, I wasn't exactly planning on running for the office of Warden Master or anything, anyway."

Roaoo sighed. "It's just as well. Because that, I can assure you, is not at all how it works. Warden Masters are appointed, not elected."

Khela giggled, and Bene turned on her. "Quit laughing. *You* as Warden Master? I don't think so!" He threw his hands up in a gesture of mock helplessness. "Oh, dear! Oh no!" he said in a falsetto voice. "The Trench is too dangerous to exist! It needs to go! Oooh, quick everyone, help me seal it up! Then we can all hold hands and make kissy faces and bake cupcakes and shit!"

"What the crap, Bene?" said Khela, screwing up her face. "I don't talk like that! I've never talked like that."

Roaoo held up a hand. "Calm yourselves, please."

A long moment of silence followed in which Khela and Bene pulled faces at each other.

"I worry about what'll happen if we don't catch her," said Khela.

Roaoo gave her a sympathetic look and shook his head. "We'll catch her. Sooner or later, one way or another."

"Do you think Mumolo's gone?"

"Tonneson's men say the town was hit particularly hard, so... yes."

"Oh no..."

"The thing that gets me," said Bene, "is how she's been able to survive this long. I mean, we're talking about a girl who basically spent every waking hour with her nose buried in a book. She wasn't exactly fighting fit. How is it possible she's survived in the

wilderness this long, alone, with an entire company of professional chasers breathing down her neck?"

"Maybe the object has something to do with it?" said Khela. "Maybe it's helping her stay two steps ahead of us, somehow. I mean, anything is possible with this thing, right?"

Bene grinned. "Well, that was certainly a rapid change of opinion, eh? Up until now, you've pretty much believed she was the one in control."

"I... know. I just wish it didn't exist. I wish there was no such thing as the Trench. It does my head in sometimes."

Roao shrugged. "Wish as you might, it will not change facts. It exists."

"Yeah, yeah," said Khela, "until death us do part."

Bene let out a sigh. "So dramatic."

Roao got to his feet. "Enough. It's getting late and it's high time I went to bed. Feel free to continue this discussion together, if you wish. There's a reason I chose the two of you for this expedition." He looked around. "But maybe tidy this tent up a bit before you leave, will you? It's gotten awfully cluttered."

With the magister gone, Bene turned to Khela and sniffed. "Do you think he meant the reason we were chosen for this expedition was because of our exceptional tidying abilities?"

Khela ignored him.

"Come to think of it," he continued, "we don't have to do anything ourselves. We could just get a couple of actual cleaners in." Khela said nothing, and when it became clear she wasn't going to reply, he folded his arms and asked, "How much longer are we going to keep doing this?"

"Keep doing what?" said Khela, getting to her feet. She stuffed a blanket into a wooden chest and shut the lid.

"You could at least look at me."

Khela gave him a sour look. "How's this?"

"Um, better?" Bene stood up to face her. "Look, I wanted to talk to you about a few things if that's all right."

"Maybe some other time, Bene."

"It's work stuff, all right? Just work, nothing personal. No personal stuff."

"Fine, then. But make it quick."

"Really? You'll talk to me?"

"Yes. Seriously, hurry up though. I'm tired."

"All right," said Bene, looking to make sure that Roaoo had really gone. "Now, you're going to have to promise me that you won't bring up what I'm about to say in front of the magister."

"Huh?"

"Just promise me."

"Fine, but—"

"You'll never bring this up in front of the magister, all right? Now, promise me."

Khela sighed and folded her arms. "I promise," she said in a weary voice, "not to bring it up, whatever it is, in front of the magister."

"Good. Thank you. Now, do remember when we were still back in Gerich, before all this business happened?"

"Uh huh."

"So, tell me, what happened the last time you were sick and couldn't go to the library or the study hall or wherever?"

"What?"

"Back at uni, all right? The last time you got sick and couldn't go to class, what did you do?"

Khela shrugged. "I dunno. Reported sick, I guess."

"And what would you have done if you were so sick you couldn't report? What then?"

"I don't know. Asked someone to report for me? Or wait for an attendant to come find me, maybe?"

"Right. Now, think back to when all this shit started."

"All right, but—"

Bene waved a hand at her. "*She* was absent for three days before anyone even noticed."

"All right? And?"

"*Three days*, Khela! She was gone for three. Whole. Days. Three days in which she didn't go to classes or show up for tutes. Three

days of not signing in or out of the testing rooms. She wasn't in the library or in her room. She didn't report sick. She was gone, and the object with her. For three days! Three days! No one did anything about it for *three entire fucking days*."

Khela knitted her brows. "That can't be right."

"It is, though. That's what happened."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Bene's voice dropped to a whisper. "And you know what? I think *they* let her get away on purpose."

"They?"

"The attendants... the staff... maybe even Roaoo himself..."

Khela rolled her eyes. "Oh for fuck's sake, Bene. That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

Bene shook his head. "Wait, wait! Just hear me out, will you? There's a whole lot of stuff going on here that just doesn't make any sense. I'm beginning to think this whole expedition is a sham."

"Oh, shit," said Khela, rolling her eyes again. "Here we go. This is gonna be good."

"What? What do you mean by that?"

"You think everything's a sham."

"What? I do not."

"Yes, you do."

"No, I don't!"

"Like fuck you don't."

"Go on then, and give me an example."

"An example?"

"Yep. Bet you can't."

"Hah!" said Khela, clapping her hands together. "Bet I can! First of all, do you remember when they came out with the new library loans scheme? You said *that* was a sham. Remember?"

"No," said Bene. "Oh, well, yeah. Actually. Sort of."

"And when they changed the rules about who got to stay at Dorm Seven? You said that was a sham, too."

"*And* I was right. It was definitely a sham."

"And you also thought the entire tenure application process for new adjunct professors was all just a big sham."

"And it was!" shouted Bene. "It is! But *this*, this right here! The expedition is different from all that."

"Right, right," said Khela as she turned to leave. "Sure it is. Look, Bene, I'm going to bed. I'm tired and definitely not in the mood for... whatever the crap this is."

"Wait! I'm sorry. I'm not messing around, if that's what you think this is. There really is some weird stuff going on." His mind raced as he battled to find the words to make her stay. "Also, I love you!"

Khela gave him a look that practically burned his insides to ashes. "*What?* That's not even funny, Bene. Good night, asshole."

"That's because I wasn't joking," said Bene, holding out a hand to her. "I swear. Please, just sit down and let's talk about it?"

"You're something else, Bene," said Khela. "You know that?" And then she walked away.

ROSARIUS**SARASINIA**

Rosarius was on crowd control duty in the Temple District. "Did you know," he said to Borrego, "that this has long been one of my favourite places?"

Borrego arched an eyebrow. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," said Rosarius, gesturing broadly. "I dunno. All these old buildings move me in a way I can't really explain. There's something fascinating about vaulted ceilings and fluted marble pillars, don't you think? And the cobbled streets... I mean, how old are all these stones? A thousand years at least. History. History!"

"I think," said Borrego, looking at him out of the corner of an eye, "the sun might be getting to you."

The Temple District was beautiful, but at the moment it was also crawling with peasants. Rosarius watched as a street urchin raked a cobblestone loose with his bare feet. "See that?" he asked, pointing the kid out. "Did you see what that little fuck just did? That stone was probably there when the city was founded. For all

we know, Sarasin himself walked on it! Little bastard doesn't give a shit about history."

Borrego scowled. "When they built the Temple District, Sarasin had already been dead a few hundred years."

He shrugged. "You know what I mean."

"Not really."

"Well, even so... fuck that kid." Rosarius turned his attention back to the peasants. He couldn't imagine filthier, more uncultured wretches. To his left, a pair of misshapen freaks were breaking up hedges for toothpicks. On the right, a woman stood in a fountain while simultaneously drinking and washing her arse. At her feet, a boy chipped away at a statue with a rock. "And what the fuck is *he* doing?"

Borrego looked. "I don't know. Carving his name?"

"Fuck me. Look at what they're doing to the place, will you? Why are they even allowed here?"

Borrego tossed his head, indicating the way they'd originally come. "We should go back to the scaffold. If we hang around here too long, we're going to get separated from the others."

"Right," said Rosarius. A pity. He'd have liked to have given Statue Boy a taste of his cudgel at least.

The morning wore on, and the Temple District filled with peasants until there was barely room to move.

"I do get what you mean about them, though," said Borrego, breaking the silence. "They really are disgusting, aren't they?"

"Aren't they?" said Rosarius. "I hate them. I think it's criminal how they let them in here." He tightened his grip on his cudgel. "If I don't get to kill a few today, it'll be a shitty day indeed."

Borrego chuckled. "Don't worry. I'm sure you'll get your chance."

"Good." He glared at the wretches. Dead-eyed, slack-jawed fuckers. Look at them, hooting at their own stupid jokes and stories! He couldn't even understand what half of them were saying. "Fuck off!" he yelled at a malformed thing of indeterminate gender that came over with its hand outstretched.

The creature flinched and looked daggers at him before shuffling away.

And then at long last there was movement on the scaffold. A prisoner was brought out, a man surrounded by a cadre of hooded guards.

"So," said Rosarius, looking up, "there really *is* an execution, eh?"

"Certainly appears that way," said Borrego.

The governor of Sarasinia made his entrance soon after. Dressed in a fine red cloak, he strode to the edge of the scaffold and called for silence. It was a good long while before he received it, though, since the peasants seemed more interested in hurling abuse at his prisoner.

Rosarius paid almost no attention to the governor's speech. The man began with the expected flowery praise for the League, for its capital, and for the Grand Magistrate. He rattled off a long list of Eusebio's achievements, interspersed with platitudes and other rubbish that the crowd embraced with enthusiastic applause and resounding cheers. "What a load of horse shit," he mumbled under his breath.

"Mm," said Borrego.

The governor waited again, much longer this time, until the noise receded. He then launched into a rambling monologue about justice, peace, and something about full bellies. Or empty ones, maybe, because Rosarius was beyond caring. Though he willed his ears not to hear anything else, he still managed to catch the words 'safety', 'prosperity' and 'strength.'

"Is he still talking about the League?" he asked Borrego.

Borrego leaned in. "I dunno. I was too busy watching that girl's arse." He pointed out the arse he meant.

Rosarius had to concede it was indeed a good one. "Nice. What would you give it out of ten?"

"Eight."

"Agreed."

The governor went on to mention something about war, and Rosarius was all ears at that point. But the man made only

passing references to the League's ongoing efforts to put down insurrection in Middle Romelia, and spoke even less about the invasion of Ahrenia. He talked much more about what he termed 'treachery closer to home' and Rosarius lost interest again. He had hoped for actual news, not rhetoric.

The governor droned on, his speech punctuated here and there by shouting and applause from the crowd. The tone of his speech shifted, and he began to speak hotly of meting out justice. Rosarius looked up at the scaffold.

"And this man here," shouted the governor, a finger aimed squarely at the prisoner, "is the most odious of the lot. He stands accused of the worst of crimes. Yes, you know of what I speak! This man plotted to kill the Grand Magistrate, Lord Eusebio, in his own home, in cold blood!"

As if on cue, the crowd booed.

"Oh, fuck off," yelled Rosarius. "Manufactured incident, much?" No sooner had he finished his outburst than someone tapped his shoulder. He turned to see the drillmaster staring back at him.

"Were I you," said Minten in a low voice, "I'd keep my opinions to myself."

"Yes, sir," said Rosarius.

"Good lad." And with that, the man stalked away.

"Careful, Rosy," said Borrego.

Rosarius cringed inwardly. "Yeah." What an idiot he was! Eusebio's spies were everywhere, and the last thing he needed was to be denounced as a traitor. None of the nearby peasants had overheard, though, of that he was sure. And he was in safe company otherwise, because even if they'd caught his comment, his Bastion brothers could be trusted not to spill their guts. Romelo didn't count, naturally, but Romelo was still on extended leave thanks to a combination of Minten's knout, the Hole, and his recent public humiliation.

"Behold!" shouted the governor, pointing again at the prisoner. "Our true enemy! Those who seek to undermine our mighty League with their poisonous intrigues." He paused, arms outstretched, and the audience responded to his accusations with

loud jeers. Some took the opportunity to toss unidentifiable bits of rubbish up onto the scaffold.

The governor continued. "But in fact," he cried, "these pathetic criminals have achieved the opposite. Their scheming will never succeed! We are stronger than ever! The Romelian uprising is being crushed as we speak! We are rooting out the separatists among us! We are conquering the north! We are unstoppable! We. Are. Sarasinians!"

The crowd's approval was deafening.

Rosarius mulled the governor's words over, thinking it odd how he had chosen to lump the Ahren invasion in with the Romelian insurgency. Neither liked the League, naturally, but that didn't mean they were working together. As far as he knew, the two shared no connection. On the other hand, since pretty much everything the man had said was rubbish anyway, what real difference would it make?

And then the governor's real work began. He seized the prisoner by the hair. "This man," he shouted, "this would-be murderer! He did not act alone. More reprisals will follow, I guarantee you that. But for now, I invite you all to witness the Grand Magistrate's justice!"

Segments of the crowd roared their hate for the prisoner. Others cheered, no doubt anxious to see him punished.

"No mercy!" screamed the governor, foamy spittle bursting from his lips.

"*No mercy!*" echoed the crowd. "*No mercy! No mercy! No mercy!*"

The guards dragged the prisoner to the edge of the scaffold. Blood dribbled as he tried to speak. His voice was lost in the din. The governor, apparently incensed by the fact that he would even make the attempt, drove a gauntleted fist into his face. The man sagged back into the arms of his minders.

The governor called for quiet. As before, it was slow in arriving. "I may have neglected to mention," he shouted, "that this wretch—this venomous traitor!—took gold in exchange for the death of the Grand Magistrate. Yes, gold! And that is why, my

dear compatriots, prior to his appearance before you today, we had him swallow a few of those precious coins. Oh yes, that's right, good people! You heard me correctly. This man here has gold in his guts, quite literally. This criminal, and his gold, the great city of Sarasinia now gives to you!"

The guards dangled the prisoner by his ankles over the side of the scaffold. The crowd surged toward him, hundreds of arms reaching skyward.

"You've got to be shitting me," said Rosarius.

As it happened, no one was shitting anyone. The guards relaxed their grip on prisoner who plummeted and disappeared into the roiling sea of peasants. They howled like animals as they pulled him apart in a frenzy of grasping hands. It was easily the most appalling end Rosarius had ever seen, although he had to admit it was mercifully quick. The crowd's compassion was entirely unintentional, of course, but still.

A lucky few found gold, perhaps, but the vast majority came away with nothing. The festive mood began to sour. Red with gore, people snarled and spat and shoved at each other. Fistfights broke out. The crush of bodies made escape impossible, and the inhuman howling started up again. Rosarius cursed as a gobbet of something landed on his shield with a wet plop. It looked like a scrap of raw meat.

"Shit," said Borrego. "Now they're tearing *each other* apart!"

Their gruesome duty complete, the governor and his guards departed. The crowd roared in fury and frustration.

"*Bastion!*" screamed Minten. "*Shield wall! Advance! Drive them out! Advance, advance, advance!*"

"Advance!" cried Rosarius. And fuck the shield wall! He was so eager for blood that he charged off alone, screaming. His cudgel found a man's shoulder. Watching him crumple made his soul sing with savage pleasure. He'd have raked the bastard's back with his hobnails for good measure, too, except they were still in his quarters. Wearing hobnails on paved streets would have been a very bad idea.

For their part, peasants seemed more than willing to take on the Bastion's students. "Get them!" bellowed someone. Fighting broke out everywhere.

Rosarius grunted as a woman hurled herself against his shield. He rammed his cudgel into her ribs, and as she dropped away clutching herself, punched her with his shield boss and knocked her out. He managed to get in a few kicks before another woman dragged her away. "Fuck you!" he screamed, snarling as he laid about him with his cudgel. This was fun—he'd have smacked skulls all day if he could! But the peasants, enjoying no advantage except numbers, stood little chance of winning. They soon lost their appetite for melee and ran. Though he'd have loved nothing better than to pursue, it was too risky. He watched them go.

Borrego caught up to him. "So, you got what you wanted, eh?"

"I did," said Rosarius, feeling a curious mix of satisfaction and disappointment. "I wanted them gone, but now I wish they'd come back!"

Borrego acknowledged the irony with a snort. "Yep."

Fallen peasants littered the Temple District. Some moved, a few called out in pain, but most lay still, trails of blood snaking away from their broken bodies. A man who had been feigning unconsciousness suddenly lurched upright and bolted. With a whoop, Rosarius ran him down and meted out such a vicious beating that he would probably never rise again.

"Bastion!" It was the drillmaster. "Form up at the scaffold!"

Minten was not the sort to dismiss his students early, and today was no exception. After calling for volunteers to finish off those peasants judged unlikely to recover, he had his charges fetch carts for the dead. Rosarius helped load the bodies, but where the carts went afterwards, he didn't know or care. It was only when Minten declared the Temple District clear that anyone was permitted to return to the barracks.

Rather than go back straight away, Rosarius found himself examining the spot where the prisoner had met his fate. Flies scattered as he knelt beside the remains, buzzing their irritation.

Aside from a few bones with bits of flesh still stuck to them, not much was left. A man's entire life reduced to a stain, he mused. More or less. Even the skull had been broken and stamped into the cobbles.

Another student joined him. "Was there even any gold, do you think?"

Rosarius glanced up, then got to his feet. "Lucius?" He almost couldn't believe his eyes. "Hey, how are you? Gods, I had no idea you'd be here today!"

"It's a good day to die, brother," said Lucius. He offered a hand.

Rosarius embraced him instead. "A good day to die with you, brother! How are you?"

"Fine. I guess."

"That was quite the afternoon, wasn't it? Did you have fun?"

Lucius shrugged. "Watching another bogus execution, you mean? Followed by us beating a bunch of defenceless people? And then braining the survivors? Oh yeah, great fun."

Rosarius laughed. "Well I loved every moment of it."

"Did you?" asked Lucius, shuddering. "Did you really? Seventeen people died here today, Rosarius. And we murdered them." He shook his head. "Four of them were children."

"So? They were just peasants."

"That's cold, brother. Even for you."

It was Rosarius's turn to shrug. "Who cares?"

"Well," said Lucius tiredly, "not you, I suppose. So, it's been a while, brother. Eh?"

"Yeah," said Rosarius. "Haven't seen you since..." The image of Lucius running away with his hands pressed to his face flashed through his mind. He could practically hear the screaming and the steel and Romelo's manic laughter. "Not since the big fight in the city."

Lucius pointed to his jaw, bandaged beneath his helm and aventail. "See what I got for my trouble that night? Fucking thing won't heal."

Rosarius nodded. "How could I forget, brother? I knew you must have been hurt. Have you been to the infirmary?"

"I have. I gotta say, this one's a strange wound, Rosy. It doesn't heal, then it does, then it doesn't again. I'm a bit worried about it."

"How long have you been back?"

Lucius ignored the question. "Hey, so I heard you guys went to the Hole?"

"We sure did. I've since been in again and everything."

"Shit. Really?"

"Yeah." He pulled off his gauntlets to show Lucius the scars on his wrists. "The first time's the worst. After that, it's really not so bad."

The corners of Lucius's mouth turned up slightly. "Heh, good one."

Rosarius looked at him. Did his friend think he was joking? "Eh? Oh, and the last time I went, they put Romelo in as well."

"I heard about your dining hall incident, actually."

"He went home the same day he got out. Sick leave. I'm hoping he's actually sick and never recovers."

"It's not good to wish ill on other people."

"Fuck that." Rosarius spat. "I hope he dies. Because if he comes back, I've half a mind to leave the Bastion for good."

"You serious? Why?"

"Because things between us are bad, Lucy. Real bad. He turned his whole hate campaign against Riva into a hate campaign against me. You know, I've actually been toying with the idea of heading north to get away. Not that I really want to, but I dunno."

"North?"

"Yeah. To join the Ahren invasion."

"What? You're kidding, right?"

Rosarius shook his head. "No, I am not."

"But you can't go north!"

"Why not?"

"Well, for one thing," said Lucius, clapping Rosarius on the shoulder, "we're not officers yet. Graduation's still a way off, brother."

"Yeah, I know, but I wouldn't be joining as a grunt or anything. They'd probably at least make me a sergeant."

Lucius shook his head. "A sergeant? Fuck that, Rosarius! Come on, what are you talking about? What would your father say? You've come this far. You can't do that to him."

Rosarius sighed. "He doesn't give a shit. And I don't give a shit about what he thinks, anyway. Look, Romelo will be back soon enough, probably. What then? You don't know how bad it's gotten, brother. You know how he is, though. I can't keep looking over my shoulder forever."

"And your solution is to run? If it's really as bad as you say, maybe you should just stay out of his way?"

"Just stay out of his way?" Rosarius was getting angry now. "More like *he* needs to stay out of *my* way. He's already threatened to kill me. More than once, actually."

"Why not challenge him, then? Single combat."

"I wish people would stop saying that! You know I can't."

Lucius blew out his cheeks, then put a hand to his jaw. "Ah, shit."

Rosarius grasped Lucius by the arm. "You're starting to bleed through your bandages."

"It's nothing. Look, you're not going north, do you hear me?"

Rosarius nodded. "Yeah. No, I know. I'll have to find a way to deal with Romelo when he comes back, though. It's either him or me at this point."

"You still have friends, you know. Hey, by the way I brought you a gift."

"Yeah? What is it?"

"This," said Lucius. And with that, he drove his cudgel into Rosarius's groin. It wasn't a powerful blow, but neither was it gentle.

Rosarius doubled over. "Ow! You cunt! What was that for?"

"I've been back maybe a fortnight!" cried Lucius. "Which you knew because you spent it giving me the brush off. Why? I thought we were friends."

"Ungh," said Rosarius, cradling his nuts. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

"Everyone said you'd changed after that night."

"I just apologised to you..."

"You weren't the only one there, Rosy. You weren't the only one affected."

"I realise that."

"So why act like you were? Mora and Milo *both* ended up losing their fucking hands. Or did you not know that?"

"Shit." Rosarius looked at him. "Oh, gods. No, I didn't know that."

"They're gone, brother. We'll never see them again. Gone from the Bastion for good, and for what?"

Rosarius hung his head, unable to reply.

"And I don't even know what happened to Benton. I sent his father a letter a while ago, but I've heard nothing back. Poor fucker might have died for all we know."

Rosarius drew himself up and took a deep breath. His balls were tingling and it was a challenge to keep from tearing up. "Yeah. This is kind of why I just want to run away."

"Yeah. Well. You're not the only one who hates Romelo's guts right now."

"I'm sorry. Really."

"Yeah, so you said. But don't take my fucking friendship for granted again. All right?"

Rosarius met his gaze. "I won't."

Lucius nodded, and they shook hands. "Good." He spat and it came out red.

"What now?"

"I had a question for you, actually."

"What is it?"

Lucius squinted against the sun. "Is it true that when they put Romelo in the Hole, he shrieked like a slut getting railed by an entire squadron?"

"Yep." Rosarius snickered. "To be fair, though, pretty much everyone does the first time. I know I did."

“Ah.”

“Hey,” said Rosarius, an idea forming in his mind. “Why are we still standing here when we’re dismissed? Want to find the others and head for a decent drinking hole? I’ve a mind to get completely shitfaced.”

“Can’t.” Lucius frowned. “Haven’t we got a class soon?”

“Only ethics. If it’s not marching or fighting, who the fuck cares? Just skip it.”

“Shit, no! I don’t need the demerits.”

“Who gives a shit?”

“Well not you, apparently.”

“I doubt you’ve got anywhere near as many demerits as me, anyway. And a few demerits never stopped anyone from graduating, did they?”

Lucius sighed. “Eh, I don’t know about that.” He spat again, and again it came out red. “Besides, you won’t learn anything by skipping lessons.”

“Ethics, though? Ethics is bullshit.”

“Oh, I dunno. I think it’s pretty useful, actually.”

“Pfft. Fuck that.”

“What’s wrong with ethics?”

Rosarius laughed. “You want to know what’s wrong with it? Look, at the last ethics class I bothered going to, they were asking whether or not it was a crime for a front-line commander to burn down a house full of enemy women and children.”

“And? What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s a stupid fucking question! I say burn the house and be done with it—our job is to kill the enemy, isn’t it?”

“I remember that class, brother. The point was about sparing innocents. Why kill people who don’t need to be killed?”

“Because they’re not us.” Rosarius folded his arms. “Why agonise over whether or not to spare them?”

“I still don’t see what’s so wrong with that, though?”

“A front-line commander’s job,” said Rosarius hotly, “is to kill the enemy and preserve the lives of his own men! Not fret over the fate of people on the other side. Muddy the waters, and he

loses focus. Make him second guess everything, and he starts losing battles.”

“But—”

“No! And did you ever think that maybe it’s the Assemblymen who start wars that should be the ones worrying after all those poor innocents? Let them take ethics classes and leave the men whose job it is to fight their fucking wars alone. Huh? How about that?”

Lucius sighed. “I do see your point, Rosarius. I just find the whole thing a bit sad, that’s all.”

“And now,” said Rosarius, flushing with anger. “Now I’m off to get stinking drunk!”

“Yeah.”

“With or without you, Lucius. But I’d rather it be with you, so let’s go.”

“Well,” said Lucius, allowing himself to be led away. “You know, after chatting with you, I feel like maybe I *do* need a drink.”

GORARIC**SARASINIAN OCCUPIED AHRENIA****ENGUND'S TOR**

Goraric twisted lazily in the air, dangling from the rafters of Mother's house courtesy of a rope around his ankles. This was how Torsmen hung a sheep before they cut its throat, and no doubt they planned to take him out the same way. Not at all how he pictured leaving this world, but seldom do men choose their fate.

It seemed as if every man, woman and child on the Tor had lined up to take a shot at him. His lips and face felt thick. He had a searing headache, too, the worst of his life. One eye was swollen shut, and out of the corner of the other he could see where red welts had blossomed all over his body. Some of the cuts on his forearms were open again, too, sending rivulets of blood down past his shoulders. And on top of all that, in the middle of the gore on the ground under his head sat a tooth. What could he do but praise Owic, though? If not for the Lord of Shields, the Great Intervener, he might be even worse off.

So he gave thanks to Owic and sighed, closing his good eye. Against all odds, sleep came. Dreams too, though it could easily have been delirium. Either way, his mind took him back through the years to Mother's house. Not the dirty hovel of now, but the one he'd been born in. And oddly enough, he wasn't looking at the place from his own perspective, but from that of something clinging to the ceiling. A fly or some other insect, perhaps. Dreams didn't always make sense.

What came next seemed very real, even though Goraric knew it wasn't. A little boy burst into the room, naked and crying. It took him a moment to realise he was watching himself. Mother came barrelling in, wielding a switch with both hands. She wailed as she beat the poor little fellow. Beat him raw! The screams made him want to vomit, and things only got worse. Dream Mother turned out to be far crueller than the real one ever had, doing things to his dream-self that were, frankly, unspeakable. At least nothing like that had happened for real. Or had it? He fought to recall. He vaguely remembered at least one occasion when the switch had gone where it shouldn't, followed by Mother's taunting laughter...

Goraric's shock turned to rage. On the floor below, out of reach, the boy lay still, hugging his knees. Blood dribbled out from between his legs.

"Ugh," said his mother, pausing to look up at the ceiling at him.

He willed himself to strike. Whatever insignificant thing he was, he would launch himself at her. However pitiful his attack, he would still make it. Alas, no. He hesitated and it cost him; the crone's switch came down hard and his world went white, then dark.

At first Goraric thought he'd lost his sight, but eventually he realised there was something over his eyes. He'd have taken it off if he'd been able to move his arms. It felt like a piece of cloth. Or leather, maybe.

"Where will you take him?" asked a woman. He knew, without a doubt, that it was Kushran who spoke. He'd have recognised her voice anywhere.

"North," said a man. "North. And that's all you need to know."

"Uncle?" Goraric's voice came out more like a hoarse whisper. "Kolf?"

"Aye, it's me," said his uncle, right in his ear. To someone else he said, "Dose him up some more, will you?"

"Wait," said Goraric, but then something rough and unpleasant pushed past his lips. A cup or bowl, maybe.

"Swallow." Whoever so commanded him now, it was neither Kolf nor Kushran.

Goraric did as he was told. He drank down a bitter brew, something with particles floating in it that reminded him of tea leaves. But it definitely wasn't tea. Yeech. Whatever it was, it tasted terrible. He kept swallowing until a strange floating sensation overtook him. Perhaps he slept; he knew nothing more for the longest time.

14

BENE

THE UNIVERSITY OF GERICH ASSET RECOVERY TEAM

EASTERN RENDEROS

NEAR MUMOLO

Mumolo hadn't just been hit. No, the town had been smashed and broken, shattered worse than any place Bene had seen so far. And there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of refugees. He watched them struggling past, weighed down by heavy sacks and wicker baskets filled to overflowing. A lucky few had donkeys to carry their gear, or pushed rickety handcarts. Many were empty handed. He'd thought he was made of sterner stuff, but it was hard to look at their dirty, tear-stained faces without his own eyes moistening in sympathy. None of them had a clue what was happening, or why.

They were just a few miles out of town, but with the only way in blocked by the relentless human tide, the Scouts could go no further. A handful of outriders were away looking for an alternate route in, but the formerly frozen ground had thawed

and the mud was worryingly deep in places. Tonneson had called a halt, ordering his soldiers to unhitch the wagons and circle them off the road. All their precious supplies, cattle, horses and non-combat personnel were now locked inside that protective ring.

"These wretches may get desperate," the colonel told his men, eyeing the refugees with suspicion. "Stay close to the wagons. Let them see your weapons."

Khela didn't like that, not a bit. "Don't call them wretches! How horribly callous of you! These poor people deserve our sympathy!"

Tonneson looked at her, but didn't reply. "If common sense doesn't prevail and they move in," he went on to say, "they're to be given no warning. Just fuck them up. No crossbows, mind you. Under no circumstances are you to waste precious bolts on this rabble."

"That's disgusting!" shouted Khela, but no one was listening. She glared sulkily at the soldiers as they took up positions on the wagons.

Bene felt bad about it, but he knew Tonneson was right. Making generalisations about a people wasn't something he'd thought he'd find himself doing, but unfortunately the Renderosi had proven time and again that they couldn't be trusted. Mostly they'd turned out to fit the stereotype: dangerous, nasty. Opportunists who took whatever you offered, and then followed up by trying to seize whatever else you had. If the Scouts let their guard down for even a moment, these folk would waste no time in taking advantage. So, as horrible as it sounded, they simply couldn't be helped. Better to keep them at arm's length.

Khela didn't agree. In her mind, all Renderosi were victims. Their behaviour was, as she put it, 'a natural consequence of Kanosh's centuries of colonialism and historic injustice.' They were sometimes wild, she conceded, but didn't know any better because they had never been treated with compassion. Of course, Khela's point of view was not only far too simplistic, it was historically inaccurate to the point of ridiculousness. Had it not

been a waste of breath, he'd have told her how full of shit she was. That, and he also wanted to keep alive the possibility of fucking her again at some point in the future. He felt a bit slimy for it, but he grinned and gave her a hearty thumbs-up. She replied by walking away.

The morning wore on, and Bene received a summons from Roaoo, who wanted help to interview a hand-picked selection of Mumolo's most unfortunate. Khela was also invited.

The enterprise was nothing short of a total disaster. Typical Renderosi, the Mumolonians (or whatever their plural form was) insisted that their predicament was the will of the gods. Roaoo, like the vast majority of Kanoshians, was a firm atheist. A man lacking patience at the best of times, he became increasingly unable to deal with their superstitious talk. And so, about a half dozen interviews in, he angrily declared the endeavour a colossal waste of time and refused to continue.

Khela did her best to encourage him not to give up. "They're just frightened, magister," she said. "They've been through an incredibly traumatic experience."

"Oh, I quite agree," said the magister.

"Well then let's do what we can for them. They desperately need our help."

"No doubt. But they're beyond help, Rusen."

Bene cleared his throat surreptitiously. It was never a good sign when Roaoo started calling people by their last name. Khela, in particular.

"Well," said Khela, not heeding his warning, "I can't say I agree with that."

Roaoo stared. "No? What I asked of these people was a straightforward account of their experiences. When I ask for a straightforward account of something, Rusen, that is what I expect to be given! Not fanciful tales. Not speculation. Not the mindless regurgitation of parables or of so-called prophecy. How does any of that help us?"

Khela became flustered. "But you can't blame them, sir. They're poor. They don't know any better."

Bene rolled his eyes but dared not say anything. Some people had to learn things the hard way.

"I swear to you," said Roaoo with a scowl, "if I'd had to listen to anyone say it was the gods' punishment for such-and-such a sin one more time, I don't know what I'd have done."

"Well it's what they believe. Maybe we could just give them some of our supplies? You know, a little bit of food and medicine and maybe also some--"

"I'm not giving them a thing!" Roaoo turned on her, his voice like a razor. "And why do you insist on making excuses for them, Rusen? There are no gods!" He narrowed his eyes. "Or have you suddenly become a believer?"

Khela swallowed. "Well no, but--"

"I should hope not! I mean, honestly? Even if gods existed, why would they give a crap about us? They're so much more powerful than we are, apparently, and yet they need us for... what, exactly? Not a thing! We're insects. We're nothing." He glanced at the refugees streaming out of Mumolo. "And they're lower still."

"That's not fair, sir." Was she pouting? "They're people, just like us. And it's not really our place to judge them either, is it? I know I wouldn't want--"

But Roaoo wasn't in the mood to debate anything. "Yes, Rusen," he said. "It *is* our place to judge them. Come on, the Cloud Spirits or whatever it is they believe in? Sending down a plague because you smiled at someone from the wrong village or built your altar out of wood instead of stone? Does that sound rational to you? Pah! It's indescribably stupid! Comical. Farcical. Superstitious bullshit that I have no patience for, and neither should you."

"I suppose, but--"

Roaoo gave her a fierce look. "No buts! You know what your problem is, Rusen? I'll tell you--you possess far too much empathy than is good for you, that's what."

Khela jerked her head back. "What? Do I?"

"Yes. You do."

"All I wanted to do was show solidarity with these people, that's all."

"Solidarity? Hah!"

"Yes. What's wrong with that?"

Roao0 cackled grimly. "Solidarity? Oh dear. We have *nothing* in common with these animals, girl."

"That's unfair!" said Khela. "They're not animals. They're people like you and me, and—"

"No," said Roao0, holding up a hand. "They're not like you and me, and I can prove it."

"All right?"

"You do know they've been sacrificing people to these gods of theirs, don't you?"

That gave Khela pause. "They're what?"

"They've been sacrificing people, Rusen. To their gods. What do you think about that?"

"*Human* sacrifices?" said Khela, shaking her head. "No. I don't believe that."

"You think I'm lying? Why not ask your special friend the colonel to show you, then? Why, just yesterday while his crew were out looking at cracks or tracks or some such thing, one of them stumbled across a rather extraordinary scene. In a clearing, I think he said. Four people nailed to an oak tree. Or was it an ash? I forget."

"Nailed?" asked Bene. This was his first time hearing about the incident.

Roao0 looked at him. "Indeed. Iron spikes, would you believe, pounded clean through their heads?" He made hammering motions with his hand.

"Yuck."

"Oh," said Khela. "Oh, no. That's... ghastly."

"Indeed," said Roao0, smoothing down the front of his robe. "It was quite a gruesome sight, or so I'm told. Two men, a woman and a small child. Oh, and they were just the latest offerings. There were quite a few old skulls on that tree, apparently."

Khela made a face. "That's... awful!"

"It's the first thing Renderosi do when they find themselves in a real bind. Or didn't you know?"

"I, uh. No. I thought it was just stories."

"Of course, they don't know any better, do they?" The magister smiled. "And they *have* just been through an incredibly traumatic experience. Most likely, though, it's a direct product of centuries of Kanoshian colonialism and historic injustice. Don't you think?"

Bene tried to contain his laughter and failed.

"Augh," said Khela, clearly distraught. She'd never looked so insulted and embarrassed.

"Anyway," said Roaoo with a sigh. "I must now run along. Much to do, much to do."

"Yes, magister," said Bene. "I'll tell anyone still waiting to be interviewed that we no longer require their services."

"Yes. Good. Do that."

Bene and Khela watched him leave, neither of them saying anything. Bene wondered if she was going to burst into tears. Eventually she did. He fought the urge to put his arms around her, remembering how the last time he'd tried to console her about something similar she had yelled at him for being patronising. Reluctantly, he left.

He wandered amongst the wagons until he found Agbo. The poor girl was up on one of the bigger carts, leaning against the side, anxiously watching the human tide as it rolled by. The desperate look on her face suggested she had yet to spot a friend or relative.

He clambered up to join her. "Hello, Agbo," he said.

"Hello." Agbo turned briefly to look at him. Her nose and cheeks were still bruised, and her eyes were red and puffy from crying.

"Whoever you're looking for, they'll probably see you long before you see them."

"Why don't you just hump her and be done with it?" said Khela, her voice coming from right behind him.

Bene nearly jumped out of his skin. "Shit, Khela! I didn't know you were following me. Also, what the fuck?"

"You heard me." Her foul mood would probably last for days yet.

When emotion got the better of her, Khela had a tendency to become inarticulate and lash out at people. Unfortunately for her, he wasn't about to cut her any slack. "Why are you here?" he asked. "I thought you'd be off somewhere, on your back, trying to fill your day's quota of soldiers."

Khela showed him her middle finger.

"Right back at you, baby," he said, returning the gesture.

Forcing a smile, Khela bounced over to Agbo and said, "Hello. How are you doing?"

Agbo gave her a fleeting glance before turning her attention back to the stream of refugees. "Hello."

Khela put an arm around the girl and squeezed. "Are you all right?"

Agbo nodded weakly. "Yes."

"Wow," said Khela, mouth agape at the scene before her. "I don't think I've ever seen so much mud in my life."

"It sure turned to mush out there in a hurry, didn't it?" said Bene. "The lead wagon got bogged, which is why we're circled up over here now." He looked at the refugees. "Well, it's partly the reason. I don't think we'll be going anywhere for a while."

"Huh?" asked Khela. "I thought we stopped to make way for all the people coming out of Mumolo?"

Bene snorted. "Stopped to make way for them? No. Why would we do that?"

"Well, I dunno. To give them a chance to get to safety and whatnot?"

"Erm," said Bene. Her naiveté could be endearing at times. "Not quite. What happened was one of our guys veered off the way by accident. He couldn't see the road for all the mud and shit, apparently."

Khela frowned. "Oh."

"And we couldn't sit all strung out on the road, so..." He'd have added something about how they would be vulnerable to attacks

by the Mumolonians, but with Agbo there it wouldn't have been very discreet.

"Oh. But won't we get bogged as well?"

"Nah." It was pretty obvious they weren't, right? "Ground's firmer here. And slightly higher, too."

"Ah."

She still looked confused, though, so Bene put a finger to his forehead. "Strategy. It's all about the strategy, baby."

"Oh geez," said Khela, screwing up her face. "You really can be an infuriating prick when you want to be." She touched Agbo on the arm. "Have you seen anyone you know, yet?"

"No," said Agbo. "Not yet."

"Ah. Well, maybe you will soon."

"Maybe."

Silence followed. The refugees continued to stream past, sullen and despairing.

Agbo suddenly rounded on Khela. "How come no one wants to talk about what's going on here?"

"Huh?" Khela's eyes darted to Bene, who shook his head almost imperceptibly. "What do you mean?"

"Don't play coy. I'm getting sick of you people brushing me off all the time."

Khela showed her palms. "What do you mean? No one's brushing you off."

"Bullshit," said Agbo, shaking her head.

"No, really..."

"Stop it. You're doing the same thing you always do!"

"I'm not sure what you mean..."

"Look, I have a right to know." Agbo, it seemed, wasn't going to let the matter drop. "After everything I've been through, I think I've earned the right to know."

Bene caught Khela's gaze and shook his head a second time. "No," he mouthed.

She shot him a black look for daring to think she needed the warning. "Well," she said, "the thing is—"

"The witch," said Agbo, folding her arms. "The one you're chasing that you thought was me. She did something to Mumolo with her magic stone, didn't she?"

"Well," said Khela. "Um..."

"Well what?"

Khela glanced at Bene again. Her expression seemed to say the cat was out of the bag, but again he mouthed, "No."

"Well," said Khela, "the truth is that even we don't know *exactly* what's going on. Not until we can get into Mumolo and have a look for ourselves, at least. So..."

Agbo laughed, but there was no joy in it. "You must think I'm so stupid."

"What? No. No, of course not. No one thinks you're stupid."

"Do you know what they did to me the other day? Your soldiers, I mean? When they caught me?"

Khela grimaced. "Well, yes, I—"

Agbo's stare seemed to bore through her skull. "You *do* know, don't you?"

"Agbo," said Khela, giving Bene a sidelong glance and taking the girl's hands in hers. "Do you *really* want to talk about this now?"

Bene took the hint. "You know," he said, "I just thought of some stuff I really need to take care of. I'll, er, catch up with you later on maybe?"

"Yeah," said Khela. "Yeah, all right. See you."

"Bye," said Bene, clambering down the side of the wagon. Instead of leaving, though, he crouched underneath so he could still hear the conversation. He didn't think Khela would spill their secrets on purpose, but then again, he wouldn't exactly bet his life on it not happening anyway.

"I just can't get it out of my head," said Agbo. "I spend all my time thinking about what they did. Whenever I close my eyes, I relive it all in my head."

"I understand," said Khela.

"I don't feel like eating anymore. I don't sleep much, either." Agbo paused for a long time. "Did you know they put their hands up both, you know... places?"

"I know. I'm sorry."

"It hurt. It still hurts. It burns every time I pee."

"You should let Ghislaine take another look at you. She has poultices for everything." Khela paused. "They didn't, um, well... how can I put this? The soldiers? They, uh, didn't use *more* than their hands, did they?"

"No," said Agbo. "No, I don't think so."

"All right."

"Well, actually I don't really know for sure. But I don't think they did. I can't remember all of it. It hurts, but that isn't the worst part. It's hard to explain. I feel... rotten. I feel ashamed, Khela. I feel dirty. I feel like I've been violated. I feel..."

"I'm so sorry," said Khela, and Bene could practically feel the emotion in her voice. "You *were* violated. And I know it's no consolation, but the men who captured you... I mean, I know them, and I doubt very much they... well, you know."

"What?"

"They wouldn't have used *more* than their hands, Agbo. I don't even know why I asked. The sergeant who brought you in? Hassing? I know him, and believe me, he would not let anything like that go on. Not that it makes much difference from your perspective, of course. You still have every right to feel violated, because you were."

"Why did they do it? Why search me like that?"

Khela took a deep breath. "They have to. They've got orders to do it to the person we're trying to catch. We can't take chances because... well, reasons. I'm really sorry it happened to you, though, that you had to go through it. I mean, really. I can't even begin to imagine how horrible it must have been. And though I know it's no consolation, it was never personal. You weren't the first and you won't be the last."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, that's not to say your experience wasn't anything less than horrendous. It was, and I don't mean to belittle it. It could have been a *lot* worse, though."

"What?"

"I'm so sorry," said Khela quickly. "I know how awful that must have sounded to you. What you went through was terrible, Agbo, really. Just horrible. It's not something I'd wish on my worst enemy. I guess what I was trying to say was that it really could have... I mean, not everyone they've caught has, um..." She paused. "Wow, I don't think I've ever had this much difficulty finishing a sentence."

Bene could hardly blame her. The word she'd almost said was too awful to contemplate: *survived*. As far as the expedition's secrets went, it was easily one of their darkest.

"I still can't believe it even happened," said Agbo. "I can't believe any of this is happening. It's surreal."

"I'm so sorry," said Khela, and Bene could tell they were hugging. They didn't speak again for some time.

"I have a question about this witch of yours, though," said Agbo, breaking the silence. "Does she really keep the stone... you know? *Up there?*"

Khela hesitated before answering. "This is going to sound unfair, Agbo, but the less you know about all that, the better."

"The less I know?" Agbo laughed bitterly. "The less I know? Here's what I know, Khela. I know you're chasing a witch who's stolen something from your university that for some reason she keeps stashed in her private parts. Something very dangerous. Your witch attacked me, and maybe my whole family, too. They're dead for all I know, by her hand! And then you people came along and attacked *me* because you thought *I* was your witch. Oh, and in the meantime the witch wiped out my whole village. So, how am I doing, Khela?"

"Well enough."

"But you can't tell me why? What did she take from you that you want so badly? This stone—what is it? What does it do?"

"I wish I could say, Agbo. Really. And hey, for all we know, your family is fine."

"Gods willing."

"Everything will be all right."

"I hope you kill that witch," said Agbo. "I hope you catch her and kill her!"

"Yeah," said Khela with a sigh. "I used to think that killing her would be too much. That it would be taking things too far, you know? But lately I've actually changed my mind about it. I hope we catch her and kill her, too."

Her frank admission surprised Bene, and he was still thinking about it when he heard Tonneson shouting. A few moments later, a series of ear-splitting shrieks tore through the air.

"What was that?" asked Agbo.

If Khela replied, Bene didn't hear. Something had panicked the Mumolonians. He managed to get back atop the wagon right before the mass of refugees practically exploded. "Get down!" he screamed.

The townsfolk crashed into each other, wailing, confused. Dozens made for the wagons and tried to climb to safety. The soldiers were having none of it. Swords cleared scabbards and the killing began.

"*Get down!*" Bene roared at Khela. "*Get your fucking head down!*" But she just stood there, not understanding what was happening, not until she caught a glimpse of some poor soul spinning away with half his head missing. At which point she screamed.

Bene dove on top of both girls, trying to pull them down amongst the wagon's sacks and crates. A severed arm bounced off Khela's head and she squealed for all she was worth. She tried to flee, and Agbo with her, but he grabbed them by their belts and dragged them back. Khela landed on top of him and wouldn't stop trying to wriggle away. He tried to switch places with her, a task made impossible with his head pressed against the wagon's floor by her weight and Agbo's knee repeatedly pummeling his crotch. "Stop fucking moving!" he yelled, clutching the pair with

all his strength. He was really starting to regret having never worked out. "Get your heads down!"

The noise was horrendous. Tonneson's men bellowed in fury, their voices merging with the cries of the folk they were butchering. Khela jammed her hands over her ears and screamed.

"Stay. Down!" yelled Bene, worried that a whirling blade would strike her.

But Khela, damn her, kept trying to rise. "No!" Her eyes reflected her fear and confusion. "No, no, noooooo!"

"Down! Stay down!" He was starting to get really annoyed. Couldn't she see the danger they were in? The tips of the soldiers' swords were barely clearing the tops of their heads!

"Nooooo!"

To Bene's enormous frustration, she just would not keep still. He panicked when she almost broke free of his grip, so he let go of Agbo and put both arms around her. It was a harsh choice, he supposed, but in that moment he knew which life mattered more to him. "Get the fuck down!"

"Bene!" screamed Khela. "Bene!"

"Stay down! Stay with me!"

Khela burrowed into his chest. He held her so tightly he was worried about cracking her ribs, but he had to keep her away from the swinging blades. He managed to roll her on her side so she was facing him, and they lay together in the bottom of the cart, closer than he thought possible. It felt more intimate, somehow, than fucking.

The battle grew in intensity, the wagon rising and dipping so wildly it felt like it might come apart.

"Fuckers!" The voice came from one of the soldiers above. "Fuckers! Fight harder!"

"Bene!" Khela bawled, clutching at him as a spray of red hit the back of her head.

He'd have reminded her again to keep her head down if not for the gout of blood suddenly spattering across his cheek. "Aaugh!"

he cried, flinching as some got into his eyes. As he tried to wipe it out, Khela's head flicked up.

"Oh no, Bene!" she wailed into his ear. She probably thought the blood was his.

"No!" he shouted as she tried to twist away. She almost succeeded, but at last he managed to get both arms back around her. There was blood coming at them from literally everywhere, splashing into the wagon bed and all over the supplies. Khela even had some spongy pieces of someone's innards clinging to her hair. The tang of blood and spilled bowels hung in the air; every breath carried the stink right up their nostrils.

"I'm going to be sick," said Khela. And she was, all over his neck and the front of his shirt.

The noise gradually abated, and Bene was dimly aware that the wagon hadn't moved in an age. The soldiers were still perched atop the wagon with their dripping swords, but they weren't moving either.

He carefully disentangled himself from Khela, who let him go without complaint. Then he got up on his hands and knees to take a peek over the side of wagon.

And gasped.

Bodies. Renderosi lay in piles around the wheels of the cart. Most were dead, but not all. Plenty of wounded were jammed into those fleshy heaps, crying and moaning and leaking streams of blood into the mud.

Khela got up, congealed vomit still caking her chin. Her eyes were glassy and dull. She half-walked, half-staggered to where Agbo stared at the carnage with shaking hands pressed to her mouth.

"Are they...?" Agbo clearly thought her eyes must be lying to her. "Are they dead?"

"Agbo," said Khela, lifting an arm to comfort her.

"Hey!" shouted one of the soldiers. "Rusen! Don't move!"

Khela flinched. Bene glanced at the man who had accosted her and did a double take. Except for a few patches of silver, it looked

as if someone had thrown a bucket of red paint over his plate harness. The eye slits in his visor yawned black, cold and inhuman.

"All right." Khela's voice had an almost faraway quality to it.

"And don't even think about going down there, Rusen!"

Khela nodded mutely, then turned to look out over the side of the wagon. Bene followed her gaze to where a woman lay panting as she bled out. Another moment, and the woman took her last breath. Beside her, a man whined as he tried to keep a long tangle of his own guts from spilling out. Some old grandfather lay across his legs, eyes wide open, taking enormous gulps of air. Chunks of meat the size of fists had been carved out of his body.

"Good grief." It was the most horrible thing Bene had ever seen, and yet he couldn't look away.

"Wights incoming!" yelled someone.

Bene blinked. Wights? He looked, and sure enough, a dozen or so were making their way through the sparse woods on the other side of the road. They came on in their usual graceless way, white eyes, half-rotted skin with bones poking through, and obviously headed for the party's wagons. One stopped, turned lazily toward its mates, and threw back its head as if shouting. No sound escaped its mouth.

It didn't take a genius to put two and two together: the Mumolonians had seen the creatures and freaked out. A pity, to say the least, because of what had resulted, but you could hardly blame them. The undead were scary as shit, what with their white eyes, half-rotted skin, bones poking through.

The soldiers put away their swords, readied their crossbows, and waited.

And waited.

The funny thing about wights was that they were slow. Stupendously slow. Even when they attacked, they did it with all the intensity of snails balling. Just watching them lurch about on their shaky, twisted limbs was almost painful. Still, they were pants-wetingly terrifying to behold, and especially so if you'd never beheld one before. Until Agbo started screeching, Bene

hadn't even considered how she might react. Khela took the girl into her arms, ignoring orders not to move.

Eventually the wights came within range, and the soldiers snapped off bolts. Within moments they all lay prone in the mud, dead. Or twice-dead, as he was fond of saying.

"Agbo," said Khela, her voice a whisper as she clutched the girl to her breast. "The stone—you know, the artefact we're trying to recover? You wanted to know what it is, what it does." She closed her eyes, and tears slid down both cheeks. "Now you know."

An extract from *Jevad the Destroyer*, by Yeunevolius

Translator's notes: the following verse was thought to have been authored near the end of the Red Age, however it may be a copy of a much earlier work

O, people! Hear me!

I speak of Jevad the Limitless.

*The Worldsbane has come out of Ceulieul * to punish you.*

*The Worldstrider, The Undefeated; he will begin with the
Ahren and end with the Renderosi. ***

*The Black Butcher and his artists you cannot withstand, for
they alone possess what is missing. ****

*The Sword of Ceulieul, The Incomparable One! You have not
seen his like before, nor will you again.*

Hail the Destroyer!

* literally: the Cursed Lands. The author is referring to Kuel, near modern day Ahrenia, where the lands were as blighted and uninhabitable in ancient days as they are today

** the Ahren tribes are called 'Aihrennos' in the tongue in which this text was written; the Renderosi are called 'Avarii,' by which the author means the whole of modern day Renderos. This line refers to Jevad's intention to conquer the world in its entirety i.e. from Ahrenia to Renderos literally means 'from one end of the world to the other'. If this particular work was circulating during Jevad's wars, its hearers must have found it chillingly prophetic.

It otherwise provides a brutally succinct summary of the Destroyer's actual conquests

*** the exact meaning of this passage has been debated for centuries. It is widely believed the term 'artists' is misleading, since the denotation of the original word has been lost to time. The phrase 'they alone possess what was missing' is thought to refer to the arms, organisation and generalship of Jevad's army (which was lacking in his opponents, hence their not being able to withstand him). Others have argued that the term 'artists' is better translated to 'conjurers' and together with 'they alone possess what is missing' points to the possibility that Jevad and his inner circle were practitioners of some lost dark art – in other words, the Destroyer's victories were the result of magic! This, of course, is quite impossible

15

ROSARIUS

SARASINIA

THE BASTION

Rosarius looked on with unconcealed hatred as Dannis paraded around the classroom in what had to be a wedding dress. The rumours had turned out to be true: Dannis and Tavaris had been invited to teach at the Bastion on a trial basis. They'd only been here for two weeks, and already the place felt different. And not at all a good sort of different.

Dannis man paused beside a desk. "Mister Tagio," he said. "Mister Tagio, how is Group Seven's purpose statement coming along?"

Helder's head snapped up. "Huh?"

"You're in Group Seven are you not, Tagio?"

"Uh," said Helder. "I dunno. Am I? Can't really remember."

"My colleague," said Tavaris, gliding over and latching onto Dannis's elbow, "asked how your group's purpose statement was coming along. Writing a purpose statement, I believe, was our class task for this morning. So, Tagio, how is it coming along?"

"Look, about this purpose sentence thing..."

"Purpose *statement*, my dear," said Dannis. "Not *sentence*."

Helder blinked. "Huh? I thought you said before it had to be a sentence?"

"I believe that what was said," said Tavaris airily, "was that a purpose statement may sometimes consist of a single sentence."

"Ah, but it is no ordinary sentence," said Dannis, his finger poised as if he were uttering a truth of world-shaking profundity. "Indeed not, for it is one that provides a given entity a sense of direction."

"What do you mean by entity?" asked Beccera, the other member of Group Seven.

"Fuck this shit," muttered Rosarius.

Dannis looked at him sharply before nodding at Beccera. "It means us."

"By *entity* you mean the Bastion?" asked Helder.

"We do indeed," said Tavaris. "And I believe that we made this abundantly clear at the beginning of the lesson, too, did we not?"

"What do you mean by *sense of direction*, though?"

"Why, the Bastion's of course!" said Dannis, showing the first signs of losing his composure. "The Bastion's sense of direction! Ours! Who else's could it possibly refer to?"

"Think of a purpose statement," said Tavaris, "as something that keeps the Bastion, as a whole, inspired. It keeps us motivated, keeps us driven, moving forward."

Beccera seemed to find the explanation unenlightening. "You mean as in what we do?"

"No," said Dannis. "No, no, no. I believe it is the *mantra* that covers that particular aspect of our business."

"The what?"

"The mantra," said Tavaris. "A mantra is a short description of what an entity *does*."

"It differs from the purpose statement, obviously," said Dannis.

"Yes," said Tavaris. "A mantra should be, above all else, memorable. The purpose statement need not be quite so memorable, although it causes no harm if it is, naturally."

"Did you say it *needn't* be memorable?" asked Helder.

"That is indeed what I said," said Tavaris. "*Needn't*."

"Yes, a purpose statement needn't necessarily be catchy in the same way that a mantra must be," said Dannis. "It is absolutely essential, however, that a mantra not only be catchy but also easy to remember. Hmm, but let's not get ahead of ourselves, all right? We'll be covering mantras in a future lesson."

"As well as mission statements," said Tavaris.

"And vision statements," said Dannis.

"Don't forget positioning statements!" Tavaris clapped his hands and beamed. "Oh, this is so exciting! Do you not find it exciting, young Tagio?"

"Oh yeah." Helder's voice dripped with a sarcasm that went unacknowledged by the teachers. "Definitely."

Rosarius shook his head. This was all so fucking stupid, and not even a little bit exciting. He thought seriously about walking out in protest.

"We really *should* focus on the task at hand, though," said Dannis. "In fact, at this precise moment you should be looking to put the finishing touches on your purpose statement."

"Quite so," said Tavaris. "To that end, we'll give you a little more time then, shall we?" He turned to Dannis. "Um, let's see how Group Three is progressing shall we, dear?"

"Fuck off," said Rosarius under his breath. Three was his group. Dannis and Tavaris, their noses pointed at the ceiling, sashayed toward him as briskly as their gowns permitted.

"Ho there!" said Tavaris. "Group Three! How are you coming along?"

Rosarius folded his arms and looked at the opposite wall.

"All right, I guess," said Tacius, Group Three's other member.

"Have you come up with a purpose statement yet?" asked Dannis.

“Um.” Tacius wrinkled his nose. “Well we were, uh, just discussing that.”

“That’s not what my colleague asked you,” said Tavaris, shaking his head.

Rosarius turned around. “I have a couple of questions for you, actually.”

“Questions?” asked Dannis. “Oh? Very well, then. Let’s hear your questions.”

“Well,” said Rosarius, “first of all, I want to know why you think the Bastion even needs a purpose statement.”

“You want to know *why*?” asked Tavaris. “I believe we told you *why* at the beginning of the lesson!”

“Yes.” Dannis looked down his nose at Rosarius. “We made it abundantly clear from the outset, methinks. Surely you do not expect us to repeat ourselves, do you?”

Tavaris sniffed. “The only thing I think, dear one, is that this particular student doesn’t like using his ears.”

“No, I heard you,” said Rosarius. “I just don’t see how any of this is relevant.”

“Is that so?” asked Tavaris, placing his hands on his hips. “Truly?”

“How, exactly,” asked Dannis, “is it not relevant?”

“For one thing,” said Rosarius, “the Bastion is a military academy. Has been for centuries. It should be pretty fucking obvious to everyone what we’re about, don’t you think?”

“What we’re *about*?” Tavaris recoiled as if Rosarius had spat on his dress. “I think someone’s getting their purpose statement confused with their mission statement!”

“I concur,” said Dannis, looking Rosarius up and down. Maybe he remembered him from that tribunal bullshit a few months back, and maybe not. “Although actually, dear, I suspect that this particular student might be trying to say he thinks that our class is superfluous.” He drew his neatly plucked brows down in disapproval.

“Surely not!” said Tavaris. “Is that what he’s saying?”

Rosarius shook his head. "Tell me something, then. What was Jevad the Destroyer's purpose statement?"

"Who the what?"

"Jevad the Destroyer."

"I'm sorry, but the name doesn't ring a bell."

"No," said Dannis. "Never heard of him."

Rosarius shared an incredulous look with Tacius, who rolled his eyes. "You two don't know who Jevad the Destroyer was? Jevad Worldsbane? The Black Butcher? Jevad, the Sword of Kuel? The man who conquered the world in the Red Age? For some odd reason, we fucking tend to study him a lot at this fucking *military academy*."

"I'm quite sure that I do not like your tone," said Tavaris. "Or your foul language. At all."

Dannis sniffed. "So, are you suggesting that you don't think this Jevad person had a purpose statement?"

"If he did," said Rosarius, "he certainly didn't call it that."

"No doubt he had a plan, though?"

Rosarius laughed. "Like I said, he conquered the whole fucking world. So yeah, I'm pretty sure he had a fucking plan."

Dannis folded his arms. "Don't you get smart with me!"

Rosarius wasn't about to back down. "The Destroyer was the warlord to end all warlords. I strongly doubt, though, that dividing his troops into tiny groups and making them come up with purpose statements, or whatever the fuck, played any role in his career whatsoever."

"You!" shrieked Tavaris. "You mind your language! We didn't ask for your opinion on the matter, did we? No! We only asked you for purpose statements. So, do you have a purpose statement to share with us or not?"

Rosarius shook his head and leaned forward in his seat. "No. Why, what are you going to do about it?"

The classroom fell silent. All eyes were on Rosarius's hands as they curled into fists. Gods help him, he would beat these two fuckwits bloody!

And then suddenly Romelo lurched to his feet, completely obliterating the tension. "Hey, ever'body!" he slurred, obviously drunk. "I got a fuckin' purpose shtatement for yer!"

"Ah!" said Tavaris, his pencilled-in eyebrows going up. "Mister Ales! Yes, yes. Let's hear from a person of *quality*."

"Quiet everybody!" shouted Dannis, clapping his hands for silence even though no one else was even talking. "Mister Ales has something he'd like to share with the class. Quiet, please! Quiet!"

Romelo looked around to make sure he had the room's attention. "All right," he said, swaying from side to side. "Get thish. Here'sh what I come up with. I reckon the Bashtion's purpose shtatement should be thish: *Fucking up cunts!*"

The class guffawed. Even Rosarius allowed himself a smirk, though he concealed it behind his wrist.

Tavaris's mouth hung open. "What did you say?"

"*Fucking up cunts*," said Romelo. "You know, as in killin' 'em?"

"Ah," said Dannis, not sure where to look.

Romelo grinned. "You guysh shaid you wanted shomethin'... what was it? Broad and far reaching, or some shit. Well, *fucking up cunts* fitsh the bill nicely, I reckon. Not only ish it what we do, it's inshpirational as well. Right? Because yer said we got extra points if our purposhe statement was also inshpirational."

"Well," said Tavaris. "Erm..."

"Right." Dannis blinked. "In what way does it provide direction, though? I mean, obviously, a good purpose statement provides direction."

"Ah," said Romelo with a shrug, "well that's easy isn't it? We'll jus' fuckin' march out o' Sarashinia... in every fucking direcshun. And kill everyone, eh? Just fuck 'em all up."

A few members of the class laughed politely, but most didn't say anything. Rosarius didn't like his cousin any more than he already did, but at least today they didn't seem to be at cross purposes.

"Er, thank you, mister. Ales," said Dannis, smiling thinly through the awkward silence that followed. "You may sit down."

He plucked at Tavaris's maunches and led him to a far corner of the room.

"This is embarrassing," Rosarius heard Tavaris whisper. "I told you we should have arranged them in groups of four!" "Groups of two can be... I don't know... conspiratorial!"

"I concur," said Dannis. "Still, let's not panic. Maybe we should just move on? What do you think? Should we see what the other groups have come up with, and then perhaps do the team building activity?" He reached into a front pocket and took out a handkerchief that he used to dab away the sweat collecting on his friend's forehead.

"Careful," said Tavaris flinching. "Careful! You're smearing my foundation. Well, I vote to quit while we're ahead and just do the team building activity. Because frankly I'm a little frightened to hear what the remaining groups have come up with. So far, no one seems to understand the concept of purpose statements at all! Where did we go wrong, do you think?"

"No, no," said Dannis, "the fault lies not with us. These students clearly lack motivation."

Tavaris nodded. "Well, of course. They've never had a purpose statement to guide them, have they?"

"You don't think we should have *given* them a sample purpose statement to look at first, do you?"

Tavaris stared at him. "Hello? Thayria to Parm's Dannis? We are *facilitators*, dear! Not spoon feeders. No, the root of the problem—and I am quite convinced of this, actually—is that these students have no real grasp of what's truly important. As we've been saying from the start, their regressive curriculum is to blame."

"Quite right," said Dannis, nodding. "Quite right. The curriculum! These poor fellows have been permitted to spend entirely too much time involved in aggressive pursuits. You know, soldiering and the like. This is highly problematic, obviously, because it renders one rather bone-headed."

Tavaris rubbed his hands together. "Do you think we could solve the problem by cutting back on their physical training sessions?"

"I love it!" said Dannis, clapping. "I must confess, I've never understood the point of all the marching they do. You wouldn't think walking needs practicing, would you?"

