

STORM and STEEL

ALSO BY JON SPRUNK

Shadow's Son

Shadow's Lure

Shadow's Master

Blood and Iron

JON SPRUNK
STORM and STEEL

THE BOOK OF THE BLACK EARTH
———— PART TWO ————



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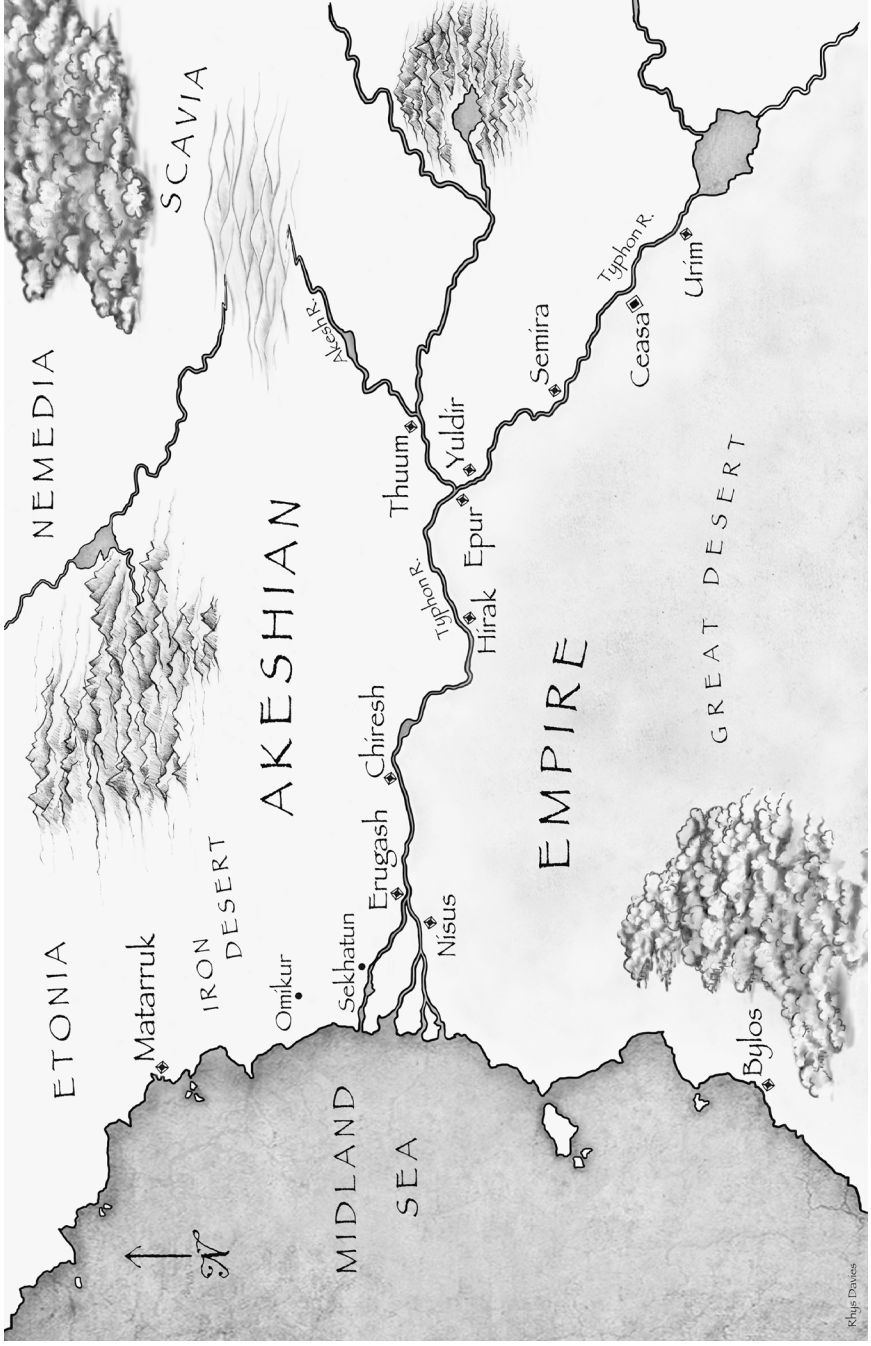
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*This book is lovingly dedicated to my wife, Jenny, and our son, Logan.
And also to Lou Anders, Eddie Schneider, and Rene Sears,
who have supported this project with such love and devotion. I am forever in your debt.*



All men are slaves to the gods.

—Kuldean proverb

CHAPTER ONE

It was a night of bad omens.

The mutton they'd eaten for dinner had dripped blood even though it appeared fully cooked. Brother Kelkaus, the house's sergeant-at-arms, broke his foot when the yard bell fell from its yoke. And a black bird had gotten inside the rectory during the evening's vespers, making an awful racket with its cawing and flapping before it could be chased away. So when Captain Appan-Amur left the warm confines of the main keep to perform his first rounds of the night, he was not surprised to see the crimson orb hovering above the city.

A blood moon.

Bats carved through the swarms of nightflies hovering above the grounds of the Chapter House, their leathery wings flapping at the end of every dive to regain altitude. Torches along the compound walls held the night at bay as sentries walked their posts.

Captain Appan pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders. Winter had arrived early this year, bringing a brittle crispness to the night air. Out in the yard, a squad of his soldier-priests huddled around a flaming brazier. He angled his path to meet them.

"Good evening, Captain," one of the soldiers called out.

"Be at ease, brothers," Appan answered. They made a space for him, and he held out his hands to the flames in a show of camaraderie. "How goes this night's watch?"

They answered in a muffled chorus. No trouble so far, but he could see the tension in their expressions, the wariness in their eyes. Appan took note of it, and then pushed it to the back of his mind where his worries resided. Many of these men were campaign veterans, and they knew how to weather a siege.

With a nod, he left to continue his rounds. His knees creaked as he climbed to the battlements. He would be forty-four this coming spring.

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He stopped at the top to gaze out over the parapet fortifications. Fires flickered in braziers spaced along the streets surrounding the Chapter House where units of the Queen's Guard stood behind wooden mantlets. The siege was going into its third month. The Temple of the Sun destroyed, brought down like a child's sandcastle. Amur's cult evicted from the city by the queen's command. He had burned that decree in the courtyard in front of the entire cohort. He half-recalled a speech about never abandoning their post, and afterward he'd sent a report to Ceasa explaining the situation. His last report, as it turned out. An hour later the first royal troops had arrived outside the house, and the waiting began.

