

LAMENTATION

KEN SCHOLLES

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*This book is brought to you by the letter J:
For Jen, Jay, John and Jerry.
Thanks for helping me roll the rock.*

Windwir is a city of paper and robes and stone.

It crouches near a wide and slow-moving river at the edge of the Named Lands. Named for a poet turned Pope—the first Pope in the New World. A village in the forest that became the center of the world. Home of the Androfrancine Order and their Great Library. Home of many wonders both scientific and magickal.

One such wonder watches from high above.

It is a bird made of metal, a gold spark against the blue expanse that catches the afternoon sun. The bird circles and waits.

When the song begins below, the golden bird watches the melody unfold. A shadow falls across the city and the air becomes still. Tiny figures stop moving and look up. A flock of birds lifts and scatters. The sky is torn and fire rains down until only utter darkness remains. Darkness and heat.

The heat catches the bird and tosses it farther into the sky. A gear slips; the bird's wings compensate, but a billowing, black cloud takes an eye as it passes.

The city screams and then sighs seven times, and ow,,,after the seventh sigh, sunlight returns briefly to the scorched land. The plain is blackened, the spires and walls and towers all brought down into craters where basements collapsed beneath the footprint of Desolation. A forest of bones, left whole by ancient blood magick, stands on the smoking, pockmarked plain.

Darkness swallows the light again as a pillar of smoke and ash blots out the sun. Finally, the golden bird flees southwest.

It easily overtakes the other birds, their wings smoking and beating furiously against the hot winds, messages tied to their feet with threads of white or red or black.

Sparking and popping, the golden bird speeds low across the landscape and dreams of its waiting cage.

Rudolfo

Wind swept the Prairie Sea and Rudolfo chased after it, laughing and riding low in the saddle as he raced his Gypsy Scouts. The afternoon sun glinted gold on the bending grass and the horses pounded out their song.

Rudolfo savored the wide yellow ocean of grass that separated the Ninefold Forest Houses from one another and from the rest of the Named Lands—it was his freedom in the midst of duty, much as the oceans must have been for the seagoing lords of the Elder Days. He smiled and spurred his stallion.

It had been a fine time in Glimmerglam, his first Forest House. Rudolfo had arrived before dawn. He'd taken his breakfast of goat cheese, whole grain bread and chilled pear wine beneath a purple canopy that signified justice. While he ate, he heard petitions quietly as Glimmerglam's steward brought the month's criminals forward. Because he felt particularly benevolent, he sent two thieves into a year's servitude to the shopkeepers they'd defiled, while sending the single murderer to his Physicians of Penitent Torture on Tormentor's Row. He dismissed three cases of prostitution and then afterward, hired two of them onto his monthly rotation.

By lunchtime, Rudolfo had proven Aetero's Theory of Compensatory Seduction decidedly false and he celebrated with creamed pheasant served over brown rice and wild mushrooms.

Then with his belly full, he'd ridden out with a shout, his Gypsy Scouts racing to keep up with him.

A good day indeed.

"What now," the Captain of his Gypsy Scouts asked him, shouting above the pounding hooves.

Rudolfo grinned. "What say you, Gregoric?"

Gregoric returned the smile and it made his scar all the more ruthless. His black scarf of rank trailed out behind him, ribboning on the wind. "We've seen to Glimmerglam, Rudoheim and Friendslip. I think Paramo is the closest."

"Then Paramo it is." That would be fitting, Rudolfo thought. It couldn't come close to Glimmerglam's delights, but it had held on to its quaint, logging village atmosphere for at least a thousand years and that was an accomplishment. They floated their timber down the Rajblood River just as they had in the first days, retaining what they needed to build some of the world's most intricately crafted woodwork. The lumber for Rudolfo's manors came from the trees of Paramo. The furniture they made rolled out by the wagonload and the very best found its way into the homes of kings and priests and nobility from all over the Named Lands.

He would dine on roast boar tonight, listen to the boasting and flatulence of his best men, and sleep on the ground with a saddle beneath his head—the life of a Gypsy King. And tomorrow, he'd sip chilled wine from the navel of a log camp dancer, listen to the frogs in the river shallows mingled with her sighs, and then sleep in the softest of beds on the summer balcony of his third forest manor.

Rudolfo smiled.

But as he rounded to the south, his smile faded. He reined in and squinted against the sunlight. The Gypsy

Scouts followed his lead, whistling to their horses as they slowed, stopped and then pranced.

“Gods,” Gregoric said. “What could cause such a thing?”

Southwest of them, billowing up above the horizon of forest-line that marked Rudolfo’s farthest border, a distant pillar of black smoke rose like a fist in the sky.

Rudolfo stared and his stomach lurched. The size of the smoke cloud daunted him; it was impossible. He blinked as his mind unlocked enough for him to do the math, quickly calculating the distance and direction based on the sun and the few stars strong enough to shine by day.

“Windwir,” he said, not even aware that he was speaking.

Gregoric nodded. “Aye, General. But what could do such a thing?”

Rudolfo looked away from the cloud to study his captain. He’d known Gregoric since they were boys, and had made him the youngest captain of the Gypsy Scouts at fifteen when Rudolfo himself was just twelve. They’d seen a lot together, but Rudolfo had never seen him pale before now.

“We’ll know soon enough,” Rudolfo said. Then he whistled his men in closer. “I want riders back to each of the houses to gather the Wandering Army. We have kin-clave with Wian"clave wndwir; their birds will be flying. We’ll meet on the Western Steppes in one day; we’ll be to Windwir’s aid in three.”

“Are we to magick the scouts, General?”

Rudolfo stroked his beard. “I think not.” He thought for a moment. “But we should be ready,” he added.

Gregoric nodded and barked out the orders.

As the nine Gypsy Scouts rode off, Rudolfo slipped from the saddle, watching the dark pillar. The column of smoke, as wide as a city, disappeared into the sky.

Rudolfo, Lord of the Ninefold Forest Houses, General of the Wandering Army, felt curiosity and fear dance a shiver along his spine.

“What if it’s not there when we arrive?” he asked himself.

And he knew—but did not want to—that it wouldn’t be, and that because of this, the world had changed.

Petronus

Petronus mended the last of the net and tucked it away in the prow of his boat. Another quiet day on the water, another day of little to show for it, but he was happy with that.

Tonight, he’d dine at the inn with the others, eating and drinking too much and finally breaking down into the raunchy limericks that made him famous up and down the coast of Caldu Bay. Petronus didn’t mind being famous for that at all. Outside of his small village, most had no idea that more fame than that lay just beneath the surface.

Petronus the Fisherman had lived another life before returning to his nets and his boat. Prior to the day he chose to end that life, Petronus had lived a lie that, at times, felt more true than a child’s love. Nonetheless, it was a lie that ate away at him until he stood up to it and laid it out thirty-three years ago.

Next week, he realized with a smile. He could go months without thinking about it now. When he was

younger, it wasn't so. But each year, about a month before the anniversary of his rather sudden and creative departure, memories of Windwir, of its Great Library, of its robed Order, flooded him and he found himself tangled up in his past like a gull in a net.

The sun danced on the water, and he watched the silver waves flash against the hulls of ships both small and large. Overhead, a clear blue sky stretched as far as he could see and seabirds darted, shrieking their hunger as they dove for the small fish that dared swim near the surface.

One particular bird—a kingfisher—caught his eye and he followed it as it dipped and weaved. He turned with it, watching as it flexed its wings and glided, pushed back by a high wind that Petronus couldn't see or feel.

I've been pushed by such a wind, he thought, and with that thought, the bird suddenly shuddered in the air as the wind overcame it and pushed it farther back.

Then Petronus saw the cloud piling up on the horizon to the northwest.

He needed no mathematics to calculate the distance. He needed no time at all to know exactly what it was and what it meant.

Windwir.

Stunned, he slid to his knees, his eyes never leaving the tower of smoke that rose westward and north of Caldas Bay. It was close enough that he could see the flecks of fire in it as it roiled and twisted its way into the sky.

“ ‘Oh my children,’ ” Petronus whispered, quoting the First Gospel of P' Andro Whym, “ ‘what have you done to earn the wrath of heaven?’ ”

Jin Li Tam

Jin Li Tam bit back her laughter and let the fat Overseer try to reason with her.

“It's not seemly,” Sethbert said, “for the consort of a king to ride sidesaddle.”

She did not bother to remind him of the subtle differences between an Overseer and a king. Instead, she stayed with her point. “I do not intend to ride sidesaddle, either, my lord.”

Jin Li Tam had spent most of the day cramped into the back of a carriage with the Overseer's entourage and she'd had enough of it. There was an army of horses to be had—saddles, too—and she meant to feel the wind on her face. Besides, she could see little from the inside of a carriage and she knew her father would want a full report.

A captain interrupted, pulling Sethbert aside and whispering urgently. Jin Li Tam took it as her cue to slip away in search of just the right horse—and to get a better idea of what was afoot.

She'd seen the signs for over a week. Messenger birds coming and going, cloaked couriers galloping to and fro at all hours of the night. Long meetings between old men in uniforms, hushed voices and then loud voices, and hushed voices again. And the army had come together quickly, brigades from each of the City States united under a common flag. Now, they stretched ahead and behind on the Whymer Highway, overflowing the narrow road to trample the fields and forests in their forced march north.

Try as she might, she had no idea a e had n why. But she knew the scouts were magicked, and according to the Rites of Kin-Clave, that meant Sethbert and the Entrolusian City States were marching to war.

And she also knew that very little lay north apart from Windwir—the great seat of the Androfrancine Order—and farther north and east, Rudolfo’s Ninefold Forest Houses. But both of those neighbors were Kin-Clave with the Entrolusians, and she’d not heard of any trouble they might be in that merited Entrolusian intervention.

Of course, Sethbert had not been altogether rational of late.

Though she cringed at the thought of it, she’d shared his bed enough to know that he was talking in his sleep and restless, unable to rise to the challenge of his young redheaded consort. He was also smoking more of the dried kallaberries, intermittently raging and rambling with his officers. Yet they followed him, so there had to be something. He didn’t possess the charm or charisma to move an army on his own and he was too lazy to move them by ruthlessness, while lacking in the more favorable motivational skills.

“What are you up to?” she wondered out loud.

“Milady?” A young cavalry lieutenant towered over her on a white mare. He had another horse in tow behind him.

She smiled, careful to turn in such a way that he could see down her top just far enough to be rewarded, but not so far as to be improper. “Yes, Lieutenant?”

“Overseer Sethbert sends his compliments and requests that you join him forward.” The young man pulled the horse around, offering her the reins.

She accepted and nodded. “I trust you will ride with me?”

He nodded. “He asked me to do so.”

Climbing into the saddle, she adjusted her riding skirts and stretched up in the stirrups. Twisting, she could make out the end of the long line of soldiers behind and before her. She nudged the horse forward. “Then let’s not keep the Overseer waiting.”

Sethbert waited at a place where the highway crested a rise. She saw the servants setting up his scarlet canopy at the road’s highest point and wondered why they were stopping here, in the middle of nowhere.

He waved to her as she rode up. He looked flushed, even excited. His jowls shook and sweat beaded on his forehead. “It’s nearly time,” he said. “Nearly time.”

Jin looked at the sky. The sun was at least four hours from setting. She looked back at him, then slid from the saddle. “Nearly time for what, my lord?”

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Jin Li Tam sat, accepted wine and sipped.

“This,” Sethbert said, “is my finest hour.” He looked over to her and winked. His eyes had that glazed over, faraway look they sometimes had during their more intimate moments. A look she wished she could afford the luxury of having during those moments as well and still be her father’s spy.

“What—” But she stopped herself. Far off, beyond the forests and past the glint of the Third River as it wound its way northward, light flashed in the sky and a small crest of smoke began to lift itself on the horizon. The small crest expanded upward and outward, a column of black against the blue sky that kept growing and growing.

Sethbert chuckled and reached over to squeeze her knee. “Oh. It’s better than I thought.” She forced her eyes away for long enough to see his wide smile. “Look at that.”

And now, there were gasps and whispers that grew to a buzz around them. There were arms lifted, fingers pointing north. Jin Li Tam looked away again to take in the pale faces of Sethbert’s generals and captains and lieutenants, and she knew that if she could see all the way back to the line upon line of soldiers and scouts behind her, she’d see the same fear and awe upon their faces, too. Perhaps, she thought, turning her eyes back onto that awful cloud as it lifted higher and higher into the sky, that fear and awe painted every face that could see it for miles and miles around. Perhaps everyone knew what it meant.

“Behold,” Sethbert said in a quiet voice, “the end of the Androfrancine tyranny. Windwir is fallen.” He chuckled. “Tell that to your father.”

And when his chuckle turned into a laugh, Jin Li Tam heard the madness in him for the first time.

Neb

Neb stood in the wagon and watched Windwir stretch out before him. It had taken them five hours to climb the low hills that hemmed the great city in, and now that he could see it he wanted to take it all in, to somehow imprint it on his brain. He was leaving that city for the first time and it would be months before he saw it again.

His father, Brother Hebda, stood as well, stretching in the morning sun. “And you have the bishop’s letters of introduction and credit?” Brother Hebda asked.

Neb wasn’t paying attention. Instead, the massive city filled his view—the cathedrals, the towers, the shops and houses pressed in close against the walls. The colors of kin-clave flew over her, mingled with the royal blue colors of the Androfrancine Order,">

His father spoke again and Neb started. “Brother Hebda?”

“I asked after the letters of introduction and credit. You were reading them this morning before we left and I told you to make sure you put them back in their pouch.”

Neb tried to remember. He remembered seeing them on his father’s desk and asking if he could look at them. He remembered reading them, being fascinated with the font and script of them. But he couldn’t remember putting them back. “I think I did,” he said.

They climbed into the back of the wagon and went through each pouch, pack and sack. When they didn’t find them, his father sighed.

“I’ll have to go back for them,” he said.

Neb looked away. “I’ll come with you, Brother Hebda.”

His father shook his head. “No. Wait here for me.”

Neb felt his face burn hot, felt a lump in his throat. The bulky scholar reached out and squeezed Neb’s shoulder. “Don’t fret over it. I should’ve checked it myself.” He squinted, looking for the right words. “I’m just . . . not used to having anyone else about.”

Neb nodded. “Can I do anything while you’re gone?”

Brother Hebda had smiled. “Read. Meditate. Watch the cart. I’ll be back soon.”

Neb drew Whymer Mazes in the dirt and tried to concentrate on his meditation. But everything called him away. First the sounds of the birds, the wind, the champing of the horse. And the smell of evergreen and dust and horse-sweat. And *his* sweat, too, now dried after five long hours in the shade.

He’d waited for years. Every year he’d petitioned the headmaster for a grant, and now, just one year shy of manhood and the ability to captain his own destiny without the approval of the Franci Orphanage, he’d finally been released to study with his father. The Androfrancines could not prove their vow of chastity if they had children on their arms, so the Franci Orphanage looked after them all. None knew their birth-mothers and only a few knew their fathers.

Neb’s father had actually come to see him at least twice a year and had sent him gifts and books from far off places while he dug in Churning Wastes, studying times before the Age of Laughing Madness. And one time, years ago, he’d even told Neb that someday he’d bring the boy along so that he could see what the love of P’ Andro Whym was truly about, a love so strong that it would cause a man to sacrifice his only begotten son.

Finally, Neb received his grant.

And here at the beginning of his trip to the Wastes, he’d already disappointed the man he most wanted to make proud.

Five hours had passed, and even though there was no way to pick him out from such a distance, Neb stood every so often and looked down toward the city, watching the gate near the river docks.

He’d just sat down from checking yet again when the hair on his arms stood up and the world went completely silent but for a solitary, tinny voice far away. He leaped to his feet. Then, a heavy buzzing grew in his ears and his skin tingled from a sudden wind that seemed to bend the sky. The buzzing grew to a shriek and his eyes went wide as they filled with both light and darkness, and he stood transfixed, arms stretched wide, standing at his full height, mouth hanging open.

The ground shook and he watched the city wobble as the shrieking grew. Birds scattered out from the city, specks of brown and white and black that he could barely see in the ash and debris that the sudden, hot wind stirred.

Spires tumbled and rooftops collapsed. The walls trembled and gave up, breaking apart as they fell inward. Fires sprang up—a rainbow kaleidoscope of colors—licking at first and then devouring. Neb watched the tiny robed forms of bustling life burst into flame. He watched lumbering dark shadows move through the roiling ash, laying waste to anything that dared to stand. He watched flaming sailors leap from burning bows as the ships cast off and begged the current save them. But ships and sailors alike kept burning, green and white, as they sank beneath the waters. There was the sound of cracking stone and boiling water, the smell of heated rock and charred meat. And the pain of the Desolation of Windwir racked his own body. Neb shrieked when he felt this heart burst or that body bloat and explode.

The world roared at him, fire and lightning leaping up and down the sky as the city of Windwir screamed and burned. All the while, an invisible force held Neb in place and he screamed with his city, eyes wide open, mouth wide open, lungs pumping furiously against the burning air.

A single bird flew out from the dark cloud, hurtling past Neb's head and into the forest behind him. For the briefest moment he thought it was made of gold.

Hours later, when nothing was left but the raging fire, Neb fell to his knees and sobbed into the dirt. The tower of ash and smoke blotted out the sun. The smell of death choked his nostrils. He sobbed there until he had no more tears and then he lay shaking and twitching, his eyes opening and closing on the desolation below.

Windwir lies in ruin. Sethbert has betrayed us all.

And after, she would sleep with a pouch of magicks beneath her pillow, ready to flee at a word.

Rudolfo

Rudolfo's Gypsy Scouts found the metal man sobbing in an impact crater deep in the roiling smoke and glowing ruins of Windwir. He crouched over a pile of blackened bones, his shoulders chugging and his bellows wheezing, his helmetlike head shaking in his large metal hands. They approached him silently, ghosts in a city of ghosts, but the metal man still heard and looked up.

Gouts of steam shot from his exhaust grate. Boiling water leaked from his glassy jeweled eyes. Nearby lay a mangled metal leg.

"Lla meht dellik ev'I," the metal man said.

The Gypsies dragged him to Rudolfo because he could not stand on his own and refused to be supported. Rudolfo, from his tents outside the ruins, watched them return just like the message bird had promised.

They dragged the metal man into the clearing and released him, dropping the leg as well. Their bright colored tunics, cloaks and breeches were gray with ash and black from charcoal. The metal man gleamed in the afternoon sun.

They bowed and waited for Rudolfo to speak. "So this is all that's left of the Great City of Windwir?"

To a man, they nodded. Slow, deliberate nods.

"And the Androfrancine Library?"

One of the Gypsy Scouts stepped forward. "Ashes, Lord." The scout stepped back quickly, head bowed.

Rudolfo turned to the metal man. "And what do we have here?" He'd seen mechanicals before. Small ones, though, nothing quite so elaborate as a man. "Can you speak?"

"Llew etiuq kaeps nac I," the metal man said.

Rudolfo looked again to his Gypsy Scouts. The same scout who'd spoken earlier looked up. "He's been talking since we found him, Lord. It's no language we've ever heard."

Rudolfo smiled. "Actually, it is." He turned back to the metal man. "Sdrawkcab kaeps," he told him.

A pop, a clunk, a gout of steam. The metal man looked Roal man up at Rudolfo, at the smoke-filled sky and the blackened horizon that was once the world's largest city. He shook and shuddered. When he spoke, his voice carried a depth of lament that Rudolfo had only heard twice before. "What have I done?" the metal man asked, his breast ringing as he beat it with his metal fist. "Oh, what have I done?"

Rudolfo reclined on silk cushions and drank sweet pear wine, watching the sunset wash the metal man red. His own personal armorer bent over the mechanical in the fading light, wiping sweat from his brow while working to reattach the mangled leg.

“It’s no use, Lord,” the metal man said.

The armorer grunted. “It’s nowhere close to good but it will serve.” He pushed himself back, glancing up at Rudolfo.

Rudolfo nodded. “Stand on it, metal man.”

The metal man used his hands to push himself up. The mangled leg would not bend. It sparked and popped but held as he stood.

Rudolfo waved. “Walk about.”

The metal man did, jerking and twitching, using the leg more as a prop.

Rudolfo sipped his wine and waved the armorer away. “I suppose now I should worry about escape?”

The metal man kept walking, each step becoming more steady. “You wish to escape, Lord? You have aided me. Perhaps I may aid you?”

Rudolfo chuckled. “I meant *you*, metal man.”

“I will not escape.” The metal man hung his head. “I intend to pay fully for my crimes.”

Rudolfo raised his eyebrows. “What crimes are those, exactly?” Then, remembering his manners but not sure if they extended to mechanicals, he pointed to a nearby stool. “Sit down. Please.”

The metal man sat. “I am responsible for the razing of Windwir and the genocide of the Androfrancines, Lord. I do not expect a trial. I do not expect mercy. I expect justice.”

“What is your name?”

The metal man’s golden lids flickered over his jeweled eyes in surprise. “Lord?”

“Your name. What is your name? thyour na221;

“I am Mechoservitor Number Three, catalog and translations section.”

“That’s no name. I am Rudolfo. Lord Rudolfo of the Ninefold Forest Houses to some. General Rudolfo of the Wandering Army to others. That Damned Rudolfo to those I’ve bested in battle or in bed.”

The metal man stared at him. His mouth-shutters clicked open and closed.

“Very well,” Rudolfo finally said. “I will call you Isaak.” He thought about it for a moment, nodded, sipped more wine. “Isaak. Tell me how exactly you managed to raze the Knowledgeable City of Windwir and single-handedly wipe out the Androfrancine Order?”

“By careless words, Lord, I committed these crimes.”

Rudolfo refilled his glass. “Go on.”

“Are you familiar, Lord, with the Wizard Xhum Y’Zir?”

Rudolfo nodded.

“The Androfrancines found a cache of parchments in the Eastern Rises. They bore a striking resemblance to Y’Zir’s later work including his particular blend of Middle Landlish and Upper V’Ral. Even the handwriting matched.”

Rudolfo leaned forward, one hand stroking his long mustache. “These weren’t copies?”

The metal man shook his head. “Originals, Lord. Naturally, they were brought back to the library. They assigned the translation and cataloging to me.”

Rudolfo picked a honeyed date out of a silver bowl and popped it into his mouth. He chewed around the pit, spitting it into a silk napkin. “You worked in the library.”

“Yes, Lord.”

“Continue.”

“One of the parchments contained the missing text for Xhum Y’Zir’s Seven Cacophonous Deaths—”

Here Rudolfo’s breath rushed out. He felt the blood flee so quickly from his face that he tingled. He raised his hand and fell back into the cushions. “Gods, a moment.”

The metal man, Isaak, waited.

Rudolfo sat back up, d

The metal man shook in one great sob. “I am now, Lord.”

A hundred questions flooded Rudolfo. Each shouted to be asked. He opened his mouth to ask the first but closed it when Gregoric, the First Captain of his Gypsy Scouts, slipped into the tent with a worried expression on his face.

“Yes?” he asked.

“General Rudolfo, we’ve just received word that Overseer Sethbert of the Entrolusian City States approaches.”

Rudolfo felt anger rise. “*Just?*”

Gregoric paled. “Their scouts are magicked, Lord.”

Rudolfo leaped to his feet, reaching for his thin, long sword. “Bring the camp to Third Alarm,” he shouted. He turned on the metal man. “Isaak, you will wait here.”

Isaak nodded.

Then General Rudolfo of the Wandering Army, Lord of the Ninefold Forest Houses, raced from the tent bellowing for his armor and horse.

Petronus

Petronus sat before his small fire and listened to the night around him. He’d ridden the day at a measured pace, not pushing his old horse faster or farther than it needed. He’d finally stopped and made camp

when the sky purpled.

Not far off, a coyote bayed and another joined in. Petronus sipped bitterroot tea with a generous pinch of Holga the Bay Woman's herbal bone-ache remedy boiled into it. It washed the old man in warmth deeper than the dancing flames could touch.

He watched the northwest. The smoke had largely dissipated throughout the day. By now, he thought, Rudolfo and Sethbert would both be there with their armies, ready to assist if there was anyone or anything left to help.

Of course, he doubted they would find anything and he suspected he knew why. The longer he thought about it, the more sure the old man became. And each league that carried him closer to Windwir paralleled an inner journey across the landscape of his memory.

"We've found another Y'Zir fragment, Father," Arch-Scholar Ryhan had said during the private portion of the Expeditionary Debriefing.

Petronus was forty years younger then, more of an idealist, but even then he'd known the risk. "You're certain?"

The arch-scholar sipped his wine, careful not to spill it on the white carpets of Petronus's office. "Yes. It is a nearly perfect fragment, with overlap between the Straupheim parchment and the Harston letter. It's only a matter of time before we have the entire text."

Petronus felt his jaw clench. "What precautions are you taking?"

"We're keeping all of the parchments separate. Under lock and guard."

Petronus nodded. "Good. They're not safe even for cataloging and translation."

"For now, yes," Ryhan said. "But young Charles, that new Acolyte of Mechanics from the Emerald Coasts, thinks he's found a way to power the mechoservitor he's reconstructed using firestones. He says according to Rufello's Notes and Specifications, these mechanicals can be erased after a day's work, told in advance what to do and what to say, and given even the most complex instructions."

Petronus had seen the demonstration. They'd needed a massive furnace to generate the power, but for three minutes, Charles had asked the blocky, sharp-cornered metal man he'd built to move his hands, to recite scripture and to answer complex mathematical equations for the Pope and his closest advisors. Another secret they had mined from the days before that they would keep close to their hearts, releasing it to the world when they felt it was ready for the knowledge.

"They could read it," the arch-scholar said. "Under careful instruction. If Charles is right, a mechoservitor could even be instructed to summarize the text without reproducing it verbatim."

"If all of the parchments were ever found . . ." Petronus let the words trail off. He shook his head. "We'd do better to just destroy what we've found," Petronus said. "Even a metal puppet dances on a human string."

The look on the arch-scholar's face when he said that was the beginning of Petronus's self-inflicted slide away from Androfrancine grace.

Coyote song brought Petronus back from the past. The fire was burning down now and he pushed more wood onto it. His fists went white as he clenched them and looked to the northwest again.

They had found the fragments of Xhum Y'Zir's spell.

"And you can get them to do most anything . . . if you know how," Sethbert said.

"Really?"

The Overseer clapped. "Servitor, run scroll seven three five."

Something clicked and clanked. Suddenly, the metal man spread his arms and broke into song, his feet moving lightly in a bawdy dance step while he sang, "My father and my mother were both Androfrancine brothers or so my aunty Abbot likes to say. . . ." The song went from raunchy to worse. When it finished, the metal man bowed deeply.

The Lady Jin Li Tam blushed. "Given the circumstances of our meeting," she said, "I think that was in poor taste."

Sethbert shot her a withering glare, then smiled at Rudolfo. "Forgive my consort. She lacks any appreciation for humor."

Rudolfo watched her hands white-knuckling a napkin, his brain suddenly playing out potentials that were coming together. "It does seem odd that the Androfrancines would teach their servitors a song of such . . . color."

She looked up at him. Her eyes held a plea for rescue. Her mouth drew tight.

"Oh, they didn't teach it that song. I did. Well, my man did."

"Your man can create scripts for this magnificent metal man?"

Sethbert spooned stew into his mouth, spilling it onto his shirt. He spoke with his mouth full. "Certainly. We've torn this toy of mine apart a dozen times over. We know it inside and out."

Rudolfo took a bite of his own stew, nearly gagging on the strong sea flavor that flooded his mouth, and pushed the bowl aside. "Perhaps," he said, "you'll loan your man to me for a bit."

Sethbert's eyes narrowed. "Whatever for, Rudolfo?"

Rudolfo drained his wineglass, trying to rid his mouth of the briny taste. "Well, I seem to have inherited a metal man of my own. I should like to teach him new tricks."

Sethbert's face paled slightly, then went red. "Really? A metal man of your own?"

"Absolutely. The sole survivor of Windwir, I'm told." Rudolfo clapped his hands and leaped to his feet. "But enough talk of toys. There is a beautiful woman here in need of a dance. And Rudolfo shall KRud leoffer her such if you'll be so kind as to have your metal man sing something more apropos."

She stood despite Sethbert's glare. "In the interest of state relations," she said, "I would be honored."

They swirled and leaped around the tent as the metal man sang an upbeat number, banging on his metal chest like a drum. Rudolfo's eyes carefully traveled his partner, stealing glances where he could. She had a slim neck and slim ankles. Her high breasts pushed against her silk shirt, jiggling just ever so slightly as she moved with practiced grace and utter confidence. She was living art and he knew he must have her.

As the song drew to a close, Rudolfo seized her wrist and tapped a quick message into it. *A sunrise such as you belongs in the East with me; and I would never call you consort.*

She blushed, cast down her eyes, and tapped back a response that did not surprise him at all. *Sethbert destroyed the Androfrancines; he means you harm as well.*

He nodded, smiled a tight smile, and released her. “Thank you, Lady.”

Sethbert looked at Rudolfo through narrow eyes, but Rudolfo made a point from that moment forward of looking at the Overseer’s Lady rather than his host. Dinner passed with excruciating slowness while banter fell like a city-dweller’s footfall on the hunt. Rudolfo noticed that at no point did Sethbert bring up the destruction of Windwir or the metal man his Gypsy Scouts had found.

Sethbert’s lack of words spoke loudest of all.

Rudolfo wondered if his own did the same.

Neb

Quiet voices woke Neb from his light sleep. He lay still in the wagon, trying hard not to even breathe. The night air was heavy with the smell of smoke mingled with Evergreen.

“I heard General O’Sirus say the Overseer is mad,” one voice said.

A snort. “As if that’s anything new.”

“Do you think it’s true?”

“Do I think *what’s* true?”

A pause. “Do you think he destroyed Windwir?”

Neb heard the sound of cloth rustling. “More likely they destroyed themselves. You know what they say about Androfrancine curiosity. Gods Kriof conly know what they found digging about in the Churning Wastes.” Neb heard the soldier draw phlegm down and spit. “Probably Old Magick . . . Blood Magick.”

For all their obstinacy toward unsanctified children, the Androfrancines did one thing for them very well. One thing that—apart from the wealthiest of the landed and lords—no one else did for their children: They gave them the best education the world could offer.

For as long as he could remember, Neb had spent most of his days in the Great Library, usually under the care of an acolyte assigned to a group of boys as a part of his own education. The Arch-Scholar Rydlis said it best: The path to learning lies in teaching. And the path to teaching lies in answering the questions of a child.

Neb knew this story very well. The Age of Laughing Madness was brought about by Blood Magick. And part of the charter of P’Andro Whym’s followers—codified hundreds of years after their venerated founder had died, nearly five hundred years since the onset of the Laughing Madness—was to keep both magick and science under a watchful eye. The Rites of Kin-Clave had sprung from that same dark time on the edge of histories, forming a labyrinth of ritual and social expectation that twisted and turned back on itself with all the mystery of the greatest Whymer Mazes. Blood Magick was expressly forbidden. Earth Magick was only tolerated during time of war, and never used by nobility. At least not with their own hands.

It made sense. Blood Magick had felled the only home he'd ever had. Such a kind that had not been seen in the Named Lands from the days the Homeseekers had migrated in from the dust storms of the deep south. Such a kind that had not been seen since Xhum Y'Zir, enraged at the murder of his seven sons by P'Andro Whym and his Scientist Scholars, had turned the Old World into the Churning Wastes.

Neb wondered if maybe he couldn't speak now because he'd been driven mad. But then he wondered if the mad could contemplate their possible insanity.

The soldiers moved off and Neb sat up. There'd be no more sleep for him tonight. The stars overhead were swollen, hanging low and heavy in the hazy sky.

Neb slipped from the wagon and returned to his tent. Inside, he went to the table and selected a pear and a piece of bread. While he chewed the pear, tasting its tart sugar on his tongue, he reflected on the soldier's words.

Gods only know what they found digging about in the Churning Wastes.

He remembered his last visit with his father three or four months ago. He'd just returned from a dig in the Waste and he'd brought Neb a square metal coin that shined brightly despite its age. Brother Hebda was excited.

"We've found a good one this time, Neb. A shrine from the time of the Y'Zirite Resurgence.&# K Res N8221;

Neb remembered this from lessons about the Age of Laughing Madness, the five hundred years after the end of the Old World that were marked by chaos, anarchy and a near eighty-percent insanity rate from the earliest days of the apocalypse to the fourth generation of children. There were some who argued that Xhum Y'Zir had built a hidden eighth Cacophonous Death into his spell after it had been shaped and bargained for in the dark places of the world—a last and final blow for one of his favorite wives who had been captured, raped and beaten to death on his last night in seclusion for his spell-making. But the traditionalists insisted that the exaggeration of ancient magicks was already a large enough problem without adding more to it. But both camps agreed that the insanity was prevalent, and that if it weren't for the Francines—a monastic movement centered around the intricacies of the human psyche, the patterns of human (and primate) behavior—humanity would have murdered itself. The Y'Zirite Resurgence was a small sect of survivors whose particular insanity was the worship of House Y'Zir. They celebrated that fallen Moon Wizard's children for challenging—and later eradicating—the Scientism Movement that had converted P'Andro Whym in his boyhood.

Franci B'yot, the posthumous founder of the Francines, though older than Whym, was influenced by the early days of the same Scientism Movement. Fragments of Whym and B'Yot's correspondence largely led to the sects working together, and eventually becoming the Androfrancines.

So Neb understood why his father had been so excited about the find. A Y'Zirite shrine would have a small library—usually two or three carefully packed jars of parchment. And sometimes mummified martyrs bearing the mark of House Y'Zir burned over their heart.

