



SAMPLE CHAPTERS

COVENANT
of BLOOD

~ BOOK 1 ~
OF THE THAYRIA CYCLE

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PROLOGUE

NO. 18 GARRISON COMPANY

SARASINIAN OCCUPIED AHRENIA

NEAR HERENA

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

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

“How d’you reckon?”

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

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

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

“Oh I dunno,” said Goraric, peering into the forest. Northern trees were something else. Harder than iron, knitted tighter than a shield wall, and with twisty little pathways and hidden alcoves that

harboured all manner of threats. He shivered. And it was cold in the woods, too. Far colder than seemed natural. “Reckon some decent roads would improve things no end.”

Ostolaza shrugged again. “Nah. Lot o’ work for no real gain.”

“Well it wouldn’t hurt to thin all this shit out a bit, surely?”

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

Goraric looked at Ostolaza. “*Them Ahren?* What’s that supposed to mean, exactly?”

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

“We’re *all right?* Wow, thanks. And this *isn’t* an ambusher’s wet dream, by the way. Our scouts would find ’em first.”

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

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

“Yep.”

“You’re fuckin’ with me, right?”

“Nope.” Ostolaza shook his head.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

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

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

“That can’t be right...”

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

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

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

"Yep."

"That's not good."

"Nope."

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

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

"Shut the fuck up!"

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

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

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

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

"We fight, we win!"

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

"*We fight, we win!*"

"*Again!*"

"*We fight, we win!*"

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

Goraric’s heart sank. “Yes, sergeant?”

“You have extra duties for two months.”

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

“You stupid cock hole!”

“Yes, sergeant!”

“And you’ll wear a woman’s dress until further notice.”

“Yes, sergeant!” He swore internally again.

“Soldier Ostolaza?”

“Yes, sergeant?” shouted Ostolaza.

“The same goes for you.”

“Yes, sergeant!”

“Dickhead.”

“Yes, sergeant!”

“Balezentis!” roared Maximo. “Where are you?”

Balezentis raised his spear. “Here, sergeant!”

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

“Yes, sergeant!”

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

“Yes, Sergeant!” yelled Abbadessa. “I won’t!”

“Yeah,” said Maximo with a grunt. “We’ll see.”

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

The company marched in silence from then on, if the *tramp tromp tramp* of a hundred and six pairs of boots pummelling the

earth could be called silence. Goraric was still wondering where he was going to find a dress when a flock of birds suddenly took to the air.

“Fuck!” muttered someone.

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

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

“*Shoulder arms, forward march!*” cried Lamela, and the company set off again.

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

“*Rally!*” bawled Lamela. “*Shield wall!*”

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

“*Ready arms!*”

The villagers ran for their weapons and gathered around their turnip cart. They outnumbered the company, probably, but with nothing but rough spun clothes and shoddy spears, Goraric doubted they posed a threat. He picked out a few vaguely familiar faces and prayed that no one would recognise him. Folk from

around here didn't join Sarasinian units and wouldn't have hesitated to call him a traitor.

After conferring with Clopius, Lamela strode over to the villagers, his empty right palm raised to show he came in peace. Goraric noticed how he still kept a firm grip on his shield with his left, though. One should never be too trusting.

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

There was no reply.

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

Still no reply.

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

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

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

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

Eventually a woman appeared. She was no ordinary villager, for she wore a white, flowing dress and a belt of golden discs cinched tightly about her waist. Young, slender and auburn-haired, and

with an intricate mask of black leather that covered her nose and mouth, she strode across the clearing as straight-backed as a queen. The soldiers of Number Eighteen Garrison Company immediately perked up. They murmured their appreciation as she drew near, and someone even let out a raucous catcall that drew laughter.

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

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

“Do you speak Sarasinian?” Lamela asked her.

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

“Do you have a name?”

“Yes. What do you want, captain?”

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

“Tribute?”

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

“I know what ‘tribute’ means, captain.” She sounded bored.

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

“You can speak to me.”

Lamela grunted. “You? Really? *You* have authority here?”

“I do.”

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

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

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

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

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

"Did they indeed?"

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

"And?"

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

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

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

"Nothing." So, he was the only one who could see it? What did that mean, exactly? He had many questions, but no way of

answering any of them. Better to pretend he couldn't see anything odd. One word about about witches or magic would almost certainly trigger pandemonium amongst the men. To say nothing of the witch's possible reaction.

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

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

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

"So?"

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

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

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

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

"Or?"

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

No reply.

"Go on, tell that to your people!"

The witch did as she was told. Certain of the villagers reacted with anger. Lamela, all too aware of how far he was from the safety

of his company, looked to be bracing for a fight. Goraric wondered if the people, emboldened by the presence of their witch, would give him one.

