

## **Excerpt from *Kingmaker* Chapter 2**

*by Patrick Sullivan*

It would shock outlanders, Mathara often thought, to learn that the Library of Haerodar contained no books.

That wasn't, of course, to say it was not a library in the proper sense; its halls were yet rich with knowledge, and long shelves did, in fact, line either side of the stairs as she descended into its catacomb-like archives. Each shelf was cut directly into the marble of the building itself, alternately of white and near-black stone -- Haerodar had sat between multiple quarries in the Dawning Days -- and indeed, repositories of knowledge sat upon them in uniform rows.

Repositories of a kind, at least. Mathara brushed one of the wooden boxes as she passed, running gloved fingers along the smooth paneling that veneered its sides. These were newer Codices, cut when she was still a neophyte -- some eighteen years ago now, all crafted as though poured from the same mold, fitting perfectly into their hollows on the shelves for tasteful contrast: ash wood on the black shelves, ebony on the white.

Her slippered feet made little sound on the stone steps as she continued to descend in tense silence, the rustling of a fist-sized woven basket at her side the only noise in the stairwell beside her soft footsteps. Mathara Life-Binder was not supposed to be in Haerodar this night, much less in the sanctified halls of the Library itself. Making sound threatened discovery. Discovery threatened death.

The academic heart of Haeron had changed in the years since her departure. Mathara remembered a time when all the Codices were contained within the archives proper, but as the Library amassed more and more arcana, service halls and stairwells like this one became storage stacks. Codices were packed so tightly into the shelves around her that their sides were flush to one another, populating a checkered wall of white and black wood. At this rate, the Library would be overfull in Mathara's lifetime -- within her thirty-six years, thousands of

acquisitions had been made in the name of the new council's campaign of expansion, where perhaps one or two a year were added before its rise. When she had dared to slip back across Haeri borders before, she had heard rumblings of constructing a second building to house additional Codices, but the very thought offended the few remaining traditionalists among Haerodar's elite. Their mantra yet carried weight: that each structure in the Cathedral City had its allotted place and purpose, all according to the Paragons' will.

The Paragons. Occasionally, the shelves would be interrupted by a statue of one of their number, and Mathara wordlessly counted them off as she passed: the Watcher, the Wanderer, the Waker, the Warden. A thick crimson cloth was laid like a shroud over the fifth statue she crossed, the Warbringer, whose title was all that remained in Haeri memory of his life. If record of the sins that saw him stricken from the Paragons' ranks existed, it was not in any part of the Library that Mathara had visited.

She shook her head fondly, remembering her days as an acolyte. To her shame, she had been caught peeking under that very cloth on more than one occasion by elder Librarians. The Warbringer -- whoever he was -- was depicted as a square-jawed man, armor-clad, the upraised spear he held that tented the shroud simple and unornamented.

Try as she might to move past him, Mathara lingered by the statue, feeling the marble eyes of the other, uncovered Paragons on her as though in judgement for paying any mind to their forsaken fellow. She brushed her fingers against the cloth covering where she expected the Warbringer's chest would be. The texture of the stone beneath was coarse and broken, the emblem -- she suspected -- on his breastplate chiseled away by Librarians of ages past. That small desecration, she imagined, must have seemed more forgivable to them than outright destroying the image of a Paragon -- even a former one.

She checked over her shoulder to be certain that no one had followed her down. It was well past the new council's enforced curfew, far beyond most

Librarians' waking hours, but it paid to be thorough. Gently, she pinched one corner of the shroud, drawing it aside so she could see the Warbringer's face -- he had a noble cast to his features, but the sculptor had surely idealized. The bearded man immortalized before her seemed far too youthful, too hopeful to merit such a title as the one he bore. This man -- no, boy -- was so reprehensible a warmonger that his brethren erased his deeds from their histories?

Mathara stared longer than she should have; she needed to keep moving. Softly, she let the shroud drop and continued down the stairs. After a certain point, there ceased to be windows in the wall, plunging her into darkness -- so she was underground already, then. With a rustle of bark and wicker, she retrieved the tiny basket from her sash and eased it open, letting free its occupant. A pair of shining, beady eyes stared back up at her, and she nodded. Be unleashed, little friend.

