

CHAPTER ONE

The Rooftop Races

Corta was going to kill him.

She had a reputation to maintain, he knew that, but he'd gone and been stupid anyway. Dominic had seen a small handful of people visiting her restaurant with missing fingers, and it was no secret that Corta had been the one to take them. That was what she did, if you didn't hold up your end of whatever bargain you'd struck with her. She wasn't a cruel woman, but she wasn't known for her mercy. She was a squat woman with thick thighs, broad shoulders, and large breasts, with a voice that was often louder than it needed to be. She had four sons, each larger and more muscled than the last, all essentially interchangeable so far as anyone who worked with Corta was concerned. Each of them was fearsome, but none of them commanded respect in the same way that Corta herself did.

She was one of the most important people among the lower classes in Gennaro, a woman who had clawed her way up from nothing until she was practically bumping elbows with the nobility. She had secured for herself a position at the very lowest tier of the illustrati, with enough fame to grant her the ability to shout a man to death – or at least, that was one of the stories that people told about her.

She was going to kill Dominic, he was sure of that.

The rooftop races were to blame.



“Have you gone to see Welexi?” asked Franco with a smile.

Dominic was trying to limber up before the race. He focused on stretching out his long legs. “No,” he replied. “Too many crowds.”

“You should look up every now and then, and maybe you’ll catch sight of him,” said Franco. “He can fly.”

“I thought that was just a story,” said Dominic. He ran his fingers through his shaggy black hair, wishing that he had thought to get it cut before the race. It hadn't seemed like it would be a problem last night, but now he noticed that it was hanging down into his field of vision. Maybe it had always been like that, and he was only noticing now for the same reason that he felt a pressure in his gut and a cold sweat in the small of his back.

“Well of course it's a story,” said Franco. “But they tell stories about things that are true all the time. Welexi has giant wings made of light, huge ones, each two or three

yards across. He flaps them like a bird.”

“And you’ve seen this?” asked Dominic. He stood up tall and started rotating his shoulders.

“Of course,” said Franco. “I just caught the tail end of it, but he had the wings alright.”

“So you didn’t actually see him fly,” said Dominic.

“Come on Dom, you don’t need to be so skeptical,” said Franco. “But no, I didn’t see him fly. I hardly doubt that people would lie about a thing like that though, would they? They love Welexi, but they wouldn’t lie for him like that.”

Dominic shrugged. “I don’t know. All I’m saying is that I’ve heard all of the same stories about the illustrati that you have, and not all of them have the ring of truth. It may be that Welexi can fly. I don’t really doubt it too much. But you have to be careful about what you believe if you don’t want to get taken for a fool.” Franco could always be seen with some pamphlet or another, printed on the cheapest yellow paper that would still hold ink, each filled with another wild story about illustrati fighting pitched battles with their elements clashing against each other, or searching out exotic treasures in foreign lands.

“You’d call me a fool? This coming from the man that bets so much on himself?” asked Franco.

Dominic shrugged. He cocked an ear. He could hear the crowds growing noisy. “Come on, I think it’s time.”

The rooftops of Gennaro were almost uniformly covered with red clay tiles, except in places where the roofs were flattened for extra living space. The taller buildings had balconies and covered corridors that were open to the city air, and at the moment all of them were filled with people. Some of the roofs had people sitting or squatting on them. The lower classes drank wine from glass bottles with woven basket covers, and they spoke loudly to one another, sometimes shouting over the rooftops to their neighbors. Above them, where the wealthy watched from the balconies, the wine was drunk from goblets, and the conversation more demure. The air smelled of smoke and seawater, and there was a mild breeze that kept the sun from being too fierce. Dominic took one last moment to drink from his canteen, then stepped out into the sunlight with the other racers. The audience – his audience – cheered.

“Vidre was there beside him,” said Franco, as though this moment weren’t enough to send their hearts hammering. “I’d let her sink one of her glass daggers into me for the slightest taste of her sweet lips.”

“Only one dagger?” asked Lorenz, one of the other racers. “I’d let her use both, just to have the scent of her hair fill my nose.”

“You think so little of her?” asked Rafaello. “Why, to have just the faintest sniff of her morning breath I would let her cleave my arms and legs from my body in one fell swoop.”

“One fell swoop?” asked Michel. “Your devotion to our most esteemed lady Vidre is lacking if you wouldn’t let her use a club to amputate you, which I would do just for the

sight of her upper eyebrow.”

“But the upper eyebrow is her most fetching part!” protested Franco with a laugh.

This continued on for some time, with the racers trying to one up each other. Dominic didn't join in. That sort of braggadocio had never been his way, and he had a great deal on his mind besides. They were all being paid a sum of fifty capi for participating in the races, with the winner getting an extra hundred on top of that. It was a tidy sum given that it was only about an hour's worth of actual work, and there were other considerations as well, like a measure of fame and the affections of pretty girls. It wasn't difficult for Corta to gather up six young men willing to risk their lives for the entertainment of others.

Dominic had won the last six races. The money was a pittance in comparison to how much Corta was making, and how much the men and women who watched from the balconies were gambling with each other, but the first win had comfortably padded out his meager living arrangements, and ensured that he could drink good wine and eat meat with every meal. When it came time for the second race, he had bet almost all of the money left over on himself, on the theory that he wouldn't be too much worse off if he had to go back to living in poverty a week early. He'd done the same on the third race, and the fourth, each time watching the pile of coins multiply. He spent little of it. He had so much money that he had to open an account at one of the banks, a large place with an interior courtyard and vaulted ceilings.

For the fifth race he had gotten a note showing proof of credit from the bank, written on fine paper by a man with a greasy mustache and a floral scent. Dominic had been ready to have to explain to Corta how this was easier than carrying thirty pounds worth of coin into her restaurant, but she was completely unperturbed and took the note without question or comment. He'd won that race at three to one odds, and Corta had ensured that the bank's ledgers reflected that at the end of the day. It wasn't nearly as exciting as being handed a pile of gleaming coins, but it was thrilling all the same when he put it in any real terms. He had enough money to pay for a place of his own, if he wanted to, instead of sharing a room with two other men. He could buy passage across the Calypso, if he wanted to, or even across the Pensic if he chose to consign himself to the bowels of some colony ship. He left the money untouched though, and saved it all for the sixth race.

This time Dominic watched carefully as the banker wrote out the proof of credit. There was a thin wax seal on the upper corner of the note, and the banker had an elaborate signature that would have been difficult to forge. The note came with a hold on the account, so that he couldn't simply give proof of credit to Corta and then take all of the money from his account if he lost. The actual styling of the numbers had been given less attention though, and it hadn't taken Dominic too much time to turn a one into a two, once he'd bought a quill and ink and spent an afternoon practicing. He'd been ready with an explanation of how he had doubled his money with a different bet, one made with another person across town, but Corta had simply taken his note as though she saw dozens of them every week, giving it no more scrutiny than the goblet of wine she idly

drank from. He had run the race as hard as he possibly could, and taken his sixth win with a comfortable lead. The odds were two to one now, but Dominic had been able to effectively triple his money with the forged note. The elation he'd felt afterward when the money was in his account overshadowed the thrill of winning by a considerable margin.

The odds were down to three to two, which was the worst that Dominic had seen. That meant that people were too confident that he was going to win. The payout would hardly be worth anything. Dominic had stared at the ceiling when he was trying to get to sleep, listening to the sounds of the city outside while he wavered on whether he was going to bet again. He had enough money to open up a shop somewhere in the city, or buy his way into an apprenticeship of some kind. He was only seventeen, not yet too old for that sort of thing. He could start over and become the sort of man that his father had always wanted him to be, and he'd have some comfortable padding besides that. At three to two, that was the sensible thing. But on the other hand, the simple addition of a fresh mark on a proof of credit would be enough to change the odds significantly. Dominic had four thousand capi, which he could turn into twelve thousand.

He'd gone ahead and done it. There had been plenty of time for regret and second thoughts afterward, once the bet was on the books and the note of credit was locked away in Corta's strongbox. What's done was done, and there was no going back on it now in any case. If the note of credit had passed muster once, there was no reason that the deception would be uncovered now – not unless he lost, and Corta tried to collect the money from him.

As he stood on the rooftops and listened to the other racers, he was sure his heart was beating faster than theirs.

Corta came out onto the rooftops with them just as the crowds were expressing their discontent. She carried herself like there couldn't possibly be a more important person in the entire world. Her hands rose high above her head, which brought a weak cheer from the crowd, and then she called out to them.

"We have six fine racers gathered here today!" she shouted. Her domain was sound, and she was famous enough to have a measure of true power, though it wasn't clear what her upper limits were. Her voice boomed loud enough for everyone watching to hear. "Six fine racers," she repeated. "Yet only one can win." She went down the line of racers, clapping each on the back and giving them a short introduction for the audience. The races themselves didn't take all that long, so Corta liked to grandstand and strut around in front of her captive audience while she had them. She saved Dominic for last. When her meaty hand landed on his shoulder, she dug her painted nails into his flesh.

"Dominic de Luca!" Corta yelled to the crowd. This close, her voice was loud enough to rattle Dominic's bones and leave one of his ears ringing. "Son of a baker, a stoic runner, and the winner of the last six races with practiced ease!" That wasn't entirely true. The fifth race he'd only won because the city guards had interfered, and they'd been down to four runners in the sixth. He was faster than the others, but circumstances had been on his side. "I know that many of you have bet on him, thinking he's a sure thing.

And others have bet against him, thinking that his luck cannot possibly hold for long. Watch this one closely!” Her grip tightened, and she leaned into him. “You had better run for your life,” she whispered.

Dominic got down into position with the other runners as Corta continued her speech. He did his best to tune it out, since he’d heard it so many times before.

“Three laps around, six flags to touch, the first one back crowned winner,” shouted Corta. “No interference of any kind.” This last was said with a wink to the crowd. Interference was one of the primary attractions of a rooftop race. A few of the nobles had taken to bringing rotten vegetables up to the balconies with them, and it was generally agreed that this was both unsporting and hilarious. Given that serious money was riding on the races, there was a heavy incentive for interested parties to change the outcome, and this too had simply become part of the spectacle. Corta’s four enormous sons were stationed at various parts of the course to prevent the worst abuses, but the races had become more and more hazardous as time went on, much to the delight of the audience. Last time two of them had carried truncheons, and now all four did, though this was more by way of warning than because they would actually use them.

This part of Gennaro had been built centuries ago, during a time when the city council had enacted a ban on carts in all but a few sections of the city. As a consequence of that, the roads between buildings had been built with only pedestrians in mind, and so the gap between neighbors was small. More importantly for the race’s purpose, it meant that the gaps between rooftops were narrow enough to leap over, though still hazardous. Dominic’s eye flickered across the red tiles as he charted his course, mostly to reassure himself. He already knew it by heart.

“Three! Two!” Corta was shouting out the countdown, joined by the crowd. Dominic grew nervous in the final second, and felt bile in the back of his throat, but that was exactly as it had been for the six races before, and when Corta shouted “One!” he was off ahead of the others.

Dominic leapt over the first gap, which wasn’t more than three feet, and pounded on ahead. Corta had called them flags, but they were nothing more than strips of red fabric tied to convenient locations. The first was hanging from a chimney, and as soon as Dominic pressed his hand to it, he shifted his momentum, on to the next one. The crowd cheered, and despite the exertion, he smiled. He had scouted out the area under moonlight the night before, making sure that the tiled roofs were stable and that there were no obvious obstacles that he’d need to avoid in the broad daylight. The crowds cheered him on, even as the first overripe tomato splattered down just two feet from him. He was fortunate that the nobles had been drinking for at least an hour now and their aim had become truly terrible.

As Dominic pushed forward, he could hear the others, who were not much more than a stride length behind him. The roofs were treacherous enough that he didn’t dare to look back, not even when he was on a relatively straight section. There were too many chimneys and crenellations to jump over, or occasional arches to duck under, and too many people to watch. The lower class had staked out positions close to the race, and

there was always the possibility that one of them would throw a wine bottle or decide to jump in, though nothing like that had happened so far. And because the races were not quite legal, there was always a chance that the guard would turn up.

“Wait, you forgot your hat!” shouted Franco from half a step behind. This drew laughter from the crowd, and Dominic could imagine that Franco had a smile on his face, but it was the sort of useless pandering that he disliked in the races. If Franco could spare the breath for a joke, then he could use that breath on running faster.

Dominic was on the second lap when there was a scream from behind him, and a sickening crash that was followed by a longer, more mournful wail of pain. The reaction of the audience was a collective gasp of disbelief and cries of terror, though Dominic could swear that he heard one or two of the nobles laughing from their balconies. He pressed on all the same, letting his feet guide him where he needed to be. It wasn't the first time that someone had taken a fall. Most of the roofs were three stories up, and the results of a misstep were never pretty.

One of the spectators had decided to get too close to the action, and was wrestling one of Corta's sons on the rooftop, right in Dominic's path. He took a detour that required an enormous jump of nearly ten feet, which drew gasps and cheers from the crowd and gave him a comfortable lead when he stumbled into a landing. It had been a hard risk to take, especially following on the heels of hearing one of his friends be injured, but he'd done it almost without hesitation. He touched the flag on a balcony railing, and turned towards the next flag after that.

Halfway through the third lap, Dominic was two flags ahead of the next closest racer. He thought that it was Franco, based on one brief glimpse he'd gotten when taking a sharp corner, but either way it didn't seem like it mattered. The race was hard to focus on when victory was so assured, and when the relief of winning was building in him like a pot getting ready to boil over. An imminent win made Dominic almost delirious with joy, and that too was as it had been in the six races before. Sweat was dripping down his back, and he was radiating heat despite the breeze, but all was right with the world. That was when he saw Welexi hanging in the air.

The enormous wings were made of a soft white light, and as far away as he was, that was nearly all that Dominic could see. The man between the massive wings was small in comparison, just an opaque figure binding the two glowing white wings together. As Dominic watched, Welexi flapped his wings like a bird, keeping himself suspended high up in the sky, higher than the tallest buildings in the city. It was easy for Dominic to think that he was seeing an angel.

All it took was that one moment of losing focus.

Dominic felt the tile slipping away beneath his foot even as he tried to push off from it, and an easy jump suddenly saw him pitched forward, staring at the alleyway three stories below him. He reached out blindly, and managed to grab onto the roof on the other side to prevent himself from falling. His stomach hit the edge and the wind was knocked from him, but he didn't slip down further. He tried to clamber back up as quickly as possible, but Franco and Rafaello had both leapt over him effortlessly in the

time that it took Dominic to find his footing. He pushed himself harder than he ever had before, trying to close the distance before one of them reached the finish line, but it was too late.

Dominic came in third.

Corta was going to kill him.



Dominic rested his head against the pedestal of Gennaro's statue. The pedestal was ten feet high, with the statue another fifty feet of intricately carved stone on top of that. Gennaro was one of the illustrati of legend, presented in the statue as a man with a thick beard and an arm stretched out in front of him, pointing to the east. His domain had been water, and at the base of his statue were waves carved in marble, splashing up near his robes. Dominic had always liked the statue, in part because of how much history it held; Gennaro had commissioned it himself. Dominic could always imagine that the statue would be there for a hundred more years.

Corta had been kind to him, in her own way. He'd heaved up his breakfast after the race, and she had come to pat him on the back as though there were some honest affection between them.

"I'll take a man's money, but I won't take his pride," she said with a smile. "I'm not one to gloat. Take the day off – no deliveries, no jobs. Come by the restaurant tomorrow morning and we'll go to the bank together. It can't be an easy loss, but I'll make it as painless as possible."

Dominic had walked through the city streets in a cold sweat after that. He was going to have to run away, there was nothing else for it. The note of credit came with a hold, and there wasn't any way to break that. It was possible that he would be able to slip into the bank in the early hours and take out his money, but if it were transferred into its weight in coins, it would be nearly impossible to move. He could get the money in the form of a promissory note that he'd take to another bank, but he didn't know whether he'd be able to get that note honored in another city. He didn't even really have any idea where he was going to run away to, or how he would get there, nor how he would protect himself against Corta. She surely had some reach within the Sovento States that extended beyond just Gennaro. He could change his name and disappear, he was fairly confident in that, but then he'd been confident in his ability to win the rooftop race, and he was keenly aware of how that had turned out.

Either way, he would have to wait to get the money, so there was nothing better to do than rest against the statue. He could pretend that it was simply another day, and nothing was wrong. Tomorrow he would run.

Dominic's chest and stomach hurt from where he had hit the edge of the building, and his forearms had been scraped up enough to bleed. His tunic was a mess, and would have to be washed. He stood up slowly, using the marble pedestal for leverage, and looked up to the statue of Gennaro, which stood firm and resolute as ever, pointing off east, to distant lands. You couldn't trust the stories about the illustrati, but Dominic had learned all of the stories about Gennaro anyway. Gennaro had founded the city in the early days,

and ensured that it was safe from anyone who tried to challenge it. He could walk on water, and would run straight across the sea to engage directly with pirates or rogue navies. He wielded water like a whip, cracking it hard enough to break bones, though it was also said that he was kind, and slow to hurt his enemies. He was everything the illustrati were meant to be, a symbol of goodness first and a strong arm for defense and negotiation second.

Dominic's domain was shadow. He had nowhere near the level of power that Corta had, and she was only barely at the lowest level of illustrati. Still, the rooftop races had gotten his name circulating, especially after he'd had six wins in a row, and he had to figure that news of his loss would make the rounds even more than the wins had. People had started to take note of him, in however small a way. He couldn't really feel the difference in terms of speed or strength, but he'd been able to feel his domain for the past month. The shadows seemed more alive to him now, and he could move his own shadow with a bit of focus, rotating it until it was perpendicular to the direction of the sun. He could see a little better in the dark, though it was hard to know whether he was just imagining it.

He was going to practice moving his shadow around before he realized that it had become too cloudy for that; his shadow was diffuse and indistinct. He tried moving it anyway, just for something to distract himself, but the change was barely noticeable. A person couldn't get stronger from training their power, only from an increase in fame or notoriety, but it was supposed to be possible to gain a greater level of finesse. Mostly to take his mind off Corta, Dominic looked beneath his feet at where his shadow was and rotated it slowly around himself. If he was thinking about that, he would stop thinking about how Corta was going to kill him.

The clouds parted, and Dominic was bathed in sunlight, which made the shadows sharp and clear. When he looked up, he saw a man falling from the sky and heading straight towards the statue of Gennaro. Motes of light hung in the air behind the falling figure.

The man seemed to descend in slow motion when painted against the vast expanse of the sky. He struck Gennaro's outstretched arm and snapped it off with a terrible crash. Dominic was standing close enough that a chunk of marble nearly hit him in the head. He flinched backwards, too slowly to react properly, and was saved from a caved-in skull by luck alone. When he lowered his arm from in front of his face, he saw a man with skin the color of a coffee stain laying near the statue. The man was perfectly bald, and his silver armor was torn, like it had been ripped into by some enormous beast. The marble tiles of the plaza had been shattered where he had landed.

Dominic moved towards the man. It had to be Welexi. He was bloodied and broken, and he wasn't moving. Dominic moved closer, through the rubble that Welexi had created during his meteoric descent, and touched the fallen man lightly on the shoulder.

Welexi convulsed and coughed up a thick clot of blood, then looked around wildly. He tried to stand up, but cried out in pain as his leg gave way beneath him. One of his eyes was a deep red, and the other looked half-crazed. He wiped blood from his mouth.

“He’s coming,” said Welexi. His voice was unsteady, nearly cracking. Light shot forth from his injured leg, and encased it in a soft white glow. Welexi stood up with great effort but no obvious unsteadiness this time. He cast a glance towards Dominic. “He’s coming.”

Dominic backed up. More people were moving forward from around the plaza, and they were all talking. He heard Welexi’s name mentioned several times, mingled with notes of confusion and fear.

A loud booming sound came from the other end of the plaza, and Dominic looked over to see dust rising up from the caved-in roof of one of the markethouses. A man in dark red armor stood in the center of the destruction with his hands on his hips. His face was nearly lost within a mass of black hair and a thick black beard. He leapt down from the building, dropping three stories with no seeming concern, and slammed into the plaza floor with a loud clang of metal against marble.

Zerstor was as widely known as Welexi, and immediately identifiable by his armor. His domain was rust, and the armor he clad himself in was corroded in a way that would have made it useless on any other man. He couldn’t fly, but he could leap long distances. There were prohibitions against speaking his name out loud, but everyone did it anyway, in part because he had never shown his face in Gennaro before, and in part because the stories about him were too lurid and too outlandish not to share.

Dominic wracked his brain for more information. You couldn’t trust the stories about the illustrati, because half of them were false, but now Zerstor was standing just a hundred yards away, and walking closer. Zerstor held his hand out to the side, and a few of the crude plates that made up his armor flew through the air and snapped into position to make a long, rusty sword.

“Get back!” shouted Welexi. He was quickly forming light around himself, sealing over his armor where it no longer protected him. There was a brilliant flash, and afterward he held a spear of white light in his fist. “Get back!” Welexi shouted a second time, and this time Dominic realized that he was talking to the growing crowds, not to Zerstor. Dominic had heard about the fights between the two causing collateral damage and civilian casualties, but he made no move to leave. He wasn’t about to miss this.

“Five fights is too many,” said Zerstor, revealing a mouth of broken yellow teeth. “Do you recall when I left you bleeding in the desert? I should have ended you there. But it was just you and I alone then, a cozy little battle fought across the dunes, and I needed someone to spread the story for me. I knew you would do it too. You never could keep your mouth shut, even when it would have served you best.”

“I spoke the truth, nothing more,” said Welexi. They were still some distance apart, and Zerstor was making no effort to close the distance quickly. “To pretend that I hadn’t been beaten would have been dishonorable.”

“Perhaps,” said Zerstor. He swung his sword out to the side. “If you try to run, I’ll kill every last person in this plaza.”

“I’m afraid you broke my leg,” said Welexi. He let out a weak laugh. His forehead was beaded with sweat, and Dominic didn’t see how it was possible that he would win

this fight. “So I suppose this is it then.”

“How does it feel to see your death closing in on you?” asked Zerstor. He smiled with his jagged teeth. “You always knew that it would be me that got you, didn’t you?”

“I’ve had a thousand enemies,” said Welexi. “That you haven’t heard of most of them is testament to their fates.”

“You say that for the benefit of these fine people,” said Zerstor as he cast a glance at the crowd. He slammed a gauntleted fist up against his armored chest with a loud clank and stared at Welexi. “I was always special to you. A monolithic evil that you could build your reputation on. I had my reasons to leave you alive in that desert, but you had your own reasons for never killing me. You could have murdered me in Lerabor, but you chose not to.”

“You set Sanguin on them!” shouted Welexi. “She washed the streets in blood! How could I have responded but to try to save the innocents?”

Zerstor had stopped his advance, and stood some distance from Welexi. He made no move to engage, but it was clear this was only a calm before the storm. The crowd around them had grown thick, and Dominic could see people watching from the windows around the plaza, and gathering up on the rooftops. Dominic’s view was considerably closer. He was in the inner circle, with nothing but empty air between him and the illustrati. A small part of him recognized that the wise thing to do would be to slip backwards through the crowd and put as much distance between himself and the fight as possible, but the promise of witnessing a piece of history firsthand was too powerful of a lure. And besides that, what did he really have to lose?

“I grow weary of your moralizing,” said Zerstor. “It never rang true for me.” He turned away and looked to the crowd. “I know you better than to think you were stalling for the guards to come, but it seems that’s been the result. Something to whet my appetite before I kill you, I suppose.”

The parapetti were pushing their way through the crowd, with their polearms clearly visible above the throngs. No one was eager to move aside for them. This wasn’t how the stories of the illustrati went; none of them had ever been brought down by a simple guard. It didn’t even happen if there were a dozen guards, fought all at once. The illustrati varied in their powers, but Zerstor had to be one of the most famous men on the face of the earth. Though he was handicapped by having the domain of rust, it was virtually impossible that he would be beaten by any ordinary man. For their part the parapetti seemed to understand this, and didn’t move with much haste. An older woman cried out that they were going to their deaths, and Zerstor grinned.

“Leave them,” said Welexi. He had finished all of his modifications of light, and his armor glowed from all the haphazard repairs that he’d made with his power. In his hand he held a solid spear of light, which was long and sharply pointed, but otherwise unadorned. “They’re only doing their duty.”

Zerstor nodded. “Yes, as people do.”

One of the parapetti broke through, and held his polearm before him like it would shield him. The others followed close behind.

“I’ll offer you a deal,” said Welexi. There was urgency in his voice. “You walk free, past all these guards, and I will not stop you. You leave this city and its people in peace, without shedding more blood. In exchange, I have bards around the world that can sing of our battles. I have riches that I can give you, to spare these lives today.”

Zerstor smiled. “You pretend at being protective to cover your own cowardice,” he said. “That’s a little too transparent for my liking. And besides, you know that there’s nothing you can offer me. I’m driven entirely by fame, am I not? ‘Not the false fame of bardic songs and embellished legends, but a trueness of character that cannot be faked.’ You said that, didn’t you, about yourself? Well, we’re much alike, in that regard.”

When Zerstor moved, the whole world seemed to be standing still. The first parapetto had enough time to lower his polearm a handspan, but Zerstor simply stepped around it. All Dominic saw was the guard crumpling to the ground with a rusted hole in the center of his breastplate. Zerstor had cleanly decapitated the second guard when Welexi arrived behind him, thrusting forward with his spear of light.

Zerstor dodged, and the crowd scattered as he moved towards them. He whipped around at the same time, to face Welexi. His pitted sword was held cautiously in front of him, and it didn’t waver in the slightest.

“If you’re really so brave and noble, so ready to protect these people,” said Zerstor, “then guarantee me that this fight is just between the two of us.”

“I can’t control what other people -”

Zerstor spun towards one of the parapetti, easily slipping within the reach of his polearm. When he finished his spinning motion he was holding the guard in front of him. The guard’s head was gripped tightly in his armored fist. His perfectly balanced sword was held in the other hand and pointed towards Welexi, as motionless as before.

“You were about to speak the words of a coward,” said Zerstor. He squeezed the parapetto’s head with a sudden violent motion, and everyone in the plaza heard a sickening crunch as the man went limp. Zerstor let him slump to the ground. “Order them to stand down. Send them away. Tell everyone that this final fight is not to be interrupted.”

Welexi didn’t have the slightest trace of hesitation. “This is my fight, and mine alone,” he called to the crowd. “If Vidre arrives, tell her that I have made a commitment. She might be the only one aside from me that could defeat this monster. Everyone else stand back. If you value your lives, you will leave. Any agents of Gennaro among you, I command you to stand down by the power vested in me by the senatori not three days ago.” He held his spear in front of him, and settled himself into a more aggressive fighting stance.

The two men began to circle each other carefully. The crowd gave them a wide berth, but didn’t dissipate entirely, even as the dead parapetti were taken away by their comrades. Dominic was one of the closest, with a mass of people to his back. He was ready to take off running at any moment, if Zerstor turned his attentions towards the crowd, but there seemed little chance of that at this point.

Zerstor and Welexi moved slowly, sizing each other up, and shifting their weight so

that they were never the slightest bit off balance. They were taking their time. A low murmur began to build from the crowd as people talked in low voices to their neighbors. Dominic was glad that no one had tried to engage him in conversation. He was fairly sure that the only thing he could have said was that they were about to see Welexi die. Welexi's left leg was the injured one, and it was encased in light like a thick plaster cast that allowed limited mobility. Whenever Welexi needed to step to the side with it, the motion was quicker and slightly tentative, as though he was worried it would give out.

Zerstor struck out first, swinging his sword at just the moment when Welexi was moving that injured leg. If Dominic had been able to make a bet in that brief fraction of a second, he would have bet that it was the killing blow, but Welexi flipped backwards with astonishing speed and landed easily on his feet. His left leg was stiff, but he'd been exaggerating the extent of how that limited him.

Some primal part of Dominic had expected them to go at each other then, to tear into each other like he'd seen cats do when they were fighting, or like dogs with a piece of meat. He wanted it, in some way, a fevered, brutal brawl that seemed to have been promised to him. But Zerstor and Welexi went back to their circling, and continued on with feints and footwork. They reminded Dominic less of the four-legged animals he'd seen skirmishing in the alleys, and more of two birds pecking at one another. To be frank, it was disappointing.

Dominic almost missed it the first time it happened, and even after he wasn't sure what he'd seen was correct. Zerstor had thrust his sword forward, and Welexi had spun away, but something had happened at the point of contact between their weapons – or rather, failed to happen. The next time, Dominic was more sure of it. Welexi's spear had passed straight through Zerstor's sword. It threw their entire battle into context, with all the distance that they kept between them and their tentative jabs at each other. Neither was able to parry a blow, and if Welexi's spear could go through armor like it went through the sword, a single proper thrust would almost certainly give Zerstor a mortal wound.

As the fight went on, and the minutes passed, it became clear that Welexi was losing his stamina. Dominic wasn't willing to rule out that this was simply another ruse, but it didn't seem like it. Welexi's bald head was soaked in sweat, which ran together with his blood to soak the collar of the shirt he wore beneath his armor. He moved slightly too slow, and a jab of Zerstor's glanced off his breastplate. A bloom of rust marked where the pitted sword had struck.

Welexi moved back, putting more distance between them, and summoned a second shaft of light into his other hand. His eyes were hard as he and Zerstor watched each other, and Dominic could feel his heart beating faster in sympathy. Welexi twirled his spears around, fast enough that they briefly appeared as disks of light, then charged forward.

His attacks were fast and furious, and a cheer came up from the crowd as Zerstor spent all his efforts on dodging away from them, the sword in his hand more of a liability than an asset. Twice Welexi got in a solid hit, but both times it was from the side rather

than a stab forward, passing through the armor and striking Zerstor's side like a staff instead of a spear. Dominic held his breath as Welexi kept up his onslaught, hoping that the killing blow would happen any moment. The world seemed to narrow itself down to those two men, the beacon of light and the giant of rust, both moving faster than they had any right to. Zerstor stepped back to avoid another thrust of the spear towards his chest, and swung his sword towards Welexi's side at the same time.

There was a blinding flash of light. Dominic tried his best to blink it away, and he could hear the cries and groans from the people around him. Welexi's form was burned into his vision, halfway split at the waist. Dominic had seen the sword moving, had seen it touch the armor again ... and then Welexi had turned into a being of pure light, like an apparition, so quickly and so powerfully that it was only possible to make sense of it after the fact.

Welexi stood in front of Zerstor, gasping for breath. He was entirely intact, his form fully physical once more. His eyes were wide. Zerstor had his sword held up in a defensive position, and if Dominic was having trouble recovering his vision, he could only hope that Zerstor had it worse.

Welexi spun his spears around once, then leapt forward again to press the advantage. With his vision half gone, Dominic could barely see except to note the rapid movements of Welexi's light. If Welexi was going to win, it would be now.

Welexi screamed in pain, and one of the spears went clattering to the ground. Three fingers were still gripped around it, but there was surprisingly little blood. The battle had turned in an instant, on a single strike that Dominic hadn't even been able to follow. Welexi staggered back now, with his ruined hand clutched to his chest and his spear out in front of him in his left hand. If the fingers that still clutched the spear of light were nearly bloodless, the wound itself was more than making up for it.

"Please," Welexi said, his voice so soft that it was difficult to hear. Zerstor stalked forward, with his sword leading in front of him. Dominic hadn't realized how close he was to the action until Zerstor passed within two yards of him. A quick glance backwards showed that the crowd had ebbed and flowed, and after the blast of light had put up a greater distance. Dominic felt as though he was stuck in place. He was closer to the illustrati than anyone else, and he couldn't do anything more than watch.

Zerstor batted Welexi's hand to the side with his sword, and the second spear of light went tumbling down to the ground. With a burst of speed, the hulking man in rusted armor wrapped his hand around Welexi's throat and lifted him up into the air.

"A fitting end," said Zerstor. Welexi tried to form another construct of light, but Zerstor grabbed his uninjured arm and snapped the bone, loudly enough that everyone around could hear it. Welexi screamed in pain. "They won't be able to speak of you without uttering my name," said Zerstor. His voice was loud, and carried across the crowd.

Dominic's eyes were drawn to the spear of light that lay on the ground not ten feet away. Welexi was dying, and a foolish plan formed in Dominic's mind. It would be a gamble larger than the one he'd taken with Corta, but it was double or nothing at this

point. Before he could consider it too deeply, he raced forward in a dead sprint and grabbed the spear of light from the ground, then tacked hard the other direction, just like he'd done on the rooftop, to propel himself at Zerstor.

There was only time for an instant of doubt when Zerstor turned around, his black beard thick with sweat and his eyes sharp and piercing, but Dominic wasn't acting on a level that permitted doubt. The spear had been moving too fast anyway. It slid straight through the armor with no resistance, and struck Zerstor in the heart.

He'd been holding Welexi with one hand, and dropped him with a gasp.

His death wasn't instant, but it was close.



Dominic dropped the spear.

A confused cheer came up from the watching crowd, which rippled around the plaza until it was taken up by those who couldn't see. Dominic's arms and back were slick with sweat, and he was breathing hard. Everyone was looking at him. His plan had only gone so far as picking up the light and attacking Zerstor, and he was at a loss for what to do now that the moment had passed. He felt none of the elation that came with winning a race.

Welexi coughed loudly and climbed to his feet. His mangled hand was bleeding freely. He looked down at it and furrowed his brow for a moment. Tendrils of light grew from the wound and wrapped around the hand. Welexi turned his eyes to Dominic, and walked towards him on unsteady feet, with his left leg dragging behind him like a club foot.