Appan went along the wall-walk, stopping to greet each man on watch with a few words. They were tired, but he was impressed by their morale. He tried to reflect it back to them, although he felt the fool. Their situation was dire. He'd lost more than half his roster when the Temple fell. He barely had enough full-rank brothers left to man the walls, and it was taking its toll. On top of the long shifts for everyone, they had another problem. The Chapter House hadn't been provisioned for an extended siege when the queen's fiat came down. Every morning he went over the inventory with Sergeant-Provost Urlunn. Even cutting back to half rations, as he'd ordered just days into the siege, they had less than a month left before they starved. He had faith they would be relieved before that happened. And if not . . . *then we will die like true soldiers of Amur.*

Appan paused at the northwest tower. Across the street stood the town home of Lord Nidintugal, which had been requisitioned as the headquarters for the queen's forces. Somewhere inside were the scheming lackeys who commanded the siege in Her Majesty's name. He stretched out with his *zoana*, allowing it to trickle through his senses. Through the Kishargal dominion, he could feel the solidity of the stone rampart under his feet and the deep flows of energy that passed under the streets, the hidden lifeblood of the city. He followed those currents to the foundation stones of the enemy headquarters, as he had done a hundred times over these past couple months. All it would take was a few nudges in the right places, and the house would come down like the wrath of the Sun God upon their heads. But he resisted the temptation as he had many times before.

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Appan glanced northward out of habit and winced as his gaze searched the empty space in the city skyline where the temple had once stood. He still found it difficult to believe. The temple had been so sturdy and dependable, like the love of a parent. Yet it had been brought down in one night by the queen's pet devil, an evil spirit in human guise if there ever was one. He had never met this "Lord" Horace, though he'd heard enough from the late Menarch Rimesh to know the westerner was the tumor infecting Erugash.

"G'evening, Captain."

Appan nodded to the soldier passing by on his rounds. "Evening, Brother Lurrage. How goes the watch?"

"All's quiet, sir."

Lurrage coughed into the crook of his elbow. He was a big man. Built like an ox, and he possessed a strong gift for wind magic, one of the strongest they'd seen in this Chapter House since Appan took over seven years ago. Some of the brothers whispered that Lurrage might be almost as powerful in the Imuvar dominion as the queen herself. If he had a dozen more like Lurrage, they could scatter the curs skulking outside their gates and break this siege. *And then march on the palace to bring the Harlot Queen to heel.*

Appan nodded. They didn't use salutes during armed conflicts, especially where the enemy could see and pick out the officers. "Carry on."

As the soldier continued on, Appan headed over to the gatehouse. He checked on the brothers on duty before descending back down to the bailey. Everything looked to be in order, and yet an uneasy feeling turned in his stomach. The same sensation he usually felt when a fight was imminent. He glanced along the walls one last time as he walked toward the central keep, half-convinced his nerves were playing tricks on him. *No good allowing my imagination to run—*

He halted in mid-step as one of his sentries on the south wall disappeared. The moon shone down on the city, its screen of clouds temporarily lifted. But he had seen a shadow move to engulf his soldier as if it had come alive and eaten him. The hairs along the back of the captain's neck stood up, tickled by the subtle itch of sorcery in the air. For a brief instant, the urge to run toward the safety of the keep nearly overwhelmed and unmanned him. Then he drew

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the sword at his side and called upon the full might of his *zoana*. Its power bolstered his courage. But what was his target? Shadows dancing on the walls?

He shouted for lights over the south wall. A few seconds later, spheres of golden light appeared, throwing the house's fortifications into stark relief. The wall-walk was vacant, no sign of the soldier who had been standing there only seconds before. Searching the ramparts for his missing soldier as shouts called out across the compound, Appan ran toward the nearest stairway. He was about to shout the alarm-sign when he felt a burst of magical power. A rent in the immaterial fabric of the Other world, followed by a quaver in the air as if a vast presence had just arrived inside the house. He turned at a flicker of movement on the edge of his vision and watched in dread as the sentry atop the southeast tower vanished inside an undulating wall of shadow. Appan could not stop the curse that whispered from his lips. "Gods' blood . . ."

By Amur's holy name, what devilry is this?

At his call, more light-orbs appeared all across the bailey. The repaired yard bell began to ring. While his men focused on banishing the darkness, he scanned the walls. The south and west wall were bare. Priest-soldiers emerged from the barracks, many of them only half-dressed, but every man carried a weapon. He directed them to take up the empty sentry positions as he climbed to the top of the wall. By the time he reached the top he was sweating under his armor despite the coolness of the night.

He spared a quick glance over the wall. In the street, the queen's troops were watching, but he was surprised to see they weren't massing in formation. He'd assumed this shadow-play was the prelude to an attack. *Don't be lulled. This could be the work of the foreign devil. The Gods only know what cursed sorcery he possesses.*

Mindful that the lights made him an inviting target to all the archers below, Appan kept his head down. He was calling out to his men to be vigilant when an icy chill ran down his back. A light-orb over the eastern wall fizzled out like a snuffed candlewick. Darkness rushed over that section of the wall. He started to run in that direction, pressing past his men who watched with uncertainty, when another ball of magical light disappeared over the southeast tower. The captain stopped as all the light-orbs between him and the tower vanished, plunging half the compound into darkness.

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Sweat cooled on his forehead and down the back of his neck. The tide of fear he had beaten down began to rise again, inching up from his stomach. He reached down with his *zoana*, into the very bones of the stone ramparts beneath his feet, but he had nowhere to go with the energy. Nothing to fight. Then he noticed things in the darkness as his night vision returned. Gray figures shambled like hunchback wraiths along the battlements. They appeared in several places at once, and every priest-soldier they touched fell senseless at their feet. Appan focused his wrath. With a prayer to the Sun Lord on his lips, he unleashed his power.

The parapet shuddered as the shockwave ran along its length. The cracks of shattering stone nearly deafened him as the battlements of the southeastern tower exploded. A cloud of dust filled the sky. One of his soldiers summoned a new light-orb in the heart of the shadowed area. Its sudden luminance showed the extent of the devastation. The allure atop the wall had collapsed for twenty paces on either side of the tower. Tattered crimson uniforms were strewn amid the rubble below. Appan said a silent prayer for his fallen brothers and commended their souls to paradise as he looked for the gray ghosts. His chest tightened as he found no trace of them. They had vanished as quickly as they arrived. The earth groaned as the tower shifted.

A muffled cry made Appan turn. The brothers on the wall behind him lay slumped at their posts. He started to call out for reinforcements when his gaze swept across the grounds. Priest-soldiers littered the courtyard, sprawled and slumped over each other. None of them moved. Not a sound broke the silence over the Chapter House, except the whisper of the breeze. Appan swallowed. He was alone.

