

The summer rains had not come. The grass was beaten down and scorched by the sun, and the soil was like rock beneath the horse's hoofs. With each step, dust rose and hung in the air, caking Derick's shirt and face. The fields were abandoned. Scattered throughout the bare furrows, stunted patches of corn were kept alive by irrigation that was hardly more than a series of muddy ditches.

Derick felt nearly sick as the column of the Harvest Temple appeared on the horizon. Houses gradually appeared, as he guided his horse further toward Tilldale. He wanted to race the rest of the way into town, but the horse was exhausted and Derick was not sure he cared to know what awaited him there.

The Harvest Temple was a simple platform with one column extending from the center. Dust clung to it, streaked in places where somebody had tried to wipe away the orange and uncover the marble beneath it. As he passed, Derick tossed a wrinkled apple onto the platform, sending up a cloud of angry flies from the slaughtered calf that lay, sickly and thin, at the foot of the column. Now that he had left Merendir, he once again felt compelled to keep the rituals.

There was nobody on the streets. Yards were unkempt and desolate. A dog that he did not know watched him with rheumy eyes, but did not bother to lift its head as he passed. Derick dismounted and tethered his horse to a tree. He could not bear to go up to the house yet, so he searched his packs until he found a bowl, set it in front of his lathered horse, and filled it from his flagon. He measured his pace, so that he would not run to the house, or turn back and ride out the way he had come. He pushed open the door, and the hinges creaked exactly where they had before, and then he was face to face with a small grey haired woman, eyes narrow and jaw clenched.

"Derick?" Her face softened.

"Mother." He wrapped his arms around her and coughed in the dust from his clothes.

"Get out of those horrible clothes."

Derick shrugged out of his cloak and unbuckled his sword belt.

"Why in the world are you riding around dressed like a soldier? You're likely to end up in a noose that way."

The door crashed open behind him, and Derick spun around. His little brother stood blinking in a lazy cloud of dust. He was taller than Derick, and ready to fight. The anger on his face turned briefly to confusion, and then he laughed. He tossed aside the bag he had been carrying and threw himself on Derick. He felt strong and wiry in Derick's arms. His hair was stringy with sweat and dust.

"Are you back for good? Did they let you go?" Jerad asked.

Derick had not given much thought to what he would do now that his military service was done. He had thought only about coming home and seeing his family, and Eliyna.

"I'm back for good. When'd you get so tall?"

Jerad took a step back and crouched down.

"What, are you worried that I can whoop you now?" He lunged at Derick, who jumped aside and into the table, nearly knocking a pot onto the floor. Jerad stumbled and regained his footing, too close to their mother, who gave him a brutal smack on the back of the head.

"Cut that out. If you two want to act like animals, go out and wrestle in the street."

Jerad grinned.

"Jerad, go buy some ale." She fished around behind a pile of clothes and pulled out a coin. It had been a long time since Derick had even seen a scant silver. His mother said sternly, "Tell Celper we want a whole jug for this, and that his watery ale isn't worth any more."

"I'll come too," Derick said. He wanted to see the town again. On his way out the door, he untied a pouch from his belt and left it discretely on the table by the door. There were eight gold coins in there, nearly a year's salary. It had been easy to save in Merendir, not having tastes for fine wine or clothing. Money had been tight for mother since his father had died, but they had always had bread and soup, clothes, and a roof over their heads. What he had saved in three years in Merendir would last them ten years or more in Tilledale.

His brother walked quickly and his strides were long.

"Did you go to war?" Jerad climbed over low stone wall to cut across a neighbor's yard.

"It wasn't much of a war, but I saw some fighting."

Derick had spent a few weeks in the field, chasing bandits and putting down a minor insurrection, but the men he'd faced had been poorly organized with little will to fight. They had broken quickly when faced with a century of imperial soldiers.

The brothers were passing one of the oldest houses in town-- a mansion with three stories and a stained glass window. The trees planted to shade the broad veranda had already shed most of their leaves, and those that remained were mottled brown and yellow from the drought. The garden had been abandoned, and only hardened furrows remained. A few melancholy phrases of music drifted from the porch. Derick squinted toward the building, outlined by the sinking sun, for a glimpse of a familiar face.

"How's Jarny doing?" Derick asked. "Has he gotten even meaner in his dotage?"

"Nah," Jerad did not look over toward the house. "The old man passed away last winter. That's his son playing the pipes on the porch. I guess it's in his blood. Jarny may have been a mean old coot, but at least he'd play something lively every now and then. Now it's nothing but dirges."

They walked in silence for a while. The heat had not abated and the air felt too muggy for their dry landscape. The sun hung red and hazy just above the horizon.

"What did mother mean when she said that I might end up in a noose wearing my uniform?" Derick asked.

"She was exaggerating. The Emperor's men out here..." Jerad gave Derick a sidelong look.

"Out with it. I'm not the Emperor's man any more."

Jerad shrugged. "They take what they want. They live like lords and act like bandits. People talk..."

"I would hate to see Tildale after a century of imperial soldiers was done with it," Derick muttered. When they had put down the insurrection in the highlands, his commander had

been merciful, and only a handful of the leaders had been executed. Other towns, Derick had heard, had fared much worse.

"Me too, but I wouldn't worry," Jerad reassured him. "People grumble, but nobody wants to fight."

Derick nodded. He hoped his brother was right.

"How's Eliyna?" He asked. His brother hesitated.

"She's... alright."

They walked again in silence for a moment.

"Is she still..." Derick did not want to ask the question that had been weighing on his mind for three years, "living with her parents?" he finished.

"Uh-huh." Jared answered quickly and looked away. Derick leaned forward and saw that his brother was trying to hide a smirk. He grabbed him by the arm.

"Come on, jackass, stop playing with me. Tell me everything you know!"

"Alright, alright. Let go of me, you're going to break my arm. She still lives around here. I don't talk to her much, but she seems as happy as anybody in this awful place. She looks even better than she did before. She's single, and she asks about you all the time. Is that good enough?"

"Really? She asks about me all the time?"

"No, I just thought that's what you wanted to hear. She probably doesn't even remember your name." Jerad winked. "She only has eyes for me now."

Derick took a swing at his brother, but Jerad was expecting it and skipped aside.

"You better watch it, little brother, or I really will break your arm."

Jerad changed the subject. "How's Lars? Why didn't he come back with you?"

"Lars is well. He developed a taste for city life and signed up for another year of service."

Lars was the same age as Derick, and had been restless in Tilledale for as long as Derick could remember. He loved the life of a soldier and the hectic streets of Merendir.

They were approaching Celper's Inn, which was a sorry sight even by the town's sorry

standards. Still, it was the only place in Tilledale to get a pint or a room for the night, and a couple of gloomy-looking ponies were tethered outside. The sign that hung over the doorway depicted two jolly and buxom young women waving pints of ale and dancing by a festive fireplace. The paint was chipped and faded, so their jolly expressions merely a memory. Even still, the women on the sign bore little resemblance to the actual patrons of the inn.

A few old men that Derick recognized sat around a table by the grey hearth with mugs in their hands, passing around a pipe of oily-smelling tobacco. If any of them were happy about Derick's return, they did not bother to show it. Two loud men in dusty cloaks at the bar seemed, by their diction and bawdy conversation, to have been there for quite a while. One of them turned as the brothers entered and Derick saw the rising sun of Merendir emblazoned on his tunic. Celper himself was nowhere to be seen, but a dessicated woman with thinning hair and a lazy eye stood behind the bar. Derick wondered if everybody who still lived in the town was old and infirm.

"What can I do for you boys?" The woman asked in a raspy but gentle voice. She could hardly be heard over one of the soldiers, who was boasting of his exploits with some wealthy woman in Merendir.

"We'd like a jug of your best ale!" Jerad clapped his brother on the back. "We're celebrating my brother's return from his military service in Merendir."

"sat right?" The louder soldier turned to Derick, swaying slightly on his stool. "I'm a soldier, too, y'know." Derick nodded politely. "The women in Merendir are something else, huh? What'd you come back here for?"

"My family and friends are here."

"So you're a country boy, huh? I bet you can live like a king here after earning city wages." The drunk soldier squinted at Derick. "You don't look like the kind of guy who spends much money on wine or women." The soldier's companion snickered and muttered something into his beer that was met with a hearty guffaw and a slap on the back.

The old woman returned with a jug and slid it across the bar to Jerad. He gave her the coin

that their mother had given them, then pulled another from his belt pouch and slid it across the bar, too. He winked at Derick and turned toward the door.

The sun had fully set, but Derick saw few lamps in the windows of the houses that they passed. He wondered for the first time what kind of life it was that he was returning to. Jerad seemed to sense his thoughts.

"It's like the town is dying." Jerad took a long swig from the jug of ale. He poured a bit out for the Harvest God, and the dry street soaked it up immediately.

"Where is everybody?" Derick asked him.

"The young people have moved away to seek their fortunes. The older people have gone to look for work to support their families. The people who stay here fixate on their despair and grow old before their times. For three years, there's been no rain. Mother says half of the town elders have died or moved away and that nobody has taken over their positions. Even Denard packed up and left a few weeks ago."

Ageless and unfailingly jovial, the Harvest Priest had been in Derick's life forever. As was befitting of a Harvest Priest, Denard had always seemed to be eating, preparing, and sharing food, and he was always just at the threshold of sobriety. He was instructive when it came to the rituals, and he kept them well, but mostly he would sing and tell tales of Tilledale and the surrounding towns. He composed and compiled the histories of their inhabitants, and their ancestors, and he would hold forth for as long as anybody cared to listen, passing a flagon the entire time. It was no wonder that the town seemed empty, if even Denard had moved on.

Their house was filled with lamplight and the smell of cooking onions when they got back. As soon as they stepped inside, Derick's mother handed him a washcloth and pointed to the back room, where she had boiled him a bath. Derick drew the curtain and gratefully stripped out of his dusty clothes and slipped into the hot water. He ached from travel and his skin felt sticky and grimy. He sat back and let the hot water massage him.

Derick was half asleep when he heard a crash in the next room. It was the front door slamming open. He sat up and heard his brother's voice, angry and indistinct.

Somebody said "It's time to pay your taxes!" in a loud, drunken drawl. Derick jumped from the tub and pulled on his breeches, still soaking. He went into the next room and saw his brother standing chest to chest with the loud soldier from the inn, looking up into the larger man's face. The other soldier stood in the doorway.

"The Emperor demands..." the soldier was swaying in a pronounced way and had to stop after each phrase to choose the next one, "that you pay... for the purposes of citizenship..." he took a deep breath, "your gold and the use of your pretty... Pretty..." he leered at Derick's mother and then pointed out the door behind him, "...horse." The second soldier giggled and leaned his head against the doorframe.

"Get out of our house." Jerad said through clenched teeth. His toes were practically touching the soldier's now. He planted his hands on the soldier's chest and shoved. The soldier staggered backwards and it looked like he would fall, but he recovered his balance with surprising speed and dealt Jerad a backhanded blow that sent him spinning into the wall. The soldier turned to Derick and wiped some spittle from his beard as Jerad crumpled to the floor.

"Are you looking for trouble, too, soldier boy?" The man spoke with alarming clarity. Derick did not want trouble, especially being unarmed and half-naked. He stood speechless for a moment, then he saw Jerad slowly stretching his arm toward the sword belt that Derick had discarded earlier. The soldier followed Derick's eyes and wheeled around, bringing his boot down hard on Jerad's hand. He grinned and shifted more and more of his weight onto Jerad's hand until Jerad screamed along with a series of sickening cracks. Derick looked over to his mother, hoping that she would say something to make the situation better, but she stood frozen in the corner.

Later, when Derick replayed the scene, he could never decide whether he lunged for the butchering knife before or after the soldier began to draw his sword. He remembered clearly the moment before-- his brother's gritted teeth and tears of pain and anger; the soldier looking down at his brother with a cruel smile and all his weight on Jerad's broken hand; the second

soldier standing in the doorway with wide eyes and an eager, almost lustful, expression; and his mother, speechless and pale, staring into the soldier's face. The next moment he was throwing the knife, and then blood was everywhere. His brother cried out again as the sword fell from the soldier's hands and landed on top of him, the huge soldier gurgled and grasped uselessly at the knife in his throat as he fell to his knees, the second soldier leaned over and vomited noisily, and his mother rushed over to where Jerad lay.

The dying man's companion drew his sword and stood in the doorway, trembling. Derick stared him down as he walked toward him. The soldier did not move. Derick picked up the fallen sword, which was cool and heavy and oddly reassuring.

"There are three of us and you're dead drunk." He told the shaking soldier, who nodded stupidly. "Drop your sword and leave." The soldier contemplated the command for the space of one long, quavering breath, and then complied. Derick watched as the man fled past the tethered horse, then turned back into the house.

Hot blood pooled around Derick's bare feet. His mother was helping Jerad to his feet. The blood seemed to belong entirely to the soldier-- Jerad must have been hit by the flat of the falling sword. Jerad's hand, however, was in a grotesque position-- bent backwards nearly in half, with a few shards of bone emerging from his palm. Jerad looked at the dead soldier, the spreading pool of blood mingled with vomit, and then at his own shattered hand. His knees wobbled and he sat down quickly, looking very pale.

Derick's eyes met his mother's. She seemed unreasonably calm. They stared at each other for a long time and then she spoke.

"You two have to leave immediately. Paulanus will send men as soon as he hears of this, you two will be hanged."

"I... What about you? Who's Paulanus?"

Derick's head was spinning. His mother was already gathering provisions from the meagerly stocked shelves. Jerad looked like he was about to pass out. The blood in which Derick was standing was sticky and quickly becoming cool.

"Paulanus is the captain of these... men. He's not the type that you want to cross. As for me, I didn't kill anybody and I'm an old woman and a town elder, besides."

Derick was not so sure. "Come with us," he said.

"On what horse?" His mother asked. "You two will be slow enough with crippled brother and weary horse." She held a large flagon in the water barrel for a moment, then capped it and wrapped it up in a cloth with some bread and cheese.

Derick protested, "I'll stay here and answer for what I've done. They were drunk and violent. I was defending my home and my family."

"You're an idiot," his mother answered bluntly. "Drag that body outside and go wash your feet."

Derick obeyed his mother and took hold of the dead man's arms. The soldier was easily twice as heavy as Derick and it was not a simple task to drag him out to the road. Outside, the air had grown surprisingly cool. The man's pale eyes stared up at Derick blankly. Derick shuddered and dropped the man's arms. He closed the eyes and pulled the knife from the man's throat. A fresh wave of blood washed over his hands.

Inside, his mother had bandaged Jerad's hand. Derick went to the basin of tepid water, scrubbed his hands and feet, and finished dressing. His mother handed him the pouch of gold that he had tried to leave her. He removed two of the coins and gave the rest back to her.

"When it's safe to come home, or if you can come find us, send word to the Mason Inn in Merendir," Derick said. "Are you sure that you'll be safe here?" She nodded, too quickly Derick thought, and embraced him.

"I was looking forward to having you back so much," She said. "We'll see each other again soon."