"Name," Welexi said sotto voce. He had a rich voice like a fine liqueur, but this was the first time that he'd said anything that wasn't pitched for a crowd. Now it was low and hushed, like a secret shared between the two of them.

"Dominic de Luca," replied Dominic, trying to keep his own voice as low.

Welexi grasped Dominic's wrist and lifted his arm up into the air.

"Never think that you are without power," Welexi called to the crowd. They went silent at his voice, which carried far. "There is nothing in this world stronger than courage and the conviction to do what is right. This man risked his life to save mine. Zerstor, long a scourge on this world, now lies dead." He turned to Dominic, but continued to project his voice out to the crowds. "I name you Dominic de Luca, Lightscour. May the story of your boldness and bravery be told for decades to come."

Dominic's heart was hammering in his chest. He could barely believe what was happening. He had been given a name by Welexi himself. People were cheering around him.

"Come," said Welexi, again pitching his voice so only Dominic could hear. "I have wounds that need tending to, and we have business to discuss."

There were a thousand people shouting after the both of them. Dominic followed in Welexi's unsteady wake. The crowd pressed in on them. People touched him, tugged at his tunic, and pressed their flesh against Welexi, and they did the same to Dominic. It was a distinctly uncomfortable feeling. Behind them, Dominic heard the sound of

Zerstor's armor being pulled apart for souvenirs. It was becoming too much, too fast, and all Dominic could do was follow behind Welexi and try to remain calm. Questions were being shouted at him, too many to answer. The crowd was becoming more insistent, and more suffocating. Just when Dominic was about to start shoving back, Welexi grabbed his hand and helped him up into a closed palanquin carried by four servants.

"This was sent by someone trying to curry my favor, no doubt," said Welexi once they were both inside. "On hearing that there was a fight, someone's first thought was that they should mobilize a litter to carry me away, so that they could improve their own position in the world. Would my nemesis have been shown the same deference, had he proven the victor?" The palanquin started to move through the crowd at a glacial pace. Welexi leaned his head back and closed his eyes. The glowing light around his mangled hand had shaped itself into crude fingers. Up close, Dominic could see the lines on Welexi's face, and the exhaustion that he carried himself with. He was dark-skinned, but with a pallor. There was a wound on almost every inch of exposed skin, scrapes and gashes from his fall. Dominic had no idea how old the illustrati was, but to have accumulated so many stories he had to be at least in his forties, maybe older.

"Where are we going?" asked Dominic.

Welexi was a long time in answering. "My ship," he said finally. He opened his eyes, which were mismatched from his injuries, one of them blue and the other filled with blood. "I hope that's alright. Feel free to step out now if you'd like."

Dominic didn't make a move. He was sitting a half a foot away from the greatest hero of modern times. Their knees were touching. Dominic had never been one to pay much mind to the illustrati's stories, but the stories of Welexi were well known. He'd single-handedly fought the Golden Horde to a standstill. He'd brought down warlords and brought an end to evil kings. Though it seemed like a lifetime ago now, Dominic had seen Welexi flying through the air like a bird. There was a reason they called him Welexi Sunhawk. Dominic wasn't invested in the lives of the illustrati like some of his friends, but here was a living legend, and a man of extreme power. He could make debts disappear with the snap of his fingers. Dominic had no idea what to say.

"The story will circle the city," said Welexi with a long sigh. He touched his face and hissed with pain. When he pulled his hand away, white light had bloomed across his skin, covering the worst of the cuts and scratches. He settled into his seat, with his head tilted back and his eyes closed. "The story will circle the city," he repeated, "By nightfall it will be on the lips of every man, woman, and child. Your name, mine, and Zerstor's, may he find some measure of peace in death. I don't imagine that you have much standing right now, hardly enough to know your domain if I read you right. But nevertheless, you will accrue an enormous amount of fame from this event."

"Alright," said Dominic. "That's ... thank you, for what you said at the plaza."

"You will have invitations," said Welexi, as though Dominic had said nothing. "The senatori, certainly, will invite you to have wine with them. If you deign to attend their parties, you will be asked to recount the story again and again, until you have perfected it. It was a moment of bravery and heroism, the kind that people like to see in

themselves. Any bumps or rough edges in the story will be smoothed out, if not by you, then by others. What Zerstor said now has an ironic echo to it, don't you think? They won't be able to mention his name without mentioning yours. Fitting, for his last words."

Welexi fell silent again, and the sounds of the crowds outside filtered through the heavy drapes inside the palanquin, which swayed and bobbed as it was carried through the city. Occasionally there were cheers, which cut against the somber mood that Welexi exuded.

"You wanted to be the one to kill him," said Dominic. When the spear had gone through Zerstor's heart, Dominic hadn't felt good about it. He'd been full of nervous energy, like he was about to puke or collapse. He had been too struck by disbelief to really feel happy that the risk had paid off. Now his heart was beginning to sink in his chest, and his mind was returning to Corta and what she would do to him. If Welexi didn't help him –

Welexi opened his good eye and looked at Dominic. "I think in narratives," he said. "It's an occupational hazard. Zerstor had built for himself an image of darkest evil, and blackened his soul enough to become a household name despite the bans and the taboos. I took the other path. It was natural for us to butt heads. Five battles. Murder writ large across the world, and I was always too much of a – he was right, you know. I could have let Sanguin drown a city in blood to chase him down. If I tally up the damages he's caused, can it really have been worth it?" Welexi closed his eye and sighed. The palanquin swayed in a gentle rhythm despite the throngs of people still outside it.

"Let me tell you a story," said Welexi. "A prince is trying to secure an alliance, and agrees to marrying one of the three princesses, sight unseen. He meets the first, and she's incredibly ugly, so ugly that she must wear a veil at all times. He meets the second, and she's just as ugly as the first, if not more so. The prince is starting to regret agreeing to marry one of them. He meets the third sister, and do you know what she looks like?"

Dominic waited for some time before he realized that Welexi expected him to answer. "If it weren't a story, I'd think she'd be just as ugly as her sisters. But since it is a story ... I expect her to be beautiful, I guess. Or different, at least."

"You understand," said Welexi. "Stories have a logic to them, a way that they're shaped. I've traveled most of the world, and these shapes hold true. The story that Zerstor and I were shaping was to have its climax in the fifth fight, the fight where one of us was to die. I wanted that story. I lost loved ones for that story. But now ... now that story has been stillborn. There's a new story, with you at the center, a story about a mortal man stepping into godly affairs." He lowered his head and looked down at his mangled hand, where the soft light glowed. Then he turned his eyes up towards Dominic. "There's a new story here, and if you'll let me, I'll help you forge it."

CHAPTER TWO

The Queen of Glass

The *Zenith* was a small ship, with a complement of thirty men and women and little room for cargo. She had seven white sails that carried her all over the civilized world. When Dominic saw the ship, the thing that struck him most was artistry of it. By his estimation, half of the crew members must have been tasked with keeping every piece of wood freshly painted and every piece of gleaming metal polished. There were thin sheets of silver engraved with elaborate designs all over the ship, in the same style as Welexi's ruined armor, and carved wooden accents that displayed organic curls. The ship's railings were heavily lacquered, with none of the dents, gouges, or simple weathering that might be expected of a ship that saw regular use. And attached to the bow of the ship was an elaborate sculpture of glass, clearly Vidre's work. It showed a muscular man reaching forward, a fragile glass finger extended in front of him, as though he was trying to touch the horizon. There were no cannons, and nothing of its design suggested it was anything more than a work of art. Yet it was said to be the fastest ship in the world, able to outpace naval flagships and express packet boats alike.

The palanquin was carried past a line of watchful crew members, to a spot that had been cleared on the dock. Welexi stepped out to the roar of the crowds. He gave a low, somber bow to them, then raised his mangled hand to the sky. He'd used the light to shape a defiant fist. Blood streamed down his forearm, though it wouldn't have been visible from a distance. Dominic followed Welexi up the plank and onto the deck of the *Zenith*, and his appearance drew another cheer from the crowd; the story had traveled ahead of them. There were hardly any waves, but Dominic felt unsteady on his feet – nearly as unsteady as Welexi looked. Welexi moved across the deck of the ship like a drunkard, down into the cabin, and gestured for Dominic to follow.

The crew watched them duck into the bowels of the ship without comment. They all wore identical white uniforms, finely tailored and far better than Dominic would have expected to see on a sailor. They had silvered buttons down the front of their jackets, and blue trim around their throats and cuffs. In the stories that were told about Welexi – the ones that took place at sea – the crew were nameless and faceless. With their appearance, it was easy to see how they could fade into the background, like they were just another piece of the ship's elaborate decorations. They even had similar haircuts. Dominic was keenly aware of his sweat-stained tunic and his shaggy hair.

The interior of the ship was used economically. The corridor that divided up the living space was only large enough for a single person to walk down, and then not without a bit of care. Welexi had already moved into the room at the far end, and Dominic followed. By the time he came in, Welexi was laying on a wide bed and bleeding onto white cotton sheets.

A woman in glass armor stood over him. She had blond hair with a tint of red to it, which was pulled back in a simple braid. The armor was as clear as crystal, and a white blouse showed through beneath it. Glass was Vidre's domain, and where the armor would be suicidal on a normal person, on her it was both an impeccable defense and a potentially lethal weapon. She was famed for taking two glass daggers into battle, one in each hand, but those were nowhere to be seen at the moment. She had a thick white scar on the side of her face which passed through her brow and down her cheek, but it didn't mar her – if anything, it made her look more distinctive, more beautiful, and hinted at her dangerous nature. Dominic had heard dozens of stories about her, and now he was in the same room with the Lady Vidre. She had as many names as Welexi: the Queen of Glass, the Whore of Abalon, the Childish Bride, the Princess of Blades, Sharddriver, Thornscraper, the Hand of Pane. She glanced briefly at Dominic when he entered, but barely seemed to register him.

“Are you going to die?” asked Vidre.

“No,” replied Welexi. “I don't think so. I lost more blood than is probably good for me, and my leg's broken, held together only by light. My arm too. That will heal. My fingers won't.” He held up his mangled hand, with the fingers of light still formed into a fist. Only his pinky finger remained, and he was missing most of his palm. “I should have picked them up, so Gael could stick them back on. Send someone to fetch them. Or send someone to make a story out of them. Some urchins probably took them as soon as it was clear it wouldn't cost them their lives, but you might be able to retrieve them.”

A short man with red hair and a bright green apron came into the small cabin, which really wasn't suited for three people to stand around in, and clucked his tongue. He carried a leather bag filled with metal instruments, gauze, and small bottles. Dominic had followed the stories of the illustrati well enough to recognize him too; he was a doctor by the name of Gael Mottram. He only had the one name – Red Angel. He had a dark history, though the stories were vague about what it was he had done, and when they weren't vague, they seemed too disturbing to believe. Experiments, they said. He was another living legend, a man who could kill with a touch. His domain was flesh. Dominic took an involuntary step backward.

“I came as soon as I got Vidre's message,” said Gael. He laid a hand on Welexi. “It's bad.” He turned to Vidre and Dominic. “Out, while I deal with my patient.”

“Wait,” said Welexi. “There are things I need to speak of with my young protege.”

“I'm not -” began Vidre.

“Dominic de Luca saved my life,” said Welexi. Gael and Vidre turned and looked at Dominic. “He is to be given our full resources, and a place on the ship, not as crew, but as one of us. We're elevating him.”

Gael muttered under his breath and began tending to Welexi. Dominic's eyes went wide when Gael used his power on Welexi's ruined hand. The bloody flesh folded in on itself and twisted around exposed bone, then slid back over it. Shattered pieces of bone fell onto the bloodstained bed. Welexi cried out in pain and hissed through his teeth. There was an angry red line where the sword had cut through his hand, but the bleeding at least had stopped. Gael began unstrapping Welexi's armor without much comment. Vidre had turned away as soon as Gael had made his move, and she was staring at Dominic rather than looking at the triage.

"Does he have any standing?" asked Vidre.

"He will," said Welexi. He was sweating, and his voice didn't quite reach the casual calm that he clearly intended.

"Does he have a useful domain?" asked Vidre.

"I have no idea," said Welexi.

"It's shadow," said Dominic.

The room was silent for a few moments, and then Welexi began to laugh. "Shadow and light, a story for the ages!" he said. His voice was weak, but he was smiling.

"You've lost a lot of blood," said Gael. He turned to the others. "We can talk about these developments later. The flesh is all healed, but I count ten broken bones, maybe eleven, and he's low on blood. He won't get any rest unless I put him out. He can't help but push himself."

Vidre pushed past Dominic, and he followed her as she went down the corridor and into a different, smaller room near the middle of the ship. She folded a seat down from the wall for him, and sat cross-legged on her bed. All around the room was glass – small figurines which sat on top of the shelves, long cylinders of glass that were held in place by leather straps, and a jar of glass marbles tucked beneath the bed.

"Dominic de Luca," said Vidre, like she was feeling the name with her mouth. "Tell me what happened."

"There was a fight," Dominic said. He'd heard the stories about Vidre and what she could do with those daggers. He'd also heard stories about what lay beneath that glass armor. He folded his arms across his chest. "Welexi and Zerstor."

"The story preceded you," said Vidre. "Details."

"I don't know how or where it started, but Welexi came falling out of the sky, straight through the clouds, with his wings breaking into pieces behind him," said Dominic. "He hit the statue of Gennaro. I thought he was dead. He woke up just in time for Zerstor to come bounding across the city. They talked. A few guards came, and Zerstor killed them. And then they fought. It was ... tentative, then fast. Welexi was injured from the fall, or from what came before it. He- he turned into light at one point."

"He gave himself armor of light?" asked Vidre with a raised eyebrow.

"No," said Dominic, shaking his head and remembering being nearly blinded. "He turned into light, just for a moment. Zerstor's sword passed straight through him."

"He can't do that," said Vidre.

"Well, he did. Ask anyone who was there," said Dominic.

“Within the next hour, half the city will be claiming that they were there,” said Vidre. “And the people who actually were there will be saying that they had a front row seat. This is why I’m talking to you now, so I can separate truth from fiction. Continue.”

“Welexi tried to press his advantage after that,” said Dominic. “But he got his hand cut off. Or, part of it anyway. You saw the result. It looked like Zerstor was going to win, he had Welexi by the throat, so ... I picked up Welexi’s weapon from the ground, and I killed Zerstor with it.”

Vidre stared at him. “Zerstor is dead.”

“He is,” said Dominic. He had almost as much trouble believing it as she seemed to. “The spear passed through his armor, into his heart.”

“He’s too fast,” said Vidre. “There’s no way that you would be able to hit him, let alone pierce – no, I suppose if you had Welexi’s spear, if he was distracted – and of course that’s why he wants you to come with us. Well. This bugger things.”

Her words were like slap to the face. “Do you understand that I saved his life?” asked Dominic.

“I do,” said Vidre. “And you’re going to be elevated for it, which I’m sure wasn’t under consideration at all.”

Dominic parted his mouth to respond, but only ended up frowning.

“I don’t mean to slight you,” said Vidre, “But this really does bugger things. It’s a counter-story that needs to find its legs. I need to get moving on this, speak with the senatori, the ship is going to have leave port tomorrow instead of two days from now because we can’t have Welexi showing weakness. I’ll have to inform the bards – look, are you alright with coming with us? We offer fame, fortune, and power. I would say beyond your wildest dreams, but I’ve seen how big dreams can be. We leave tomorrow morning, that gives you the rest of today to get ready.” She watched him carefully.

“Yes,” said Dominic. The world was coming back into focus. He had a path laid out in front of him, which was more than he could say for his life as it had been an hour ago. “Of course.”

“And?” asked Vidre.

“And?” repeated Dominic.

“You were supposed to ask me where we’re going,” said Vidre, like she was talking to a child.

“Where are we going then?” asked Dominic.

“Torland,” said Vidre. “And from there to elsewhere, part of Welexi’s quest for the Numifex. We won’t be back in the Sovento States for years.”

“Okay,” said Dominic. She was speaking too quickly for him, and clearly impatient. It was starting to become clear that this was his life now. He would be traveling with the Sunhawk and the Queen of Glass. He was one of them now, or would be soon.

“You’re supposed to ask what the Numifex is – look, we’ll do all this another time, when I have more patience and you’re less awestruck, or whatever it is that’s clouding your head,” said Vidre. “And I do hope that this is not you at your smartest.”

“Sorry,” said Dominic. “It’s been a long day.”

“Is there anything I desperately need to know about you?” asked Vidre.

“No,” said Dominic, quickly enough that it almost wasn’t a lie; his brain simply hadn’t caught up to his mouth, and it was only after the word was out that a cascade of other thoughts came following which showed how untrue that “no” really was. Right at the top of the list was Corta. He had half a mind to ask Vidre for money, to explain that he owed a debt of four thousand capi on top of the four thousand in his account, but he could very well imagine her laughing in his face and telling him that he wasn’t worth that to Welexi. He wanted her to note some falseness in his denial, to extract the information, so he would be able to lay things out for her.

Vidre simply took him at his word though, and that was that.

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The crowds weren’t as thick when Dominic left the ship, though there were still quite a lot of people milling about. When they saw him, a ragged cheer rippled through their ranks, but it was clear that they were waiting for someone else – someone more important. He came down the plank and passed through the sailors in their white uniforms, and was grateful that no one in the crowd immediately began to grab for him, as they’d done in the plaza. The fact that a few of the sailors carried swords might have had something to do with that.

“Is it true you killed Zerstor?” asked an older man, who Dominic took for a pensioner.

“I did,” said Dominic. “It was luck more than anything.” The people parted way for him, but not easily. He wasn’t the man they wanted to see, but he was by far the most interesting person around.

“What did they say in there?” asked a girl a few years younger than Dominic.

“They just wanted to thank me,” said Dominic.

“What’s your name?” asked an old woman.

“Dominic de Luca,” he replied. To his mild irritation, a few of the people had started following him, walking alongside him as he made his way to his parents’ house. Afterward he planned to stop by his apartment and pack his meager possessions away, and get back to the ship before anyone could change their mind. He would be long gone by the time Corta came looking for him. “I’m Dominic Lightscour now,” he said, remembering the name that Welexi had given him. Welexi had a hundred names, each of them a testament to some good deed: Whitespear, Sunhawk, Brightshield, on and on for ages. Dominic resolved that Lightscour wouldn’t be the last of the names he received.

With another two blocks and twenty questions, only the young girl was still keeping pace with him. He hadn’t quite ran from anyone, but many of those who could afford to sit around the docks all day waiting for something interesting to happen were older, and not able to follow quickly. The girl dogged at his steps despite his long strides, asking more questions.

“What do you do for a living?” she asked.

“I’m a runner, packages for the wealthy mostly,” he replied. Usually it was contraband of one kind or another, stolen goods to be sold to those who didn’t inquire

too deeply about their provenance, or teas and spices that hadn't passed through the customs office. Sometimes it was drugs – malum, mostly – and sometimes it was proscribed literature. Corta had fingers in many pies. Dominic wasn't supposed to look inside the packages, but he did whenever there wasn't an obvious seal on one of them. There'd been a time when he'd taken his own cut, but he'd stopped that when Santino had been caught doing the same and paid with his life.

He glanced around as they passed through a five-way intersection. He was vaguely worried about another mob forming. Thanks to Welexi, everyone knew his name, or would soon, but practically no one knew his face. He couldn't have been seen by that many people in all, maybe more if he counted the ones that had been watching from the rooftops or leaning out their windows. Eventually he would be known like Welexi was. He was sure that when he returned to the ship in an hour's time there would be all sorts of people wanting to meet him, senatori, merchants, and everyone else. He still had time before everyone recognized him on sight. If not for the girl, he would be virtually anonymous.

“How old are you?” the girl asked.

“I'm seventeen,” Dominic replied. “Look, do you think we might part ways here? I'm worried that you're going to call attention to me, and there are things that I need to get done in the next few hours that I don't think are going to be possible for very long.”

“Like what?” asked the girl. She continued on, right next to him, and Dominic contemplated running away from her before deciding that he had a little bit more dignity than that.

“I need to speak with my parents,” said Dominic. “And with the friends I share a room with.” And after that, slink back to the ship before Corta had any chance to take his hide. He had a day though, she'd said that.

“I can wait outside,” said the girl with a smile.

“I would really prefer to be left alone,” said Dominic.

Her smile dropped. “You're new,” she said. “If you want to be an illustrati you need to have an ombra, and I'm as good as any.”

“Aren't you a little young -” Dominic began.

“Not that kind of ombra,” she said with a moue, “Like an assistant.”

“You're still a little young,” he replied. They were coming up on his parents' shop, and he wanted her gone before then. “Look, if you want to help me out, then just leave me to my business. In the meantime, start telling some stories about me. Like a bard. Alright? And if I need your assistance later on, I'll come find you.”

To his surprise, the girl nodded. “You can find me near the Orrico fountain, in the small building with a blue door.” She held out her hand. “Clarissa Fiscella.”

Dominic shook her hand, and then she was off like a dart. She was playing to her archetype, in the way that those who sought fame often did. He didn't need a precocious youth in his life though, and he had no intention of ever seeing her again, let alone seeking her out. He would leave Gennaro tomorrow, and when he returned he would be a different person entirely. That was the opportunity that had opened up in front of him.

He'd been thinking too small when he'd thought about asking Vidre for money to pay off Corta.

His parents were bakers, and the moment he opened the front door the smell brought him back to his childhood. He had spent many early mornings working dough with his father, and many evenings cleaning the shop while his mother rang up customers. He had stolen sugar from the sack in the back with his sister, sticking a wet finger in it and sucking it clean while listening for parental footsteps. His arms and hands had suffered innumerable burns from the accursed oven. That had been his childhood, the smell of it alone was nearly enough to knock the wind from him.

"Dominic!" called his mother when he stepped inside. It was warm in the bakery, as it always was. The rooms upstairs had never lacked for heat in the winters. "What are you doing here?"

"It's complicated," he replied. "Is dad around?"

"In back, I'll get him," said his mother. "We're making a cake for one of the senatori." She waved a hand towards the loaves of bread that were stacked up in baskets on the wall, with olives, cheeses, and garlic baked into the top of most of them. "Pick out a loaf to take home."

Dominic waited, and stuck his hands in his pockets. His sister Nilda was behind the counter. She didn't say hello to him, or give him a particularly welcoming look. He nodded to her, but it was some time before she nodded back. After that, she began cleaning the counter. She was trying her best to ignore him, and so he ignored her in return. He wanted to ask where the others were, but he could make his guesses. Firmino and Marcello would be making deliveries, and Anna would be studying with whatever tutor his parents could convince to work for bread. The patterns of the family had been well-established when he left, and there was no reason to think that they had changed.

His mother came back into the store's central area and gave Dominic a tight hug. His father came much slower, wiping his hands on his apron. He looked much older than Dominic remembered – he'd gone gray at the temples, and where he'd always been a thick man, now he had a bit of a pouch. He was sagging, in more ways than one.

"Dominic," said his father. Dominic's mother stepped to the side, and looked back and forth between the two of them.

"Dad," said Dominic. He felt like a child again. "Look, I had to come by here because you'll probably be getting some people that are looking for me -"

"Are you in trouble?" his father asked with a frown.

"There was a fight in Nuncio Plaza," said Dominic. "Welexi and Zerstor, a final confrontation." He wasn't sure how to say the next part. It still didn't feel like it had really happened.

"Were you picking pockets?" his sister asked from behind the counter. She was scowling at him. "Nothing like a fight to distract people, isn't that right?"

"I was just watching," said Dominic. He tried to force down his anger. "Welexi lost part of his hand, cut off by Zerstor's sword, and it looked like he was about to lose, so I stepped in and ... it's probably better that you hear it from me, because you're going to

hear it one way or another, but I killed Zerstor.”

His mother gasped and put her hands to her mouth, but his father said nothing, and only gave Dominic the same sort of look that he'd always had when he was going over his ledger at the end of the day.

“How?” his father asked.

“Welexi had dropped one of his spears. I picked it up and ... it was over quickly. I got him by surprise.” It was a hard thing for Dominic to put into words. There hadn't been much to it. It could have been any other person in the crowd. It seems like a dozen people should have been going towards the spear the moment Zerstor's back was turned, but it had only been him. “I got lucky.” The more he thought about it, the more he thought about all the ways that it could have gone wrong.

“Gambling with your life,” his father said.

Dominic nodded. There was no use in denying that.

His father shook his head. “Well, if you're telling the truth we'll get a surge in business at least. But we won't lie for you.”

“Lie for me?” Dominic asked. He could already feel tightness in his throat.

“I won't make you out to be a hero,” his father said. “I won't pretend you're someone to look up to. Now if that's all, I have a cake to bake.” His father turned back towards the kitchen.

Dominic balled up his fists. “Dad, I'm leaving the city. I'm going to be Welexi's protege. Don't you understand how important this is? How big of a thing it is? I'll be gone for years!”

“So go then,” his father replied. He folded his arms across his chest. “We wish you the best.” Dominic spun on his heel and opened the door to the bakery. He had hoped that his mother at least would offer up an objection, but there was no sound from her. He wished that he could have said goodbye to his brothers, or his sister Anna, but standing in the same room with his father for much longer would have hurt too much. He would have to hope that Anna understood.

He turned the corner to get to his apartment, and came face to face with one of Corta's enormous sons.



Vidre sat in a dimly lit room with two bards on either side of her. Their names were Leon and Marco, and both had thick beards and curly black hair. They sometimes claimed to be brothers, though that was just a bit of flourish you had to expect from men who crafted stories for a living. They had already talked about Welexi's injuries, and the stories that would have to be told to downplay them while he recovered. It was almost universally accepted that showing weakness wasn't worth whatever you gained in short-term sympathy, and besides that, the fight with Zerstor was a capstone on their time in Gennaro, and there was no point in an extended denouement.

“His name is Dominic de Luca,” said Vidre. “He's going to be a new addition to our crew, Welexi's protege. His domain is shadow, which should help matters. There's a duality there. Light saved by shadow, we can use that.”



“I swear I’ve heard that name before,” said Leon.

Vidre shook her head. “I’d doubt that. He’s a complete unknown.”

“The rooftop races,” said Marco. “I lost twenty capi betting on him.”

“He’s one of Corta’s whelps?” asked Leon with a raised eyebrow.

“Corta?” asked Vidre. They’d spent the last nine days in Gennaro, and while Vidre had memorized a flurry of names, that hadn’t been one of the ones that stuck. “Who is that?”

“She’s a criminal, the kind that the senatori don’t have too much of a problem with,” said Leon. “There are the rooftop races of course, gambling, smuggling, bribery, aggressive loans which the banks wouldn’t take, and a few other matters like that. As far as the underworld goes, she’s one of the top three in Gennaro.” He frowned. “I left her out of my brief, I didn’t think she was quite important enough.”

“What does this say about Dominic?” asked Vidre. She had a glass of wine in front of her, which she hadn’t touched. She was too on-edge for alcohol, and had a suspicion that she would have to keep her wits about her until they set sail. Welexi had looked downright sickly when she left. It would be the perfect time for someone to make an attempt on his life.

“Oh, likely your new boy is a criminal himself,” said Leon. “Most of the racers are. Being fleet of foot makes you valuable among the criminal element, in case someone needs a lookout that can outpace the guards. That was the genesis for Corta’s races, I believe.”

“This presents a problem from a narrative standpoint,” said Marco. He turned to look at his partner, then back to Vidre. “We’ve been trying to weave two narratives of redemption, one for Gaelwyn and one for you. Gael is going to be making up for his sins if he lives to be a hundred, and you’re waiting for the proper moment for that part of your story to conclude. To add on a third redemption arc concurrent with those two is going to strain credulity, and by the rule of three, something has to be different about this one.”

Vidre let out a long, low sigh. “Point taken. Welexi as serial reformer is questionable, but to say he’s working on all three of us just doesn’t work.”

“Especially not after what Gael did in Grantholm,” said Leon.

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room.

“We can try to scrub Dominic’s past clean,” said Vidre. “But we’d have to interrogate him first, and if he is a criminal he’s already lied to me once. I could kick him off the ship, but that doesn’t serve a narrative, and Welexi would likely object. So we pivot. It’s not a story of redemption at all, it’s a story of betrayal. We spread some rumors about a shadowy conversation down by the docks, or whispers from cloaked figures, and there’s an implication that Welexi is going to find a dagger in his back, that he was too trusting or too good.”

“Setting the boy up to take a fall?” asked Leon.

“No,” said Vidre. “It’s like I said, the narrative can’t show Dominic valiantly saving the day and then immediately cast him as a villain, even if that’s what his domain naturally suggests. We make the rumors vague. It’s not necessarily Dominic plotting,

maybe it's Gael. Maybe it's me."

Leon and Marco looked at each other.

"We need to shape this story," said Vidre. "Make it into something that people will want to share, to talk over. Betrayal works for that. There's an element of the unknown that will appeal to people. Will Welexi be betrayed by the monster, the whore, or the thief? Will he manage to survive? And if we need to bring a resolution, it can simply be that one of the crew was the betrayer, a poisoner or some-such thing. A viper snuck into his bed perhaps – some ridiculous bit of showmanship no real assassin would ever use. We have months to figure that out."

"Possibly we complete the redemption arc for Dominic then?" asked Leon. "Just to get it out of the way. Dominic heroically saves his mentor for a second time, removing any doubts about his trustworthiness. Depending on what his actual crimes have been, or at least what comes to light in the next few weeks that can be treated as credible, perhaps it'll be easy to say he's turned over a new leaf."

"There's a problem," said Marco. He gulped down his wine. "We can't sell this. Not the bit about betrayal. It's too transparent. Leon and I are known to be in your employ."

"Use intermediaries," said Vidre. "You're going to have to anyway, to spread the rumors we need. Write under a pen name. Figure out a way to make it work. And in the meantime, write the songs and stories about the battle that Dominic brought to an end. I know this is extra work, but it's necessary. We'll be in touch." She stood up without waiting to listen to their complaints. "I need to go find Dominic."

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Dominic's first instinct was to run, but Corta's son reached forward and grabbed him by the tunic.

"Mother would like a chat," said the large man. He was six and a half feet tall, with the musculature of a pit fighter. One of the sons had actually taken to that line of work, but Dominic could never keep them straight, and all of them were of similar build.

"Tell her I'll pay her," said Dominic. He struggled, and received a hard blow to the side of the head in return. Dominic wasn't completely useless in a fight, but Corta's son had too many pounds on him, as well as years of experience being his mother's enforcer. He also had a truncheon hanging conspicuously at his side. "It hasn't even been a day."

"We got word that things have been exciting for you," said Corta's son. Tito? Tino? All their names began with the same letter, which made them even harder to keep track of. "Mother wants you to not do anything foolish."

Dominic was marched forward with one hand pinned behind his back. A few people took note of them as they made their way to the restaurant where Corta made her headquarters, but no one said anything. Dominic was anonymous again, just another young man in poor clothing, not a would-be illustrati.

Corta was sitting in a booth near the back, her customary spot. The restaurant was empty. Dominic was pushed down into a seat in front of Corta. She grinned at him. She was a full-figured woman, with a blouse that was more unbuttoned than was proper, which showed off her breasts and the brassiere that struggled to hold them. Her wine-

stained teeth were large and flat. She had thick rings of gold on most of her fingers, and these clinked against her goblet when she drank from it, which was often.

“You said I could take the day off,” said Dominic.

“That was before I got word that you killed an illustrati,” said Corta. She tapped her painted nails against the wooden table. “And here I had thought you were nothing exceptional.”

“I’ll have the money to you tomorrow,” said Dominic. “Like we agreed.”

“Well, I hardly believe that, now do I?” asked Corta. She sipped at her wine. “I had wondered, after I heard, why a man would so readily risk his life. Even one so foolish as you, even one who had lost an enormous bet. It was a puzzle. So I took a look at the proof of credit you gave me, and I’m sure that you know what I found there. A four turned into an eight. I was going to kill you, but after having some time to reflect, now I think perhaps we can help each other. You’re about to be famous.”

“Alright,” said Dominic quickly. “Partners. And I’ll get you the money I owe you.”

“Ah,” said Corta. “But you were a little too fast to acquiesce, and of course we have the problem that I can’t trust you in the slightest. What plans are going through that thick skull of yours? How do you intend a second betrayal? Do you think that killing Zerstor and saving Welexi gives you so much power that you can stand against me? Do you think that you can find an ally willing to tangle with me?”

The door to the restaurant opened, and light spilled in. The earlier clouds had passed, and the sun lit Vidre up from behind, highlighting the red in her blond hair. Where the light hit her glass armor it reflected into the restaurant, momentarily lighting up the place until she stepped inside and let the door close behind her. A pair of glass daggers hung at her hips.

“Ah, Dominic, I had wondered whether I would find you here,” said Vidre. “It seems that you weren’t entirely honest with me when you said that there was nothing that I should know about.”

“Lady Vidre,” said Corta. She didn’t seem the least bit surprised to see the Queen of Glass come into her empty restaurant. “Come, have a seat.”

“No thank you,” said Vidre. “I’m only here to grab my charge.” She stood some ten feet away from the booth where Corta and Dominic sat, with Corta’s son looming close by. Vidre was halfway turned toward the door with an expectant look on her face.

“Yes, I’ll just be going,” said Dominic. He stood up, and Corta’s son stepped forward to put a hand on his shoulder and roughly force him back down.

“Hush,” said Corta. “The women are talking.” She turned her eyes to Vidre and licked her lips. “You see, the problem is that dear Dominic owes me a sum of eight thousand capi, tried to cheat me, and furthermore is my employee -”

“I’ll pay it,” said Vidre with a shrug. “Anything else?”

“You can’t simply pay -”

“Of course I can,” said Vidre. “You have to know that eight thousand capi is nothing to me.”