He turned the coin over in his hand, looking at the image stamped into its surface. "Who is it?" he asked.

"Let me see it." His father took the coin and studied it. "The third son, Vas Y'Zir," he said after a moment. "He was the Wizard King of Aelys." Around them the Orphans' Park was quiet, as the other children were in their classrooms. Brother Hebda always pulled him out of class when he came to visit, and the teachers never minded. He leaned over on the bench, holding the coin in the palm of his hand and pointing to it. "If you look closely, you can see the etching around his left eye—and if you look even

closer, you can see that the left eye is actually carved out of nightstone. They said it made him able to see into the Unseen World to make pacts for his Blood Magick.” Brother Hebda handed it over.

Neb took it, held it to the light until he could see the dark eye. “Thank you, Brother Hebda.”

His father nodded. “You’re welcome.” His voice lowered and he looked around. “Do you want to know what else we found?”

Neb nodded.

“The arch-scholar didn’t let me get too close to it, but buried in the back, behind the shrine figure, they found a Rufello lockbox.”

Neb felt his eyes go wide. “Really?”

Brother Hebda nodded. “They did. And it was entirely intact.”

Neb had caught glimpses of the mechoservitors Brother Charles, the arch-engineer, had reconstructed from Rufello’s Book of Specifications. They were kept in stalls in the lower parts of the library, but once, during a research trip in the care of an acolyte, he’d caught a glimpse of one. It clanked when it walked, steam hissing from its exhaust grate as it moved. It stood about three spans high and it was bulkier than the metal men from the days before P’Andro Whym and Xhum Y’Zir. Still, it was close enough to the drawings that Neb could see the similarities. Neb watched it select a book and slip back into one of the library’s many disguised elevators.

“Do you think it may have some of his drawings inside?” Aedos Rufello was one of Neb’s favorite figures from Old World history. His work was old when P’Andro Whym was a boy, and he’d given his life to understanding the scientific mysteries of the First World.

“Unlikely,” his father said. “You know why. Show me how well they’ve trained you in that school of yours.”

Neb studied the coin, digging in his memory. He found what he was looking for and looked up with a grin. “Because the Y’Zirites would have no interest in preserving Rufello’s science-based work. Xhum Y’Zir saw the Scientism Movement as a threat against his magick, and later, some of its scattered followers murdered his seven sons.”

“Exactly,” his father said, a proud smile spreading across his face. “But isn’t it interesting that all those years later, whoever built the shrine used Rufello’s science-based work to protect something they had hidden there.”

“Why would they do that?” It had to be important to them, Neb thought.

Brother Hebda shrugged. “It could’ve been an aberrant Gospel or perhaps part of the Lesser Spell Codex. Regardless, they had me race it back here under a full complement of Gray Guard Elite. We rode day and night; we even magicked our horses for silence. One of the mechoservitors is going to cipher its lock code, but I doubt what’s inside will ever be announced.”

Neb frowned. “I wish I’d been there.” This was one of the digs he’d applied to attend as an intern.

His father nodded. “Someday they’ll approve your grant. ‘Patience is the heart of art and science alike,’” he said, qu K1; Somoting a passage from the Whymer Bible.

“I hope so.”

Brother Hebda slipped his arm around Neb's shoulders. He rarely touched the boy, and Neb thought maybe it was harder to be a parent than an Androfrancine. But now, he pulled Neb close and squeezed his shoulders together with his thick arm. "Give it time, Neb. And if it doesn't happen in the next year or two, it won't matter. I may not have any sway with your headmaster, but I do know a few archeologists that owe me a favor. Once you've reached your majority, we won't need the headmaster's leave. I'll arrange something." He grinned. "It may not be very glamorous, though."

For a moment, Neb felt like his father might actually love him. He smiled. "Thanks, Brother Hebda."

Setting down the pear, Neb felt a stab of loss at the memory. That numb, hollow feeling still licked at the edges of him, but at the core, he felt the twisting of a hot knife.

He would never see Brother Hebda again. There would be no more chats in the park in the shadow of the Orphanage. That first time he'd put his arm around him was the last time. And there would be no assignment with him in the Churning Wastes.

Neb tried to push his grief aside, but it pushed back. And he could not stop the tears when they arrived.

Jin Li Tam

Jin Li Tam had been sure that of all nights, this would be a night that Sethbert would summon her. She suspected that her father would want her to do what was expected and use the opportunity to learn more about the Overseer's plot. But a part of her wondered if she didn't already know enough, wondered if she shouldn't, instead, slide a knife between his ribs. Of course, at least half the few times—of late—he'd summoned her, he'd had her carefully searched as well.

But Sethbert didn't summon her. Instead, he called a council of his generals and waved Jin Li Tam away in dismissal. She was grateful for it.

She closed the tent flap, tying a set of ankle bells to the silk rope so that the door couldn't move without the subdued tinkling. Jin Li Tam had been trained since girlhood to use all of the accoutrements of her courtesan role to keep herself safe and the information flowing back to House Li Tam.

Slippers and all, she wore her riding silks to bed, her hand wrapped around the handle of her slender, curved knife. Before the banquet, she had hidden a small bundle wrapped in a dark cloak beneath her bed. She could magick herself, slip past Sethbert's patrols, and be to the Wandering Army before morning.

But only if Rudolfo sent a man. And if he Kan.p hdid, she would be sure of the hidden message she'd found in his hastily tapped words.

A sunrise such as you belongs in the East with me, Rudolfo had said. But he'd pressed the word "sunrise" harder and he inverted the word "east," and turned his fingers ever so slightly on the word "belongs," giving it a sense of urgency.

The message was that there was compelling need for her to leave the camp and travel west before the sun rose.

But the message behind the message was even more intriguing: Rudolfo somehow knew an ancient form of House Li Tam's nonverbal sublanguage. The "accent"—if you could call it that—was off, giving it an older, more formal tone.

Before the banquet, when she'd made her preparations to leave, she had expected to flee south and

west, making her way back to the Emerald Coasts under magicks until she was far enough away to not be recognized.

But now, another offer seemed to be clearly—and cleverly—presented.

This Rudolfo, she thought, may be a bit of a fop. But there was hardness in his eyes and practiced purpose in the way his fingers moved along her wrist.

She willed herself into a light sleep, one ear turned toward the bell on her door.

Jin Li Tam awoke to the hand over her mouth. She brought the small knife up and as she stabbed with it, another strong hand snaked in to grip her wrist. She struggled against the intruder. “Easy, Lady Tam,” a voice whispered. “I bear a message from General Rudolfo.” She stopped struggling. “Would you hear it?”

She nodded and he released her. “I would hear.”

The Gypsy Scout cleared his voice, then recited the message. “General Rudolfo bids you good evening and assures you that his proposition is true. He bids you to choose well between he and Sethbert and to consider your father in all of this. It is true that the Wandering Army is small, but as you well know, House Li Tam will launch its Iron Armada to honor its secret kin-clave with Windwir, and when they blockade the Three Rivers and its Delta, it won’t matter how small General Rudolfo’s army is. Sethbert will be divided, fighting the fight in two theaters.”

Jin Li Tam smiled. Her father was right about this Rudolfo. He was a formidable leader.

The Gypsy Scout went on. “Meanwhile, should you choose well, you shall be his guest until this unpleasantness passes and you can be reunited with your father.”

She nodded. Of course, her father’s secret kin-clave was with the Androfrancines, but Rudolfo’s messenger was proof that other alliances were being sought. House Li Tam, a shipbuilding concern that had established a successful line of banks over five hundred years ago that—known for their political neutrality—even handled the massive Androfrancine accounts. Because House Li Tam had no formal, acknowledged kin-clave with any of the powers, they were free to collect and share information on all of them to the highest bidders.

“What does Rudolfo get out of this for himself?”

She could hear the Scout’s smile around his reply. “He said that when you asked that question, I should tell you that one dance with the sunrise will warm him all the days of his life.”

She chuckled. “I see. A king who wishes he were a poet.”

“We will be waiting to the west for you, should you accept General Rudolfo’s offer of aid.”

And then she was alone in the dark again. Once more, the bell didn’t ring.

Jin Li Tam didn’t need any time to make her decision. It had already been made before the scout arrived. But she’d wondered earlier if Rudolfo would make the third gesture, and the scout in her tent was sufficient. Typically, there would be less subterfuge involved, perhaps even a formal gathering. But each of Rudolfo’s three gestures bore a subtlety that could be open to interpretation. The first had been the offer to dance in the presence of Sethbert. The second had been another message he had tapped into her

wrist, the last words: *And I would never call you consort.*

She had her third gesture. If there had been only one or two gestures within the night, it would have meant nothing. But the third gesture contained yet another hidden message, and she knew for certain now that this Rudolfo was a Whymer Maze of hidden paths behind secret doors. That last hidden message was clearly present, wrapped in the cloak of courtesy to her father. It was the third gesture of a night, a clear point made with subtle grace.

Lord Rudolfo of the Ninefold Forest Houses had announced himself as a potential suitor, following the ancient kin-clave rite prescribed for a Lord seeking alliance between Houses in order to defeat a common foe.

That meant that if she wished to, she could invoke the Providence of Kin-Clave, and by doing so, state without words that she was accepting him as a suitor.

Jin Li Tam wondered how much of this her father already knew, and decided that it had probably been his idea in the first place.

Isaak released his hand. His eyes went hot and steam shot out from him. "I will not, Lord. I will not be anyone's weapon again."

For a brief moment, Rudolfo tasted fear in his mouth. A metallic taste. "No, no, no." He reached out, took up the hand again. "Never that, Isaak. But the other bits. The poetry, the plays, the histories, the philosophies, the mythologies, the maps. Everything the Androfrancine library protected and preserved . . . at least what bits you know. I would not have these pass from our world because of a buffoon's ambition."

"That is a monumental task, Lord, for a single servitor."

"I believe," Rudolfo said, "that you may have some help."

The magicked Gypsy Scouts returned from the Entrolusian camp before dawn. They carried a bound, gagged, hooded man between them, deposited him in a chair and removed his hood. Another scout put a large leather pouch on the table.

Servers laid breakfast on the table—oranges, pomegranates, cakes made with nuts and honey, berries with liquored syrup—while Rudolfo studied their guest. He was a smallish man with delicate fingers and a broad face. His eyes bulged and veins stood out on his neck and forehead.

Isaak stared. Rudolfo patted his arm. "He looks familiar to you?"

The metal man clicked. "He does, Lord. He was Brother Charles's apprentice."

Rudolfo nodded. He sat at the head of the table and nibbled at a cake, washing it down with chilled peach wine.

The Gypsy Scouts gave their report; it was brief.

"So how many do they have?"

"Thirteen in total, Lord," the chief scout answered. "They are in a tent near the center of his camp. We found him sleeping among them."

"Thirteen," Rudolfo said, stroking his beard. "How many mechoservitors did the Androfrancines have, Isaak?"

"That is all of them, lord."

He waved to the nearest Scout. "Remove his gag."

The man blustered and flushed, his eyes wild and his mouth working like a landed tr Ske ">

Rudolfo stabbed a slice of orange with a small silver fork. "I will ask you questions; you will answer them. Otherwise you will not speak."

The man nodded.

Rudolfo pointed at Isaak with his fork. "Do you recognize this metal man?"

The man nodded again, his face now pale.

“Did you change this mechoservitor’s script on the orders of Overseer Sethbert of the Entrolusian City States?”

“I . . . I did. Overseer Sethbert—”

Rudolfo snapped his fingers. A scout drew a slim dagger, placing its tip at the man’s throat. “Just yes or no for now.”

The man swallowed. “Yes.”

The knife eased up.

Rudolfo selected another slice of orange and popped it into his mouth. “Did you do this terrible thing for money?”

The man’s eyes filled with tears. His jaw tensed. Slowly, he nodded again.

Rudolfo leaned forward. “And do you understand exactly what you did?”

The Androfrancine apprentice sobbed. When he didn’t nod right away, the scout refocused him on Rudolfo’s question with a point of the blade. “Y-yes, Lord.”

Rudolfo chewed a bit of pomegranate. He kept his voice level and low. “Do you wish mercy for this terrible crime?”

The sobbing escalated. A low whine rose to a howl so full of misery, so full of despair that it lay heavy on the air.

“Do you,” Rudolfo said again, his voice even quieter, “want mercy for your terrible crime?”

“I didn’t know it would work, Lord. I swear to you. And none of us thought that if it *did* work it would be so . . . so utterly, so . . .”

Rudolfo raised his hand and his eyebrows. The man stopped. “How could you know? How could anyone know? Xhum Y’zir has been dead over two thousand years. And his so-called Age of Laughing Madness has lo SMadcoung passed.” Rudolfo carefully selected another honeyed cake, nibbling at its corners. “So my question remains: Do you wish mercy?”

The man nodded.

“Very well. You have one opportunity and only one. I can not say the same for your liege.” Rudolfo looked over at the metal man. His eyes flashed and a slight trail of steam leaked from the corners of his mouth. “In a few moments, I am going to leave you here with my best Gypsy Scouts and my metallic friend, Isaak. I want you to very slowly, very clearly and in great detail, explain everything you know about scripting, maintaining and repairing Androfrancine mechoservitors.” Rudolfo stood. “You only have one chance and you only have a few hours. If you do not satisfy me, you will spend the rest of your natural days in chains, on Tormentor’s Row for all the known world to see, while my Physicians of Penitent Torture peel away your skin with salted knives and wait for it to grow back.” He tossed back the rest of his wine. “You will spend the rest of your days in urine and feces and blood, with the screams of young children in your ears and the genocide of a city on your soul.”

The man vomited now, choking foul-smelling bile onto his tunic.

Rudolfo smiled. “I’m so glad you understand me.” He paused at the tent flap. “Isaak, pay careful

attention to the man.”

Outside, he waved for Gregoric. “Bring me a bird.”

He wrote the message himself. It was a simple, one-word question. After he wrote it, he tied it to the bird’s foot with the green thread of peace, but it felt like a lie. He whispered a destination to the bird and pressed his lips briefly to its small, soft head. Then he threw it at the sky and the sky caught it, sent it flapping south to the Entrolusian camp.

He whispered the question he had written. It sounded empty, but he whispered it again. “Why?”

Neb

Neb didn’t realize he had fallen asleep until he felt a hand shaking him awake. He opened his eyes, jerking alert. The redheaded woman knelt next to him. She was wearing a dark cloak, but the hood was pushed back and her hair was up.

She placed a finger over her lips. When he nodded, she spoke in a low voice. “War is coming. It’s not safe here. Do you understand?”

He nodded.

“Sethbert destroyed Windwir and is giddy with his handiwork. He’s keeping you alive so that your story can entertain him. Do you understand?”

Neb swallowed. He’d wonder S#82">

“I’m leaving now. I want you to come with me.”

He nodded, scrambling out of the cot.

“Stay near me,” she said, drawing a pouch out from under her shirt where it hung on a cord around her neck. She loosed the drawstrings and poured a handful of powder into her hand. She cast it at her forehead, her shoulders and her feet, then licked the remainder of the powder from the palm of her hand.

Neb watched as her eyes rolled back, then watched as she faded to a shadow in front of his eyes. For a moment, he thought she might magick him as well, and the prospect terrified him. He’d read about scout-magicks and knew how they could affect the untrained and inexperienced. But then she sealed the pouch and dropped it back inside her shirt.

“Follow me,” she said. She unraveled a silk string from her wrist and attached it to his wrist as well.

Holding the string, he moved with her as she slipped out of the tent and into the predawn morning. Neb followed her into the darker places of the darkened camp, sliding past tents where soldiers snored and mumbled. He did the best he could to keep track of where they were, but it seemed she changed direction just as he would get oriented.

Finally, they left the camp altogether and moved silently through the forest. As they ran, the redheaded woman’s words sank into him.

Sethbert destroyed Windwir. Those words kept at him, pressing him, prodding him, but he did not know why. He’d heard the soldiers earlier, but agreed that Androfrancine curiosity was a more likely culprit than the Overseer, madness or not. But now, this woman not only believed it, but also said war was coming, and she could have just left. But she hadn’t—she had come to him first, taking more risk

onto herself than she needed.

Neb trusted that.

Sethbert destroyed Windwir. Again, it pressed and prodded. Something behind that wall of words crumbled a bit more, and light peeked through.

Sethbert.

When it hit him, Neb stopped short and the string went taut. The redheaded woman stopped, and in the gray light Neb could see the faintest shimmer of her as she crouched.

“Why have you stopped? We’re nearly there.”

He wished he could open his mouth and explain to her why he couldn’t go with her. He wished he could tell her about the bolt of electricity that passed through him when he realized the truth.

Sethbert destroyed Windwir.

Neb hadn’t really killed his father—Sethbert had. And it changed everything.

Because of that, he couldn’t leave with her now.

Because of that, he had to go back and kill Sethbert.

Petronus

As the sun rose behind him in a birdless sky, Petronus crested the ridge and looked down on the Desolation of Windwir.

Nothing could have prepared him for it. He’d crested this ridge hundreds of times, riding out and back on various assignments for the Order. Certainly he’d known this time that he wouldn’t see the familiar sights. The large ships at the docks, low in the water with cargo bound for the Entrolusian Delta. The wide, high stone walls that encircled the various quarters that made up the world’s greatest city. The spires of the cathedrals and of the Great Library, colors waving in the morning breeze. The houses and shops outside the city gates, nestled up against the walls like calves against their mother.

Petronus slid from the saddle and let his horse tend itself. He stood, shaking, studying the scene that unfolded before him.

He’d known better than to expect any of these things, but he’d thought surely there’d be something familiar to him here.

There was not.

The charred ruins were scattered across the field, and there was no clear delineation where the wreckage of the city stopped and the wreckage of the outlying areas began. Flecked with impact craters and mounds of black rubble, the landscape stretched out and away, ending abruptly at the river’s edge. It was bordered by hills to the west and south, and Petronus could see the smoke and flags of the Gypsy camp nestled between foothills.

There was no sign of the Entrolusian camp, but knowing Sethbert, it was hidden away, within reach but not easy reach. A man seldom fell far afield of his father, and from everything he’d heard, Sethbert was every bit as paranoid and problematic as the man who’d raised him and trained him up into his current

role. Petronus had once had Aubert removed from the Papal Residence under the watchful eyes of the Gray Guard for threatening the Pope's hospitality staff after accusing them of some kind of treachery or another.

Of course, the same theory would apply to Rudolfo. He'd known the father well enough. Jakob was a fair albeit ruthless man who ruled his Ninefold Forest Houses with a blend of Androfrancine sensibility and Snsih. uncompromising attention to the Rites of Kin-Clave. He hadn't balked at putting heretics on Tormentor's Row . . . but neither had he been willing to allow the Order access to those prisoners.

Petronus suspected that Rudolfo was made of similar stuff as his father, too. He'd been a boy when Petronus had set into motion his transition out of power. But soon after, Jakob died and that boy was forced to early manhood, taking up the turban of his fallen father. The old man had heard a bit here or there, most notably that he'd stood with the Freehold of the Emerald Coasts in their decision to embargo the City States when they announced their annexation of the Gulf of Shylar and its free cities. Rudolfo had earned a reputation as a brilliant strategist and a competent swordsman during the skirmishes that followed.

He gathered what little he knew about both men and stored it away for future use.

Even now, he told himself, in the face of this devastation, you're scheming and plotting, old man. But why? He'd needed to see for himself that it was gone. He couldn't wait for the birds or the other messengers—no one's description, written or spoken, would've been good enough. He needed to see it himself.

Beyond that, what did it matter? There were two kings on the field, both having kin-clave with the fallen city. And both men were competent—albeit different—leaders.

You've seen what you came to see. Go home now. Return to your boat and your nets and your quiet life.

He turned away from the blasted plain below him, recovered his reins, and then turned back.

"There's nothing here that I can do," Petronus said out loud. "It's not my place."

But in his heart he knew it was a lie.

Jin Li Tam

Jin Li Tam knew they were close when the boy stopped. The magicks had not only enhanced her speed and her strength, but also her sight and her sense of smell. The trade-off was the buzzing in her ears and the shifting headache. Her father had seen to it that she was trained in all manner of subterfuge, including the use of stealth magick even though it was considered unseemly for a noble to use the Elder Ways.

She looked at the boy when he stopped, and what she saw raised the fine hair on her forearms. Alternating waves of anger and relief washed his face, and he kept looking behind them, pulling at the string.

"We're nearly there," she said in a low voice. "Keep moving."

Then he d Smannt>id the unexpected. His hand snaked out, catching the magick pouch that dangled from her neck and tugging it so hard that the cord snapped. With his other hand, he snapped the silk thread that bound him to her. She reached out to grab him, but he was already running back toward the camp.

Cursing beneath her breath, Jin Li Tam followed him. She knew that she could catch him easily, but the

sky above proclaimed the cusp of morning and every minute she spent going in the wrong direction was a minute closer to being caught. But she couldn't leave the boy knowing what Sethbert's state of mind was. She moved quickly after him.

She overtook him and caught his shoulder, spinning him around and to the ground. She pounced on him. "I don't know what you're playing at," she whispered, "but nothing good awaits you there."

He struggled against her, his mouth working and his eyes rolling.

I should've drugged him and carried him, she thought. He's less well than I thought.

"I think," a new voice said low in her ear, "that you should release the boy now and stand up slowly." She felt the cold steel tip of a knife pressed in against her ribs, near the back of her heart.

She released the boy and did as she was told. Shadow hands grabbed the boy and pulled him to his feet. More hands gripped her and held her away from him.

A shadow face leaned in to hers. She could make out the blond stubble on the chin and could smell the roast pork on his breath. A single blue eye took form just inches from her own eye.

Another whisper cut the night, drifting across the forest. "What do you have there, Deryk?"

Jin stayed quiet.

"A woman and a boy." The blue eye blinked. "She's magicked, too."

Another shadow slipped into the clearing. Jin Li Tam carefully looked around. She could see the patches in the soft forest loam where their boots were—or at least had been. She could pick out the faintest breeze as they shifted around her. But the magicks held, and unless they were inches apart, she could not see them. Still, standard Academy tactics suggested a half-squad loosely surrounded her.

She looked at the boy. He seemed unafraid. The pouch he'd taken from her was nowhere to be seen, and she wondered if he'd hidden it in his shirt. If so, they'd find it soon enough.

"The boy looks familiar to me," the voice said again. "Aren't you the lad we brought down from the ridge? The one with the wago S wir tn?"

The boy nodded.

The voice moved now across the clearing to Jin's side. Hands fumbled with the hood of her cloak. "And who do we have here?"

Another eye appeared near her face—this one brown and speckled with green. It widened and he gasped. "Well this is a surprise." A smile formed in the shadow.

"You'd do well to release us now and go about your business," Jin Li Tam said, her voice barely above a whisper.

The scout captain laughed. "I don't think you'll convince us of that, Lady Tam . . . no matter how persuasive your courtesan ways may be."

Jin Li Tam relaxed the muscles in her shoulders and in her arms; she willed her legs to unlock. "I can be very persuasive."

The sky was purpling now, and she knew that when the sun rose, what little of the scout magicks that

remained would be half as effective. There was no time for preferred strategies in the face of this present crisis.

“I’m sure you can—”

She dropped before he could finish his sentence, and as she fell to her knees, she flicked her wrist and felt the small knife’s handle fall into the palm of her hand. Pitching forward, she ran the knife once around the back of his boot as she rolled toward the boy. As she came up, her hand wove the air, the blade slipping in and out of cloth as she cut where the magicked scouts should be if they were following their own field guides. The howls told her she was not far from the mark.

The one behind her—the one whose knife had pressed into her back—growled and lunged forward, knocking her over. And then she was all knees and elbows, whipping the cloak around his knife hand as she brought her own blade up to the side of his throat.

“Be still,” she said. “You don’t have to die here today.”

But he moved and she didn’t give it a second thought. Father trained his daughters very well indeed. Pulling herself into a crouch, she looked around the clearing. She could smell the blood and she could see the wet patches of black on the gray shadows that lay groaning and thrashing on the ground.

The boy was gone now. She could hear him running full on for the Entrolusian camp, and she knew that she could catch him. But what would she do when she did? The look on his face spoke to more than just having left something valuable behind. It spoke of compelling need, of resolution, of a decision being made.

She would let him run. But she would also do what she could to protect him right here, right now. It didn’t matter that the injured scouts had recognized her—she would be under Rudolfo’s offered protection in a matter of hours. But they had also recognized the boy. And for whatever reason, the boy was returning to Sethbert’s care.

One by one, speaking quiet words of reassurance to the hamstringed scouts, she moved from man to man and cut each throat with careful, practiced precision.

She wiped the blood from her knife onto a twitching, silk-clad corpse and stood, facing west. Then she ran, and the thought came to her again, unbidden but true:

Father trained his daughters very well indeed.

Rudolfo

It took less than two hours for the apprentice to teach Isaak his trade. When Rudolfo returned to his tent, the metal man sat at the table, sifting through the pouch of tools and scrolls, and the man was gone.

“Do you know enough?” Rudolfo asked.

Isaak looked up. “Yes, Lord.”

“Do you want to kill him yourself?”

Isaak’s eyelids fluttered, his metal ears tilted and bent. He shook his head. “No, Lord.”

Rudolfo nodded and shot Gregoric a look. Gregoric returned the nod grimly and left in silence.

The bird had returned in less than an hour. His question had gone unanswered. Sethbert’s reply had been terse: *Return to me the man you took. Surrender the servitor that destroyed Windwir.*

He’d had an hour to ponder the why. Ambition? Greed? Fear? The Androfrancines could have ruled the world with their magicks and mechanicals, yet they hid in their city, sent out their archeologists and scholars to dig and to learn, to understand the present through the past . . . and to protect that past for the future. In the end, he found it didn’t matter so much why the City States and their mad Overseer had ended that work. What mattered was that it never happen again.

“Are you okay, Isaak?”

“I grieve, Lord. And I rage.”

“Aye. Me, too.”

A scout cleared his voice outside. “Lord Rudolfo?”

He looked up. “Yes?”

“A woman met the forward scouts west of Sethbert’s camp, Lord. She came magicked and asking for your protection under the Providence of Kin-Clave.”

He smiled but there was no satisfaction in it. Maybe later, when all of this unpleasantness had passed.

“Very well. Prepare her for travel.”

“Lord?”

“She is to be escorted to the seventh manor. You leave within the hour. The metal man goes with her. Select and magick a half-squad to assist you.”

“Yes, Lord.”

“And fetch me my raven.” Rudolfo fell back into the cushions, exhaustion washing over him.

“Lord Rudolfo?” The metal man struggled to his feet, his damaged leg sparking. “Am I leaving you?”

“Yes, Isaak, for a bit.” He rubbed his eyes. “I wish for you to start that work we spoke of. When I am finished here, I will bring you help.”

“Is there anything I can do here, Lord?”

He doesn't wish to go, Rudolfo realized. But he was too tired to find words of explanation. And the metal man brought something out in him—something like compassion. He couldn't bear to tell him that he was simply too dangerous a weapon to have on the battlefield. Rudolfo rubbed his eyes again and yawned. “Pack your tools, Isaak. You're leaving soon.”

The metal man packed, then swung the heavy pouch over his shoulder. Rudolfo climbed to his feet.

“The woman you will be traveling with is Jin Li Tam of House Li Tam. I would have you bear a message to her.”

Isaak said nothing, waiting.

“Tell her she chose well and that I will come to her when I am finished here.”

“Yes, Lord.”

Rudolfo followed Isaak out of the tent. His raven awaited, its feathers g [itsn="lossy and dark as a wooded midnight. He took it from the scout's steady hands.

“When you reach the seventh manor,” he told his scout, “tell my steward there that Isaak—the metal man—bears my grace.”

The scout nodded once and left. Isaak looked at Rudolfo. His mouth opened and closed; no words came out.

Rudolfo held the raven close, stroking its back with his finger. “I will see you soon, Isaak. Start your work. I'll send the others when I've freed them. You've a library to rebuild.”

“Thank you,” the metal man finally said.

Rudolfo nodded. The scout and the metal man left. Gregoric returned, wiping the apprentice's blood from his hands.

“Sethbert wants his man back,” Rudolfo said.

“I've already seen to it, Lord.”

Somewhere on the edge of camp, Rudolfo thought, a stolen pony ambled its way home bearing a cloth-wrapped burden. “Very well. Magick the rest of your Gypsy Scouts.”

“I've seen to that as well, Lord.”

He looked at Gregoric and felt a pride that burned brighter than his grief or his rage. “You're a good man.”

Rudolfo pulled a thread from the sleeve of his rainbow robe. This time, no other message. This time, no question. He tied the scarlet thread of war to the foot of his darkest angel. When he finished, he whispered no words and he did not fling his messenger at the sky. It leaped from his hands on its own and sped away like a black arrow. He watched it fly until he realized Gregoric had spoken.

“Gregoric?” he asked.

“You should rest, Lord,” the chief of his Gypsy Scouts said again. “We can handle this first battle without you.”

“Yes, I should,” Rudolfo said. But he knew there would be time enough for rest—perhaps even a lifetime of rest—after he won the war.

Neb

The Entrolusian camp was at second alarm when Neb slipped back into his tent. He’d run when the woman attacked the scouts, but he’d seen enough to know she was not the typical noble. The magicks had concealed most of her movement, but it was as if a violent wind had rolled across the clearing. Over his shoulder, he heard men shouting and falling, and a part of him wanted to go back and make sure the woman truly was okay. But she seemed the sort to take care of herself and that meant he needed to get as far away from her as he could. Now that he knew what must be done, he couldn’t afford to let her take him away from Sethbert, no matter how good her intentions might be.

The genocide of the Androfrancine Order hung upon the Overseer’s head and Neb meant to hold him to justice for it. He hid the pouch of stolen magicks. He’d seen the lady use them—the casting seemed easy enough.

He pretended to wake up when the serving woman entered with fresh clothing and a platter of breakfast. She placed the clothing at the foot of his cot and the food on the table, then curtsied at the door. She looked like she wanted to say something, and Neb watched her. Finally, she spoke. “I’ve just come from the officers’ mess. Word is that Rudolfo’s war-raven arrived this morning. There was a raid last night. An Androfrancine was taken right from his tent as he slept. The Overseer’s Lady, Jin Li Tam, was taken as well. And a half-squad of our scouts were butchered west of camp. These are dangerous days, boy. I’d stay close to the tent if I were you.”

He nodded. After she left, he wondered about the Androfrancine. He’d seen glimpses of him—he wore the robes of an apprentice, colored in the drab brown of the Office for Mechanical Study. He wondered if he’d been taken or if he’d left. And the thought of the dead scouts made his stomach sink. At least he was confident she’d gotten away from them. When he’d run, he’d not looked back but he’d also not had any doubt in her ability to protect herself.

Not only was she one of the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen—tall, with copper hair that threw back the sunlight and piercing blue eyes and alabaster skin, lightly freckled in the waning second summer. But now it seemed she was also the most lethal.

Neb moved to the table and ate a breakfast of eggs and rice, chased with a crisp apple cider and a wedge of cheddar cheese. While he ate, he plotted the assassination of the man who killed his father.

He’d never really thought about killing anyone before. Well, that wasn’t exactly true. He had thought about it once about two years ago, but it was a brief thought. He’d been thirteen then and the Gray Guard had come to the school to make their annual round for recruits.

He was a big man, a captain named Grymlis, standing tall and broad in his dress gray cap, cloak, trousers and jacket—offset starkly by the black shirt. The blue thread of inquiry woven together with the white thread of kin-clave formed the jacket and trouser piping. The long, slender sword flashed silver as he whipped it in the air.

The orphans fell back, gasping, and the tip of the sword hung in the air, pointed at one of the larger boys.

“What about you?”

It hadn't been a hard decision, really. Petronus sent in the Gray Guard scouts, magicked and armed with arrows that burned upon impact with a white heat that not even water could put out. Another ancient bit of science kept back from the world so that the Order could keep its edge and limit just how far humanity could go along its headlong path to self destruction.

Petronus sent them in, led by a captain who was already old for the job. Grymlis was the only Gray Guard that Petronus knew could do what needed doing to push the Marsh King back into minding his own and still be able to sleep at night, he thought. So they burned the village on Petronus's orders, killing every man, woman and child.

Afterward, he'd insisted that they ride him out there. It had taken him a day and half. Grymlis had gone with him, though it was obvious that he did not want to, and did not think the Pope should go either.

Petronus had done the same thing then that he did now. It wasn't a large village, but it was larger than he had imagined. And he'd approached it on foot, though an assistant led his horse. Ash crunching beneath his feet, he'd approached the ruined village until he could see it through the haze of smoke that still rose from it. He could make out the charred lumber. The tumbled, steaming stones. The smoldering, black piles that had been . . . what? The larger ones were livestock. The smaller ones children, or maybe dogs. And everything else in between.

Petronus had gasped then, and covered his mouth with his hand, and even though he'd known exactly what he was doing when he gave the order nearly three days earlier, the realization of it shifted like the load of a wagon and it rocked him.

“Gods, what have I done?” he asked no one in particular.

“You did what you must to keep the light alive, Excellency,” the captain said. “You've seen it now. You know what it looks like. We need to leave.”

He turned around and walked back to his horse. He knew full well that the Marshers would not bury these dead. The Marshers way was simple: You ate or buried what you killed. You did not burn the living or dead—unless it was food.

The Androfrancines had come using fire and they had left those they killed unburied. The message to the Marsh King was clear. And Petronus was smart enough to know that Grymlis had only agreed to escort him back to the village because it added to the message: *Behold, I stand at the edge of your field of dead and turn my back.* The spies they had pointed out to him in the tree line would bear the last of the message back to their Marsh King, and Petronus's neighbors and caravans would be safe for another three or four years.