Jerad moved to embrace his mother slowly, with a faraway expression. They left the house and Derick's mother closed the door behind them. As he mounted the horse and pulled his brother up behind him, Derick looked back toward the house of his childhood. Lamplight still spilled cheerily out onto the walk. As he kicked the horse into motion, he saw his mother,

sitting at the table, her head in her hands.

The wind was blowing hard as they travelled the same streets that Derick had taken into town. In the time it had taken the sun to set, Derick's whole world had been turned upside down. He thought once again of Eliyna.

His horse reared suddenly as the sky lit up and thunder rolled across the plains. His brother grasped him tightly with both hands and gasped in pain. As they trotted past the Harvest Temple, the heavens opened and large, cold drops of rain began to fall. The temple transformed before their eyes as the orange facade of dust melted away and the shining marble was revealed below, looming dark against stormy sky. Derick pulled up his hood, bowed his head against the rain, and spurred his horse out onto the windswept prairie.

The sun sets earlier in the Valley, at least that's what people say. Certainly, the darkness is more complete. The lighting after dusk is haphazard, and the buildings irregular, casting countless passages and corners into murky shadows that seem to be made for lurking, skulking, or any number of other activities that unnerve the honest citizens from the hill tops.

Lighthall was not unnerved in the valley. He had been dealing with these people for most of his life. He was watchful, though. It was important to be on one's guard in the Valley, and even though Lighthall travelled with ten armed men, he studied his surroundings carefully. Some day, perhaps, the Mouse would sweep this whole area clean. It was a blemish on an otherwise glorious city. Lighthall had a few business interests here, but they offered meager profits. Mostly, the Valley was a place to find people to do unpleasant work for little pay, while they lived out their short lives steeped in booze and squalor.

They were approaching Lower Market Street, which was Lighthall's least favorite place in the entire Valley. The notion of a street devoted to commerce pleased him on some level, but out in the city, Market Street was hardly different than any other, with shops and apartments side by side. Only here, on Lower Market, was the street used as it had originally been intended. Few of the hawkers-- to call them merchants would demean many honest men-- contained their wares in shops, and even those who did maintain meager storefronts were not shy about joining the dense throng that harassed anybody unfortunate or unwise enough to traverse the street. A man of Lighthall's standing attracted far more attention than most, and the shouts started well before he turned into the motley marketplace.

It was regrettable that Grainger considered himself some kind of populist, and that this led him to maintain his mock court on Lower Market. It was perhaps more regrettable that Lighthall was forced to deal with the man. Lighthall doubted that the men who ruled Silt, or the Far East, or even the barbarous priests in Fellnia, would allow an extortionist like Grainger to operate openly-- to even be afforded some respect and unofficial responsibility.

Lighthall stared straight forward, walking quickly in the pocket that his men opened in the crowd. Any of the hawkers who made so bold as to try to wave some worthless trinket in

Lighthall's face, was pushed indelicately aside, as was anybody who did not move to the side of the street with sufficient haste to let them pass.

They walked over a flagstone with a worn engraving marking the spot where Lower Market would intersect Haderian Street, had not hasty and zealous construction obstructed passage to and from Lower Market in all but a few places. Lighthall started counting the stalls on his left. The entrance to the twelfth stall was given a relatively wide berth by the throng, despite the silver displayed there that was a good cut above anything else in the market. A handful of men and women lounged near the entrance, looking disreputable but regrettably more alert than his own guards on the occasions that Lighthall surprised them on duty. It had been the tenth stall on his previous visit, and the sixteenth the time before. He now had no doubt now that the entrance to the Poorman's Union moved. The Poorman's Union was an institution whose very name was disingenuous. Lighthall knew few men-- and women-- so wholly dedicated to enriching themselves, and with as much talent for doing so, as those in the Poorman's Union.

Grainger's guards made no move to impede him, though one of them rose and walked ahead of them, taking a lamp from a peg on the door and leading them through the storefront and into an unlit wooden passageway that took a handful of turns before merging into a more permanent brick hallway. Lighthall clenched his teeth. This was unlikely to be a pleasant meeting.

Not long after Lighthall and his men made their disruptive charge through Lower Market, Leyda watched in amusement as another man caused a disturbance of an entirely different nature. She had a tedious assignment this week-- sitting in a shop that sold cloth of moderate quality and watching who came and went on Lower Market. If the wrong people came-- she had never actually been instructed about who these people might be, but presumably they would come in force-- she would hurry a couple hundred yards from a back door and slam the back door to the silver shop. She wasn't sure what would happen from that point on, but she

guessed that it would take the intruders some time to find the entrance to Union Hall.

The man was Endrev Berekker, of course. She had never seen him before, but his elegant yet casual attire, his confidence, and the touches of grey framing a handsome face all matched the descriptions she had heard. What confirmed it, in her mind, was the Islander that walked beside him with a large sword and the calm authority of one who used it well. Of all the leading merchants, only Berekker put Islanders in positions of authority. It was even said that he preferred the company of dark women.

The Islander walked beside Berekker with a stony dignity. Berekker smiled at the merchants who tried to entice him to their stores, and gave cursory glances at the items that were thrust in front of him. His man stayed impassive and alert, ignoring everybody. They moved easily through the crowd, and although people pressed in close trying to attract attention to their wares, the two somehow managed to avoid being jostled, or even touched. Then suddenly, Berekker stopped. He reached out and took a beaded necklace from the hand of a merchant in front of him. Leyda could just barely hear his words over the crowd.

"This is finely done. Is it your own work?"

"Sir, yes. Well, no, sir. My wife makes them."

"How much do you want for it?"

"Four pieces silver is the typical price, but for you I'll make an exception. Give me three silver for that, or five for that and another like it."

Berekker laughed.

"Do you think that I became this rich as a fool? I'll give you one silver for both."

The merchant could not help smiling for a moment before assuming an indignant look.

"I know you do not intend to insult my wife, but please, sir, be reasonable. I assure you that I will be soundly beaten if I return home with a silver for these fine works. I will take four silver in coin, or five in scrip."

"Be careful, my friend," Berekker warned, "if we become engaged in serious negotiations, you may find yourself going home without the clothes on your back."

The crowd had quieted somewhat, enjoying this rich man who played the game of the marketplace, and this drew a couple guffaws.

"Name your price then, but be so kind as to make a serious offer this time."

Brekker turned to the man beside him.

"What do you say, Catyan? What are these necklaces worth?"

The Islander took them and inspected them without interest.

"Give him three silver and let's go." Catyan was impatient.

"Three silver?" Brekker looked in mock dismay at the merchant, who wore a broad smile. Brekker's man had lost the game for him, before it had even begun in earnest. Brekker untied a purse from his belt and handed it to the Islander, shaking his head.

"Very well, Catyan, pay the man what you will. I fear for your future, though. Some day your muscles will begin to fail, and without muscles or business sense, I'm afraid the only position left for you in my organization will be doorman."

Catyan opened his mouth, as if to object, and Brekker looked at him with a mischievous smirk.

"I think your negotiation skills would benefit from some practice. Be so good as to keep that purse and do some shopping for me. I think I'd like..." Brekker looked around dramatically, "one of everything."

This met with a roar of humorous approval from the crowd, which pressed immediately in on Brekker's man, as Brekker himself slipped deftly away, chuckling to himself. Leyda gave a quick laugh aloud at the expression on the unfortunate Catyan's face, then returned to her seat to watch the endless stream of people coming and going from the market.

Lighthall had been disinclined to like the man, but Brekker's demeanor when he arrived five minutes late in Grainger's audience chamber enraged him. The man strode in unapologetically, wearing a smirk that made it clear that he was, for whatever reason, extremely pleased with himself. He did not arrive with his infamous retinue of Islanders-- in

fact, he arrived with no protection whatsoever, aside from a dagger at his belt. Lighthall had brought ten men as a show of strength, but found now that they made him look weak. Both merchants were under Grainger's protection for the duration of the meeting, and it was obvious to everybody present that Lighthall's ten men could be dispatched handily by the thirty-some archers standing in the gallery of the torchlit room.

After a cursory greeting, Grainger had lounged in silent disinterest, inspecting the sleeves of his silk tunic for nothing in particular. There was only one chair in the room, occupied by Grainger, on a dais at the front of the hall. Below the dais were a dozen long, unwashed tables, where Grainger's thieves could gamble and drink themselves into oblivion, though the room had been cleared for this occasion. Lighthall had stood uncomfortably, marvelling at the presumption of the aging thief on his throne. Lighthall was out of his element, among these burglars and extortionists. He would gladly have delegated this aspect of his work, had there been anybody in his organization worthy of such responsibility. He could sit at a table with the Empire's elite-- the lords and ladies, even the Candle, or the Emperor himself-- and feel charming and respected. At the Poorman's Union though, he was extremely conscious of the scrutiny that he bore. He was being judged, and not favorably, by these men and women who undoubtedly resented his station, all the more so because he had come by it honestly.

When Berekker strode smugly into the hall, Grainger sat forward. Berekker did not so much as acknowledge Lighthall or his men. Instead, he inclined his head slightly toward Grainger.

"We have gone far too long without making each others' acquaintance," Berekker said. They two merchants were forced to stand, like supplicants, at the foot of the dais.

Grainger sneered ever so slightly, but Berekker was unfazed. He put his hand to his belt, and there was a brief commotion among the archers in the gallery.

Berekker held out a sheathed dagger, and said, "I gather your son will be coming of age in a fortnight. Business may take me from Merendir, so I thought I should bring my gift today."

Grainger nodded to one of the men who stood at his flanks, a stubble-faced bruiser in a

sleeveless doeskin shirt that showed off his prodigious muscles and tattooed bands in geometric patterns. The man's necklaces and bracelets clattered audibly as he came to fetch the offering for Grainger. Lighthall found everything about this scene thoroughly tasteless.

Brekker continued to fawn. "Your heir will need a good knife, and this is one of the best."

Grainger pulled the knife from the sheath and held it to the light. The blade was milky white and so thin that it nearly disappeared for a moment when Grainger turned it. He brushed his thumb against it critically.

"It was made by a smith named Fil Eirer in the Far East. His skill is unsurpassed in this generation, or in any recent generation. It is made from Yeshan ore. It will darken if it is exposed to sunlight. Its strength will not be diminished, but its value will diminish considerably. It has been at my side for quite a few years now. I trust your son will use it well."

Grainger returned the knife to the sheath without betraying any appreciation of the gift. Lighthall smiled to himself. Brekker's attempt to ingratiate himself seemed to have failed.

"I have important matters to attend to." Lighthall snapped at Brekker. "State your business and let's have this done."

"Three more of my men were assaulted on the docks last night," Brekker said, "One was killed, another severely injured."

"What does that have to do with me?" Lighthall asked.

"It was your men who assaulted them."

Lighthall exchanged an amused glance with the captain of his guard.

"If your men were not so dark..." Lighthall suggested, "they would invite less trouble."

Brekker turned to Lighthall for the first time. Lighthall felt his amusement fade under the cold stare, but kept his smile up and refused to look away. After a long time, Grainger spoke and ended the contest.

"What terms will you offer for a truce?" The head of the Poorman's Union sounded bored.

"I did not come to negotiate a truce," Brekker stated.

Lighthall started to open his mouth to say something, but scoffed instead to cover his

surprise, and asked, "Then why am I wasting my time here?"

Lighthall had spent long hours last night working out the terms he would offer, the minimal terms he would accept, and his bargaining strategy.

"I don't know why you are here," Berekker replied. "I came to talk to Grainger. I can only assume that he invited you."

Lighthall thought there was a hint of amusement on Grainger's face, and he fought a hot flush in his face.

"As long as you are here," Berekker continued, "I will say this: Your time is past. Do not hasten your irrelevance by beginning fights that you are not prepared to finish. Leave us now. I have an important business with the Union."

Lighthall stood for a moment, nearly quivering with rage. Grainger said nothing. Lighthall could not repair his dignity by staying, and so he turned on his heel to walk out, snarling "You'll regret this."

"I doubt it," Berekker said to his back.

The word in the valley, among those who sought to sell their muscle to the merchants, was that Berekker was on the way up, and Lighthall on the way down. It was clear to everyone in the room that this was what Berekker wanted them to believe, but Grainger was not convinced. Berekker had handled Lighthall well enough, and made him look foolish. Grainger had seen enough newly-made men, reckless and inflated with early successes, brought low by arrogance, and Berekker was no longer even young. Grainger's wager was still on Lighthall, but he was glad to have a chance to take his own measure of Endrev Berekker.

"You should have offered him terms," Grainger told Berekker, "Having Lighthall as an enemy is a waste of energy."

Grainger should know, too. For years, Lighthall had refused to pay for any form of protection from the Union, and much blood had been spilled as a result. It had taken the deaths of several city guards, and the subsequent intervention of the Mouse, to end the feud.

"I am not concerned with Lighthall," Berekker said flatly, "I am concerned with the safety of my men."

Grainger foresaw the direction that the conversation was headed, and it displeased him.

"Get to your point." There was lazy malice in Grainger's voice.

"The captains of my ships pay you well for protection while they are in the harbor," Berekker told him.

"And?"

"And the longshoremen, whose salaries I pay, pay dues to the Union as well."

"And you are dissatisfied with the protection that I provide?" The room grew tense at Grainger's voice. Berekker seemed to be unaware that he was putting Grainger in a dangerous mood.

"I am dissatisfied that my men are routinely subjected to slurs and violence," Berekker said. "We both know that the protection you provide at the docks does not come from your patrols. The service that you provide comes from the influence that you have over larceny in the city, and your ability to retaliate against parties who embarrass you or devalue your contracts. The patrols are incidental. I would go so far as to say that they exist only for show-- a dramatic touch that makes your services seem all the more valuable to the ships' captains."

Up in the gallery, one archer in particular listened attentively. He kept up on the affairs of the merchants only as much as necessary to avoid ending up in taverns that were full of people were hostile to the Union. Berekker was making a pitch, though, and whatever he was pitching was sure to be something that would interest a woman he knew. She would buy him drinks, and favor him with her attention for a while. He never got to hear Berekker's proposal, though, because Grainger had decided that Berekker was making some sort of pitch, too.

"This is an uncivilized way to discuss business," Grainger said. "Come."

Grainger rose, maybe a touch more slowly than he used to. He walked without further comment through the door at the back of the hall, followed only by his lieutenants and Endrev Berekker. Without even thinking of it, both men touched gold as they passed the treshhold--

Brekker pressing his thumb against a ring that he wore, and Grainger touching his earring--
keeping the ancient ritual of the Tradesman.

The prisoner's face was badly bruised. His white curls were a bloody mess and a thickening trail of blood oozed down toward his eyes. He was shackled hand and foot in such a way that he was forced to stand on his toes. A filthy rag had been shoved into his mouth, and he choked on every breath. Still, he held his head up and glared at the two Gaolers through the iron grate door. Cadras sneered at him.

"All this trouble for an old man." Cadras turned his back on the cell and pulled out a pouch of tobacco. The prisoner had been escorted to his cell by six armed men.

"I heard he escaped from here a few years back. He's some kind of warlock or something." Stanton spit through the grate, but it fell short of the prisoner.