A rush of cold air blew over him. It smelled faintly of old rot like a moldering tomb. Shivering, he tried to extend his *zoana* around him in a tight cocoon of protection, but it was gone. He reached for the power that had been a part of him his entire life, which he had painstakingly cultivated under the tutelage of his superiors until he became a living weapon consecrated to Amur. There was nothing inside him, as if something had reached inside and hollowed him out. Only his decades of training and rigid self-discipline kept him from screaming in frustration. And then he saw it. A shadow in the

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courtyard. Not gray, but black like a spike of darkness fallen from the night sky. Then it moved, and Appan saw the ripple of fabric. A long robe, its hem brushing the ground. A deep cowl that obscured the face. No regalia or sigils on its clothing, nothing that reflected a sliver of light.

Appan pointed his sword. “Begone from this holy house, spirit of evil. In the name of Amur, I cast you out!”

The figure stepped forward. Its voice slithered across the yard in a whisper like silk sliding over bare steel. “The time for posturing is over, Captain. I have come with a message for your hierarchs.”

Appan clenched his jaws until his teeth ached. At the critical hour, he had failed the men under his command. It was a shame he knew he would never forget or forgive, but he swore to himself that he would one day have vengeance. “Speak, and I shall deliver your message, demon-spawn.”

“Yes, Captain. You will.”

A sudden pain sliced through Appan’s midsection like he had been cut open by a knife. He clutched his stomach but found only the unbroken bronze scales of his outer armor. There was no blood or sign of injury. With a grimace, he took a step toward the figure in black but halted as another line of agony ripped through his innards. He bent over, gasping for breath. *Lord of Light, shield your servant from this creature of darkness!*

The torment moved through his body in sudden, excruciating bursts. He felt like his guts were being shredded by some unseen torturer. Sticky wetness filled his throat, forcing him to cough, and he stared in shock as a stream of blood poured from his mouth. It splattered on the stones at his feet, as black as tar in the moonlight. His sword dropped from his hand, clattered on the parapet, and fell over the side. Then his balance vanished, and he followed the weapon, tumbling forward through the air. His head spun past his feet and around again.

He landed on his back. Multiple bones shattered on the impact from his ankles all the way up to a meaty crunch at the back of his head. He had no idea how he remained conscious. The pain flooded his brain, too vast to comprehend. He squeezed his eyes shut as he rode the tide. He wanted to scream, but a great weight pressed down on his chest. Blood trickled from his mouth, his nose, and drenched the padded tunic under his armor.

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The agony forced his eyes open. The stars glittered above him. He longed to see the sun rise one last time.

Appan looked down past his toes to the figure standing a score of paces away. His killer said nothing. He made no gesture. He merely turned and walked away across the yard. With a last burst of strength, Appan gasped at the departing figure. He couldn't form a word, just a wheezy rattle, as the figure stepped inside a shadow and disappeared.



The locals called it *Labri-Abnu*. The Old Stone. Situated atop a low tor of bare rock, its limestone walls surrounded an elevated platform topped by a brick dome. Round towers protected each of the structure's six corners overlooking the dusty road that cut through the wasted landscape, worn into a knee-deep gully by the wheels of countless wagon trains. The road ran southward along the eastern edge of the Iron Desert until it eventually crawled eastward to the great city of Erugash.

The fortress was so old that no one could remember who had built it. Certainly centuries older than the Akeshian Empire that currently occupied it. Jirom studied the fort through a gap between two large boulders. A cool wind blew down from the north, kicking up dust devils on the lonely plain. The sun touched the horizon. It was almost time.

"Scouts will be back soon."

Jirom nodded as Emanon settled down beside him. The man's nearness was comforting. He wanted to lean closer to feel his lover's warmth but held back. They refrained from personal contact when out in the field.

Emanon was alert, his eyes always moving, across the rebel fighters scattered amid this cluster of rocks, to the fort, to the road. *The burden of command. Better him than me.*

Jirom didn't expect the scouts to bring back any new information. The fort was going to be a tough nut to crack. He tried to settle his nerves, but it was a useless pursuit. They would calm once the bloodletting began. "You sure about this, Em?"

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“What do you mercenaries say,” Emanon asked, “when you’re about to rush into some damned fool situation? ‘We’ll eat and drink in hell tonight!’”

Jirom looked sideways at his paramour. “It was just a job, Em. Not some romantic brotherhood where we drank each other’s blood and pledged our souls to the cause.”

He didn’t mention he’d often thought of his fellow mercenaries as brothers, or that he sometimes missed those old bonds. The rebels, for all their zeal, weren’t as tightly knit. That was something he thought about often. He had certain skills that were valuable to these men, but they weren’t his followers to mold. “If your plan doesn’t work, we’ll be caught out in the open. Those archers on the walls will cut us down by the score.”

“Too late to worry about that, handsome,” Emanon whispered in his ear. “It’s time.”

They crept back through the field of boulders to a gravel-filled depression where sixty fighters in makeshift desert kit—loose tunics and pants, bleached scarves wound around their faces to protect against the sun and wind—waited out of sight. They were hunkered around Yadz as he spun some tale.

“—as big as a packhorse—”

“That’s donkey shit, Yadz, and you know it! Ain’t no such thing as scorpion men.”

“If my da said he saw it, then he did. It was big and black as night with six legs—”

“Now I know yer lying, Yadz! Scorpions got eight legs.”

“My da weren’t counting the arms, Kasha. So shut yer mouth!”

Jirom slapped the hilt of his sword as he squatted down among them. “Are you stupid fuckers trying to alert every soldier in the country?”

Sheepish glances were passed around as the fighters quieted down. They’d trickled into Emanon’s net after the battle at Omikur, a few at a time until he and Jirom decided they had enough to form a decent-sized strike group. Then they started to put Emanon’s “master plan” into motion.

It was classic hit-and-run tactics. Every few days they emerged from their desert hideout to attack a different target. They sacked merchant trains and supply convoys, took out small outposts on the edges of the wastes. Jirom

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devised the tactics, and Emanon led the operations. So far, it had proven to be a good partnership, both on the battlefield and during the rare quiet moments they'd stolen together. Jirom allowed himself to think about those moments, so few when examined from a distance, but each so blindingly precious. Then he pushed them away as the anticipation of combat pulled at him.