Seeking the warmth of skin, the lightbringer darted from its prison and skittered up the sleeve and collar of Mathara's ornate robe, clinging harmlessly to her bare neck. The bulbous tip of the creature's upraised tail cast a steady, pale glow by her cheek, illuminating her way for want of natural light -- for as many of the Codices and their contents were wood and cloth, flame was forbidden in the Library, the function of torches replaced by the docile lightbringers the Librarians cared for. The acolyte she'd stolen this basket from had painted in white ink the runes *lae raish* on the creature's carapace. "Hood-candle." Lamp.

A lamp to light my way, Mathara thought, smiling appreciatively. A functional name, certainly. Someone in the hives is lacking in imagination. Lamp remained placidly on the side of her neck, occasionally skittering to find his balance, but his blunted claws did no damage to her skin or collar.

With the lightbringer's help, she arrived at the beginning of the labyrinth that constituted the Library's archives. The stairs bottomed out into a wide antechamber, and Mathara began to see signs of the old Library, the one she knew: lines of poured gold slicing through the polished stone floor, organic, rolling patterns of marble in shades of grey, and sculptures of scenes from the

Dawnwords carved in relief by forgotten artisans of the Dawning Days. Those same artisans were likely Echoes now, their knowledge hoarded somewhere within the very archives they'd helped build.

Mathara passed through the antechamber with reverence, breathing in the dust and cool air that hung in the Library's lower levels. The scent of age stirred memories; some sixteen years prior, this had been her sanctuary. Her safe space. While the rest of Haerodar slept, the neophyte Mathara stole away to the archives to be among the wisdom of the past.

Now, she had returned to rob it.

Through the antechamber laid the archives proper, an underground hall great enough to encompass many of the cathedrals from which Haerodar drew its nickname. There had been other such halls built across Haeron in its image -- in times before the Paragons' will was scripture -- but all had collapsed or been abandoned as the centuries wore on, for no architect before or since could compare to the ones who wrought the Grand Library of Haerodar. Twisted pillars of granite and crystal soared toward the ceiling around Mathara as she pushed inward, footfalls echoing through the cavernous expanse even despite her slippers muffling them. Beneath her steps hummed a low, resonant note she strained to make out, seeming to permeate the archives in their entirety.

Between the earthen pillars lay more shelves, stretching in parallel rows from one end of the hall to the other, of far grander woodwork than those that lined the stairs she'd come through. Mathara counted off aisles as she passed between them, her -- ha, yes -- lamplight falling on the sconces that capped each row, holding clusters of pale crystal that came aglow at her lightbringer's passing. She bit her lip, cursing silently -- she hadn't accounted for the archives' esoteric means of lighting in her clandestine plans. Glancing behind confirmed her fear; for as the sconces absorbed even Lamp's weak light, they remained steadily luminescent long after her passing. Anyone following her into the archives could easily follow the path of brightness she'd wrought by her trespassing.

Lamp's tail drooped beside her cheek, as though he too had realized he'd become more liability than asset. Lightbringers had no such cognition, but Mathara stroked his shell reassuringly anyway, moving him from her neck to her wrist.

She had come too far to back out of her plan now. Rounding the girth of a titanic pillar, she came to the aisle she sought, turning down it and hurriedly scanning the shelves that lined either side. Codices sat upon them, but each Codex here was a unique work of art, far removed from the uniform, lifeless ones above - delicate shrines of dark woods and precious metal filigree, fancifully carved, with engraved runes and mosaics upon each lid. The archives had always felt to Mathara more a museum than a library, for beneath each Codex on its velvet cushion was a name and date: Seire Whisper-Stone, 1135. Raon Sword-Heart, 324. Echoes of the past.

It cost Mathara precious minutes to search for the first of the Codices she'd come with intent to steal. She feared the Librarians might have moved it, but on her second pass across the shelf, there she saw it: a Codex not of wood, but burnished black metal, delicately forged and set with front-facing doors whose mesh allowed the cold light to filter through. The glint of a more reflective metal within winked back at her, and she crouched low to ease the box's palm-sized doors open, questing for the object it held.

Mathara let out a low, hissing breath as she beheld the remains of the shrine inside the Codex -- the helmsblood petals strewn about its floor had withered, the plate of offering was barren, and some insect had come and chewed away the corner of the scribed prayers she'd left on her last visit. It seemed as though no one had so much as cleaned the accumulating dust inside the Codex in the intervening sixteen years -- and these apostates called themselves Librarians. Disgusting.

Calm. Remain in control. Be as ice. Mathara stilled her shaking hands, repeating her mantra under her breath as she peered deeper inside the codex. A relieved sigh left her when she found the relic itself undisturbed.