Stanton had been Cadras' partner since Cadras had been moved to the Gaolers. He was a few years older than Cadras, and he had been in the service of the Empire for his entire adulthood. He was a distant relative of some general, and in spite of being stuck for years with Gaoler's duty, he seemed to think he was on the fast track to an exalted military career. Cadras thought he was dull-witted.

Cadras rolled a clump of tobacco back and forth between his hands and mused disinterestedly, "A warlock..."

"Yep," Stanton continued. His face was broad, vaguely handsome, aging quickly, and totally bereft of insight. "He's a warlock and a thief. They say he can kill men with a word and then turn into a fog and float away. I guess he won't be getting away this time, though. Not chained up and gagged like that with a double watch on him."

"If he can turn into fog," Cadras asked, "why should chains and cloth stop him?"

"A sorcerer needs to speak to work his magic." Stanton nodded sagely. "They speak words of power in a foul tongue and bend all the beasts and the elements."

"An ancient tongue," Cadras corrected him.

The flickering lamps made it seem like Stanton's lips were in motion even as he stared blankly back at Cadras.

"They utter words of power in an ancient tongue and bend to their will all the beasts and

the elements," Cadras quoted. He knew that Stanton despised him without looking at the man's face. He continued his lecture with no small amount of satisfaction, "That was written by the poet and philosopher Antaxces, describing a mythical race of men. It is often bastardized by priests of Lord Quelestel, who do little reading of their own. No doubt you heard it at the basilica."

Cadras relished such blasphemies-- subtle repudiations of the the gods, and particularly of Quelestel, that often went unnoticed and could never be proven. He looked over to Stanton to enjoy the effect of his words, and found that Stanton was not outraged at Cadras' blasphemy, and was instead staring in admiration at the paper that Cadras was using to wrap his tobacco.

"Where'd you get that?" Stanton asked.

"I know a scribe," Cadras said, offering the cigarette to Stanton.

"Thanks," Stanton said, and then, "You know, paper is a really good idea. My cousin-- the one who's great uncle is Elder General Blackwell-- uses tobacco leaves, but usually they're either too damp to burn or too brittle to roll."

"He should should roll them when they're wet and then let them dry." Cadras rubbed his temples. He always felt a little stupider after talking to Stanton.

"There's nothing like tobacco to keep the lungs good and dry when it's damp." Stanton said, standing to light the cigarette from one of lamps ensconced on the walls. He inhaled deeply.

Cadras nodded and played with the cigarette that he had rolled for himself. He made it spin between his fingers and disappear and reappear in his other hand.

"I feel strange," Stanton said, and sat down hard on his chair. His eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped forward. Cadras took the burning cigarette from Stanton's hand, snuffed it out carefully, and put it into his cloak. The prisoner looked at Cadras with newfound interest. Cadras let the prisoner wait, watching him. Then he took his time unlocking the cell. He dragged his stool into the cell and sat down near the prisoner.

"Halvered of Tyletos." Cadras took a small vial, filled with a dark liquid, from his cloak,

shielding it with his hands. In the light, the liquid would have been irradescant, but it was a bad idea to expose it to light. Cadras pulled the stopper out and a blue flame shot from the opening. He lit his cigarette and recorked the vial. "Reknowned thief and suspected sorcerer. Wanted by the Mouse for assorted thefts and murders, notably the assassination of the elder Lord Herfield and the theft of several artifacts from the library of the Church of Quelestel. Wanted by the Poor Man's Union..."

Here the prisoner's eyes narrowed. Cadras blew a stream of smoke into his face, and continued, "...wanted by the Poor Man's Union for the murder of two initiates, for refusing offers of membership while operating inside Union territory, and for general disrespect."

Cadras let him ponder this for a minute, then took out his knife and tested the edge on his finger. "Also wanted by Lighthall, the Tribunal, the First Assessor, and the governing lords of various provinces and sovereign nations." The knife lashed out at the prisoner's face. It caught the corner of the rag stuffed in his mouth, and pulled it out. Halvered gagged and spit a mouthful of blood onto the floor.

"Aren't you afraid I'll kill you with a word and turn into a fog?" The old thief sneered.

"I don't believe in magic."

Halvered stayed silent. Cadras stood before the man and stared blankly into his bruised face for a long time before saying, "I'm not here to kill you."

Halvered gave a hollow chuckle. "Alright, then. Get me out of these irons, boy."

Cadras pressed his knife lazily against Halvered's throat, and said, "A man in your position should be respectful."

"What do you want?" Halvered asked, annoyingly calm.

"I want help with a job." Cadras tickled Halvered's throat with the tip of his knife, then reached into his cloak and took out an ivory cylinder. It bore a worn relief of a man prostrating himself before a woman, flanked by two executioners. Above and below this scene were letters in an unfamiliar alphabet. Cadras twisted the cylinder and it came apart. Inside was a parchment scroll, which Cadras removed and unfurled.

"From what I've heard, you have underdeveloped senses of gratitude and loyalty, and your word is worth practically nothing. I've had a contract drawn up by the Brotherhood of Earth and Dust." Halvered's ironic smile faded a bit and Cadras made a noise that might have passed for a laugh. "Good, I see you've heard of them."

"I thought you didn't believe in magic," Halvered said.

"I believe that the Brotherhood of Earth and Dust is a group of dour old men with an inflated notion of justice and few excellent assassins." Cadras explained. The Poorman's Union was full of people who knew somebody who had known somebody who had met a mysterious and gruesome end after breaking a Brotherhood contract. Those stories alone made their service valuable. They had not been easy to find, for fear of the Church, and the contract had been expensive.

"Maybe I can get out of here with out your help," Halvered suggested. He seemed uneasy about signing the contract.

"Maybe," Cadras began to slowly reroll the parchment. "There are a dozen pious men building a scaffold out there. If you don't get out, you'll hang in the morning. I think that would be a waste of talent."

Halvered licked his teeth. "Read me the contract."

"Whereas the undersigned shall receive reprieve from execution; And whereas he who presents this contract has undertaken risks to life and liberty in order to provide said freedom; The Brotherhood of Earth and Dust determines that the terms to be set forth below are commensurate and just, and agrees that said terms shall be enforced by the Brotherhood, with the penalty of forfeit being death."

Halvered rolled his eyes. "Get to the point."

"In exchange for me freeing you, you will agree to help me break into the Library of the Church of Quelestel. If you try to harm me, or take anything from me against my will, you forfeit the contract. If you forfeit the contract, the Brotherhood will hunt you down and kill you."

Cadras saw the suspicion in the old thief's face. Cadras was not being completely

forthcoming, and Halvered knew it. Cadras waited. Halvered chewed his lip for a moment, and then grinned. "Well, that's not so bad. What are we after?"

"A book," Cadras answered. The scribe who Cadras knew was good for more than paper. He smuggled books out of the library, to circulate among their small, underground, group of philosophers. The books from the library were like nothing available for sale in the city. Their language was much richer, and more nuanced, to the point where reading them required frequent trips to the apothecary to consult his immense and ancient lexicon. According to the scribe, there was a room at the very center of the library that was a mystery to all the scribes, a room that not even the Candle could access. He claimed, however, that he had seen the Seer leaving the room with a book, and returning it later. Of all the riches in the Empire, Cadras felt certain that that book must be the most valuable. "We'll discuss the details after we've gotten out of here. There will be a patrol coming by any minute, and we don't want to have to fight our way out."

Cadras unlocked one of the shackles on Halvered's arms. The older man put a foot flat on the floor with a gasp of relief.

"Give me a quill, then," Halvered said.

Cadras shook his head and took out his dagger again.

"Ink's no good," he said, taking hold of Halvered's hand. The man's hand was gnarled with age, but the fingers were long and slender. With alarming quickness, Halvered broke free of Cadras and grabbed the wrist of his dagger hand. His grip was incredibly strong and Cadras made no attempt to break free. He looked at Halvered with disinterest.

Halvered looked at him intensely. "What do you want from me, boy?"

"You're the only person who has ever broken into the library. Like I said, I want a book."

This was not the whole truth, but if Halvered was still suspicious, he decided to resolve it later. He relaxed his grip on Cadras' wrist and held out his free hand. Cadras sliced the meaty part of the man's thumb and blood oozed out around the blade. Cadras held out the contract and Halvered smeared his thumb across it in two broad strokes. Cadras rolled the scroll up

and put it back into the case. He quickly unlocked the remaining shackles and Halvered fell, groaning, to the floor. Now, for the first time, he looked like a bloody and broken old man. He rose slowly, clutching his side.

"How did you get out of here last time?" Cadras asked, looking out into the corridor to see if anybody was coming.

"Two levels down, there's a duct that connects to the steam tunnels for the baths. If you stay low, you can avoid being scalded." Halvered massaged his wrists as he spoke.

Cadras had never been in the bowels of the prison, but he had heard rumors of dormant machines, untouched for centuries, designed to break men in horrible ways. He had heard that there were lower levels still, and he believed it, because there was always something older and deeper in Merendir.

"Alright. Don't get caught. I'm staying here," Cadras said, locking the cell behind them. He pulled his stool up beside Stanton and sat. "Meet me at sunrise tomorrow outside the Furred Standard on the Street of Fools." He pulled out the scroll case and handed it to Halvered. "Take the contract. Destroying it doesn't make it void, but it does violate the second clause."

Cadras took out the remainder of the cigarette he had given Stanton and grasped it in his lips. Cadras had grown so accustomed to Stanton's dull, uncomprehending stares, that he was surprised when Halvered seemed to understand his plan immediately and hurried off down the corridor. Halvered was going to be a pleasure to work with, Cadras thought. At least until he realized that Cadras must have had contract prepared before Halvered had been arrested. Cadras lit the end of the cigarette and inhaled deeply. What a strange feeling, he thought, and slumped forward, unconscious.

"It will not sit lightly on my conscience."

Exotic chords drifted through the room as elaborate clockwork plucked strings in a jade box from the Far East. Two men had carried it carefully into the courtyard and wound it gingerly, and then left the device to create music for Berekker's amusement. The box was worth a sum that would be unfathomable to many in the town where Berekker had been raised, but he rarely thought about such things any more.

He closed his eyes and lost himself for a moment in the play of Gahdania's fingers through his hair and the glow of the late dusk in the silvery leaves of the old oak above them. She did not respond for a long moment, and he valued that, because her's was always a carefully considered opinion. He let his head rest on the back of his chair, and opened his eyes to look up at her as she stood behind him. Her face was still, eyes cast slightly downward, in the expression of thought that he knew well.

"And it should not." Her accent was strong, though her Imperial Standard was perfect. She rested her hands on the sides of his face. "Yet I think this would not be the first time that men have lost their lives to your ambitions."

"That is true," Berekker acknowledged. It was a dry summer, and a quick breeze blew brown leaves down on them from the canopy above them. Berekker reached up to take Gahdania's hand. He brought her hand to his face and smelled the faint perfume that took him back to the Isles, and to the sea.

"Come, sit beside me," he said.

She moved with an unhurried grace that Berekker was certain did not belong in this world. She sat beside him on a chair of hardwood slats that had been moulded specifically for her body, and pressed her bare toes against the cool flagstones. He poured two glasses of wine. They kissed their glasses before they drank, as is appropriate in the Isles between the closest of friends.

"I do not think that I have ever initiated violence on this scale," Berekker mused.

The wine was Siltian, from a cask that might well have been the finest in Merendir.

"It is not unprovoked," Gahdania's voice was quiet, but firm. "They are the men of your enemy."

"They are no different from my men," Berekker countered.

"They killed Laraydho because his skin is darker than their own."

"And because he was in my employ." Berekker breathed deeply in his glass, but only from habit. He was paying no attention to the smell or taste of his wine.

Gahdania said nothing. Laraydho had come with her from the Isles. He been a servant in her family's household since she had been a child.

Berekker hesitated, and said, "You know that I must ask Catyan to do this."

"And you know that in Mahagenia it is not the place of a younger sister to interfere with her brother's duties."

Berekker squeezed her hand in both of his. "I care nothing about that, my love." He said, gently, "If something were to happen to him, I fear that you would hate me."

"Perhaps."

"But he is my man. I cannot ask another to do this for me."

"He would not stand for it," she said, pulling her hand free and standing. She walked a few feet away, and pretended to admire the blossom of some exotic plant. Berekker's gardener was an artist, and exuberant island flora flourished across the estate, in the shade of stately continental trees.

"In war, those that we love must be put in harm's way." She spoke slowly.

"Then you believe that this will lead to war?" Berekker frowned.

"It is inevitable. Do you not think so?"

Berekker went to stand by her, and put an arm around her waist.

"Do you think that this is unjust?" He asked.

"No," Gahdania shivered, even though the evening was warm.

"How do you justify it?" He asked.

"Lighthall means for there to be conflict," she said. "It is better that it begin on your terms."

"Then what is it that upsets you?"

"I fear for you, and for Catyan, and for myself," Gahdania said. "I fear that lives will be lost for nothing."

Berekker drained his glass and went to the decanter.

"Do you think that I have misread the situation?" Berekker asked.

"You are certain where Grainger stands?" Gahdania answered with a question.

He held the decanter out to her, but she declined.

"Grainger would not entertain the idea of turning over dock security to me, regardless of price. He understood my need for retaliation, but warned me not to embarrass him. I think that he has no love of Lighthall, but he still speaks of him as if he is an ally. He will not choose a side unless he is forced to do so, and right now I believe he would choose Lighthall."

"...And yet he helped you?" Gahdania asked, pruning dead leaves from the low branches of the great oak.

Berekker nodded. "He knew an Assessor who would be... receptive... and agreed to mediate the deal. He has a certain interest in seeing retaliation, and if it happens outside the Sea Wall, Lighthall cannot blame him."

"You are keeping something from me," Gahdania said softly, and the words came like a blow.

"I..." He started, and then said nothing. Behind all of this was Paya Gandro, the man who had taught Berekker ledgers, who had given Berekker his start, who had shared his charts and his crews and his contacts with Berekker. And now Paya Gandro needed Berekker's help to accomplish something unspeakable.

Gahdania looked at him and waited, and he felt a tightness in his throat. He stayed quiet too long, and when he reached out to touch her arm, she was rigid.

He whispered, "There is nobody who knows my thoughts like you do."

That was all he could say. He could not deny that his secret existed any more than he could tell her what it was. She left without a word, without even looking at him, and Berekker

sank into his chair and stared up at the sky, deciding in that moment that he would have no part in Paya Gandro's traitorous machinations. Berekker's enterprises were doing well. He held no enmity toward the Empire. Paya Gandro had asked too much. He would excuse himself from Paya Gandro's plots, and then explain it all to Gahdania, but he had other matters that required his attention first.

"Janieu!" Berekker yelled, and one of the doors to the courtyard opened. Berekker's attendant was a somewhat sour-faced man, beginning to hunch with age, and meticulous in dress and bearing. He awaited instructions silently in the doorway.

"Bring Catyan and Reven," Berekker said.

Janieu bowed slightly as he closed the door. Berekker refilled his glass and wondered what Gahdania said about him to her brother. A short while later there was a knock at the door.