This was their most ambitious attack so far, and Jirom had wondered at several points over the past few days if they were pushing too hard. The fortress was well situated and manned with an ample garrison. Jirom had considered pushing Emanon to reconsider, to move the attack to a less formidable target. He believed in the rebels' cause, believed that all men should be free of the yoke of slavery. Yet a part of him wanted to avoid escalating this conflict. There had been something romantic about their paltry campaign for freedom, and he feared that a larger struggle would swallow up too many of the ideals for which these former slaves fought. In the end he'd held his peace. He had promised to trust his captain, and he would. Whatever the outcome.

The scouts arrived like silent ghosts and huddled around him, their heads bent low.

"Nothing unusual happening at the Stone," Mahir said. The scout leader was a big, stocky Isurani who moved with the grace of a dancer. His bushy eyebrows nearly touched as he spoke. "But Seng saw something interesting."

Jirom glanced over at the smallest member of the scout squad. Seng hailed from the east, from some country none of them had ever heard of before. He claimed to have been an explorer searching out new trade routes when the Akeshians captured him and put him in chains. Jirom had a hunch, based on the little man's clandestine abilities, that Seng had been a spy, but he allowed the man to keep to his story. They all had secrets in their past.

"Four wagons approach from the north," Seng said in his soft voice. "Coming fast."

Emanon muttered a long stream of inventive curses. "How did we miss this? Jirom, didn't our source say there weren't any caravans due to come through until next sennight?"

Jirom ignored the question. "What about the escort, Seng?"

"Akeshian medium cavalry. Twoscore."

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Emanon's cursing continued. Jirom frowned at the small scout. "Cavalry regulars? Are you sure about that?"

Seng folded his hands over his chest and nodded. "They display the sigil of the yellow mare."

Emanon dismissed the scouts and hunkered down in front of Jirom. "That's the sign of the Golden Charge outfit. Tough bastards. How do you want to handle this?"

Jirom ran his fingers along the hilt of the sword strapped to his side. He had replaced the handle's cord-wrapping with oxhide for a better grip. The smooth leather was reassuring to his touch. "They must be heading for the fort. If they get inside, it almost doubles the size of the garrison. We can't handle that many. We'll have to postpone the assault. With luck, the wagons will move on in a day or two and take their escort with them."

Emanon's left eyebrow rose slightly. It was an expression Jirom found distracting because it made the man look so damned good. "Or . . ."

"Or what?"

"Or we could incorporate this new wrinkle into our plan."

The muscles along Jirom's jaw tightened as he frowned. "How?"

Emanon bent closer and explained his idea. Jirom had to fight not to shake his head as he listened. It was crazy. Foolhardy and reckless. Worst of all, it was completely unscripted. But Emanon made the call, and all Jirom could do was go along with it. They quickly passed the new plan to the squad leaders, adjusted assignments, and gave the signal.

The rebel fighters moved with quiet efficiency through the rocks and onto the plain. Jirom hurried ahead with the advance units. Timing would be critical. The gathering darkness would help, but any errors would alert the fort garrison and end all chance for success.

While Jirom oversaw the positions of the fighters, Seng relayed that the caravan would arrive in five or six minutes. *That's cutting it damned close.*

He could make out a blurry cloud on the road. He wished he had time to plan this better. Pikes and polearms would have been a great help against cavalry, but they had planned for a fort assault, and so he was stuck with the tools at hand.

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Mahir came over beside him while the others set up. "This is a bold move, boss."

Jirom nodded as he scanned the array of forces. "Problem, soldier?"

The scout leader shrugged. "Changing plans at the last moment don't exactly make a body feel comfortable."

"Plans change."

"Sure. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

Mahir spat in the dry soil. "A couple of the new recruits have been grumbling."

Jirom turned and looked him in the eye. "Anything I need to worry about?"

"Nope. Not yet, anyways. I just wanted you to know." He winked. "Covering my ass, you know?"

Jirom motioned for him to rejoin his squad. As much as he appreciated the vote of confidence, he wished the rebels didn't place so much trust in him.

Once all the units were in place, Jirom could barely see them. He peered back in the direction of the fort. There was only one place an ambush could be sprung without any chance of alerting the garrison, and that was directly in line with the boulder cluster. Everything looked good. He waited until the last moment before he found himself some cover behind a stunted olive tree.

The ground trembled as the caravan approached. Ten soldiers on horseback rode out front. Seng hadn't been wrong. These were true Akeshian lancers, the flower of the empire's legions. Chain hauberks, round shields, and polished conical helmets rushing past in a storm of gleaming steel. Jirom wiped his forehead. It was too late to reconsider. He had to roll the dice and pray for the best. He didn't have to wait long.

The caravan's vanguard passed by his position just a dozen heartbeats after he found cover. They rode past without slowing or changing their demeanor. Both good signs. Jirom counted in his head. When he reached ten, the first war-cries erupted behind him. He didn't have to look back to know that Emanon and his squads had ambushed the vanguard. The clash of steel and animal screams told the tale.

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Jirom drew his sword. The *assurana* blade gleamed like molten iron in the dim starlight as he ran to intercept the first wagon. A pair of cavalrymen flanked each vehicle. At the first sign of attack, the nearest horsemen couched their lances and put spurs to flanks. They galloped toward the front of the caravan, granting Jirom a clear path to his prize. The oxen bellowed as the driver yanked back on the reins. He reached for something behind his seat, possibly a weapon, but Jirom grabbed him before he could turn back around and hauled him down. A blow from the sword's pommel laid the man out. Jirom jumped up to the driver's bench and slammed home the hand-brake. Only then did he peer into the back of the covered wagon.

Twenty faces stared at him. An entire infantry platoon filled the back of the wagon. Fully armed and armored, they sat on benches on either side of the long bed. Jirom drew back and swung with both hands. The sword's blade chopped through one of the support poles, and the wagon's canvas covering dropped on the sitting soldiers. He stood up and looked around for the closest assistance. Mahir's scouts were engaging a pair of horsemen a dozen paces away. Within seconds, the cavalrymen were down on the ground. Narrow-bladed daggers found the gaps in their armor and helmets.

Jirom whistled and motioned to the soldiers fighting free of the canvas. The first infantryman to emerge from the back of the wagon received a clip to the temple with the flat of his sword. Blood flew as the man fell over the side. Then the rest of the soldiers shoved the tarp aside, and Jirom found himself facing a hedge of spears. He dove off the wagon.

A twinge ran across his shoulders as he hit the ground and rolled away. A horse nearly stomped on his head before he could get back to his feet. The soldiers from the wagon jumped down to meet him. Jirom raised his sword as he faced them. Fear exited his mind, and a placid tranquility came over him. The soldiers spread out as they came toward him, their spears held low as if he were a rabid boar preparing to charge them. Jirom remained still, willing to grant them the first move. The faces confronting him were mostly young, lacking many scars. Then he noticed the iron collars around their necks.