Tavaris rubbed a lacquered fingernail against his gown. "One would tend to think not. And did you know they practice with arms *every day*?"

"Oh, truly?" asked Dannis, checking that his own nails were still intact. "I didn't realise they went at it quite as often as that. No, that does seem excessive for officer training. Do officers even fight?"

"I don't believe so. No."

"So would one day a month be sufficient to practice war's craft then, do you think?"

"Oh, I should think so, yes. One cannot neglect it entirely, I suppose."

Dannis nodded. "Yes. Everything in moderation, as they say. And do you know, I've just had an idea!"

"What is it?" Tavaris looked at him expectantly.

"Makeovers! The poor creatures look so shabby, don't they? Not a hint of cosmetic enhancement to be seen. What do you think?"

Tavaris twirled and clapped. "Oh! Yes, yes! I love it!"

"Why, we could always—" began Dannis, but then he clucked at how noisy the class was becoming. "Oh no, we're losing them. All right dear, perhaps we should get back to it then? Shall I do a quick summary, do you think, before we move on to the team building activity?"

"Right you are, sweetling," said Tavaris. "Let's proceed!"

Dannis dashed into the centre of the room. "All right, good people!" he shouted, clapping. "Great work, today! Really, really great work! I truly do believe that thanks to today's work on purpose statements, you're all beginning to understand what the Bastion is all about. What is it all about, again?"

The class went silent, and stayed that way.

"Yes, that's right," said Tavaris. Serving and preserving our imperial dominion."

No one said anything. Beside him, Helder looked at him blankly. Rosarius thought back to the day of their tribunal, back to when these two idiots had referred to Colton as 'Prince Colton.' And now they were talking about *imperial dominion*? Were they just being pretentious fuckwits, or did they genuinely believe Eusebio was king of Sarasinia?

Dannis and Tavaris mistook the absence of chatter for rapt attention. "Precisely!" cried Dannis. "I can tell by your expressions that it's all beginning to sink in. Marvellous!"

"Most encouraging," said Tavaris. "Most encouraging indeed! But as for the purpose statement itself? Oh dear, well we didn't quite get there, did we?" He wagged a finger in mock remonstrance. "And how you have survived as long as you have without knowing what a purpose statement is? Well! Well, it's simply beyond me. 'Where are we headed?' 'What drives us forward?' *These* are the vital questions we must strive to answer if we are to succeed as agents of Sarasinian dominion! Ah, well not to worry, because—and here I'm going to shamelessly borrow one of your more military-minded turns of phrase—we'll reorganise and double down on our assault on that particular foe. Eh? Eh?"

The students looked at each other. "You fuckin' idiots," hissed Rosarius under his breath.

"Well said, sweetling," said Dannis. "We are facilitating your *empowerment*. Why? Because we want you to succeed as students! It is a fact that your individual success is absolutely critical to the Bastion's success as a whole. More on that, of course, in due course. Because for right now we have a real treat lined up for you!"

Tavaris clapped his hands. "Oh, yes! A real treat!"

"So then," said Dannis, "everybody on their feet!"

"Form a circle over here!" said Tavaris, moving to one side of the class where a sizeable area of clear space had been reserved.

“Make it big enough so there’s plenty of wiggle room for us all to see you when it’s your turn to go in the middle.”

The students were slow to move, but eventually they arranged themselves into something that vaguely resembled a circle. “Do you want us to hold hands as well?” asked someone. Muffled laughter followed.

Tavaris refused to be baited. “Good, good. Now, everybody be seated on the floor, please.”

With the students in position, Dannis stepped into the middle of the circle clutching a small purple sack. “I have an important issue to raise,” he said, looking at each student in turn. “We have heard tell that there is bad blood between certain members of this class.”

Rosarius and Romelo glanced at each other.

“This bad blood,” said Tavaris as he stepped into the ring to join Dannis, “should not be, but it is. And it cannot be allowed to continue. It must, as I’m sure you will agree, be cleansed.”

Dannis brandished the purple sack. “To aid in this task, we have something very special to share with you all.”

“Watch!” barked Tavaris. “And no talking!”

“Behold,” said Dannis, his eyes twinkling. “For I present to you... the Healing Stone!” With a flourish, he reached inside the sack and withdrew an object.

The Healing Stone turned out to be a pink crystal about the length and width of a baby’s arm, and with a flat, polished base wrapped in copper wire. The class regarded it dubiously.

“Look at the wonder writ large on their faces!” cried Tavaris.

“Doubtless.” Dannis cupped the crystal reverently in one hand and stroked its length with the other. The students sniggered, but he ignored them. “For the Healing Stone is a thing of wonder! Let each of you gaze on it with awe, as we do, for this is no ordinary stone. Behold, students, for what I hold betwixt my fingers is a most remarkable tool!”

“I’ll bet it is,” said someone, to snorts of laughter.

“Still your despicable tongues!” yelled Tavaris, not mistaking their meaning. “No doubt you see this thing before you as a mere

rock. Nevertheless, I assure you, it is not. It is... the Healing Stone!"

"Yes," said Dannis. "Now, before we proceed, I should like to explain how the Stone works. Well, what I like to do is take a firm grip on it like so." As he shifted his hands, the entire class roared with laughter.

"There will be silence!" yelled Tavaris.

"There's no need for rudeness!" said Dannis. "Students, truly that was uncalled for." There were more guffaws and giggles. "Now, the next step is to address the Stone. It is a simple matter of speaking your troubles into it. Now, I must stress that this will only work if you say your troubles aloud. But I swear to you, as surely as the sun orbits our world, it does work."

"Truly, it does," said Tavaris. "You have but to speak of your worries to the Stone and it will absorb them."

"So," said Dannis, "what we shall do is as follows: one by one you will enter the circle and take hold of the Healing Stone. You will then air your grievances. Specifically, you will mention the name of the person *or persons* whom you feel have wronged you. Moreover, you will list the harms that person *or persons* has done to you. Thereafter the Stone will activate, miraculously relieving you of your burdens! I assure you that before we leave this classroom today, the bad blood that exists between any of you will be completely gone."

"So mote it be-e-e-e!" chanted Tavaris.

"So mote it be-e-e-e!" chanted Dannis, and then he placed the crystal on the ground and left the circle.

The students all looked at one another, but no one moved.

"I wonder who shall go first?" Tavaris also departed the circle. "Step within, speak your troubles to the Stone as we have described. Come now, don't be shy."

"This is a safe space!" said Dannis. "No one here will judge you, and you may speak your mind without fear! The Healing Stone is truly a thing of wonder, believe me!"

Gyllo stood up. "Yeah. All right. I'll have a fuckin' go, then."

"Please do!" said Dannis, gesturing at him to come forward. "Let's give a hand to our first volunteer." He began clapping, and of course Tavaris followed him, but not one of the students joined in.

Gylio edged toward the crystal. "I'm supposed to what, just pick it up?"

"Correct," said Tavaris. "Take up the Stone in both hands and speak to it. Speak to it as we have instructed. Go on, dear!"

Gylio picked it up the crystal and closed his eyes. A hush descended over the classroom.

"Do go on, er, student?" said Dannis. "Please... continue."

"O, precious Stone," intoned Gylio with great solemnity, "I beseech you, heed my call!"

"Very good," said Tavaris. "Now tell the Stone your troubles, dear."

"O, wondrous Stone, aid this lowly servant, for alas I have a serious problem."

Dannis urged him on. "You must state the problem, dear."

"Aid me, O righteous gem," said Gylio, "for I am in dire straits indeed. You see, my problem is--"

"That you can't find your dick?" shouted someone.

Gylio opened his eyes. "Yeah! Hey, how'd ya fuckin' guess?" All pretence of gravity evaporated as he put the base of the crystal against his crotch. "Oh no, wait-what's this? Never mind, boys, I found the bastard!" He began thrusting his hips and the class erupted with laughter.

"My turn!" shouted someone, and a dozen students each tried to claim the crystal for themselves. Gylio handed it to the first comer, then stood back as they all elbowed each other in their eagerness to outdo his performance.

"Come at me, brothers!" shouted Helder, bent over, hands pressed to his butt cheeks. "See if you can't give me some extra deep healing!" His classmates roared.

Rosarius hadn't laughed so hard in recent memory. He wiped away tears as Dannis and Tavaris stood there, rooted to the spot, too shocked for words. This. Was. Glorious.

Tavaris was the first to recover his wits. "*You vile beasts! Out! Get out!*" With some difficulty he waded into the tangle of students and managed to wrest the crystal away.

"Everybody out of the classroom!" shouted Dannis, his voice rising to an almost impossibly high pitch. "Leave! Leave! Leave at once!"

The students fled, squawking and giggling. Most went back to the barracks, happy at having some free time. Rosarius nearly went with them, but some impulse told him that he should stay. Something, it said, would pass between Dannis and Tavaris that he needed to hear. So he doubled back to listen and watch outside one of the classroom windows.

"What animals!" said Tavaris, wiping away a tear stained black with kohl. He cradled the crystal in both hands.

"I know, I know," said Dannis. "Is the Stone all right?"

"I believe so," said Tavaris, returning it to its purple sack and cinching the drawstring tight.

Dannis breathed a sigh of relief. "Good! Good. Oh, thank the stars!"

"But oh, dear, whatever shall we do about this class? Such awful students!"

"I concur," said Dannis, putting a comforting hand on Tavaris's shoulder. "But we shall not allow ourselves to become disheartened. After all, we have only just begun our work here, have we not? There are bound to be a few hurdles to clear before we hit our stride, surely."

Tavaris nodded. "I suppose that's true. However, we should implement those curriculum changes we were discussing earlier, dear. The sooner the better."

"Yes," said Dannis. "Yes. The sooner the better, I quite agree. We'll tame these savages yet."

"Quite so. Take the animals out of the jungle, and surely the jungle will come of out the animals."

"Hmm." Dannis looked thoughtful. "Yes, I do like that."

Tavaris beamed. "Thank you, dear. I have put a great deal of thought into the matter, actually. Henceforth, we shall declare the

playing of all sport in the Bastion forbidden. In addition, no horseplay or anything even resembling the like. There shall be no drilling, no marching and no weapons. Well, save for the practicing of war's craft, as previously discussed, which I think should be permitted on the last day of every month."

"Very good," said Dannis, smoothing out a crinkle in his gown. "We shall go to Prince Colton and speak with him about making the necessary changes."

Tavaris nodded. "Indeed. We are seeing him this weekend, are we not?"

Rosarius raged silently, unable to continue listening. His first thought was to simply rush in and stab them to death. Too many witnesses in the nearby classrooms, though, unfortunately. He walked away. Dannis and Tavaris were enemies of the Bastion, no two ways about it. Left unchallenged, they would destroy it. He would not allow that happen, of course. No way. He'd tell Borrego and the others about what he'd heard, and between them they'd come up with a plan of action. The Bastion would fight back!

GORARIC**THE SARASINIAN 5th ARMY FOLLOWERS' CAMP****SOUTHERN AHRENIA**

Goraric could only vaguely recall his most recent visit to the Tor. He remembered, with almost perfect clarity, his life up until leaving the Sarasinian garrison in Herena, but as for his return to the Tor... well, his memories of that had more or less vanished. Kolf wouldn't speak about what happened there, and none of his uncle's men could be persuaded to say anything beyond how he'd gotten the shit beaten out of him. Better for him, they said, if he never remembered.

He hadn't forgotten about the dead girls, of course. If anything, he revisited that fateful day in the forest more often than ever. And as for his dreams, the awful bloody images that made him scared to sleep, well, they still loomed large in his life. Would he ever be free of them? It didn't matter. "Owic be praised," he whispered. The words brought comfort, and he felt safe in the knowledge that the Lord of Shields was surely watching over him. "Lend me the strength to bear what I must."

And he hadn't forgotten was that he was a deserter, either. Enlistees served their time in the army—or else. The knives were out for him now, figuratively and literally. Which was why it seemed like an awful risk to be out here, in the Fifth Army's very followers' camp. On the other hand, as Kolf was fond of reminding him, catching him would hardly be a priority for the Fifth. No one could have expected him to come here, anyway, and few knew who he was. Besides, followers' camps were full of rogues and shady characters. Everyone out here was running from something. Even so, Goraric jumped at shadows and spent too many waking moments looking over his shoulder. That would be his life until he had a chance to escape over the Asfour. Not long to go until then, at least. "Owic be praised," he whispered again. "Lend me strength."

He wondered which clan would adopt him. The Ture, perhaps? They lived over the river, and Torsmen were related to them, too. Supposedly. Or maybe the Wehen would take him? Why not? Or the Ulse, or even the Alcala. They were up that way as well. Or would it be better to strike out for the Cired Isles? Did he even have enough money to make it that far, though? And would the position of the moons allow sea travel this year, or next? Not that any of it mattered, of course—if Owic willed, He would provide.

"Are you even listening?" asked Kolf.

"Sorry," said Goraric. "Say that again?"

"I said," said Kolf slowly, "you certainly cannot go out there looking like that."

"What do you mean?" He pointed at his own face. "I trimmed my hair and beard like you told me. I even—"

Kolf folded his arms. "It's not that. I'm talking about the shirt."

"Eh?" said Goraric, holding his arms out. "What's wrong with it?"

"Traders don't wear mail shirts in camp. Take it off and put that on instead." Kolf pointed to an oilskin coat in the corner of the tent.

Goraric did as he was told, though he didn't like it. "This thing won't turn a blade," he said, making a face as he fingered the

oilskin. "It's too light. What if I run into trouble and everything goes to shit?"

"It will too turn a blade," said Kolf, giving him a stern look. "Well, once or twice it will. And it'll keep the rain off, too, which is more than can be said for mail. It's raining out, in case you hadn't noticed. Besides, you're not going to get yourself into anything that could go to shit, are you? You're not fully recovered. All you're doing is asking questions, Goraric. Find out where the girls are, and nothing more."

"If they're even here, you mean."

"That goes without saying. And you'll report back before midnight, do you hear me?"

"Uh huh. Got it."

"And you can leave the sword as well."

"Aw, shit. Why?"

Kolf scowled. "Because you'll stick out like dogs' balls, that's why! How many traders have you seen lugging one of those about, huh? You've got your knife. Thing's practically a sword, anyway."

"Fine, fine. Can I go now?"

"Not yet. Do you remember your cover story?"

"Of course I do."

Kolf smiled. "Then get the fuck going. And good luck, Goraric."

"Thanks," said Goraric, grateful to be finally leaving.

It was cold outside. Goraric drew his coat around him against the wet. As the light drizzle eventually gave way to a downpour, he was very glad of the oilskin. A pity, though, that Kolf hadn't given him some sort of hat to go with it.

He walked amongst rows of tents and lean-tos, thinking on how many thousands shared such a tiny space. People pushed past him, running. So many individuals, each with their own thoughts and stories, but all united at that moment by a desire to keep dry. He ducked under the nearest marquee and almost ran headlong into a plump young woman. "Oh shit!" he cried, jumping away in fright. "Sorry."

"That's all right," said the woman. "Shitty weather, isn't it?"

"Yeah, you said it."

"Fancy a couple of nice hot buns to warm you up?"

Goraric gave her a wink. "Is that a euphemism?"

The woman folded her arms and took a half step back. "Take me for a whore, do you?"

"What? No, I uh—"

"Are you saying you *wouldn't* want to tumble me?" The woman's darkened brow and quivering chins showed her indignation. "Is that it?"

Goraric wasn't sure how to respond. "Well, no. I, uh... didn't mean..."

The woman smiled, then laughed. "Never mind. Anyway, it's probably best if you didn't answer that!"

"Um..."

"Relax, I was only messing with you."

"Ah," said Goraric, grinning as he wiped beads of water from his forehead. "Er, all right then?"

"I was actually referring to this," said the woman, stepping aside to reveal a wooden handcart with a charcoal grill built into the top. "I sell hot buns."

"Hot buns?" He licked his lips.

"Yep." The woman held something out to him.

He saw a mound of dough cut lengthwise and stuffed with a fat sausage. He smelled butter and garlic and herbs he couldn't put a name to. His stomach rumbled. "Looks delicious."

The woman shrugged. "Try it. It'll only cost you a sen."

Goraric rummaged around in his purse and handed over a coin. "Done," he said, taking the bun from her and cramming half of it into his mouth. "A bargain, too."

"You're not wrong."

He finished the bun in two bites. "Mmf," he said, chewing. "Thish's acshully preddy goob." He noticed the lettering on the handcart. "Ennette?"

"That's me," said the woman, tracing the letters with a finger. "Well, actually it's my mother's name as well. I was named after

her. 'Ennette's Sausage Buns' isn't the most creative name I suppose, but I came up with it when I was six and so that's what she went with." She offered her hand. "Happy to meet you."

Goraric pressed his palm into Ennette's. "Happy to meet you too." He remembered his cover story. "I'm Father Durnin."

"Ooh," said Ennette, sizing him up. "A slaver, eh?"

"Yep," said Goraric. "Out of Gillendum. I'm looking to pick up some new additions. Something exotic, maybe? Ah, I don't know. I only got here yesterday."

Ennette nodded. "Fair enough. Can't say as you'll find anything terribly exotic in this shithole." She frowned at some dingy lean-tos as if to underscore her point. "But then again, what do I know about the business? Thick sausages and saucy buns are more my thing." She laughed and gave him a suggestive look.

Goraric smiled. Ennette was too homely for his taste, but she had an honest face and he found her raucous laugh oddly appealing. "Are you from Herena?"

"I am," said Ennette, wiping her fingers absent-mindedly down the front of her apron. "From the city proper. How about yourself?"

"Like I said, I'm out of Gillendum. Born and bred."

"You should have been a singer, not a slaver."

"Hm." He nodded even though he had no idea what she was talking about.

Ennette laughed at his confusion. "Never mind. It was pretty stupid."

Goraric tried to recall what she'd said prior to that. "Oh wait. It was because I was rhyming, wasn't it?"

Ennette grinned sheepishly. "Yup! Well, like I said, it was pretty stupid."

"No, no, it's all right." Goraric pointed to the handcart. "So, you run this thing all by yourself then, do you?"

"Oh no. No. This place," and she gestured to show she meant the followers' camp in its entirety, "is not somewhere I could survive alone. The hubby and I came here thinking we could make some money, but uh..."

"But what?" She'd piqued his curiosity. Something was troubling her a great deal.

"Yeah, let's just say it hasn't worked out so well in practice."

"Why not? What's the problem?"

"No, no, it's nothing. We just, well, miscalculated a bit, that's all."

"Miscalculated how?"

"I dunno," said Ennette, folding her arms again. "Maybe it's better if we just forget I said anything."

Goraric decided to force the issue. "No. Tell me. Why aren't you making any money?"

Ennette looked away. "Oh, no. I misspoke. We are."

"Really?"

"Uh huh."

"You're not a very good liar, Ennette."

She turned back to him, an annoyed expression on her face.

"That's a bit rude coming from a stranger."

"Sorry."

She unfolded her arms. "No," she said, softening her tone. "It was my mistake. I shouldn't have started talking about it."

"Talking about what?"

Ennette gave him a look. "Forget it, please, Durnin. I don't know you."

"Of course. As you wish."

"I'm sorry. I mean, you seem nice and all, but..."

He shrugged. "Nah, it's all right."

"I didn't mean to ruin the otherwise pleasant conversation we were having." Ennette sounded disappointed. "It's just that... well, look, I hope I'm not keeping you from something important?" She smiled, but her heart clearly wasn't in it.

Goraric adjusted his oil skin. "No, not really. The weather's sent everyone indoors. I haven't found what I need yet and I don't really feel like walking around in the rain looking for it, either. I have time."

"As you like." Ennette pointed eastward. "And the slave pens are down that way, in case you were wondering."

"Oh yes, I know. I could go another sausage bun, actually."

Ennette nodded. "Of course."

Goraric paid for the bun and ate it. He didn't want to keep pestering her, but he also didn't want to leave without trying to help. He'd failed plenty of people recently, and it was high time he turned things around. "Are you and your husband in some kind of trouble, Ennette?"

"No."

"Is someone standing over you?"

"No."

"Someone's standing over you, aren't they?"

"No."

"Yes, they are."

"No, no. Don't be silly."

"I thought so. It's Leonf, isn't it? That fucking banker? Don't worry, I'm not one of his goons."

"I really don't know what you're talking about."

Goraric knew he'd worn out his welcome. And it wasn't as if he hadn't tried to help her out. "Fair enough. Well, it looks like the rain's eased a bit, so..." It wasn't true, but this was all getting really awkward now. "I suppose I'll take one more bun and get out of your hair?"

"All right," said Ennette, handing him another sausage bun fresh off the grill.

"Wait." He looked at her expectantly. "You're not going to do anything with that?"

She gave him a curious look. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know." He smiled. "I was thinking maybe you were going to say something along the lines of, 'Anyone who devours my buns like you do is welcome in my hair anytime?'"

"You're a strange sort," said Ennette, stifling a giggle. "And that does sound like something I might say, actually."

"I'll leave you in peace, Ennette," said Goraric as he passed her a third coin. "You have a nice smile, and I hope to see it again sometime."

"Bye, Father Durnin. Come back any time."

Goraric gave her a genial salute as he departed. His appetite now more or less sated, he ate his bun at a leisurely pace as he walked. "Fucking Leonf," he said under his breath. Peddling misery, as bankers were wont to do. No doubt he was taking protection money from Ennette and her husband, or forcing them to borrow from him. "Fucking Leonf."

"Smoked fish?" asked a man selling the same out of a tent.

"Looks good," said Goraric, casting an eye over his wares. "Maybe later. Slave pens this way, are they?" He already knew they were, but he was in character and it seemed like a question someone like newly-arrived Father Durnin might ask.

"Yeah," said the man. "Keep goin' straight like y'are. Can't miss 'em."

"Thanks."

"Righto, friend."

The slavers' area was a sodden place heavy with the smell of shit and wretchedness. The first cages he came to were home to maybe a dozen children and a handful of women. They all looked cold and exhausted. There was a northerner or two among them, but most were Kai Shang or maybe Candran. There was even a Zann in there as well, possibly. He'd never really been able to tell those peoples apart.

A pair of guards saw Goraric approach, and one went off to fetch his employer, who turned out to be a portly man well into his fifties. Goraric noted his expensive clothes and concluded that business must be good.

"Welcome, young sir!" said the man, addressing him in Sarasinian. "Welcome!"

"Morning." He supposed he could have sounded a bit more enthusiastic, but Sarasinian was a language he'd started to despise of late.

"Come inside. Have a drink." The man ushered Goraric into a large green tent and sat him in one of several chairs clustered around a low table. He put a pair of cups of unidentifiable liquid

on the table before taking one of the chairs for himself. "Welcome, welcome!"

Goraric looked around. Good quality carpets on the floor. Nice furniture, too. Not exactly lavish, but well made. Sturdy.

"Oh, I nearly forgot!" said the man. "Ha, ha. I'm Father Roland." He extended a hand, and Goraric squeezed it.

"Father Durnin," said Goraric. "Out of Gillendum."

Roland's eyebrows went up. "Gillendum! I used to live there! Can't say I enjoyed it much, mind you. Bit too out of the way, nothing to do."

"That's true." He'd been to Gillendum enough times to know that boring described it well. The little frontier town was known for having grown quickly after its founding, but then withering like fruit left on the vine.

"Tell me true, Durnin, all right? Is business there as bad as they say?"

Goraric paused. Was he talking about the slave trade, or just generally? "Uh, yes," he heard himself saying. "It's pretty bad, actually. Not much happening, you know, on account of how the, uh—" Shit. What to say next?

"Mm," said Roland, nodding along. "Yes. On account of how the clans stopped selling captives."

"Yeah," said Goraric, relieved. "Exactly."

"Well it's because of the invasion, of course. You wouldn't expect any different. Are you surviving the downturn all right?"

Goraric waved a hand. "Oh, yes. I'm doing fine."

"Good to hear, good to hear. I suppose you're following the Lion too, eh, hoping to get the jump on the other traders?"

Goraric nodded, even though he didn't really get it. "Oh, yeah. Yep. Following the Lion... and all that."

"A wise move," said Roland, tapping his temple with a finger. "Soon enough we'll have all the stock we need and then some, eh? Of course, prices'll be a bit depressed in the interim."

"True."

"Volume will be key."

"Oh, yes. That it will. Definitely."

"How long you been in the trade then, Durnin?"

Goraric was starting to regret that he hadn't put more effort into his cover story. "To be honest with you, Roland," he said, "not very long. A few years back I joined the garrison in Gillendum for a bit, but it didn't really work out. Then my father died suddenly and left his house and business to me. That was about a year or two ago, I guess..."

"Yes, yes," said Roland, looking at him. "You have the look of a soldier about you. I was a spearman too, you know. Once, in another life."

"Oh yeah?"

"Believe it or not, yes." Roland slapped his belly, and the fat rippled beneath his shirt. "But as you can see, that was a very long time ago indeed!"

"Who were you with?"

"The Fifth."

"The Fifth? Really?"

"Swear to the gods, I had the great privilege of serving under the Lion himself. The great lord Virgilio."

"Huh. Fancy that."

Roland smiled. "So, when I heard he was marching out again, well I just couldn't resist, could I? I thought I'd make the effort, you know, for old time's sake. It's not the same now, of course. I mean, I've no spear this time around and I daresay I'm travelling in a bit more comfort, too. But the sights, the sounds... ah, it really takes me back."

"I can well imagine."

"Those were the days, I tell you." Roland's eyes glittered at the memory. "We were young and fit and strong. We were soldiers, full of youthful exuberance. Full of fire. Nothing could stop us. I fought twice, but then I was wounded badly enough I had to be sent back. I didn't mind too much, though. And why would I? I came back rich as a lord!"

Goraric nodded. "Slaves."

"Of course! What else? Now in those days you were allowed to trade, but you could only keep one slave for your own. These

days it's all different." He frowned and shook his head. "Gone to shit. No one can keep anything. And they don't even let other ranks trade at all anymore."

"No?"

"No, lad. It was such a lucrative business they had to go and lock the common man out of it. It's a politicians-only racket now, pretty much. Meaning I'll be forced to buy from some Old Blood bastard who already has more money than he knows what to do with. Or that fucking banker, maybe."

"Leonf?"

"Yeah," said Roland, his voice thick with disgust. "Him. Bought a licence from Archon Riva, or so I heard."

Goraric wanted to ask Roland more about the banker, but decided it might do to build a bit more rapport first. Leonf's own agents were known to disparage their chief openly, and it was always a ruse to unmask his enemies. "So," he asked, "what was your connection to Gillendum, then? Is that where you went when you got out of the army?"

Roland seemed to find the question amusing. "It's not merely the place I went to!" he said, laughing. "No, lad. I helped build the place—I was one of the pioneers! Helped build it, then became a farmer. A lot of us old soldiers stayed out there and became farmers. I got into the slave business quickly though, I must say. They were good years, initially, but when things soured I moved to Romelia."

"Oh. Better prospects out that way?"

"Yeah," said Roland, pursing his lips. "Something like that. I'm thinking though, what with the invasion and everything, Gillendum might be about to boom again."

"You think so?"

"Sure. I mean, why not? What with the invasion and everything, it'll be the conduit for the coming slave boom. Might even become a major hub. I'd be willing to bet good money on it happening, lad. More northern provinces will spring up, and they'll need support and supplies, won't they? Money to be made,

Durnin! Money to be made. I kept my old house in Gillendum, you know, and good thing I did."

"Wow," said Goraric. Roland might actually be on to something. "You know, I hadn't really thought about that." He imagined Father Durnin's house in Gillendum and his possible future windfall, and felt sad because it wasn't real.

Roland reached for the nearest cup. "You know, Durnin, all this talk is making me thirsty. I promised you a drink, didn't I? So let's have at it then, eh?"

"All right," said Goraric, picking up his cup and taking a sip. Whatever it was, it burned his throat as he swallowed. He grimaced.

Roland laughed at his expression. "Romelian wine. An acquired taste is what this stuff is."

Goraric licked his lips. "It doesn't taste like any wine I've ever had before."

Roland peered into his cup. "I don't even know why they call it wine, to be honest. It's made of goat's milk."

"I see."

"How is it?"

"Like you said, it's an acquired taste."

Roland smiled. "I have to admit, it's a little early to be drinking, even for me, but a man must show his guests a little hospitality, eh?"

"And I think you're a fine host, Father Roland. Thank you."

"Mm," said Roland with a nod. "Well, I'm sure you didn't come here for wine and small talk, eh? Let's get down to business, then. What can I do for you, Father Durnin?"

"Well, I'll be honest with you," said Goraric, showing him the palms of his hands. "I don't deserve the 'Father' title. Not really. I'm just a small-time trader looking for something rather... specific."

Roland rubbed his chin. "Specific? Specific, how?"

"I'm looking for a *very* young girl."

"A *very* young girl?"

"Yes. Say, six or seven years old. Do you have any?"

"Well now," said Roland, thinking. "Let's see... I've got a Candran who's maybe seven years old. She's quite the looker, so of course I can't exactly let her go for cheap. I've got another couple who must be nine or thereabouts. Not near as pretty as the looker, I don't think, but sometimes Candrans surprise you down the track. They're all intact, too. And not too expensive. If you're looking to save even more money, though, I've got plenty of Kai Shang. All ages."

"They're all intact?"

Roland laughed. "What, the Shang? No, I don't think any of them are. And I'm not a man to say a thing is something when it's not, either. You have my word on that." He started to get up. "Come, see for yourself if you don't believe me! I'll show you. Here, let's go."

"No," said Goraric. "No, I trust you. It's just that I'm not looking for anything from the western provinces."

Roland relaxed. "All right then. Oh, and I do have a couple of Zann girls, too. They're a good bit older, but you don't see too many of them on the market these days. And they're not *that* old either. They're still young enough you wouldn't mind letting them warm your bed. Make perfect house slaves, they would. Ah, but they're not exactly intact, though. Let's see... what else have I got?"

Goraric put a hand on the table. "I'll be blunt. I'm looking for Ahren girls."

Roland gave him a puzzled look. "Ahren girls? Why?"

"Let's just say I have a customer who is very interested in getting his hands on one or two. Urgently."

"Why, what's the rush? In another month or two, there'll be more Ahren on the market than you can poke a stick at! And for cheap, too. Tell your customer to wait."

"Well," said Goraric with a shrug, "that's the thing. He doesn't want to wait. And he's a very good customer, so..."

Roland returned the shrug. "Well, unfortunately I don't have what you're looking for."

Goraric didn't try to hide his disappointment. "Do you know anyone here who might?"

Roland shook his head. "No. Can't say as I do."

"That's a shame."

"Sorry I can't help. You could go ask some of the other traders, though, just to make certain."

"I suppose I will..."

"Mind you," said Roland, shaking a finger at Goraric in a gesture of caution, "on the off-chance you do find one, don't you go paying more than you would for a Shang at current market prices."

"Will do."

"Speaking of, they're not going to be worth shit in another couple of months, either."

"Yeah, probably." Goraric could see how tens of thousands of Ahren captives flooding the slave market would affect prices.

Roland narrowed his eyes at him. "Your accent's an odd one, eh? I've been meaning to ask—are you Ahren or Sarasinian?"

Time for more bullshit. "Both. My father got me by a northern woman. I was born in Gillendum, but I mostly grew up in Herena."

That got Roland's interest. "Your father was a southerner, then?"

"Yeah."

"So you have citizenship?"

Goraric shook his head. "I'm not sure anymore, to be honest." That part at least was true.

"I have no idea what those idiots in the Assembly were thinking with that bullshit!" said Roland with a scowl. "I mean, they're trying to put down revolutions in one corner of the world, starting a full-blown war in another, and it's somehow also the perfect time to go about revoking citizenships?"

"A stupid move indeed." Though the man was a Sarasinian, Goraric was beginning to like Roland.

"Indeed. Well, no matter. Maybe they'll come to their senses, eh?"

Goraric shrugged. "A man can hope." Once he was over the Asfour, it wouldn't make a difference to him either way.

"Your Sarasinian is truly excellent, you know," said Roland. "You speak the Ahren tongue mostly though, right?"

"Mostly, yes."

Roland shifted in his seat. "Tell me true—was your mother a slave?"

"No."

"Well now, there's no shame in it if she was, you know. None at all."

Goraric looked at him. "Few would agree with you. In any case, she wasn't. Nor was she a whore if that's what you were thinking."

Roland shook his head. "I wasn't, lad. Nor would it matter to me if she had been. No man decides his parents, so why would anyone judge him for it? So, no matter. And I believe you, whatever you say."

"I couldn't agree more about the deciding-your-parents thing."

"Just to give you my take on it all," said Roland, "I nearly married one of my own slaves. She was a northerner as well."

"Really?"

"My oath. Rare one, too. I loved that woman."

"What happened to her?"

Roland's face fell. "Ah, well. She died."

"I'm sorry to hear it." Goraric stared down into his empty cup.

"Caught a fever and never recovered. It happened a long time ago, and I still miss her. Poor Stef."

"That was her name? Stef?"

"It was," said Roland with a wistful sigh. "Short for Steficala."

"A pretty name."

"Think so? Nah. Doesn't roll off the tongue easily, which was why I shortened it."

"I suppose."

"Ugly names, ugly people."

"Mm," said Goraric. Did the man realise he had just insulted him?

"I mean no offence, of course," said Roland. "And the funny thing is, you can't get better stock for cross breeding than Ahren. Look at how you turned out, for example." The man looked him up and down, gesturing at him in an appraising way. "Tall, big frame, broad shoulders, strong jaw—that's all Ahren. You got your grey eyes from your mother, too, of course. Surprising. Your nose is Sarasinian though, as well as your dark features."

"Mm." There was nothing Sarasinian about Goraric's nose or any other part of him. And... dark features? What did he mean by that, exactly? He wondered what would happen if he punched Roland full in the face. A part of him definitely felt like having a go.

Roland went on, seemingly oblivious to Goraric's mounting irritation. "Another funny thing is, every once in a while you find one so stunning she puts everyone else in the shade. I've heard tell Archon Riva has one like that."

"Does he? I have no idea."

"Indeed he does. Lucky bastard. She's an islander, they say. From Cired." Roland roared with laughter. "Stef was your typical forest kind. You know how you look twice at some girls because they're so pretty? Well, men used to give Stef a second glance because she had a face like a pig's arse. Body like a sack of turnips. No tits to speak of, either. None of that mattered to me, though. She had an adorable nature. You can overlook many a flaw in a woman if she's easy going. Counts for a lot, that does."

"I suppose." Goraric decided that Roland was a bit of weirdo.

"My oath, it's true. And what's more, she gave me the most beautiful little girl you ever saw. Died young. And Stef along with her. Ah, I was going to free her and make her my wife, I swear, but I guess fate had other ideas. A few years later, I married a right bitch instead. Southerner, thinks she's a fucking princess." He waved a hand. "But that's a whole other story."

Goraric looked at him. "Sounds like you loved your Steficala."

Roland sighed. "I did, lad. I did. Body and soul."

Goraric had wanted to sock Weirdo Roland in the nose just a moment ago, but now his heart went out to him. "I'm sorry you

lost her," he said quietly. He tried not to think about his dead brother, Lyglot. Or the girls in the forest. Or Kushran, even though she was still alive. But he would likely never see her again, so she was as good as dead.

Roland sighed again, then looked down at his cup. "Oh, I definitely need another drop. Come on, Durnin, how about it?"

"All right," said Goraric. "Why not?"

Goraric left Father Roland's tent far later than he intended to, but he couldn't say he regretted it. Roland was good company and generous to his guests. Boorish, too, but boorishly honest at least. His final verdict was that for a Sarasinian, the man wasn't so bad.

Roland predicted that he'd have no luck finding an Ahren girl of the sort he wanted, and unfortunately, he was right. Though Goraric spent the early evening wandering about the slaver pens, the sellers had nothing to offer. Finally he left, weary and torn between buying another sausage bun from Ennette and finding his bedroll. Tiredness won out.

He was still on the far side of the camp when he glimpsed a man standing beside a nondescript tent, beckoning to him. Goraric nodded in a casual way, but didn't slow his pace. Nearly everyone out here had something for sale, or was otherwise looking to part you from your money, so you could scarcely walk around without being harried.

"Hey," said the man. "Come 'ere." He spoke in Sarasinian.

Goraric put a hand to his own chest. "You talking to me?"

"Yeah. Come 'ere."

"Nah, I don't think so."

The man shrugged and came to him instead, halting close enough that he could count the freckles around his eyes. "I'll be blunt, eh?" he said quietly. "I know where you can find what you're looking for."

"Yeah?" Goraric looked the fellow over. A southerner, and judging by his sickly face and ragged clothing, he'd been living rough for some time. "And what might I be looking for, pray tell?"

"Your kin."

Goraric's heart nearly skipped a beat. Of all the things he'd expected to hear, that wasn't one of them. "What?"

"You heard me. I know where you can find 'em."

"My kin?" He did his best to feign indifference and hoped it didn't show. "I'm not really sure I know what you mean."

The man chuckled. "Oh no. I think you know."

Goraric rolled his eyes. "Oh, all right. Fine. Why don't you just go ahead and tell me where my kin are, then? Whatever that means."

"The information isn't free."

"I've no time for this," said Goraric, shaking his head and pushing past the man. "And now if you'll excuse me..."

"Hey," said the man, stepping in his way. "You think I'm pulling your leg? I do know where you can find 'em."

Goraric folded his arms. "My kin?"

"Yep."

"Maybe if you were a little bit more specific..."

The man sighed. "See here, it's two little girls you're looking for, isn't it? That specific enough for yer, friend?"

Goraric did his best not to lick his lips. He failed. If that wasn't confirmation of the rumours, what was? "So how much for your information?"

"How much," asked the man with a grin, "do you have?"

"How much," asked Goraric, not wanting to be the first to say a number, "do you want?"

The man shrugged as if going first was of no consequence whatsoever. "Two dremms."

"What? Two? That's a bit high, don't you think?"

"No," said the man, folding his arms. "Not for this. Not for them. Not for you."

"Two dremms, though? You've got to be kidding!"

"I'm not. The information's worth it and you know it."

Goraric sniffed. "I do, do I?"

"You do."

"Oh? And I should just take your word for it, should I? Tell you what, eh? You'll spill for one drem, and if it turns out you were

just stringing me along, I'll find you and kick you in the balls. How about that?"

The man shrugged. "My price is two dremms, no less. It's not even your money."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I guarantee you won't be disappointed."

"Yeah, I dunno..."

The man scowled. "Look, you can go ahead and drop the innocent act, friend. I know why you're here, and I'm offering to give you what you want. If you continue to bullshit me, though, I'll just walk."

Goraric laughed. "No, *you* look! I'll give you a drem for your information, but that's it."

"It has to be two dremms," said the man. "Two, and I'll tell you where the girls who were taken from Engund's Tor are. That's one drem for each of them. See? Still think I'm stringing you along, eh? A bunch of Sarasinian soldiers kidnapped them, isn't that right? And sold them to someone else, who sold them to someone else, who sold them to Leonf. Yeah? Now, how would I know all that if I wasn't legit, eh?"

"Well then," said Goraric, trying to keep a lid on his excitement. This was too specific not to be real. Right? "How about if—"

"No, Goraric," said the man, waving a finger uncomfortably close to his face. "No more haggling. You in or out?"

Goraric blinked at hearing his name. "Do I know you?"

"Seems kinda obvious you don't, eh?"

"How do you know who I am?"

"You think just because you got a haircut I wouldn't recognise you?"

Goraric took a deep breath. The man had seen through his disguise. Who was he, and how had he come to know so much? "How do I know I can trust you?"

"You don't."

"Why are you doing this?" asked Goraric, not sure what to do. Was this guy for real? He was almost too excited to think

properly. Bringing the missing girls back alive would surely redeem him in the eyes of the Torsmen. It might even help lessen the guilt he felt over the deaths of the others. "Why would you want to help me?"

The man looked him dead in the eyes. "Well," he said, "let's just say there are plenty of folks in this place with a grudge against Leonf. Maybe I'm one of them. Maybe I was working for him, but maybe he wasn't good to me. Maybe helping you and yours is a way of getting my own back."

Goraric nodded. That actually made sense. "If you're looking to change employers, you could always join us. My uncle can protect you."

"No offence, but no fuckin' thanks. Some men might have the stones for what your uncle's trying to do here, but I'm not one of them. I mean to get out of this camp. Tonight. Your two dremms will go a long way to seeing me out of here, and well out of Leonf's reach."

Goraric sighed, and after fishing through his purse he dropped the coins into the man's hand. "Fine," he said. "There, you win. Two dremms."

The man pocketed the money. "We both win. Now, you see that gaudy red and gold coloured tent down there?" He pointed. "The big stripy one?"

Goraric looked. "Yeah. Seen."

"It belongs to Leonf. The men who guard it are away for the moment, attending to other business. They'll be gone for a while yet, but they won't be gone all night. You hear me?"

"Yeah."

"Right. So, the girls are there. They're in a cage." He pressed something into Goraric's hands. "Here's the key to it."

"Wait," said Goraric, looking down at the key. "So, what, I should just go there? What am I supposed to-?"

But the man simply backed away, shrugged, and left.

17

BENE

THE UNIVERSITY OF GERICH ASSET RECOVERY TEAM

EASTERN RENDEROS

MUMOLO

It was near full dark when Khela finally awoke. She had lain in the corner of her tent for hours, unmoving except for the rise and fall of her chest beneath the blankets.

“Hey there,” said Bene. “Lie back down. No need to get up.”

“Ow,” said Khela, ignoring him. She sat up and rubbed her forehead. “My head hurts.”

“Lie back down, then. No need to get up.”

“No.”

“All right.” Who was Bene to argue? “As you like.”

“For a moment,” said Khela, still rubbing her head, “I didn’t have the foggiest idea where I was.”

“And now?”

"It was bliss, Bene. Pure bliss. I forgot about everything. I even forgot about the massacre on the road. I almost wish I hadn't woken up."

"I hate it when that happens."

Khela shook her head. "Don't trivialise it. I don't suppose you have any water, do you? Ugh! My mouth feels like a cat took a shit in it."

"Now there's a pretty picture." Bene handed her his canteen. "Here."

She swallowed a few mouthfuls. "Thanks. Is this my tent?"

"Yeah. I'll go back to mine if you want. You know, now that you're up?"

"No. No, it's all right. Stay."

"Are you sure?" asked Bene, unconvinced. Just talking to her felt weird. They hadn't had anything good to say to each other for ages. And he felt extra weird for having sat there for so long while she slept. He didn't want her to think he'd done it because he wanted to get into her pants or anything. Even though, deep down, he knew that was exactly why he'd done it.

"Stay. Please? I think I could do with your company, after... well, everything."

"All right." He held out his hand to take the canteen back, but either Khela didn't want to give it up or she couldn't see him in the darkness. "Do you want me to light a candle or something?"

"No, no," she said. "No need."

"All right."

"I don't mind the dark."

"You were out for a good long while." At one point he'd wondered if she might never open her eyes again.

"Yeah?"

"Oh yeah. It's been ages, Khel. Whatever they gave you, it was pretty potent."

"Fornt leaf tea." Khela shifted under her blankets.

"Really? That's what they gave you?" A particularly powerful infusion, that. One that was usually reserved for people with serious injuries.

"Where's Agbo?"

"Don't worry. She's all right." He paused. Might as well give her the truth. "Well, actually she collapsed from shock."

"Oh no! Is she all right?"

"She's fine, Khel. Really. Or at least she will be. Ghislaine's lot are taking good care of her."

"Yeah?"

"Don't worry. She's in good hands, you know it."

Khela seemed to relax a little. "Fine. Yeah, all right."

"How do you feel?"

"Ugh. Like death. My head's pounding. Mouth's dry as sand dunes."

"Well," said Bene, "they did say you'd probably have a bit of a hangover. I promised to keep an eye on you until you woke up. You know, Ghislaine didn't even ask me if I wanted a little of the fornt leaf myself. I don't know if I should be flattered or offended."

"You know it's the first one, Bene."

"Heh. Yeah, true."

"Her not asking is her way of acknowledging your 'tough man' status. Or at least it is, in your mind."

Bene laughed. "You've always been able to see right through me."

"So, you said I was out for a long time? How long, exactly?"

"Um, over a day."

"Shit!"

"I know, right?"

"Over a day? What a waste of time, Bene!"

"Oh, I dunno. You needed the rest, Khel. You were in a pretty bad way."

"You don't need to remind me. Oh Bene, all those people..."

Bene nodded, then was reminded again that she probably couldn't see him through the darkness. "Yeah. I know."

"Why? Why did we have to kill them? It was a bloodbath..."

"Shh. This isn't the time to discuss this, Khel. You're still woozy."

"Yeah, but—"

"Shh. Just relax."

"Don't tell me what to do!" spat Khela, smacking her pillow. "Think you could be any more patronising? I'll talk about whatever I want to talk about!"

"No." Bene's voice was hard. "I know where this is going, so don't start, Khel. All right? And whatever you do, don't you go saying anything to Roaoo."

"What? But—"

"No!"

"We butchered those people, Bene! Don't say otherwise!"

"Just stop, will you? We—"

"No, you can't just—"

"Enough!" cried Bene, far too loudly. "You still don't get it, do you? After everything we've been through, I can't believe you still don't fucking get it!"

"Bene, we bloody well *butchered* those people!"

"Not on purpose we didn't! It's not like we planned it! The simple fact is, they panicked. They stampeded when the wights showed up, and we did what was necessary to protect ourselves. We had absolutely no choice."

"No choice? It was a massacre, Bene! There's nothing you can say that could possibly justify what we did to those people. All those innocent people!"

"What did I just say, Khela? Enough! And I'm not trying to justify anything. They flipped out and we did what we had to, plain and simple. And we lost six people ourselves because of them. Six! Did you know that?"

Khela hesitated. "Really? Who?"

"A soldier, an apprentice blacksmith, two stablehands, and two kitchen girls. Six people we couldn't afford to lose, Khela. Dead. Gone."

"Oh no, that's terrible! Who were they?"

Bene frowned, remembering. "Traven was the soldier. Apprentice Abrey. The stablehands Birt and Frozie. Midri and

Thelsee from the chuckwagons. And we've got maybe two dozen people injured, some of them badly."

"Oh no."

"Those fucking Mumolonians could have ended us all had we not done what we did."

"Don't curse them, Bene."

"I'll say whatever I want about them!" He felt hot, angry. "They could've ended us! And then where would we be?"

"Well couldn't we have, I dunno, taken a different route around Mumolo or something? Maybe we provoked them somehow?"

"No," said Bene tiredly. "We couldn't have taken a different route around anywhere. And we didn't provoke anyone, so don't say that again. They got spooked by the wights, that's all. Shit, so just don't start. All right? I hate playing the 'what if' game with you all the damn time. What's the use? And if you dare suggest it was in any way our fault outside this tent, the soldiers will skin you alive. After what happened to Traven, they're on the warpath."

Khela tossed the canteen aside. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! I hate this expedition."

Bene scrambled over and took her hand in his. "Yeah, I know you do. Truth be told, I'm not exactly having a ball either. But let me make one thing clear about what happened: it was them or us. All right? We didn't set out to kill those people, but they're dead. And we can't second guess everything all the time, either. We have a job to do, remember? We have to stop *her*, and we have to recover that object. Regardless of the cost, Khel. You know that. There's no one else to do it. And we're not the bad guys, either, even though maybe sometimes it looks that way."

"I'm not sure I agree," said Khela, sniffing, "but I just don't have it in me to keep fighting you. I really don't. My head's hurting too much, so let's just leave off."

"All right."

Khela sighed. "How is it that you seem to cope with everything so much better than I do?"

"Oh, I wouldn't go so far as to say that."

"I would."

"No, Khela."

"No, really, Bene. It always seems like—"

Bene snorted. "Look Khel, forget what it *seems* like. If you want me to be completely honest with you, most of the time I'm just trying to make it look like I'm not totally useless in front of Roaoo and the soldiers. Especially the soldiers. They all stand head and shoulders over me. And I weigh maybe half what they do. They make me feel so small, so useless..."

"So what? Size isn't everything, Bene. Roaoo made you his right-hand man for reasons other than how big you are."

"Yeah, but most of the Scouts are giants! In fact, I don't think I've ever felt so puny and inadequate my entire life." He found his canteen and took a swig. "And I'd probably have been ripped in half today if not for them."

"You're not puny. You're... bigger than puny."

"Um, thanks Khel."

"You know what I meant."

"Eh, not really." He patted his paunch. "I have to say, though, my gut's kinda getting there. I don't know whether I qualify as a fat skinny man or a skinny fat one. Can you be both?"

Khela pulled him into an embrace. "You look fine. And regardless of anything, I'm glad you weren't hurt."

He held her tightly. "So am I."

She laughed. "And just in case I don't get the chance again, I wanted to say thank you for today. I'd probably have been ripped in half if not for *you*. And I'm sorry about the last few weeks, too. You know, for some of the mean things I said to you?"

"Nah," said Bene, letting go of her. "Don't worry about it. I said some pretty mean things to you, too."

"So you forgive me?"

"Of course I do. Do you forgive me?"

"Of course."

"Well, great."

Khela rubbed the back of his hand. "And do you remember that time when you were saying this expedition might be a sham? I'm sorry I dismissed you out of hand. I shouldn't have done that. I should have been more open-minded about it, and listened, but I guess it's just that at the time I was—"

"Nah," said Bene, shaking his head. "Nah, look, just forget about all that. I was talking out of my arse that night. No idea what I was even saying. I don't really think that about the expedition. At all."

"Oh. Well, that's good. I guess?"

"Yeah. No, really Khel, just forget about all that stuff. Not important."

"All right, if that's what you want... So, what now?"

"What now what?"

"I mean," asked Khela with a shrug, "where do we go from here?"

"You mean you and me? Well I guess we could, uh, kiss for a bit if you want. Then, you know, take it from there? See what happens?"

Khela laughed. "Stop it. I don't want to laugh right now."

"Sorry," said Bene with a chuckle. "I know what you meant. You meant the expedition, right?"

"You know I did."

"Well," said Bene slowly, "as of this moment we're camped right outside Mumolo. On a hill. The place is absolutely teeming with wights. Er, Mumolo, I mean. Not the hill."

"Really?"

"If I told you how many there were, you wouldn't believe me. You just wait until you see for yourself—there's gotta be thousands of them, Khel! They're clustered in the town, mostly, but we've been catching some strays now and then."

"Thousands? Of wights?"

"Yeah! I mean, it's not like anyone's been counting them or anything, but yeah. Khel, it's absolutely swarming down there."

"Oh. Oh no, that's horrible."

"Yep. The scale of it is something else. Oh yeah, and the town's on fire, too."

Khela gasped. "On fire?"

"Oh yeah. Big plume of smoke went up this afternoon. Could've been an accident, could've been deliberate. We don't know for sure yet."

"What's Roaoo's plan, then?" asked Khela.

"Well," said Bene. "He and Tonneson and I were talking about sending a team of soldiers in to have a look around. It was supposed to happen this afternoon, but the weather took a turn for the worse, so they'll probably go in first thing tomorrow. Well, that's if the weather comes good, I guess."

"And if Mumolo hasn't burned to the ground by then."

"Let's hope *that* doesn't happen. Anyway, we can't exactly hang around much longer in any event. Tonneson's worried about repercussions from the locals because of what happened on the road. There's a lot of ill feeling towards us, and vice versa. Roaoo's more worried about *her*, though. About the trail going cold."

"Hm."

"Oh, yeah," said Bene, almost forgetting. "Apparently, we had an agent in Mumolo. Did you know anything about that?"

"No." Khela seemed surprised by the question. "How would I?"

"Dunno. It was news to me as well, and I can't say I liked finding out about it second-hand. It was someone by the name of Leander. I wonder if he made it out in time."

"I hope so."

"Yeah, me too. He'd able to fill in a lot of blanks for us."

Khela sighed. "So I guess that's it for Mumolo, then? Another town wiped off the map?"

"Yeah," said Bene. "Totally fucked. Like nothing we've ever seen."

"Poor Agbo. I can still hear her screams in my head."

Bene patted Khela's hand. "She'll be fine. Besides, her family might still be alive. They weren't in Mumolo itself, so you never know."

"I really hope they're all right."

"Oh, that reminds me! Shit—I nearly forgot to tell you!"

"What?" said Khela, startled. "What is it?"

"About what happened this afternoon! Little Dony got bitten by a wight!"

"What?"

"I know. Can you believe it?"

"Whoa, whoa! How? What happened?"

"Well, all right." Bene giggled. "I'll tell you. But let me preface this by saying I didn't witness the attack first hand."

"All right?"

"All right. Here goes. So, it all started at lunch time. I'm in the line outside the chuckwagons with everyone else, right?"

"Hm?"

Bene took a breath. "It's lamb soup, and I'm really looking forward to it. And I mean *reeeeaaally*. I don't care about the black mood hanging over the entire place. I mean, I do but I don't. You know? Because the smell of meat is driving me absolutely insane. I've been dreaming about it for days, so I'm practically drooling in anticipation. Anyway, suddenly Dony appears out of nowhere. He comes running up with his pants around his ankles, screaming for help."

"Hang on, which one's Dony again?"

"You know Dony, Khel. He works in the stables. He's the one with the ridiculous hair you always say looks like a girl's."

"All right. Go on..."

"Anyway, he's crying and crying. Bleeding from a cut on his head, too, and going absolutely bonkers. Everyone's asking him what's wrong, but he's incoherent. But then finally he blurts out something about wights."

"Of course, at that point the soldiers dive on him. They get him pinned down, but Dony's not having any of it. He's wailing and crying harder than ever. They're trying to get him to talk, but they can't get anything out of him. Then he lets slip something about being bitten."

Khela gulped. "Oh, no! He hasn't turned, has he?"

"I'll get to that," said Bene. "So anyway, they've got him pinned down. The poor little guy's kicking and fighting like you wouldn't believe. I try to help, but Dony won't talk to me. He's practically foaming at the mouth. Everyone's worried he might be turning. There's talk of cutting his throat."

"Oh, no! Poor Dony. They didn't, did they?"

"Don't worry, they didn't." Bene gave Khela's hand a gentle squeeze. "But now here's the thing—at the time, I honestly thought that because he came running out with his pants down, it meant he must have been bitten... well, you know, below the belt? But no, he seems to be all there."

"So what happened next?"

"Yeah, well, the soldiers soon have the poor little bastard trussed up like a pig. He's yelling out, 'I don't wanna be a wight! I don't wanna be a wiiiight!' at the top of his lungs. So they gag him."

"Someone goes and gets Roaoo, and of course Roaoo starts firing off questions left and right. He keeps referring to Dony as *Tony*, and for some reason, my brain decides it's the funniest thing I've ever heard. I'm having a hard time trying not to lose my shit. Also, Dony's flopping around like a fish and I can't help but notice he's wet himself and there's dirt collecting on the tip of his little todger. Ha, ha!"

"Wow. That's horrible."

"Yeah. I'm kind of amazed all the noise didn't wake you, actually."

Khela nudged Bene's knee. "So, come on! What happened next?"

"All right, so Roaoo sends for Ghislaine. She arrives and she's as calm as always. Roaoo and the soldiers fill her in on what's going on, and she starts examining Dony. Sure enough, there's a bite mark on Dony's head just above his hairline."

"Oh no."

"Yep. And Ghislaine's pretty sure it's a human bite, too. She wants to take Dony's gag off, though Roaoo warns her against it. She's adamant, and he finally relents. So, Ghislaine gets down on

the ground with Dony and starts talking to him in that soft voice of hers. Don't know what she said, but Dony's nodding. And get this—he doesn't scream once the gag is off. He's still crying, but he starts telling her exactly what happened. I lean in so I can hear him, and..."

"What did he say?"

"He says a wight tried to bite his head off."

"Wow. And?"

"He also says something about getting *wight juice* in his mouth."

"Wight juice? What's that?"

"Yeah, Khel, I dunno either. All he said was he got it in his mouth."

"Could he have meant blood, do you think?"

"Maybe." Bene pondered the possibilities. "Or maybe he was talking about the fluid under their skin. You know those big blisters they get before they really start to rot? But I dunno, can't be sure."

"Huh," said Khela, thinking. "And this all happened today?"

"Yeah. Today at lunch time."

"All right. So, go on. What happened next?"

"Right," said Bene, taking another deep breath. "So anyway, Ghislaine's there comforting Dony, and when she's done, she and Roaoo start having this big discussion. In front of everyone, I mean. Ghislaine is all, 'I'm not going to let you put him down, Roaoo,' and Roaoo is all, 'I don't even know where you would get the idea that I would do such a thing, Ghislaine.' It was... weird."

"Wait a moment, Bene. You're saying that Ghislaine thought Roaoo wanted to put Dony down? What, as in, kill him?"

"Yeah. Apparently."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe to spare him the agony of turning, or something? Or to protect us. Or both."

"Go on."

"Right," said Bene. "Well, after that, Ghislaine announces she's taking Dony into her care. She's insistent. Roaoo's in full

agreement. For some reason Ghislaine seems very surprised by this. It was almost as if she was expecting him to fight her over it, or something. He doesn't, though. He says she can take him, but only if there are two soldiers guarding him at all times. Ghislaine says she's fine with that. There's a bit more discussion, and then Roaoo has the soldiers pick Dony up and take him away."

"And so what happened?" Khela was obviously concerned about the boy's fate. "Is Dony all right?"

"As far as I know, he's just fine. Last time I checked, the soldiers were taking bets on how quickly he's gonna turn. But he hasn't so far. Roaoo thinks he won't, which was partly why he let Ghislaine take him in the first place."

"He thinks he *won't*?" Khela obviously had doubts about that. "Why?"

"Because we don't think wights are contagious."

"*What?* That's insane! Of course they are!"

"How do you know?"

"How could they not be, Bene? We've always assumed they are."

"Yeah. And?"

"Well... aren't they?"

"That's the thing, Khel. We've never known for certain. We just assumed they were."

"And because they are. I mean—"

"No," said Bene, cutting her off. "We don't have proof of that, actually."

"Don't you think that's taking a pretty big risk?"

"With Dony? Not really. Look, Khel, the boy isn't going anywhere. He's in chains, so even if he does turn, it's not like he can do any damage. And while Ghislaine's the most compassionate soul you'll ever meet, even she isn't going to risk him wiping us out. And if he doesn't turn, well, that kinda tells us another thing about wights and the object, doesn't it? But we're pretty sure he won't."

"I guess. It still sounds like a huge risk, though."

"No, not really. The object has a limited area of effect—that much we know for sure. If you're unlucky enough to get caught in its field, you get wighted. But if not, you don't. And we've never seen anything to indicate contagion otherwise."

"Wighted?"

"Yeah. I came up with it a while back. Like it?"

"No offence, Bene. But no."

"Yeah." He sighed. "I don't think it's going to catch on either, unfortunately. Anyway, our current theory is that although *she's* turning people into wights, they don't go on to beget more of themselves by attacking others. Beyond the initial infection, there's no spread of sickness. And when you think about it, it actually makes sense."

"Yeah," said Khela, clearly very reticent about buying into this new theory. "I really dunno about that."

"No, really. I mean, if wights are contagious, then why are we still alive?" He didn't wait for her to answer. "Because they're not. Think back to the first few days, Khel, back to when it all started. Any contagion would have wiped out the entire campus. Not only that, it would have spread across the whole of Gerich like a wave. And from there, across the world. But it didn't. Why not? The logical answer is because it doesn't work that way. There's no contagion beyond the initial infection."

"Maybe there was contagion but it didn't take hold until after we left?"

"Come on, Khel," said Bene, shaking his head. "We're still getting letters from the university and everything. The place is obviously still standing."

Khela sat there, digesting his words. From somewhere outside came a sudden cry of alarm and the snapping of crossbows. And then silence. "What was that?"

"Eh, probably just the soldiers shooting a wight," said Bene, standing up. "Anyway, I should let you get back to sleep, huh? Well, see you tomorrow!"

Khela grabbed his arm before he could leave. "What? Shit, Bene! You'd better be joking..."

Bene laughed and sat down again. "Of course I am."

"Good. There's no way I could get back to sleep now." She paused. "The wights... they can't get in here, can they?"

"We're in camp. No way can they get in here."

"Then what did we just hear?"

"Um, most likely a wight *not getting in*? I told you we were catching strays up here, didn't I?"

"Bene!"

"What?"

"Aren't you forgetting about Dony?"

"Pfft," said Bene. "Dony was being a dipshit. He wandered out of bounds while gathering firewood, or something."

"What happened to the wight, anyway?"

"They shot it. Hey, are you hungry? Wanna go get something to eat?"

"Ugh, no. Are you kidding? You've killed off any appetite I had, boy."

Bene produced a small bundle from one of his pockets. "Oh, really? So you're not even hungry... for this?"

"What's that?" asked Khela, peering at him in the dark. "That's not your liquorice, is it?"

Bene unwrapped the bundle. "You know it, baby. I've only got a few bits left. Of course, since you're not hungry I guess I'll just have to eat it all myself."

Khela thrust out a hand. "Bullshit you will. Give it!"

"Are you sure?"

"Don't toy with me. Now."

"As Your Highness commands," said Bene, laughing. He handed her the largest piece.

Khela popped the liquorice into her mouth. "How do you still have any left? I thought you'd run out weeks ago."

"I was saving the last of it for a rainy day." He took a piece and chewed it slowly. "It's not raining, but now's as good a time as any. How is it?"

"Mmm. You know I love liquorice."

"I don't understand why they call it *eating liquorice* though. There really can't have been that much confusion over what to do with it, could there? I mean, were people shoving it up their arses in such numbers that the makers felt the need to specify what it was really for?"

"If I hadn't heard your anal liquorice joke a hundred times already," said Khela, "I'd probably find it funny."

"Well, I think it's a fair question. I mean, don't you?"

Khela stopped chewing. "Um, not really. You're a very odd person, Bene. You do know this, don't you?"

"Of course. Oh, yeah, and I shared some with Agbo yesterday, by the way. She liked it, I think. But then I did the anal liquorice bit and she spat it out. Heh. Gave me disgusted looks for the rest of the day, too."

Khela laughed, and a stream of black juice dribbled down her chin. She wiped it off with the back of her hand. "Didn't get it, huh?"

"Nope. Whooosh. Waaaay over her head."

"Oh, you're terrible."

Bene grinned, then handed her what was left of his bundle. "Yeah, I know. I don't know how I live with myself."

ROSARIUS**SARASINIA****THE BASTION**

Another boring history class. His interest in old buildings aside, Rosarius had never particularly enjoyed the subject. It was just a bunch of dusty facts, names and dates for which he had no practical use. To be fair, though, at least Dannis and Tavaris weren't teaching history. So, it had that going for it. The pair had inserted themselves more or less everywhere else in the Bastion, and they were doing their best to gut the curriculum exactly as they said they would. It was causing tension on campus; students were in uproar. He looked forward to the day when tempers flared and *they* were history.

Lecturer Haron stood at the blackboard. "What is today's topic? Can anyone remember?" He looked pleased when several hands went up. "All right," he said, choosing one. "Enlighten us please, Gyllo."

"The Jalut priesthood," said Gyllo.

"Yes," said Haron. "Very good. Although I wonder if you could be more specific?"

"The Jalut priesthood as it relates to name magic."

"Excellent!" said Haron, stroking his wispy beard. "Name magic. Now I trust you all did the required reading for today? I'm going to assume as much, anyway. So then, who can tell something about the origins of so-called *name magic*?"

This time no hands went up. Rosarius watched as Beccera leaned forward in his seat.

Haron's brow creased in anticipation. "Yes, Bec—" he began, but instead of answering his question, Beccera reached over his desk and flicked Gyllo's ear.

"Ow!" squealed Gyllo. "Fuck off!"

"Oh dear," said Haron, looking down his nose at Beccera. "I'll have no more of that, thank you. Can anyone answer the question?"