"Enter," Berekker called.

Janieu opened the door, and Catyan strode into the room, followed by a skinny, wild-haired, sailor who wrung his hands as he walked.

Catyan's face was studiously impassive, which meant that he was furious. Berekker remembered that his man had surely not been amused earlier that day, when Berekker had asked him, loudly, to buy one of everything in the market, and then abandoned him.

"Your trinkets are in the gatehouse," Catyan said, in a tone that made the disheveled sailor look nervously back and forth between them. Berekker briefly considered explaining why it was important for the hawkers in the market to love him better than Lighthall, or how he had embarrassed his rival by showing up with no escort.

Instead Berekker ignored him and asked, "Who are your five best men?"

"Rydes, Faurad, Gahrans..." Catyan stopped, pursed his lips, and asked "Best for what purpose?"

"Stealth and close fighting."

"...Haneel and Kouragh."

"A ship will arrive this evening, bearing oils and silk from Silt. The cargo represents the better part of a month's profit to Lighthall. It will be stopped outside the Sea Wall for the night. Reven," Berekker gestured at the sailor, who stepped forward and bowed, "will show you to a cave in the cliffs west of the city, where I keep a rowboat. Board Lighthall's ship, kill whatever crew remains to protect the cargo, and burn the ship."

Catyan received the instruction without reaction or comment. Berekker waited, but Catyan merely continued to stand at attention.

"I do wish that you didn't consider questions to be a sign of weakness..." Berekker mused aloud.

"And I assume that you will tell me everything that you know," Catyan said flatly. Reven looked nervously again from one man to the other. Berekker nearly smiled. Catyan would not have responded with such impudence five years ago.

"That's fair." Berekker conceded. "Would you like tea? I'd offer you wine, but I expect you'll want all of your wits tonight."

"Thank you, no," Catyan said.

Reven cleared his throat and said hesitantly, "I wouldn't mind some wine, sir. I figure I don't need much in the way of wits."

Berekker poured Reven a glass, and the sailor took it in a gulp. Reven knew every crevice of the coastline, but had lost his taste for danger after he had nearly been hanged. Berekker had been happy to offer the former smuggler legitimate employment.

Unsure whether to address Berekker or Catyan, Reven addressed his own sandals. "When you head out to the ship, row as close to the Sea Wall as you can. The water's choppy, but plenty deep, and the Assessor's men can't see you, even if they patrol the wall. You shouldn't have to worry about Grainger's men, or Lighthall's, but be off as soon as there's flames lit, because they'll be visible from the Whale and Wharf, and Lighthall and Grainger'll both have plenty of men there."

"Do not let any of Lighthall's men survive," Berekker instructed. "Everybody will suspect

that I have ordered this, but if you are recognized as Islanders, I will not be able to deny it. If all goes well, none of Grainger's men or the Assessors become involved, but if they do, make sure that none of them are harmed."

With his instructions complete, Catyan turned to leave.

"Catyan!" Berekker said, stopping him.

"Sir?"

"Be careful."

"Yes, sir."

Flickering lamplight reflected in the window across the narrow avenue, casting pleasing shadows on the wyrms and stars in the illuminations in the Candle's book. He sat with his own windows open to the mild summer breezes. The day's troubles had been set aside for an old wine and an older text-- a remembrance of a philosopher by the pupils of his school, a school which was now more myth than memory. The Candle had been reading for an hour without pause, when a missing page jolted him back to the quiet city night. Three sheets had been cleanly cut from the book. He pursed his lips and shifted in his chair, suddenly aware of discomfort in his back.

Distracted from his reading, the Candle looked dully out the window. A set of footsteps on the damp cobblestones, muffled by the fog, came and went quickly, and the Candle saw nobody. The pages would have been interesting. The authors had been describing the debate that had discredited the philosopher's mentor. The philosophies in question were steeped in superstition and old beliefs, but the truths uncovered by brilliant men with limited perspectives can still be fascinating when approached with better understanding, and these were the foremost minds of their time. The Candle had sympathy for the mentor, a Tyletian by the name of Ramos, who had left his own school in disgrace and had nearly been burned at the stake. Three hundred years of hindsight made it clear that Ramos was a necessary casualty in the expansion of the Church. At the time, Tyrus the Undying had only recently proclaimed the Empire in the name of Quelestel, and there had been a very real notion that heretics from the north might march in force on the city itself. Those were precisely the days where no stance but the absolute was acceptable. In a public debate against his most brilliant pupil, Ramos had passionately defended plurality and the coexistence of the old rituals with the doctrines of Quelestel. Ramos had lost, but now the account of the debate was gone forever.

The Candle wondered whether the pages had been excised purposefully, or the pages had merely been reclaimed when materials were scarce. The Candle had decreed that no pages should be cut from old texts, but that was a new policy. For many decades, scribes had taken pages from older works and scrubbed them clean when new paper was not available.

The Candle suspected that the pages had been cut from the book because they posed an ideological threat to Church and Empire. The irony of this was that only those who were most devoted to Church and Empire had access to the library, aside from the scribes, who were illiterate by tradition, and the knights, who were dutifully uninquisitive. One of many massive undertakings of the Church and the Empire during the rein of Tyrus the Undying had been to collect and organize the scholarship of man in the impenetrable fortress that was the Library of Merendir. A few old manuscripts or reproductions were still at large, prized in underground circles of men and women who fancied themselves renegade philosophers, but they were considered smoke by most honest people.

There was a slow knock on his door, and the Candle looked at his door curiously, mildly surprised that he had not been startled by having a caller at this hour. He struggled heavily to his feet, went to the door, and threw back the bolt, thinking as he opened the door that he should have thought more for his safety.

It was only the Lash, standing motionless, already stooping in anticipation of moving through the door frame. Perhaps with slight cruelty, born of annoyance at having been disturbed from his reading, the Candle said nothing, and merely watched the Lash, whose mouth hung slightly open, waiting expectantly on the stair. The man was a giant, oddly proportioned, with huge hairy hands and broad shoulders. The Church had convened a Tribunal, and the accused had been given to the Lash, who was an artist of sorts. Tribunals were rare, and yet this was the second in a matter of weeks. The first had ended with the release of the prisoner, on the Candle's orders, complying with the terms of the blackmailers who had threatened to expose the Lord Commander's filthy proclivities. The apparent blackmailer had been caught, and a second Tribunal had been convened to try her.

The Candle had observed the fever with which certain ambitious men had pursued the honor of being appointed to the Tribunals. He had sent a Rider to the the Most Holy Confessor, concerned that the instruments of holy justice where being used to play politics. The Most Holy Confessor had replied that, while the Candle was correct in his concern,

righteous zeal was to be applauded in these days of decadence and turpitude, and that there could be nothing wrong with a Tribunal, which was by nature a truth-seeking entity.

"You said to tell you when I knew something," the Lash said. His voice was a hesitant rumble, gentle and stupid. He seemed to sense that he had done something wrong.

"Please, come in." The Candle stood aside, and the Lash moved through the door, removing his battered hunting cap and straightening to his full, considerable, height. The Candle sighed, confident that the Lash would not perceive the sigh as an insult. He did not bother to explain that the Lash's report might have waited until morning. Such subtleties of instruction confounded the man, and the ensuing circle of explanations left the Lash disheartened and the Candle aggravated.

"Well, what have you discovered?" The Candle asked. The prisoner's guilt had already been established. He was interested now in her motives.

The Lash pushed back a thinning mop of brown hair, which fell immediately back into his face.

"She's in the Order," the Lash offered, hopefully.

"Which Order?" The Candle asked, wearily.

"The Order of Learned Men of Old Blood. They call it 'The Order.'"

The Candle knew vaguely of this group. As he understood it, the Order of the Learned Men of Old Blood was a loose confederation of heretics and superstitious peasants who claimed to preserve long forgotten customs and rituals and dabbled in every dark art that came their way. They were enthralled with secrecy, and they posed no ideological threat.

"What else?" The Candle asked.

"She has enemies."

"And who are they?"

"It's confusing."

Most things were, to the Lash.

"Try to explain it," the Candle said, asking Quelestel silently for patience.

"They're in the Order, too. That's what she calls the Order of Learned Men of Old Blood, 'The Order.' But she calls her enemies 'The Cult.' She says they had her arrested."

"Hmm..." the Candle said, only mildly interested.

"Then somebody broke in to try to get her out," the Lash said matter-of-factly, relaying his discoveries in chronological order. "...so I subdued him, and questioned him, too." The Candle could only stare at him, a bemused smile forming itself on his face. The Lash's interrogation chambers were far below the ground, in the middle of the compound outside the city walls that housed the administrative and training facilities for the knights.

When the Lash said nothing for a long moment, the Candle asked, "And?"

"He's her friend. He told her the Council will get them out, because he wanted to make her feel better. Then I moved him to another room, where they can't talk, but they can still hear each other scream."

"The Imperial Council?" The Candle asked.

"The Dark Council," the Lash looked slightly ashamed for having to correct the Candle.

"How would the Dark Council get them released?" The Candle had learned how to interrogate the Lash-- methodically questioning, covering each nuance separately. He could only imagine that this was how the Lash had interrogated his guests.

"The Dark Council would tell the Church to release them."

The Candle frowned and looked into the Lash's face for a moment before asking, "What is the Dark Council?"

The Lash took a deep breath, nodding, and answered, "The Dark Council is a group of wise men. Her uncle is in it. Crowley. He's an alchemist. They run the Order. They run the Empire. They arrange marriages."

"They run the Empire?" The Candle began to wonder if this whole line of questioning was useless.

The Lash screwed up his face and chewed his lip for a while, and then said, "They run the Hidden Gaurd."

"The Hidden Gaurd?" The Candle asked, eyebrows raised. The Lash should not have known of the Hidden Gaurd. Only a few people did.

"It's like the City Gaurd, but they don't wear uniforms," the Lash told him, "Most people don't know that they're real. They can take people and kill them."

"Did they take somebody and kill him?" The Candle asked, now only half-listening to the Lash, wondering about these prisoners, and the Dark Council, and the Hidden Gaurd.

"Yes." The Lash said.

"Who?" The Candle asked.

"Shervin. The man in the Cult. The man who got her arrested."

The Candle frowned. It was Loche Mendlekker who had petitioned to convene the Tribunal that was trying the prisoner. The Candle knew nobody named Shervin.

"What else?" The Candle asked. The Lash shrugged, brushing his hair out of his eyes and looking at the Candle with huge, watery, eyes.

If it was true that the Hidden Gaurd had arrested and executed a man named Shervin, Mardis Dantley would know. The Candle wrote a note to Mardis, admiring the elegance of his script, sealed the hot wax with his stamp, and gave it to the Lash.

"Deliver this to Mardis Dantley's quarters, please. Do not wake him. You may leave it in his doorway."

The Lash nodded, and stood staring at the Candle for a while, until the Candle said, "You may go."

The Candle returned to his book and his glass of wine, but just found himself staring out the window at the drifting fog. He asked himself what it was that troubled him about the Lash's account. He did not believe that any of the heretical organizations in Merendir posed any threat to the Church, but somebody had-- supposedly-- mobilized the Hidden Guard. That would mean that somebody extremely well-placed in the Imperial bureaucracy had loyalties other than to the Empire or the Church. More specifically, that person had loyalties to the Learned Men of Old Blood and to this Dark Council.

The Candle wondered about the Order, about the Council, and about the Cult. He was very tired. He sipped his wine. He was confident that these were trifling conspiracies, but there was at least one man among them who held position of authority. Mardis Dantley would root him out, and the Candle would see him punished, swiftly and viciously. Perhaps that would earn him a reprieve from the Most Holy Confessor, who seemed to have become obsessed of late with deterring heresy.

The Candle sighed. As tired as he was, he doubted that he would sleep that night. He sat with his book in his lap, staring out the window at the slowly lightening sky. Eventually, still sitting in his chair by the window, a restless half-sleep came upon him, and as the street outside began to wake, it was with conspiracies inside conspiracies, and he wrote letter after letter to the Most Holy Confessor, going over each word again and again, unable to break his obsession, and every word he wrote condemned another man to death.

Cadras was still groggy. Deep blue encroached on the night sky, snuffing out the stars as it went. He was vaguely aware of Stanton and a palace guard chattering beside him as they made their way through the third ring of the Imperial Palace, where the offices of the bureaucracy were housed in rather plain brick buildings, made even plainer by their proximity to gloriously constructed inner rings. There was still at least an hour before dawn. He and Stanton had just been interrogated for two hours by the Captain of the Gaurd himself, Althurre Barwell, in a dingy and airless chamber that smelled of snuff and stale tea. It had gone well. Stanton had been eager to do the talking. He told the Captain that they had been bewitched into a dreamless sleep and that Halvered had turned into a fog and vanished. It was the most excited that Cadras had ever seen Stanton. Cadras had confirmed Stanton's story, but pointed out that they had no way to tell how Halvered had actually escaped, because they had been asleep at the time. This had not changed Stanton's conviction about the fog. The Captain, who seemed tired, was not put off by Stanton's obviously inconsistent story.

Cadras had spoken little, sizing up their interrogator. Since Cadras had begun his service in the City Guard, he had laid eyes on the Captain several times, but had never spoken to him. Althurre Barwell had always seemed to be a reasonable man-- fair, and strict, and uninspired. Now, meeting him in person, Cadras immediately distrusted Barwell. The Captain spoke in a measured way, but his eyes were evasive, sizing up Cadras and Stanton only when he thought they were not looking, and darting back to his papers whenever they returned his gaze. There was something oily in the captain's manner, almost fawning. Cadras thought that Barwell cared nothing for Stanton's story, and little for Halvered's escape. Cadras had assumed a dull countenance and fixed his eyes on the corner of the desk, while his mind raced to figure out what Barwell wanted from him, until the Captain stood and announced officiously, "You may go."

Cadras gathered from Barwell's accent that he came from the Southern Isles, though his skin was light enough to pass as Continental. It was not unheard of for Islanders to be in the service of the Empire, but it was rare for them to achieve rank. Barwell was a central plains

surname, and Althurre was a name given to men in the coastal highlands, presumably derived from the Alturrik, a name ubiquitous north of the Addenines. Cadras deduced that the Captain of the Guard had been born of a Southern woman and an Imperial soldier from the plains, shortly after the invasion of the Southern Isles, and had been named after a soldier from his father's century.

Cadras could not help sneering slightly as he left. The Captain was a santimonious, unimaginative, insecure man. Aside from learning this, the previous two hours had been a complete waste of Cadras' time.

Althurre Barwell had not cared much for what he saw, either. Stanton was a fool, that was obvious, but it was Cadras who had interested him. Cadras was an arrogant youth, enthralled with his own cleverness. He was a second rate thief and confidence man, hiding in plain sight behind a uniform. Cadras was a member of the outlawed, if tacitly tolerated, Poorman's Union. Barwell knew that Cadras had had a hand in Halvered's capture. Cadras was mostly quiet during their meeting, no doubt sullen at having been outsmarted by Halvered-- an older, more clever, thief. Much as Barwell disliked him, Cadras was exactly the man he sought.

