

Malleus Hoerst

City of Brennan, Malleus Hoerst's Office

“Can I ask what you hope to accomplish by talking to Briana?” Stefan stood before Hoerst’s desk in his office.

“Deirdre’s spies are already chasing rumors to find out what the Emperor is up to. Now, we just need to give her something to think about inside the Seidi.” The Malleus signed the last document on a stack with a flourish, replaced his pen, tidied the stack, and set it aside, aligning it with the edge of his desk. He ran his hands over the smooth surface of the desk. He had it made from mala, a hardwood imported from the farthest western provinces of the Empire. Very rare. For all he knew, the furniture in his office represented the very last of that beautiful species of wood. It was a rich, dark brown with swirls of deep red in the right light. Richly colored tapestries and plush rugs complemented the expensive furniture. Sighing with satisfaction, he leaned back in his chair, steepled his fingers and continued. “As the leader of the more devout faction in the Seidi, Briana has every right to believe she should be Malefica instead of Deirdre. She’s more...spiritually pure. One of many reasons she hates Deirdre. She’s perfect for our purposes.”

“Spiritually pure may be a bit of an understatement. I’ve heard her described as a zealot. I’m not sure you’ll be able to manipulate her the way you do the Emperor.”

“On the contrary. The religiously devout are quite predictable. Briana will do what we want her too, as long as she believes it’s Daga’s will, and who knows the mind of Daga better than the Malleus.”

Stefan hesitated and then offered, “The High Priest?”

“Pffft.” Hoerst waved his hand. “The Church establishes the doctrine, it’s up to me to interpret it.” To Stefan’s skeptical frown, he said, “The High Priest and I are of a mind on this. The Inquisition serves to insulate the priests from the...practicalities of a sinful world...and ensure their income, of course.” He stood, straightening his uniform jacket. “Now, is there anything else, before my guest arrives?”

Stefan hesitated, lips pursed, and then said carefully, “I took the liberty of inserting one of the Dominicans in Harold Wolfe’s escort.” Stefan paused and Hoerst could see him bracing for a rebuke, but when it didn’t come, he continued. “We’ve had a report from the man, a very interesting report.”

Hoerst smiled indulgently. Stefan hated Harold with a dangerous passion, but despite his best efforts, had never produced credible evidence of his supposed misdeeds. At least, not in Hoerst’s mind. Wolfe, though a half-blood, was the most gifted Inquisitor in the Empire. He glanced at the clock. “Can this wait?”

“Yes, of course,” Stefan said, trying to hide his disappointment. “It can wait until I return.”

Hoerst fixed his subordinate with a penetrating look and said, “Are you quite sure you should be going to Fennig? Could you not send someone else?”

“The only inquisitor in Brennan at the moment is Wolfe,” Stefan said. “Inquisitor Torbert’s message indicated the witch is one of the most powerful he’s ever sensed. If she’s pliable...” Stefan shrugged. “Besides, I haven’t been in the field for some time. It will be a welcome change of pace.”

Hoerst gazed at him. Wolfe would be the better choice, especially if the witch was anything like what Torbert described her. “Who are you taking with you?”

“Sister Keelia,” Stefan said a slight blush reddening his cheeks.

That was a good choice. A rare combination of power and piety, she would certainly compensate for Stefan’s deficiencies. “Very well. Go to Fennig, but don’t linger and be careful. There are new reports of partisan activity in Argren.”

“Of course. In addition to Sister Keelia, I’m doubling my escort.”

“Excellent!” Hoerst rounded his desk. “Now, let us prepare for my guest. You know the plan.”

“Yes, sir.” Stefan opened the door to Hoerst’s private rooms.

Hoerst called after him, “And Stefan, make sure Aife understands what I wish of her.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Malleus crossed his office to where floor to ceiling bookshelves displayed his collection of rare editions. He was standing in front of an ornate lectern on which his most prized possession rested, rehearsing how he wanted the coming meeting to play out when there was a knock at his office door.

“Come.”

His assistant opened the door and said, “Sister Briana is here for her appointment, Malleus.”

“Ah, excellent! Right on time. Show her in.” He turned, careful to place himself between the door and the lectern. Briana was unlike Deirdre in almost every way imaginable. Deirdre was open, engaging, greeting everyone as if they were a friend, quick to laugh, but with a volatile temper. Briana was severe, suspicious and taciturn and clung tenaciously to grudges. Gray streaked her short black hair, and she wore the

traditional gray robes of a sister of the Seidi, a fashion that was no longer common among her peers. Deirdre would burst into a room, leaving no doubt who was in charge. Briana stepped carefully into the office, studying the room warily.

Hoerst approached her, offering his hand and said, "Good afternoon, Sister. Thank you for coming all the way to my office. I thought it best we speak here."

Briana turned slowly toward him and nodded, ignoring the proffered hand.

