

## **Part One**

## *Endings*

Sweat dripped off Tobias's brow, falling to the floor in droplets. With his left hand behind his back, and his right hand holding a dueling blade, he had no way to wipe it off. He circled his teacher, Aran Blackthorn. Their swords were dulled, in case of accident, but a true duelist only cuts when he intends to cut. Aran stared back at him. He wore a simple brown coat, nothing like the duelists Tobias had come to know in his father's court, and even his practice sword was less ornate than Tobias's own.

A bird cawed in the distance, and Aran's eyes glanced to the left. Tobias took the chance, lunging towards his teacher. Aran swept the blade to the side with his own and sidestepped. His blade hooked under Tobias's and nearly swung the whole blade from his hands. Tobias was forced to dive to the left, away from the blade. Aran allowed him to scramble to his feet.

Tobias didn't wait any longer, jabbing at him. Aran twisted past the jab and rammed his shoulder into Tobias, throwing him back onto the ground. Aran pulled his blade towards Tobias's throat, the signal of a won duel. Tobias pushed the blade aside and stood up, brushing off his coat.

"There was no honor in that," Tobias said.

Aran laughed. "There is no honor in dueling at all, my Lord."

Aran often said these strange things, carry-overs from his life in Sharan. But Tobias wouldn't let it pass un-challenged.

"What do you mean?" Tobias exclaimed, "Dueling is the most honorable thing a man can participate in. It is chivalrious."

"That is a mistake," Aran said sadly, "Chivalry dictates the defense of those who need it through duel. But do those who hurt the defenseless have any honor? Righteous duel is barbaric and wild, if sometimes necessary. But it is never honorable."

"Well said," Antrell said, stepping into the practice yard. Tobias's father, the King of Greystone was a tall, imposing man. He wore the fiery red of their house.

"But what of the official teachings of the College?" Antrell said, "Dueling is commended there as necessary to protect one's honor. And that is where you graduated from, yes?"

Aran fell to one knee, "Yes, my King."

Antrell took him by the arm and hauled him to his feet. "How many times do I have to tell you? This is not Sharan, and you are my son's teacher. I am only first among equals here."

Aran stilled looked hesitant. “Of course, my King. Yes, I graduated from the College thirty years ago, but I have found that their teachings are... idealistic to say the least.”

“Their teaching lay the foundation for the kingdom, Aran!” Tobias said, “The first King of Greystone founded the College on the teachings he developed through his travels.”

“Teachings change, my Lord. It has been two thousand years since Arthur Greystone founded the College, and since then many have had the chance to ‘re-interpret’ his ideas.”

“Are you accusing the College of blasphemy?” Tobias said, shocked.

Antrell held up his hand. “Think before you speak, son. His only accusation was towards unspecified officials in the College’s history.”

Tobias bowed his head in shame. Such an accusation was egregious - he couldn’t believe he’d let the words leave his mouth.

“Of course, father. I apologize.”

“Don’t apologize. That is the first rule of being a King. Correct fault, and carry on.”

Tobias nodded.

Antrell looked satisfied. “Think on what Aran says, son. It carries wisdom. But do not accept it as truth until you have seen it for yourself. Now, I must speak to Aran in private. The chefs have almost prepared dinner.”

Tobias nodded and left the practice yard.

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Geradin stood behind the line of troops he captained. They were at the forefront of the army, a mass of shields and spears. His unit was part of the vanguard, and they were to go in first, to break up the enemy formation before the cavalry charged in. It was a deadly job, but someone had to do it, and Geradin was proud of his part in the battle.

The enemy was a short way ahead, huddled in a defensive encampment. They had been chased north by the Greystone army for days, ever since the Greystone took the Sunfort. Their encampment stood in an ancient field, next to a large ruined fortress. The fortress would have made a great last stand, but it had collapsed and now was nothing besides a mountain of stone. The encampment was surrounded by a makeshift fence. Behind the fence stood a massive wall of shields held up by infantry. Pikemen’s weapons jutted out between the cracks of the shields, forming a deadly wall of metal.

He heard a shout from behind him, “*Assin!*”

A battle command meaning “ready”. He readied himself, and his unit tightened the grip on their spears.

“*Toro!*” You didn’t need to be fluent in *Szeplin* to know what that command meant. The vanguard charged forward into the defensive encampment, his unit in the very centre. He ran in the back, shield held over his head to block incoming arrows. His

longsword would be of no use in breaking up the shield formation, but his job was more important. He was to watch the battlefield, and micromanage his unit, directing them to the most strategic position.

The vanguard crashed past the rickety fence and into the line of shields. A few were skewered on the long pikes, but they were well-trained. Most let the pikes glance off their shields, and thrust their spears into the cracks, killing the pikemen beyond. Enemy shields fell to the ground, and Geradin found himself climbing over their bodies into the enemy encampment. He could hear the drumming of the cavalry behind him, charging into the camp.

A soldier ran up to him, spear aloft. Geradin brushed it away with his shield, and thrust his longsword into the man's side where the chainmail didn't reach. Geradin himself wore little armor - a thick, black gambeson was enough to stop any glancing blows, and a simple bowl-helm protected his head well enough. He surveyed the encampment from the inside, and was surprised to find a lack of soldiers. There were enough to hold out for a few minutes, but far less than the scouts had surveyed.

*Did they slip away, leaving these men to die in their place?* Geradin thought.

A sharp pain bloomed in his thigh, knocking him to the ground. He reached back and found an arrow sticking from his leg. Standing up slowly, he turned around to face the origin. He saw a large group of archers standing atop the ruined fortress, raining arrows down on the encampment.

*Void those scouts! They said the fortress was completely collapsed!*

All around him, friend and foe alike died to the rain of arrows. Geradin managed to swing his shield around to face the archers, but those who were still alive seemed oblivious to the ambush. Geradin yanked the arrow from his thigh. It left only a small cut, the gambeson taking most of the blow.

"*Carn!* Ambush!" Geradin shouted, straining his lungs. A few nearby soldiers turned and immediately readied their shields against the arrows.

Soon everyone was shouting. "*Carn!* To arms! They're behind us!"

Geradin gestured to the nearest soldiers, who saw his longsword and gathered around him.

"Follow me! They must have more than archers in that fortress, and I won't let them ambush us with cavalry, too!" The men nodded and followed him to the fortress. Sure enough, a small group of cavalry was trying to navigate the ruins, but their horses were slow atop the fallen piles of rock. When they saw Geradin's group, they dismounted and readied their long jagged pole weapons that they used to hook infantry as they rode past.

Geradin's group smashed into the cavalry, shields up. Without shields themselves, the horseless men soon fell to the barrage of spears. Geradin himself took out a couple, but his longsword was not suited to fight against their long polearms. The last enemy's weapon clattered to the stones as he died to a spear. Geradin dared not waste any more time.

"Find a way up!" he shouted. The men took a moment to recover from the fury of battle, but soon began searching the perimeter of the floor, looking for any way to the

top. Geradin searched as well, and noticed that all of the rubble had been shifted to one side of the ruin, to give the appearance that it had completely caved in.

*Smart, he thought, but the scouts shouldn't have been fooled by such a simple trick.*

"Over here!" a soldier shouted, and the mass of infantry converged at his position. Geradin joined them to find a massive ramp of stacked rubble on the far side of the floor, reaching up to the top, where the archers were firing down.

"*Toro!*" Geradin shouted, and the soldiers charged up the ramp, into the bright daylight of the second floor. It's roof and walls had caved in, leaving a perfect position to fire down on an unsuspecting force. The archers here had heard the scuffle downstairs, and were facing the ramp, sidearms drawn and bucklers readied. Geradin's soldiers piled out onto the floor and into a bloodbath of swinging swords.

Geradin found himself in the middle of the battle, metal slamming into his shield and numbing his arm. The spears may have better range, but they were at a disadvantage the way they were clumped together on the ramp. Geradin pulled himself up onto the floor and cut his way through the crowd. These archers had very little experience in close combat, and he was able to cut many down, leaving an opportunity for the rest of the soldiers to spread out and dominate.

Soon the archers had all fallen, and Geradin's group cheered in victory over their corpses. Geradin walked to the edge of the ruined fortress and examined the battlefield below. With the arrows from above stifled, the Greystone army was cutting through the enemy with ease. The cavalry charged down enemy infantry, and the last of the archers below were being executed. It was a victory.

Geradin looked down to see someone running towards the fortress. He wore a crimson gambeson and a long, decorative dueling blade. *A commander.* He hastened down the ramp and left the fortress to meet him. As he approached, he recognized the commander as Daloe Tibbett, a lowborn similar to himself who rose to the rank of commander through sheer force of will. He didn't look happy.

Geradin lowered his head slightly, "Commander."

"There's no time for formality, soldier," Daloe said, "I just recieved communication from the Sunfort,"

"The one we chased this lot from? What about it?" Geradin asked.

"It's been recaptured," Daloe said.

Geradin was stunned. "How?"

"It appears that they were waiting for us to chase the stragglers down, and as soon as we left, pounced on the fortress and recaptured it."

"*Void,*" Geradin said. Daloe only nodded.

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Tobias left the dining hall, belly warm from the feast he was served for dinner.

*If I didn't practice with the sword every day, I would look like the Chaplain Fry,* he thought with amusement.

He heard a trotting behind him, and turned to see Victoria sidling up to him.

"Hello, Tobias," she said, walking beside him.

"Hello," he replied.

There was a bit of a pause. Tobias didn't know how to act near Victoria - their parents planned to marry them when Tobias turned twenty. They hadn't told them of course, but it was obvious what their plan was. Her father, Davian, was the Steward of Arms in the military and wanted to establish a firm connection between their houses.

"I wanted to ask you something, Tobias," she said hesitantly.

"Yes?" Tobias said. He could feel his face flushing even though he was certain that she wouldn't ask what had immediately sprung to mind.

"It's my father - he is fighting in Levee, but I haven't heard from him in weeks! Nobody will tell me what's happening, but I thought... since you know a lot about the war..." She looked up at him expectantly.

"The last I heard, he broke one of their major fortresses to the west, and is now chasing down the stragglers." Tobias replied. That much was certainly true, but that was all he knew. His father didn't let him onto as much as Victoria seemed to think. She still looked worried, apparently not happy at the prospect of her father chasing down violent Ramblons.

Tobias hastened to add, "But there's no reason they would need the Steward of Arms to chase down stragglers. He's almost certainly safe at the captured fortress."

Victoria breathed a deep breath and smiled. "Finally, an answer. Thank you, Tobias."

"Of course," he said. They walked alongside each other for a while, towards the hall where both of their quarters lied. Victoria was silent, and she didn't seem completely relieved, as if something was still bothering her.

"Are you alright, Victoria?" he asked.

"I- of course, Tobias. I just miss my father," she said.

"Why hasn't your mother come?" Tobias asked. Victoria had arrived weeks ago, quite obviously in preparation of Tobias's upcoming 20th birthday, and the marriage that would follow. Her mother hadn't accompanied her, however.

Victoria hesitated before answering, "She just had to stay home. To take care of the estate."

Tobias frowned. Her mother never had to do that before. Before he could press her further, however, shadows flashed past the hallway ahead.

"Did you see that?" Tobias asked, walking faster towards the end of the hallway.

"Did I see what?" Victoria said, raising her dress slightly to rush after him.

Tobias reached the end of the hallway and looked down to the left. His father's quarters were open, shining light out into the dim hallway. He heard a yelp of pain, and ran down the hallway. Before he reached the door, two shadowy figures exited the door and stared down the hallway at him. They stared at each other in deadlock for a moment.

"Guards! The King!" Victoria shouted behind him. The figure on the right produced a

dagger and used it to shatter the hallway's window.

Tobias ran towards them, shouting, "Hey! Come back here!"

It was too late. They were already gone, having jumped through the windows with incredible dexterity. He stuck his head out, and saw no evidence of them, even though the window was near the top of the keep.

The light shining in from his father's quarters reminded him of what they had been doing. He dashed into the room, almost blinded by the bright light. As his eyes adjusted, a terrible picture formed before him. His father was splayed out on the large, ornate bed. A knife was stuck in the center of his chest. Tobias fell to his knees in front of the body as Victoria rushed in the door.

## *Introductions*

Tobias felt like one of the ornate dolls that the Lady Edna kept lining the walls of her quarters. He wore a ridiculously crimson overcoat with golden linings, and an overly ornate sword at his hip. He approached the doors to the great hall with hesitation. It felt wrong to be thrust into the shoes of his father like this, without recourse and without warning. After a moment, he nodded to the servants, who opened the oversized doors, revealing the shimmering, golden room beyond. A long, crimson carpet lined in gold made a pathway to the Throne at the end of the hall. Walling the sides of the carpet was an enormous amalgamation of people, some whom he had known since childhood, and some who were all but strangers. He stepped between them, onto the carpet, and began the walk to his throne.

Faces watched from his sides, and it was an effort to keep his head straight. Still, he could make out their faces. The women looked worried and sympathetic, like they wanted to mother him. The men were stoic, nodding in stout approval as he passed. He walked for what seemed like an eternity, the throne growing closer at a snail's pace. The faces lining his peripheral vision seemed to get more motherly and stoic as he went. He could swear he saw someone crying as he made the final step from the carpet to the throne's platform.

He sat down, careful to not look too comfortable or too intimidated. Considering the circumstances, however, he probably looked like a stray dog trying to casually join a dinner table. Alrentius, the Herald of the Court, stepped up beside him, holding the Stone Cap on a small pillow.