"What question?" asked Tacius.

Haron straightened. "Can anyone tell me something about the origins of so-called *name magic*?"

"Magic?" asked Beccera.

"Yes, Beccera. Magic. Name magic, specifically. I'm growing weary of saying it. What say I give you all a little time to collect your thoughts?"

Haron began pacing with his head bowed, and Rosarius counted his steps. "No one?" said the teacher, sounding disappointed. "Did we not go over the foundation material just last week? And have none of you done the required reading for this lesson?"

No one spoke.

Haron sighed a heavy sigh. "Very well. It has to do with names, obviously. The Jalut priesthood became rather fixated on nomenclature, if you remember. Why?"

Amid a sea of blank faces and still bodies, a single hand went up.

"Good," said Haron. "That's better. Julian?"

"They thought everything had a True Name," said Julian.

"Well done!" said Haron. "That's exactly right. According to their teaching, everything had a True Name. Animals, plants, rocks. The sea, the mountains, the sky. Everything. And what did they believe you could do if you possessed the knowledge of a thing's True Name?"

"Achieve mastery over it."

"True enough, however they didn't believe that to start with. The idea did come along a bit later of course. But no, in the beginning—"

"It was all bullshit, though," said Helder.

Haron fixed him with a stare. "Bullshit? I don't recall that particular word appearing in the lectures or the readings at all. Unless I'm mistaken?"

The class laughed, and Helder flushed with embarrassment. "Um, well, I was maybe reading between the lines a bit, sir."

"More than a bit, I think," said Haron, claspings his hands behind his back. "But what about it do you think was bullshit, exactly?"

"True Names aren't real, sir. The idea is ridiculous."

"Oh? Do you mean to say you don't think names have power?"

"Um..." Rosarius could see that Helder clearly didn't know how to answer.

Haron looked at the front row. "Beccera, what do you say about that?"

"I dunno," said Beccera.

"Really?" said Haron, grimacing. "You don't know? So it doesn't mean anything when your father signs his name to a document about, say, the purchase of a house or a horse or a slave?"

"Huh?"

"Your father," said Haron slowly, "has a name, does he not?"

Beccera looked confused. "Of course he does."

"And so when he signs his name to a document, he is exerting his power—true or false?"

"Yeah," said Beccera, nodding, "that's true, I guess. But so what?"

"No," said Haron, punctuating the air with a finger. "You cannot dismiss it so easily. And this is but one everyday example of how we understand and communicate our realities through names. Make no mistake about it—they have great power."

Beccera shrugged. "All right."

"You can read and write, Beccera, can you not?"

"Of course."

"Of course!" shouted Haron. "Of course you can. You've learned how to use a pen and ink, haven't you? You're privileged, and so naturally you take it for granted. You think nothing of it! The vast majority of the world's people, however, are utterly illiterate."

"Back when the world was young, when practically no one could read or write, writing was seen as something truly extraordinary. In fact, people believed it was a gift of divine origin, sent by the Creators. And therefore inherently *magical*. And they thought this especially true of names."

Beccera shrugged. "Mhm."

"That's all you have to say?" said Haron, appalled. "Mhm?" Seeing how Beccera had nothing further to add, he addressed the class as a whole. "The Jalut were arguably the first to come up with the theory behind *name magic*. They were still living in the north at the time. Neighbours, of course, to the Ahren."

Romelo, on the other side of the classroom, coughed loudly. Rosarius checked to make sure his town blade was loose in its scabbard.

"Yes, Romelo?" said Haron, turning to look at him. "Do you have something to say about it?"

"They're my favourite barbarians," said Romelo, grinning like a fool.

Riva, sitting on a bench not far from Rosarius, didn't say anything. The comment drew snide laughter from other parts of the room, however. Rosarius felt his anger stirring.

"Student Romelo," said Haron. "Speak plainly by all means, but can I ask you to keep it civil?"

Romelo folded his arms. "Fine."

“Good,” said Haron, nodding. “Right. So, back to the topic at hand, eh? Now, as far as the ‘when’ is concerned, we are of course talking about a rather specific period of time. Can you remember what we call the era in which the concept of Jalut name magic first emerged?”

“The Black Age,” said Romelo.

“Very good. That’s right. The Black Age began some five hundred years ago, and name magic emerged around the same time. Over the course of two centuries or so, the Jalut propagated religious schools throughout the north, each one dedicated to the discovery of True Names. It was a time of reading, of enlightenment, and very rightly regarded as a quest for knowledge unrivalled in history. These schools were extremely popular. The trend—for want of a better word—spread throughout the world. There were even schools of magic in Sarasinia. Here in the capital, would you believe?”

“No,” said Romelo.

Haron looked at him. “Well I can assure you it’s true, Romelo.”

Romelo’s lips formed a sneer. “It is *not*.”

“Excuse me? As a matter of fact, the Bastion itself was at one time host to what became a particularly infamous school of magic.”

Romelo shook his head. “What a load of horse shit.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said, it’s horse shit.”

“No, this is a fact of history. You can’t just deny something because you—”

“No!” shouted Romelo, thumping his desk with a fist. “It’s fucking horse shit!”

“What is it you find so objectionable?”

“Ahren name bullshit? Here in Sarasinia? No. I don’t fucking think so, Haron. I call bullshit.”

“Romelo,” said Haron, his voice cracking, “let’s not... let’s not make a scene. Not again. Please?”

“If I say it’s fucking horse shit,” said Romelo, thrusting an arm in the air, “then it’s horse shit. Who else here thinks what Haron’s

saying is horse shit? Let's have a show of hands." He threw glares around the room, daring people to refuse him. Beccera immediately raised his arm and prompted others to do so. Several more went up, albeit reluctantly.

Rosarius shook his head. "Put your arms down, the lot of you." To Romelo he said, "Have some respect, cousin."

Haron took a deep breath and clasped his hands in front of him. "Come now, Romelo. Be reasonable. I mean, first of all it was Jalut name magic and not Ahren. Second, this is not really the time for—"

Morie, who had to be the tiniest and least outspoken senior Rosarius had ever met, suddenly leaped to his feet. "The only thing that's horse shit is you, Romelo!" he shouted. "You fuckin' pants pisser!"

A shocked stillness descended on the room. No one moved, not even to breathe. Finally, Romelo got up and pushed his desk aside, his hands balled into fists. "How dare you, Morie, you little fucking cunt!" he screeched. "You are so fucked!"

Haron shrank away. "Oh no. You can't... I mean, I won't stand for any..."

But Romelo wasn't listening. He bore down on Morie, his face a mask of rage. The little man let out a squeal.

"You little shit!" shouted Romelo, grabbing a big handful of his hair. "How dare you!"

"Fuck," hissed Morie between clenched teeth, "you!"

The pair tussled, but Romelo had the advantage of size. He manoeuvred Morie into a headlock and started pummeling his face with his free hand. "Little cunt!"

"Pants pisser!" screamed Morie, blood streaming from a cut above his right eye.

"I reckon that's enough, cousin," said Rosarius, standing up.

Romelo let go of Morie and shoved him out of the way. "Come on then, cunt," he said. "Come on!"

Rosarius crossed the room, feigned a jab and took Romelo's legs out from underneath him with a sweeping kick. Romelo hit the ground, winded.

Beccera and others were suddenly on their feet. "Get him!" shouted Beccera.

Rosarius booted Romelo in the side of the head and backed off, not so much because he was scared of Beccera or his friends, but more because he didn't want his cousin reaching upward and grabbing him by the balls. He showed them his fists. "Yeah? Come on, then! I'll be happy to kick all your fuckin' teeth in!"

Beccera licked his lips. He looked at Romelo lying on the floor gasping for breath.

"You all right, Morie?" asked Rosarius, not taking his eyes off Beccera.

"Yeah." Morie smoothed down his hair and wiped blood out of his eyes. "I'm all right." He stood beside Rosarius with his fists raised and a determined look on his face.

"You're fucked," said Beccera. "You're so fucked."

"Am I?" said Rosarius. "Take another step and let's see if you're right."

Beccera's hand went to the town blade on his hip.

"I've got one of those as well," said Rosarius. "Draw it, and I swear they'll send you home in a fucking box."

Beccera licked his lips and edged away. His friends didn't look keen to fight, either.

"Cowards," said Rosarius. He picked up his cousin as if he were a bag of turnips and practically tossed him onto the nearest chair.

"I'm going to..." said Romelo, still struggling for air, "going to get... you..."

"It's one thing to say it," said Rosarius. "And another to do it." Then he drew back his arm and slapped him hard across the face. Romelo yelped and curled into a ball.

"Motherfucker!" shouted Beccera. "You'll pay for that!"

Rosarius sneered. "Let's go, bitch."

Beccera pounced, punching wildly. Rosarius ducked his blows and elbowed him in the jaw. He went down hard, and when he got up again, he was glassy-eyed and gazing around the room as if he'd never seen it before.

"That was for Benton," said Rosarius. "You cowardly piece of shit. Or did you think I'd forgotten how you stabbed him in the back? I should fucking kill you."

Beccera mumbled something unintelligible and left the class with one hand pressed to his mouth. His friends followed and started bickering amongst themselves even before they reached the door.

Morie clapped Rosarius on the shoulder. "Thanks for having my back. I won't forget it."

"No problem," said Rosarius.

Riva was laughing so hard he was almost in tears. Rosarius threw him a lopsided grin. "Did you enjoy that, you barbarian bastard?"

"I did, brother," said Riva, wiping his eyes. "Thank you."

Rosarius turned to Master Haron. "Sir, I apologise for the disturbance. I'll take my punishment along with anyone else who disturbed your class this morning."

"Ah," said Haron, blinking. "Well I don't think it's, uhm, an issue that need go any further. Not if everyone agrees it's finished."

Rosarius glanced at Romelo who nodded once and then looked away, pouting. It was a wonder he hadn't left with the others.

Haron pursed his lips. "Uh, anyway, so where were we? His eyes went to the blackboard where he had earlier scrawled the word 'Jalut' across it in chalk. "Oh yes, of course. Name magic."

Morie, his face still shining with blood, put up a hand. Haron nodded at him. "Was the Bastion really once a school of Ahren naming magic?"

"No," said Haron. "As I've already said, name magic originated with the *Jalut*, not the Ahren."

"I thought," said Helder, "that you told us it spread amongst the Ahren, though?"

"I did say that and it's true, but only to an extent. You see, it was the Jalut priestly caste who first came up with the notion of name magic. It formed the core of their mysteries. Others borrowed from them, incorporating their methods into their own

religions. Thus, in one form or another it spread around the globe.”

“So it wasn’t Ahren?”

“I thought I just made the fact abundantly clear,” said Haron, annoyed. “In essence, name magic was simply a new way for man to make sense of his world. A quest for knowledge, if you will. As far as we modern folk are concerned, there was nothing particularly magical about it. The written aspect of it transformed life as we know it, but the magical aspect was relatively short-lived. Does anyone remember why?”

“Because it was horse shit?” muttered someone.

“That,” said Haron, his eyes darting to Romelo, “is a matter of perspective. It’s easy to look back on things that people did in the past and, in the light of all the knowledge we’ve gleaned over the intervening centuries, judge them less than favourably. But you simply cannot do such a thing. You cannot judge the past by the standards of today. You cannot pretend they knew what we do. The words *unenlightened* and *backward* come up repeatedly in the readings, and I take issue with that. I don’t think these terms are very helpful. They’re opinions, not facts.

“But anyway, we digress. Jalut name magic was ultimately consigned to the garbage pile of history, no one can deny it. But I’m more interested in the events leading up to its demise.”

“You mean when the Ahren up and killed the Jalut in their holy war?” asked Julan.

“When the Ahren up and killed the Jalut in their holy war?” said Haron, practically spluttering with laughter. “Dear me, no! Come on, people! Try to recall the lecture! The readings? Riva, can you add anything to our discussion?”

“The Jalut tried to take over the leadership of certain Ahren clans, I think,” said Riva, “and triggered a holy war.”

Haron held up a finger. “Ah, now that’s closer to the truth, I think, but it’s still not accurate. Remember how the Jalut priesthood postulated that everything had a True Name? They believed that if you could discover the True Name of a thing, you lifted the fog of mystery surrounding it, and came to truly *know*

it. I don't think it's easy to capture in words exactly what it meant to them, and no, the irony of this is not lost on me! Suffice to say it would have been a very profound, spiritual religious experience...

"Over the course of time, however, the religion began to change. It evolved to the point where the Jalut priesthood began to speak of domination over the things they had found names for. Imagine, if you will, achieving complete mastery over the physical world, all via the manipulation of names! And I'm talking complete mastery over everything... mastery over the rocks, the trees, even the wind."

"What about people?" asked Gyllo.

"Yes," said Haron. "Even people. They sought mastery over *literally everything*."

"But how?" asked Helder. "How did it work?"

"The 'how' was through very specific rituals known only to the priesthood."

"But did it actually work?" asked Helder.

"What do you think?"

"I think not."

Haron smiled. "I have my doubts about it as well. You mustn't forget, though, that the Jalut priests were also rulers. Rulers have a tendency to use any and all means at their disposal to remain in power. In a population where only they could read and write, name magic was an extremely powerful tool for maintaining social order. These men were revered-feared, even-and most certainly above being questioned by ordinary folk. Anyway, what happened next?"

"The Jalut tried to find out the True Name of the Ahren and thus control them," said Rosarius.

"A myth," said Haron. He looked at Riva. "But a pervasive one. The Ahren, then and now, are more a loose federation of peoples than an actual race. We refer to them as 'the Ahren' out of convenience. Or laziness, I suppose. Or ignorance. That being the case, how could they have had a True Name? Think about it. They couldn't have, could they? And the Jalut priesthood would have

been well aware of this fact, too, of course. So no, contrary to what has been written by historians with overly fertile imaginations, they did not try to work spells on the Ahren."

"So what actually happened then?" asked Julian. "There was a war, wasn't there?"

"There was indeed a war," said Haron. "Remember, the Jalut religion taught that it was the Creators' utterance of its True Name that produced the Empyrean and everything in it. This was hardly a new idea, though, since older faiths also held this to be true. I can't stress enough how, at least in the beginning, the search for True Names was never about control. It was merely an attempt to make sense of the world. Or I should say *worlds*, because we must include the spiritual realm as well as the physical. It was but another avenue in the enduring search for truth.

"But anyway, then the Jalut religion began to evolve. The notion of control and exploitation, via True Names, eventually became the heart of religious theory and practice. The high priests seized upon the idea that if they could uncover the True Names of the Creators, they could bring Them to heel and They would be forced to serve man. Or the Jalut priesthood, at any rate."

"And *that* was when the Ahren slaughtered them?" asked Julian.

"No," said Haron. "No, no. Did anyone actually do the readings? Riva? What happened next?"

Riva shrugged. "The war?"

"Yes. But why?"

"I don't know. I was never a very good student of history, sir."

"Not even your own?"

"Not even my own. All I know is there was a war."

Haron grimaced. "There was a war, it's true. But it didn't happen just like that. It makes more sense when you also consider the low-level tension that had long existed between the Jalut and the Ahren. The Jalut are more accurately called the *Lugen*. They came not from the north originally but from the

south, from ancient Zann. They were pushed out by other tribes and came to live alongside the Ahren in the Red Age. But they were never Ahren. They possessed an altogether different faith, different culture, different language, different appearance. An altogether dissimilar people, and make no mistake. They were tolerated by their new neighbours, but only barely. There was practically no intermarriage. Of course, we southerners tend to ignore this, and even today most people here consider these two peoples one and the same. But if you truly want to annoy an Ahren clansman, go ahead and call him Jalut. Is that not right, Riva?"

"More than annoy him," said Riva. "He'll kill you for it."

"For centuries," said Haron, "the Jalut co-existed more or less peacefully with their Ahren neighbours. However, when the priesthood began to promulgate the notion that the Creators could be bound and forced to serve humanity, the Ahren did not like it. In fact, they considered it the very worst sort of blasphemy.

"It didn't help that a couple of decades prior, Jalut merchants had begun to dominate trade in Ahren lands. There was much resentment at how prosperous and self-serving this alien people was becoming, and the Jalut 'heresy' gave Ahren chiefs the perfect opportunity to take up arms against them. For the first—and last—time in history, the Ahren united under their own banner and marched to war.

"Now the Jalut were no great fighters, but they had much in terms of resources. They spent vast sums of money on mercenaries, and also on bribing enemy commanders. They were skilled propagandists, too, and exploited rifts between certain tribal factions. One of the most surprising events occurred when a fifth column of Ahren heretics sprang up, but that is a topic for another day.

"War raged for years, but ultimately the Jalut were defeated. The entire priestly caste was put to the sword and their sacred texts reduced to ashes. The populace was largely spared, but religion and trade continued to be a source of problems for many

years. Finally, the Ahren chiefs ran out of patience and annihilated much of the Jalut population. The remnants were driven from the northern reaches. Forever."

"You *can* find them in Herena, though" said Riva. "Thanks to Sarasinian occupation."

"Why do people still hate them?" Gyllo asked Haron.

"Well, I don't know," said Haron. "Do you hate them?"

"I dunno. Never really thought about it. No?"

"You're in the minority," said Riva. "My ancestors were right to exterminate them. Jalut are nothing but trouble. I mean, you've got Jalut banking clans practically running half your provinces—the same bullshit that got them killed up north!" There were scattered murmurs of agreement around the class.

"Master Haron?" asked Helder.

"Yes?"

"Sir, you were saying something before about how the Bastion had its own school of magic?"

Rosarius looked at Romelo. The man sat awkwardly in his seat, hunched over his hurts, but he had an almost thoughtful look on his face.

"Yes," said Haron, "I did. It was called the Cult of Sarasin. Or at least that was the name later historians attached to it. We're not entirely sure what they called themselves. You see, the Jalut priesthood was not alone when it came to thinking to challenge the Creators. In fact—"

A bell echoed in the distance.

"Well," said Haron with a tired smile, "it seems we're out of time. Perhaps we'll return to this topic at a later date? Class is finished for today. And thank you, gentlemen."

An excerpt from *Conquest of the Herenians* (author and date unknown)

In the Year 127 of the Black Age, Emperor Menniaius the Magnificent turned his gaze to the northern reaches. Gathering his armies, he carried out raids from Gau until he conquered Herena in 129. At first he ousted its ruler, Odalwyn Riva, but later invited him to become governor as long as he showed obedience and promised to give regular tribute. Menniaius also fortified the city, thus establishing a base from which to conduct future northern campaigns.

The cost of taking Herena was substantial – perhaps more than 12000 lives and well over a third of Sarasinia's treasury. The undertaking was also bolstered financially by loans from the Jalut merchant class, which in addition to trading concessions, sought the right to return to lands from which the Herenians had ejected them centuries prior. They were to be disappointed: Menniaius's campaigns beyond Herena proved largely unsuccessful, and the mere presence of Jalut faces in the city resulted in repeated uprisings in 198 that even the combined forces of the emperor and Odalwyn Riva were unable to deter; Menniaius was forced to order the complete removal of the Jalut population in 205.

Odalwyn Riva led a major revolt shortly after the assassination of Menniaius in 209, but the insurrection was swiftly put down by his successor, Goleta. Odalwyn Riva was eventually executed. Further risings took place in subsequent years, but none were as severe as that of 198.

GORARIC**THE SARASINIAN 5th ARMY FOLLOWERS' CAMP****SARASINIAN OCCUPIED AHRENIA**

Goraric had seen the red and gold pavilion before, he was certain of it. With its three poles and dozens of guy ropes, it was probably big enough to sleep twenty. Water still beaded on its sides despite days of rain, too. Few men in the camp had coin enough to afford a beauty like that one. No question it belonged to Leonf.

He made a dozen careful circuits, staying well clear, just watching it out of the corner of his eye. It wasn't guarded, just like the ragged man had said. His gut told him it was a trap, that the man was a liar, and that he should walk away while he still could. Besides, Kolf had only sent him to *find* leads, not to follow them up as well. He wouldn't be at all impressed if he got in over his head. Far better to leave now and come back in force.

On the other hand, what if the ragged man had told the truth? What if the girls were actually in there? Rescuing them would go far with their families, and surely atone for his past mistakes.

Going in alone was a big risk, but the potential payoff was equally big. Besides, by the time he reported back to Kolf, the girls might be long gone. He'd already failed them once by letting that bastard Giandelone take them, and he would not fail them again.

He smiled nonchalantly at a boy carrying a pair of chickens, then waited for other passers-by to move on. Satisfied there was no one else around, he crept over and put an ear to the tent. He wasn't sure what he'd expected, exactly, but he couldn't actually hear anything. With a prayer to Owic on his lips, he took out his knife, pushed the door flap aside and ducked through.

It was dark. A candle on a stand sputtered in one corner, its feeble light casting sinister shadows and puffs of acrid smoke. He coughed as he peered around, waving his free hand in a vain attempt to clear the air. What looked like black streams criss-crossed the ground, and the place reeked of shit.

Thick shapes materialised on the ground. He knelt beside the nearest, but it was too dark to see well. Then, just as his intuition finished telling him they were corpses, something man-sized dashed out of the shadows and tried to tackle him.

Goraric yelled, almost dropping his knife as he grappled with his attacker. Exchanging grunts, they stepped on each other's toes, bashed their knees together, and went to the ground trying to get an arm around the other's neck. He took some blows to the face, but it only made him angry and more determined to win. He managed to get on top, his elbow in the other guy's windpipe, and then he remembered his knife. The man went limp after the first flurry of blows, but he kept stabbing until his arm ached and he was out of breath.

Goraric rolled away, exhausted. He lay on his back next to the body, heart racing, desperately sucking air into his lungs. The smoke from the candle made him cough, and suddenly his mouth felt sour. Overcome by a wave of nausea, he vomited.

"Euuch," he said, smearing bile, fermented milk and bits of sausage bun over his lips and chin. He felt better, but not much. The candle flickered, and he belatedly swivelled around, holding

up his knife to ward off any more attackers. Fortunately, no one came at him out of the gloom.

The enormity of what he'd done began to sink in. Everything had happened so quickly that he almost couldn't believe it had happened at all. He put a hand on his attacker and felt around. No breath, no pulse, and no response when he touched the eyes. Definitely dead.

So, he had killed a man. His first. Purely unintentional, because it wasn't as if he'd come looking for a fight. Kill or be killed—wasn't that the way of these things? But he had no more time to reflect on it because the nausea was suddenly back. This time he heaved until his stomach was empty.

The candle flickered again, and he remembered that he still had a job to do. He got up, put a foot on something slippery, and went straight back on his arse.

"Shit," he muttered. Something unpleasant was seeping through his trousers. Or had he wet himself? He checked. No. And he hadn't cut himself on his knife, either, since his hands seemed intact and a quick poke around his legs and torso revealed nothing. Or at least no immediately obvious damage, anyway. His face felt banged up, but he didn't think he was bleeding.

Eventually he realised the source of his discomfort was external—he was sitting in a puddle. He groped around until his hand closed on something soft and spongy. When he put his fingers to his face, they glowed black in the candlelight and smelled strongly of blood.

On all fours, avoiding corpses and their black spillage, Goraric made his way over to the candle. He stood to grab it, wincing as molten wax spilled onto his fingers, and held it up. On the floor of the pavilion lay all kinds of rubbish. He counted three corpses, four if you included the one he'd made. Rubbish and bodies... but no cage. Shit. The ragged man had said there'd be a cage!

Candle smoke stung his eyes and he started coughing again, inadvertently blowing out the flame and plunging the interior of the pavilion into total darkness. Of all the luck! With no way to light it again, he flung it away.

Candle or not, there was no point in hanging around. The pavilion had been a trap. The man who'd taken his dremms had obviously set him up. Every word out of his mouth had been designed to get him here to be ambushed. Even the key was just a prop to make the whole thing seem less of a trap. And Goraric had wanted to believe. He'd wanted to be a hero so desperately that he'd almost lost his life in the pursuit.

Stupid, but at least his luck had held. The ambush had failed. The same couldn't be said for whoever had been lured here ahead of him. But instead of thinking about that, he had to get out of the tent, and quickly. He had to return to Kolf before his good fortune dried up.

He got down on all fours again and crawled until he was sure he was back at the door. He found the flap and was about to open it when he heard voices outside. He froze. If anyone saw him now, he would have a very difficult time explaining himself. Trespassing, covered in blood, bloody knife in hand, in a corpse-tent? A mob would have him dangling on the end of a rope before sunrise, and not even Kolf could save him. Perhaps that was Leonf's ruse—not to ambush him, but to frame him for murder? Whatever way you looked at it, he was stupid to have come here. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! In what way wasn't he now completely fucked?

Feelings of dread multiplying until they sat like a stone in his stomach, he went back to where he'd dropped the candle and hunkered down behind some discarded pillows. Not a moment too soon either, because the door flap opened and someone thrust a lamp inside. Goraric's heart hammered in his ears as he willed himself not to move. Or be seen.

"Raidey?" asked a man. "Raidey?" A few moments went by. "Hey, Raidey's not 'ere."

"Huh?" asked a second man. "What?"

The first man withdrew the lamp. "Oi said, Raidey's not in the tent."

"Eh? What d'ya mean?"

"Oi mean 'e's not in the fuckin' tent! What fuckin' else could Oi mean?"

"How come?"

"Oi don't fuckin' know, do Oi?"

"Well where is 'e then?"

"Is moi fuckin' face red? Why ya askin' me?"

There was a pause. "Oh, shit. Ya don't reckon...?"

"Reckon what?"

Another pause. "Nah. Forget it. Prob'ly just gone for a piss or sumthin' I expect."

"Yeah," said the first man. "Well, come on! Get in, get in! Quick, 'fore we're seen."

Goraric groaned inwardly as the men entered the pavilion and shut the flap behind them. He closed his eyes and gripped the handle of his knife, a thousand thoughts racing through his head. He sent a prayer to Owic in the hope that he wouldn't die tonight. Or, if that's what He wanted, to at least make his end as quick and painless as possible.

And then the lamp went out.

"Hey!" spat the first man. "What'd ya do that for? Now we can't see shit."

"Can't keep it on," said the other. "You fuckin' know that."

"Yeah. S'pose."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

"We'll just wait for Raidey."

Another pause. A long one. "What if the next sap gets 'ere afore Raidey does?"

"We can take 'im. Two against one. Shouldn't be a problem."

"All right. Bit o' shush then, eh? And back away from the flap this time, will ya? The last one what come in saw ya 'fore 'e was all the way in in."

There was a chuckle. "Didn't make no difference in the end, eh?"

"Yeah. Now, shhh."

Time passed. For Goraric it seemed like a very, very long time indeed. And in that time, his mouth went dry even as his palms starting leaking. Seriously, it was as if he'd just washed them.

The first man spoke again. "What's keepin' Raidey?"

"Shh."

"Should be back by now, don't ya reckon?"

"Shh."

"And what 'appened to the candle?"

"Shhh! Mm. Reckon it went out."

"Shouldn't 'ave, but."

"Mm. Oh well, we'll just loight it up again then, eh?"

"Yeah."

More time passed. Eventually another man spoke, only his voice came from outside the pavilion. "Oi in there! It's me. You guys done yet or what?" Goraric thought it sounded a lot like the ragged man.

The second man replied. "Raidey?"

"What? No, it's Haris."

"Haris?"

"Yeah. So, are you lot done or what?"

One of the two inside men opened the flap. "What?"

"I said," said Haris, "are you lot done?"

"Done with what?"

Haris seemed annoyed by the question. "Done with the one I just bloody well sent you?"

"Which one?"

"Goraric. I directed him here a good while back."

Goraric's heart practically skipped a beat at the mention of his name. He swallowed.

"Huh? No, we 'aven't seen 'im."

"What do you mean?" asked Haris, clearly not wanting to believe what he was hearing. "That can't be right. I saw him go in with my own eyes!"

"You sure about that? We been in 'ere awhile and we 'aven't seen no one."

"Of course I'm sure," said Haris, indignant. "I sent him, and he went in."

"Well there's no one in 'ere save us two."

"What?" Haris was more confused than ever. "There are only two of you? Where's Raidey?"

"Dunno. Guess 'e's not back yet?"

"What?"

"Well we uh, took a bit of a piss break an' when we got back 'e wasn't 'ere."

Haris paused. "What?"

"Oi said, we took a piss break an' when we got back Raidey wasn't 'ere!"

"You... took a piss break?"

"Yeah."

"Both of you?"

"Yeah."

"And you left Raidey on his own? Here, in the tent?"

"Well, uh, yeah. But you know, it's Raidey. Oi mean, it's not like 'e couldn't 'andle 'imself!"

"So," said Haris, now sounding very drained, "you two left to take a piss break, together? And you left Raidey here by himself? And then when you returned, he was gone?"

"Well, yeah. Yeah, pretty much."

There was another pause. "Out! Quick!"

"Huh?"

"Out!" cried Haris. "Get out! Goraric's in there with you!"

The men fled. Goraric heard them tying off the entry flap from outside, followed by calls for help. He got to his feet, almost overwhelmed by panic. Shit! Shit! Shit!

And then he remembered his knife.

The pavilion's canvas would have been easier to get through if Goraric, like an idiot, hadn't neglected to keep his blade sharp. Even so, he eventually managed to poke a hole in one side. Fibres popped as he tried to widen it with his hands, but that was the extent of his success. "Fuck!"

Desperate, he hacked and strained until he had the hole big enough to fit his head through. The followers' camp air was notoriously fetid, but at that moment it smelled like summer rain. Tucking his knife in his belt, he grabbed the edges of the hole and pulled for all he was worth. To his relief and delight, more of the canvas began to give way.

He'd worked a gap in the side of the pavilion almost big enough to crawl through when he saw men coming. "There!" cried one, pointing at him. "There! Get 'im!"

"Fuck!" said Goraric. There were three of them, and two had spears. He didn't like his chances, so he edged back inside where they couldn't easily strike him.

"In, in!" yelled someone, and a moment later a man tried to wriggle through his hard-won exit strategy.

"Muuh!" yelled Goraric and he pounced, sinking his knife into flesh. It stuck fast, so he abandoned it and went for the man's spear. The fellow practically handed it over in his shock and haste to get away, and Goraric wasted no time in using it on the insides of his thighs.

"Fuck!" yelled the man, crawling back through the opening. "He got me! He got me!"

Goraric heard a terrified voice. "Oh, mother of fuck! He's bleeding! What do we do now?"

"Shit!" said another. "Fuck it, I don't know."

"Cut the ropes!" shouted someone else. "Cut the guy ropes! Bring the fuckin' tent down on top o' the cunt's head!"

Goraric knew he wouldn't last much longer without help. "Kolff!" he roared. "Kolff! Come and get me, you bastard!"

The men outside laughed. "Oh we'll get ya, ya little son of a bitch! We'll get ya!"

They must have misheard him. "Fuck you!" he screamed. "I killed Raidey!"

His side of the pavilion collapsed in reply. He backed away, thinking about trying to poke another gap somewhere else with his new spear. But almost before he could even complete the thought, another section of the pavilion came down.

Goraric knelt, waiting for the end. The canopy would fall on his head, and Leonf's men—he had no doubt it was them outside—would finish him off with their spears. He didn't imagine they'd be in a hurry, either. "Kolff! Kolff! Where are youuuu?! Kolff!"

He was still composing a final prayer to Owic when he heard the unmistakable sound of fighting outside. He wiped a sweaty hand down his trouser leg, then jabbed at one of the pavilion's remaining sides with the spear. At first it went much like it had with the knife, but he kept at it until he again had a gap large enough to accommodate his head.

He looked out, and sure enough, a battle was raging around the pavilion. Men screamed, axes thumped into shields, and there were already bodies on the ground. Goraric couldn't immediately recognise the participants, but then he saw his cousin and his heart leapt with joy. "Tarec!" he shouted.

Tarec made straight for him, a couple of companions in tow. "Goraric! Goraric! Holy shit, you're alive! Are you all right?"

Goraric grinned. "Tarec! I can't believe you're here!"

"Kolff sent us to find you! Come on, out! We need to get out of here." And with that, Tarec and others began cutting him free.

"Praise Owic, because I don't think—" said Goraric, but he was interrupted by the arrival of new enemies. Tarec's men turned to engage them, fending off spear points with their shields, but they were outnumbered. His cousin finished carving his exit, and Goraric leapt from the pavilion with his spear at the ready.

"Fall back!" shouted Tarec. On hearing him, Leonf's men came on with renewed purpose. Tarec turned and ran. Goraric thought it cowardly, but then everyone was running and he had no choice but to do the same.

Goraric fled with Tarec's men as they made a fighting retreat through the followers' camp. Ordinary folk shrank away, wanting no part of the violence. Although they pursued them hotly for a while, eventually Leonf's men pulled back. Even so, Tarec ran a while longer before calling a halt.

“Why stop now?” asked Goraric. “Why not go all the way back to headquarters?”

“Orders,” said Tarec. “We’re to regroup here.”

Kolf found them soon after, accompanied by around thirty followers. He took off his helm and clapped Tarec and others about the shoulders, and then he hugged Goraric with such gusto it was almost embarrassing. “Thank fuck!” he cried. “Thank fuck! I thought we’d lost you for sure!”

“Praise Owic,” said Goraric. “I’m all right.”

Kolf peered at him. “From head to foot you’re red, nephew!”

“Eh? Oh, it’s not mine.”

His uncle’s eyebrows went up. “You killed, eh?” He turned to Tarec. “How many did you lose?”

Tarec looked down at his toes. “Two.”

Kolf gave a grim nod. “Ah. More’s the pity. Their families will receive compensation from us, though, mark my words.”

Tarec made a face. “They were good men, uncle.”

“No doubt,” said Kolf. “And that’s true of every Upright Man, Tarec. But tonight’s enterprise cost Leonf a lot more than it did us. He paid dearly for their lives, I assure you.”

Tarec merely folded his arms, his vambraces scraping against his mail shirt.

“Don’t believe me? We just came from his headquarters. He wasn’t expecting an attack there, I don’t think. We killed at least a dozen of the bastards, Tarec. A dozen!”

Tarec nodded but seemed neither heartened nor impressed by the news. “Mm.”

Kolf put an arm around Goraric. “And best of all, you rescued this one!”

“How did you know where I was?” asked Goraric.

Kolf pursed his lips. “We’ll talk about that later.”

“That pavilion. It was a trap.”

“Yeah. And luckily for you we figured it out right quick as well, eh?”

Goraric gave Kolf a pained look. “I thought the girls were in there, but they weren’t. I failed you.”

"No," said Kolf, shaking his head. "You didn't. Mistakes were made, but everything that happened tonight was pure Leonf. Cunning bastard. And at least he didn't get you, eh?"

"Well, yes," said Goraric. He forced a smile. "There is that, I suppose."

"Don't worry. He'll never catch us the same way again."

"Yeah," said Goraric, shaking and feeling suddenly more fatigued than he'd ever felt in his life. He sat, not caring that the ground was muddy. "Once was more than enough for me as well."

20

BENE

THE UNIVERSITY OF GERICH ASSET RECOVERY TEAM

EASTERN RENDEROS

MUMOLO

For two days the party had clung to its hilltop position outside Mumolo. Roaoo was apparently waiting for what he called ‘the perfect time’ to send the soldiers in, though he hadn’t elaborated on when that would be, exactly. The town was still wreathed in smoke from the fires, so perhaps he was waiting for it to clear. He didn’t seem concerned that *she* was probably half a week ahead of them now, off to fuck-knows-where to continue her wight-making mischief. But presumably the magister knew what he was doing, and anyway, who was Bene to question his methods?

With some unexpected free time on his hands, he decided to tour the camp. It didn’t take long to spot Khela sitting on a log with a book open on her lap. Absent-mindedly winding a strand of her golden hair around a forefinger, she seemed lost in its pages. It was like a scene from a fairy tale. She couldn’t be more

beautiful if she tried. They were on reasonably good terms again, so he was tempted to go over and say hello, but she really seemed to be enjoying her own company. He didn't want to ruin that. No, he thought, best to just leave her be.

He was still turning away when Damien Barls came out of nowhere, casting a shadow across Khela's feet and causing her to look up. Bene moved to confront him, a few choice words forming on his lips. At the last moment, though, curiosity got the better of him and he held off, squatting behind a tree stump where he could watch without being seen. After all, he needed evidence against the man for Roaoo, didn't he? He might just get some if he let him harass Khela a little first. Besides, he'd look like a hero when he eventually came to her rescue.

"Oh 'ello!" Barls said to Khela, a sickly grin plastering his face.

"Hello," said Khela. She tried to mask her disgust.

"Fancy seeing you 'ere. So, how are ya?"

"Fine." But Bene could tell by her body language that she wanted to run.

"Yeh. Yeh, me too."

"That's good."

"Yeh." There was a lengthy pause. "Ya know, yer real pretty."

"Uh," said Khela, glancing around as if to reassure herself that she wasn't alone with the man. There were some soldiers on the periphery, but no one in her immediate vicinity. "Thanks."

Barls seemed oblivious to her anxiety. "Yeh. Real pretty." He traced his bottom lip with his tongue.

"Hmm," said Khela, feigning intense interest in her book. "Well, nice talking to you..."

Barls shuffled his feet and gazed up at the clouds. If Khela had hoped he would simply go away, she was surely disappointed. Then he coughed and said, "Yeh. Oh, hey, the name's Barls by the way." Another long silence followed. "Yeh. I mean, Damien's me first name, o' course. And so that makes, uh, Barls well... y'know, me uh, second one." He held out a grubby hand.

“Research Assistant Rusen,” said Khela. There was no mistaking her icy tone, and she made no move to take his hand. “I’m a little busy, actually.”

Barls eventually realised that she wasn’t going to shake hands with him. In what was probably intended as a casual movement, he leaned against a dead sapling. It broke with a crack and deposited him on the ground. “Aw, fucken fuck!” he cried, getting to his feet and dusting himself off.

“Oops,” said Khela, covering her mouth and trying not to laugh. Behind his stump, Bene choked back a giggle.

Barls examined himself for grazes, which he spat on and rubbed with his pudgy fingers. Then he looked at Khela and screwed up his face. At first Bene thought he was about to cry, but instead he turned bright red and his whole body began to shake. There was an unmistakable look of rage in his eyes.

“Oh shit,” whispered Bene, ready to burst from his hiding spot.

Instead of attacking, Barls broke into a grin. “Yeh, heh heh,” he said, panting. “That *was* good, wasn’t it? Eh? Heh, heh, I absolutely meant to do that, you know. Heh, heh. Thought you’d like it, eh? Eh?”

“Um,” said Khela, pointing vaguely behind her. “I really should be getting back...”

“Wow, I really like yer eyes,” said Barls, his colour returning to normal. When Khela smiled uncertainly at that, he practically glowed with pleasure. “It’s so good to be this close to yer, y’know? I seen yer ‘round lots an’ I’ve wanted to, like, meet yer for the longest time.”

“Oh.”

“An’ yer real pretty. Everyone ‘ere thinks it.” He frowned. “Oh shit. I was s’posed to bring flowers, but I forgot. Shit.”

“Uh, that’s fine.” Khela was looking for an escape route in earnest now. “No need to go to any bother...”

“Heh. Y’know, I saw these heads on these poles a few weeks back. You know, how them indigemous people from ‘round ‘ere cut off heads and stick ‘em ‘round their villages? Yeh, it really got me thinkin’. I’s thinkin’ pacifically that if they ever put *your* head

on one o' them poles an' shit, it would be, like, the prettiest one of 'em all. Even once all the skin and everythin' come off. Y'know, like, rotted away an' stuff? Yeh, I bet even then ya'd still 'ave the prettiest head of all time."

Bene grimaced. What the fuck was he talking about? Was that some sort of veiled threat? Should he step in?

"Wow," said Khela, swallowing. "While that's quite the compliment, I, uh, think I really should be getting back to—"

"Yeh," said Barls, apparently determined to finish his line of thought. "I 'ave a lot o' time to think about stuff an' that on account o' me work. Maybe ya seen me 'round the chuckwagons? Yeh, reckon y'ave. Yer must of, 'cause I'm workin' there. In the chuckwagons. I know I seen yer 'round there at meal times an' such. Yeh, but that's strick-ly temporary, o' course. Me workin' in the chuckwagons, I mean. Yeh. Reckon they's gonna make me a fighter soon. Heh, heh. When I showed the colonel me blade work a few weeks back, he was real impressed. Told me I was a real danger. Hey, I know—lemme show ya some o' me moves!"

"No, no," said Khela, holding up a hand. "It's all right, really. I actually do need to get going now."

Barls ignored her. Taking a few paces back, he produced what looked like a paring knife. He waved it about theatrically, then thrust as if stabbing an invisible enemy. "Hup!" he cried, whirling around and almost losing his footing. "Hup! Hup!"

"Wow," said Khela, closing her book with a snap. "Look, I don't want to seem rude but I really need to be elsewhere."

"No, wait!" cried Barls. He executed a series of frantic slashes and stabs to the left and right, hissing and spitting all over the place. He hesitated, thinking, before deciding on a backward lunge punctuated by another loud "Hup!" Then, as he spun around to face Khela once again, he stumbled and went down on one knee. It popped with a loud crack. Finally, with what was probably supposed to be a flourish, he put the knife away. He got to his feet, breathless and beaming with pride. "So? Eh? What'd ya think o' that? Good, eh?"

Bene struggled not to laugh. It was like an obscene mockery of the worst clowning routine imaginable. But the true comedy was that the little man was deadly serious.

"Well," said Khela, "it was certainly, uh, something."

"Yeh," said Barls, puffing out his chest. "Yeh. Knew ya'd love it. Heh, heh. Yeh, when I first started practicin' I wasn't really all that good, y'know? But these days I'm what they call, uh, what was it again? It's 'ec-something.' Oh wait, no it's 'ex' and then something."

"Excellent?"

"No. Um, it's a word what means the same thing as excellent, I think, but that's not it. It's somethin' else..."

"Oh? All right."

"It's 'ex...'"

"Ex?"

"Wait." Barls tried to gather his thoughts. "Maybe it's 'excra' and then something."

"Excra?"

"Yeh! And then something."

"Oh." Bene could tell that Khela didn't want to say what she said next, but she did anyway. "It's not, uh, 'execrable' is it?"

Barls's face lit up. "Aw, yeh! Yeh! That's it! Exec-er-able! Heaps o' people 'ave been sayin' me knife skills are exec-er-able!"

Bene spluttered, trying not to laugh. He clamped both hands over his mouth, his chest heaving, tears streaming down his face.

"I think that's about right, too," said Khela, standing up, "and now you'll really have to excuse me."

Barls stepped in front of her, barring her path. "Yeh," he said, "y'know, I reckon a woman like yerself needs a strong man like me around to protect 'er. Y'know, keep ya safe an' whatnot? Like, from wolves an' stuff. Or them native Renderosians. Because hey, if anyone ever threatened ya..." He took up what was probably meant to be a fighting stance but looked more like a monkey taking a shit. "Yeh, I'm protective of all me women. Ya can count on it, eh, 'cause it's a fact."

Bene saw that Khela was on the verge of panic. He took a breath and readied himself to confront Barls.

"I need to go," said Khela. "Let me past, if you don't mind?"

Barls ignored her. "An' another thing—"

Bene dashed out of his hiding place. Inserting himself squarely between Khela and the little creature, he shouted, "Damien Barls! You're out of bounds! Get back to the chuckwagons right now!"

"Oh, thank fuck," whispered Khela.

Barls sized Bene up. His lips curled back in a sneer. "You? Piss off."

"Excuse me?" said Bene, furrowing his brow. "You need to leave, Barls. Immediately."

Barls drew himself up to his full height, which was still half a head shorter than Bene, and Bene was not particularly tall. "Lemme alone," he whined. "You weedy fucken prick!"

"How dare you address me like that?" Bene narrowed his eyes. "Do you have any idea who you're talking to? Consider yourself on report."

"Fuck you," spat Barls. "Lemme alone or I'll fucken cut ya!"

Bene went very still. "What did you say?"

"Let's just go," said Khela, grabbing Bene by the arm. Her hands were trembling, and he regretted not acting sooner.

Bene shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Yer a stupid weedy fucken cunt!" Barls howled. "I'm a soldier! I'm in Tonneson's Scouts, don't ya know? I don't take no fucken orders from you!"

"Holy shit," Bene said to Khela. "Can you believe this?"

"Let's just get out of here," said Khela.

Bene turned back to Barls. "You need to leave, Barls. Go back to the chuckwagons immediately."

Barls gnashed his teeth. "Yer not the boss o' me, eh, Weedy. Cunt! So fuck off, ya fucken cunt box."

"I *am* the boss of you, Barls," said Bene. "I have the same authority as Colonel Tonneson on this expedition, and I'm second only to Magister Roaoo himself. And if you don't do as I say, I'm going to have you whipped raw—that much I promise you."

Barls, practically bursting with fury, pulled out his paring knife. "Fuck! Ya stupid fucken weedy fucken cunt! Ya forced me hand, dick cunt!"

Bene backed away, holding his arms out and blocking Barls's path to Khela. "Woah! Hey, are you for real? You could hurt someone. Put that away." He stared at the little man in disbelief. Was this actually happening?

Barls whipped his neck from side to side as if he were warming up before a morning run. "Let no one say I didn't warn ya! Eh? Eh?" He took a few cautious steps sideways, knife held at the ready.

"You—" began Bene, but then a very large shape suddenly loomed over the three of them.

"Damien Barls," said Tonneson. His voice was deep, measured, dangerous. "What in fuck's name do you think you're doing?"

Barls had to crane his neck just to look at the colonel's chin. "Oh hi, sir!"

Tonneson stared down at him. "Answer me."

"Um, well," said Barls, rubbing the back of his head self-consciously. "I's jus' teachin' this civvy cunt 'ere a lesson." He indicated Bene.

Tonneson kept his eyes fixed on Barls. "I don't think so. Put the knife away."

Barls stared back for a few moments, and then at the knife in his hand. He licked his lips. "Yeh, but..."

"No," said Tonneson, shaking his head. "No buts. Just put the knife away. Do it now. I won't warn you a third time."

An evil smile spread across Barls's face. He looked past the colonel, right at Bene's throat. "Hup!" he cried, and lunged.

Tonneson's fist connected with the side of Barls's head. The little man fell, stiff legged, and hit the ground. A few moments later he started convulsing.

"Oh!" cried Khela. "Oh no!"

"Yeah," said Tonneson. "That's never a good sign."

"Should we get someone to look at him?" asked Bene.

"No."

"What?"

"I wouldn't bother," said Tonneson, rubbing his knuckles. "I say just leave him. He may come around. Or he may not."

"What if he doesn't?"

Tonneson shrugged. "Then he doesn't."

"Wait," said Bene, mouth ajar. "You don't care if he wakes up or not?"

"Nope." The colonel's face showed no emotion. "We all saw what he did. Attempted murder. If he even does wake up, I've half a mind to hang him."

"And you don't want us to help him?" asked Khela.

"You can do as you like, I suppose." He regarded them both coolly for a few moments, then strode off.

Bene glanced sideways at Khela before turning to face her. "Wow," he said. "Holy shit! Wow."

"We can't leave him here like this," said Khela. She looked at Barls with great concern, even if she wasn't exactly hurrying to his side. His convulsions were slowing.

"This expedition," said Bene. "Huh. I tell you, just when I think I've seen it all, something else happens that makes me realise shit can always get weirder."

"I really think we should get him some help. Like, right now."

"Why?"

"Because he's a human being, Bene? Because he doesn't deserve to die?"

Bene turned on her. "And what about *my* well-being, Khela? The little prick was going to stab me. You saw him. I could have been hurt, maybe even killed. What did I do to deserve that?"

"I know. But nothing happened, Bene. You weren't hurt."

"Nothing happened? How can you say nothing happened, Khel? Something fucking happened! No, I'm with Tonneson on this one. If he wakes up, he wakes up, and if he doesn't, so what? I'm sure as shit not going to lose any sleep over him dying."

Khela folded her arms. "No."

"No?"

"No! I'm not gonna let him die."

"What? You wanna save this creepy bastard's life?"

"I do."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Why?"

"Because he's a human being, Bene!" cried Khela, stamping her foot in exasperation. "There's been enough killing around here lately and I just don't think I can take any more!"

"Fuck," said Bene, taking a deep breath. "All right, fine. But you heard Tonneson, right? Even if he does wake up, he's going to be hanged."

"No, he won't."

"And why's that?" Bene fought the urge to spit. "Because you'll intercede on his behalf?"

"Yes. That's exactly what I'll do. And if it comes down to it, you will as well. Because I'll make you."

Bene gave her the most pitiable look he could muster. "I can't believe you."

"Sorry to disappoint. Gotta say, though, I can't believe you either."

"Ugh," said Bene, looking down at Barls. "You're absolutely sure you want to save this miserable piece of shit?"

"Yes."

"He might already be dead."

"Bene! Stop trying to change my mind and *do* something?"

"All right, fine. Have it your way." He put two fingers in his mouth and whistled, drawing the attention of a pair of soldiers. "Get a medic over here, will you?" he called. "There's a man down." The men gave him a gesture of acknowledgement.

"Thank you," said Khela, taking Bene's arm.

"Yeah."

They sat on Khela's log, watching over Barls until orderlies came and carried him away on a stretcher.

"I'm really glad you showed up when you did, though," said Khela. "Thanks for that."

Bene wasn't about to admit that he hadn't come as soon as he could have. Or should have. "Nah," he said. "You should be thanking Big T, not me. If he hadn't come along when he did, I don't know how it might have ended."

"Yeah," said Khela. "I guess."

"Ugh. Shit, I suppose now I'm gonna have to get him a thank you gift? I feel like I should. Although he probably doesn't care one way or the other."

"You're not serious..."

Bene laughed. "When I first saw you over here with Barls, I knew something was up."

"It was all very, very weird. Wasn't it?"

"I can't stand him, you know. And he can't stand me either, as you might have guessed from all the names he called me."

"I kinda got that impression, actually," said Khela, giving him a wry look. "Why, what happened?"

Bene laughed again. "I guess I forgot to tell you." He took a deep breath. "It's a bit of a long story, though."

"That's all right," said Khela, shrugging. "I've got time if you have."

"All right. Well, it happened a few weeks ago. I was talking with His Magister-y in his tent when Barls suddenly barged in. Apparently he'd been trying to speak with him for ages, but--"

"Wait," said Khela, putting a hand on his arm. "His Magister-y?"

"Yep. That's been my secret name for Roaoo for a while now."

Khela giggled. "That's hilarious!"

"Isn't it just?" said Bene, grinning. "So anyway, Barls comes barging into the tent, right? He'd been trying to speak to Roaoo for a few weeks, or some shit, but apparently Roaoo kept turning him away. Didn't have time for a lowly dishwasher, or something. Ha, ha, you know how he is."

"Yeah. I do."

"So anyway, I stood there, fully expecting Roaoo to just, I dunno, destroy the little guy. But then, for some reason he didn't.

Maybe he was bored or curious or... something. It was weird. Anyway, he tells Barls to speak but to make it quick.

"Well, Barls bows and scrapes and says his thank yous and whatnot, and then he says something about how he's got some very important information about the wights."

"About the wights?"

Bene nodded. "Yeah. So Roaoo tells him to go ahead. He does, but I can't follow the story because Barls is all over the place. However, it's apparent that he believes he's the cause of them."

"He's the cause of them?"

"Right."

"*He's* the cause of the wights, you mean? Barls?"

"Yes. Exactly."

"How?"

Bene laughed at her confusion. "Oh don't worry, Roaoo asks him the exact same question. At which point Barls breaks down and very tearfully confesses that he's been jerking off into the camp latrines at night."

"What?"

"Barls had apparently been jerking off into the latrines on a nightly basis. Which he believed to be the genesis of the wights..."

Khela shook her head. "Huh? I don't get it."

Bene smiled. "Try to stay with me Khel. It's Barls, remember?"

"All right..."

"So Barls had been sneaking into the latrines at night to jerk himself off, right? Night after night, since the very beginning of our expedition."

"I understood that much," said Khela, making a face. "Which is disgusting, by the way."

"No kidding, Khel. But what else do you expect from a grotty little simpleton?"

"All right. And?"

"He's clueless about everything, and of course that includes wights. He has absolutely no idea about them, aside from the fact that they exist, obviously. He doesn't understand the connection

between them and the object, or *her*, or anything. As far as he's concerned it's all a mystery."

"All right?"

"Well, somehow he got it into his head that wights emerge from human shit..."

"Oh no," said Khela, closing her eyes. "The latrines. Oh, yuck. I think I know where this is going now."

Bene hooted with glee. "Right! All this time, Barls has been thinking turds are wight eggs, and he's been jerking off on them. Fertilising them, as it were, with his cum! You know, kind of like how fish and frogs reproduce?"

"Oh no. Oh no."

Bene doubled over, cackling. "He'd been thinking of himself as some kind of wight-father, servicing our turd-eggs! Oh Khel, you just can't make this stuff up."

"That's just gross," said Khela. "Ugh, and maybe the most appalling thing I've ever heard."

"Actually now that I think about it, full moons figured into the whole mess too, somehow, but I can't really remember the details. Can you imagine, though? According to Barls, every shit pit we've ever dug was the source of a whole new generation of wights? And he was their king! Ha, ha, ha!"

Khela looked at Bene as if he were being unjustifiably cruel. "Poor Barls, though. That's absolutely horrible."

"I know! And he was deadly serious about it, too. He was practically in tears by the end of his little confession! Of course, I was too, but for a totally different reason. I couldn't help myself, Khel. I was laughing so hard I swear I nearly passed out. Barls gave me the dirtiest looks, too. I can still see his face."

"Yep. Now it's pretty clear why he hates you so much. So what did Roao do?"

"Eh, not a lot. He took the whole thing pretty well, considering. He did say it was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard, though, and that Barls should not come forward with any more stories. And then he told him to leave."

"And Barls just left?"

"Yeah," said Bene with a shrug. "He did. I mean, what else could he do? I couldn't stop laughing, and Roaoo told me to grow up. I did my best, but you know me, so then he ordered me out as well. So I left."

"Poor Barls."

Bene stopped smiling. "Poor Barls? Why do you keep saying that? I wouldn't waste my sympathy on him if I were you. Anyway, he tried to get revenge on me a few days later."

"Oh, no. Why, what did he do?"

"Brought me food, which was something he'd never done before. He had this ridiculous grin on his face the whole time, too. It was screamingly obvious there was something wrong with it. He tried to dump it after I made it clear I wasn't going to touch it, but the chuckwagon boss saw and whipped him for wasting food."

"Poor Barls."

Bene frowned. "Look, you really need to stop saying that. Save your pity for someone who actually deserves it. He's completely insane."

"How did he even get hired for this expedition?"

"Yeah. It's a question I ask myself all the time," said Bene, sniffing. He stood up. "Anyway, forget him. We should probably go and do some work."

"I kind of want to go and see if he's all right, though. Is that bad?"

Bene shook his head. He looked at Khela, who stared back with an innocence that made him sad. "Khel," he said, "you have the softest heart of anyone I've ever met. It'll be your undoing, I swear."

ROSARIUS

SARASINIA

THE BASTION

Rosarius sat in the dining hall with his friends, arms folded, watching Borrego finish what had to be his tenth bowl of morning slop. The topic of discussion around the table was Dannis and Tavaris. In fact, it seemed that nobody in the Bastion talked about anything else anymore.

"Did anyone else here go to their class this morning?" asked Carranza. "The one about conduct and standards or some shit? I still don't have a clue what a fucking *safe space* is supposed to be. Does anyone know?"

"No idea," said Andreas. "Was that the class where Dannis kept dropping hints about how a man could only experience true physical pleasure with another man? I mean, what the fuck? I don't even know what these fucking classes are supposed to be about any more."

"I know what you mean," said Alanso, snorting with derision. "I think they're trying to recruit some pillow mates. I caught

Tavaris with his hand down the trousers of one of the sub-juniors the other day. The poor lad was terrified."

"I heard something similar," growled Borrego. "Only it was the other guy. Or at least I think it was the other guy. Fucking disgusting."

"Gods above," said Carranza. "Is that what they want? Maybe that's why they're really here? It would explain a lot."

"Nothing would surprise me," said Rosarius. "Those two, they're something else."

"Yeah," said Andreas.

"What I want to know," said Alanso, "is why the administration's allowing this to happen? I mean, why did they even let them come here in the first place? And where's our fucking student council in all of this? They've not said a word. Why all the silence? These two are ruining everything."

"This is all because of Colton," said Carranza. "They say he pushed his dad to get Dannis and Tavaris on the teaching roster."

"Which one's Dannis and which one's Tavaris again?" asked Alanso.

"Dannis is the one with the blonde hair," said Andreas. "I think. And Tavaris is the one with the brown."

"I thought it was the other way around," said Rosarius. "You know, actually I have no idea. And I don't give a fuck."

"Why are they always wearing dresses, though?" asked Andreas. "And putting that white shit on their faces? They look like a pair of fucking princesses."

"Ugliest fucking princesses I ever saw," said Carranza.

"We haven't had drill or phalanx training for three fucking weeks now," said Andreas. "They've made it so we've only got drill on the last day of every month. How are we supposed to be soldiers if there's no soldiering? What's the point of the Bastion anymore?"

"I know," said Carranza. "Word is they're moving to get rid of Minten, too."

"Fuck that," said Rosarius. "If Minten goes, I go."

"I'm with you," said Andreas. "I've had enough of these bullshit classes, all this crystal crap and making up slogans and whatnot."

Alonso spat. "Yeah, agreed. You know what we should do? Kill them."

"Mm," said Rosarius. "It *would* solve the problem."

"Who are we killing?" asked Borrego, apparently so focussed on his gruel that he'd missed most of the conversation.

"Dannis and Tavaris of course," said Andreas, glancing around to make sure no one was eavesdropping. "Seriously though—what do you think of the idea?"

Borrego looked at him over the rim of his bowl. "How would we do it?"

"Dunno. They could die in a training accident maybe?"

"How do you figure?" asked Rosarius. "They don't train. And there's no training anyway."

"Poison?"

"Hey, there's Riva," said Carranza, pointing.

"Oi, Riva!" shouted Borrego, waving at the man. "Come 'ere a moment, will you?"

Riva waded through the breakfast crowd to get to their table. "A good day to die, brothers."

"May we die with honour," said Carranza, Alonso and Andreas together.

"A good day to die, brother," said Rosarius.

"May we die with honour," said Borrego. "Now sit."

"We were just talking about Dannis and Tavaris," said Alonso.

Riva pulled up a bench and sat. "Oh yeah?"

"And thinking of ways to get rid of them," said Andreas.

"You want to get rid of them?" asked Riva. "Fair enough, I guess, but how?"

"Murder," said Rosarius, keeping his voice down.

Riva chuckled as if he were joking. "Yeah, right."

"No," said Borrego, looking at everyone in turn. "Last resort, maybe, but let's not lead with that. Instead, we'll play up. You know, we'll boycott their classes and stuff? Train with Minten's

lot only. Or train ourselves. Or even just sit in the barracks and do nothing if it comes to that.”

“I didn’t think you’d be averse to bloodshed,” said Rosarius. He couldn’t help but feel cheated.

Borrego shrugged. “And I’m not. I just don’t think it’s a good idea to go ahead and kill these two just like that. Not yet, anyway.”

“The boycott idea,” said Alanso. “I like it.”

“We need to send a message to the Assembly,” said Borrego. “A message about how the Bastion is a military college, not a fucking finishing school for princesses. Because I don’t know about the rest of you, but I came here to learn how to lead men in battle, and I don’t see how we can do that with Dannis and Tavaris fucking everything up.”

“Too fucking right!” said Andreas.

“We need to tread carefully, though,” said Carranza. “Dannis and Tavaris are here because Colton made his father appoint them, so—”

“Eusebio!” shouted Borrego, making a fist. “I’m sick of hearing the man’s fucking name! Who the fuck does he think he is?”

“Um, only the Grand Magistrate?”

“Yeah, well he’s behaving like he owns the fucking city! What about the rest of the Assembly? What about all the big families? What about *our* families? Since when does one man get to go around doing whatever he wants? And at our expense?”

“So what are we going to do, exactly?” asked Andreas.

“Right,” said Rosarius. “Like Borrego said, we’ll boycott classes. Does anyone remember when they tried to get rid of the scholarship system a few years back? That’s what the seniors at the time did—they made it so no Bastion student went to classes until the administration reconsidered their decision. We’ll do the same.”

“I wasn’t here then,” said Alanso. “Did it work?”

Borrego gave him a murderous look. “Use your brain. Scholarships are still a thing, aren’t they?”

“Point taken, big man. You win.”

"So, a boycott of classes?" asked Carranza. He shrugged. "All right, consider me in."

"I'm in too," said Riva.

"Not all the classes, though," said Rosarius. "We're only boycotting Dannis and Tavaris."

Borrego looked at Rosarius and slapped the table. "Yes! Let's do this, brothers!"

"I'm in as well," said Alanso.

"We're all in," said Andreas.

"Right," said Borrego, flexing his shoulders. "If everyone's had enough to eat, let's head back to the barracks and start planning. If we're going to do this properly, we're going to need to organise a meeting of students."

"I'll meet you there later," said Rosarius. "I have somewhere else I need to be right now."

Borrego inclined his head. "Really? Where?"

"The infirmary. Lucius went in again three days ago, and I haven't seen him since."

"Damn," said Alanso.

"Yeah. It's his jaw. It just won't heal."

"Fuck," said Borrego. "I didn't know. Well, in that case I'm coming with you."

"Me too," said Riva.

"Yeah," said Andreas. "Why don't we all go?"

"You do remember," said Alanso, "that Farias's aunt is a pretty well-known surgeon, right? Why don't we get her to take a look at Lucius?"

"Farias's aunt?" asked Borrego. "Nope. No way."

"She's really good, apparently."

"And how do you know that? Have you ever met her?"

"Well, no..."

"So how would you know? Besides, would you go to a woman doctor? Because I fucking wouldn't."

Alanso frowned. "Well, maybe? Why not? Farias says she's one of the best in the city."

"Farias says a lot of things," growled Borrego, "and most of them aren't worth a fucking turd."

Alonso didn't reply, and everyone else seemed content with silence as they left the dining hall.

The Bastion's infirmary had once been a fort. Or at least part of some larger complex, maybe, judging by the short length of wall jutting from its southern side that currently served no apparent purpose. Weather had stripped away some of the infirmary's render, dumping it at the base of the building. Rosarius ran his fingers over the exposed sections, exploring the old-style mud and gravel construction within. His eyes fell on a shard of pottery. A small piece of an ancient bowl, perhaps, rammed into the wall in ages past. Drawn by its blue glaze and delicate flower motif, he plucked it out and put it away for good luck.

"Place is falling apart," said Borrego, voicing the obvious.

"All right," said Rosarius. "Now, before we go in, let's get something straight—no matter how bad Lucius looks, try to say something... I don't know... nice? Supportive? Or at least don't say anything bad. He's really not in the best shape, and I don't want anyone making things worse."

"Sure," said Andreas. Riva, Carranza and Alonso nodded their agreement.

"Of course," said Borrego. "I can be supportive." Alonso rolled his eyes at that, but didn't say anything.

"Then let's go," said Rosarius. He led them down a flight of stairs which opened into a dingy room lined with rows of equally dirty-looking cots. Most were occupied.

"Oi!" yelled Borrego, snapping his fingers at a grey-robed doctor making his rounds.

"Can I help you, gentlemen?" asked the doctor.

"Yes," said Rosarius. "We're looking for a senior who would have come in here a few days ago. His name is Darnell Lucius. He has a cut on his jaw, a bad one."

The doctor nodded. "A cut on his jaw? Ah, yes, I know who you mean. Come." He took them to the far end of the building,

through a narrow corridor and into another room. Lucius was there, stripped him to the waist, asleep in a filthy cot in one corner. He'd lost so much weight you could count his ribs, and the cut on his jaw was hanging open. The room smelled like rancid pork.