Luckily, nothing happened. Though clearly incensed, no one seemed inclined to violence, and Lamela gave his company no orders. The witch seemed content to let her people vent. It was as if she were hearing them, but not actually listening.

“They don’t like it, eh?” said Lamela, not trying to disguise his delight.

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

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

“So?” Lamela’s hand brushed the hilt of his sword. “What’s it to be?”

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

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

“Good,” said Lamela, nodding. “Sensible. I’ll take them. And something else.”

“Something else?”

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

“Mm.”

“You do have a name, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

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

The witch shook her head. “No.”

“No? What do you mean?”

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

“Pfft. Can’t say as I see the harm in it myself.”

“No doubt.”

“But you do have a name?”

The witch nodded. “I already said I did.”

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

“Unseemly? No, not particularly.”

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

“It’s considered unseemly of you to ask.”

Lamela made a braying sound. “Fuck me. You Ahren certainly have strange customs, don’t you?”

“Strange to you, perhaps.”

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

The witch shook her head. “Not always.”

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

“I’m no fighter.”

“Then what are you?”

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

Goraric's mouth fell open as her magic flared.

* * *

"Unh," said Lamela, blinking. He could feel the barbarian woman's mind sliding around inside his skull. Instinct said to resist, to push her out, but the attempt hurt so badly he wanted to throw up. His vision swam.

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

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

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

Becoming a soldier, and swinging a sword in anger.

His promotion to captain.

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

Overwhelming joy at the birth of his son.

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

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

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

"Depietro!"

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

“Depietro!”

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

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

“Depietro!”

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

“Depietro!” screamed the skull. The voice was his!

“Waaah!” he cried, flinching. He recoiled in horror, tripping over his boots and nearly rolling down the hill. “It’s just a dream. It’s just a dream!”

* * *

Goraric broke into a cold sweat. The witch obviously had Lamela in her sorcerous grip. He said as much to Ostolaza.

Ostolaza didn’t reply. He stood still, glassy-eyed and unresponsive, just like the captain.

“Oh shit,” said Goraric, looking around. The witch had ensorcelled the *entire company*! He looked again for the warband that must surely be encircling them by now, and again he didn’t find it. And then it hit him—the witch hardly needed one. Even farmers with sticks could make short work of defenceless men. He thought about running for the forest and leaving them to their fate. But before he could do anything, Lamela and everyone else snapped back to reality.

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

“Uh,” said Goraric, not sure how to reply. “Maybe? No? I dunno...”

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

“Your cows,” said the witch. She spoke calmly, nothing in her bearing suggesting anything unusual was afoot. “They’re here.”

But Lamela knew better. He looked about, bewildered. “What? Where did I—?”

“Breathe, captain.”

“But I was—? I saw—?”

“Forget it. Breathe.”

“Huh?”

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

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

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

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

“Over there.” The witch pointed.

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

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

“Is there a problem, captain?”

“Yes. There is.” He showed her his teeth and put a hand on the hilt of his sword. “You think you can palm these scrawny things off on me do you, whore? And there are only nine of them, not twelve as agreed! What do you have to say for yourself?”

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

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

“Oh no,” said Goraric as Lamela reached for his blade. The woman made a gesture. “Shit,” he said, glancing around. Lamela and his entire company had been ensorcelled again. Well, at least everyone except for him. “Shit.”

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

“Uhh,” said Lamela, his voice languid, eyes vacant.

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

“My, my,” murmured the witch. “How very interesting.”

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

“Goraric of Herena.” She traced a finger down his chin. “Look at you. You can see what most can’t.”

He wasn’t sure how to answer. His secret was out, but he didn’t care. His blood was practically igniting under her touch.

“You’re so well hidden I almost didn’t see you. You know me, don’t you?”

“Yes, lady.”

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

“Malyred,” he whispered. He hadn’t heard the name before today, of that he was certain. And yet, somehow he had always known her. It was... a puzzle.

Malyred took off her mask. “Yes,” she breathed as she moved in closer. “Such power. You’ll do nicely.”

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

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

“Welcome back.” Ostolaza, his dopey grin stretching from one ear to the other.

He sat up. “What?”

Ostolaza pointed at his nose. “You’re bleeding.”

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

“You fuckin’ passed out on us there, mate.”

“Did I? I don’t remember...”

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

Goraric got to his feet. “Really? I don’t even...” He half-remembered something, then looked around for the captain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I see."

"Are you all right, sir?"

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

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

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

"Er, yes sir. Correct."

"But they're..."

"Sir?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Clopius?”

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

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

Clopius stood to attention, staring beyond the captain’s shoulder. “Sir!”

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

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

“It’s the Twenty-first, I think?” hissed Ostolaza. “The fuck are they doing?”