"Please, have a seat." He indicated a chair in front of his desk, shifting sideways to reveal the lectern.

Briana glanced at the chair, but didn't move from her position next to the door. She looked back at Hoerst and said, "I would prefer to stand until I know why I have come, thank you." Her eyes shifted to the side and widened. "Is that..." Brushing past him, she approached the lectern.

"A first edition of Necco's biography of Lachlan Olafson? Yes, it is." Hoerst stepped up beside her, but rather than looking down at the illuminated page of the tome, he studied Briana.

"I didn't know any survived the reformation," Briana said in an awed voice. She reached out, but pulled her hand back before she touched the page.

"As far as I know, this is the only copy in existence. I won't tell you where I found it."

Briana's eyes cut to Hoerst. "Have you read it?"

"Oh, yes. Many times."

She looked up at him, not even trying to hide her desire. "How much does it say about Abria?"

“There are extensive passages.” Hoerst smiled knowingly.

The biography was written long after the events it described, and Hoerst suspected it was more legend than fact. But there was sufficient corroborating evidence of the most important part, that it was probably close enough to the truth. Abria, the first woman to display the gift, was the only daughter of Lachlan and Illiana Olafson. Lachlan was a warlord of an insignificant clan in the small mountainous nation of Vollen, and would have disappeared from memory had he not recognized the potential in his daughter’s gifts. With Abria’s growing strength, the clan subjugated the other clans in Vollen, and led by Abria and her daughters, Lachlan conquered the verdant lands to the south and built an empire. Abria and her descendants formed the Seidi to rule the empire. Although Necco’s writing style provided little insight into his subjects’ personalities, Hoerst often wondered what it said about Abria that she took the unfortunate title of Malefica: witch in ancient Vollen. In any case, as the first Malefica, Abria was revered within the Empire and especially within the Seidi. Briana’s reaction was exactly what he hoped for.

Watching Briana staring at the book with misty eyes, he offered, “Perhaps, when time allows, you would like to peruse it?”

Her head snapped around, something like hope or greed flickering across her face, before her eyes narrowed and suspicion closed her expression.

“Yes, well, to business.” Hoerst sat in one of the two chairs arrayed in front of the lectern, crossed his legs and smiled placidly at Briana.

Briana hesitated, then sat in the facing chair, perching on the edge with her hands cupped in her lap and watching Hoerst expectantly.

“Briana, the reason I’ve asked you here is to confess I have become concerned about the Seidi. Of course, the Seidi is not technically the concern of the Inquisition. After all, I report to the Malefica. It is not my place to dictate to the Seidi. However, it is my role to interpret the will of the Church, and, as my concerns are religious in nature, I thought it best to approach a member of the Seidi council who could allay my fears...or not.”

Briana stared intensely at Hoerst. “Deirdre.”

So easy. “I’m afraid you have anticipated me. As you know, there were questions when Deirdre made herself Malefica.”

Briana nodded, emotions crawling across her features.

“Now, those questions seem especially prescient.”

“What have you heard? What has she done?” Briana asked. If she were trying to hide her eagerness, she failed.

“I’m not prepared to say right now. Not until I have proof. Let’s just say, I have reason to question her purity...her devotion to Daga.” He frowned. “I bring it to your attention now, because we have come to a perilous point in the Emperor’s wars, and a vacuum at the top of the Seidi would be dangerous. We must prepare for a smooth succession...if it proves necessary.”

“What do you want, Hoerst?” Briana asked flatly.

“Why, I want only what’s best for the Empire.”

Briana snorted. “You might think, because I follow the will of Daga, that you can lead me around by my nose, but you’re wrong. You can keep your insinuations to

yourself. I don't like Deirdre and she doesn't like me. We disagree on almost everything, but she is no heretic. Now, what do you want?"

Right on cue, the door to Hoerst's apartment opened and Stefan entered, followed by a woman. The Malleus watched Briana's reaction from the corner of his eye. Her gaze slid past Stefan with hardly any reaction, but her eyes widened and she went very still when she saw Aife. Hoerst understood her reaction. The woman's presence seemed too large for her diminutive stature. Unmistakably *Alle'oss*, she wore her red hair long, with thin braids that hung in front of her left ear. She wore a tunic and leather pants tucked into the moccasin boots common in Argren. As she entered the room, she let her presence appear, a strong steady pulse that left no doubt she was gifted. Though she had no tattoos on her face like a sister, dark paint encircled her green eyes and appeared to drip down her pale cheeks. She leaned her shoulder against the wall, arms and ankles crossed, staring at Briana appraisingly, a menacing, feral presence. Briana stared at her, lips slightly parted, a slight tick at the corner of her eye.

Hoerst cleared his throat and Briana glanced at him before returning her gaze to Aife. "What I want, Briana, is to return the Seidi to the proper path, a less...unpredictable path. A path that you can ensure. I want you to be Malefica."