Dog soldiers.

For a moment he was back in the queen's training camp, struggling to

survive its brutal measures. He had shed his collar, but some part of him would never leave that camp. Inspiration struck him for the second time this night. He lowered his sword.

The dog soldiers glanced at each other. Two of them continued to advance, but the rest held back. Jirom held his ground. A heartbeat later, Mahir's squad rushed from behind the wagon and swarmed over the dog soldiers, knocking them down. Within seconds the soldiers were disarmed and bound in heavy ropes.

Jirom surveyed the rest of the operation. The fighting was all but over now. Most of the cavalymen had been dragged off their mounts, which evened the odds dramatically. A few soldiers had thrown down their weapons and run off. Jirom gave the signal not to pursue. Far to the north beyond the profile of the fortress, the sky was dark purple verging on black.

He helped the scouts secure the dog soldiers and then moved down the line. The third wagon had also contained an infantry platoon, which the rebels had uncovered and dealt with, albeit with more bloodshed than Mahir's team. The second wagon remained intact, its driver slumped on the front bench with a javelin through his stomach. Jirom didn't see any movement within, but still he was wary as he stepped up to the bench. A quick look revealed there was no one inside. He pulled back the canvas. Three long rectangular boxes sat end to end down the center of the bed. They had been anchored to the floor with steel chains.

Jirom spotted Emanon talking to some of the sergeants near the first wagon. He whistled. Emanon waved back and headed in his direction. "Are you all right?"

Jirom fought the urge to kiss the man on the lips. "Take a look at this."

Emanon hopped inside the wagon to examine the boxes. They were wooden, reinforced at the seams and corners with iron, with two key locks each. Emanon took a war-axe from his belt and attacked the chains securing the middle box. They parted after several blows, and he tossed them aside. The rebel captain raised his axe to smash the locks next, but Jirom held out a hand.

"Wait. What if they're enspelled?"

Emanon lowered the axe to his side. "I don't know much about Akeshian witchery. You think they could be cursed?"

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“Perhaps. But they went through a lot of trouble to protect these chests. They must be important.”

“Aye. Important.”

“What if we—?”

Before Jirom finished his question, Emanon chopped down on one of the locks. The blade of the war-axe lodged in the iron sheathing. Jirom froze in expectation, but nothing happened. “Em, someday that luck of yours is going to fail.”

“Probably so.” Emanon hacked again, and splinters of wood flew from the box. “But that’s why I have you. To pull my sorry ass out of the fire.”

When the second lock had been shattered, Emanon heaved open the lid. Jirom clambered up beside him. Emanon’s breath hissed between his teeth. “I don’t fucking believe it.”

Jirom leaned down and lifted an ingot from the box. He borrowed Emanon’s axe and scratched the surface of the bar. The steel blade bit deep into the soft metal. He dropped it back in the box with a solid clank. Gold. And if the other two boxes were also filled with ingots, there had to be . . .

“A king’s goat-fucking ransom,” Emanon said with a laugh.

“Or a queen’s.”

“Aye. This must have been heading to Erugash. I wager it’s tribute from the northern territories meant for Her Majesty’s war chest.” Emanon closed the lid and sat on it. “And that means we’ve just stuck a big old finger in her royal eye. She’s going to want this back, and badly.”

Jirom played out several scenarios in his head. Emanon was right. If this was intended for the royal treasury, the queen was going to be hot to get it back. Thus far the rebellion had survived by living in the shadows, striking at easy targets and fleeing before the empire’s might could come down on them. Seizing this booty could change that. “If she wants it back,” he said, “she’ll have to come get it. And in the meantime, I have some ideas how we can put this to good use.”

“Something in the way you say that makes me think you’re going to get us in serious trouble.”

“Is there any other kind?”

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“And what about the Old Stone? If we don’t strike now, we won’t get the chance later. The gathering is almost upon us.”

Emanon had been hearing rumors of a rebel gathering for the past few weeks. Finally, they’d gotten the official word: the captains of the various bands were convening. Ever since, Emanon had been on a tear to hit the Akeshians like never before.

“Leave it. We don’t have time.” Jirom indicated the storm clouds brewing to the north.

“Shit.”

Emanon began shouting orders to depart. The captured lancers were put to death, quickly and without sympathy. The dog soldiers were freed and given the choice to join the rebels or flee on foot. Not surprisingly, most of them chose to stay once their collars were struck off. The rebels and new recruits climbed aboard the wagons and set off.



Sweat dripped down Horace’s face, despite the cool breeze blowing across the long, narrow courtyard. It got in his eyes and ran in long rivulets down his naked torso. His skirt clung to his thighs as he circled around the patio’s confines, sandals scuffing across the pavestones. His left hand was bunched into a fist, his other splayed open like a fan, both ready to react at the slightest provocation.

Across from him, his opponent circled as well in a long robe of black silk, face hidden under a deep hood. A slender tentacle of water snaked across the courtyard. Horace lowered his right hand to block. A burst of heat erupted from his palm, and the water jet evaporated in a sizzle of steam. He punched with his left fist while visualizing an image of a burning rope. He shaped the *zoana* inside him into a fiery lariat to hurl at his foe. At least, that’s what he intended to do. The power refused to take the desired form. The flow sputtered and fought against his control. Before he could compel it to obey, a force seized his ankle. He fell hard on his back with a grunt.

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Horace rolled onto his side and leapt back up, just in time to be struck square in the chest by a swarm of tiny white balls, shoving him back while they exploded against his bare skin in a shower of icy needles. He reacted out of instinct. A barrier of pure Shinar energy formed in front of him, deflecting the remaining cold spheres. Their impacts thudded against the invisible energy and spread webs of frost across its surface. Hissing from the sting of the icy splinters already lodged in his flesh, Horace tried to channel a flow of Imuvar into a sudden gust of wind. He felt the power pressing against his *qa*, building up inside, but again it refused to conform to his control. He grasped for it, and suddenly the *zoana* filled him. Instead of summoning a strong breeze, a streak of bright gold—almost like an impossibly long icicle carved to resemble a tongue of flame—sizzled across the courtyard.