"What the fuck?" said Borrego. "He looks like total shit!" The comment earned him unfriendly looks from the others.

Rosarius turned to the doctor. "How is he?"

The doctor's expression was grim. "Not good," he said. "He's not well at all, I'm afraid."

"Why?" asked Borrego. "What's wrong with him?"

"His jaw has rotted, tainting his blood."

"What does that mean?" asked Rosarius. "And what are you doing about it?"

"Well," said the doctor. "We've been bleeding him to purge the infection from his body. Unfortunately, he hasn't responded as well as we'd hoped. We will persevere, of course."

Rosarius rubbed the back of his neck. "Can't you try cutting the rotten bits out or something?"

The doctor shook his head. "It's too late for that, I'm afraid." He pointed. "Do you see that line going down his neck there? That's the taint spreading through his veins."

Borrego folded his arms. "What are you saying? That he's fucked?"

"It's in the hands of the gods," said the doctor, showing his bloodstained palms.

"Meaning he's fucked?"

"Well I can't say for sure, but there's a strong possibility he will not live out the week."

"A strong possibility?" Rosarius looked down at Lucius in disbelief.

"Bullshit!" said Borrego. "He was fine a few days ago!"

"I assure you he was not," said the doctor. "His blood has been polluted for some time, perhaps a week or longer. In my experience, cases such as his have a tendency not to end well."

"So we just leave him here and hope for the best?" asked Borrego.

The doctor showed his palms again. "Well, we are bleeding him, as I said. There is really nothing else to be done."

"No," said Rosarius, shaking his head. "There has to be more you can do, surely?"

"I'm afraid not."

"We could always get Farias's aunt to take a look at him," said Alanso.

"No way," said Borrego.

"Why not?"

"What's she going to do that the people here aren't already doing?"

Alanso shook his head. "I dunno, Borrego. All I know is she's supposed to be really good."

"I say we give her a try," said Andreas. "I mean, if they can't do anything more for Lucius here, then what's the harm?"

"I have to say I'm with Alanso on this one," said Riva. "Let's get a second opinion."

"I agree," said Rosarius. "We could at least bring her in to have a look at Lucius, don't you think? What have we got to lose?"

"Lucius," said Borrego, pointing at their friend.

"By the sounds of it, we could lose him regardless," said Alanso. "Anyway, it's four to one against. You're outvoted."

Borrego scowled, and for a moment he looked like he might even start punching. Finally, though, he nodded. "So be it."

Rosarius turned to the doctor. "We want to bring someone from outside to examine Lucius. Can we do that?"

"What?" asked the doctor. "Who?"

"Another doctor," said Alanso. "A surgeon."

"To see *my* patient?"

"Yep," said Andreas. "Exactly. Can we do that?"

"Another doctor? In here? Absolutely not!"

"Why not?" asked Riva.

The doctor looked sorely affronted. "Because I say so! And because it's against the rules. Unless you have special dispensation, I'm afraid I cannot allow it."

"Huh?" said Borrego. "What sort of dispensation are we talking about?"

"Or could we take Lucius to see her instead?" asked Carranza.

"No," said the doctor, shaking his head. "No. Definitely not. The patient must remain here."

"So where does that leave us?" asked Rosarius. "You expect us to sit by and watch our friend die? Because we're not going to do that."

"Too fuckin' right," said Borrego, squaring his shoulders. "Do you even know who I am, doctor?" The way he said the word 'doctor' made it sound like an insult. "Do you even know who *we* are?"

The doctor took a deep breath.

The boys left the infirmary carrying an unconscious Lucius between the five of them. They had him bundled in a thin blanket.

"Bribing a medical professional," said Andreas. "That's a first for me."

"Medical professional my arse," said Borrego, spitting. "What a cocksucker. I fucking hate doctors!"

"We know," said Alanso. "You've reminded us of that at least fifty times now. We're also well-acquainted with your feelings toward the medical profession as a whole. Not to mention the filthy condition of the infirmary, its smell, and how many fucking stairs there are between floors."

"Fine. You won't hear another word of complaint from me."

Alanso rolled his eyes. "If only."

"Watch it." Borrego looked daggers at him.

"Look," said Rosarius "I don't think us bickering right now is the answer to anything."

"Where are we going, exactly?" asked Andreas.

Rosarius looked at Alanso. "Where's Farias's aunt?"

"Near the stadium," said Alanso. "That's where she lives."

Borrego screwed up his face. "The stadium? Ah fuck, that's gotta be at least..." but he trailed off when he noticed how many black looks he was attracting. "Fine. The stadium it is, then."

On the outskirts of the city, with the midday sun beating down on their backs, the students set their bundle down on the ground.

"This is taking too long," said Alanso, sweat dripping from his hair. "Feels like we've been walking half the day. And this skinny boy of ours is surprisingly heavy. We should have borrowed a cart or something."

"Half the day?" said Borrego. "It hasn't been anywhere near that long. Besides, I carried him most of the way by myself."

"So you did," said Riva. "But you had him slung over your shoulder like a bag of apples. That's not good for him."

Borrego started to object, but Rosarius cut him off. "Let's not start, guys. The quicker we get there, the better." He pointed to a tree. "Move him over there so he's in the shade. Wait here. I'll be back in a moment."

"Where are you going?" asked Andreas.

"Back soon," said Rosarius, and stalked off. It took him longer than anticipated, but he returned with a donkey hitched to wagon and a grubby old farmer.

"That 'im, is it, sir?" asked the old farmer, pointing at Lucius.

"Yeah," said Rosarius. "That's him."

"An' you want me to take 'im to the stadium? Yeh, dunno if I wanna be going that far outta my way."

Without taking his eyes off the man, Borrego touched the hilt of his sword. "I think you do."

The man swallowed. "Right y'are, sir."

Alanso bought some pancakes from a nearby seller. "Now I know it's not the slop we've all come to love," he said as he passed them around, "but it's what's available."

"It's still peasant food," said Borrego, frowning.

Alanso grinned. "I had a feeling you'd approve."

The farmer licked his lips as he watched them eat, but knew better than to say anything without first being spoken to.

"Let's go," said Rosarius, and they loaded Lucius carefully into the wagon bed.

"Go," said Borrego to the farmer. "To the stadium."

"Yessir," said the man.

After discovering that Farias's aunt didn't actually live anywhere near the stadium, and after suffering through numerous geographical embarrassments and other minor tribulations trying to find her real address, the boys finally ended up in one of the city's more affluent districts.

"This must be it," said Alanso, pointing out a modest shingle-roofed townhouse whose façade was hung with a sign bearing a colourful—and also somewhat gruesome—depiction of the use of surgical implements.

"Go ahead then," said Borrego, gesturing at it.

Alanso knocked on the door and an older woman answered. "Yes?" she asked.

"My name's Temir of House Alanso," said Alanso. He gestured behind him with his thumb. "I'm here with some friends from the Bastion."

"And?" said the woman, looking over his shoulder. "What do you need from me?"

"Uh, we're looking for the aunt of one of our friends. His name is Farias."

"I'm an aunt to such a one."

"So you're a doctor then, madam?"

"I am indeed. Is Farias with you?"

Alanso shook his head. "Um, no madam. He's not, but he told us about you. We need your help. We've brought someone who's very sick. He was in the Bastion's infirmary, but they say they can't do anything more for him."

The doctor sniffed. "Huh. That sounds about right."

"Can you help him?"

"How will I know without examining him first? Bring him inside."

Alonso turned and waved. "All right!" he shouted at his friends. "Let's go!"

Rosarius dismissed the farmer with a curt gesture. The man looked sore about having earned nothing for his morning's labour, but he bobbed his head and took off without protest.

Borrego carried Lucius to the townhouse door. Just before they crossed the threshold, Lucius opened his eyes. "Can you hear the bells?" he asked.

"The bells?" said Borrego. "Uh, yeah. Sure."

"Then it's already too late," said Lucius before slipping back into unconsciousness.

Borrego looked at Rosarius. "The fuck was that about?"

Rosarius shrugged. "Dunno. Fever dream?"

"Mm," said Borrego as he stepped into the doctor's home. "This place smells funny."

"That'd be the herbs," said Riva, marvelling at the hundreds of little boxes and bottles that Farias's aunt had stashed around the place. His eyes alighted on a desiccated human hand. "And other things."

"Come," said the doctor. She stooped to wipe off a bench with a rag that seemed well overdue for laundering. In fact, the clothes she wore looked no better. "Lay him out here." Another bench held a fresh-looking corpse that she hastily covered with a sheet. Borrego and Rosarius exchanged looks as Borrego put Lucius down. The doctor waved them away and set about examining her new patient.

"Are these all... glass?" said Andreas, tapping one of the bottles with a finger. "Must be worth fortune."

"Mhm," said the doctor without looking up. "Medicine pays when you know what you're doing." Andreas and Alonso both glanced at the body under the sheet, and then at each other.

"So can you help him?" asked Rosarius.

The woman opened Lucius' mouth and took a good, long look. "To be honest," she said, "I don't know. He's very sick. But I'll do

my best. Anyway, since I like to know who's who when I take on a new case, who's going to do the introductions?" She pointed at Alanso. "I know who you are, Temir, since I already met you."

"I'm Borrego," said Borrego. "Urius of House Borrego."

"Lozano of House Rosarius," said Rosarius.

"Fenli of House Andreas," said Andreas.

"I am Wes Riva of Herena," said Riva.

"Huh," said the doctor, looking Riva up and down with mild surprise. "A northerner. And the patient's name?"

"Lucius," said Alanso. "Darnell of House Lucius."

"Very good," said the doctor. "You can call me Phenah. So, I'm going to write you a short list of things your friend is going to need if he's to have a fighting chance. Bring them to me as soon as possible."

"What things?" asked Rosarius.

Phenah shrugged. "A few simple ingredients."

Borrego folded his arms. "How much will they cost us?" He waved a hand at the angry stares that followed.

"The things I need are not particularly expensive."

"Hmh," said Borrego, relaxing.

"My knowledge concerning what to do with them, however, will cost you considerably more."

"Ah," said Borrego, his face hardening.

"We'll do whatever we have to, doctor," said Rosarius, though he looked at Borrego as he spoke. "Just give us our friend back. Nothing else matters."

Borrego scowled but nodded. "Yeah. What he said."

An excerpt from *The Aftermath of the Battle of the Rock or: The Conclusion of the War of the Brothers* by the bard Lonhedin

The magnificent Rock Palace at Lida was built in the year 25 in the Black Age by the third ruler of Ahrenia's illustrious Ergaeon dynasty, King Perbinice (may his shade dwell in peace in the Otherworld). When he built the wondrous Rock Palace, the righteous and goodly king also shifted the capital from Herena to that place. Prior to that, the capital of Ahrenia had always been Herena. No man in the kingdom doubted the wisdom behind moving the centre of power, naturally.

Now, the virtuous and just king had two loving and devoted sons named Mairn and Goen (may they be remembered with kindness), who lived at the glorious Rock Palace with their celebrated father until he died of natural causes – an occurrence which no man denies – near the end of 34.

Fighting broke out between Mairn and Goen at the beginning of the year 35. War raged on and off for some time. Eventually Goen was besieged at the world-renowned Rock Palace in 39 by his brother, who had rallied support, not abroad as certain slanderers have been known to utter, but exclusively amongst clans in Ahrenia. Goen was heavily outnumbered and the castle was overrun in 41. In his final moments, losing all hope of victory, Goen prayed to the Creators to forgive his transgressions against his worthy brother. In their loving mercy, the Creators delivered him from death and conveyed him immediately to the Otherworld. Thus, the honourable Prince Mairn became the new and rightful ruler of Ahrenia, and his majestic reign was celebrated from one end of the realm to the other with much rejoicing and merriment.

And let no man speak other than the facts contained herein, on pain of having his tongue removed from his jaw.

LORD RIVA

THE SARASINIAN 5th ARMY

SOUTHERN AHRENIA

NEAR BORDIS

Riva spent the best part of the morning readying himself to visit the Torsmen. It wasn't the most opportune time to leave the marching camp, not with battle imminent, but he'd put the matter off long enough. A few days longer and it would almost certainly be too late.

He'd envisioned simply riding out to the followers' camp with a small detachment, but in reality, things turned out to be slightly more complicated. First of all, his security chief, Nohrt, refused to let him leave with anything less than his full bodyguard. They'd argued about that until eventually the man agreed to whittle his escort down to a mere thirty men.

Next, Istome insisted on accompanying him. He knew he hadn't the slightest chance of dissuading her, so he didn't even

try. At least she'd dressed decently for the occasion, hiding herself under a long cloak.

One final problem materialised in the form of Lord Amulius intercepting him before his entourage reached the western gate.

"I regret," said Amulius, wheezing. He had his hands on his hips and his enormous gut heaved beneath his breastplate. "To inform you that you cannot leave."

"I beg your pardon?" asked Riva, looking down at the man from the saddle.

Amulius scowled. "You heard me." He turned and gave his own followers—all purple-crested officers—a pained look.

"I must have misheard you," said Riva, sitting up straight. "Or did you actually say I couldn't leave?"

Amulius cleared his throat. "Correct. I have instructions from our general, Lord Virgilio. No one is to leave the marching camp. That is all. Good day."

"So," said Riva, indicating the gate behind the man, "should I take it to mean you intend to prevent me from passing through?"

Amulius reached around behind himself and scratched his arse. "Well, I do believe the general's instructions weren't exactly unclear."

"Just open the gate."

"Alas, I cannot. I have orders that no one is to—"

"Shut up, Amulius."

Several members of Amulius's staff gasped. The man himself reeled as if struck. "What did you say?"

"I told you to shut up. It's high time, I think, that I put you firmly in your place."

"This is an outrage!" said Amulius. "I'll *not* be spoken to in such a way by you!"

"Dismiss your officers, Amulius."

"I will not! Why would you even—?"

Riva waved a hand at Amulius's men. "Leave." They looked at each other, hesitant, but dispersed.

Amulius put a hand on the hilt of his sword. "What is the meaning of this, Riva?" he said, bristling. "Such a crude display of power!"

"This, from the master of crude displays of power?" said Riva, laughing.

"What do you mean?" asked Amulius, his chins quivering in indignation.

"Remove your hand from your weapon, Amulius," said Riva, looking down at him. "Or do you intend to draw it, perhaps?"

"What?" squawked Amulius, spreading his arms. "What in the world are you talking about? Don't be absurd, man! It was just somewhere to rest my hand, that's all. I didn't put it there intentionally."

Riva glared at him. "I'm inclined to think otherwise."

"It was nothing, truly." Amulius's face betrayed his mounting panic. "On my honour."

"I don't like you, Amulius," said Riva. "You know that, don't you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Riva spat. "I said, I don't like you. In fact, I despise you. I think you're a bloated piece of shit."

"I'm not altogether sure what's going on with you, Riva, but—"

"Shut up, Amulius."

"I—"

"Shut! Up!" said Riva, gripping his mount's reins with white knuckles. Furious didn't quite describe what he was, and it felt good. "One more word from you, and I'll remove your head from your shoulders. And if you ever put so much as a finger on a weapon in my presence again, I'll assume you're challenging me!"

Amulius didn't reply.

Riva spat again. "And here's something to remember for the future: I'm in charge here. Not you. Whatever blood flows through your veins, Amulius, it means nothing to me. In my eyes, you're lower than the filth under my boots."

Amulius just stood there, too shocked for words.

"Oh, and that reminds me—more latrines need to be dug. I've been receiving complaints that there aren't enough latrines."

Amulius licked his lips. "I shall have my people see to it."

"It's when shit starts piling up, Amulius, that men start getting sick."

"Indeed."

Riva narrowed his eyes. "Have *you* ever dug a latrine, Amulius?"

"No."

"Perhaps you should start," said Riva, his eyes falling to the man's belly. "Digging latrines is hard work. Keeps a man fit."

Amulius, who looked like he was on the verge of an existential crisis, merely nodded.

Though he was enjoying the man's humiliation, Riva wasn't quite through toying with him just yet. "Have you seen Lord Mozga about this morning?"

"Lord Mozga?"

"Oh, and here I was thinking you already knew Virgilio's champion?" said Riva. "Seems I was mistaken. In that case, shall I describe him for you, Amulius? Very well. He's Ivorian—which of course means his skin is rather dark—and he's quite tall, too, with—"

"I know *who* he is, Riva," said Amulius, at last managing to gather his wits. "I'm just not sure of his current whereabouts."

Riva nodded. "I see. Then maybe you'd be so kind as to fetch him for me. I'll wait."

Amulius stood motionless for a few moments before stiffly marching off. When he returned, he said, "Mozga shall be here presently, Lord Riva," and then swivelled on his heels if to leave for good.

Riva cleared his throat. "I don't believe I dismissed you, Amulius."

"Lord Riva," said Amulius gruffly, turning back.

"If it's not too much bother, you can open the gate for me as well."

"Oh?"

"Did you not hear me, Amulius?"

"You, er, actually wish to leave the camp?"

"Yes, Amulius. I do. And will."

"I—" said Amulius, stuck for words.

Riva arched his brow, at which the man swallowed and gestured at the soldiers manning the gate. It was promptly opened.

Though Virgilio's champion came loping along soon after, Riva would have been quite happy to keep Amulius standing there awkwardly for a bit longer.

"Lord Riva," said Mozga, saluting. "Lord Amulius. You called for me, yes? How can I be of service?"

"I called for you," said Riva, wheeling his horse so its arse pointed at Amulius. "How are you, Lord Mozga? I thought you might like to accompany me on a short trip beyond the walls."

Mozga bowed. "Of course, general. I should be greatly honoured."

"Good," said Riva. "I have a mount for you."

Amulius watched them, red-faced and with his hands curling into fists, but said nothing. Riva wondered what the man's next move would be. Would he go crying to Virgilio? Would he try to get revenge? If the latter, he'd better do it quickly—he was fast running out of time.

Riva swiftly forgot about Amulius as he rode out of the marching camp with Mozga, Nohrt and his bodyguard. Half a dozen servants trailed behind, Istome among them. He set a casual pace, inviting the Ivarian to ride beside him. "So, Mozga," he said, "I understand this will be your first campaign?"

"That is true, lord," said Mozga. "And yours as well, yes?"

"In a way. It's my first real one of this size, anyway. You must be excited?"

"Yes, lord."

"Although I've been told you don't fight in the ranks?"

"That is so, lord. It is not my style, though I will serve as I must. I am more at home fighting one-on-one."

"Ah. Like the northerners."

"Yes, lord."

"We are mere days from fighting, I think, so I wanted to broach a certain subject with you. You will like what I am going to propose, I hope."

"Lord?"

"Before every battle, it's the Ahren custom to send out their best warriors to duel. Did you know this?"

"I have heard it said, lord."

"Yes. Well, I haven't spoken to Lord Virgilio about it much, though I do remember him saying once that he didn't like it. Didn't particularly like the idea of our men accepting duels, that is."

Mozga nodded. "I see."

"I do think he could be persuaded otherwise, though."

"Ah."

"A man who killed an Ahren champion in a duel," said Riva, raising a finger, "would win himself much renown, not to mention deal a significant emotional blow to the clans. Our enemy is particularly vulnerable to this sort of thing. In fact, it's a major weakness I'm keen to exploit. This is the point I will impress upon the general to try to sway him."

"I understand," said Mozga.

"In the Ahren world, when a man says no to a duel, it is a nod to the superior strength of his challenger. And while there is no shame in refusing, it does tend to elevate the other man's prestige. You follow me?"

Mozga nodded. "I follow."

"So, if we were to refuse the enemy's invitation, it would be seen as weakness. Their army would be emboldened, and their men would fight all the harder. And while there is no doubt that we will prevail under any circumstances, a mere win is not enough for me. I want nothing less than a crushing victory, Lord Mozga! Which is why I would have us accept their champions' calls to fight. Accept, and then kill each of them! It will shake the confidence of their rank and file, making them fight poorly. We'll

butcher them, and their humiliation will be compounded when we drive them from their land. I want this battle to be such a great victory for the League that the Ahren will make songs of their lament. What do you think?"

"If you are asking me to be part of your strategy, lord, then know that I would be happy to do so," said Mozga.

"I am," said Riva, "and I will do everything in my power to make sure you fight."

Mozga bowed in the saddle. "Thank you, lord. I think I would be greatly indebted to you."

Behind them, Nohrt cleared his throat conspicuously. When Riva showed no reaction, he did it again.

Riva smiled and turned around to face him. "Are you all right, Nohrt? Or could it be that you have something to say? I wonder what it might *possibly* be in regards to?"

"I want to fight an Ahren champion as well," said Nohrt.

Feeling playful, Riva pretended to give the matter serious thought. "Hmm. I don't know, Nohrt. Duelling is a terribly dangerous pursuit."

Mozga chuckled, but gormless Nohrt didn't get the joke. "Lord?"

"However," said Riva with a sigh. Teasing the man was as sporting as a foot race against a brick and even less entertaining. "Now that I reflect on it, it's hardly fair to let one man fight and deny another. Is that not so?"

Nohrt first shook his head, then nodded after realising he was meant to be in agreement. "Uh, yes, that's right."

"So I suppose I should let you enjoy a chance to duel, too, shouldn't I?"

"Yes, lord," said Nohrt and then he grinned at Mozga in a way that suggested the man could go eat shit. But the Ivarian took no offence, smiling benignly.

"I have a question for you, Mozga," said Riva. "Something philosophical that I like to ask people from time to time."

"Yes lord?"

"What do you think about the idea that good always triumphs over evil?"

Mozga thought about it. "Not always. But, ultimately? Yes."

"How so? What do you mean?"

"In the days before mankind faces his final judgement," said Mozga, clearly reciting, "there will be a final battle between the gods and foul spirits in which evil shall perish forever."

"Mm. So you believe in the Sarasinian pantheon, then?"

"I do, lord."

Riva pressed his lips together. He held to a different set of gods himself, though not tightly. Still, to each his own. "Very well. Nohrt? How about you? Do you believe that good always triumphs over evil?"

"No," said Nohrt, casting a sideways glance at Mozga. "I don't."

"How so?"

Nohrt shrugged. "I heard tell of a purple shield whose men murdered a score of our people recently. Burned a certain hall down on top of them and everything."

Riva looked at him. Nohrt obviously knew about the reasons for this excursion. But how had he come to know? Perhaps Amulius, not content with merely intercepting his mail, had also divulged their contents? By the gods, he would have the man's head on a spear! "Still just gossip at this point. Besides, what does it have to do with what I asked?"

"If it's not just gossip, lord," said the man with another shrug, "it would be a case of evil triumphing over good, wouldn't it?"

"Not," said Riva, hardening his tone, "if the perpetrators are brought to justice in the end, Nohrt."

That was enough to quiet the man. Riva turned again to Virgilio's champion. "The question of good always triumphing over evil is something I ponder almost daily. I even asked Lord Virgilio about it just the other day, Mozga, and do you know what he said? He said it all depends on how you define good and evil."

Mozga thought about it. "On how you define good and evil? What does that mean, exactly?"

"Well," said Riva. "It means that one man finds evil in a place where another does not. Which is an interesting concept, don't you think?"

"I think," said Mozga quietly, "it's best for men to leave it to the gods to make those distinctions."

"But which gods? There are many faiths, and their gods all seem to require different things of their followers. And these deities, of course, do not always agree with one another. What one deems evil, another deems good! To whom should we defer?"

Mozga didn't seem to know how to reply. The Ivarian surely knew that Riva didn't follow his Sarasinian gods. And he was far too polite, no doubt, to say that he thought the whole of mankind should defer to those gods exclusively.

"What do you think of the idea then, Lord Mozga, that sometimes good men are called upon to do evil things?"

"Maybe they are," said Mozga. A moment later he added, "Usually by men or false gods."

"Let's take murder, for example. Murder is inherently evil, isn't it? I believe that Nohrt even suggested as much just now. Did he not?"

"Yes. And I would agree that murder is evil."

Riva shrugged. "And yet we call murder by another name when it suits us, don't we? When it's sanctioned by law courts it isn't murder, is it? No, because we don't *murder* murderers. We *execute* them instead. We kill them all the time and no one loses sleep over it. No evil there, eh? And yet some might argue that murder and execution are the same thing. That a mere change of words transforms the immoral into the principled?

"And that's just one example. Rulers have sometimes been assassinated for one reason or another, haven't they? Sometimes we call it murder, but at other times we say it was a justified killing. Another word choice based on whether or not we think it's good that a particular man is being put to death. And this is why I think Virgilio is right. It all comes down to whose heart we're cutting out, and why.

"But perhaps you need another example? Well, there's no better one than what we're doing out here, is there? We're making war on the northerners for no reason other than we want their land! That's murder, isn't it? And wholesale murder at that."

Mozga said nothing.

"Halt!" cried Nohrt suddenly. "Visitors!"

Riva looked up. A sizeable mounted warband had appeared on the horizon. His men arrayed themselves for a confrontation, and waited. The warband didn't seem to be making aggressive manoeuvres, however, and eventually a lone rider broke away from the group, a white pennant flapping in his grasp. Riva recognised him as he drew near.

"Greetings, lord," said the man, climbing out of the saddle and getting down on one knee.

"Goraric of Herena," said Riva. He dismounted and walked toward the man, raising him up with both hands. "What is this? On your feet, man. I am your governor, not your king!"

"I bring you formal greetings, Lord Riva," said Goraric. His eyes were puffy and he looked as though he hadn't slept for days.

"And I return them." He indicated the warband in the distance. "I assume you mean to offer us escort?"

"Yes, lord."

Riva chuckled. "Why? Are things so dangerous in the mile or so between my army and its followers' camp?"

Goraric did not smile. "Allow me to speak plainly, lord?"

"Of course."

"Kolf sent us," and here the man made a sweeping gesture with one arm toward the rest of his warband, "partly out of courtesy, but also because he was concerned that some misfortune might befall you on the way."

"Indeed?" said Riva, arching an eyebrow. "Like what?"

"Well... uh, you have enemies, lord. Even amongst the Fifth."

"That's not exactly news to me, Goraric." Riva shook his head. "Every man of standing in the League has enemies. That's just how things are. Do you know how hard it is sleeping with your eyes open? Have you ever tried?"

“Uh, no lord.”

Riva took Goraric’s elbow and guided him until they were out of earshot of the men. “That was my attempt at humour.” And a poor one, obviously, because Goraric wasn’t laughing. He looked terrible, almost haunted, and Riva knew why. Straight to business, then. “So, is it true?” he asked. “The Sarasinians attacked Engund’s Tor?”

“Yes, lord. It’s true.”

“And you were there?”

Goraric took a deep breath. “No. I wasn’t on the Tor that day, but I was nearby. It was the city garrison that did it. Men under a purple shield by the name of Giandelone.”

“*Captain* Giandelone?”

“You know him?”

“I know *of* him. A minor noble. So, what happened, exactly?”

“He and his went to the Tor to collect the annual levy, but by all accounts things went awry.” Goraric transferred his weight to his other foot. “There was a disagreement, and he used it as a pretext for murder. I’ve also heard that he might have even planned the whole thing in advance. Either way, his men killed a third of the people on the Tor, more or less. Made off with a great deal of goods and coin. What cattle wasn’t stolen was killed. And the bloody-minded bastards even burned the hall to the ground with people in it.”

“I see.”

“They killed women and children, lord. Little boys and girls, and even babies. Babies, would you believe? Gutted like sheep.” Goraric hung his head. “And when they left, they took some small girls with them.”

Riva frowned. “But you said you weren’t a witness to any of this?”

“It’s true that I wasn’t on the Tor when it all happened. But Kolf told me the story. I was in the Herenian garrison myself, only that day I was serving with a different company, led by another purple shield, Captain Lamela. We’d been collecting the levy from a smaller hamlet just a few miles from the Tor. Then on the way

back to our camp, we crossed paths with Giandelone's company in the forest. I heard Giandelone himself tell Lamela the same story Kolf later told me. That's how I know what happened is the truth. Not that I would gainsay my uncle, of course."

"And what happened in the forest?"

"Giandelone's company had stopped there to rest. When we found them, they were in a sorry state. I think the captain might have been having some sort of argument with his sergeants. One of them was lying right there on the ground with his cock half chewed off."

"Go on."

"There were four girls there, lord. I saw them with my own eyes. They were from the Tor." Goraric shook his head. "May Owic preserve them, they were just children! One was already dead with her throat cut, and Giandelone might have said something about the injured sergeant having forced himself on her. I think they were raping those girls and killed the one when she fought back, or something like that. I wasn't there from the beginning so I can't say for certain."

"Anyway, it was then that I heard Giandelone tell his version of what happened on the Tor. Lamela listened, but didn't like what he heard. The wounded sergeant was a liability, and the girls were potential witnesses. I didn't hear him say it, but I think he told Giandelone to get rid of him and the girls. And that's exactly what happened. He killed the sergeant with a knife in front of everyone."

"It was then that Lamela ordered us to march out. To my everlasting shame, lord, I obeyed. I did nothing. I should have at least said something, raised some objection to what I knew was going to happen to the girls. But I didn't. I just marched out without even trying to help them. Those poor children. I heard them screaming..."

Riva rubbed his chin. "This... explains much." If nothing else, it was confirmation that the reports about Engund's Tor were more than mere tales.

"There's more, lord. I have another confession to make."

“Oh?”

“I left my company soon after. I had to. I haven’t been at peace since all of this happened. I had to do something, had to try to make amends to the families of the little girls I failed to protect. I wanted to give something to the families who lost everything to the Sarasinians. So, I stole money from my friends and my company commander. I took it, and I went back to the Tor with it. Which was where my uncle found me before we came here.”

“You left your company unlawfully? That makes you a deserter.”

“Yes, lord,” said Goraric, swallowing. “That’s what I am. And I am at your mercy.”

Riva nodded. “I will have to give that particular matter further thought before I pass judgement. For the moment, I want to know why you are here, exactly. Why have you and yours come all this way, to me?”

Goraric nodded. “I am a poor storyteller, lord,” he said with a sigh. “A fact for which I must apologise. After the Tor, but before I deserted my post, Kolf and other Torsmen went to Herena to bring our case before your regent, your good brother. We were told that he was too busy to see us, however, and the guards ordered us to leave. The following day we enquired again, only this time his steward informed us that our business was a matter for the courts.”

“Which,” said Riva, “to be fair, it is.”

“The courts didn’t agree, unfortunately, because no less than three different magistrates directed us back to the regent’s office. And each time, the regent’s steward referred us to the courts again. Eventually we found a company of purple shields waiting for us outside the courthouse, barring our entry. We were charged with disturbing the peace and the Torsmen escorted from the city.”

“And were you disturbing the peace?”

“No, lord,” said Goraric, shaking his head. “I swear it.”

“The charge carries a fine. How much did you pay?”

“Nothing. There was talk of fining us, but I think they just wanted the Torsmen out. Kolf himself was warned not to return to the city for a year and a day.”

“Kicked out of the city, for requesting justice? Now I begin to see why you’re here.”

“Kolf said there was no other option.”

Riva pondered all that Goraric had told him. “Indeed, indeed.” It wasn’t stretch to conclude that purple shields in Herena had plotted to hide their crimes. To what extent were the courts involved, though? And was his brother tangled up in their webs, or had his steward kept him isolated on purpose? And was Amulius connected to all this? If so, it would certainly explain his behaviour. After all, he’d gone to considerable lengths to try to prevent this very meeting.

Goraric looked down at his feet. “We’ve been travelling with the followers’ camp since the beginning. Would you allow us to receive you? We don’t have much, but we would be honoured to have you as our guest. And my uncle will, without a doubt, explain everything much better than I have.”

“Lead on,” said Riva.

Goraric bowed, mounted his horse and rode off.

Riva went back to his men. “Onward. Let’s go.”

Riva’s arrival drew much excited attention in the followers’ camp, even as his retinue spread word that he was on important business and would not be accepting petitioners. It did little to deter the crowds.

Kolf met Riva amid the bustle and attempted to usher him into a large white tent, but Nohrt protested, saying that he wanted to inspect it first. Kolf acquiesced, and as Riva waited for Nohrt to finish his business, carried out an informal inspection of the assembled Torsmen. They greeted him with deference, thirteen men not counting Kolf, each with a polished mail shirt and carrying arms of good quality.

Nohrt declared the tent acceptable, after which Riva entered ahead of Kolf, Goraric and a handful of others. The interior was

decorated with thick blankets, though most were damp from rainwater. Someone dumped a handful of incense on a brazier. As the room filled with sweet grey smoke, Goraric offered Riva their largest cushion, which he accepted, and when he sat, the others stood in front of him in a loose semicircle. Istome entered the tent and took up residence in a corner, out of the way.

"Sit," said Riva. "And let's begin." The men obeyed.

"Welcome again, Lord Riva," said Kolf, "and please forgive the state of our lodgings, such as they are. Er, and the lack of refreshment. I had sent someone to fetch some items, but it seems--"

Riva inclined his head. "Thank you. But that won't be necessary."

Kolf nodded. "Let me just say, again, that we are greatly honoured by your presence today."

"Very good. Tell me about the company you've formed here in this, my followers' camp."

"Yes," said Kolf. He glanced at Goraric, who subtly shook his head. "It seems you are well informed, lord."

"Would you expect otherwise, Kolf of Herena?"

"I would not, lord."

"I hear it described as a *mercenary* company."

"I would be uncomfortable calling it such, lord, although I can see why others might."

"Led by yourself."

Kolf indicated the men with him. "We couldn't have gotten by without these--"

"Is it not led by you?"

"It is. I am the captain of said company, lord."

"How many followers do you have?"

"Around eighty."

"Tell me how you started it."

Kolf cleared his throat. "I started it after something happened on the Tor. A certain event that--"

"I know," said Riva, holding up a hand to forestall him. "Your nephew told me. I know about the tax collectors, about the girls

in the forest, and about more besides. What I'd like is for you to tell me the story of how *The Upright Men* came to be."

"Ah," said Kolf, his face reddening. "Yes, lord. That is what we're called, although it's not a name we chose for ourselves. We began as just a handful of Torsmen doing odd jobs to get by, here in your followers' camp. Mere guards and watchmen. We did our share of foraging and running messages too, but guarding was our mainstay. Our aim was only to earn our keep long enough to bring our case to your attention. To find justice for those killed by the purple shields."

Riva inclined his head. "Go on."

"We had no intention of staying here long. But as the days rolled by, we resigned ourselves to being here for longer than we planned."

"I see," said Riva, smiling inwardly at Kolf's way of rebuking him for not answering his letters promptly. The man didn't know anything of Amulius's meddling, of course, and nor would he tell him. A lord need not explain himself.

"So we settled in, even took on a few extra hands. Charity cases, mostly. I don't know what we were thinking with that, to be honest, because we were already having trouble making ends meet. But we put them to work for us all the same. More men joined, and with a growing crew of strangers to manage, I had to lay down some rules about our association. We talked about taking fair pay for fair work. We agreed to take legitimate security jobs only, and never be involved in anything shady. We started running thieves out of camp. Word got around about that, and people started calling us *The Upright Men*."

"But?"

Kolf nodded, grimacing. "Yes, there's a 'but' in every story, isn't there? Ours came in the form of Banker Leonf. He runs a protection racket. He didn't like us because a lot of his... clients... wanted to come over to us. As you can imagine, we've had run-ins with his thugs."

"Mm," said Riva. "I'm sure."

"I wasn't sure what to do at first. We had a general meeting to discuss it, and it was agreed that we'd offer protection to anyone who asked. Actual protection, not Leonf's version of it. And for free, though charitable donations would be gratefully accepted."

"That's certainly an interesting business model."

"It sounds like a quick route to poverty, lord, I agree. But the camp folk went for it. Not so surprising if you consider they now had a choice between paying a nominal sum for actual security or an exorbitant fee for not being beaten up. A trickle signed on with us, then a flood. And that's when the war began."

"War?"

"Very much. Goraric here can tell you about all the fun games he's been playing."

"They're not fun at all," said Goraric, looking down at his knees as he recalled his experience inside the red and gold pavilion. "People are dying out here."

Kolf let out a humourless bark of laughter. "The bodies are piling up on both sides. The banker tried to buy us off initially, but that would have meant things going back to the way they were. When he finally understood that we wouldn't take his coin, he tried to have me killed. I've called for a truce many times so we can sort things out amicably, but the man won't hold to one. We've lost good men to his false promises. So, it's become a war in truth. The Jalut bastard is trying to wipe us out, and gods help me but we've no choice except to reply in kind."

"You know," said Riva with a smile, "I had always thought of followers' camps as exceedingly boring."

Kolf returned his smile but it was fleeting. "We didn't come here with the intention of getting caught up in anything like this. We only wanted justice for our folk."

"I believe you," said Riva. "Just as I believed Goraric when he told me what happened on the Tor, and about the things he saw in the forest afterward. Even if I hadn't heard elsewhere that you have the support of the camp folk, I would know it to be true."

"You don't know how glad I am to hear you say that!" cried Kolf, his face briefly lighting up in joy. "I fear though, that we must ask for your assistance..."

"I anticipated such a request," said Riva, and suddenly every man was still, hanging on his words. "Your war with Banker Leonf cannot continue. I have discussed it briefly with Lord Virgilio and he agreed that this place is not the private fiefdom of such men. So, I have made a decision."

The Upright Men kept their silence as they looked at him hopefully.

"I intend to have a document prepared, a charter to state that your company is acting as my agent in upholding the law in this camp."

"I... don't know what to say," said Kolf. His men exchanged looks of disbelief.

"Further," said Riva, "I shall convene a court of enquiry to find out what happened at Engund's Tor, and to take whatever action necessary subsequent to that."

The man sitting to Goraric's immediate right put his head in his hands and burst into tears.

Kolf looked ashamed. "I humbly apologise on this man's behalf for this display, Lord Riva."

"Don't," said Riva, watching the man's shoulders heave. "It's not necessary."

"The Sarasinians," said Kolf, lowering his voice, "cut down his wife and children on the Tor. Like many of us, he was away at the time. And when he returned, well... he's been like this ever since."

"I am sorry for his loss."

Kolf paused, clearly unsure about what to say next. The silence dragged on, punctuated by his companion's loud sobs. Finally he said, "He can read and write. He's our bookkeeper."

"I see."

After the man's tears eased somewhat, Kolf said, "There's something else I needed to discuss with you, lord. You see, after they burned the Tor, the purple shields also took some of our girls with them."

Riva's mouth became a flat line. "Yes. So I've heard."

"We found the bodies of two of them in the forest. Their throats had been cut. They'd also been... violated."

"Two? I heard that four were taken?"

"That is true, lord," said Kolf, though his voice began to break. "But only two were found. One of whom was mine." He looked away and composed himself before continuing. "It's possible the other two survived the forest. But we don't know for sure."

"And certain people have been putting it about that they are somewhere in this camp," said Goraric.

"Yes," said Kolf, "and the possibility has been driving us insane. It's a huge camp, maybe eight thousand souls. We've gone to great lengths to find them, but searching a camp this size is no easy task." He looked at Goraric. "Personally, I think Leonf made up the rumours himself to toy with us. He's used our desperation to his advantage, dropping hints about where the girls might be and then setting traps for us. For a time he had us believing he was holding them himself, though lately he's been hinting that he passed them onto someone else. We don't know what's true anymore."

The bookkeeper finally ceased his tears and wiped his eyes and nose with the sleeve of his jupon.

"The charter I shall give you will force Leonf to the bargaining table. He won't risk my wrath," said Riva. "And if he has your girls, I'm sure they will be returned to you."

Kolf bowed his head. "To say we're grateful would be an understatement," he said, allowing himself a wide smile. "We are forever indebted to you, lord." There were murmurs of agreement from his companions.

Riva glanced over to where Istome crouched in the corner of the tent. He wondered if she were happier now at seeing Goraric in the flesh.

23

BENE

THE UNIVERSITY OF GERICH ASSET RECOVERY TEAM

EASTERN RENDEROS

MUMOLO

“Keep going as we are?” asked Hassing, his voice a rough whisper under his helm’s visor.

“Yes,” Bene whispered back. He was in charge here, sort of, although Roaoo had said to defer to the sergeant if need be. He felt more like a struggling apprentice than a leader, and so he practically hung off the man’s elbow as they picked their way through the town’s winding back alleys with the rest of the men.

The streets of Mumolo were far too quiet. Yes, he thought, it was just after dawn, a time when you could reasonably expect a fair amount of quietness. But not like this, and not in the bowels of a town so big. Oil lamps should have been leaking rays of yellow light from under doors and between gaps in curtains. People should have been up and busy in their homes, making breakfast and getting ready for work. But there was none of that—

all the signs of domestic normality were absent. Even if he hadn't already known that something beyond terrible had happened here, the eerie silence would have been the biggest clue.

He glanced about. Of course, the carnage would also have been a pretty strong sign. The streets were a mess. Every house looked like it had been ransacked, and broken furniture and household paraphernalia littered the streets. There were bodies everywhere. Most lay amid the wreckage, barely distinguishable from it, though here and there a corpse sat propped against a garden wall or the side of a house. Fortunately, they were all twice-dead and could be safely ignored.

Parts of Mumolo's northern quarters were still smouldering, but the flames hadn't really taken hold. Here on the southern side, the town was untouched by fire. Lucky. Unfortunately, a thick pall of smoke clung to the ground for miles, and the lumpy wet kerchief tied over his mouth wasn't enough to keep him from coughing. He went to adjust it, and banged his hand on his helm. It felt odd to be wearing a helm. An uncomfortable thing, and too heavy by half, but Roaoo had insisted. And it was exactly like a birdcage, not even remotely the horror-faced bascinet that the soldiers wore. They looked menacing; he looked more like a children's entertainer.

Bene hadn't told Khela that he would be accompanying the soldiers into Mumolo. Why? Well, not so much because she would have tried to stop him (though she probably would have), but because she didn't actually *need* to know what he intended. He didn't owe her anything. And she didn't have a claim on him or anything, did she? Fuck, no! He was his own man. He could do whatever he wanted. Besides, he was going into Mumolo because he had to. It was his job and he didn't care if she had a problem with it or not.

Except, fuck it, deep down he sort of did care. And she cared for him as well, probably. Secretly. He imagined that if she had some choice words to say to him when he got back, it would speak volumes about the depth of her feelings for him.

Shit, he sure was hung up on this girl, eh? Despite the ups and downs when they'd been together (mostly downs, if he were being totally honest) and their current ridiculously complicated love-hate, friends-with-benefits, on-again, off-again relationship, he was still crazy about her. He made a vow that if they weren't a proper couple by the time this expedition was over, he would move to another town so he wouldn't have to look at her ever again.

But enough of Khela. He had other stuff to think about right now. He coughed from the smoke. The amount of coughing he was doing was cringe-worthy, but at least the soldiers were spluttering and gagging along with him. Even Hassing. Seeing the toughest of the tough affected in the same way you were felt like a real victory. He just hoped all the noise didn't attract wights. They hadn't seen a live one up close yet, but it was only a matter of time. He hoped he wouldn't fill his breeches when push came to shove. That would be something, wouldn't it? Then everyone could call him 'Shitpants Munning.'

Through they town they went, hacking like old pipe smokers. Then, somewhere deep in the south-west quarter, he spotted a likely target: a bungalow of unpainted wood. It looked intact. Or at least the door hadn't been ripped off its hinges. He pointed. The men deployed in a half circle around it, taking cover with crossbows at the ready.

Hassing tried the door but found it locked. He took out a pry bar to force a gap between it and the frame. Trooper Horvey jumped in beside him to help. Bene couldn't see how he managed to unlatch the locking chain, but the sound of it slamming into the back of the door was like a thunderclap. They all froze.

"Shit," muttered someone, and someone else had a coughing fit.

Shit indeed. This, Bene thought, was a great way to get surrounded by wights. Sure, they weren't the fastest, and yes, their eyesight was pretty poor. But they weren't deaf, and there certainly wasn't a shortage of them. He counted to ten in his

head. Nothing. Not even one wight came to check out the noise, let alone a horde. He counted to ten again. Same result.

Hassing tried the door again. Iron hinges yelped in protest as he cracked it enough to peer inside. Sword out, he opened it fully before disappearing beyond. Horvey followed.

Bene waited. After a few moments, Horvey came back to the doorway and motioned for him to come. Had they found what they needed so quickly? His heart raced. He hadn't been this scared since... well, he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt fear like this. But, reassured that Hassing would protect him, he put one foot in front of the other and started forward. If the sergeant couldn't keep him safe, no one could.

His first impression of the bungalow was how cosy the interior was. In fact, even calling it a bungalow was generous. Not including his tent, it was one of the smallest structures he'd ever been inside. It was dark, but a pair of small windows let in enough light to see by. Well, sort of. And the stink! It smelled like a latrine, only a hundred times worse. He could practically feel it through his eyes!

"Look," said Hassing.

Bene looked. Just paces away, a corpse lay on a mattress, covered by a thin, stained blanket. Perched on the edge of a wicker chair was another body. Female. Green, and with large, fluid-filled blisters on her arms and neck. Something vile had seeped through the bottom of her dress to pool on the floor. "Wow."

"Any good?"

Bene nodded. "Wow." He crouched to get a better look at the dead woman's ankles. Blood was starting to collect in her feet. "Yeah, this is good." It was better than just good, though. She was exactly what they wanted. He felt goosebumps rising on his arms. If the next few hours went according to plan, he would make history!

Using the tip of his sword, Hassing peeled away the blanket covering the body on the mattress. Another female, only much younger than the other, and bald. Curious. Bene recoiled from an

almost boiling wave of stench, then vomited. He was soon grateful for his birdcage helm, even if the steel slats did retain some of the chunkier pieces of breakfast. Unflattering though it might look, it was definitely a practical choice for warriors with weak stomachs. He was less grateful for the kerchief. "Eyuurch," he said, wishing he could untie it and clean up his face.

"Easy now," said Hassing, putting a steadying hand on his shoulder.

"I'm all right." Trying to ignore the warm gunk running down his chin, he turned his attention back to the body on the bed. The skin on the legs was scarlet and blotchy where it touched the mattress, but otherwise it had taken on a waxy yellow sheen. She was absolutely perfect. "We'll take her," he said, unable to keep from grinning. "We'll take both of them."

"Right you are," said the sergeant. He turned to Horvey. "Go and get the gear."

They were almost free of Mumolo. But they weren't in the clear just yet, for the safety of their hilltop headquarters was still a good way off. The going was slow, a situation of his own making. They'd probably have been home already if he hadn't hassled the men shouldering his rotting prizes so much about getting them back perfectly undamaged. He really shouldn't have emphasised (and an unnecessary number of times, too, admittedly) the need to handle the bodies as if they were made of the finest porcelain. At this rate, they wouldn't get back until nightfall! He thought about asking them to hurry things up a bit, but then they'd think him indecisive. Indecisive and weak.

One major problem with pre-wight corpses was that you could never tell when they were due to reanimate. Bene's pair could start wriggling now, in an hour, or tomorrow. If they came back now, at least they couldn't go anywhere or harm anyone. He'd barely stopped looking at them since Hassing and Horvey had readied them in the bungalow, swathing them in blankets and heavy rope. The foulest and yet most precious bundles in the world!

Fact: to date, no one had documented the passage from life to death and undeath. Bene hadn't seen it when a person became ensnared in the object's killing field, but if all went well, he would be amongst the first to witness one becoming a wight. And he was almost certainly the first to come up with the idea of abducting a once-dead in order to do so. For that alone, he was going to be famous. The thought of his future celebrity status made him giddy with anticipation. It was probably why the fetid smoke no longer bothered him. Even the disgusting vomit-soaked kerchief clinging to his lips didn't seem that bad anymore. No, the only scent filling his nostrils now was the sweet, sweet smell of triumph!

A warm, gooey feeling enveloped him as he pictured himself on stage in a packed university auditorium. Standing there before an enthralled audience, with the Warden Master himself placing the Robe of Distinction for Outstanding Service to Learning over his shoulders. All to wild applause, naturally. Oh, and the first few rows of spectators were busty babes in revealing clothes, each vying for his attention with lascivious winks and grins. Sexy brunettes and redheads. And blondes.

Thinking about blondes made every girl in his fictional audience morph into Khela, and from there into naked Khelas. And then, just as they all stormed the stage so the group sex could get underway, the first shard of doubt pricked Bene's ridiculous fantasy.

Shit.

Extremely sobering fact: not all corpses were viable. Plenty of once-dead simply corroded without making the journey to undeath. From rotting green to shrivelled black and nothing in between. For all he knew, the Scouts were carting around a couple of lumps of useless dead flesh.

Shit.

The stage, the Warden Master, the Robe of Distinction, the wild applause and all the Khelas abruptly winked out of existence. He felt stupid to have gotten his hopes up.

Then a new thought struck him: they could always try again, couldn't they? You know, if at first you don't succeed and all that? Keep going until you get the desired results, right?

Shit.

No. They couldn't hang around Mumolo forever. Whether this experiment was successful or not, they had to catch up with *her*.

Shit.

But they could always try again somewhere else, couldn't they? And he might be wrong about the wights—what if they were actually viable? What if everything worked out? Oh, except...

Shit.

Roao would steal the credit. Because of course he would. That was how it worked at the University of Gerich, and he was a fool to think otherwise. *Magister* Roao would get all the glory, and he would be relegated to being some guy who just happened to be there when it all went down. No matter the scale of his achievements, a lowly research assistant could never be permitted to outshine a magister.

Emerging fact: he didn't give a fuck if they never made it back to camp. The soldiers could go as slowly as they wanted. He kicked at a stone, sending it skittering away. Ah, but they were on the edge of town now, with one last walled alley to clear and a stretch of dead ground to cover. Beyond the dead ground, in some thick scrub at the base of the hill leading up to camp, more soldiers were waiting. He couldn't see them, but he knew they were there.

It took almost bumping into Hassing for Bene to realise that everyone else had stopped moving. Baffled, he looked up to see a large green wight blocking their path. A very large male, in fact, and with its back to them. It didn't know it had company yet, but that would change very quickly unless someone took care of it.

"Munning?" whispered Hassing.

Bene nearly gave the order to shoot. But then he had a crazy idea. What if, instead of simply killing it, maybe they could—?

Before he could finish the thought, Trooper Alec fired a bolt into the creature's back.

"No!" cried Bene. "No! Don't shoot!"

The wight heard him. It turned around, its jerky movements a monstrous parody of life.

"Sergeant?" said Alec, glancing at Hassing as he reloaded his crossbow with shaking hands.

"No!" cried Bene again, waving at Alec. "Don't shoot!" He caught Hassing's eye. Something about his expression must have convinced the sergeant to follow his lead.

"Don't shoot!" said Hassing. "Back up." But the soldiers just stood there, flat-footed, staring at the wight. He lifted his visor and snarled at them. "I said, back the fuck up!" This time the men obeyed.

"Sergeant?" asked Alec, more than a hint of panic in his voice. "What are we doing? What are we doing?"

"Shut your mouth, trooper," said Hassing, facing the wight. It stared back at him with dead, milky eyes. The bolt jutting from its chest was apparently of no concern.

Alec licked his lips and shouldered his crossbow. "Let's just kill it and be done with it!"

Hassing shook his head. "No."

The wight just stood there. A cluster of maggots spewed from its mouth and onto the ground. Though he was no expert on the subject, Bene didn't think it wanted to attack.

"But sergeant, that thing is gonna get us!"

Hassing pointed at the man. "Trooper Alec," he said through gritted teeth, "shut your fucking trap! Stand down, and I swear if you say another word, I will fucking break you in half!"

The wight's eyes shifted from Bene to Hassing and back again.

"Munning?" asked the sergeant, his voice low but calm. "I'm assuming you have something in mind?"

Bene swallowed. "Yeah." Though the more he thought about it, the more insane it seemed.

"Over to you, then."

Bene decided to stop thinking, trust his instincts, and just go for it. He stepped forward, holding a hand out to the wight in

what he sincerely hoped it would take as a gesture of good will. "Please. I'm not going to hurt you."

The wight just stood there, dribbling maggots.

"Can you hear me?"

No reply.

Bene let the wight see his palms. "See? No weapons." He took off his birdcage helmet and kerchief and tossed them aside. "I promise you, no one is going to hurt you." He turned to look at Hassing.

Hassing shrugged and put his crossbow on the ground.

Bene and the wight stared at each other for what seemed like forever. Then it took a single tottering step and slowly—ever so slowly—raised one of its bloated arms toward him.

"Fuck me," said Hassing.

The hair on the back of Bene's neck stood up as the creature's other hand moved to the swollen, rotting flesh beneath its shirt. Its mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. More maggots did, though.

Bene thought he understood. "Yes. You are... sick. We know."

The wight lowered its arm and took shambling steps toward him. Soldiers began shouting at him to look out. No doubt they thought he'd lost his mind, but did they also think he'd lost his sight?

Fortunately, Sergeant Hassing voiced his exact thoughts. "Shut the fuck up!" he bellowed at his men. "That's an order! And lower your crossbows, for fuck's sake!"

The wight, apparently spooked by all the fuss, began to shuffle away. But Bene hadn't come this far to just let it go. He gave it encouraging gestures, and told it in soothing tones that he would not let anyone cause it any harm. His sweet-talk must have convinced the creature, because the wight took its next halting steps back toward him.

"That's it," said Bene. "Yes. Come to me. I will not hurt you."

Perhaps the wight understood, for it edged closer and closer until it stood just out of reach.

Bene paused to take stock of the situation. He had beckoned a thing of nightmares to him and it had come. What now? Should he offer his hand? No. Not to a distended bag of maggots that smelled worse than vile. Just breathing was enough to make him feel like he was absorbing its putrescence. If he had to touch it, he would almost certainly throw up again and never be able to stop.

Despite its malevolent appearance, the creature hadn't shown any propensity for violence. If anything, it seemed curious, even friendly. Had it retained some measure of intelligence in its transition to undeath? Was it sentient? Based on what he'd seen so far, it was a distinct possibility. Only one way to find out for sure. "Can you hear me?"

The wight shifted its bulk. Was it just him, or was it favouring its right leg? The mouth opened and closed again. Was it trying to speak? Its chest wasn't moving, which meant that its lungs had probably decomposed. No breath, no voice.

"If you can hear me, friend," said Bene, "raise your hand like you did before."

Slowly, one fat green arm went up.

"Well bugger me," said Hassing behind him.

Bene got goosebumps on top of his goosebumps. Holy shit. He was communicating with the dead! With. The. Dead! He knew exactly what he wanted to ask next. It was something he'd been wondering about from the very beginning. "Are you in pain?"

The wight didn't move.

"Do you feel any pain?" He waited a few moments. Still no response. He realised his error. "If you are in pain," he said, "raise your hand like you did before."

The wight didn't move.

Hmm. Did that mean the creature wasn't in pain, or that it didn't understand the question? "So it doesn't hurt... to be... you? Is that right?"

The hand came up again.

"Ah." He didn't know what else to say. There was no doubt in his mind now that he was communicating with a human being. Wights were sentient, obviously. Or at least this one was. The

implications were staggering. That the creature didn't feel pain was interesting. Even... comforting. To be trapped in undeath was bad enough, but if it also hurt? Talk about a shit sandwich! Of course, not all pain was physical. Which led him to his next questions. "Now I don't mean to offend you, but, er... do you know that you are... dead?"

For the briefest of moments, a curious but unmistakably human expression seemed to cross that hideous, rotted face. Sorrow.

"You know that you're... dead?"

The man raised his hand and then lowered it.

Bene felt as if he'd been punched in the guts. "Do you... know what happened? Do you know how you died?"

The man's arm stayed by his side. He didn't know.

"But you know you're not alive anymore?"

The hand came up once more. Yes.

He desperately wanted to do something nice for this poor, poor soul. "Are you hungry?" he blurted out. "Do you want food? Water? Is there anything I can do for you?"

The hand came up.

"Yes? Water?"

The man didn't want water.

"Food?"

He didn't seem to want food either.

"Then what?" asked Bene, confused. "You want something? What do you want?"

The dead man lurched toward him. The soldiers shouldered weapons, and Bene could practically feel the points of their bolts on his back. He resisted the urge to run, not wanting to even take a step backward if it meant they'd take it as a sign to start shooting. Not knowing for certain if the wight meant to harm him, it took every bit of his self-discipline to stay where he was. "Um..."

The man stopped right in front of him. The smell made it almost impossible not to gag. Even so, he looked into those awful,

clouded eyes. "You want something. I will give it, if I can. Just tell me what you need from me?"

The man held out an arm as if pointing at something behind Bene. Bene turned, tried to follow his line of sight. "Sergeant Hassing? Can you come over, please?"

"Yes," said Hassing, and came to stand next to him. Didn't question the order, didn't even flinch. But the wight shuffled sideways, one arm still out.

"I thought he was asking for you," whispered Bene. "You don't know what he's pointing to, do you?"

Hassing turned to look. "Maybe the crossbow?"

"Do you think?"

"Want me to get it?"

Bene thought about it. "I dunno. Yes?"

The sergeant went to retrieve his crossbow. "This?" Bene asked, indicating Hassing's weapon. "Is this what you want?"

The wight looped a trembling, clumsy finger around the weapon's cocking stirrup, then guided it until it rested against his own forehead.

"Oh," said Bene.

"Munning?" asked Hassing.

Bene wanted to say no. But he knew he couldn't. Instead he nodded, slowly, just the once. The simple flexing of a few muscles, but easily one of the most difficult things he'd ever had to do.

"Be at peace," whispered Bene, and he closed his eyes right before Hassing pulled the trigger.

ROSARIUS**DOWNTOWN SARASINIA**

It was already dark when the boys met at the Red Shell. The guards frowned at their town blades, but ushered them up the stairs and into their suite without comment.

"Don't forget," said Rosarius, eyeing Borrego. "Don't forget what we agreed."

Borrego blew out his cheeks. "Fuck! All right! I promise not to mention the money when Lucius gets here. How many times would you like me to say it?"

"Good. Thank you." He looked around. The room was a little worn, but at least everything had been set up as he'd requested. Cushioned alcoves lined the walls. On a long table, heaping platters of bread, sliced meats and pitchers of beer awaited. There were more mugs than seemed necessary, and benches enough for a small army. Overkill, but he wasn't about to complain. "Hey, this looks all right, boys, don't you think?"

"It looks great," said Andreas. "How come we don't do this more often?"

“Probably because we’ve got no money left thanks to our so-called surgeon,” said Borrego. “I swear, for what we paid that fucking Phena, we could have bought an entire fucking—”

Rosarius glared. “What about your promise?”

Borrego returned the look and then some. “Sod off, Rosy. I said I wouldn’t mention anything *until he gets here*. For right now, I’ll say what I want.”

“So we’ll not be on the subject beyond the next few moments,” said Carranza, holding up a finger, “let’s make sure we’re absolutely clear about Lucius. He pays for nothing. Not for Phena, not for tonight, not for anything. Got it?”

Borrego sniffed. “I never suggested otherwise.”

“Yeah,” said Carranza, eyeing him dubiously. “Uh, all right.”

“Come now, boys! It’s decided. Enough!” said Farias, stuffing a slab of beef into his mouth as he gave the table a once-over. “So, before we get started, let me just say I think tonight is going to be...”

“Epic,” said Alanso.

“Incredible,” said Carranza.

“Debaucherous!” said Borrego, brightening.

“Tit-tastic,” said Andreas.

“Uh, I don’t think ‘tit-tastic’ is even a word, Andreas,” said Farias. “Besides, I haven’t seen so much as a girl yet, let alone a nipple.”

“Don’t worry, they’re coming.” Carranza filled six mugs, handed out five, and raised one. “So then, let’s drink to epically incredible tit-tastic debaucherousness!”

“To epically incredible tit-tastic debaucherousness!” said the boys except for Farias, who rolled his eyes. Nevertheless, six mugs clattered against each other, foamy beer sloshed onto the floor, and they all drank.

“When’s our man getting here, anyway?” asked Andreas.

Alanso shrugged. “Soon, I hope.”

A steward in a leather apron appeared at the door. “Good evening, my lords,” he said, bowing and rubbing his hands as he entered. “How’s the room? Is everything to your liking?”

Borrego belched loudly. "Yep, it's fine. Just make sure you keep the booze coming! Also, where's the fucking girls?"

The man smiled and gave a short bow. "Happy to be of service, sir. And the girls will be with you shortly. Enjoy." He turned to leave.

"Oi, wait up! How many did we order, again?"

"Girls? Uh, I believe there was a request for seven, sir."

Borrego made a face. "Seven? Nah, that can't be right. We need like, what? Another three, at least."

"Another three? It should be no problem, sir. Except...?"

"Except," said Borrego, growling, "you want to be paid up-front."

The man smiled thinly. "If it's not too much to ask, of course."

Borrego wasn't at all happy about it, clearly, but he fished around in his purse until he found a grad. "Will this do?"

The man took the coin and slipped it into a pocket. "It will, sir." Then he departed, closing the door carefully behind him.

"Gods above," said Andreas. "I don't think we need *ten* girls, do we?"

Borrego waved a hand. "No, we do. You can never have enough." He pulled out a seat at the table and the others followed.

"Yeah, dunno what kind of cunt it's going to be three to a goldie, though," said Carranza.

"Are you kidding?" said Andreas. "It'll be more than decent. Has anyone not been here before?"

"I have," said Farias. "And I agree—the Red Shell isn't exactly what you'd call downmarket."

"Gotta say I'm with Carranza on this one," said Alanso. "I'll believe it's good when I see it."

"Pfft!" said Borrego, sneering. "A couple of snobs is what you guys are. Pussy snobs!" He laughed and took a hefty swig from his mug. "The extras are mine anyway, so hands off. Unless you want to chip in?"

"You can't fuck three girls by yourself," said Alanso.

Borrego smiled. "We'll see about that, eh? Anyway, with all the pussy snobs here tonight, I might have to. Besides, you know how I don't like anything going to waste."

"Last time I was here it was awful," said Carranza, wrinkling his nose. "They tried to give me a girl with three nipples, would you believe?"

"Three nipples?" asked Farias.

"Does that mean she had three tits, then?" asked Borrego. "Or what?"

"No, no," said Carranza. "Not three tits. Just an extra nipple on top of one her regular ones."

"So, what'd you do?"

"I asked for a different girl, of course." Carranza stuck out his tongue. "It was fucking disgusting."

Borrego looked at him over the top of his beer. "What? Who gets their panties in a bunch about an extra nipple? You're a fucking idiot."

"Suck my dick."

"No thanks. Heard you're into that kind of thing, though..."

Carranza was on his feet. "Hey, fuck you!"

Borrego drained his mug before pelting it clear across the room. "Wanna take me on, Carranza?" he said, puffing out his chest. "I'll take you on, bitch."

"Who the fuck are you calling a bitch? You useless lump of shit!"

"That's it," said Borrego, getting up. "You're gone."

Rosarius banged on the table with both fists. "Woah! Woah! Woah! Sit the fuck down, Borrego. No one is taking anyone on. Fucking knock it off, both of you. We did *not* come here to fight!"

Carranza and Borrego glared at each other. Finally, Carranza nodded. "Yeah. Fine. At least *I* certainly didn't come here to fight."

"Fair enough," said Borrego, sitting again. "I didn't, either."

"Good," said Andreas. "That's better. It's finished, eh? Now shake hands, the pair of you."

Borrego seemed reluctant, but eventually he leaned over and extended his palm. Carranza glowered as he took it.

"There," said Andreas. "That wasn't so hard, was it? We're all brothers, remember? And brothers don't fight."

"Yeah, yeah." Borrego poured himself a fresh mug.

"Fine," said Carranza. "I'm over it."

Andreas poked a hole in the air with a finger. "Boys, we're here to drink, fuck, and otherwise have a good time. Nothing else. You got it?"

"Yeah," said Carranza. "Got it."

"Whatever," said Borrego.