There were no books in the Library of Haerodar. Upon a velvet pillow inside the Codex sat a simple piece of jewelry, lifted up as though on display. Mathara plucked the silver bangle from its cushion, and immediately she felt the hum of vibration radiating through her thin glove, one Echo among the many thousands that constituted the Library's choir.

She slipped the bangle onto her wrist, then -- bracing herself -- bound Threnody.

It was a familiar process to her now, though in all her years -- no matter how many times she beckoned Echoes from their relics -- she could never quite brace herself for the unique dysphoria that came with binding them to herself. Her head swam as Threnody's influence spread throughout her body, the vibrations blooming outward from her chest until she was completely suffused. With a distinct unease in her stomach, she felt her body language change in the subtle way Threnody's often did -- weight shifting to the balls of her feet, prowling rather than walking as she stood from the empty Codex.

It stood to reason, after all, that in order to rob the most treasured place in Haerodar, she would have to become a master thief. Threnody's Echo settled, full-body vibrations fading and giving way to a pulsing drumbeat at the base of her skull, and Mathara flexed her fingers experimentally. They felt distant, not quite her own. The second stage of binding -- the dissociation -- sunk in as she came to the next Codex on her list, where she found she unconsciously reached for it with her right hand instead of her dominant left. Mathara had become ambidextrous.

Lamp scurried up her arm, disoriented by the sudden motion. Shaking off the swimming feeling, Mathara dared to whisper aloud.

"Are you there?"

Always, child, Threnody's rasping voice intoned within her mind. And you are late.

"Not even a hello, grandmother?" Mathara slurred her words slightly, and her voice sounded to her ears as though underwater. While she gave up most of her autonomy to Threnody, watching her hands retrieve the lockpicks from her slipper without consciously prompting them -- good, she'd found those already -- she could yet manage functions like speech with some difficulty.

You come back and bind me now, for the first time in all these years? I know what you're here to do, child. Threnody selected a pick and slipped it into the Codex's lock -- child's play, more for display than function, but Mathara wouldn't have even begun to know how to crack it while unbound. She'd retrieved Threnody's Echo first for a reason, not simply out of familial obligation. We'll have plenty of time to catch up after we clean the bastards out.

"Language, grandmother." The lock accepted the pick with a gratifying click, and Mathara simply watched and marveled as the master went to work.

Give me some time to warm up, child. I've not yet begun to show you "language." Are these my picks?

"I thought you might want familiar tools..." Mathara trailed off, strangely nostalgic at Threnody's acerbic reproach. It had been quite some time since she'd bound any Echo, but Threnody Glass-Caller was among the most familiar to her -- a soft, rolling pulse at the nape of her neck, at once gentle and deliberate. She had gone far too long without this feeling. "Will they do?"

I'm just damned surprised you kept them after all this time. Threnody made short work of the ornamented lock, and the Codex fell open, revealing another neglected shrine: corroded copper inlays beneath a long-dead spider's web. She gingerly retrieved the ivory ring from inside and slipped it onto her finger, but Mathara dared not bind the Echo within -- for every neophyte was rightly taught that to bind more than one Echo at once was too great a strain on the human mind.

When she'd foolishly tried in her youth, the seizure and hallucinations that followed quickly ridded her of any desire to attempt again.

Mathara whispered directions to the next Codex, and Threnody took her there with a silent gait perfected by a lifetime's sneaking. Speaking aloud wasn't necessary to communicate with an Echo, but she found it the easiest means of conveying exact meaning. The strain of binding tended to muddle her thoughts.

Another locked Codex -- it was a stroke of mercy that Threnody's had not been such -- gave way beneath Mathara's hands, and another ring went onto another finger. Jewelry was a form of phylactery that many lifebinders favored: easy to hide in plain sight, with maximal skin contact for its size, allowing for a resonant Echo. Mathara had tucked Threnody's bangle beneath her glove to keep hers securely bound in this way.

She muttered more directions. The next Codex was several shelves away, but Threnody lingered. You're not taking them all? She sounded genuinely baffled, but went where she was directed, her practiced lurk completely silent where Mathara had been unable to quite quell her slippers' shuffling.

Mathara shook her head. "Just what I can carry on my own, grandmother. I... spent a long time deciding on who to prioritize." Realizing she had retained some control over her own head, she glanced downward and found an explanation for her newfound stealth -- her feet were bare, and Threnody carried her slippers in one hand. Lamp poked his tail out from within them. When had she done that?