The Stone Cap was a round, open-topped crown hewn from a single piece of granite. It was said to have been handcrafted by Arthur Greystone's father, in a fury of genius craftsmanship. It had been worn by every King of Greystone since Arthur Greystone ruled two thousand years before. Alrentius placed it atop Tobias's head. As soon as he let go, the crowd burst into a raucous cheer. Tobias had no reason to smile.

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“We have to head back to the Sunfort!” Geradin said, “Recapturing it is our only chance of reestablishing control in the west. If it remains taken, we will lose this war!”



Kierny looked thoughtful, but Daloe shook his head. The two commanders had full control of the company's decisions.

"We have no chance of taking it alone. We should contact the King and organize a retreat." Daloe said.

"A retreat?" Geradin said, sputtering, "The Sunfort is in the hands of Ramblon! We are in *enemy territory* right now, Daloe. If we head south, we will run into just as many enemies as if we head towards the Sunfort. If we manage to hit the Sunfort at the same time as another company, we can take it back unquestionably. All you have to do is ask the King through your communicator."

"I won't disregard protocol just for some crackbrained plan of yours, Geradin. We're heading southeast," Daloe said.

"Now, Daloe, we're *both* in charge of this company. I think we need to discuss the matter privately," Kierny said.

"Fine," Daloe said reluctantly, "but you leave, Geradin. You have no place in this discussion."

Geradin was angry beyond belief, but he had to follow a direct order. He left the tent with as little humility as he could muster, and stepped out into the fresh air of the encampment. They had repurposed the enemy's broken encampment into one of their own while they decided what to do. From the looks of it, that could take a while.

Geradin started down the grassy path. It was only a path in the sense that it didn't have any tents on it, but it provided the same benefit. He headed towards the barracks to see how lazy his unit was being. They needed to train with every spare moment, but without him there to... encourage them, they only lazed around. On the way, a stout man nearly half of Geradin's height joined him in his walk.

"Geradin, I hear you are?" the man said. He had a strange accent - possible from Szara.

"That is my name," Geradin replied.

"I have a proposition, if you have a moment," the man said, pulling out a crinkled piece of paper from his coat pocket, "I work for Lord Davian, you see, and I think that he is alive."

"Alive? It's certainly a possibility, although the Ramblons aren't known for their mercy," he said.

The short man uncrinkled the paper, revealing a short, hastily scribbled message:

*Don't seek me out. The Sun is lost.*

"Where did you get this?" Geradin demanded, snatching the paper out of his hands. The man fumbled in his pockets again and produced a round, red gem linked to a golden chain.

"I have a communicator. For the master to transmit orders, you see."

Geradin looked at him in disbelief, "You have a communicator *just* so Davian can transmit orders to his servant?"

The man spoke in his defense, but Geradin ignored him. *Is he really saying that the Sunfort is lost? How many soldiers could they possibly have there?* It didn't sound like the kind of order Davian would issue.

"and I transmit important messages to other lords - it is of the utmost importance that I can-"

Geradin cut him off. "This message must be destroyed."

That made the short man stumble. "What? This is an important communication from-"

"It's wrong," Geradin said, "There is no way that they have enough troops at the Sunfort to make it impossible to take. He was obviously forced to write this message to you, in hope to convince us not to try and retake the Sunfort."

"If that's the case," the man said, taking the note back from Geradin, "Then I'm sure the Commanders will agree with you."

"Agree with what? Daloe said, as he and Kierny approached from behind.

Geradin spun around, ready to keep the note from Daloe at any cost, but stopped in his tracks when he heard an earshattering sound. A single note on a horn, followed by a shout.

"*Carn!* Ambush!"

Daloe furrowed his brow, "This will be finished later. Geradin, gather your unit and meet the rest of us on the front line."

He hurried off. Geradin did the same, in the opposite direction towards the barracks. Confused soldiers were already piling out, with other unit captains shouting at them to form up.

"*VANGUARD 15, HERE!*" Geradin roared, drowning out the other unit captains. His unit quickly diverged from the rest and entered formation. He had to suppress a smile despite the circumstances - his odd talent for shouting loudly had its uses in the army.

"*Arm up!*" Geradin said, not quite as loudly as before. A couple embarrassed soldiers had to sprint back into the barracks to equip something they forgot, usually their helmet. When they had all prepared, he continued.

"*Front line - fast march!*" he said. The unit immediately turned and ran towards the front line, leaving some of the other, less organized units behind. A couple had managed to form up correctly, and they were fast behind him.

They reached the front line in only a couple of minutes. From there, they could see a mass of cavalry on the horizon. Geradin looked around him and didn't see Daloe or Kierny anywhere. *Where are those damned captains? We'll never win this if we're disorganized.* He waited as more units of every type lined up on the front lines, but without any orders beside "wait on the front lines," everyone looked worried.

From the slight plateau this plain rested on, they could see the cavalry riding closer and closer, much more accurately than they could see the Greystones. That was the biggest reason for using this as a holdout position. Geradin realized while viewing the force before him that they would not win. Their numbers were simply better, and if they met like this, army-on-army, they had no chance of winning. He waiting a moment as

they grew even closer, hoping for Daloe or Kierny to arrive, but nothing happened. Geradin steeled himself and stepped out in front of his unit.

"I don't know where the commanders are, and I don't care. If they don't arrive and give us a strategy, we will all die. I need a unit of archers to come with me - we will hide in the fortress and hit them from behind once they're on our front lines. Shields and pikes - do not yield! It looks like they have mostly cavalry anyway."

The soldiers stared back at him, dumbfounded.

"Are you soldiers or not?!" he bellowed, then pointed at a specific archer unit, "You, come with me now, we can't afford to waste any more time."

Their unit captain hesitated for a moment, but turned and shouted at his archers to follow. They traveled in a curve towards the fortress, to make sure the enemy below didn't see them. When they entered, Geradin directed everyone to the ramp.

"Archers to the top. Hide behind the ruined walls until I tell you to reveal yourselves and shoot. Vanguard," he said, turning to his own troops, "stay hidden until I come down. We will charge down behind them right as the arrows begin going, and smash their back line."

The soldiers nodded in agreement, some of the worry leaving their faces. Geradin followed the archer unit to the top floor. He took position behind a piece of rubble that gave him good vision of the battlefield. Below, the troops had formed into the correct defensive positions. He didn't see Daloe or Kierny down there, still.

"It's a good plan," the archer unit's captain said, taking position next to him.

"I know. I just hope it's enough."

"I'm Dale," the man said, sticking a hand out.

Geradin took it hesitantly, and Dale gave it a hearty shake.

"Either way," he said, "I'm glad someone took command. Those damn commanders have no idea what they're on about."

Geradin couldn't help but smile. It was quickly wiped from his face, however, when he looked down on the battlefield. The enemy cavalry was closing in now, close enough to shoot at. That would only involve them storming the tower immediately, and certainly losing the battle. He had to wait. The cavalry crashed into the shield wall, and their archers took a forward position behind them, shooting a flurry of arrows past the shields and into the infantry.

"*Toro!*" Geradin shouted. He ran down the the ramp to a cacaphony of snapping bowstrings. The men below were readied, and Geradin repeated his order to them. They charged out of the fortress under a ceiling of flying arrows, and down the slight hill onto the back of the enemy forces. The rear was made mostly of archers, who fell almost immediately to Geradin's raging vanguard. At that moment, the shield wall fell like a line of dominoes. The Ramblons had lost nearly half of their cavalry doing so, but the rest charged into the encampment.

*Morons*, Geradin thought while an archer's shortsword clanged against his shield. Cavalry is completely ineffective against shields and pikes. *But*, he noticed while taking down another archer with a longsword thrust, *they don't seem to have any infantry at all.*

*It's almost like... they wanted to get here fast.*

Of course. They knew that the Greystones would have won against the Ramblons that they chased here. And now they sent the fastest troops they have to finish them off before they could attempt to retake the Sunfort.

Geradin charged through the encampment, his longsword cutting the leg tendons of any horses that he found, sending their riders to the ground. Horses and rider fell around him as his vanguard charged from behind. Their attack seemed to invigorate the defending soldiers, and soon the entire enemy force had been destroyed.

"What is the meaning of this?" Daloe roared, stepping into view.

The exhilarated soldiers's smiles of victory faded as he approached Geradin.

"Have you mutinied? What gives this... *unit captain* the ability to give orders?" he asked. He turned directly to Geradin. "You have defied a direct order, captain."

Geradin sputtered, "I saved this company! You were off running in the void, so I set up a strategy that might actually let us live!"

The surrounding soldiers nodded in agreement.

"My command," Daloe said forcefully, "was to remain on the front lines and destroy their cavalry with shields and pikes. And I was not *running in the void*, I was being attacked by an assassin."

"An assassin?" Dale asked, walking up to Geradin's side.

"That's what I said. He managed to kill Kierney, but not me," Daloe said, the surrounding soldiers gaping, "but the more important thing right now is the *insubordinace* happening before me."

"It doesn't matter why you were gone," Geradin said, "but you were. And someone had to take charge."

"If you had followed my orders, it would have turned out fine. I will not establish a precedence for insubordination. Take him," he said to the nearby soldiers.

"*What?!*" Geradin said. The sounds of the soldiers around him echoed his feeling.

"You have lost your rank, civilian, and you are in a warzone. TAKE HIM,"

A couple men reluctantly took his longsword and helmet, then guided him away from the group.

## *Arguments*

Tobias sat at the end of the central table in the war-room. The table was surrounded by bickering High Lords, each suggesting a different strategy. There were nine of them, representing each of the great houses of Greystone.

“We must retake the Sunfort!” Varian Hawkwreath said, slamming his hand on the table, “It is *integral* to our control of Levee.”

“Do not call it that. Levee has not existed for thirty years,” Reanne Lightstock said calmly, her face impassive.

Varian nearly popped a vein, “I doesn’t *matter* what it’s called, we still need to capture the rotting Sunfort!”

“We cannot,” she said, “Davian controlled nearly our entire army in the west - to take it back would require moving huge amounts of troops from the easter front, which we simply cannot afford. We should take the troops that we still have left in the west and move them east for a final push.”

They didn’t even consider turning to Tobias for a solution. With his father gone, the monarchy might as well be dead. Tobias had been tutored in the arts of war, but his inexperience would make him a liability if he tried to interfere. They would come to him with their final decision, and he would approve. What else could he do?

The lords argued for hours, and by the time they were done and leaving, Tobias could barely move from his seat. He had never sat in one place for that long before. He managed, however, and the lords cleared a path to the exit for him. He was still their king, after all.

Outside, he found Victoria. Their eyes met, and neither smiled. She joined him on his walk down the hall.

“Victoria - your father -” he began

“I’ve been informed,” she said, “and there is nothing you can do. He is almost certainly dead, and an attack to retrieve him would be futile anyway.”

He blinked. “I... thank you. You have taken a weight from my shoulders.”

She nodded, and they continued walking in silence for a while.

“My father’s funeral will take place soon. I would like it if you attended,” Tobias asked. A king’s funeral was a very private event, and even as a king himself he was nervous to ask her.

“His funeral?” she asked, “I’m surprised you’ve had time to plan that, with the war.”

He waved his hand. “I have no part in that - my inexperience would only be a

hindrance to them.”

She stopped in place and looked at him. “You can’t do that, Tobias.”

“It is for the best, Victoria. The king is dead, and the high lords must do what they can alone.”

“But they are not alone, Tobias,” she said, stepping up to him, “You are their king. You must lead them, or the kingdom will never survive.”

“How can I? I have no experience in war.”

“There is a difference between letting the high lords rule you, and you ruling them while taking advice. If they have no one to make the final decision, the war and the nation will be lost.”

He frowned. “Where are you getting this from, Victoria?”

She blushed. “My father often talked about unification. It is why he wanted us to marry.”

Tobias was stunned. They had never spoken of that before, not directly at least. *Things really have changed*, he thought, *I am king now*.

“We will still marry,” Tobias said firmly. When she looked up at him, he blushed. “If you want to, that is.”

“Of course I do, you lummox!” she said, embracing him.

Tobias smiled. Not all was lost.

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Geradin stepped out of his tent cautiously. There were no guards - why would an unarmed civilian need guards? He grimaced. The pain of demotion was still fresh in his mind.

He began his walk through the camp. Just because he had been stripped of all rank didn’t mean he couldn’t help. As long as he could get an inkling of what was going on in the camp, there was always hope. As he walked, soldiers along the path looked at him in sympathy. Nobody but Daloe thought that Geradin’s demotion was in any way right, but these soldiers had been trained well. A boon on the battlefield, but a curse when your only hope was through mutiny.

Walking among the barrack tents, he felt oddly out of place. He had been a soldier his entire life, yet without any weapon or uniform to display it, he felt naked. The eyes watching him, pitying him burned into his soul. He was like a six-fingered man, stripped of dignity and carried in a carnival wagon to be gawked at.

He quickened his pace and left the barracks for the mess area. Civilians would be fed in a military camp, as much as it pained him to think of himself like that. Before he reached it, however, Davian’s miniature messenger scurried towards him. Geradin stopped, allowing the man to approach.

“Geradin, sir, hello. Yes, hello. I have another proposition, if you have a moment,” the

man said.

Geradin frowned. "I can't do anything for you..."

"Mus, my good sir." He pronounced it *moose*, like the strange animals that travelers from the northern realms spoke of.