When the interrogation ended, Barwell composed a letter to Mardis Dantley, the Captain of the Hidden Guard, praising Cadras' intelligence and discretion, acknowledging the disreputable aspects of his past, but nevertheless recommending enthusiastically that he be removed from his position as a gaoler and promoted to a position within the Hidden Guard, where he could be easily bribed by Barwell's associates.

Cadras started and almost stumbled when he nearly collided with a streak of blue cloth and black hair flying from a doorway. A young woman also stopped, startled. She looked Cadras full in the face, and then she turned and ran. Her feet made mismatched scuffing and slapping noises on the cobblestones as she fled, and Cadras bent to pick up a single slipper, beautifully made from dark satin.

Cadras would not soon forget her face. She was terrified, and there was no hope in her eyes, only pleading.

"The Princess Celani." The palace guard said this as if he were introducing her. Cadras watched as she disappeared from sight.

"The Imperial problem child." Stanton made this proclamation with satisfaction, as if his knowledge of the Imperial court marked him as a man of importance. "Ever since she was a small child, she's been getting into trouble."

"Problem child, nothing..." the guard lowered his voice and beckoned for Stanton and Cadras to lean in close. "She's a witch."

"Witch or no," whispered Stanton, enjoying their little conspiracy immensely, "I'd take her to bed."

I could get your tongue cut out for that, Cadras thought, but he did not say anything, choosing instead to enjoy the notion privately. They were nearing the gates. Cadras was tired of Stanton and the guard, and he had more business to attend to before dawn. He handed the slipper to the guard and picked up his pace, leaving the two men behind.

Outside the palace, the city was beginning to wake. There was a warm, salty, breeze, and Cadras turned into it, winding his way through the back streets toward the bay. This part of the city was packed tightly together, but the buildings were well-built, and the waste was nearly contained in the runoff ditches. Short houses with orange tile roofs stood shoulder to shoulder with two story brick buildings with wrought iron balconies. Through the windows on the top floors, Cadras saw merchants beginning to stir, having their tea before climbing down to their shops. Soon the street would be full of men discussing the prices of this thing or that, or the upcoming horse races. They would call to people who passed, trying to lure them in for a look at their wares. Cadras could smell the brewing tea, dark and acrid, and more fashionable than the sweet, herbacious stuff that he drank in the Valley.

Nearer to the docks, the streets narrowed and darkened. The buildings pressed together and loomed over the street, cracked and augmented with layers of cloth and pieces of wood.

The smells of fish and leather were pervasive, even in the quiet time before dawn. Trails of smoke rose here and there, occasionally from a chimney, but more often haphazardly from cracks and make-shift smoke holes, as people started their fires. A pair of cloaked men, hoods up, ambled lazily uphill toward Cadras. Cadras gave them a mocking salute and one of them laughed, or maybe just coughed. They were Grainger's men.

The street wound back toward the east, and Cadras could see the already bustling docks. The bay was the shape of a half moon, waning just a bit, and tilted so that one corner stretched almost to the horizon, while the other was not very far from Cadras where he stood. The bay was partially enclosed by rocky fingers jutting out from the chalky cliffs. The stout Sea Wall ran along the bars of rock and extended far into the water, leaving only a narrow gap, as wide as three or four galleons, into the bay. The far reaches of the Sea Wall ended in gate houses, from which the iron gates could be extended to seal the bay entirely. The gate houses were topped with mighty beacons, the amplified lights of which could be seen miles out to sea.

The Sea Wall, like the inner rings of the Imperial Palace, far exceeded modern ambitions in engineering. The masonry was smooth and precise, and even after the fiercest storms and the changes of a hundred thousand tides, never so much as a crack had appeared in its facade. The gate was treated with some lost chemical that defied the salt and the sea. The Philosophers' manuscripts held no clues to the wonders, and Cadras had read them all. Cadras smiled widely, since nobody there to see him. Soon, he might know the secret of the Sea Wall.

At the far end of the bay sat most of the Imperial Navy-- five galleons and some thirty long ships, all in a deep red wood foreign to the Empire. They had been built twenty years ago by shipwrights in the Far East, at the behest of Emperor Lushar III. He had directed the brilliant naval conquest of the Southern Isles, at a massive cost to the empire and to his health, before dying of madness and consumption. His chief advisor, the Elder General Malhorren, had finished the campaign, bringing a flood of spices, tea, exotic goods, and refugees into

Merendir. Now most of the navy sat unused in the bay, while the occasional patrol went out to curtail the piratical ambitions of certain disaffected Southern Islanders.

A few ships had arrived during the night and dropped anchor beyond the sealed gates of the Sea Wall. In the gathering light, the gates had opened, and now the vessels glided across the bay toward the massive docks, which teemed already with shoremen, tax men, and merchant crews preparing their own vessels to set sail.

Cadras came to a jumble of wooden stalls built near the piers where small fishing boats were coming in from the bay with the morning catch. Men wrestled nets full of dark writhing shapes off of the boats, heaving them up against their chest and dumping them into barrels. Cadras approached a stall of grey wood. A sinewy man with hollow cheeks and a deeply creased face was sorting fish into shallow troughs built into his counter. A pipe burned next to him, neglected as he stood elbow deep in barrels of brine and wriggling fish.

"Hello, father." Cadras said, and the fisherman looked up and nodded. "How about a game of stones?"

Cadras' father looked at the sky to gauge the time of day, then wiped his hands on a cloth and picked up his pipe. He puffed it back to life and exhaled a great cloud of smoke.

"Alright."

Cadras' father produced two leather bags and a painted board from beneath the counter. They sat on short stools across an upturned barrel and began to arrange their pieces-- flat, smooth, stones in grey and black. The board was cracked and faded from years of use. Cadras studied the circle, surrounded by eight squares, as he had hundreds of times before. He pulled a conservative number of stones from his bag and placed them in the first square. His father placed stones in a square opposite his, and they alternated, choosing how many of their pieces to deploy to each compass point on the board, imagining how to move their pieces into the circular battlefield, outflank the other, and capture as many pieces as possible. These pieces, along with any they had reserved from their initial placement, would be reset for the second half of the game, where score was kept.

Neither man spoke. Both smoked continually. The game of stones had been around for centuries, at least. Cadras was good at the game. He had an eye for the flow of pieces around the board, for chokepoints that could be used to drive wedges through his opponent's defenses, and for dynamic defensive positions that would not break at the first assault. He almost never played unless he played with his father, and so he usually lost.

They played quickly, as was appropriate for informal games. When the game ended, they did not bother to count stones. Cadras had lost.

"Better get back to work," his father said. They poured the stones back into the bags, and Cadras stood to go.

"See you later," Cadras nodded to his father.

"Sure," his father replied.

There was a faint glow on the horizon. Cadras hoped to make another stop before meeting Halvered. He headed quickly toward the Street of Fools. The city was built on the Merendir river, which flowed south from the Addenine mountains, but turned east before running through the city and into the bay, which fed the South Sea. The oldest parts of the city of Merendir were built on two hills on the south bank of the river. At the summit of the larger of these hills was the Imperial palace, a sprawling compound that housed the Emperor's family and servants, as well as scores of soldiers and bureaucrats. The silver gilded spires of the first ring glowed orange in the rising sun. The central spire, which soared above the others, was plated in gold. It burned in morning sun, and made Cadras think about being rich.

The infamous Street of Fools, named for the entertainers that gathered in and around its numerous taverns, ran the length of both hills on the river side, informally marking the boundary between the Valley and the more decent parts of the city. The Street of Fools was quiet at this hour, but Cadras instinctively changed his gait slightly and took heightened notice of his surroundings.

A squat man pulled a creaking cart of apples huffed laboriously up the street toward Cadras. Cadras showed him a couple bills of scrip, tucked them into the band of the man's

hat and took two apples. The man grumbled "I don't take scrip," but Cadras was already well past him, and the man did not stop.

Cadras stopped in front of a small tavern with a whitewashed sign that said merely "Food and Ale." From the outside, it looked seedy, with shuttered windows and crumbling paint. Inside, it was reasonably clean and cheerily lit. The room was bare, except for a couple long tables with benches, a fireplace, and a cask of ale on a stand. A sour-looking old man was scrubbing one of the tables and a weary hound dog lay in front of the empty fireplace, his face and ears sagging onto the floor like puddles.

"Good morning, Leward," Cadras said, bowing slightly to the old man, who looked up and nodded curtly. When he got no more response, Cadras asked "Is Marta around?"

Leward set down his rag and walked wordlessly out the back door. Cadras waited, and was beginning to think that Leward was not coming back, when he emerged again, now followed by a young woman, and resumed scrubbing as if there had been no interruption. When the old hound saw Marta, he thumped his tail once against the floor without lifting his head, then snorted and closed his eyes.

Marta looked strangely mundane in an apron, with her lively eyes and wild hair. She smirked at Cadras and whispered something in Leward's ear. The old man coughed uncomfortably and nodded, eyeing Cadras. Marta untied her apron and slipped her arm through Cadras' as they walked back out onto the street.

"Leward thinks you should marry me." She said as they left the tavern. Cadras blinked. Marta had had many boyfriends, but never Cadras. She removed her arm from his. He handed her an apple.

"How's the new arrangement working out?" He asked.

"It's dull." Marta wrinkled her nose. "It's dull scrubbing dishes. It's dull serving ale to dull old men. Sometimes they grab me and then I spit in their drinks, but I don't really enjoy it. It's dull tormenting poor old Leward. Even the dog is dull. I'm going to try to stay on through the winter, though. I can put up with a lot for a warm room." She looked Cadras up and down and

bit into her apple. "You look like an opium addict."

"I had a long night." Cadras said, giving her a frowning look from corner of his eye. He had indeed smoked a powder derived from opium-- the powder that he had used to knock out Stanton and then smoked himself.

Marta gave him a smug smirk. She walked fast and talked faster. "Everybody's saying that the bodies on the docks were Islanders, but I think they were Lighthall's men," she said.

Cadras frowned, "Bodies?"

Marta rolled her eyes and snatched the cigarette from Cadras' hand before he could protest.

"Are you serious? There were twelve bodies on the docks and a ship burning in the harbor. You're losing your edge, old man."

Marta was no more than two years younger than Cadras. Marta remembered his mother, and Cadras barely remembered her himself. Cadras started to roll another cigarette.

Lighthall was one of the most influential men in Merendir. Of all the merchants in the city, he was the most pious-- if such things were measured in extravagant public donations to the Church of Quelestel. He was rumored to have Imperial blood, but was quick to assure everybody that he was just a humble man. He was widely recognized as a canny and generous businessman. In the best circles, he was appreciated for his charm and wit. Lighthall loaned money to those less fortunate than himself, and naturally had to employ many men to keep track of these accounts. These men were routinely seen in groups of two and three throughout the city, notable in a crowd for their height and girth. Lighthall was one of the few common-born with sufficient assets to be allowed to employ men-at-arms. His men carried swords and iron cudgels, to complement their below average intelligences and above average tempers. Lighthall had a number of other vocations, including providing protection for lesser merchants, de facto governance of the race track, the sale of various scarce materials, and-- it was rumored-- the sale of men and women for use aboard merchant galleys.

"Why do you think they were Lighthall's men?" Cadras asked. If twelve of Lighthall's men

had been killed at once, then somebody powerful in Merendir no longer respected his authority.

Marta grinned at him as they walked. She loved this stuff. "A bunch of Lighthall's men were in a rush to get to the dock just after it happened-- I saw them. Anyway, I think they bribed the guards to tell everybody that they were Islanders, because nobody heard that part until later. The ship that burned was Lighthall's. Do you remember Sael? He and his brothers were out in their canoes all night dousing the rubble so it wouldn't ignite anything else, and he saw the mast head. It belonged to the Fire of Dawn. Funny, huh? I mean, I guess it's not really funny, but it's a fitting name, right?" She gave him a moment to digest this, whistling something cheerful.

"The bodies might not have anything to do with the burning ship." Cadras said.

Marta shrugged, and switched topics. "Everybody's talking about the Emperor's races, too. People are saying that he's going to flood the arena, like Charus II used to do, and have a mock sea battle. It would be a great excuse to show off that navy again before all the ships get dusty."

"Um..." Marta said, and bit her lip before starting again, "There's a rumor that Raker's gone lame, but nobody important is saying anything. People think that the next best horse is Swallow, and he's Lighthall's, too, but other people think that this might be Fury's chance, and of course you can't discount a veteran like Archer, even if he is a little old, especially if it stays dry..." Marta paused for breath and Cadras looked down the hill toward the bay. It was fully dawn. A Squire of the Coffers passed them, with long, dirty, hair and a gold-embroidered tunic, asking silently for tithes to Quelestel with a bowl held in outstretched arms. They ignored him.

Marta continued, "Grainger is having that party when his son comes of age. It sounds like he's going to try to put on a spectacle to rival the Emperor."

Grainger ran the Poorman's Union-- a confederation of men and women of questionable vocation. The Union's territory extended over most of the city, but their ties were on the

Street of Fools and in the Valley. The Union was tolerated, maybe even appreciated, in the Valley because a nominal fee could insure that residents went unmolested, while the Union members brought wealth down the hill to distribute liberally among the local taverns and brothels. The Union was tolerated by the Empire, because the Mouse could negotiate with Grainger, and Grainger could hold the Union members in check. The Union was even responsible for the security of the docks, after a bizarre accord between Grainger and the Mouse, whereby the Poorman's Union would provide security for the docks, and, in exchange for this privilege, every nobleman to visit Merendir would also be assured protection by, and from, the Union.

"You remember that guy you asked about, Halvered of Tyletos?" Marta asked. Cadras nodded, looking away from her. "Well, he got arrested last night, but he escaped," Marta paused for dramatic effect. "The best explanation the City Guard can come up with is that he's a sorcerer!" This amused her immensely. Cadras wondered how she could possibly have known that already.

It was time for him to go meet Halvered.

"I..." he began, but got no further.

"Lords and Ladies from the provinces have already started arriving for the races and the festival. The Brinehalls are set to arrive with three hundred armed men, and the Emperor is furious. They'll keep the brothels busy, though. Oh, and, I'm pretty sure that the Lord Commander is screwing one of the choir boys. I've suspected it for a while, but then I saw the Lord Commander going into the Wayfarer's Beacon and then while later a carriage arrived and a scribe took a boy in there-- the smallest one, Northern-looking, with black hair and blue eyes."

"I should..." Cadras started again.

"Grainger is looking for somebody who broke into Jareck's place and stole almost twenty weight worth of jewelry, plus a ham. Word is that the Mouse might have to start paying more attention to the Union again, what with Lighthall has been whining so much, so Grainger has

to make sure that everybody who pays their dues gets protected."

"It's almost..." Cadras began.

"I have to go," Marta interrupted. She cocked her head, thinking over everything she had told him, and then nodded. "Yeah, that's everything."

Cadras muttered goodbye and quickly turned to go. Marta cleared her throat.

"You seem to be forgetting that this is a business relationship." She had her hands on her hips and her eyebrows arched in an imitation of indignation.