His opponent darted sideways to avoid the evocation, and it struck the wall on the far side of the courtyard, drilling a hole as wide as a bread plate completely through the stone blocks. The edges of the hole were rimed in hoarfrost. Horace stopped and stared. *What in the world just happened?*

Before he got an answer, a sharp pain tore through the center of his chest. Then, not half a heartbeat later, a blast of frigid air swirled around him, freezing the sweat coating his body like he'd been dropped into a barrel of ice water. Bright light blinded his eyes as he felt himself falling. Horace tried to brace himself with his hands, but he fell on his back for a second time. All at once, the *zoana* drained out of him. For a moment, he was consumed by a terrible feeling of loss. Then a shadow loomed above him, blocking out the midday light.

“What say you, Lord Horace?”

Horace raised both hands. “I yield.”

Lord Ubar pushed back his hood and squatted beside him. “Are you injured, *Inganaz*?”

He Who Does Not Bleed. The nickname the young lord had given him after the first time he used his power to deflect a chaos storm in the desert, because he did not display the *immaculata*.

Pinpricks of blood dotted his chest in crimson constellations. “I don’t think so. Nothing more than my pride.”

He groaned as he climbed to his feet with Ubar’s assistance. A wave of

dizziness took hold of him, but it passed quickly. For the past couple days they had taken to dueling in the private courtyards of this, the queen's villa in the small oasis town of Hikkak, two days' sail up a northern tributary of the Typhon River. It was Her Majesty's retreat from the city. They had arrived eight days ago—the queen and her private entourage, including some members of the court and a small army of guardsmen. As First Sword, Horace had been required to come along, and he was glad to be away from the city and his official duties for a while.

Lord Ubar had been assigned by the queen to take over his magical tutelage. The queen had decided to retain Ubar in her court, despite his father's treachery. Or perhaps because of it—Horace still did not understand the intricacies of Akeshian politics. In any case, the young lord was smart and capable, in addition to being good company.

Ubar peeled off his robe as he sat down on a tall stool at the edge of the courtyard. A court physician hurried to his side and began binding the several long gashes that covered the young lord's limbs and body. Horace felt a twinge of guilt at the sight. "I'm sorry you have to suffer for my training."

"My teachers used to say we suffer the *immaculata* because the body is too frail to contain the *zoana*. I don't know if that's true. It was all very metaphysical. Perhaps you are blessed, First Sword."

"I wish there was something I could do to repay you."

"Just learn well." Ubar smiled. "And swiftly."

"I'm trying, but I'm so . . . unsure of myself." He looked over at the hole in the wall. "What was that?"

Ubar nodded toward the newly made cavity. "A complex weaving. I believe it was Girru and Mordab blended together, but there was something else involved as well."

Horace suspected he knew what that extra component was. He could still feel the echo of the void in his chest, wanting to break free. "I can't control it sometimes. It's like the power wants to explode out of me all the time."

"The sage Mesanapuda said all *zoanii* begin as larvae, and it is only through rigorous study and self-examination that we emerge from the cocoon of our own ignorance."

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“He sounds like the kind of guy who has an answer for everything.”

Horace massaged the back of his head. Exploring his powers was an adventure in frustration. Sometimes he felt so strong, like he could move mountains, but again and again he failed at the simplest tasks. Exercises for young children such as lighting candles required all his concentration, and he still botched it half the time. Duels were the worst experience of all. Time and time again, Ubar bested him because he could not control that strength. At times, he felt like there was an entire world right before his eyes, but he couldn't see it. No wonder Lord Ubar called the Shinar dominion “the unseen realm.”

“You are doing better,” Ubar said.

Horace tried to laugh, but it came out as a grunt. “You're just being kind. You finished me with ease.”

“Not so. I was forced to use every trick and tool in my arsenal to defeat you.”

“That's the point. I'm so much stronger than you. I can feel it, sitting here next to you.”

“This is true. Your aura shines like the sun. It's almost blinding.”

“Exactly. No offense, but I should be able to win every time.”

“Battling another *zoanii* requires more than pure strength. It takes control and experience. Much like swordplay, eh? Any brute can swing a sword, but a studied fencer knows how best to ply his blade, how to see an attack coming before it arrives.” He darted his hands in front of him like two striking snakes. “How to feint in one direction so that his true offense slides past your guard to strike home.”

Horace sighed, and Ubar slapped him on the back. “It will come to you. You must not be impatient. It was difficult for me, too. As a child, I wanted to know everything right away, always trying to run before I could stand. But to unlock the mysteries of the *zoana*, you must still your mind and open your *qa*. Only then will the path be revealed to you.”

Horace was tempted to make a terse remark about wisdom being doled out in ambiguous nuggets, but Ubar was only trying to help. It wasn't his fault that no one alive knew how to control the Shinar dominion. In that endeavor, he was well and truly alone.

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“Let’s go find a cool drink.”

They exited the courtyard through an arbor of vines with beautiful orange and pink blossoms that led into the villa’s enormous gardens, surrounding them in a riot of colors and scents. Stone pathways wound among beds of well-pruned topiaries and burbling fountains. Birds twittered from hiding places within the foliage, and statues in alabaster, marble, and bronze decorated niches carved from the hedges.

Horace wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm. Lord Ubar smiled at the gesture. “I find it difficult to believe you are not cold.”

“What? This?” Horace looked up at the clear blue sky. “This feels like a fine spring day back in Arnos. You don’t know anything about real cold. Snow on the ground, all the streams and lakes frozen solid.”

“It sounds dreadful.”

“No. The change of the seasons is quite magical. You appreciate the warmer months, for sure, but there’s something beautiful about a blanket of fresh snow covering everything, like the world has been reborn in virgin white.”

“You miss it.”

“I suppose, sometimes. But it’s not as simple as being homesick. After my wife and son died, no place truly felt like home. I was happier at sea, to tell you the truth. Then, when I washed ashore here, it was like a new beginning. A fresh start.”

On the other side of the garden was a gate leading back into the villa proper. Sunlight gleamed off its high walls and narrow minarets, built of white and red stone.

Ubar paused at the gate. He opened his mouth as if to say something but then closed it.

“Is something wrong?” Horace asked.

“I was not sure how to broach this subject with you, *Inganaz*. Forgive me. I have news that you might find disturbing.”

“All right. Just spit it out.”

“It concerns the town of Omikur.”

An uneasy feeling gripped Horace’s stomach. He hadn’t heard much of

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anything about the town since the queen took him on a tour to see the siege firsthand. The memory of the massive storm that had ravaged the crusaders' defenses still haunted him.

"I have heard the royal legions conducted a new assault just days ago."

"Did the town fall?"

"Not yet, *Inganaz*. But it seems to be only a matter of time."