Briana tore her eyes away from Aife, a hunger she couldn't hide on her face. "The council votes on the Malefica and only in the event of retirement...or death."

Hoerst smiled. "I would suggest you gather your support, Briana, so you are ready, should your opportunity arise. All I ask is that, in the meantime, you keep Deirdre preoccupied, to keep her out of trouble."

Briana hesitated, glanced at Aife, then looked back at Hoerst, her eyes narrowing.
“An *Alle ’oss* witch?”

Hoerst’s smile faded. “A very powerful *Alle ’oss* witch.” The Malleus braced himself and nodded to Aife. Aife’s expression didn’t change, nor did she move, but the pulse of her presence surged violently. Despite knowing what was coming, the sensation set him back in his chair, wincing and fighting against the sensation of his mind twisting on itself. The Malefica, the most powerful Seidi sister, was fond of using this technique to remind people of her station. However, the difference between Deirdre and Aife was as a drop of water to a lake. While the Malefica could cause discomfort, in the close proximity of his office, Aife made him feel as if his mind would be torn in two.

Even though her gifts were marginal, as a sister, Briana should be able to withstand the sensation better than he or Stefan, but her shocked expression and the tension in her hands gripping the arms of the chair revealed she was not immune. He managed to nod to Aife, letting out a shuddery breathe when his mind returned to normal.

He waited until Briana looked his way, taking advantage of the moment to breathe and allow his heart to slow. When she did look at him, shock still troubled her pale features.

“Abria’s gift began to appear among the *Alle ’oss* some 20 years ago,” Hoerst explained. “There are, as you know, prohibitions concerning...fraternization between the Volloch caste and the lower castes, the Brochen especially. Unfortunately, despite these prohibitions, there will always be those seduced by sin.” Briana was shaking her head impatiently. This was not new information to her. When she started to interrupt him, he held up his hand, and she clamped her mouth shut and pressed her lips together. “The

Inquisition works tirelessly to eliminate the children, and we have successfully turned the *Alle'oss'* own folk tales to our advantage. Their own neighbors kill many of the children as witches before we can get to them.” He paused, letting the silence emphasize his next words. “However, mistakes happen, and we have discovered, quite by accident, that the *Alle'oss'* witches, when they are allowed to mature, are quite a bit more powerful than our Seidi sisters.”

While Hoerst spoke, Briana’s gaze drifted back toward Aife, but on that last revelation, her head snapped back. He watched her face, guessing the moment when she realized the full implications. Briana’s venomous hatred of the Malefica was rooted in the vast difference in their gifts. Deirdre would already be out of the Malleus’ hair if she weren’t so much more powerful than Briana and her followers. “You see, power is all about options,” he said, softly, drawing her in with a conspiratorial smile. “Those with power have options and those without have few. Do we understand one another?”

“Power.” Briana’s lips twisted as she said the word. Her eyes narrowed and her head tilted. “If it’s power you desire, why do you need me?”

The Malleus waved his hand. “Oh, Aife has no interest in being a sister. She rather despises the Seidi, truth be told.” Hoerst picked a bit of lint from his pant leg, dropping it on the floor. “Plus, I rather doubt she has the political acumen required to be Malefica. No, Aife is an elemental creature, a force of nature. What I need from you is to provide the steady leadership the Seidi requires. Aife, and her friends, would merely ensure you stay there.”

Briana studied Aife, the moments dragging out. When she met his eyes, she nodded slowly. “I think we understand one another.”

“Excellent! I think we will find that we work well together. After all, we, you and I, have the same goals. We both want what’s best for the Empire, that it glorifies the name of Daga. Right?”

Malefica Deirdre

Imperial City of Brennan, Seidi Tower

When Deirdre became Malefica, she eschewed the ornate office furnishings her predecessor preferred. Instead she took advantage of the sun streaming through the wide east-facing doors onto her balcony, gathering plants from across the Empire, choosing carefully so that she would have colorful blooms from early in the spring through early autumn. When she arrived this morning, the small sithia bush she found in the remote northwest province of Ferra had finally bloomed. Its small white flowers seemed to shine with their own light amid the scarlet leaves. They were the last blossoms she would see before the following spring.

The only concessions Deirdre made to tradition were three portraits on the walls. The first was of Abria, the first Malefica. The painting showed her standing on a high precipice, staring out over green prairies far below, preparing to lead Vollen out of the mountains. The painting was one of Deirdre’s favorites, because despite the gravity of the moment, the artist managed to capture a certain mischievous glint in Abria’s eyes. It was an insight into the real Abria that Deirdre found very appealing.

The second portrait was of Ione, the greatest Malefica. The painting captured her at a critical moment when the fledgling Empire, beset by many enemies, was struggling to find its footing. She stood inside Brennan’s eastern gate, alone before an invading horde. Lightning flickered from her upraised hands, illuminating her resolute features in a blue glow.