Corta glowered at Vidre. “And what is *he* to you?”

“I don’t have time for this right now,” said Vidre. “Dominic, let’s go. Corta, I’ll authorize you to take money from our vault, go to the Banco Albergo at your leisure.”

Dominic again began to stand up, and again Corta’s son moved forward, but this time there was a sound of footsteps and a rush of air. When Dominic looked over, Vidre had one of her daggers pressing against the stomach of Corta’s son, with the other dagger pointed lazily in Corta’s direction.

“I don’t like to judge a book by its cover,” said Vidre. “But when I walked in here, I thought to myself, ‘My, that looks like a very dumb man.’ And lo and behold, it turned out that my first instincts were correct. I hate that – when a man is all surface, no hidden depths, no subversions of my expectations of him. It’s so dull. Now, I suppose the only question that remains here is whether I’m going to have to paint the walls of this shithole of a restaurant with your blood.”

Corta clinked her rings against her goblet with narrowed eyes. “Dominic broke contract with me,” said Corta. “He tried to steal from me, after I provided for him for years. This is about more than money.”

“Then the money is off the table,” said Vidre. “I’m taking Dominic, no payment on offer.”

“I will not allow it,” said Corta. Her breathing had become very controlled. She had both her hands on the table.

“Her domain is sound,” Dominic said quickly.

“Look,” said Vidre. “I think you might have some misunderstanding of who I am. You have your own little realm of influence here. You’re one of maybe fifty people in the city with any real power, enough that you can get some use out of it instead of just having a parlor trick. Perhaps you can even hurt someone with it. That’s you.” Vidre smiled. “I’m one of the most famous women on the planet. There’s a small temple in Luchistan that you can only reach by riding a mule for twenty miles up treacherous mountain paths, and they tell stories of me there. My name is muttered in small jungle villages, in huts on the frozen tundra, in every corner of this earth. I’ve killed hundreds of men with twice your power, and they were all trained soldiers. I’m stronger than you. I’m faster than you. I can bend steel with my bare hands and catch a cannonball in mid-flight. Do you want to make this about raw might?”

Corta wavered. She looked at her son, and then at Dominic, then back to Vidre. “Sound shatters glass,” was her feeble reply. Her voice had been sapped of its confidence.

“And then what?” asked Vidre. “My armor shatters, and I’m left with a million shards of glass to kill you with. It wouldn’t be a new experience. It wouldn’t hurt me. I haven’t been cut by glass since I was ten years old. The domain of sound has never scared me before, and it’s not going to start now.” She spun her daggers around in her hands. “I’m going to leave with Dominic. Do I need to kill you?”

“No,” replied Corta. She sank down and drank what was left of her wine. Her eyes didn’t meet Vidre’s.

“Good,” said Vidre. “And while everything I know about you could fit a pair of

sentences, let me assure you that if you do anything to Dominic's family or his loved ones, or if you attempt retribution because of this unfortunate embarrassment, I will take a great deal of pleasure in slicing the skin off your face. That's the sort of thing they write songs about." She nodded to Corta's son. "That goes double for you. And get some education, find a hobby, something. if you're going to be a thug, at least be less boring about it. It's offensive."

She put her daggers back onto her belt and walked to the door without looking behind her.

Dominic followed, though he wasn't nearly so nonchalant.

CHAPTER THREE

Nighttime Ballet

There were people waiting outside. Some of them had small glass trinkets with them, on chains around their necks, or held in their hands. It wasn't one of the enormous crowds, not one like at the fight or down by the docks, but there were enough people that it was hard to see the gaps between them. Vidre's followers tended to be younger girls and older men, the former because of some combination of envy and adoration, and the latter for more lecherous reasons.

"Thank you for your patience," Vidre said to them. "I have retrieved the fledgling hero Dominic Lightscour from the clutches of that criminal woman, and all is right with the world, save for one thing." She turned to Dominic. "You lied to me."

"I'm sorry," said Dominic. Everyone was looking at him. "I'm not sure what else I can say, how I can explain myself, but ... perhaps it would be better as a private conversation."

"It's easier to bend the truth when only one person is listening," said Vidre. "Anything you have to say can be said in front of these people. They kindly waited here while I went in to deal with your mess. Explain for them how you came into this predicament. And don't lie – I can see the truth in a man's eyes." She nodded for him to continue, and there was something in her countenance that made him consider his words carefully.

"I was a runner," said Dominic. Vidre couldn't actually tell when a person was lying just by looking into their eyes, he was almost entirely sure of that. It was just poetic language, even if she probably preferred people thinking she was being literal. He saw her raise an eyebrow just a fraction, and knew he had to continue. The thought of losing this opportunity was like a stab to the heart, and he needed to say whatever it was that Vidre wanted to hear, if he could figure out what that was. He went with a confession, and pitched his voice to the crowd. "But before I was a runner, I was a thief." There was some murmuring from the crowd. They were all watching him, unabashedly. "I stole from shops because I didn't have any money, and then I began to steal from shops because I was good at it, and I didn't realize the harm I was causing." Dominic had seen enough of his friends go before a judge to know how these things went. There were rules to it. Don't admit to anything specific, show contrition, promise reform, talk about your crimes like they're all in the past, and maybe you get a few days in the stocks instead of a

year of back-breaking galley slavery. “After a while, all of my friends were thieves, and we started trying to show each other up. We would steal fancier things from more difficult targets, making a game out of it. The older boys taught us how to pickpocket. I started taking orders, so I could get my cut from the larger schemes, and then one day I realized that I had begun working for Corta without even knowing it.”

Vidre nodded. “You could find a similar story in any city in the world,” she said, more to the crowd than to him. “That’s how we sin, a little at first in a way that seems harmless, a bit of bread taken because we’re hungry, and by the time we realize the depths that we’ve sunk to, it can seem too late to crawl out. We make our sin a way of life.”

“Yes,” said Dominic. The story was flowing easily now. “I didn’t feel like there was any way to escape it. I picked up the spear and attacked Zerstor because it felt like my final chance.” He watched Vidre closely, trying to divine the meaning of every small movement of her face and the subtle shifts in her posture. Outwardly she was projecting power, speaking to him like she was the sole person in charge of his fate, which was effectively the case with Welexi so badly injured. This was just as much an act for her as it was for him, a presentation that they were giving to the crowd, but whatever Vidre was feeling beneath that surface was hidden to him.

“I can see truth in a man’s eyes,” said Vidre. “But I can’t see his future. You saved Welexi and thereby took a first step towards redemption. For that, I forgive your crimes. If you stray from that path, I will not hesitate to slit your throat, whatever else passes between us.”

“I won’t, my lady,” said Dominic. He wasn’t sure of the proper form of address. “I regret not explaining matters to you earlier, and I can only hope that I prove myself to you in the days to come.”

“Welexi is injured, and in need of our assistance,” said Vidre. “Consider that assistance your first task as his apprentice.” She turned and began walking, and he followed just behind her. Some of the people who had been watching left, but at least a dozen of them fell into step, hanging around like a cloud of bad air. Dominic’s eyes were firmly on Vidre.

As the story went, Vidre had been sold into marriage by her father for a sum of forty drams. Her purchaser was the king of Geswein, who had seen her while strolling through a market and taken an instant liking to her.

He was forty-eight, and she was nine.

The king doted on her, more like she was his daughter than his wife. The indulgences were stories of their own, grand feasts of a hundred courses, cunningly crafted toys plated in gold, and festivals that lasted for weeks. Vidre had already become one of the illustrati on the basis of her royalty and the scandalous circumstances of her marriage, but the stories of her extravagant life spread quickly, and she was thereby granted extraordinary power for one so young. She used her domain to shape glass trinkets for herself and those who had found her favor. When she was unhappy, the glass would shatter beneath her fingers and form sharp edges that never seemed to cut at her flesh.

For seven years she played in her husband's gardens, spending his money on earthly delights and generally being a terror to anyone that didn't amuse her. When her husband died, she was unceremoniously booted from Geswein by a group of merchants who had pretensions towards democracy and no respect for her nominal title of Queen.

She ended up in Abalon, a small kingdom with a hundred nobles. She had grown into a woman, and her appetites had changed. Where once it was toys and treats, now it was men. It was said that she slept with all hundred of Abalon's nobles, sometimes two or three at a time, and when that had been accomplished, she moved on to the lower classes. The stories of her childhood were still circulating the world, and now they were joined by stories of adult promiscuity.

She stepped onto the battlefield by accident. She had been sharing a bed with one of the generals of Abalon during a brief border war, and had taken the whole thing for a lark until the camp was overrun. Her suitcase had been filled overflowing with her trinkets of glass, and from this great mass she fashioned weapons for herself. She was one of the major illustrati, her comings and goings spoken of in taverns across the world, and when the soldiers came to her tent, she moved through them like a wind made of blades. Thereafter she came out to meet the army and turned the tides of battle. It was sometimes said that she was nude for that battle, her bare skin hidden only by crystal-clear glass, but Dominic thought that was far-fetched, even for a story of the illustrati.

Vidre became something of a mercenary after that, as bloodshed joined her growing list of appetites. Money was of little concern to her, so she instead sought out wars that were interesting in some way. She had no training in warfare, but summers in the Conto Mountains and winters hunting warwolves in the Sverna Valley worked their own sort of magic on the woman clad in glass. Men were eager to teach her, if only to put themselves in her company. She sliced a path through dozens of wars, almost always at the frontlines, her swiftness and strength compounding the advantages that her razor-sharp blades gave her.

She was just starting to get bored with the killing when Welexi found her, and they had been sailing together ever since.

That was how the stories went, anyway. As Dominic watched her walk, he tried to sort out what of it was likely true, and found that he had no real way of knowing. It was certain that it wasn't *all* true. They said that in her childhood Vidre had kept a puppy as her constant companion, and when the puppy grew too old for her liking she had fed it shards of glass just to see what would happen. Dominic didn't believe that one, but it was something his mother had repeated more than once. There was a persistent story told among his friends about how Vidre had once had sex with an elephant, but Franco had admitted to making it up. That didn't stop anyone from repeating it, with new details added every time. Before he'd met her, he was willing to entertain the possibility that the woman was almost entirely mythological. Now, he wasn't so sure. If it was an edifice, it was a masterfully constructed one.

When he realized that they were heading toward the ship, he almost asked whether they could stop by his shared apartment first, but his reasons for returning there were

more sentimental than practical, and he couldn't very well say that he was going to be a hero and then ask for permission to pick up a second pair of pants – not with all these people around listening in. He would have to speak to her privately later on.

It was sunset when they reached the ship. Gaelwyn came out on the deck to meet them. His apron and hands were both bloody, but he greeted them with a smile.

"I put him out," said Gaelwyn. "A simple constriction of the carotid, not terribly good for him but better than having him endlessly pushing himself. After I released it, he stayed down. He needs more blood, but there's no one with that domain in Gennaro, not at the level of power needed for domain genesis."

"He needs to be able to make an appearance tomorrow when we leave," said Vidre. "Whatever that takes."

Gael's face fell. "He needs to stay in bed. It's a small miracle that he was able to stumble back here. It will take a month and a half at a minimum for all the bones to mend, and he's going to have to learn how to use a hand made of light, at least until we can make a trip to the Bone Warden."

"I'm not asking," said Vidre. "And you know that Welexi would agree with me."

Gael nodded, but he didn't look happy.

"And stay by his side tonight," Vidre continued. "There's a good chance that we'll have visitors. Not the courteous kind."

"What do you expect me to do about it?" asked Gael. His voice wavered.

Vidre rolled her eyes. "Whatever your conscience demands. Keep him company, tend to what wounds still remain, be there to raise the alarm. I'm not asking you to rip anyone apart at the seams."

Gael winced. "Alright. Another sleepless night. Before we leave tomorrow we'll need new sheets and bedding, he's bled through what was there. His armor is in a shambles as well."

"I'll see to it," said Vidre. "Our new companion and I need to have a talk, if you don't mind."

Gael went down into the ship with only a brief, pitying glance at Dominic. Vidre rested her hands on the pommels of daggers.

"The pecking order on the ship is becoming clear to me," said Dominic. He tried to smile, but it faltered when Vidre's mouth remained in a thin line.

"We got the public explanation out of the way," said Vidre. "That went well enough, I can give you credit for that." She looked to the dock, where the sailors with swords were making sure that people were staying well back. "I shouldn't have sent you out there on your own, I see that now, and I can take some of the blame."

Dominic kept silent. Vidre's eyes turn back toward him. Though the light was fading, Dominic found that his ability to see wasn't impaired at all. It wasn't exactly as though the deck of the ship was brightly lit, but he could see clearly all the same. His connection to his domain had deepened, and he ached to test his new limits.

"Any man who inserts himself into a battle between the illustrati is a fool," said Vidre. "If you stab a man through the heart, if you do it perfectly, if his blood is flowing

swiftly, it takes a matter of seconds for him to drop. Any other mortal wound, aside from piercing or cutting through the spine or the brain, will leave you with a man that can still fight you, even if he's not long for the world. I don't think you properly understand the damage that Zerstor could have done. Zerstor should have killed you before you could touch him. And even though you touched him, it shouldn't have killed him. And even though it killed him, he should have had enough time to drive his sword through you. I can't overstate how lucky you got. You were an absolute fool, one unhindered by his total lack of knowledge, and you were rewarded for it. What probably saved you was that Zerstor couldn't get over your sheer, idiotic audacity."

"You're upset that I wasn't punished," said Dominic. His cheeks were flushed, and he hoped that the lanterns the sailors were lighting wouldn't let her see it. "You think that if someone does something brave but reckless, they should be smashed down for it, ground into paste just because you think that's the way of it. You would rather I had died, and that Welexi had died too, just so that the world could be 'fair'."

"The next time I'm in the middle of a fight, the kind that unfortunately tend to happen with a large number of civilians around, one of those bystanders is going to think to himself, 'Well, Lightscour did it, why can't I?' I'll be bristling with glass, armed with unimaginably sharp blades, and I'll be going up against someone wreathed in flame, and this hypothetical idiot, inspired by you, is going to try to be a hero, and I'm going to have to watch him die for it."

Dominic was silent. Vidre's hands were clenched around her daggers.

"I've watched so many men die," said Vidre. "The ones that go willingly to their end are easy. They don't want to die, but they've accepted that it's a possibility, or even an eventuality. There are these other men though, the ones that think they're somehow invincible, who think that they're going to engage the enemy and walk away unscathed. Sometimes I was that enemy, and I had to prove their vulnerability to them. I hated it. Still hate it, though my line of work has made it more rare." She shook her head. "And I just came in and rescued you from a situation of your own making, and it's not so much that that bothers me, it's the fact that you haven't learned anything from it except for the fact that you can escape unscathed."

"I do understand," said Dominic. "I should have at least been more honest with you. It would have made things go more smoothly. I wasn't thinking."

"No," said Vidre. "That's the problem, you were thinking, but you were thinking that you could get away with it, and sail off across the sea with us before your recent past could catch up to you, without having to jeopardize your place on this ship. You underestimated how badly things would go for you, and you're lucky that I showed up when I did. I was only coming to speak with her, not expecting to find you there. If you had been dragged in there an hour later, we wouldn't have had a choice but to leave without you."

There was a small, stubborn part of Dominic that was fairly confident that he could have handled it himself. He could have convinced Corta into letting him go, pretended at being defeated so that she wouldn't see him as a risk, and made it back to the ship. He

could feel some newfound strength coursing through him, though less than he would have expected. It seemed like it would have been enough to make a difference. He resisted the urge to say as much to Vidre.

“Welexi needs me,” said Dominic. “I’m part of his story now. You can’t have so much buildup between two titans and then have it end with a random civilian turning a defeat into a victory, Welexi explained that much to me. He’s using me, and I’m getting a lot out of it, and that’s all well and good. But that does mean that we’re going to be traveling together, so ... look, I’m sorry. I am. I’m not sorry that things worked out for me, but I’m here now, and I want to get along.”

“Fine,” said Vidre. “I had one of the cabins cleared out, it’s the second one on your right. Go get some sleep, and Welexi can deal with you in the morning.” She turned and looked out towards the sea. There was indistinct chatter from the docks that drifted over to the ship. The ship was a fair distance from anyone; some of the sailors had been put to guard duty and closed off a portion of the docks. Dominic could still see them in the dark though, small clusters of men and women on shore leave, and a few people who were watching the ship, waiting for something exciting to happen, even if the nighttime view left something to be desired.

“You said visitors?” asked Dominic.

Vidre didn’t turn around. “How much did you know about Zerstor? I know there are laws in the Sovento States against talking about people like him, but I know how effective those laws tend to be.”

“He was a villain,” said Dominic. The sound of a man’s skull being crushed had left its impression. “He killed people so that he could be famous, so that he could get power, so that he could kill more people, on and on.”

“That unfortunately describes a hundred men and a fair number of women,” said Vidre. “But Zerstor was special. He was smart. He picked his fights carefully. He made a name for himself by meddling, isolating those topics that people couldn’t stop themselves from talking about and inserting himself into that discussion with all the subtlety of a cannon. He was an abolitionist for a few years. He would descend on plantations with sword in hand, or stowaway on slave ships and unleash hell when they were out to sea. He freed thousands, maybe tens of thousands.”

“And they would talk about him,” said Dominic. The purpose was clear enough. He had heard of illustrati freeing slaves, but hadn’t realized that Zerstor was one of them. The Sovento States held no slaves, and didn’t allow slaver ships in port. “They would tell stories about the man in rusted armor that saved them.”

Vidre nodded. “And when the slaves were recaptured, they would spread those stories to other slaves. The slaves wouldn’t have the same incentives not to speak his name. The laws would stop them even less than they stop everyone else. Not that the taboos do much good in the first place,” said Vidre. “Some of the slave masters took to cutting out the tongues of their property, in the hopes of curbing Zerstor’s power, but a single person is inconsequential when it comes to our fame, no matter how much of a fanatic they are. Zerstor didn’t really care about the slaves, of course. It was just a path to power. Once

the legend had been cemented, he moved on to other schemes, other places that he could barge into the global conversation. He'd pick fights with powerful opponents, not for any real reason except that it would make waves. For a better part of a decade he was a thorn in the Iron King's side." Dominic had heard those stories. Zerstor had rusted hundreds of the Iron King's cannons, and they had fought each other a few times as well. "And then he was killed by a street rat."

"You said visitors," Dominic reminded her.

"Yes," said Vidre. "That was one of the ways that Zerstor was clever. He would team up with other rogues, so that both their legends would grow. These were always temporary alliances, never more than a month or two, but it was the sort of thing that people couldn't help but talk about. Zerstor and Sanguin, Zerstor and Boletus, Zerstor and the Animal Twins, on and on. He was a dangerous friend for anyone to have, only an ally for as long as you were useful to him, but there was something about him that many found compelling." Vidre sighed. "So there's a good chance that he came to Gennaro with someone, and with Welexi being injured as he is, it would be an opportune time to strike. Those are the sort of visitors I'm talking about."

"Ah," said Dominic. He watched her carefully.

"They might also want to kill you," said Vidre.

He almost asked why, but it was obvious enough. He was Welexi's would-be protege. Of course that would make him a target. "I can take care of myself."

"Alright," said Vidre. "Let's spar then." She turned to look at him, and slowly shifted her position so her feet were shoulder-width apart and her hands were held loosely in front of her.

"I didn't mean like that," said Dominic. He made no attempt to match her fighting stance.

"Come on," said Vidre. "There aren't too many ways that I can get out my frustrations, especially if no one takes the bait and goes after Welexi."

"You'd kill me," said Dominic. "And you're fully armored."

Vidre looked down at her glass breastplate. "You haven't seen me fully armored," she replied. "When I'm serious about battle, I don't have an inch of skin exposed. The bodily domains are too dangerous." She pulled her armor apart at the middle, as though there was a hidden seam there, and laid the two half shells of it beside one of the ship's masts. "It should probably go without saying that one doesn't normally kill one's sparring partners. I pledge not to hurt you too much more than what Gaelwyn can fix. You think you can handle yourself? You think if Leiptora comes slithering up on the ship you'll be able to do a damned thing about it? Show me."

Dominic settled into a crouch and put his hands in front of him. Vidre was four or five inches shorter than him, and he had at least fifty pounds of muscle on her, so it wasn't absurd to think that he could beat her, so long as she didn't have use of her daggers. What's more, he could feel his newfound power, a speed and strength that would be easy to tap. The whole city must know his name by now. The story of the fight in the plaza would have spread to every home and every tavern. He wasn't on her level, but physical

strength was still supposed to count for something.

“My god you’re a fool,” said one of the sailors. Dominic realized only belatedly that they were being watched, not just by the faraway hopefuls, but by the men and women that made up the crew. The sun had set some time ago, and the deck of the ship was lit by lanterns. It was easy for him to see, almost as though it was daylight, and that would give him an advantage over Vidre.

“Seaman,” said Vidre. “Give us a count.”

“Three,” said one of the sailors. Dominic’s thoughts went to Corta’s booming voice, and the moments before a race began. There was nothing on the line here though, nothing but his pride. “Two. One.”

Vidre launched herself towards him and kicked forward with both feet, hitting him squarely in the chest. Dominic tumbled backwards and slammed his head up against the railing of the ship before slumping to the ground. The sailors applauded, and Dominic heard a few drunken cheers from the docks. Apparently this humiliation was clear enough to be visible from there.

“I did a backflip when I kicked you,” said Vidre. “You missed it.” She was smiling wide and feral. “Don’t ever try anything like I just did in a real fight, by the way.”

“You’re fast,” said Dominic with a cough. The back of his head was throbbing, but he got to his feet anyway. “Really, really fast.”

“I am,” said Vidre. “Also quite strong. I also have a decade of experience, and trained under many masters. Ready for round two, or are you going to give up?”

Dominic spit over the side of the ship. “Ready.”

“Three,” called the same sailor. “Two,” Dominic was ready this time, in a more defensive position and prepared to grab her, “One.”

Vidre just stood there. She wasn’t even in a fighting stance. She put her hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side, grinning at him. “Welexi looks down on exhibition matches. He thinks it’s poor form to flaunt our power. The only reason I stopped doing them was one too many dangerous people making their way past my security. You sign up to fight twenty yokels at once, and all of the sudden there’s a man growing horns from his forehead, ready to gore you to death.”

Dominic responded by manipulating his domain. The lanterns were casting shadows where the panes of glass met at an iron strut, he thickened those until the light was completely obscured, as though the lanterns had been snuffed out. He was surprised by how easy it was, and smiled in the darkness. Vidre was lit only by the waning moon, and without the benefit of night vision.

“At least you’re smart enough to cheat,” she said. She was still smiling, and still with her hands on her hips. It would still be bright enough for her to see him moving, but if he could catch her off guard it would be harder for her to block or dodge.

He lunged forward and threw a right hook, and Vidre calmly took the hit, right in the cheekbone. Her head moved only fractionally. She grabbed his wrist and ducked down to push her shoulder into his stomach, and before he knew it, he was sailing up over her, through the air. He landed on the deck of the ship, and Vidre pressed her boot lightly

against his neck. Again, the sailors applauded.

“I don’t know how much you think I’m boasting about my abilities, but you have a very long way to go until you can match me,” said Vidre. “It’s my hope that this will teach you some humility, but if not, at least it’s fun to beat you up.”

“Again,” said Dominic. Vidre raised an eyebrow, and pulled her foot back. “Rule of three,” said Dominic as he climbed to his feet. “The third time, I have to win.”

“Depends on the story we’re telling,” said Vidre. “Are you the new recruit who gets his ass handed to him by a waif? Or are you the new recruit who beats one of the strongest illustrati on his first night aboard the *Zenith* and thereby shows his worth? Which story is more plausible? Which is more true? Is the third time special because you finally get the better of me? Or is it special because I hit you hard enough that you can’t get back up?”

Dominic didn’t wait for the count this time, and moved towards her. For a moment he thought that he might be able to land a solid hit, one she wasn’t prepared for, even if it was sloppy. It was foolish for him to think that he could catch her by surprise. She slid to the side, letting his punch sail past her, then punched him in the shoulder to knock him off balance. She followed this up by kicking his feet out from under him, and he landed on the deck of the ship with a loud thunk. The shadows he’d been maintaining faded away as he lost his focus, and the lantern light returned in full. The sailors cheered a third time.

“I yield,” Dominic groaned from the ground. “I can only hope that beating me so badly has helped you to relax.” He rubbed his hip, which had taken most of the weight of his fall. “Are you faster than Welexi?”

“Not usually,” said Vidre. She wasn’t even breathing heavily, and had dropped from her fighting stance to get into a squat and watch him. “My standing reaches a peak around Velen’s Feast, and I believe I’m higher than him then. There are other seasonal variations, and sometimes a new piece of news or work of fiction winds its way into the public consciousness enough that there’s some measurable impact. For the most part, he’s my superior in terms of raw standing.” She cocked her head to the side and smiled. “Just as you’re my clear inferior.”

“Consider my lesson learned,” said Dominic. He was thinking about the bruises he would have tomorrow, then remembered that he would only have to ask Gaelwyn for them to be removed.

When he looked at Vidre, she was stock still and tense.

“Stay out of the way,” she murmured. She kicked at the pieces of armor that were laying on the ground, and the glass flowed up to her. It solidified into place around her torso and limbs, and quickly extruded spikes at the joints. When the process was finished, moments later, not an inch of Vidre’s skin was bare, just as she’d said. The armor grew thicker with every passing second. When Dominic looked around, he realized that the sailors had all moved, huddled into corners or gone down beneath the deck of the ship.

Dominic’s one prior experience with a battle between illustrati had made him expect

that there would be a grand entrance, and banter between Vidre and whoever she had sensed. That was how it always went in the stories. Instead, the fight began with little fanfare. A cloaked figure leapt up from the water and landed on the deck of the ship; Vidre fought him at once, with her daggers flashing out towards him. He was armed with a whip of water and lashed out at her, driving her back before her blades could find flesh. Dominic's mind was racing, and he held his hand out to the side, trying to summon the shadow into a physical thing. If Welexi could do it with light, then surely it could be done with shadow as well. He grasped at the air and felt nothing.

The whip of water cracked forward and struck Vidre's armor, which shattered and then reformed in an instant. She threw one of her daggers forward, but her assailant leapt out of the way. Vidre pushed towards him, and this time managed to plunge the dagger into his chest. The glass dagger cracked and then made itself whole in her hand again, and she jumped back to dodge under the water whip. The assailant was wearing heavy armor beneath his cloak.

Dominic grabbed at the air again, and this time found himself holding a dagger of his own. It was a thin, nearly insubstantial thing, and he could see straight through it. He had no armor, and given how tenuous his dagger was it would have been a miracle for him to summon some. Vidre continued to fight against her assailant, and he had no way of knowing which of them was winning. Dominic remembered Welexi's fingers being cut off, and how quickly the fight had shifted. He imagined that this would be the same, their combat decided by a quick, decisive blow. Another crack of the whip hit Vidre's armor and broke it, but this time it didn't pull back together so quickly. Dominic began to move into position, extending the shadows to cover him.

The cloaked figure raced towards Vidre as she began to form a dagger to replace the one she'd thrown. He seemed not to care about her weapons. The thin tendril of water he'd been holding onto became a thick sphere around his hand, and he got in close enough to press it against her helm. It was clear enough that he was trying to drown her, to force the water down her throat until she choked to death. Her daggers kept hitting him, but beneath the cloak he was wearing something of impeccable make, and though her daggers were razor-sharp, they couldn't get through steel. She was stabbing at his joints, trying to find a chink in the armor, but he had the sphere of water surrounding her head. Even if the helm was sealed tight, Vidre wouldn't have much air. Dominic moved forward, creeping silently, keeping his concentration on his shadow-dagger. He was only going to get one chance, and maybe not even that.

Vidre dropped her daggers entirely, and began tearing at the man's armor with her bare hands. She began ripping off pieces of it, wrenching the metal apart and sending links of chain rolling across the deck of the ship. Dominic could see water within her glass helmet. She tore the cloak from her attacker, and Dominic saw a spot on his left side that was now almost bare of plate or mail. He darted forward and swung his dagger in from the side at the exposed flank, and a man's soft cry of pain seemed louder than it truly was. From there he wasn't long for the world. Vidre punched him squarely in the face, crumpling his armor there, and darted around, out from beneath him. When the

figure stumbled, Vidre pulled a glass dagger from the material of her armor and stabbed him in the side, over and over, with a grimace on her face, until she was halfway supporting him with a hand beneath his armpit.

When he slumped to the ground, Vidre finally let her helm of glass part and spill water onto the deck. She spit a mouthful of water to the side and let out a low hiss. Her arm was covered in blood up to the elbow where she'd been stabbing him.

"That's what you get," she said. She stepped forward and kicked the corpse, which produced a loud clang. "That's what you get!"

There was a muffled sound from the cabin, and Dominic barely had enough time to think *two of them* before Vidre was racing off again.

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Gaelwyn had been watching Welexi sleep. All of the fleshly damage had been fixed, which just left the cuts to his skin, his broken bones, and a deficit of blood. Gaelwyn itched to open Welexi up. All it would take was a cut across the abdomen. Gaelwyn could push the muscles aside, taking the major blood vessels with them, and get a look at the intestines, kidneys, liver, and every other part that his power didn't touch. It was the fastest way to diagnose a perforation or a puncture. Internal damage could be insidious. He had asked, while Welexi was conscious, but Welexi had said no, and that was that. Still, Gael felt the urge in his fingertips. It was a nagging feeling, the need to make sure that nothing was seriously wrong. He touched Welexi's bare skin, and again made sure that his friend was still as healthy as possible, given the circumstances. Welexi's hand was going to be the biggest problem into the foreseeable future. Gaelwyn could have rebuilt the hand, but not the bones within it, and it would have been red flesh, without skin to cover it. Beneath the bandages there was a swollen line where the hand simply ended instead of continuing on. Vidre hadn't been able to recover the fingers to reattach them, so Gael had stitched together the ragged flesh as soon as Welexi went unconscious.

He heard something behind him, and turned around to see a man in full wooden armor. Behind him, the hull of the ship gaped open.

"No," whispered Gaelwyn.

Being an *illustrati* normally meant knowing the name of every person who came to kill you, but this man's face was covered with an oaken helm, and there were a half dozen *illustrati* with the right domain and the proper amount of power to push through wood like that.

"Please," said Gaelwyn.

The man held a length of wood in his hand, and stalked forward with it held high. It was thick at the end like a club, the weapon that the domain of wood most lent itself to. More important than that, a club was the sort of weapon that you used against someone with the domain of flesh. Gaelwyn could heal damage to his muscles almost instantly, but a club was best for breaking bones and cracking skulls. The man's wooden armor covered him fully, with no place to lay a hand on bare skin. That was the best protection against the bodily domains, everyone knew that. The mask of wood had a vent at the front for air, and two small holes around the eyes, styled like knots of wood. The eyes



were intent as the illustrati stalked closer, ready to bring his club down the moment Gael was in reach.

“Turn around,” said Gaelwyn. “Leave, please, just go, I won’t even tell anyone you were here.”

The man raised his club, and Gael stepped forward quickly, to put a hand against his chestplate.

Everyone knew that you had to be careful going against the bodily domains, and that became more and more true as you moved up the ranks, until you arrived at someone like Gaelwyn Mottram. A single touch could kill you. Everyone knew that the solution was to cover yourself from head to toe, so that there was no bare skin for them to find contact with. Lesser illustrati couldn’t kill so quickly, but for someone like Gaelwyn or the Bone Warden, it was the only way that you had a hope of winning. Deprive them of the ability to touch, and you didn’t have so much to worry about.

Everyone knew that.

But you had to be careful about what everyone knew.

Gaelwyn’s power reached straight past the wooden armor. He could feel the yellowish-white fats and the thick red fibers of muscle, and in the first split second of making contact he brought everything to a halt. The arm that was holding the club jerked back, dropping it to clatter against the floor of the corridor. The man’s eyes were wide, and Gaelwyn looked at them with pity. He had to imagine that the paralysis was unpleasant. Before his attacker could get any clever ideas, Gael formed new muscles in the neck and used them to gently squeeze the carotid artery, a quicker, more violent variant on what he’d done to Welexi. The changes in blood pressure caused a baroreceptor nerve response, and the man was out like a light. It had taken an enormous amount of practice to be able to do that without it being lethal, and years of study to understand the mechanism behind it.

When the man fell to the ground, Gael used his power a second time, reshaping the muscles one by one until every important muscle had been detached from its joint, not bleeding or otherwise harmed, but incapable of producing any movement. Gael had watched people try before. You could see the muscles moving beneath the skin, like enormous creatures trapped there.

“I told you not to,” said Gaelwyn to the still form. He tried to keep himself mournful, and to not think about the thrill that came with having another person under his control. It wasn’t something a person was supposed to get their pleasure from. He looked back toward where Welexi still lay in his bed and said another small oath.



Dominic came down into the ship to find Vidre and Gaelwyn standing over a man in wooden armor.

“This is why they hate me,” said Gaelwyn. “This is why they curse my name.”

Dominic stared at the body. Vidre tore the wooden mask away and looked down at his face. He was a handsome man with sandy brown hair, taking in shallow breaths. Dominic didn’t recognize him, though that didn’t say much. The only illustrati he could really put

a face to were those stamped on his money.

“Wake him up,” said Vidre. She was still in full armor from head to toe. “I have questions.”

“Promise not to hurt him,” said Gael. “Promise me.”

“There might be a third,” said Vidre. “We don’t have time for this.”

Gael crouched down and touched the man’s armor, and he woke back up with a gasp. Vidre’s dagger flashed forward and into his mouth, where she pressed it against his tongue. He went completely still and watched her.