Behind them, the door burst open. Startled, they all flinched and reached for their blades. But they needn't have worried, and grimaces turned to grins as a pack of girls rushed the table in a flurry of colour, greeting everyone with hugs and loud demands for beer.

Alonso leaned in to whisper to Andreas and Rosarius. "Shit. Check out the tits on that one, will you?"

"Which one?" asked Andreas.

Alonso pointed. "Her. The one with the gold pants."

"Oh yeah," said Rosarius. "Very nice."

"Eh, she's all right I guess," said Andreas.

"You gotta be kidding." Alonso gave him a flat look. "She's got tits for days. And she's gorgeous."

"Well I've seen bigger," said Andreas, shaking his head. "And I dunno know about gorgeous. But she isn't bad."

"No, no. She's the prettiest one here by far."

"Eh, we'll agree to disagree. What's with those trousers, though?"

"What do you mean?"

"Might be trying to hide something."

Alonso gave him a look. "Hide something? Like what?"

Andreas snorted. "Like a dick?"

"She does not have a dick," said Rosarius, laughing.

"You don't know that for sure," said Andreas. "And there's really only one way to find out."

"We ordered *girls*," said Alonso, horrified, "and girls don't have dicks! The fuck is wrong with you?"

Alonso shrugged. "Like I said..."

The girl who had formerly worn gold pants (and definitely didn't have a dick) was thumping out a lively beat on a drum, while another played the flute. The rest were dancing around the room in various stages of undress. The boys sat at the table ogling them, laughing, eating and slapping their mugs against the table in time to the music.

Attendants had finished replenishing the beer for the second time when Lucius finally arrived. "Looks like the party's in full swing," he said, sweeping into the room with his arms raised.

The boys got to their feet. "Lucius!" cried Borrego, hastening to meet him. "It's good to see you, brother. Ha, you look good!" He clapped a hand on Lucius's shoulder and steered him to the table where Carranza thrust a mug into his hands.

"He does, doesn't he?" said Rosarius. There were murmurs of agreement, though in truth Lucius's clothes were hanging off him. Phena's skill might have snatched him from an early funeral, but she hadn't been able to keep it from seeming otherwise.

"It's really good to see you guys," said Lucius. Though he had the appearance of a thing conjured from the Otherworld, his wound had closed and the surrounding skin looked pink and healthy. "You have no idea how good!"

"What took you so long?" asked Farias. "We've been waiting forever."

Lucius sipped at his beer. "Am I that late?"

"Eh, who cares?" Farias waved away the thought. "So, what did my aunt have to say, then? Any parting words?"

"Same stuff she's been saying for the past month, really. You know, how it was a near thing but I'll live? All that."

Andreas looked him up and down. "You're still so skinny."

"Mm, I know. It'll be a bit longer before I'm fully recovered. Phena said the weight will come back soon enough."

Borrego grabbed two pitchers of beer. "Sounds good. Drink up then, Lucius!" Turning to Rosarius he yelled, "Oi, Rosy! Where's ya mug?"

"No thanks," said Rosarius. "I'm not drinking tonight."

"Bull fuckin' shit you aren't! Where's ya fuckin' mug, ya big girl?"

Rosarius frowned. "No, I'm serious. Romelo's waiting for me to slip up. I don't want to drop my guard..."

Borrego shook his head. "Romelo? Pah! Forget that prick."

"He's up to something, brother."

"Oh, come on! He's not going to try anything here."

"Borrego—"

"No!" said Borrego, pushing the mouth of one his pitchers into Rosarius's chest. "You can't keep letting that little boyfucker cunt up your life. You won't go here, you won't go there. You can't do this, you can't do that. You're always looking over your shoulder. Well, fuck that noise! Whatever you think that fuckin' piece of dog shit's got planned for you, it isn't happening tonight. You're safe here, brother!" He gestured at the door with his chin, spilling beer in the process. "And I swear to you—and this is an oath now, you hear?—I swear that if that arse rapist so much as pokes his nose through that fuckin' door there, I'll rip his motherfuckin' nuts off and shove 'em down his neck!"

"Mm."

Borrego brandished his pitchers. "Besides, it's only beer!"

"Fine, fine," said Rosarius as Farias found him a mug and Borrego filled it to the top. "I guess one or two won't hurt."

"We're all armed anyway," said Farias, slapping the hilt of the town blade on his hip. "Not only that, there are guards in the hall and more downstairs. And we can always bar the door."

"I wouldn't even fuckin' worry about the door," said Borrego. "Not even your dumb fuckin' cousin would do something as stupid as make trouble at the Red Shell. It's not gonna happen." He looked at the girls as they skipped and shimmied around the room. "I'd watch out for them, though. Wouldn't put it past the son of a bitch to pay a slut to plant a dagger in your ribs or poison your drink. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Great," said Rosarius, frowning at his beer. "Thanks. Right when I was beginning to feel safe."

"You can't keep living like this, Rosarius," said Farias.

"Yeah. So you guys love to remind me."

"It's because we want the best for you," said Borrego. "Look, I've said it before and I'll say it again—we should kill him ourselves. It wouldn't be that hard to do. We could lure the fucker onto the roof of the dorm one night and shove him over the side. It'd look like an accident. Or we could get him during training. A blunt sword can still kill, eh? I mean shit happens, right?"

"A training accident?" Rosarius nodded. "Yeah, you know that could actually work."

Borrego grinned. "We'll talk about it later, eh? Between us I'm sure we could think of a way to kill that cunt *and* get away with it. But in the meantime, let's fuckin' put him out of our thoughts and enjoy ourselves, all right? Drink up, and maybe flirt with one or two of the least dangerous-looking girls, eh?"

Rosarius smiled as a trio of naked women drifted past. "I'll do what I can."

"Look at the tits on this lot!" said Borrego, putting down a pitcher and putting his arm around the closest girl. She laughed and let him bury his face in her chest. Her friends pounced on the big man, one trying to jam a nipple in his left ear, while the third bounced her heavy breasts on the back of his head. "It's tits, tits and more tits!" he cried, and with a roar he upended his remaining pitcher and doused the four of them. The girls screamed and giggled and staggered away flicking golden liquid out of their hair and eyes.

Each of the boys had settled on a girl except for Borrego, who was careful to keep his three within easy reach. Two of the couples retired to the semi-privacy of the alcoves, while the rest ate and talked around the table. Rosarius sat with Gila, a sharp-featured local with mousy hair and full lips.

"Why do you keep looking at the door?" Gila put a hand on his face and turned it towards hers. "I'm naked. You should be looking at me."

"I'm not looking at the door," said Rosarius, lying.

Gila squinted at him. "You're not... er, you know? Are you?"

"Huh? Not what?"

"You know..." She held up a hand and let it fall at the wrist.

"No. Fuck no."

"Are you sure? We hear a lot of stories about you Bastion boys, you know, all living together up there on your hill in your cosy little dormitories."

Rosarius laughed. "Well it goes on, I admit. But I'm definitely not that way inclined."

"Just as well." Though she was already close enough that he could smell beer on her breath, she leaned in further still and kissed him.

"I like your smile," he said.

"Thanks. I like yours too. When you remember you've got one, that is."

"Eh?"

"Seems to me like you're preoccupied with something."

"I suppose I am." Rosarius let his eyes drift to the door. Try as he might, he couldn't seem to shake the feeling that his cousin might burst in at any moment.

Gila took his hand and put it on her left breast. "So why not occupy yourself with something else?"

Rosarius rolled her nipple between his fingers, smiling as it stiffened. "All right. I guess I could at least give it a try."

"Mm," said Gila, biting her lip. "I like that. Hey now, don't forget the other one."

Rosarius kneaded her breasts with both hands before taking one in his mouth. Thoughts of Romelo left his head. "I haven't been with a girl for ages," he said, licking around her nipples. "I'd almost forgotten how soft you are."

"Someone has to be." Gila reached into his trousers and took hold of his hardening prick. "Gods know you boys aren't."

"Yep," said Rosarius, laying a trail of kisses up the side of her neck. She shivered, and as he moved to repeat it on the other side, she intercepted him with another kiss. This time she opened

her mouth to him, and he blinked in surprise. Her tongue felt oddly thick and wet in his mouth, but he went along with it. "What was that?" he asked when they broke away.

"Did you like it?"

Rosarius wiped off his chin. "It was a bit weird with your tongue all, you know, in there. But, yeah. I liked it."

"It's called a soul kiss," said Gila, and she moved toward him again. "It's all the rage in Romelia these days. And it really does things for me." They stayed with their mouths locked together for a while, his hands on her breasts and hers around his shoulders. When she spoke again, her voice was raspy. "I'm ready. Are you ready?"

"Oh, yeah," said Rosarius, his cock straining against his trousers as he fumbled with the buckle on his sword belt. "I'm ready."

"Here, let me." She undid his belt with a practiced flick and his trousers fell to his ankles.

Rosarius's cock stood like a pole. Gila grasped it with one hand and squeezed out a droplet of fluid. She peered at it for a moment before rubbing it between thumb and forefinger. He looked at her. "Gotta warn you, I really haven't done this for a whi—"

"Mhm," said Gila, taking him in her mouth.

"Oh shit," he said. Her mouth was hot and velvety, and she swirled her tongue around the head of his cock in a way that was impossible to resist.

"Give it," said Gila, sensing his impending release. She redoubled her efforts.

"Uunh!" cried Rosarius, his dick twitching. "Oh fuck! That's—" he said, exploding into her mouth. It was all happening far too soon!

She swallowed every drop. "Mm, that was quick."

"Yeah," he said, unable to hide his frustration. Why did she have to look so pleased with herself? He took a deep breath. "I didn't want it to be over so quickly, but..."

Gila took a slice of meat from the table and stuffed it into his mouth. "Don't worry," she said, taking a second piece for herself. She chewed it between sips of beer. "There's always round two."

Rosarius's spirits lifted even as his cock did the opposite. He sighed a happy sigh. "That one went right down to my feet."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I can still feel it in my ankles a little bit."

"Mmm!" said Gila. "I love it when that happens. Sometimes when I cum I get these little orgasms in my hands as well."

The table lurched suddenly, making them recoil. They turned around to see a girl perched on the far end, with Andreas ploughing her roughly from behind. Gila let out a whoop of encouragement that made them all laugh.

Rosarius reached for her hand. "Come on," he said. "It's a bit uncomfortable on this bench."

"All right," said Gila, allowing herself to be led away.

"That's better," said Rosarius as they settled against a pile of cushions in one of the corner alcoves. She smiled but didn't say anything, putting her arms around him and kissing him instead. His hands explored her breasts, her back, her pale little arse. She went for his cock and slowly massaged him back to stiffness.

"Hey now." Gila giggled as Rosarius pushed her onto her back. He got up on his knees between her legs, but instead of mounting her, he bent down and licked carefully up the length of her thigh. The look of surprise on her face delighted him as he nuzzled the edge of her crotch. "Wait!" she cried, trying to wriggle away. "What are you-?"

Rosarius licked around her clit in circles. She stopped moving and closed her eyes. He kept going for as long as he could, but when his tongue started to hurt, he lay alongside her and massaged her with his fingers. He stopped when she hoarsely whispered that she couldn't take any more. At that point, he spread her legs and eased his cock into her. He fucked her hard, spurred on by the sight of her cunt taking him in up to the balls.

"I'm nearly there," he gasped, and she kissed him as he came.

They lay together afterward, practically melting into their cushions. "Where did you learn how to do that?" asked Gila.

"You mean the thing with my hands?"

"Uh huh. And your tongue."

"A girl I used to know taught me."

"Really?"

"Yeah. She couldn't get off otherwise."

"Well I have to say it was pretty fucking good."

"Yeah?"

"Oh yeah." Gila nodded. "And believe me, *nobody* has ever done anything like that for me before."

"Ah, because of how you're a-? Because you-?" He knew what he wanted to say, but couldn't say it.

Gila took his meaning anyway. "Mhm. Yep."

"Yeah, well now they have."

"You don't regret it?"

"What? No. Why would I?"

She closed her eyes. "It really was wonderful. Thank you."

"Can you feel little orgasms in your hands?"

"Actually, I can. Now please shut up so I can enjoy them?"

They spent the rest of the night talking and laughing. She traced her fingers over the myriad scars on his body, even insisted on squeezing the blackheads on his back. She wasn't gentle and seemed to relish the task, proudly displaying the fruits of her labour on fingertips for him to see. He found it oddly erotic. Later, when the other boys traded partners, he declined. Gila seemed pleased by that, and they fucked again before sunrise.

Rosarius floated through the next few days. He carried the scent of her on his skin, and it was almost as if he could still feel her touch. He went back to the Red Shell at the end of the week and asked for Gila, but she wasn't there. He was told that she'd left the city and would return later. A fortnight went by and she still hadn't come back. He spent those weeks trying to convince himself she was just a whore who meant nothing to him.

25

LORD RIVA

THE SARASINIAN 5th ARMY

SOUTHERN AHRENIA

NEAR BORDIS

It was the eve of battle, and like an ill wind, a dreadful kind of euphoria swept through the marching camp. For youngsters, it translated into rough-and-tumble. Excited by the prospect of blades flashing overhead, many were given to arrogant boasting, wrestling, and ostentatious displays of their ability with weapons. Anything to keep from being overwhelmed by sudden thoughts of home and family. Veterans largely sought company elsewhere. Some slept, but most sat with friends and chatted quietly.

A heightened sense of brotherhood saw grudges between men set aside. Some remarkable acts of generosity took place as outstanding debts were forgiven, gifts exchanged, and pledges of eternal friendship offered. And although thoughts of death must have weighed heavily on their minds, no man jinxed himself with

talk about the possibility of not seeing the next sunset, or of losing cherished friends.

In stark contrast to all this, Riva found the mood in Virgilio's tent sour, his staff unusually tense, with some even beginning to snap at each other. The reason for their discomfit was soon revealed: the general had hoped to choose the battlefield, but by degrees it had become apparent that the enemy had beaten him to it. "Bah!" he kept saying as he slouched around, grim-faced and brooding, and it was difficult to get anything else out of him.

As the night wore on, however, and as scout reports and empty wine goblets piled up on the table, the man's temperament began to improve.

"I was mistaken," said Virgilio. "It seems that our enemies have actually done a poor job of selecting the field after all."

"Mm," said Riva. He'd been thinking about Istome. Her skin, her eyes, her perfect mouth. Every now and again, he caught the aroma of perfume, unmistakably hers. She wasn't here, though. For reasons unsaid she had remained in their tent.

"It's not enough merely to occupy the ground, of course. They've the high ground, but one must also prepare it—dig trenches, plant stakes, and the like. Ah, but why am I telling you this?"

Riva pursed his lips. "That's why I'm wondering if it's not a trick."

"More wine?" the general asked, his eyebrows raised, hand resting against the neck of the pitcher.

"Thank you." Riva shook his head. "But no."

Virgilio sagged back down into his chair. "As you like."

"I've only had one, but it's enough for me. I'd sooner keep a clear head tonight."

"Yes, good. Sensible. So, you were saying something about tricks?"

Riva gave a noncommittal shrug. "I was thinking about the possibility that they haven't prepared the ground because they mean to abandon it."

"And why would they do that?"

"Because even with superior numbers, I doubt they'd be foolish enough to besiege a fortified camp like ours."

Virgilio smiled. "They might, but in any case we're going to march out in battle array in the morning."

"I see. But still keep the camp at our backs?"

"Indeed. You were right, you know, when you said they made a mistake by not engaging us sooner. They've had ample opportunity to concentrate their forces and attack where the ground better favoured them. But they withdrew instead, and along an eastern route instead of a northern one."

"It *was* an odd choice," said Riva. "If they'd gone north, they'd have had room to manoeuvre. If they keep going east they'll be trapped on banks of the Asfour, most likely."

"Correct."

"Men will fight like fiends if they have nowhere to retreat."

"And die like dogs if they've no room to move," said Virgilio. "I suspect their leaders have been dithering. Arguing. Agonising over tactical choices. And now perhaps they feel they've run out of them? They're making a stand, I think, on what decent ground remains, and hoping for the best. We'll offer battle, and they shall accept."

"We'll know for sure tomorrow."

"Yes. We will. And speaking of, you're in no doubt as to your role, are you? Is everything clear in your mind?"

Riva looked directly at the general. "It is. Very clear."

Virgilio finished off his wine with a sigh. "Excellent. I have ordered a trench dug ahead of our entire front. Have your men dig one perpendicular to your lines, though not too far out, and make sure it stretches all the way back to the camp. That should go some way to preventing us from being flanked on that side."

"Consider it done."

"Right. And now, Lord Riva, I think it high time we addressed your recent public humiliation of Amulius."

"Address away," said Riva, folding his arms. "But I stand by my actions."

"Take care not to bite off more than you can chew, my friend."

“Meaning?”

“Do you want to start a full-blown feud with the man? I heard that not only were you abrasive in your speech, you even went so far as to challenge him to a fight.”

“I did.”

Virgilio smiled. “And how many duels have you fought, Riva? Real ones, mind. Not training.”

“I know enough to beat Amulius at least.”

“Which is to say none. And while I’ve little doubt you could beat him, what if you were injured?”

Riva shrugged. “He turned me down, anyway.”

“And I suppose that makes you happy?”

“Well it doesn’t exactly make me unhappy.”

“Enough,” said the general, shooting him an angry look. “I don’t need this, so I’ll keep it short: the whole thing is beyond petty and will not continue. I would ask that you suspend your hostilities, please. I have already spoken to Amulius about it, and told him in no uncertain terms that he is not to antagonise you. In the coming days I will bring the two of you together, and you will reconcile.”

“As you wish.”

The general offered a thin smile. “I knew you would see sense. And I do hope you will exercise caution on the field tomorrow, and not act even half as boldly as you’ve done with Amulius. Avoid the front lines. Stay out of danger.”

“I promise, Mother.”

Virgilio’s smile slipped. “Such cheek. Now if you are as sure of your role tomorrow as you say, perhaps you’d like to make your nightly rounds of the men.”

Riva unfolded his arms, but only partially. “Oh? Do you disapprove of that as well?”

“No,” said Virgilio tiredly. “I don’t. But nor do I approve.”

“I read somewhere that Jevad went from fire to fire every night while on campaign.”

Virgilio snorted. “Oh? One campaign and you’re the Destroyer now, is that it?”

"Hardly," said Riva, biting back his irritation at the man's mocking tone. "But what harm is there in talking with the men?"

"No specific harm. But times were very different back then, Riva, as you well know. Our men follow because they must. Jevad's men followed him because they wanted to. And he had to keep such men on side, which he did by appearing more a brother who shared their hardships and less a superior who issued orders from afar."

"I realise all that, of course."

"Do you, though?"

"I do. I get your point. And anyway, I don't speak with the Sarasinians. But I would like the Herenians at least to see me as a fellow soldier, and not just their governor."

Virgilio raised an eyebrow. "And this, even after what I taught you about keeping up appearances? Well, if you truly want what you want, you might consider doing more than fireside chats."

"Such as?"

"Swapping your bed for a bedroll, for one thing. Swapping your wine for water. And as for Istome, why, swapping her for your hand!" The man cackled. "Your fellow soldiers enjoy no such luxuries, I assure you!"

"Indeed," said Riva. The accuracy of the observation stung more than the fact that Virgilio had outwitted him. He shifted awkwardly in his seat, wondering how closely Istome had been following their exchange.

"Don't spend too long out there gasbagging, either," said Virgilio, oblivious to the embarrassment he was causing. Some of his attendants had overheard and were failing at masking their amusement. "Try to get some sleep."

Gasbagging? Riva stood up, feeling quite the fool. Even so, he was careful not to lose his head. "Has any man ever slept the night before battle?"

Virgilio snorted. "A very few, maybe."

"I thought so," said Riva, bowing. "Nevertheless, should I find my eyelids growing heavy, I shall send for you at once to tuck me

into bed." The general clucked his admonishment as Riva departed, hiding a scowl.

Outside, Nohrt and the others stood to attention as soon as they saw him. "Final orders for the night, gentlemen," he told them. "You're to have a trench dug down our right flank."

"Yes, lord," said Nohrt.

"Wide enough to stop horses. Not that we're expecting horses. The trench should have breastworks, too, I think. Any questions?"

"None, lord."

"That's all. You may go."

"As you say, lord," said the man, grinning, then he wheeled around and strode off into the night. The rest disappeared just as quickly, wanting to be gone before he added to their duties.

Riva went back to his pavilion and exchanged his armour for plainer gear. Until now he had worn his black brigandine exclusively, and the men knew him on sight because of it. Tonight he would see how long it took them to recognise him.

"You want me to stay here," said Istome, lying on the bed. It wasn't a question.

"Yes," said Riva.

"They really don't see me as anything beyond your mattress slave, do they?" she asked, stretching.

"Which was exactly what you wanted, remember?"

"I'm just getting tired of the game, that's all."

"You'll be able to reveal your true self soon enough."

"As will you. You could have hidden yourself better from your mentor this past fortnight, I think."

"Why? Do you think he suspects something?"

"No," said Istome, sitting up and facing him. "I know he doesn't. But he does wonder about you."

"In what way?"

"He marvels at your ability to lead an army."

"Why? He knows I went to the Bastion. And anyway, for the most part I just copy what he does."

"Your flashes of immaturity vex him, though."

Riva grunted. "Good."

"So." Istome flashed a grin. "Are you seriously thinking about not taking me on future campaigns?"

Riva looked at her. "Get out of my head, please."

"Swapping me for your hand?" she said, pouting. "It'd be your loss..."

"Why do you ask questions if you already know the answers?"

"Because it's fun." Her grin widened. "So you really mean to keep me, then?"

"I can almost feel you digging around in my brain. Stop."

Istome laughed and lay back down on the bed. "Fine, I'll stop. By the way, don't let Virgilio get under your skin, my love. Forget what he said, because soon it won't matter anyway."

"I'm leaving."

"Will I see you later, or in the morning?"

"I think you already know," said Riva tersely, and he left.

Regardless of what the general had said, Riva was determined to continue his nightly *chats*. He might not be the Destroyer, but he wasn't exactly no one. He was Lord Isidra Erbis Riva, Archon of Herena. Descended from Ahren kings brought low by the Destroyer, but then raised up to serve in his unstoppable armies. "If I want to *gasbag* amongst my men," he muttered to himself, "I bloody well will!"

He walked around the marching camp in search of the men upon whom he would bestow his presence. Seeing a half dozen spearmen clustered around a small fire, he ventured within earshot. If he deemed their conversation interesting, he'd think about joining them.

"So anyway," said a broad-shouldered fellow with a long, black beard, "I'm walking past this knob shop with my little boy, right? He was about four at the time, I think, or maybe five. I don't really remember. Anyway, he sees the sign they have outside and he says to me, he says, 'Papa, what's that?' It was a painting of a cat, of course."

There was laughter from the other men.

"Yeah," continued Long Beard. "So I said, 'It's exactly what it looks like, son. It's a cat.' He says, 'Does that mean they have cats in there?' Now, I should have said no, but I didn't. Instead I say, 'Well, yeah, they do. In a manner of speaking.'"

More laughter.

"The boy gets all excited. 'Can we go in and see the cats?' he asks me. Over and over. I tried to tell him the place was closed, but he could plainly see it wasn't. So, I tell him he doesn't want to go in there, but of course that didn't work either. 'I don't think it's what you think it is,' I said, but he doesn't believe me. He says, 'You said it's a cat house, I wanna see the cats,' and then he starts with the tears.

"Well, I didn't really know what to do. I should have just given him a clip 'round the ear and kept walking, but ah, I don't know what was wrong with me. Maybe I've gone soft in my dotage. Or maybe I was nursing a hangover that day. I dunno. Anyway, I had one last go at trying to discourage the boy. I says to him, I says, 'Yeah, son, there are cats in there, but they're a special kind of cat you can't play with until you're a damn sight older than four.' Or five. But he called bullshit on that as well. So, what else could I do? I took the lad inside."

His companions laughed raucously except for one, a man wearing a dirty yellow tunic. "You took a four-year-old into a brothel?"

Long Beard grinned at Yellow Tunic. "Actually, I'm pretty sure he was five. But hey, before you start judging me too harsh, it was the middle of the day and there were no johns about. And the boy didn't see nothing he shouldn't have, neither. Turns out one of the girls was keeping a kitten for real and she let him play with it. Said it was a nice distraction and thanked me for bringing the little bugger along. Pretty lass, too, she was. Young. Nice tits. Obviously didn't have any kids of her own. If I'd had coin, I think I'd have stayed longer. Of course, the wife wasn't happy about our visit to the 'cat's house' though."

Yellow Tunic slapped his forehead. "Oh geez, this just gets better and better! You told your *wife* about all this?"

Long Beard shook his head. "What? No, of course not. *I* never said a word! It was the boy who spilled his guts about the kitten and the nice ladies, eh? And my wife isn't stupid. She knew exactly where we'd been. Typical woman, wouldn't even let me try to explain. She was so furious she cut me off for a month."

"Ouch," said someone. "That's tough." The men laughed. Even Yellow Tunic cracked a smile.

"Well it was tough on my purse all right," said Long Beard. "Because I went to that knob shop every other day until the wife got over herself. Cost me a small fortune!"

All the men guffawed, Yellow Tunic included. Long Beard winked at him. Someone got up to poke at the fire.

Riva smiled and moved on to the next fire. It was smaller, and there were only two men around it. As before, he kept his distance.

"Wait, wait, wait," said the first man. "So let me get this straight—it was you and another guy, but just the one girl?"

"Yeah," said the second man. "Yeah. And like I said, it was a bet."

"All right. So, how did it go? What happened?"

"Well, we were both laying back on her mattress, right? I mean, he and I were on either side of her."

Man One nodded. "All right. And were you on her right-hand or left-hand side?"

"Umm, I was on her right-hand side, I think."

"Ah. And which way was she facing?"

"She was facing towards us, of course! You want to see the front of the girl, eh? Not the back."

"Sure. Point taken. But if she was facing *towards* you, and you were on the right, then it means you were really on her left."

There was a pause as Man Two thought it over. "Uh, yeah. I guess."

"So, you got her left hand."

"Yeah. Must have."

"Well, that's not good."

"No, it was fine."

Man One squinted. "But she was probably right handed, eh? I mean, chances are. That means the other guy got her right hand, doesn't it? So he would've had a clear advantage."

"Actually, I'm pretty sure she *was* right-handed."

"So then the other guy definitely had a clear advantage, like I said."

Man Two shook his head. "No. Not necessarily. It really seemed like she was trying to make up for not being left-handed. It felt like she was putting in extra effort to compensate, I mean."

"Ah. Because she was conscious of it not being her dominant hand?"

"Who knows? Maybe."

"All right. So who won?"

"Well, let's just say the other guy should have bet on which one of us would've been *last* off."

Both men laughed. Riva chuckled, shook his head, and decided to press on.

Around the next fire sat three young officers.

"So yeah," one of them was saying, "I'm not arguing that point. What I'm saying is, there's no way the battle happened like the history books say it did. The chroniclers fuckin' prettied it up later, or glossed over it. You know, whitewashed it for the sake of the losing side?"

"How do you figure, though?" asked another. "Why would they do that?"

"Well, look," said the first man. "The worst kind of war is a civil war, right? Once it's over, win or lose, at some point both sides must reconcile. They have to let bygones be bygones. They have to kiss and make up, you know? If they don't, things will keep festering and sooner or later the stage will be set for another confrontation. Seeds of war, an' all that. You get me? So, what I'm saying is that what was written about the war afterward doesn't make sense."

"Get to the point."

"All right. Prince Goen loses the Battle of the Rock to his brother, right? He retreats to his stronghold with the shattered remnants of his army. Now, I'm fine with what the books say up until that point. It sounds realistic, I think. Goen lost the battle and Mairn besieged him in his last fortress, slowly starving him out. I've got no problem believing that. But here comes the part I just can't wrap my head around: the bit where Prince Goen prays to the gods."

"You don't think he did?"

"Pray? Oh, I'm sure he did. Goen probably prayed to the gods until he was blue in the face. But I *don't* believe he confessed to being the one who started the war. And I *don't* believe he begged for their forgiveness, either. And I especially *don't* believe that the gods answered his prayers by magically transporting him to the Otherworld."

The man's companion seemed shocked. "You don't think it really happened?"

"No. No fuckin' way it happened! I'll tell you what did, though—Prince Mairn stormed that castle, captured Goen, cut his dick off, and then killed him."

The third officer chose this moment to chime in. "Er, is it just me or does that seem... oddly specific?"

"All right, so maybe it didn't go down exactly like that. At the very least, though, Mairn killed Goen in cold blood and stashed his body where no one would ever find it. I mean, it's a lot more plausible than *oh, the gods whisked him away because he admitted to starting an illegal war! And because he asked nicely to join them and thus extinguish his wrongdoing*. Don't you think? I mean, come on! When was the last time you saw anything like that happen?"

"I don't know..."

"Never. And look, hear me out, all right? The War of the Brothers makes for a great story, and maybe some of it's factually correct. But in my opinion, the ending is a total lie. I think Mairn's side cooked it up. Why? Because they needed something—some sort of device—that would end the war *and* smooth things over

with Goen's supporters. What they came up with was perfect! I mean, with Goen taken to the Otherworld through divine intervention, no one could say it was Mairn who killed him. Therefore, no need for Goen's camp to take revenge. And with their leader gone, also no point in continuing the fight.

"Now, with his brother gone without a trace, all Mairn had to do was stick to the script. We know he made public proclamations to the effect of, 'Well shit, if the *gods* have forgiven Goen for starting a war against me, who am I to hold a grudge?' Thus, Goen becomes a kind of mythical figure. Semi-divine, dwelling in peace in the Otherworld with the gods. And he's blameless, impossible to hate.

"Mairn's inner circle knew the truth, of course. But Goen's story gave them an out, so they went along with it. The alternative would have been to fight on with no chance of winning. So rather than be slaughtered, they threw down their weapons and surrendered. Mairn made them swear fealty to him, then let them go back to their estates. The war was won and he was declared the victor, right? And most importantly, the rightful heir. And everyone was free to get on with their lives."

There was a long pause before the second man replied. "You make some interesting points. But I'd really have to have a good think about this one."

"That's not to say I don't believe in the gods, though," said the first. "I do. Mark my words, eh? I'm no blasphemer."

"Oh no, 'course not. Wouldn't suggest otherwise."

Riva chose that moment to make an entrance. "A fine evening, gentlemen," he said. "How is everyone?"

"We're all right," said one of the men as all three turned to look at him. "How are-?" and then his jaw went slack as he realised who he was speaking to.

"No, no," said Riva, as the men hastily got to their feet. "That won't be necessary. As you were."

Riva sat and peered into the fire. The officers glanced at each other, apprehensive, before joining him. "I couldn't help but overhear your take on Mairn and Goen."

The man who had spoken the most coughed in a futile attempt to hide his nervousness. "Lord, of course I meant no disrespect towards--"

Riva waved his words away. "Oh, of course. For what it's worth, I thought your argument was actually quite compelling."

The man shook his head. "Even so, I, uh, shouldn't have spoken about it so bluntly, lord. I was crude where I should have been circumspect. Had I known you were there..."

"Yes?"

"Well, lord, had I known you were listening in... well, I probably would not have, uh, spoken of it in quite the way I did."

"How would you have spoken of it?"

"I... probably wouldn't have."

Riva nodded. "You'd have not wanted to risk offending me because Prince Mairn is my ancestor, you mean?"

"Lord, I must--"

"You're a soldier!" said Riva forcefully, startling everyone. "Are you not? Not a courtier! Tell me honestly--do you believe that Mairn cut Goen's dick off before he killed him?"

The man nodded and then cleared his throat. "Uh, well..."

"Answer the question."

"Forgive me, lord, but that's how I always imagined Goen's death."

Riva smiled. "Why? Because Goen raped him when they were boys?"

"Because of that, yes, but also because it was what Mairn did with captured enemies. It was his signature move."

Riva turned to the man's companions. "And what about the rest of you? Do you think Mairn cut Goen's dick off before he killed him or not?"

"Er," said the first, "Lord I, uh... don't really know enough about the subject to be able to say one way or another..."

"I don't know either, lord," said the other.

Riva looked at the first man again. "What is your name?"

The man swallowed. "It's Gualtius, lord."

"Gualtius." Riva produced his silver flask, removed the plug, and passed it to the man. "Here. Try this, Gualtius."

Gualtius carefully accepted the flask and took a sip.

"Don't forget your comrades," said Riva, gesturing at the others. Gualtius handed the flask to the man on his left, who also took a sip before passing it on. "What are your names?"

"Grigan, lord."

"Eichel, lord."

Riva took back his flask and drank. "You all have surnames. Which is good, because otherwise I think I might have taken exception to your discussing the War of the Brothers so frankly."

Unsurprisingly, no one had anything to say to that.

"The story of Mairn and Goen," said Riva, holding up a finger, "goes back some centuries. My great grandfather, even though he couldn't possibly have been at the Battle of the Rock, was nevertheless convinced that Mairn did indeed cut Goen's dick off. He was actually quite emphatic about it whenever he told the story. Where did you learn about it, Gualtius?"

"An old tutor of mine taught me the official version, lord," said Gualtius. "But the part about the gods spiriting Prince Goen away just didn't make sense to me. It's said that they work in mysterious ways, and I agree, but something about that part seemed... off. It just wasn't believable, you know? I pestered the tutor about it for months until he told me the other version."

Riva laughed. "I find it's the unsanctioned versions of history that are often the most entertaining. And I can't help but suspect they're closer to the truth as well. It makes me wonder how much of our past is invented." He passed the flask back to Gualtius. "You don't happen to know any other tales, do you?"

BENE**THE UNIVERSITY OF GERICH ASSET RECOVERY TEAM****CENTRAL RENDEROS**

It was early evening, hours since the soldiers had snatched his bodies out of Mumolo. Roaoo kept repeating about how even getting this far was a triumph for the ages, but for Bene it wasn't enough. While he couldn't disagree that it felt like a victory, a true triumph for the ages would have been if the corpses also reanimated. So far, unfortunately, they hadn't. And they might not. He didn't realise how anxious he was about the whole thing until he'd chewed three fingernails down to the quick. "Fuck," he said, digging them into his palm. It hurt.

Word of his exploits had spread through camp faster than the clap. The attention was welcome at first, but after a few dozen retellings of his encounter with the wight, the wonder of it had started to diminish. Roaoo was the worst. As soon as they'd gotten back, the man had made him write a lengthy and detailed chronicle of the day's events. Not only that, he had practically stood at his elbow reading every word aloud as he jotted it down.

Oddly, during the course of that awful endeavour, the magister's usually taciturn demeanour had fallen away, exposing a buoyant and enthusiastic personality Bene found disturbing. He'd always thought of the magister as sombre, cold and almost inhuman, so it was bizarre watching him caper about, whooping and jabbing the air like a tyke at a birthday party. He'd found it so unsettling, actually, that he'd almost bitten his tongue in half in an effort to keep from shouting at the man to pull himself together.

"Here he is," said Khela, sidling up to him and putting a hand on his chest. "The man of the moment." She had a handkerchief in the other, pressed tightly to her nose and mouth. The bodies, he had to admit, seemed to be getting whiffier by the hour.

"Hi, Khel."

"Is that contraption going to hold them?" she asked, pointing.

"Oh yeah." Bene looked at the wight enclosure, a rough cage of pine trunks and rope. The door was secured with a seriously heavy-duty chain and the biggest brass lock he'd ever laid eyes on. And that was fair enough, really. But the soldiers had also put up barriers of stakes for good measure. And at intervals around the stakes, they stood with crossbows at the ready. That was extreme. So extreme it wasn't even funny. At least it was good at keeping onlookers at bay.

Khela touched his arm. "I'm a bit surprised to see you alone, actually." Glancing at the soldiers nearby she added, "Relatively speaking."

"Yeah. Been something of a hectic day, hasn't it? Seems everyone wants a piece of me."

Khela laughed. "An understatement if ever there was one."

"Yeah. I guess."

She squeezed his arm. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure." Bene blew out his cheeks. "I guess maybe I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed by everything, you know?"

"I can imagine you'd be feeling quite conflicted. I know I am."

He looked at the wight cage again. "I dunno. It's a lot of stuff. Look, Khel, I don't want to get into anything, but I have to ask—are

you mad at me because I didn't tell you about this morning? That I was going into Mumolo?"

"No," said Khela, shaking her head. "No. Not mad. I mean, I was a bit disappointed that you didn't confide in me. But I figured maybe you had your reasons."

"And what did you think those reasons were?"

"Things are different between us now, Bene." She sounded blue. "We used to be colleagues, and by colleagues, I mean in the true sense of the word. Equals. But we're not any more. You've become Roaoo's deputy, the number two in this party. And I, on the other hand..."

"No, I—"

"Please don't interrupt me," said Khela, giving him an earnest look. "It's true and you know it. You're Roaoo's number two. It's not a bad thing, Bene, and it's no small achievement either. He trusts you, trusts your judgement enough to let you manage so many different aspects of our mission. I mean, you ride with the soldiers all the time now. And today? Wow." She pointed at the bodies in the cage. "I heard it was all your idea—is that true?"

Bene nodded. "Yeah. But I can't take all the credit. Roaoo and Tonneson pretty much nudged me toward it. And Hassing? Holy shit, we would've never pulled this off if not for him. If he doesn't get a promotion out of this, Khel, I swear there's no justice in the world."

"Don't sell yourself short. He might never have pulled it off without *you*."

"Mm."

"I know everyone's been at you for your story all day, so I'm not going to make you tell it again for me now. But can I ask you one thing?"

Bene reached down and took her hand. "Of course. And we're still colleagues, Khel. Equals too, despite what you just said. And we're friends. And I don't mind telling you the story either, if that's what you want."

Khela glanced at the wight cage. "I'll get it from you, but not now. Is it true what they're saying, though? I mean, they're sentient, aren't they? Still human."

"Yes." He paused to take a breath. "They are. There's not even a shadow of doubt in my mind about it. What happened in Mumolo will stay with me for the rest of my life."

"Then promise me something," said Khela, squeezing his fingers. Her eyes were fierce and wet, and the hand with the handkerchief fell away from her face. "Make us chase *her* harder! Make the Scouts hound her day and night, never giving her a chance to catch her breath! They should be out there, right now, just running her down. Why aren't they? That girl has to die, Bene. She needs to pay for everything she's done. This shit needs to end!"

"Well..."

Khela laughed a joyless laugh. "I know what you're going to say. You're going to say it's not that easy, right? Where is she, Bene? Where is she right now, at this exact moment? We don't know, do we? No one knows!"

"Yeah, but—"

"Why does it feel like we're just following her around, waiting to find out what her next target is? And then always after the fact?"

"That's not true. And it's not just us out here, remember? We've got people all over Renderos. Agents. Watching, listening, trying to figure out where she's headed."

Khela let go of his hand. "Fat lot of good it seems to be doing us. I remember you saying something about how we had an agent in Mumolo?"

"Yeah. Leander. And?"

"So where's Leander, then?"

"I don't know. He hasn't surfaced yet."

"Which probably means he's dead, Bene. Exactly like what happened in Sanod. Remember that?"

Bene nodded. Their agent there, probably hoping to become a hero, had led the defence of the village and gotten himself wighted for his trouble. "Of course I do."

"Which kind of proves my point."

"All right, but what would you have us do instead, Khel? Send an army into every town and village in Renderos? It's just not possible. How would—"

Khela sighed. "It's like you're always telling me. I guess I just don't get it. Maybe I never will."

"I don't know how to reply to that, Khel. I'm tired. I don't want to say anything to make things between you and me go pear-shaped again."

"So, what's going to happen?"

"What do you mean?"

She gestured at the cage. "With them. Now, tonight."

"Nothing. We just wait for them to reanimate, I guess. There isn't really anything else we can do."

"And if they don't?"

"I'm still hopeful they will, but if not then we'll have to move on. *She's* already got a day on us at least, so we'll be going in the morning regardless."

Khela nodded. He invited her to sit, and they sat. Neither of them said anything for a long time, but it wasn't an uncomfortable silence. Holding her hand, he stretched out and looked up at the moons.

Khela nudged him awake. "You need to get up."

Bene rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. "Huh?"

"Get up, Bene," she said, smacking his shoulder with the back of her hand. "Quick! The cage—!"

He sat up, instantly awake. "What?"

The air was abuzz with excitement. Roaoo was up near the wight cage, as was Tonneson, and more soldiers had gathered around than he thought they even had soldiers. Everyone else in the camp was trying to get a look, too, but the magister's angry

glares held them back. "Return to your posts!" he barked. "The rest of you, keep the noise down!"

Few obeyed, but Bene didn't care to back him up. Taking Khela's wrist, he rushed over to the magister. "Holy shit, is one of those bodies moving?"

"I think you know the answer to that," said Roaoo, a look of violent ecstasy on his face.

There could be no mistake—one of his corpses had reanimated! He watched, fascinated, as a rotten creature fought to detach itself from its shroud of blankets. There were gasps of horror and amazement all round.

"I'm going to be sick," said Khela, retching.

"Yeah." Bene didn't see her vomit because he couldn't tear his eyes away from the wight cage. He definitely heard her, though.

The corpse attempted to gain its feet, but failed. Some of the soldiers shouldered their crossbows.

"You will not shoot!" Roaoo's voice rose above everything. "Not unless I specifically give the order!" The wight's head swivelled to look at him, his outburst having gained its full attention.

"Uuuuurgh," said Khela, adding to the gastric fluids pooling under her shoes.

Bene spared her a momentary glance. The corpse again tried to stand up, this time grasping at the bars of the enclosure for support. It moved in the stilted way typical of its kind, but finally succeeded. "Khel," he said, open-mouthed. "Khel? Are you seeing this?"

"Attention, villager of Mumolo!" Roaoo called out. "Can you hear me?"

The wight flinched at the sound of his voice.

"Wow," said Bene, goosebumps sending a prickly shiver up his spine and down his arms and legs. "It heard him. Just like with mine. They really can hear."

"Urrch." Khela wiped off her mouth.

Roaoo took a few halting steps toward the cage. "Can you hear me?"

The wight started back in fright, then toppled and fell. The assembled crowd gasped.

"Amazing!" Roaoo gestured at Bene. "Come. With me, Munning."

Bene hastened after the magister, a hush descending as they braved the wooden stakes to get as close as possible to the cage. This close up, the stench was something else. The fallen wight watched them through cloudy eyes, its fat green jaw quivering. She was the larger of the pair, the one he'd come to think of as the mother.

"Why does it not get up?" Roaoo seemed unaffected by the smell.

Bene didn't have an answer, so he didn't volunteer one. "Hello?" he said to the wight.

The wight's head shifted.

"Hello," said Bene again. "Can you hear me?"

She was looking right at him.

"Your daughter," said Bene, kneeling and indicating the other corpse that still lay unmoving under its blankets. "Or your sister, maybe? She's... she's in there with you. We brought you here, together."

At first the wight did nothing. Then, slowly, her head turned to the other body and an oozing arm reached out.

"There's something wrong with its legs," said Roaoo. "I don't think it can get up."

"Yes," said Bene. The wight's movements did seem unusually feeble.

Khela came to kneel beside him so suddenly it made him jump in fright. "Sorry."

Bene put a hand on his chest. "Scared the crap out of me."

"What is it doing?"

"She's trying to reach the other wight under the blankets," said Bene. "And I could be wrong, but I think she's dying. Again."

A tear slid down Khela's cheek as they watched. The wight's movements grew weaker and weaker.

Bene made a decision. "I'm going in there."

Khela grabbed his sleeve. "What? Bene, you can't be serious--"

He ignored her. "Magister Roaoo?" he asked, standing up. "Can I go in there?"

Roaoo looked at him. Surely, he would refuse. But no, he reached into the folds of his robe and took out a large brass key. "Do what you must, Munning."

"Bene!" hissed Khela, tightening her grip on him. "You can't be serious."

Bene looked at her hand, and then into her eyes, and she understood: everything he'd said earlier about them being equals had been a lie. The realisation seemed to crush her, but she nodded and let go without saying another word.

"Thank you, magister," said Bene, taking the key. It felt cold and heavy in his palm. He went to the padlock. He paused, waiting for some dire reaction from the wight. Nothing. He turned the key in the padlock, unlooped the chain and let it fall.

"Look at that," he heard someone say as he pulled the door open.

"What a fucking legend." A male voice, maybe one of the soldiers.

"Here goes nothing," whispered Bene. The door was heavier than expected, but he managed to haul it aside on the third or fourth try. The rope hinges croaked. His fear mounted. Even so, he went in.

He was shaking as he knelt beside the wight, but she seemed to accept his presence. "I'm not here to hurt you," he told her. Somehow the stench barely touched him now. "I'm only here to help." He pointed to the blankets concealing the other corpse. "You want her, don't you?"

The wight's mouth opened and closed. She was trying to speak.

"Yes?" he said, guessing. "I'll bring her to you, shall I?" And with that, he pulled the smaller body toward them and began unwrapping the blankets.

The wight tried to shift her bulk, but her arms twitched uselessly. He sensed what she wanted. Even though it made him

feel ill, he took both her putrescent wrists and put them around the little corpse.

Outside, Khela began to cry.

So did Bene. And he sat in the cage long after the mother went still. No one said a word to him when he finally got up and marched back to his tent.

The following morning, Roaoo patted his shoulder. "The second corpse turned black. Seems she wasn't viable, Munning. Sorry."

"Don't be," said Bene. It was good news. But the magister had already left, and didn't hear his reply.

ROSARIUS**SARASINIA****THE BASTION**

Rosarius had hoped for an easy victory over Dannis and Tavaris, however Fate, it seemed, had other ideas. Borrego's boycott idea proved popular with the students, but it was soundly rejected by the Bastion's administrators. He was shocked when none of the teachers or ancillary staff rallied to the rebel banner; a scant few whispered words of encouragement, but otherwise they lacked the balls to cross their employers. And although rumour had it that Chancellor Loedus himself harboured pro-student views, he was careful to say nothing of the sort in public. No one, it seemed, dared gainsay Eusebio and his wretched son.

For a month, no student attended any classes held by Dannis or Tavaris. The Bastion responded by closing the kitchens. The atmosphere on campus grew very tense, and then Loedus made the situation infinitely worse by announcing the dismissal of all

staff and teachers *except* for Dannis and Tavaris. A nonsensical move, and for the students, the final straw.

Drillmaster Minten's parting words hinted at having left the keys to the armoury in his room. It was a mystery, he said with a wink, how he'd become so forgetful. Rosarius and Borrego wasted no time in finding them. Chancellor Loedus reacted poorly to the students arming themselves, and so did the president of the Bastion Student Council, who wrote a letter demanding the immediate return of the armoury's contents. Borrego let his anger get the better of him, and stormed the Council's headquarters alone. By the time Rosarius got there, the president was missing his front teeth and Borrego had been forcefully restrained. Rosarius threatened every member of the council with arrest unless they let him go. They did, at which point Borrego denounced them as 'massive fucking traitors' and promised to slit their throats if they didn't leave the Bastion. They left.

The same day, certain students smashed their way into the suite shared by Dannis and Tavaris, intending to smear them on the walls. Unfortunately, the pair had already fled. Rosarius tried to find out who might have tipped them off, but his inquiries went nowhere. They left behind dozens of suitcases filled with belongings, one of which included the infamous Healing Stone. It was presented to Borrego who flung it against a wall, breaking it in half.

When Rosarius later received a message that the chancellor was considering having Borrego taken into custody, the boys broke into his quarters and took him prisoner instead. Loedus strongly denied planning any such action against Borrego, but they searched his office and found documents suggesting otherwise. Rosarius ordered a huge bonfire built, and the chancellor was made to stand next to it while the entire Bastion hurled abuse at him.

"You stupid old fuck!" shouted Borrego, inadvertently spitting on Loedus's forehead. "You think we wanted things to go this far? All we wanted was Dannis and Tavaris gone!"

Loedus sighed. "I'd have obliged you if I could, Master Borrego."

Borrego held a fist to the man's beard. "You could have done more. You did nothing to save this place, you miserable son of a whore! I hope you're proud of yourself."

"If you say so."

"If I say so? Don't get smart with me, old man—I'll shove you into this fucking fire!"

Loedus sighed again. "I don't doubt your resolve, Borrego."

Borrego, red with fury, grabbed the chancellor by the scruff of his neck. "You clearly don't understand, do you? All we want is those two pricks gone from this fucking academy, never to return! That's all! You could still make it happen, if only you had the balls to stand up to Eusebio! So, do it. Say you're with us. Help save the Bastion!"

Hundreds of students waved swords and spears, thunderous in their agreement. "Save. The. Bastion!" they chanted. "Save. The. Bastion!"

"I cannot," said Loedus, hanging his head. "There was an executive order. I can't just refuse. I don't have that kind of power. No one does!"

Behind Rosarius, Andreas repeatedly crashed the pommel of his blade against his shield. "Dannis, Tavaris!" he yelled. "Out, out!" The Bastion gradually stopped their old chant and took up this new one, yelling it at the top of their lungs.

Loedus mumbled something and tried to pull away, but Borrego laughed and shoved him at Carranza with instructions to bind the man and find him somewhere to sleep.

Rosarius watched as Loedus was led away. If only they'd been able to capture Romelo as easily. He'd been hoping to settle the score with his cousin once and for all, but he'd apparently escaped the Bastion ahead of Dannis and Tavaris. Perhaps he'd even been the one to warn them of their intended fate. Romelo had hated the pair as much as anyone, but frankly, it wouldn't have surprised him.

"We have Loedus, brother," said Borrego. "That should get Eusebio's attention, don't you think?"

"Yeah," said Rosarius. "Should do."

The next step was to remove anyone who would not stand with them. With the chancellor under arrest, the Bastion was now theirs.

Three days later, the Bastion rebels received their first official envoy. The man rode in through River Gate, the wall above the entrance having been decorated with a pair of tailor's dummies dressed in some of Dannis and Tavaris's captured gowns. Both were peppered with arrows and crossbow bolts.

"Urius Borrego, I presume?" asked the envoy, dismounting.

"Yes, sir," said Borrego. He took the man's hand in his huge grip. "Welcome to the Bastion, General Thaller."

Thaller smiled. "It's truly a pleasure! I've heard quite a bit about you."

"Sir," said Borrego, nodding.

"Ah, yes," said Thaller, turning to Rosarius and shaking his hand. "And you must be Rosarius?"

"I am, sir," said Rosarius.

"I've heard quite a bit about you as well, cadet."

Rosarius nodded. "And I you, general."

Thaller looked at him. "Have you?"

"Yes, sir. I'm keen to ask you about some of your most recent exploits, actually. We all are."

"Ach!" said Thaller, laughing. "We have much to discuss then, I think." He moved past Rosarius to the one student he hadn't yet greeted.

"General Thaller," said Riva, extending his hand.

"Wes Riva of Herena," said Thaller, his eyebrows going up. He took Riva's hand between both of his own, a gesture that Rosarius noted he hadn't done with him or Borrego. "An honour."

"I'm honoured to meet you too, sir," said Riva.

"No. The pleasure is all mine, believe me."

Something about Thaller's tone struck Rosarius as odd, though he couldn't say exactly what. Was he the only one suspicious of the general's cheerful demeanour? "Can we interest you in some refreshments, general?" he asked, gesturing at the door of the building behind them.

"Indeed you can," said Thaller, allowing himself to be guided away.

The night before, Rosarius had ordered some juniors to prepare a room in which to receive their visitor. Though he was not exactly a décor specialist, he reckoned they'd done a pretty good job. Thick woollen carpets, freshly beaten, covered the floor. Cushions lined the walls. Hanging above them, half a dozen lanterns bathed everything in a soft, welcoming light. There was even a silver tray heaped with fruits and nuts in the centre of the room along with a small wheel of cheese, two pitchers each of wine and water, and half a dozen pewter mugs.

"Won't you?" said Borrego, indicating a conspicuously large cushion in one corner.

"Well now." Thaller glanced around. "This all looks very comfortable, doesn't it? Very nice."

"It was an old storage room," said Rosarius. "Until yesterday."

"A cosy space indeed," said Thaller. He sat, resting an arm over the back of his cushion. "I like it." He accepted a mug of wine from Riva with an almost imperceptible nod. All three students took up places around him.

"How are things going in the western provinces, sir?" asked Borrego.

"Well enough." Thaller pulled on an earlobe. "It seems as if every generation or so the Romelians forget who's in charge, eh? We're almost done reminding them, I think."

Borrego and Riva chuckled darkly along with the general. Rosarius, however, again found something troubling about Thaller's tone. "And when should the Bastion expect *its* reminder of who's in charge?"

Thaller smiled at him. "Ah. My joking should not be construed as a threat. No, in fact you'll find in me a man quite sympathetic to your cause, actually."

"Really?"

"Really."

Rosarius gestured. "No one cares that we have Loedus? That we've taken this place for ourselves?"

The general cleared his throat. "By the way, I trust he's still in good health?"

"He is."

"Good. And I wouldn't say no one cares about what's going on, exactly. After all, you have chosen a particularly... forceful... way of expressing your discontent. You can't expect that to be to everyone's liking, can you?"

"And to whose liking isn't it?" asked Borrego.

"I think you already know."

"Meaning the Assembly?" Rosarius looked at the man. "See here, everything we've done was done out of love for the Bastion."

Thaller nodded. "I understand that."

"We couldn't stand by and do nothing," said Borrego.

"Yes," said Thaller slowly, "and *I* appreciate all that. However..."

The boys just looked at him, waiting for him to continue.

Thaller steeped his fingers. "There are all sorts of rumours flying around the city at the moment. Look, I'll be very blunt because I think it's for the best, eh? Certain *political* factions are calling you separatist traitors."

Rosarius coughed. "Wow. That is blunt."

Borrego, predictably, got his back up. "What? That's ridiculous! We're not separatists!"

"Which factions do you mean?" asked Riva. "Who's saying we're separatists?"

The general raised an eyebrow at him. "Who else but Eusebio's staunchest supporters? The diehard traditionalists, that's who. They've denounced your rebellion, citing the

prominent role that you, Riva of Herena, have been playing in it. It's triggered debates over whether or not the Bastion has been seized as part of a separatist plot."

Riva laughed. "That's crazy. All that separatist business is coming out of the Romelias. Do I look Romelian to you?"

"Right," said Rosarius. "It's utterly insane. All our families are loyalists. *We're* loyalists. We have absolutely nothing to do with the Romelian insurgency."

"Look," said Thaller, "I know how tenuous the connection is, but it *has* been established in the eyes of some. Insurgency is all anyone's talking about right now. And for a few, any and all rebels are enemies of the state. Allow me to be very frank with you, gentlemen, all right? I know what you set out to achieve here, but I'm afraid it has the potential to end quite badly. Certain factional heads have strong opinions about what's happening here... and also about how to solve it. Let's just hope cooler heads prevail."

"You've got to be shitting me!" Borrego snorted. "What does that mean, exactly? Is someone planning to take action against us or something? Send in troops, maybe?"

"No one is planning anything at present," said Thaller, shaking his head. "Or at least I don't think they are. It's all just talk. Rhetoric. And sending troops in would be too drastic a step, so you needn't worry about that. You have the blood of practically every noble family in Sarasinia here in the Bastion, and I think it would be a very bad idea if that blood were shed."

"However?" asked Rosarius, sensing there was more to it than that.

Thaller rubbed his chin. "Well, what you're asking for is the reversal of a decree made by the Grand Magistrate's office. He cannot possibly accommodate your wishes without looking weak. Your conduct has embarrassed him greatly."

"Eusebio's office has embarrassed itself greatly with this bullshit," said Rosarius, shaking his head. "And since when does he rule by decree, anyway?"

To that, Thaller offered no reply.

"What did they expect, though?" asked Borrego. "Were we just supposed to roll over and let the Bastion die? Centuries of tradition gone just like that, and all because of some shit bureaucratic decision that should never have come to pass? No, fuck off. This is an outrage."

"It is an outrage," said Rosarius. "How could destroying the Bastion be anything but a disaster for Sarasinia? Or for the League? How can one man simply dismantle us when it's clearly not good for anyone except his idiot son and his idiot son's putrid friends? What about us, the students? This is our home! How could Eusebio have not seen that this was a terrible idea? And why would anyone be blaming us for what we've done, when it was *his* actions that triggered ours?"

Thaller nodded. "I understand your frustration. And these are all good questions. But I cannot answer them. The political climate is extremely turbulent at present. The war in the north was supposed to quell the troubles in Romelia. It was expected that the provinces would come together, that we would all join spears against a common enemy. But instead, the flames of rebellion burn hotter. And now this, with you."

"We get it," said Borrego. "But do you know what Dannis and Tavaris actually tried to do here, general? I mean, do you really? Do you know how they turned this place upside down? I went to this one class where they were teaching us how to apply eyeshadow. *Eyeshadow lessons*. Right here, would you believe, in the fucking Bastion? On my say so, the entire class walked out in protest. It earned us double demerits."

Thaller nodded. "You're every bit as hard-headed as they said you'd be, Borrego. I could use a man like you in Romelia, you know."

Borrego appeared not to hear him. "That's not all they've been doing though, general. Did you know they were trying to make a kind of harem out of the first-year students?"

"A what?" said Thaller, frowning. "Did you say *harem*?"

"Yes," said Riva, his mouth pressed into a flat line. "It was despicable some of the things that were happening here."

"That was *it* for me, when I came to know that," said Borrego. "We've vowed to burn this place to its foundations rather than let those two ever come back here. If the Bastion must die, let it be a mercy killing at least."

"The Bastion is united in this, general," said Rosarius. "The likes of Dannis and Tavaris have no place here. They were sullyng our reputation, making us a laughingstock. We have all taken oaths that they will not return as long as we hold these walls."

Riva cleared his throat and poured four mugs of wine. "It's well known," he said, "that I didn't come to the Bastion of my own free will. I was sent here because of a treaty my ancestors signed. But over the years, I have come to see the men here as my brothers, and this place as my home away from home. I'm most offended to hear that people are talking of what's happening here as if it's some kind of separatist plot. It isn't."

Thaller held up a hand. "Gentlemen, look. I am truly sorry for everything that has happened here. As a former student of the Bastion myself, I am angered by the things I'm hearing. Even I didn't realise things were so bad." He looked at the tray of food with sudden interest. He chose an apricot, stripped the flesh away in two bites, and tossed the seed aside.

"Is it true," asked Borrego, "that Dannis and Tavaris are the jumped-up sons of a pair of merchants who paid to be introduced to Colton?"

"I don't know," said Thaller. "Maybe. What I do know is that I've no wish to waste your time. Or mine, for that matter. Therefore, I will now convey the information I was sent here to convey." He paused to clear his throat. "I have been instructed to extend an offer to each of you, and it's conditional on your walking out of here within a fortnight. The offer is that each of you will graduate immediately and with full honours. You will be given a choice of elite units in which you might gainfully serve the League, and you'll go to those postings in the coming year."

Borrego and Rosarius exchanged glances.

"That's the offer?" asked Riva.

"It is," said Thaller. "What do you think of it?"

"Not much," said Borrego.

"Right," said Rosarius. "It's ridiculous. I mean, *give* us commissions? By right they're ours anyway! Besides, we didn't start this rebellion for ourselves. We started it because we truly believe that a place like the Bastion cannot be surrendered to the likes of Dannis and Tavaris. I, for one, won't ever allow anyone to say that I sold this place out."

"Right," said Borrego. "If we took your offer, we'd be selling out the Bastion. It would destroy our reputations forever. Our careers would be over before they even started. We'd be jokes in our new units."

Thaller looked at Riva expectantly.

But Riva shook his head. "I've nothing to add," he said. Rosarius thought he sounded regretful.

"I fully understand your decision," said Thaller. "And I respect it. Of course, certain people won't be happy about it."

"Too bad," said Rosarius. He passed a fresh mug of wine to the general. "So, what happens now?"

"Mm," said Thaller, accepting his drink. "A good question. Nothing? As I said, you have a fortnight to consider your options. I should be completely unsurprised if, after that, every student in the Bastion receives an offer of clemency."

"Clemency?" Rosarius narrowed his eyes. "Clemency implies we've committed a crime. And what crime would that be, exactly? Defending the Bastion?"

A prolonged silence descended on the room. Rosarius contemplated the next two weeks, competing strategies for dealing with Eusebio whirling about in his head. All of them were bloody and unrealistic. Without Loedus and his administrators, the Bastion's supply of money would soon dry up. They couldn't hope to hold out here for long without coin. What would they do for food? In another two weeks, everyone would be hungry. And bored out of their skulls, too, probably. What then? How many would take the Assembly's offer of clemency and leave? Even if they didn't, what realistic hope did they have of keeping their

rebellion going? He hadn't really discussed the Bastion's long-term future with Borrego and Riva.

Thaller watched him, impassive, drinking his wine. "Look, I really wouldn't worry about it. All the fiery talk from politicians aside, I doubt anything serious will happen here. It's just bluster, I suspect. Forget about it. And I'll be sure to put in a good word for you with Eusebio, all right? He'll listen to me, I guarantee you. Sit tight, and the Bastion will be back the way it was in no time."

"If you say so." Rosarius wanted to believe him. Deep down, though, he didn't. Something about the man's quality and his overall manner spoke to Rosarius of deception.

"I will say one thing," said Thaller with a contented sigh. "It's good to be back in the city."

"How much longer will the Romelian campaign last?" asked Borrego.

"It's basically over." The general said it with a shrug. "Otherwise, I don't think they'd have asked me to come and have this chat with you, eh?"

"Is it true that the rebels staged diversions in an attempt to get their main force into Alinall?" asked Riva.

Thaller nodded. "It is. They hoped to take over the arms factory there."

"Clever," said Borrego.

Thaller nodded again. "It *was* quite impressive, actually. Good leadership, solid planning. But even if they'd succeeded in taking Alinall, they'd not have been able to hold it for long. No, the Romelians made a good go of it, I think, but without proper arms and training it was never going to work. And the battle, such as it was, was an absolute bloodbath."

"And what of Jurl?" asked Rosarius. Despite his misgivings about the general, it was difficult not to get swept up in the excitement surrounding the war with the Romelian insurgents. And, after all, Thaller was a celebrated veteran who no doubt had some interesting stories to tell.

"Missing," said Thaller. "Dead or gone to ground."

"You think he'll regroup and try again?"

“Not if he’s dead, he won’t!” Thaller laughed. “Either way, it doesn’t matter. It’ll be another decade at least before the Romelians recover, so unless the man figures on leading another rebellion when he’s seventy, I don’t see it happening. There are still more than a few armed bands around, though, so I suppose we’ll have work for the rest of the season at least.”

“I’d like to hear more about your campaign,” said Riva. “Are you planning to stay the night with us, general?”

Thaller raised his mug. “Is that an invitation?”

Borrego, Rosarius and Riva all looked at each other and shrugged. “Of course,” said Borrego. “We’ve got plenty of wine. Girls too, if you’re interested.”

Thaller flashed his wedding band. “I don’t think my wife would like that.”

“Fair enough,” said Rosarius.

They all paused to watch Borrego devour half a cheese wheel and chase it down with two mugs of wine. “It’s your loss, general,” said the big man. “Because I can’t even begin to describe the sheer quantity of eager young pussy that’s been climbing this hill since we took it over.”

As if on cue, a half dozen girls skipped into the room, their quivering tits on full display. The general’s eyes went straight to the plumpest one, settling on the rolls of fat bunching above her too-tight skirt. “On the other hand,” he said with a grin, “I never did much care for my wife’s opinion.”

An excerpt from *On Philosophism*, author unknown

The Gerich Show Trials

Though ostensibly held for the purpose of ending the street fighting that had broken out between Philosopher and Philosophist, the Gerich trials only served to fuel tensions. Out of the dozens of participants who were charged with murder, theft and rape, it was chiefly Philosophist leaders who were found guilty. While a small number of influential Philosophers were indeed convicted of capital crimes, almost none had actually partaken in violent acts. If this was not an attempt by the Philosopher leadership to divest itself of troublesome individuals both within and without its ranks, it was certainly seen that way. One notable Philosopher victim was the moderate Ayule of Gemia; part of his testimony survives and is reproduced below.

