

Building Toward a Dream, Part 1

My dearest Klytessa—

Will you open this letter? Will you read it? Or will you toss it into the fire? As you watch the paper curl and flicker into flame, will you feel regret? Or satisfaction? Will you tell Lara about it?

I am responsible for the lives of ten thousand people. We are on the precipice of the greatest achievement our kingdom has known... and these are the questions that plague me.

I tell myself we are brokering this peace for the future of Iretis. It is for our men and women, and their children, and their children's children. It brings us out of the shadow of Meletis, accomplishing a peace they never achieved. These things are all true.

But they are not the whole truth.

The formal signing with the leonin is in a fortnight. Udaen is with their tribal councils even now, making the last arrangements. You would marvel at Udaen's spark and energy. Two months ago he was near death, an old and sick man breathing his last. His recovery was a direct answer to my prayers. We have both long relied on his sage counsel, and the prospect of forging this peace without him was impossible. In his recovery from sickness he gained a vitality that is astonishing. I have put that vitality to good use, making him my main factor in the dealings with the various tribes.

Peace, Klytessa. Peace in our lifetimes. I remember that day you first arrived from Meletis. The sun glinting in your hair, and I didn't know which was brighter. Your smile outshining them both as you beheld what must have seemed the humble charms of my kingdom, compared to the wonders of Meletis you had known. With your smile I knew that you were the right choice for me, for our people. That night, your first night, *our* first night, as the survivors, bloody and scarred, came in with their report of yet another border skirmish between the leonin (how tempting it is to still refer to them as cats, or worse... the old prejudices die hard) and our people, when you saw the bloody toll that comes from living in Iretis, the first time I saw your smile dim. Sometimes I wonder if your smile ever truly came back, the way it was in the sun with the gentle wind heralding your arrival. The peace is coming, Klytessa.



It comes with a cost. The outer settlements report atrocities committed by impossible monsters, more ferocious than any leonin, and difficult to kill. Nonsense, Udaen says, and I agree. The expansionists always want more land, and they see this potential peace as a direct blow to their dreams of expansion. I ask them for bodies of these creatures as proof, and they claim the bodies disappear into dust. Instead, they present me the bodies of their own, and indeed they are mangled with a ferocity and violence rarely seen. I don't wish to believe our people could do this to themselves in order to sabotage the peace, but I agree with Udaen's caution.

Men will do terrible things in pursuit of their dreams.

I remember a night, soon after Lara was born. We had spent the day with our baby, putting the cares of our kingdom aside, just for a day. *One day for our baby*, you had said, and I agreed. Surely she deserved that much. The day she was born, I felt like I had known her my entire life, that there had never been a part of my life that did not have her in it. It was the first time I had ever resented being king, having to sacrifice so much for people who were not you and Lara. So I gave you and her the day, and gave it gladly. We spent the day at the lake, splashing and walking and talking, and I think for a while you even forgot the guards. It was a wonderful day. And after we returned to the palace that wonderful day became a wonderful night. As you lay sleeping, the moonlight on your shoulders, my hand on your back feeling your breath slowly enter and leave your perfect body, I knew I wanted this moment to last forever. If I could capture that moment, the moonlight framing our intertwined bodies, and have it never change, I would. The moment was perfect, and change could only make it worse.

I think about that night often.

I choose to hope, Klytessa. I choose to believe the leonin will keep their word and sign this peace treaty with us two weeks from now. I choose to believe that the expansionists will come to understand the benefits of peace, of stability, and stop their attempts at sabotage. I choose to believe that you did open this letter, that you opened it and are reading it right now. I choose to believe that

there is a path forward for us. A path that has you here at my side in Iretis, where you belong. Where I need you.

I love you. There will be peace. You are beautiful. I miss our daughter. I could not come up with the right combination of words to stop you from leaving. I hope I can find the right combination of words to make you return.

Kedarick

Klytessa—

A difficult and dark day. I have known Thoros Clawkiller for over thirty years. We grew up together, trained together, fought together. He has saved my life against the cats many times. He was my friend. I killed him today. With my sword I parted his head from his body, neatly cleaving his neck. It was a clean cut, and quick.

You used to ask me how I could go into battle seemingly so unafraid. I would have had a different answer many years ago, but now my answer is this—a battle kills you quickly, but life kills you slowly. Every day, another part of you dies.

I long for the simplicity of battle.

The day started off well enough. Thoros had sent word he was coming to offer his support for the upcoming peace treaty. It was a major victory, to have such a prominent expansionist come around to the side of peace. I greeted him in the throne room and there we embraced and smiled. Thoros had brought a small group of his men, and although they were armored and armed, I expected nothing else from the warriors of the outer settlements. Not all journeys to the heart of Iretis are free from violence. The rest of the palace staff was busy with the preparations for the signing a week from now, but Udaen himself was on hand to welcome such an important guest, one who might bring the entirety of the expansionists to our side. As I made to go to the banquet hall for the welcoming lunch, Thoros held up a hand. We stopped, and Thoros put his hand into a satchel and pulled out a head. It was that of a young man, although I did not recognize him. The neck had been ripped savagely from the body; there was no sign of a clean or straight cut. The guards drew their swords but Thoros and his men made no attempt to draw theirs.

“My nephew,” Thoros said. “Killed by the cats, last night.”



I asked him if he had proof.

“Once, my word would have been proof.” I could not deny his truth, but we weren’t warriors fighting cats anymore. I was the king, trying to forge a peace, and I needed proof.