“Wealdwood. Try to use your power and I’ll stab straight into the base of your spine,” she said. She ground out the words and stared deep into his eyes. “Your muscles have been rendered nonfunctional. Even if you warped the wood of this ship to make an escape, you would drown when you hit water. Cerulean Bane is dead. Answer my questions, and I’ll let you live.” She held up something that would have been nearly invisible in the lantern light save for the fact that Dominic could see clearly in the dark. “Illustrati-forged. Expensive stuff. And you both kept yourselves cloaked. Who is your employer?” The object was a ring of metal, a single link from the chain mail that she’d torn off during the fight. She slowly removed the dagger from Wealdwood’s mouth.

Dominic wracked his brain trying to connect something to the names. After some reflection he realized he heard of both before; Cerulean Bane had rescued treasures from the depths of the ocean with the help of Aspect, and Wealdwood had been part of the Flower Queen’s court before his exile. Neither were villains, and Dominic couldn’t imagine either traveling with Zerstor. Vidre had asked her question with authority, but it had to be a guess on her part.

“I don’t know,” Wealdwood said quickly, as soon as the last bit of glass was out of his mouth. He was bleeding slightly, where Vidre had dragged the edge of her dagger across his lip. “He wore a cloak, he wouldn’t tell us his name.”

“What were you told to do?” asked Vidre.

“Come with you,” said Wealdwood. The words were spilling out quickly. “Cling to the bottom of the ship, wait until it was out in the Calypso, then kill everyone aboard. I was going to make chambers for us, bulbs beneath the hull like barnacles. The two of us could sink you easily, then mop up whoever was left. That’s what he said. After Welexi was attacked, he came to us and said that the plan had changed. We didn’t even know he’d followed us to Gennaro, but we agreed to it. Cerulean was supposed to distract you, and I was ... I was supposed to kill Gaelwyn, and then the Sunhawk, and flee.”

“What were you offered for this idiocy?” asked Vidre. Her knuckles were white around the handle of her dagger, and she was trembling slightly.

“Money,” said Wealdwood. “Fame. Stories spread around the world, though this wasn’t going to be one of them.”

“Ask about the third,” said Gaelwyn. He was looking around anxiously and squeezing his hands.

“There was never any third,” said Vidre. “They wouldn’t hold back like that.” She glared down at the man beneath her. “He knows there’s nothing to hope for.”

“If you didn’t know who he was, why did you think he could deliver on his promises?” asked Dominic. Vidre looked up at him, and narrowed her eyes before nodding.

“Answer,” she said to Wealdwood.

“He had a ring,” said Wealdwood. “Forged by the Harbingers.”

“You went to war with us over a bauble?” asked Vidre. She positioned her dagger above his face.

“You said you would let me live!” cried Wealdwood. He tried to turn his head, but the only result was that the muscles in his neck twisted and crawled beneath his skin.

“Wait,” said a rich, mellow voice from the bed. Gaelwyn was standing by Welexi’s side.

“How much of that did you catch?” asked Vidre.

“Enough,” replied Welexi. His arm was in a splint that was wrapped up against his chest, but he used his ruined hand and Gaelwyn’s help to sit up. “Wealdwood, the Forest Knight, formerly of the Flower Queen’s court and now adrift in the world. You hew to the old stories. You saw that you were falling from grace, and thought that perhaps this stranger had a power you knew not.” He was slow and tired. “There was an aspect of story to him, a theatrical compulsion that you couldn’t resist. He had a face he kept in the shadows, and your eyes were drawn to the ring, and the unmistakable presence it exuded. He told you stories about me, stories that you had no way to verify but which sounded right to your ears because of how they tore me down, and with his promises to propel you back to greatness, that was enough to push you in the direction he wanted.”

Wealdwood was staring up at Vidre’s dagger, though he didn’t have much choice in where to look. “It’s true,” he said.

“Tell me of the ring,” said Welexi.

“It was made of a hard metal, dull grey, with a thousand facets,” said Wealdwood. “And I felt it, like a feather landing on the skin of my mind. It was a real and true artifact.”

“Set him free,” said Welexi.

“He put a hole in the side of our ship,” said Vidre. Dominic looked at her hand holding the dagger. He knew that she followed Welexi, but he had no idea how closely. If she wanted to murder Wealdwood right here and now, there was nothing that anyone could do about it. For a moment it seemed as though it was inevitable that she was going to drive her dagger down and destroy him, and Dominic wondered what would happen after that. Would Welexi have her removed from the ship? Or would he be complicit in the crime? But Vidre got up instead, and nodded to the hull where the wood was warped. “We need to have him fix it, before anything else.”

“You promised me that you would let me live,” said Wealdwood. He struggled fruitlessly.

“Promises to dead men don’t mean much,” said Vidre.

“We can’t kill him,” said Welexi. “There’s no justice in taking the life of someone in your mercy.”

“So we take him to the Bone Warden?” asked Vidre. “We somehow weather a voyage far out of our circuit with a man that can sink our ship at any time? We let him go and hope that he keeps his word? We’re done with Gennaro, we don’t need an extended coda.”

“The path of goodness is sometimes a difficult one,” said Welexi.

“Please,” said Wealdwood. “I won’t speak a word of this to anyone, I’ll slink off into the night and never see any of you again.”

“Close the hole in the ship,” said Vidre. She grabbed him by the shoulder and dragged him over to the side of the ship, then placed his hand against the wood. He stared at her, and then his eyes swivelled down to her dagger. “Don’t get any ideas,” said Vidre. Dominic stepped closer to watch her. If it had been him, he would have tried to sink the ship, in the hopes of finding some leverage as it threatened to capsize. Once the ship was repaired by Wealdwood’s touch, Vidre would have no reason to leave him alive, and he had to know that.

Wealdwood closed his eyes and concentrated. The wood grew slowly, shaping itself back into straight timbers. It took five minutes in total, all of it in tense silence. Welexi had gone back to resting, and Gael stood beside him, staring at the hull of the ship sealing up.

“There were people on the dock,” said Dominic. “I don’t know what it is that they saw, but if we want to keep this quiet we’ll have to make sure that they’re saying the right things. And we’ll need to deal with Cerulean.” One of Dominic’s tricks for getting through stressful situations was to focus on what needed to be done. Sitting there and waiting would have been more nerve-wracking than putting plans into motion. “We can weigh the body down and dump it at sea after we’ve gone.”

“Good thinking,” said Vidre. She looked down at the mostly dried blood that was caking itself to her forearm. “You’re going to have to deal with the locals. Tell them a story, any story. I set someone up to ambush you as part of your training, a hazing ritual. Check to see how much they saw first. We need to get everything straightened here. I don’t think the deck of the ship would be fully visible from the shore, but they might have heard something.”

Dominic looked to Welexi. He had expected an objection, but Welexi said nothing. Perhaps this was the way it went between him and Vidre, when these things needed to be done. The stories had said that he had reigned her in, and turned a hardened killer to the side of good, but it didn’t seem nearly so simple as that. When Dominic was sure that everything was well in hand, he strode back down the narrow corridor that separated the cabins and up onto the deck. The sailors were gathered together in their white and blue uniforms. Their low conversation stopped when Dominic came up. Cerulean Bane’s body had been covered with a tarp. One of the sailors split off from the others and approached Dominic.

“Is everything okay up here?” asked Dominic.

“Yes,” replied the sailor. “Is everything okay down there?”

“We have a prisoner,” said Dominic. “And we need to get the body into storage. We’ll

be doing a burial at sea.” That sounded better than saying that they’d dump the corpse overboard. “Do it quietly.” He had no authority over these men, and they’d just seen him have his ass handed to him by Vidre, but the sailor nodded. “What’s your name?”

“We’re paid not to have names,” said the sailor with a grim smile. “And for the hazards of being around illustrati.” He looked to the tarp, and the long shape that the folds marked the edges of. “But it’s Michael, if you ever need me for anything. I think we’ll all be happy to be back at sea.” He went back to the other sailors, and they resumed their conversation in low voices. Dominic watched until they began drawing straws to see who was going to move the body, and walked down the plank and onto the dock. He double-checked himself to make sure that he didn’t have any blood on him, then looked back to the ship to see if he could tell what the crowd could see. It was as clear as daylight to him, but through their eyes, it would just be a confusion of shapes. He made his way down the dock to where the sailors with swords stood guard, and put a smile on his face.

“What was going on there?” asked an older man with a decanter of wine in one hand.

“Lady Vidre was instructing me on the finer points of single combat,” said Dominic. “Apparently she thought I needed to be taken down a peg, and ended up taking me down three instead.”

“We heard some yelling,” said one of the others.

“I got a lucky hit in,” said Dominic. “I agreed to settle our differences over a bottle of wine, one last taste of home before we set sail tomorrow. Does anyone have a suggestion?”

That seemed to be just the trick, and the men and women began to argue loudly among themselves. Dominic hadn’t intended to leave the safety of the dock, not with Corta still out there and unknown parties who might want to take a piece of his hide just for the meager fame it would get them, but he couldn’t very well ask about wine and then not go to get it. If he couldn’t have seen what was within the shadows, he was sure that he would have been straining his eyes looking for a hidden assailant. The wine was given to him gratis, and he walked out with a cask that he had to hold awkwardly beneath one arm. All the way back, people peppered him with questions. They wanted to know how badly Welexi was hurt, why the *Zenith* was leaving tomorrow, what Vidre was really like, and whether he knew anything about Gaelwyn’s time in the Iron King’s service. Dominic tried his best to answer in diplomatic ways, but he was dog tired and didn’t even remember half the things he said the moment they were past his lips.

Wealdwood was bound, gagged, and unconscious in Vidre’s room when he got back. The door to Welexi’s cabin was firmly closed, and Gaelwyn was nowhere to be seen. Vidre was at a small desk that folded out of the wall with a quill and parchment, which she set aside as he came in.

“Wine?” asked Vidre. Her armor had relaxed somewhat, leaving her face uncovered and her hands completely free. She had retracted most of the sharp edges.

“They don’t expect anything, I don’t think,” said Dominic. “The wine was free.”

“Don’t leave the ship again,” said Vidre. “These two were sent alone, but we have

another enemy. One with an artifact, or the ability to convince people he has an artifact, and a seeming penchant for proxies. Until Welexi has healed, I'm the only one with the will and the ability to save you if there's trouble. Welexi can't, Gael won't."

"Gaelwyn doesn't need to touch flesh to kill a man," said Dominic. That was one of the things that had been moving around at the back of his mind. "Wealdwood was sealed up tight when we came in."

"Gael's power extends three inches from the surface of his skin," said Vidre. "Him and the Bone Warden both. They're the only ones with enough standing for it. Keep that secret close."

"He'd be unstoppable if he decided to fight," said Dominic. Not strictly unstoppable though. It would be possible to kill him from a distance, with a pistol or an incredibly lucky cannon shot, or even a crossbow that hit him in the right place. Maybe it would work with a very long blade of some kind, but there were a whole host of injuries that Gaelwyn could simply heal himself of in the midst of combat, so you'd have to go straight for the head. You couldn't let him touch you though, even through layers of armor.

"He wouldn't protect you," said Vidre. "He wouldn't even protect me. Only Welexi, and then only with a minimum of violence. He's not a murderer anymore. He hit his limit." She ran her fingers through her hair, which was damp with sweat. "And if you believe that ... well, I can tell that you don't. You said that he was unstoppable, and then you began thinking of ways to stop him." She sat down on her bed, next to Wealdwood's unmoving form. "That secret getting out is one of the risks of letting this one go." She tapped at the papers. "And now I have to write letters of instruction to our bards, so that when the story of this assassination attempt inevitably gets out we can stay in control of it. We leave with fanfare, and it comes out weeks later, when we're not so immediately in the minds of the public. We make up our reasons for not telling anyone, but we technically have the authority of the senatori. It's something of a mess no matter what we do." She turned to the bed. "I have half a mind to kill him right now."

"But you won't," said Dominic.

"No," said Vidre. "Good girls don't murder their captives, however inconvenient letting them live would be. Look, I have to stand guard – Gaelwyn's tricks aren't all that reliable in the long term, not if he's trying to ensure that a person is going to live through it. So long as a man has his power he's a threat, even bound and gagged, even paralyzed. You should go get some sleep, because you're going to have to watch him tomorrow while I'm resting."

"Okay," said Dominic. He turned to go, but Vidre rested her hand on his elbow.

"I'm not going to say that I was wrong about you," she said. "But I will admit that you have some redeeming qualities. Try not to let me down."

"I won't," said Dominic.

He laid down in the small cabin they'd given over to him, and though he thought that sleep would be impossible, he was unconscious only minutes later.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *An Interlude At Sea*

Dominic's body was stiff and sore when he awoke in the morning. He was momentarily confused about where he was, until he saw the thick beams of the ship and felt its movement in water. The events of the day before came flooding back; the race he'd lost, the fight he'd ended, being threatened by Corta and saved by Vidre, and the two assassins that had come aboard the ship. It felt like it had happened over the course of weeks, instead of in the span of a single day.

He gave a start when he turned his head and saw Gaelwyn standing in the small room.

"I knocked," said Gaelwyn. He held a plate of pastries and fruit in one hand and neatly folded purple clothes in the other. His red hair had been slicked down and tucked behind his ears.

"Sorry," said Dominic. "Waking up in unfamiliar places gets to me."

"We do a lot of it," said Gaelwyn. "We don't always sleep on the ship when we're in port, but even my cabin can seem like a strange place when the air smells different and the noises of the city have changed." He handed the food over, and Dominic ate greedily. "Vidre got you some clothes for the send-off. We're not making a big production of it this time, but she said what you're currently wearing is unacceptable. I think some tailor must have been woken up in the middle of the night to get something altered for you." He set the clothes on the bed. "Get dressed as soon as you're finished, it won't be long now. There are people who want an introduction."

The clothes were something only a noble would wear. There were garishly purple knee-breeches, black tights, and sleeves that were five times wider than they needed to be. The outfit included a cape with golden thread and a floppy hat that seemed to sit slightly askew no matter how he tugged at it.

When he slid aside the door to his cabin, he saw Vidre in full battle regalia. It wasn't the sleek and functional armor of the night before; it had a look of elegant style, with sweeping lines and filigree flourishes. The sunlight glinted off of it, enough that it would draw attention from across the docks. In certain places the glass was frosted instead of clear, creating an elaborate pattern that was suggestive of flowers. Vidre was wearing more makeup now; she had red lips and blush on her cheeks. Her hair sat in an elaborate circular braid on top of her head, pinned into place with small glass birds. Dominic felt his heart start to beat faster. He had seen her stab a man to death, arm bloodied up to the

elbow, breathing heavily and ready to let loose a primal scream at the world. She was dark, and cruel, and dangerous beyond all reason, the kind of woman that you'd cut yourself to ribbons on if you tried to get close. There were dozen of stories about Vidre that ended that way, merchant-princes and holy men that ruined themselves in pursuit of her. The vertical scar that ran from her brow to her cheek was supposed to have been the result of one of those liaisons. Yet in the morning light, it was easy to forget all that and feel the tug of infatuation all the same.

Vidre took one look at him, sighed, and began to fix his outfit.

"It was the best I could do on short notice," she said as she pulled down the fabric of his tights. Her hands were firm and businesslike. "We'll have to get you to a proper tailor once we reach Torland, I know just the woman, but for now ... gods this looks terrible. It will have to do though." She did up some buttons on his shirt that he hadn't even known were there, and pulled his hat off to one side, so that it flopped down to touch the top of one of his ears. Apparently that was how it was meant to be worn. "Now, I don't have the time to run you through who anyone is beyond what I'll say in introduction, nor do I have the time to make sure that you know the proper forms of address, and you're not going to see these people again for a long time anyway, so just for the next hour or so, you're the naive newcomer, startled by the world that you've been thrust into and not sure what to make of it. You're overawed by all these people, these legends of your city that you've been hearing about since you were a little boy. They'll like that. And I think it should go without saying, but do not mention anything about our inept assassins, especially not the prisoner in my cabin."

"Who's watching him?" asked Dominic. He was slowly remembering himself. He wasn't some besotted fool, he was an illustrati now, Vidre's equal. He straightened up. Pretending at being naive and overwhelmed was something he could easily do, but the only way to earn his place was if it was an act.

"Wealdwood is out cold," said Vidre. She caught his look. "But I also have two of my most trustworthy sailors ready to stab him to death if he wakes up and tries to talk or move, which he probably won't be able to do because he's gagged and bound. I took off all his armor last night, and Gael did some additional work this morning that will prevent him from doing anything more than breathing – and then only slowly – even if he does wake up. Satisfied that I'm not an idiot yet?"

"It never crossed my mind," said Dominic. He smiled at her, but she didn't smile back. On closer inspection, her makeup was especially thick beneath her eyes. It wasn't too much past dawn, and she had apparently spent the night watching over Wealdwood and writing letters without taking time to sleep.

"This is backstage," said Vidre, gesturing to the cabin. "Out there, it's a performance. Keep that in mind. Most of these people won't care about you, they only want to be seen with you."

Vidre walked down the ship's corridor and up into the light of dawn, where she received cheers and applause from the crowd, who were gathered considerably further down the docks than the night before. Dominic followed after her, and got the same



treatment – perhaps even more so. He couldn't keep from smiling. Yet when Welexi came up from within the cabin, Dominic could see that this was the reason that hundreds had gathered on the docks so early in the morning just for a send-off. Welexi wore the same silver armor that he'd had on the day before, cracked and torn. The spots of rust had been scoured away, and it was now beautiful in its state of decay. Bright light shone where the armor had been damaged, and not a bit of the leathers that Welexi wore beneath his armor could be seen. He'd used the light to fill himself out, and change the shape of his profile. The man Dominic had seen bleeding on his bed was muscular but slender, almost lanky. Welexi had made himself imposing now, with pauldrons of light that gave him the appearance of broad shoulders, and greaves that made his legs seem thicker than they were. Welexi was taller too, even more than his natural height, which must have been the result of his boots having a high lift to them. His bald head gleamed in the sunlight.

Dominic had trouble looking away. Welexi had been intimidating before, but now he was fearsome, an idealized warrior. When he moved, there were signs that not all was right. He had a slight limp that would be invisible to the crowds, and he kept his right arm unnaturally still. His damaged hand was covered by a gauntlet made of hard white light. The bruises had vanished, no doubt thanks to the work of Gael. Dominic could see a few places on Welexi's face where there were lines of small white stitches, which stuck out against Welexi's coffee-colored skin, but those too would be invisible from a distance. The crowd had begun cheering for him as soon as he stepped onto the deck. He waved at them, though his smile was strained.

"Let's get this over with," said Gaelwyn. "Having him move around is firmly against doctor's orders, however masterfully his casts of light have been crafted." Dominic hadn't even seen Gaelwyn come up on the deck. He was dressed in a clean green apron, and otherwise wearing a tan-colored tunic and trousers, with little of the accents that Dominic's own clothes had. It was a costume too, in its own way.

Two dozen people filed onto the ship, and Dominic was introduced to them all. Most of them were senatori, illustrati, or both, and while most of the names were familiar to him, little else about the situation was. They shook his hand, asked him some polite but meaningless questions, and smiled out at the crowd. Dominic had thought that the whole thing would be perfunctory, but it kept going on well after he had grown ready for it to end. Welexi was repeating the story of the fight, with Gaelwyn looking nervous at his side, while Vidre was looking happier than Dominic had yet seen her, touching arms and laughing at jokes. She didn't seem like she had killed a man eight hours earlier.

"Lightscour, your father is making a cake for me," said a man who had half his face covered by a white mask. Dominic found himself trapped in a half-circle of men and women in their elaborate costumes. He realized only belatedly that he'd been steered there by Vidre.

"He is?" asked Dominic. He vaguely remembered his mother saying something about that. He had forgotten the name of the man almost instantly, but it didn't seem to matter. They were all speaking to him like he was an old friend.

"The cake is for my daughter Margherita's coming-of-age party," said the man.

His smile was halfway covered by his mask. “It’s two days from now; I do so wish that you had the time to attend. It was my understanding that the *Zenith* would be in port for another three days, perhaps longer, and we had been looking forward to seeing Welexi and Vidre there.” Gaelwyn’s name was conspicuously absent.

“It’s unfortunate, I agree,” Dominic nodded. “When I picked up that spear I had no idea I’d be leaving my home so suddenly. But Welexi has his reasons, not least of which is the bad omen that was Zerstor.”

“It must be terrible to leave your family,” said a woman with copper wires around her wrists and neck. “I’ve left Gennaro twice, once to travel to Lerabor, and once to Maskoy. The trip to Maskoy was marvelous; I saw the minarets towering over the city and ate far too much of the black-spiced food. The algalif took dinner with me a few times; he’s a righteous man almost the equal of Welexi in his convictions, if not his physical prowess.”

“Physical prowess? The Sunhawk was lucky yesterday,” said a large man with a braided beard. He had the look of a foreigner. His name hadn’t even had the hint of familiarity. “He was losing, and a boy steps out from the crowd to land a solid hit. A shame the fight was decided by that fortune alone, isn’t it?” Dominic could feel eyes on him, not just from the half-circle of people around him, but from other nearby clusters of people, who had gone silent to wait for his response. The large man’s voice had carried far.

“It was fate, not luck,” said Dominic. “Fate only conspired to bring the fight to me. I was standing right next to the statue of Gennaro when Welexi came crashing down, and I was closest to him when he looked half-dead. It might be easy to say that this was simply arbitrary, but I felt the tug of destiny. I picked up the spear and fought as Welexi would have fought, because I believed in the message that he preaches to the world. If their situations had been reversed, if Zerstor had been the one broken and bloodied, no one would have come to his aid. Those two titans reaped the harvests that they’d been sowing for years, and I was only the instrument of that realization. Luck had nothing to do with it.” Dominic glanced to the side only briefly, but was gratified to see a small nod from Welexi’s direction.

Conversation continued on for some time, veering back to less important matters. He learned more than he had ever wanted to about the algalif of Maskoy, and promptly forgot all of it. He was told about people he would never meet and estates he would never visit. Some of these people were local legends, but Dominic had never taken much stock in legends. It didn’t seem to matter to any of them that he would be gone for a long time, and they asked surprisingly few questions about the fight between Welexi and Zerstor; they were more concerned with speaking than listening. It was an utter relief when Vidre slipped into the circle of conversation and politely informed everyone that the ship would be leaving soon, and they would have to take their leave unless they wanted to travel to Torland. This drew a few laughs and smiles, and after another quarter hour of everyone saying their goodbyes, the visitors finally departed.

Dominic walked to the ship’s stern and looked out on the crowd. He was surprised to see a few familiar faces. Many of the racers were there, with Franco up on Lorenz’s

shoulders, waving frantically and making a scene. Corta stood with her musclebound sons, though she was speaking with other people instead of looking at the ship, which Dominic was glad for. And there was another girl waving to him that he almost mistook for his sister, until he realized that it was the girl Clarissa that had offered to be his assistant. He felt a slight pang of guilt at that.

Though he looked for them, his family was nowhere to be seen, not even Anna.

“That’s Leon and Marco,” said Vidre. She stood by his side, and pointed out two men with thick beards who were speaking loudly to the crowds. “They’re the ones that will make you famous, at least in Gennaro.”

“I’m already famous,” said Dominic. He could hear his name – not “Dominic” but “Lightscour” – being spoken here and there. In part, the crowd was there for him. “Everyone in the city has heard the story by now.”

“No,” said Vidre. “News travels fast, but reaching every last person doesn’t happen nearly so quickly. Even for something like this, there will be a fair number of people who haven’t heard the story. And even among those who have heard the story, some will have forgotten it immediately, because it has no impact on their lives, or because they don’t care about the illustrati, and you can’t count those. Some will just be confused about what’s happened, until they hear a compelling version of the tale from our bards, or someone that our bards have paid, or one of their friends who’s heard it from the bards. An event by itself is just a nascent story – it’s not until someone has put in the work of adding flourish and context that it can properly reside in a person’s mind.”

“So I’m going to get stronger?” asked Dominic. He stretched his fingers out then closed them into a fist. “I’ll gladly accept that.”

Vidre covered her mouth for a yawn, then looked around to see how much progress the sailors had made. “Much stronger,” she said. “Gennaro has perhaps a quarter million people. There’s more growth to happen here, people who will start to care about you, to invent stories of their own about the time you did some ridiculous, implausible thing. And given your history, there are people who will come forward claiming that you stole from them. Within a week, women will be claiming that you slept with them, or tried to, and men will claim that you were a long and lasting friend, or a bitter rival. That’s one of the wellsprings of fame, and all of it will happen without you having to lift a finger. But this is just Gennaro. A large city, but not the largest.” She pointed out across the harbor, to a few other ships. “Packet service across the Calypso will carry letters from myself, Marco, and Leon. Maskoy, Lerabor, Rannos, Grantholm, Parance – all the major centers of population, one by one. We employ hundreds of bards. You’ll wake up and feel the difference every so often, as the legend spreads to some new node of civilization. The scholars’ best estimate is that there are a billion people in the world, and while there will always be people in some backwater that have never heard of you, eventually you’ll have your own legend.” She turned to look at him with tired eyes. “Assuming that you don’t get yourself killed first.”

Dominic would have frowned at that, but he was in good cheer, so he simply ignored her. Vidre had been trying to teach him a lesson about learning his place last night, and

he'd stabbed Cerulean Bane all the same. There was little chance that she had missed that fact, but she hadn't yet said anything about it, and he hoped that she wouldn't.

Dominic looked around at the sailors, and then back to the crowd. He had a small, foolish hope that his family would arrive at the outskirts. They would have better sales if they could be seen with their son the illustrati, but not even that self-interest would compel his father to come. He hoped that his sister Anna had been kept home, but worried that she had simply chosen not to see him go.

When the ship finally cast off, the masses began to cheer for them anew, and Welexi came out to the keel of the ship to stand firm and tall. There was a spot of glowing light on his back that burst outward into wings so large that they hung over either side of the ship, and the noise from the receding crowd grew louder. Dominic found himself waiting with bated breath to see Welexi fly, but there were only a few flaps of the wings before they folded in behind him, arching several feet above his shoulders and nearly dragging on the ground before folding inward.

"They love that," said Vidre to Dominic. "It's authentically impressive, and impossible to fake. Nevermind that it takes him an hour every morning to get those wings created, and that he's going straight back to his cabin immediately after this. An hour's work for a dozen seconds of spectacle." She shook her head. "It's not all moonlit assassination attempts and courtyard battles. Most of it is tedium, endless meetings, boring parties, talking to people who are only trying to use you for their own ends. You had the abbreviated version of that this morning. But maybe it's worth it, for those dozen seconds."

The *Zenith* had moved into the bay, and though there were other ships around them, and no doubt spyglasses trained on them from the shore, Welexi moved away from the helm and back to the center of the ship. His limp was more pronounced now that he was without his audience, and he cradled his broken arm. Dominic followed.

"You need rest," said Gaelwyn. "You're low on blood and your bones need to mend."

"Do you remember how brilliant you thought the brace of light was?" asked Welexi with a smile.

"Years ago I thought it would help you to heal faster," said Gaelwyn with a cluck of his tongue. "Now I see that it's only made you more inclined to push yourself."

Welexi gave a weak laugh, and turned to Dominic. "Lightscour," he said. He looked Dominic up and down. His face was gentle, and the bulk of his armor had begun to fade as pieces of light vanished from it. "If I had to pick the name over again, I would have chosen differently. In the context of your domain, it's a villain's name – not one who scours with light, but one who scours the light itself. Not a cleaner of rust, but a consuming darkness."

"I'm honored by it," said Dominic.

"You'll have a new name in time," said Welexi. "Something more appropriate to you, something we've given due consideration." He smiled, showing pearly white teeth. "I have full faith that you'll earn another name soon." With another small tug at his armor from Gaelwyn, Welexi turned to go down into the ship. Gennaro had disappeared behind

them, and there were no other ships within sight. Dominic didn't really consider himself to have a home, but the city he'd grown up in had faded entirely. He was in Welexi's world now.

"What's the Numifex?" Dominic asked, before Welexi could disappear entirely.

Welexi turned around slowly and carefully. "She called it that?" asked Welexi with a faint smile. His eyes flickered to Vidre. "I'll have to inquire about what else my travelling companion has been telling you. That term, 'Numifex', dates back decades. Too early for you, and too geographically distant. There was a bard near Grantholm, a storyteller and an illustrati, who was famed for how his stories ended – namely, that they didn't. He would stretch a tale on for hours, and at the very end, he would say something like, 'And there I was, laying in bed with the beautiful lass, and I saw her begin to raise a dagger dripping with poison – but ah, it's getting late, and the rest of it will have to wait until tomorrow.' Then the next night he would repeat the entire process again. It was bunk, all of it, but he was a good storyteller, and sometimes that's enough for some smaller measure of fame. Some pointed out the contradictions in these stories, but he would explain them away. He was always ready with another lie. It didn't seem to matter though; people always wanted to know what was going to happen next, no matter how improbable the story was."

"Get to the point before you collapse," said Vidre.

"One of the hallmarks of his stories was a chase for an object," said Welexi. "Not one, but many. These were gained and lost as his tales stretched on, never important save for how and where they propelled this bard, or what machinations they forced his foes towards. The point," he looked toward Vidre, "is that it wasn't important. The object never mattered to the story, it could have been anything, something crafted by the Harbingers, the crown jewels of some forgotten kingdom, a spear forged by the gods – it didn't have any consequence, ultimately. The Numifex was one of these, the most nondescript of all these objects, and the one that he went after the most often. It was variously described as a golden orb, or a broken sword, or an eldritch tome. This bard wrote down his tales into many books, and he didn't even keep the descriptions consistent within a single volume. Over the years, it became a derisive term used by storytellers, and thus by the illustrati. The Numifex is what you call something that's meaningless save for its role in the story." He looked to Vidre and smiled.

"So ... we're going to Torland because we're tracking down a thing that doesn't matter?" asked Dominic.

"We're going to Torland for many reasons," said Welexi. "Not least of which is the request of the Flower Queen, and the news of civil unrest. But yes, I have long been tracking an object of ancient power, and there is a scholar who my recent investigations have revealed might be able to help me. Vidre, as I'm sure you've gathered by now, believes I'm chasing a phantasm."

"To bed," said Gaelwyn. He touched Welexi lightly. "I can practically hear the sound of bone grinding against bone."

Welexi nodded. "I believe that my physician may have a point. We will speak on

these matters later.” He hobbled off, moving slowly and stiffly, with his armor of light seeming to do most of the work.

“Come on,” said Vidre. “I need you to keep an eye on our prisoner while I get some sleep. And after that, your training begins. We’ll see what we can do with you in nine days time, shall we?”



Dominic followed Vidre down into the ship, and stood next to her outside the door of her cabin, where Gaelwyn had his hand on their prisoner’s chest. He had been stripped of his armor, and wore only white underclothes and a gag.

“He’s still alive,” said Gaelwyn. He sighed with relief. “It’s easy to knock a man out, but hard to make sure he’ll be able to return to consciousness. I’m going to bring him out of it.”

“He’s going to wake up?” asked Dominic.

“Restricting bloodflow is a short-term solution,” Gaelwyn replied. “If you want a person to come out the other side without brain damage, anyway. There’s also the issue of bedsores, given that he can’t properly move.”

“Wait,” said Vidre. She turned to Dominic. “I meant to run this by you earlier, but you were the one to kill Cerulean Bane. He snuck up on me, got a lucky hit in, left me sprawling on the ground, and you defended me from the killing blow. You saw me helpless, and that’s what gave you the courage and fortitude to fight.”

Dominic frowned. “Why?”

“It’s a better story,” said Vidre. “It sets up a romance between the two of us that people will find compelling, and it makes the both of us come out looking better. People like when I’m vulnerable. People will want to see you as strong, brave, and willing to fight against the odds.”

“Fair enough,” said Dominic. His mind had tripped itself on the word ‘romance’.

“You don’t need to relay any of this to Wealdwood, just don’t contradict it,” said Vidre.

“Welexi is okay with this deception?” asked Dominic.

“It’s true enough,” said Vidre. “There’s a chance – albeit a low one – that I would have died without your help. And without your intervention, it’s possible that Cerulean would have been able to slip back into the water. Is this going to be a problem for you?”

“No,” said Dominic, and it wasn’t. If he could have turned back time, that was how the fight would have gone, with him standing firm above Vidre, knife in hand against her aggressor, facing down impossible odds and winning. Besides that, Vidre had already spent the last night writing letters to the bards and others, so if he was uncomfortable with the mild deception, it was likely too late to do anything about it.

Gaelwyn worked his domain. Wealdwood stirred slowly, ineffectually straining against his bonds with his disconnected muscles. He froze when he saw Vidre and Gaelwyn. He tried to say something around his gag before realizing it was there. Gaelwyn nodded, and left for Welexi’s room.

“Lightscour is going to watch you,” said Vidre. “Give him any trouble, and I’ll kill

you without hesitation.”

“Can I speak with him?” asked Dominic.

“You have a dozen books that you need to read,” said Vidre. “Etiquette, history, dossiers, all manner of things you’ll need to be passable at court. And I don’t see what you would hope to get out of it. He’s said everything that he knows.”

“He’s answered every question that you’ve asked him,” said Dominic. “That’s not the same thing.”

Vidre shrugged. “I’m too tired to argue.” She stepped forward and slashed at the gag in one quick motion. Wealdwood spit it to the side, and Vidre grabbed him by the jaw. “I’m going to take a nap.” Somehow she made that sound foreboding. “Lightscour has my full permission to kill you if he thinks that’s in his best interests. If you scream and wake me up, I’ll jam a dagger through your eye and go straight back to bed.” She turned to Dominic. “Speaking of which, I’m taking your room for the day. Don’t wake me unless it’s urgent.” She placed one of her daggers in his hand, then left the room without waiting for a response.