Cadras fumbled too quickly with his coin purse, spilling coins onto the ground, which amused Marta greatly. He felt his ears burning as he bent to retrieve his coins. He straightened and met her gaze, unamused. He placed two silver pieces in her waiting palm, and she smiled at him.

"Get some sleep, you look like shit," she patted him on the cheek, and then she was gone.

Cadras took a deep breath and tried to compose himself. Halvered would be waiting for him just around the corner. He lit a cigarette, assumed an impassive face, walked confidently around the corner, and stopped short.

Halvered was there, pacing heavily back and forth in front of the Furled Standard. His face was discolored with rage. Cadras swallowed and then swaggered toward him, hoping that the Men of Earth and Dust were worth their salt. When Halvered saw Cadras, he planted his feet and gathered the full force of his wrath into the most malignant stare that Cadras had ever seen. Cadras strode forward unflinchingly.

"You set me up." Halvered hissed when Cadras was close. His skin burned red around his oozing cuts, and the bruises on his face and neck had turned black.

"We'll talk inside." Cadras walked past Halvered and into the tavern, feeling the heat of Halvered's eyes on his back. Cadras did not look back at the man until they reached a corner table far from the few patrons that were eating their breakfasts.

"Food?" Cadras asked, seating himself in the corner, where he could see everybody in the room. Halvered glared, and said nothing, so Cadras held up two fingers and the proprietor

nodded from across the room. Cadras pulled out his tobacco pouch, nearly empty, and started rolling cigarettes. The familiar activity kept his hands from shaking. The proprietor delivered two cups of unpleasant brown tea. Only then did Cadras speak.

"I did not set you up, I merely saw an opportunity to benefit from your capture." This was not true. It was Cadras who had discovered where Halvered lived and reported it to his sargeant. Halvered was important for Cadras' plans in more than one way. Halvered narrowed his eyes and stared hard at Cadras. He did not seem convinced. Cadras feigned indifference, sipping his tea and lighting another cigarette from the stubby candle that sat on the table. The night had taken a toll on him. He felt slow and unconvincing. Cadras took a long sip of the scalding tea.

"Whether you believe me is no concern of mine," Cadras told Halvered flatly. "Hear me out, and I think you'll find that cooperating with me will bring no small benefit to yourself." When Halvered did not react, Cadras set down his tea and digressed, lowering his voice. "It's my sargeant who's been after you. You're his most prized quarry. Halvered-- thief, assassin, and sorcerer. He was the one who ordered your beating. I'll help you kill him." Cadras flicked his wrist and a brutally sharp piece of metal, half-wrapped in cloth to form a handle, shot into his hand. He started to clean his fingernails with in.

At this point, Halvered gave Cadras an unfriendly smile and took one of the cigarettes that Cadras had rolled. Cadras brought out his alchemist's vial and removed the stopper. He held the column of flame in front of Halvered and lit his cigarette.

"How many games are you playing, boy?" Halvered asked, coldly, exhaling.

"As many as I can get into." Cadras met his eyes through the cloud of smoke between them.

Halvered spoke quietly now, shrewd calculation in his eyes. His rage was gone, but he did not like Cadras. "You said you want a book. What's this book and what's the benefit to me?"

Cadras wanted to sigh with relief, but he showed no reaction. Halvered had let him get this far without putting the contract to the test. Now, if he had judged the man correctly, Cadras

would hook him.

"For all 363 years of recorded history," Cadras said, "the Emperors have descended in an unbroken line from Tyrus the Undying, who proclaimed the Empire in the name of our just and mighty God, Quelestel. Upon Tyrus' death, the Church proclaimed that he had become an Aspect of Quelestel, and that the next Emperor, as his heir, was therefore also an Aspect of Quelestel-- the reincarnation of Tyrus, and the earthly embodiment of the god.

"It's a convoluted bit of theology," Cadras smirked, as he often did when he was about to utter the worst kind of heresy. "It doesn't really stand up before an inquiring mind, but Merendir is not exactly full of inquiring minds, particularly at the basilica."

Cadras saw just a hint of the familiar wild-eyed fear in Halvered, the expression that every good citizen wore when confronted with heresy, or philosophy, or critical thought.

Cadras sneered at Halvered, and said, "It's all smoke, right?"

Halvered snarled back at him, "Get to the point."

"The point," Cadras emphasized the word, and then paused to light a cigarette, letting Halvered hang on his words, "is that the Emperors of Merendir rule by divine right, as Aspects of Quelestel, and incarnations of Tyrus the Undying. Mightily lords humble themselves before our Emperors, in deference to their divinity."

Halvered was getting restless. Cadras took his time.

"The Church of Quelestel," Cadras continued, "both legitimizes, and is legitimized by, the divine Emperor of Merendir. The Church also guard the collected scholarly, philosophical, and theological works of man. Its library holds tens of thousands of volumes, collected and stored during the reign of Tyrus. The people are not allowed into the library, and no books are allowed to leave. The scribes cannot read. Only a few members of the Church ever see and understand the texts inside the Library. The Knights of Quelestel are the most powerful in the world. The first part of their charter is to guard the library.

"Those rare people who wonder why our notion of history is so sparse, buy into the notion that a catastrophic war destroyed the legendary City of Silver, and with it the library that

contained the collective knowledge of men prior to the founding of the Empire. I don't think that's true. I think that the history exists, but that the public's understanding of our history is kept purposefully opaque."

Cadras had all but lost Halvered's interest. History, knowledge, and heresy were bound tightly together in the minds of the people of this great Empire-- irrelevant nonsense, easily dismissed as smoke. It was not uncommon for the people in Merendir, and even the towns of the Empire, to know their letters, but this was only so that the merchants could keep their ledgers, and the dutiful citizenry could read the proclamations of the Church and the Empire. The public's capacity for philosophical pursuits was so anemic that the language itself had shrunk, as words were forgotten or combined, and shades of nuance were lost, until the writing, the speech, and indeed the thought, of the Empire were but small and brutish shadows of their former selves. Cadras' small circle of Philosophers were lonely in their rejection of ignorance, and they had few resources, but they did have access to the occasional book, smuggled out of the library and circulated at some risk. In one of their recently acquired books, there was a small citation to which none of the other Philosophers gave any particular notice. Cadras had noticed it, though he had not bothered to share its importance with the others.

Cadras leaned across the table and whispered. "I have reason to believe that the library of the Church of Quelestel contains a book called The Lives and Lineages of the Emperors of Merendir."

"So?" Halvered was unimpressed.

Cadras paused for dramatic effect. "The book is 1,000 years old."

Slowly, understanding came to Halvered. History did not begin with Tyrus the Undying proclaiming the Empire in the name of Quelestel. The divine right of the Emperors was a relatively recent invention, and the Church was responsible for keeping that secret. Halvered's malice dissolved into a broad grin. He slapped the table hard with his palm.

"You son of a bitch," Halvered whispered, "you're going to blackmail the Emperor."

Cadras smiled back at him and said casually, "...and the Church."

It was nearly dawn. The rain had not let up, and still the parched soil soaked up the water as quickly as it fell. Derick's horse was shivering, and had slowed to a grudging trot, occasionally trying to look back at the brothers with reproof. The brothers fared no better than their horse, soaked through and exhausted. They could not travel quickly through the tall grasses in the rain, but the terrain was flat and reliable and they did not want to travel by road. The rain hid them from sight, but it also hid anybody who might be pursuing them. Derick thought Paulanus' men could not have followed them.

Derick stopped at the outskirts of a town. There were lights on at an inn and Derick thought he could smell baking bread, through the heavy aromas of wet earth and grass. The town was small and looked a lot like Tilledale. The houses were mostly small, built of grey stone with thatched roofs, and fenced to keep the sparse livestock from wandering. Unlike Tilledale, this town sat next to a river and seemed to be prosperous. Derick guessed that the town was Canter and that the river was the Shale. If this was true, they had not gone far at all.

"I can go on," Jerad mumbled as Derick nudged his horse forward, toward the inn. Jerad sounded delirious. Derick's stomach growled and he realized that he was half starved and that his head ached.

"We'll sleep for a few hours," Derick declared. "We could have gone in any direction, there's no reason for them to look for us here." He hoped he was right.

"I'm hungry," Jerad mumbled, and then he swayed and nearly fell from the horse. Derick dismounted and helped his brother down. They approached the inn on foot, and Jerad leaned heavily on Derick's shoulder. They climbed two stairs to the covered porch, and Jerad doubled over in a fit of coughing.

"Hello?" Derick called. They waited for a reply that did not come, and then let themselves in. Derick stopped at the threshold, kissing both palms and touching them to the doorframe before he entered the inn. Jerad copied his older brother. They were travellers now. It would be best to observe the rituals of the Vagabond.

The common room was well-lit, with lanterns burning brightly in every corner. There were

several small tables, and a smoldering fire. The smell of baking bread was stronger. There was nobody in sight. Derick called out another greeting and, a moment later, a tiny rotund man, covered in flour from his bald head to his sandaled toes, emerged from a back room.

"Oh my, look at you two," he exclaimed, clapping his hands together and disappearing for a moment in a cloud of flour. "Hand those clothes over to my wife and change into something dry. I'll have breakfast on the table in just a minute." He bustled off, calling out "Lina!" as he disappeared again into the back room. Shortly after he left, a woman came into the room who was nearly a perfect match for the man, except that she had a full head of hair-- white, and cropped close to her round face. She was short and round and moved in the manner of somebody who is accustomed to being busy.

"For the Lord's sake," she said, clapping in the same way her husband had. "Follow me." She began to lead them upstairs. She stopped on the landing, looking back at them and clearing her throat. "You do have coin?"

"Yes. Our horse..." Derick began.

"We have an excellent stablemaster," Lina interrupted. "If your horse looks half as bad as you two, he'll need a bag of oats and a rub down. What possibly compelled you two to travel on a night like this?"

"We have... business in Merendir." Jerad stammered. Sweat and water from his sodden hair was streaming down his face. Lina's eyes narrowed as she looked at his bandaged hand.

"You're a bad liar," she said, sizing them up more closely, "but that's the mark of an honest man. If you boys are in trouble, see that you don't bring it here. I will take very good care of you, until you start trouble, and then I will throw you out, with no hesitation." She scowled and then added, "Three of our lodgers are trained soldiers, and they're very fond of us." She opened the door to a small room with two pallets. "Put something dry on and come downstairs for breakfast."

"We, uh..." Derick was embarrassed, "have no fresh clothes."

"I'll see what I can do," Lina said left. The brothers stretched gingerly and massaged

themselves until she can back with two sets of dry, clean clothes. They even fit reasonably well. When Jerad and Derick went back down into the common room, two bowls of steaming soup, a loaf of fresh bread, and a large, soft, pad of butter sat on one of the tables. The brothers set into the food with enthusiasm, suddenly awake and refreshed. They ate in silence for a while, trying to ignore their questions.

"Do you think mother will be alright?" Jerad asked finally, around a mouthful of bread. His eyes were deeply ringed, and he even chewed slowly.

Derick played with his soup for a little while before he said, "She's more likely to be left alone if we're gone than if we had stayed, right?"

Jerad said nothing.

"She couldn't have come with us," Derick said, "right?"

Jerad shrugged.

"I'd never heard of Paulanus, before last night!" Derick snapped. "So why don't you tell me?"

"Paulanus and his men are bullies and thieves," Jerad said, pausing to slurp noisily at his soup. "As far as I know, they haven't done any killing."

"So they'll be looking for us-- you and me." Derick said, a bit peevishly. "So the best thing we can do is leave. Let them chase us. They have no reason to bother her, if we're gone."

Jerad said nothing, bit off a large chunk of buttered bread, and said nothing, but gave his brother a smirk.

"Right?" Derick demanded. "What else could we do?"

Jerad leaned forward and said, with his mouth full, now smiling insanely, "We could kill them."

For a moment, Derick was speechless. Then he leaned forward and whispered in Jerad's ear, "Don't joke about killing Imperial soldiers."

Jerad whispered back, "I'm not joking."

Derick bit his lip, and then shrugged, as if he was actually entertaining the idea, and

asked, "One green soldier and a cripple against an entire band of seasoned soldiers?"

"We don't have to kill them all at once." Jerad looked around the room to make sure they were still alone. "And they're not that seasoned. They go out in pairs, or small groups. They drink like Northmen, and they pick fights. The people might help us."

"They're still the Emperor's men," Derick said, "and they still wear his uniform. We'd be likely to bring a whole legion out here." He remembered the insurrection he had helped to put down, and the executions that had followed. "Besides," he added, "how would any of this help mother?"

Lina swept back into the room. Jerad scowled and bit into the bread again, but stayed quiet. Lina approached the boys where they sat, asked if they were satisfied, and was gone again as soon as the two had smiled and given their approval. Jerad shook his finger across the table.

"Mother won't be any worse off, and many people will be better off. We aren't doing anybody any good by running off to Merendir," Jerad said.

Derick could not deny that this was true. Suddenly, he was exhausted again. The meal no longer held any pleasure for him. He looked across the table at his brother. Jerad's face was haggard, his eyes were bloodshot, and he was trembling noticeably.

"You're delirious," Derick snarled. It was probably true. They had been awake all night and Jerad's pain must have been severe. Jerad bristled. He pushed his bowl away and moved his chair back from the table-- too quickly, because he used both hands and choked in pain. Derick regretted his sharp statement, and tried to reason, in what he hoped was a conciliatory tone. "Even if they travel in groups of two or three, what's to say that we would be able to best Paulanus' men?"

The question hung there for a while, while Jerad looked past Derick.

"We may find out sooner than you'd like," Jerad said, gesturing out the window.

A burly man in Imperial light battle gear was reining in his horse outside the inn. He moved gingerly, wincing at the dawn.

"Is that one of Paulanus' men?" Derick whispered, rising from the table.

"I don't know." Jerad was stubbornly nonchalant, apparently offended. He crossed his arms across his chest and made a good effort at a surly stare, but his eyelids fell a bit and he nearly swooned in his chair. Outside, the soldier dismounted, massaged his temples for a moment, and started slowly tethering his horse to a post.

Derick hauled Jerad up out of his chair. Jerad hissed quietly with pain, and mumbled something that Derick could not understand. Derick tugged Jerad after him, up the stairs until they had passed the turn, where they could not be seen from the room below. Jerad's eyes were watering, and he looked angrily at Derick, but both brothers stayed silent and waited. Derick noticed uneasily that sweat streamed from Jerad's brow, in spite of the chill in the air.

The door to the inn slammed violently open and the soldier yelled "Innkeep!"

Heavy boots struck the floor as the man came into the common room.

"Innkeep!" The man bellowed again, and now to the brothers heard light, hurrying footsteps. "I'm searching for two men. One of them has an injured hand." Jerad turned to Derick with a wide-eyed stare, before his eyes rolled back into his head and he collapsed. Derick caught him, heaved him across his back and took the stairs slowly, wincing with every creak from the old wood stairs.

"We have no new guests." They heard Lina lie to the man. Jerad mumbled something in Derick's ear.

"Whose breakfast is this?" The soldier asked.