Horace felt the sudden urge to sit down. If Ubar's account was true, then hundreds—perhaps thousands—of soldiers were going to die. The Great Crusade was over, at least for the time being. *What does that mean for me? Should I be angry? Should I want revenge for men I've never met and didn't know? What does it mean if I don't? They were soldiers. They knew the risks when they signed up. But what soldier could understand the risk of Akeshian sorcery?*

As the moments piled up, Horace realized he wasn't angry. The feelings stirring inside him were a *mélange* of sorrow and disgust. Those lives were being wasted. Fathers, brothers, sons—all dying because their rulers could not find a peaceful way to resolve their disputes.

"*Kanadu*," he said. *Thank you*. "I'm glad you told me. It is . . . an unfortunate affair."

Horace reached for the handle, but the gate into the villa opened before him, and a man carrying a thick leather valise walked through. Mezim was his new secretary. Nearly a head shorter than Horace, with dark bronze skin, Mezim wore a long skirt of white linen with a straight red border, as befitted a member of the *khalata* caste of freed slaves.

After he was named First Sword, Horace soon realized how much responsibility the post entailed. He'd made inquiries and been furnished with someone to help him navigate his duties. Mezim understood the Akeshian system of government backward and forward. Every day Horace said a prayer of thanks for him.

The secretary bowed when he saw them. "Lord Horace, pardon my interruption. I have been searching for you."

Ubar nodded to Horace. "I will see you later, *Inganaz*."

"Tomorrow?" Horace asked. "At the third bell?"

"Very good."

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They clasped forearms, and then Lord Ubar went inside.

Mezim handed Horace a bundle of flattened scrolls. “I have some dispatches from the city. As well as a petition from the royal armory requesting that your lordship approve the purchase of five tons of—”

Horace hadn’t been listening. “What do you know about Omikur? It’s an outpost town—”

“Sixteen leagues northwest of Erugash on the fringe of the Iron Desert,” Mezim finished for him. “*Ai, Belum*. I am familiar with the location. I assume you are referring to the recent attack on said town?”

“What do you know about it?”

“Nothing was mentioned in today’s reports. Shall I request a detailed update from Lord Dipatusu?”

“No, don’t bother the High General.”

“As you wish.”

Horace entered the villa, and a chill touched him as he entered the huge house. The queen’s villa covered a parcel of land the size of a city block with numerous abutting outbuildings.

“Her Majesty seems well pleased by the recent developments in the war effort,” Mezim said, following behind him.

Yes. She would be.

Horace stopped in the middle of a broad corridor, flanked on both sides by caryatids of nude women. He wondered if this could be his opportunity to build a bridge between Akeshia and the West now that the invasion had been blunted. Both sides might be willing to come to the bargaining table, but he needed a lever, something to convince the queen of his good intentions.

Mezim juggled the documents in his arms until he came up with a particular scroll. “Your inquiry of Omikur reminds me. I have information about that other matter.”

“Hmmm? Are you talking about Jirom?”

The first assignment he gave to Mezim when he hired him was to track down Jirom’s whereabouts. They’d been able to confirm that Jirom was pressed into the royal military training camp, but the trail went cold after that. No one in the queen’s court was able, or willing, to share the information. Horace

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had been told by various officials that the legions did not keep records for dog soldiers, the derogatory term they used for slaves drafted into the royal army, but he hadn't believed it for a minute. He'd seen firsthand how meticulous the Akeshians were about recording everything, from the most menial things like shopping lists and street repairs. Somewhere Jirom's name was on a list, and he intended to find it.

Horace didn't like how Mezim had prefaced his remark. "Don't tell me . . ."

"I have confirmation that a slave by that name was transferred to Omikur a little more than three months ago."

That would have been right before the Tammuris.

"Forgive me, *Belum*," Mezim said. "But I have found nothing after that point. The siege appears to have been a rather messy affair, with many dead and missing on both sides. The commanders of the Third Legion report they have no soldier named Jirom among their surviving forces. I'm afraid I must conclude that this man likely died in battle."

"No." Horace started walking again at a swift clip. "I do not accept that finding, Mezim. Keep digging. I want to know for sure. We will not give up until someone produces a body. Do you understand?"

"I will redouble my efforts."

"Good. What about the Chapter House attack?"

They'd heard about the killings at the fortress-temple of the Order of the Crimson Flame just a few days ago. Details had been sketchy, so Horace had ordered Mezim to find out what he could.

"I'm sorry to say the latest reports don't convey much more than before. The soldiers surrounding the House have testified they heard noises coming from inside. Screaming and such. It only lasted a short time, but the commander in charge decided to break down the gates and investigate in any case. They found everyone dead. The injuries are supposedly quite brutal. Decapitations and disembowelments. Yet no signs of who or what killed them."

Horace frowned, as the description reminded him of a night some months ago when he and Alyra had been attacked by *idimmu*—demons—at the royal

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palace. It was a night he preferred to forget. *I'm gathering quite a collection of those. Nights I'd rather not remember. It's almost like a curse hanging around my neck.*

"Come find me if anything new turns up," Horace said as he turned to a flight of stairs leading downward into the foundation of the villa's main building.

"One final matter," Mezim said. "Mistress Alyra has returned."

Horace froze on the step. Not long after the events at the Sun Temple, when he'd thought they had agreed to stay together and see where their relationship would lead, she had left. Vanished, with not much more than a cryptic note about having to track down some loose ends. That had been almost two months ago. Two months without a word, not knowing if she was alive or dead or in trouble.

"Thank you," he muttered, and started down the stairs.

Warm, humid air washed over Horace as he descended into a long, brick-lined chamber with a double-vaulted ceiling. One of this villa's most interesting features was the underground baths. At the far end, taking up most of the floor space, was a pool large enough to bathe the entire crew of a twin-masted schooner, all at the same time. Men and women lounged by its edge, eating and drinking while they soaked.

He went to a row of wooden stalls along the north wall to change out of his clothes and was intercepted by a young slave girl. She was entirely nude except for a silver collar around her neck. The collar and her pale skin, much lighter than most Akeshians, reminded him of the first time he met Alyra at the palace. The parallels to this moment made him uncomfortable, but he allowed the slave to lead him into a stall and stood while she undressed him. Horace tried to think of other things, but all his thoughts inevitably turned to Alyra, which only served to escalate the awkwardness. When he was disrobed, the slave escorted him down to a smaller pool of very hot, foamy water.

He couldn't hold back a quiet groan of pleasure as he stepped into the bath. The steaming water grasped his calves, washing away the tension from his muscles. The sensations became more intense with every step he descended. He had been looking forward to this all morning.