“Release me,” said Wealdwood, as soon as Vidre was gone.

“No,” replied Dominic. “Besides, you’re not moving anywhere anytime soon. The bonds aren’t doing much. If you had your strength, I’d bet that you could simply snap them.”

“I could make a wooden pod and float away from the ship,” said Wealdwood. “I could find someone to repair the damage the Red Angel has done.” He tried to turn his head and failed. “Help me.”

“No,” said Dominic. “I want to know about your master.”

“I’ve said already,” Wealdwood replied. “He was always in shadows, with a hood that hid his face.”

“But not his hands,” said Dominic. “Those were visible, because you could see the ring he wore. What were his hands like? What color was his skin? How old was he? Did he have calluses?”

“White skin,” Wealdwood replied. “Wrinkles. Thin fingers. He wasn’t tanned at all, I don’t think he was a worker.”

“You said that you were surprised to see him in Gennaro,” said Dominic. “Where did you first make the arrangements?”

“Please let me go,” said Wealdwood. “Help me to escape, escape with me, and we can expose -”

Dominic shook his head. “All I want are answers,” he said. “Something that I can bring to Welexi to help him solve this mystery.”

“You want to be his lapdog?” asked Wealdwood. “What do you even know about the Sunhawk? About the Red Angel? About the depravities of the Queen of Glass?”

“Where did you first make the arrangements?” asked Dominic again.

Wealdwood’s face fell. “Do you understand what Gaelwyn Mottram is? How many thousands of innocent lives he took?”

Dominic shifted in his seat. The truth was, he didn’t know much about the people he

was traveling with beyond what he'd heard in the stories, and those couldn't be trusted. "I want to know about this mysterious man," said Dominic. "They're planning to let you go, but if I tell them that you're hiding something ..." Dominic shrugged, and hoped that it came off with the same nonchalance that Vidre had affected.

"They'll kill me," whispered Wealdwood. "Not in front of you, but all it will take is a touch from Gaelwyn to weaken my heart, and the next time that I get into combat, the strain will make something pop, that will be it for me. They've done it before." He tried to turn his head again, and again failed. Wealdwood's eyes moved to Dominic, and he licked his lips. "I first met him in the Iron Kingdom, in the city of Larance. I was running low on coin, and was forced to work at making boats, but fame is fleeting and I knew I wouldn't last for long doing that. The Knight of the Woods reduced to a simple carpenter, and I could feel the legends fading away, even after the scandal I'd run from. This man came to me one night and made me an offer. A return to fame, and fortunes beyond my imagining, and all I had to do was sink the *Zenith*." Wealdwood paused. "I refused. Even seeing his ring, and feeling its unmistakable signature of power, I refused him. He began to tell me stories of Welexi. They were stories that I already knew, of Whitespear striding onto fields of battle, or fighting in narrow castle corridors, of forest ambushes where the Brightshield defended merchant convoys against well-armed bandits. You're familiar with the legends?"

"Familiar enough," said Dominic. He didn't have an exhaustive knowledge, as he'd always tried to avoid the stories, but he had picked many of them up all the same. It was difficult not to, when that was all some people wanted to talk about.

"Welexi planned out his most famous fights. He worked in collusion with his villains," said Wealdwood. His brow was furrowed. "How else would so many of the battles have ended with his opponent slinking off to return another day? The man has a reputation for being soft, for letting people go, but to hear my benefactor tell it, this was all part of the plan. If two people fight, it raises the reputation of both. But it went further than that. Those well-armed bandits? My benefactor spoke with some of the men, decades after the fact. They had been paid, paid to attack, and paid to fall back. That was how Welexi forged his legend, and it's only because he's so good with his lies that he hasn't been unmasked. People revere him now. They don't want to think the worst of him. But look at the company he keeps, no offense."

"It all sounded true to you," said Dominic. "And so you agreed that you would kill him."

"No," said Wealdwood. "We were never meant to kill him. Think for a moment. There was a gaping flaw in the plan if our intent was to kill Welexi." He paused, and a slow smile spread across his face, as though it was amusing. "He can simply fly away. And as our benefactor said, that's what he would do. He would watch his crew flounder from the air. He would watch Cerulean Bane choke Vidre out. And he would leave Mottram to sink to his death. We weren't trying to kill him, only weaken him." His face fell. "Cerulean Bane is truly dead?"

"Yes," replied Dominic. He rubbed at his chin. "So the plan was to weaken him, and



then what?"

"We never knew," said Wealdwood. "Our part in it would have been done then. I met with our benefactor three times in total. The first was when he introduced himself, the second was when he paired me with Cerulean, and the third was in Gennaro, when he changed our plans. Cerulean ... we spent time chasing down the *Zenith*. We became friends. I used to joke with him about his name. It didn't make any sense – Blue Bane? He's the bane of things that are blue? Or is he a bane that's blue? A bane of what?" Wealdwood closed his eyes. "And now he's dead."

"He's trying to gain your sympathy," said Gaelwyn. He stood just outside the door, frowning slightly. "Have you learned anything interesting?"

"No," said Dominic. "Just pieces of the puzzle." There was no gentle way to ask whether any of the accusations against Welexi could possibly have been true, even if Gaelwyn would have known. Nor was there a gentle way of asking Gaelwyn whether he could sabotage someone's heart. "I was hoping that I would find some small detail that would illuminate matters."

"Vidre wanted me to have a talk with you in private when I found the time," said Gaelwyn. He walked over to the prisoner and touched him briefly on the chest, knocking him out cold. "Welexi will want you in better fighting shape, which means making some modifications."

Dominic frowned. Matters of the flesh, he'd heard it called. The domain of flesh was associated with death so often that it was hard to remember that it was also used for other things, if you were rich enough. There was a taboo that surrounded the bodily domains, one which encompassed the changes they could make to a person.

"Your consent is important to me," said Gaelwyn. "If you don't want me to make you stronger, just say so, and that will be that."

"No," said Dominic. "I do. I've just heard ... I've heard stories about it going wrong for people."

"It can be dangerous, if you're just starting out," said Gaelwyn with a nod. He took off the green apron, and began to unbutton his shirt. "But I'm no amateur." He pulled his shirt to the side.

Gaelwyn Mottram was a short man, half a head shorter than Dominic, and to look at him you might think that he was small and bookish. Beneath his loose clothing he was hiding a body that would put Corta's sons to shame. There wasn't an ounce of fat anywhere. As Dominic watched, unable to look away, the muscles strained and twisted, like a crossbow being drawn.

"There was a time, after I left the Iron King's service, when I kept myself deflated and weak. It was a penance, I thought." He touched his abdomen. "It was Welexi who showed me that I didn't have to reject my domain." He looked up at Dominic, and began buttoning back up. "Of course, it doesn't do to show it. I heal so many people with every place that we visit, and I know half of them would turn away if I looked like the monster they thought I was." He gave a nervous laugh.

"And the side effects," said Dominic slowly.

“There are none, if it’s properly done,” said Gaelwyn. “It’s the freshly minted illustrati of flesh that are the problem there. They pack more and more muscle on as quickly as possible, leaving stretch marks on their biceps and legs, warping everything out of proportion, until bone or connective tissue give way. Or they offer their services to some nobleman, who isn’t willing to put in the work to keep the physique that they’ve purchased, and a year down the road there are ugly rumors of a man with sagging skin that once held impressive brawn. Sometimes the illustrati won’t know enough, and work on domain intuition alone, which can have bad results, and occasionally ruin something in a way that can’t be fixed. Change the muscle, and you have to change everything else, and that means giving it some time.” He nodded to himself. “We go in cycles, let the body rest. Remove any fat, pack on muscle, prevent the skin from stretching too much or outright splitting, make sure that you’re not losing blood-”

“Losing blood?” asked Dominic.

“Not actually losing blood,” Gaelwyn explained quickly. “But for every ten pounds of muscle you gain, you need an extra pint of blood, so the effect can be similar.”

“Can I think on it?” asked Dominic.

Gaelwyn’s smile was strained. “Certainly, certainly. But it’s better to start soon, given the number of cycles we’ll need to do. It’s not painful at all. I can understand though, if the concept is foreign, or unfamiliar to you, how you might hesitate, I don’t blame you for that at all – do we need to speak candidly?” He saw Dominic’s look. “You’ve heard rumors about me, stories, tall tales, and if you’re going to be with us it might be better to clear the air.” He laughed slightly. “People hear about something like a crate of teeth or a headless child, and their imagination runs wild, and it would be so much better to simply explain things.”

“You’ve been kind to me since the moment I got here,” said Dominic. “But if someone asks me about your past, I don’t think it would be good for me to shrug and say that I never cared enough to ask. So if you don’t mind,” he looked to Wealdwood. “Is he going to be okay?”

“Just fine,” said Gaelwyn. His hands fidgeted.

“Then yes,” said Dominic. “I think it’s better for me to know.”



Gaelwyn was ten years old when he got his turn in front of the audience.

He stepped out onto the stage with a light shove from one of the masked attendants, and then there were ten thousand people staring at him. The master of ceremonies began to speak, the domain of sound making his voice boom out across the open air, and the words that came out were all about Gaelwyn Mottram, something between an introduction and a promotion. It was late in the evening, and Gaelwyn was far from the first, and so the master of ceremonies was working against the natural inattention of his audience.

“Let me tell you about Gaelwyn Mottram!” the master of ceremonies screamed.

“When he was only a baby, a stray spark from a fireplace lit the thatched roof on fire! Baby Gaelwyn was trapped inside the house, about to burn alive! But he turned to the

fire, and he commanded it with his first words, striking a deal – that the fire could forever find a home in his hair, if only it let him live!”

One of the attendants pushed Gaelwyn forward, towards where the dozens of objects arranged on a table. There was one for every domain, some in small jars, some simply sitting there, and a series of cages that held the animals. He had instruction beforehand, but being the focus of attention was making him feel sick. The attendant leaned down and whispered in his ear.

“Find which one is yours, don’t waste our time.”

Gaelwyn reached out and touched them one by one as the master of ceremonies droned on. He was telling a story about how young Gaelwyn, at the age of five, stared down a grizzly bear. The stories were obviously untrue, but enough that the audience might be able to overcome their apathy for a moment. Ten thousand people, focused all on a single small boy, was supposed to be enough to allow his domain to be found.

He didn’t know enough to know what it was supposed to be like, when you found your domain. If you had the temporary fame of the crowd you were supposed to simply know, but as Gaelwyn touched the blocks of metal that comprised the metallic domains, he grew worried. Children were supposed to stay as long as it took, and the audience was often blamed for a failure. Too much time, and someone would be grabbed at random by the attendants and publicly whipped for a few minutes before being returned back to the crowd. The master of ceremonies aside, this was one of the things that helped to focus attention.

Gaelwyn touched every domain for long enough to be sure. Glass, sand, ash, and a candle that served triple duty as smoke, heat, and fire. He went through the animals quickly, reaching into their cages to touch them and see their reactions to him. The cat looked up at him with a blank expression, and the dog seemed interested only in a piece of meat that sat on the table, and none of the others were anything more than put upon by the contact or simply non-responsive. It was none of the base elementals, or the derived elementals, none of the ephemerals, nor the animal domains, nothing manufactured, or organic – and that left only the six bodily domains, which everyone saved for last. They were set off to the side, clustered together. Hair, bile, skin, bone, blood, and flesh.

Yet even before he touched the quivering chunk of meat, he knew it for his domain. He was flesh, the temporary attentions allowed him to feel it beneath his skin, a whole part of himself that he’d never really given much thought to before. So it was no surprise to him that he could make the chunk of meat move slightly beneath his touch. He was happy to show the attendant, happy that he hadn’t had to go through all of them a second time, and happy that no one had to be whipped. The attendant had nodded, marked something on a sheet of paper, and led him away.

He never saw his family again.

He shared an enormous building in the country with a hundred other children and twenty teachers. He cried often, early on, but less as time passed and life in the school assumed a sense of normalcy. The full meaning of the school wasn’t fully apparent to him, as nothing was ever explained to the children, but gradually Gaelwyn came to

understand. The Iron King was famous for many things, but his cannons were chief among them. He could make them quickly, much faster than any forge, and he had used that ability to extend his empire around the world. At the school he was doing something different; taking the raw ingredient of childhood and forging something useful.

Gaelwyn took to his studies more than the other children. He was intelligent, and in this new environment he had a chance to show it. As the years passed, other students left, sometimes taken away in the middle of the night. Gaelwyn was one among many with the domain of flesh, but in the end, the Iron King would only need one. Gaelwyn knew what his role was to be before he was told, and took to studying his domain, not only what was written in the library's books, but his own body as well. He went from lean to powerful, growing slowly so as not to make mistakes, honing his craft in front of a full-length mirror. He was short, but he made his shoulders broad and his muscles thick.

One day Gaelwyn became the last remaining illustrati of flesh at the school, and the next day he was standing before the Iron King.

The Iron King stood eight and a half feet tall. He was a mountain of a man, an impossible giant, and when he saw the perfection of the king's form, Gaelwyn wondered what he could possibly be needed for. Yet on first touch, it became apparent. The king had not started out so enormous; he had been made that way. He was a sculpture of flesh and bone, changed and warped into his state of seeming perfection. Yet there were flaws; he had little feeling in his legs and feet, and suffered disorders of the body. His joints were weakened, and though he was extremely powerful, above and beyond what was granted by his fame, he moved sluggishly. Gaelwyn was able to solve some of these problems, with time, and give instruction to alleviate some of the others, but eight feet was taller than a man should be, especially one that demanded such an excess of muscle. The Iron King weighed eight hundred pounds. He ate two dozen eggs for breakfast, and a whole chicken for lunch. By most accounts he was a titan, yet he was king all the same.

Gaelwyn wasn't allowed to work on the king at first. He was given prisoners to practice on, and instruction in making them as powerful as he possibly could in conjunction with one of the Bone Warden's acolytes. He refined his techniques and his artistic talent. It was easy enough to swell the muscles, but there was a difficulty in making sure that the men were still aesthetically pleasing afterward, and unintended consequences that could result from putting emphasis in the wrong place. Domain intuition wasn't enough, it took study of human physiology and a keen eye for the arts, both of which Gaelwyn was made to learn. He made mistakes, in those early years, but there was always a fresh body to practice on. He made a half-hearted effort to fix his errors, but one of the king's advisors had stopped in to say that his job wasn't to fix things – it was to never make a mistake in the first place.

Officially, Gaelwyn was the court physician. The Iron King didn't publicly admit to using the bodily domains to his advantage, in part because he had made the practice illegal, and in part because it might have hurt his reputation. The stories circulating about the Iron King claimed that he was born enormous, that his mother died in childbirth because of his size, that he could lift a wagon with one hand at the age of ten, on and on.

His father had prepared him well for the role of king, with a mythology that he easily slipped into. Gaelwyn never shared the king's company in public, only in small, secret rooms, when repairs and modifications needed to be done to the king's flesh. It continued that way for a time, until a fateful day when the king asked a question.

“Where does blood come from?”

Gaelwyn recited the theories. The older theory was one of latent domains. Domain genesis was often considered one of the core abilities, and few domains lacked it; the Iron King could produce more iron simply by touching an existing stock of it, and with concentration and an exercise of will, produce it from thin air. The theory of latent domains postulated that every person contained within themselves all the bodily domains, and had a mild, entirely subconscious access to them. Bones knit by themselves, given time. Flesh would mend, if slowly. Hair grew, skin stretched, all – so the theory went – because people had an unspecialized and basal access to those domains. The answer to where blood came from was then the same as the answer to where any substance produced by the *illustrati* came from, which was a great and unsolved question of a different magnitude.

The second theory was that blood was produced by some organ of the body, in the same way that salivary glands – isolated only five years prior – produced saliva. Which organ was an open question; many thought it was the heart itself, in the course of its constant beating, while others said it was a secondary (or even primary) effect of the lungs or liver.

“Find out for sure,” commanded the Iron King.

Gaelwyn didn't start by taking people apart. He started with rats, with hounds, with other animals whose biology was close enough to human. He wrapped himself in the problem, partially because there was nothing better to consume his time, and partially because he found it faintly absurd that no one knew the answer. Blood was so basic to life, so elemental to human physiology, but they had no idea where it came from. Gaelwyn ran his experiments, often several in parallel. He would remove a single organ from a rat, then drain a quantity of its blood, and compare these different rats to each other after several days. The heart was a tricky one, but the solution had been simple – remove the heart, then stitch together veins and arteries from a second living creature, so that both shared blood. It took many iterations to get right, with mysterious deaths that couldn't be accounted for by the trauma of the surgery. He made investigations, and found that this was a problem long-known by the *illustrati* of blood, an incompatibility that they couldn't explain.

He published a brief titled “The Classifications of Blood” which documented his methods and his findings. It was the first of its kind, an attempt to bring the revolutions in study to the human body. The second volume he produced gave detail to the process by which blood was created in the marrow of the bones, something he'd discovered when he'd begun removing bones from his rats. Before, Gaelwyn had been elevated through the Iron King's sheer might and bardic organization. Afterward, it was through a measure of his own success.

Gaelwyn pushed himself, and the Iron King smiled on these efforts. There were new things to learn, questions that the Iron King found value in having answered. How long could a man survive cold? How long could he survive heat? There was no domain to govern the majority of the organs with a man, but could it be made safe to replace a sick organ with a healthy one? How were teeth made? Why did people have two sets of them? What governed the natural repair of bones, if the theory of latent domains was incorrect? What caused people to be misshapen, or to have disorders of the mind? Gaelwyn wanted to know the answers to these questions, even more than his king did. Curiosity was part of it, and he wouldn't deny that fame was too, but mostly it was that sense of progress that came when the air smelled metallic and his fingers were slippery with blood.

Many of his subjects were prisoners, but not all. He was given a building to conduct his studies in, and it housed a number of his subjects, many of them oddities brought in from around the Iron Kingdom. Gaelwyn never killed anyone, at least never by intent. With his power he could split the skin and tug at the muscles to look at the inner workings of a person, to inject drugs directly into their vital organs or make observations of the body under distress. He was kind to his patients, and understanding. They were provided for. They were comfortable.

The Peddler's War brought changes. The Iron Kingdom was attacked, and when it fought back, more viciously than anyone realized it could, prisoners of war were given over to Gaelwyn. Gaelwyn published many volumes on the findings that resulted, and the state of the art was advanced immeasurably. He surrounded himself with assistants and like-minded colleagues, and rarely ventured from his hospital save to attend to the king's body and keep it in its optimal shape. The hospital was Gaelwyn's castle, and he thought of himself as a king in his own right, a ruler over human biology, an explorer forging straight ahead.

When the Peddler's War ended, Gaelwyn was nearly executed. The Iron King had won the counter-war, claiming land in the process, but Gaelwyn had become too well known, and too much of a political liability in a time of peace. He hadn't known before how much of a monster the world saw him as, nor had he heard the stories that were told about him. His mail had been censored. The domain of flesh was looked down on or outright hated, and the stories of mangled men and piled up corpses had only added to that. The Iron King settled on exile instead of execution, and Gaelwyn was thrust out into a world that hated and feared him. The bubble he'd been living in was popped, and he was left to face cold reality.



"I drifted," said Gaelwyn. "For three years. I heard the songs that they sung about me, watched on occasion as they burned my books. I kept myself shrouded. I was hunted from time to time, but I fought back. I was strong, monstrously strong, a tight ball of muscle and pain. I lashed out. I grew despondent. I tried to hide, and failed. And in the end, it was Welexi who brought me back from the brink."

"You saved his life," said Dominic. He had heard that story before. As it went, Welexi had been badly injured in a fight and nearly dead. He propped himself up against a lonely

orange tree, waiting for the end. His heart had stopped when Gaelwyn found him, but for Gaelwyn, a stopped heart was an easy problem to fix. Ever after, Welexi had traveled with Gaelwyn, and acted in his defense.

“I saved his life,” nodded Gaelwyn. “And he, in turn, saved mine.”

Dominic wondered whether it was true. It was impossible to say just from watching Gaelwyn’s expression, but Dominic suspected that it wasn’t. There were many reasons to keep Gaelwyn Mottram close to you, not least of which was the fact that he was a powerful illustrati and – even assuming some exaggeration – one of the foremost healers in the world.

“I worry I’m a stain on his goodness,” said Gaelwyn. “I worry about the answers that he has to make for me. The duels he’s been forced to fight because I’ve vowed to take no further lives. Welexi wouldn’t throw me away like the Iron King did, wouldn’t ever turn his back on me, but I worry about what I cost him. It’s been nine years since the Peddler’s War, and still people talk. Sometimes I think that I’m the only thing that they remember from that time, nevermind that the death toll between all sides was four hundred thousand men. I was a symbol. I still am.”

“I’ll take whatever enhancements you can give me,” said Dominic.

Gaelwyn’s eyes lit up. “You will?”

“I trust you,” said Dominic. “Whatever is in the past is in the past.”

He said it with his most ready smile, but the truth was that he knew he was going to take the offered advantage at some point in the future, so it was better to simply take it now, when he could gain the most benefit from it and solidify a bond between them. For all Gaelwyn had said in his story, there were few enough specifics. *Don’t admit to anything specific, show contrition, promise reform, talk about your crimes like they’re all in the past.* It was close enough to that script that Dominic had used, if he was being cynical. And Gaelwyn had never explained the headless child, or the crate full of teeth. In a world full of stories, perhaps it was simply easier to say that all the bad ones directed your way were inventions of the frightened and ignorant.

Gaelwyn touched him lightly on the arm, and the change began. Dominic’s muscles twitched slightly, moving of their own accord. He sagged slightly, leaning against the wall. Parts of him were shrinking, or vanishing entirely. He felt like there were tides of flesh moving within him. And then, just as quickly as it had begun, it was over. It hadn’t been unpleasant, exactly. Dominic flexed with newfound strength, a physical might that seemed to nearly match that granted by his fame. He felt the need to go running, to stretch his legs out and punch at the air.

“That’s the beginning,” said Gaelwyn with a small, cautious grin. “We’ll let your body adjust over the next few days. I’ll watch this one; go do some stretching out, feel how things are working, and report back to me at once if you feel something wrong in one of the joints. And save some energy for later in the day. I know that Vidre wanted to put you through your paces.”

“I will,” said Dominic. “And thank you.”

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Gaelwyn rested his hand on Wealdwood's chest, feeling the muscles squirm.
Would the world be a better place if Wealdwood never woke up?

CHAPTER FIVE

The Belligerent Bard

Dominic felt like he had been sick his entire life, and had only now gotten better. Partly this was a result of the magic Gaelwyn had done, and partly it was Dominic's continued increase in standing, but the combined effect was that Dominic was brimming over with energy and power. He wanted to run, but the ship couldn't have been much more than sixty feet from bow to stern, and even if it hadn't been teeming with sailors, there wasn't enough of a straightaway to put on a good amount of speed. There were another eight and a half days until the ship arrived at Torland, and Dominic was already aching for the chance to sprint at full speed. He'd been able to do that at the outskirts of Gennaro, where the roads were straight and mostly empty; he could run until his lungs ached and he was drenched in sweat.

Dominic needed someone to show off for, or at least someone that could share in his excitement. He held out his hand in front of him, and with just a slight act of will, conjured the same dagger as he had last night. The closer he looked at it, the more it looked like one he'd seen in a display case in Gennaro. A smile split his face, and he couldn't have hid it if he wanted to. So long as his fame lasted, he would never be truly disarmed. More than that, it was a blade that wouldn't weigh him down. He would be able to run through the city streets and then reach out to grab his dagger from nothing. The intimidation aspect alone would make him the envy of all his friends, even if the blade itself had been completely non-functional. Dominic's smile faltered when he remembered stabbing Cerulean Bane in the side, and then fell completely when he remembered spearing Zerstor through the heart.

Dominic shook away those thoughts, and looked at the shadows. He could make the shadows larger or smaller, shrinking them away entirely until he was left with no shadow at all. He closed his eyes to concentrate on the sensation of movement, and was mildly surprised to find that he could still sense the shadows, at least those along the deck of the ship. He continued for some time, testing his limits, from the range of his powers to the strength and speed of them. When Vidre found him, he was trying to alter the form of his dagger.

"You started training without me," she said with a yawn and a cat-like stretch. She had abandoned her armor entirely, though her daggers still hung from her belt. She was barefoot and wore a blue dress. Dominic realized it was the first time that he'd seen her

without pants. She seemed almost absurdly feminine in comparison to the night before, if Dominic ignored the daggers. He could see the graceful curve of her collarbone and the flare of her hips.

“You can’t have a dagger,” said Vidre. She was watching him with a raised eyebrow. “Thematically, I mean. I use daggers, Welexi uses a spear, you need to pick something else.”

“I like daggers,” said Dominic. He thrust forward with the shadow dagger, stabbing at the air. The balance of it seemed perfect, even though the dagger itself was weightless. It was an odd sensation. “And besides, can’t I just pick whatever best suits the moment? Surely you’d use a sword if the situation called for it.”

“Absolutely,” said Vidre. “But as I said before, being an illustrati isn’t all about fighting. It’s not even mostly about fighting. If you want to be an icon, you have to craft an image for yourself, something that people will remember you by. You need a persona that causes an instant association. There are people who have no idea who I am, but they’ve heard the name ‘Queen of Glass’ before, and maybe some stories about my daggers, so when they see me in the flesh they make the connection. What you don’t want is people arguing about what should be a matter of fact. I’ve gone incognito more than a few times, and listened to stories get brought to a grinding halt because two people wanted to argue about whether some illustrati wore a cape or not.”

“Well, maybe he didn’t wear a cape all the time,” said Dominic.

“That’s exactly the problem,” said Vidre. “Variations in personal appearance make it harder for you to stick in someone’s mind. If you see a person once, and they’re wearing a cape, that’s how you think of them until the next time that mental image is challenged.”

“I’ve seen you in four different outfits over the course of two days,” said Dominic.

Vidre looked down at her dress. “This one doesn’t count. No one is around to see it. And as for the others, those were for different occasions. I have one outfit I wear for day-to-day, I have a formal suit of armor, and I have a full combat outfit. That’s the whole of it though. All of them are distinct from each other. If I do switch over to something that’s not one of those three, it’s generally a large departure – an outfit where the whole point is to draw attention to how unusual it is.” She looked back down at her dress. “And of course, when I have some privacy, I can wear whatever I damned well please.”

Dominic looked down to his dagger and let go of it. It faded away in an instant. “So I’ll need to pick out something iconic for myself,” he said slowly.

“I’ll need to pick out something iconic for you,” said Vidre. “You can have some input, but I have years of experience seeing what works and what doesn’t, and I know who has claim to various looks. There’s a fortunate dearth of shadow in this part of the world.” She tapped her lip and looked him up and down. “We’re almost certainly putting you in a dark purple and gold, which won’t step on any toes. It’s no use having people mistaking you for someone else.”

“Fair enough,” said Dominic. “I welcome the help.”

Vidre gave him a quizzical look. “You’re more pragmatic than I expected you to be.”

“I suppose I’ll take that as a compliment,” Dominic replied. “Now then, a sword?” He

held out his hand to the side and willed a long blade into existence. The sword that resulted was familiar to him, a shadow replica of one that he had stolen off a noble's belt and fenced for a small fortune. He hadn't consciously been thinking of that sword, but it had come to him all the same.

"Mildly impressive," said Vidre. "Our bards must be doing a better job than I thought."

"The sky's the limit," said Dominic. "And perhaps not even that. I'm fairly certain I could make wings of shadow."

Vidre smiled. "I have a scenario. You've attended a dinner party, followed by dancing, followed by parlor games, but now the hour is late. Your host asks if you would like to spend the night in a guest room. What should your response be?"

"What?" asked Dominic. Vidre only gave him a slight, expectant tilt of the head. "I suppose it depends on how far away I am, and how late you mean when you say it's late."

"Wrong. You decline," said Vidre firmly. "Your host will insist, and only then do you take pragmatism into consideration. If they do not insist, then it was only a nicety that was expected of them."

"Is that really how nobles do it?" asked Dominic.

"That's how it's done among the people you'll meet in Torland," said Vidre. "What is the proper form of address for the Flower Queen's husband?"

"Your Majesty?" guessed Dominic.

"Ealdwine of the House Marburg is a prince, not a king, and as such is styled with 'Your Royal Highness' on first address, and thereafter simply 'Sir'," replied Vidre. "If you referred to him as 'Your Majesty' you would be putting him on par with his wife, which at best would get titters of laughter at your expense, and at worst would be seen as a deliberate slight against the Queen."

"Well," said Dominic. He was blushing slightly, despite himself. "I didn't know that."

"You don't know anything," said Vidre. "There are a thousand things that you need to learn that are more important than learning how to fight, or how to properly use your domain. Etiquette is one of those things, and the names, stylings, and personal histories of the Flower Queen's court are another."

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Time passed.

Vidre was a surprisingly gentle instructor. She never tried to make him feel stupid, and didn't berate him for not knowing things. Her corrections were clear and to the point. It might even have been tolerable, if she were teaching a more interesting subject.

"Never leave the table until a meal is over," said Vidre. She stood with her hands folded beneath her chest and her chin slightly lifted. The sailors worked around them, occasionally calling instruction to each other. Vidre ignored them completely. "However, if you absolutely must leave, where should you place your napkin to show that you intend to return?"

Dominic frowned, and tried to figure it out from base principles. There only seemed

to be two options, the chair or the table, but he had no idea which was correct. It was also possible that the answer was “atop the bread plate” or some other ridiculous bit of specificity that he would never be able to guess at.

“I can’t get some leeway as the naive newcomer?” asked Dominic.

“Not forever,” said Vidre. “Some of your social missteps will be excused, and perhaps they’ll even find it funny, but if you want to be regarded as someone on the rise, you need to make an honest effort. I can dress you properly and never leave you on your own, but that’s a short-term solution. Later on you might play the boor deliberately, but that would work better if you were truly foreign. There are more than enough men and women that play the fool though, and I don’t think you’re particularly well-suited to it; not enough to go into competition with the people who have made their livelihoods on being buffoons.”

“Fine,” said Dominic. “I put the napkin on the seat of the chair then?”

“Correct,” said Vidre with a smile. “You’ll get there eventually. It took me two years with the best tutors my husband could buy, I don’t expect you to attain mastery in a week’s time.”

At the mention of Vidre’s one-time husband, a dozen questions seemed to work their way from Dominic’s brain straight to his tongue. He managed to close his mouth tight enough to keep the words from escaping. Gaelwyn had been almost eager to share his past, to frame public stories in a light that flattered him, but Dominic didn’t imagine that Vidre would want to do the same. For everything that was said about her, some of it had to be true, and he didn’t want to make her air it out. He didn’t want her to lie to him either, as he was halfway sure Gaelwyn had.

“Well,” said Vidre with a sniff of the air. She turned away from him. “I think we’re done for the day. Time for real dinner instead of a fake one, at any rate. And after that, we throw Wealdwood and his companion into the sea.”

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Cerulean Bane had been wrapped in a tarp. At some point before they’d left Gennaro, someone had been sent out to get armfuls of herbs, which had been placed in with the corpse. The result was a smell of oregano, basil, and thyme, which mingled with the smell of decaying flesh. Wealdwood had been dragged up onto deck, with his muscles restored enough for him to stand, but he looked away from the covered body. Welexi had stayed down in his cabin to rest, but everyone else was up on deck. The ship was nearly still in the water, and all seven sails had been furled. The sailors stood around talking quietly among themselves.

“A man can’t attack someone and not expect them to fight back,” said Vidre. “It’s better not to have to kill a man, if it can be helped, but sometimes it can’t.” She had put her armor back on, and eyed Wealdwood carefully the whole time she was speaking. Dominic had thought she was going to start into a eulogy of some kind, but those two sentences were the extent of what she had to say on the matter.

“He tried to be a good man,” said Wealdwood. His voice was strained. His arms were bound behind him with thick rope, and his feet were embedded in a giant chunk of glass

that Vidre had shaped around them. His muscles had been reconnected, but sapped of their strength; Gaelwyn had withered the muscles down, then bled the illustrati, explaining to anyone who would listen that there was a relation between the ratio of blood volume to muscle volume. Wealdwood's arm had a thick bandage around it, which showed a dot of red. "But being a good man is hard. I didn't know him well. I was the talker, between the two of us. I wish I'd let him fill the silence more."

Vidre nodded. "Dominic, grab the feet."

They picked up the tarp. It was surprisingly light until Dominic remembered how much stronger he was now. Even with the armor still on the body, Vidre could probably have lifted it all by herself. The mixed smell of herbs and death filled Dominic's nostrils. Together he and Vidre moved the tarp over to the side of the ship, swung it back once, then tossed it over the edge. It splashed into the dark blue water and immediately began to sink. The smell lingered.

"Now you," Vidre said to Wealdwood. Four long pieces of wood had been brought up onto the deck, and Vidre gestured to them. "We're letting you go, against my better judgment. Thank Welexi for that. There's land just visible to the north. Your strength isn't going to be returned to you; you can find someone to do that for you, or build it back up naturally, but it's not our problem." She pointed to the four planks. "I'm going to take off your fetters, and you're going to make yourself a raft. The wood is a gift, from us to you. If you make any sudden movements, I will kill you. If you say anything unwise, I will kill you. If you use your domain to do anything other than making a raft for yourself, I will kill you. You have a narrow path to life here, try not to wander from it."