Lina's response was too quiet to hear.

"I think I'll have a look in the rooms!" The soldier proclaimed loudly.

Derick struggled as quickly as he could up the remaining stairs, carrying Jerad. As they reached the hallway to their room, he heard Lina protest that her guests were sleeping. Then the old stairs groaned again as the soldier came toward them. Derick pushed the door to their room open with his foot, deposited his delirious brother on the bed, and then hurried back to close and latched the door as quietly as possible.

"What are we going to do?" Jerad asked, too loudly, from the bed. Derick went over and sat beside him.

"Shut up," Derick whispered. "Don't worry, just be very quiet."

From the hall, Derick heard the soldier declare ominously "I hope you aren't lying to me. I'd hate to have to make an example out of you." They heard a gauntleted fist pound on a door not far away. The door opened soon afterward and they heard Lina making apologetic noises. Then there were more footsteps, and more pounding. There was nowhere to hide in the room.

Derick went over to the window and looked out. The stables were not far, and his sword was with his horse. The drop into the cobblestoned courtyard looked bad standing at the window, but it was surely not more than fifteen feet. Lina's husband whistled a tune flatly as he chopped wood a short distance away, pausing for a deep breath each time he hauled the axe back for another swing. Derick realized he was gripping the sill with white knuckles. Before he could think too much about what he was doing, he swung first one leg and then the other over the sill, and lowered himself down until he was hanging outside from the sill. He heard pounding on the door to their room and he let go.

The fall was jarring, but he did not hurt himself. He staggered backwards for a couple steps and then turned and ran toward the stables. He was so intent on his destination that he nearly ran headlong into Lina's husband, who was huffing along, red in the face, carrying an armful of wood.

"Woah, hey. Is there a problem, son?" He asked, stepping out of Derick's way.

"My brother's in danger," was all Derick could manage as he threw open the stable door. His horse stood laboriously as he entered and gave him a baleful look. She was not in the mood for any more travelling. He fell to his knees beside the saddlebags and pulled his sword from its sheath. The innkeeper stood in the doorway, alarmed, as Derick ran past him again, this time carrying a naked blade.

"Your wife may be in danger, too." Derick called over his shoulder as he sprinted back toward the front door of the inn. Behind him he heard the clatter of falling wood and heavy

breathing that faded rapidly as he outpaced the squat innkeeper.

Back inside, Derick took the stairs three at a time. The door to his room stood open, spilling fresh morning light into the hallway. Two shadows struggled in the doorway. Derick heard Jerad cry out. Reaching the doorway, he saw the soldier-- a thick man, tan and weathered, with bristling grey hair-- binding Jerad's hands behind his back as his brother struggled feebly. Fresh blood was spreading across Jerad's bandage and he was fighting back tears of pain. Lina stood in the room, aghast, her hands pressed up against her cheeks. Derick stood for a moment behind her.

Before Derick had time to decide what to do, the soldier had a knife at Jerad's throat.

"Drop your sword." The soldier growled. He looked like he was in no mood for anything, let alone this. Derick could see where the blade pressed into the skin at Jerad's throat.

"Drop your sword, fool," the man repeated. "You think I'm scared to kill him?"

Lina's husband made it up the last of the stairs and arrived, wheezing, beside Derick.

"What's the meaning of this?" The stout innkeeper blustered, out of breath and nearly doubled over.

"These two are wanted men," the soldier scowled, the daylight made him wince as he turned toward Lina, "and this woman was hiding them."

The innkeeper stood up straight and looked the soldier in the eye, but he hardly cut an imposing figure.

"We don't want any trouble here. I'm sure Lina wasn't trying to deceive you." The rotund man said. Derick wondered where Lina's soldiers were.

The soldier scoffed.

"Very well then. Bind his arms behind his back." The soldier threw a length of twine to the innkeeper and nodded toward Derick. Derick slowly set his sword down in front of him. As he set it down, the soldier removed the blade from his brother's neck with a trembling hand. The innkeeper wrapped the twine several times around Derick's wrists then pulled hard when the soldier barked at him to make it tight. Still, Derick thought, it was loose enough that he might

wriggle out of it if he was left alone.

The soldier pushed Derick and Jerad in front of him down the stairs and out of the inn, while the two innkeepers followed along behind. He shoved the brothers over to the post where his horse was tethered-- a huge brown beast with unkempt hair and an evil gleam in its eyes. The soldier tied first Derick and then Jerad to the post, back to back, with lengths of sturdy twine wrapped several times around their bodies and arms, the post, and each other. When he was done, Derick found himself nearly eye to eye with the horse and could feel its hot, sticky, breath on his face.

"Careful," the soldier chuckled. "He bites." With this he turned to the doorway of the inn, where Lina and her husband stood watching. "And now for you." He said, leering at Lina. Her husband stepped protectively in front of her, but the soldier just laughed and shoved him to the ground.

"You lied to me and gave shelter to two men wanted for the murder of an Imperial soldier." He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her around so that her back was against him and held both her arms tight across her chest. She gasped, but said nothing. He tied her wrists and then went to his horse and produced a length of rope from the saddlebags.

"Please, sir..." her husband's voice quavered as he rose to his knees, "please, have mercy."

Derick felt Jerad straining to see what was happening. The soldier threw one end of the rope over a beam that supported the awning for the porch. Lina made a soft whimpering sound and her husband clutched the soldier's pants and sobbed, "Please, sir..."

The soldier shook the miserable man off distainfully.

"No, no..." Lina's husband repeated over and over, shaking.

The soldier grabbed Lina's wrists and tied the rope around them. When her husband saw that the soldier did not intend to hang Lina, he stood, still shaking, and thanked the man several times, more and more quietly, until he was only mumbling.

Once the rope was fastened securely to Lina's wrists, the soldier hauled the rope up so

that her body was fully extended, toes barely touching the ground. She sobbed, and her husband began to shake his head, tears streaming down his face. The soldier grabbed the front of her dress with both of his hands and tore it off in one quick motion, exposing all of her pale, pudgy flesh. She closed her eyes and bowed her head and he struck her hard in the face. His gauntlet tore her cheek and blood flowed liberally down to her chin, where it collected and dripped down between her breasts and onto her stomach.

Derick heard muted hooves striking the soft ground and turned to see another soldier riding up to the inn. This one looked distinguished, with long, well-brushed, hair and a luxurious mustache. He wore no armor, and rode with an air of dignity and command. Maybe, Derick thought, he would put an end to this cruel treatment that Lina was receiving.

The man dismounted before his horse had stopped completely. He stopped for a moment to look Jerad and Derick over before striding imperiously to the porch of the inn, riding crop in hand.

"What do we have here?" His voice, in contrast to his well-groomed appearance, was oily and shrill.

"My lord!" Lina's husband rushed to the new soldier's side and was rewarded with a blow from the riding crop that split his lip and sent him reeling.

"She lied to me about those two, Captain." The first soldier reported. "I thought to teach her a lesson, and the rest of the town as well."

The Captain nodded, and turned to Lina's husband, who looked like he might retch.

"I will send men back here every few hours, do you understand?" The Captain asked. Lina's husband nodded quickly. "She is not to be clothed or untied until you hear it from me. If my men find that you have not obeyed me, both of you will be dragged behind our horses back to our camp, where we will feed you piece by piece to our dogs. Do you understand?" The innkeeper whispered something unintelligible. The Captain took a step toward him and raised his fist. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," came the innkeeper's choked reply.

"Good."

The soldier turned to his captain. "If you like, sir, I leave you to treat this wench to whatever further punishment you see fit. I will go inside and see what taxes I can collect."

"Very good." The Captain replied, and the soldier strode inside, gesturing for Lina's husband to follow.

The Captain turned to Derick and Jerad.

"Watch this well," he said. "We have similar pleasures in store for you at camp." He let out a gleeful twitter of a laugh. "Much, much, worse, of course, but similar." With that he flicked his wrist and lashed Lina with the riding crop. She cried out, tears of pain and humiliation now running freely down her cheeks. A welt raised almost immediately and a little blood began to seep from the wound. Slowly, the captain circled the woman, lashing out every few seconds with his riding crop to bite into soft, exposed flesh.

The soldier came back out of the inn with a bottle of liquor. Derick saw him mutter something that looked like "Oh, thank the gods," before he took a long pull from the bottle and offered it to his colleague. The Captain traded the riding crop for the bottle and sipped and laughed while the soldier flailed brutally at Lina's naked back. After a while, the soldier handed the riding crop back to the Captain and went back into the inn.

Derick heard whistling and turned to see three men walking toward the inn. They strode with easy confidence, fishing poles over their shoulders. One of them, tall and lanky with birdlike features and light, short cropped hair, was the source of the cheer whistling. Two pheasants hung from his belt and a bow and quiver were strapped to his back. The whistling stopped, as the men stopped walking, taking in the scene at the inn. His companions, on either side of him, looked stocky by comparison, but were in fact lanky themselves. One carried a line strung with several fish, still gasping in the air. The other had just taken a large bite from half a loaf of bread that looked very much like the one served to Derick and Jerad that morning. He chewed, slower and slower, and finally swallowed. There was no sound but the chirping birds while the three men looked furiously from Lina, to the Captain, to Jerad and

Derick.

The Candle had just started to doze in the back of the chapel, when Lord Dilluther finished his prayers and stood. Although Dilluther was a knight, and admirable in his devotion, he wore the secular emblems of the Imperial army on his black tunic. The Candle pushed himself heavily up from the bench as the old knight walked toward him, his strides still long and his back still straight. The Candle gave a slight bow, which Dilluther returned.

"Good morning to you, Elder General," the Candle said, unsmiling, "I hope you might do me the honor of taking your breakfast with me."

The Candle had never felt that Lord Dilluther liked him particularly, but the Elder General respected the Candle's station. Neither man made frivolous social calls, and so the Elder General nodded without hesitation. The Candle had a carriage waiting and, knowing that the Elder General maintained the ascetic habits of the knighthood, he directed his driver to a pleasant cafe with simple food and excellent tea. He made a nominal effort to exchange pleasantries on the ride, and was relieved when they lapsed into silence. Dilluther pulled back his curtains and watched the street solemnly. He appeared fit and well-rested, the Candle noted with a touch of jealousy.

Only after they had been shown to their seats in the cafe, in the Candle's customary room, and they had been served their tea, did Dilluther ask, "What concerns you this morning, Your Holiness?"

He pronounced the title respectfully and without enthusiasm.

Dilluther had little use for subtlety, a trait which the Candle alternatively admired and despised, so the Candle asked him simply if he was aware of the Order of the Learned Men of Old Blood.

Dilluther shook his head.

The Candle explained, "The members of this order have undertaken to preserve all manners of heretical rites and philosophies. They claim to practice sorcery."

"Why are they allowed to operate?" The Elder General asked. He did not seem overly concerned, and in this he was not alone. Only the oldest, most devout, citizens spared any

worry for sorcerers these days. The rest of the population considered such concerns quaint, if not ludicrous.

The Elder General did not fidget, but his eyes frequently left the Candle's face to make a circuit of the room, at intervals that were probably exactly even. Now he watched somebody approaching their table. The Candle sipped his tea silently as the serving man set a plate of biscuits between them and withdrew immediately.

The Candle took a biscuit and pondered it while he spoke. "Their membership is secret. There seem to be factions within the organization that are at odds with one another. I used to believe that if they posed any threat, it is only to one another. Now, it seems that their influence extends much further than I had imagined-- further than can be tolerated. Far enough to direct the Hidden Guard to arrest and execute a man."

"Only a handful of people know of the Hidden Guard," Dilluther said, raising an eyebrow. The Candle could not recall ever seeing him so expressive.

"Yes," the Candle said, "and one of them is a traitor."

Dilluther pondered this for a long moment and the Candle took the opportunity to take a couple large bites of his biscuit.

Eventually, Dilluther asked with a frown, "What evidence do you have?"

"None," the Candle admitted. "Mardis Dantley confirmed that the man was arrested and executed without trial, but claimed that he did not order it. I bring this to you because your loyalty is beyond reproach." In his faith, his loyalty to the Empire, and his devotion to his family, the Elder General was steadfast in a way that is unique to those who have no imagination.

The Candle could almost hear Dilluther slowly cataloguing all the people who could command the Hidden Guard.

"I will discuss the arrest with Mardis Dantley," Dilluther said as he stood. Their meeting had ended. The Candle had not expected the Elder General to shed any light on the matter, but he thought it was important that somebody on the Imperial Council be made aware of it--

somebody whose values and loyalties were absolute. The Candle had, of course, discussed the matter with Mardis Dantley, but Dantley was a godless man who spent his life enmeshed in intrigue, and was not, to the Candle's mind, above suspicion. The Candle felt greatly relieved to share the burden of watchfulness with the Elder General.

Dilluther opted to walk back to the palace, and the Candle knew that the Elder General preferred the open air and exercise to the confinement of a carriage, but wondered if Dilluther was also pointedly showing the Candle that he could walk the streets of Merendir, alone and unafraid of ambiguous plots by unknown traitors. The Candle drew the curtains in the carriage and closed his eyes to think. Dilluther and the rest of the Imperial family were understandably reticent when it came to matters of sorcery. Although there were always rumors and tall tales, the Emperors had been meticulous in keeping their... odder... family members out of the public eye. The Church ignored the failings of the Imperial family, which, after all, could not be failings, because the Emperor was the Avatar of Quelestel. Anything the Imperial family did was, by definition, the will of the God, so it was convenient-- a relief, almost-- that they kept their matters very private.

The calm of the library took many forms, some soothing, some gloomy, some tiring, and the Candle knew them all. At this hour of the morning, the rooms along the east wall were filled with pale, dusty, sunlight. The Candle took a moment on his way to the great hall to browse a shelf that he had never noticed. He often thought that the worst part of mortality was that he would die with so many books unread. So few people would ever encounter the knowledge within these walls, or even know what existed here. The Candle ran his fingers down the spine of a thin volume, A Treatise On The Utility Of Passion, and smiled to himself. The scholarship from that period had been a waste, in his opinion, except insofar as the records of songs they had left-- songs that had formed the basis for many of the hymns still sung today.

The Candle tread quietly into the great hall. The air smelled like paper, and the scratching

of quills was the only sound, except for a far away scraping of metal as a knight made his rounds. Far beneath the vaulted brick ceiling, a couple dozen scribes sat scattered among the long tables, dilligently copying texts they could not read. The scribes were dressed alike, in brown wool and slippers. Most were tamed hermits, brought as children from the mountains or the steppes to the city, where they were fed and clothed and taught the faith. Occasionally, somebody would join the order because they longed service and temperance, but were too gentle for knighthood. The Candle recognized a younger man as one of the latter, and approached him. Reluctant to break the quiet, the Candle nodded to the man, took a tablet and chalk and wrote out the phrases that interested him. The scribe bowed solemnly and left the hall.

The Candle marvelled at the waste of intelligence-- that a scribe could memorize long sequences of symbols, and know where they fit in the elaborate system of categorization in the library, without any notion of what any of it meant. He sat in the scribe's seat and compared the page that was being written to the original text. Every nuance of every character was the same. The Candle supposed that that would be impossible for a literate scribe.