Goraric looked around. “Yeah.” There were spearmen scattered all over the place. Most sat on their arses in the dust, chatting, while others poked around the forest. “They’re supposed to be formed up, aren’t they?”

“Yeah,” muttered Ostolaza. “They are. Not lounging around like they’re on a fucking picnic.”

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

Ostolaza pointed. “Look at that dipshit over there. What’s he doing? Picking flowers?”

Lamela had almost certainly overheard them. He offered no comment, although Goraric could tell by the look on his face that he was every bit as appalled as they were. He shouldered his way through a cluster of soldiers, which split to reveal their

commander, a sweaty little Sarasinian they all knew well—Giandelone, captain of Number Twenty-one Garrison Company.

“Giandelone?” asked Lamela.

“Lamela!” Giandelone looked up. A sergeant writhed at his feet, a pair of bloody hands clamped to his groin. There were red spatters on the dirt and leaves around him. “Thank fuck you’re here!”

“What are you doing?” asked Lamela. “What’s going on?”

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

Goraric saw three little girls huddled together, sobbing. A fourth lay nearby, her throat laid open, sightless eyes fixed on something far above the forest canopy. Unfortunately, he could have put a name to each of them. “Oh no...”

Lamela made a face. “Locals?”

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

“What happened?”

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

“Where was this?”

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

“There are lot of places out here matching that description, man.” Lamela folded his arms. “You’ll have to be a bit more specific than that.”

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

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

Gorarc’s blood turned to ice at the mention of the name. He knew it was coming, of course, had known as soon as he saw the girls. His home. His clan.

“Yes!” said Giandelone. “Yes! Engund’s Tor. I think that was it! Why? You know it?”

Lamela nodded. “Yeah, I know it. What happened?”

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

“And?”

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

“And?”

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

Lamela scratched his head, impatient. “All right. And?”

“So I was expecting fucking silver, wasn’t I? The ledger said silver, not fucking horses.”

“So what did you do?”

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

“Shitfight?”

“Hah! As if! Slaughter, more like.”

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

“Casualties?” asked Lamela.

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

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

“Right,” said Lamela. “So, then what happened?”

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

Gorarc’s knees gave out, and he’d have met the ground if not for Ostolaza’s timely intervention. The man raised an eyebrow at him, but didn’t say anything. Gorarc murmured his thanks and waved him away. Here in the midst of enemies, he’d have to keep a tight rein on his emotions. Showing his Ahren sympathies would be a potentially fatal mistake. And Owic knew it wasn’t his time. Soon enough, maybe. But not yet, and hopefully not at the hands of ghouls like Lamela and Giandelone.

“You burned down the hall?” Lamela’s mouth fell open. “With people inside?”

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

Lamela chewed his lip. “I see.”

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

“He doesn’t look good,” said Lamela, looking at the sergeant on the ground.

“No,” said Giandelone. “Dick’s practically hanging by a thread.”

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

“Yep, yep.”

“You fucked up,” said Lamela, shaking his head. “You do realise that, don’t you?”

Giandelone’s eyes went very wide. “Oh no, don’t say that! Don’t say that!”

“Well, what would you have me say? Good job?”

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

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

Giandelone glared. “That’s easy for you to say!”

“Look, there’s no point in getting worked up about it.”

“Again, that’s easy for you to say! What if the Tor folk go to Herena to complain?”

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

“I don’t have the sort of funds to buy a verdict, Lamela...”

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

“Hmm.”

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

“Yes,” said Giandelone, peering over his fingers at Lamela. “Yes! I *could* say that!

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

“Yes! That’s true!”

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

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

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

"Ha! Yes. I love it!" said Giandelone.

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, shit! I had no idea."

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

"The League is the League..."

"No, man. It isn't."

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

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

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

Lamela took out the knife on Giandelone's belt, wrapped the man's fingers around the handle and murmured something in his ear.

A look of uncertainty passed over Giandelone's face as he listened, but finally he nodded and knelt down beside his injured sergeant. The man was shivering, the front of his trousers

glistening with new blood. “Easy now,” said the captain, and then plunged the knife into the side of his neck. The sergeant struggled as blood gushed out.

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

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

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

Goraric shuffled away with the rest of the men, catching a glimpse through the crowd of Giandelone looming over the girls. He wanted to help them, but how? He dressed the line, his spirit sinking, and as the order to march was given, he closed his eyes and begged Owic to forgive him. He put one foot in front of the other and hoped no one noticed his tears.

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

I

LORD RIVA

THE SARASINIAN 5th ARMY

SARASINIAN OCCUPIED AHRENIA

NEAR GILLENDEM

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

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

He returned to his marquee to find Istome waiting near the entry. His bodyguard was lolling about, though as soon as he appeared, they all stood to attention and pretended they hadn't been gawping at Istome's bare legs. He wanted to laugh but settled on a small, inward smile instead. One valuable thing General Virgilio had taught him was that he should never appear too familiar around subordinates. Always strive to keep up appearances.