Wealdwood licked his lips and nodded. When Vidre pulled the glass from his feet, he went over to the provided wood and began to shape it. The sailors lost interest quickly enough, but Vidre stared at Wealdwood with unwavering intensity. Dominic had asked whether Wealdwood would be able to sink the ship while standing on its deck, and Vidre had replied that his power wouldn't extend so far, and besides that he'd be dooming himself. Watching her now, Dominic wasn't sure how confident she was in that assessment.

"Did you kill me, Mottram?" asked Wealdwood as he pushed the planks together. He ran his finger along the seam, altering the wood so that it was a single solid piece. The process gave off a faint sound of creaking. "Did you introduce some flaw in me? Simple enough to do, for someone like you."

"You are venturing into unwise territory," said Vidre.

Wealdwood's hands were shaking as he repeated the process on another of the planks. "Not knowing is the worst part," he said slowly. "I've expected my death from the moment I was captured, but I don't know whether this is a charade or not, a performance put on for your crew or a genuine act of clemency."

Vidre and Gaelwyn were both silent. A light breeze blew across the deck of the ship, carrying away murmured conversation among the sailors, and not much of that.

"I'll say whatever it is you want for me to say," said Wealdwood. "I can be a tool for you, an instrument of your will, if only you let me live." He was working quickly, and

finished merging the fourth piece. He turned to look at Gaelwyn. His eyes were brimming with tears. “Please, Gael, if you’ve done it, you can still undo it, you can still let me live, I’ll tell them, all of them, the whole world about how you let me go, how you’re not the man that you were, how you’ve truly changed your ways – or, or how you never were that man to begin with. Please, please don’t let me die.”

Gaelwyn’s lips twitched slightly. His eyes showed little emotion. “You tried to kill me,” he said, “What good would it do, to have me tell you that I haven’t acted in retribution? You don’t trust my word now, and wouldn’t have reason to trust it just because I’d told you what you wanted to hear. If this is a charade for someone’s benefit, I would touch you on the shoulder and tell you that I’d undone whatever it is you think that I’ve done.”

Wealdwood finished the pitifully small boat in silence, shaping the flat rectangle of wood into a crude half-shell. His hands were unsteady, and his breathing was uneven, but he didn’t ever quite cry. After the boat was finished, Vidre made him sit in it, then began pushing it towards where there was a gap in the railing. Her eyes never left Wealdwood. The Zenith wasn’t too high up off the water, and it would be a short drop.

“Dominic,” said Wealdwood, his voice thick with urgency, “If you never see me again, never hear word that I made it to safety, you’ll know what was done to me.”

Vidre shoved his boat hard, and it splashed down into the water. Wealdwood looked up at them, then began the work of fashioning oars for himself. His arms looked pitifully small, and if he weren’t an illustrati, Dominic would have put low odds on the man making it to shore.

“Sailors, go check the bilge and make a survey of the hold,” said Vidre as she pointed to two of them. “Let’s make sure this bastard didn’t try something foolish, just in case. Everyone else, let’s get moving again. The sooner we’re in Torland, the better.”

The sails came down again and billowed up with wind, and the ship began to leave Wealdwood in his small boat behind. Dominic watched from the stern of the ship until the boat was only a speck. Vidre stood beside him.

“That’s trouble,” said Vidre. “Welexi thought that the man had learned his lesson by being at our mercy, but I’m doubtful. Wealdwood took a first step down the path to villainy – maybe it was his second or third, I don’t know – but it’s been my experience that people don’t often turn around, not until they’ve reached the lowest low. I’ve already set too much in motion for Wealdwood. Gennaro will know what he’s done within the next week or two, depending on how our bards think the wind is blowing. It’s going to be harder for Wealdwood to come back to the light after that, even if we’ve effectively given him a pardon. So what will he do but turn to villainy?” She sighed and closed her eyes. The wind pushed her hair back, and for the first time since Dominic had met her, she looked content. “It’s a problem for the future.”

Dominic looked around, to make sure that Gaelwyn had gone down into the cabin. “Can Gael do that? Kill a man from a distance?”

Vidre didn’t open her eyes, and a strand of loose hair danced in the wind. “He described the body as a temple, when he was one of his more poetic moods,” said Vidre.

“Easy enough to knock down, if you have a siege weapon, and that’s all that most illustrati of flesh have. Gaelwyn is like an exceptionally skilled architect of temples. Is it within his capabilities to introduce a subtle change, so the temple blows down in the next strong wind, or collapses in on itself in the next heavy rain?” She kept her eyes closed and pursed her lips. “He keeps secrets. We all do. But yes, I think that if he wanted to, he could do something like that.”

“Has he, in the past?” asked Dominic. The information was third-hand, or perhaps even more tenuous than that. The ultimate source was Wealdwood’s benefactor, and it was an open question where the benefactor had heard it, or if he had simply made the whole thing up.

“If he has, I didn’t give the order,” said Vidre. She had drawn back her armor slightly, now that Wealdwood was gone. The danger was now well and truly past, and her muscles were relaxed. The piece of glass around her upper arm was clear enough for Dominic to see the muscles of her bicep.

It was only when he looked at it that it occurred to him that Gaelwyn might have enhanced her too. The thought of Gaelwyn’s hand on her, touching every muscle in her body at once, shifting them around and trying to bring about the most aesthetic shape, caused a cold feeling in Dominic’s gut. It shouldn’t have, he knew that, but it made her less beautiful in his eyes. What was to say that her skin hadn’t been made smooth and soft by another illustrati? That her hair hadn’t been made thick and full? The Bone Warden could fix teeth. Vidre’s were straight, and the more he looked between her slightly parted lips, the more her teeth looked preternaturally white. Flesh, skin, hair, bone – she wasn’t perfect, and there was nothing overt, but his guess felt right it all the same. He shouldn’t have expected anything less. Vidre was the sort of person who would take any advantage she could grab hold of. Yet she still had a scar on her face.

“How did you get that scar?” asked Dominic. It was white and vertical, and didn’t disfigure her in the slightest. It was suspicious, in that regard.

“Not the time for stories,” said Vidre. “You have books to read, and lessons to learn.”



The next day, Dominic and Vidre fought.

“There is a difference between animal instinct and learned knowledge,” said Welexi. He sat on a chair, fully braced in light, with Gaelwyn beside him. Dominic and Vidre were circling each other slowly. He had a sword of shadow, and she had crafted a sword of glass. “If you go into combat, you must have both. You must know on an intellectual level what your opponent might do, and weigh your options with a keen mind, and at the same time have an understanding deep in your bones, in order to react without thought.”

“There’s too much distance between your feet,” said Vidre. Dominic tried to correct it.

“It’s instructive to think of battle as a drama,” said Welexi. “At a certain point, we all know our lines, but what distinguishes a man is the character of his performance. Patience, attention, rage, confidence, all these things contribute to a person’s expression of martial skill, and to be truly great, you must know how to respond to these subtleties,

and control the subtleties of your own.”

“That’s not going to help him if he can’t master the basics,” said Vidre. “There’s still too much distance between your feet. When you step over to circle I could dash in and get you off-balance, and from there it wouldn’t be long before you died.”

“Alright,” said Dominic. He tried to shift his positioning. There were too many things to think about at once, and Welexi’s bits of martial philosophy weren’t helping matters. Vidre had gotten him into a proper fighting stance with his sword held in front of him, but when he moved he needed to focus on keeping his spine straight, his arms bent at the correct angle, his feet the proper distance from each other, his torso presenting a profile, and his shoulders square. As soon as his attention was focused on one of those things, one of the others seemed to slip. Worse, he was being taught only one of three basic stances, and those other two would have to be mastered as well.

“There are three planes of reference,” said Welexi. “From head to shoulders, from shoulders to waist, and from waist to feet. Each is defended in a different manner.”

Vidre darted towards Dominic with what he now recognized as exaggerated slowness, and he brought his sword forward to block her. After a brief contact, she backed away and fell back into a stance that was far superior to his in every way. For the time being, she was pretending at not being an illustrati; techniques for dealing with other illustrati varied widely according to Vidre, depending on the standing of the opponent and their domain.

“I’m reasonably confident that by the time we arrive in Meriwall, Dominic will be able to stand toe-to-toe with any normal man, one-on-one, in a fair fight,” said Vidre. She circled slowly, stepping with care. On occasion she would leave an opening for Dominic, and that was his cue to attack. These openings were wholly by her intent, and he was sure that he was missing half of them, if not more. “That’s good – better than expected. We should work more on etiquette and social skills.”

“There is civil unrest in Torland,” said Welexi. “The odds that we will be forced to fight are high. It is entirely possible that our first visit to the Flower Queen’s court will result in her asking us to take care of some problem. Given that we’re, ahem, short-handed, Lightscour needs to be able to defend himself at the least, not just against a background character, but a major player.”

Dominic was becoming doubtful that this would happen. His strength, speed, and resilience would give him an advantage, but there was far too much to learn. Vidre had let him tag her once or twice now, but there was little doubt in his mind that she could kill him with ease if she had the motive for it. He felt strong, and his command over his domain had grown from the day before, but his confidence had been shaken by these combat lessons.

“Let’s take a break,” said Vidre. She folded her glass sword in half with ease, and clamped the glass down onto her wrist to make a bracer. Dominic dismissed his shadow sword, and felt like a faint weight had been lifted from his mind.

“Mimicry is in the nature of shadow,” said Welexi. “Every shadow is a duplicate, in its own way. Armor will come easily to you, I think.”

“Better sooner than later,” said Vidre. She sat cross-legged on the deck of the ship. “If it’s possible to get something in place before we reach Meriwall, that would be ideal.”

Dominic held his hand out, and tried to force the shadow into a bracer like the one Vidre had given herself. Nothing happened until he held his hand slightly above his forearm to cast a shadow there, and after that it was easy to make the shadow a solid thing. He clamped the hard shadow into place around his arm, and held it up for inspection. He could feel the same faint tug of attention there, and wondered what the upper limit of his power would be. He’d heard a story of Welexi outfitting a hundred men with spears during some large battle.

“The question is whether it will make good armor,” said Vidre. She touched the bracer and frowned. “We’ll have to test how easy it is to penetrate or shatter. Welexi’s is nearly as strong as steel, though steel isn’t too strong in the hands of an illustrati.” Dominic briefly thought of her fist crumpling Cerulean Bane’s faceplate, and her bare hands tearing into his armor. She should have torn her hands up doing that, but they were perfectly fine, slender and delicate save for the calluses her daggers gave her.

“How likely are we to have to fight in Meriwall?” asked Dominic. “I’ll be ready for it, whatever the challenge,” he added.

“Civil unrest is a nasty thing,” said Vidre. “And somewhat outside our purview, come to that. Our arrangement with the Flower Queen is that in the event of a defensive war we’ll be called in on their side, along with a few of the other major players. I believe she hopes to quell dissent merely by having us present for a month or so. We’re an implied threat to her would-be enemies.”

“The Queen is a gentle soul,” said Welexi. “We would protect her anyway.”

“She’s important to the balance of power,” Vidre replied. “There will be a succession crisis when she dies, which will give the Iron King an opening, and that’s not good for anyone.”

“They went to war before,” said Dominic with a shrug.

This was greeted with silence.

“We all played our part in the Peddler’s War,” Welexi eventually replied. “It will be a point of contention when we reach Torland. It would do best not to mention it. The Sovento States were neutral, and you would have been eight years old when it ended, so I don’t expect you to know, but it was a brutal thing. Thousands of corpses littered the killing fields. Men starved within their forts. There’s some threat of it happening again; nine years is too long to go without one of the major powers making a play against the other. This is not a matter to be met with a shrug.”

“I’m sorry,” said Dominic. “I only meant . . . I don’t know. That it wouldn’t be the end of the world.”

“This is why your lessons are a priority,” said Vidre. She stood up from the deck and touched her glass bracer. “Combat is all well and good, but it’s words that will sink us. There are a number of gaps in your knowledge that need to be filled in as quickly as possible.” She turned to Welexi. “Four hours of combat training a day, nothing more?”

“Agreed,” said Welexi. “I see the wisdom of your approach now.”

“Good,” said Vidre. The smile she gave Dominic was sharp. “Now, Lightscour, let me give you an abridged history of the Peddler’s War ...”



Halfway through their trip, Dominic began to have second thoughts about becoming an illustrati.

He was growing more powerful with every day that passed. He could see perfectly in the dark now, and read the books he’d been assigned without need for a candle. He could make a number of pieces of armor for himself, including a rather sturdy breastplate which could almost match the strength of metal, but with none of the actual weight. He could leap at least fifteen feet into the air now, though he’d put a stop to that particular line of experimentation after almost landing in the sea. He was on the verge of being able to move around with his eyes closed, going by the feel of the shadows alone.

That was all well and good – those were the parts that he liked.

Unfortunately, there was an enormous quantity of learning to be done. There were two hundred people on Vidre’s list, and each of them had at least two names, a domain, and some small bit of personal history. He had been given a rundown on the major nations that ringed the Calypso, their dispositions towards each other, their forms of government, principle trade goods, major cities, and recent wars (where “recent” seemed to stretch back at least fifty years). Worst of all was etiquette, which had numerous rules that followed little in the way of internal logic, and which seemed especially pointless. All of that was what Vidre called “the essentials”. A small fraction of it he had already known, but most of it he had not. He would have slammed his head against the cabin wall in frustration, but was worried that he would leave a dent.

The combat training was almost worse. Every time he began to feel that he was doing well, some new aspect would be introduced that seemed to set him back to square one. On the sixth day, Vidre had said, “Alright, I’m going to speed up a little bit,” and he had nearly thrown his sword down and quit for the day. He’d thought he was doing well, but she was operating far below her limits. Every time he seemed to be matching her capabilities, she simply began using some hidden reserve that he hadn’t even known was there.

“Oh come on,” said Vidre over dinner. They were eating together in her cabin, a stew of lamb and peas, and she had her bare feet propped up against the cabin wall. “Don’t look so glum.”

“It’s just frustrating,” said Dominic. “I feel like I’m not getting any better.”

“You are getting better,” said Vidre. “You just didn’t realize how much further there was to go.”

“But it was easier for everyone else,” said Dominic. “They didn’t need to so much time and effort.”

“Like me?” asked Vidre. She speared a piece of lamb and plopped it in her mouth, then continued talking around the food. It was terrible etiquette, but in private Vidre didn’t put up many pretenses. “I know the stories that they tell, of the girl who was laying in a goose-down bed. She was woken up with ruffled hair and went out to see

what the commotion was about. She made some daggers for herself and walked right into the melee, taking to killing like it was what she had been meant to do. Does that sound even the least bit true to you?”

“I suppose not,” said Dominic. “But I don’t know what the real story is then. You trained for years beforehand with some secret master?”

“No, the truth is that I was terrified, and I wouldn’t have fought back against the attackers if I had thought I had a choice. I nearly died, and I broke down afterward. The story started out as a lie for my benefit. It was a kindly officer who found me crying next to the two men I had killed. He told me that I had turned the tide of the battle, that I had inspired the troops and turned a sure rout into a triumphant defense. I believed it for a full two years. After that first battle, I received my training. The stories never mention the training, or if they do, it’s glossed over, or corrupted into something like a search for a mystical technique, or a romance. Mostly, it’s not even that. ‘Time passed’, and all the sweat, tears, and frustration of getting better are nothing but that single sentence. It’s amazing how much of your life a bard can sum up in a sentence.” She caught his eye. “And yes, I understand that you want to skip over all of the boring bits and become a perfect gentleman of society without first learning the rules that society operates under. You want to skip right to being a fearsome warrior without having to learn your footwork or how to put up a proper guard. But you’re already skipping far ahead of everyone else, and that should be enough, shouldn’t it?”

“I suppose,” said Dominic. Vidre was right though. He wanted to skip over the hard work. Yet knowing that this was what he wanted didn’t make him want it any less, it only made him feel worse.



“I want to fight you at your best,” said Dominic. It was the last full day at sea; the sailors were saying that they’d be through the Angel’s Mouth shortly after sunset, and in Torland by evening.

“Why?” asked Vidre. She arched an eyebrow, but kept circling him carefully all the same. Her defense was not quite ironclad, but the flaws she’d put into it were subtle, and difficult to see.

“Lightscour means to test himself,” said Welexi with a laugh. “He wants to see whether he is worthy of a place among us.”

“More or less,” said Dominic. He had never really felt that he wasn’t worthy of a place on the ship. He only wanted to know how much further he truly had to go. There was a strong element of masochism in his request.

“Fine,” said Vidre with a shrug. “We’ll pretend it’s an exhibition match. I’ll only hold back enough to prevent your death.” Her stance changed slightly, and the small imperfections which Dominic had been on the edge of seeing disappeared entirely. Her daggers were blunt, but he knew from experience that they still hurt. His own sword was as blunt as he could make it, and couldn’t cut through glass; whatever method Welexi used to slice straight through armor had not yet been taught to him, if it was even a trick that shadow could do. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Dominic stepped slowly. The more they'd practiced, the more he found the ship constraining; there were too many obstructions, and too many people nearby. Vidre had said that real fights often took place in cramped quarters, and that this was good training, but pacing the same section of deck for hours on end had only increased his yearning to run. Still, there were peculiarities to this landscape, and he could use them. You couldn't step too close to the mast, or risk being backed up against it. He had been proud of himself for seeing it some days earlier before he realized that Vidre meant for him to see it. He could force her to put herself in a position where she had to change direction though, and that might be enough.

She easily parried his first attack with one of her daggers, and stabbed him in the gut with the other, hard enough that he was sure it would bruise, even with the armor he was wearing.

"You're dead," said Vidre. "Sorry."

They backed away from each other, and began circling again. He waited until she had to change direction, and brought his shadow blade down hard. She dodged to the side, as though his attack were the most predictable thing in the world, and slammed him against the temple with the butt of one of her daggers. "Dead again."

Dominic's head swam briefly, and they were back to circling. He was beginning to regret asking for this, but it was better to know his limits. She was right though; it would have been easy enough for her to drive the blade straight into his brain. The daggers could be made sharp enough to slice a falling hair lengthwise; sharpness was part of the nature of the domain of glass.

He came at her hard the third time. He swept his sword in from the side, an uncontrolled hacking motion that was calculated to seem like it was borne of frustration. When she saw his fist it was too late, and his punch landed right on her mouth. She swore and stepped back, then rubbed at her jaw. When she pulled her hand back, Dominic could see that her lip was bleeding.

"I'm sorry," he began.

"No," replied Vidre. She smiled, and touched her lip. "You did better than I had expected."

His heart swelled at the compliment, and at the fact that he'd been able to land a single hit against one of the most powerful illustrati in the world. His excitement was ungentlemanly, and he tried to hide it, but he wasn't quite able to hide his smile. Vidre was going to make him pay for that.

"We'll call it quits for today," she said. "I don't want to risk going before the court too badly marked by you, and there's still a wealth of review for you to do. I think you're almost ready for polite society."

Dominic didn't even complain.



Torland was just past the Angel's Mouth that separated the Calypso Sea from the Pensic Ocean, a large island that sat within view of the civilized continents. It was known for its mountains, though the few flat areas with wide meadows were where the vast

majority of its people lived. In recent years, as the colonies to the west had begun to flourish, the capital of Meriwall had become a bustling port for every ship that sought to pass from within the Calypso Sea. It was the last place a ship could stop at if they wished to cross the Pensic with full supplies, or needed to fix a last-minute problem with their hull, mast, or sails. The mountains at the heart of the island towered over the fields and towns that clung to the outer edges of Torland. The largest of them was a dead volcano, and while Dominic had heard that there was a sleeping demon at its heart, he had long thought that this was merely another legend. Looking at Tor Craighorn looming above the island, almost impossibly tall, it was easy to see why people felt the need to tell tales about it.

The first thing anyone leaving the Calypso saw of Torland was the Face. It was an immense figure carved into the mountain at a massive scale. His expression was enigmatic. His lip was slightly curled. One eyebrow was slightly raised. He seemed to be looking at you no matter where you viewed him from. Some people found the Face to be looking out on the continents with disgust; others thought it was bemusement. He could seem paternal or oppressive, and sometimes both at the same time. The scale was so large it practically beggared belief. The entire city of Gennaro could have been turned on its side and laid across the carving, and it wouldn't have reached from cheek to cheek.

The Face was King Laith's; he had sought to make himself immortal. Fame made you stronger, faster, and better able to recover from wounds, or simply not take them in the first place. When Laith had begun to age, he had thought that the solution was simply to acquire more fame. He wasn't the first of the illustrati, but he was the first of the modern era. He paid far-flung missionaries to spread his image and name across the known world, and funded expeditions to seek out peoples who had never had contact with civilization. He ordered his subjects to worship him for two hours every day, kneeling before his image and singing songs of adoration. And on the mountain that gave Torland its name, he carved the image of his face, so large that it was a miracle that the project had ever been completed.

King Laith had died all the same.

"Laith said he'd return one day," said Welexi. His eyes were fixed on the stone face, still miles away from them. "On his deathbed, he knew that all the fame in the world couldn't save him, so he cast his hope in another direction. He had heard stories of reincarnation, and souls unhooked from their bodies. He gathered up people who would tell him what he wanted to hear." Welexi shook his head. "Laith is another of the wasteful dead that siphon from the pool of fame."

"Is fame limited like that?" asked Dominic.

"You've been lazy about your reading," said Vidre.

"There was a lot to read," said Dominic. Mostly he'd stuck to the biographies, and then only the ones that entertained him.

"Well, the answer is yes," Vidre replied. "Fame is limited."

"There are several schools of thought," said Gaelwyn. "I know quite a few men who would argue over these things. Vidre is right, but she cuts the debate down to only its

conclusion, and there are those who would disagree with her stating it so bluntly. It's actually one of the Five Questions, what happens to the so-called fame directed at the fictitious or deceased."

"If Laith has ensured his legend, he has diminished ours," said Welexi. "We are robbed of power, power to do good, because Laith was afraid of death. That is that."

After that, the waves lapped against the ship in silence.

Welexi took flight when they were a mile out, against Gaelwyn's advice. The red-headed doctor had frowned at the sight of those enormous wings sprouting from Welexi's back, but Dominic had felt a rare sense of wonder at seeing a man fly through the air. The ship was tacking against the wind, and Welexi flew on ahead of it. He could be seen swooping down over Meriwall, passing over the people in order to announce their arrival.

"How does it work?" asked Dominic.

"The wings?" asked Gael. Dominic nodded. "Welexi spent years, maybe decades, trying to get them to work. He made a study of birds and spoke with natural philosophers. There are diagrams of how the air moves that I'm sure he could show you. He worked with many illustrati of different domains in order to perfect the design."

"I'm not sure that answered my question," said Dominic. Welexi was a point of light, clearly visible only when he made a turn in the air and began to flap his wings again.

"He uses his power to shape the wings," said Gael. "The structure takes a great deal of attention, and he needs a mirror to watch as he forms it. There are something like muscles in it, parts of the construct that he can pull at in a way that's become natural to him now, after years of patience. The wing pushes against the air and provides him with lift. Beyond that, you would have to ask him, but in most respects he flies just like a bird does."

"And I could do that someday?" asked Dominic. He imagined wings with black feathers, like a raven, flying over foreign cities at night and looking down on the lights below him.

Vidre laughed. "Well, that's the source of your curiosity at least. And no, it doesn't seem likely that you'll be able to fly. I've known more than one illustrati with the domain of air that's tried to get flight working, not to mention those with other less likely domains, and Welexi is the only one who's managed it."

"Shadow isn't supposed to be common," said Dominic. "So maybe no one was ever famous enough to have the power for it."

Welexi landed back on the deck and folded his wings behind him until they were only a small pack of light resting on his back. He frowned at his maimed right hand and reformed the light around it. The effect was mostly for aesthetic purposes; they'd taken dinner together a few times, and Welexi had always held his fork in his other hand.

"Torland is looking well," said Welexi. "Dom, prepare yourself for the unpleasant smells of the world's busiest port. Vidre, be ready for trouble."

"What sort of trouble?" asked Vidre.

"Kendrick Eversong, the Blood Bard," said Welexi. He spat the name. "I spotted him

on the streets, and believe he was coming to the docks to greet our arrival. He's never been violent in the past, at least not towards other illustrati, but my injury might change that."

Vidre shrugged. "Four on one wouldn't be odds he'd be willing to take. It's the spectacle that concerns me."

Dominic couldn't help but feel some elation at the fact that she'd included him.

Meriwall wasn't built on the sea; it was a mile up a thick, sluggish river that was visible from a distance as a forest of ship masts and a line of low buildings. The crowds had gathered to greet them long before they reached the city proper. It began as small clusters of workers who had taken a break to see the *Zenith* come in, but by the time they reached their dock just outside the high walls that gave Meriwall its name, the crowds were so thick it was hard to see where the mass of people ended. Dominic had avoided the crowds that surrounded the illustrati in Gennaro. He wondered if the reception in Gennaro had been like this one was. His sense of the illustrati as enormous figures of myth had returned to him with a vengeance.

Dominic wore the same purple clothing, overlaid with a simple breastplate of shadow. The clothing had been cleaned and tailored by one of the sailors. They fit him better now, but Vidre still frowned at the tights and cape, and told him they'd need to get him fitted for something more iconic when he made his debut at court. She had on the same suit of glass armor as she'd had when they'd left Gennaro. It hugged her form and presented hard, shiny surfaces. She'd also fashioned a circlet of glass around her head, which held her hair in place. Welexi had on the same damaged suit of armor from before, though the quick alterations that Vidre had made to it had been refined, and now it looked more perfect in its state of ruin. It would be replaced once they had a spare moment in Meriwall.

Gaelwyn stood back from the others, and didn't present himself to the crowds in the same way that Welexi or Vidre did. From time to time the wind would carry a shouted word to the ship, "Red Angel", and from the way that Gaelwyn's jaw tightened, it was clear that he wasn't taking this as a compliment. The connection was slow in coming, but when Dominic put the thoughts together they twisted in his gut. Gaelwyn Mottram had been given prisoners of war, and this was the country that the bulk of them must have come from.

The lion's share of the crowd wasn't shouting dissent. Most people were there to see Welexi in all his shining glory, or Vidre in her faceted armor. They cheered loudly as the ship made dock, and the sailors moved forward to guard against anyone trying to get aboard. Dominic saw more than one woman trying to push her way through with tears streaming down her face. That sort of reaction was precisely why Dominic had always avoided the illustrati. He'd seen the gathered crowds a few times, but there was something unseemly about them, just as there was something unseemly about the crowds that watched him race across the rooftops.

"Ohhhhhhhh," sang a loud voice from within the crowds. People turned towards it, and a pair of hands lifted up a man with a lute above the surrounding press of people. He

was dressed in a crimson red, with black tights and a large red hat that sat slightly askew. He had pale white skin and a black goatee, with a slightly pinched face and a wide smile. His voice rang out with a note that was throaty and loud, enough to pierce the murmur of the crowd. It was a toughened voice, one lubricated with ale. His identity was easy to guess. When the Blood Bard was properly elevated, he began to strum his lute, and sing a song that the crowds went silent for.

*Welexi Sunhawk,
Is easy to mock,
He's cowardly as a chick-en
He runs from the fight,
Off into the night,
For fear of gettin' a lickin'!*

*During the siege of Arronbach,
The powdersmoke was thick,
Welexi went to the doctor,
And played at being sick!*

*Ask me any questions,
About this man I know,
To tell it true Welexi is,
As low as a man can go!*

*He's fought the villain Zerstor,
A time or three or four,
He arranged the fights ahead of time,
And Zerstor faked his roar!*

*I do not call him rapist,
Nor exaggerate his misdeeds,
But he's a crooked cowardly craven,
Always aiming to mislead!*

*He travels around with Vidre,
A woman clad in glass,
She's a spoiled brat, a murderer,
And a whore of the highest class!*

*The men of the realm must love her,
They call her a saucy lass,
In exchange she likes to bend over,*

And let them take her in the ass!

As the song had gone on, Vidre's armor had changed. Sharp black shards had grown from it, and the spikes elongated. Her face was a mask of barely restrained anger. Welexi had not changed his expression at all, only folded his arms across his chest while he waited for the bard to finish. Neither made any attempt to interrupt him. Gaelwyn shrank back with downcast eyes. Dominic deliberated on his response. He didn't know what his own part was. The authentic response would simply have been confusion, but while half the crowd was watching the bard sing his song, cheering or booing at some particular line, the other half was watching the crew of the *Zenith*. Dominic settled for crossing his arms in front of him like Welexi had done. He twisted his mouth and furrowed his brow, and hoped that he looked more upset than befuddled. As the song reached its end, and the affront settled in, it became far less of an act.

"A pleasant enough song, if you enjoy flights of fancy," said Welexi. His voice was calm and even, and projected for a wide audience. The noise of the crowd was low. People were hanging on every word, and Welexi was speaking past Kendrick to them. "Doggerel verse isn't enough to change a person's mind, especially when your lyrics are soaked through with jealousy and irrational hatred. A better man would speak of his own deeds rather than belittle someone else, but perhaps that would be easier if you had accomplished anything of note."

"Ah, well, if it's actions you want," said Kendrick with a grin. His eyes shifted towards Gael. "I did happen to write another verse." He strummed his lute again and began to sing before Welexi could interject.

*His name is Gael Mottram,
The Harbinger of Death,
He'll cut your vital organs out,
Until there's nothing left.*

*Mottram's killed a hundred,
He's ripped their flesh apart,
He cut off legs,
He tore out hearts,
He gouged out eyes,
He's use dark arts,
He's eaten brains,
And bo-dy parts!*

*Now he travels the ocean,
Free as a man can be,
His crimes have been forgiven,
By her royal majesty!*

*But Mottram killed my father,
In ways both vile and cruel,
So Mottram, for your recompense,
I challenge you to a duel.*

Kendrick Eversong gave a deep bow to the crowd, and there were scattered cheers among them. A hulking man pushed his way between the sailors. He carried a thick package wrapped in a crimson cloth that matched the bard's outfit, and as the *Zenith's* sailors began to push him back, he threw the package overhand towards the deck of the ship. Vidre blurred forward and caught it without any apparent effort on her part.

"The terms of the duel," said Kendrick. "Negotiable. You know where to find me once you've thought it over." He began to strum on his lute again, humming the tune loudly. "Of course I know that dear Gaelwyn is a pacifist, so I suppose it shall be the two of us, shan't it Whitespear?"

It was a trap. That was clear enough. Gaelwyn had committed a host of crimes against the people of Torland, or at least they believed that he had, which was the important bit. It hadn't been mentioned at all in the course of Dominic's rapid education, but there was little doubt that this was a point of tension the bard was tugging at. The Blood Bard was a bit player in the scheme of things, formerly employed by the illustrati before he'd raised his profile. He wanted a duel to increase his standing, and had chosen Gaelwyn because it was a justifiable way to get at Welexi. The motive was unclear. Having the champion of good defend Gaelwyn's supposed experiments would do damage, certainly, and there was little doubt that the Peddler's War was underpinning this whole thing in one way or another. That was as far as Dominic's thinking got before it seemed as though he would lose his window of opportunity.

"I'll stand in Gael's place," said Dominic. He moved up, past Welexi and Vidre. "I was nine years old when the Peddler's War ended, and had no stake in it. I don't step forward to retread the past. I step forward because for as long as I've known him, Gaelwyn Mottram has been a kind and caring man." The words came quickly, projected out to the crowd with a voice he'd practiced at sea.

Kendrick Eversong, the Blood Bard, nodded as though this were the most natural result of his challenge. "Very well then. I'll kill you in three days time, at Amare's Theater, and Gaelwyn's life will be forfeited immediately after." He rose his hands, holding his lute high. "All are welcome to enjoy the spectacle!"

CHAPTER SIX

The Flower Queen's Court

Kendrick Eversong had been sipping on a mid-morning ale when a young boy came into the tavern, hollering about Welexi Sunhawk flying overhead.

The last piece of correspondence from Gennaro had arrived three days ago, which meant that it was nearly two weeks out of date. At that time, word had been that Welexi was intending to sail to Parance, which likely meant another two weeks until he came to Meriwall, if he kept to his patterns. Something had changed, but it was a mystery as to what. When Kendrick had worked as Welexi's bard, he was always dealing with stories coming in weeks or even months after they'd happened, responding to events that had happened ages ago. By the time word of a broken siege in Lerabor reached Meriwall, the siege had already been over for weeks. It had been a pain then, and it was a pain now, but Kendrick got up and went to work.

The man that carried him was named Clarence. He was short but wide, and extremely muscular, and had been chosen from among the Council of Laborers for precisely those reasons. The idea was for Kendrick to be held high above the heads of the gathered crowd, moving along as though he was floating. It was important for Clarence to be short so that he wouldn't be too visible to the crowds and draw attention to himself. Clarence and Kendrick had practiced together in a warehouse where racks of lamb were curing, until they could move together in a way that didn't betray the amount of balance and strength it took.

"Something's wrong with Welexi's hand," said a wiry man from within the Council. He was slightly out of breath, with news that was only minutes out-of-date instead of weeks. "And there's another illustrati with him, looks like shadow."

"Gaelwyn and Vidre are on the ship?" asked Kendrick.

The wiry man nodded. It was really the long-awaited moment then. Kendrick had to resist the urge to show his anxiety. If only the *Zenith* weren't so fast, he wouldn't have so many gaps in his knowledge. The landscape had changed, and the gambit was now far less certain. There was a strong argument to be made for holding off and waiting for more information to come in, but theatrics demanded that the challenge happen now, when everyone would be assembled and the crowds would be thick. There was no guarantee that he would be able to get all three of them together in public again; Vidre in particular liked to slip off the ship at the first opportunity. In Kendrick's experience, news

traveled in waves, and if you timed things wrong you would end up with those waves crashing into each other instead of adding their force to one another. No, it had to be now, whatever the risks.