As he rode back to Windwir from that village so long ago, Petronus had realized suddenly that his life was close to becoming such a lie that he could no longer live it. When he returned, he started plotting against himself with the help of his named successor.

Now it was no longer a village before him. It was the largest, greatest city of the Named Lands. It had been his first lover, this city, and Petronus approached it.

Of course he saw the connection immediately. *I'm identifying with past grief and seeking redemption for perceived wrong.* He'd wondered if the Market Path would eventually show up along the Fivefold way, and here he was, getting ready to bargain.

And certainly that was something he could anchor to within himself—a great sin that he had committed, that he could experience shame over and avoid the larger shame that threatened to swallow him whole.

If I'd been here. If I'd kept the throne and ring, this would have never happened. It would all still be here.

Yet he knew it wasn't true, that evaluating the present based on imagined and different pasts was an unsolvable cipher. Yet he felt it, and it didn't matter that it was a lie. It squeezed his heart and caught in his throat.

If I'd been here.

He ran the Whymer Maze inside himself as he shuffled forward on wooden legs. And then stopped.

He saw it now. What he had been looking for. He'd thought they were sticks, but how could there be so many sticks? And he thought they were stones but they were all nearly the same size, though certainly some were smaller. Bones scattered across the charred and cratered city. Seeing them, Petronus knew what he had to do.

He would bury Windwir's dead.

Jin Li Tam

Jin Li Tam wasn't sure what she expected. The scouts had been waiting for her, and though her own magicks were fading fast, theirs held true. Surrounded by ghosts, she ran with them across the hills beneath a morning sky until they reached the safety of Rudolfo's camp.

The camp of the Wandering Army was ablaze with unbridled color. There was no rhyme or reason to it, no theme that interconnected the rainbow hues of the Ninefold Forest Houses. Unless maybe, she thought, the theme was chaos.

One of Rudolfo's captains had greeted her upon her arrival, explaining that the general himself was busy. They'd even had a bird ready so that she could get word to her father of her recent change of situation. She composed her note over breakfast, using three different codes for the message, and flung the white bird at the sky.

The c [w R

He appraised her with his dark eyes. "We will be riding to the seventh manor, Lady Tam."

She calculated the leagues. "Four days?"

"Three," he said. "We'll be moving fast."

Jin looked at the hill where the officers sat on their horses and the soldiers gathered. "When do you think the fighting will start?"

He looked at the sky as if the sparse clouds could predict pending violence. "Soon, Lady. And General Rudolfo wants us far away when that happens."

She nodded. "I'm ready to ride."

They brought a roan for her, and she climbed easily into the saddle. A half-squad of scouts pressed in, their stallions magicked to muffle their hooves and increase their stamina and speed. When she looked to

the captain, he shifted uncomfortably.

“We have another rider coming.”

It was the biggest horse she'd ever seen, its hooves still flecked with the powder that would muffle their sound to a whisper. It was black as midnight, and upon the stallion's back was a robed figure that sat too high in the saddle. The robed figure hissed and clanked as it shifted. A small gout of steam released from high in its back, and Jin realized that the back of the robe had been cut away to expose a small square grate made of metal. From a distance, it would look like an Androfrancine on the ride. But up close, Jin could clearly see the shining hands, the metal feet, the dim specks of golden light from beneath the hood.

“Lady Jin Li Tam,” the metal man said, “I bear a message from Lord Rudolfo of the Ninefold Forest Houses, General of the Wandering Army.”

As he turned, light fell on his face. This newer mechoservitor was far sleeker, far more refined than Sethbert's older model. She felt her eyes narrow as she examined him.

“I am to tell you,” he continued, “that you have chosen well and that Lord Rudolfo will come to you when he can.”

“Thank you,” she said. Then she paused. “What am I to call you?”

The metal man nodded slightly. “You may refer to me as Mechoservitor [Mec"juNumber Three. Lord Rudolfo calls me Isaak.”

Jin Li Tam smiled. “I will call you Isaak, too.”

The soldiers were double-checking their gear, tightening the straps on their saddlebags and testing their bow-strings.

The captain took the lead. “We leave fast—west, then north, then east—and we don't slow for the first twenty leagues.” He pointed to Jin Li Tam and then to Isaak. “I want you two just behind me. The rest will hem us in.” He nodded to a young scout with blond hair peeking out beneath his turban. “Daedrek, you'll take first scout. Brown bird for danger, white bird for stop.”

Daedrek reached over to take the small partitioned bird basket. He looped it over the pommel of his saddle and laced the pull strings through the fingers of his left hand.

Jin Li Tam watched, fascinated. She'd heard stories about the Gypsy Scouts . . . legends, really, going back to the first Rudolfo, that desert thief who'd led his tribe of Gypsy Bandits into the far off forests of the New World to avoid the desolation of the old one. She'd heard the legends, but she'd never seen them in action.

She hoped they were better fighters than Sethbert's Delta Scouts. From the looks of them, she was pretty sure they were. There were only five plus their captain, but she could see the danger in their narrow eyes, their tight smiles and the way they cocked their heads at the slightest noise.

Daedrek surged forward, and the others waited now until he made the league.

She looked over to the metal man. It explained the larger horse. Obviously the mechanicals weren't nearly as heavy as they looked, but still easily twice that of a large man. Yet he rode well enough. She wondered if he'd ridden before now.

The captain whistled and they took off, riding low and pushing their horses hard. They rode with bows

tied to their saddles and swords tucked beneath their arms.

As they moved over the first hill, Jin saw the Desolation of Windwir to her right, an expanse of scorched, pockmarked earth. She thought she saw a horse moving out there along the edge of the wasteland, but she couldn't be sure because the sun came out from behind a cloud and blocked out her view.

They rode for three hours before the white bird flashed back into the captain's short bird net. They stopped then to change out first scouts, then pressed on.

The day flashed by, and when the sun set, they could see the next river's low line of hills in the distance—the beginnings of the prairie ocean that hid Rudolfo's nine forests and their houses. The [ir hily made a fireless camp, pitching their tents in a ring around the tent she shared with Isaak.

He sat in the corner and she lay in her bedroll. He clicked and clacked faintly, even when he wasn't moving, and she found it both disturbing and comforting.

She tried to sleep, but she couldn't. The events of the past few days would not release her. From the moment she saw the pillar of smoke until now—how much had transpired? How much had the world changed? How much had she changed?

She hadn't killed a man since her first kill when she was still a girl. She'd maimed her share, but at heart she still held on to some of the Whymer beliefs, no matter how impractical they were for her way of life. But today alone, she'd killed five. And she'd sworn off the possibility of children, and saw a magick woman three times a year to keep it that way. And this morning she'd been risking her life to help a boy she did not share blood with.

She'd known Sethbert was slowly going mad. Her father had told her it would be so because every sixth male child in Sethbert's family died in madness, a pattern that generations of kin had still not recognized and rectified. She had expected his gradual deterioration.

But she had never expected that she would be consort to the man who destroyed the Androfrancine Order, or that in the span of a night she would suddenly be kin-clave to the Gypsy King through his announcement as a suitor.

And now she shared a tent with a metal man made from yesterday's magick and science.

She looked over at him. He sat still, his eyes glowing faintly. "Do you sleep?"

A bit of steam escaped his back and he whirred. "I do not sleep, Lady."

"What do you do, then?"

He looked up, and limned in the light of his eyes, she could see the tears. "I grieve, Lady."

She was taken aback. Sethbert's mechoservitor had never shown any sign of emotion. This was new and frightening to her.

"You *grieve*?"

"I do. Surely you know of the Desolation of Windwir?"

She had not expected this. "I do know of it. I grieve it as well."

"It was a terrible thing."

She swallowed. "It was." A thought struck her. "You know," she said, "you're not alone. Sethbert has others—he has all of the others, if I remember right."

Isaak nodded. "He does. Lord Rudolfo assured me of it. He intends for them to help me with the library."

Library? She sat up. "What library?"

Isaak clicked and clacked as he shifted on his stool. "Between us, we contain perhaps a third of the library in our memory scrolls from our work in catalogs and translations. Lord Rudolfo has asked me to oversee the reconstruction of the library and the restoration of what knowledge remains."

She leaned forward. "Rudolfo is going to rebuild the library in the far north?"

"He is."

It was an unpredictable move. She wondered if her father knew of this. It wouldn't surprise her if he did. But the more she learned about this Rudolfo, the more she thought that perhaps this one could even outthink her father, and play the board three moves beyond his five.

That made him a strong suitor.

And his decisiveness. To rebuild the library, three days after the fires of the first had finally died, in the far north, away from the squabbles and politics of the Named Lands. The descendant and namesake of Xhum Y'zir's desert thief, suddenly host and patron to the greatest repository of human knowledge.

A strong suitor indeed, she thought.

"He is a good man," Isaak said, as if he were reading her mind. "He's told me that I'm not responsible for the Desolation of Windwir." He paused. "He tells me Sethbert is."

She nodded. "Rudolfo speaks the truth. I'm not sure how, but Sethbert destroyed Windwir. He was working with an Androfrancine apprentice."

More steam shot from Isaak's exhaust grate. His mouth opened and closed as his eyes shifted. More water leaked out from around the jewels. "I know how Sethbert destroyed Windwir," Isaak said, his voice low.

And in that moment, because of the tone in his voice or perhaps the way his shoulders chugged beneath the tattered Androfrancine robe, Jin Li Tam realized that she knew, too. Somehow Sethbert had used this mechanical to bring down the city.

She looked for something to say to the metal man, something by way of comfort, but could not find the words.

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Instead, she lay awake for a long time after that and wondered at the world they'd made.

Rudolfo

First battles, Rudolfo thought, set the tone for the entire war.

Rudolfo sat astride his horse and watched the line of forest. Gregoric and his other captains gathered around. "I've had a vision," Rudolfo said to his men in a quiet voice. "The first battle shall be ours." He smiled at them, his hand upon the pommel of his long, narrow sword. "How shall we realize this vision of mine?"

Gregoric nudged his horse closer. "By striking fastest and first, General."

Rudolfo nodded. "I concur."

"We'll send the scouts in first and drive them west like pheasant. Sethbert is no strategist, but his general Lysias is Academy bred—very conservative. He'll see the ploy and try to engage the scouts, judging them to be the inferior force. He'll think to put them between the ruins and the river and call up his contingency to keep the battalion occupied." His voice was low, and Rudolfo watched him make frequent eye contact with the others, measuring them.

One of the other captains smiled. "First battalion will fall back at rapid retreat after a modest effort to hold their ground. If Lysias sees that what he thought was a brigade is only a battalion, he'll most likely pursue."

"Or divide his force when he sees that the scouts are our primary assault," Gregoric said. "Or both perhaps."

Rudolfo smiled, remembering the song very well. "Feint with the cutlass, strike with the knife."

"Then, strike with the cutlass, too," Gregoric said, finishing the lyrics out.

Rudolfo nodded. His father, Jakob, and his First Captain of the Gypsy Scouts had taught them the song to keep time with their blade and footwork. Later, Rudolfo realized, it had really been a strategy lesson, teaching him the Hymnal of the Wandering Army. Three hundred and thirteen songs had never been written down in the two thousand years that Rudolfo's people had occupied the Ninefold Forest. They were written in the hearts of the living, moving fortress that first Rudolfo had built so long ago, the Wandering Army, and sung down to his recruits from the first day of training forward.

"If he pursues the retreating battalion—as I'm sure he will," Gregoric continued, "he'll find three more waiting and we'll net that fish."

"Excellent work, captains," Rudolfo said. "I will ride with the scouts and open this war in a way that is fitting for the general of this Wandering Army."

Gregoric nodded and the others did the same. It pleased Rudolfo that none of them worried about him entering the field. It meant they understood him and respected him as a soldier and a general.

"Very well," Rudolfo said. He turned toward his aide. "And afterward," he said, "I will dine with the men."

Two hours later, Rudolfo hid in the copse of trees surrounded by magicked scouts. He sat on his horse

but the scouts around him were on foot. Their magicks would move them at nearly the speed of a horse and hide them from the eye. But at those speeds they would not be quiet. They would sound like wind rushing across the ground.

Gregoric looked at Rudolfo. “General, would you give the whistle?”

Rudolfo smiled and nodded. “For Windwir, my Gypsy Scouts,” he said quietly, and then whistled, low and long.

He kicked his horse alive and bolted toward the Entrolusian infantry encamped in the forest across the meadow, smiling at what they would see.

A horse, a single rider galloping forward with a narrow sword lifted high in the air. Around him, a wind low to the ground and roaring towards them.

He lowered himself on the back of his horse, holding his sword low and across the stallion’s dark side. He heard his Gypsy Scouts around him, catching slight glimpses of the ones nearest—though very slight.

They raced the meadow, entering the woods at breakneck pace. A few magicked Delta Scouts shouted because there wasn’t time to send up birds. Rudolfo assumed one must’ve decided to brave the rushing, invisible river because he heard the briefest clash of steel and a magick-muffled scream. The first of the Entrolusian soldiers rallied to that shouting, and Rudolfo rode straight into the center of them, Gypsy Scouts mowing over them like a wind of blades. Rudolfo turned then and rode back, laughing and waving his sword. He chose a man and rode him down, then took the ear off his sergeant.

“Where’s your captain?” Rudolfo shouted.

The sergeant sneered and lunged forward with his sword, drawing a line of blood along the horse’s side. Rudolfo kicked him back and brought the sword down on his neck. The sergeant fell, and Rudolfo whipped the sword over and took the ear off another sold cf abroier. “Where’s your captain?”

The soldier pointed, and Rudolfo put the sword through his upper arm. He’d not fight in this war again, but he’d have his life for his respect.

Rudolfo spun the horse and rode in the direction the man had pointed.

It did not surprise Rudolfo that Sethbert’s worst and weakest were out for this particular battle. It was wired into the Academy to use the worst resources first as a gauge of your opponent. It also told the farmers at home they, too, could die heroic deaths.

He found the captain standing with three soldiers and an aide. The ground moved around him strangely, giving the Delta scouts away, but Rudolfo let his own contingent take care of them.

He slid from the saddle and killed one of the soldiers. One of his scouts—he thought it might be Gregoric—slipped in and killed the other two.

The Entrolusian captain drew his sword and Rudolfo slapped it down and aside. “They send me children,” he said, gritting his teeth.

The captain growled and brought the sword up again. Rudolfo parried, then stepped to the side and went in with his knife to slice at the sword hand.

The captain’s sword clattered to the ground, and Rudolfo pointed his own sword at the aide. “Ready your general’s bird.” He nodded to the captain. By now, at least six Gypsy Scout blades pressed in

against the shaking captain. “You will write Lysias a message in B’rundic script.”

The aide drew a bird and passed a scrap of paper and a small inking needle to the captain. The captain swallowed, his face pale. “What shall I write?”

Rudolfo stroked his beard. “Write this: Rudolfo has slain me.” The man looked up, confused. Rudolfo whistled, and a knife tip pricked the young man’s neck. “Write it.”

He wrote the message and passed it to Rudolfo, who inspected it. He handed it to the aide and watched him tie it to the sea crow’s foot. After the bird launched, he pushed his sword into the captain and climbed back into his saddle.

“For Windwir,” he said again, and turned back to join his men.

Then, for the next nine hours, Rudolfo helped his Wandering Army send that first message in blood to the man who had snuffed out the light of the world.

Petronus

Petronus skirted the ruined city and followed the river south. Three or four leagues downriver from the shattered and blackened stubs that had once anchored Windwir’s piers, Petronus remembered a small town. Once he reached it, he’d recruit what men—or even women—that he could and return to begin his work.

It would be months, he realized, and the rains would be upon them sooner than that. Not far on its heels, the wind and the snow of a northern winter. With the Androfrancines gone, there’d be no one to magick the river. Some years it froze. Some years it didn’t. But with the Androfrancines gone, there’d be no need to go upriver with any frequency.

Petronus rode his horse along the bank, careful to keep from the forest. The first battle of the war had gone late into the night—he’d heard bits of it as he’d ridden south—and from time to time, during the day, he saw the birds lifting and speeding off carrying whatever word they carried. He’d also listened to it as he lay in his fireless camp and tried to sleep, before rising early to silence and morning fog.

As he rode in the quiet of the day, Petronus wondered about this new war and what had started it.

The Entrolusians would easily outnumber the Wandering Army, but if Rudolfo was his father’s son, he’d be fierce and swift and ruthless.

He was less clear why they were fighting, but wasn’t willing to stop and ask, either. It had to do with Windwir, but just what eluded him. Neither of those two armies had anything to do with the city’s destruction—that was something the Androfrancines had done to themselves, meddling with what they had no business meddling with.

Still, Rudolfo and Sethbert would have their piss together and see who could go the farthest.

His horse started, jerking its head and frisking. Petronus felt a hand on his thigh, and realized that invisible hands held his horse by the bit. “Where are you going, old man?”

A face stretched up and the light hit it in a way that Petronus could barely see its outline. Magicked scouts. But which?

“South to Kendrick Town,” he said, nodding in that direction. “I’ve business there.”

“Where do you come from?”

Petronus wasn't sure how to answer. Caldu Bay was too far for any citizen to have reasonable business so far away. He glanced back over his shoulder, taking in the black expanse of Windwir. “I was bound for Windwir on Androfrancine business,” he said. “But when I arrived, there wasn't anything left of it. I just thought any survivors would have headed south.”

“We've been instructed to bring any survivors before Lord Sethbert, Overseer of the United City States of the Entrolusian Delta.”

Petronus squinted, trying to see the line of the man's face. “So there were survivors?”

“It's not our place to say,” the scout said. “We will bring you before Lord Sethbert.” Petronus felt his horse being pulled. At first the roan resisted, and Petronus considered doing the same. He'd known Sethbert when the Overseer was a pimple-faced teenager. The young son of Aubert had been in the Academy around the time of Petronus's death by assassin's poison. They certainly hadn't seen much of each other.

But what if he recognizes me? He chuckled. Thirty years had changed him. He was twice the size he'd been and his hair had gone white. He was an old man now, moving a bit slow. Dressed in ratty fisherman's robes. It had been three decades since he'd worn the blue cloak or the white robe. The man that he had been in those days wouldn't even recognize the man he had become.

“Very well,” Petronus said with a laugh, “take me to Lord Sethbert.”

They moved quickly through the wood. Those places where the sunlight lanced in, Petronus caught shadows of the dark clothing and the drawn battle knives of the Delta scouts. They reminded him of the Gray Guard, and he thought about Grymlis again and the Marshes village.

A black field littered with bones as far as the eye could see.

Petronus shook off the memories. “I heard fighting in the night,” he said.

No quick reply and no boasting. These men were defeated, he realized. He'd not press the question to them again.

In silence, they made their way to Sethbert and the Entrolusian camp.

The camp was alive with activity, a small city of tents blended into a forested hillside, invisible until you were within it. He saw servants, war-whores, cooks and medicos all busy about their trade. For the whore, his escort even paused for a moment, laughing and pointing at the young lieutenant she was riding.

Finally, they stopped outside the most lavish array of connected tents Petronus had seen. It even out-glamoured the silk Papal Suites that the Gray Guard accompanied around the Named Lands during the Year of the Falling Moon, that time each century when the Pope wandered the Named Lands to honor the settlers who homesteaded the New World.

They walked Petronus to the side of a large open canopy, and whispered for him to dismount.

“Wait here. When Lord Sethbert is finished, he'll send for you.” Then, taking his horse, they left him there. He couldn't help but hear the one-sided conversation.

“I just hope you'll be able to speak soon,” the voice said. “I'm running out of patience, boy. You are the only witness and I must hear your story.”

Petronus looked for the voice, and saw an obese man sitting upon a folding throne that creaked beneath his weight. He was chastising a boy in robes not dissimilar to his own. With Sethbert's tone, he would've thought the boy would hang his head, but instead, he was looking all around.

He's counting the guards, Petronus realized, and with no subtlety. But Sethbert wasn't noticing as the boy cased the open air court.

What's he up to? Perhaps a spy from the other camp. But Jakob would've certainly never used a boy in such a hapless way. Surely Rudolfo could not be so very different from his father? Then he saw the line of his face.

He'd had a professor of human studies at the Francine School named Gath. "Show me the line of a man's face," Gath would say to his classroom, spanning the students with his finger, "and I will tell you the intentions of his heart." Petronus stayed late after class three afternoons per week and asked that old professor every question he could think of.

It had never failed him, and he knew exactly what the line of the boy's face meant.

The intention of his heart was to kill Sethbert, and as careless as he was studying Sethbert's circumstances, Petronus was fairly certain that his intentions wouldn't matter once the guards saw what he was doing.

Petronus shouted and raced beneath the canopy.

Jin Li Tam

Jin Li Tam rode across the prairie ocean and watched the metal man beside her. He'd been silent most of the day, his eyes fluttering as the lids flashed up and down. He was drumming his long, slender metal fingers on the saddle.

Every time she looked at him, she remembered his tone when he'd told her he knew how Sethbert destroyed Windwir. Somehow, Sethbert had used this mechoservitor to bring down a city and end an era where knowledge of the past was carefully preserved . . . and protected.

She shuddered. "What are you doing, Isaak?"

His fingers and eyelids stopped, and he looked over at her. "I am ciphering, Lady. I'm calculating the supplies and surface area necessary to rebuild the Androfrancine Library."

She was impressed. "How can you possibly do that?"

"I've spent a number of years logging expeditionary expense ledgers and cataloging the financial reports of various holdings," he answered. "Once I'm finished, I will modify my numbers based on the economic growth patterns between now and the day the reports were written." A gout of steam from his back. "These will merely be initial inquiries," Isaak said. "I will have to present Lord Rudolfo with something far more accurate."

She smiled at the metal man. "You really mean to do this, don't you?"

He turned to her. "Of course I do. I must."

Jin Li Tam chuckled. "It's a giant task."

"It is," he said, "but a pebble shall fell a giant and a small river make a canyon over time." She recognized

the quote from the Whymer Bible. She couldn't pinpoint the exact passage—and she certainly couldn't find it if you pushed that heavy, square book into her hands.

“Hopefully you'll have help.”

“I'm sure Lord Rudolfo will free my brothers.” He paused and blinked. “But of course, there will be other Androfrancines that were not in Windwir when I—when it fell.” He looked away.

Others, she thought. *Others*. The expeditions, the scattered schools, missions and abbeys. They would be out there, and soon—if not already—they would hear about the fall of Windwir.

“What do you calculate the library holdings outside Windwir to be?” she asked.

“Ten percent. The mechoservitors—all of us—account for another thirty between us.”

“Gods,” she whispered. She thought about all that was lost, but it was quickly burned out with what they could save. Forty percent of that massive library would still be a significant trove of knowledge. This was what Rudolfo had chosen when faced with the end of an age. And he'd made this decision, sending them north to the Ninefold Forest, *before* he made his final decision about going to war.

That was a rare thing. A man who thought of what to guard before he thought of what to kill. She smiled at this. Of course, this Rudolfo seemed to be a man who could do both at the same time.

And she smiled at that, as well.

“I am hoping you will help, as well, Lady Tam.”

Now it was her turn to blink. He was clever, this metal man. “I see.”

“Your father's bank holds the Androfrancine accounts,” Isaak said. “I'm sure that Lord Rudolfo intends to combine some form of Entrolusian reparations supplemented by Androfrancine holdings in order to fund this venture. It far exceeds the Ninefold Forest Houses' economic capacity.”

“I'm certain my father will be interested in this endeavor of Rudolfo's.”

He certainly would be. She wouldn't be surprised at all if there were a bird waiting for her already, encouraging an alliance with the Gypsy King to keep House Li Tam connected with what little knowledge of the First World remained.

She wasn't sure she minded that at all.

Neb

When the summons arrived, Neb decided to use it as an opportunity to see exactly what he was up against. He listened to the Overseer's chiding, all the while counting the guards, counting the steps he'd need to take and planning his route to and from the Overseer's assassination.

Sethbert was well guarded, especially since yesterday's defeat at the hands of the Wandering Army. They'd at least doubled the contingent of honor guard that took up positions within view of the Overseer and his creaking wooden throne. And there had to be Delta scouts nearby, though Neb couldn't see them.

Magicked or not, he doubted he'd survive the attempt. And he wasn't even sure he'd be successful. The Overseer was easily three times his size, and Neb had nothing but his rage to guide him. Beyond a few

fistfights with the other boys, he'd never raised his hands in violence . . . much less raised a knife.

The woman's words came back to him: *Sethbert has destroyed Windwir*. He felt the anger stir inside him, and he summoned a memory of his father, Brother Hebda, with his arm around him sitting in the park. He reminded himself of how that would never happen again because of this man, because of what he'd done.

Even if it cost his own life, Neb had to go through with it. He could think of nothing else to do.

He heard shouting, and looked up.

An old man was running toward him, shouting a name he did not recognize.

"Del," the old man said, "thank the gods I've finally found you." He looked vaguely familiar; Neb couldn't place it.

He was a large man—not nearly the size of Sethbert, but broad shouldered and powerfully built. He had to be approaching seventy, but he moved like he was younger. His white beard stood out from his face, long and unruly, and beneath his straw hat, wisps of white hair poked crazily out. His eyes were set in laugh lines and crow's-feet, and before Neb could react, he'd been swept into the man's embrace, squeezed and lifted by those massive arms. Putting him down, the old man gave him a stern look. "I told you to wait for me."

Neb looked at him, not sure what to do or say.

Sethbert cleared his voice. "You know this boy?"

The old man looked surprised, then turned. "Yes, certainly. Humble apologies for interrupting, Lord—I was overcome with relief."

Sethbert squinted at him, too, and Neb wondered if the old man seemed familiar to him as well. "You're the old man my scouts took by the river."

He nodded. "Yes, Lord. We were returning to Windwir when the city . . ." He let the words trail off. "I'd been looking for survivors when—" he patted the boy's shoulder and Neb felt the strength in the large hand that settled on him "—when Del here must've wandered off."

Neb opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it. What was this crazy old man doing?

Sethbert looked at him then, his eyes cold and calculating, his lips pursed in thought. "I was under the impression that he had seen the city fall. My medicos believe some trauma or another has stolen his voice."

The old man nodded. "Aye," he said. "But we only arrived after." His voice lowered. "His mother passed some days ago; he's not spoken since." Then he leaned in closer and whispered. "He's never been altogether right if you know what I mean, Lord."

Sethbert's eyes narrowed. "What is his relationship to you?"

The old man blinked. "He's my grandson. His father was an Androfrancine. They wanted to put him into their orphans' school but I wouldn't allow it." He met Sethbert's eyes. "I don't hold to their secrets and their smugness. His mother and I raised him."

Neb had never seen anyone lie so quickly, so competently before. He studied the old man's face, looking

for some tick that would betray him. Not cetrie hing.

He realized Sethbert was speaking to him, and looked up.

“Is this man your grandfather?”

Looking at the old man, he realized he’d seen him before. In the Great Library . . . but where? It hadn’t been so long ago, either. Or perhaps he looked like someone else—someone well known to him. But why would he lie to Sethbert, creating an elaborate story about a grandson and a dead mother?

Their eyes met and the old man raised his eyebrows. “Well, Del? Are you going to answer the Overseer?”

Slowly, Neb nodded once, then twice.

“And you did not actually see the city of Windwir fall?”

Looking at the old man again, Neb felt a stab of memory. The fire, the lightning, ash falling like snow on the ruined landscape. The screaming, hot wind that blasted out from Windwir, the ships burning and sinking in the river even as they cast off their lines to drift south.

Neb shook his head.

Sethbert scowled. He leaned in to the boy, his voice cold and hollow. “I should teach you to be more truthful.”

“I intend to do just that, Lord,” the old man said with a firm voice. “Though I’m sure he was just confused. These are dark days for all of us.”

Neb wasn’t sure what to expect next, but a scout signaled Sethbert, and the Overseer motioned him closer. Sethbert looked once more at Neb and then at the old man.

“You were bound for Kendrick when my men took you?”

The old man nodded. Neb knew Kendrick. It was a small town not too far south of Windwir. He’d been to it a few times on various errands. “I thought there might be survivors there.”

Sethbert nodded. “I find it odd that you did not tell my men about your missing lad.”

The old man went pale and stammered for a moment. “I beg your forgiveness, Lord. I heard fighting the night before and I was uncertain of how much to say.”

The Overseer smiled. “These are, as you say, dark days.”

The old man nodded.

“Aye,” the first scout said. “You heard the captain.”

Rudolfo waited until they were out of earshot. “A survivor. That’s new.”

Gregoric nodded. “He has another seven brigades. That’s what concerns me.”

“And he’s still not brought forth his best effort,” Rudolfo said.

“He’ll have to pretty soon,” Gregoric said, looking down the slope. Rudolfo followed his gaze and saw another wave of movement sweeping in through the high grass.

This time a white bird flew up, and both of them drew their swords. The infantry on the perimeter saw the bird, too, and drew blades as well. Rudolfo shot a glance to the Captain of the Archers nearby, and the captain nodded.

Gregoric started down the hill and Rudolfo followed. At the foot of the hill they waited, and the squad raced past.

“They’re just behind us,” the lead scout hissed as he slipped past Gregoric.

And they were, only these weren’t the magicked scouts they’d so easily mowed through yesterday. This pack was made of harder stuff. Rudolfo felt a searing pain in his side and realized even as he swung his sword down that a knife had slipped in and cut him.

Gregoric went to one knee, his thigh suddenly bleeding.

No one called attention to it. They wouldn’t want their opponents to know who’d been injured. But the Gypsy Scouts pressed in, both those who had just returned and the half-squad set aside for these very reasons, and they slowly pushed the Delta Scouts out of the tree line. Rudolfo had managed to wound one of them, but held back once his own scouts were in the fray.

Medicos raced to the front as soon as the fighting had moved back, and they supported Gregoric while running him back up the hill. Rudolfo followed without assistance.

Back in camp, he drank chilled pear wine and ate orange slices and warm sweet bread. Leaning back on his cushions, he reread the note from Vlad Li Tam.

My kin-clave with Windwir is now yours. It was a brief letter, but these closing words grabbed him. He chuckled.

“A formidable woman,” he said out loud. She had told her father about his three gestures. In other words, she had publicly acknowledged him before her father. Which meant in a good game of Queen’s War, she’d moved on the tower he’d threatened with and in turn now threatened his paladin.

And of course, her father had now responded with subtle grace. The symbol Vlad Li Tam had chosen for kin-clave was an old one that had fallen out of use.

It indicated the unity of houses through strategic marriage.

A formidable woman indeed, Rudolfo thought.

Jin Li Tam

Jin Li Tam’s quarters at the seventh forest manor were far simpler than what she’d had at the Overseer’s Palace, and the simplicity impressed her. It was a suite of rooms accessed through a wide set of double doors on the third floor. The closets were already stocked with a few items that seemed to be her size. She bathed, dressed in summer gowns and went down to the dining room.

Though he didn’t eat, Isaak was waiting there for her. Sitting away from the table, along the wall on a servant’s stool.

Jin pointed to an empty chair at the table. “Please, Isaak,” she said. “Join me.”

“Thank you, Lady.” He stood and limped over to the empty chair.

She noticed he was wearing a clean robe and it prompted her to smile. “Why are you still wearing your disguise?”

He looked at her, looked down at the robe, and smoothed it with his metal hands. “I do not know. It seemed appropriate.”

He had his hood down, so she knew it wasn't that he meant to hide himself. Something else then? “Are your quarters satisfactory?”

He nodded. “They are, Lady Tam.”

The smell of fresh baked bread and venison stew filled the room as the kitchen door swung open. A servant hastened in, carrying a steaming platter. She placed it in front of Jin Li Tam and then retreated.

Jin paused, trying to decide between the stew or the bread. She broke off a piece of the hot bread. “When will you start your work?”

Isaak buzzed and a bit of steam jetted out. “I'll start tonight by cross-referencing the mechoservitor work logs—I translated them last year—and see exactly what we might still have between us. Scrolls are replaced or cleared from time to time, but it's rare.”

She nodded, dipping her spoon into the stew. She held it beneath her nose, smelling the fresh onions, carrots mingled with venison roast k veipped in herbs and spices that made her mouth water. “How long will that take?”

“Two weeks, five days, four hours and eight minutes,” he said.

“And after that you'll recalculate your ciphers?” She chased the stew with iced apple cider.

“Yes.” A breeze blew in from the forest carrying the faintest scent of evergreen and wood smoke. The light from the candle reflected off his metal face. “After that, I will go to the last of the Androfrancines and appeal for aid.”

The door opened and the steward walked in. “Lady Tam,” he said, “I've just received a bird from your father. Would you prefer it now or after you've finished?”

She dabbed her mouth with a napkin. “Now, please.”

He handed the small scroll to her and she unrolled it, holding it to the light.

The surface message was simple and nondescript. *I'm glad you are well*, it said. But under the surface, triple coded and buried, was the longer message: *I approve of your choice; you will assist in the rebuilding of the library*. And the tense he used and the slightest blurring of the dot of an “i” told her that Vlad Li Tam considered his forty-second daughter betrothed for purposes of kin-clave.

She looked at Isaak and then back at the note in her hands. This was not entirely unexpected, but the timing was at a faster pace than she'd planned for. It confirmed her suspicions, certainly, that her father was involved in Rudolfo's plan to rebuild the library before she'd known of it. She looked again at the metal man, wondering what lay ahead of them in the upcoming months. She thought about the man she was betrothed to, now, and wondered what lay ahead of her, and Rudolfo as well.

When she spoke, it could've meant either or both. “We should discuss the strategy of it,” she said.