"I've been stripped of rank, Mus. I have no influence here." Not exactly true, but unless he had a good reason, these soldiers would not follow him whatever he said.

"Terribly sorry to hear of that, sir," Mus said, "but my proposition has nothing to do with rank."

Geradin frowned. "What does it have to do with?"

"As I'm sure you're aware, Commander Daloe is in possession of a Communicator feeding directly to the King."

"Yes."

"Well, you see," Mus said, sweating slightly, "if we managed to get word to the King of the distinct... advantage that our position offers us in regard to the Sunfort..."

"You want me to steal it," Geradin said.

Mus looked quickly back and forth. "Keep your voice down! It's not stealing if you only use it once. Think of it as borrowing."

"Rationalize all you want, Mus, I am no thief."

"But surely you can see the effect that Commander Daloe is having on the camp. These soldiers are demoralized - not only have they lost the Sunfort, but they are not even trusted to take it back? I am no general, as you can plainly see, but our position offers quite the opportunity. If we managed to coordinate with the King and attack the Sunfort from two sides..."

Geradin wanted to say yes. Mus was perfectly correct - if Daloe would only present this opportunity to the King, the whole tide of the war could change for the better. But Geradin was no thief - if he had a problem with Daloe, he would confront him. *As a civilian?* he thought. *He would brush you aside. Besides, it's not stealing if you give it back.*

"Borrow, Mus. We will borrow it."

Mus smiled. "Of course, sir, of course."

o O o O o

"This food is wonderful, Tobias," Victoria said, her mouth full of dinner roll.

Tobias raised an eyebrow, "How ladylike."

Victoria blushed and swallowed the food as quickly as possible. "You shouldn't have left the feast, though. Now that you're king, people expect you to be there."

"It's fine. I was there at the beginning, and that's more than enough. It's what my father used to do," Tobias said.

The mention of his father froze the conversation for a moment.

“What do you think honor means?” Tobias asked, looking up.

“Honor?”

“My father never gave me a straight answer. He told me to find out for myself, but I just don’t know. Is there any honor in war? In dueling?”

Victoria scooted closer. “I don’t know about honor, Tobias, but in my eyes a good man is one who strives against both.”

“Against war, and against dueling? That goes against everything the College teaches.” he said.

“My mother told me that the College was run by morons,” she said.

“But your father loved the college!” he said.

Victoria started crying.

“I’m sorry, I just meant... he could still be alive, we don’t know...”

Tobias carefully put his arms around her. “I’m sorry.”

“My mother,” Victoria said between sobs, “she’s- she’s dead.”

Tobias jerked upright, which was uncomfortable with his arms still around her.

“What? How?”

Victoria looked up at him, tears running down her cheeks. After composing herself a bit, she replied, “She killed herself... jumped off the balcony. Father doesn’t... didn’t want me to tell anyone.”

“Why would he do that to you?” Tobias asked.

“I think- I think he didn’t want to be taken out of command.”

That was true. If Antrell had known of her death, Davian would certainly be taken out of command. Emotion can not be allowed to play a part in war, even when it’s seemingly unrelated.

“I’m sorry, Victoria,” Tobias said, “we can have a funeral for her soon, if you’d like.”

Victoria sniffed. “Thank you, Tobias.”



## *Schemes*

Geradin walked through the camp, trying to stay inconspicuous. It was difficult though, considering he was the talk of the camp. People stared as he walked past despite his best efforts.

*Oh well, he thought, it won't hinder my work too much.*

He was scouting out Daloe's tent, to try and get a sense of when there was an opportunity. The plan was to sneak in when Daloe was gone, use the communicator very quickly, and then leave. The hope was that the King, realizing what an advantage their group had up here, would then command Daloe to attack the Sunfort. Geradin might be punished in the process, but as a civilian, there really wasn't much that Daloe could do to him.

Geradin started as Daloe quickly left the tent and ran away, towards the privy. He tried to avoid cracking a smile at the man's hustle.

"I know what you're doing."

Geradin spun and found one his soliders - well, previous soldiers - standing behind him.

"Torok's fall, Bast, you scared me. And I don't know what you're talking about."

Bast smiled. "Of course, of course. But I'd like to offer my services, captain."

"Ex-captain"

"Not if we succeed, Geradin. Think about it - if the King found out what Daloe is doing, he would be demoted and probably replaced by you! And I know just the way to get to his communicator..."

Geradin held up a hand. "Hang on, how do you know what my plan is? Did Mus tell you?"

Bast looked confused. "Who's Mus? And everyone knows what you're planning, it's obvious. You've been walking in front of Daloe's tent for an hour."

Geradin nearly blushed as he looked around. Sure enough, all of the surrounding soldiers were looking at him. As soon as they noticed him looking around, they turned away and went on with their business.

"What if somebody tells Daloe?" Geradin asked.

Bast almost looked hurt. "Nobody would do that, Geradin. We won't outright mutiny against Daloe - void, we're Greystone soldiers! - but we'll help you contact the King. It's your right!"

"No it isn't"

“Well, not your right. But he shouldn’t be so protective of our only channel to the King.”

Geradin almost got excited. He hadn’t expected such loyalty from the other soldiers. *At least they realize the gravity of what Daloe is doing.*

“Alright, well what’s your plan for helping me?” Geradin asked.

“Well,” Bast answered, “we figured that you were out here trying to learn when Daloe leaves. Problem is, we’ve realized that he has no schedule. He spends almost all day in his tent, and only leaves to eat and use the bathroom - which he has seemingly no schedule for.”

“What do we do then?”

“We send in a signal that the scouts have spotted enemies. He leaves with us to deal with it, and you go in to use the communicator.”

“And when he realizes that there are no enemies?”

“By then you’ll have communicated the King and left the tent. Then the King will surely contact him and tell him to use your strategy, and to reinstate you. He might even demote Daloe.”

“But what guarantee do we have that he would even follow that order?”

Bast’s face fell. Before he could say anything, however, shouts came from the front of the camp.

“Don’t tell me you already organized this without thinking it through,” Geradin said.

“That’s not planned. They’re really here,” Bast said.

Geradin cursed and ran towards the front of the camp. Bast grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back.

“This is your chance! Daloe won’t be coming back here, just do it!”

“But what if-”

“It’s worth a try, Geradin.”

Geradin hesitated, then nodded. After the soldiers had all cleared the camp, he quietly entered the tent.

Inside, he found a large wooden desk - much more ornate than anything the soldiers had to use. On the desk was a mass of documents, and on top of those was a deep red gem connected to a golden chain. The Communicator.

Geradin picked up the communicator. He was about to activate it, but he noticed the documents underneath. It looked like a camp report, but some of the letters were circled in pen. The circled letters spelled out a sentence:

*Kill him.*

Geradin stumbled back. Daloe was receiving secret messages? From who? He dropped the communicator and left the tent, stunned. Looking to the right, he saw another person leaving a tent - *his* tent. It was Daloe, and he was holding a wicked-looking knife.

Daloe turned to Geradin and they locked eyes for a moment. Daloe charged towards him, across the plains. Geradin considered running for the front lines, but that would end up getting him killed by a Ramblon. He ducked back inside Daloe’s tent and turned over

Daloe's cot, looking for a weapon. Nothing there. He turned to the desk and threw the stacks of paper aside. Still nothing.

Daloe crashed through the front of the tent, knife in hand. His eyes locked on Geradin in a fury, he charged again. Geradin grabbed his hand, trying to keep the knife as far away as possible. Daloe beat him in the head with his other hand, making Geradin's vision blur. He shouted for help, but everyone had moved to the front line. *Of course*, Geradin thought hazily, *it was Daloe's false alarm*.

Geradin's arms shook as the knife grew closer and closer to his chest. Spittle flew from Daloe's mouth, and the wordless fury from his eyes glared down on Geradin. The eyes went glassy, and Daloe fell, crashing on Geradin's chest, the knife clattering to the ground behind him. Another knife stuck out from Daloe's chest, and behind him stood a small soldier, by the looks of him barely a recruit.

Geradin huffed and threw Daloe's corpse to the side. The recruit stared at it, shaking.

"Was he... working for them?" the recruit asked finally.

"Yes," Geradin said. He stood shakily and sat down in Daloe's desk-chair. He could hear running outside, the soldiers returning from the front line.

"Go get Bast," Geradin said to the recruit, "and... thank you."

The recruit nodded numbly and left the tent. Geradin took the communicator from the table.

"Finally time to say hello to the king," he said.

Geradin hefted the communicator and realized that he didn't have the slightest idea how to work one. He tried twisting the gem, he tried pushing it, he tried pulling on the golden chain - nothing worked.

Bast entered the tent, and gave a start at Daloe's corpse. "You *killed* him?"

"He was working with the Ramblons, Bast," Geradin replied, "He tried to kill me. That recruit you saw saved me."

"Void," Bast said.

Geradin nodded. "I can't figure out how to work this forsaken communicator."

Bast took it from him, and grasped the gem, pulling it away from the chain and twisting.

"It's not working," Bast said, "that's how you start a communicator."

Geradin nearly fell out of his chair. "Torok's fall, Bast, it's a fake!"

Bast threw the gem to the ground, shaking his head. "What do we do now?"

"I don't know."

o O o O o

Tobias strolled through the palace gardens with Victoria at his side. Light streamed down through the latticed masonwork above, bathing the array of exotic plants in the orange light of the evening. The ground below them was packed dirt, brushed clear of

rocks by servants. Victoria wore a violet dress, the traditional colour of mourning. Her voice contained no hint of sadness, however. Tobias and her had been chatting for hours about anything and everything, strolling in circles around the oversized garden.

“My king?” a voice said. Tobias turned to see a spindly servant approaching with an envelope.

“Thank you,” Tobias said, taking the envelope. The servant seemed surprised, but quickly bowed and walked away.

He opened the envelope, and carefully removed the folded parchment within.

*My King,*

*In light of your coronation, you are cordially invited to feast with my family tonight. We have a Szaran chef who is very skilled at preparing eastern rind sausage, which I hear is your favorite.*

*- Lord Samuil Hightree*

He handed the note to Victoria.

“He says ‘My King’,” said Victoria, “but his tone is casual.”

Tobias shook his head. “They don’t see me as King. They see me as ‘the young prince’.”

Victoria looked up at him. “Will you accept?”

“Of course,” he replied, “but what do I say to him? How can I make him - and the rest - respect me?”

Victoria patted his arm. “Let me come along. I can help.”

“You can?”

“You and your father practiced with the sword, but my father taught me the ways of politics. I’m not as good as he was, but I’m certainly better than you.”

Tobias smiled. “I am your king, you know.”

“I know,” she said. She leaned against his arm as they continued to walk through the beautiful gardens.

## *Conversations*

Tobias entered the estate with Victoria on his arm. His retainers followed closely, a group of servants and attendants that were obligated to follow him wherever he went. He wasn't a fan of them - they tended to slow him down considerably - but the King had an obligation to them as much as they to him. This estate was the manor assigned to Lord Hightree - a place for him to live when he came to the capital, Arthtrian.

The entrance hall to the Hightree estate was magnificent. A deep blue carpet extended from the doorway and split, rising up two staircases, one on each side of the entry hall. Down the center, another branch of the rug connected into a large feasting hall, seen through an open set of massive brown doors. Tapestries hung on open wall, presenting the royal symbol of House Hightree: a field of deep blue split down the middle by a slender line of light grey.

"My king!" a voice exclaimed. Tobias turned from his examination of the tapestries towards the feasting hall. Samuil Hightree was there, walking towards Tobias along the deep blue carpet.

Tobias nodded towards him. "Lord Samuil, greetings."

Samuil approached and noticed Victoria on his arm. "Lady Victoria! I didn't know that you were coming. How is your mother?"

Tobias flinched, but Victoria calmly replied, "She is doing well, Lord Samuil. She would join us here in Arthtrian, but she is occupied with managing our estates."

"A pity," Samuil said, "but let us not dwell on those who could not attend! Come, join me in the feasting hall! We have quite the meal prepared."

Samuil was not lying. As they entered the feasting hall, servants bustled in and out of the kitchen, delivering plate upon plate of food to the large table in the center of the hall. It still seemed small in comparison to the room, because a truly large feast would require a much bigger table. For the relatively private affair of this dinner, however, this smaller table would do just fine.

Tobias and Victoria sat down next to each-other, across the table from Samuil's wife and son. Samuil sat himself at the head of table - even when a king was in attendance, tradition dictated that the head of the household took the head of the table. Even so, it made Tobias uncomfortable that Samuil had such a primary position among the group. Was his chair taller than Tobias'?

"May I introduce you to my wife, the Lady Elaine?" Samuil said.

Elaine nodded and smiled at Tobias, "My King," she said.

“And my son,” Samuil continued, “Tomas.”

Tomas looked to be only seven or eight years old. “That’s *Lord* Tomas, daddy.”

Samuil smiled. “No, son. You aren’t a lord until you’ve come of age. We’ve spoken of this before.”

Tomas looked disgruntled. A final servant entered and poured wine for everyone in attendance. Tobias nodded at her as she poured, and she blushed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Victoria making the same face as Tomas.

“I’d like to give my condolences about your father, my King,” Elaine said after everyone had piled food on their plates, “and to you too, Lady Victoria. They were both good men.”

Victoria nodded, and Tobias replied, “Thank you.”

They ate for a while, exchanging small talk with the occasional excited interjection from Tomas when he recognized something they were talking about. Soon, everyone had had their fill. And yet, there were still plates piled high with food. Tobias felt awful about the waste, but it would be rude to reprimand Samuil about it, especially in his own estate.