When the *Zenith* docked, Kendrick was lifted up, and sang the song he'd been practicing for ages. From his new vantage point he could see Welexi's hand; "something's wrong" had been understating it by a wide margin, given that most of the fingers were missing. Vidre was looking as radiant as ever, even with her mask of anger. Yet Kendrick's eyes kept going to the newcomer, the unknown element dressed in unfashionable clothing and a breastplate made of shadow, with shaggy curls of hair and a mildly confused look on his face.

When the man - no, the boy - stepped forward to accept the duel, Kendrick almost faltered. Yet he had honed his skills in improvisation over the course of a decade and a half, and he decided to run with it and figure everything out later. He wanted desperately to stay, to ask what in the hell was going on, or simply to listen to the speech that Welexi was about to give, but the narrative had to be centered on the duel, and that meant making an exit instead of heckling.

A slight movement of the foot got Clarence moving through the crowds, and Kendrick strummed his lute as though he had not a single care in the world.



The Blood Bard retreated, held aloft. He hummed his tune and idly played his lute, while Dominic watched him go.

Dominic nearly jumped when he felt a firm hand on his shoulder. He looked to the side, and saw Welexi standing next to him, with a benevolent smile on his face.

"This young man is Lightscour," Welexi said to the crowd. "Ten days ago he was living a hardscrabble life on the streets of Gennaro. Nine days ago he killed the Titan of Rust and Ruin." Ripples went through the crowd, hushed murmurs and gasps of disbelief. Welexi held up his ruined hand, the one with fingers of light, and the masses again went silent. "Tonight at Amare's Theater, just after sundown, I'll tell the tale of how I took this wound. And three days after that, Lightscour will prove the strength of his convictions on that same stage."

He smiled wide, and the crowd burst into cacophony as people talked loudly to each other and shouted questions at Welexi. He merely gave a bow to them, and turned to the others. "The Flower Queen will expect us at Grayhull in not too much longer."

When Dominic saw Vidre's face, he took a slight, involuntary step backwards. He had thought he had seen all her shades of anger before, from the cold threatening calms to the primal fires of passionate rage, but this was something else entirely. He could see her anger in her eyes, and the slight tightness in the muscles of her face, but it was restrained; there was a mask in place. She was going to yell at him later, he'd known that as soon as the idea of stepping forward had occurred to him, but now he was worried that she was going to do him some actual physical harm.

"To Grayhull," said Vidre with a nod. "This was an inauspicious start to our time in Meriwall." She focused on her armor, and the spikes and shards it had been protruding

began to retract in. There was a slight twitch to her cheek as her eyes passed over Dominic and Welexi. “Let’s hope that the Flower Queen’s Court is in better shape than we left it.”

They proceeded through the crowds with the sailors accompanying them. The crowds were oppressive, and more noisy than they’d been in Gennaro. The people of the Sovento States were well-known for being self-assured, confident, and oftentimes even boastful; that was part of their cultural charm, and Dominic had grown up hearing jokes and stories where the men from Gennaro, Triana, and Ponticelli were always trying to top each other. The Soventian peoples were often compared to an excitable dog by foreigners, which Dominic had never taken to be terribly insulting.

In contrast, the Toric people were simply loud. It was perhaps unfair for him to judge a whole nation by their reception in the capital city, but the voices weren’t as expressive as they were in Gennaro, despite the volume. All the questions, even the pleasant ones, had a slight undercurrent, as though it would be an affront for no answer to be given. Many of the questions weren’t pleasant at all.

“Did you work with Zerstor?” screamed one of the men who got too close to Welexi. The man was shoved back by the sailors, and Welexi kept walking, addressing his answer to the crowd.

“Zerstor is dead, and I’ve lost the use of my hand,” said Welexi. “Kendrick Eversong is a petty, bitter man looking only to muddy clear waters in pursuit of his own fame. After the tale you’ll hear tonight, there will be little doubt of that.”

The crowd didn’t just want answers to their questions. They tried to tell breathless stories past the guards, with desperate faces that barely paid attention to the road. Men shouted marriage proposals to Vidre. Dominic had seen the hangers-on who followed Vidre around in Gennaro, but that had been after nine days, when she was no longer a novelty in the city. It wasn’t just adoration, or curiosity, it was a rawness of emotion that extended all along the spectrum; hatred and despair were readily apparent, and not just directed in the ways that Dominic would have expected. A few people were calling Welexi a coward, or a traitor. Perhaps Torland was worse than other places, but Dominic could scarcely imagine putting himself through this same reception every time they made port. Yet that seemed like what it was going to be, if he made it through the duel.

All along the way to Grayhull, the only time they paused was when a mother thrust her son before Gaelwyn. The boy was weak, and sickly looking. It was a matter of two minutes for Gaelwyn to fix the boy’s heart. The procession began moving again shortly afterward, but not before Dominic heard people shouting unkind things at the woman.

Grayhull Palace was an enormous building that stretched its three wings wide across the city, each the same size and shape as the others. It was given its name from the flat gray of it, which matched the visage of Laith’s Face looming in the distance behind it. It was ornamented with gargoyles and shaped stone, and the vast walls were marked with immense bas reliefs which depicted scenes from the history of Toric rule. The palace was surrounded by carefully manicured grounds and expansive gardens, which gave a buffer of defensible space and privacy for the royal family. The Queen of Flowers was well-

known for inviting commoners in to visit once a week in order to see the majesty that her domain had produced. The crowds were left behind at the front gates, and a half dozen guards became their new escort. It was a display of ceremony and nothing more; if the illustrati had been attacked, the guards would be nearly useless, and if the illustrati had been attacking, the guards would quickly die. The last nine days had impressed upon Dominic the gap between the illustrati and normal men.

They were led into a tastefully appointed receiving room to wait for the Flower Queen's attention. When the doors closed, Welexi sagged and staggered to lay down on a chaise lounge with floral embroidery. He was sweating and slightly pale. All of the pent-up conversation came flowing out.

"You should have let them carry you," said Gaelwyn. He rested his hand on Welexi's. "Six weeks at a minimum, I was clear on that, showing a little humanity wouldn't have been the worst thing."

"You doubled down," Vidre said to Welexi. The pretenses had dropped, and there was no compassion. "We need to have a plan in place for when Dominic dies, a way to mitigate the disaster and ensure that Gaelwyn isn't killed. We shouldn't even let it get to that. We'd take a hit if we back out, but there's nothing compelling the duel besides honor and pride, and I could take Dominic's place —"

"It was a masterstroke," said Welexi. He groaned slightly as he shifted. "The Blood Bard set it up. He insulted us. He brought the Peddler's War to the forefront with his song. The siege of Arronbach? Just the name of it is enough for the veterans or their widows to feel a stirring. Most likely the Blood Bard has been whispering into ears since the moment we left. The song was a direct challenge to me, with Gaelwyn as a proxy, bringing up old memories and forcing my hand. I could have beaten him soundly in a duel, but no doubt he was prepared for that, either to make himself a martyr, or because he would know that clemency was expected of me." He turned to Dominic and smiled. "The Blood Bard had a plan, but the masterstroke was Lightscour's."

"I only took the opportunity when I saw it," said Dominic.

"If he touches you, flesh to flesh, he'll be able to move your blood," said Vidre. "The first thing he'll do is to draw it down from your head. You'll go light-headed then unconscious in a matter of seconds, and from there he'll desecrate your body before killing you. So you'll wear armor to prevent that. He'll force blood through the cracks and gaps in it. He'll push blood down your throat until you choke, just like Cerulean Bane tried to do to me. I can make my armor airtight, but you can barely make a breastplate for yourself. Even if you could find or produce armor with few enough gaps in it that Kendrick couldn't push blood through, how would you hope to defeat him?" She clenched her teeth together. "He doesn't bleed unless he wants to. You could give him a thousand cuts and he wouldn't spill a drop of blood. Stab him through the heart and he'll use his domain to keep his blood moving. He'd die when he went to sleep, but that would still give him more than enough time to beat you. He can restore the vital essence to his blood without needing to breathe, and that means that he's not going to tire out, not until his muscles start physically failing him, and you'll have dropped long

before that happens. In a fight to the death, he doesn't need his lungs, or his heart, or his vital organs. You'll have to break his bones and slice through connective tissue to stop him, and he knows this, so he can just dance back and forth all day while spewing insults and wearing you down.”

Dominic felt his stomach turn. He hadn't realized how dire the situation was, in part because he'd known little about the domain of blood. He was trying to find a loophole somewhere, a way that he could ensure that he would win. A single decisive strike to the head would do it, but the Blood Bard would know that too, and make defend against it

Welexi gave a weak laugh from where he was lying. “I appreciate the theatrics, but these are problems that can be overcome,” he said. “I have every confidence in Lightscour's ability to triumph over the Blood Bard. He's disrupted whatever plans were in motion, and turned the narrative in our direction.”

“Until he loses,” said Vidre. “What do we do when Dominic's blood is dripping through the floorboards of the stage?”

“The path is set,” said Welexi. He waved his hand in an idle motion. “The first half of the story has been told, and unless you have a better idea for how we might conclude it, we must continue on with what we have haphazardly planned. The story has a natural flow to it. You must remember that the Blood Bard is not so strong as Sanguin was; Dominic is not in so much danger as you would have it.”

It seemed as though Vidre was about to offer a retort, no doubt about how quickly Dominic would die, but the doors to the room opened, and an attendant with a ruffled collar stepped in.

“The Flower Queen, Her Majesty Gwyndellon Gloriana of the House Walton, will see you now.”



The throne room was enormous, and took up three full stories in the center of Greyhull. The walls were the same smooth gray of the building's exterior, curved where they met the floor to give an impression of trees, and the ceiling was an elaborate creation of iron and glass that let through the morning sunlight. The floor was covered in flowers, and flower petals, in a wider variety than Dominic had ever seen in his life; the air smelled almost sickly sweet with their fragrance. It was a riot of color, and laying on the throne, with her bare feet up in the air, was the Queen of Flowers. She kicked her legs and smiled wide when they walked in, showing pearly white teeth.

While they were announced by the attendant (with “His Illustriousness”, save for Vidre, who was technically a Queen and followed that styling) Dominic looked at the Flower Queen's court. The Flower Queen was a slim woman with slightly elfin features, and a youthful, girlish look that couldn't possibly have been natural; she was nearing fifty years old. She wore a dress made from orange and purple flowers which left her shoulders bare, and her hair was down and flowing freely. To her right was her husband, Steelminder, who was more clearly showing his age with a gray mustache that matched the walls and slightly red cheeks that spoke of too much ale.

Ringed around them were more than a dozen illustrati, most of them clad in their domains: a woman with hair of fire, a man with yellow eyes flanked by two hounds, elaborate metal armors and bright colors on everyone he saw, each trying to be distinct. Dominic had been made to memorize the details of two hundred people, and was thankful that he wasn't being tested on his study just yet. He was sure that the woman whose head was on fire was Ember, and he could make a fair guess at the rest, but he would be in trouble if he was thrown into freely mingling with them.

"Sunhawk!" trilled the Flower Queen the moment the attendant was done with his droning introductions. The Flower Queen leapt up from her gilded throne and strode towards them with her hands on her hips. "It has been far, far too long." She reached towards Welexi and wrapped him in a hug, then pulled back and looked at his maimed hand. Her eyes went wide for a moment as she tried to focus on it, then she blinked once slowly. "But whatever happened to your hand? And your sword hand at that!" She shrieked slightly, as though she had just seen a mouse.

"A fight with Zerstor, Your Majesty," said Welexi. He held the hand up and flexed the fingers of light with a fair bit of concentration. "I'm on the mend, you need not worry about that."

The Flower Queen's head turned towards Vidre, and her body followed sluggishly afterward. "And my fellow Queen, of the poor, misbegotten country of Geswein. You look as lovely as my flowers, as you always have."

"Your Majesty," said Vidre with a small curtsy. "We had heard there were troubles, and came to lend our aid."

"Oh, plenty of time for that later," said the Queen, "I would hate to talk business so soon after you've set foot on Toric soil, it would be terrible form, especially before I've talked to Gaelwyn." She smiled towards the physician and stepped close to him.

"Gaelwyn, I've received the most interesting book on botany from the algalif of Maskoy, 'Meditations on the Heart of the Palm', but I've been having a little trouble with some of the terminology, and I'd like a little of your time. In private, shall we say?" She gave an exaggerated wink that had to be obvious to anyone paying the slightest bit of attention. "You are so knowledgeable in matters of natural philosophy, if you catch my meaning."

She turned towards Dominic, and he realized her pupils were too wide. "And that brings us to this new young creature," she said slowly. Her words were not quite slurred, but it was a close thing. "Lightscour. From the Sovento States, I can always tell a man from there, and you are a fine specimen, aren't you? Another student of natural philosophy, if I dare to say it."

She turned to Welexi. "A stranger in our midst, in these troubled times." She blinked slowly at Welexi. "Did you know, I bought you a hawk?" She pouted slightly. "There was a merchant in from the far east, and the hawk he had looked just like you. Very brown, if you'll forgive me saying so. I thought it would be a wonderful present, but we fed it too many grapes, and it perished after only a week."

The throne room went silent, save for a polite cough, but there was nothing more to that story.

“If you’re feeling unwell, ma’am,” said Vidre, “Perhaps we might speak with your advisers and allow you to rest.”

The Flower Queen sagged. “Oh yes, of course, the matter of the Council of Laborers, such a dreadful thing. A small dispute over trade and they think that they have some leverage over me, as though I’m a boulder they wish to stick their pole under and shove out of the way.” She tittered slightly and bit her lip. “Perhaps they do not know how often boulders crush people?”

The Flower Queen wasn’t drunk, Dominic was fairly sure of that. It wasn’t malum either, because that put people straight out and left them incapable of rational thought. Yet he was certain that he wasn’t far off the mark; the Flower Queen had ingested something that was making her act like this, and given the reactions he’d been glimpsing in those moments that he took his eyes off the Queen, this was embarrassing for everyone involved. For all that he had etiquette drilled into him, he was unprepared for this situation.

“There will be a show tonight, ma’am,” said Welexi. “Just after sunset at Amare’s Theater. If you’ve had a chance to have something to eat by then, we would appreciate if you would come, but in the meantime we have much to prepare for, and a number of people that we will need to meet with, including your advisers.”

“Yes,” said the Flower Queen with a distant voice. “Yes, yes, I see.” She drifted back to her throne, where Ember took her by the elbow. The Flower Queen began to cry.



The Flower Queen’s husband caught up with them just outside the throne room.

“She’s gotten worse,” said Steelminder. His gray mustache did little to conceal his frown. Dominic couldn’t remember the man’s age, but the illustrati almost certainly looked older than he was, in contrast to the queen. “Ember has been helping her to make a concentrated form of the flower, a tar instead of a syrup, and my wife’s desire grows by the day. This business with the Laborers has only pushed her harder, and there’s talk that the Iron Kingdom might seek to reignite the war.”

“We should have been told, your Royal Highness,” said Welexi. “We’re to understand that this is a continuous condition?”

“No,” said Steelminder. “No, but the moments of true sobriety — the moments when she chooses to be lucid — are getting further apart. There are diplomats and advisers, and the other illustrati, and I do my best to help run the kingdom, but to usurp my queen entirely is something I could never do. Once this business with the Laborers is cleared up we can try to bring her down gently, to wean her, but with the stresses being as they are, I think you can understand the difficulty we’re in.”

“We will do what we can,” said Welexi.

“There is the unfortunate matter of payment,” said Vidre. “Your Royal Highness, I mean no disrespect, but we are at your service for several things, and fully internal matters are not one of them unless we can strike a new deal.”

Steeleminder looked between the two of them, and his frown deepened. “This matter is quite a bit deeper than that,” he said. His eyes met with Vidre’s. “I should think that you

of all people would understand that a kingdom is never too far from being torn down by its subjects.”

“The king of Geswein spent too little time on administration,” said Vidre as she folded her arms. “He was more concerned with doting on his wife, and that was to the detriment of his subjects. Geswein is my home, of course it is, but I do feel some sympathy for those who felt that they could do better. If the fate of a country is at the whims of someone who would rather eat flowers, then perhaps your subjects deserve —”

“It’s barely noon, and we’ve had a long day already,” said Welexi. His hand rested on Vidre’s arm, and she shrugged it off. “If it wouldn’t be too much of a burden on your hospitality, might we be able to find some meats and cheese while we speak with your advisers about this trouble with the Laborers?”

Steelminder narrowed his eyes, and his mustache moved back and forth. “Yes, of course.”

They were set up in a large room with windows that overlooked the gardens and statuary outside, and plate of food was brought to them shortly afterward with a wide variety of food on it. Gaelwyn excused himself shortly after eating to go set up in Meriwall’s hospitals. Before he left, he pulled Dominic aside.

“Thank you,” he said. Gaelwyn was fidgeting with his apron. “Even if it was just a ploy, just cynicism to increase your own fame, the words were meaningful to me. No one but Welexi has ever stood up for me before.”

“I — it wasn’t, you’re my friend,” said Dominic. Yet there was a small part of him that recognized that his actions had little to do with Gaelwyn, and the Blood Bard’s song had been echoing through Dominic’s head enough to wonder how much of Gaelwyn’s past was yet to be revealed.

The advisers came in, and a long meeting began.

The central conflict was between the Council of Laborers and a small group of merchants, and this was about where Dominic lost the thread. It wasn’t that he wasn’t trying to pay attention, it was that a glorified trade dispute seemed to have little to do with him, and all that aside, Welexi and Vidre seemed ready with all of the questions.

The table they sat at was finely made, with matching chairs. It showed the imprint of an illustrati; there were no joints in it, and nowhere that they could have been hidden, which was a way of making the craftsmanship more obvious. The patterns of the lacquered wood were like nothing that you would find in nature, with warps and whorls that caught the eye and held an artistry of their own. As Dominic understood it, craftsmanship was looked down on by the illustrati save for when it could produce something with an aesthetically pleasing appearance. A fair number of the statues in Gennaro had been shaped by someone with the domain of stone, and the *Zenith* was a product of illustrati hands, which was part of the reason that it was so quick across the seas. As a general rule, illustrati made armor for individuals, not armies, and it wasn’t solely because most of them didn’t have the ability. Vidre could have gone to work repairing windows or crafting glassware, but for the most part she devoted her time to the business of being an illustrati.

“— because we can’t simply kill them,” Vidre was saying. Dominic quickly tried to figure out where the conversation had been, but he hadn’t been paying the slightest attention to what was said.

“I’m sorry,” said Dominic. “What?”

Vidre scowled at him. “I was saying that this is a problem, because we can’t simply kill them,” she said.

“I believe Lightscour has been gathering wool,” said Welexi. He smiled slightly. “Vidre was saying that we can’t kill the illustrati in question, because that would weaken the nation far too much in terms of offensive and defensive capabilities, and if we’re to assume that the Iron King is looking for a continuation of the Peddler’s War, this would strip away much of Torland’s deterrent.”

“That assumes that the Iron King isn’t behind the incipient rebellion in the first place,” said one of the advisers, a pinched-faced man with thinning hair.

“Even if he is, this is likely a way to damage Torland in preparation,” said Vidre. “It’s not his way to weaken someone and then ally with them.”

“The Iron King is nearing ninety years old,” said Welexi. “He was slowing down, even at the end of the Peddler’s War. The news has been sporadic from within the Iron Kingdom of late; he hasn’t made a public appearance in nearly a year.”

“How does the Blood Bard fit in with all this?” asked Dominic. He desperately hoped that this wasn’t something that had been covered while he was staring blankly at the finely made table.

“Unknown,” said Vidre. She raised an eyebrow and looked at Dominic. “The Peddler’s War is a point of discontent. Gaelwyn’s war crimes will be brought up, which reflects poorly on the Flower Queen given that she pardoned him. They’ll paint it like she cared nothing for the men and women that died in his labs, which is a part of the larger narrative of a woman disconnected from the people she nominally rules. Amare’s Theater holds eighty thousand people. Kendrick will be speaking to them, ready to drive the point home. Our options are all terrible. Intervention from the Flower Queen exacerbates matters; it would be like offering a pardon all over again, maybe worse. Pulling out of the duel now, having already accepted it, would make us cowards and let them say that the illustrati don’t have to answer to the common people.”

“But you said that the rebellion was illustrati,” said Dominic.

“No, if you’d been listening, I said that there are illustrati at the forefront,” said Vidre. “Almost by definition a leader needs fame, save for the masked statesmen of Kenning. It’s a common enough ploy; you pretend to care about the common people, gain their trust and respect, and use it to propel yourself to the top. That was what happened in Geswein. The merchants said that they were making a democracy, which became a representative democracy, and all the representatives happened to be within the same small group of merchants. The same thing will happen here, unless we can stop it, except the punchline will be invasion by the Iron King. That’s without considering all the traitors within these walls.”

“Lightscour will win the duel,” said Welexi. “He was only recently a commoner, the

son of a baker, risen up from poverty. How can they criticize someone who is at heart one of them? He's from a different country, and a different culture, but he's out of place within the nobility, and an outsider to these affairs in the way that you or I are not."

Vidre sighed, and looked at the advisers, who were shuffling their papers around and trying not to be seen listening in. They hadn't contributed in quite some time. "We need this win then. Dammit all." She looked to Dominic. "Three days to find a way for that to happen."

Dominic felt slightly sick as the conversation wound its way to other topics. The duel was seeming less and less like a good idea the more the prospect of it had been discussed. When he'd stepped forward, he'd thought that it would be a simple thing, almost like the sparring matches he'd had with Vidre, or the rooftop races. He knew how to fight now, that wasn't at issue, but there was an enormity to this that was making him uneasy. Eighty thousand people would be watching if the theater was full, and it would decide — at least in part — the fate of this country, and possibly the entire shape of the world. He'd thought that the duel would be a sideshow of their time in Torland, but now it seemed like it would be the main event. Kendrick Eversong had no doubt given it a span of three days in order to drum up excitement and get the largest possible audience. Dominic was beginning to feel that it would also give him too much time to think.



Amare's Theater was an enormous open-air structure with tiered seating that seemed to climb to the sky. It was a perfect half-circle with a large stage. People began filing in well before sunset in order to see the show that Welexi was about to perform. It was one of the largest buildings in all of Meriwall, visible from most the city, and Dominic was nearly dizzy just looking at it, let alone being inside it. The murmur of the crowds was diluted by the empty space, but the sheer volume of people was almost oppressive.

"We're disrupting the performance of a play," said Vidre. They sat behind the stage, and she was pacing back and forth. "Securing this place on such short notice was costly, as was hiring the choir."

"We have money," said Welexi. He was laying down, unmoving. Dominic didn't have all the details, but he knew that Welexi would need all of his strength. The bones hadn't had enough time to mend themselves. "This performance sets the narratives we need in place. It's unconnected with the current state of politics in Torland, and helps to cement Lightscour as disruptive."

"I was only mentioning it," said Vidre. "Gaelwyn should have been here by now."

"Is he in any danger out there?" asked Dominic. "If they truly hate him, will they try something?"

"He'll be fine so long as he defends himself," said Vidre.

"Will he?" asked Dominic. "He seems to think that perhaps ... I don't mean to say that I believe he's so terrible, but the way he's been trying to atone makes me think that he might imagine that taking a beating is his penance."

"No matter," said Vidre. "That's him now."

Gaelwyn was dragging his feet, and had a defeated look. He smiled weakly when he

saw them, but the smile quickly fell.

“Eight people,” he said. “That was all that came to visit me, for all the hours I was there.”

Dominic had expected hundreds. He had thought that there would be a line around the hospital of people wanting to be cured of what ills he could erase with a touch, even given the stigma against the bodily domains. Gaelwyn had offered the same aid in Gennaro, and while Dominic hadn't gone to see it himself, he knew that the work was mostly met with approval, in part because Gaelwyn was a physician above and beyond what his domain granted him. To have your flesh changed and warped was taboo, but having a doctor heal you was not, so it was easy to pretend that one was the other when it suited you.

He was going to ask Gaelwyn about it when the choir began to sing. Welexi stood up and walked onto the stage. The sun had fallen, and the lanterns that lit the theater had been snuffed. Save for the stars above and the voices of the choir, the theater was dark and quiet.

An enormous white man made of light appeared on the stage beside Welexi. He stood fifteen feet tall, and though Dominic was looking at it from behind, he could tell that the form was Welexi's own. The man had a spear in hand, and twirled it around effortlessly, practicing his forms and thrusts with it. Dominic was entranced by it.

“You never went to the shows in Gennaro?” asked Vidre. She was standing beside Dominic, watching his face. Her voice was low, though with the size of the theater it was doubtful that anyone would have been able to hear her.

“No,” said Dominic. He shrugged. “You charged money for it.” Now he wished that he had gone.

“Limited seating in Gennaro,” said Vidre. “We have to filter people out somehow. We're nearly filling Amare's now; it's likely that we could have gotten away with a small charge to defray the costs.” She wasn't watching the show at all, even when a second man of light showed up, this one larger, bulkier, and covered in a cloak. When the man pulled back his hood, Dominic recognized it as Zerstor, though the features weren't fully in place.

“They're insubstantial?” asked Dominic. He had a hard time imagining that they weren't.

“Insubstantial and difficult to control,” said Vidre. “What you're seeing is the result of decades of practice, and this current production was part of why I wish we'd had more time at sea. The choreography isn't perfect.” She was right; if you looked closely, you could see that it was a mock battle, like the sort two inexperienced actors would make. “Kendrick used to work for us.”

“What?” asked Dominic. He'd been too focused on watching the show, and had been caught off guard by the change in subject. He glanced to Gaelwyn, who was sitting apart from them and too far away to hear.

“He was a natural philosopher of a different kind,” said Vidre. “His area of study was music. He came to Welexi a dozen years ago, before I was around. You've seen the way

that we dress, the way we make a statement with our appearance and impress ourselves upon the world. I've talked about why. It's not uncommon for us to have sigils and brands to identify us, flags we can fly and symbols to mark our most devoted followers. Welexi's is a white spear laid diagonally across a rounded shield. Kendrick's idea was to have something similar for music."

"I don't understand what that means," said Dominic. He watched the enormous white figures fighting each other. Now that Vidre had mentioned it, he couldn't help but see the flaws in how the fighters moved.

"He thought that every illustrati should be associated with a sound, or at least the most famous of us," said Vidre. "We all have songs, too many to count, and stories beyond that, but what Kendrick sought was a unified audible identity. He carefully selected five notes, and began weaving them into Welexi's songs. Those five notes would be at the beginning, and worked in throughout. When Welexi was announced at a formal event, the trumpets would play those five notes." Vidre hummed them, and Dominic realized that he'd heard it many times before without even being aware of it. It was part of the song the choir was singing. "When he went into battle, the common men would hear those five notes and be inspired by them, knowing that he was out there, fighting on their side. It was a clever enough idea, and Welexi hired him on as his bard in Meriwall. He wanted to come onto the ship, and asked about the possibility several times, but Welexi always refused him. Every time that the ship came into port, Kendrick would ask to leave on it. I was there a few of those times; it was tragic, in a way."

"So what happened?" asked Dominic.

"Gaelwyn happened," said Vidre. "There was already some tension given how the war ended, but after Welexi fell in with Gaelwyn, that was the end of it. Kendrick was a coward about it. He kept drawing money from our account while he spread his own legend. When we found out, Welexi was furious. That accounts for much of the bad blood between us and him."

"Why are you telling me this?" asked Dominic.

"Kendrick's going to tell you his own version," said Vidre. "You're going to be on this very same stage with him, and he's going to tell lies, and they'll be mixed with the truth so well that you might not be able to know which is which."

On the stage, the battle had moved on; the form that represented Welexi was limping now, and fighting off enormous sword strokes with his spear, barely blocking each time. A second spear appeared, and now they began fighting again. It wasn't exactly how Dominic remembered it, but it was close.

"I'm not sure I know the truth," asked Dominic. He was trying to see a way that the fight with Zerstor could have been faked. Every time that he thought of a way that it must have been a real thing, he imagined some way that it could have been part of the performance. The only part that didn't seem to make sense if it was fake was — there, Welexi's hand being cut off, represented in the show as spray of light.

"Better for you not to know where the unmarked graves are," said Vidre. "All I mean to say is that Kendrick has his reasons for hating us. I don't want you to learn later on

that he's not the bastard you thought and falter when you need your strength. He has his reasons. Some of them are surely cynical, but ... his father really did die in Gaelwyn's hospital. It was what's called a living autopsy."

When everything looked dire, and the choir was singing their most mournful tune, a third figure appeared, holding the spear of light. It was Dominic, dressed in street clothes, or as close as you could get to the effect in shades of white. It wasn't like how it had really been though; the figures of light faced each other down, and there was even a brief battle between the two before the killing blow came.

When one form of light pulled the other to his feet, the crowd cheered, in a way that should have raised Dominic's spirits.

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Dominic had trouble sleeping. He'd been given a large bed in one of the seemingly endless bedrooms of Grayhull. His thoughts were scattered, and kept touching on different subjects, never staying on one for very long. Tomorrow they would begin training him for the duel, which meant that the day had been an almost total waste on that front. Vidre's words were floating uncomfortably in his head; he had tried to be friendly with Gaelwyn afterward, and didn't think he had been able to pull it off.

Welexi crept into the room, bringing a glow of light with him. "Lightscour," he hissed. "Are you awake?"

"Yes," replied Dominic.

The room flooded with light, and Welexi came to the side of the bed, smiling. In his hands was a small wooden box. He handed it over with a grin. "Open it."

Dominic sat up and frowned. He opened the box slowly and looked at the grey shape inside. It was a Harbinger artifact. Dominic stared at it, and wondered how he knew that. He picked it up slowly and turned it around in his hands. It was a thick, matte, grey rectangle with no discerning features, yet he knew that it was a Harbinger artifact all the same. He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them again. Again, it was immediately obvious that this was a Harbinger artifact. The thought kept coming into his mind. It wasn't a conclusion that he had drawn based on its appearance, it was only something that he knew, in the same way that he could look down at his hand and know it without any particular chain of inference.

"Quite the effect, isn't it?" asked Welexi. "Knowing, without knowing how you know. That seems to be all it does, so far as I can tell, but it's the first real piece."

Dominic frowned and handed the box back.

"Wealdwood was telling the truth, about the weight on his mind," said Dominic.

"Oh, not necessarily," said Welexi. "It could be that he had heard second-hand from someone else and knew enough to match the description. But I do believe that it was true, and that someone else might be traveling down the path I've been on for years." He closed the wooden box. "The Harbingers are real, and I have proof of what they knew."

"And ... what is it that they knew?" asked Dominic.

"The answers to the Five Questions," said Welexi. "'What is fame?' We have working definitions, certainly, enough that we can attempt to manipulate it and find some success.

Yet if you ask the scholars, there are a hundred variations on how they would formulate it, and they simply cannot agree. Yet the Harbingers knew. Of the other questions, these central inquiries of our age, the answers are even less clear. Yet the Harbingers knew. They had to, in order to build something like this.” He patted the wooden box. “Haven’t you ever wondered why the *Zenith* has no special powers? I often have. It’s a well-known ship, talked about in much the same way I am, and people cheer when they see it come or go. Yet it has no domain, none of the special resilience of an illustrati, and its speed is due solely to the construction.”

“I suppose I never thought about that,” said Dominic. “A sword is just a sword, no matter how many people know about it?”

“But why?” asked Welexi. “We have no idea, for all that it’s been thought on. Why are none of my sailors illustrati? We’ve tried to keep them anonymous, there were too many that tried to elevate themselves, but why are they not imbued as a collective? The Harbingers had the answer to that, and more. They could freely transfer fame from one person to another. They could create new domains from nothing. I’ve been chasing this story for years, Lightscour. Years. And this small grey object is the first thing I’ve come across that shows the truth.” His smile was fierce. “The Flower Queen might think that all of this is about her kingdom, and Vidre might think we’re trying to stop war between all the countries of the Calypso, but this,” said Welexi, tapping the wooden box, “This is the real prize.”

Dominic wasn’t quite ready to nod along. “If they were so great and powerful, what happened to them?” he asked.

“They discovered the opposite of fame,” said Welexi. “Not obscurity, that’s only fame’s absence, but the true opposite. The Harbingers destroyed themselves with it.” He leaned back. “Vidre will tell you that I’ve pulled together a story from too many different threads, but you’re on my side, aren’t you Dominic?”

Until that point he hadn’t realized that there was a side to take. He swallowed once, and said, “Yes, of course.”



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Rapier Wit*

Vidre walked through the city streets of Meriwall, incognito. She had a hood up to hide her hair, and had pinned it back in a tight and efficient way. In the stories, a woman who was traveling as a man was always revealed by her hair, which was dramatic but also stupid. The sole tactical advantage to that reveal was an element of momentary distraction, and that wasn't enough for it to be worth it. A woman who couldn't secure her hair properly had no place trying to be sneaky, in Vidre's opinion. The rest of the disguise was a bulky coat and thick pants, with fifty pounds of glass armor to give her some bulk. The beard she wore was made from beaver fur and tied in place; she was less sure about that part of the disguise, but it was easy enough to stick in a pocket. With the disguise on, she was a burly, if short, man, and no one would bother her. The only way it could have been more convincing would have been if she'd had Gaelwyn reshape the muscles of her face, but asking him for that would mean that Welexi would know, and she wanted to avoid that.