Neb couldn't help but stare at the old man as they drove their wagon south to Kendrick. Neb had dragged him to it, pointing, and the old man had made a big show of hitching the horses to it and tying his own to the back.

"I'm glad you didn't let this get away, Del," he said with a wink.

Neb watched him scan the back of it, saw his eyes light up at the tools, and then climbed into the seat beside him.

When the guards had escorted him to the edge of their camp and pointed them southward, he'd thanked them profusely. Once they were out of sight, he leaned in to Neb.

"We're not out of it yet, lad. They'll have scouts shadowing us most of the way."

Neb nodded.

They rode in silence, stopping briefly to eat stale bread and hard cheese from the old man's saddlebags. Neb lay back against the wagon wheel, stretching himself out. In the forests that edged the river road, birds flitted in the shadows and chirped at them. A kingfisher dove the river, coming up from the slow, wide waters with a fish in its bill.

He couldn't speak to ask the old man if he was who he thought he was—but he also wasn't sure that he should ask anything with Entrolusian scouts nearby. After all, if Sethbert had hated the Androfrancines so much that he crushed them like a garden snake beneath his boot, he couldn't possibly love an Androfrancine Pope.

Neb still wasn't sure if leaving the camp was the best of all possible choices, but the old man had made that happen without leaving him much room to protest. Perhaps, he'd seen Neb assessing the Overseer's security. Neb wondered if he'd been that obvious.

And if the old man had seen it, others may have as well. So it was possible that Neb owed him his life. It was also possible that Neb had now missed his first, best chance to bring down the madman who had killed his father and robbed the world of Androfrancine light.

Now they rode for Kendrick with a wagon full of supplies meant for the Gamet Dig, far south and east, in the Churning Wastes. Questions rattled him, poking at him as if he were in a cage.

He glanced at the old man again. He was checking the back of the wagon, rummaging through one of Brother Hebda's pouches as if it were his own. Neb leaped to his feet, feeling a surge of anger that he wasn't sure what to do with.

The old man saw the look on his face. "I'm looking for the Letters of Credit and Introduction."

Hot shame flashed through him, and Neb opened his mouth to speak. A flow of garbled words poured out, sentence fragments from the Nineteen Gospels, the Francine Codex and the other scattered bits that made up the Whymer Bible. He closed his mouth, then tried again with the same results. The old man grabbed up the pouch and pushed it into Neb's hands. He leaned in close, speaking quietly. "There's paper in here. And pencils. This will help our rather one-sided conversation. But do nothing until we know we're clear of Sethbert's men."

Neb nodded. Later, once they were safely shut into a barn along the way or if they actually pressed through and found an inn in Kendrick, they would have many questions for one another.

The old man climbed into the creaking seat, and Neb climbed into the back this time, holding Brother

Hebda's pouch to his chest. There was the snap of a crop and a high, sharp whistle. The wagon lurched forward.

As they rode, Neb's mind wandered. A mad Overseer smothering the world's best light and plunging them all into darkness. A beautiful woman with the sunrise in her hair and secrets on her lips. An old, strong Pope back from the dead to avenge his desolate city.

It belonged in a story—like one of the hundreds he'd read on those quiet days spent in the library. And the memory of it was so strong that Neb could smell the parchment as the rocking of the wagon and the warm afternoon sun gentled him to sleep.

Petronus

Petronus heard the boy's quiet snores from the back and looked over his shoulder. It was good that he slept. He looked like he hadn't slept for days, and Petronus could understand that. He'd not had a full night since the day he saw the cloud. And though he didn't need much these days, he'd take what he could.

While he drove, he wondered about the boy.

It was obvious that he could speak at one time and he was certainly intelligent. Well educated, too. Probably one of the orphans—they received the best education in the world, better than any lord's child. They received the education reserved otherwise for the Androfrancines. Hells, they were Androfrancines as far as Petronus was concerned. And they didn't really get a choice in the matter. By the time they were old enough to have minds of their own, they had already been filled with the backward dream, the constant looking to the past to mitigate the future. Most of the orphans joined the Order when they reached their majority. Even the girls served in some way, though their prospects were less glamorous within the male-dominated knowledge cult.

Petronus had certainly strayed from the vows from time to time—especially during his early years in the Order. But he'd always taken care, and his dalliances hadn't lasted long enough for him to worry overmuch.

But others weren't as careful, for reasons all their own. It was easy enough—especially for an Androfrancine, with access to the potions and powders for either man or woman who wished to avoid offspring. Maybe, he thought, life longs to recreate itself.

Still, if his assumptions were correct, the boy in the back was one of hundreds that the Androfrancines had brought into the world and then dropped into their orphanage as if the world's best education among the world's brightest scholars could make up for a mother who baked fresh bread and a father whose hands stank of fish.

And he saw Windwir fall. Gods, what a terrible thing to see at any age. Th kat ">

Enough to plan an assassination, it seemed, though with more bravery than discretion.

And why Sethbert? The line of the boy's face couldn't lie. He'd meant to harm the Overseer either then and there or sometime later. Yet he'd not balked at Petronus's intervention.

Petronus hadn't found the letters he was looking for in the courier pouch. They should've been with the wagon, but then again, the boy wasn't old enough to be an acolyte. Perhaps an internist or an assistant, though even those were usually in their majority. So certainly there were others along at one point in time. The wagon was clearly bound for the Wastes—routine by the looks of it, and not carrying anything of

value to merit a Gray Guard escort.

So both the letters and at least one other Androfrancine was missing.

And then there was the war. The two nearest armies had ridden to Windwir's aid and were now fighting each other. Why? One of his favorite Whymer quotes was P'Andro Whym's response to the question put to him about finding truth.

The truth, the Seventeenth Gospel said, is a seed planted in a field of stones beneath a stone and guarded by snakes. To have at it, be strong enough to move the stone, patient enough to dig the hole and fast enough to dodge the viper's fang.

He would continue his excavation when the boy woke up, when he could be sure that there were no ears or eyes but their own. And he would not forget that vipers came in many shapes and sizes.

Jin Li Tam

For Jin Li Tam, the seventh forest manor and the town that surrounded it teemed with rainbow-colored life. The house itself was set upon a slight rise, and the town around it gathered in close—a collection of cobblestone streets and one- or two-story buildings made of finely planed lumber, and glass windows painted in a multitude of colors. The people wore cottons primarily, though she occasionally saw the silks that her own Emerald Coasts were famous for.

She wondered why she'd never visited before, but quickly brushed that thought aside. There'd been no reason to. The Gypsies kept to themselves, far from the machinations and intrigues of the Named Lands. Once in a while, she'd heard of Rudolfo riding south with his scouts to attend various functions. But they were never the functions she attended, and for the most part the Ninefold Forest Houses kept to their edge of the world.

She walked the streets alone, mindful of the scouts who followed her at an appropriate distance. They meant to give her the illusion of independence, but she suspected that it wouldn't take much to bring them running. Of course, this far from the war, she should be safe enough. The scouts weren't even magicked.

As she walked, Jin listened to the voices around her, picking up fragments of day-to-day life in the forest. A patchwork quilt of hunting stories, rumors about the war and about Windwir, bits of gossip about who was sleeping with whom and what so-and-so's son had seen limping about the seventh forest manor.

Jin paused.

"He was dressed as an Androfrancine, he said. But made entirely of metal."

She had wondered how long before the secret was out. Certainly, most people were familiar with the mechanicals that the Androfrancines had gradually revealed to the world. Small things like the bird her father kept in their indoor gardens, beneath the crystal dome. The little golden bird was unlike any other she had ever seen, and it could sing in sixteen languages. It could also say small phrases—simple things like asking for water it could not drink or food that it could not eat. It had been a gift from one of the Popes, she thought, years ago.

But Isaak was different. Fully the size of man—perhaps even a head taller than average—slender yet solid in build, and perhaps the most amazing spectacle she had ever seen. At one time, according to some of the heresies, there were nearly as many metal men as people. Those were the days long, long before the Age of Laughing Madness. But when P' Andro Whym walked the ruined basement of the world with his scattered band of diggers and scribes, the metal men were all but extinct.

And now they'd been brought back—at least, a handful had. And if Rudolfo had his way, she realized, those few—built from the parchments and scraps found in the Wastes—would be here, helping Isaak rebuild what Sethbert had destroyed.

"Lady Tam," a voice said beside her. She looked. One of the scouts had slipped to her side.

She looked at him. He was young but not a pup, and unlike Sethbert's Delta Scouts, Rudolfo's men did not swagger. "Yes?"

"The . . ." He paused, looking for the right words. "Isaak would like to see you."

She was surprised. She'd seen him just an hour before and had asked after his planning and his correspondence with the Androfrancines. "Very well."

She walked the half league back to the manor and met Isaak in the courtyard garden. He held a scrap of paper in his hands and she while he stood there, eye shutters blinking at it.

"What is it, Isaak?" she asked, stepping toward him.

The metal man limped toward her, his dark robe hiding the angles of his lean steel frame. "I've word from the Papal Summer Palace," he said. His eyes flashed open and shut.

"That was very fast," she said.

"It was not in response to the message."

Curious, she thought. "What word does it bring?"

Steam blasted from his exhaust grate. "It is a Papal edict, decreeing that all remaining Order resources and personnel are to be inventoried at the Papal Summer Palace."

She felt her brows furrow. "How can that be? Surely the Pope is dead?"

"I—" He stalled, whirred and clacked. She regretted the words instantly. But he recovered and continued. "Androfrancine Succession is complex—there have been volumes written on it over the last two thousand years. Though traditionally the Offices are passed on through the laying on of hands, there are contingencies upon contingencies. Pope Introspect could very well have passed the Office on in some manner before his—" Isaak stopped. His eyes blinked back water and he looked away.

Jin put a hand on his shoulder. "Do not forget, Isaak, that Sethbert was the hand that moved you."

Isaak nodded. "Regardless, the edict bears the mark of the ring."

Could it be something that had slipped past her father? She doubted it, but anything was possible given the events of the last week. She knew the answer to the question before she asked it, but she asked anyway. "What does it mean?"

"It means that I cannot stay here," Isaak said, head downcast, his voice sounding weary—something she didn't think possible in a man made of metal. When he looked up at her, she thought perhaps that she'd never seen such a look of conflict on any human's face, and it amazed her that she had already assigned such human features to this metal man based on how his eyes or mouth moved and how he held his head. "I am the property of the Androfrancine Order," he finally said. "Constructed to do their bidding."

And if her suspicions were correct, he was also the greatest weapon the world had seen in over two thousand years.

He stood there, not moving. "Is there more?" she asked.

He nodded slowly. "There is. Pope Resolute's first act as Holy See was to sign a Writ of Shunning."

A Writ of Shunning. Now the Entrolusians would truly stand alone, cut off from the world. A Shunning from the Androfrancine Pope would sever all ties of kin-clave between the scattered governments of the Named Lands and whoever it named—a powerful tool that had only been used (to the best of her recollection) three times in the history of the Named Lands.

"That's good news," she said. "That will only aid Rudolfo's cause."

Isaak shook his head. “No, Lady. You misunderstand.”

She looked at him and she felt her mouth drop open. “You mean . . . ?”

“Yes,” Isaak said, “the Writ of Shunning named the Ninefold Forest Houses and Lord Rudolfo, General of the Wandering Army, as culpable for the Desolation of Windwir, and declares his lands and holdings to be held in escrow until a Conference of Findings has convened and made a final determination.”

Jin Li Tam felt the air go out of her. Shouting for a bird and paper, she stormed into the manor, her mind already coding the message to her father.

Petronus

Petronus and the boy sat down with the paper as soon as they closed themselves into the barn. They’d hit the outskirts of Kendrick as night fell, and had happened across the farmer.

“I’ve a coin for the use of your barn,” Petronus said.

The farmer approached their wagon, squinting to see them in the fading light. “Are you from Windwir? What news do you bring?”

Petronus climbed down from the seat. The boy watched, rubbing sleep from his eyes. “The city is gone entirely. The Entrolusians are warring with the Gypsies. I’m not sure why.”

The farmer nodded. “Androfrancines, then?”

“I’ve worked for them on occasion. My name is Petros.” He turned to the boy and caught a glimpse of a smile when he gave his name. “This is my grandson.”

“I’m Varn,” the farmer said, extending his hand. Petronus shook it. “You can keep your coin. These are rough times for the Order. Sheltering you is the least I can do.”

After they’d settled in, and after they’d torn into a basket of fresh bread, pickled asparagus and roast rabbit that Varn had brought out to them, they filled their metal cups with wine from one the wagon’s three barrels and sat down with the paper by lamplight.

Before Petronus could ask, the boy scribbled quickly onto the paper and held it for him to see. *My name is Neb*, it read.

“It’s good to finally know your name,” Petronus said. “How did you come to be in Sethbert’s care?”

For the next two hours, Petronus asked the questions and Neb answered them, his hand working hard to keep up with the old man’s tongue. Petronus took it all in—Neb’s eyewitness account of the city’s fall, his capture by the Delta Scouts, what he’d heard the soldiers talking about, what the redheaded lady had said . . . and how she’d tried to take Neb with her.

Sethbert destroyed Windwir. He had to read those words three times. “Do you have any idea how?”

Neb shook his head.

Petronus pondered this. He’d paid someone, promised something, made some of kind deal to get his hands on the spell. The wasteland where the city once stood had to be the work of Xhum Y’Zir’s Seven Cacophonous Deaths. Somehow, the Androfrancines had put the fragments together and Sethbert had used it to his advantage. Somewhere along the way, all of the intricate safeguards, the locked boxes and

vaults, the subterfuge of two thousand years of protecting humanity from itself, had failed.

If I'd stayed, this would not have happened.

Petronus felt a hand at his sleeve and looked down at the paper. *Can I ask you some questions?* Neb had written there. He nodded. "Please."

Why did you stop me?

Petronus put his hand on Neb's shoulder and looked him in the eye. "If I could see your scheming, it was only a matter of time before one of Sethbert's scouts or guards picked up on it. How did you imagine you'd be able to assassinate one of the most powerful men in the Named Lands?"

Petronus watched Neb's face. The corner of his mouth twitched and his eyes shifted. It was obvious that he was wrestling with how much truth to give. "You don't have to say, son."

The boy's hand reached into his shirt and came out with the pouch. Petronus recognized it immediately and chuckled. "Clever," he said. "But that alone wouldn't have seen you to safety, even if you'd managed to kill the sed eve bastard."

But even as he said the words, Petronus realized that the boy didn't care at all about being seen to safety. That hardness in his eyes, and once more, the line of his face, said without words that Neb would've gladly traded his life for that of the mad Overseer.

"Listen well," Petronus said. "Taking a life—even a life like Sethbert's—robs your own soul in the end. I agree with you that he deserves death for what he's done. A thousand deaths couldn't be enough. But Androfrancines do not kill," he said. Unless you're the Pope, he thought. Unless you merely give the words to the most seasoned captain of your Gray Guard and close your eyes and pretend that there is no connection between your own words and the deeds of others.

He felt the tug at his sleeve again and looked down. *I am not an Androfrancine.*

"No," Petronus said, "I suppose you are not. But someday you may be. And last year's ghosts haunt next year's forests."

The boy thought about this, then wrote more. Petronus read it. "What now? I don't know. I suppose I'll try to find someplace for you to stay here in Kendrick. I'm only here long enough to rally some men, and then I'm back to Windwir."

When the boy looked at him, eyebrows raised in question, Petronus's felt his own jaw tighten. "I've a city to bury," he said in a quiet voice.

The boy scratched more words onto the tablet, and Petronus was surprised to see it was a statement, not a question.

I know who you are, Father, the crisp handwriting declared, starkly black on the gray paper. Petronus stared at the words and said nothing, knowing his silence said enough.

Neb

Neb watched Petronus work the town all that next day. He stopped at the inn to talk with the lumbermen at their breakfasts. He wandered through Kendrick speaking with women and paused in the crowded village square. The large open space had filled up with the tents and carts of those waylaid en route to Windwir, waiting in shocked silence for some better destination to drop into their minds. And still waiting.

He spoke in hushed tones with the mayor while Neb watched from a distance. At first the mayor was agitated, waving the old man away. Then he was nodding, brows furrowed with anger. In the end he looked intent, and when they shook hands, the mayor left to call an emergency council meeting.

It was easy to see now how this man had become the Order's youngest Pope. Neb had remembered his lessons—Petronus hadn't merited much mention in *The Works of the Apostles of P'Andro Whym*, but there'd been a bit. He'd been the youngest. He'd been assassinated. He'd been a strong King and Pope. Though the book didn't say so, Neb had heard the old men talking from time to time. "His tongue's as silver as Pope Petronus" had become a common phrase among that generation of Androfrancines. Now Neb saw it firsthand.

The mayor sent riders out into farmlands, sent runners throughout the village, and called in everyone willing to listen within two hours ride. By the time the couriers had gone out, Petronus had sent birds to Calvus Bay and two other villages Neb didn't recognize in care of names that Neb wasn't close enough to read. Last, he wrote a long note in a script Neb recognized as from somewhere on the Emerald Coasts. This he attached to the strongest, fastest looking bird, and he whispered longest into its ears before lifting it to the sky.

When they finished Petronus took Neb to the inn, and they stuffed themselves on catfish stew and fried bread.

As Neb wiped the last of the stew from the bowl with his last crust of bread, he smiled at the old man.

Petronus smiled. "We've done a good day's work."

Neb nodded. They had. And though he really hadn't done much himself, he'd learned in a way that he'd never learned in the Orphan's School. Watching this man work, building trust here and suspicion there—grabbing a grin from this one and a nod from that one. He'd never seen anything like it, and it stirred a part of him. He was suddenly pushed back into his past.

"But I don't know what I want to be," he'd told his father during one visit.

Brother Hebda smiled. "Do not be what you do," he said. He'd been trained in the Francine Disciplines and Neb had always enjoyed seeing them lived out in real life. "Doing and being aren't the same."

"But isn't who I am determined by what I do?"

His father's face broke into an even wider smile. "Sometimes. But what you do can change from situation to situation. Can a good man kill?"

Neb shook his head.

"But the Gray Guard kill . . . are they good?"

Neb thought about this. "I think they are. Because they are doing their job to protect the light."

Brother Hebda nodded. "They are. But say they were ordered to kill a man because he was a heretic, but really he was an enemy of a spiteful c sf a822uckold? Are the Gray Guard then defined by what they do?"

Neb laughed. "I only said I don't know what I want to be when I grow up."

Brother Hebda laughed, too. "Oh. That's easy, then."

“Really?”

His father nodded and leaned in. “Watch for the ones who leave your mouth hanging open. Study them, find out what they love and what they fear. Dig the treasure out of their soul and hold it to the light.” He leaned in even closer now, so that Neb could smell the wine on his breath. “Then *be* like them.”

He remembered thinking in that moment that Brother Hebda was a man he wanted to be like. That very winter, Neb turned in his first grant request to study in the care of an expedition to the Wastes, preferably assigned to Hebda Garl as a student apprentice.

Now, after a day of watching Petronus—or Petros—at work, he’d found someone else he could want to be like.

After dinner, they went out to the gathering crowd. It wasn’t a large crowd. Not everyone had come. But enough had. And they stood in the square among the tents and carts, near the open doors of the inn. They stood around an overturned tub that the old man climbed onto, holding a shovel over his shoulders.

Neb watched from the side. The mayor, all agreement earlier, now seemed agitated and anxious to speak. Neb wondered what had changed.

“I’ll be brief,” Petronus said before the mayor could try to introduce him. He dropped the shovel from his shoulder and pointed north with it. “You all know what happened to Windwir. It’s a field of ash and bones for as far you can see.” There were muted gasps in the crowd. “We are all the Children of the New World, and at some place in our lineage, we are each kin-clave unto one another. We know this to be true.” He waited for heads to nod, a few voices to speak out. “I’m not a man to leave my kin unburied,” Petronus said.

Then the old man went on for another fifteen minutes, laying out a plan of action that astounded Neb with its simplicity.

“Those who can,” Petronus said, “will come and help as they can.” Shifts of a week on and a week off by thirds—two men at home looking after their neighbor’s farm as well as their own while that good citizen was away. Women working in similar shifts. And those who had nowhere else to go—they would leave with Petronus and Neb in the morning and go set up their camp.

“What about pay?” someone asked.

And Neb’s mouth fell open at Petronus’s words. “Those who need it will get it. Those who don’t will work for love.”

Petronus hopped down from the washtub and winked at Neb. “How did I do?”

Neb nodded, wishing he could say something. Then he heard another loud voice and looked. The mayor had climbed onto the washtub now and was holding a scrap of paper up in the air. “I have a word to share as well,” he said. “Though I hate to contradict our well-spoken guest.”

The mayor waited for the crowd to quiet. “I have word today that Bishop Oriv at the Papal Summer Palace has been named the Pope of the Androfrancine Order and King of Windwir. His Excellency has ordered all Androfrancine resources and personnel be gathered there to be inventoried in the light of this great tragedy. He also sends along a Writ of Shunning against the Ninefold Forest Houses and an Exercise of Holiness.”

Neb gasped. A Shunning was an Old World practice that had carried over to the New World through the wisdom of P’Andro Whym. It severed all ties of kin-clave, making its recipient fair game for anyone

and an enemy of the light. It had only been used a handful of times, and usually as leverage to manipulate a Pope's desired outcome. But during the Heresies, it was used as a mask for open war.

And the Exercise had fallen out of fashion for over a thousand years. But there was a time when once in seven years, the Pope declared an Exercise of Holiness, calling for Windwir to be closed to the outside world for an entire year. Twice, it had been used to wait out schisms—a year of separation could quell most arguments. Enforced by the Gray Guard, violators early on were killed . . . but later merely punished and evicted.

If Neb had wondered about its meaning, it would've been clear on Petronus's face.

"There will be Gray Guard at the Summer Palace," Petronus said in a quiet voice. "Not many. Not enough to enforce this."

The mayor continued. "And out of kin-clave with Windwir, Lord Sethbert, Overseer of the Entrolusian City States, has agreed to provide guardianship and enforcement of the Exercise. His Excellency, the Pope, compels all townships within the Providence of Windwir to comply and assist as required."

Neb watched the crowd to see how they would respond. And he watched Petronus, too. The old man's face was hard and unreadable. The mayor climbed down and no one moved.

Finally someone spoke up, and Neb was surprised at the voice. It was *his* voice, clear and marching forward with every word.

"I am not a man to leave my kin unburied," Neb said.

And when he said it, he couldn't help but think of Brother Hebda.

Rudolfo

Rudolfo sat in the shade of a fir tree, alone, and thought. There was dried blood on his sleeve and his boot, but it wasn't his. He'd killed a magicked sapper the night before when they breached the perimeter. Rudolfo's men had taken a beating had held their ground. Three of his Gypsy Scouts—*three*—lost in one night.

Gregoric slipped beside him and sat. "General Rudolfo," he said.

Rudolfo nodded. "Gregoric. What do you think?"

Gregoric shook his head. "I don't know."

The bird had arrived two hours earlier bearing news of the new Pope and the Writ of Shunning. Rudolfo had immediately sent word to House Li Tam and the Seventh Forest Manor. Just as he'd finished, his Captain of Intelligence had approached with more bad news. "We've word that two more brigades of Delta infantry are northward bound. And Pylos and Tyrn are sending contingents."

That's when Rudolfo slipped from the camp into the forest in order to think. Of course he'd known that Gregoric, still magicked from the morning patrol, had followed at a distance. And after sufficient time had past, his first captain had done as he always did and came to sit with his friend.

Rudolfo sighed. "I think we may have to pull back and find new vision. This new Pope has changed the pieces about on the board."

"Aye," Gregoric said. "We still have some time. A few days. We can do what we can and then divide the

army.”

Rudolfo nodded. “And I will be needed elsewhere.”

Tomorrow, with his own half-squad of Scouts, Rudolfo would ride for the Papal Summer Palace to parley with this Pope. Behind him, his Wandering Army would fall back to their forest islands until their general called them back to war.

For the first time in a week, Rudolfo wondered if he truly would prevail.

Jin Li Tam

The halls of the seventh forest manor were wide and long, with hardwood floors and wood paneling on the walls, dressed up with thick silk carpets and framed portraits. During her brief stay, Jin Li Tam explored what rooms she could, finding few locked doors in the large four-story building. Most of the rooms were spacious, including the servants' quarters, and even boasted running water, heated in a large metal furnace and gravity-fed through copper pipes. Another gift from the Androfrancines.

She'd walked most of the manor on the first day. But now, she sought out the floor she had avoided. She took the wide sweeping staircase that passed the second and third floors, going directly to the fourth.

There, at the end of a short wide hallway, stood the double doors and stained glass windows leading to the Family Quarters.

She looked in on the rooms for children. There were many, all empty now but for one—the room of a small boy, she gathered, complete with scattered toys and a small silver sword hung over the bed. An unwrapped turban lay draped over the back of a chair, and a small boot jutted haphazardly from beneath the bed.

It had been carefully cleaned, but she could tell that the room had been this way for a long while.

A dark, unlocked door marked Rudolfo's quarters—a suite of rooms that included a den and connected to another suite through a large bathing room. The bathing room was impressive. It smelled of fresh lavender, and at its center was a large, round marble tub. An elaborate golden nozzle was set into the ceiling, along with long cords tipped with golden tassels for bathers to pull and bring down the hot rain.

Jin walked through the room, her hand moving over the edge of the tub. The marble was cold to the touch.

Beyond the bathing room a similar suite waited, and the softer colors told her that someday soon, if her father's will held despite the recent Papal Writ, she would be moving from the guest quarters into this space as Rudolfo's bride.

She'd known that someday, when her father willed it, she would either be released to seek a mate for reasons of her own, whether love or convenience, or she would be wed for strategic purposes to advance House Li Tam's interests in the world. Of course, some of her sisters had chosen to stay home instead. She'd always thought that if she were left to her own heart, she'd neither wed nor stay home. Instead, she'd go to the places she wished to instead of the places her father sent her.

She reached out a hand and touched the thick quilt folded at the foot of the large canopied bed. Certainly, this place would have been one that she would've wanted to see. The ancient forest islands in an ocean of prairie, and their ruthless Gypsy kings—tied by their past to the legacy of Xhum Y'Zir, evidenced by their Physicians of Penitent Torture and their redemptive work. Yet Rudolfo's forebears had blended that dark blood magick rite with the mystic teachings of T'Erys Whym, the younger brother of P'Andro Whym who for a time succeeded his {sucitebrother and led the leftovers of the world until the Francine Movement, of all things, brought them back to reason as the principal tenet.

Yes, she would've wanted to visit this place. But would she have chosen to stay here?

Probably not, she realized. Instead, if she had her way, she'd spend some time in the Great Library, possibly tour the edges of the Churning Waste, and then move south and sail the channel islands.

Instead, she thought, I am to be here in the shadow of a new library.

Of course, all of that hinged on the Writ of Shunning and its resolution . . . and on her father's wishes. She was certain he'd shift his strategy and she'd been certain that a bird would come. But instead, a note from Rudolfo had arrived that morning.

Pay no mind to this emerging Pope's Writ, it read. I ride to deal with him. Stay with Isaak. Only the word "with" had been tilted just ever so slightly to give it the subtext of "near," lending it the weight of great importance.

She'd smiled. Another code was buried in it, too. It was simple and unexpected, woven into the note with the jots and tittles of the Bank Cipher script. *I'll dance with the sunrise yet again*, the equation said.

Jin Li Tam heard limping footfalls in the hall and went to the door.

"Lady Tam?" she heard a metallic voice call.

She poked her head out. "In here, Isaak."

The metal man stopped and turned. He still wore robes—dark and long. "I've come to wish you well," he said.

The words hit her. "What do you mean?"

He blinked. "I'm leaving for the Papal Summer Palace."

Stay with Isaak. Near him, she thought, because of his great importance. "I don't think Lord Rudolfo would permit this."

Steam left the exhaust grate. "I know. I received his message this morning as well. But regardless of Lord Rudolfo's instructions, I am compelled to obey my Pope. I am the property of the Androfrancines—it is written into my behavior scrolls."

She watched his eyes, looking for an awareness she knew she couldn't see. But she knew from the tears that leaked out from them that he understood at least part of the equation {f t co. If this mechanical wonder had indeed brought down the City of Windwir with his very words, what risk could he be to the last of the Androfrancines?

But the other side of the equation would not bother him at all, she knew. He'd welcome it, even ask for it, in the hopes that it would help him shed the weight of guilt she saw him bear with every step. She doubted even the hope of rebuilding the library could be strong enough to lift something so heavy from him.

Stay with Isaak, Rudolfo had written.

But it wasn't Rudolfo's words that moved her. No. It was the other side of that equation that sent Jin Li Tam down the stairs to pack what little she had in preparation for her journey with the metal man who had been Sethbert's sword at the throat of a city.

She didn't worry that Isaak could ever be used in such a way again. She was certain he would not permit

it. But then there was the other side.

What risk would the last of the Androfrancines be to him?

Petronus

Petronus led the small group of men over the last rise, and those who hadn't already seen it fell back, gasping, at what they saw there.

They pushed wheelbarrows full of tools, and those with mules or horses pulled small carts along behind them. Petronus looked them over and shook his head.

Damn Pope Resolute and his Exercise of Holiness. It had cost him two thirds of the crowd. No one wanted to tangle on the wrong side of Sethbert's army. They were all smart enough to know that the Exercise was to keep people from digging, and gravediggers were diggers nonetheless.

He looked down at the boy. He hadn't spoken again for two days now, but Petronus was fairly certain that he could if he wanted to. "But you don't have to," he'd told Neb when he realized that he hadn't spoken since, "if you don't want to."

As they crested the rise, Petronus saw birds fly out of the forest, moving north of them, their wings beating furiously. He read their colors and smiled. A horse pulled out from a copse of trees not far from the edge of the blasted area. It rode toward them, and Petronus saw ripples of wind in the grass to the left and right of the rider.

He waited until the young lieutenant pulled up and hailed him. "Windwir is closed," he said.

The wind rippled out as the magicked scouts took up positions around them.

Petronus pointed. "Windwir is a field of bones. We aim to bury them."

The faintest hint of surprise registered on the young man's face. "I'm afraid I can't let you pass."

Petronus stepped closer. "What is your name, Lieutenant?"

"Brint," the young man said. He studied Petronus and the motley band of travelers.

"Have you not faced a loved one's passing?"

Petronus watched the young man's face. He saw the stab of loss rise to the surface and then quickly vanish as the officer forced his emotions aside. It was just slight enough that the untrained eye might miss it, and Petronus suddenly realized he wasn't dealing with the spoiled son of an Entrolusian noble.

Petronus's hands moved close to his body so that others could not see. *Whose are you?* he signed, first in the intelligence subverbal of the Forest Houses and then in the hand dialect of House Li Tam.

The lieutenant blinked but kept his own hands still. "I have seen several loved ones pass," he said in a quiet voice.

Petronus leaned forward, his voice also low. "Did you bury them or let them lie where they fell?"

The first look was anger, but it was followed by a look of deep weariness. The lieutenant said nothing for a full minute, then stared down at Petronus. He whistled, and the wind blew back from around them as the Delta Scouts retreated. When they were out of earshot, he leaned down from his saddle and spoke in a quiet voice.

“Be watchful. I can let you pass but I cannot keep you safe.”

“The light will keep us safe,” Petronus said, quoting the Whymer Bible’s opening admonition.

The young lieutenant shook his head. “There is no light now.” He looked around again, scanning for any sign that his men were nearby. “And the one now asked to guard it is the same who snuffed it out. You will not be safe here.”

Then, he turned his horse and rode off in the direction of the wind.

By nightfall, Petronus and his ragged band of gravediggers had set up their camp by the river, just outside what had once been the river dock gate and clearly in compliance with the Exercise of Holiness. That area had been granted special Dispensation to keep the supply chain moving through the duration of the Exercise in years past.

Jin shook her head. “Not that. I can piece that together myself. Sethbert has fingers on many strings. What I don’t understand is why they would even undertake such dangerous work in the first place?”

Isaak looked at her, and steam trickled from his exhaust grate. “The preservation of all knowledge is at the heart of the Androfrancine vision.”

Jin knew this was true. Along with an abiding curiosity about how and why things work. She’d heard stories of fabulous machines and intricate mechanicals kept locked away in the hidden vaults of the now dead city. Her father, along with others close to the Order, had benefited from this. There was the mechanical bird in his garden—a trinket really. But more practical than that, there were the iron ships at his docks, powered by engines that the Androfrancines had built from ancient specifications and housed in high, broad iron-shod cruisers. It made House Li Tam the most formidable naval power in the Named Lands.

Perhaps, she thought now, the root of Windwir’s fall lay exposed in that.

They hid in their city, guarded by Gods knew what in addition to their Gray Guard. And they doled out scraps of knowledge and innovation to those they favored, withholding it from those they did not. They held on to what they learned until they felt the world was ready for it.

They’d been so cautious about those outside of their city but had somehow not brought the same level of care within their own Order. Somehow, Sethbert had learned of the spell and had then learned how to use it to bring down the Androfrancines.

She looked at the metal man across from her. She wondered if he wasn’t another example of their failure to watch themselves as well as they watched the world. “I’m curious about you, Isaak,” she said.

He blinked at her. “Why would you be curious about me?”

She shrugged, smiling. “I’ve never met a metal man before. You are somewhat of a rarity.”

He nodded. “There was a time when there were thousands of us. When Rufello drew up his Specifications and Observations of the Mechanical Age, he was working with the broken and discarded remains of mechoservitors found in the ruins of the Eldest Days, broken artifacts from the Age of the Younger Gods.”

Jin finished chewing her rice before speaking. “When were you built?”