“My King,” Samuil said, leaning back in his seat, “one of the reasons I asked you here was to discuss an issue - namely, the caravan tax. You see-”

Samuil went on about how his house depended on his trading caravans, and how they formed the backbone of the Greystone economy. Tobias had heard this all before, secondhand through his father. It was one of the issues that Antrell refused to budge on.

When Samuil had finished, Tobias took a breath to calm himself. This was the chance Victoria and him had discussed.

“My father was famously stubborn on the point of the caravan taxes, Lord Samuil.”

Samuil’s face seemed to light up.

“And it was for good reason. Fifteen percent has been the standard since House Hightree was founded hundreds of years ago. Your caravans may play a significant role in the economy, but this tax has served us well so far and I see no reason to change it.”

Samuil’s face darkened. “My King, with all due respect, I-”

Tobias interrupted him. “I am not a young whelp to be pushed around, Samuil. My father may be dead, but his beliefs live on in me, and I will not disrespect him by destroying much-needed improvements that he made to this kingdom.”

Samuil and his wife were stunned. Tomas blew his nose on a slice of cheese.

Tobias stood up. “Thank you for the meal, Lord Samuil.” He took Victoria’s arm and began his exit. Before he left, he turned and said, “And from now on, don’t waste so much food. Only make as much as you will eat - void, we’re at war!”

As Tobias and Victoria reentered the entry hall, Samuil seemed to recover behind him. “Of course, my King. Of course.”

Tobias’ retainers scurried out of the estate behind him. As they walked the stone path outside the manor, Tobias turned to Victoria. “I didn’t overdo it, did I?”

Victoria laughed, “He will not disrespect you again, Tobias. I am sure of that.”

o O o O o

Ana shivered as she approached Greystone Palace. The enormous structure was the most intimidating thing she had ever seen. It's outer wall was of simple grey stone, topped with a parapet stationed by archers. Inside the wall was a short ring of grass surrounding the palace itself. It was made from a glassy, polished crimson stone, with a golden lining.

She approached the primary gate of the outer wall. The guards looked at her menacingly.

"No civilians," the left one said curtly.

Ana took a deep breath. "I am here on personal invitation from the King."

The left guard's eyes dilated for a moment. "Of course. Please, enter."

"What? She's shown you no proof!" the guard on the right exclaimed.

Ana turned to him. "I need no proof."

The right guard went through the same strange expression of eye dilation before stepping aside. Ana walked through the front gates and into the outer garden.

She took another deep breath. Even a simple Influencing like that took some out of her. Fortunately, the guards had very little conviction, so the Influencing would not have any permanent toll.

As she approached the great crimson doors of the palace, she tried to exude as much confidence as possible. Now that she was past the outer gate, the palace guards shouldn't be too suspicious of her, as long as carried herself like a Lady.

Sure enough, they allowed her into the palace without question. It was fortunate that she had managed to acquire this beautiful, shimmering blue dress. Without it, every guard in the palace would be suspicious of 'the rabble'.

The entry hall to the palace was lined in the crimson and gold of House Greystone. A man, clad in servant's white, approached her.

"How may I assist you, my Lady?" he asked.

"I am here to see the King," she said.

"Of course," he said, luckily requiring no Influence.

The servant led her through a maze of halls, and to a glass door. Through it, she could see a garden bathed in orange light. Walking through the garden was the King and the Lady Victoria. A guard stood outside the door, eying her and the servant.

"The Lady, ah..." the servant began.

"Ana," she said.

"Yes, the Lady Ana is here to see the King."

"Would she submit to a search first?" the guard asked.

Ana cursed under her breath. "I do not need to be searched, the King is expecting me."

The guard's mind resisted. She pushed further, feeling her life drain away as she did.

The guard succumbed after what felt like hours, although it all occurred within the span of a second.

“Of course,” the guard said, eyes dilated. He opened the door.

Ana stepped through, feeling weak. That probably took a few months off her life. She approached the King and Lady Victoria. They stopped in their pacing and turned towards her.

“Yes? Who is this?” the King asked of the servant trailing behind her.

“I am the Lady Ana. Tell me, my King, would you join me for dinner tonight?”

He seemed surprised, and the Lady Victoria even more so.

“The King is currently courting, *Lady Ana*, so I suggest that you retract your offer.”

Ana ignored her and focused on Tobias. She pushed as hard as she dared, and the King resisted. She could almost feel him give, but each time it rebounded with a force greater than she thought possible of someone with no knowledge of Influencing. *They spoke the truth*, she thought, *he is just like his father*.

Reluctantly pulling away, Ana focused herself on Victoria instead.

“Apologies, my Lady. I was not aware. Tell me, how is your mother?”

Victoria was less resistant. Her eyes widened in surprise for a moment before succumbing. Ana took a deep breath. That had still cost her a few months.

“My mother is dead, Lady Ana,” she said.

The King recovered from his daze. “Victoria! I thought- I-”

“May I talk to the Lady Victoria alone, my King?”

The King shook his head, still dazed. “No, I-”

“It’s alright, Tobias,” Lady Victoria said, “I will talk to her.”

The King, still dazed, nodded and left.

“Now,” Ana began, “for your instructions.”



## *Recollections*

### **3 weeks ago**

“You’d best get home, miss. It’s almost night now,” the fruit-stall man said as Ana picked up her heaving bag of fruit.

Ana looked towards the horizon. Orange evening light illuminated the market, gradually clearing the streets as people made their way home. She hadn’t realized that nighttime was so close. Thanking the man, she started down the street at a quick pace, nearly toppling over from the weight of her bag.

The streets darkened further, and she began to have trouble seeing. Arthrian was not as safe in recent years, due to so many troops assisting the war effort. The streets were empty now, and she was still far from home. How had night come so fast without her realizing?

She felt a tug on her arm and was yanked into an alley. She tried to scream, but a hand was clamped over her mouth. The mugger pulled her further into the alley, and threw her against the wall at the end.

“Please, you don’t have to-” she began.

“Shut up,” he said, tugging the bag from her arms. He dumped the fruit onto the ground, letting it roll into the sludge of the alley. She winced. Her parents had sent her with the entire week’s food budget. When he didn’t find anything of value, he stepped towards her and roughly picked her up. He tore her bag from her arm and searched through it.

His face darkened. He threw the bag to the ground and sighed, pulling out a dagger.

“Stop!” she cried. He stepped closer.

“No! STOP!” she shouted.

The mugger stopped in place, dagger still raised menacingly.

“Of course,” he said.

o O o O o

### **2 weeks ago**

Ana walked along the path towards the market. It was a much more comfortable walk

with her new boots - the old ones were frayed and had lumpy soles. She approached the fruit stall.

"Hello, miss," the fruit-stand owner said, "buying more fruit today?"

"No, actually," she said as she piled fruit into a large paper bag, "I'll just be taking it for free today."

She looked up from the fruit into his eyes. He stared for a bit before replying.

"Of course."

Ana shivered at the now-familiar draining feeling that came from doing that. The fruit man gazed at her as she left the stand with her bag of fruit. She pushed through the throng of people crowding the square. It was much busier today than usual, perhaps because it was morning as compared to the evening that she usually comes here.

As she pushed through, a hand brushed her hip far too firmly for comfort. She spun, nearly dropping her bag, but the offender had disappeared into the crowd. She noticed a piece of paper sticking from the pocket where the man had groped. After moving to the side of the street, she pulled out the scrap and began to read.

*We know of your ability, and have taken your parents.*

Ana sprinted back into the crowd, leaving her bag of fruit behind. She eventually made it out of the marketplace and into the significantly less-crowded residential district. People stared as she darted past, towards the small tenement that she and her parents called home.

She rocketed through the front door and to the end of the hall. Throwing open the door to her home, she stepped inside. In the center of the room, sat in her mother's wooden rocking chair, was a man in a black coat. He had long, pitch-black hair and wore a pair of darkened glasses.

"Ana. It is good to finally meet. Please, sit," he said, motioning to another chair across from him.

"Where are they?" she asked.

"Safe. Now, sit. We need to talk about your abilities."

Ana glared at him, trying to enter the familiar feeling of someone else's mind.

"Not worth trying," he said, motioning to his darkened eyeglasses, "You require eye contact to work your ability."

Ana continued her attempt for a moment, but eventually, convinced, sat down.

"This ability of yours," the man said, "is known as the Influence. It is an ancient ability that manifests itself very rarely."

"Well, how come I've never heard of it?" she asked.

"Like I said, it is very rare. For the past few hundred years, my organization has taken it upon themselves to locate everyone who obtains the ability. To put them under our wing, you see."

"You work for the King?" she asked.

The man laughed heartily. "No. In fact, your first assignment will be to-"

“Assignment?”

“Yes. You work for us now,” the man said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“And why would I do that?”

The man made a point of rocking back and forth in her mother’s chair. “You know why.”

Ana nodded, resigned. “What is it I you need me to do?”

He held up a hand. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. First, you need to know of your limitations.”

“My limitations?”

“Yes, this power is not infinite,” he said, “Each usage comes at a cost. It takes time off your life.”

Ana’s heart nearly stopped. “Time out of my life? How much?”

He shrugged. “Very little - only seconds - unless you encounter a particularly hard-headed foe. The more difficult it is to Influence someone, the more it takes off.”

Ana nodded slowly. “And how do you know so much about it?”

“My organization is knowledgeable. We have handled this ability for centuries.”

She scoffed. “‘Handled’? More like abused. You’ve kidnapped my parents and are about to force me to do your dirty work.”

He scoffed back. “Dirty work? You misunderstand, Miss Ana, this is not a simple matter of convincing some street tough or shop owner. You will be influencing the King.”

“What? How would I even get to him?”

“Easily, I’d imagine. He knows nothing of Influence - nobody does. My organization has made sure of that. Simply Influence any guards on the way to him, and then influence him.”

“Was the last King under Influence?” she asked.

“No. That’s why we need to do it now - the new King is young and weak. He should be easy.”

Ana leaned back in her chair and took a deep breath. “You are trusting me with a lot.”

“I trust that you care for your parents. And I don’t have much of a choice - it’s not like I can go with you.”

“Yes, you could.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head, “I prefer to stay in the shadows.”

“And let the poor girls whose parents have been taken hostage do the work for you?” she asked sweetly.

He smiled. “Yes. You take to this remarkably fast.”

Suddenly, she felt sick. Her parent’s lives were at stake, and she was still taking this lightly. Just like everything else.

“One more thing,” he said, producing a silver necklace from his pocket, “You will wear this at all times.”

“A necklace?” she asked.

“This will prevent you from Influencing when not instructed to. You might say that it turns your power against.”

She took it from him, but hesitated before putting it on. “While wearing this, I have to do whatever you say?”

“No, unfortunately,” he said, “All that it is programmed to do is prevent you from Influencing anybody except whom the wearer of *my* necklace instructs you to Influence.”

She noticed an almost identical silver necklace around his neck. Reluctantly, she put her own one around her neck. The cold metal against her skin sickened her to the core, but she had no choice.

“Now, for the details of the plan...”

She listened numbly as he laid out every detail of his plan, every target she was to Influence.

## *Decisions*

Daloe's horse was uncomfortable under Geradin. He wasn't used to riding, especially not an overactive warhorse like this one. He had to get used to it before they set out, however, so he was riding a circle around the encampment.

"What are we going to do, commander?" Bast asked.

Geradin sighed. "For the last time, man, I am not a commander!"

Bast smiled. "Maybe not, but you're leading us aren't you?"

"I don't know what we're going to do, Bast. We can't take back the Sunfort alone, and if we head south we lose our advantage. We have to find a way to contact the king."

"We should send scouts out. Maybe they'll find another company," Bast replied.

"Maybe. But we can't rely on it. We need a plan."

Bast fell silent for a moment. "Well we can't stay here. We should move towards the Sunfort and hope for the scouts to find someone."

"And if they don't? If we arrive at the Sunfort by ourselves?"

"Then we try to take it. There's no other option."

"I won't lead these men to their deaths!" Geradin said, "We could retreat. Head south, back towards the capital."

"We would lose our advantage. The Sunfort would never be taken."

Geradin shook his head. "Is it worth their lives? All of these soldiers?"

"I would do it," Bast said, "I would sacrifice my life for this cause. All of these men would. This isn't a band of newly-recruited welps, Geradin, we are trained soldiers dedicated to Greystone. Any of use would die for our country - for our commander."

Geradin looked out towards the camp. Every soldier worked at their duty in fervor. From field-repairing armor to preparing food, each soldier was single-minded in their occupation.

"Let's do it," he said.

o O o O o

Tobias ate his dinner quietly. Victoria sat across from him, eating perfectly normally. She looked up and smiled.

"What's wrong, dear?" she asked.

Tobias frowned. Since yesterday, Victoria had been acting strangely. He kept trying to remember what happened, but it was... blurry.

"A headache, nothing more," he replied.

She put her hand over his. "I wanted to suggest something to you," she said.

Tobias looked up from his food. "Yes?"

"My father was your Steward of Arms - your premiere military strategist,"

He gripped her hand tightly. "Your father may not be dead. It's too early to give up."

"Yes, of course, but what I'm trying to say is that I grew up with him. I like to think a bit of it rubbed off on me."

"And you have a suggestion?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, sitting up in her chair, "I've been thinking over the two options - the one's you've been considering for the past week? - and I think that you should go with Reanne and abandon the Sunfort. Put everything on the eastern front."