Ayule of Gemia:

Well, one interpretation is that of the individual Philosopher, whose method reveals truths that have value for all those who agree they have value. The other is that of the Philosophist

Collective, whereby individual practitioners engage in an exhaustive exploration of as many roads of thought possible in order that the “true path” be exposed for the rest to follow.

Hubo of Pluers:

Yes, and it’s who decides what the “true path” is that worries me.

Ayule of Gemia:

I share your concern, of course. But as I was saying earlier, I object to Philosophism not so much because of its methodology, but because its practitioners appear to have dedicated themselves to an altogether dangerous path.

Ampine of Thry:

I am afraid that I must interject.

Hubo of Pluers:

So interject, then.

Ampine of Thry:

Ayule of Gemia, do you mean to say you’ve no issue with Philosophist methodology?

Ayule of Gemia:

I didn’t say I have no issue with their methodology.

Ampine of Thry:

Then why won’t you condemn them and be done with it?

Ayule of Gemia:

I have, have I not? Many times.

Ampine of Thry:

Why not say it again now so we can all hear it?

Ayule of Gemia:

I hereby condemn the violent activities of certain members of the Philosophist Collective. There, does that satisfy you?

Ampine of Thry:

Not at all. This court expects you to condemn not only their actions, but each and every one of the Philosophists themselves. And their vile methodology. Or need I remind you that they've no small amount of blood on their hands?

Ayule of Gemia:

You need not, sir. They do indeed. Of course, our own side is not exactly innocent either.

Ampine of Thry:

Oh? What's this? So you're defending the Philosophists now?

Ayule of Gemia:

No, of course not. Let me repeat what I said: I condemn the violent activities of certain members of the Philosophist Collective. Why do you insist that I condemn their methodology as well? Why, when there's nothing terribly controversial about—

Ampine of Thry:

Are you sure you're not one of them, Ayule of Gemia? Are you a secret practitioner, perhaps?

Ayule of Gemia:

I am quite sure I am not one of them. And what a thing to say, Ampine of Thry! I am nearly at a loss for words, sir. Isn't this just so typical of our fellows nowadays? Here we are, practically fighting for our lives, and yet we've managed to set aside time to eat each other.

Hubo of Pluers:

Order! Silence! Silence! I will have quiet! Members of the gallery will keep their opinions to themselves! And they will refrain from moving into the court!

It is small wonder that the Gerich trials were widely regarded with cynicism and suspicion. Though almost certainly intended to destroy the Philosophist Collective through killing its leaders, in reality the trials achieved the opposite. Fresh commanders were duly found, and in many instances they proved even more effective than their predecessors. Moreover, they were wise to the tricks of devious opponents, and far less inclined to show mercy.

LORD RIVA

THE SARASINIAN 5th ARMY

SOUTHERN AHRENIA

NEAR BORDIS

In the cool darkness of pre-dawn, Riva watched his commanders go about the laborious task of assembling soldiers into ranks. Once in position, men whetted blades and shrugged into mail shirts. Some warmed cold muscles by jogging or jumping in place, while others practiced overlapping their shields. In all likelihood there would be little else to do for many hours yet.

Crews were still working on Virgilio's defensive trench, a jagged scar that stretched over a mile across their front. The channel doubled as a toilet, though only for officers. Ordinary spearmen had to stay in formation and so were forced to relieve themselves where they stood. The lines stank accordingly.

Virgilio's deployment of their forces reflected his confidence. Shunning the protection of the marching camp, he sited his pavilion on the grassy knolls that bordered the western edge of

the battlefield. He would direct the conflict from there, assisted by a small army of runners. Outcroppings protected his position on three sides, with woods and thickets below ideal for concealing men. As the main body assembled, he used their movement as a cover to shift some of his reserves there. The remainder he left in camp, ready to be deployed if or when they were needed.

Nestled inside the muddy banks of a wide brook, the Candran and Romelian troops comprised the army's left wing. In addition to protecting against flank attacks, the brook would keep them supplied with valuable water. The provincials themselves were hardy, seasoned fighters, though considered inferior races by Sarasinians. Shorter in stature compared to northerners, and with little armour aside from iron helmets and padded jackets, they would probably suffer most of the casualties. Even so, they waited, watching the front with characteristic indifference.

The Sarasinian elite occupied the centre. Unblooded youths in front and veterans behind, their lines of purple and silver bristled with the banners of every great southern house and more besides. All wore mail shirts, breastplates, helmets, greaves and vambraces. Fanatical and arrogant beyond redemption, the youngsters sang and cheered, waving their colours with great passion. Green they might be, but they were raised to war and every bit as lethal as the veterans.

On the right, Riva's Herenians completed the line. A mixture of older and younger men, veterans and novices, there was nothing particularly eye-catching about them. Favouring drab colours and content to stand in silence, they were closest to the provincial soldiers in temperament. That said, their gear was more like the Sarasinians and they could be counted on to fight with equal ferocity.

The ground shook as squads of archers, slingers and cavalry moved into position. Most of the horsemen wore purple, but the banner of Herena was there too, fluttering in the breeze. The archers arranged themselves well in front of the infantry, planting arrows point-first in the soil. Slingers found space

behind them, turning out sacks to make piles of stones and lead bullets.

Dawn came, and the Ahren host swelled. Virgilio's scouts had estimated facing forty or fifty thousand men, but it was becoming apparent they were up against considerably more. Riva felt a small pang of fear at the length of their front line. He fretted about the trench along his flank not being sufficient to keep from being skirted, but then a note came down from the general's knoll. Everything looked good, Virgilio wrote, and all Riva needed to do was hold formation. He felt much better for the reassurance, and even managed to eat some boiled beef.

The sun began its slow ascent. Pale yellow rays streamed across the plain, falling on the backs of the enemy and reflected by myriad spear blades and helms. It was a sight to make any warrior's breath catch in his throat, no doubt, but it was also a considerable handicap for the southerners. No matter which way he angled his head, Riva couldn't face forward and avoid the glare at the same time. Putting the sun in their enemies' eyes was one of the few things the Ahren had gotten right. If it would make a real difference to the outcome of the battle, though, he strongly doubted.

Time passed, and the enemy continued to mass. Men arrived on horseback and, seemingly unconcerned with forming up in any discernible pattern, dismounted wherever they could find room. Now perhaps around seventy thousand strong, the Ahren host was so large that from afar it looked like swarming insects. The longer Riva watched, the more certain he became of their strategy. There would be no cavalry thrusts or shock troops. No feints, no false charges, no tricks. They would simply come screaming down the field in a human wave, trusting in numbers to carry the day. It would be something to see, but not the sort of approach that would defeat a League army. The Ahren had obviously learned nothing from past engagements.

Somewhere around mid-morning, after the sacrifice of a bull and twelve sheep, an Ahren rider brought an offer to parley. Accompanied by Virgilio and some senior officers, Riva rode out

into the space between the two armies. It was mostly tall grass and weeds, but they passed a few stunted shrubs and even some patches of wild cana.

The Ahren notables who met them were also on horseback. The first to be introduced was the Eratii chieftain, Secreen, a round-shouldered, sour-faced man in his mid-forties. After him came Baros of the Ulse, bear-like in stature and with a salt and pepper beard down to his waist. He was probably the same age as Secreen. There was also Julanten of the Cimal, a gaunt fellow of at least eighty. Riva didn't think he weighed even half as much as Baros, and his eyes were so far apart he looked like a mantis. A black mask covered the lower half of his face.

Virgilio spoke no Ahren, so Riva offered to translate. The general, however, showed very little interest in learning his opponents' names. He even cut formalities short by curtly telling Riva to go ahead and introduce him so they could finally get down to fighting.

"You are in the presence of General Renaldo Diemoz Virgilio, also known as the Lion," said Riva, indicating the general. "A lord of Sarasinia. He leads the Fifth Army on behalf of the League. And I am Isidris Riva, son of Erbis, and the archon of Herena. The officers with us are—"

Julanten cut him off. "We know who you are." His mask—or perhaps a lack of teeth—made him sound like he was talking around a mouthful of pebbles.

"Yes," said Secreen, giving Riva a sour look. "A poisonous southern lapdog and his master. Were I you, I'd return whence I came."

Riva looked at Virgilio, who frowned. "With respect," he told the chieftains, "I don't think so."

Secreen stared past him. "Hmpf. No matter. We have warriors enough to kill you a thousand times over. Before that, you'll send your champions to fight ours. Agreed or no?"

"Agreed."

Secreen snorted. "I was expecting otherwise."

"No. They'll fight."

"Hmpf," said Secreen again, and then he gestured at a trio of servants. Each carried a wooden tray with an item on it.

"Gifts," said Baros. "As is our custom."

"Many thanks," said Riva, accepting a silver figurine. "Is this Owic?"

"The same," said Baros, bowing in the saddle. "I thought you might appreciate it."

"Well given."

Virgilio received two gifts, the first being a copper mirror and the other a small pair of tweezers. "I get it," he said. "Implying that I'm a woman? How amusing. Tell them it will come back to haunt them."

Riva did as he was asked, but received no response. He waved a hand and one of Virgilio's officers distributed the gifts he'd brought for their counterparts.

"A fine blade," said Baros, unsheathing his new dagger. "Well given."

Julanten received his blade without enthusiasm, and Secreen tossed his at some nameless member of his entourage without so much as looking at it.

"Aren't you going to tell them they're for cutting their own throats?" asked Virgilio.

"If you wish," said Riva, though he didn't see the point. In any event, he didn't get the chance.

"Enough of this farce," said Secreen, clearly out of patience. "We go."

"Aye," said Julanten. At his gesture, men ran the servants through with spears and left them to die on the ground, twisting in agony.

Virgilio looked at Riva, who simply shrugged and said, "Probably an attempt to unnerve us?"

Virgilio laughed. "It didn't work."

Secreen noted his reaction, then turned his horse around and rode off. The other chieftains and their retainers followed.

Noon, and the Ahren sent out their champions, five in all. Not an impressive number by any means, but they walked out to the sound of tens of thousands cheering and beating weapons against shields. The noise gradually subsided, replaced by an ancient song of clannish pride and defiance: *The Ahren*. Every note carried across the field with perfect clarity, and its haunting refrain made the hair on the back of Riva's neck stand on end. The League considered *The Ahren* seditious, and so it was banned. He wondered how many Herenians were following along in their heads; the penalty for singing it out loud was hanging.

The Ahren champions stopped about four hundred paces away, roughly halfway between the two armies and beyond the range of southern bows. They made exaggerated gestures, shouting for anyone brave enough to take them on in single combat.

The Fifth offered five contenders of its own, accompanied by wild applause as they left the lines, and also by the Sarasinians singing *The Sword of Sarasin*. Like *The Ahren*, it was a song to stir the blood, although they weren't even a quarter of the way through it when the enemy started up again and drowned them out. Unsporting though it was, and an ill omen into the bargain, the Sarasinians didn't seem to care. They simply kept going. Their earlier blood sacrifices had been interpreted favourably, and what enemies chose to do before battle was of no consequence. In their minds, they had already won.

As previously arranged, Nohrt had the honour of representing the men of Herena. He went out with his polished armour gleaming, attended by shouted encouragement. He waved to his supporters with no trace of trepidation in his bearing, and when he jumped down into the trench it was only a moment before he was out again on the other side. Though the thing must have been as deep as he was tall, he made it look like no obstacle at all. Riva felt pride, but also envy. What wouldn't he give to be a warrior even half as fearless and capable as Nohrt?

The other duellists followed. It was never a challenge to pick Mozga out of a crowd. He was the tallest man in the Fifth, and the

only leading warrior who wore neither helm nor mail shirt. He carried a greatsword in one hand and Virgilio's yellow pennant in the other. Two Sarasinians flanked him, though Riva would have been hard pressed to put names to them. The provincial troops offered no champions, not due to cowardice but because Virgilio had forbidden their participation. The greater part of the glory must always be reserved for southern masters.

Before the fighters from both sides met, Mozga stopped to push Virgilio's pennant into the soil. The move prompted enthusiastic chatter from the archers, and Riva caught the words *two hundred paces*. You didn't have to be too sharp to know they were talking about the distance at which a steel point would punch through mail armour. Not that many of the Ahren were wearing mail, of course. And the yellow pennant meant nothing to slingers, most of whom could put down lethal lead shot from eight hundred paces away and further.

The duels began with little preamble. At least from where he stood, Riva had a mostly decent view. At four hundred paces, it wasn't possible to hear whatever conversation passed between Mozga and his opponent, but an exchange of words clearly took place. Then the Ivorian stepped away, drew his sword, and cut the air with it a few times. The other man, who carried a similar weapon, did the same. The two swapped words again, perhaps, after which Mozga closed the distance with a single stride, swinging his blade with both hands in a huge downward arc. The Ahren met the attack with the flat of his sword, but Mozga's heavier weapon knocked it back against his body. The man ducked away, perhaps disconcerted by such an inauspicious beginning. Or maybe he was unfazed; it was difficult to tell.

Mozga gestured at his opponent to attack. The Ahren obliged, and Mozga parried with apparent ease. Undeterred, the Ahren planted his feet and brought his sword around hard. Mozga, unwilling to risk his blade, stepped out of the way. As the blow whipped past, Riva expected Mozga to lunge and skewer the man. He didn't, perhaps because the Ahren quickly darted beyond his reach. He was impressively quick. Mozga chased, the man

whirled around, and the Ivarian barely got his blade up in time to save his neck. Steel met steel with a ringing crash. Mozga came off second best, stumbling backward. The Ahren launched a frenzied attack, no doubt eager to rid himself of the Ivarian as quickly as possible. He moved well, but try as he might he could not break Mozga's defence. Wherever he was, so was the Ivarian's sword.

"Ease up," said Riva under his breath. It was hard to watch without wincing, because sooner or later one of those blades was going to snap. It must have concerned the Ahren as well, because he broke off his attack. The two men stopped, gesturing and tossing their heads as if speaking again.

The Ahren then did the most stupid thing imaginable: he pushed the point of his sword into the ground and leaned on it. Mozga wasted no time in taking advantage. The Ivarian was big, but he was also fast, and as the point of his blade raced towards his opponent's chest the Sarasinians let out a roar of victory.

"Got him!" shouted a man ahead of Riva. "Yaaaaaa!"

But the Ahren's ineptitude was a ploy, for his sword was suddenly in hand again and he swatted Mozga's blade aside, stepped around, and cut. The Sarasinian cheering died as Mozga tottered away and the Ahren launched another lightning attack. He rained down blows that the Ivarian had serious trouble turning. At one point, the Ahren feigned a massive overhead blow, of the sort that could split a man in half down the middle. Riva half-expected to see Mozga's sword jerk up in response, but he judged the northerner well and ignored him instead. Fortunate, because otherwise the fight might have been brought to a swift conclusion. He dodged several more of the man's blows, then scuttled away with a hand pressed to his gut and his sword point dragging along the ground. The Ahren fighter sensed victory, and rushed in to deliver the killing blow. Behind the pair, the Fifth took a collective gasp.

But instead of being slaughtered, Mozga dropped his shoulder and charged. The northerner went sprawling, and although he recovered quickly, Mozga was faster. He brought his blade down

on the Ahren's mailed sword arm with all his strength and sent the weapon flying from his grasp. The man instinctively raised his other arm to defend himself, but Mozga cut him down in a torrent of blows. The Fifth erupted in joy; the Ahren host let out a groan of despair.

Mozga knelt beside his fallen opponent for a while, perhaps speaking with him. Then he stepped on the man's arms and put the tip of his sword against his throat. The Ahren didn't seem to struggle. Mozga knelt again after, and... caressed the man's face? At this distance it wasn't clear to Riva what he did, exactly. But then at last he bowed to the enemy host and began limping back to his own lines.

On seeing him go without claiming their champion's possessions, the Ahren cheered him. Mozga turned once to salute them, and their applause redoubled. His movements grew increasingly laboured as he moved, and Riva wondered how badly he'd been injured.

He had little time to ponder. Nohrt fought his chosen opponent next, both men stepping up to batter at each other with axes and shields. The match was at first uneventful, with neither having much of an advantage. But then the Ahren booted Nohrt in the leg, and as Nohrt staggered back, the beards of their axes became entangled. Freeing them became a contest of brute strength, and during the back and forth the northerner let his shield arm drop. Nohrt's reprimand was swift, the edge of his shield knocking his opponent's helm sideways and no doubt rattling every tooth in his jaw. Nohrt then took his axe and dropped the man with a ferocious blow to the neck. The Fifth, and the men of Herena in particular, exploded in jubilation. The Ahren host stood in stony silence.

Nohrt raised his hands to the sky and shouted his victory. He was still celebrating when one of the remaining Ahren champions lunged at him with a spear. The point took him in the back, causing him to fall on his face. He got to his feet, angry and eager to get to grips with this new, impolite opponent. That man retreated while jabbing at Nohrt's face and ankles. Nohrt

sprinted at him, turning spear blows with his shield and swinging his axe overhand. The Ahren tried to block, but his spear shaft snapped and Nohrt's axe ploughed into the front his helm. He plopped onto his arse, stunned, and Nohrt finished him off, caving his head in with heavy strikes.

Another man might have exulted in having killed two foes in quick succession, but not Nohrt. Instead, he chose to vent his fury at being attacked from behind. Whatever he said sparked the ire of the last two Ahren warriors, who came at him together. Neither seemed to notice the pair of Sarasinian champions moving to intervene. One brought a halberd down on the first, felling him instantly. The other used the beard of a great axe to sweep the other man's feet out from underneath him, after which he hacked him apart. The halberdier then decapitated both men and Nohrt flung their heads at the Ahren lines.

The enemy host reacted with rage. By design or on impulse, the middle of their front line burst open and hundreds of men boiled out. Moments later, the rest of the army followed in a tangled mass of blades, beards and thrashing limbs. Nohrt and his companions ran, throwing away their shields and weapons to better make their escape.

"Shit," said Riva, putting on his helm. The Fifth's officers bellowed, and spearmen locked shields and lowered weapons. Ahead of them, archers put fingers to bowstrings, while slingers began loosing shot. "Shit."

The real slaughter was about to begin.

BENE**THE UNIVERSITY OF GERICH ASSET RECOVERY TEAM****EASTERN RENDEROS**

It was late afternoon in camp, with many days and miles between the party and the horrors of Mumolo. The weather was mild and Bene was sitting quietly, working on his notes. For all those small pleasures he was glad.

For other things he was not so glad. What bothered him the most, of course, was the fact that *she* had managed to evade their grasp yet again. They'd very nearly been upon her a few days north of Mumolo, but she'd somehow found a way to slip free. And she was moving more erratically now, too, which was new and unexpected, and therefore of grave concern. Over the past fortnight she had gone east, then northwest, backtracked, and then suddenly veered west. To be fair, she didn't exactly have a lot of options. Had she continued north, she would have eventually stranded herself on the coast of Renderos, with nowhere left to run. An easterly route would have yielded the exact same result. From the interior, however, she could go

anywhere. South, and back to Kanosh, was a most unlikely destination but still a possibility. Directly west lay lands even harsher than most and less travelled. It was doubtful she'd go there, but you couldn't rule it out, either. Most likely she would dodge them. Northwest, and attempt to slip into Bayar, in Sarasinian League territory. Or southwest and Cirum, which was also Sarasinian. Kanoshians were not exactly friends of the League, so if they followed her there, they would almost certainly be received... well, less than cordially. She was ultimately headed there, though—he'd be willing to bet his mother's life on it—and the thought of that kept him awake at nights.

As was too often the case, Bene wasn't in love with the terrain they were travelling through. The forest was gone and the knolls he'd hoped never to see again were back, supplemented by all the joys of a dry expanse of treeless rock and dirt. Ah, but that only made *her* easier to track, or so said the experts. Despite that major advantage, why were they not gaining on her? He'd asked that very question, only to be informed that she was moving faster now, having apparently acquired a horse and several spares. He found it more than a bit hard to swallow, truth be told, but didn't dare say it. Weren't these guys also expert horsemen? As Khela had once said, you'd think they'd just ride her down or something.

"You will absolutely not believe who's a couple now," said Khela, making him jump. The girl had apparently acquired the ability to materialise out of thin air. Her eyes sparkled the way they always did when she had a juicy bit of gossip to share.

"Well hello to you, too." Bene closed his book. "Who?"

"Guess, I said."

"Actually, you didn't."

"Well it was implied."

"Ugh," said Bene, shaking his head. "You know how shit I am at guessing games, Khel. Just tell me."

"Come on, guess."

"No."

"Please?"

"No way."

"Fine." She swivelled her head in what seemed like no particular direction. "It's those two."

He peered around. There were dozens of people about, so he settled on the first pair he saw with their heads together. "Big T and His Magister-y? Wow. You're right, I would never have guessed they'd end up together."

Khela feigned throwing up. "No! Yuck! How could you even-? Yuuck!"

Bene surveyed the camp again. "All right, then it must be... Gansen and Barls? Hmm. Well I can't say it doesn't come as a surprise, but I'm hardly one to judge."

"Ugh. No."

"It's not those two apprentice smiths over there, is it?" asked Bene, one eyebrow raised. "Because that actually wouldn't surprise me."

"All right. Just stop."

"Do you see now why I said it was better if you just told me?"

"Those two," murmured Khela. "Over there. Sergeant and New Girl."

Bene's jaw fell. "Hassing and Agbo? No fucking way! You're kidding, right?"

"Shh!" Khela suddenly sat and pulled him to her so their faces were almost touching. "Not so loud. She's got ears like a... I dunno, what's something with really good hearing?"

"A bear."

"Really?"

"I've no idea."

"Ugh."

"Well that's great and all," said Bene, struggling not to look at Khela's boobs. The problem was, Khela was all boobs. And she was asking a lot of that blouse she was wearing, too, by the way. As his cock inevitably stiffened, he slid his notebook over it and hoped she wouldn't notice. "But how do you know they're a couple?"

"Because they were screwing last night."

Bene's jaw fell again. "They were *not*! Were they?"

"They certainly were."

"You saw them?"

"Well, no, but I definitely heard them."

"I'm not surprised. You've got ears like a bear."

"Shut up," said Khela grinning. She was really enjoying this.

"All right. Go on..."

Khela's eyes gleamed. "They were in her tent. Actually, it wasn't their first time."

"Wow. And you're sure it was them? I still can't really imagine it, to be honest."

"I'm sure. I'm two hundred percent sure."

"That, uh, seems a tad excessive, but then again it's not like you're majoring in maths. Which is probably for the best."

"Bene..."

"Fine. Sorry. But wait—even if they're doing it, it doesn't necessarily make them a couple, does it?"

Khela shook her head. "Oh no, they're a couple. You don't know her like I do. We've been talking. She asked me for advice, actually."

"What? Do you mean, like, sex advice?"

"Well I can't say I didn't give her a little bit of that as well, but mostly it was more like, I dunno... relationship advice."

Bene laughed. "Relationship advice? You? Well that's it, then. It's official—they're screwed."

"Ugh. Stop! I mostly gave her hints about what she could do to get his attention, all right? Besides, it worked."

"Hmm. Well I guess if they're really together, your advice can't have been all that bad."

"And talk about strenuous! You have no idea..."

"Yeah? Wow."

"They're getting less discreet about stuff, though."

"Well, if there's anyone who knows a thing or two about that, it's definitely you."

Khela scowled, her buoyant mood vanishing. "Piss off, Bene. Or I'll just go."

"Sorry."

"Just... don't. It's ancient history, anyway."

"Fair enough, Khel. Well, I'm happy for them. I'm surprised, but I'm genuinely happy for them. So, uh, you were saying something about how they were... strenuous?"

"You've no idea." Khela's cheeky grin was making a comeback. "That little tent of his can barely contain the gymnastics contest they've got going on in it nightly."

Bene swallowed. Was it just him, or was the air between them practically humming with energy? She was so beautiful that it honestly ached just to look at her. He fought the urge to put his mouth on hers. "It's kind of weird though, don't you think?"

"Weird how?"

"Well, I do remember you telling me she wasn't interested in doing any kind of pre-marital stuff. And also considering how he beat the living shit out of her in that swamp, and er, you know what else besides."

Khela shrugged. "Yeah. I mean, sure, maybe theirs wasn't the most auspicious first meeting ever, but believe it or not, that was part of why she chose him."

"Um, all right?"

"She says it kind of, oh I don't know, helped her connect with him or something. I mean, somehow? No, don't go looking at me like that. It didn't seem logical to me at first either, but the way she explains it, it sort of makes sense. Sort of. Oh look, I don't know..."

Bene thought about it. "It's a bit messed up, but hey, who am I to say they're wrong? So much shit has happened on this trip, I'm kind of at the point where if stuff *wasn't* weird I'd be suspicious."

"Yeah. Well anyway, it wasn't some snap decision on her part. Going with Hassing was a bigger step for her than you can possibly imagine. But after Mumolo, after we found out what actually happened to her family and everything? Well, I think all that contributed to it. And then when Roaaa offered to take her on..."

"Mm?"

"Well, it was almost like she was reborn."

"Reborn?"

"All right, well maybe not that, exactly," said Khela, making a face. "But something close to that? Free?"

Bene nodded. "Sure. She's had a pretty traumatic time. She's probably just looking for happiness where she can find it."

"Yeah! And she's tough. I mean, she's all about not letting anything that's happened get the better of her, you know? But I think it's mostly the happiness thing like you said."

"And let me guess... you helped things along by telling her she should grab Hassing by the nuts and enjoy him while she was still alive to do it?"

Khela slapped him on the arm. "Well, I definitely did not use *those* exact words. And I think she'd already come to a similar conclusion anyway. I really just helped validate her decision, if anything."

"Hmm."

"He so likes her, too. Did you know the other day I actually saw him smile? I was so shocked I did a double take. And the way he looks at her? Oh, I wish a man would look at me the way he looks at her!"

Bene wanted to laugh, but didn't. "You're kidding, right? There's a camp full of guys who all look at you that way, Khel."

Her shoulders slumped. "Yeah, I suppose..."

Time to change the subject, thought Bene. He had precisely zero interest in finding out who she'd humped and dumped this week. "Hey, by the way, I've been meaning to ask you how that manuscript of yours is coming along."

She gave him a flat look. "Um. It isn't."

"Ah."

"I haven't written a word since Mumolo, Bene. Literally! Roaoo is going to kill me when he finds out."

"No, he won't. It'll be all right, Khel."

"But you don't know that!" wailed Khela, her voice rising. "He's going to--"

"You'll be fine."

"How do you know?"

"Because I just know."

"No, it's a total disaster, Bene. I've missed all the deadlines. He's going to ask me to leave the university for sure!"

"No, no. Actually, Roaoo said not to worry."

"He said not to-? What do you mean?"

"Well I was talking to him the other day, and--"

"Woah, woah! Talking to him about what?"

"About your manuscript, of course. And about, well, you and your er, situation."

"Oh no!" said Khela, mortified. "Tell me you didn't?"

"Relax. It's all right--"

"Tell me you didn't?" Khela's eyes hardened. "Oh, no! No! I did not give you permission to go blabbing about any of that, did I?"

Bene showed her his palms. "Hey, hey! Stop. Just take it easy, will you? Look, it's not like I went to him and said you were struggling or anything, all right? Shit, Khel, have a bit more faith in me than that!"

"So what *did* you say, exactly?"

"I was talking with him about my own manuscript, that's all, and I just happened to mention how you and I had the same problem. Which is that there are so many variables with the wights and everything, and how everything keeps changing on us all the time. Right? I'm not wrong, am I?"

"No, I guess not."

"Right. Well Roaoo understood the situation better than you think. I mean, what happened at Mumolo practically turned our knowledge of wights upside down. Not to mention the world! How many new theories and discoveries will come out of all that, huh? So, he suggested we both just, well, put our manuscripts aside for the time being. And maybe concentrate on compiling more notes and recording our travels and experiences and stuff."

"Really?" Khela looked genuinely confused.

"Really."

"He actually said that?"

"Yeah, he did."

"So I don't have to do my thesis?"

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," said Bene with a frown. "I mean, c'mon, Khel, of course you still have to do it! Eventually. But we've got some extra breathing space at least. A *lot* of breathing space, potentially. At the rate we're going, I don't think we're ever going to catch up with *her*..."

"And, what, we'll do our manuscripts when we get back or something?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"Wow. I can't quite believe it."

Bene smiled. "He said he was too busy to tutor us at the moment anyway."

"Wow."

"Yeah, I know."

"Thank you." Khela took a deep breath.

"For what?" Bene took a deep breath as well. "I didn't really do anything."

Khela's eyes moistened and tears began to flow. "Oh, Bene. You did. This means a lot. You've really been there for me lately, and I haven't said thank you often enough."

He took her into his arms. "Yes. Well, I am pretty great."

"You idiot," she said, half-laughing, and then began sobbing in earnest.

"Hey now," said Bene, stroking her hair. "It's all right." He held her close and it took all his willpower not to let his eyes linger on her chest. When it stopped its awful (but also tantalising) heaving, he said, "You're still having those dreams of yours, aren't you?"

Khela nodded and looked up at him, her face wet with tears. "Yeah."

"That sucks."

"It does. They're horrible. But I think the worst part is that I don't really have anyone I can talk to about them. Except you. Even Ghislaine's sick of listening to me. She makes herself scarce

if I try to approach her tent these days. Everyone thinks I'm pathetic."

"No. No, that's not true."

"Yes, it is. They do, Bene."

"They really don't, but even if they did, so what? Why would you care what they think?"

Khela disentangled herself from him. "I don't belong out here, Bene. You've said it yourself many times. I'm too soft-hearted, I cry all the time, I'm too emotional..."

"I know I said that, Khel, but I take it back. Whatever you are, I know one thing that's true, and it's that despite everything we've seen and done out here, you've managed to hold onto your sense of compassion through it all. I mean, you saved Barls from the rope, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"And you reminded us that the Renderosi aren't all savages, and that we could probably go a bit easier on them. Which we have, I think. And you were instrumental in getting Agbo to join us—don't forget about that. So, all these things make you the opposite of pathetic. And if they're the result of you being soft-hearted, well, maybe a little soft-heartedness isn't all bad."

Khela smiled. "That's a sweet thing to say."

"Maybe. But I'm not saying it to be sweet."

Fresh tears coursed down Khela's cheeks. "I can't bring myself to write about them anymore, Bene. The wights, I mean. I just can't."

"Yeah, fair enough."

"They know what they are. They know!"

"Yeah."

Khela shivered as she shook her head. "It's a horror I can barely imagine, even though I've seen it so many times. I keep asking myself what it must be like. You know, for them? What does it feel like to wake up from *death*, of all things? But you don't know you're dead, not at first. You only begin to get a sense of it when you look down and see yourself rotting. And everyone

you love is the same! Oh Bene, I can't even begin to imagine the shock and anguish these people must go through."

"Mm. I think about stuff like that all the time, too."

"And then you realise that you're not even breathing, that you don't even have to! And you can move even though there's no blood pumping through your veins. Because you're alive, but not really."

"Yeah, I know."

"And you can't talk, either. Try as you might, no one can understand you. And anyone who isn't like you runs away because they think you're dangerous and you're trying to kill them. But you aren't. Deep down you're still *you*. Only you have no way of communicating it. You're stuck, neither dead nor alive."

"Yes."

Khela screwed up her face. "And then we come along and kill you."

"Yes."

"Do you remember, in the beginning? When we first started? We shot so many of them, Bene! We used to go out of our way to hunt them because we thought they were aggressive *and* contagious. But they weren't. They weren't even thinking about hurting anyone. They were only reaching out for help, but we didn't know. They'd have been screaming inside. Desperate. Scared. And we put them down like dogs. I can't even bear to look at them anymore. I don't want to see another wight as long as I live."

"I know."

"That wretched *object* shouldn't exist, Bene. Who would make something capable of so much evil? And to think *she's* out there, using it every chance she gets. She's evil, too. But we're to blame as well because we're the ones who had to go and dig the fucking thing up! Didn't we? In the name of knowledge and everything. That thing should never have seen the light of day!"

"Yeah," said Bene, looking down at his lap. If nothing else, this conversation had been a very effective boner killer.

"It's all so disgusting. And you know what? I don't want to keep talking about any of it anymore. I don't even want to speculate about it. Not about that bitch, not about objects, not about anything. I don't care. You know, I think I'm going to quit, Bene. I'm going to ask if I can go back to Kanosh. I have to get out of here. I've had enough."

"No." Bene's voice was firm. "No way."

"No?" Khela wiped her nose with her sleeve. "You don't get to decide this. I don't think I even have a choice anymore, Bene. I mean it. I can't stay out here. I can't keep on like this. I just can't do it!"

Bene shook his head. "Bullshit. We all have choices. And I think you if you left—which I don't think would be so easy, by the way—you'd be losing a golden opportunity."

"How do you mean?"

"How do I mean? To do good!"

"I don't see how..."

Bene put a hand on her arm. "This is something I've actually given a lot of thought to over the last few weeks, Khel, so hear me out."

"All right."

"Get this: you've witnessed first-hand what the object is capable of, right?"

"Yeah..."

"There aren't many people around who can say that, let alone talk intelligently about it. I mean, no one who hasn't seen the shit we have would believe even a fraction of it. Right?"

"Probably."

"Well, everything that's happened out here needs to be told. And not just by Roaoo. *Your* version of events needs to be communicated, and not just to the campus crowd either. The ordinary people back in Kanosh should hear it, too. I mean, you could use what you've seen to argue against further exploration of the Trench. You could lobby to have the Object Studies Department shut down. How about that? You could be part of, I dunno... the opposition."

"The opposition?"

"Yeah, absolutely! This isn't Sarasinia, Khel. Tell your story, bring what happened out here to light! Become an anti. If you don't, people will only hear Roaoo's account of this expedition. You don't want that, do you?"

Khela looked at him. "No. I probably don't."

"Right. So you won't accomplish anything good by quitting now, will you? And there's another side to all this you might want to consider, Khel. And it's this: when we recover that object—and we will—a lot of people back home are going to think it's the best thing ever. Despite what you might have to say about it. Shit, maybe even *because* of it!

"But it gets worse. We don't know what the Warden Master really thinks, or how he'll react when we get back. Do you think he'll be in a hurry to lock the object away, though? Or destroy it? Because I don't. You could conquer the world with that thing, potentially. And do you think he's going to want to seal up the Trench? Because I'm not sure he will, not when there might be more world-conquering objects down there waiting to be dug up. That's why there needs to be an opposition—to make people think twice!"

"Mm. You're right."

"I get your impulse to run, though. To quit? Really, I do. There are times when I feel exactly the same way. But you're sure as shit *not* leaving. You can't just walk away."

"Wow. That speech was actually inspiring. I had no idea you were this good."

"Also, I'd miss you too much."

Khela chuckled despite herself. "I shouldn't be laughing, but that's too funny."

"It wasn't meant to be. I really would miss you. Who would I have to bounce ideas off about my research if you weren't here?"

"Um, I hate to contradict you, Bene, but you haven't bounced anything off me in ages."

Bene grinned. "That's what she said!"

Khela's expression was a delicious fusion of a smile and a wince. A smince? Eh, not bad, but he'd come up with a better word for it later, maybe. "I meant ideas-wise, Munning. I didn't mean *that*."

"I know," said Bene. "I know."

"How's your research going, anyway? It's been a while since we discussed it."

"Khel, are you kidding me? I'm the first guy in history to communicate with a dead person. My research is going to help the world redefine the very notion of death. Of life! Or undeath, or whatever. Doesn't matter what you call it, I'm at the cutting edge! Do you know what this means for my career? Talk about an upward trajectory, baby! I'm set. Absolutely set. Even at this point, I've got enough work to go on for the rest of my life."

"Yeah, true."

"Everyone's going to want a piece of me when we get back. I'm going to be up to my ears in pussy."

Khela chortled. "You think? And only up to your ears? You are too funny."

"And it can't come soon enough, I must say. I haven't exactly seen a lot of action lately, if you get my drift."

"Oh yeah?" Khela bit her lip.

Bene knew that look well. He felt the blood rushing to his ears. "Well, no, I wasn't proposing anything—"

"Are you blushing?"

"No," said Bene, in spite of the fact he very obviously was.

"You're so cute." Khela moved to kiss him.

Bene nearly passed out from shock. Her lips felt softer than butter. When she finally drew back, he looked at her. "So," he said, trying not to let nerves get the better of him. "So, I was thinking of holding a gymnastics contest in my tent tonight. You, um, wouldn't be interested in registering as a competitor at all, would you?"

Khela paused. "Sorry."

"Ah," said Bene, swallowing his disappointment. "Heh, well..." Nothing ventured, nothing gained, as they say.

Khela grinned, and then leaned in as if to whisper in his ear. Instead, she flicked her tongue against his earlobe. In an instant he went from semi-chub to raging hard. "I meant, sorry, but there's no way would I *not* like to register."

Bene almost couldn't believe his ears. "Wow, really?"

"Yep."

"Well... great!"

"Better limber up, boy. Or don't. Either way, I'm gonna be the one taking home the blue ribbon." And with that she got up and walked away.

"That's fine," said Bene to her back. "I don't mind coming second!"

Khela giggled without turning around. "See you after dark, then."

He got up and performed a victory jig. He'd never been much of a dancer, unfortunately, so anyone watching would probably think he was having a seizure. He didn't care. His stomach grumbled. A celebratory meal, he decided, was in order.

He was halfway to the chuckwagons when Damien Barls fell in beside him.

"Hey," said Barls, a finger jammed in his nose.

Bene stopped. "Can I help you?" Against all expectation, the little man had survived Tonneson's fist. He hadn't made a full recovery, though, since the colonel had taken the sight in his left eye.

"Nope." Barls rushed past. "I'm good."

Bene shook his head. "Like fuck you are," he murmured. He picked up the pace, but Barls seemed determined to beat him to the chuckwagons. The fellow ran straight up to Orly, who was bent over a sack of flour.

"Hey girl," Bene heard him say to her.

Orly looked up, scowled, and went back to her work. "The fuck 'ave you been? Cook's out lookin' for ya an' all!"

"Well I'm 'ere now, aren't I?"

"Pfft."

"Come on, no need to be like that, eh?"

Orly pointed to a large cask. "Spuds are over there, mate. Start peelin'."

"Hey, uh," said Barls, fidgeting. "Ya know, I's jus' thinkin' somethin' eh?"

"Thinkin' what?"

"Oh, dunno. Maybe that if yer got the time, maybe yer might wanna go out back and... uh, y'know?"

Orly stood up, dusted off her hands and fixed Barls with a stare that Bene thought could have made a spud peel itself. "Got coin then, 'ave ya?"

"Yeh. Might do."

"Either ya do or ya don't. Which is it?"

Barls looked down. "Well, nah, not right now I don't. But hey, I will 'ave! They 'aven't paid us for the month yet, but it's comin' up soon an—"

"Forget it until then," said Orly, turning away. "And even so, it'll cost *you* triple the normal rate."

"Aw, come on, Orls!" wailed Barls.

"No."

"Pleeeaaase? Please? I'll have it in another week. It's just that right now I'm skinned."

Bene giggled to himself. He meant *skint*, surely?

Orly gave him a mocking smile. "Duh, an' that's why I'm tellin' you no, eh?"

"Oh, please please please please please please?"

"For fuck's sake, Barls!"

Barls wasn't one to give up easily. He wrung his hands and whined. "Come on, eh? Orls? I need ya. Eh, girl? An' me tool really needs ya minister-ations..."

"Oh geez." Orly spat. "Yuck. Go away, will ya?"

"But me blood's hot!" He grabbed her hand and tried to direct it to his crotch. "Me blood's burnin' so hot! C'mon, I gotta nut, girl. Pleeeaaase? I need it bad!"

Orly shrugged him off. "I said no!"

"Well, fuck!" screamed Barls, going scarlet. He raised a fist.

Orly's jaw tightened as she picked up a carving knife and pointed it at him. All the other chuckwagon girls froze. "Get away from me."

Barls eyed the blade as he slowly backed away. "Well then," he shouted, "keep yer fucken mouldy cunt all to yerself then, ya stingy bitch! Aaaaauuugh!" He made as if to leave, but then turned around and glared. "And to think I's thinkin' about buyin' ya a dinamond ring! Now it's nope to that, ya fucken slut whore!"

Bene watched as Barls stormed off muttering dire curses under his breath. Orly shrugged and everyone went back to what they were doing. Perhaps dealing with Barls and his antics was an everyday thing around here.

"I, uh, just came to see if I could get something to eat," said Bene to nobody in particular. "Like maybe a snack or something..."

Orly stopped what she was doing. "Sure, boss," she said, sidling up to him. "Want I should make you a sandwich?"

"Um," he said. And with a nod added, "Yes. That would be nice." He swore he could feel her nipples against his arm even though they were each wearing several layers of clothing. He knew what they looked like because he'd paid to see them a couple of times.

"Coming," she said with a wink. "Right. Up."

Since Mumolo, everyone had been treating him differently, and Orly's smile had an almost...rapacious... feel about it. It made him slightly uncomfortable. He looked around and saw that all the chuckwagon girls were eyeing him. When his sandwich was ready, he ate it elsewhere.

That night Bene lay in his tent, wondering if Khela was ever going to show up. How late was it? Had she forgotten, maybe? Or fallen asleep? It seemed like he'd been lying there for hours, rock hard, his anticipation growing with each passing moment. He'd never felt so hot and flustered. He belatedly realised that he hadn't rubbed one out in three days. Aw crap, he wouldn't blow his load as soon as she took off her shirt, would he? He should have

cleared the tubes earlier to make sure he wouldn't be too quick tonight. It wasn't too late now, was it?

That was the thing about Khela: she inspired lust in him to a degree that no one else could. He'd had some memorable lays before and after her, but it was almost always Khela's body that he thought about during his alone time. He had only to picture her in his mind and his dick became a tree trunk. They'd always had an incredible attraction, too. Insane chemistry, absolutely off the charts. He was strictly a one-a-day man, but back when they were together they'd had days when he'd fucked her three times in a row and *still* wanted more. She'd been the only girl he couldn't ever seem to get enough of.

And suddenly she was there, crouched by his feet at his tent's door flap. "Hi there."

"Wow," he said. "Hello."

Khela wasted no time undressing. "Sorry I'm late." She threw her shirt and trousers at him. She crawled towards him on her hands and knees, quite naked. "I hope you don't have anything on under that blanket."

"Not a stitch."

"Good."

"Stop. Wait."

Khela froze. "What is it?"

"Can you stay there like that for a moment? I just want to look at you."

"Oh?" Khela raised an eyebrow and wiggled her hips, which set her huge breasts quivering. "Yeah? And do you like what you see?"

Bene devoured her with his eyes. "Please tell me I'm not dreaming."

She laughed. "You're not dreaming."

Seeing her eyes go to where his cock had made a tent out of his blanket, Bene said, "Look what you made me do."

"Hmm." Khela licked her lips in the corny, exaggerated way she knew he liked. "Just what have you got hidden under there, mister Munning?"

He feigned a shy smile. "Oh, nothing..."

She knit her brow in mock suspicion. "It doesn't look like nothing." She lunged and whisked the blanket away, exposing him. "Aha! Just as I thought!"

Bene shook his head. "It's not what it looks like, I swear."

"It looks like a big, hard dick."

"Oh. Well then, it's exactly what it looks like."

Khela giggled. "Wow, I'd nearly forgotten what a big boy you were, Bene."

"Nearly?"

"Well, you know..."

His mind went back to the time when she'd compared him unfavourably to Tonneson. "Hold up. I remember you saying something once about how I was hung like a mouse?"

She grasped his cock and licked his frenulum. "I lied. And maybe you should just forget about that?"

Bene took a deep breath and let it out slowly, hoping like crazy he wouldn't unload in her face. "Forgotten. Oh, wow."

"Mmm," said Khela. "Tasty." Bene tried to sit up and kiss her, but she pushed him back down. "Hey, when did you start shaving?"

"I dunno. Been doing it for a while, I guess. Do you like it?"

"I do, actually."

"Well, I started because—" said Bene, but then suddenly her mouth was all over his cock and he lost his train of thought. "Ohhh, wow..." He pushed her hair aside so he could savour the sight of her working his shaft. Between that, the way her tits spilled across his legs and the curve of her hip, his heart was hammering in his chest. The awareness that this incredible girl was naked in his tent and sucking him off was... well, unfortunately, it was more than he could handle.

Khela stopped and gave him a look. "I hope you're not going to—"

"Zhuuur!" cried Bene. "Yes! I am. Don't stop! Keep going!"

Khela got her mouth back on him just in time. He grabbed a double fistful of her hair and tried not to scream. She even

swallowed, though afterwards shot him a look of irritation. "That was quick, Bene."

"Yeah. I know. I'm sorry."

"I hope you're planning on making this up to me?"

"Don't worry," said Bene, taking a deep breath. "I aim to."

"So how was it?"

"Good. Staggeringly, unbelievably good."

She smiled. "Mmm, well that's something at least."

Bene pulled her to him and kissed her. "On your back, girl—it's your turn."

"If you say so," she said with a grin, lying next him and settling her head on his pillow.

He kissed her again, hard, and laid a trail of wet kisses down the side of her neck. He lingered at her breasts, taking a nipple in his mouth while he massaged the other with his fingers. "You have the most amazing tits," he said, at which she let out a little moan. He laid another trail of kisses down to her navel while running the tips of his fingers up the inside of her thigh. She laughed when he plunged his face between her legs, then opened her thighs and pushed against him, really grinding her pussy into his face.

"Ohh, fuck. That feels so good," she said. "Oooh, shit yeah."

She was hot and wet. He licked and sucked until she started panting, and then without breaking stride he traced a line teasingly up her leg with his fingers and eased two past her cunt lips.

"Mmmm," she said as his fingers went in. "Oh, I like that."

"Like it?" He slid his fingers in and out of her as he alternated between sucking and licking her clit.

"Do it," she said, though it came out more like a yelp. "Do it."

Bene took his fingers out of her cunt and pushed just the middle one into her arse.

Khela shuddered. "Oh fuuu—!" she cried, holding her breath. It took all of Bene's strength to stop her wriggling out from under him and she came, he guessed, more than once.

"That was fun." Bene found her hands and locked her fingers in his.

"It was," said Khela. "Would it be asking too much of you to fuck me now, though?"

"Really?"

Khela nodded. "Uh huh. Don't get me wrong, what you did felt fantastic, but I need to feel your cock inside me."

"Say that last part again."

"I need to feel your cock inside me."

The words were enough to rally Bene's flaccid member. "If you used your mouth again, I think I could get hard enough for it."

"All right," said Khela, getting on her haunches. She sucked him again, her mouth gliding up and down his cock.

"Watching you do that is a huge turn-on," he said, enjoying the sensation of him growing in her mouth.

"Mmm. It's a turn-on for me, too."

It wasn't long before he was fully erect again, at which point she aimed her arse at him. "Still your favourite position, huh?" he asked.

"Uh huh."

"So then, beg for it."

Khela smiled, then pouted. "Mmm, please? Please give it to me?"

Bene smacked her arse. "You call that begging?"

"Ow! Again."

"Yeah?" He smacked her again, so hard it stung his palm. "Ow. Sorry, that was a bit rough."

"Ow? Ow is right!" She sounded pissed. "Shit, that really hurt!"

"Sorry."

"Way to kill the mood, boy."

"Sorry," said Bene, rubbing the head of his prick against her pussy lips.

"All right. C'mon then, boy. Give it to me."

With a grunt, Bene grabbed Khela's hips and sank his cock into her up to the balls. She gasped as he filled her up. "Your pussy feels like warm honey," he said, finding a steady rhythm.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"So come on and fuck me, Bene. Really fuck me."

"All right." He slammed his dick into her, their bodies coming together with a slap.

"Harder!" said Khela, moaning. "Fuck me!"

Bene grit his teeth and pounded her until they were both sweating.

"Ohhhh!" she cried. "Harder! Yesss! I'm getting there. Oh, don't stop! Don't stop!"

Bene was running out of energy. Sweat poured down his back and brow. He loved the way her tits wobbled about crazily though, so he focussed on them, clenched his butt cheeks and gave her everything he had. "Your cunt," he said between breaths, "feels so fucking good."

That seemed to have the desired effect. Khela let out a low moan, then sucked in what had to be a double lungful of air. "Oommmph!" she cried, burying her face in his pillow.

Though nearly spent from maintaining his furious tempo, he drove his cock into her until she moaned again, then whimpered, and finally sagged down onto her belly, unable to speak. And for a long time they lay together in each other's arms, sinking into his blankets. Leaking into them, too, he noticed. That was going to be fun to sleep in later.

Khela broke the silence first. "Whew. That was great."

Bene nuzzled her breasts. "You know, you have the most amazing 'o' face."

"The most amazing what?"

"You know the face you make when you cum?"

"That's an 'o' face? Who calls it that?"

"I dunno. People."

"That's stupid. If it's the face you make when you cum, shouldn't it be 'c' face?"

"No." Bene snorted. "No, I think that's a whole other thing."

"Huh? Oh, yeah. True. Well, I suppose you have a nice 'o' face as well."

"No. Sorry, but that can't be right. We guys don't look even remotely sexy during. I caught my reflection in a mirror once while I was getting off, Khel, and I honestly wondered if I wasn't having an aneurysm."

Khela laughed. "I don't know if I agree with that. Anyway, thanks. I really needed some cock tonight."

"Huh? Does that mean you're leaving?"

"No. Not unless you want me gone?"

"Of course I don't want you gone! I just thought I heard a note of finality in your voice and I didn't want to have to beg you to stay."

"Oh, I'm sorry, baby." Khela smiled. "I was only thanking you. I haven't had sex for a couple of weeks and I was starting to get a bit antsy."

"*You* managed to go without sex for two whole weeks? I feel I should congratulate you for showing such commendable restraint. Or did you-?"

"Shut up."

"All right."

Khela reached for his sagging cock. "Did you come just now?"

Bene shook his head. "Nope."

"Mmm," she said, stroking it. It stiffened in her hand, and she climbed on top of him. He felt the weight of her chest against his, and ran his fingers down past the small of her back and squeezed her arse. She reached through her legs, grabbed the head of his cock and guided it into her. Then, sitting upright, she began to ride him. "Mm, I love it when you're this deep in there."

"I'm going to cum if you keep this up."

"You want to cum inside?"

"Can I?"

"If you want. I've got some greenwort I've been saving for a special occasion."

"It's settled then."

"Mmm. Come on then, Bene. Cum for me, baby. Fill me up."

Bene grabbed her tits with both hands. "Oh yes," he said as she impaled herself on him over and over. She upped the tempo and he erupted soon after.

"You've no idea how good that was," he told her as she lay down next to him again.

"If your 'o' face was any indication," she said, grinning, "it was really, really good."

Bene laughed and kissed her. "We're all right together, aren't we?"

Khela looked alarmed, then sat bolt upright. "Bene, I hope you're not going to make this weird..."

"Hey, relax." He touched her arm. "I was only trying to say that we're very compatible in the sack. That's all."

"All right," said Khela, lying back down. "I thought for a moment there you were taking this conversation in a whole other direction."

"No."

Neither of them said anything for a long time, a comfortable silence shared in post-coital bliss.

"Have you ever had a threesome?" asked Khela suddenly.

Bene looked at her. "A threesome? Why would you ask me that now?"

"Just answer the question. Have you, or haven't you?"

"Had a threesome? No."

"Really? Why not?"

"Well, I don't know. I've never really had the chance, I guess. Oh no, wait. Actually, that's not true. I did get the chance not so long ago."

"You mean out here, on the expedition?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, this I've got to hear! C'mon, out with it!"

"Hmm. Yeah, well I'll tell you the story I suppose, but I'm telling you in the strictest confidence, all right? You absolutely cannot repeat it to anyone."

Khela nodded. "Go on."

"Promise me you won't tell anyone."

"I promise."

Bene cleared his throat. "All right. Well, this happened maybe three months ago. So, I'm walking around the camp looking for my tent, and it's dark. It's early evening, maybe, and I get a bit turned around. Somehow, I eventually find it."

"I'm with you so far."

"Right. Well I'm a bit irritated to find the door rolled up, but I figure I must have forgotten to tie it down before I left, or something. So I'm going in, almost expecting to find a scorpion or a snake or something waiting for me, and then I realise something."

"What?"

"It's not my tent."

Khela grinned. "Whose was it?"

"It belonged to two soldiers. Who were right there. Going at it hammer and tongs."

"No way!"

"Yes way. And take it from me, Khel—some things you can't unsee."

"Wow. So, what happened next?"

"I took off, of course. Couldn't get out of there fast enough."

Khela laughed. "That is hilarious! Who were the soldiers?"

"I shouldn't say. Maybe I'll point them out to you some time, if you're really that interested."

"All right. So that's it? That's your threesome story?"

"Yep. So, what about you? What's yours?"

"Er, yours wasn't really a threesome story, Bene. No offence."

"Yeah," said Bene, shrugging. "I know. Could have been, though. I had a feeling those guys wouldn't have minded me joining them. Not that I wanted to, but still. Anyway, your turn."

Khela nodded. "All right. Well, it happened last year. On campus, in the dorms. It's kind of similar to what happened with you, actually, except there was alcohol involved and I didn't exactly run the other way. Unlike you."

"That's because I don't dive groin-first into every situation I encounter. Unlike you."

"Very funny."

"I thought so."

"Wait. You don't really see me like that, do you?"

Bene hesitated. "No..."

"What?"

"I, uh, paused too long just now, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you did. You really think I dive into every situation groin first?"

"Well, kind of."

"No..."

"Yeah. Because you actually do, Khel. You do, and then you complain about how people only see you as a fuck toy. But what do you expect when you'll basically sleep with anyone?"

"Holy shit!" cried Khela, sitting up. "What the fuck, Bene? Where did *that* come from?"

Bene grimaced. Not a bad question, actually. "I'm sorry. Look, I misspoke. Please, just... forget I said anything."

Khela reached for her clothes. "Um, no. No. I'm out of here."

"Khel, please, just—"

"I know what this is. This is your jealousy rearing its ugly head again. Some things never change."

"No, it's not that. I misspoke, that's all. Come on, just lie back down."

"No. And, yes, it is that. And I know you want us to be a couple again, too. But believe me, Munning, that's never going to happen."

"Huh? When did I say I wanted us to be a couple again?"

"You didn't have to. That time, a while back in Roaoo's tent when you blurted out how you loved me? Remember that? And all that nice stuff you did for me, how you talked to Roaoo? You weren't being nice because you care. Oh no, that was your way of getting me to take you back. Don't even try to deny it!"

"What? I *will* deny it, because it's ridiculous!"

Khela practically threw her clothes back on. "Ugh. I am so out of here. I guess you'll have to go back to your chuckwagon sluts. Or your hand. Sorry."

"Don't be," said Bene, sitting up with a snarl. "At least my hand doesn't wig out after I fuck it."

"Good."

"And I wasn't planning on giving up my chuckwagon sluts for your sake, anyway."

"Great."

"Anyway, the only difference between you and them is you have no business sense."

"Fuck you."

Bene's simmering anger boiled over. "Yeah? Well fuck you, too! I'm done helping you out with your work, too, by the way. Fucking idiot. And you got it all wrong, as usual! The things I did, I did for you with no expectation of anything in return! And for your information, I do love you, but not in the way you think. But who cares? I'm done with your shit. So, go on. Good riddance! Fuck off!"

"Fuck you!" shrieked Khela, bursting into tears.

"*Why are you still here?*" he bellowed at her. "*Get lost!*"

Tears streamed down Khela's face. "So what if I fucked around a bit on this trip? Who cares? All I wanted was to feel something other than miserable for a change, Bene! It's no sin, and it doesn't make me indiscriminate. And all I wanted out of tonight was to enjoy myself, to live for today. With you. And I don't regret it, because just for a little while you made me forget. You made me forget that we're surrounded by death! Every single day since we left Kanosh, we've been surrounded by nothing but death. I've no way of knowing how much longer until I end up as a wight. Until we all end up as wights! But yeah, sure, I'm just a slut who gives it up to anyone. Fine, Bene. Whatever. See you around."

Bene watched her leave. "Yeah," he said. "I probably could have handled that better."

He lit a candle and tried to get some reading done, but the words wouldn't co-operate. He lay back and closed his eyes, but sleep avoided him. And so much for the post-sex, don't-give-a-shit-about-anything feeling that usually preceded pleasantly-drowsy-and-ready-for-some-solid-hours-of-shut-eye. He could

probably kiss all that goodbye as well. The tent felt suddenly confining. He put on his clothes and went out.

After finding a tree to piss against, he went back to his tent. Instead of going inside, he built a small campfire. As he sat next to it glumly, brooding, to his astonishment a pair of soldiers came over.

"Hey," said Hoyt.

"Hi," said Bene.

"Mind if we sit?" asked Eckols.

"No." Bene motioned vaguely around his fire. "No, I don't mind. Go right ahead."

The men sat. "Here," said Hoyt, producing a small flask.

Bene eyed it dubiously. "Are you kidding? It's a dry camp." The mere possession of alcohol was a punishable offence. This guy was taking a huge risk just having it, let alone offering some to a superior!

But Hoyt just shrugged as if it wasn't a big deal. "Figured you could use it regardless."

"Ah." Against his better judgement, Bene nodded and took a swig. The stuff tasted like... well, he wasn't entirely sure how to describe it. Very strong. And not entirely awful, even if it did remind him of Ghislaine's disinfectant. Almost certainly made locally. "Thanks," he said, returning the flask. The soldiers each took a belt before Hoyt returned it to the folds of his tunic.

"We used to think you were a bit of a dickhead," said Eckols.

Bene blinked. "Oh?" How wonderfully blunt. What was the punishment for insulting a superior, again?

"We don't think that now, though."

"Ah. Well. That's, er... good. I guess."

"Yeah," said Hoyt. "Especially not after Mumolo."

Aha! So these guys had come to worship at the altar of Bene! And he would let them, too, that was for damn sure! He chuckled. "It was quite the adventure, wasn't it?"

"You got Hassing promoted to Master Sergeant," said Eckols, "and any man looks after one of ours, we look after him."

Hoyt glanced at Eckols and nodded. "Too right. You're one of us now, Munning."

For a long while, Bene just stared at the fire. Finally, he said, "Maybe you were right about me, though. I do feel like a bit of a dickhead at the moment. Uh, you both probably heard what happened between Rusen and me just now? The whole camp probably did. We're kinda... going through a thing. Actually, we're always kinda going through a thing." He closed his mouth again. He didn't really know these guys, so why the fuck was he sharing *this* stuff with them? Maybe that booze was even stronger than he thought.

Eckols merely shrugged. "Yeah. Well. Shit happens."

"Here," said Hoyt. "Check this out." He opened a cloth bag, took out some stiff dough and began kneading it between his hands. "Made this earlier. What you do is pull it out into a long piece like this, then you take a stick..." He held up a forked tree branch slightly longer than his arm. "Trick is to get a branch like this and wrap it around all snake-like." He coiled the dough in and around the forks in the branch. "Like so."

"And you hold it over the fire?" asked Bene.

"Give it here," said Eckols, taking the branch from Hoyt. "I'll show him. Yeah, you hold it over the fire, but there's a trick to it. You need to wait until the flames have died down a bit, but you've still got plenty of hot coals left." He gestured at the fire. "Like now. You just hold the branch over the coals like I'm doing. And turn it every so often so it doesn't burn."

"I take it you're using a forked stick for a reason?"

"Yep. You'll find out why you don't want a straight one for this if you ever try to use one."

"Dough falls off?"

"Yep."

They divided the bread between them when it was cooked. Bene pronounced it the most delicious snack he'd ever tasted, and he wasn't exaggerating much.

As the evening wore on, more soldiers joined Bene's fireside gathering. They built up the fire, and he laughed at their jokes and stories. He even told a few that he thought went over quite well. He felt a pang of guilt whenever he remembered Khela, but he tried to put her out of his mind. She would be all right. He'd apologise, and they'd work it out somehow. They always did. Everything would be fine. What had happened tonight would have happened sooner or later anyway. It always did. And as much as he really did love her, he had to concede that couldn't exactly picture them married with children. No. So, in the grand scheme of things, what had he lost, really? But he didn't want to overthink it as usual. Better to just apologise to her and work things out. As friends. Never again lovers, because that never seemed to work. Yeah, everything would be all right. As friends. You could never have enough friends, right?

Another sip of Hoyt's firewater and Bene was reflecting on how good it felt to have all these new friends around his campfire. The soldiers were all right, you know? And how good was it to get out of himself a little?

But then Damien Barls appeared.

"What the fuck's this cunt doing 'ere?" said Barls, pointing.

"That's an officer you're talking to," said Hoyt, giving him a stern look. "Or good as. And it's his fire besides. So either sit down and play nice, or fuck off."

Barls glared, then found a spot as far away from Bene as he could while still staying relatively fireside. He licked his lips. "Anyone got booze?"

"Yeah. And you know what to do if you want it, little man," said Eckols.

Barls sneered across the fire at Bene. "Nah. Not wiv *'im* around."

"What did I say?" Hoyt sneered. "Play nice or fuck right off. I'll not warn you again."

"A'right." Barls looked less than pleased. "A'right. Well, I got a story for yers, anyways."

Eckols nudged Bene with his elbow. "You'll get a kick out of this, mate."

Bene doubted it. Doubted it very much, but he smiled politely all the same.

"A'right then." Barls cleared his throat for what seemed like an excessively long time. He made a show of cracking his knuckles, too, at which Bene rolled his eyes. "A'right. This's a story what I call *The Littlest Nermaid*."

There were murmurs of anticipation around the fire.

Barls scanned the faces of his audience. "A long time ago—like maybe twenny years—there was this king, right? He was King o' the Ner-people an' 'e ruled over the oceans. Lived in a palace in the sea wiv 'is wife and beautiful nermaid daughters."

"Wait," said Bene. "You mean *mermaid*, don't you?"

Barls looked at him. "That's what I fucken said! Nermaid!"

Eckols nudged Bene again. "Er, maybe just let him tell the story his way, all right?"

"How fucken rude!" shouted Barls.

"Sorry," said Bene, making conciliatory gestures. "Sorry for the interruption. Won't happen again."

Barls sniffed. "A'right. Where was I? Ah, yeah, that's right. The King o' the Ner-people. Wife. Beautiful daughters. Yeh. So anyway, these daughters of 'is, these nermaids, they're not allowed to 'ave any kind o' contact with yumans at all. Like, at all! Can't go to the surface to check 'em out or nuffin'. By order o' their dad, because 'e does not like yumans. Thinks they're dangerous an' stuff, right? So, naturally, they's all curious an' shit about 'em, right? Especially the littlest nermaid who this story is about. She's seriously fucken curious about yumans. I mean, fucken, you 'ave no fucken idea! Sooo curious. An' she's got this grandma, too, who's always fillin' 'er pretty 'ead with fancy stories about yumans. Like, this bitch isn't even tryin' to discourage 'er or nuthin', just keeps feedin' this little nermaid's fucken fantasies an' shit. The king would of been pissed, but 'e doesn't know she's doin' it.

"So anyway, one day the littlest nermaid lets 'er curiosity get the best of 'er, right? She swims up to the ocean surface, big titties all floatin' on top o' the water an' shit. 'Cause I dunno if I mentioned it, but this nermaid might be the littlest one, but she is fucken stacked!" Barls made the universal gesture for big boobs with both hands. "Fucken staaaaacked."

The soldiers laughed. Bene feigned a gracious smile.