He hesitated, and Jin noted that hesitation. *He’s not used to speaking about himself.*

But then he continued. “My memory scrolls have been replaced at least twice since my first awareness. I have no record of those times. My first memory is Brother Charles asking me if I were awake and could I recite the Fourteenth Precept of the Franciscan Accord.” He paused, and she watched his eyes alternate between dim and bright as the gears in his head whirred. “My last awakening was twenty-two years, three months, four weeks, six hours and thirty-one minutes ago. I’m not sure when I was built, though I suspect that knowledge is stamped somewhere onto me. Brother Charles was a meticulous craftsman.”

She studied him. His chest bellows moved in and out to keep whatever strange fire burning in him hot enough to boil the water and keep him moving, to keep air moving through him to power his voice. His eyes were jewels of some kind—dull yellow and glowing with varying degrees of brightness. His mouth was more of a flap that opened and closed—probably to humanize him more than for anything else. A wonder of the ancient world, brought back carefully by adapting old knowledge to present-day capability.

“He was indeed a meticulous craftsman,” she said.

Isaak looked at her and the eyes dimmed. “He was . . . my father.”

The bellows began to pump faster and harder. Water leaked from around the eyes—another humanizing characteristic: A machine that could cry. A high pitched squeal leaked from his mouth.

She put down her bowl and reached across, placing her hand on his shoulder. It was hard beneath the coarse wool robe. “I don’t know what to say, Isaak,” she told him.

In the end she said nothing, and simply sat with him while he cried.

Neb

Neb looked up from the wheelbarrow and saw the riders from the south, a large group of them. He started counting horses but gave up—there was no way he could count them. There were too many.

Dropping the load of bones, he turned and ran for Petronus, shouting at the top of his lungs. The old man looked up from across the blackened field, but he was too far away for Neb to see the expression on his face. Other nearby workers stopped what they were doing until Petronus waved and shouted at them to get back to the task at hand.

Neb ran as fast as he could, but the riders still overtook him and he fought his way through the storm of ash they kicked up. As it cleared he saw they had surrounded Petronus, and a large man on an enormous stallion—Sethbert, he realized—leaned down to speak with the old man.

Neb approached but stayed off to the side, listening.

“I thought,” Sethbert said, “you were in Kendrick.”

Petronus bowed. “I went, Lord. I’ve come back.”

Sethbert snorted. “I see that. And what exactly are you doing?”

Neb watched as the cavalry around Sethbert surveyed the group, quickly counting heads. An unfelt breeze lifted ash from the ground and he heard a low whistle. “We’re here,” a voice said in the faintest whisper. Neb nodded and his stomach went to water.

“We are burying our dead,” Petronus said.

“Surely,” Sethbert said, “you are aware that an Exercise in Holiness has been decreed?”

Petronus nodded. “We’ve been very careful not to enter the city itself. We were going to wait until we had your permission to suspend the Exercise for humanitarian reasons. It is my understanding that precedence was set for this by—”

Sethbert raised his hand. “I know, I know. I’m not a fool, old man. I know a bit about Androfrancine Law. But we can move past that. I will do far more than grant you permission.”

Neb saw a pained look cross Petronus’s face, as if he knew what Sethbert was going to say next and dreaded its outcome.

Sethbert straightened himself up as high as he could in the saddle, his jowls shaking as he jiggled around. “Bring them in,” he shouted to his men. “Bring them all in.” The soldiers started herding the workers.

He smiled down at them, and his horse danced a bit while they waited. When everyone was gathered, he addressed them.

“I commend you all,” Sethbert said, “for the work you have undertaken. It is a noble thing that you do.” His eyes scanned the crowd, making contact with theirs if he could. “Petros here has said there is a loophole in Androfrancine Law that would allow me to grant you permission to enter Windwir for humanitarian reasons. I will go further than that,” he said, his voice raising as he said it. “I will underwrite this venture on behalf of the Androfrancine Order and as Windwir’s appointed Guardian, I will protect you as you work. Every one of you will get a fair day’s wage for a hard day’s work and I’ll send a contingent of cooks and supplies.”

Perhaps he expected a cheer to go up. It did not. Petronus looked at him, his eyes hard. “We don’t do this work for money, Sethbert. We do it because it needs to be done.”

Sethbert snorted. “Exactly.” He leaned down. “Look, old man, whether you want it or not, you’ll have my help or you’ll not be permitted to enter the city.”

Petronus gritted his teeth. “It won’t change how the world sees you when it knows what you have done,” he said quietly. Then he spit at Sethbert.

Neb watched the look on Sethbert’s face shift from shock to fury. He wiped the spittle away, and when his foot shot out it was fast and hard. The boot hit Petronus’s jaw, and the old man was spun around as he fell. Neb raced in but wasn’t able to hold him up. They fell together into the ash. Sethbert glowered down at them. “One last condition,” he said. “Anything you find here belongs to the Androfrancine Order. I will send men daily to collect whatever you may happen to find. I already have at least one spy in your camp and I will know if you try to cheat me.” Sethbert smiled. “Do you understand me?”

Petronus rubbed his jaw, his eyes bright and dangerous. “I understand you.”

Then Sethbert noticed Neb. “Did you find your voice, boy? Are you ready to tell me the story of the Desolation of Windwir?”

Their eyes locked and Neb felt himself shiver. He couldn’t move.

Sethbert laughed. “I didn’t think so.”

As he turned and rode away, Neb watched him go. Suddenly, he wished he’d never met Pope Petronus. If he hadn’t, perhaps he would’ve found a way to kill Sethbert.

But the look on Petronus's face, the fire in his eye, the ice in his voice—they resonated deep inside Neb.
It won't change how the world sees you when it knows what you have done.

Perhaps, Neb thought, someone else would make Sethbert pay for his sin.

Rudolfo

Rudolfo prowled the high-windowed prisoner's quarters in the western tower of the Summer Palace. They'd removed his shackles at the door, marching him through the compound in chains for show more than anything else. They locked the door behind him, and he noticed immediately that there was no way to open it from inside. The windows were set high enough and deep enough into the stone that there was no way a man could squeeze through. And the colored glass blocks looked too thick to break.

The suite of rooms was more than adequate. The living area contained a full bookcase—a treasure of books, Rudolfo saw from a glance, ranging from the tragic dramas of the Pho Tam Period to the mystic poetry of T'Erys Whym—along with an ornate desk and a sitting area near a Žancgolden furnace.

His boots were hushed by thick carpets as he strode across the room and opened the door to the bedchamber. The bed was large, with heavy timber posts and heavy wool blankets and quilts. Once he'd seen the entire suite, he returned to the desk and sat at it. He found paper and started crafting messages that he doubted he'd be allowed to send. Still, it kept him focused to write them.

He was finishing his fifth message when he heard a key at the lock. He looked up and watched as an older man in white robes trimmed with blue stepped in, accompanied by two taciturn guards.

“Lord Rudolfo,” the man said with the slightest nod.

Rudolfo stood and then bowed. “Pope . . . *Resolute*, is it? I wish we met under more favorable circumstances.”

The Pope nodded, then gestured to the sitting area. “Let's sit and talk for a while.” He walked to a large, plush chair near the furnace and waited until Rudolfo joined him.

Rudolfo walked to the chairs and then sat. He adjusted himself until he was comfortable. “You've issued a Writ of Shunning against me, and your guards arrested me on sight,” Rudolfo said. “I would know why.”

The Pope's eyes narrowed. “You know why. You know damned well why.”

Rudolfo kept his voice low, his tone calm. “I did not destroy Windwir.”

Resolute's next question was edged with urgency and anger. “Where is the metal man?”

Rudolfo hoped his next words were truthful. “Somewhere safe.”

“I've issued orders for all Androfrancine resources to be gathered for inventory here at the Summer Palace. All resources, including the mechoservitor.”

“I understand this.”

“Yet you ride to me alone and empty-handed?” The Pope leaned forward. “You are harboring a fugitive.”

Rudolfo matched his posture, leaning forward himself. “I'm safeguarding the Named Lands—and *you*, I might add, the Last of the Androfrancines—from the most dangerous weapon conceived in recent

history.”

The Pope smiled. “So you admit it?”

“Yes, I did not destroy Windwir. Your cousin did that.”

Resolute sat back, his mouth open and his eyes wide.

“Certainly I know Sethbert’s your kin,” Rudolfo snapped. “I make a point of knowing.” But the disdain—much like the cockiness—was a sham intended to provoke.

Inwardly, he felt grateful for the look of surprise on the Pope’s face. It meant he did not know what Rudolfo knew. Of course, the Androfrancines no longer had the intelligence resources available that they had once had. To be sure, the Order maintained a vast network of operatives, but it would take months to pull it back together under the vastly different circumstances.

If it *could* be pulled back together. Rudolfo suspected that it would be an impossible task.

Do I press or hold? He pressed his hands together, forming a tent beneath his chin. Hold, he thought. Wait.

Resolute’s face flushed. “And you say my cousin Sethbert destroyed Windwir? Those are lofty charges.”

“And yet I imagine he made the same allegations to you regarding me,” Rudolfo said.

“He did.”

“With what evidence?”

The Pope didn’t even think. “You *do* happen to have only one of the fourteen mechoservitors. And the one you happen to have is the one that supposedly brought down the city. We also have the body of Arch-Mechanic Charles’s apprentice, allegedly killed by your men.”

“All of these are true enough,” Rudolfo said. “I do not hide it. And tomorrow, I will tell you my tale and you may judge for yourself.” Rudolfo offered an apologetic smile. “I am tired and would present my best case to you, not the mumblings of an exhausted general.” He stood. “I will also have messages to send,” Rudolfo said, “in accordance with the Rights of Monarchy spelled out in the Rites of Kin-Clave.”

More surprise. Whatever kind of archbishop he’d been, this Oriv hadn’t learned the subtle dance of kin-clave politics.

Finally, the Pope stood and smoothed his robes. “Tomorrow, then,” he said. “And I will consider your *request*.”

Rights are not requests, Rudolfo wanted to say, but didn’t. Instead, he waited, counting the steps, until Pope Resolute the First reached the doorway and raised his hand to knock.

“Excellency?” he said, stepping forward and raising his hand.

The Pope turned. “Yes?”

“I would just have you ask yourself one thing on my behalf.”

The Pope’s jaw clenched but he forced the words out. “What is that?”

“I do have the metal man. And I did kill the apprentice—or rather, I had him killed. But how would I have known anything about the discovery of the Seven Cacophonous Deaths?”

Pope Resolute frowned. “Spies. Someone in the upper echelons. Anyone can be bought at the right price.”

Rudolfo smiled. “Even a cousin?”

Resolute’s face went white. He turned back to the door and knocked on it three times. When it opened to him, he left without saying a word and his guards followed after.

Rudolfo watched them go, and inventoried everything he had just learned.

Vlad Li Tam

Vlad Li Tam’s summer office was on the eighth patio of his seaside estate. The building was layered like a pyramid, each level smaller than the one before it until the eighth and last—the highest point in a hundred leagues or more. There, reclined on cushions and smoking his pipe, he asked questions and gave answers as he saw fit each day, every day.

“What news have we of my forty-second daughter?” he asked, drawing in a lungful of the kallaberry smoke.

The aide found a string on his stack of pages and followed it to the appropriate message. “She comes under the color of knotted blue.”

Ah, he thought. An admonition couched in inquiry. She was a clever one. He’d named her for the water ghosts that once raced the oceans—the Jin of Elder Times. Quick and unseen and too deep to be caught.

She’d lived up to her name.

“What is her admonition?”

The aide shuffled papers about. “Her admonition is that the metal man is returning to Pope Resolute.”

Of course, Vlad Li Tam thought. He is dangerous and in danger all at once. He didn’t need for her to say that she would accompany the metal man. He knew that she would. “And what is her inquiry?”

“Do you still mean for her to wed Rudolfo?”

He knew his daughters well, and now he smiled. Once the new Pope issued his decree, Vlad Li Tam had known she’d write and ask. Not because she thought his strategy might’ve changed—though she’d tell herself that. She would ask because there was a part of her, deep down, that saw marriage as the hunter’s snare—something to poach but not be caught in.

He laughed. “Of course I do. Resolute the First will come to nothing.”

“Lord?”

He inhaled from his pipe and watched the green waters of the Inner Emerald Coast. “What else do you have?”

The aide pulled the dark purple thread—a color not on any message scarf but known to be that of silent kin-clave. “I’ve word from Resolute,” said the aide, “ordering significant credit transfers of guardianship custom to Sethbert.”

“How significant?”

“Certainly enough to offset part of the impact from destroying the major pillar in the Delta’s economy. For a short while, anyway.”

Vlad Li Tam smiled. “He only needs it for a short while. The Writ of Shunning coincides nicely with Sethbert’s guardianship of Windwir. It’s not a stretch to assume he intends to take the Ninefold Forest under his care as well.”

But why? Vlad Li Tam did not ask this question out loud, though. He did not want his aide to know that he did not know—it was better for them to believe he knew everything.

Most days, he *did* know everything. But today, he did not know why Sethbert had turned on Windwir, why he’d brought her down so utterly without any warning or posturing.

The plan was well conceived. The cousin conveniently away at the Papal Summer Palace. The apprentice paid for. The metal man’s script rewritten. Sethbert had managed to bring down the city, prop up his economy and position himself to annex the Ninefold Forest and provide the muscle for an Androfrancine Remnant.

But why?

“Rudolfo also rides for the Dragon’s Spine,” the aide said, pulling another string. “His Wandering Army’s vanished.”

Vlad Li Tam sighed. He’d known the army would vanish. He’d wondered whether or not Rudolfo would go to face the Pope. Now he knew something more about Rudolfo.

The aide shuffled paper. “That is all of the *unquiet* business of the day.”

“And the quiet business?” Vlad Li Tam said.

“Pope Petronus has voided our letters of credit in the Windwir Effort, with apologies.”

Vlad Li Tam leaned forward. “Because Sethbert is tending to it?”

The aide nodded. “Yes, Lord.”

“Good. Tell Pope Petronus that I will keep his secret. For now.”

“I will send the message immediately.” The aide stood, bowed and left.

Three days, he thought. *In three days I will tell everyone that I am going to the Dragon’s Spine as well.*

Vlad Li Tam inhaled the deep salt air. It was nearly as soothing as the kallaberry smoke.

“I wonder what we are making, daughter,” he said to the sea below.

Jin Li Tam

Jin Li Tam approached the Gray Guard at the gates of the Summer Papal Palace before any of the Gypsy Scouts could.

“Hail, keepers of the light,” she said. “I would speak with Pope Resolute.” She cantered her mount closer. “Tell him it is Jin Li Tam, former consort of his cousin Sethbert, forty-second daughter of Vlad Li

Tam, and most immediately, betrothed of Lord Rudolfo of the Ninefold Forest Houses and General of the Wandering Army.” She inclined her head to them. “Tell the Pope I have personally escorted his metal man home.”

Getting in, she realized as the gates creaked open, is never the problem.

The Pope insisted on seeing her immediately, personally escorting her to the guest quarters. He did not understand the taking and giving of kin-clave, she realized. And he did not understand that because of this, she knew everything there was to know about him in less than seven minutes.

“My father was very specific,” she told him, smiling through the lie, “that I was to personally escort and supervise the mechoservitor until this matter of Windwir is resolved. He said that you of all men would understand why this was so important in light of recent events.” Her tone was dark and she lowered her voice. “House Li Tam has acted as a neutral party in many negotiations of kin-clave.”

The Pope nodded. “We will accommodate his request.”

She nodded. She knew full well it had nothing to do with anything other than money. This new archbishop’s only bridge to what remained of the Order’s treasury was her father, and doing what her father wanted was prudent for him. “Also, there is the matter of consummating my betrothal to Rudolfo.”

The Pope stammered. “Yes. I did not know until today.”

“My father only recently announced it. I’m assuming that the Order does not forbid conjugal visits of their prisoners?”

“It can be arranged, certainly.”

“My father would appreciate that,” she said. Already, the betrothal was working in her favor. It had to be her father.

After the Pope left her, she bathed and perfumed herself and oiled her hair. She unrolled the one gown she’d found among the clothes laid out for her at the seventh manor and she hung it near the hot water so that the steam could lift the wrinkles.

She moved easily and naked around Isaak as she prepared.

“We will see Lord Rudolfo tonight then?” Isaak asked.

“We will,” she said. “We have much to discuss.”

She arranged to have her dinner served in Rudolfo’s chambers, and ten minutes before, she and Isaak went to the staircase that led to the tower where the Gray Guard waited. They did not bother to search her, though they looked Isaak over thoroughly, exchanging furtive glances of trepidation between themselves. Still, her father’s wishes—even those she manufactured—would be followed. Of this, she had no doubt.

Finally, they worked a large key in the door and opened it for her. She walked in, Isaak close behind, the thick carpets shushing his metal feet.

The Prisoner’s Quarters were nearly indistinguishable from her own. Wall hangings of hunting scenes woven in tapestry took the place of a wide glass window—this room’s windows were set high and narrow in the ceiling. She saw a desk with scattered sheets of paper filled with cramped script in at least three languages, and behind it, a bookcase. A door led off the main room into what she supposed was

the bedroom and bathing room. Across from it, a small dining table was set for three, and in the “ee,e. center of the room stood a golden furnace surrounded by a low couch and three armchairs.

Rudolfo stood from the couch and bowed. She watched his eyes move over her quickly, pausing in the right places. “Lady Tam,” he said, “you are a vision in my desert.”

She curtsied. “Lord Rudolfo, it is agreeable to see you again.” And it was. It surprised her just how agreeable. He was dressed in a pair of dark green trousers and a loose-fitting silk shirt the color of lightly cooked cream, tied together by a crimson sash. A matching turban accentuated the midnight of his eyes. He looked at the metal man, and his smile widened.

“Isaak,” he said. “Are you well?”

“I am not, Lord,” the metal man said. “I fear—”

Rudolfo raised a hand. “After dinner, my metal friend.”

He walked to Jin’s side and offered her an arm. She let him take it. He seemed taller than she remembered, but certainly shorter than she was. She felt his fingers moving along her arm, pressing and releasing.

I hoped to spare you this, he tapped. “Let me seat you,” he said aloud.

She nodded and smiled as he moved her toward the table, placing her hand on his wrist. *My father had other plans it seems*, she replied.

He pulled out her chair and pushed it in as she sat. Then she watched as he circled the table to stand behind his own chair. “Come and sit with us, Isaak,” he said, pointing to a third place at the table.

“I do not eat, Lord Rudolfo,” Isaak began, but Rudolfo waved his words away.

“Join us anyway.”

Isaak limped to the table and sat, staring down at the place settings arranged before him. He looked up at the dome-covered dishes and the bottles of chilled wine. “May I at least serve, Lord?” the metal man asked.

Rudolfo shook his head. “Certainly not.” He winked at Jin. “Tonight is our betrothal dinner, and I intend to do all of the serving.”

Jin watched him as he moved from one side of the table to the other, now by her side again and holding a dripping bottle of wine wrapped in a white cotton towel. He raised his eyebrows and she nodded. He filled her glass, then filled his own and sat.

He raised the glass and leaned in. “I wo“in./p>uld have cooked,” he said, “if Resolute had given me free run of the kitchen.”

Jin smiled, shifting easily into another nonverbal language. She sipped her wine, moving her fingers and shrugging. *Resolute knows little of statecraft*, she signed to him. She licked her lips, wishing the wine were tart and a bit drier. “This is an excellent choice,” she said.

I concur; we can use that to our advantage, he signed back. He returned her smile. “I’m glad you approve.”

He turned to Isaak. *How has he been?* Rudolfo signed to her, moving his fingers along stem of his glass

while touching the table cloth with his right forefinger. “How have you been, Isaak?”

Remorseful, she answered.

“I am functioning properly, Lord Rudolfo.”

He nodded and turned back to Jin Li Tam. “It’s a tradition in my house that the groom-to-be prepare a feast for his betrothed. When my father took my mother into his house, he spent a week in the kitchens and three weeks before that in the Great Library poring over recipes to make the perfect selections for her.” Rudolfo chuckled. “He spoke of it often as his greatest test of strategy. He sent runners across the Named Lands gathering the ingredients. A bottle of apple brandy from the cave-castles of Grun El. Peaches from Glimmerglam, of course. Rice and kallaberries from the Emerald Coasts.”

Her father had spoken of Lord Jakob. He’d not spoken of the lady, though. Under better circumstances, her father would have fully briefed her on the history of Rudolfo’s house. When she’d accepted the role of consort to Lord Sethbert, she’d spent nearly a month locked away with everything her father had gathered on that man and his family.

Now, the stakes were higher—a full betrothal—but she knew far less about this man she was to marry.

She shifted in her seat, suddenly feeling the weight of those stakes. Perhaps her father had changed his strategy.

She doubted it. If he’d intended to do such a thing, word would’ve waited for her here and she’d not have been allowed to see Rudolfo.

Your father must protect Isaak, he signed to her as he stood again. “Alas,” he said, “we’ll celebrate our occasion with less glamour.”

Rounding the table, he took her plate and served her. He watched the look on her face as he lifted each lid, and she noticed how well he read her expressions, leaving off those dishes that elicited a less than favorable response from her.

He reads people well, she thought, as he speared asparagus onto her plate. He left off the drizzle of butter and roasted garlic and continued.

She smiled at him as he put the plate in front of her. “You are quite good at that.”

He nodded. “I am a student of the masses.”

He served himself quickly, and filled fresh wineglasses with something red and unchilled. She lifted it to her nose and knew already it would be tart and dry on her tongue.

Rudolfo raised his glass. “To formidable partnerships,” he said. His other hand moved slightly, but she followed with her eye. *May we find happiness in one another despite the circumstances that bring us together.*

She raised her glass as well and repeated the words that he had spoken aloud. She was too surprised to reply to the words he had not spoken, the words he’d signed in the nonverbal language of House Li Tam.

She’d not considered happiness as something important to this Gypsy King. She wondered what else would surprise her about him.

Petronus

Two days after Sethbert's visit the first supply wagons pushed their way along the ash-strewn road, delivering tools, food and clothing to the workers.

Petronus tasked Neb with inventorying and assigning them. The boy was quick with a pencil and ciphers. Over the days, as word spread to the outlying villages, more workers drifted in. A few refugees—tradesfolk who'd relied on Windwir for their livelihood—showed up. And at least two Androfrancine caravans had stopped, en route to the Summer Palace to heed Pope Resolute's call. When those wagons—and their Gray Guard contingents—stopped, Petronus marked his face with soot and talked to the ground, though he knew it was unlikely that anyone would recognize him.

But the boy recognized you, some part of him chided. Of course, the amazing thing about boys was that they actually paid attention to busts and portraits even when it seemed like they didn't. But someday, he thought, someone who really knew you will recognize you. *You were lucky with Sethbert*, the same voice said.

Now that Introspect was dead, there were no other Androfrancines who knew about Petronus. And back at home, in Caldu Bay, the few still living who knew his secret were too grateful to have their limerick master back to ever break it. And of course, Vlad Li Tam had known. He'd helped locate the roots and flowers that Petronus's particular poison had required, and had arranged for and financed the runaway Pope's escort home after an appropriate period of time in hiding at House Li Tam on the Inner Emerald Coast.

Rudolfo

When they finished dinner, Rudolfo led Jin Li Tam to the sitting room and brought a bottle of cinnamon scented liquor and two metal glasses with him.

Before sitting, he looked back at Isaak. "And you're certain that you can do this?"

Isaak's eyes shuttered. "My limited understanding is that in matters of Shunning, communication privileges are not withheld. Your request does not interfere with my adherence to Androfrancine protocol."

Rudolfo nodded. "Very well."

He'd spent days in this room, hating the cage, and writing out carefully coded instructions to his scouts, to the stewards of his Ninefold Forest Houses and to the pontiffs. Of course, he'd assumed the messages would never be seen; it was more for *his* benefit that he wrote them. He would have burned them eventually . . . until the old Gray Guard captain had poked his head in to say he would be dining with his betrothed and the mechoservitor that was not to leave her side.

Now, Isaak sat slowly reading each document. Then later, in the same way Rudolfo hoped to rebuild the library, Isaak would conjure back each page exactly as Rudolfo had written it. Truly a miracle of mechanics.

After Isaak reproduced them, Jin Li Tam could pass them to the Gypsy Scouts that arrived with her. They in turn would run them to the half-squad that Rudolfo had left outside.

Rudolfo sat and poured liquor into the glasses. He held one out to her.

She took it and he found himself admiring her long slender fingers. He followed them, then caught the line of her wrist and lower arm. The gown she wore accentuated the line and grace of her and he'd found it hard to take his eyes off her.

Her father's acceptance of him as suitor and declaration of their betrothal had surprised him a bit, but more surprising was that he'd not reversed it when Resolute took power. Of course, it also said something about the man. He was a Whymer Maze, to be sure, and he knew something or he would not gamble with his forty-second daughter.

But even more surprising than all of that was the sheer fairness of her. And the fierceness, too, Rudolfo saw. It was not unheard of for a woman to be taller than him, but she towered—and she held that poise as power in her fists. Her red hair, now pulled back and pinned to reveal her long neck and the curve of her jaw, threw back the lamplight. She was not overly slim, she had muscle, she had curves and the gown played to all of them.

Beyond the beauty, intelligence shone in her eyes and wit played on her tongue and Rudolfo felt utterly charmed.

He studied her face, sipping the warm liquor. "How do you feel about this . . . *arrangement*?"

She shrugged. "I am a daughter of House Li Tam. I am about my father's business."

Rudolfo smiled. "A proper response." He leaned forward. "Are you always so careful, Lady?"

She took a drink from the metal cup, then put it down on the small pine table nearby. "Are you always so direct?"

"I am known for it when it suits me."

He watched her face, finding her harder to read in this instance, now that the reading went deeper than food and drink. "I am intrigued by my father's choice of strategy," she finally said.

Rudolfo stroked his beard. "Your father studied with the Francines as a boy, yes?"

She nodded. "He did."

"His move to humiliate Sethbert by so quickly aligning with his enemy—and so quickly endorsing our betrothal—shows that he learned well from them." One of probably hundreds of actions Vlad Li Tam spun into his web in order to influence outcomes to his advantage. "I have always admired his strength."

Jin inclined her head slightly. "My father has spoken highly of you and your house, as well."

"Then you are not displeased with his decision?"

Her words were careful again. "My father is a brilliant man. I trust his judgment implicitly."

Rudolfo refilled their cups. Back in the Ninefold Forest, they called this liquor Firespice. It was a blended spirit his people had brought across the Keeper's Wall when the first Rudolfo settled the Prairie Sea. It was strong, and if the night went where it could, he thought it might help prepare them.

He sipped it and put down the cup. He looked over to Isaak, who sat at the table, humming quietly as he read Rudolfo's stack of notes. The mechoservitor looked up and their eyes met for a moment.

Jin Li Tam followed his eye. "He is a wonder to behold," she said.

Rudolfo leaned forward. “He is amazing, to be sure. But truthfully, Lady Tam, you are the only wonder in this room.”

She blushed, then went redder when she realized it. She shifted uncomfortably in the seat, her poise lost for just a moment. But she recaptured it, and her blue eyes narrowed. “You flatter me, Lord Rudolfo. And yet you do not need to. I can assure you that I will—”

He raised his hand and she went quiet. “It is not required,” he said in a quiet voice. Her eyes narrowed even further. “I recognize,” he said, “that you are well versed in the rites of kin-clave and the highest machinations of statecraft. But these are dark days upon us, and your father’s strategy is sound. We do not need to invoke our flesh in these matters.”

Her mouth opened but he continued. “I am fully aware of the expectations upon you as a daughter of House Li Tam. I am fully aware of the Articles of Consummation in the Fourteenth Overture of Kin-Clave by Betrothal. You do not need to bring those to bear in this conversation. It is the two of us,” he gestured to Isaak, “and a metal man. If you wish it, we can go into the bedchambers, close the door to Isaak and let the world believe what it will. We need do nothing but sleep, yet we can both claim it to be the most rewarding and exhausting night of passion either of us have ever known.”

He did not think it was admiration on her face. It might have been surprise or perhaps even uncertainty. But for the slightest moment, he thought he saw relief there. Then it became amusement, and she smiled. “You are a kind man to ask after my feelings on the matter.”

He inclined his head. “I believe some journeys are best taken slow. The Desolation of Windwir has changed us all. It has changed the world and we do not know what will come of it. It is enough; I would not add more change to it, strategy or no.” He paused. “Though, I must tell you that I am pleased with your father’s work so far.”

Jin Li Tam stood and walked to him. “Change,” she said, quoting the Whymer Bible, “is the path life takes.”

Rudolfo stood, and when he did, she bent down and kissed him softly by the side of his mouth. He placed his hands on her hips, feeling the solid warmth of her, and stretched up on his tiptoes to return her kiss. “A fortuitous undertaking,” he said quietly. Pressing his fingers into her hip, he sent her another message, and she blushed again.

You will ever be my sunrise, he told her.

Then, because he knew that it was important to her that it be her own idea and that she lead in this particular dance, he let her take him by the hand and guide him into the waiting bedchamber.

Rudolfo looked into the hallway at the body of the Gray Guard, stretched out on the floor. Already, one of the scouts pulled at it. Under any other circumstances it would be comical, watching the corpse slide—seemingly of its own volition—across the threshold and into the Prisoner’s Quarters. Once it was in the room, he stepped over the body and into the hall.

Invisible hands closed the door and locked it.

A belt was pushed into his hands, and he felt the sheathed scout knives, magicked with the oils that kept them as silent and invisible as the scouts that danced with them. He pulled the belt around his narrow waist and buckled it.

“What of Isaak?”

Jin Li Tam's voice was near his ear now, her breath warm on the side of his face and smelling like apples. "He is with the archbishop."

"Excellent."

Rudolfo let the Gypsy Scouts lead the way, staying to the sides of the long, wide halls, finding the shadows where they could, and quickly dowsing lamps where the light was most likely to betray them.

They slipped past acolytes and scholars, guards and servants. Once, he and Jin Li Tam waited in an alcove while the two scouts found a better route. Once more, when no better route could be found, they waited while another Gray Guard was killed.

The Palace went to Third Alarm just as they reached the middle point of the stairs that swept up to the Papal Offices. Below them, the main doors burst open and a squad of Gray Guard, led by that ancient captain, poured in. They locked the door behind them, posted sentries, and scattered.

Rudolfo grinned at the danger of it. When two guards pounded up the stairs, he crouched and pressed himself against the hand carved railing. Once they passed, he continued up, feeling Jin Li Tam's hand on the back of his knife belt.

The four Gray Guard at Oriv's door did not have time to shout. Blades whispered and two of them fell, their shouts muffled by the scarves shoved quickly into their mouths. Rudolfo felt Jin Li Tam move past him quickly, and watched as the third guard's throat opened to her knife in a red line that moved with a quick, careful stroke. Blood spilled onto his gray uniform.

When the fourth guard hesitated, his mouth opening, Rudolfo danced forward with his own blades, pushing one into the soft tissue beneath his chin and the other through the left side, into the heart.

He heard scrambling behind the door, and pushed it open quickly. Oriv was on his feet behind the wide desk, fumbling with a drawer, his eyes wide with terror. The archbishop raised a strange cylindrical device—a metal tube bound to an ornately carved pearl handle—and worked a small lever on it with his free hand.

Rudolfo saw the spark and ducked, feeling the heat from it as it singed the left side of his head. Behind him a heavy form fell, and he heard the sound of bubbling blood and the drumming of soft boot heels on the floor.

Roaring, Rudolfo pounced across the desk, pulling the archbishop to the floor. The weapon fell to the carpet, and the archbishop resorted to his feet, his nails and his teeth. Rudolfo fought back, keeping his grip on the archbishop as well as his knife. Finally, he worked the tip of the knife into the would-be Pope's ear. He shifted so that his mouth was close to the other ear. "We've done this your way," Rudolfo whispered. "Now we do it mine."

The others moved into the room, leaving the bodies where they fell and quickly working the locks of the door. "We've lost Rylk," the remaining scout said. "Whatever it was, it put a hole through his torso the size of a child's head."

Rudolfo resisted the urge to push his knife farther into Oriv's ear. "Is anyone else hurt? Lady Tam?"

"Singed but otherwise fine," she said.

Rudolfo looked around the room. He saw Isaak in the corner. "Isaak, are you well?"

"I am functional, Lord Rudolfo."

“Good. Ready yourself for travel. We’re leaving.”

“But Lord Rudolfo, I am the property of—”

Rudolfo ignored him. He twisted the knife just a bit. “Release the mechoservitor into my care until this unpleasantness is past.” He felt Oriv’s muscles, tense and he pushed the knife. “You’ll realize soon enough,” Rudolfo said, “that my restraint has limits.”

“Killing me only reinforces your own guilt.” Panic laced the archbishop’s voice, and it pleased Rudolfo greatly.

“And yet,” he said through his smile, “you’d still be dead. Now do as you’re told.”

They stayed long enough to scoop the papers from the cluttered desk into a carrying pouch along with the strange weapon. Two minutes later, with Isaak bringing up the rear and Oriv under knifepoint at the front, they made their way down the stairs.

Soldiers waited at the bottom, swords drawn.

Rudolfo smiled and twisted the blade again, savoring the melody it made. Sweeter than any choir, the archbishop screamed for the Gray Guard to stand down, and they obeyed their so-called Pope.

Neb

It was Neb’s turn to inventory the artifact wagon. Petronus did it himself most of the time, but over the past several days, the old man had become further withdrawn. He’d started trusting Neb with more of his responsibilities, and Neb didn’t mind that at all.