"Why?"

"It simply occurred to my that, very simply, you have more forts on the eastern front than the west. If you ensure the taking of the eastern front, you control more advantageous positions, and therefore a larger portion of Levee."

He considered it. It was similar to the reasoning that Reanne Lightstock had been using in the war-room meetings, although worded differently."

"I'll think on it, Victoria."

She frowned and pulled away from his hand. "That's what you've been doing for the past week, Tobias! You have to make a decision eventually, and this choice is *obviously* superior."

"I understand that your father may have rubbed off on you a little bit, Victoria, but you can't assume that your opinion means more than all of my advisors!"

She paused for a moment, frowning. Her frown disappearing in a flash, and she leaned over the table, laying her hand on his chest.

"I thought my opinion meant a lot to you?" she said, biting her lip.

Tobias pulled away. "It does, but not on *military strategy*. What is happening, Victoria? Why are you acting this way?"

She flinched. "I... I..." She collapsed on the table, knocking over their glasses of wine.

Tobias grabbed her. "Victoria? *Victoria?*" Her eyes were closed, but she still breathed. It was as if she were asleep.

"*Someone bring a doctor!*"

o O o O o

Daloe's horse still felt uncomfortable under Geradin. The horse, at least, seemed to be finally used to his presence. They trotted down the path next to Bast. The countryside

was in the bright green of spring, and flowers along the beaten dirt road bloomed in bright colors. As they approached the crest of the hill, a scout galloped over towards them.

“Commander!” he cried.

“I’m not your *voiding* commander,” Geradin said.

“There’s a town just over this hill,” the scout said.

Geradin glanced at Bast. Towns are usually good news in Levee, since the former country had such a good relationship with Greystone before it was annexed by Rambon.

“Let’s restock there before we move on,” he said. The scout nodded and rode back to rejoin the troops.

As they crested the hill, the town appeared before them. It wasn’t large, but it was certainly more than a village. Arranged in a northern-styled grid shape, the central buildings were much taller than the surrounding.

“This looks more like a fortress than a town,” Bast said.

Geradin nodded. The higher central buildings would be the perfect place for archers to perch in defense of the town.

“I wonder who designed it. And I wonder why he was so worried about defense,” Geradin said.

The company gradually moved down the hillside and towards the town. Ahead, he could see soldiers hurrying to stand guard along the outer wall. A portly man stumbled out of the gate and arranged himself as Geradin pushed his way to the front of the company and towards the town.

“Greetings, friend!” the portly man said with a too-wide smile.

Geradin nodded to him. “We’d like to use your town to restock our supplies.”

“Of course, of course! Come on in and restock to your heart’s content. Our humble town is supplied by nearby farms, so we always have food available.”

Geradin turned to face the company. “I need around fifteen soldiers. Bring sacks.”

The soldiers standing in the front scrambled to find the burlap sacks used to carry food. Eventually, they found them and joined Geradin at the gate.

The portly man, nodded to him, still smiling, and called for the gate to be opened. It creaked loudly as it did so, and the town beyond seemed somehow darker than the area outside. Geradin stepped through cautiously.

“So are the mayor, or what?” one of the soldiers asked the portly man.

“Yes, yes you could say that,” he said.

“Where are your food vendors?” Geradin asked.

“Right this way, sir.”

The mayor led them through the right-angled streets, past the staring citizens. They didn’t seem quite as strange as the mayor, although they certainly weren’t normal. Their clothing, specifically, used much brighter colors than you see in Greystone. *Must be a Levee cultural thing*, Geradin thought, *or perhaps a Ramblon one. They’ve certainly occupied this area for long enough.*

They reached the market, which was oddly calm compared to the rowdy markets in

Arthrian. Stall owners stood stock-still behind the wooden counters, gazing at the soldiers empty.

“What is going on here?” Geradin asked as the soldiers went to the counters and began buying an assortment of food.

“Whatever do you mean, good sir?” the mayor asked.

“These people, they’re... empty.”

“It’s the war, my good man,” he said, his eternal smile finally slipping away, “it has taken a lot out of these people. They almost have no hope left.”

The mayor stared for a moment, looking as empty as his citizens. He jerked up and re-plastered his smile.

“But that’s no reason to get down!” he said cheerily.

Geradin nodded. “Right.”

The soldier’s sacks seemed ready to burst open from the food piled within. As they walked away, back towards Geradin and the mayor, the stall owners behind them seemed slightly happier for the money they had received.

They strolled through the streets, back towards the gate. The mayor jumped, and reached into his pocket, pulling out a turquoise communicator gem. He stuffed it back into his pocket, and quickened his pace.

“Is something wrong, mayor?” Geradin asked.

“It’s just... oh why did this have to happen now?” the mayor said, nearly running now.

“What is it?”

“It’s...” the mayor said, turning to Geradin, “Ramblons. They come here occasionally to restock and carouse in our taverns. I didn’t think they’d return for at least a week.”

Geradin didn’t hesitate. “Men! To the gates, and RUN!”

The soldiers broke into a sprint - much faster than the mayor was managing, although he seemed to be exerting himself quite hard - and Geradin followed. As they got closer, they could hear the screaming and clashing of metal. The company had moved inside the gates, and was defending the town from the inside. They hadn’t managed to close the gates, however, so a hastily arranged shield-squad was standing in the opening, defending against the raging Ramblon forces. Archers stood on the rooftops of nearby buildings, raining arrows over the walls and shieldmen. The Ramblons fell, but kept coming in an endlessly replenishing avalanche.

The soldiers that had joined Geradin dropped their sacks of food and joined the fray. The mayor, panting, caught up and found his way next to Geradin.

“How big is their company?” Geradin asked.

“I... they... many...” he said between gasps of air.

Geradin stood and examined the battlefield. The Ramblons weren’t likely to pierce this defense, unless they had an unreasonable amount of troops for one company. There were other possible problems, however...

“Are there other entrances to the town, mayor?”

“Yes... opposite side of town...”



Geradin shouted to the mass of soldiers standing anxiously behind the shield-line. "You lot! With me!"

They turned and followed without question as Geradin sprinted down the central avenue. Through the now-emptied streets, they eventually passed the central square, and the opposite gate came into view. It was fortunately closed, but as they approached it became clear that it was under attack. Dust clouds blew from the gate as it rhythmically crashed.

Geradin looked back at the soldiers that had followed, around fifty. With all the archers on the other front, they would have to throw open the gate and ambush the invading party, hopefully catching them by surprise. Geradin communicated this plan to Bast, who had followed with the soldiers. Bast spread the plan through the party, and by the time they reached the gate, each soldier knew what to do.

Two men ran to each side of the iron-reinforced gate, and on Geradin's signal, pulled it open. The party ran through without warning, and the Ramblons on the other side froze in terror, completely exposed and obviously sore from their coordinated smashing of the gate. They dropped their makeshift battering ram, a chopped-down tree trunk, and picked up their weapons as the wave of Geradin's party swept over them.

Geradin ran forward, eager to join in the frenzy, but Bast pushed him back.

"The commander does not fight!" he shouted, before diving in himself.

As adamant as Geradin was about not being a commander, he knew that he shouldn't participate. He stepped back, and the soldiers who had pulled open the gate ran into the battle. His hands itched to participate, it felt *wrong* to stand back as his soldiers died, but he restrained himself.

The battle was quickly over. The Ramblon's main force was obviously centered on the front gate. When it became obvious that they had won, Geradin shouted to Bast and headed back to the main gate. *Running back and forth between front. Is this what command is all about?*

He reached to main gate to find the battle won there too. Not without casualties, but the town's strangely effective defenses kept the soldiers safe. The mayor was there, sat on a bench and having finally recovered his breath. He stood when he saw Geradin approaching.

"Your soldiers are well-trained, commander," he said.

"Thank you. Did these Ramblons have any other companies nearby? Ones that might blame you for what we did here?"

He shook his head. "Not as far as I know. We'll bury the bodies and try to forget this ever happened. Hopefully the Ramblons will too."

Geradin held out his hand, and the man grasped it in a firm handshake. "I hope our visit here doesn't cause you too much trouble, mayor."

"Of course not, commander," the mayor said, somewhat regaining his effervescent smile, "No trouble at all. Especially not for Greystone. We don't like to announce it, of course, but us Levens have always been firmly in favor of Greystone."

Geradin nodded and exchanged goodbyes with the man. As they parted, a soldier ran

out from the party currently looting Ramblon bodies.

“Sir, we found a communicator!”

Geradin looked at the gem in the man’s hand. It was scarlet - the color of a communicator linked directly to the King.

## *Communications*

Jon sat at his post in the Communications room. After spending so much time in here, he often forgot how magnificent it was. A room, lined wall to wall in sparkling Communication gems, each possessed by a military commander so that they can have direct contact to the king. His job was to sit and watch, waiting for one to glow a bright scarlet.

He nearly jumped out of his chair - one lit up right as he was thinking that. And it was #55. *What does that number remind me of?* he thought as he took the Communicator off the wall and activated it.

A disembodied voice crackled into existence, emanating from the gem.

*"Company, hello? This is Raven Company, hello?"*

"You are speaking to Arthrion," Jon replied.

*"Thank the sky, this is Geradin of Raven Company. We have an important report for the King."*

"State your report."

*"We have taken position north of the Sunfort. Our commanders are dead, and we haven't had access to a communicator until now. The Ramblons think us dead, and we need help attacking the Sunfort. We will be there in 5 days."*

Jon nodded before realizing that he couldn't see it. "Report recieved, soldier. It will be transferred to the King immediately."

*"Thank you. Remember, we need another force to attack the southern side of the Sunfort in five days."*

"Affirmative," Jon said. He closed the communication and replaced the gem on the wall.

#55.

Leaving through the door, the brightness of the hallway nearly blinded him. The communication room was kept dark, to keep any glowing gems visible. He nudged the sleeping guard, who jerked awake.

"What?" he asked, looking at Jon drowsily.

"I'm carrying a message to the King. I need you to be in there in case any other communications come through."

"I'm not trained to recieve communications, just give me the message like you're supposed to."

#55.

“It’s a long one. Plus, I need to take a walk. I’ve been cooped up in there all day.”

The guard shrugged and lumbered into the room, still groggy.

Jon started down the hall to the left. *That’s not the way to the king, that’s towards the front of the keep.*

His feet kept moving despite this thought, and he soon had left the keep entirely. He walked steadily towards the closest residential district. Soon, a small tenement came into view. It seemed to glow in the daylight, drawing him closer and closer.

#55.

He entered and walked down the hall, to the room at the very end of the hall. He knocked, and a woman’s voice answered.

“Hello?”

Jon’s mouth moved, and he said the only thing that he could remember at that point.

“#55.”

The door flew open.

o O o O o

Ana looked out at the man. She couldn’t even remember his name, but she knew why he was here. The man who had kidnapped her parents - she had taken to calling him Blackcoat - had instructed her to Influence every communications officer in the keep.

*There’s little chance that this will come of use, he had said, but just in case, tell them to inform me if there are communications from #55.*

Ana hadn’t told them to report to Blackcoat. She had told them to report to herself, in some sort of rebellion. The best rebellion she could offer, at least, while wearing that silver necklace.

“What did the communication say?” she asked.

The man repeated his message to her. The message from this man, Geradin. She wasn’t a strategist, but it seemed incredibly important. Fortunately, the necklace didn’t prevent her from going to the king in person.

“You are dismissed,” she told the man. He stood for a moment, eyes glazed, before leaving. It was best to keep him under Influence, in case another communication came in. *Not to mention the fact that I don’t know how to remove it,* she thought with a tinge of guilt. Not too much, though. As far as she could tell, those under Influence lived perfectly normal lives unless something happened to trigger it.

Ana gathered her shawl and started down the hallway. She would go to the keep and inform the king of Geradin’s plans. Leaving the building and entering the streets, she felt a familiar sense of nakedness. Her only weapon was her Influcing, and with this necklace on, she had no defense against any attackers like that mugger three weeks ago. If that happened again... well it wasn’t something she wanted to think about.

She was approaching the keep now, and realized that she had no way to get in. *Well, I*

*might as well check who is on guard, she thought, there's a small chance that it's the same duo I Influenced a couple days ago.*

Unfortunately, that didn't seem to be the case. The current guards were a couple of burly men, very different from the spindly twigs she had dealt with before. She approached them anyway. She may be devoid of Influence, but she liked to think that she was pretty good at convincing people without it.

"Hello, I am here to deliver a message," she said.

The guard on the left only stared at her suspiciously. Eventually the one on the right replied.

"To who?"

"To the Lady Victoria," she said, picking the first name that came to mind.

The guards shared a glance. "And what would your name be?"

"Ana."

"I knew it!" the left guard exclaimed, reaching out to grab her. She dodged out of the way and ran. *How could they know my name?* she thought as they pursed. She ducked into an alley, the guards growing further and further behind.

She lost them after a while. It wasn't difficult, that ridiculous looking plate armor they wore slowed them down considerably. Not designed for chasing small women through the busy streets of Arthrian. Sitting down on a stone bench, she began to think.

*It seems that someone has managed to fight the lingering Influence and recall my name. That means no getting into the palace.*

She could bribe a servant. *No, they will have spread my name to everyone. Except-*

Of course! One of the communications officers she had influenced. They would follow her commands. But if she couldn't get into the palace, how would she find them?