"Right. So anyway, as she's floatin' there wiv 'er tits out, she sees this ship. On it there's this 'andsome dude. A prince. She's crackin' a lady boner like ya wouldn't believe for this prince, on account of 'ow e's so 'andsome. Love at first sight an' shit. Ah, but then this big storm blows up and fucken breaks the boat in half! Luckily she saves 'im from drownin' and dumps 'im on a beach.

"After a while 'e wakes up again. Now, even though 'e was all unconscious, 'e still kinda remembers that 'e got rescued by this beautiful, mysterious girl. So later on when some people find 'im there on the beach 'e's all like, 'Oh, where is the mysterious, beautiful girl I got saved by?' and they're all, 'Fucked if I know, mate. Never saw no one.'"

There was more laughter from around the campfire. Bene contrived to look amused.

"An' the nermaid, o' course, well she can't let anyone see 'er so she just swims away. She goes back down under the sea an' she tries to forget about the prince, but she can't on account o' the fact she 'as fallen arse over nips in love wiv 'im.

"Finally she goes to this sea witch, 'cause she's 'eard 'ow the witch 'as got magical powers. The sea witch tells 'er she can turn 'er into a yuman so she can be wiv the prince, but it's painful as shit an' she is gonna hafta trade in 'er voice for it.

"The littlest nermaid is all, 'An' if I trade in me voice I'm gonna be a yuman?' an' the sea witch is all, 'Kinda, but yer gonna hafta get the prince to fall in love wiv ya an' shit if ya want it to be permanent, and it's gotta be before the next full moon,' an' the nermaid is all, 'What if it doesn't happen?' an' the sea witch is all, 'Well ya better make it happen, bitch, or yer gonna turn into sea

foam, ya get me?’ And ‘cause the nermaid is a total fucken idiot, she’s all, ‘I wanna do this.’

“So then the sea witch cuts the littlest nermaid’s tail off and gives her yuman legs. It’s painful as, and not a fun time was ‘ad by anyone except the sea witch. She was kinda into it ‘cause she’s evil and shit.

“So then the nermaid goes to the castle to make sure the prince gets an eyeful of ‘er new gams. The prince is all, ‘Hey, ‘ow about a bit?’ O’ course, she’s up for it, and they screw. But she can’t tell ‘im she’s the nermaid from the storm when ‘is boat got all broken ‘cause she traded ‘er voice in and now she can’t talk no more.

“So, a couple o’ weeks goes by. An’ o’ course the nermaid knows she has got a fucken big problem on account o’ the prince’s life now basic-ly bein’ all about tryin’ to get ahold o’ the mystery beauty what saved ‘is life. Which is ‘er, but ‘ow can she tell ‘im? She fucken can’t, eh? No voice.

“Then one day the prince goes to the nermaid, he goes, ‘Hey, I think I found the princess what saved me and I’m gonna marry ‘er. She’s from a faraway country,’ and she’s all, ‘No you fucker, marry me instead,’ but she can’t say that, o’ course, on account o’ the fact she can’t talk.”

There was more laughter from the soldiers. This time, Bene didn’t even bother pretending he found the story funny. He sat there, stone-faced, hoping that Barls would somehow pitch forward into the fire and die. Out here in the pagan heartlands, where were the wicked spirits when you needed them?

Barls cleared his throat several times. “Sorry. I got a frog in me mouth.”

Bene giggled and got a warning glare in response. “Oops,” he said quietly. “Apologies.”

Barls waved him away. “So anyway, the nermaid goes wiv the prince on a ship to the faraway country to meet the princess. When ‘e meets ‘er, e’s all, ‘Fuck me, you’re a fucken beauty! I am now totally sure you must of been the girl what saved me that

time. Let's you an' me get 'itched, eh?' and they start plannin' all their wedding shit.

"The littlest nermaid, well she is sad as fuck. On the trip back, she's all cryin' an' shit but then suddenly 'er sisters come swimmin' up alongsides the side o' the boat. They got this big knife an' they're all, 'Hey ya better take this knife an' kill the prince. It is the only way what ya can get outta this fucken mess.'

"So the nermaid takes the knife. She goes into the prince's cabin and she opens that fucken prick up from ear to ear. Stabs 'im in the nuts too, on account o' him poppin' 'er cherries an' carryin' on wiv other ladies, and whatnot. So wiv the prince all dead, the nermaid tries to ex-cape back to the ocean, but the prince's men catch 'er as she's jumpin' off the deck. An' so she got hung as a murderer-ess once the ship got back. The end. Thank you!"

The soldiers broke into applause, and Bene clapped along half-heartedly so no one would think him rude. The story had been appalling, though, and he was amazed when everyone began showering Barls with gifts of food and small coins. He turned to Eckols and asked, "Do I have to give him something, too?"

"He did his best," said Eckols. "Doesn't hurt to be nice, does it?"

"I guess not," said Bene, and he begrudgingly reached into a pocket.

30

ROSARIUS

SARASINIA

THE BASTION

Rosarius sat bolt upright on his mattress, sure he'd heard a bell. Had he really, or had he only dreamed it? He didn't think he'd even been asleep, and yet he must have been because it was almost as if the sound had come from somewhere on the periphery of consciousness.

It was still dark, but the sky outside the tower window said dawn couldn't be far off. He rubbed his eyes and a sharp pain awoke in his skull. Real bells or not, one thing was for certain, and it was that he'd definitely had too much wine last night. And the girl he'd shared with Borrego was gone. He couldn't remember paying her off, but if the contents of his coin purse were any indication, he'd been a very generous patron indeed. He should have found a better hiding place. Or an actual hiding place. She wasn't worth any amount of money. She'd been nothing at all like Gila.

Gila. The girl he'd spent just one night with ages ago, but couldn't get out of his thoughts. The girl he now compared every other girl against, and found wanting. None were a match for her looks, wit or personality. Or her mattress skills, for that matter. He didn't care that she was a whore, didn't care how many customers she might have had since then. He just wanted to see her one last time, even if it was only to say goodbye. But she was gone, sent off to some other city by whoever owned her. They'd likely never meet again. He sank back into his pillow with a groan, thinking he might be ready to face the day somewhere around lunch time.

"Get up!" hissed Borrego from nearby. Rosarius was surprised to see him already wearing his hauberk. "Something's happening!"

"What?"

"I said, get up!"

Rosarius was immediately on his feet. "What is it?"

"I just heard a fucking bell."

"Shit."

"Yeah, up at Old Keep. Fucking thing rang once and then someone strangled it. Something's wrong, Rosy. I can feel it."

"Fuck! I thought I'd dreamed that bell..."

Borrego buckled on his sword belt. "We need to get out there and see what's happening."

Rosarius laced up his arming doublet, then reached for his hauberk. "Give us a hand with this thing, will you?"

"Arms up," said Borrego, putting the shirt over his head and grabbing the steel links under his armpits.

Rosarius shrugged into it, then put on his belt and cuffed the hilt of his sword. "Thanks."

Borrego grunted and slapped on his helm. "Let's go," he said, and with sword drawn and shield clasped in his left hand, he plunged down the staircase.

"Right," said Rosarius, donning his own helm and shield.

In the chamber below they found three sub-seniors huddled together by the tower door, engaged in furious whispered debate.

"Mirtius!" cried Rosarius. "What are you guys doing here?"

The trio spun to face them, wide-eyed. "Sir!" cried Mirtius. "You're here!"

"What's going on?"

Mirtius and his friends started talking over the top of one another. Rosarius couldn't understand a thing they were saying. "Bylen, Shabbie, shut up!" he shouted. "Let Mirtius talk!"

"Soldiers!" Mirtius blurted out. "Someone opened the gate and let them in!"

"What soldiers? What do you mean?"

Mirtius swallowed. "I was just out, patrolling the grounds. I thought I heard the bell go off up at Old Keep. I doubled back, turned a corner and saw the fucking gate was open. I said to myself, 'Shit, that's not right,' and then I saw them—soldiers!"

"What soldiers?"

"I dunno. All I know is they're not us. And they're all over the place, hundreds of them."

"Told you," said Borrego to Rosarius. He looked at Mirtius. "I heard the Old Keep bell as well."

"And you said the gate's open?" asked Rosarius. "How?"

Mirtius shook his head. "I don't know. Soon as I saw it, I headed up the other way towards New Barracks to tell someone. Couldn't get up that far, though, because the same thing was happening there."

"Yeah," said Shabbie. "Bylen and I just came from up that way. Same thing, like he said. The gate's open, and soldiers everywhere. And they're not us."

"Yeah," said Mirtius. "So the three of us married up and decided to stay here and maybe figure something out."

"We didn't even know you guys were here," added Bylen.

"Shit," said Rosarius. "We must have been betrayed."

"Sounds like it," said Borrego.

Mirtius shrugged. "Dunno. Maybe? Who are they?"

"I don't know." Rosarius looked at Borrego, who stared back. So, the Bastion was under siege. No, actually it was worse than that. Much worse. But what were they going to do about it? He started—they all did—when someone began pounding on the door.

"Open up!" came a frantic voice from the other side. "It's Waslos! Open up!"

Borrego unbolted the door and flung it aside. Waslos tumbled over the threshold, out of breath. Borrego hauled him into the chamber by the belt as Rosarius slammed the door shut and locked it again.

"Thank," said Waslos, panting. "Fuck."

"Waslos!" cried Shabbie. "What the fuck's going on?"

"Give him room," said Borrego. "Let him breathe."

Waslos stood doubled over, gulping air. "They're here!"

"Who's here?" asked Borrego.

"I don't know exactly," said Waslos. "Some general."

"A general?" asked Rosarius. He turned to Borrego. "Who?"

"No idea," said Borrego, shaking his head. "It's not Thaller, is it?"

Waslos stood up and said between breaths, "I don't know. But we've been betrayed, sirs. Old Keep gate. It's wide open. There's hundreds of them. And more coming in."

"Yeah," said Rosarius. "We know. Who did we have in charge at Old Keep?"

Borrego didn't have to think about it. "Rasnid."

"You don't think he—?"

"Betrayed us? No." Borrego looked at Waslos. "You didn't happen to see Riva over at New Barracks, did you?"

Waslos shook his head. "No. But I haven't been up there in a while."

"We have," said Bylen. "He's still in charge."

"So," said Rosarius. "Whoever this general is, he's managed to get two of our gates open without a fight and marched his entire fucking forces through them?"

"Dividing ours in the process," said Borrego.

"Right. And no doubt wants to keep Rasnid's men shut up in Old Keep and Riva's in New Barracks."

"Wants to? He's already done that, don't you think?"

"And we're stuck here. How are we going to reach either of them? Fuck."

Mirtius suddenly came skidding down the stairs. Rosarius couldn't even remember seeing him go up. "We've got some fucking visitors, guys!" he shouted. "Party of five, headed our way!"

"Friendlies?" asked Rosarius.

Mirtius shook his head. "Nope!"

"Shit."

"Unlock the door," said Borrego.

"Why?" asked Shabbie.

"When they try it and find it locked," said Borrego, looking at him as if the answer were obvious, "they're going to know someone's inside."

"And?"

"And they'll come back with reinforcements and break it down?" He turned to Mirtius. "Party of five, did you say?"

"Uh huh," said Mirtius. "Five men."

"And you want to just... let them in?" asked Shabbie, doubtful.

Borrego unbolted the door. "I do. We'll ambush them! Everyone, find somewhere to hide. Rosy and I will get it started. When you see us attacking, you all join in. Got it?"

Bylen and Shabbie looked at each other. "Um, what are we supposed to do, exactly?" asked Shabbie.

"Kill whoever comes in," said Borrego, matter-of-fact. He pointed around the chamber. "But first, hide. Get down behind those sacks. We'll start, like I said. And when we do, you jump out and help. You get me?"

"We're actually going to kill them?" asked Bylen, looking at his spear as if he'd never seen one before.

"Yes," said Borrego. "We're actually going to fucking kill them. They're enemies."

"You mean with our spears?"

Borrego gave the boy a withering glare. "You can use your fucking pinky finger for all I care! But a spear would probably be more effective. Now, be a good soldier and go fucking hide."

Rosarius and Borrego perched behind the door while the others found concealment where they could. Soon enough, the door swung open and a man poked his head in.

"Eaaah!" screamed Mirtius, dropping his spear and bolting up the stairs.

"Get him!" screamed the man, taking off after Mirtius. Four others followed on his heels.

Rosarius kicked the door shut and struck at the nearest intruder. The point of his sword disappeared into the man's armpit, and then Borrego was on him and plunging a dagger into his neck. They hit the ground together in a confused mess of limbs and jangling armour.

Rosarius swung his blade again. It bit a man's arm and sent them both stumbling. Waslos, Shabbie and Bylen came out of their hiding places and began stabbing with their spears.

The first man had already gained the stairs, but the last two panicked and tried to go back the way they came, elbowing each other in their haste to be first out the door. Rosarius and Borrego soon had them pinned to the ground.

"Kill them!" roared Borrego, having lost both his sword and dagger in the melee. "Fucking kill them!" Steel points found the men, and they screamed and thrashed as they died.

"Help me!" shouted Mirtius from the guardroom above.

"Go!" yelled Borrego, lying on the flagstones and covered in blood. He pointed up the stairs. "Someone go!"

A wordless cry escaped Rosarius's lips. He got to his feet and dashed upstairs, taking two steps at a time. At the top, Mirtius was curled up on Borrego's cot, trying to fend off the last surviving intruder with his feet. "Yeeaaaah!" he screamed. "No! Don't hurt me!"

Rosarius hurled himself at the man's back, hooked his left arm under his chin, and choked him out. Mirtius squealed the entire time, his eyes wide with terror.

Rosarius glared at him until the intruder went limp and started snoring. "Get off that mattress," he said.

Mirtius didn't move. "Unh?"

"I said, get the fuck off the mattress!" snarled Rosarius. "Quickly, before he wakes up! Come on!"

Mirtius flinched and jumped away, scared out of his wits.

"Everything all right?" asked Borrego from the top of the stairs.

Rosarius cut into the mattress with his sword and tore off a strip of cloth. Straw and goose feathers spilled out. "Yeah."

"We need to go, brother. Someone's going to come looking for these guys, and we don't want to be here when they do."

"I know," said Rosarius, tearing off another strip of cloth.

Borrego finally noticed what he was doing. "You take him alive?"

"Yeah," said Rosarius, getting a proper look at his captive for the first time. The man wore an old leather cuirass and his mostly-white beard was at least three fists long. "We need to question him. Find out a few things."

"All right, but we'd better move quickly." Borrego pointed at Mirtius and then at the window behind him. "Keep a lookout. Tell us if anyone else is coming. Take care you're not seen."

"Yes sir," squeaked Mirtius.

The prisoner, hands tied behind his back with mattress cloth, woke up as Borrego hoisted him over his shoulder. Rosarius followed them down the stairs to find Bylen and Shabbie pacing, studiously avoiding the pooling blood of the four dead intruders. Waslos sat with his head in his hands.

Rosarius sniffed, gesturing at a puddle of vomit by the door. "That wasn't you was it, Shabbie?" he asked.

"Actually it was him." Shabbie jabbed a finger at Bylen, who scowled but didn't try to defend himself.

"Doesn't matter," said Borrego. He set the prisoner on the floor and forced him to sit, then unsheathed his sword. "It happens."

"Why do I feel...?" asked Shabbie, looking at the corpses, "I dunno... bad? Like I've done something wrong?"

"Yeah," said Bylen. "And I can't stop shaking."

Shabbie pointed. "I got that one through the eyeball. Could kind of feel him shivering when the point went in."

Borrego ignored them. "Who are you?" He was addressing the prisoner, slapping him on the back of the head with the flat of his blade. "Speak."

"The name's Entius," said the man.

"Entius?"

"Yeah."

Borrego seized Entius by his beard, and the man quailed as their eyes met. "What the fuck are you doing in our Bastion?"

"Just a job. Sir."

"Yeah? And who recruited you for this job?"

"I don't know."

Borrego brought the point of his sword to rest under the man's eyeball. "You're going to want to answer every fucking question I ask, Entius."

"Uhn!" said Entius, looking at Borrego with reproach. "All right, but I really don't know!"

Borrego pushed until the blade drew blood. "Where are you from?"

"F—from here!"

"From the city?"

"Yes sir."

"Tell me how you got yourself recruited for this job."

"Some people came around asking..."

"Who? What people?"

"I dunno! Just some purple shields. Weren't only me. They were asking after all the old vets."

"You a vet, then?" asked Rosarius.

Entius looked at him. "I am, sir."

"Veteran of what?" asked Borrego. "Where'd you fight?"

"Candra."

"Candra? That must have been a long time ago."

"Yes sir. Long time."

"Who were these purple shields, then?" asked Rosarius. "The ones who took you on?"

"I can't be sure, but..."

Borrego took his sword away and knelt beside Entius. "Did they say they were recruiting for the Assembly, maybe?"

"Yes sir," said Entius, eyeing him warily. "Think so."

"How did you get past the gate at Old Keep?"

"I don't know what that is."

"Old Keep? It looks like a square castle. It was probably the first thing you saw when you came through the gate."

"Oh."

"So how did you get past it?"

Entius shrugged. "We just walked in."

"Through the gate?"

"Yes sir."

"And it was just open? I don't think so. Who opened it for you?"

"I don't know. All I know is it was already open when I got that far."

Rosarius kicked Entius in the face. The man toppled over backward, blood oozing from a split lip.

"Who opened the fucking Old Keep gate?" shouted Borrego as he hauled him upright again.

Entius groaned. "I don't know."

"I really don't think he knows," said Bylen.

"I don't," said Entius, shaking his head. He spat red. "It was already open when I got there, as I told you."

"How many men did the Assembly recruit for this job?" asked Borrego.

"I dunno exactly, sir. Fifteen hundred? Two thousand?"

Rosarius whistled. "Two thousand veterans signed on for this? Bullshit."

"I never said they were all veterans," said Entius with a shrug.

"So why did *you* sign on?"

Entius shrugged again. "It was a paying job."

"And why were you and your friends," asked Borrego, indicating the corpses, "sniffing around this tower, then?"

"We were looking for coin."

Borrego showed him the blade of his sword. "You sure about that?"

"I swear it."

"So you came here," asked Rosarius slowly, "looking to loot the place?"

Entius nodded. "Yes sir."

"He's just a foot soldier," said Shabbie. "He doesn't know anything."

"I was going to say the same thing," said Borrego. He sat on his haunches, eye level with the man. "I've just one more question for you, Entius."

Entius shuffled, perhaps trying to find a more comfortable position on the stone floor.

Borrego leaned in very close. "Who's leading you?"

"General Romelo."

Rosarius closed his eyes. "You have to be fucking kidding me..."

"Romelo?" asked Borrego, sounding like he didn't trust his own ears.

"Yes," said Entius.

"Ales Romelo? Or Alexis?"

"Alexis."

"Do you know if he's brought his son with him?" asked Rosarius. "Ales is his son."

"I heard the young sir was along," said Entius, nodding. "Ales."

Borrego laughed, a hollow bark. "Oh, you can just see how the Assembly's going to spin this one, eh Rosy? House Romelo's going to be the saviour of the fucking Bastion. I can't fucking believe it."

"We're done with Entius, I think," said Rosarius quietly.

Borrego shoved Entius onto the flagstones. "Yep."

"Wait!" shouted Bylen. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" Borrego put his sword away and readied his dagger.

"You can't kill him! I mean, look at him—he's a grandfather! Probably."

Borrego sniffed. "In case you haven't noticed, Bylen, we're at war. And we can't leave him alive, not after what he's seen and heard here."

Bylen lifted his spear. "No! It isn't right. We can't kill him in cold blood!"

Borrego glared at him. "I'd quit pointing that thing at me if I were you."

Bylen swallowed as he lowered his weapon. "Yes sir."

The old veteran stiffened as Borrego opened up his neck. Hideous guttural noises came out as he twitched and bled onto the floor. He was dead within moments.

"Ugh," said Shabbie, making a face at the spreading wash of blood. "That was disgusting. You didn't need to do that."

"Shut the fuck up." Borrego wiped his dagger on Entius's clothes before putting it back in its scabbard. Shabbie looked away, unable to maintain eye contact.

"I'll go and grab Mirtius and whatever shit we might have left upstairs," said Rosarius. "Then we'll get out of here."

The boys crept out of the tower and into the still greyness of pre-dawn. A thick fog clung to the Bastion, heavy, damp and earthy. Rosarius led them through it, heading east until they came to the disused dormitory block that was Old Barracks.

"Can't see for shit," muttered Borrego.

"Be grateful," Rosarius whispered back. "We can't be seen either." If not for the fog, they'd probably have been spotted already. He paused beneath a crumbling window ledge some distance above their heads. "We'll go in there."

Borrego eyed the ledge. "In there?"

"Yep."

"You want to go *through* Old Barracks?"

"Yeah. It'll give us the cover we need to get over to Riva at New Barracks without being challenged."

Borrego slapped the heel of his palm against the side of the building, dislodging clods of mud and dirt. "Look at it, though. All the floorboards are probably rotted through."

"Trust me."

"Fine," said Borrego, getting down on one knee. "You go first."

Rosarius slung his shield over his back before stepping onto Borrego's shoulders. When the man stood again he was able to pull himself up and over the window ledge. The rest followed the same way.

"Your turn, brother," said Rosarius.

Borrego had to take a running jump so the others could catch his arms and haul him up; he was such a great lump that it took all of them working together.

"I remember this place," said Waslos, looking around. "I stayed here in my first year."

"Yeah," said Rosarius. "We all did, pretty much." Sadly, most of Old Barracks was no more. The roof was gone, and a huge portion of the uppermost floor had collapsed onto the one below. Rows of empty cubicles stretched before them.

"I was here the night the top floor started to give way," said Borrego as ancient oak slabs creaked ominously beneath his feet. Dust fell from beams overhead.

"You were probably the reason," said Rosarius. Mirtius and Waslos giggled at that.

"We should keep moving," said Bylen.

Rosarius nodded, leading the way. The whole structure practically swayed around them as they walked, groaning under their weight.

"Stay away from the middle of the hallway," said Borrego. "Stick to the outside walls."

"If I remember rightly," said Rosarius, "there's a staircase on the far side."

His memory ultimately proved itself reliable, but unfortunately the stairs lay in ruins.

"What now?" asked Shabbie.

"We need to get to the ground floor somehow," said Borrego.

"It's too far to jump." Rosarius peered down. It was also a mess of mud, broken timber and rubbish at the bottom. "Unless you want to break a leg. Hey, wasn't there a second set of stairs somewhere?"

Borrego shook his head. "Nope. This was the only one. Don't you remember?"

Rosarius frowned. "Mm." He'd forgotten.

"Hey, look what I found!" Mirtius was hunched over something on the floor. "You guys need to see this!"

"Fuck," said Rosarius, the first to take a look. Mirtius had found a body, or at least a set of bones inside a decayed pair of trousers and a tunic.

"What is it?" said Borrego, pushing Mirtius aside. "Oh, shit."

"I reckon it's that first-year student," said Rosarius. "Remember? The one who went missing years ago? Poor bastard."

Borrego nodded. "Yeah. Does anyone remember his name?"

"Wonder what happened to him?" asked Shabbie.

Mirtius pointed to a rusted blade lying next to the bones. Rosarius was about to suggest murder when they heard heavy footsteps and the walls around them began to shake.

"Rosarius!" shouted a man, stepping out of the shadows. A dozen followers or more stood behind him.

Though a steel helm concealed most of the man's face, Rosarius would have recognised that voice anywhere. "Romelo!" he yelled. "You piece of shit!"

"I'm so glad I found you, cousin."

Rosarius gripped his sword. "Me too." He was still pondering his next move when Borrego thundered past with a roar, his sword already in motion. Fuck! No time to think; nothing else to do but follow.

"Shit!" muttered Romelo, taking a hasty step backward and tripping over his own boots. No doubt he'd expected events to unfold somewhat differently.

"Fuck you!" shouted Borrego. But the decrepit building's hallways afforded very little room to manoeuvre and Romelo's men intercepted him, cutting off the path to their boss. He rained down blows against their shields. "Fuck you!"

"Muuuurgh!" screamed Rosarius as he traded blows with a pair of his cousin's lackeys. Soon all of them were grunting and swearing as they battered at each other.

"Don't kill them!" Romelo shouted. "Don't kill them! I want them alive!"

Rosarius grit his teeth. His helmet rang as a heavy blade connected with it, and though he stumbled sideways from the force of the blow, he still managed to keep his footing. He snarled and struck back, but his blade caromed uselessly off the edge of a shield. Fortunately, Waslos and the others chose that moment to add their spears to the struggle. It was six against too many, but at least the lack of space meant not having to worry about being flanked.

The fight lasted until one of Romelo's men sagged onto Borrego's shield. He pulled back to let him fall, and Rosarius was amazed to see a huge rent not in the front but in the *back* of the man's helmet. He was still puzzling over it when their opponents abruptly turned and ran.

"Ungh?" said Borrego, also confused.

It took Rosarius a moment to realise that a third party had joined the fight, attacking Romelo's men from the other side. Tumbling bodies sent the floorboards rattling underfoot. "Romelo!" he bawled. "Where are you?" He kept his shield up and sword at the ready, but couldn't tell Romelo's men apart from the newcomers.

"What's going on?" asked Shabbie.

"Hold," said Borrego. "Just hold."

The din of combat died away. Romelo's men were dead or fled, and Romelo himself was nowhere to be seen. A big man with a broad-axe and blackened helm stepped forward.

"Fuck me," said Borrego, lifting his visor. "It's the drillmaster!"

"Minten?" Rosarius copied his friend's gesture. "What the fuck?"

"Gentlemen," said Minten, taking off his helm. Unlike his former students, he was barely out of breath.

"What are you doing here, sir?" asked Rosarius.

Minten stared at them. "Saving your arses, apparently."

"Where's Romelo? We have to—"

"Gone. He got away."

"But—"

"Forget him. He should be the least of your concerns right now, believe me. Now, follow me before it's too late."

"Too late for what?"

"Just come," said Minten, and he led them out of the building.

A bright new day was dawning over the Bastion. The fog was beginning to lift, leaving New Barracks partly visible in the distance. The base of the hill on which it sat teemed with armed men, and none of them were students.

"Riva's up there," said Borrego.

"We need to go and help him," said Rosarius.

"No," said Minten, barring their path with his axe.

Borrego looked at him. "What? But we need to get up there. He's surrounded—he needs our help!"

"No," said Minten again. "Come." He separated them from Shabbie and the others, who seemed lost but didn't try to follow. "Look, I don't have much time to explain things to you, and for that I apologise, yes? But you two must get out of here. Immediately."

"Why?" asked Rosarius. "What are you talking about?"

"What's going on?" asked Borrego.

"There's been an uprising across the city."

"An uprising?" asked Rosarius. "What? How? Is this because of us? Because we haven't—"

Minten raised a hand. "Look, everything's fucked up at the moment. I have reason to believe that the Assembly is cleaning house and the uprising is nothing more than a convenient cover.

Last night, General Romelo added certain forces to the city watch, and he has his own troops waiting outside. You understand me? He's here now, and he's looking for you, which is why you both need to leave. If you don't, you'll almost certainly be killed."

"He's looking for us?" Rosarius couldn't believe his ears. "The fucking nerve! What's he trying to do—start a civil war?"

"Fuck," said Borrego.

Minten nodded. "Look, maybe he is. I don't know. There's more to it than what I'm saying, but I don't have time to get into it. It's a total mess. Alliances are shifting faster than I can keep up with, and even I don't understand all the players. But it doesn't matter right now, anyway—you both need to get out of the city before Romelo catches you." He pointed. "See those men on the wall there? They'll take you to where you need to go. Once you're clear of the city, you're on your own."

"Now? But we can't just leave," said Rosarius. "What about Riva? What about the Bastion?"

"Let me worry about Riva," said Minten, hefting his axe. "He's why you even fucking know me. But I'm not getting into that now, because we're out of time—if you don't get out of here, you'll die. Do you hear me? Go! Leave the city, and meet me in Imbune in a week. I'll be waiting for you there."

"Imbune?" asked Borrego. "Why?"

Minten put his helm back on. "Do you trust me?"

"But—" said Rosarius.

"Students! Do you fucking trust me?"

"Yes, sir," said Rosarius and Borrego together.

Minten nodded. "I think you know I would never lead you astray. Know that you two are like brothers to me, and I don't say such a thing lightly. If you do exactly as I ask, you have a chance of surviving this. Do you understand? Am I clear?"

"Yes sir," said Rosarius and Borrego together.

"No more questions. Go. Meet me in Imbune in *exactly* seven days. If I'm not there for some reason, don't stay. Head on to Lof. There you'll find a tailor by the name of Stuchius. He'll tell you what to do next. Got it?"

"I think so," said Rosarius.

"Repeat your orders to me."

"We're to meet you in Imbune in seven days. If you're not there, we're to go to Lof. In Lof, we're to find Stuchius the tailor."

"Correct." Minten pointed again at the wall behind them. "Now go, and good luck."

"Yes sir," said Rosarius and Borrego together, and then they ran for the wall. Men there put ropes under their armpits, and others hauled them to the top.

Rosarius turned to look out over the Bastion. Grey smoke had started to billow from Old Keep's myriad tiny windows, and at the foot of New Barracks students were forming a shield wall against the intruders.

"We should be down there," said Borrego.

"Fuck," said Rosarius. "I know." Then he flung off his helm and vomited.

Borrego clasped him about the shoulders, then pulled him upright and cupped his jaw, heedless of the undigested food dribbling down his chin. "I've got you, brother."

Rosarius stared at the Bastion, barely comprehending what he was seeing. "What have we done?" He pushed away from Borrego. "What have we done?" Then he dropped to his knees and vomited again.

31

LORD RIVA

THE SARASINIAN 5th ARMY

SOUTHERN AHRENIA

BORDIS

The Ahren shrieked as they thundered toward the southern lines. Riva stood there, awestruck by their roiling fury, his visor hiding the fear his eyes would have almost certainly betrayed.

The Herenians readied their spears. He was never more grateful for calm companions than at this very moment. Was there anything more inspiring than men facing death with such grim determination? How many would have fled if not for their unwavering comrades beside them?

A glance told him that Mozga had already reached safety, but Nohrt and the Sarasinian champions were still running. Would they make it? This was not the time to ponder such things, however. Commanders bellowed orders, though Riva swore his heart was louder, thumping over the din. He sucked air into his lungs, stale air laden with the sweat of unwashed bodies, piss,

leather and shit. He locked shields with the men on either side of him and hefted his spear. This was it—time to meet the enemy onslaught.

The centre of the Ahren host picked up speed, outpacing the wings until the entire mass took the form of a gigantic wedge. Did they mean to punch through the Sarasinians? The line of purple must have looked fragile from a distance. A tempting target, and not a bad plan, at least in principle, for splitting the Fifth in half would almost certainly end the battle before it even started. Would the youngsters part so easily, though? He knew them well enough to believe otherwise.

Virgilio's slingers had already started lobbing missiles, and as the Ahren came within range his archers unleashed their fury, pouring black clouds of arrows onto their heads. Men screamed and fell and were crushed underfoot, but the wedge rolled onward. The missile troops began to retreat, filtering back through the spearmen while they still could.

The Ahren drew nearer. Sarasinian veterans hurled javelins over the heads of the youngsters. The foremost Ahren toppled over, some men with multiple shafts jutting out of them. The trench slowed the rest for a time, but only as long as it took to bridge by rolling corpses into it.

The northerners would not be denied their grand charge, and they hit the Sarasinian shield wall with the sound of a thousand tree trunks snapping in half. The southern line shuddered and flexed under the impact, but held. Spear points flashed. Men screamed in fear and rage. The noise was like nothing else.

If the enemy had indeed hoped to overpower the centre, they were to be disappointed. Their wedge became a shapeless bulge as frontrunners found themselves trapped between the southern line and the weight of numbers at their backs. Tightly packed and unable to move, they were to discover that the more is not necessarily the merrier. With no room to wield their weapons, they were easy meat for Sarasinian spears. Warriors spilled out along the sides, some surging toward the Herenians. A fresh

torrent of missiles found them, but did little to cool their ardour. They returned fire as they closed, giving javelins to the air.

For Riva time seemed to slow, and dread seized him in the moments before the terrible shafts began their descent. He leaned forward so the top of his helm almost touched the rim of his shield. He waited, half-expecting to see an iron point burst through the wooden boards. Instead, nothing happened. Where the javelins landed, he didn't know. When he found the courage to peer over the top of his shield again, he saw hundreds of Ahren lying with arrows sticking out of them. The survivors began dropping them into their section of the trench. It didn't take long to top the thing off.

Instead of flinging themselves at the Herenian wall as their brothers had in the centre, the enemy stopped short and thrust underarm with their spears. Riva's men replied, and both sides parried blades or took them on shields, jostling each other, roaring and spitting. The second and third ranks thrust overhand, past the helms of the men ahead, trying to find targets in faces and necks. Where they did, mouths contorted and eyes widened in shock and pain. Dozens dropped, screaming, though almost all of them were northerners. The lethal rain of missiles from Virgilio's bowmen and slingers erupted again, adding to the enemy's grief.

The battle raged until mid-morning. Mounds of corpses gathered where the two sides met, three or four deep in places, enough to make close-quarter fighting difficult. The Ahren eventually withdrew, dragging the bodies of wounded and slain comrades behind them. Riva marvelled at the scale of the killing. Save for a few scattered patches of earth and grass, the ground lay thick with gore.

Riva's commanders used the lull in fighting to reorganise their lines. A mere handful of Herenians had fallen, and their bodies were carried back through the ranks and placed at the rear. Others were bleeding, but no man who could still wield a spear would give up his place in the wall. On the Ahren side, amidst the bodies, dying men cried for their mothers.

The northerners attacked again, and again they fell, their shouts of defiance and rage turning into anguished squalling as the Herenians stabbed them and trampled their bodies under boots. Riva admired the enemy's courage, but their suffering was horrific. This was not war, but slaughter. And the battle was to continue like that for several more hours, with the Ahren attacking and retreating, ebbing and flowing like the ocean tides, one swell after another dashing itself against the Herenian line. The men were as mindless as the sea, too, for the fate of the wave before seemed of no concern to the one after.

The sun passed overhead, creeping across the sky until its rays touched Herenian backs. A few more hours and it would slip over the horizon. Night fighting was virtually unheard of, so unless the Fifth prevailed before twilight, both armies would retire until the following morning. Mind you, for how much longer could the Ahren stand to bleed?

Virgilio's army, Riva decided, had far and away proven itself a superior fighting force. It would not be a stretch to say that it had, with minimal losses, laid low at least ten thousand enemy warriors. How many were injured was a question only the gods could answer. The other clans, their spiteful, greedy brothers over the Asfour, would be watching with great interest. And taking notes, no doubt, hoping to take full advantage of whatever passed here.

Virgilio's army was not without problems, however. Despite having inflicted considerable losses on the enemy, the opposing host still had him outnumbered and, now, more or less confined to the field. His front line hadn't ceded ground, but neither had it taken any, and there seemed no option apart from enduring the seemingly endless waves of assaults. After a full day of it, fighting was starting to feel like trying to push actual water back into the sea.

And while the Fifth had fought like heroes, signs of debility were becoming evident. As they waited for the next Ahren surge, men leaned on shields, their arms leaden, exhausted. When the

enemy came, they were put down with less and less fervour. Even the fanatical Sarasinian youngsters seemed to have lost their fire—how long since their last song? The missile troops were silent, having run out of ammunition. Riva looked up at the general's knoll and wondered how the man was planning to break what was fast turning into an awful deadlock.

"Here they come!" bellowed someone. "Shields up!"

Riva had advanced to the third rank: his time to fight had arrived. Nohrt tried one last time to discourage him from doing so, but he told the man bluntly to leave him be. What would folk say if he refused his place at the front? And, anyway, what of the men behind him nursing hurts? Should they fight again ahead of him? Never. "Sons of Herena!" he bellowed. "Stand fast! Here come more bodies to feed this wretched land!" The men raised their weapons and cheered.

The Ahren charged, and at last he felt their spears grinding against his shield and glancing off his helmet. The sound grated, but it wasn't long before he forgot about it and became caught up in the elation of fighting. His fear, at first renewed, gradually melted away as he yelled and stabbed. He could feel his spear blows meeting resistance, but between the narrow slit in his visor and the confusion of battle, he could hardly see what he was doing. It seemed more like blind luck when the point of his spear slipped into a neck, followed by a bright gush of red. A man fell and was quickly swallowed by the turmoil. "Yaah!" he screamed. Let no one say he was not a warrior!

An eternity of shoving and stabbing later, the Ahren withdrew. As they did, a fresh wave of javelineers rushed forward to pepper the Herenian line with missiles. The man on Riva's right took a pair in his shield and another through his collarbone. He dropped his spear and tried to pull the shaft free, oblivious to the barbed point poking out of his back.

The enemy charged again, only this time something felt wrong. This new wave looked very familiar. Taller men with halberds, long-handled axes and heavy coats of double mail. No poor tribesmen, but elite warriors with peaked helmets that glittered

in the sun. Herenians, surely? Riva blinked, wondering if he wasn't seeing things. Had part of his own line somehow swung around to face itself?

But there was no mistake. The Herenians' shock on facing such well-equipped enemies was palpable. And the newcomers wasted no time in getting to work. Up and down the Herenian line, they slipped axe beards over the tops of shields and pulled them down, while comrades leaned past to fell the warriors behind. Axes slammed into helmets, and more than one halberd spike found its way through a visor slit. A dozen of Riva's men dropped in quick succession, leaving a yawning gap in the front line. Men moved to fill it, but their spears had grown dull and pushed uselessly against the enemy's armour. Riva's own halberdiers answered better, but there were too few of them to make a difference. The northerners renewed their efforts, screaming in triumph, sensing that the tide was beginning to turn.

And perhaps it was. The Herenians had fought all day and were now too tired to keep their shields up, let alone deal with shock troops. They paid a high price, for nearly every man in the first rank was soon on the ground. Those who had until only moments earlier made up the second and third ranks drew swords and flung themselves at the enemy. They shoved the Ahren back in places, desperately trying to re-establish their careful formation, but the northerners were relentless. Riva could scarcely believe it—everything had been going so well, and seemingly out of nowhere his spear wall was collapsing! The Ahren roared, no doubt seeing their success as the prelude to a rout.

Axes and halberds continued to claim their shield-mates, but the Herenians did not panic. To turn and run would spell not only their end, but probably the end of the Fifth as well. And they knew it. So, bearing the deaths of their comrades with great stoicism they fought on, determined to hold. All the while, Riva wondered what Virgilio was doing. Could he see that his entire right wing was at grave risk of being chopped down?

The man in front of him was suddenly hammered into the ground, and Riva found himself in the first rank staring at an enormous Ahren axeman. He tried to get his spear into the eye slit in the man's helm. It didn't work. Others put points on him, but his mail shirt turned each one. The axe rose and then fell almost before Riva brought his shield up to meet it. The force of the blow would have put him on his knees if not for men at his back, holding him up. He braced for a second blow. Before it came, someone with better aim took the man through his visor. Riva thought him finished, but he lifted his axe again with a roar. Riva managed to counter, somehow, but at the cost of his shield's iron rim and a sizeable chunk of wood. He was pondering what to do next when someone jostled him, causing him to lurch into the man and inadvertently take him to the ground.

"Yuurgh!" screamed the Ahren, dropping his axe and trying to wrest Riva's helm away.

"Maah!" Riva yelled back as he tossed his spear to focus on battering the man with the remnants of his shield. It didn't do much, so it went the way of the spear. They traded gauntleted punches to little effect. He'd have drawn his sword if he'd had the room, so he went for his dagger instead. Almost as soon as he had it unsheathed, though, the thing leaped from his hand somehow and was gone! He felt around, and by sheer good fortune his fingers closed on what turned out to be a mace. The press of bodies prevented him from swinging it with any real force, but he managed to land enough blows against the side of the man's helm to knock him out. He didn't stop there, of course. Screaming like a madman, he brought the mace down again and again until the helm's rivets burst and fresh blood oozed out. "Bleh," he rasped at man's corpse as he fell on it, too spent to do anything else.

Riva eventually found his feet again. The Herenian ranks had moved past him, bolstered by missile troops who had rushed forward to lend a hand. It was definitely not, he knew, an encouraging sign, but at least the line was restored. Did it mean that the reserves been used elsewhere, then? And where were the horses?

He looked at his mace. Though it had served him well, it was less than ideal for fighting in a shield wall. He was still sifting through the detritus of the field, hoping to find something better, when an Ahren warrior sprang out of a corpse-pile. The man came on, shrieking, with a loose spearhead clutched in one hand. Riva started, but was too shocked to do anything beyond stand there. Luckily his brigandine checked the blade, and after a brief tussle he managed to crack the man's braincase open with the mace. As the body joined the wreckage once again, one leg nudged the haft of a long-handled axe. Riva had just laid a hand on it when he became aware of a man yelling at him. He braced to defend himself, a weapon clutched in each fist, but then he recognised the man's armour even though it was sheeted with blood. "Nohrt?"

Nohrt lifted the visor of his helm and spat out a string of unintelligible words.

"Here!" shouted Riva, lifting his own visor. "Here! Take!" And with that he thrust the axe into Nohrt's hands.

"Yaa!" said Nohrt, or at least that was what Riva heard, and then he slammed down his visor and brandished the weapon in an apparent gesture of gratitude. "Yaa!" he said again, and strode off purposefully toward the front line.

Men were running everywhere, most toward the fighting but some away, and Riva lost sight of Nohrt in the swirling chaos. He surveyed the battlefield and marvelled, yet again, at the scale of the butchery. Blood, bodies and the bloody parts of bodies covered the ground. As far as he could see was red, and in places the vital fluid of thousands had pooled and congealed in enormous rivulets. Dying men lay where they had fallen. Some wailed, others waited for the end in silence. They failed to notice that they were amongst enemies. Perhaps they didn't care.

Riva cursed himself for so readily giving up his axe. Nohrt the hero was probably already hard at work cutting apart scores of enemies with it. He wouldn't be surprised if the big oaf even managed to turn the entire fucking Ahren host by himself. He'd

have spat if his throat wasn't so dry. He looked around for a water bearer. "Fuck," he said, not seeing one.

A stray arrow flickered overhead. It should have been a reminder to put his visor down, but his eyes went to the general's knoll instead. Plenty of activity up there, with dozens of messengers running this way and that. No doubt the old man was watching, and no doubt he had a plan. But what? How was he going to pull his nuts out of the fire, so to speak? And when? Ah, but at last Riva saw a water bearer, and any thoughts not related to thirst left his head. He called, and a boy who couldn't have been older than eleven or twelve struggled over, his skinny arms straining to hold a sloshing bucket and a sheaf of arrows. No one came for the ammunition, but Riva gladly relieved him of the bucket. The lad offered no ladle, and he dared not remove his helm entirely, so taking a sip of water proved quite the challenge. He brought the bucket to his mouth, pouring a good amount down his brigandine in the process. He later reflected that he could have taken off a gauntlet and cupped water into his mouth, but at the time he was very thirsty and clearly not thinking straight. When he finally got some past his lips he detected the metallic tang of blood, but swallowed anyway.

"Please." Someone called to him. He looked and saw a man lying on the ground.

"Please," said a man. "Water." He was, without a doubt, an enemy.

At first, Riva ignored him. Only after he had drunk his fill did he take the bucket over to the man.

"I may need," said the man, nodding at it, "your help. Please." He was unarmed and had both hands pressed to his belly. The ratty garment beneath was soaked red and clinging to his skin, and Riva could see teeth through a cut on his left cheek. Too injured to be a threat.

"You fought bravely, brother," said Riva, helping him to sit up. The man was not of gentle birth, obviously, but there seemed little harm in honouring him. He knelt, plucked away a gauntlet, and used his bare palm to sprinkle water into the man's mouth.

The Ahren swallowed and looked at him, eyes bright with emotion. "Are we winning?"

Riva looked away, to the front where warriors still screamed and spat and stabbed. "To be honest, I don't know." He let the man have as much water as he wanted, and pretended not to notice that most of it dribbled from the wound on his face.

"Many thanks." The man leaned back on one elbow.

"Do you know me?" asked Riva.

The man peered at him, perhaps finally noticing the quality of his attire. "Lord Baros?"

Riva shook his head in mild rebuke. "Archon Riva of Herena."

It took a moment for his words to sink in. And then a look of fear crossed the man's face. "Oh."

"Don't worry," said Riva with a smile. "I wasn't planning on killing you." Not if he didn't have to. And anyway, the poor bastard probably wouldn't last more than a few days with that pierced gut of his. "More water?"

As the man opened his mouth to reply, Riva felt the ground shuddering under his boots. Moments later, thousands of voices roared in celebration. Startled, he leapt up and unsheathed his sword, half-expecting to see northern fighters running rampant through his shield wall. Not the end that had been foreseen—of all the blasted luck! Even so, he resolved not to show his back but to meet his doom head-on.

But he was not fated to die, at least not that day. For it was the northerners who had broken, and his men were hacking into them as they ran. He stared, open-mouthed, at purple banners impossibly far ahead and put two and two together—Virgilio had sent cavalry against the Ahren left wing. A surprise attack against an unprotected flank, sowing confusion and panic enough to put the entire host to flight!

He continued to stare. Ordered ranks became a thing of the past as every southern line dissolved. Men rushed forward, seized by a new fever of bloodletting. The noise grew to levels he had scarcely thought possible.

So, the Lion had saved them after all. They would know for certain in the next few days. And if the Ahren horde were truly crushed, every scrap of land south of the River Asfour had just passed from its hands.

The bucket of water and the dying Ahren forgotten, Riva struck out in the direction of the general's knoll. His horse was in the woods beneath, saddled and waiting. It would carry him to join the slaughter.

BENE**THE UNIVERSITY OF GERICH ASSET RECOVERY TEAM****CENTRAL RENDEROS**

Magister Roaoo chuckled. "And you, my dear?" he asked, turning to Agbo. "What is your verdict?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Bene watched Agbo watching Khela out of the corner of her eye. She was the only one of the four of them who had yet to sample the wine. Not only was her body language saying she didn't want to, it was practically screaming that she wanted to be anywhere but here in Roaoo's tent.

"Go on," said Khela, gesturing in friendly encouragement. "It's all right. Try it."

Hesitant, Agbo put cup to lips and drank. "It's nice," she said. The way she curled them afterward suggested otherwise, though, and that made Bene laugh.

"It's good, isn't it?" Roaoo swayed slightly as he scrutinised each of them across the table.

"Auuuggh!" said Bene. "Sooo good!" He only realised how camp he sounded after the words left his mouth, at which point he wanted to slap himself. Luckily, no one else seemed to pick up on it. Or maybe they just didn't care.

"It's absolutely wonderful, magister," said Khela. "What sort of wine did you say it was again?"

"This is a northern Ivarian brown wine," said Roaoo, brandishing the bottle. "The name and colour are both quite *unlovely*, I know, but the taste is very much the opposite. Don't you think?"

Khela took another sip from her cup and nodded. "I do. It's the sweetest wine I've ever had."

"Even if you told me right now it was poisoned," said Bene, "I'd drink it anyway."

"Enjoy this one," said Roaoo. "It's a rare vintage, and not cheap either. I daresay it will be a very long while before you see its like again."

"What's the occasion, anyway?" asked Bene. But the magister merely shrugged and asked Khela to fetch some candles because blah, blah, something about growing dark. He wasn't really listening. Another sip of wine and he almost forgot that he'd even asked the question. It truly was an exceptional drop. How had he never appreciated wine before? Probably because he'd never drunk much of it before. Not the really good stuff anyway. Too expensive. Back on campus, he hadn't been able to afford anything beyond a pitcher of beer on weekends, and maybe a few shots of something harder to keep the beer buzz going. And that was only on alternate weeks, mind you. And only when friends were kind enough to lend him money...

Two more bottles of northern Ivaria's finest brown later, everyone was laughing. Even Agbo seemed more relaxed, even if she hadn't yet shown much interest in joining the conversation. Bene felt better than he had in a long time. It was good to let off steam, though he'd never imagined having the opportunity to do so with Roaoo in the magister's own tent!

"I will say one thing, though," said Khela, wiping off her chin. She was famous for being anyone's after just one cup, and she'd had at least three. "I really miss the university. The parks, the cloisters, the halls. And the dorms and the library. Oh, and I love the library. Did I mention that? Oh, and the lectures and the professors too, of course. It's a world away from here and all... this... stuff we're... dealing with."

"Yeah I miss uni too, I guess," said Bene. "Life on the road does kinda get to you after a while, huh?"

"Do you enjoy being out here, magister?" asked Khela. "In Renderos? In the middle of nowhere?"

Roao ignored the question and said, "I must say, I take objection to the neat little list you just rattled off."

"My list?"

Roao made a face. "Parks? Cloisters? Halls? Libraries? They're just buildings. Buildings don't make a university."

"I mentioned lectures and professors, too. I think."

"Buildings *are* an important part of the campus experience, though," said Bene. He wasn't sure why he was coming to Khela's defence, exactly. They weren't on speaking terms yet, and probably wouldn't be for a while. They weren't even on acknowledging-each-other's-presence terms yet, for that matter. "I mean, you can't have a university without buildings, can you?"

"You can," said Roao. "To a degree. You can certainly have a university without parks and cloisters and halls."

Bene scratched his chin. "Well, yes. I suppose..."

"You can't not have libraries, though," said Khela. "And what sort of institute would it be without professors? Or lectures?"

Roao waved a hand. "I will admit that libraries are useful. Lectures are too, provided there's room in them for lively debate. But to a very great extent, I think students would be much better off without professors."

"Really?" asked Bene.

"Take ours, for instance. Largely useless. Dimwits, most of them. Oh, I could name two or three who are decent, I suppose, but most of the rest are beyond redemption."

Bene's mouth fell open. Khela's did too, but at least she was the first to regain her wits. "Can I ask what makes you say that, magister?"

Roao grinned. "Of course! Just name a department, my dear. They're all full of so-called experts who pump out nothing but bullshit year after year. Only they call it *studies*." He made air quotes with his fingers around the last word, which almost made Bene choke. "Beneath all their clever phraseology there's nothing of substance. In fact, if you want to know what I really think, I'd go so far as to say that most of their *studies* aren't even rooted in reality. They don't realise this, of course. No, they all see themselves as these deeply profound thinkers who are doing vital work to keep our society—nay, civilisation!—marching along."

There followed a very long, very awkward silence that Khela covered with a nervous cough.

"Mmm," said Bene. He wasn't entirely sure where to look. For a man like the magister to heap scorn on the University of Gerich was unthinkable. Where was it coming from? It wasn't the alcohol, was it?

Except Roao wasn't finished. "Take that dolt Saund, for example. He's the perfect example, actually. A few months before we left Gerich, he presented this truly abysmal paper in which he proposed a new type of ballista. 'Saund,' I told him when he was done, 'this thing is absurd. Even if it managed to hold a bolt of the size you suggest, it would most likely toss the thing backward, if at all.' Well, everyone at the presentation went very quiet, didn't they? Saund himself looked at me with great pity and said that I *couldn't rule out the possibility of it working*. And to my great surprise, everyone agreed with him! I was aghast. We argued at length, but he refused to back down. So naturally I decided to prove him wrong by having the damn thing built." He chuckled at the memory. "The armoury boys thought I'd lost my mind, but as soon as I mentioned whose design it was... well, I think they understood my intention."

"And what happened?" asked Khela.

Roao held up a finger. "Ah, well. Now, mind you, I explicitly forbade any modification of Saund's design. The day it was tested, I forced the man and his colleagues to watch. Needless to say, the device was a complete failure. It was a fortunate thing no one was injured, actually. But do you know, Saund wasn't the least bit embarrassed! He gave me a hundred reasons why it didn't work, but steadfastly refused to admit that *he* was one of them. 'It actually proves,' he said smugly, 'there's no such thing as certain knowledge.' Can you imagine a more nonsensical conclusion? I was so dumbfounded I could have strangled him. And I could have strangled everyone else for insisting that he was right, too. And so it went that Saund was credited for coming up with a truly innovative ballista design!"

"Oh dear," said Bene. "Even though it didn't work? Really?"

"Indeed," said Roao. "So what do you say about that argument, eh, Munning? There's no such thing as certain knowledge—true or false?"

Bene shook his head. "False. I mean, of course. It's an odd position to take, isn't it? I mean, I can think of so many things wrong with it."

"Right," said Khela. "You can't possibly argue that *everything* is unknowable, can you. I mean, can you? Because I think there are some things we can definitely know."

"Congratulations," said Roao, applauding them. "You've both just acknowledged a truth that a worryingly large number of my colleagues will not. And to think these people are teaching you! Who amongst *your* colleagues will be bold enough to contradict their mentors?"

"This isn't really a thing on campus though, is it?"

Roao nodded at her. "Unfortunately, yes. The notion that there's no such thing as certain knowledge is coming into vogue right now. I'm sure you've both read Varre?"

"He was required reading for us the semester before we left," said Bene.

"Of course he was," said Roao, looking angry. "He's from where Saund and his ilk draw their inspiration. You'll recall that

he wrote, and I quote, 'No one can rule out the possibility of anything.' That particular piece of profundity was followed by sundry musings about how a pear tree might produce kittens, or how a man might spontaneously metamorphose into a woman as he sleeps. I mean, really? And these were but two of the many, many utterly ridiculous examples dear old Varre took great pains to list *and* describe. And apparently the fools in charge of academic prizes were thoroughly intrigued by all this rubbish. I'm sure you recall that for his remarkable insights he was awarded the Warden Master's Medal of Endeavour? *No one can rule out the possibility of anything.* Indeed. How about the possibility that the man is descending into senility? Did the prize committee stop to consider that one?"

"Oh dear," said Khela, giggling.

"I always liked the bit," said Bene, "where Varre staunchly maintains that what we think of as the physical world is just an illusion. I was expecting him to admit there's a possibility that it isn't, too. But no, he doesn't."

"Yes," said Roaoo. "It goes to show how ridiculously speculative it all is. Hmm, though if we must speculate, let's speculate about what Varre would do if his university stipend were cut off. Would he protest? Oh, he would. In fact, no one would scream louder. But what do you need money for if everything around you is merely an illusion? Eh, Varre? But when you ask him such questions, he starts talking in circles and soon finds an excuse to leave the conversation. Pah. It just goes to show that he doesn't actually believe in what he's saying. This is Varre: *a thing is true because I insist that it is and because it suits me to believe it, even though I don't really believe it.* And to think frauds like him are hailed as the greatest minds of our time! 'Tirelessly working to bridge the gap between knowledge and wisdom,' was what they said at the ceremony where they awarded him the Medal of Endeavour. Pah! More like a fool building a bridge to nowhere if you ask me."

"A bridge to nowhere!" cried Bene. "Brilliant. Could I borrow that, do you think? It would make a really good title for a rebuttal paper."

Roao0 shook his head. "Oh, no. Don't you go challenging him." "Why not?"

"Rock the boat at your peril," said Roao0, pointing at him. "Or do you have no desire whatsoever to rise through the ranks of academia? They will drive you out, Munning. No, you must take care that everything you say and do aligns with whatever narrative it is that prevails in Gerich at the time."

"And who decides that?"

"Wait, wait," said Khela. "I'm sorry, sir, but don't you think that's being a bit too cynical? That's not how things really are, surely?"

"Unfortunately, Rusen, it is both cynical and realistic," said Roao0. To Bene he said, "The prevailing narrative is decided by whoever is in charge. The Varres of this world are idiots, but they're useful idiots to the people pulling the strings."

"Shit," said Bene. "And to think I was going to ask Saund to be my mentor when we got back. Now I'm thinking it might not be the best idea."

Roao0 laughed. "Do it. If nothing else, I'm certain you'll find him endlessly entertaining."

"With respect, magister, you've just gone and ruined him for me."

"I was thinking of asking Jeromi to be my mentor," said Khela. "If she'll have me."

Bene made a face. "What? Jeromi? I thought you couldn't stand her? You're always complaining about how she can't ever seem to prove anything."

"Well I take it all back. I'm reading one of her latest papers right now and I actually don't hate it."

"You don't hate it? Now there's a ringing endorsement!"

"Ugh. Look Bene, I don't really care if--"

"Now, now," said Roao0, holding up his hands. "Don't start."

No one said anything for some time. Khela broke the silence by asking, "Who was your mentor, magister?"

"Ah," said Roaoo. "Well, I was fortunate there, let me tell you. Instead of having to choose my mentor, my mentor chose me."

Bene answered for him. "It was Uzadine of Thry."

"Indeed." The magister sounded almost wistful, and paused as if deciding whether or not to continue. Finally, he produced a box from a pocket in his robes and set it on the table with a click. Opening it revealed an oblong pendant made of dull greyish metal. "A most remarkable woman. She gave me this as a memento before she—"

"Yeeeh!" cried Agbo, leaping up and practically diving into a far corner of the tent. She knocked over an empty wine bottle in the process, though luckily it landed on the ground without shattering.

Bene looked at Roaoo's pendant, noted its metallic sheen. "Fuck me," he said, the effects of the Ivorian wine instantly evaporating.

Khela apparently shared his suspicions. "Sir, is that an *object*?"

"Relax," said Roaoo. "It's inert. Long dead."

"It is not!" cried Agbo. "It is not dead!"

Bene and Khela looked at Roaoo. "Not?" said the magister, turning to Agbo with knitted brows.

"No!" said Agbo. "I can see its magic!"

Khela pointed at the pendant. "Is that an object from the Trench, magister?"

"It's not," said Roaoo flatly. To Agbo he said, "My dear, I think you must be able to see something the rest of us obviously cannot. What is it? What do you see?"

Agbo edged further away. "Ugh! Take it away! I don't want it anywhere near me! Please!" With her face screwed up in disgust, she waved her hands about as if fending off some awful creature. "Ugh! That one almost *touched* me!"

"What did?" asked Roaoo. "What almost touched you? What is it you can see?"

"Magister Roaoo," said Khela. "If that's a Trench object..."

"I assure you it isn't," said Roaoo, shuffling over to where Agbo cowered in fright. "Agbo? Please tell me what you can see."

Agbo stuck out her tongue, looking at the box on the table with pure loathing. "Oh!" she cried, suddenly ducking to one side. "Oh, it's horrible. It's like it's falling apart! It's got these little things coming out of it. Ugh. They're flying out..."

"You can see all this?"

Agbo nodded. "Yes."

"And these things coming out of it? What are they? Can you describe them?"

"I don't know. Pieces of itself? Oh, Khela! That one landed on your arm!"

"What?" asked Khela, clutching at her sleeve. "What did?" But she clearly couldn't see anything, and neither could Bene.

"One of its... things. The things coming out of it."

Khela looked at Bene. "Can you see anything?" Bene shook his head.

Roaoo went to the table and closed the box. "And now? What do you see now?"

"They're gone!" Agbo looked about ready to throw up. "All the flying things are gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes."

"And if I open the box again?" he asked, doing exactly that.

Agbo flinched. "Ugh. No, no! Please don't."

Roaoo snapped the box shut and put it back in his robes. "That's... very odd."

"Magister Roaoo?" Khela stood up. "Is that thing from the Trench?"

Roaoo rounded on her. "No! It's not from the Trench! And that, Rusen, is the last time you'll ask me that question. Actually, you can get out!" He pointed at Bene. "And take him with you. Go!"

"Wow," said Khela as she and Bene put as much distance between themselves and the magister's tent as they could. The camp was full of the usual activity, and no one looked their way. "What the fuck just happened?"

Bene checked to make sure there were no eavesdroppers. "I wish I knew. That was some next-level shit, eh?"

"There's no way that thing didn't come out of the Trench, Bene. No way."

"Yeah. He said it didn't, though."

"Do you believe that?"

"I don't know."

"We've both seen objects before, Bene. It had the tell-tale colour, that rainbow sheen! Where else could it have come from?"

"I don't know." His mind was reeling from the implication. All objects came exclusively from the Trench—it was an established fact. Canon. Indisputable.

"Do you think he stole it, then?"

Bene stopped. "What? He said Uzadine of Thry gave it to him, didn't he?"

"Do you believe that?"

"Khel, stop. Right now, I've got no fucking idea what to believe. I'm still trying to figure out what just happened!"

"All right. Sorry. Sorry."

"From the top, let's go through what we saw."

"All right."

"It started when you asked him who his mentor was."

"And you said it was Uzadine of Thry."

"And then he took out the box and opened it."

"Right," said Khela, nodding. "And then—"

"And that's when Agbo flipped out."

"Yeah. Understatement of the year. Obviously she could see something."

"Yeah. Something scary."

"Something we couldn't."

"Right. Which means..."

"Which means that thing was an object."

Bene couldn't argue that it wasn't a strong possibility. Quite the contrary. "Yeah. Most likely."

"All right. Which means Agbo might also be able to use it. Like her."

"Possibly." Shit, wouldn't that be something?

Khela touched his arm. "When I asked him who his mentor had been, and you said Uzadine of Thry, I noticed how weird Roaoo got. Did you notice that, too?"

"Yeah, I did. I thought he even looked kinda sad. I've never seen him like that."

"Who was she?"

Bene fought the urge to quip that she'd been Roaoo's mentor. Instead he said, "You're kidding, right? She was only the first and last female magister in Gerich, Khel."

"Oh."

"Oh? Is that all you have to say?"

"Well, I kind of knew the name from somewhere, I guess..."

"You kind of knew the name from somewhere, you guess? Shit Khel, the woman was a really big deal!"

"All right! All right!"

"She was extremely sensitive to objects, apparently. Couldn't use them, but she could sniff 'em out like nobody's business. Used to get a tingly feeling, they say, like something was calling her name. That's how she unearthed the first one. And that's how the Trench was discovered. Or at least according to what I read."

"She could hear them calling her? Now that's seriously creepy."

"Yeah. Tell me about it."

"What happened to her?"

"You really don't know her story, do you? She died of consumption while still in office. Her and Roaoo were pretty close, I think. It was her recommendation that Roaoo succeed her."

"She was that high? I didn't know that."

"Yeah, well you could fill a great big fucking archaeological dig site with what you don't kn--"

"Shut up, Bene. That really isn't helpful."

Bene shrugged. "Fine. But c'mon Khel—we learned all this in our first year on campus! Don't you remember?"

"I guess I didn't pay much attention to all that stuff."

"I'll say. And I didn't think it was possible, but did you notice how Roaoo managed to reach a whole new level of cynicism tonight? With that thing about Saund? And Varre? And you thought I was bad. Tell you what, if ever use the phrase *Roaoo levels of cynicism* at any point in the future, at least now you'll be in on the joke."

"All I know is that he seemed shocked and scared."

"Yeah. He really did, didn't he? Agbo's reaction spooked the shit out of him. First time I've seen him looking like he didn't know what was going on. Like he didn't have control over the situation."

"Oh no," said Khela, grabbing his arm, a stricken look on her face. "We're not in trouble, are we?"

"How do you mean?"

"I don't get what just happened, Bene. I really don't. What does it all mean? That's an object he's got, right? It came from the Trench, and before you tell me it didn't, just think about it, huh? He got it from Uzadine of Thry, who discovered the Trench. He said so himself. *From the first person in our time to find an object.* Or am I wrong?"

"No, that sounds about right."

"Which means the magister has an unsanctioned object in his possession. That's a crime, Bene. And now that we know about it—"

Bene couldn't help but cringe at her mental gymnastics. "That's a pretty shit conclusion, Khel. Sorry, but it is. We don't know for certain it's an unsanctioned object. And that definitely isn't the sort of thing you should be saying out loud, by the way! If you go making wild accusations, you're definitely going to get yourself in trouble. He himself said it was dead, inert."

"It wasn't dead. Agbo said so, and based on the strength of her reaction we've got no reason not to believe her. And we left her back there, with him."

“So?”

“So what is he doing in there with her?”

“I don’t know. Unless...”

“Unless what?”