The slave girl lathered him in soap and rinsed him. Then she led him to

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the main pool. Horace didn't look any of the other bathers in the eye as he lowered himself into the water. Not quite as hot as the first pool, the main bath was the perfect temperature to relax.

The pool's edge was slick under his palms where his burn scars touched the polished stonework. Grief spun through him as he thought of his departed wife and child, but it was not as painful as it had once been. He lounged against the side of the pool with a long sigh.

Some of the other bathers looked over at him, but they kept to their private clusters. The slave brought him a pewter cup with chilled wine and offered him orange slices from a tray. Horace declined the fruit but sipped from the cup as he tried to unwind, while a multitude of problems jostled inside his brain. Jiron's disappearance, Alyra's absences, the duties of his position, not to mention his problem with controlling his powers. And now the new campaign against the crusaders at Omikur. He'd been hopeful his life would become easier after the *Tammuris*, but if anything it had gotten more complex. He wanted to run away to someplace quiet and peaceful. *I could always go back to sea.*

It was a tempting idea. Life aboard a ship was filled with routines and hard work. No women to distract him, no politics to muddle his head, no sense of impending doom. Just the wind and the water. But he couldn't go back. He'd witnessed too much to be content as a ship's carpenter ever again. As much as it frustrated him with its elusiveness, the *zoana* was part of him now. It was the salt in his blood, as the sailors were like to say.

"May I join you?"

Horace nearly spilled his cup when Alyra came up behind him. For a moment he couldn't say anything, could only stare at her in mute wonder. He'd almost forgotten how beautiful she was, especially unclothed with the water lapping about her hips. Her long blonde hair was down, curling around her shoulders down to the upper slopes of her breasts. Horace blinked and forced his gaze back to her face.

"I heard you were back," he said.

"Yes. I just returned."

He wanted to ask where she had been but held his tongue. There was

something about the way she regarded him, a wariness he'd noticed before she left, that put him at a loss for words, afraid to say the wrong thing. The slave girl brought more wine, and Alyra accepted a cup. Horace allowed his to be refilled while he watched Alyra, trying to read her expression, to garner some hint of how she felt about him.

"So," he said after the slave had left them. "Did you accomplish your mission?"

Horace kicked himself mentally. If anything was sure to drive her away again, it would be prying into her affairs. She'd made that much clear.

"It's difficult to say," she replied after a long pause.

Sweating now, Horace cleared his throat. "Will you be staying long?"

"I don't know yet."

"I'd like . . . it would be nice if you . . . I mean . . ." He took a breath to steady himself. "I'm trying to say I missed you."

That brought a smile to her lips. "I missed you, too."

Horace breathed easier. Then he remembered they were both naked, sitting just a couple feet apart, and his awkwardness returned in force.

"How have you been getting along while I was away?" she asked.

"Well, I haven't received any challenges since . . . that night. So that's been good."

Alyra turned to watch a pair of noble ladies wading nearby. "Do you think they like you better, now that you've saved their queen's life? Or are they just too afraid to confront you directly?"

"That's tough to say. No one at the palace speaks to me except for the queen and Lord Ubar."

"Yes. I've heard that he was recalled to court. An odd development."

"I thought so, too. But I'm glad Byleth brought him back. He's a good man. Nothing at all like his father."

Alyra switched to the Arnossi tongue. "Be careful, Horace. He's still Akeshian and *zoanii*. Backbiting and deception are bred into them."

He frowned at her depiction but nodded so as not to start an argument. "I'll keep that in mind."

"While you're at it, keep both eyes on Byleth as well," she said. "The queen is no blushing ingenue."

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“Point taken. While you’re here, you can help me avoid making any disastrous mistakes.”

“You’re the First Sword, Horace. Any mistake can be disastrous. However, I’m not as adept at court politics as Lord Mulcibar. You’ll need to find your own way.”

The mention of Mulcibar’s name sobered Horace and doused his mood. He missed the old nobleman. Part of him still felt responsible for his death.

Horace finished his wine and set the empty cup on the ledge of the pool as Queen Byleth entered the bath chamber with a small entourage. The queen strode to the hot pool where her handmaidens removed her clothing and jewelry. Lord Xantu, as ominous as ever in his black robe, stood nearby as the queen was washed. He had taken to growing out his hair, which now hung down to his collar.

“Beautiful. Isn’t she?” Alyra asked, gazing at the queen.

Horace cleared his throat. “I, uh . . . sure. Yes, I suppose.”

“She still hasn’t selected a new bodyguard to replace Lord Gilgar?”

“Not yet. She’s been genuinely upset since . . . well, you know.”

“I bet she has.”

The vicious tone in her voice irritated him for no good reason. He had expected she would be happier to see him, but everything felt disjointed, as if they’d reverted back to being strangers again.

Horace tensed as the queen was rinsed, the water sluicing down her body. Her eyes locked onto him from across the chamber, and he felt her terrible magnetism working on him. *Keep your mind on Alyra, fool!*

“I’ve missed you,” he repeated.

“You look like you haven’t been getting enough sleep.”

The way she tilted her head gave him hope that she was inviting him to speak more intimately, so he plunged ahead. “I worry about you when you’re gone.”

“I’ve told you before, Horace. You don’t need to worry.”

And just like that, the invitation vanished. Horace didn’t know what to say next.

Blanket-sized towels were brought to dry the queen. Then she departed

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the chamber without coming to the large pool, taking her retinue with her. Horace couldn't stop the sigh of relief from escaping his lips. Being in the presence of both Alyra and the queen was beyond uncomfortable. In fact, he'd prefer to continue this conversation somewhere more private. He turned to Alyra, but the slave girl interrupted before he could ask her.

"Pardon me, *Belum*," she said with a bowed head. "Her Majesty invites you to sup with her this evening. At the eighth bell, if it pleases you."

"Ah, of course," he replied.

The slave backed away, and Horace swallowed, wondering how Alyra would react. Yet nothing in her demeanor changed. If anything, she appeared amused by the situation. He decided to take a chance. "Can I see you tonight?"

"I'll be in my chambers, if you can get away from the queen."

Before Horace could think of a witty reply, she left the pool. He watched her climb out, enjoying every curve and line of her body. He settled back into the water as she entered a dressing stall. His heart thumped loud in his chest, and his thoughts were scattered. There were problems that required his immediate attention, but they seemed insignificant all of a sudden. Alyra was back, but now he had to go prepare to meet the queen.

He shivered as he left the warm water. A few of the nobles turned to watch him go, but he ignored them. A slave girl, a different one this time, approached to help him dress, but he waved her away.