*I'll have to do some digging,* she thought.

o O o O o

Tobias stood outside Victoria's room with his face in his hands. She slept inside, like she had been for hours. The King's Physician said that she would sleep like that indefinitely, that there was no predicting when she would wake.

He tried to think about what happened, but everything from the past couple days was blurry. Trying to focus on it only made the experience less clear. Sinking down with his back against the wall, he tried anyway. He dug into the memory, dug into that day in the gardens...

*Yes? Who is this?*

*I am the Lady Ana. Tell me, my King, would you join me for dinner tonight?*

"My King?"

Tobias jumped to his feet. It was only a frightened servant.

"Go to the leader of the palace guard - Malf - and tell him to find a 'Lady Ana'"

Tobias told him.

The servant hesitated.

“Go, man!” Tobias cried.

The servant took off at a sprint.

## *Ambushes*

Ana skulked outside of the palace. It's wasn't a nice word, *skulked*, but it unfortunately fit. She wasn't sneaking by any means, that implies some kind of skill at being hidden. No, she skulked, wearing her shawl low and creeping along the servant's exit trying to stay unnoticed.

It was known as the servant's entrance, but since it's naming it had become more of a de-facto entrance for anyone not of nobility. She positioned herself in what she hoped was an inconspicuous position where she could watch the faces of all that left. The door flung open, and a stream of workers exited - she had gotten here just in time.

The workers chatted and laughed amongst themselves, ignoring her. She examined each face as it passed, looking for the one who had visited her yesterday. It would be easier if she had remembered any of the others, but her memory was unfortunately insufficient.

She jumped as she spotted him, pulling her out of her thoughts. He was chatting with another worker. As he approached, she called out to him.

"Hey!"

He looked towards her, curious. She pulled down her shawl, and his eyes glazed over as he recognized her. His buddy spotted her and laughed, nudging the man. He walked towards her.

"Yes," he said.

"Follow me."

He followed without any emotion. She led him into a nearby inn, where she had rented a room. She nodded to the innkeeper, who eyed her and the man following her disapprovingly.

Walking upstairs to the room, she fished her room key out of her pocket. The hall was empty, and she led the man to her room. To her surprise, however, the door was already ajar. She stepped in, expecting a maid, but was instead confronted by Blackcoat. He was lounging in a chair, playing with a small wooden puzzle that she had left on the table.

"Now, now," he said, "you weren't going to do this without involving me, were you?"

She was at a loss for words. The man from the palace stepped into place behind her.

"What exactly was your plan?" Blackcoat asked, "it's not like I gave you permission to Influence him."

"He's already Influenced" she found herself saying.

"Towards one task, certainly. But giving him new instruction will be pointless, unless

I instruct you to. He'll follow you around and stare at you a great deal, certainly, but new instruction will go in one ear and straight out the other."

Ana again had nothing to say.

"I think," Blackcoat said, standing up, "that there is a misunderstanding here. Close the door, and have a seat for Val's sake."

*Val?* she thought, *I've never heard of that god before.* She complied, closing the door behind the palaceman, and taking a seat on the bed.

"First things first," Blackcoat said, "I should give a proper introduction. I am Veril."

Ana nodded.

"My organization," he continued, "is not trying to *take down* the Greystones or anything as ridiculous as that. In fact, we are trying to win this war for them."

Ana stared at him.

"No verbal confirmation of your understanding? Nothing?" he asked.

"I'm listening," Ana said.

He nodded and continued. "We assassinated Antrell, true, but only because he proved impossible to Influence. We hoped that Tobias would be more... malleable, but as you know, that didn't turn out as hoped. The Lady Victoria was our last hope."

"Was?" she asked.

"Yes. It appears that she collapsed, and is now in some kind of indefinite sleep."

"Because of the Influence?"

"Yes," he replied, "I hadn't considered it, but it seems that Influence includes some kind of natural skill. Our assumption was an even skill level for all, but your Influence is much less effective than what we have become used to over the years."

This man had kidnapped her parents and forced her to attempt mind-control on the king, and yet somehow that comment still hurt.

"So what are we doing, then?" she asked.

"Oh!" Veril said, laughing, "Now it's *we*? Weren't you about to betray our cause to the king?"

She crossed her arms. "What does it matter? Are you going to punish me for it, or are we going to get to work?"

He nodded, still smiling. "I'm beginning to like you."

That just made her mood even worse. He motioned to the stock-still communications officer in the corner.

"What was his message?"

"Someone called Raven Company will be at the north of the Sunfort in 4 days, and they need troops to come from the south to assist."

"Interesting. Well, I see no reason to keep that from the King. Tell him to tell the King."

She did so, and the poor man left the room, his eyes still glazed in some permanent horror.

"Well, this means that we don't have to Influence the king after all!"

"We don't?" Ana asked, incredulous.



“Well, not for the moment,” he said with a mischevious smile.

o O o O o

Geradin laid in his pitch-black tent. The company was on a kerosene shortage, and that unfortunately meant that his insomnia could not be cured with novel-reading. He felt the book in his hands as he thought. It was terribly constructed, with the binding falling apart already. He had purchased it before leaving on the war. Since then, he had read it over twenty times. It wasn't a fantastic book, but it was better than lying awake. Before they ran out of kerosene, that is.

He heard shuffling outside. *Who is walking around at this hour?* With nothing better to do, he got out of bed and left the tent. The outdoors was only slightly lighter than the inside of the tent - still not enough to read by. Looking up and down the path, he didn't see whoever it was that had been walking by.

*That's strange*, he thought, gazing at the edge of the encampment, *I don't see any guards.*

He walked down the path a bit until he reached a crossroads marking the center of the camp. From here, he could see all four edges of the encampment, and yet no guards stood at any of them. Except for a light from the southern side. Multiple lights, actually.

The lights grew closer and it dawned on Geradin what was really happening.

*“Carn!”* he shouted, “Damn you! It's the Ramblons!”

Some nearby soldiers stirred from their tents, but Geradin was already sprinting towards the armory tent, shouting the whole way. When he got there, it was unguarded as well. He ducked inside, planning to quickly grab a sword and helm. It was empty, however. Every chest was opened and emptied.

*How?* he thought, leaving the tent as fast as he came in, *How could they have done this without waking anyone up?*

Everyone was shouting now. The torchlit Ramblons were at the entrance of the camp, hacking into everyone they found. It seems that some soldiers had slept with their weapons, and were trying to fight back. Without armor, however, they were easily cut down. Geradin only stood there, staring. He had no weapon. He had no strategy.

They were doomed.

The Ramblons swept into the camp like wildfire. Soon, the entire southern side had been swarmed, and the Greystones residing there killed.

Geradin came to his senses and ran among the remaining soldiers.

“Surrender!” he cried, “We must surrender! There is no chance of victory, they have taken our weapons!”

The soldiers he passed looked at him, but most charged into the fray anyway. *Damn them!* he thought, *They make me into some kind of commander, and now do this to me?*

He ran almost headfirst into Bast.

“Bast! What’s going on?” he asked, frantic.

“I don’t know,” he said slowly, “but I think we should surrender.”

Geradin nodded. The battle was slowly winding down around them. The remaining soldiers had congregated near Geradin, having seen enough sense to surrender. They waited there for what felt like an eternity as the screams of the dying became less frequent.

Eventually, a Ramblon soldier - the star painted on his helm designated at some Ramblon version of a commander - approached the group.

“Surrender?” he asked in a slurred Ramblon accent.

“Yes,” Geradin said, meeting the man’s eyes and trying to work up some semblance of confidence.

The commander regarded him with utter condescence, smirking at Geradin’s nightclothes. “From your posture, I assume that you are the leader of this... band”

He nodded, still firmly meeting the man’s eyes.

“Then you will come with me,” he said, motioning for him to follow. He did, walking as upright as possible.

“And kill the rest,” he said as he passed another Ramblon soldier.

“NO!” Geradin cried, spinning back towards his troops. The soldier that the commander had ordered grabbed him by the back of his arms. He motioned to another group of Ramblons that had positioned themselves near Geradin’s soldiers.

Geradin tried to pull free of the man’s grip, but there was no use. He grew limp as the Ramblons unsheathed their swords and began decapitating, one by one. Bast was one of the last, and he gave Geradin one last look before his death, a look of quiet reluctance.

o O o O o

Tobias stepped into the war-room. He didn’t find himself intimidated by the High Lords anymore - he had more important things to worry about. They turned as he entered, their chattering quieting.

“My King,” Petrus said softly as he passed.

He took his place at the head of the table. “I have recieved communication from Raven Company,” he said.

That threw them back into talking.

“Raven company! Why haven’t they contacted us earlier?”

“How do we even know that it’s them?”

“Who even is Raven Company? Why am I the only one who doesn’t know?”

Tobias raised his hand in an attempt to silence them, as he had seen his father do before. It didn’t work.

“SILENCE!” Tobias shouted. That shut them up.

“They are behind enemy lines and in position to attack the Sunfort. We have four

days to get troops to it's south."

The chattering started back up, quieter this time. One voice rang out above the others - Reanne Lightstock.

"If this is true," she said, "then we have no choice. We can argue about the details day and night, but the strategy has become obvious. All in favor?"

Tobias frowned. He was the one meant to ask that. All of the High Lord's hand shot up. A couple more reluctantly than others, but it was unanimous.

"Excellent," he said, already leaving the room.

"My king!" someone said from behind him, "We still have to decide on details - where will these troops come from? Who will lead them?"

Tobias didn't slow. "I'm sure you all can figure it out alone."

They sputtered behind him, but he took no notice. He walked briskly towards Victoria's room, bristling. He reached it and entered.

"My king," Aran said, sitting by her bed.

"Aran," Tobias replied, trying to compose himself, "how are you?"

"I am well, my king. It is you I am worried about."

"Me?"

"Yes. Please, sit." He motioned to another chair across from Victoria's bed. Tobias took it. *I will not get angry with Aran*, he decided. Aran had been his teacher of the sword from childhood.

"About Victoria..." he said cautiously.

"I love her," Tobias replied without thinking.

Aran only nodded. "I've realized that. But, my king, you cannot let your grief get ahold of you."

"It's not grief!" he bellowed, "She is not dead yet, Aran."

If Aran was disturbed by Tobias's anger, he didn't show it. "That's what I mean, my king. I know you very well, and I have never seen you like this before. The Tobias I know, he can lead this kingdom to victory."

"And as I am now?"

"If I may be blunt, your... emotional state will destroy this kingdom."

Tobias didn't answer, he only gazed at Victoria. He thought of their time spent together over the past weeks. He certainly hadn't expected to come to love her in such a short time. If what he felt was truly love, that is. *No*, he thought, *there is no doubting that now*.

He looked up as a hand rested on his shoulder. Aran had rounded the bed without him noticing.

"All I ask, my king, is that you try and set aside a part of yourself for the kingdom. A part that you can inhabit when needed."

Tobias nodded. "I'll try, Aran."

"Good. Now, if you'd like to accompany me to some much-needed sword practice?"

Tobias longed to stay at Victoria's side, but he needed to practice with the sword. The king was expected to be well-practiced in all aspects of the military. He sighed and

followed Aran out of the room.

## *Motivations*

Geradin felt a kick in his side. He groaned and reluctantly opened his eyes. Light streamed down through the rough tent hide. His insomnia had been cured, at least. The Ramblon kicked Geradin again, making him grunt. He got up slowly, glaring at the kicker.

The Ramblon looked back without emotion and shuffled Geradin out of the tent. His back was sore from sleeping on the hard ground, but he tried to stand up straight and project confidence anyway. The Ramblon camp around him was already being packed up, much more efficiently than any camp he had been in. They were impassionate, however. There was no joking or chatting between the soldiers, only blank-eyed dispassion.

He was led towards the front of the camp, where the commander, Azin, stood. He turned as Geradin approached.

“Geradin. I see that you’re still trying to retain some semblance of dignity.”

The man’s voice was like a droning horn, each word slurring into the next. Geradin got the general meaning of the sentence, however, and he didn’t respond.

The man looked at him impassively. “I’m giving you a chance to tell me in advance.”

“Tell you what?”

“The plans of your army.”

Geradin stifled a laugh. “The *whole* army?”

Azin’s level expression never changed. “Yes. Why not?”

“I don’t know the plans of my whole army. Void, I don’t know plans about *any* part of the army besides my own. And they’re all dead!”

Azin frowned. “You will be tortured.”

“Even if I knew anything, I wouldn’t tell you.”

Azin turned away from him. “You’ll see.”

The Ramblon guard dragged him away.

o O o O o

Ana cursed Veril under her breath. It seemed that she wasn’t as useless as he had insinuated, because he had sent her on another mission. This time to find and Influence

someone named... *Highbush? Cloudtree? I don't even remember.*

He had also asked her to limit her use of Influence as much as possible. With the Lady Victoria in her unknown condition, it was apparently wise to keep the effects of Influence from showing itself as much as possible. He was probably right, but Ana hated to admit. She hated everything about that man. And she hated that fact that she so relished these missions that he sent her on.

She approached the estate. *The Hightree estate! That's the name*, she thought. The entrance guards were chatting, and didn't notice her come up the side of the estate. It was nighttime, and her hope was that no servants would be using their back-exit at this hour. She skirted the wall, and the other side opened up into a lake. The entire estate was built on a small peninsula jutting into the Great Lake. It looked more like an ocean from here, though. Stonemount, the great mountain marking the center of Greystone, stood on the other side of the Great Lake, towering over it like the lip of a very large bowl.