Bene clicked his fingers. “Shit, I can’t believe it’s taken me this long to see what’s been in front of my face all this time. You said something a moment ago about Agbo maybe being able to use Trench objects. Right?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s obviously why she’s here—that’s why he agreed so quickly to her joining our expedition. Do you remember when we met her? When we pulled her out of that swamp and interrogated her for the first time? She talked about seeing *her* magic. Do you remember?”

“Uh huh. I mean, I got kicked out of the tent but I hung around outside, listening...”

“I knew you must have! So, Roaoo would have guessed from then that she had an affinity for objects, right? Well tonight, she proved him right. Inadvertently, I think, but still. I mean, I really don’t believe he was expecting any of what just happened back there...”

“I dunno.”

“No, Khel. He looked genuinely surprised by all that. Like maybe he didn’t even know what he really had in that box.”

“All right. Yeah, maybe.”

“So now he’s questioning her all over again. I mean, of course he is. He’s just made another huge discovery, hasn’t he? And we’d probably still be there too, sharing in it, except your big mouth got us kicked out. Why did you keep insisting that thing was a Trench object? He kept telling you it wasn’t.”

“He doesn’t have a lot of patience.”

“True. But you don’t exactly inspire it, either.”

Khela punched his arm. “What the shit?”

“No, don’t you go getting angry at me, girl. He kicked us out because you were being annoying as fuck. I’d have done the same.”

"Bene! That *is* a Trench object he's got!"

Bene folded his arms. "And where's your proof?"

"I already told you."

"What? That because Uzadine of Thry gave it to him, it means she must have pulled it out of the Trench?"

"Exactly."

"What if she didn't, though? What if she got it elsewhere?"

"Then it would mean that the Trench isn't the only source of objects. But that's where objects come from, right? And *only* from there. Every. Single. One. It's canon. It's lore. Except..."

"Yes," said Bene, taking a deep breath as it finally dawned on him. Another extremely worrying implication that he really should have picked up on sooner. "I know. Only tonight he showed us one and stated repeatedly that—"

"That it didn't come from there," whispered Khela, wide-eyed as she finished his sentence. "Oh shit, he really *did* say that, didn't he? He was adamant that she got it elsewhere."

"Yeah. And now I'm getting goosebumps, Khel. I really don't know what to make of this situation now. Something's seriously fucking amiss here."

"That object wasn't dead like he claimed either, Bene. No way it was."

"I know. I got the impression that he really thought it was, though. And even Agbo didn't seem to realise it until he opened the box. Seriously, what was going on with all that?"

Khela put her arms around him. "I'm scared, Bene. I mean, really scared."

"It'll be all right." Bene held her tightly. He looked at the magister's tent as he said it, wondering what was happening in there. Shit was weird, no two ways about it. On the other hand, when wasn't it? Besides, he truly believed that everything had an explanation. Not necessarily one that seemed logical at first glance, but things generally followed a kind of logic. Roaoo was probably keeping secrets—anyone in his position would—but one way or another, he'd work out what was really going on. "We'll be all right."

33

LORD RIVA

THE SARASINIAN 5th ARMY

SOUTHERN AHRENIA

BORDIS

The Battle of Bordis had proved a decisive victory for Virgilio, and the bloodiest page in the annals—however brief they were—of Riva's military life. A great many Ahren warriors perished in the conflict, and more had quit the field for good. In the days that followed, the purple shields pursued some of the vanquished north, butchering thousands of souls on the banks of the Asfour and capturing the Eratii leader, Secreen. Men who had been there spoke of the river flowing red, and of untold numbers drowning in the waters as they tried to get away.

To the frustration of the Sarasinians, Riva and his Herenians won themselves even greater glory. Backed by the Candrans and Romelians, they seized not only the Ahren wagon train but another of the enemy chieftains, Baros. Leaving the Candrans behind to guard his prizes, Riva harried what remained of the

shattered northern army to the outskirts of Bordis, fighting until darkness fell.

Just after dawn the next day, the reunited Fifth descended on the city. The two words that best described what happened were thus: epic slaughter. After a spirited stand, Julanten, the last of the Ahren leaders, tried to negotiate a surrender. He was beaten, he argued, and with thousands of civilians trapped in Bordis there was no need for further suffering. Virgilio disagreed. Smarting from the loss of a tenth and more of his forces, he was disinclined toward generosity. "Until midday," he said, "I say let the men do what they like."

The southerners overran Bordis, howling like lunatics. With Julanten and his men lying dead in their wake, homes were looted, temples defiled, and the city's ordinary folk duly set upon. Few of the invaders were unimpeachable, but it was the Sarasinians who committed the worst atrocities, raping and murdering not only women and young men, but even the elderly and children. Riva gave his warriors free rein as well, although later he came to regret it. At the time he was too drunk on victory to care, and perhaps half-insane from having lived through the blood and horror of the shield wall.

It was mid-afternoon and Riva stood in the baking sun. A trickle of red spilled down the corpse's face as it lay on the ground, spine twisted, arms stiffening. The man responsible stood there dumbly, a smith's hammer clutched in one hand.

"*Next!*" shouted Nohrt.

Another captive was brought out. "Please," he said, terror contorting his features as he fell on his knees. "Please don't do this."

Nohrt looked at the man with the hammer. "Will you spare your brother's life?"

The man nodded. "Yes. Gladly!"

"Fool." Nohrt shoved him to the ground. He snatched the hammer, held it out to the newcomer and said, "Kill him."

"And if I refuse?" asked the kneeling man.

“Ever been fucked by a dog?”

The man thought about it for a moment. Then with a strangled cry he jumped up, grabbed the hammer and used it to break its former owner’s skull almost in half.

“Well done,” said Nohrt. At his feet, blood and brains leaked out of the newest body.

Unable to help himself, the man let tears fall. “I...” he said, but nothing more came from his mouth.

Nohrt grinned. “You killed him with one blow. No small mercy, that. But you can always give the hammer back if you want.”

The man clutched it to his chest, sparing Nohrt a baleful look.

Nohrt laughed. “That’s the spirit! *Bring out another one!*”

Another captive was fetched. Nohrt forced him to his knees, looked at the man with the hammer, and asked, “Will you spare your brother’s life?”

The man shuddered and took a deep breath. “No.”

“Well then, do what you must.”

With tears streaming down both cheeks, the man lifted the hammer and swung. His victim closed his eyes slightly ahead of its iron face punching through his left temple, and a moment later he was down and rolling on the ground, his mouth opening and closing like a freshly landed fish.

“Finish him off,” said Nohrt.

The man obeyed without a word; more brain matter splashed across the ground.

“That’s two,” said Nohrt, grinning at the scene. “The record is sixteen. Let’s see how you go, eh? *Next!*”

Secreen turned away from the killing and faced Riva. “Why are you showing us this?”

“Virgilio wanted me to,” said Riva.

The man spat before replying. “And where *is* your illustrious general?”

“Busy with other things.”

“Why kill our people like this?” asked Baros. “Why not sell them instead?”

"We fought bravely," said Secreen, fuming, "and you're having us hit each other with hammers? At least give us better deaths, man! We're warriors. Haven't we earned that much?"

"Have you?"

"He's right," said Baros. "A warrior deserves better than to be put down like an animal, Riva. To say nothing of dying at the hands of his own kinsmen."

Riva watched as Nohrt's latest hammer-man, still crying, cracked another skull. "Mmm."

"I've no wish to see any more," said Secreen bitterly. "Kill me, too, and be done with it."

Riva gestured at the buildings around them. "Granted. But before I do, I want to know something of this city. Of Bordis."

Secreen tossed his head. "Go fuck yourself."

"It's just a city," said Baros. "The name means—"

"*River City*," said Riva. "I already know. Tell me something of its history."

Baros shrugged. "It's just an ordinary city. Nothing to tell."

"No. Not true." In the centre of Bordis, a squat building thrust upward and then inward, like a truncated pyramid. Overshadowed by the drab grey squares surrounding it, the untrained eye would have found it odd, perhaps slightly out of place. Foreign, but not especially remarkable. But Riva knew differently. Buried in Istome's copy of *On Philosophism* was a sketch of a building that looked almost exactly the same. He would have to ask her about it later. "Was it always yours?"

Baros shrugged again. "No. We took it from the Alcala."

"We?"

"Don't tell him anything more!" hissed Secreen through clenched teeth.

"Our clan," said Baros, looking at Secreen. "The Ulse. My clan. Me."

"And you didn't think to fortify it ahead of the battle?" asked Riva.

"Why would we?" asked Secreen. "Ahren don't cower behind walls."

"Mm." Riva snorted. The man was mocking Herena's land walls. The tribes had done so for generations. She was nothing without them, or so the saying went. By way of reply, he gestured at the northern bodies littering the streets. "How many of them died with spears in their backs?"

Secreen clenched his jaw. "Dog."

"What will you do with the place?" asked Baros. "Raze it?"

Riva shook his head. "No. We'll settle here. It'll make a good staging point." Let Secreen choke on those words, he thought. "So, what are you not supposed to be telling me anything more about?"

"Say nothing," hissed Secreen.

Riva glared at the man. "Baros *will* tell me. If he wants to die a good death. Because I can make your last moments in this world utterly miserable... or not. The choice is yours."

Secreen was unintimidated. "Do your worst, Riva."

Riva turned to Baros. "Answer. What is it that our friend here doesn't want me to know? That you pushed another clan out of this place? It doesn't sound like some great secret."

"There are ruins here," said Baros. "Below. Old ones."

"What ruins?" Was he referring to the pyramid, maybe?

"I know nothing about them beyond what I just said."

"How come? Is this your city or not?"

Baros looked at Secreen, who narrowed his eyes in response. "There was another city here once. Bordis was built on top of the ruins."

"I thought you said it was just an ordinary city?"

"And it is. It's just that a large part of the old city was underground. A tiny portion of it is still intact."

"And?"

"And," said Baros with a sigh, "some of our people have taken refuge there."

"Who?"

"Women and children, mostly. All we ask—"

"Mostly?"

"There are warriors guarding them. But not many."

"I see. Waiting until dark for the chance to cut our throats?"

"A handful of warriors, Riva. Useless against the army you've assembled here."

"I believe you. So, the undercity—how do we reach it?"

Baros hesitated, but then bowed his head. "I can show you where the entrance is. All I ask is that—"

"Idiot!" shouted Secreen. "Why did you have to open your stupid mouth? He'll kill them!"

Baros ignored him. "Can you find it in your heart to spare these people, Riva? Please..."

Secreen spat. "You think he will? He won't. You've seen how he treats his prisoners. This man has no heart!"

"Not true," said Riva.

"So you'll spare them?" asked Baros. "If I show you where they're hiding, will you let them live?"

Riva nodded. "I don't kill women and children, Baros. I can't guarantee the safety of anyone else, though."

"It's enough," said Baros, though he looked far from happy.

"It's enough?" shouted Secreen. "It's enough? No! You cannot trust a thing this man says. He'll kill them! You'll see! He'll kill them all!"

Riva turned to where his officers stood awaiting orders. "I have no further use for this one." He flicked a hand at Secreen. "Do as we discussed."

The men removed the chieftain to a hill on which a tall post the thickness of a man's thigh had been prepared. Around it, they placed bundles of wood interspersed with pine needles and old straw. Secreen was made to stand on one of them, after which he was secured to the post with a riveted iron collar. A soldier was chosen to pluck out the man's eyebrows using the very tweezers presented to Virgilio some days earlier. More bundles of wood were then heaped around him until only his head was visible.

Baros spat. "He deserves a better end than this."

"I'll bet you're glad now you gave me that Owic statue," said Riva.

"You're doing *this* because he insulted your master?"

"Virgilio isn't my master, Baros. And Secreen never offered anything except insults. Like begets like. Besides, what would you have done with me had our fates been reversed?"

"Hard to say," said Baros, stroking his beard. "Strangled you, maybe?"

"Is it a quick death?"

"It is when done properly."

"It doesn't sound particularly honourable."

"The opposite," said Baros, inclining his head at Secreen. "But it's better than this. You only do this sort of thing to the worst kind of men."

"Better to have died on the battlefield and not been captured then, eh?"

"On that we are agreed."

"How is it that you didn't die with your men, Baros?"

"Because I surrendered when I had the chance. Fool that I am."

"You could have cut your own throat. I didn't give you that dagger for no reason."

"So that's what it was for?" Baros grunted. "I thought about it, I admit."

"Perhaps the gods meant you to live a while longer."

"Perhaps."

At Riva's signal, the bundles around Secreen were set alight. The pine needles and straw inside flared straight away, crackling and belching thick clouds of grey smoke. Secreen stood motionless, even when the first flames licked at him. He struggled against the collar as his hair and clothes caught alight, but he did not cry out. Deprived of their fun, the watching soldiers booed him.

"Ha," said Baros, enjoying their displeasure. "Good for him."

As the fire engulfed the chieftain, his skin bubbled and part of his face sloughed off. Although he must have been in excruciating pain, he still didn't make a sound. Eventually he stopped moving.

"I didn't like him very much," said Riva. "But that was brave. I hope I meet my end even half as valiantly as he did."

Baros shifted. "And I suppose I'm next?"

"Why? Are you in a rush to see the Otherworld?"

"I don't know. No."

Riva looked at him. "Well. Unlike Secreen, you've been courteous. And you may be of use to me yet. So when the time comes, maybe I'll cut your head off?"

"I'd prefer that to burning."

"I've been meaning to ask you about something, Baros. Near the end of battle the other day, you sent in men with axes and coats of good double mail. Where did they come from?"

"The men or the gear?"

"I want to know about the mail coats, especially," said Riva, ignoring the joke. "Where did you get them?"

Baros laughed. "That's the best part. We got them from you!"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning southern traders supplied us."

"No," said Riva, looking Baros in the eye. "That's not possible."

Baros met his gaze. "It's the truth, I swear."

"Well I want the names of those traders, then. There's a prohibition on selling arms to northerners for a reason."

"I never dealt with them personally, so I can't give you any names. And it was a few years back, anyway. Julanten might have been able to tell you more. Or Secreen, maybe."

Riva stared at Secreen's pyre. The chieftain's body was visible through the flames, black and burning. Every so often the wind changed direction, bringing the delicious smell of meat to his nostrils. "Would I have gotten anything useful out of him, do you think?"

"Probably not. He always was a stubborn bastard."

Riva snorted. "If you'd had more of those coats, you know, I might not be alive."

"We could only get two hundred."

"They were very fine, though."

"Good axes, too. The best steel."

"And who trained you?"

Baros offered him flat look. "Ha! Give us *some* credit, Riva."

"Mm."

"Do you really think we could have beaten you?"

"Virgilio said as much. He didn't think you'd have done it easily, but he did say it would have been possible."

"How? With more mail coats and axes?"

"No," said Riva, shaking his head. "Although it would have been a good start. No, your shock troops worked well together, but otherwise you lacked cohesion. Each man was left to do his own thing in his own way."

"That's it?"

"That's a lot, Baros. But no, that's not all. Your entire strategy seemed to rest on overwhelming us with frontal assaults. Moving in a single direction, and always against our strongest point."

"I suppose that's true. It seems so obvious in retrospect."

"It always does. Not to mention our cavalry catching you unawares. You weren't paying attention to your left flank. Virgilio waited until you were fully committed before he unleashed them. You could have prevented that, if you'd been of a mind. Instead, he destroyed you."

"So how could we have won?"

"Hard to know. I will say that if a few thousand men had suddenly dismounted off our right flank half way through the battle, the outcome might have been very different. Although we'd probably have made a fighting retreat into our marching camp."

"Ah."

"But we knew you too well, Baros. Didn't we? We knew you'd make only frontal charges. And we knew you'd ignore your own horses. Because of those things, your clans are gone."

Baros shook his head. "The clans are not gone. We live on yet, Riva. Plenty of survivors made it over the river."

"On that topic, we'll speak later. For right now, I want to see this underground city of yours."

"Now? You want to see it now?"

"Yes."

"I will take you to the entrance, then," said Baros, though he grimaced as soon as the words were out.

More often than not, a victorious army is monstrous to its enemies. The streets of Bordis were practically choking with blood and death. Down one alley, Sarasinian youths were torturing captured Ahren fighters, breaking their limbs with staves and rocks and forcing them to watch as women were raped and mutilated. Crying children begged them to stop.

Baros paled at the sight of the fate that had befallen his people. "This," he said. "This is..." But he was unable even to complete his thoughts.

"This is why you cannot lose battles," said Riva.

Baros reacted as if he'd made a sick joke, but Riva was serious. Before either of them could say another word, a Herenian spearman ran over and spat full in Baros's face. He darted off again, whooping, and seized a captive Ahren boy. Grunting with effort, he swung the little fellow by the ankles and dashed his head against a wall. The skull burst, smearing the bricks red. "This is what you get, huh, fucker?" screamed the man, jabbing a finger repeatedly at Baros. "Fuck you! Fuck you!"

"Kill that man," Riva told his officers.

"Ay, what?" said the man, shocked at seeing friendly blades drawn against him. He backed away, then tried to run, but Riva's men caught him and hacked him to pieces.

Baros stared at Riva. "Why did you do that?"

"He spat on us," said Riva, pointing to a bit of phlegm on his arm. "And who was he to spit on kings?"

"Kings?" asked Baros, but Riva merely motioned that they should walk onward.

They ventured deeper into the city until Baros pointed out a semi-circular tunnel framed with black stones. Set into a wall, Riva mistook it for a drain until he realised it lacked a channel beneath for conveying storm water. The dark mouth, he also noted, pointed away from the cut-off pyramid.

"We need to go in there," said Baros. "I should warn you it's a few hundred steps long and black as night, but it leads to an

antechamber. And the antechamber marks the only way into the undercity."

"If it's black as night," said Riva, giving the tunnel a dubious glance, "how will we see?"

"It's not necessary. The way is easy, and the antechamber is cunningly lit. You'll see."

"Go," said Riva, indicating a pair of his men. They disappeared into the tunnel, hands pressed against the sides to feel the way ahead. It wasn't long before they returned.

"Was it not as I said?" asked Baros.

"It was," replied one of the men.

"Very well," said Riva. "Now we shall all go."

The way was easy enough, though Riva did not particularly enjoy having to half-walk, half-crouch without being able to see even his hand in front of his face. At least the air was cooler inside the tunnel than it was outside.

"There used to be pit traps all along here," came Baros's voice in the darkness. "But we filled them in."

Finally they reached the antechamber. Built out of thousands of tiny bricks, it resembled an upturned vessel. The ceiling was perhaps the height of five men, and featured a curious aperture in its centre. Dust motes turned lazily in the air, illuminated by a single shaft of pale sunlight. Riva looked up. "It opens to the sky?"

Baros craned his neck to see. "It must do, but we don't know how."

"What do you mean?"

"You would think that if you stood directly underneath it you could see outside. But you can't."

Riva did exactly that, and saw for himself that Baros was right. Despite the beam of light coming from the aperture, he couldn't see the sky. "How is this possible?"

"Mirrors? Or some other canny trick?"

"What happens at night?"

Baros nodded. "Well, it's darker at night of course. And on moonless nights it's completely black in here."

"So then it must open to the sky?"

"It must," said Baros, spreading his hands. "But the how of it? We don't know. When it rains, this chamber stays dry. We can't find where the opening comes out in the city, not without destroying it. And even if we did, I'm not convinced it would give up its secret."

"Intriguing." Riva pointed out a section of wall adjacent the tunnel. "And this? There was something painted here, once. What was it, do you know?"

Baros shrugged. "I couldn't tell you. It was like this when we found it."

"Jevad the Destroyer built places like this."

"So he did," said Baros. He gestured to the far side of the antechamber, at a slab of polished orange metal. "And there is the door. It leads to the first of the rooms below."

Riva walked over and bent to examine the door. A tiny thing, as if built for children. "Copper?" he asked, running his hand over a surface thick with raised inscriptions.

"Orichalcum, I think."

"Ah. And this writing is all in Jevad's tongue, obviously."

"Yes," said Baros, nodding. "Though we have no idea what it says."

Riva knew nothing of the alien script, either. At least not for the moment.

Baros leaned in. "I don't think a Sarasinian has ever laid eyes on this door. They'd have melted it down otherwise. How many mirrors will Virgilio make out of it, do you think?"

Riva shook his head. "None. This is one of Jevad's holy places, and it will remain intact."

"Good luck convincing him of that!" laughed Baros.

"So," said Riva, ignoring him. He took his hand away from the door. "What's on the other side?"

"Rooms, mostly. Like this one. And tunnels. And there are some collapsed sections we've not been able to clear. We actually made maps of everything..."

"And where are those maps now?"

"I don't know."

"A pity. And *who* will I find down here, Baros? Your family, perhaps?"

"No." Baros shook his head. "I sent them over the river after the battle. I told you the truth about who's down here."

Riva nodded. "How many wives do you have?"

"Two."

"Children?"

"Four sons. Three daughters."

"Will your eldest son succeed you?"

Baros seemed surprised by the question. "If he was elected, maybe? Not that I think it ever likely to happen!"

"No?"

"No. He's a weakling. Or at least that's what his mother says. I don't know. Maybe she's right. He has a younger brother who would make a better candidate."

"The clan would... elect... the younger over the elder?"

"Of course," said Baros, laughing. "You've been a Sarasinian too long, Riva! You've forgotten our ways."

"Enough. Moment of truth—what's *really* on the other side of this door, Baros?"

Baros blinked. "What do you mean?"

"You have a tell, Baros."

"A tell?"

"Yes." Riva nodded. "You said there were *mostly* women and children down here."

"Which is true." Baros spread his hands. "And some guards, maybe? I think I said as much before, didn't I? This is not a trap, Riva, if that's what you're thinking. On my honour, I haven't set you up."

"It's not that," said Riva, shaking his head. "There's something else you're not telling me. I can *feel* it."

Baros's face fell. "Well, I was just about to tell you..."

"Tell me what?"

"I just hope you will show her mercy."

"Her? What are you talking about?"

"Among the women, there's... well, an oracle."

"An oracle?"

"Yes."

"A real one?"

"Of course a real one!"

Riva offered a smile. "No need to look so offended."

"After the battle, she could not be persuaded to flee over the river. I warned her that if she stayed... Ah, but never mind. You won't kill her, will you?"

"I give you my word," said Riva, "that I will not allow your oracle to be harmed in any way."

"But Virgilio will almost certainly want her head?"

"He won't get it. Look, I'll deal with Virgilio. Now, on with it—I presume this door is barred from the inside?"

"It is."

"I have no wish to destroy it. Best you start knocking."

It took an age, but Baros finally managed to convince the people on the other side of the orichalcum door to open it. Instead of having them come out, or ordering his men to venture inside, Riva pressed the cold edge of his sword against Baros's neck.

"Riva?" The chieftain stiffened. "What are you doing?"

"Get in," said Riva. "And don't come out until I return."

"Can I ask why?"

"Just do as I say."

"But—"

"In." Riva pitched Baros forward and into the darkness behind the door. His men pulled it shut with a clang.

"Riva!" shouted Baros, his voice muffled by the space of his new confines. "Am I to die here?"

"I thought you had a real oracle in there, Baros!" Riva yelled back. "So why don't you ask her?"

GORARIC**THE SARASINIAN 5th ARMY FOLLOWERS' CAMP****SOUTHERN AHRENIA****BORDIS**

Goraric was smiling because Kolf was smiling, and his uncle had good reason. Riva's visit to the followers' camp had not only greatly elevated the status of the Upright Men, it had forced their greatest foe to come to them with his tail between his legs. Childish though it was, Goraric couldn't look across Kolf's writing desk without smirking at Banker Leonf.

The banker wore the gaudy style of dress typical of his folk: a gold brocade jacket over a green kurta, and glaring red trousers that were puffy on top but tight around the ankles. He had his oiled black hair in a ponytail, a thick gold earring dangled near his jaw, and heavy gold rings adorned each of his fingers. A protruding gut and multiple chins completed his look.

"I came here..." said Leonf, but he seemed to be having trouble finishing his sentences.

"Unh," said Jaifur, Leonf's eldest son. Unlike his father, Jaifur was scrawny and his clothes, though exceedingly fine, fit poorly. Within moments of meeting him, Goraric was struck by his sallow features and wispy moustache. His pinched face spoke of cruelty; rumour had it the boy was a rapist.

"That you did," said Kolf. He spoke in Sarasinian, of course, for Leonf knew no Ahren. "You came. And we're truly honoured to host you."

"Bah," said Leonf.

"Bah," echoed Jaifur.

Kolf spared Goraric a wink. "You'll have to speak louder, Leonf. I can barely hear you."

Leonf scowled. "Don't play games with me."

"Games?" Kolf unfolded his arms and smoothed his moustache down with a thumb and forefinger. "What games?"

"I'm glad you're enjoying this," said Leonf. "I thought you'd be above kicking a man when he's down."

Kolf snorted. "All things considered, you should be grateful I'm only kicking you in the figurative sense. Had the shoe been on the other foot, I think it quite likely you'd be spitting on my corpse about now."

"You misjudge me!" cried Leonf, pouting. "You've long misjudged me! I'm not who you think I am!"

Goraric snickered. So did the half dozen or so Upright Men standing in the background, silent until now.

"You came here to surrender," said Kolf, clearly unimpressed by the banker's theatrics. "So, surrender."

"No." Leonf held up a finger in reproach. "I didn't come to surrender. Never that. But I am willing to stop fighting you and yours. Because it suits me."

"Because it suits you?" Kolf laughed, and Goraric joined him.

Leonf and Jaifur exchanged looks. Goraric could feel the rage coming off them, Leonf in particular. A powerful man with a boundless sense of entitlement, and accustomed to always having his way. Coming here must have been a bitter pill for him to swallow.

"I'm willing to stop fighting you and yours as well, Leonf," said Kolf. "But you're not going to like my terms."

"Go on," said the banker.

"Before I give you my terms, you're going to confirm something for me."

Leonf nodded. "I know what you're going to ask."

"Speak, then."

"I don't have your girls."

"No?"

"I don't have them and I never did. We made the whole story up."

"Actually," said Jaifur brightly, "it was *my* idea. *I* thought of it first."

"Son of a whore!" hissed Goraric, blazing with anger. "So where are they? What happened to them?"

The banker gestured mutely. "I really have no idea."

"I don't know either," said Jaifur. He grinned, vacant-eyed, like a moron.

Kolf snarled and bashed the table with a fist, hard. Leonf showed no reaction, but his son jumped in fright. "I might have known it was all bullshit! For all the trouble he's put us through, what say I feed your Jaifur here his own balls?"

Leonf put a comforting hand on Jaifur's shoulder. "You wouldn't dare."

"A thousand," said Kolf, folding his arms again.

"Excuse me?"

"I'll take a thousand grad in compensation, Leonf. That's how much your bullshit story will cost you. Have your men deliver it before sundown today."

"One thousand? Grief of gods!"

"I know you have the money. And if you baulk again at the amount, make any snide comments, or even give me a funny look, I'll cut off your precious little Jaifur's fruits. Right here, right now. What say you?"

Goraric could hardly believe his ears. A thousand gold was a staggering sum of money!

When Leonf failed to reply quickly enough, Kolf thumped the table again. "Well? Speak!"

The banker looked about ready to have a conniption. "So be it," he whispered. Of course, in the face of Kolf's threat what else could he have said?

Kolf nodded. "Now hear the rest of my terms. From this day onward, Leonf, we'll suffer no more standover bullshit in this camp. You're not the lord of this land, and honest taxpayers owe you nothing. Any man caught trying to extort money from anyone will be whipped to within an inch of his life."

Leonf kicked at the corner of a carpet near his foot. Goraric thought he saw his eyes bulge slightly, but he didn't open his mouth. Perhaps he was still concerned about the safekeeping of his son's testicles.

"Usury is forbidden," said Kolf in a tone that suggested he was just getting started. "No man shall lend money at a rate exceeding five percent. The penalty for breaking this rule in the future will be the same as that for extortion. Do you hear me?"

The banker merely nodded.

"A disturbingly large number of people in this camp have apparently become indentured labourers because they couldn't repay funds loaned to them by you. I've no doubt that you engineered the whole scheme to work the way it does, but it doesn't matter because it will not continue. A man who cannot pay his debts should not lose his liberty because of it. You will release all such victims immediately."

Leonf cleared his throat, his eyes now practically exploding out of his skull. "These are harsh terms! I'll be ruined! You've clearly no head for business, have you? No idea how it all works, eh?"

Kolf's lip twitched. "Oh, clearly."

"How about the following, then? Instead of--"

"No."

"But--"

"No. This is not up for negotiation."

"But the loans?"

"What about them?"

"If a client agrees to a given rate of interest, my dear, or if he accepts the terms offered to him, then how-?"

Kolf shook his head. "Loans will be capped at five percent."

Leonf let out a sigh of pure despair. "Would you agree to thirty-four percent? Thirty-four percent, and I'd even be willing to cut you in? Let's say--"

"No."

"Come now, man! Five percent is trivial!"

"It only seems trivial," said Kolf angrily, "because you're used to charging people *sixty percent or more!* Your banking practices are abhorrent. Your loan schemes are designed to deprive people of their freedom. You speak of clients *agreeing* to your rates, or of *accepting* your terms, yet you make no mention of the hundreds of people that you've literally *forced* to take your money!"

Leonf's eyes glittered with ill-concealed malice. "I swear on my mother's grave, I have never done such a thing!"

Kolf shook his head. "Spare me your lies. And take heart, banker! You'll abide by these rules only so long as you remain here. Should you decide to leave the followers' camp, its laws cease to apply to you. I've no mandate to regulate your... business... should you choose to set up in Bordis, for example."

Leonf jerked back as if slapped. "Och! Why do you mock me?"

"What do you mean?"

The banker shot him an offended look. "As if you don't know!"

"Don't know what, Leonf?"

"You act like you don't know, Kolf, but you do. I would deny you the satisfaction by not speaking of it further."

"Do whatever you want," said Kolf, waving a hand at him. "But I've got no idea what you're talking about."

"So you say."

Kolf shrugged. "Our business is concluded. You can show yourself out."

"Do you know what galls me the most?"

"No," said Kolf wearily. "I don't. But I have a feeling you're going to tell me anyway."

"How does it feel to come in from the cold? I mean, why would Riva suddenly show you such favour now after all these years?"

"Why don't you head over to Bordis and ask him?"

Leonf pouted like a toddler deprived of a toy. "Why must you vex me so, man?"

Kolf turned to look at Goraric, who shrugged. He didn't know what game the banker was playing at now either. Though he did wonder what he'd meant by the phrase *show you such favour after all these years* with respect to Riva.

Leonf took note of their exchange and said, "I'm beginning to think you really don't know."

"I'm tired of this," said Kolf, pointing the way out. "It's time you were gone."

Leonf didn't move. "Fine. You dragged it out of me—Riva isn't allowing me into Bordis."

"Why not?"

"I thought maybe you and your Uptight Men had something to do with it?"

"Well, I didn't," said Kolf, taking no notice of the taunt. "And Bordis is closed to everyone for the moment. Not just you."

"It's closed to the rabble, perhaps." Leonf put a hand on his chest. "But I am hardly rabble, now, am I?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

Leonf smiled. "I know we have our differences, but—"

The banker's words were cut off by a sudden commotion outside, and Goraric heard the Upright Men around the tent shout in alarm. He stood up, ready to draw steel. If this was some kind of trick, he resolved that Leonf and Jaifur had taken their last breaths.

"What's going on?" asked Leonf.

Kolf looked nervous. "I know as much about it as you do."

At a nod from his uncle, Goraric went outside. He saw people running in all directions, crying out in fear, hastening to pull down tents and lean-tos. Before he could even ask after the source of their panic, grizzled old Hagh, their reconnaissance chief, came riding in and saved him the trouble.

"The boss in, or what?" asked Hagh, quickly dismounting. He tossed his horse's reins at the first man to cross his path.

Gorarc nodded. "He is. What's going on?"

"There's a big force movin' up from the south, that's what. Headed this way."

"A big force?"

By way of reply, Hagh merely clicked his tongue and shook his head irritably, so Gorarc moved to usher him into the tent. Leonf and Jaifur chose that exact same moment to take their leave, rudely forcing their way past him. The banker stared straight ahead, but Jaifur gave him a haughty look.

"Mind your sack," muttered Gorarc, pivoting so that his scabbard caught the young man square in the crotch. The indignant squawk that followed made his day.

Hagh offered Kolf a stiff salute and launched straight into his report, which in actuality was little more than the single line he'd delivered to Gorarc just a few moments before.

Kolf pondered the news for a few moments. "How big? And what force, exactly, would be coming from the *south*?"

"Well I heard rumours aplenty," said Hagh. "But nothin' solid. Whoever they are, they're kickin' up a lot o' dust. We're talkin' tens o' thousands."

"From the *south*, though? It couldn't be stragglers from the battle regrouping, I don't think."

"Nay." Hagh shook his head. "That lot went north, boss. Or east."

Kolf rubbed the back of his neck. "What are the rumours, then?"

"Well sir, I did come across some fellows what claimed it's reinforcements for the Lion. Ran into some other folk, though, what claimed it's the Wehen."

Kolf rubbed his chin. "The Wehen?"

"Said they seen their banners."

"What do you think about that?"

"I'm not a man to put much stock in rumours, sir. But I'd be willing to wager it's not reinforcements for the Lion."

"It couldn't actually be the Wehen though, could it?" asked Goraric. "Why would they come so far south? And why now?"

"I don't know," said Kolf. "It does seem unlikely for them to be so far from home, and on this side of the river into the bargain. They've no friends here. Unless they've thrown in their lot with their brothers, maybe?"

"Best assume they're no friends," said Hagh. "Whoever they turn out to be."

Kolf pondered some more. "Yes. If it's not friendly reinforcements, we must assume it's another clan army come to challenge the Fifth. Wehen or otherwise, and shit timing or no. I am worried that our current position will very likely become a battlefield in the near future, and I don't want to be around when that happens."

"Orders?"

"We get out of here. Bordis is closed to us, and I suppose the route back to Gillendum is no longer an option, either. So, I propose finding some good ground to the north. Somewhere between the city and the river."

"A fine idea," said Hagh. "Though there may be enemy warbands out that way."

"We should be all right as long as we go in numbers, and if we stay within sight of the city."

"You sure you don't want to try for the city itself?" asked Goraric, scratching his chin. "Maybe they'll let the Upright Men in?"

Kolf shook his head. "No. Every man and his dog will be trying to get in, and I don't expect the Fifth will be keen to oblige any but strong arms. The Upright Men don't want to be caught up in the politics of all that. How would it look if we abandoned our people now?"

Goraric nodded. "I'll tell the men to strike camp, then?"

"Yes," said Kolf. "Do that. Hagh, send your scouts ahead to find a suitable site."

"Yes, sir." Hagh threw another stiff salute as he departed.

It took the Upright Men all morning, but they finally managed to gather some four thousand people under their banner. Less than a quarter were men, though, and most of them possessed only makeshift weapons. Despite what Kolf had said about travelling in numbers, Goraric knew they were a hostile warband's wet dream.

They headed toward the Asfour at a ponderously slow pace, passing by Bordis's eastern gate. The Fifth had already dug a defensive ditch around the city and men were busily working on an earthen wall atop it. It certainly gave credence to the notion that enemies were moving up from the south, and not support.

Camp followers swarmed around the gates, just as Kolf had said they would. His prediction about the Fifth wanting no refugees proved accurate as well. They all watched as a pair of desperate souls tried to scale an unfinished part of the wall only to be shoved back into the ditch. The first scarpered off relatively unharmed, but the second lay screaming in the mud with a broken back. His frantic cries deterred other potential climbers, and it was good news for the Upright Men because they came away with hundreds of new recruits. Goraric couldn't help but feel for the injured man, however, and regretted that there was nothing he could do to ease his suffering.

Kolf's following swelled to some five thousand before arriving at the muddy banks of the river around midday. With only forty-six wagons between them, though, Goraric didn't like the odds of throwing together a laager capable of sheltering everyone. Fortunately, he needn't have worried. Trusty old Hagh found a promontory a mile or two upriver, and with relatively little difficulty they managed to haul the wagons onto it. By late afternoon they had them roped together in a line across its neck.

"I like it," said Kolf, admiring their new sanctuary. The wagons could be defended with just a fraction of the men at their disposal, presenting enemies with a formidable obstacle, and the promontory itself jutted into the river where it was sheer cliff faces on all sides. Assaulting their position from any point would be a daunting task, even for an experienced commander.

"We're sealed off from the outside world," said Goraric. "Which is both good and bad, I guess."

"More good than bad, I think."

Goraric looked around. Tents were going up and people seemed happy enough. The promontory didn't offer much aside from grass and rocks, though. "Until we run out of food."

"Well now," said Kolf, extending an arm out over the water. "You see all those waves? That there is what you call a river, Goraric. Now I don't know if you're aware of this, but rivers have fish in them."

"You have to catch them first, uncle."

Kolf smiled. "Then that's what we'll do, nephew! That's what we'll do."

Goraric thought it easier said than done, but saw no point in pressing the issue. Thinking it better to let someone else worry over it, he said goodbye and went to see to his horse. By the time that was finished, darkness fell and the first stars appeared in the sky. No one had much in the way of firewood, so the few cooking fires that sprang up were short-lived. He didn't have much of an appetite anyway. After wandering the promontory, he propped himself up against a boulder and pulled his cloak over his head. He half-slept, dreaming that a demon came to peck at his skull, followed by recurring visions of dead girls laughing as they smeared blood on his cheeks. Someone nudged him awake during; he felt worse than if he'd never even closed his eyes.

"Boss wants you," said Tarec, standing over him, head silhouetted against a waxing moon.

Goraric struggled to his feet. "Right." How had the man managed to find him amongst the civilians?

Tarec pointed at the wall of wagons off in the distance. "He's over there."

"Thanks." He watched the man leave, then made his way to where Kolf, flanked by heavily-armed Upright Men, was speaking to a weary group of newcomers. He took a small sack from a man and waved the lot through.

"Have you denied entry to many people?" asked Goraric.

Kolf turned to face him. He looked tired, but a fierce light burned in his eyes. "Not one!"

"Even if they can't pay?"

"Even if they can't pay." He gestured at the backs of the latest arrivals. "I let them in for almost nothing. So, how goes it?"

"I'm tired, but who isn't?" said Goraric with a shrug. He'd never said a word to his uncle about his dreams. And everyone already knew that he rarely slept anyway, and why. "You sent for me?"

"I did. I have news. Or confirmation, rather."

"Oh?"

"The Wehen are marching on Bordis after all."

Goraric stifled a yawn, but only because he was that drained. "So the rumours were true?"

"Apparently." Kolf nodded. "They're moving up from the southeast. But it gets even more interesting, Goraric, because it seems they're not alone. The Ture have also taken the field."

"Well, shit." Wehen territory started a week north of the Asfour. Or about that long on a fast horse, maybe. And the Ture came from even further afar. "How is that even possible? The clans despise each other."

Kolf looked at him. "They do, and they don't. But they hate the Sarasinians more. Enough to band together to try to wipe out the Fifth, at least."

"Is that what's really happening?"

"Do you have a better theory? We've had all sorts turning up here, and they're telling more or less the same story. I've no doubt it's the Ture and the Wehen. None."

"But those two, marching *side by side*? I'm having trouble picturing it."

"I know." Kolf shook his head. "Two massive hosts. The Wehen are coming from the southeast, as I already said. And the Ture from the northwest."

"One the hammer, and the other the anvil," said Goraric, turning his gaze beyond the wagon-fort. At this distance, Bordis was a cluster of shimmering yellow dots, as if a handful of stars

had dropped out of the sky and gathered on the ground. "Three clans working together couldn't defeat the Fifth, though. What chance do two more have?"

"Maybe Bordis was a trap? Three weak clans for bait? Gods, I don't know."

"How will it pan out, do you think?"

"Who knows?" said Kolf, looking at him. "But if the Fifth gets fucked, so do we."

"So, what now? We just wait here and see what happens?"

"Yes and no. I have a task for you, if you're willing."

"And that would be?"

"I want you to go to Bordis, to the eastern gate. There are Herenians there, and—"

"You want me to try to get into the city?"

"Yes. We've no eyes or ears there, a situation that must be remedied."

"And you think they'll just let me in? They turned away thousands of people just this morning."

Kolf nodded. "They turned away useless mouths. It'll be different for you."

Not every mouth that had been denied was useless, but who was Goraric to argue? The assignment offered more excitement than sitting around here with the civilians on their promontory. "As you wish. I'll go, of course."

Kolf took a helm from a basket and held it out. "Good man. This is for you. There's a letter inside with our new seal on it, promising five hundred fighters, fully equipped. Use it to gain an audience with Riva, if possible. While you're there, find out as much information as you can."

"Five hundred?" asked Goraric, taking the helm. It was a plain-looking nasal helm with an aventail, but well made. "Can we afford to give that many?"

"It doesn't matter. It's just a ruse to get you inside. Now, wear your best armour for this one, nephew. And take your sword as well as your spear."

"Yes, uncle."

"It will be light soon. Stay safe. Come back as quickly as possible."

Goraric nodded. "Am I to go by myself?"

"Take what men you will," said Kolf with a wave as he turned around. "And good luck, Goraric."

Goraric left the promontory alone with the sun's first rays warming his cheek. Why he hadn't chosen some companions was a question he couldn't answer. He rode swiftly, meeting no opposition on his way to the city, and was relieved to find its eastern gate still manned by Herenians. A hundred men in total, maybe, armed and guarding a makeshift bridge spanning the ditch. Archers peered down from atop the new wall.

A group of ex-camp followers, voicing their anger at not being allowed in, edged too close to the bridge. The soldiers dispersed them with threats. Goraric rode through the crowd, stopping to tell any who would listen where to find refuge with the Upright Men. Some thanked him. Others, thinking he was mocking them, told him to get fucked. He refused to be baited, and his weapons and armour deterred anyone from getting too carried away. Some people left, but if it was to go looking for Kolf's promontory he never found out.

A pair of soldiers intercepted him as he neared the bridge. "That's close enough," said the first, giving him and his horse the once-over. "Who are you?"

"Goraric of Herena," said Goraric. At least Kolf hadn't given him an alter ego this time, or a story to remember. "I'm here on behalf of the Upright Men."

"An' you're here for what, exactly?"

"To enter the city, if possible."

The soldiers looked at each other. "It's not."

"I have a letter from our captain, Kolf of Herena. My uncle." When that name received no response he added, "The letter is addressed to Lord Riva. We're, uh, offering manpower, should you need it. What with the enemy clans closing in and everything?"

"Right," grunted the man. "Who'd you say you were with again? The Upright Men?"

"Yes."

"I've heard of your company."

Goraric smiled. "Only good things, I hope?"

The man shrugged. "Does it matter? Can't let you into the city regardless."

Goraric's hope began to fade. "Don't you want to see the letter? Here, I'll show you..."

"It won't make any difference, friend. No one's getting' in or out—those are our orders."

"Well," said Goraric, taking off his helm to retrieve his uncle's letter anyway. "Maybe you can give this to whoever and they can take it to Lord Riva? After all, it was the archon himself who gave the Upright Men our charter."

"That may be," said the man, shaking his head. "But currently no one's allowed in, us included."

"Even *you* can't get in? Why not?"

"We don't write the orders, friend. We just follow them."

"So there's no way I can get past? What about my uncle, then? Would you let him through if he were here in my stead?"

"Nope. Wouldn't even let your grandma in."

Goraric frowned. "Very well." He pondered his choices. Going back to the Upright Men with nothing to show for it didn't hold much appeal. Of course, he didn't actually have to enter Bordis itself in order to gather useful information. He could do that right here. "I hear the Ture and the Wehen are closing in. How long until you get to try out your new defences, do you think? Or will you fight them outside?"

The soldiers exchanged looks again.

"Actually," said the second man, finally speaking. "Show us that letter you said you had?"

Goraric let them have Kolf's document. They turned around to examine it, whispering, though he failed to catch anything of their conversation. The first man faced him again as the other walked off with the paper in his hand.

"Is he coming back?" asked Goraric.

"Gone to show the boss."

Goraric tried to think of something to keep the conversation flowing. "Hey, I didn't catch your name?" he asked, holding out his hand.

"Oh," said the man. "Sorry, yeah. The name's Angrig." They shook.

"How's things?"

Angrig shrugged. "Meh."

"You know I hate to ask this, but if you're preparing for a siege why are you *outside* the gates?"

Angrig gave him a curious look. "We already answered you. I been doin' this for eight years, friend. I stopped questioning orders a long time ago."

"Fair enough," said Goraric, nodding. "Fair enough." No doubt he was asking too many questions. Better slow down or they'd get suspicious and ask him to leave. Of course, if that happened there were other gates he could try...

The soldier who'd taken Kolf's letter returned, though it seemed that he no longer had it with him. "You can't go in right now," he said. "But you're welcome to stay here with us until you can."

Goraric frowned. "Where's the letter?"

"Boss kept it."

"And if I don't want to stay?"

"Eh, it's up to you. Boss strongly suggests it's in your interest to stick around, though."

"Why?"

"Dunno, he didn't say." And with that, he walked off again. "Stay. Go. You can do what you want."

Goraric thought about riding back to the promontory, but the phrase *it's in your interest to stick around* kept bouncing around inside his skull. A phrase as compelling as it was mysterious. He dismounted, pulled a deck of cards out of a saddlebag and showed it to Angrig. "Got time for a game, then?"

Goraric spent most of the day playing cards with as many people as he could. He ultimately came out slightly ahead, even though he'd done his best to win friends by losing every hand. Unfortunately, although the soldiers had warmed to him they remained tight-lipped about the Fifth's battle plans, and no one seemed to want to talk about the encroaching tribes except in the broadest terms. At least they weren't denying it was the Ture and the Wehen, which he supposed was at least something. He told them about Kolf's promontory, even broached the topic of maybe returning there before nightfall, but was told it would be better if he hung around. They weren't threatening, but their secrecy began to irritate him. He stopped trying to lose at cards, and eventually no one wanted to play with him anymore. By mid-afternoon he was moderately wealthy but utterly exhausted despite having done nothing particularly strenuous.

He awoke to Angrig kicking the soles of his boots. He sat up, shocked to see stars overhead. "Fuck!" he said. "It's night?"

"It's almost daybreak, friend," said Angrig.

"Is it?" He'd had a long and dreamless sleep, not that he remembered even lying down. No visits from dead girls, and no demons either. A true miracle! He almost couldn't believe it.

"It's time," said Angrig.

"Right." Goraric reached for his spear as he got up. Every man on the eastern gate was sharpening a blade or fiddling with gear. "Uh, time for what?"

"Look," said Angrig, pointing.

"Well I'll be fucked." He was unprepared for the sight awaiting him. The flickering campfires in the distance... there had to be thousands of them. Tens of thousands of them. "Is that... the clans?"

"Yep."

"They're, uh, camped all the way around the city..."

"Oh yeah. They sure are."

There was a truly massive army out there, a host big enough to completely encircle Bordis. "Shouldn't we be inside or something?"

Angrig laughed. "That's what you get for sleeping through all the excitement, mate."

"What?"

"Shit, man! How you managed to sleep through the racket I don't know. I even tried to wake you. Never seen anything like it—it was almost like you were dead."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Goraric scratched his head. "What did I sleep through?"

"Purple shields broke out the other side. In two places, actually. Wiped the poor bastards on the north gate out, or so I heard. Glad they didn't come our way..."

"Purple shields?"

"Yeah! A whole bloody lot of 'em got out!" He laughed grimly. "But I don't reckon they got far."

Goraric shook his head, bewildered. "What? Sorry, Angrig, but what the fuck are you on about?"

Angrig stared. "Riva sprung his trap."

Goraric was more confused than ever. "Trap?"

"Lord Riva's kicked off his rebellion."

"*He's what?*"

Angrig laughed. "Worst kept secret ever—that's what everyone's saying. I never saw it coming myself though, so I dunno..." He trailed off as an officer in scale armour emerged from the east gate's wicket. Shouted orders and a flurry of movement followed. Goraric, his mind still reeling from shock, belatedly realised that the crowd of civilians was nowhere to be seen.

"That was the order to rally," said Angrig as the men began forming two lines, one on either side of the gate. "Just do as I do."

A burly sergeant opened his mouth. "*Dress the line!*"

"Like this," said Angrig, stretching out his left arm and stepping sideways so his fist barely touched Goraric's shoulder. "It's so we make our lines nice and straight."

"I know," muttered Goraric. "I've done this before."

"Cut out the chatter," said the sergeant, looking at him.
"Ground arms!"

Each man grabbed the shaft of his spear with both hands, placed the butt so it sat on the ground outside his right foot, and then let his left arm drop to his side.

"When they come!" shouted the sergeant, pacing up and down the other line. "When they come, remember to keep your fucking heads down and your mouths shut. And for fuck's sake, don't make eye contact with anyone. Hear me? Do *not* make eye contact!"

Goraric stood next to Angrig for what felt like forever, the man's most shocking sentence bouncing around inside his skull.

Lord Riva's kicked off his rebellion!

And then the sergeant's words began to sink in. *When they come*, the man had said. *When they come*.

"Are the Ture and the Wehen our allies?" he whispered to Angrig.

"Uh huh," Angrig whispered back.

Yes? Every hair on the back of Goraric's neck stood on end.
Lord Riva's kicked off his rebellion!

"Present arms!" cried the sergeant.

Goraric pushed his spear point forward, taking care to keep the butt planted firmly on the ground. Eventually he heard boots and the jingling of mail on the bridge, and then saw indistinct figures approaching. Heavy infantry? After they passed, the bridge's timbers began to groan under the weight of something large.

"Fuck me," murmured Angrig.

"Eh?" asked Goraric. He didn't get a reply. His peripheral vision seemed to suggest that a cart was coming over the bridge, but he realised he could hear footsteps. Big, weighty footsteps, and not the sort made by horses. He felt anxiety creeping into his heart, followed by an almost overwhelming urge to look. Of course, the sergeant had explicitly warned against doing that very thing. He swallowed, and instead let his eyes fall on a pebble

near his foot. It was black except for a thin vein of lighter material running through the centre. Normally he wouldn't have looked twice at it, but now he tried to convince himself that it was a very interesting pebble. Why look at anything else when he had such a wonder before him? He certainly didn't need to look at whatever was on the bridge, did he?

"By the gods," said Angrig.

And then the not-cart came closer. He sensed rather than saw a very big man—a veritable giant. By the gods, indeed! He wouldn't look at him directly, though. He would look only at the extremely interesting pebble. Wow, so rounded and smooth and pretty...

Look at the man? asked his brain.

No, he told it. Just the pebble. You know, that vein of lighter material running through it was probably quartz. Did that mean the whole thing was quartz? He couldn't remember if quartz also came in black or not.

Look at the man? asked his brain again.

All right. Fine. Angrig was surely looking, so why not him as well? Cursing himself, he let his eyes dart upward for half a heartbeat. He saw a dark carapace, helm, and a massive sword resting against a shoulder. The blade seemed to be attached to the carapace by a length of chain. Just looking at it made Goraric's blood run cold. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. Why had he looked when there had been orders not to look? He cursed himself for listening to his stupid brain.

A second hasty peek revealed someone else walking beside the giant. A woman in a white dress and a mask covering the lower half of her face. A witch.

The giant stopped. As in, right in front of him. The spit in his mouth turned sour and his knees shook. He closed his eyes and waited for the man's rebuke. Or the witch's, maybe. It was coming. She was angry. He could feel it. A sudden pressure in his belly made him sure that his bowels were about to open. Shit, he'd been told not to look, and no doubt with good reason! His doom was coming, he could feel it...

"Ground arms!" shouted the sergeant.

Goraric pulled the point of his spear upright. Opening his eyes was something of an anti-climax, since all he saw was the line of soldiers opposite. No giant, no witch. He touched the side of his face, then pushed his fingers up through the stubble on his chin to reassure himself that he was still in one piece.

Anrig put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey. Your nose..."

"I thought I was going to die," breathed Goraric, enjoying the fact of his continued existence.

The man pointed to a spot under his own nose. "Your nose," he said again, insistent. "It's bleeding."

Goraric touched his upper lip. Sure enough, his finger came away red. "That's weird." There was only a drop of blood, at least, and he wiped it on his sleeve.

"So, did you see the size of him? The size of that... thing that came through here?"

Goraric nodded. "He was huge. I thought he was going to cut me in half with that blade."

"Why would he do that?" said Anrig, laughing. "Biggest man I ever saw in my whole fuckin' life, though! Fuck me!"

"And what about the witch?"

"With the dress and the mask? Yeah. I saw her, too. Her and her coterie."

Goraric pondered, not remembering seeing anything resembling a coterie. But... another memory bubbled up from somewhere deep within, something he'd forgotten. No. Not forgotten, exactly. More like not been allowed to remember until now. "Malyred," he said. "That's her name. I've met her before." Only after he'd uttered the words did he realise he'd actually said them.

Anrig looked at him. "No shit?"

"Yeah. She... went inside my head."

"Say what?"

Goraric's mind took him back. He saw the forest. The stinking turnip fields. He remembered the villagers and their cows. The witch had told them to trust her, that she had a plan. He

remembered how Captain Lamela had challenged her, and she had slipped inside his mind. He'd forgotten it until now, but she'd done the same to him. "That day," he said. "She froze us. Stopped a whole company in its tracks. And I think she just went in my head again." He frowned. "Just now. But I don't remember." He felt sick. Confused and sick.

"All right, friend," said Angrig, patting his arm. "Now you're just talking crazy. C'mon, let's go and get something to eat."

35

LORD RIVA

THE SARASINIAN 5th ARMY

SOUTHERN AHRENIA

BORDIS

In the darkness beyond the tent, he could hear the men of Herena gathering. When it finally started, the killing opened with confused shouts followed by a stretch of prolonged silence. The quiet was not to last, though, and soon the city erupted.

“Hold him,” said Riva, putting on his gauntlets. He spoke to Nohrt, who had Amulius’s arm twisted behind his back.

“Riva,” said Amulius, his voice breaking in terror. Of course, you couldn’t exactly fault him for it. “What have you done?”

Riva looked past him. “Make sure he doesn’t move around too much.” He readied his sword.

Outside, the sounds of savagery redoubled. Bodily shrieking overlaid the screaming of steel on steel. Amulius listened, almost in tears. “Riva! What have you done?”

"Birthed an empire," said Riva. He ran a finger along the length of his blade, admiring the whorls and ripples in the steel. How many years of plotting had led to this moment? Years of meticulous planning and preparation? Years of cajoling those who needed cajoling, threatening those who couldn't be cajoled, and killing those whom he couldn't otherwise bend to his will?

"Oh!" cried Istome suddenly. Sitting on the floor, deep in meditation, her voice seemed to come from far away. "They're dying. The youngsters are fighting. But dying... Oh, can you feel them?"

"No," said Riva.

Istome opened her eyes briefly but then closed them again. "Our lady joins us. So many minds. All working together. I can see it, and yet not! Oh, I wish... I wish I had the words to describe it. It's so... beautiful..."

Amulius regarded Istome with revulsion, then spat. "So you *are* a witch! I always knew it."

Riva didn't expect her to reply, so it was a surprise when she did. "You have no idea what I am, worm."

Judging by the expression on his face, Nohrt was every bit as appalled as Amulius. The man might be at home on the battlefield, unafraid of blades and making sport of death, but put a witch in his midst and watch him practically fill his pants in terror! One of the hardest parts about the coming months, unfortunately, would be convincing all the men like Nohrt that women like Istome shared their cause.

"Do you remember our time at the Bastion, Amulius?" asked Riva.

Amulius's eyes snapped to him. "The Bastion?"

"Yes. The Bastion." He reached forward to prod the man's stomach with his blade. "Do you remember our time there?"

"No? Well yes, I suppose. But what do you mean?"

"You graduated when I was still a junior. I was glad to see you go, Amulius. For two years you were the bane of my existence. Do you remember?"

Amulius shook his head, and his jowls quivered. Perhaps he was lying. Maybe not. It was hard to tell, and didn't matter anyway.

Riva let him see the blade up close. The patterns along its length gleamed in the lamplight. "Hmm." He spoke again to Nohrt. "Break his arm."

"As you wish," said Nohrt. Amulius's bone snapped with a click and he gasped in pain.

"Still don't remember?" asked Riva.

"No." Amulius panted and grit his teeth.

"On the night you left the Bastion for good, you did the same thing to me all those years ago. You and your friends. Prick."

"I- I don't remember."

"Urgh!" said Istome, blood suddenly springing from her nose. "Oh, that doesn't feel good."

"What is it?" asked Riva, annoyed at her for stealing his thunder.

"You...know..." And with that she paled, gagged, and finally threw up.

"What devilry is this?" asked Amulius, aghast. "Riva?"

"No devilry," said Riva. A lie told more to assuage Nohrt than anything else, since the man had gone even whiter than Istome. "So you don't remember breaking my arm when we were at the Bastion?"

The man digested the words, his eyes reflecting his confusion and pain. "No."

Istome gasped. "I think they have him!"

Riva almost rolled his eyes at her. Did she not realise she was ruining what was supposed to be the delicious moment when he finally let Amulius know he was to die horribly, and why? "*Him*, him? Virgilio?"

"Yes!" she cried. "His thoughts are so vivid I can almost see what he sees! Oh, his mind is a whirl. He has no idea what's going on. None of them do..."

"As long as they don't kill him."

"They won't. Yes, they have him! He's alive."

Outside, the din of combat rose to a ferocious pitch. "But we haven't won yet."

"No," said Istome, making an attempt to wipe herself clean with her hands. "But we will."

Reading his thoughts? "Can you tell if Goraric is still...?"

She paused, concentrating. "Mm. Yes. Sleeping."

"Even with all this racket?" Outside, some nameless man howled.

"Our lady is keeping him from waking." She opened her eyes and stood up. "Sorry. Continue what you were doing—I won't interrupt you again."

Riva turned back to Amulius. "I had prepared a whole speech about waiting half my life to take revenge on you for what you and your friends did to me. But you know what? Fuck it." And with a grunt, he lunged.

"Urp!" said Amulius as Riva's blade punched through his nightshirt. His mouth opened, and judging by the smell that filled the room, so did his arse.

"You might have warned me," said Nohrt, giving Riva a black look. The point had come out of Amulius's back and stopped perilously close to his chest.

Riva acknowledged his carelessness with the hint of a shrug. For fuck's sake, the man wore an iron breastplate over mail! Unafraid of blades, was he? It was an effort to keep from laughing.

Amulius made a horrible keening noise as Nohrt dumped him on the ground, and another when Riva twisted and pulled the sword out of his body. "There you go, Amulius," he said, standing over him. "I only hope you live through the night. It'll give you time to reflect on a few things, eh? For starters, I'd like you to think about the fact that, come tomorrow, every purple shield in this city will be dead or a slave. You hear me, Amulius? Every veteran, every youngster."

The man just lay there. No doubt he was too deep in shock to do much else.

"I've freed Herena from the League."

No response to that, either. Noticing a gold chain around the man's neck, Riva stooped to take it.

"For me?" asked Istome when he stood up again and motioned that he wanted to put the chain on her.

"A gift." He gathered up her hair. He wiped away some flecks of blood before settling the links around her neck and closing the hasp. "For my little witch."

Istome scowled. "You know I don't like that word," she said, but then struck a pose. "It feels heavy. How does it look?"

"Made for a man, but somehow it suits you."

"Thank you." She spared Nohrt a glance, for though he was unperturbed by Amulius's fate he seemed genuinely troubled by the ongoing mention of witches.

"What say you and I go kill ourselves some Sarasinians, Nohrt?" Riva gestured with his sword. "Before there aren't any left."

"Yes, lord," said Nohrt, unsheathing his own blade.

Before they left, Riva let a gobbet of spit fall on Amulius, who mewled weakly at being disturbed. "Maybe I'll see you in the Otherworld, brother," he said. "But until then..."

EPILOGUE

THE ARMY OF THE AHREN COALITION

SOUTHERN AHRENIA

BORDIS

Riva watched Malyred negotiate the bloody streets of Bordis. She stepped over bodies with casual grace, as if it were something she did often. Any other lady might have lifted the hem of her dress to avoid soiling it, but not her. She didn't seem to mind getting blood on her clothing.

The Mother of Oracles halted before his dais, on the patchwork of carpets laid out for her. "My lord Riva," she said. Up close she seemed far older and thinner than he remembered. Hunched, almost crone-like. Her auburn hair was freshly combed, but heavily streaked with grey. That made him wonder. When he'd last met her a year ago there'd been no grey at all.

Riva rose from his seat. "My lady. Welcome to Bordis."

She held out a withered hand, and he took it. "Thank you," she said. "And congratulations!" She practically shouted the last word, falling into his arms and embracing him with an enthusiasm he could never have anticipated.

“Thank you, lady,” he said, his cheeks reddening. He wondered what the hundreds of onlookers would have to say about such a spectacle. “It’s an honour to see you again. And you look well.” But in truth her arms felt like vines around his shoulders, and twiggy fingers raked the back of his brigandine. What could have happened to age her so prematurely, to strip so much meat from her bones?

Malyred broke away, her eyes moist and sparkling above her black mask. “This is a truly momentous occasion. I knew my faith in you was not misplaced.”

Riva inclined his head. “Likewise. We’d never have taken the city if not for your... intervention.”

“It cost me, as you can see. This body is failing—I shall need another, and soon.”

He wasn’t sure what she meant by that, exactly, though he heard himself saying, “Indeed, indeed.”

While the rest of Malyred’s bodyguard took up position near the east gate, Wegdan joined his mistress. The monster’s black harness rattled with each lumbering step, and the chain joining his breastplate to his blade jingled against his armoured thighs. Not one to step over corpses, he cleared a path by kicking them aside with his enormous boots.

“Your pet has grown, it seems,” said Riva, doing his best to conceal his unease. Wegdan’s helm swivelled around at the sound of his voice, the slits in his visor aimed directly at him.

“He does that,” said Malyred. “So, where’s Virgilio?”

“Fetch the general,” said Riva, snapping his fingers. His officers brought the man out in shackles. Stripped of his armour and with his head freshly shaved, Virgilio the Lion had been reduced to a frail old man in dirty underclothes.

Malyred regarded Virgilio with interest. She traced a broken fingernail down his jaw, over the encrusted dirt and stubble on his chin. “I’d have stopped you the last time you were in Ahrenia, Lion,” she said. “Alas, I couldn’t. But now I have your standard, and I have you.”

Virgilio didn't reply. Beyond humiliated, he didn't even try to make eye contact.

"I know you are wondering about them, so hear this: the remnants who managed to escape this city last night will not get far. The Fifth is no more, and this is just the beginning of my revenge."

Virgilio didn't have anything to say to that, either. Riva heard a sound like a shrub being uprooted, and turned to see Wegdan twisting the head off a corpse.

Malyred gave the general her back. "As we agreed," she said to Riva, "the Ture and the Wehen are yours. Tomorrow you shall be acclaimed High King of the Ahren." She waved a hand. "Or the next day, perhaps. So, have you decided on a name yet?"

With a jarring pop, Wegdan wrenched the head from another corpse. Riva fingered the pommel of his sword as he watched. "I have, my lady."

"What is it?"

"Urwolc."

"Urwolc," said Malyred, pursing her lips. "A potent name indeed. The last one who chose it was—"

"I know. The Lord of War."

Malyred's eye twitched. "Quite." Evidently she was unused to being interrupted, even by the likes of her future sovereign. "As I was saying, it's a potent name. Of course, all you have to do now is live up to it."

Ha! Not exactly a subtle insult. Knowing she would judge him according to how he reacted, he chose to ignore it. "I have gifts for you," he said mildly.

"Is that so?"

Riva offered his arm. "Baros and Goraric. I'm certain neither are surprises, but I'd still like to present them to you personally. Will you walk with me, lady?"

Malyred looked him over, then placed her hand in the crook of his elbow. "Naturally," she said. "Lead on then, Urwolc, Lord of War."