Alone? Threnody sounded affronted. Don't tell me you don't have accomplices.

"Only you," Mathara said, biting her lip. She knew it was the wrong answer.

Before Threnody could mount another reproach, however, another voice interrupted her -- a pair of voices, murmuring in a low conversation that the crystal pillars caught and bounced through the entirety of the cavernous archives. The sound was so layered and muddled by the nightmarish acoustics that Mathara



couldn't distinguish exact words, but a definite "ssshh" from one voice brought a sudden halt to their conversation. Footsteps fell within earshot, paused, then picked up in pace. Coming closer.

Lamp wriggled, and Threnody cursed, eyes snapping toward the nearest of the crystal sconces. It -- like dozens of others -- was now brightly aglow, signaling to any who might traverse the archives that they were not alone in the Library's undercroft. The imminent threat of discovery pulled Mathara's heart into her throat, and she seized control from Threnody in the moment of uncertainty, panicking.

What are you doing, child? Threnody snapped at her, of course -- but Mathara knew which Codices she needed to prioritize, and she had to streamline the process. Continuing to speak directions to Threnody could alert whoever had arrived, whom she hoped against hope were just sleepless Librarians and not summoned guards. She wouldn't leave without what she'd come for.

The marble floor was suddenly cold against her bare feet, sensation restored as the dissociation of binding ebbed. Threnody wasn't fully banished, the drumbeat still throbbing in her head, but a fainter Echo wouldn't be able to impose itself upon her so long as she concentrated. Not that Threnody would try to assert dominance, but Mathara had built significant mental defenses to use against more dissonant Echoes -- coping thoughts that helped maintain her sense of identity.

Mathara flattened herself against a pillar as the voices grew close enough to be distinct, tuning out Threnody's protests. Don't idle, idiot child, keep moving so you aren't corne--

"--nces are lit," one of them was saying -- male, younger. Sixteen? A neophyte. Mathara closed her eyes, letting out a held breath. They hadn't sent the Unbound after her. "Are you sure no one else is down here?"

"I-I thought they always glowed," said the second voice, female and just as young -- so they were neophytes, not as familiar with the Library as the experienced Mathara. She thanked the Paragons for the small mercy, and the

initial panic faded, emotions calming as though they'd heard the prayer and given her their soothing blessing. She was in control. As ice. Calm.

The next Codex was immediately adjacent to the last, so she let Threnody back in-- but only partially, maintaining the majority of control so she could easily listen to the neophytes and track their progress. The footsteps were growing closer, but only gradually, unhurried and exploratory. Mathara trusted in the archives' forest of pillars and shelves to hide her.

You should run before you're found, Threnody said, retrieving a tourmaline necklace and draping it over Mathara's neck. The hum of another Echo joined the chorus, vibrating against her skin beneath her dress. Coming back another night will be much easier. You have me now, after all.

"Someone's confident in herself," Mathara whispered breathlessly. She didn't actually need to make sound for Threnody to know the intent of the words - - it wasn't as though the bangle had ears.

Some clever mynx came to get me first, did she not?

"Point," Mathara whispered. The neophytes' footsteps had stopped. As she eased shut the Codex, Mathara found herself lingering, looking in the direction she'd heard their voices from. Were they like her, she wondered? Sneaking down to the archives simply to find a place to be alone? It would be a far more daunting -- even deadly -- task than in Mathara's youth, with the new council's curfew enforced by the Unbound.

A thought seized Mathara, and she felt her chest grow tight. Maybe the Unbound hadn't come for her, but a neophyte, less adept at leaving no trail for the creatures to track, could have unwittingly alerted them. Would the new council be so indiscriminating in their commands to their secret police?

What would the Unbound do to children?

I know what you're thinking, Threnody said, and they're not your concern.

"They're children, grandmother."

And you're my grandchild. If you're so intent on courting death, at least stick to one fool's errand at a time. Another Codex fell open, and another Echo joined the song. Mathara's list of remaining Codices grew smaller and smaller, and with the addition of the next relic -- a decorated whalebone dagger -- her confidence swelled, fingers closing around its familiar hilt. Sairao, the Echo within, could defend her if it came to a confrontation.

How many more?

Mathara counted the rings on her fingers. "Six." Twenty in all. Twenty souls she was stealing from the gods.

You're an idiot and a fool, and this is going to get you -- and possibly me -- killed. Again, in my case.

"I know, grandmother."

Good. Let's keep moving.