The path between wall and cliff grew uncomfortable small as she approached where the servant's entrance was meant to be. Not enough to be dangerous, but enough to make her wary about where she stepped.

Sure enough, there was a small opening, just big enough for one man in the side of the wall. An door stood there, painted to look like the surrounding wall. Up close, however, it was obvious. She rummaged in her pockets for the key that Veril had given her. It was painted silver, and shaped almost like a spoon. She fitted it into the long, narrow hole in the doorway and twisted. It unlocked and swung open before her.

She stepped in, surprised by the darkness. *I suppose that the servants usually bring torches*, she thought. Moving through the dark hallway, using mostly touch to know where the walls were, she eventually found a small, lit room. A simple table stood here, piled with junk presumably meant to be dumped in the ocean outside. A quick search of the pile found her a rusted paring knife. She tucked it away, glad for the small protection it provided.

Cracking open the door, she peeked into the well-lit hallway. It was hard to see with such a contrast between light intensities, but there was obviously nobody in the hallway. She motioned to grab her shawl tighter, but her hands found nothing.

*Of course*, she thought, *These ridiculous servant clothes.*

Still, they would help keep her hidden at least. She made her way down the hall, trying to walk confidently yet humbly as a servant did. The hallways were mostly empty, however, with everyone having gone to bed for the night. Everyone except Lord Hightree, however. According to Veril, he was a night-owl who did most of his work during the night while everyone slept. An important weakness that she could exploit.

She navigated through the halls to a stairway leading to the second floor. Her quick memorization of the route hadn't failed her so far. As she reached the top of the stairs, however, she heard a voice.

"Girl! You know that Lord Hightree doesn't like having servants out at night."

Ana turned to see a stout, pudgy woman coming up the stairs behind her. She wore the same white servant's clothing, but it seemed like it must have been made from a

tablecloth for it to fit her.

"I am on call for the Lord Hightree," she said, repeating the words that Veril had told her. He'd prepared her quite heavily for this mission, probably as a response to the relative failure of her last one. It made it easier, certainly, but it also felt a little patronizing.

"On call, eh? And what happened to Shiaine?"

"I- she fell sick."

The woman looked at her suspiciously. "I see. And who assigned you as a replacement?"

Ana groaned. She didn't want it to come to this, but it seemed she had no choice. Focusing on the woman's gaze, she responded.

"I am on call for the Lord Hightree, there is no question."

Her eyes glazed. "Of course."

"How did you do that?" a voice said from behind Ana.

She spun, hand going to the knife in her pocket. It was a small girl, no more than ten years old. She relaxed, pulling her hand from the pocket.

"I'm good at convincing people," Ana said.

"You could have just told her who assigned you."

"That would just lead to more question. The quickest way is to assert yourself, and then they will usually listen."

The girl smiled. "Really? Because she always makes me do mean things."

Ana hesitated. She didn't want to get the little girl into trouble. "You may not want to try it until you're older. It doesn't work very well for children."

Her face fell. "Oh well. What's your name?"

"I am... Hanna. But I really am on call for the Lord Hightree, so I will have to go now."

"Okay," the girl said, stepping aside. Ana walked past, giving her a smile. *Poor girl, she thought, she'll probably work as a servant here for her whole life. At least she's fed.*

Soon she found herself outside the Lord Hightree's office. She took a deep breath, and knocked.

A female voice answered. "Who is knocking at this hour?"

Ana panicked. He was meant to be alone. The door opened, revealing a slender woman, much taller than Ana. Probably of Szaran descent. When the woman saw her, she looked back into the office.

"Did you order a servant here, Samuil?"

"No," a gruff voice answered from inside.

The woman turned back. "Why are you here?"

Ana took a deep breath and met the woman's eyes. "I have a private message for the Lord Hightree. It would be best if you left."

The woman struggled, more than most. Ana cursed her - that would probably take a few days from her. Eventually, her eyes glazed and she pushed past Ana, stepping into the hallway. As she walked, Ana noticed for the first time that she wore little more than

her shift. She repressed a blush, and stepped into the room. *I should have known that this Lord Hightree wasn't a night owl because of work.*

Lord Hightree - Samuil, the woman had called her - sat on a soft bench. Still repressing that blush, Ana ignored the voices in her head and met his eyes, peering into his mind.

"Who are you? Why did Sara leave?"

She focused on him in that familiar way. "Lord Samuil Hightree, you will report to The Broom's Handle tavern every three days beginning tomorrow night. You will be disguised, and you will tell nobody where you are going. You will stay there and receive orders from me, which you will follow without exception."

His eyes had dulled halfway through, without any real fight. As she finished the instructions and unfocused, she shivered. That was the most complicated Influence she had ever woven, and she could feel the toll it had taken on her. Not only was she suddenly exhausted, but she felt somehow older. A complicated order like this must have taken a lot of time away from her.

Samuil wasn't faring much better though. In fact, he looked quite sickly. Ana wondered, not for the first time, to what extent Influence had on somebody's consciousness.

"Hanna?" a voice said from behind.

Ana spun and saw the little girl from before standing in the doorway.

"Is he okay? Why did you ask him to do those things?"

"Why did you follow me?" Ana asked, louder than she intended.

"I wanted to see where you were going."

Ana ran her hands through her hair. She couldn't allow the child to repeat what she had heard to others. It was too big a risk. Eventually she put her hands down. There was no choice.

"Hanna?" the child asked, looking up at her.

Ana knelt down in front of the child and looked into her eyes. "Tell nobody what you saw today."

The girl, already trusting of Ana, put up no fight. Her eyes muted in color, lacking the bright shine they had possessed before.

"Of course," she said in monotone.

Ana felt a hot ball of guilt in her stomach. *There's no reason to think that this effects anything. All it will do is keep her from spilling this secret,* she thought. The ball didn't go away. She sighed and stood. After a last look at the girl, she left the room and began her exit to the keep. So much for keeping Influence to a minimum.



## *Silences*

Geradin laid still on his mat, trying not to move. His body was purple and welted from the beatings, and any movement only exacerbated the pain. His insomnia, unsurprisingly, had returned, and he was not looking forward to the long walk the next day.

The Ramblons refused to believe that Geradin wasn't in on everything the Greystone military had planned. It was incredible that the Ramblon army was so effective, considering that they apparently share all of their plans with everybody.

Through the side of his tent, he heard soft voices.

"I heard the commander say that we are moving towards the Sunfort," one voice said.

"What? I thought we were meant to be moving east to help with that front?" said another.

"Apparently that prisoner we picked up is too valuable."

The voices faded as they moved away from his tent. Geradin thought on what they had said. If they were going to the Sunfort, that wouldn't bode well for the Greystone forces that were meant to arrive there in a few days. It would make sieging the fort even less likely to succeed than before.

*But wait, he thought, now they have a man on the inside. All he had to do was somehow build trust with the commander - enough trust to allow him to wander about the Sunfort without a guard. Then he could try to sabotage defenses and help the army take it.*

*It's a ridiculous plan, he thought, but it's my only choice.*

o O o O o

Tobias entered the war-room and all went silent. The effect his change in personality had had on the High Lords was astonishing. It almost made him smile in spite of the situation.

"I was requested?" he asked.

"Yes," Varian said, "We have news about the battlefield."

Tobias nodded, moving up to his place at the forefront of the central table. Each High Lord had a spot somewhere around it, the more important ones closer to him. There was

no official ranking, of course, but there was a general unspoken consensus about which High Lords had a bigger impact. The table itself had a large map of the continent in the center, with colored tiles marking important locations and companies of soldiers.

“On the eastern front,” Varian said, motioning to the larger mass of forces taking up the east side of Levee, “we are at a stalemate. The Eastfort is held by them, and the Redfort is held by us. As you know, it’s been like this for years. However, while before there has always been some kind of back-and-forth in regards to smaller territories, for the past few weeks it’s been completely stagnant. Any attempts to capture towns held by them has failed, and any attempts by them to capture something of ours has failed. We need some kind of edge to push this front into our favor.”

“Any ideas?” Tobias asked.

Varian shook his head, and the other high lords made similar gestures of negativity.

“And on the western front,” Varian said, “we still have not determined the absolute validity of the message from Raven Company. However, it has been confirmed that there was a captain in the company called Geradin. Moreover, Commander Daloe's quarters were searched on military warrant, and we found evidence that he was working with the Ramblons.”

Tobias nodded. “Good.”

When Varian didn't continue, Tobias looked at him. “Is that all? I'm sure you didn't request me just for a report.”

“We have a proposal for you,” he said cautiously.

“And what is it?” Tobias asked pointedly.

“We’d like you to accompany the army,” Varian said. The other High Lords were looking to him, obviously having decided that he would be the one to speak their consensus.

“The one going to siege the Sunfort?” Tobias asked.

“Yes,” he replied, “in such an important battle as this, any advantage we can get is worth the trouble. Not only will your presence invigorate the troops, but it will hopefully make the Ramblons more aggressive, weakening their defense of the fort.”

Tobias nodded. “Yes, that makes sense. I accept.”

Varian looked stunned for a moment before composing himself. It seems that Tobias had acquired a reputation for being unreasonable. He would have to work on that.

“Good job, men. I trust that this is all you needed of me?”

They vocalized their agreement.

“Alright then. I have to go deal with the First Clerk now,” he said, rolling his eyes. The High Lords laughed - dealing with clerks was a common hassle for Lords. Tobias left the room, feeling strangely confident. It would be good for him to leave. He would have to bring Victoria, of course, but these palace walls were starting to dig into his mind. *Fresh air will do good for me.*

o O o O o

Ana sat next to Veril in the Broom's Handle Tavern. She felt distinctly uncomfortable next to the man, though he had made himself look a bit more normal for his foray into public view. He had insisted on coming himself, presumably so that Ana wouldn't be privy to the orders he gave Samuil. Now only to wait for him to arrive.

Not for the first time, she found herself wishing that she had given Samuil a more specific time to meet. Although, she supposed, that would probably make his leaving more specific. This gave him more wiggle room. It was still awful having to share a table with Veril though.

The tavern door opened, and Samuil entered. He wore a large hat and a dusty coat, although his fancy dyed clothing was still quite visible underneath. The patrons were too drunk and sociable to notice the strange-looking man, however. Upon seeing her, Samuil immediately moved to their table and sat down. He stared at her expectantly, and Veril nudged her. She pulled away, but did what she was supposed to.

"Samuil, your first instruction is to do everything that this man tells you to," she said, motioning to Veril.

"Of course," Samuil said.

Veril waved her away, and she left the table reluctantly, heading for the bar. Behind her, Veril whispered lengthy instruction, leaning towards the impassive Samuil who sat straight up, looking ahead.

"What'll you have?" the lady barkeep asked.

"Ale," Ana replied.

"Ale? That's not a very ladylike drink," someone said from beside her.

She turned to see a blonde, lanky man leaning on the bar next to her.

"It's cheap and it gets you drunk," she said. The barkeep snorted, but the lanky man just looked at her curiously.

He stuck out a hand. "I'm Tom."

She hesitated. Would he know her name? *No*, she decided, *I haven't heard any rumors about my name. The King probably only spread it among the guards. Besides, it's a common name.*

Taking his hand, she replied, "Ana."

"You're a very curious woman, Ana," he said.

"Why, because I drink ale?" she said, taking a swig.

"Partially. There's also the fact that you wear your hood up while inside."

Her cheeks went flush, and she pulled it down, embarrassed. "I just find it comfortable."

He nodded, as if that were the most reasonable thing in the world. He turned to his ale, apparently lost in thought, though he glanced back at her every once in a while. After she finished hers, she turned back to Veril to see Samuil gone. She approached him.

"How long have you been finished?" she asked.

He shrugged. "A while. I didn't want to interrupt the silence you were so skillfully

imposing on that young man.”

She flushed and stalked away towards the exit of the bar. She was intercepted by Tom.

“So,” he said, “are you and him...”

“No!” she said forcefully.

“Sorry!” he said, eyes widening, “I just wanted to let you know that I come to this place pretty often, so...”

What a strange thing to say. “Maybe I’ll see you again,” she said.

Leaving through the door, she stepped onto the street and started the walk back home.

**END OF PART ONE**

## **Part Two**

## *Meetings*

Geradin hunched over, trying to keep inconspicuous as he roamed through the halls of the Sunfort. If a Ramblon recognized him, they would often try and use him as an errand boy. The Ramblon had a strange way with prisoners - rather than locking him up, they seemed to trust him to wander around as long as he did whatever he was told. The beating continued, of course, and there were chores he was expected to attend to every day, but even then he was allotted free time to roam about.

Unfortunately, any time that he tried to access an area related to military fortifications, he was denied. That was to be expected, but now he needed a plan. The soldiers promised by the King should attack in two days, and he needed to find some way to make them win. Otherwise, the war was lost.

The halls were empty, and Geradin relaxed his posture a bit. He moved quickly, trying to keep his bare feet from staying in one place too long on the freezing stone floor. They had already grown numb from the cold, but he didn't want to risk a serious injury to his feet, not at such an important time. Crimson stone walls flew past, and he rounded a corner, smashing into someone.

*Shit*, he thought, *I'll be doing chores all day now.*

But the man he had run into was also barefoot. Well, nearly. He had found rags to wrap around them. Recovering himself, he looked up at the man's face. It was Davian Brightfeather.

"Lord Davian?" he said, "I thought you were dead!"

Davian blinked and gazed at Geradin. "Who are you?"

Geradin kneeled. "Geradin Robett, my lord. A captain of Raven Company."