Leaving Grayhull Palace had been simplicity itself. Getting back in would be slightly more difficult, but only because she didn't want them to raise the alarm. Half of the illustrati that Vidre had seen were taking the same concentrated dose of narcotic that the Flower Queen had, albeit less intensively. The other half were more concerned with palace intrigues and political positioning. Only a fraction of them were in fighting shape, and the palace had no illustrati as guards. If the Iron King attacked, his illustrati would move through Meriwall like a flash flood, leaving buildings toppled and trees uprooted.

Kendrick Eversong still lived in the same place; she'd checked on that before donning her disguise and making her journey. The lower portion of the building was a shop that had previously sold heavy fabrics and now fishing equipment. Kendrick owned the entire building, which he'd inherited from his father, but he only lived in the upper half of it.

This area of Meriwall was primarily home to shops and industry, with few living spaces, and the crooked roads meant that line-of-sight was poor. When she'd assured herself that no one was looking, Vidre set her sights on the two feet of roof outside one of the upper windows and leapt up towards it. She landed perfectly, stuck her hand straight through the glass like it was a cobweb, unlatched the window, and stepped into Kendrick Eversong's bedroom with her daggers drawn.

It was late, but he would still be out carousing, and probably singing that infuriating song in whatever tavern would have him. He wouldn't be one to squander the fame he'd just gotten, and no doubt if he'd seen the show he would be spinning up some new verse to replace the old one about Zerstor, or claim that the fight in Gennaro had been something of a lover's quarrel, or a mock battle turned real. Vidre could see the shape of those stories, but they were weaker than what Welexi had presented on stage, and couldn't hope to match the reality of the missing fingers.

Kendrick's bedroom had a large bed, a number of outfits draped over chairs and dressers, and half-melted candles sitting on a multitude of surfaces. Vidre looked around only briefly before moving into the next room, which Kendrick used as a place for reading, composing, and occasionally meetings. Six years had done little to change it. The smell of tobacco smoke was stronger, and there were more books on the shelves, but it was still substantially the same. There was a small staircase at the back of the room that led down to the street; Vidre pulled a chair from behind a desk, placed it so that she could sit with moonlight striking her face, and waited.

It was only a half hour before Vidre heard raucous laughter coming up from the otherwise silent streets. It came closer to the house, and Vidre worried briefly that Kendrick would bring people up with him, but then the conversation began to grow distant, and the sound of a single man's unsteady footsteps came up from the stairwell.

"Kendrick Eversong," said Vidre, a fraction of a moment before he would have noticed her.

Kendrick swayed slightly and peered at her. "What heavenly beauty is this that I find lying in wait?" he asked. A grin spread across his face. "I find myself flushed and flustered by this marvelous militant, clad in her domain, a reflection of its sharp yet brittle nature." He swayed slightly. "Come to kill me, Vidre? No, but you're too practical for these theatrics, were that the case. You use the drama only when it suits you, and slip out of the role of actor just like you've slipped out of so many dresses over the years."

Vidre's hands rested on her daggers. "Purify your blood. This isn't a conversation that you want to be drunk for."

Kendrick sighed, but closed his eyes and did what he was told. His swaying stopped, and when he spoke, his words were precise. "I do note that you didn't say you weren't going to kill me," he said. "Was my song really so offensive?"

"What do you hope to gain from all this?" asked Vidre.

"All this," repeated Kendrick Eversong. "If you mean this conversation, then I suppose my hope is to see you disrobed and bent over my bed." He leered at her, in a way that men sometimes did when they wanted to make her uncomfortable. It had stopped having an effect long ago, but coming from Kendrick she felt a small twinge of sadness that her face would never show. They had once been friends.

"There's no audience here," said Vidre.

"If by 'all this' you mean the duel, then I suppose my aim is to put an end to the — I'm certain — wonderfully charming Lightsour, and then do the same to the monster Gaelwyn Mottram," said Kendrick. He made no indication that he had heard what she'd

said. “And if ‘all this’ is to mean anything after that, then I would suppose you’ve already made your guesses about that. It’s no secret that I’m in with the Council of Laborers. I’m certain that you didn’t come here to talk politics though, and seeing as you’re still dressed, I suppose it’s not a yearning in your loins. So that means you’re here to make a deal.”

Vidre shrugged.

“A play is always better when everyone is following the same script, isn’t it?” asked Kendrick. “I consider you a great thinker, did you know?” Vidre only stared at him. “You know that coming here gives me ammunition against you, and you know that it allows me to know that there’s a very good chance I’ll win this duel, and you came here all the same in order to try to work something out. So I’m left wondering what incentive I would have to make a deal, do you see?”

“Your victory is far from assured,” said Vidre. Her hands clenched around her daggers. “I can still take Lightscour’s place, in which case there would be little chance of you walking away.”

“At great personal expense,” said Kendrick with a shrug. He leaned back against the railing of the staircase.

“My reputation would take a hit,” said Vidre, “Welexi’s reputation would probably also take a hit, and Lightscour’s as well. I don’t want to make you into a martyr either. But on balance, it might be worth it if I thought that the risk of us losing the duel was too high with Lightscour fighting. I wouldn’t have any trouble killing you.”

“There’s no narrative to spin there,” said Kendrick with a wave of his hand.

Vidre shrugged. “The narrative isn’t always the most important thing.” The fall back plan was to fabricate a romance with Dominic. If she could convince Dominic and Welexi, this could be done prior to the duel itself, and she could stand in Dominic’s place in much the same way that Dominic was standing in Gaelwyn’s, though she didn’t imagine that anyone in the audience would like it. Failing that, if it looked like Dominic was going to lose, Vidre could step in, claim that she wouldn’t let her lover die, and kill Kendrick. And if Dominic lost so quickly that she couldn’t do that, then she could pretend to fly into a rage using that romance as her motive and kill Kendrick before he had a chance to demand Gaelwyn’s head. These plans had flaws in them, but they made the best of a bad situation.

“You negotiate by saying that you’ll kill me?” asked Kendrick. “Well, I can’t say that I care for that.”

“That’s the stick,” said Vidre. “As for the carrot, you haven’t made your demands.”

“I have,” said Kendrick. “Gaelwyn Mottram, dead.”

Vidre frowned. “He’s been my traveling companion for six years, whatever else he’s done.”

“So you’d have me believe that you’re loyal to him?” asked Kendrick. “No, I rather think not. Gaelwyn is powerful, and a useful man, but he’s a liability, now more than ever. It wouldn’t have escaped your notice that much of the messiness of the Peddler’s War could be cleaned up by putting Gael in a shallow grave. By all rights it should have

been done years ago, as soon as Welexi saw the man who'd saved him. Do you remember me telling you how my father died? Ripped apart, piece by piece, because Gael wanted to know how the brain controls its limbs. They told me it took a dozen hours, as the Red Angel prodded at bundles of nerves in the spine with a needle. Can you even imagine the betrayal I felt when Welexi brought him into the fold?"

Vidre could have mounted a defense. Gaelwyn killed prisoners that the Iron King had condemned to die. He had saved hundreds of lives in the past six years, ever since joining up with Welexi. The lives lost in Gaelwyn's hospital counted for less, if they were men who would have died anyway. Eventually the balance of good and evil would swing the other way, if it hadn't already, and Gaelwyn would be a net good in the world. It would be possible for a skilled bard to paint Gaelwyn as a tragic figure. He was a man forged by the Iron King, and aimed like a cannon along a specific trajectory.

She'd given these defenses before. Yet with every year it became more difficult; there was something unsavory that lay within Gaelwyn, a way that he never took full responsibility for his actions, or pretended that they could be justified on their merits. His pacifism and nervousness were hiding something in his core; she had no idea whether he had killed Wealdwood, but her suspicion was that Wealdwood would never be seen again.

If she was being honest with herself, she'd first thought about getting rid of Gaelwyn after the fight with Cerulean Bane. She had heard the noise from down in the cabin, and her immediate reaction had been to hope that Gaelwyn had been killed. It would have been convenient for him to have finally gotten his redemption through a timely death.

This wasn't what she had planned when she'd decided to pay Kendrick a visit.

"Your original goal couldn't have been to kill Gaelwyn," said Vidre. "It was to bait Welexi, and the point of that was — well, unclear to me, but I presume you thought he would show you mercy, and you would get a free stage to incite the people of Meriwall against their queen?"

Kendrick shrugged again, an elaborate roll of the shoulders. "Plans change."

"You don't want to die," said Vidre. "Dominic doesn't want to die. If we agree on this script together, it's the only way that everyone gets what they want." She took a breath and tried to map out her course. "Gaelwyn ... was a friend."

Kendrick grinned in the moonlight.



After the conversation with Welexi, Dominic hadn't been able to sleep. He'd thrown on his now-familiar outfit that Vidre had procured for him the day they left Gennaro, with its purple tights and baggy sleeves, and wandered the hallways of Grayhull. It was quite late; no one was awake, and the hallways were in darkness save for the moonlight. He could see perfectly, without need for a candle, and went so far as to admire the paintings on the walls in the pitch blackness. After looking around for a moment, he unlatched one of the side doors and stepped out onto the manicured grounds that surrounded the palace. He looked at the empty space in front of him for only a moment before getting down into a crouch, counting silently to three, and then sprinting forward.

The grass was slick with dew, and Dominic was faster than he'd ever been before. Each step put on more speed, and though the grounds were as long as a full city block, he didn't have nearly enough room. A wrought-iron fence decorated with tastefully-sculpted spikes loomed in front of him, nearly fifteen feet high, and Dominic leapt over it.

He rolled into a landing on top of a house, and pitched over the side of it when he was unable to find his purchase. It was a two-story fall, and it hurt, but the pain was only temporary, and he'd suffered none of the broken bones he would have in his old life. Welexi had fallen down from above the clouds and suffered relatively minor injuries for it, and some day Dominic would be at that level too. For now, falling down from rooftops was no longer a concern. Dominic got up, brushed himself off, and leapt back up.

The rooftops of Meriwall weren't as conducive to a run as the rooftops of Gennaro, but Dominic was stronger and faster than he'd been, and could compensate more easily for the dips and valleys as he passed from house to house. The darkness was a friend to him, and no hindrance to his ability to see, and he was soon moving faster than he'd ever moved before, save perhaps for when the *Zenith* was moving at full sail and a strong headwind. He began to sweat from exertion, and pushed himself harder, until he began to feel a familiar ache in his lungs that came more sharply with every breath.

He dashed across the city until the buildings grew thin, then dropped down onto a wide street and kept on going. A pair of constables spotted him, but made no move to stop or even call out after him. He hooked right, nearly skidding across the cobblestones as he made his turn, and leapt back up onto the rooftops to continue his run. He had no particular destination in mind until he saw the spires of Laith's Cathedral, and then he forged a lazy path towards it.

Laithism had been founded a hundred years ago, when Laith was in his waning years. He had been fading away, with all his attempts at gathering more fame or forestalling his decline doing little for him, and had invited spiritualists and scholars in from all over the known world. He had taken many of the ideas about reincarnation to heart, and began to write a lengthy tome filled with his own ideas on the subject. The central idea of Laithism was that he would one day rise again, and that the citizens of his kingdom would one day be ruled over by a King Eternal. The religion (such as it was) was only practiced in Torland and its colonies, and was largely seen as being both inauthentic and derivative. Much of Laith's book had been copied wholesale from other tomes; the ideas in it were already well-worn when it was written. Still, the clergy held some power in Torland, and the Vicar Most High was an illustrati in his own right.

The cathedral was silent and empty. Dominic began his climb. It was easy going, for the most part. There weren't any convenient handholds, but the cathedral was constructed like a tiered cake, getting smaller as it rose and having a number of nearly flat surfaces to stand on. Dominic could simply leap from one landing to another. He was halfway to the top, five stories up, when he realized that he was being followed.

A figure stood twenty feet below him, on one of the gently sloped parts of the cathedral's lower tiers. It was a short, stocky man with a thick beard and what looked to be a pot-belly. His head was covered by a hood, but he was staring up at Dominic. The

man was an illustrati, that was clear enough by the fact that he was on the roof, but Dominic hadn't memorized the list he'd been given well enough to know who it might be. It was also conceivable that this was the man that had set Cerulean Bane and Wealdwood on them, or someone in his employ. Dominic crouched down slightly and began to form armor around himself, which was a serious violation of etiquette if the man was friendly but quite sensible if he was an enemy. The figure leaped up towards Dominic, and landed on the rooftop near him just as Dominic finished making a sword of shadow — now a firm and substantial blade, not the wispy construct of his first night as illustrati.

"We need to talk," said the figure, in a high voice that momentarily startled Dominic. When he saw the scar, he dismissed his sword and armor and flopped down on the roof.

"How did you find me?" he asked.

"You weren't exactly being secretive," said Vidre. "I spotted you running along the rooftops, and thought that I should make sure that you weren't doing anything foolish."

"Sorry," he replied. "I know I shouldn't have. I just needed time to think."

"The palace isn't a prison," said Vidre. She pulled her false beard aside and drew back her hood. "We're free to come and go, so long as we don't commit any breaches of etiquette in doing so. Which, of course, is what you've done. Leaving a domicile in which one is a guest without first informing the staff is a gross violation of protocol. Unless you did inform the staff?"

"Etiquette," said Dominic with a shake of his head. "I hate that word."

"This indiscretion doesn't matter," said Vidre. "I'll help you to sneak back in." She looked out over the city, at the river that meandered through the heart of it and at Laith's Face, always present wherever there was a view of the horizon. "I've cut a deal with Kendrick."

"The Blood Bard?" asked Dominic, but he knew this was a stupid question, the kind that only leaves the mouth because the brain is still trying to catch up. "What sort of deal?"

"The two of you will fight," said Vidre. "You'll get in a position where you have him at your mercy, and then spare his life. Welexi can't ever know of this, which means that Gaelwyn can't either."

Dominic frowned.

"Don't tell me you've grown some sense of morality all of the sudden?" asked Vidre.

"I could have won," said Dominic. "Not easily, but it was a test that had been put before me, and ... you want me to just breeze past it with this deception?"

"This kingdom is on the brink of a civil war, in case you hadn't been paying attention," said Vidre. "There will be other, truer tests of your ability. Dominic, I need to know that you'll go along with this."

"You should have asked before you went to talk to him," said Dominic. "I would have said yes, but ..." He trailed off. "I don't want to betray Welexi."

"You don't know Welexi," said Vidre. "In certain matters, he prefers to play the role of the hero. If that means that there's someone working behind the scenes to set him up

for his moments of dramatic climax, that's perfectly acceptable. Why do you think we travel together? I can act in ways that he can't."

"Is this an arrangement that's been expressed explicitly, or ..."

"No," said Vidre. "No, of course not. Welexi believes in his own legend. That doesn't mean that we don't have an understanding though. There are certain things that he couldn't possibly ask for, but which he would want done all the same. This is one of them."

"You're guessing," said Dominic.

"You don't understand what I've done for Welexi," said Vidre. "When I came aboard the *Zenith*, it took me a month to get a look at the ledgers. It was Welexi, Chrysos, and Pescond in those days, with Welexi as their leader, but they treated him like his rule was unquestionable. It was Welexi who negotiated the contracts and decided where the ship would go, and Welexi who paid the bards. He couldn't ask for help, and when people offered help, his persona obligated him to turn them down, but after stopping in three different ports I started to get a feel for how the conversations would go. The bards loved him, because he was a hero, but they weren't getting paid on a regular basis. Welexi was always ready with an apology and an excuse, but it wasn't until I looked inside the ledger that I saw what a mess he'd made of things. I don't blame him for it; the work of moving money is tedious, and he had no natural talent in that area. I took the ledgers from within his cabin, spent several days looking them over, and from then on I was the one who dealt with payments and receipts. We never once talked about it, no matter how grateful I could tell he was."

"And this is one of those things," said Dominic. What she'd said had made him feel better. There was little question that he was going to take the deal, given how frightening the thought of the Blood Bard was, but he felt the knot of stress untwisting itself. "What about the greater game though?"

"I don't know," said Vidre. "It's an open question, and one that Kendrick wasn't willing to provide answers to. Getting through the duel is the important part though. You'll go along with it?"

"Yes," said Dominic. "It feels like I'm walking a tightrope without knowing where it's going, but ... yes."

"Good," said Vidre. She looked out over the city, like she was contemplating something of her own. "Come on, I'll race you back to the palace."



Two days passed quickly. Dominic was given more instruction in single combat from both Welexi and Vidre, but it could only happen in the off hours, when the Flower Queen's court didn't demand their attention. There were performances to see, tales to recount, and seemingly endless dinners to sit through as course after course of food was served. Welexi didn't speak to Dominic about the Harbinger artifact, but it underscored their conversations; the same went for Vidre and the deal that had been struck with Kendrick. Dominic tried to prepare himself as best he could, but when he wasn't speaking with the aristocracy of Grayhull Palace, time seemed to fly by. He took solace

in the fact that it wasn't a real duel, and he wasn't at risk of dying; he might otherwise have resented the time spent pretending at enjoying the company of glittering, empty-headed women and arrogant, foppish men. He was offered the narcotic flower three times in total, and turned it down each time.

They didn't have Amare's Theater for the full day. The duel was only scheduled for an hour in total, and there were plays being performed both before and after it. Now that he knew there wasn't much risk to him, Dominic could look on all of it with a sense of humor; there was a fair amount of business involved in a production like this, a flow of people into their seats that was accomplished with a swift efficiency by the attendants who spent their entire day moving people around the theater. The upper tiers of seating would have an exceedingly poor view of the duel, but they were filling up all the same.

Dominic had given himself as much armor as possible, but Vidre had been right; he still wasn't able to get anything close to airtight. He had a breastplate, and a helm that left the majority of his face exposed, and a number of plates of armor on his arms and legs for protection. Everything else was covered with fabric, which meant heavy gloves and thick boots. It was a cool day, but he could feel himself sweating, even before the fight had begun. Dominic could cast shade on himself, but that was only of marginal help.

The trick was to make the fight look real to everyone watching. Vidre had said that most people were used to the sorts of fights that they saw in plays, given that Torland hadn't seen a war in nearly a decade, but there was still a strong chance that someone knowledgeable would be watching them, and looking closely enough that they could make out some kind of deception. The hits would have to actually connect, which meant that the fight would have to be a real fight, at least in some sense. Dominic hadn't talked to Kendrick at all; Vidre had done the negotiation between their sides. There was a small part of him that expected betrayal, either from Kendrick or (less likely) from Vidre, but there was nothing much that he could do about that. He'd certainly had his own thoughts of betrayal, but both Vidre and Welexi had agreed that it was better not to make the Blood Bard into a martyr; Welexi thought it was likely that it couldn't be helped.

Vidre fussed with his outfit. "His natural instinct will be to get close, and your instinct needs to be to get some distance between the two of you. The further you are from him, the better. Polearms are good, but don't hesitate to form a sword to push him away. He'll want to talk, but that's a way of baiting you in and getting you to make the first move, which will give you a disadvantage and waste your energy. Small cuts can win you the battle, if you can give him enough of them, because it'll take up his attention. Too many, and he's a dead man walking."

They'd talked about all of this at length, and Vidre was simply repeating herself. She seemed as nervous as Dominic was, in her own way, though it was only obvious in the decisive way that she moved around the backstage area and checked everything over time and again.

Welexi stood with the light bracing his broken limbs. He offered no words of encouragement, but the set of his shoulders and the radiant aura of his armor were



enough that Dominic grew more confident just by looking at him. In Welexi's mind, the outcome of the duel was practically preordained, and had been ever since it was set in motion. He'd never doubted Dominic's abilities, not even in private, and that was far more reassuring than all the training and planning that Dominic had done with Vidre, and even more reassuring than the fact that the duel had a fixed outcome.

"One final enhancement," said Gaelwyn. He laid hands on Dominic without asking, and began mild tweaks that could hardly be felt. It felt brazen to do this in the relatively open backstage, but Gaelwyn didn't seem to pay any mind to it, and no one seemed to be looking. "You'll do well, I know you will."

"I hope so," said Dominic. He had no idea whether he'd said it convincingly; he'd always thought that he was an excellent liar, but he'd never had the stakes quite so high before, not even when he'd been lying to Corta.

"Prepared to die?" called a rich, well-worn voice from some distance away. Kendrick Eversong strode towards Dominic with a grin on his face. For all that the last three days had seemed to revolve around the Blood Bard, this was the first time that Dominic had seen him since they met at the docks. "I suppose no man is truly ready to die, save for those that bring an end to their own lives. Did you know I'm the favored? You should have bet on yourself, for if you die there's no cost to you. I've done the same, naturally."

"I don't want to kill you," said Dominic. It was better to establish that now, with everyone watching, so that showing mercy later wouldn't be suspicious.

"Well, this should be quite the easy duel to the death then," said Kendrick with a smile. He wasn't dressed for battle, and wore no armor, but Vidre had warned that he wouldn't; for how little protection he needed, it was better for him to have the maneuverability, at least in this sort of fight. He wasn't even wearing a helm, and Dominic couldn't help but wonder whether the Blood Bard would have made the same decision if the duel wasn't a sham. A single strike to the head was all that it would take.

"Shall we?" asked Kendrick. "It seems the most important members of society have come to see a killing, and the crowds are growing restless."

Dominic nodded, and they stepped out onto the stage together.

Kendrick was right; everyone of importance had come to see them fight. Amare's had a central area of the seating reserved for the queen and her court, which amounted to forty people all told. They weren't watching the stage, even after Dominic and Kendrick stepped out together; instead, the illustrati and hangers-on were talking to each other, or sipping at heady wines.

"Gaelwyn Mottram killed thousands!" Kendrick shouted. The murmuring masses began to grow quiet at this. Kendrick and Dominic were standing apart from each other, but this wasn't anything that they had agreed upon. Dominic wasn't sure whether to let Kendrick talk, or just to start the duel. He shifted from foot to foot, and tried not to cast a glance back towards where Vidre was waiting backstage.

"Gaelwyn Mottram killed thousands!" Kendrick shouted again. "The Sunhawk will say that this was all under the orders of the Iron King, but the truth is that Gaelwyn was always a monster. He would give his would-be patients sweets in the morning and dissect

them at night. Gaelwyn will tell you that he sought only to promote the useful sciences, yet there was no reason for him to be so cruel. He gave no soporifics to let his victims go quietly into sleep! He did nothing to dull their pain! He did not plead with the Iron King to stop these vile practices! I have read every piece of correspondence that I could get my hands upon, and Gaelwyn never once speaks of the burdens of his position. It is only a breathless excitement about what he has learned by his murders.”

“He’s changed,” said Dominic. He realized that his voice wasn’t loud enough; it would never reach anyone in the back rows, but even those in the royal seats would have trouble hearing. Kendrick was projecting his voice, like bards were trained to do, and Dominic had to do his best to match it. “Gaelwyn has changed!”

“The Flower Queen did not know!” called Kendrick in response. “She provided him with a pardon on nothing but faith alone, and it was not even that. She wanted his expertise and power to shape her! Even now a fool could see how much younger she looks than she did four days ago. Like her ancestor Laith, she was willing to set aside the will of the people in order to have a continuation of her youth. A thousand of our countrymen were ripped into, their flesh taken from the bones of their comrades in arms and fed to them, and that was forgiven because the Flower Queen wanted to be more beautiful. This is how little we mean to her!”

“We’re not fighting over what happened in the past,” said Dominic. “This is about the present.”

Dominic was trying his best to gauge the reactions of their audience, but it was difficult given that the various tiers of seating divided people roughly by their class. Kendrick had their attention, and that was bad enough.

“The past shapes the present!” crowed Kendrick. His smile didn’t reach his eyes. He stood with his rapier held out like a baton. “Of the Flower Queen’s crimes against the people of her city, the pardon of the monster Gaelwyn Mottram has not been the worst, but it’s the only one that a lowly man like me can work to correct.” He turned towards Dominic and held his sword out in front of him. “I’m only sorry that you were so foolish as to stand in his way.”

Dominic’s shadow sword came up to block the rapier, and Kendrick kept coming, moving his left hand forward to try to find purchase. Dominic spun backwards and got into a defensive stance; the fight had begun without him being entirely ready, and it wasn’t clear whether Kendrick had already broken their deal.

They watched each other carefully. Dominic waited for the opportune time, when Kendrick’s gaze shifted slightly, and transitioned his sword of shadow into a long spear with a sharp point on the end. The sun was out and the sky was fairly clear, which meant that his shadows were able to draw a little bit more strength.

Dominic made a lazy forward attack with his spear, which was both a probe of Kendrick’s stance and a signal that their deal was still in place. Kendrick responded by leaping past the point of the spear and again trying to grab at Dominic. A single touch wouldn’t be a disaster until after Dominic’s clothing had been ripped, he’d asked Vidre about that a dozen times, but it seemed that Kendrick was trying to do his best to rip the

clothing as a precursor to that. At the last moment, Dominic moved away, releasing his spear and conjuring up another one. It left them both in nearly the same position that they'd been in before, but Dominic had used some of his previous reserves of energy and was beginning to heat up.

It was a slow fight. Kendrick spent much of the time talking, which he could do without much cost to himself. The topic of conversation was invariably the Flower Queen, and how little she cared about the people of Torland. Every time Kendrick would attack, Dominic would give a little bit of ground, but Kendrick was making no efforts to press his advantage; he was perfectly willing to let Dominic tire himself out. It was impossible for Dominic to tell whether this was a legitimate effort or simply part of a play they were putting on. Vidre had said that she would intervene, but Dominic was worried that Kendrick would simply call the bluff.

Kendrick was not a terribly good fighter; that made sense, as he was a bard by trade. He was also slower than Dominic. When Dominic realized this, he put himself on the offensive again, striking forward. Welexi had used two spears in tandem, but Dominic just used the one, trying to find a place to stick Kendrick. The proper use of a spear was to have one hand near the back, which provided forward thrusting, and one hand near the front, which provided a point for the spear to pivot around. Using his rear hand, he was able to thrust the spear forward quickly and then pull it back, and with a minimum amount of effort, Dominic was able to put Kendrick on the defensive. It would do little good without a hit though; Kendrick wasn't tiring. One of these thrusts found its mark in Kendrick's chest though, and even though the hit felt weak, Kendrick staggered back. The front of his outfit was white and ruffled, and soaked through with blood almost instantly until Kendrick stopped the bleeding.

Kendrick stared hard at Dominic and began to attack in earnest. Dominic was forced to drop the spear again, and pulled a thick sword from the shadows even before he could watch the spear fade. Kendrick's rapier was pushed aside by the shadow sword at the last moment, and clanged off of Dominic's pauldron with a dull sound. Kendrick was a sloppy fighter, but he could afford to be, and he attacked a second time, following up on the first. Dominic was getting quite hot by now, even with shadow cast over him, and his sweating hands nearly caused him to lose his grip for the second parry.

"You want to defend him?" asked Kendrick. "Those who defend monsters are no better than them! They're equally worthy of destruction!" His cries broke the silence of the theater.

Dominic had no breath to respond with. He dodged a third attack, and parried a fourth, but it was becoming clear that if this fight was no longer a play, he was going to lose. The blood that had soaked Kendrick's white ruffles was worrying; if Dominic couldn't be sure that their deal hadn't been broken, then surely the same had be said for Kendrick. When a fifth attack came through, Dominic lashed out with his sword and trusted in his armor to protect him. Kendrick's rapier bounced awkwardly off Dominic's armor, and Dominic's sword bit into the flesh of Kendrick's arm.

Kendrick cried out in pain and stepped back. He watched Dominic closely and licked

at his lips, then began to draw up a small globe of blood into his off hand. When this was a sufficient size, he formed it into a whip, and stalked forward, with a blood whip in one hand and a rapier in the other. Dominic dodged the first crack of the whip but not the second, which struck his armored wrist hard enough that the construct of shadow disappeared completely. The third crack of the whip was aimed at Dominic's head, and he ducked beneath it, only to find blood dripping down onto him from above; Kendrick had released the whip from his control.

They fought on. Despite his best efforts, Dominic was beginning to tire, and the fight was feeling far too real. He needed to end it, either on his terms or on the terms that they'd agreed to. He found his chance when Kendrick made another sloppy attack. Dominic kicked out at him, and Kendrick fell to the ground. Before he could spring to his feet, Dominic planted a foot on Kendrick's chest. He brought his sword down quickly, until it was resting against Kendrick's neck. Just like that, he had won. A part of him wanted to end it right there, to simply press down with his sword until it had pierced Kendrick through the neck, but even that didn't seem guaranteed to kill quickly and cleanly. Besides that, it wouldn't have been what Welexi would have done. The crowd was cheering for him to do it, to end the duel with a severed head, but this was a moment to prove himself as a hero. All that aside, he and Vidre had agreed that it was better not to make a martyr.

"Yield," said Dominic. He pitched his voice to the crowd. "I don't want to kill you."

"Kill me?" asked Kendrick. He laughed, though he could scarcely draw breath.

"You've already killed me. My heart's been pierced, and that's the end for me."

Dominic hesitated. "Gaelwyn can save you, if you yield." He kicked out with his free foot and sent Kendrick's rapier spinning across the stage.

Kendrick laughed again, though his laugh was hollow. "Prove that I have no convictions? Prove to everyone that I don't care about my country so long as my own life can be saved?"

"Better to live and fight than become a martyr," said Dominic.

Kendrick turned to the side, and it took Dominic a moment to realize that he was crying. "My father," said Kendrick. "Fine, let the bastard prove himself." This last was said so quietly that Dominic was sure he was the only one who heard.

Gaelwyn came onto the stage with timid footsteps. There were boos from the crowd. Kendrick tried to get to his feet, but Dominic's boot was still in place.

"Let him up," said Gaelwyn. "Eversong, for what happened to your father, I am truly sorry, but I hope that with time you can understand."

Dominic allowed Kendrick to stand up, and watched the scene carefully. He had won the duel, just as planned, and having fought it there was little doubt in his mind that it wouldn't have gone that way if it had been more natural. Still, there was something wrong with this scene. He kept his sword drawn, and waited. He halfway expected Kendrick to attack, and readied himself for it. People began to come out from behind the stage, with Vidre and Welexi among them.

"Something is wrong," said Vidre. She stood next to Dominic, with her own daggers

out and ready for danger.

Gaelwyn approached Kendrick slowly.

“You will never be anything more than a monster,” spat Kendrick. “Never anything more than someone’s dog. For all that you present a false front, people will see through it. Pretending at being a moral creature will never make you one.”

Gaelwyn reached out a hand. Dominic saw the danger; if two men with bodily domains touched each other, both would be at each other’s mercy. Kendrick might be able to killed Gaelwyn, even if it would have to come at the expense of his own life.

They touched, only briefly, and Kendrick jerked backwards, screaming in pain. His head hit the stage, and he went still, just as everyone exploded into action. Kendrick’s entourage swarmed his body, picking it up and taking it out of the way, while everyone else moved with weapons drawn.

“I didn’t,” said Gaelwyn. He stood with his hand still in front of him and a shocked look on his face. “He did it to himself, he —”

“We need to move,” said Vidre.



Kendrick was carried down into one of the many rooms beneath the theater floor. His body had gone completely limp, and he was having trouble keeping from smiling. There had been two significant points of risk with the plan; the biggest was the risk that Dominic would kill him outright, but at a close second was the risk that this deception would be found out. Gaelwyn’s reaction had helped matters tremendously; Kendrick had been counting on the fact that the damage he’d done to himself with the surge of blood could be felt through Gaelwyn’s domain sense. It really had hurt, but help was on the way, and testing had shown that so long as Kendrick could keep renewing the vital essence of the blood in his brain, little else mattered.

Clarence laid him out on a table, and Kendrick stood up slowly and aching once the door was locked. “A martyr,” he said. “I’ve always wanted to be a martyr, but better not to have to die to do it.”

“You are dead,” said the cloaked figure, standing in a corner of the room. A pretty young woman stood beside him, one that he hadn’t been seen with before. “Kendrick Eversong is no more.”

“Yes, yes,” said Kendrick. He’d only rarely met another person who insisted on so much theatricality in private, and he could see how it would be trying. “A new identity awaits, and a life in the Iron Kingdom.”

“Are you injured?” asked the man.

“Yes,” replied Kendrick. He looked down at his shirt. “I might have overdone it with the blood a bit, but I think I can move about. Nothing that will kill me when I’m not awake to keep the blood moving. If I can be seen to by a doctor, that would be for the best.” He laughed. “You know, I think that Gaelwyn was going to do it?”

The cloaked figure nodded. “He follows a moral code.”

Kendrick shook his head, but it didn’t really matter if the benefactor had his quirks; the Council was being supported either way, and Torland would soon be free of the

Flower Queen's influence.



They stood around a thick table in Grayhull Palace: Welexi, Vidre, Dominic, Gaelwyn, Steelminder, and the halfway gone Flower Queen. No one looked particularly happy, save for the Flower Queen.

“It was a play for the audience,” said Vidre. “We just didn’t know the punchline. Easy enough to figure out after it had happened, but that doesn’t help us much.”

“We can cry foul,” said Dominic. “We tell them to show the body. If Kendrick is still alive out there, they won’t be able to do that.”

“It depends on where he is,” said Vidre. “Seeing the body wouldn’t be enough, we would have to inspect it, and I can already imagine the affront that they would pretend at.”

“It’s all in the past,” said Welexi. “There will never be any proof, until the day that we meet the Blood Bard again. People have already seen what they saw, and the narrative has already been set in place. Responding now, without the most concrete of evidence, will do nothing to stop that narrative. Tens of thousands of people were primed to believe that Gaelwyn was a murderer, and they will know what they saw, especially because it makes for a better story.”

“So that’s it?” asked Steelminder. “You’ve done nothing in the time since you landed on our shores but introduce further instability?”

There was a loud banging on the door, and a messenger burst in without waiting for anyone to respond. “The city’s on fire,” he said quickly. “There’s a riot in the streets.”