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

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

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

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

spear and helmet away. Someone would bring them should the need arise.

“Very good, Pyrian,” said Riva, his dressing ritual complete.

“A pleasure, my lord.” Pyrian bowed low. “As always.”

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

“Of course,” said Istome.

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

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

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

“Oh yes?”

“Mm. They’re as bad as described.”

“Yes,” said Riva, nodding. “They are.”

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

“No.” Riva leaned back in his chair. “I wasn’t. Any advice?”

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

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

“No,” said the general, shaking his head. “No, not really.”

Riva raised an eyebrow. “Nothing?”

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

“I see,” said Riva. “It’s just that I thought you might—”

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

Riva shook his head. “Well no, not harsh words exactly, but let’s face it—these figures aren’t what you could call impressive.”

“Oh indeed! They’re not.”

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

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

“Yes, they are, but—”

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

“No. Not particularly.”

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

Riva nodded. “Well I suppose that’s something.”

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

“Very well.”

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

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

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

“Very well.”

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

“Which is?”

“You’re an honest man, my dear Riva.”

Riva made a face. “Am I?”

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

“I do.”

“But not you.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Riva shrugged. “Why would I? It wouldn’t be right.”

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

Riva frowned. “Well, he still holds my eldest hostage, doesn’t he? Few other governors enjoy such incentive to keep on the straight and narrow.” Though he didn’t want to think about it, he pictured Wes in the Bastion. How many years had separated them now? Twelve? If everything went according to plan, the boy would soon be trapped behind enemy lines, quite literally. But hopefully not for long. And then... Oh yes, and then—!

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

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

“Although I do have some news of young Wes to share with you though, by the way.” The general’s voice trailed off as Istome reappeared clutching a silver tray. She had changed into a gown of sheer fabric, a flimsy thing that left nothing to the imagination.

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

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

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

“What is she? A mix of some sort, yes? She’s Ahren, definitely, but what else?”

Riva shook his head. “Nothing else. Just Ahren.”

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

“I am indeed.”

“Where did you get her?”

“She’s from Cired,” said Riva. “If my source can be believed.”

“The islands? Truly? Ah, now, wait a moment... That’s odd...”

“What is?”

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

Riva chose not to answer immediately, letting the silence build until it verged on awkward. “Well, I suppose that’s because she doesn’t have one.”

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

“Because she’s not a slave.” Riva paused again. “She’s my second wife.”

The general’s mouth fell open, and he flung Istome’s hand away as if she were cursed. “What? You can’t be—!”

Riva shook his head. “Serious? No, I’m not.”

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

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

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

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

Virgilio seemed to have difficulty concentrating on anything except Istome. It wasn’t his fault, of course, for in addition to the

most enticing hips, she had tits enough for three women. “What’s her name, anyway?” he asked.

“Istome.”

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

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

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

“What of him?”

“Ah. So, you’ve not had word from him recently, I take it?”

“No.” Riva frowned. “I have not.” Not for years.

“Ah, I see. Well, that’s boys for you. I rarely hear from mine either, and they’re a lot older than yours. My daughters are another story, of course. They write all the time—too often if you ask me. And always complaining. But the boys? Not a word!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I don’t,” said Virgilio, melancholy. “I really don’t. I can feel it.”

“Oh, come on! You’re vigorous enough for a man half your age.”

Virgilio’s expression was a cross between a scowl and a smirk. “I take back what I said before about your honesty. The truth is I don’t have long, Riva. I realise how odd it must sound, but I can *feel* it.”

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

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

“Mm.”

“I mean, look at me! Ugh. I’m fat and skinny at the same time. I can’t seem to digest anything properly anymore. I have to get up at

least a dozen times a night to piss. And for what? I barely drink past sunset.” The general’s voice became a whisper. “Oh, and just between you and me, the sword on your belt gets heavier while the one under it gets lighter...”

Riva grimaced. “I could have done without knowing that.”

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

“Gladly. I don’t even know why you keep bringing it up.”

“Hm. So, I meant to ask you earlier—what do you think of the title ‘Guardian of the Greater North’?”

“Well it’s not exactly original, is it?”

“No indeed. But that’s the Assembly for you, eh? A truly unimaginative lot. When I turned sixty-five they gifted me with the title *The Old Lion*. I mean, really? What was wrong with *The Lion*? Talk about a slap in the face! What will they call me should I live to turn eighty, eh? I shudder to think.”