The text concerned the campaigns that Tyrus the Undying led in his first incarnation against the bandit lords of the plains. The illuminations were faded and cracked and showed worn supplicants who were raised to the glory of knighthood. There were some in the Church who considered references to the first incarnation of Tyrus the Undying to be heretical, because his first incarnation predated the proclamation of the Empire, and hence predated history. The Candle was more tolerant. All of Tyrus the Undying's incarnations were avatars of Quelestel, and everything written about the first incarnation was myth and hyperbole, anyway.

Tyrus brought order to a world in upheaval, and eager volunteers joined his ranks in every village and farmhouse, even though Tyrus' discipline was harsh. His progress across the plains could be tracked by a steady trail of shallow graves, where his own men were beheaded and interred for crimes such as praying to an ancestor, or possessing jewelry. All

the spoils of his wars went to the coffers of a newly founded order dedicated to the exclusive worship of Quelestel. That was the discipline that was needed to heal a world crippled by decadence and senseless cruelty.

This text could safely be transcribed and sold to a nobleman, who would feel the thrill of forbidden knowledge and at the same time a greater empathy for the Church. The nobleman would learn nothing that might present a true ideological crisis. He would die without ever learning about Quelestel's humble origins as one among many in the pantheon of the lost City of Silver. He would not know about how Tyrus the Undying-- the true Tyrus, who had proclaimed the Empire in the name of Quelestel-- had been determined to destroy the library at Merendir, an event that was narrowly averted by his advisors. The nobleman would never learn that the Scribes Rebellion against the Tyrus and the newly proclaimed Empire was not started by scribes, but by knights acting in the name of Quelestel himself, and that these knights had merely found awkward allies in a handful of scholars who were advocating a violent renaissance. In the aftermath of the Scribes Rebellion, hundreds of scholars were murdered and dozens of lesser libraries burned. Though the thought was certainly heretical, the Candle could not help but consider this a blight on the history of man. Whoever bought this transcription, however, would not be confronted with such agonies of conscience.

The atrocities of the past-- in the time before history-- had been caused by the arrogance of men who believed that, through a more perfect understanding of the physical world, the power of the gods might be within the reach of man. These men, who would pursue any base philosophy in the name of progress, built greater and greater wonders until the only great deeds left of them were those of destruction. This body of knowledge was what the Candle, like so many before him, could never allow in the hands of the common man, and yet could never allow to be erased. The library contained what remained of the mysteries of a lost civilization-- mysteries that Tyrus the Undying sought to destroy. These were the mysteries that had raised such wonders as the Sea Wall and the Palace In Merendir, and these were the mysteries that had destroyed an entire race of men and turned the City of Silver to dust.

There was a room, in the very heart of the library, that could not be opened. There was a single door to the room, and no mechanism to open it. The Candle had spent long hours searching for a hidden trigger, pulling, and pushing, and prodding, and even-- in occasional moments of weakness-- attempting to force the door in more unseemly ways. The room had to have windows, but he had never seen into it from outside. He had taken to counting windows on his walks home, when windows in this area were lit, and he could never make his counts from the outside match his counts from the inside. The library was a labyrinth, though, and it was impossible to know exactly once he had wound his way into its depths.

The scribe returned, laden with scrolls and crumbling volumes-- everything the library held about the Order of Learned Men of Old Blood. The accounts were varied and ambiguous, and many were old enough that the language was difficult. The moon had traversed half the sky, the scribes had long returned to their chambers, and the Candle was burning his third jar of oil when he returned the last sheaf of scrolls to its case.

The Order seemed to be an ever-shifting collection of countless underground societies, linked by tenuously connected beliefs in old wisdom, or sorcery, or in heresy for its own sake. It had been formed during the Scribes' Rebellion-- called "The Great Purge" in some accounts. There were no references to a "Dark Council," but the Candle found "The Cult," or "The Cult of Stelmarren," everywhere.

One relatively recent treatise on ritual and religion, sympathetic to the heretical, used the Cult to illustrate how an aberrant society justifies otherwise unreasonable oversight from the Church. An alarmist pamphlet about the Cult spoke of abductions and tortures so outlandish that the it was almost humorous. An evil volume, laden with hideous illuminations of violence and depravity, named Stelmarren the greatest of scholars, discoverer of the eighth element, the Bringer of Rain, the Ever Young, and the True God of Men. A history of warfare in the east spoke of Stelmarren as yet another general whose successful campaigns in the northern mountains and on the plains were subsequently ruined by a failed invasion of Fellnia. A Fellnian scroll, which the Candle deciphered slowly and incompletely, being clumsy in that

language, called Stelmarren the Child of Nothing, the Body of Kerashavid, and the Pretender to That Which Lies Between.

For all of the linguistic flourishes and descriptions in the newer histories, it was a first-hand prehistorical account-- long predating the first incarnation of Tyrus, in the dry and stilted language characteristic of writing in that period-- that made the Candle pause and shiver and close his books.

On the plains, we reforged our tools into swords against the host of the Ever Young. Our own brothers came against us first, naked and maddened, and those slaughtered in the contest were many.

The Candle blew out his lantern and left his books on the table to be reshelved. The moonlight through the high windows cast a pure dim light across the worn tables and the Candle felt very much alone. He wanted to hurry, to be outside as quickly as possible, but found himself treading slowly and quietly, watching and listening. He listened for the grinding metal of patrolling knights-- a sound that typically aggravated him-- and heard nothing. The Candle paused, his heart now pounding, before turning into a windowless corridor and walking quickly, running his fingers over the spines of books that he passed. When he reached the door, he threw it open, close to panic, and saw the outline of a man in front of him.

"Hello, Candle," said a quiet voice.

Ashir Corvyne, the Seer, stood before him, his reading lenses low on his nose, inspecting a shelf that, if memory served, contained texts concerned with the classification of edible flora.

"Good night, Lord Corvyne," the Candle said, fighting a tremor in his voice, and bowed slightly as he passed. The Seer returned his bow, and a moment later, the Candle was out in the night air with his carriage waiting on the street. His coachman, an ancient knight, far too artheritic to hold a sword, was asleep inside the carriage. The Candle had to pounded on the door for a long while, until the knight stirred and slowly extracted himself from the cushions

and opened the door, grinning toothlessly.

"Home!" The Candle yelled, loud enough for the deaf knight to hear. The Candle worried about his driver's eyesight, but thus far had had no complaints about his driving. The Candle climbed into the carriage and was dozing almost as soon as he had settled into the cushions.

Inside the library, the Seer Corvyne flipped through a few more pages in the book he had picked at random after encountering the Candle, noting that potatoes from a single region in the northeast were classified with names derived from three separate languages. He returned the book to its shelf and went to the great hall, where he lit a lantern, picked up an accessible book, and listened for an approaching knight. When he heard the armored footstep of the knight, he rose and ambled toward him. The knight saluted as he passed, and Corvyne nodded. Once they had passed one another, Corvyne hurried up the stairs, past several rooms filled with shelves, to an empty corridor that contained a single unmarked door. Corvyne looked around and listened carefully before placing his palm in a circle engraved in the center of the door. A familiar tingle pulsed through him. It felt for a moment as if somebody was blowing on his palm, and then the door slid open. Corvyne went into the room and the door closed behind him.

There was a chapel in the second ring of the imperial palace that for many years had been tended by a single priest. The priest was mostly blind and deaf and went about his daily rounds as he had for sixty years, not caring much anymore whether or not anybody came to worship. Throughout his long tenure, knights and lords and ladies had come and gone. There was a time when this little chapel might have been crowded at dawn, when knights-elect in gilded armor would spend the night kneeling here in silent contemplation before taking their vows. It is the manner of all things to ebb and flow, however, and the habits of people are no exceptions. Now the chapel smelled like dust, and the stones that had been gently worn down by thousands of shuffling feet seemed to exude silence.

A solemn balcony extended from the back wall of the chapel, from which the priest might address a throng of worshippers. This balcony was reached by way of a steep set of stairs outdoors that the aged priest had not climbed for many years. From the top of the stairs, it was an easy scramble up to the roof of the chapel, where the eaves of the peaked roof blocked the rain and wind, and where a small stained glass portal provided a view of the interior of the chapel, dyed in blues and reds. It was here that Celani came when she wanted to hide. She sat, leaning her head against the cool stone and watching the old priest sit in contemplation.

Her Uncle Dilluther was looking for her, and probably the Seer Corvyne, and maybe even her brother. Corvyne had shown the stablemaster a shattered lantern-- where it had come from, she could not say-- and tried to explain away another accident, glaring over the tops of his spectacles, daring the stablemaster to object. Dilluther had hissed words at her that she could not even hear, with the world swimming in front of her, close to sickness. He had taken her by the shoulders and shaken her, not hard. She had retched, and he had recoiled, ashamed, and she had run. Somewhere, she had lost a slipper, and now she was alone.

Celani had not wanted to cause trouble. She never wanted to cause trouble. She had gone to the stables to see Pepper. After stroking his muzzle for a while and feeding him carrots, the stablemaster had left, and she had been left alone with her favorite horse. She had spoken

the forbidden words that her cousin Myriel had taught her. Her mind opened like a floodgate, and she heard Pepper's voice.

"I missed my lady," the horse said, pressing his head hard against her hand, and the first flicker of light had flashed behind her eyes.

"Pepper," Celani had whispered his name without speaking, swallowing hard and trying to blink back the light. "I've missed you, too."

"Shall we run today?" He had asked, but she had not responded. The outside world had gone dark, with flashes of light bursting behind her eyes. She had been aware of her body hitting the rough floor of the stables, but she had not felt it. She had not fallen asleep exactly, but the shouting, and the fire, and the panicked horses had been very far away. She had been at peace in the dirt and straw, eyes open, while her mind convulsed and her body was absolutely still. Then, Corvyne had knelt beside her and touched her brow, and she had sat up, vomiting. The stablemaster was screaming, and servants were running all around her, hurling buckets of water at the spreading fire.

Now she was alone, huddled against the stained glass window of the chapel, watching the old priest. She trembled a little, exhausted as she always was after she lost control. There was a constant, searing, pain behind her eyes. She had not knocked over a lamp, and even if the Seer managed to convince the stablemaster that a broken lamp had caused the fire, she would still be the Emperor's odd sister, the one who was not quite right, the one who took after her mother, the one who seemed to always be followed by strange occurrences. She would be scolded, by Dilluther and her brother, and told to control herself, as if were that easy. Some days, she wished she could trade her lot for that of her mother, who wandered the corridors of their palace day and night in her robe and slippers, eyes wide and expressionless, silently searching. People averted their eyes with pity when her mother approached, but her mother never lost control. Her mother never hurt anybody.

Celani bit her lip, hard, and watched the old priest lighting candles in the chapel. She wiped the beginnings of tears out of her eyes. The old man moved serenely around the

chapel, and pinpoints of light sprang to life wherever he went, blue and red in the stained glass. She watched and eventually she even smiled. She felt as if a raging beast had been let loose in her mind, and it had just now layed down to rest. She let out a shuddering sigh and closed her eyes. There was still a low pulse behind her eyes-- the resting beast-- but it would be gone soon. She laughed, probably only in her mind, and drifted into something that resembled sleep.

Darkness pressed in around her. She was under water. She struggled toward the surface, fighting the drag of her long dress. The pressure on her chest was unbearable. She fought to hold her breath. The surface was far away. It was too far. Dark, dead, shapes floated in the water around her. One was her brother. His belly was torn open, and his face was bloated, still bearing a look of fear and confusion. A white fish with huge, pale, eyes nibbled at one of his eyeballs. His other eye turned suddenly to look at her, and the shock forced the last bit of air from her lungs. She struggled after the bubbles, up toward the surface, but instead she sank further into the murk. The other dead things were her mother, her cousins, the gatekeeper, and the cooks, and the stableboys-- all corpses, discolored, disfigured, bloated, and drifting in the dark water. She was dying, drowning, struggling pathetically, miles from the surface and surrounded by the corpses of everybody she had ever known. With her last act, she would take control. She took a deep breath...

...and she found that she could breath the water as easily as if it were air. She felt the blood coursing through her veins as never before. She glided easily to the surface and broke through the waves to emerge into a room lit by lamplight. She saw no ocean, no water at all, just a wood floor. A man sat at a table, studying an ancient book, bound in dark leather. She had seen him earlier that day. She had nearly run him over when she had fled from the stables. He had picked up her slipper.

"I've been waiting for you," the man said.

He held out a hand to her, and she took it. He pulled her close to him, and she thought for a moment that he meant to dance with her, but instead he withdrew a long blade from his

sleeve and plunged it into her. She looked into his eyes, now cold and pitiless, and then down at the dagger, which had disappeared up to its hilt into her chest. A dark stain spread quickly across the front of her dress. She fell to her knees, her lips trying to form words that she did not know, and the world went dark once more...

...and then she felt strong arms bearing her up. She opened her eyes and the sunlight pierced her. She retched and clamped her eyes fiercely shut. She would have fallen again, but for the arms that held her. Gradually, she came to see again. She was on the chapel roof. The sun had risen. Her head ached. She was being supported by Althurre Barwell, the Captain of the Guard. Her first impulse was to accept the strength and comfort that he offered, but then she pushed away.

"You were having some terrible dream," Althurre told her, smoothing back his hair and licking his lips.

"How did you find me?" She demanded, worried that he had been sent to bring her back, to punish her, to arrest her for setting fire to the stables.

"I know a lot about you," he said, smiling eagerly, but without warmth, "as a matter of duty." Now she remembered why she did not like the man.

"Are you taking me to be punished?" She asked.

"Nobody sent me here," Althurre said, pulling her close to him. He smelled of lamp oil, sweat, and scented powder. She pushed away, but he held her fast, and whispered, "Nobody else knows about your hiding place..." She realized with horror that he was caressing the back of her neck. His hands were soft and clammy. She was pressed against his chest. She stiffened and tried again to pull away. "...and nobody needs to find out about your hiding place."

Celani stopped struggling and shook her head, crying now, as the flickering lights blotted out her peripheral vision. She felt Barwell caressing her. He had taken her stillness as acquiescence. She shook her head again and tried to mouth a warning, but the world was already receding from her, and Barwell was already screaming. He writhed in front of her,

screaming in pain and terror, clutching his face with both hands. The skin on his face was black and cracking. Smoke rose from his charred skin and empty eye sockets stared at her through his fingers. What was left of his nose hung from his face in a ragged clump. She watched with distant fascination as he fell, screaming, and rolled back and forth, clutching his ruined face.

She was sitting, somehow, when her Uncle Dilluther pulled himself up onto the roof. Althurre Barwell had only just stopped thrashing. She stared at his charred body. The smell was nearly unbearable. She leaned over to vomit, but there was nothing left inside her.

"Celani?" Her Uncle Dilluther said, covering his nose with his sleeve. She sobbed and tried again to empty her stomach. Dilluther looked at Althurre Barwell's blackened corpse and then at Celani, and she saw only sadness in his eyes.

Chapter One