He approached the wagon now, keeping the rolled parchment and pen hidden beneath his robe and out of the rain. They’d rigged a canvas covering with a system of ropes and poles. The wagon waited beneath it, guarded by an uninterested merchant who muttered and moved about to avoid the water that flowed in channels off the makeshift roof.

The merchant looked up as he approached. “How long?”

Neb looked over the side of the wagon at the muddy items stacked inside. He poked at it with his walking stick. “Two hours, I’d say.”

He nodded. “I’ll be back then,” he said, and shambled off to find some hot soup.

Neb pulled himself up into the back of the wagon and picked his way to the front. He spread the parchment out on a dry patch on the seat. Then, sitting amid the day’s collection, he started inventorying each item.

The workers gave a cursory look at anything they found. Initially Sethbert’s man had insisted they bring everything, but they quickly saw that the sheer volume exceeded the capacity of several wagons. Now they left the more mundane scraps they found, and saved only the most important pieces for the daily wagon.

Neb—or Petronus on the days when he did it—was the second pass through the items, giving them one more opportunity to pull out a cup or a blade or some other implement that had found its way in amid the mechanical birds or the copper globes.

The first hour always went fast and the last hour always went the slowest. Some days merited a third or

fourth hour, but today the wagon was only a third of the way full. Neb typically went through everything all at once, tossing the unwanted items over the side and into the mud. After that initial pass, he then inventoried what was left.

But then, an hour into his inventory, he saw it in the corner of the wagon.

He was not surprised that he missed this particular artifact on the first pass; it wasn't very large at all. The fact that anyone had found it was probably a small miracle. Perhaps the light had caught it just right there on the skeletal finger of the man who had worn it.

It was a simple affair—a plain ring made of a strange metal, dark as iron but light as steel. The signet itself was clogged with ash and mud, but Neb knew it before he spit on the corner of his robe and used it to clean the dirt out of it.

He'd seen pictures of this ring all of his life. And he'd seen the stamp of its signet on thousands of documents throughout the Great Library. He'd seen it on the finger of every man whose portrait hung in the Hall of Kings.

It was the signet ring of the Androfrancine Pope.

He looked around, unsure what to do. He knew Petronus wouldn't want the ring to fall into Sethbert's hands. It was just a ring, certainly. It had no magicks about it. But it was one of the oldest symbols of the office, something that could not be reproduced. And news was all over the camp that some other Androfrancine—someone keeping quiet but at least known to a few—had a more direct line of succession to the Windwir throne. Of course, Neb was the only one around who knew the truth about Petronus. He certainly hadn't shared that information, which meant someone else knew. Or perhaps, he thought, it wasn't Petronus at all that they were referring to. Perhaps it was another archbishop vying for the crippled Order's highest office.

Still, during the time they'd worked together, Neb had quickly come to think of the kind, strong old man as the true Pope. Though it wasn't anything he could conceive of proclaiming—regardless of what Brother Hebda told him in his dreams.

In the end, he slipped the ring in his pocket. At the very least, he could keep it from some pretender's finger. At the very best, if Petronus took back his rightful place the ring would be nearby.

Neb resumed his inventory, feeling the weight of millennia in his pocket and not knowing quite what to do with it.

Jin Li Tam

They rode for a night and a day, only stopping for minutes at a time. Jin Li Tam and Rudolfo galloped their stallions side by side, riding without words.

By morning, she'd felt her senses falling back into their normal place. By early afternoon the last of the magicks had burned out, and she felt the weariness of withdrawal aching in her limbs. Scouts spent years practicing the magicks, learning the rhythms of their bodies and picking up the tricks of the trade that made withdrawal less of an issue. The fact that magicks were only used during time of war—and by only the most elite of soldiers—also made a difference.

Though not officially a scout, she'd spent enough time with the scouts. Still, these she rode with now could stay magicked for days at a time—even weeks—without undue effect. She could barely handle a day of it.

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They were a full squad now, between Rudolfo's escort and her own, less the man who'd been killed by the archbishop. They kept her and Rudolfo in the middle with Isaak as they rode, and they kept their blades tucked back beneath their arms, ready to bring them forward with a moment's notice.

When it was well past dark, they stopped to make camp. They rode their horses into a forest of old growth pine a league or better from the muddy track that served as the solitary road this far north.

Rudolfo pulled away with his lead scout while the others set up camp. Jin Li Tam tried to make herself useful, but in the end she was only in the way. The Gypsy Scouts moved with precision, quickly putting up tents and laying in a small fire.

Of course, Oriv would be a fool to have them followed. His already limited Gray Guard had been thinned by a handful of men. He'd not risk losing more or leaving his Palace unguarded. If he went looking for vengeance—and Jin was not sure he was the sort to do so—he would hire it out. Or turn to his cousin. She had no doubt that birds were already winging their way rapidly south and east, carrying news of Rudolfo's escape.

Isaak had not spoken since leaving Oriv's office, and for the first time since they'd left she realized he no longer wore his Androfrancine robe. How had she missed that? He sat against a tree, staring out through the woods at nothing. His bellows shook from time to time, as if he heaved sighs that his chassis was not designed for. She could see the intricacies now of his metal frame and musculature. His long, slender arms and legs and his helmetlike head with his jeweled eyes all glistened dully as the Gypsy Scout struck the sparks for their fire. His mouth opened and closed periodically.

Jin Li Tam walked to him and crouched. "Isaak?"

He did not respond. She reached out a hand, hesitated, and then lowered it onto his cold, metal shoulder. He spun, eyelids flashing to life as his hand came up. He paused. "Apologies, Lady Tam."

"Where are your robes?"

His eye-shutters flitted and steam released from his back. "Pope Resolute ordered me to remove them. He said it was unseemly for a mechanical to wear the habit of P'Andro Whym."

"I suspect," Jin Li Tam said, "that P'Andro Whym would have been glad for you to wear it." She waited, wondering if she should continue. "Is that what troubles you?"

Isaak looked up, his eyes full of a sorrow of such magnitude that she had only seen once before. "No, Lady Tam. I am troubled by another matter."

She felt her eyebrows knit together. &<<nit

"I fear," Isaak said, "that I am malfunctioning. I do not believe I will serve well to assist with restoration of the library." He paused, and his mouth clacked open and closed in a metallic stammer. "I am no longer . . . reliable."

"In what way?" Around them, the scouts put the last finishing touches on the camp. She could smell the onions that the cook sliced as he prepared dinner.

Isaak looked back out at the forest. "Pope Resolute asked me many questions. Difficult questions. About my role in the Desolation of Windwir." He paused. "Then he asked me if I could reproduce the spell from recall, in writing."

Jin Li Tam felt her stomach clench. But she couldn't bring herself to ask it.

Isaak continued, still staring off into the forest. "When he asked me to, I told him I could not. I told him that part of my memory scroll had been damaged in the execution of the spell."

Jin Li Tam sighed. "And he believed you?"

"Of course he believed me. Mechanicals cannot lie."

She nodded. "You are worried that you are malfunctioning because you lied to the archbishop?"

"Yes," Isaak said, turning back to look at her. "How can a mechanical lie? I think—" He sobbed, and the violence of it cause Jin Li Tam to jump back. "I think perhaps the spell altered me."

It changed all of us, she thought. "If it did, Isaak, then it was for good. You are carrying the most dangerous weapon the world has ever known. A spell that killed a world to satisfy a father's wrath. A death for each of the seven sons P' Andro Whym executed in his Restoration Scientifika pogrom. Those Deaths must be kept hidden in you, Isaak. The Androfrancines were the best and noblest of us—with infinite patience, studying their matrices and working their ciphers, only releasing to the world what secrets and wonders it was ready for. If *they* couldn't safeguard this secret, no others of us could. You are the safest tomb for it until it can be removed and destroyed." She paused, charting her course of words carefully. "If you must lie to keep this secret, then lie." Her eyes narrowed. "There is no price too high, Isaak."

She waited to see if he would respond. When he didn't, she put her hand on his chest, her fingers splayed out. Where his shoulder had been cool, his chest was warm. "Change is the path life takes," she told him. "Maybe the death you have seen has brought you life."

"It is an odd sensation," he said in agreement.

She opened her mouth to speak again but Rudolfo interrupted her as he swaggered in from the forest. "Hail, Isaak," he shouted, and tossed a bundle toward the metal man.

Isaak caught it and stared down at it.

"I thought perhaps you could use it. I picked it up on our way out."

Jin Li Tam looked at the bundle now too, and felt the smile pulling at her mouth.

In that moment, she suddenly knew that love was planted in her heart toward the laughing Gypsy King, Rudolfo.

She smiled at Rudolfo while Isaak stood and dressed himself in Androfrancine robes.

Vlad Li Tam

Vlad Li Tam was not even halfway to the Emerald Coasts when the bird found him. This bird always found him. He was riding when it settled upon his shoulder and nibbled playfully at his beard. He'd petted it and raised his fist to signify a halt. They helped him down from the saddle, and he pulled the message.

While he read it, his servants hastily erected a tent and chair for him to sit in. He summoned his master sergeant and his aide. "There has been a significant change in the course of events," he finally said after leaving them in silence for a time. "I have in my hands a decree from our invisible Pope. Of course, he doesn't name himself. But he has the tone of authority, the confident positioning of his words."

Vlad Li Tam stopped, took the message and passed it to his aide, who sat quickly and began to study it, making ciphers in the margins. “He’s moved faster than we thought he would,” the aide said.

“But without his name,” Vlad Li Tam, “we have nothing but words.”

The aide went back to reading. “He encourages the continued gathering of resources at the Papal Summer Palace and commends Archbishop Oriv for his strategic effort on behalf of the Order.” Then he shook his head, amazed. “And then exercises his Right of King by way of kin-clave to declare war on Lord Sethbert, Overseer of the Entrolusian City States.”

“Note that,” Vlad Li Tam said, accepting his kallaberry pipe from the servant who was setting luncheon. “He does not declare war on the City States themselves.”

The aide chuckled. “He is allowing them a way out. They can deliver Sethbert or they can support him.”

Vlad Li Tam nodded. “Mark him, Arys. Petronus is the wiliest of men.”

But, he thought, for all of his wiliness, he still hid himself from the world. Vlad Li Tam had spent a year fishing with Petronus when they were both young. Vlad’s father, Ben Li Tam, had insisted that his first son spend a year without privilege. Of course, every Tam father realized that a true first son would think beyond the edges of the light. So they offered the families that took them in a stupendous amount of currency to ensure that the experience truly was without privilege. Because these boys—the first sons—would someday inherit the lucrative and invisible network that the Li Tam shipbuilders had created when they turned to banking both currency and information. And that inheritance demanded a broad range of experience to give a broad range of knowledge.

He’d lived with Petronus and his family, had eaten at the table with him, taken his share of beatings with him, fishing daily the wide waters of Caldas Bay.

Even then, he remembered Petronus’s love affair with the Androfrancines. He showed him the excavations he’d led to his own backyard forest, pointing out the holes he’d dug in search of artifacts that did not exist in the New World.

“Maybe someday,” Vlad Li Tam had said to Petronus as they mended their nets at the end of a day, “you’ll be Pope.”

Petronus had laughed and he had joined in. But he wasn’t surprised at all to read about a young Archbishop Petronus in his intelligence training with Father. By the time Petronus was made Pope, Vlad Li Tam had already seen his twenty-third daughter into the world, fully managing House Li Tam. They rekindled their friendship as if twenty years hadn’t passed.

Though they didn’t see each other often, they met occasionally at affairs of state. Three times, they met in conference at the Summer Papal Palace over Androfrancine accounts. Vlad’s most vivid memory was the summer before Petronus’s so-called assassination. They were sitting in the office on the upper floor, the afternoon sun spilling into the room through glass doors wide open. They’d pored over the papers from morning until night and only had the afternoon left because of Li Tam obligations that called him elsewhere.

After a particularly challenging conversation on asset liquidation, Petronus paused, and a pained look crossed his face. “Do you ever wonder what your life would be if you weren’t Lord Tam of House Li Tam?”

“I can’t,” Vlad remembered saying. “I was made for this. I can’t imagine being anyone other than who I

am.”

Petronus had thought about this and nodded. “But do you ever miss fishing?”

Vlad Li Tam laughed. “Every day.”

Five minutes later, the staff and servants at the Papal Summer Palace did not know what to do when their Pope came bellowing down the hall for bait and tackle and wine.

Now all these years later, Vlad Li Tam still believed the answer he’d given his boyhood friend. He had thirty-seven sons and fifty-three daughters, all honoring him in some fashion. At no time had he wondered what it might have been like otherwise.

I do not believe in otherwise.

It’s what he was made for. Somehow, he had to make his friend see the same thing for himself.

Vlad Li Tam turned to the Master Sergeant. “We will need the birder to order a flock. You’ll have a day to set up the bird-tents.” He looked over his aide. “You’ll have the same day to rescript the proclamation.” He drew in on the pipe as his servant held a long stick match to it. “The next day, we ride for Windwir.”

He dismissed them with a nod, and they stood to leave.

I’m coming, Petronus, he thought.

I’m coming to remind you what you’re made for.

After they left him, not even the kallaberry smoke could lift his spirits.

Rudolfo

Rudolfo arose early, as was his custom, and walked alone through the forest. He whistled, long and low, to warn his sentries that he approached. They whistled back to acknowledge him, but after years of riding with their general, they did not approach or interrupt.

He loved the mornings most of all. It was a time when the world still slept and he could be in solitude, apart from everything. It was a time for processing strategy and plotting the day's schemes.

The rain let up sometime in the night, but the ground and foliage were still wet. The air hung heavy with moisture—ribbons of mist moving low across the ground in the deep gray of predawn.

They would ride hard today and put yet more distance between themselves and the last of the Androfrancines. But soon enough, that small remnant would be the last of Rudolfo's concerns.

War was coming. A bigger war than he'd imagined when he launched that dark raven with its scarlet thread what seemed so long ago. Then, he'd thought it would his Wandering Army against Sethbert. But much had happened in the weeks that followed.

Vlad Li Tam's message intrigued him and he wondered how this new development would play out. A second Pope, one with a more direct line of succession, could mean divided loyalties. At the very least the Writ of Shunning would not stand, though he was certain Sethbert and his cousin would force the issue for as long as they could. The Androfrancines' leadership crisis would reproduce itself around the world as the houses of the Named Lands were forced to pick a side.

You get ahead of yourself. Rudolfo chuckled.

For all he knew, this Pope was also in Sethbert's pocket. Though he doubted it very much. Li Tam's involvement would have been different if that were the case.

Of course, the papal succession aside, there were other developments that also intrigued him. He'd seen the messages and knew now about the Marsh King's sudden declaration of kin-clave with him. A strange and unexpected alliance that prompted him to send birds to the Forest Manors, sending his stewards into the records archives to search for some shred of information about kin-clave between the Gypsies and the Marshers. The only connection Rudolfo could make was the Marsh King's capture when he was a boy.

Still, the Marshes Army was a formidable force when pulled together. Less predictable even than the Wandering Army, they relied on chaos—even madness—to prevail. Known mainly for their skirmishing raids, those few times the Marsh King's army had been called together over the last thousand years were formidable for those they faced. They rarely won when strategic minds came into play against them, but they never really lost, either. They slunk back north to their swamps and marsh grass, daring generals and kings alike to enter their demesnes and fight on Marshes land.

Few did, though the Androfrancine Gray Guard had forced the issue with them a time or two, exacting a price on skirmishers who raided the villages and towns that Windwir protected.

Why would the Marsh King side with the Ninefold Forest Houses?

And alongside that strange and unexpected alliance, there was another. His sudden kin-clave with House Li Tam through betrothal to Vlad Li Tam's forty-second daughter. It was a surprise that Rudolfo still did not know quite how to measure.

The consummation had been effective and even pleasurable. Though it wasn't the physical act that defined the pleasure of that night for him. Certainly, she was skilled enough. And judging by her response to him, their skills were well matched for the deed. But his pleasure had been deeper than their bodies pressed together or his hands tangled in her long, honey-scented hair or their mouths moving along one another's bodies. There was something deeper. Something sparked by their mutual conquest of one another. For though he took great pride in wearing her down and at long last commanding her body to pleasure, the truth of it was that she had done the same thing for his heart, and he was compelled now to think of her, to wonder about her, to wish to see her.

He'd considered going to her that night. Their eyes had caught across the fire and they'd traded brief smiles. But in the end, they'd slept side by side but in their separate tents.

Gods, what a woman.

And her father had not changed his strategy to the best of his knowledge. Nor would Rudolfo change his. He would align himself with this new Pope—if he were a man of reason and moderate strength—and he would win that new Pope to his way of seeing. When the war was finished, he would rebuild the library in a place where he could watch over it, a place far from the meddling of men like Sethbert.

Rudolfo heard a whistle behind him. It was too high and it did not warble at the end.

Setting his jaw, he crouched near a thick evergreen and drew his long, curved knife. He did not return the whistle, and after a moment he heard soft footfalls.

“Lord Rudolfo?” It was Jin Li Tam's voice.

He stood, putting his knife away. “I'm here, Lady Tam.”

She slipped through the foliage with the ease of a Gypsy Scout. “I don't quite have the whistle down,” she said.

Rudolfo smiled. “It's nearly there. You learn quickly.”

She curtsied. “Thank you, Lord. May I join you for your walk?”

He'd just started to think it was time to turn back, time to rouse the last watch from their few precious hours of sleep and strike camp for the long day's ride ahead. “Please,” he said.

She came alongside him, and they were both careful not to touch. “You are well?”

“I am. And you?”

“Yes,” she said. “Better now that we're on our way.”

They walked together, side by side, and her measured footsteps impressed him. She moved like a scout, confident and light with her step. The ferns and branches around her only trembled lightly as she went past; they did not leak the water that had collected there.

Rudolfo paused midstep, looking at her, then resumed walking. “Yes?”

“Why do you wish to do this? You intended to do this before the archbishop declared, even before I

proposed you as a suitor to my father. You meant to do this and finance it yourself.”

He chuckled. “Sethbert would have paid for it. He still will if I have my way.”

“But why would you do this? You do not seem to be the sort who would keep what light remains to yourself. The strategy beneath it suggests that you mean to keep the library in a place where it can be protected.”

Like she protects Isaak, he thought. *That* was the quality of parenthood he heard in her voice.

He shrugged. “I am not a young man. I stand just past the middle of my road. I am only now taking a wife. If I cannot give my Ninefold Forest Houses an heir, then at least I can give them knowledge. Something to love and defend fiercely in this world.”

Her next words surprised him. “Doesn’t it also atone for the first Rudolfo’s betrayal?”

He laughed. “I suppose perhaps it does.”

“Regardless,” she said, “I think it is a wise and wonderful thing that you do.” They settled back into silence before she surprised him again. “Do you want an heir, Rudolfo?”

Now he stopped entirely, a smile widening on his mouth. “You mean now? Here?”

“You know what I mean.”

He shrugged. He’d been with many women. For a time, he’d used the powders to dull his soldiers’ swords. And he’d certainly taken them through enough gates. But when he had finally tried to make a child with a consort sent from the Queen of Pylos as a matter of kin-clave courtesy, he’d been unable. And they’d tried for nine pleasurable months. After that, fearing that he couldn’t sire, he left off with the potions and redoubled his efforts with the women on his rotation. No discreet notes arrived by bird from his stewards, no reports of a girl (or three) heavy with child and claiming his patrimony.

He’d heard that the Androfrancines also had magicks for this. But even if it were true, it felt contrary to him for no reason he could discern.

He looked at Jin. “I’ve certainly considered it at length,” he said. “Alas, I’m afraid my soldiers have no swords.”

“Forty-seven, Sethbert.”

Sethbert noted that the general failed to use his title. “Forty-seven deserters in two weeks? We’re not even fully engaged.”

Sethbert watched a look of disgust march across the general’s face. “It has nothing to do with cowardice. It has *everything* to do with your indiscretions. Men will not willingly follow a monster.”

“Surely you can break their will?”

Lysias shook his head. “You don’t have enough loyal officers to do that. You will leak resources slowly. It is time to relieve these and bring forward fresh faces. You do not want to mix the bad in with the good. The spoiled pear always takes the barrel.”

“Fine,” Sethbert said. “Make it so.” He looked to his aide. “And you have a message for me?”

The young man stepped forward and passed the unrolled paper to Sethbert. “It isn’t good news, Lord.”

Of course it wasn't. The day had brought no good news. There'd really been no good news since the day the Marsh King showed up across the valley, blasting his nonsensical ramblings across the night, every night, for how long now?

Shortly after that mud-bugger showed up, he'd received word from Oriv—Pope Resolute, he reminded himself—that their funds had been frozen by House Li Tam. He'd flown into a rage to hear it. He'd known it was a risk—that there might be someone higher placed than his cousin out there somewhere. And after the first week, because no one had come forward disputing Resolute's succession, he'd assumed no one would.

Of course, there had also been mixed news. As angered as he was about Rudolfo's escape, he was pleased to learn that they had resorted to violence. It meant they no longer needed to keep up the pretense of civility in their dealings with him.

"How did it arrive? And from whom?" he asked, squinting at the message.

"It came under Androfrancine thread from House Li Tam, Lord."

He read the note, feeling his anger rebuilding. He saw everything right in front of him. House Li Tam again. His consort now Rudolfo's betrothed—an alliance formed. Perhaps, he thought, Rudolfo was involved from the start. In bed with the Androfrancines along with Vlad Li Tam and, though he did not know how, the Marsh King as well.

What would they gain by the Desolation of the Named Lands at the hands of those ³hanghtrobed tyrants? That question bothered him, but not overly so.

What bothered him more was that now they played a Pope of their own onto the board. Convenient that he was in hiding, invoking some obscure Androfrancine codex. And even Sethbert knew enough of their law to realize it was a stretch of that rule's intent.

He read the proclamation, his lips moving as he followed the words. When he finished, he crumpled the note and cast it aside. While the aide scrambled for it, Sethbert kicked over a chair.

"There is another Pope," the Overseer finally said.

"What does he say?" Lysias asked.

At Sethbert's wave, the aide passed the note to Lysias. He scanned it quickly. "This changes the war," Lysias finally said. "It is now a contest of words *and* swords. It will shift loyalties but it is impossible to say which. Or how we'll stand in the end."

"We need to fix the problem within our ranks. We will punish the men who fled."

"We don't have the resources to track them down," Lysias said.

"I have a better idea," Sethbert said. "I will address it personally."

Lysias nodded. "And what about the gravediggers?"

Sethbert thought. "We'll continue to subsidize their work in the name of the true Pope, Resolute the First."

"Very good, Lord."

He smiled at the respect he had purchased at some small price. Or at least the form of respect. He

doubted Lysias had ever truly respected him. A man like that wouldn't appreciate Sethbert's strength of character.

After the general left, he turned to his aide. "Cross-reference the deserters with their homes of record. Send a bird to the Overseer's Watchmen. I want a wife, a child, a mother, a sister. But don't kill them. Blind them. Mute them. Tell them why."

The aide paled. "Lord?"

Sethbert smiled, thinking about lunch and hoping it was pheasant or pork. "And when it's done, have word leak to the men of it."

"Yes, Lord."

"Now, fetch me a mechoservitor and tell the chef I'll take my lunch outside today."

The aide bowed and walked quickly away.

Alone, Sethbert righted the chair he had kicked over in his rage. Then he sat on it, and wondered what Rudolfo would do now that he was free. He'd been delighted to hear that the Gypsy King had delivered himself over to Resolute in the first place, and he'd known that he would not stay away from his Wandering Army and his Ninefold Forest for too long. His cousin was barely competent and no match for the wily fop.

But now, with Rudolfo's alliance with House Li Tam through strategic marriage, his role in this deepened considerably more than just a Gypsy King enraged at the death of a city.

Sethbert took no pleasure in his lunch that day.

Neb

Neb read the proclamation again, his fingers moving over the ring buried in his pocket. He looked at the haphazard sketch of the Androfrancine Papal seal, a great finishing touch on the message, then returned to the beginning of the proclamation.

Oh My People it began, and it continued in perhaps one of the most moving documents he had ever read. It read with the resonance of ancient greatness, something that one could study but never emulate. Within it he felt the death of something beautiful, and the solemn, humble work of saving what could be saved knowing full well that nothing would ever be as good as it had been.

This truly was a man he could want to be like.

Of course, Neb saw Petronus's mastery even in the way he led the gravediggers. At some point, Brother Hebda said he would proclaim him Pope. Maybe it was figurative, he thought. Maybe he was supposed to give him the ring.

He'd thought about it a dozen times since he'd found the damned thing. And each time, he pushed it back out of his mind for reasons he could not fully conceive.

He looked up again, and realized in his headlong walk out of camp he'd wandered pretty far into the ruins of the city. He looked around, trying to use the hills and the river to determine where he stood within the city. He was close to where the Garden had once been, or at least he thought he was. Not having walls and buildings to navigate by made it a difficult chore. But he picked his way north the equivalent of half a block, then west, then north again.

When he was reasonably sure he'd found it, he sat down in the ash and pulled his knees to himself. They'd already been through this part of the city, raking the ash for bones and artifacts.

Neb pulled the ring from his pocket and studied it for the hundredth time. It was simple and rare—the way that life should be. He'd cleaned it carefully by the light of a guttering candle when Petronus made his rounds around the camp at night. Now, it shone dully in his hand. He looked at it, turning it in the gray daylight of emerging winter.

“My king would speak with you,” a heavy, guttural voice whispered to his left.

Neb jumped, looking around but seeing nothing. Still, this darker light was perfect for scouts. “Who is your king?”

The voice moved now. “My king is the Reluctant Prophet of Xhum Y'Zir, the Unloved Son of P'Andro Whym, Most Beautiful of the Northern Marshes.”

Neb hesitated as the voice continued away. He looked back toward camp, so distant now that he could barely make out the figures that moved along its edges. He looked north, in the direction that the voice went, and saw the line of dark trees. Behind the trees, smoke drifted into the sky from the Marsh King's camp fires.

The voice returned. “My king would speak with you,” it said again. “You will not be harmed. You will return bearing his grace to your people.”

“I think you're mistaken,” Neb said. “I think perhaps he wants to parley with Petron—Petros, our leader.”

“No,” the scout said, moving away again. “No mistake. You are Nebios, son of Hebda, who watched the Great Extinguishment of Light, the Desolation of Windwir?”

Neb swallowed the sudden fear in his throat and nodded.

“My king would speak with you.” Now the voice grew more distant, and Neb looked back to camp once again.

Then, turning north, he ran after the Marsh King's ghostly messenger.

Rudolfo

Rudolfo and his party made their last camp together twenty leagues northwest of Windwir. In the morning, they would split up. He would ride with his escort to meet Gregoric and his company of Gypsy Scouts well beyond sight of the armies encamped around Windwir. While he turned southeast, Jin Li Tam and Isaak would ride northeast with their escort and make for the Prairie Sea with all haste.

A cold rain fell as the sky shifted to twilight, and the sun slipped b¶

They huddled beneath canvas tarps hung low, using the pine trees as natural cover as much as possible. Rudolfo looked at Isaak, the rain beading and rolling off his metal surface.

“You’ll not rust, will you?”

“The alloy composite of my chassis is resistant to rust and other forms of erosion, Lord Rudolfo,” the metal man said.

Rudolfo nodded. “Well enough.” He leaned against the tree. A few paces away, he watched Jin Li Tam lay out a tent and pull it together and up with the practiced skill of a soldier. He watched her as she worked, enjoying the places where the water clung to her clothing, accentuating her curves. “I want to speak with you about the work ahead,” he told Isaak, his voice dropping.

“Yes, Lord Rudolfo?”

“I’ve asked Lady Tam to assist you. She will speak to her father on behalf of the library and try to get sanction from this new Pope he spoke of.” Rudolfo turned from watching her and studied Isaak. “I will get you more help as soon as I possibly can. Meanwhile, start planning.”

The metal man’s head swiveled around to face him. “Have you given any thought to the location of the new library?”

Rudolfo thought about this. “There is a hill near the seventh forest manor—on the outskirts of town. I had intended it to be a Whymer Maze. Is it of sufficient size?”

Isaak’s eyes flashed bright and then dim, the shutters working quickly as he calculated. “If we build into the hill and above it.”

Rudolfo nodded. “Once we have secured the patriarchal blessing, I will hire the best architects, engineers and builders in the Named Lands to realize this vision. I will hire the carpenters of Paramo to design and build the furnishings required. Your role will be to tell us what we need to properly house the holdings you think can be restored.”

Steam chugged out of his exhaust grate. “Your faith in me continues to astound, Lord Rudolfo.”

“You are a marvelous wonder, Isaak. You may even be the very best of the Androfrancines’ work among us.”

Certainly the most dangerous and the most innocent at the same time, he thought. »thom"

“I will strive to exceed your expectations.”

Rudolfo smiled. "I have no doubt that you will."

"I had started my preliminary research before the summons arrived. I will resume that work now, by your leave."

Rudolfo nodded. "To your work, my metal friend."

Isaak limped off and Rudolfo watched him as he went. His armorer had done the best he could, certainly, never having worked on a mechanical before. Perhaps he could do better for the metal man with enough time to properly study his musculature and metallic skeleton. Maybe as they cataloged what was left in the memory scrolls of the mechoservitor corps, they would even find the ancient drawings from Rufello and have done with that limp.

Part of him wondered, though, if Isaak would permit that or if he would bear the limp along with his great remorse, a constant reminder of a pain that defined him.

Rudolfo had talked with Jin Li Tam about the metal man's lie. It was an interesting development in the mechoservitor's character.

Change is the path life takes. Perhaps that meant Isaak was truly alive. He wondered at the implications of such a thing. A man made by a man.

That night, as the coyotes howled beyond their camp, they ate cold rations and washed them down with colder wine. They talked briefly, voices low, about the next day and the work ahead.

"I'll see to the Marsh King and plumb this sudden kin-clave he's declared towards me," Rudolfo said. "I'll send word when I know. Until then, the Wandering Army stays at home. We need to see what this new Pope will mean for present loyalties."

Jin nodded. "I think Queen Meirov is tenuous at best in her alliance with Sethbert. He's not been a good neighbor to her people."

Rudolfo stroked his mustache. "She is a strong queen with a weak army." Pylos, the smallest of the Named Lands, used their army primarily to police the border they shared with the Entrolusian City States. He'd had kin-clave with her in the past. "Perhaps I will call upon her after I've parleyed with the Marsh King."

"My father will also send word to her," Jin said. "She relies on House Li Tam for her small fleet of river ships, and no small amount of her treasury is held with him as well."

Rudolfo smiled. "What do you think your father will do about the City State» thht=s?"

She shrugged. "It's hard to say. I'm sure he'll follow this new Pope's lead. He can put the blockade back in place in a matter of days."

And in two weeks, Rudolfo knew, those iron ships—powered in some similar way to the Androfrancines' metal men but on a much larger scale—could cripple the supplies and replacements that Sethbert relied on his wooden riverboats to deliver.

Gradually, as the clouds broke overhead and the stars shined out, swollen with wet light, they fell into silence. The scouts moved about the camp, some restringing bows and preparing to go on watch, others crawling into tents for a few hours of sleep. Beneath his own tarp across from them, Isaak sat with his eyes flashing and his bellows wheezing slightly as he ciphered.

They sat in silence for an hour, listening to the forest as it moved about them. A wind carried the faintest sound—a bellowing voice carried across long distances—and it stirred the fine hairs on Rudolfo’s neck and arms. Everyone knew of the War Sermons of the Marsh King—they sprung from the pages of that people’s violent history in the Named Lands, though they’d not been heard for more than five hundred years.

Rudolfo turned and tried to pick out the words, but it was in the ancient Whymer tongue—a language he was largely unfamiliar with.

Jin leaned closer to him. “He’s prophesying now. It’s fascinating.”

Rudolfo’s eyebrows shot up. “You understand him?”

“I do,” she said. “It’s faint. Something about the dreaming boy and a Last Testament of P’Andro Whym. A coming judgment on the Named Lands for the Androfrancine Sin.” She paused, and Rudolfo admired the line of her neck and the strength of her jaw as she cocked her head and listened. “The Gypsy King will . . .” She shook her head. “No, it’s gone. The wind carried it off.”

They fell back into silence again and another hour passed. Finally, Rudolfo stood, bid his company good night and crawled into the low battle tent they had set up for him.

He lay still, listening to the low voices outside and to the sounds of the wind as it played the evergreen ceiling. Was it so long ago that he dreaded the idea of staying still? When one bed or one house was not enough for him? He’d spent his life moving between nine manors. From the age of twelve, when he stepped into his father’s turban, he’d spent more of his life in the saddle and tent than he had manor or bed. And he’d loved that life. But that pillar in the sky created a longing for something else within him. Perhaps it was a temporary fixation. The Francines would say to follow the thread of his feelings backward. It was grief connecting to grief—today’s sadness reaching back i>reaixanto yesterday’s and gathering strength.

You’ve lost your light young, he remembered his father telling him when he lay dying in the amber field. First his brother at five, then his father and mother at twelve. Windwir’s destruction found that grief and worried it, creating inside of him a longing for home and rest that he could not remember ever knowing before.

He jumped when she slid alongside of him into the narrow bedrolls. She moved as silently as a Gypsy Scout, perhaps more so. And when she had entwined her arms and legs with his, she pinned him down and kissed him on the mouth. “For a great and mighty general,” she whispered, “you are not so very bold.”

Rudolfo returned her kiss, amazed at how in the moment he finally longed for home, home appeared and welcomed him.

Petronus

Petronus was rounding the corner, approaching the galley tent, when the muddy bird flapped into camp. It squawked and hopped about until he scooped it up and slipped the unthreaded message from its foot. He opened it and saw Whymer runes.