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

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

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

“We’re both puppets, Riva. Me, you, and everyone else besides! That’s what life in the League has become, though. And Eusebio’s Assembly openly mocks all its little puppets, or at least that’s how it seems. Having said that, you can’t be completely ungrateful for

this particular opportunity though, can you? I mean, it goes completely against policy to allow—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Riva knew he had pushed his point too far when Virgilio made a gesture of finality. For a while, neither man spoke.

At last Riva stood up. “Well, at any rate we should probably get back to the business of warlording, then.” He peered at the

refreshments on the tray before slapping a few dark grapes and a thin wedge of cheese into his mouth.

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

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

BENE**THE UNIVERSITY OF GERICH ASSET RECOVERY TEAM****EASTERN RENDEROS**

They'd been trudging through the seemingly endless rocky knolls for a few weeks, but to Bene it felt more like years. To say it was hard country was an understatement. He longed to see civilisation again, even if it came in the form of a few crude huts butted up against one another. Because as far as he could make out, that was about as civilised as Renderos got. Still, it was better than dirt and scrub.

At least their journey so far hadn't been without its highlights. They were travelling through a wild land unchanged by the passage of centuries. He couldn't find half the villages they'd visited on any of his maps, and their inhabitants were fascinating, if backward. The great wide open in between was harsh, but it was also starkly beautiful. Everyone had marvelled, many times, at the mysterious flickering lights in the night sky that were neither stars nor meteors.

And no one would ever forget the sweet, clear water from the spring they'd stumbled across just a few days ago. He'd never tasted anything so fresh and pure in his life!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, professor."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sir," said Tonneson. "I didn't—"

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

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

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

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

"Sir," said Tonneson, holding up a finger. "I'm afraid I must object to that on the grounds—"

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

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

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

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

"Magister," said Khela, "please let me just say I'm very, very sorry for—"

“No, no!” Roaoo waved her words away. “Whatever it is you have to say, I don’t care to hear it. Just go.”

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

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

Tonneson looked up. “Sir?”

“I said, you do surprise me. I expected more from you. Tell me, just what were you thinking?”

“I... well, I suppose I wasn’t, professor.”

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

“Yes, professor.”

Roaoo straightened. “It’s *magister*, actually.”

“Uh, sir?”

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

“No, sir,” said Tonneson, but it seemed to Bene that he was agreeing for the sake of it, and didn’t really understand the point Roaoo was trying to make.

Roaoo put his arms behind his back and drew himself up to his full height. “Hmm. So, is a captain higher in rank than a colonel, Tonneson?”

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

“Of course not.” Roaoo managed to sound far more patronising than Bene thought possible. He was starting to feel sorry for Tonneson, even though he’d never liked him. And, as of this morning, hated him more than he could say. “I suppose that’s probably why you never hear me address you as *Captain Tonneson*, isn’t it?”

“Er, yes. Sir.”

“A professor is to a magister what a captain is to a colonel. Don’t make the mistake of calling me a professor again.”

“Yes, sir.”

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

“No, sir.”

“Meaning?”

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

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

“Yes, sir.”

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

Tonneson shared Bene’s astonishment. “You’re not going to write me up?”

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

It took a few moments, but Tonneson actually smiled. Smiled! And it wasn’t the cynical smirk Bene was used to seeing on his stupid, handsome face, but an apparently genuine expression of gratitude. Perhaps Roaoo had actually gotten through to him?

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

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

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

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

“Yes, magister,” said Bene. Why in fuck’s name had the man wanted him to see and hear all that, though? It would probably take weeks for him to process everything! Months! In his head, Khela lay on her back, legs open, with the colonel atop her. He made his way back to the main part of the camp, trying to suppress the image, and all the while trailing Tonneson but still keeping a good amount of distance between them. They had absolutely nothing to say to each other. Come to think of it, he wasn’t sure he had all that much to say to his ex-girlfriend either.

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

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

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

“Four, sergeant?” asked Tonneson. “I don’t hear a thing. How fast are they moving?”

“Doesn’t sound like they’re in a hurry, sir.”

“Can you tell who they are, exactly?”

Styler shook his head. “I’d only be guessing at that, sir.”

“But you know there are four of them?”

“I’d be willing to bet money on it.”

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

Styler’s expression was blank. “Sir.”

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

“No sir,” said Gansen. “Nothing.”

“Did you get any sleep before your patrol?”

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

Bene stifled a giggle. “Oh yeah? For some reason, eh?” he said under his breath.

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

Gansen perked up immediately. “Really? I’m off until midday?”

“That’s correct, trooper. Go and sleep. In fact, that’s an order.”

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

Bene studied Tonneson. The man glanced around in what he probably thought was a casual way, but Bene wasn’t fooled. He

was looking for Khela, obviously unaware of the fact that she'd been gone a while. Then he brought a hand to his face as if he were smoothing his moustache, but surreptitiously sniffed his middle finger instead. A very specific image of the two of them together formed in Bene's mind, and he was again seething with envy. Fuck it! Hadn't he just decided he was done with all that shit?