“I saw it with my own eyes. It was the largest cat I ever saw, seven or eight feet tall. Built like a bear. It had four arms, two heads, and teeth and claws as long as daggers. A cat out of our nightmares. It just appeared in the middle of the scout camp. It ripped Teralos’s head off of his body. We lost ten others trying to bring it down.” I’m capturing his exact words because I find them so hard to believe. Four arms? Two heads? Did he think me a fool? I looked closely at him and his men, but only stoic faces glared at me in response.

I asked him if they killed the monster. They hadn’t. The cat disappeared in the middle of battle, evaporating into mist, leaving only the slain and wounded. I asked him what he wanted of me.

“Justice,” he said. “Justice for Teralos. Justice for the dead. Justice for the living. Why do you seek peace with those who do this to your people?” He was shouting at the end.

I had no answer. It’s a lesson I told you long ago—never show uncertainty. And yet I looked at my friend and I did not know what to do, and I said nothing.

Udaen broke the silence. “I wonder,” he said, “who is the largest landowner in the Greenhills settlement? Who has the biggest claims on land we have sought to take from the leonin?” This broke the stony resolve of Thoros’s men. Now there were open rumblings of anger. Udaen was cruel, but he was right. Thoros was my friend, and my compatriot in battle, but he also stood to lose much if the peace with the leonin held. I could not forget that.

I had decided, Klytessa, to be kind. Remember that. Please. My friend was furious and still grieving over the loss of his nephew and his people. While I was angry at the pretense of his visit, I understood it. And a part of me wanted to make the world right for my friend. I told him I would think on the matter, and would have my men investigate to see if there was proof to be found. It was

not decisive action, but it would give us time. Time I desperately needed to reconcile such bizarre accounts of these attacks.

It was not the answer Thoros was looking for.

Even now, I almost believe that Thoros looked as surprised at his actions as I was. I had finished speaking, and turned to leave, to give Thoros and his men the privacy to grieve and regain their composure. As I turned, I saw the look come over Thoros's face, that familiar look of rage and battlelust... but never had I seen it directed at me. Before I had time to react, Udaen was there, interposing his frail body between myself and Thoros, shouting, "For the King!" He jammed his staff in between the legs of Thoros, sending Thoros sprawling forward to the ground, and only then did I see the dagger fly from Thoros's hands, the dagger he had begun swinging at my back.



The slaughter of Thoros's men was quick. If they had been a part of his assassination plot, they were ill-prepared for it. They seemed as surprised by the attempt as I had been. Thoros himself seemed in a daze, even after he was hauled up by my guards, his face beaten and bruised, as he looked over his slain comrades.

"They said... they said you had gone blind. That your quest for peace, your quest for your... queen, had blinded you to the needs of your people. I told them you would listen to me. That you would see me, and see the... truth. That you would open your eyes and stop this nightmare." I want to capture every word he spoke. I want to remember every drop of blood he coughed up as he spoke them.

I had my eyes wide open as I passed judgment on Thoros Clawkiller, my friend. I saw my blade descend down swiftly, and pass cleanly through his neck. No ragged edges for my friend, not like his nephew. A quick and clean cut.

It is the kindness of a king.

Kedarick

My darling Klytessa—

I've carried the secret with me all day. Udaen handed me the letter this morning. It has been my shield, my armor, my sword. I could do no wrong today, because I had my secret.

Tomorrow is the signing ceremony with the leonin. Elders from several tribes ("Six tribes, Kedarick, six. Shall I have you name them again?" That was Udaen this morning. He is being quite thorny, but given all he has done to set up this ceremony, I can forgive it) will meet with me and Udaen for the signing. They will give us a ceremonial weapon. We will give them formal land rights to their current areas, with lucrative trade privileges for each clan. They get better of the exchange, but if it gives us lasting peace, how worth it!

I gave a speech today. The last speech I had given was shortly after you left, when the kingdom needed my voice and my reassurance. That speech was a disaster, but how could it not be? My heart was gone. I know no man who can speak convincingly without his heart.

Today's speech was beautiful. There have been few times in my life when I've spoken to my subjects, and realized they hung on my every word, that they were captivated by the power of my voice and my message. Today was such a day. I spoke of the historic occasion of tomorrow's signing. I told them we were ushering in a new age of prosperity and safety, that we were here to glimpse the early dawn of Iretis's golden age. I told them the rumors of the expansionists's newly formed army, the rumors of terrors that stalk the night, these were ephemeral, and would evaporate like the morning dew against the power of the sun, the power of our peace with the leonin. It was a triumphant moment, and the cheers and cries of our people were sublime.

Yet it was a pale shadow of the joy from my secret.

After the speech, Udaen wanted to brief me on the scouting reports of the expansionists. Thoros's brothers and sons had gathered a small army of several hundred men from the settlements. But they would still need more before challenging us, and Udaen was confident that the peace with the leonin would shrivel the expansionists' support. I dismissed Udaen from the room as quickly as I could. What need had I to talk of the expansionists or the final details of tomorrow?

I want to talk about Lara. How much has she grown in the last year? Are figs still her favorite food? Does she speak of me often? Does she still play the lute? It has only been a year, and yet I tremble at the thought of seeing her again, her auburn hair, her smile, the way she stubbornly sets her arms in the exact way you do, with the upturn in her nose and resolve in her eyes.

Ignore my tears that stain the edge of this page, for I have my secret and I am invulnerable. You are coming back. You are coming back!

My darling, my love, until a few days when we see each other again. I tremble at the thought. A new age is starting for Iretis tomorrow, and you and I shall preside!

Your love,

Kedarick

End of Part 1. Next week: Part 2.