The last portrait, her portrait, was mounted behind her desk only because tradition required it. She stood, chin slightly raised, her right hand held out in front of her and her left hand pointing down at a copy of the *Seidi Sacramentum*. Deirdre found it very telling that, while most of the past Malefica were depicted in heroic defense of the Empire, her battleground was the Seidi council chambers. Her battles were fought against her fellow sisters, the outcomes largely irrelevant to the fate of the Empire. The irony was that they were only able to engage in such indulgent bickering because of the heresy of a small number of sisters with spirit sight who held back the Kaileuk in the south. The thought brought her back to the enigma of the person sitting before her now.

Deirdre watched the young woman, slouched in a chair, chewing a fingernail, one knee bouncing rhythmically, causing her short unruly, hair to bob in time. She wore the leathers and boots so popular among the younger sisters who spent time at the front. What happened to her? Keelia suffered through the cleansing when she arrived at the Seidi, and emerged a shy, devout girl, eager to prove herself. She had a reputation for piety and humility and demonstrated the limited gifts of those who suppressed their spirit sight. Deirdre was having a hard time reconciling this morose, churlish young woman with that girl.

Keelia peeked up at her, scowl deepening when she found Deirdre watching. Deirdre sighed. "I have to say, the tales surrounding your exploits against the Kaileuk are hard to credit. It's true, people tend to exaggerate the exploits of heroes." That drew a snort from Keelia. "But there are so many, I have to assume some of it must be true." Keelia said nothing, only studied her nails. "Keelia, are you sure you don't want to talk about what happened?"

Keelia dropped her hand, straightened in the chair and shook her head. “I told you what happened.”

“Yes, you did, and I have the reports of your commanding officers.” She gestured to a pile of paper on her desk. “But they tell me only what you did, not what happened to you.”

The young sister opened her mouth, but nothing emerged. There was the smallest quiver of her chin, then her mouth snapped shut and she dropped her head and mumbled, “I have nothing to say.”

Deirdre sighed again. “Okay, I’m assigning you to accompany Inquisitor Stefan.” Keelia’s head shot up, her face a picture of outrage. Deirdre held up her hand to forestall her protest.

Keelia gathered herself, took a deep breath with her eyes closed. After a moment, she opened her eyes and asked calmly, “Stefan?”

“Yes, Stefan. I know, he can be a trial, but he has requested a sister and, frankly, I rather suspect that you can handle him better than most. Some of the novices are far too easily impressed by him.”

She slumped and resumed examining her nails.

“Keelia, I’ve seen you struggling since you returned. I’m sure it doesn’t help that so many people want something from you. You need some time to recover. Stefan’s going to Fennig. It’s a small village on the far side of the Eastern Mountains. You’ll be gone for at least three weeks. Take the time to consider what you want to do. When you get back, we’ll find an assignment for you that will give you time to heal. Something far from the war.”

Keelia looked up, moist eyes wide. The hope in her expression tugged at Deirdre's heart. "Really?"

"Yes, of course." Deirdre stood, coming around her desk. When the younger woman stood, Deirdre took her by the shoulders and said, "This is your family. We squabble among ourselves sometimes, but we are family. We'll get through this." When Deirdre pulled her into a hug, Keelia tensed briefly before slumping, her head resting on Deirdre's shoulder.

When Deirdre released her, she fled the office. Deirdre called after her, "Don't let Stefan get to you, Keelia."

She glanced back, head down, wiping moisture from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

Nia, waiting in the outer office, watched Keelia leave, then said, "Well? Anything?"

"No, she's still as sullen and silent as she has been since she got back. She's always been a bit shy, but once you got to know her... Something happened to her that she doesn't want to talk about. Hopefully, she just needs time." She returned to her desk.

Nia followed, saying, "Briana won't be happy you sent her away."

"Which is one of the reasons I am sending her away. Keelia has always been one of Briana's favorites, and now that she's the only member of her faction with genuine talent, Briana has been waving her around like a banner. I don't think that is helping her adjust."

"Do you think the stories are true?" Nia picked up one of the reports and flipped through it. "I've known Keelia since she arrived, she was just two years behind me. I

never saw anything from her like this. I mean, lightning? No one has had that gift since Ione.”

Deirdre gazed at the Malefica’s portrait. “No. I was afraid I might never see her again when she left for the front. She...has always had a hunger to prove herself, and she pestered me until I relented. I wouldn’t have sent her, even so, but we’re running out of options.” Deirdre gestured at the files on her desk. “Yet, she returned a hero. A damaged, desperately unhappy woman, but a hero. She doesn’t deserve to be used by Briana. She needs time.”

“I hope time away helps her.”

“Me too. I need time, as well, to think about what this means.”