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

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

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

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

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

Bene jumped off his barrel, all thoughts of Khela leaving his head. So, they might finally catch the fugitive and go the fuck home again? "Aw, fuck yeah!"

"Move out! Move out! Move out!" bellowed Tonneson. "Northwest! Go! Go! Go! Everyone, move out!" The outriders mounted up and thundered out of the camp. You could practically feel their anticipation.

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

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

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

Russek swallowed. "Alone? Wha-? No! No sir, of course not! I only left when one of the other teams caught up to us. His horse

threw a shoe, so he stayed with them. And I was right behind the others that just got here, so I could tell you what we saw..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How can he be sure?"

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

"Really?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yep," said Bene.

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

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

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

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

"Think so?" She sounded hopeful.

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

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

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

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

“Sorry.”

“Are you really?”

Bene grinned. “Actually, no. Not really.”

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

“Dealing with my *what*?”

“You heard me.”

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

“Yep.”

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

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

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

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

“Nope. I don’t get jealous.”

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

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

“Uh huh.”

“No. Really, I don’t care at all.”

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

“No, it isn’t.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it isn’t.”

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

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

Khela spun to face him. “I knew it!”

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

“You’re making it sound like it was out in the open for all to see! It wasn’t. We were in a tent, and we didn’t think anyone would care. And I wasn’t thinking, was I? I mean, obviously I wasn’t. Neither of us were.”

“You’re going to be the butt of a lot of jokes now, you know.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” said Khela, giving him a sour look.

“Yeah, you really messed up this time.”

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

“Actually no, he won’t. Not really.”

Khela’s mouth fell open. “What do you mean, he won’t?”

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

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

Bene grinned. “Heh. Yeah, it is.”

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

“I guess. Basically, yeah...”

“That’s bullshit. Why’s it different for me?”

“Dunno,” said Bene, shrugging. “It just is.”

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

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

“Jealous? Of you? No.”

Bene laughed, but there was no mirth in it. He raised his eyebrow in an exaggerated way and waggled his head from side to side. “Oh yeah?” he said, mimicking the sound of Khela’s voice. “Just be honest. If that’s possible.”

“There’s a big difference between feeling jealous and being cheated on.”

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

“Well, you started it!”

“I did not!”

“Sure. Whatever.”

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

“It wasn’t all that long ago, Bene.”

“Well it seems like a long time ago.”

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

“So?”

“So? You’re kidding me, right?”

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

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

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

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

“Augh!” shouted Bene. “What the shit, Khel? I can’t believe we’re even talking about this. Again! It’s ancient history. And I’m not going to defend what I did, even now. I was a dickhead. I said I was sorry then and I meant it, but I don’t see why I should have to keep on apologising. We’re not even together, anyway, so...”

Khela looked the other way. “You still are a dickhead.”

Bene took a deep breath. “Everybody’s entitled to their opinion.”

“Maybe you should just go.”

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

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

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

“Why don’t you mind your own business?”

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

Khela’s jaw dropped. “And so we’re back to that again?”

Bene shrugged. “So, what’s the attraction anyway? You never told me.”

“Don’t mock me.”

“I’m serious.”

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

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

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

Bene hesitated. “Yes,” he said, meaning no.

Khela put her hands together, and then pulled them slowly apart until there was nearly an arm’s length of space in between. “*That*,” she said, arching an eyebrow, “is the attraction. Compared to him, you’re hung like a mouse.”

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

“What can I say? I’ve been taking lessons from the master.”

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

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

ROSARIUS

SARASINIA

THE BASTION

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

Relaxing didn't work. He felt around in the gloom with his feet, but there was nothing to sit on or lean against. Gods, but it was impossible to get comfortable. If he let his wrists take his weight, the shackles dug into his skin and the pain forced him back up. But stooping made his back ache. If he tried crouching to relieve the pressure, the burning in his thighs eventually forced him back to his original position. Cycling between crouching and standing

didn't work, either—there was simply no respite from the pain! He screamed in frustration. The Hole was fucking awful, much worse than he'd imagined. Whoever designed it had obviously put some thought into it, the cunning bastard. He chuckled, then laughed, and finally began howling. "I hope at least they got you too, Romelo," he yelled. "Prick. Fucker! Motherfucking fucker!" The sound bounced off the walls, hurting his ears.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rosarius shut his eyes against a sudden, blinding light.

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

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

Another man spoke. "What did he say?"