Davian nodded. "Raven Company. I see they got to you."

"Eventually they did, my lord," Geradin looked up and down the hall, "but we set up a plan with the king. He'll-"

"No!" Davian exclaimed, holding out his hands, "I don't want to know."

Geradin cocked his head. Why would he-

"I don't believe it, sir," Geradin said, backing away, "not you."

Davian grimaced. "They took my wife"

"But-"

"They took my wife, soldier. If you ever marry, you will understand. I would lose this entire war for Greystone if it meant that my wife would live."

Geradin didn't respond. The Steward of Arms, High Lord of War, Davian

Brightfeather was a traitor. He *knew* that the Sunfort would be ambushed when he sent them away. The deaths of Raven Company was his fault. Bast, Mus, Kierny. They all rested on him. But what could he have done? Let his wife die?

If Davian was unnerved by Geradin's stare, he didn't show it. Geradin turned to leave.

"Wait," Davian said. Geradin turned to see him digging around in his shirt. He produced two rags.

"Wrap them around your feet. They don't want you wearing shoes, but they don't seem to care about rags."

Geradin took the rags silently and put them on. Then, without a glance back, he walked away, down the hall he came from. He tried to ignore the thoughts raging through his head. The Great General, Davian Brightfeather was a traitor? Not by choice, but did that make it okay? What would he have done in that situation.

He was so wrapped up in these thoughts that he barely noticed when a Ramblon soldier walked next to him in the hall.

"Servant!" the soldier said.

Geradin turned reluctantly. He should have noticed and kept his head low. They seemed to be less demanding when you showed deference.

"Bring this to the Guard's quarters," the man said, handing him a heavy sack.

"I'm not allowed there," Geradin said. The man had obviously mistaken him for a common servant.

The soldier squinted. "Ah, you're that prisoner then? Void, this means I have to take it myself." He roughly took the sack out of Geradin's hands, and went trotting down the hall. Geradin resumed his walk to no place in particular.

The incident had him thinking, though. Ramblons may have accents, but they didn't look very different. If Geradin could get his hands on a real servant's uniform, and a pair of shoes, he could infiltrate defenses around the fort.

Perking up, he quickened his pace. Perhaps this plan wasn't so crazy.

o O o O o

Ana's knees were raw. She had been assigned to scrubbing out the portable ovens that the army carried, and it was hard work. When Veril had made her sign up as a cook to travel with the army towards the Sunfort, she hadn't expected this to be her job.

"Girl," someone said from behind her. Ana sighed and squeezed her upper body out of the oven. Her skin was hit with the sudden blast of cool air. She stood up to face Cook Pegg, the rotund head cook of the kitchens Ana worked in.

"Yes, Cook Pegg?" she asked, trying to not let her exasperation show.

"How long have you been cleaning that oven?"

Ana shrugged. "An hour or so."

“It shouldn’t take you that long. Work faster.”

Ana nodded and turned to get back to her cleaning.

“I didn’t dismiss you,” Pegg said, tapping her foot impatiently.

Ana really tried to remain calm. She turned back to face Pegg.

“Go deliver a message to Captain Bag. Tell him that we need more damned workers if he wants his damned food to be cooked tonight. Then come back here and finish cleaning these damned ovens.”

Ana set her soot-scraper down on top of the oven and left. Her skin and clothing was completely black with soot, and people stared as she left the kitchen area. It was almost night now, the camp having been set up only a little more than an hour ago. In Ana’s opinion, it would make more sense to have less cooks and to march for longer, but the new Steward of Arms didn’t seem to think so.

They had marched all day, but the soldiers didn’t show it. They were still setting up tents for the night, somehow working efficiently and chatting at the same time. Ana had heard that Ramblons were more stoic, that they worked always in complete silence. It sounded like hell. This camp was sociable and nice. People stared at her soot-covered clothing, but they were nice about it. Nothing like the indifference of the city. Perhaps this is the comraderie of battle she had heard so much about.

She was approaching the small clearing that captains usually hung around. There were far more than she expected, probably because half the City Watch had been taken on this mission. Eyes passing over the crowd of captains, they eventually rested on a familiar face. Not Captain Bag, but a lanky blonde man that she remembered from somewhere.

He looked up at her. “Ana?” It was Tom. He got up and approached her. “What are you doing here?”

She had to think fast. Somehow he didn’t know her name even though he worked for the City Watch.

“My name’s not Ana. It’s Sara,” she said.

He frowned. “You gave me a fake name.”

“It was more habit than anything,” she said, shrugging.

He frowned deeper. “You’re in the habit of giving fake names.”

She tried to remain as nonchalant as possible. “I’m a cautious person.”

His frown lessened, but he was obviously still curious. “Why are you here... Sara? I didn’t think I would see you again after I got called out for this mission.”

“I signed on as a cook. Thought I would get out of the city for once.”

“I see. Well, for what it’s worth, I’m glad you’re here. It’s nice to have a friendly face.”

“We’ve only met once before,” she said, smiling in spite of herself.

“I suppose we have.”

She looked around behind him. “Do you know where Captain Bag is?”

He shook his head. “No, afraid not. I haven’t seen him today.”

She turned away to look elsewhere. He jogged up next to her.



“Don’t you have captainly duties to attend to?” she asked.

“Nope,” he said, looking amused, “I won’t really be doing much until we go to battle.”

Ana fell silent. She had never seen battle before, and she didn’t intend to start. Hopefully the cooks would be kept far, far away.

“What is your message for him?” Tom asked.

“I’m to tell him that he needs to send more damned workers if he expects any damned food tonight,” she responded.

“Damn,” he said.

She glanced at him for a moment, shaking her head. He only smiled slyly before going back to their search for Bag. Eventually they found him chatting with a soldier. She delivered the message - without the swearing - and turned to head back to the kitchens.

“Where are you going now?” Tom asked.

“You’re very nosy, you know,” she said. He didn’t respond. “I have to get back to work for Pegg.”

“Well,” he said, “when you’re done with working, you should come visit me at the Captian’s clearing.”

She considered it. *I suppose he’s good enough company.*

“Sure.”

He nodded and said goodbye, splitting off from her. She continued her walk back towards Pegg and the ovens.

o O o O o

Tom lounged in his chair. The other Captains talked amongst themselves as they ate, and he found it best it was best to sit with them and blend in. Ana hadn’t arrived yet. It’s possible that she wouldn’t at all. What a strange woman.

*I don’t like her.*

Tom sighed inwardly. Would it ever shut up? *It doesn’t matter if we like her or not, as long as she leads us to Veril.*

*I don’t like him either. Can we kill him?*

The voice didn’t seem to like anyone. It loved killing, though.

*Maybe after we’re done with him,* Tom thought.

It fell silent, seemingly satisfied.

## *Requests*

Geradin searched the halls of the Sunfort for Davian. His footrags were tied tight, and they offered meager protection against the freezing cold of the stone floors.

He made sure to stay hunched in a non-imposing posture to avoid being sent away by one of the soldiers.

*Where is the traitor?* he thought. Geradin had no desire to interact with the man, even if he understood his reasoning. Davian was necessary to the plan, however. He had been a prisoner here for much longer, and would hopefully know where Geradin could acquire a servant's uniform.

Rounding the corner ahead, he caught sight of Davian, his head bowed as a soldier gave him orders. Geradin ducked back around, trying to stay out of the soldier's sight. Eventually, Davian turned and walked towards where Geradin hid.

"Hey!" Geradin said when Davian passed by.

Davian jumped and spun towards him. A look of recognition passed over his eyes and he stepped around into Geradin's hallway, looking disgruntled.

"I need your help," Geradin said.

"No. I will not be part of a plan with the potential to hurt my wife."

"You won't be involved. All I need is knowledge."

Davian looked at him for a moment. "What knowledge?"

"Where can I find a servant's uniform."

Davian shook his head. "They won't fall for it."

"I thought you weren't part of the plan? Just tell me where I can find one."

"What's the king's plan?"

"Excuse me?"

Davian stepped closer. "I've changed my mind. I want to know what the king's plan is."

"They're attacking in two days from the south."

He watched expectantly, waiting for more details. When he got none, he threw his arms in the air. "Is that it? That's the whole plan."

"We were to attack from the north," Geradin replied, "but we were captured. Now I need to sabotage defenses so that the attack doesn't fail."

Davian began pacing. "It's a decent plan. If it works, I'll need to get Asa out of here."

"Who?"

"My wife," Davian said. He continued pacing for a moment, before turning back to

Geradin. "I'll get you a uniform. It will be under your bunk tomorrow morning. Don't fail."

Geradin nodded and left him to his pacing.

o O o O o

Ana was on her knees, with her torso fully inside another oven. Pegg still refused to give her any job other than this one. She had acquired coughing fits, too, from all the ash she was forced to breath in. *This can't be good for my health*, she thought.

Her fingers were red, worn raw from the uncomfortably ridged handle of her soot-scraper. As she made a big lunge, beginning the process of ash-scraping from the next big metal bar, she nicked her finger on a ridge.

Blood dripped on metal as she quickly yanked herself out. Her head slammed into the top, and everything went blurry. She felt a hand on the back of her shirt, pulling her out of the oven.

"The only worker I know who can knock herself out cleaning a damn oven," she heard as her vision cleared. She was laying on her back, on the grassy floor of the makeshift kitchen. Pegg stood over her in all her lumpy glory, like a big sack of potatoes consuming the majority of her vision.

She sat up, only to feel a whack on the back of her head. Pegg held the offender, a large wooden spoon.

"Damn lurker," Pegg said, "I should just throw you out of the damn encampment."

Ana felt her face grow hot. If Pegg had assigned her a real duty instead of this disgusting oven business, this never would have happened.

*Do not Influence unless it is necessary*, Veril said in her head, *only in self-defense*.

Loophole or not, Ana felt no reason not to try.

"Pegg," she said, looking up into Pegg's strange, beady eyes, "I will not be on oven duty anymore. You will assign me to the cushiest job you have. And you will act respectfully to me."

She half-expected it to not work, but Pegg's eyes easily glazed over, and she muttered the customary "Of Course."

"That's some trick," she heard from behind. She spun to see Tom, who looked uncomfortable without a wall to lean on.

"How do you do it?" he asked, looking strangely calm as if he hadn't just witnessed mind-control.

Ana stared at him, lost for words.

"I've heard tale of an ability like that," he said, "But I always dismissed them as myths."

He looked at Ana, amused. "Relax, Sara, I won't spill your secret. I just find it very interesting, is all."

o O o O o

The scratchy white servan't uniform rubbed against Geradin's skin. He tried to stay unassuming on his trip towards the armory. The plan was to pour kerosene from the lamps around the armory, then light it and run. Davian said that he would keep the guards away. How he would do that *and* keep his wife safe, Geradin had no idea.

The halls seemed to grow darker as he approached the central area of the fort. Torches made orange arches along the wall, far enough apart to leave the hallway dim. He carried a kerosene lamp. Servants were technically not supposed to carry them, but Geradin had found that the rules were lax on the matter.

The door to the armory came into view, it's reinforced wooden doors standing sturdily to his left. There was a single guard outside the door. He was leaning against the wall with his eyes shut, and his helmet was lying on the floor beside him.

The guard's eyes opened when Geradin approached.

"Eh?" he grunted.

Geradin prepared the most convincing accent he could manage. "I'm to retrieve something from the armory"

The guard squinted and laid a hand on his sword hilt. He leaned towards Geradin suspiciously. "I don't think you're supposed to be in here."

Geradin took a breath and swung his fist around in a left hook, knocking the Ramblon to the floor. He crouched and placed his hand on the man's mouth. There was no need, however. The guard had been knocked out cold

Opening the armory door, he dragged the body in as quietly as possible, but cursed himself halfway through. *I can't leave him in here to die!* He left the body where it was, halfway through the door, and trudged into the room with his lamp open. The interior was torchlight, and the red walls were lined with shining weaponry. A mixture of strange, wavy Ramblon swords and Greystone spears made for an odd collection.

The room was not big enough to store weaponry for the whole company, meaning that they almost certainly have a secondary armory somewhere.

*It'll have to do*, Geradin thought. He blew out the lamp and began dumping the reserve kerosene around the room. As he was about halfway complete, he heard voices from the adjacent hallway. Cursing, he stumbled over to the guard's body and dragged it inside, closing the door.

They entered the hallway, voices growing louder. *Void*, Geradin thought, *the helmet!*

As they grew closer to the room, Geradin recognized a female voice with them. She was subdued every time she tried to speak.

"She's a feisty one, eh?" one of the guards said.

"Highborn, she is," another said in a foreign accent, neither Greystone nor Ramblon. *Possibly from the northern territories?* Geradin found himself thinking, despite the

situation.

“The armory?” asked the first guard.

“Yeah,” the foreign one said, “What better place?”

The door was thrown open, and the two guards stepped in, each holding one arm of the woman. Geradin and the body were crouched in the corner, and as they entered he jumped up to tackle the closest guard.

Geradin put all of his weight onto the man’s head, and they crashed into the floor, knocking him out cold. The second, foreign guard didn’t hesitate and grabbed Geradin by the scruff of his neck, throwing him backwards into the hallway. Geradin ducked under a swing from the man’s sword and charged forward, sweeping his feet out from below and knocking him to the floor. The sword clattered to the ground.

The guard tried to grab his sword, but Geradin kicked it away and picked up the helmet. He lifted it over his head and smashed it into the guard’s head. He stopped struggling, going limp on the ground.