Your grandson is our honored guest, it read.

Petronus checked the tent first. Then the wagon and the galley and the bathing tent. When Neb didn’t turn up at any of those places, he went next to the sentries. But the sentries were pulled in closer now that

defense was warranted, and at sundown, the guard had changed.

After he'd done that much, Petronus returned to the camp and organized a search party. The War Sermon started up as they moved into the city.

But midway through the search, Petronus called them together and sent them back to the camp. The Marsh King's note was specific enough that he knew they wouldn't find the boy. While the others drifted back, Petronus stayed on the northern edge of the city and watched the line of forests. Tonight, the War Sermon was particularly cryptic—a string of prophetic utterances about a boy, obscure references to texts Petronus had heard of but never seen. Texts that not even the Androfrancines had seen these two thousand years. Only the memory of these texts survived as references in newer works.

He understood the words but did not understand their meaning.

"He's in the Marsh King's camp," Gregoric said.

Petronus turned in the direction of the voice. "You've seen him then?"

"Aye," the scout said. "We saw him running with one of their scouts."

Petronus felt anger, sharp and focused. "And yet you did not stop him?"

"No. For many reasons I'm sure you can cipher out."

Yes. It would have meant giving away the Ninefold Forest House's continued presence at Windwir. Petronus did not like the mathematics of it, but it was what it was. He would hope he'd choose differently, but knew that he had been in that position before. Sacrifices for the greater good. Memories of that burning village chewed at him. "Have you seen their camp?"

Gregoric's voice moved again. "I have not. They're better woodsmen than Sethbert's men. And they seem to have kin-clave with us."

"I found that surprising," Petronus said.

"We did as well. But we'll have some better idea of it in the next few days."

Petronus raised his eyebrows, waiting for Gregoric to finish, but he didn't speak right away. When he did, his voice was far away and he was running fast. "We will also inquire about your boy."

Those words settled him somewhat. He still felt the strain pulling at his neck and back, and he swung his arms as he turned back toward camp.

There's nothing more that you can do here, old man.

As he walked, he thought about the Gypsy Scout's words. Most likely, it meant that Rudolfo was near and intending to parley with the Marsh King. It would be a first, and to Petronus's recollection, there had been a rather brief and nasty war between the Ninefold Forest and the Marshers. Four, maybe five years before his assassination. Jakob had captured the Marsh King and showed him his Physicians of Penitent Torture. Then he released him, and the Marshers never bothered the Forest Houses again.

Now they were Rudolfo's only kin-clave remaining in the world apart from his alliance with Vlad Li Tam.

And they had Neb.

Petronus stopped and looked behind him at the dark line of trees against the sky. Remnants of his

upbringing as a Gods-fearing boy momentarily usurped his Androfrancine sensibilities. It happened infrequently, but when it did it reminded Petronus of how fragile the human heart and mind can be when faced with potential loss.

All the way back to camp, Petronus prayed.

Neb

Th»s Nizee Marshers defied Neb's imagination.

He'd run as fast as he could to keep up with the scout, tearing through the underbrush, ducking and weaving to avoid the branches that slapped him. The scout was fast and big, making no attempt now for stealth.

Neb ran for what felt like leagues before he realized the forest had changed. Fishing nets interwoven with branches concealed mud-smeared, tattered tents. Unkempt men and women, many slack-jawed and empty-eyed, wandered the camp. They wore unmatched bits of weaponry and armor scavenged from two thousand years of skirmishing, and they moved to and fro in silence.

Neb's guide vanished, leaving him at the edge of camp. A young girl approached him. She was covered in filth, just like the others, her hair shot through with mud and ash, and Neb suddenly realized that it wasn't simply different values around hygiene. They did this to themselves, painting themselves with earth and ash, for reasons that were sacred to them.

The girl smiled at him, and beneath the caked dirt, he could see that she possessed a coltish kind of prettiness. She was nearly as tall as he was, and he thought perhaps her hair was a mouse brown beneath the mud. Despite the dirt, she had it pulled back from her face and wrapped with a bit of red ribbon.

"The Marsh King summoned you," she said. It wasn't a question.

"Y-yes," he said.

She took a step closer to him and he smelled her. It was a distinct scent—the musk of sweat, the smoky smell of the ash, the traces of sulfur and clay in the mud. And apples, he realized. She extended her hand to him. "I will take you."

He took her hand and felt her gently tugging him along, walking at a quick gait. He studied her as they went. She wore mismatched boots and a long man's tunic cut down to fit her. Beneath it, a long-sleeved shirt that had once been white. Her calves were bare and gray with dirt. She wore no weapons that he could see.

The Marsh girl led him through a maze of trees and tents, dodging in and out of the Marsh King's silent soldiers. "Why are they so quiet?" he asked, his curiosity finally getting the better of him.

"It is our faith. We have one voice in war—the voice of our king. So we only speak when necessary."

Neb took her hint and remained quiet until they approached a tent slightly larger than the other, snug against the side of a low hill. "The Marsh King awaits you in there," the girl said pointing.

Before Neb could thank her, she vanished, running quickly and vanishing around the side of the hill without looking back.

He swallowed and approached the unguarded tent. Dim light danced inside the filthy canvas structure, and as he pushed aside the free-hanging flap, he realized that the tent was just a foyer. A tunnel had been

dug into the side of the hill, widening into a cave with tangled roots for its ceiling and mud for its floor. Sitting in the center of that cave at the foot of a large triangular idol was the largest man Neb had ever seen. Bits of twigs and food hung in his large black beard, and on his lap he held a massive axe, the head of which glistened in the lamplight like a mirror, throwing back the light and intensifying it. He wore armor of a similar sort—silver and mirrored like nothing Neb had ever seen before. The giant fixed his dark eyes on Neb, then looked quickly to the left to the idol. It was a meditation bust of P’Andro Whym, from one of the earlier heresies.

“Come forward,” the Marsh King bellowed in the Whymer tongue.

Even without the magicks, the voice was compelling. Neb shuffled forward. He looked around the room as he went. It looked like there was a back entrance—much smaller, certainly too small for the Marsh King, and shrouded with a heavy curtain hastily staked into the ceiling. There were scattered reed mats and piles of ratty blankets.

Neb wasn’t sure what to do next, so he erred on the side of caution and lowered himself to his knees. “I am here, Lord.”

Again, the Marsh King stared down at him and then looked away to the idol. “I will preach about you tonight,” the Marsh King said. “I will call you the dreaming boy because I have seen you in my dreams.” He looked to the idol, nodding slowly. “Now is set into motion the time of judgment, and the unloved children of P’Andro Whym will be the firstborn of the new gods.” Neb looked at the idol himself but saw nothing there but an old metal god. The Marsh King leaned down. “Do you understand any of this?”

Neb shook his head. “I do not.”

Another glance to the idol, head cocked to hear, then the deep voice continued slowly. “Do you understand what it means to be the reluctant prophet of Xhum Y’Zir? Because someday, you will be.”

“I do not understand, Lord,” Neb said. But the words, when they washed through him, left him shaken. He’d studied the fundamentals of the mystic heresies and he understood the straying from Androfrancine truth. His own dream of Hebda, dead and speaking with him as if he weren’t, was powerful regardless of whether or not it was real. Who wouldn’t listen to the ghost of their dead father?

But the Francines were clear: The ghost was just an aspect of himself, working out problems in his sleep.

Except for the part where those dreams came true, the Marsh King and his army perfect proof of that.

“How is it that you invade my sleep, Dreaming Boy? What are the things that you show me?” The Marsh King waited, glancing quickly to the idol. “Who is this resurrected Pope that will avenge the light by killing it?”

The fear worked its way into his stomach and it lurched. He knew about Petronus somehow. His hand wanted to go to the pocket now and check it again, make sure it was still there. But he didn’t. “I do not know, Lord,” he said again.

The Marsh King roared and leaped to his feet, moving past Neb quickly and moving to the tent flaps. “I will speak with you in the morning.” Neb watched him draw a large silver drinking horn and hold it to his lips. When he brought it down his face was covered in what looked like blood, and his satisfied sigh shook the walls of the tent.

The Marsh King strode into the night, his War Sermon booming out, a storm of words that could be heard as far as twenty leagues away.

Neb was still watching him when the girl approached. He jumped when she touched his shoulder and he turned. The curtain still swayed where she came from. "He will be all night," the Marsh girl said.

"He's preaching about me," Neb said.

She nodded. "He is. The dreams were very powerful."

"What do they mean?"

She laughed. "If I knew what they meant, why would the Marsh King summon *you*?"

Neb looked at her. She didn't look as dirty as he'd thought she did. Or maybe it was the light. Her large brown eyes crinkled at the edges, as if she laughed a lot. But there were deep places there that suggested she cried a lot, too. When she smiled, her teeth were straight and white.

"Maybe they don't mean anything," Neb said.

She shook her head. "It is unlikely. Most dreams mean something." She sighed. "But I hope you're right."

Neb saw that the thought of it relieved her. "Why do you hope I'm right?" he asked.

She looked to the idol herself for a moment, then back to Neb. "Because the dreams said that many would go to their second death in the fire for the Androfrancine sin." She shuddered as she said the words.

"And I had something to do with it?" Neb asked, his voice suddenly small.

Neb woke up to a hand on his shoulder and sat up quickly. Winters crouched near him, dressed in a burlap dress that clung to her emerging curves. This close, she smelled of earth and smoke and sweat.

"I brought you breakfast," she said, pointing to a chipped bowl set at a small table.

Neb rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "You're not eating?"

She shook her head. "I fast today. The world is changing."

He kicked himself out of the blankets and stood. She stood, too. "Is the Marsh King back?"

"Soon," she said. "Eat first."

He went to the table and sat on the rickety wooden stool that waited for him there. The bowl was filled with boiled oats that still steamed, and the smell of buttermilk, honey and dried apples made his stomach growl. Near the bowl was a plate holding an assortment of roasted chestnuts, a chunk of bread and a bit of white, strong-smelling cheese.

Winters sat across from him, watching as he ate the food and washed it down with cold water from a metal cup.

"There was a parley this morning," she said. "All of the lords attended, including Lord Tam of House Li Tam."

"Did the Marsh King go?"

She nodded. "Our people were represented."

He tried the cheese. Its sharpness saturated his mouth, driving out the sweet and sour flavor of the boiled oats. “What do you think will come of it?”

“Nothing but war,” she said. “Though when this hidden Pope declares, I think alliances will shift.” She looked at him. Her large brown eyes hardened. “Of course, the Marshfolk care nothing for Named Land statecraft and even less for Androfrancine politics.”

“Then why has the Marsh King brought his army south?”

Winters scowled. “Curiosity and kin-clave,” she said. “The Marsh King’s dreams have long foretold an end of the Androfrancine light. As have the kings that went before. For many years we even warred with the Androfrancines, thinking perhaps we could bring about that end.”

Neb looked up from his breakfast, surprised. He’d known all his life about the skirmishers, but had never heard a sufficient justification beyond ancient grudges and the residue of madness in the Marsh line. “But why?”

She smiled, and in the soft light of the cave it carried a sweetness that he felt tugging at his heart. “Because when the light goes out,” she said, “the dreams of the Marsh Kings will be realized and we will be guided to our new home.”

She reached across the table now and laid her hand on Neb’s cheek. “Dear, dreaming boy,” she said. “If you could see the Marsh King’s dreams, you would weep with joy from the beauty of it. Your father has seen them, and the power of them brought him back from death to parley with you in your sleeping hours.”

Neb wasn’t sure which made him more uncomfortable, the Marsh mysticism or Winters’s hand cupping his cheek. He felt warmth moving through him, and something fluttered in his chest and stomach.

Winters dropped her hand, and he realized from the look on her face that she’d felt the discomfort, too. She looked away and blushed.

“I don’t understand,” Neb finally said. And he meant both the strange feelings this ragamuffin girl stirred up inside of him as well as the Marsh King prophecies.

“We are at the end of our sojourn, Nebios ben Hebda,” she said. “When all that was left of our peoples came to this New World from the lands beyond the Churning Wastes, the first Marsh King wore sackcloth and ashes, bathing himself in the dust of the earth that he came from and calling upon his children to do the same. Strangers in this land, we eschewed the Androfrancines and their light, loving shadow more because we knew the knowledge of the past could not create a safer future—it would merely remake the past. Even P’Andro Whym knew that a day was coming when his sins would be visited upon his children.” Her words tumbled out fast, her eyes alive as she spoke and her sentences rushing together. “A home-seeking is upon us and by the waking and the sleeping dreams, you are the one who leads our pilgrimage homeward.”

Suddenly she was speaking in tongues like the Marsh King, her eyes wide with wonder and fear. Neb saw the muscles tighten in her jaw and neck as she tried to fight the ecstatic utterance, but she couldn’t.

Neb opened his mouth to ask her if she was okay, if there was anything he could do, but his mind wasn’t able to pull the words together into a question. He felt something like panic growing in him, starting in his stomach and spreading throughout his body. He felt arousal and fear and rapture as his body tingled head to toe.

He opened his mouth to ask what was happening to him, and when he did he found himself suddenly speaking in tongues with the Marsh girl, their voices weaving in and out of one another as they finished one another's sentences in a language that was no language but longing and terror and terrible sadness.

Her eyes Eöma tehad rolled back into her head now, and she fell away from the table to twitch on the floor. Neb felt his own muscles pulling him down as well, but he forced himself to his feet and went to Winters before falling to his knees before her.

Her arms snaked out around him, her strong fingers digging into his skin and pulling him down to the dirt. Holding her close to himself, Neb let his words wash through him and out of him, dancing with her own words as they held one another on the floor. Finally, the fit of language ceased and they lay still, eyes closed, their ragged breath the only sound in the room.

When he opened his eyes, she was staring at him. He felt the ache in his jaw and the rawness in his throat, ragged from words he was unaccustomed to speaking. "I don't understand what happened," he said, his voice rough and quiet. "I don't understand how I could have any part in this."

She stretched her neck toward him and kissed him on the cheek. "Dear, sweet, Dreaming Boy," she said with a voice that seemed far away. "Understanding is not always necessary."

Neb's muscles were sore now, and he realized suddenly that he was still entwined with the girl. The tingling had become something different. The warmth of her body and the firmness of her hands as she held him were building toward something in him that was frightening and exhilarating all at once.

He disentangled himself quickly, scrambling to his feet. She did the same, and he realized that her face was as red as his. "I'm sorry," he said.

She laughed. "There is nothing to be sorry for. The spirit moves as it will, so also the body."

He looked at his half-eaten breakfast at the table, but knew already he wouldn't be able to finish it. "I think I should go back to Windwir soon. They will be worried for me."

A sad look passed over her face. "I understand. I will see if the Marsh King has returned from the parley."

She walked close to him, near enough for him to feel her warmth. Then the Marsh girl Winters quickly touched his cheek once more, and left through the back entrance of the cave.

After she'd gone, he sat and thought about her and her people.

A home-seeking is upon us.

Neb hid all of her words in his heart and wondered about the world that had changed.

Petronus

Vlad Li Tam's wagons of donated supplies Eñat3>

"I would talk with the captain of this company," Vlad Li Tam said to the sentries who stopped him.

"That would be Petros," one of the guards said, turning to look for him.

Petronus stepped forward. "I'm here."

"I come bearing the grace of House Li Tam and the Pope of the Androfrancine Order," Vlad Li Tam

said. "I would speak with you about your work here."

Petronus gritted his teeth. "I'd gladly speak with you about our work, Lord Tam."

The slight, older man dropped from his saddle, heavy in the armor he wore beneath his canary colored robes. "Let us walk together."

They moved away from the camp and toward yesterday's work. Petronus guided them toward a recently filled trench, feeling the anger build in him with every step. When they were out of earshot, he rounded on Tam.

"What game do you play at?" he asked, not even trying to mask the rage.

Vlad Li Tam smiled. "I play at the game of survival, Petronus. I play at the game of keeping the light alive." He paused, his eyes narrowing as his smile faded. "I should ask what game *you* play at, Petronus. You could have stayed dead. You could have stayed in Caldas Bay. But here you are."

Petronus knew Tam was right, and he knew that at least part of his anger was directed inward, toward himself. "I had to see it," he said, his voice thick with loss. "I had to see what they'd done to themselves."

"And then you had to bury them?" Vlad Li Tam's voice wasn't chiding, it was matter-of-fact, as if he were stating some obvious truth about Petronus's soul.

He nodded. "I did." He waved his arms around, taking in the four points of the compass. "These others weren't prepared to do it. They're too busy posturing and pointing fingers." He stared at Vlad Li Tam. "We both know who really brought down Windwir."

Vlad Li Tam's eyes flashed. "They've done this to themselves. We both knew they would when they started playing with words that should not be played with. It was only a matter of time."

Petronus felt his fists clenching and unclenching. "You claim House Li Tam had no part in Ehad's death?"

Vlad Li Tam shrugged. "We monitored increased intelligence gathering in the City States coinciding with the discovery of the final fragment. My forty-second daughter, Jin Li Tam, was Sethbert's consort until recently. She'd known something was under way but not exactly what. I knew an event of some kind was likely." He stepped closer to Petronus and put a hand on his shoulder. "When or who—these facts eluded the best work of my sons and daughters." He leaned forward. "But I do know this much—word of the final fragment was not initially leaked by the Androfrancines. They were most cautious."

"And you did not leak it yourself?"

Vlad Li Tam shook his head. "I did not."

"But you knew of it?"

He nodded. "I did. I had been approached years ago about storing something of great value and great danger in the Li Tam vaults. There was talk of scattering the fragments under Pope Introspect, but it was quickly abandoned."

Petronus studied the man, then studied the line of his face, and tried to gauge the truth of his words. But Vlad Li Tam was a master of queen's war and a master of himself. There were no telling movements, no revealing posture, no hints whatsoever to catch him in a lie. And not even the best Francine training could see through that perfect mask. "Then we need to know how Sethbert discovered the spell and what compelled him to take action."

Vlad Li Tam shook his head and chuckled. “An Androfrancine to the end.”

Petronus felt his blood rise. He pointed to the filled-in trench, then pointed to a line of diggers closer to the center of the city. “A city lies dead, Vlad. A way of life is ended. What little remains of the light is guttering. If it weren’t for the mechoservitors, it would be all but extinguished now. I want to know why.”

“We all do, Petronus. But strategy would dictate that first, we shore up what remains.” Vlad Li Tam sighed, looking away for a moment before meeting Petronus’s eyes. “I’m afraid I have not been completely truthful with you.”

Petronus felt his eyebrows furrow. “What do you mean?”

Vlad reached into his belt pouch and drew out a yellowed scroll, rolled carefully and tied with Androfrancine purple. He passed it to Petronus.

Petronus read the note and paled. He read it again, this time more slowly, and the words finally came together. He looked up. “These are plans for the relocation of the Order, away from Windwir.”

She looked at the large man who played her proxy. “My father chose Hanric to play the part of my shadow until I found my own strength. Of course, my people know.”

This surprised Rudolfo. “Really?”

She smiled. “Marshfolk are very different from Named Landers.”

“Aye,” Rudolfo said, chuckling. “As are the Forest Gypsies.”

“My role is more spiritual than directive,” she continued. “Most of my life is spent writing my dreams, both the waking and the dreaming. I also write out my glossolalia.”

Rudolfo pondered this. “These are the War Sermons we hear.”

She nodded. “They are. I’ve written these down for as long as I can remember. My Whymer Seers catalog them and assign them numbers, weaving my dreams into the matrix of dreams from the Marsh Kings that have gone before. My father chose Hanric as my shadow partly for his strength as a warrior, but also because, like me, he remembers everything he reads. He has spent his life preparing for the War of Androfrancine Sin, reading the dreams.” She looked to Hanric now. “I will draw numbers tonight and determine their sequence at random. And the Marsh King’s War Sermon will continue.”

Rudolfo laughed now. “I think we lead our houses very differently.”

The corners of her eyes crinkled as she smiled. “We do.”

Rudolfo’s hand crept up to stroke his beard. “I must admit that this is not what I expected for my parley with you.”

“But you saw through my subterfuge soon enough.”

The Gypsy King shrugged. “I’ve had a life of statecraft and intrigue. Until now, I would imagine you spent your life away from that.”

“I have,” she said. “Though I had an Androfrancine tutor.”

Rudolfo raised his eyebrows. “That is quite curious given the history.”

“Yes.” She looked at Hanric. “I will come for you soon, Hanric.”

He bowed and quickly left the cave.

When he left she looked at Rudolfo, and for just a moment her hard eyes became soft. The Óeca" wre was a certain prettiness beneath the dirt, and a coltish, awkward strength in her bearing. As young as she was, Rudolfo sensed that she already exhibited the trappings of formidability. “Now,” she said, “let’s talk strategy for this war of ours.”

Rudolfo smiled and reached for the bottle of whiskey.

Petronus

Petronus sat amid the rubble and ash and thought about the past.

He’d waited for Neb to return or for Gregoric to bring some word, but neither had happened, and eventually he’d wandered into the city. In addition to the boy’s disappearance, the work worried him. By his estimates they’d buried nearly a third of the dead, but it was obvious now that the winter was upon them, and their workforce dwindled with each day that the armies waited.

He’d often found that walking helped. One of the things he’d hated about being Pope was that he could no longer simply go for a walk. Gray Guard or archbishops or aides surrounded him everywhere he went, though from time to time he’d managed to slip past them. On those days or nights, he wandered a circuit of streets, always the same streets, head low and hands clasped behind his back, dressed in the simplest robes he could borrow.

Now he had done the same thing, his feet picking out a path that carried him along the backside of the crater where the great library had stood. Before he knew it, he was where the Garden of Coronation and Consecration had once been, where as a younger man he’d taken the scepter and the ring offered to him and had been proclaimed Pope Petronus.

He sat down, thinking about what it meant then to be Pope, contrasting it to what it meant now.

Tonight, Rudolfo would raid the Entrolusian camp. Petronus had his doubts about the success of the operation, but rebuilding the library would be a popular cause in light of the Desolation of Windwir. And it was sound strategy to move the library north. The only unsound part of the strategy was the Androfrancines’ continued care of the light. Given their weakness now—from over a hundred thousand souls to maybe a thousand—there was no way they could keep the secrets of the Old World and even the First World safe from men like Sethbert.

You know what you need to do, old man, he told himself. You’ve known since you learned it was Sethbert. You’ve known since that clerk proclaimed himself Pope.

Petronus sighed. It was easier then, with the trumpets and the shouting and the crowds. Because on the surface of it, there was nothing to be done. Nothing to be responsible for, not really. Archbishops and Gray Guard and scholars and lawyers shielded him from any silent moment of accountability. The closest he’d come to it was the Marshier village, and only that because he’d commanded that captain to take him.

And yet, despite the clarity of strategic intent, she found herself suddenly full of doubt. Her father’s work consisted of dozens of living, breathing games of queen’s war, the move in this game connected in some way to the move in another. And she had believed—had been taught to believe—that his work was in service to the light, darker in many ways than the work of the Androfrancine Order, but critical for the

Named Lands to never go the way of the Old World.

But now, for some reason, his work enraged her. And at the heart of it, it was the perception of Rudolfo's mistreatment at her father's hands.

Is this what love is? If so, she struggled to find anything useful in it. Love, she thought, should be whatever strategy best protected the greatest good. And who was she to question her father's will? For all she knew, he merely added to a work his own father had carried forward. Who was she to question the work of House Li Tam?

This work will keep light in the world. And before she'd seen that pillar of smoke what seemed so long ago, she would've said without hesitation that the nobility of that end justified any and all means. Now, though, she hesitated.

When she knew Rudolfo was a few hours away, she cleaned herself and washed the red from her eyes and dressed in simple woolens and boots. Tonight, she would do her work—her part in her father's work—but she would not dress it up.

Jin Li Tam went to the edge of camp with the others, including Isaak, and watched the line of metal men running in perfect synchronicity across the white ground. Alongside and behind them, as if riding herd, the Gypsy Scouts rode their horses hard. For the first time since meeting him, she could not pick her betrothed out of the group of riders.

Even when they pulled up, she did not recognize him at first. When he slid from the saddle and handed his reins to a waiting aide, she finally spotted him. But she stayed at the edge and watched him, gathering what she could.

He was not himself. He walked more slowly, his shoulders slouched, and his face was hard and tired and unspeakably sad. His eyes were rimmed red with exhaustion, and the line of his jaw was tense. He wore the winter woolens of a Gypsy Scout, and the dark clothes were stained with darker patches that she knew must be blood. She wondered if that blood was Gregoric's.

She watched him pass instructions to another captain, and finally she could wait no longer. She walked out to him, and when he looked up at her, his expression stopped her in her tracks.

In that moment, something broke inside of her and a realization dawned within her—a certainty took shape—but she pushed it aside. After, she told herself, I will reflect upon this.

He did not express any surprise at seeing her so far afield—so—from the seventh forest manor, and he only nodded and grunted when she told him she'd brought Isaak to look after the other mechoservitors.

She repeated this to the captain who waved Isaak over, but before the metal man reached his kind, Jin Li Tam had grabbed Rudolfo's hand and pulled him after her. He did not resist.

She called for a tub and hot water, for food and drink, and while the servants laid these things out, she sat Rudolfo on the wide cot and pulled at his boots.

The loss was hard upon him, she saw, and soon he'd move along that Fivefold Path of Grief the Francines spoke of. Now, he shook his head and mumbled and kept his eyes cast down and away from her.

Still, he stayed pliant, even lowering himself into the hot bath and suffering her to wash his friend's blood from him. After, as if he were a child, she dried him with thick, heated towels and wrapped him into a heavy cotton robe.

While he sat at the cot and nibbled halfheartedly at a piece of cheese she'd sliced for him, she turned her back to him and poured his brandy.

Swallowing against the lump in her throat, she stirred in the first of the powders. Then she sat with him, forcing him to eat more and to drink down the warm spiced liquor.

After, she lay him back in the bed, blew out the lamps and crawled in beside him. Holding him close, she stroked his curly hair and ran her hands around the back of his neck until he fell asleep.

She lay awake a long time after, thinking of what was to come. She waited the full three hours, then stripped and pressed herself close to him, stroking him and kissing his neck.

When he responded, she pushed open his robe and crawled onto him, taking him into her and finding a rhythm that could sustain them both.

He clung to her but did not make a sound, even at the end. After, he fell into a deep sleep clutching tightly to her.

But Jin Li Tam did not sleep. Instead, she thought about the new certainty she had found when she first saw Rudolfo in his grief, and she knew that she had transcended her father's will.

This child is not for you, she told her father deep in the places of her heart where she was afraid to go. This child is *never* for you.

She rolled over and faced Rudolfo, feeling the heat of his breath against her neck as he moved in his sleep to embrace her.

"For you," she said. "Only you."

As if answering, Rudolfo mumbled.

Jin Li Tam pulled him close and kissed his cheek.

And finally, sleep chased her down into her restless dreams.

Petronus

The men gathered around Petronus in the galley tent, and he looked up with raised eyebrows. Everywhere he went now, magicked scouts moved around him. Meirov's personal Border Rangers formed his private escort. Someone had even dug up a fancy white and blue and purple robe—from the smell of it, a relic from an attic. Petronus had accepted the gift, but knew he'd not wear it. All he'd brought himself to wear so far was the ring.

"Excellency," the group's leader said with a brisk bow. "We beg audience with you."

Petronus chuckled. "You need not start begging now, Garver. Regardless of recent events, I am still myself."

Garver looked around at his companions, twisting his knit cap in his hands. "Yes, Excellency."

Petronus sighed. Everything had changed, and part of him resented the boy, Neb, for his place in that, though he knew it was a road he would've walked with or without the boy. And the Marsh King's role in this was also something he couldn't afford to forget. Why were the Marshers suddenly supporting the Order? Or were they simply supportive of Rudolfo?

He looked up at the men, and lowered his spoon back into the bowl of cooked oats. They'd tried to give him a bigger tent and better meals to go with his fancy robe, but he'd refused those, insisting that he be treated as every other worker. He'd continued to make his rounds, though now under escort, and even stopped to help dig the bones from the frozen ground.

"What can I do for you, Garver?" he finally asked.

The man was clearly uncomfortable now. Before the proclamation he'd had no difficulty speaking his mind to Petronus, and the sudden shift reminded Petronus that this role he now played honored a lie he did not believe in. That somehow his station in the Order set him apart in some way.

Petronus looked across to Neb. The boy sat quietly, looking from Petronus to the group.

Petronus sighed again. "You had no trouble speaking plainly when the latrines needed redigging or when the supply wagon came up short on flour and salt." He offered the best smile he could. "Nothing has changed."

Everything has changed.

Finally, Garver spoke up. "Excellency, we know how important this work is to you, and we've come up with a plan to finish by early spring if the winter is as mild as the past three. We can rotate men and women into the camp just as we've been doing. The new supplies are coming in well, and the workers are overwhelmed by the Order's generous wage."

Petronus nodded. "Excellent." But the look on Garver's face told him that he'd not gotten to a point he was afraid of raising. "And the problem is . . . ?" He let the words trail off.

"I don't know how to say this, Excellency," Garver said, looking around to his companions for moral support. Petronus followed his gaze. He'd brought the best of the lot with him, the smartest and most able.

"Say it plainly, Garver, like you did four nights past in the council tents when we talked about curtailing the hunting because of the armies."

Garver nodded. "Very well, Excellency. We don't need you here anymore." He flushed. "Not to say we don't want you. You've done right by us and by your kin. But we don't think it proper for our Pope and King to dig graves in the snow."

"And I think it's quite proper," Petronus said, feeling the anger rise quickly in him.

Garver swallowed, eyes shifting to the left and right again. "You mistake my meaning, Lord, but it's from my poor choice of words. Any of us here can work a shovel or wheelbarrow. But only one of us can be the Pope." He took a deep breath before continuing. "The world just lost a Pope and does not need to lose another. The fighting has stepped up. You will be safer elsewhere and able to focus on your work."

Petronus studied the faces of each man around him, including the rangers. None of them looked surprised or uncertain. None of them looked as if they were ready to disagree. And if he were honest with himself, he wasn't sure he could disagree with that wisdom either.

"What would you propose?"

Garver released his held breath. "Appoint someone to lead this effort in your stead. Work with them by the bird if you must, but don't overlook your other responsibilities. The Named Lands need their Pope."

Petronus sighed. "Very well. I'll think on it and we'll discuss it at council tomorrow. Is that reasonable?"

Garver nodded. "Thank you, Excellency."

"Thank you."

After they left, he looked across to Neb. "What do you think?"

Neb chewed a piece of bread, a thoughtful look on his face. "I think they're right, Excellency."

Petronus rolled his eyes. "Not you, too."

Neb grinned but the grin faded quickly. "I think Sethbert's men will come for you here at some point. Or try to. There is no dispute for the ring and the scepter if you are not alive. But more than that, I'm certain you're going to need to convene a Council of Bishops under Holy Unction. There is much work to do beyond digging these graves."

Petronus leaned back, realizing for the first time how much the boy had grown these past few months. Well-spoken and wise, firmly rooted in a classical Androfrancine education and yet so young. "And who do you think I should put in charge of this operation?"

He shrugged. "Rudolfo is in charge, by proxy, as the Guardian. He or one of his officers can provide the military support and council we need. You could appoint Garver or one of the others to oversee the gravedigging and the day-to-day logistics of running the camp."

Petronus shook his head. "I'd want someone from the Order for that."

Neb shrugged. "I don't know then. Most of the Androfrancines went to the Summer Papal Palace. There are a few left, but I don't know them."

Petronus smiled. "How strongly do you concur with Garver's recommendation?"

Neb scowled, his brow creasing. "I think you can do more away from here, in a safer place. Regardless of what we believe, there is another Pope competing for authority and attention, and the only way to prevail is to be a better, stronger Pope than he." He paused, and his face softened as he shrugged again. "I concur strongly, I guess."

Petronus stood. "Then you'd best find new robes, Neb."

Neb looked at him, confusion clouding his face.

"I've just made you my aide. Your first assignment is the completion of the work here. Afterwards, you will join me in the Ninefold Forest to assist with the restoration of the Great Library."

The boy was still sputtering and red-faced when Petronus left the galley, chuckling. He hoped he was making a good decision. He'd always been impeccably good at picking out the shepherëouted-ds from the sheep, but this shepherd was terribly young and these sheep were a motley herd.

Still, the boy had seen the work of Xhum Y'Zir and lived to tell it. He'd been the guest of the Marsh King and the subject of his War Sermons. He'd proclaimed a Pope and buried his own dead.

But more than that, he'd known when to keep Petronus's secret, and had known even better than Petronus when it was time to break that secret onto the world.

That alone was enough for Petronus to trust him with the graves of Windwir.

Neb

Petronus rode out three days later. Neb watched him and his escort leave the plains of Windwir and slip into the northern forests. There had really been no time for him to adjust to this new responsibility. But whenever he felt the panic rise in his chest, Neb remembered what Petronus had said to him.

“You’ve watched everything I do here,” Petronus told him that first night after Neb had asked him to reconsider his decision to put him in charge. “You won’t need to deal with the guard shifts or any other military matters. Just keep the work moving and the workers supported. Anything that can’t wait a day or two for a bird, decide by council or ask whoever Rudolfo attaches to you.” Then the old man had paused, smiled, and put a hand on Neb’s shoulder. “I know this is a lot. But I would not give you more than I thought you could handle.” And finally, he’d leaned forward, his voice low. “You of all people understand why we must finish this work.”

Neb had nodded, and from then on he’d spent every waking moment with Petronus, following him everywhere he went and asking him every question that he could imagine.