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

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

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

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

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

Rosarius wasn't familiar with this particular room in the Old Keep. A tiled stone floor, probably slate. No bars on the windows. No bookcases or carpets, either, which was unusual. No furniture aside from a table with three plush chairs behind it. His warders hung

around, chatting with two pairs of guardsmen. None of them paid him any mind.

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

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

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

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

Dannis and Tavaris responded with hard looks.

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

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

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

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

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

with the neckline to accentuate our lord prince's striking facial features. What fabulous tones!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dannis and Tavaris looked at Colton, who shook his head. “Er, yes. Well then, it seems I must remind you that we are here because Grand Magistrate Eusebio—my father no less—has willed that we be here. Furthermore, he entrusted *me* to head this commission of enquiry, specifically.”

Dannis smirked. “Indeed.”

“I just said it was a good day to die,” said Rosarius. “I mean, you said you wanted manners, didn’t you? Well, I just gave you the proper Bastion greeting. Why haven’t you replied as you should? Or do you not know where you are?”

“We know where we are.” Tavaris eyed him coldly.

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

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

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

Colton ignored him. “Let’s proceed, shall we?”

“Sure. Why the fuck not?”

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

course—better served by minds like ours. Minds, of course, that are inclined to proactive engagement.”

“I’ve no idea what the shit you’re on about,” said Rosarius.

Colton continued to ignore him. “Assisting me with my task today,” he said, peering down his nose, “are His Lordship Parmis Dannis, Esquire, and His Lordship Bo Tavaris, Esquire. Two very esteemed personages with whom I believe you are already well acquainted. True? Together, we shall continue our quest to uncover the facts of a certain recent—and most unfortunate—event, one in which *you* played a significant part. Of course, I am sure that you need absolutely no reminder of the subject of the aforementioned enquiry. Yes or no?”

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

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

Rosarius shrugged.

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

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

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

“Just get the fuck on with whatever this is, then,” said Rosarius, hands balled into fists as he got to his feet. He longed to lash out at someone. Anyone.

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

“I said, get on with it!” shouted Rosarius. He was tired, his nerves were raw, and at this very moment he wanted nothing more out of life than to beat the living fuck out of anyone who pissed him off.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rosarius edged closer to the table. The day before, the warders had given him a bucket of water and some fresh clothes, but despite his best efforts he was still encrusted with filth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Peasant?” asked Rosarius, reaching for the blade on his hip that wasn’t there. “I’ll make you eat that insult. Just who the fuck do you think you’re talking to?”

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

“Very well, my lord prince,” said Dannis, stroking Colton’s hand as if it were a puppy.

“Your wish is our command,” said Tavaris.

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

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

“I concur,” whispered Tavaris, dabbing at his friend’s cheek with his handkerchief. “No words.”

“Fuck me,” said Rosarius under his breath. How nuts were these three? They were only visiting, but gods help the Bastion if they were here all the time.

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

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

Rosarius stared them down. “First, a chair.”

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

Dannis blinked. “You there!” he shouted at one of the guards. “I say, you there! You! Guardsman! Do fetch this man here

something to sit on, will you? A chair!" He clapped his hands twice. "A chair, at once!"

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

"Now if you don't mind, Lozano," said Colton, "tell us what happened on the night in question. "And again, I implore you, please omit no detail. Tell us, no matter how trivial it may seem. We need to know everything."

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

"We've no time for all that!" shouted Tavaris. "Get to the part about the fight!"

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

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

"As I said, it all started some months ago. Romelo had mentioned in passing, to a group of us, about how one of the other students had insulted him..."

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

"Yes," said Rosarius, nodding. "Riva. Er, and that's Riva junior, of course, not senior. Wes Riva."

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

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

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

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

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

“He did, but–”

“So, elaborate.”

“There’s not really anything to tell,” said Rosarius, annoyed. “Riva’s not a thief. Never was.”

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

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

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

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

“Right. Look, this whole thing came about because Riva was seeing this girl from the city, all right? A citizen, I mean. She wasn’t from a noble house or anything, but her father had money. Now, for some reason, Romelo didn’t approve of them being together.

He kept calling Riva *that Ahren barbarian*, you know, and that sort of thing. Saying stuff about how *his kind* had no business consorting with southern women.”

“Ah,” said Colton, nodding. “I see.”

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

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

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

“Hmm,” said Tavaris, wrinkling his nose. “Unlikely.”

“Excuse me?” asked Rosarius.

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

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

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

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

Rosarius stared. “Your point being?”

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

“Romelo’s hardly my better,” said Rosarius, laughing. “He’s my cousin.”

Dannis and Tavaris exchanged glances. Worried glances.

“It’s true,” said Colton. “They are indeed cousins.”

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

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

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

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

“So? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, to quote him, ‘I believe that Ahren barbarians have no business—’”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Rosarius, holding up a hand. “I’ll just finish that sentence for you, eh? I’ll bet it goes something like ‘Ahren barbarians have no business training at the Bastion?’ Or is it

‘Ahren barbarians have no business being in Sarasinia?’ Is that it? If I’ve heard that bullshit once, I’ve heard it a hundred times.”

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

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

Dannis snorted. “I mean, it’s implied in the name!”

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

“You *are* correct,” said Rosarius. “I couldn’t agree less if I tried.”

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

“An excellent question, my lord prince!” exclaimed Tavaris.

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

Rosarius considered the question. “Well—”

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

Colton motioned for silence. “Let Lozano speak, please.”

“Hmf,” said Tavaris, sitting down.

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

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

“Indeed.” Tavaris wagged his head. “I, too, object to the foulness of this man’s words.”

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

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

“Yes, yes, we acknowledge your thoughts on the matter,” said Colton. “Moving on. Now, I understand that on the night in question, Ales posted you and one or two others around the city as spies?”

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

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

“Yes. At least.”

“And how many squads were there?”

“I dunno. Four, maybe?”

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

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

Tavaris yawned. “Oh dear. This *is* getting tedious, isn’t it?”

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

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

“Thank you, Bo-Bo dear,” said Dannis.

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

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

“I move to terminate this investigation,” said Dannis. “Immediately.”

Tavaris winked at him. “Seconded.”

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

“My lord prince?” Dannis looked frightened.

“We are conducting an investigation,” said Colton, “into an episode in which noble sons of this great city were grievously injured and could easily have lost their lives. In fact, some may yet lose their lives! Some of the individuals involved come from very important Sarasinian families! There are provincial families involved too, granted, but we cannot merely ignore them, can we? No! No, no, no! This is an event that, though apparently trivial to you, has the potential to send shockwaves throughout our entire dominion. Lo! We must remember that the eyes of the world are upon us, just as we must remember that we are expected to do our utmost to uncover the truth of the matter. Ours is a lofty task indeed. The ramifications—not only of what has happened but

how we are seen to respond to it—why, they simply boggle the mind! No, I cannot emphasise enough how serious this is, my dear fellows. So, please, I urge us to complete our duties with due diligence!”

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes,” said Tavaris, mirroring Colton’s gesture. “Just skip to the fight, please, Lozano.”

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

Rosarius sighed. The Hole had left him exhausted and aching, and he wasn’t entirely sure if being around these idiots wasn’t doing his head in. Better just to give them what they wanted, come

what may. “Whatever,” he said. “So, as I was saying, we had the job of trying to corral Riva. It took some doing, but we finally got him cornered in some back street. Romelo had made it clear we weren’t to do anything until after he got there...”

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

“So, we all stood there for ages, just looking at each other. The Ivarians were shaking their heads, saying they were leaving. I told Romelo in no uncertain terms we weren’t going to kill Riva. A student by the name of Villasenor backed me up. Romelo wasn’t happy about it, of course. He started screaming his head off about how Villasenor was a traitor to the Sarasinian cause, or some shit. Then they started wrestling, and Romelo stabbed him in the arm. Swords came out, and then some of Riva’s friends showed up. They must have gotten wind about what Romelo was doing and, well, anyway... talk about bad timing. Things got confusing. There were too many people there, too much happening. A lot of shouting. Tempers frayed. And then, of course, everything went to shit...”

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

get hurt. Luckily some others came in at that point and he got distracted. And then I remember Beccera going around Benton...”

“And?” asked Colton.

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

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

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

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

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

Colton tapped the table with a finger. “That’s it?”

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

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

Rosarius felt his anger rising. “I would.”

“It’s quite interesting, actually. He said that you, Wes, and others attacked him and his friends.”

“He fuckin’ said what?”

“Why? Do you find that... objectionable?”

“Of course I do!” shouted Rosarius, making a fist. “It’s a complete fucking lie!”

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

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

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

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

Rosarius jumped to his feet, heedless of his squalling, protesting muscles. “Fuckin’ what?”

Colton feigned deafness. “We are done here, Lozano,” he said, standing up. “A small fine will be imposed upon the families of the individuals involved to compensate our fine city for disturbing its peace. With the exception of the Romelo family, of course. You’re free to go back to your studies. Good day.”

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

Rosarius stared after them. Good day? He’d just gotten out of the Hole for doing his cousin’s dirty work. Dirty work that had gotten friends badly hurt. And gotten his family fined for it into the bargain? And Romelo’s punishment was apparently... nothing? No. It would not stand. “What the fuck?” he screamed, hurling his chair across the room. It skidded and bounced off a

wall. Ignoring the pain flaring in his arms and back, he went to retrieve it and dashed it against the floor until it broke apart. He did the same with each of the remaining chairs.

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

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