Now, three days later, he felt uncertain all over again. After Petronus vanished, he sent the workers back to their tasks. None of them balked. Then he checked the supply wagon schedule, the artifact wagon and the galley. While at the galley he had the cook pack him a lunch, and he started walking the line, surveying the effort remaining. Having to move the snow first was extending the time, and though the cold wasn’t yet unbearable, they’d still had to shorten the shifts considerably. One of Neb’s biggest hopes was that Petronus would issue a plea for help with the gravedigging effort.

Neb walked out each direction, trying to keep the hem of his new robes up off the snow as he went. They had carved Windwir into quadrants. The city proper—those parts within the walls—was the inner layer, quartered by north, south, east and west. Most of that section had been taken care of before the snow fell to take advantage of finding any artifacts while the ground was clear. Beyond the city itself, they quartered the outer layer. They’d finished the eastern and southern quadrants, but uncertainty about the Marsh King’s intentions—regardless of his words—had kept them from the north, and they were already digging trenches in the western quarter in preparation for the work beginning there.

By the time Neb reached the outer northern quadrant, he was ready to eat. He cleared a small patch of ground beneath a tree and pulled out two pieces of pan-fried bread and a slice of lamb. He ate the sandwich, sipping from his canteen between bites, and wondered for the twentieth time that day what the Marsh girl Winters might be doing right now and whether or not she wondered about him and when he would see her again.

He felt himself blush, and forced his mind back to the plains. She popped into his head more and more and he wasn’t sure why. He’d even dreamed about her twice. He was talking to Brother Hebda about the Churning Wastes and he saw her just outside the window, standing beneath a solitary pine tree in a vast wasteland, watching him with a strange smile on her dirty face.

Suddenly, someone sneezed, loudly, and Neb jumped. He looked around and saw no one.

“I know you’re there,” he said.

Silence.

“You are a Marsh Scout,” he said. And suddenly a thought occurred to him. “You are the same Marsh Scout that took me to your king.”

Still, no answer. Neb shifted, wondering if he should ask what he wanted to ask next. He tried to push it

aside, but couldn't. "Do you know the girl Winters?" he asked, feeling his face and ears go red.

This time, he heard a grunt. Neb decided to assume it was in the affirmative. "Tell her that Nebios ben Hebda saw her beneath the tree in the Churning Wastes."

Another grunt.

Neb drew an apple out of his pouch and munched on it. Then, as if an afterthought, he pulled another. "Here," he said, holding it up. "Catch." He tossed it in the direction of the grunt and watched it melt into nothingness as the scout snatched it from the air.

Silently, they ate their apples. Then Neb stood up and stretched. "I have to get back," he said. But as soon as he said it, he felt awkward. "Give her that message, please."

One last grunt, and Neb turned and left the forest. All the way back, he stopped periodically and scanned the snow for other sets of footprints. There had been enough foot traffic with the fighting and the patrols that he really couldn't tell.

Was it possible that the scout had followed him all morning? Maybe he was still out there, carefully walking in Neb's own footprints, hanging back but never letting the boy leave his sight.

Could it be that the Marsh King had assigned Neb a bodyguard? Unlikely. More likely, he was a scout on patrol or posted on the perimeter.

Still, the thought of that level of attention from a king made him smile. It wasn't so long ago that the only kings he knew were in books.

Neb looked to the sky, saw that it was growing white, and moved eastward toward the river, putting his mind to the work ahead.

Rudolfo

Spring came early to the Named Lands in rare fashion, and war moved on around it. For Rudolfo, the months had been a blur. He'd divided his time between Windwir and the front as the war moved southwest and Sethbert's allies fell back. He'd lost a good portion of his Wandering Army holding Rachyl's Bridge on the second river, connecting Pylos to the Entrolusian Delta. They'd held their first true parley just after that, though no terms had been reached. And the two Popes were starkly contrasted—Resolute in his fine, white linens and Petronus in his simple brown hermit's robe—as they spoke in voices that were sometimes hushed, sometimes raised.

Now, Rudolfo rode with Petronus from the seventh forest manor to Windwir so they could escort Neb back with that work finished. He'd spent three rather luxurious days with his betrothed, and he found it more satisfying than anything he had ever known. Since Gregoric's death, her strength had become his own. It was a strange sensation. For so long, it had been Gregoric as his right hand and he'd never imagined this level of partnership possible. But there was a reckless joy in this new arrangement. She had the strength and spirit of a Gypsy Scout, the mind and strategy of a general. He admired her skills of statecraft and misdirection. And for all of that, she was a formidable lover as well.

Still, he carried the loss of his friend near at all times. They'd been like brothers for longer than he had memory, and the world did not make sense without him in it. Perhaps because it was combined with the loss of Windwir that this particular death had struck him so hard. Though the Francines would say that all loss connected back to earlier losses, and that Gregoric represented the last vestiges of a time in Rudolfo's life when he was innocent and responsible for nothing.

As he rode, he looked up to the hill above the town. Most of it had been cleared now that the snow was gone, and he expected the workers he'd hired to level it and start digging the basements within the next week. The stones were already being cut in the shallow hills at the base of the Dragon's Spine. He had deferred to Petronus on all matters regarding the library, but the Pope had been more concerned about planning the council of bishops than plodding through the details of the restoration. Isaak continued the work of identifying the resources that hadn't already gone *tîcouo* the Summer Papal Palace. They'd located a small private library on the Emerald Coasts that would now be en route with the passing of the snow.

Rudolfo watched the men moving on the hill and saw the glint of light on steel, the morning sun reflecting off Isaak's metal head. He turned in his saddle to stare at the narrow glass door of his bedchamber's balcony. Wrapped in a red silk sheet, Jin Li Tam stood in the doorway and watched him leave.

He smiled and whistled his horse forward to catch up with Petronus.

The old man had aged in the last handful of months, but it was no wonder. The skill with which he moved across the political landscape impressed Rudolfo, but it had to take a toll. The Named Lands were locked in its fiercest conflict since the settlers had come across the Keeper's Wall.

Rudolfo saw that the Pope was also looking to the hill. "Three years by our best estimates," he said. "But Isaak is confident that we can restore nearly forty percent. He's having the mechanicals double check their inventories."

Petronus nodded. "I'm impressed with his work."

Rudolfo smiled at this. “He is a marvel. They all are.”

“Yes,” the Pope said, “but Isaak is different from the others. They’re more reserved. They don’t seem to have the empathetic capacity that he does.”

Rudolfo had noticed this as well. The other mechoservitors spoke when spoken to for the most part and kept to themselves. They also hadn’t clothed themselves and hadn’t taken on names, preferring their numeric designations. Yet oddly enough, they looked to Isaak as their leader.

“I think Windwir changed him as it changed all of us.”

Petronus sighed. “More, I would suspect.”

Rudolfo agreed. “I tried to convince him again yesterday that he should have one of the other mechoservitors fix his leg. He said he wanted the limp as a reminder of what he had done.”

Petronus scowled. “You reminded him, I’m sure, that Sethbert did this?”

“Yes.”

Petronus’s brows furrowed. “Where is Sethbert these days?”

“He’s back in the City States dealing with insurrection. Tam’s blockade has sown its discord. Lysias continues to hó cofacold their borders up, but between Pylos and the Wandering Army, it’s starting to wear them down.” He chuckled, but it was a dark laugh. “Turam’s nearly done for; the crown prince has pulled back to reconsider his commitment.” Rudolfo had been in communication with the Marsh King, but she had insisted on staying near Windwir until the graves were filled in. He hoped to spend at least some time trying to convince her that now, with that work finished, they could use her military leverage in the southern lands.

He suspected that the Marsh King’s forces could end this war and bring about successful parley. But she’d surprised him by her refusal to leave that work. At first, he’d thought it had to do with the gravedigging.

But the last few times he’d visited Neb, the boy had remarked that he thought he was being followed by Marsh Scouts. Rudolfo saw a connection of some kind there. After all, Neb was supposedly the dreaming boy mentioned in the Marsh King’s War Sermon.

Still, if it was the boy she was concerned about, he hoped that she would trust him and his Gypsy Scouts to make sure Neb was well cared for.

Rudolfo started, suddenly realizing that Petronus had spoken. He looked up. “I’m sorry?”

“I said: Perhaps this insurrection will do our work for us.”

Rudolfo nodded. “I hope so.”

But as he rode south, Rudolfo doubted it could be so simple as that.

Jin Li Tam

Jin Li Tam slipped from the manor into the afternoon light. She used one of the many concealed passageways and doors within the large house after telling her escort that she would be bathing. She’d even filled the large marble tub with hot water and perfumed oils. After, she’d taken first one passage,

then a ladder down to the basement, its tunnels eventually bringing her to the manor's low stone wall beyond its northern gardens.

Eyes constantly scanning for watchers, she'd slipped out of a hidden gate she found during her winter reconnaissance of the manor.

She wore nondescript robes and sturdy boots to guard against mud and melting snow. She moved quickly over the ground.

When she reached the River Woman's hut beyond the town, she waited in shadows and watched to be sure that the old alchemist was indeed alone with her cats.

Last night, she'd used the last of the powders and so far, she'd not had the result she was looking for. Twice since winter she'd thought perhaps it had taken, but both times came to nothing. Todayó no fa, she would decide whether or not she should keep trying.

It was the longest winter she'd ever experienced, a cold and white expanse of time largely spent indoors. The only bright patches were the few days Rudolfo managed to spend with her as he moved between Windwir, the front and the work Petronus and Isaak were doing. She wasn't accustomed to a cold so bitter that it could freeze a river in its track. She wasn't accustomed to a house becoming a cage.

Certainly, Rudolfo would not hold her. But where else could she go?

From time to time, the tropic warmth of her father's house sprang to mind but she knew she could not face him. After Gregoric's death, she'd stopped returning House Li Tam messages, even those from her brothers and sisters as they did their part in her father's work. Eventually, the messages stopped coming altogether.

It was a silence she'd never experienced, and a part of her grieved it but another part felt a freedom growing within her beyond anything she had ever known.

She'd always prided herself on being her own woman, a strong woman, self-contained and able to hold her own against any circumstances. But as the time marched on away from the Desolation of Windwir, from her discovery of her father's hand in Rudolfo's life and her realization that she herself was a critical component of that work, she saw clearly now that she had never been her own woman. She'd been her father's daughter and nothing more. All of these events had shown her that this was no longer enough, that there actually could be a higher calling than the Tam matrix.

To her father's credit, he'd not pressed her. But perhaps, she thought, this too is what he wove into the elaborate tapestry that he and all of those other fathers before him had created.

Smoke leaked from the chimney of the small hut, and she saw movement inside. Jin Li Tam broke her cover and walked the muddy path up to the porch, knocking lightly on the door.

The River Woman met her with a smile. "Lady Tam," she said, sounding delighted to see her. "Please come in. I've just put on some tea."

Jin kicked off her boots on the porch, then concealed them behind a chair. "Thank you," she said.

Once inside, she saw that the small cottage and its connected shop was even more full than the usual sacks and jars, overflowing from the counters onto the table and stacked in some instances to half her height.

"War is tragic but good for business," the River Woman said. "Magicks for hooves, magicks for men,

magicks for blades and interrogation. Even the physicians have orders in, anticipating their own work ahead.” The woman clucked. “Men and their violentón d s fce,” she said. She poured tea into two ceramic cups and placed one in front of Jin Li Tam. “But enough of death,” the River Woman said as she sat down across from her. “Let’s talk of life.”

Jin Li Tam nodded and sipped her tea. It had a strong lemon and honey flavor to it, going down smooth and hot. “I’ve used the last the powders,” she said. “I will need more.”

The River Woman smiled. “I can’t give you any more,” she said.

Jin Li Tam blinked and set down the cup. She felt a moment of panic, and it folded in on itself, reproducing more anxiety as she realized how afraid it made her that she might not be able get more of the powders and continue her attempts with Rudolfo. As much as she hated the deception—and had even convinced herself a dozen times that she would tell him—she’d gotten quite adept at slipping the powders into his drinks in those hours before they were to be together. She knew that telling him about this deception meant leaving footprints that he could follow back to other deceptions, eventually seeing her father’s work—and her own work in support of her father—in his life.

She could not bear the way he would look at her once he realized that House Li Tam had murdered his brother, his parents and his closest friend in order to move his life in a direction one man thought it should go in.

All of this flashed across her mind, and she felt something squeezing her heart. “I don’t understand,” Jin Li Tam finally said. “You have the recipe. I can arrange whatever ingredients you may need delivered.”

The River Woman shook her head, still smiling. “It would not be prudent, Lady Tam.”

Jin Li Tam felt anger rustling awake within her. She could hear her own voice getting cold as she pushed back the chair from the table. “I need those powders,” she said. “If you can’t make them for me, I’m sure Caldu Bay’s woman can oblige me.”

The River Woman’s smile continued, broadening as she clucked. “Lady Tam,” she said, “please sit down.”

Uncertain, Jin paused, then sat. Suddenly, she didn’t feel she could meet the River Woman’s eyes. She looked around the room instead.

She felt the old, rough hand slide over her own and give it a squeeze. “I can’t give you any more,” the River Woman said, “because they might harm your baby.”

Jin’s eyes snapped up. “My what?”

The River Woman nodded. “It’s all over you now. The tone of your skin. The brightness. The T”les in your eyes. It’s in the very way that you walk.” She stood and walked over to a cabinet, drawing a gold ring with bits of pink and blue ribbon tied to it.

Jin Li Tam felt her heart flutter and expand. “You mean—?”

The River Woman nodded again, picking up a bucket of river water. “You’re with child. Recently, too, I’d say.” She winked.

Jin Li Tam did not know what to say. Instead, she sat still and watched as the woman clenched the ring and its strings in her closed fist, speaking to them in a mumbled tongue she could not place. The River Woman poured the water into a wooden cup, then dropped in the ring, still mumbling.

“Now,” she said, “we see what your water tells the river.”

Jin went into a back room, feeling suddenly awkward and exposed. She felt fear and elation arguing within her over whether she should run or dance. Afterward, when she brought the cup back out, the River Woman took it and set it on the table.

“Now finish your tea, dear,” the River Woman said. “It will take awhile.”

Jin Li Tam looked at the cup and the ring at the bottom of it. The threads were tucked neatly beneath the gold circle, their tips waving slightly in the blended waters. “What if it’s wrong?”

The River Woman shook her head. “Forty years and I’ve yet to not know a woman with child when I saw her walk into this hut—even as soon as the morning after if you get my meaning.” She grinned and sipped her tea.

They finished their tea in silence and sat, watching the cup. Finally, the River Woman clapped her hands. “Delightful,” she said. The blue thread had become disentangled from the ring and drifted to the top.

Jin Li Tam didn’t need to ask what it meant. She fell back into the chair, letting her breath out. She felt tears in the corners of her eyes, and her stomach suddenly felt uncertain. “A boy,” she said in quiet voice.

The River Woman nodded. “A strong one, by the looks of it. What will you name him?”

She didn’t even think about it. The name leaped to mind immediately even though she’d not thought about it before this very moment. “Jakob,” she said. “If Rudolfo concurs.”

The River Woman’s smile filled the room with light. “A strong name for a strong boy.”

Jin Li Tam couldn’t take her eyes off the cup now and its blue thread floating in the yellowed river water. “He will need to be,” she said. “He is inheriting a tremendous task.”

The River Woman nodded. “He will be strong because he has strong parents.”

One of the tears broke loose, and Jin Li Tam felt it trace its course down her cheek. “Thank you,” she said.

The River Woman leaned in, her voice low. “Lady Tam,” she said, “it occurs to me that you are more concerned about how this child came to be than you need be. Lord Rudolfo will be delighted and he will not question this.” She paused. “I consider this to be a private matter between you and me.”

Jin Li Tam nodded. “Thank you,” she said again.

As she left the hut to make her way back to the manor, she found herself wondering what kind of mother she would be. She’d barely known her own mother, spending most of her time with large groups of siblings, taking instruction from her father and his brothers and sisters as they raised her to be a Tam. The idea confounded her. Two parents bringing one child into the world and staying near that child until old age carried the parents away. That child creating children of their own and the turban passing down from father to son in the shadow of a new library in a different world.

It was the most terrifying undertaking Jin Li Tam had ever imagined.

Once inside her room, she reran the bath and stripped down, pausing in front of the full-length mirror to study her stomach.

Easing herself into the hot, sweet-smelling water, Jin Li Tam smiled.

Neb

Neb felt the weariness deep in his bones now that the work was done. He'd walked Windwir twice in the last week to be certain, but despite the winter's storms they'd finished ahead of schedule. And though the sense of accomplishment permeated him, he felt a sadness in the midst of it. Over the months, he'd seen more and more of the Marsh girl, Winters, and they'd fallen into a routine together. At least twice weekly now, she met him out on the northern edges of the camp, when he could discreetly slip into the forest. They walked together, and somehow, somewhere along the way, their hands had touched and then joined so that now, whenever they walked alone, they did so hand in hand. They had not kissed again, but Neb found himself thinking of it all the time, uncertain of how to bring that about again.

He laughed as he walked north across the empty plain. Over the last several months, he'd commanded a camp of gravediggers, presided over discipline, even buried some of their own dead when the war crossed into their work. He knew how to order and inventory the supplies for a camp, and he found himself suddenly understanding and even proposing military strategy. All impressive for a boy of fifteen years.

Sixteen now, he realized suddenly. Sometime in the last few weeks a birthday had slipped past him unawares.

He had learned much and had proven much, but he still did not know how to kiss a girl.

As he approached the line of trees he called out, and she broke from them, running nimbly across the ash and mud.

"Nebios ben Hebda," she said, smiling and out of breath. She looked around the field and looked south to what remained of the gravediggers' camp. The tents were already coming down as the workers began their exodus. A small contingent would be traveling north with Neb to aid the construction of the new library. Most were scattering to what homes they could either find or make or return to. "You really are finished," she said.

Neb nodded. "I am. Petronus and Rudolfo should arrive tomorrow. I'll ride back with them to the Ninefold Forest to see what help I can be with the library."

Winters smiled. "Your work here was impressive. I'm certain you will be an asset to them."

He smiled, feeling the heat rise in his cheeks. Odd how only she could do this to him. "Thank you," he said. "Shall we walk?" He extended his hand to her and she took it.

They walked to the river first, pausing there to watch a deer at the far side. They'd never come so close before, but nature reasserted its rule quickly. Someday, Neb thought, if no one built here, this plain itself might return to the forest it once had been.

As they walked, they didn't speak this time. Before, they'd talked about his dreams and the Marsh King's dreams and where they intersected. He'd always been amazed at her grasp of those—as if she were in them, herself. And she had been on a number of occasions, or at least the image of her.

She'd shown up in other dreams, too, that Neb could never talk about. Just thinking about them made his hands get sweaty and his mouth go dry. In one of those dreams, they lay beneath a clear canopy looking up on a moon far more massive and blue and green and brown than the one that hung in their night sky. They lay there naked in their own sweat, holding one another in their arms. She had rolled into him in that dream, her body sending shivers through him as she whispered in his ear.

“This dream is of our home,” she had said, and he’d awakened afraid that she really had been there, not just some image of her conjured out of his imagination and his desire.

As they turned west and walked with the river to their back, they fell into a rhythm. After a while he looked over to her, and saw the sadness on her face.

She looked at him and as if reading his mind, she explained. “We will never have these times again,” she said. “I will miss them.”

Neb shrugged. “I’m sure we’ll see each other again, Winters.” He knew he should say something else, thought about it, and hoped they were the right words. “I want to see you again,” he said.

She squeezed his hand. “I do, too. But it will be complicated.”

He stopped, suddenly knowing what to do, exactly what to do, and the words tumbled out before he could think himself out of them. “Then come with me, Winters. Surely, the Marsh King would understand and grant you this? Perhaps Rudolfo would speak to him on our behalf. Come and help me with the library.”

She stopped walking and dropped his hand. A wry smile played on her face, and the beauty of it, despite the smudges of mud and ash on her face, made his heart ache. “An interesting proposal, Nebios ben Hebda.”

He blushed at the word “proposal,” and started reaching for words to dismiss his outburst. But she continued before he could finish that dismissal. “What would I do in the Ninefold Forest? How could I help with this library?” She took a step closer to him, and his nose was alive with the earthy scent of her. He could feel heat radiating from her, and he willed his feet forward one step.

Just one step. And then the kiss. But he couldn’t do it. “I’m sure Petronus would have work you could do,” he said.

She chuckled. “I’m sure he would. But I’m less concerned about his plans for me and more interested in *yours*.”

Neb’s face went red and he lost control of his tongue. He opened his mouth, but the words escaped him utterly.

Her eyes were playful now. “Childhood is but a day behind us, and adulthood looms ahead of us the day after tomorrow. Whose house would I share? What family would I have?”

The words came out suddenly before he could stop them. “We’d be together,” he said.

She laughed. “Would you take me as your bride, Nebios ben Hebda, and grant me a Gypsy wedding filled with dancing and music? Is that what you would do?” She paused. “I suspect that’s *not* something Androfrancines do.”

It wasn’t; he knew this. Though there had been special dispensations down through the years, strategic alliances and such. And with the Order so completely shriveled now, it wouldn’t be out of the question. Still, he’d not considered marriage at all in this. He really hadn’t considered anything beyond the fact that he did not want to be away from the Marsh girl.

Her face went serious now, but it remained soft. “I know you’ve seen my dreams of home.”

Neb’s mouth dropped open, and he felt panic rising.

She reached out and took both of his hands, holding them loosely in hers. “You have seen my dreams. I have seen yours. We do not need to concern ourselves with matters that the Gods have already spoken to.” She leaned in and kissed his cheek. “No matter where we go from each other, we will always come back.”

You’ve seen my dreams of home. The words resonated within him. Not the Marsh King’s dreams. *My dreams.*

She stood still before him there, her eyes searching into his own, her lips slightly parted as she watched and waited to see if he would hear the words beneath her words.

“You are . . . ?” His words trailed off as he tried to make sense of it.

She nodded. “Today is the day I have held in my heart with hope and fear. Though the dreams give me great hope, and my fear is only that my deception might somehow hurt your trust in me.”

Neb looked into himself. Surprise seemed to overwhelm any hurt he might feel, yet it made sense. Never had he seen the burly, fur-clad Marsh King in his dreams, but she had intersected them again and again. And her deception made sense to him. Just his few months leading, he’d come to realize quickly how carefully a leader had to be with who knew what. It wasn’t a matter of trust, he realized, but of practicality. Hers was a secret that could take the teeth out of the Named Lands’ carefully sown fear of the Marshers. To find out that a slip of a girl was the power behind that army . . .

Her eyebrows furrowed, and concern washed her face. “Nebios, I—”

Neb didn’t wait for her to finish. The moment arrived and he recognized it for what it was. Without thinking, without giving himself even a second to hesitate and change his mind, he stepped forward and wrapped her in his arms. He enfolded her and pressed himself to her, his mouth moving in slowly even as her head came back and her eyes closed.

Then Neb kissed the girl whose dreams shared his own, the girl who was in all actuality the Marsh King that the New World trembled to think of.

He kissed her and kept on kissing her, hoping that the dreams were true and that their paths would croóataliss again.

Vlad Li Tam

Vlad Li Tam waited in an office in the upper room of a squat, square guard tower on the Pylos border. He’d left the preparations at home in the hands of his capable children, steaming for Pylos in one of his iron ships for this clandestine meeting. His fourth son and his thirteenth daughter accompanied him along with two squads of their best trained men and women. Even now, they were magicked and taking up various positions around the guard tower. Vlad sat with his aide and waited.

There was a knock at the door and the aide opened it. A man in Androfrancine robes entered, pushing back his hood. General Lysias looked out of place in those robes, his eyes narrow and looking around the room.

Vlad Li Tam gestured to the chair across from him. The aide quickly refilled the glasses with Firespice, that Gypsy liquor that he’d grown to love. “Please sit, General,” he said. “Drink with me.”

Lysias held the glass beneath his nose, inhaling the scent of it. Then he took a long drink. “I bring word from Sethbert’s nephew,” he said. “Erlund is agreeable to the arrangement, though he isn’t pleased with

it.”

Vlad Li Tam shrugged. “Pleasure and displeasure do not enter into it.”

Lysias nodded. “I told him I saw no better resolution to this conflict. The City States are nearly in civil war. The blockades—in addition to the loss of Windwir—have crippled the Entrolusian economy.”

Vlad Li Tam wondered how it felt to move from being a general of the most powerful nation in the world to a desperate man hoping to save at least some of that nation’s pride through last-minute bargaining. “The delta will most likely never recover fully from this,” he said in a quiet voice.

Lysias swallowed. “I agree, Lord Tam. But we must save what we can. This entire event has been a great tragedy.”

Vlad Li Tam thought about the children he had lost along the way. Most recently, the son who had given himself in the Entrolusian camp and the daughter who no longer spoke to him. And before that, others he did not wish to think about in this moment. “It has been unfortunate,” he agreed.

Lysias drew a pouch from beneath his robes and passed it over. “We’ve drawn up the terms and—”

Vlad Li Tam waved him away. “Burn those, Lysias. There will be no written terms.” He looked to his aide, and the aide came forward with a cloth-wrapped object and a sheet of parchment. The aide put the sheet of parchment into Lysias’s hands and unwrapped the metal object. It was roughly the length of a forearm, a metal tube ornately decorated and set into a wooden crossbow stock. “This belongs to Resolute,” he said. “It’s a powerful weapon.”

Lysias looked up from the note he read. “And this letter?”

Vlad Li Tam smiled. “It matches Resolute’s handwriting. Any scholar who could tell otherwise is long dead.”

Lysias looked at the weapon, then returned to the note. “And you think they’ll believe this?”

Vlad Li Tam sipped his drink, savoring the burn of it as it traveled down his throat. “They will. The rumors continue to grow. Sethbert wasn’t exactly discreet about his role at the beginning of this.”

Lysias’s jaw tightened. “He claimed he was in the right. He claimed he had evidence that the Androfrancines intended to restore the spell and use it to rule us.”

“Ask him,” Vlad Li Tam said slowly, “to produce that evidence and I suspect he will be hard-pressed to do so.” His eighteenth son had taken care of that for him. “Once word of this next tragedy unfolds, expect a new Papal decree offering terms. Tell Erlund that this will be the final offer and that all he need do is accept the terms and demand the arrest of Sethbert.” He leaned forward, his eyes narrowing in the dimly lit room. “And if he thinks to protect his uncle in some way, tell him that what is offered here is a mercy. The boot is firmly on the delta’s neck. One twist of it and she is broken.”

Lysias nodded. “I will carry your message.”

Vlad Li Tam stood. “Very well, I think our work here is done. The letters of credit will arrive quietly once Sethbert is in custody.”

Lysias bowed his head. “Thank you, Lord Tam.”

Vlad Li Tam returned the bow, careful not to incline his head more than what was proper. After the

general left, he sat again and finished his drink.

Later this week, one of the two Popes would be dead. Once the Named Lands heard the details of the note Resolute would leave behind, no one would doubt that Sethbert had brought down the City of Windwir and its Androfrancine Order. Resolute's grief-stricken confession would lay out his shame at having told Sethbert of the spell's existence and speak of the guilt that gnawed at him until he could no longer bear to live with it any longer. It would point to accounts at House Li Tam that even now were being carefully created and funded to point accusing fingers at a man whose paranoia and ambition had nearly cost the world the light of knowledge, and at a cousin who would be his puppet Pope, doling out what little light remained for profit.

After this, Sethbert would lose his following and the war would lose its grounding.

The Overseer would be stripped of his lands and titles, reduced to flight. And that was as much as Vlad Li Tam would do for now. But he was certain that it was enough.

Rudolfo and Petronus would take care of the rest.

Resolute

A warm spring rain fell beyond the opened windows of Oriv's makeshift office. When the Entrolusian insurrection had started heating up, Sethbert had insisted that his cousin return to the city states with him. He'd told the Pope he thought it would bolster his people's morale and possibly quell the fighting, but Oriv suspected it had more to do with keeping him nearby and easier to watch.

So now Oriv—he no longer thought of himself as Pope Resolute—spent his days working at the small desk or making speeches that he did not believe in.

And drinking too much. He stared at the empty cup and reached for the bottle of brandy. Since that winter day when Petronus declared himself, Oriv had found himself drinking more and more. It was an easy snare to fall into. The warm sweet liquor, in sufficient quantities, promised to blur the edges of his memory and take the teeth out of it.

And there was a lot he wanted to forget, to not feel. First and foremost, there was Windwir. From a distance, he'd seen the gravediggers' camp and the scars in the snow where the filled-in trenches hid the bones of a city. He'd needed to prove to himself that it was really gone. And now, more than that, he wanted to forget it had happened at all.

There was also the war to forget. Because even though on the surface this was called a war between two Popes, at the heart of it he knew it wasn't. There was one Pope—Petronus—and Oriv knew he could bring the violence to an end quickly by simply bending his knee and accepting Petronus's authority over him. And yet he wouldn't. Partially at his cousin's insistence. Mostly, though, because he did not know how to stop.

But there was even more to forget than these things. There was the deeper truth beneath it all.

Oriv could no longer dismiss Rudolfo's charge: His cousin, Sethbert, had destroyed Windwir.

He'd had his suspicions shortly after reaching Sethbert's camp seemingly so long ago. He'd overheard bits of conversation between the Overseer and his general Lysias. Grymlis and his Gray Guard had also brought him rumors fröy som among the soldiers. And once Petronus left Windwir for the Ninefold Forest Houses, that crafty old fisherman had turned in his shovel for a pen. His tracts and proclamations were riddled with accusations against the Entrolusian Overseer, though always careful not to implicate Oriv.

Those tracts were everywhere in the Named Lands now. Combined with the blockade and the devastated economy, those damning pamphlets fueled the Entrolusian insurrection. Civil war had already swallowed Turam, and even what little remained of the Order was divided. Those of the Androfrancines who had not found their way back to the Papal Summer Palace were now in the Ninefold Forest. And with winter now past, there were rumblings that some of the higher ranking arch-scholars and bishops—men old enough to remember Pope Petronus—were planning a migration eastward.

He filled the cup to the brim, lifted it and tipped it back. It took most of a bottle now for him to forget. Half of another for him to sleep.

Oriv heard a knock at his door, and tried to stand. He swayed on his feet and sat down heavily. "Come in," he said.

Grymlis pushed open the door. “Excellency, may I have a word?”

The old soldier looked more tired than usual. His eyes were red-rimmed in the flickering lamplight, and his shoulders slouched.

Oriv waved him in. “Grymlis. Come. Sit. Have a drink with me.”

Grymlis walked into the room, pulling the door closed behind him. He sat in the chair across from Oriv, and their eyes met. Oriv looked away, then pointed to the bottle. “Help yourself.”

Grymlis shook his head. “I don’t need it.”

Oriv thought for a moment that the old soldier would suggest that perhaps Pope Resolute didn’t need it, either. He’d certainly been free enough with that opinion in days past. But instead, he watched the old soldier pull a flask from his pocket and pass it across. “Try this,” Grymlis said. “It’s got more kick.”

Oriv accepted it, unscrewed the cap, and sniffed it. “What is it?”

“Firespice—a Gypsy brew. Very potent.”

Oriv nodded, took a sip, and felt it burn its way down his throat. He stretched the next sip into a gulp, then screwed the cap back on and held it out to Grymlis.

“Keep it,” he said.

Oriv wasn’t sure why, but the generosity moved him. “Thank you. You’re a *Youldtgood* man, Grymlis.”

The general shrugged. “I’m not sure about that.” He leaned forward. “But I want to be a better man than I am. And I want the same for you as well, Oriv.”

He used my given name. Oriv chuckled. “We all could do with being better men,” he said.

Grymlis nodded slowly. “We could.” He paused and looked around the room. “Tonight,” he said. “We could be better men *tonight*.”

Oriv leaned forward. “How?”

“We could leave this city,” Grymlis said. “We could flee to Pylos and denounce Sethbert for the traitorous whore-child he is. We could end this war and go help rebuild what can be rebuilt. Keep the light alive.”

Even as Grymlis said it, Oriv knew it was true. He’d thought the same thing a dozen times in the last few months. Since winter, the war had spread. Everyone had their side and everyone made their warfare in service to their so-called light. But it didn’t take a Pope to figure out that what the New World had fallen into had nothing to do with light and more to do with fear.

He wanted to tell Grymlis that he was right, that they should pack what they could carry and quietly gather the contingent. Sethbert’s men were tied up putting down riots and quelling revolution. They could reach the ruins of Rachyl’s Bridge easily by dawn and trust the rangers to ferry them across.

But instead, he snorted. “And you think Petronus would have us back after this?”

Grymlis shrugged. “Possibly. He was ever a fair man.” He leaned in even closer. “But does it matter? What matters is that we can stop this if we choose to.”

Oriv felt his lower lip shaking. "I'm not sure that I can."

Now Grymlis was leaning in close enough that he could smell the wine on the old man's breath. The line of his jaw was strong and his eyes flashed. "Say the word, Excellency, and I will do it for you. I will call my men and we will carry you away from this. You need do nothing but say you wish it."

But Oriv didn't say anything. He blinked back the tears and unscrewed the top of the flask and drained it with one long gulp.

Grymlis's shoulders sagged. He pushed himself up to his feet. "I've a bottle in my room," he said. "I'll fetch it for you."

Oriv nodded. "I'm sure this will all sort itself out, Grymlis."

Grymlis nodded as well. "I'm sure it will, Excellency."

He let himself out, and Oriv watched the door close. Already the Firespice was taking the edge off, and he saw the fuzzy underside of forgetfulness. Maybe tomorrow, if he felt better, he would go to Sethbert and suggest another parley. Perhaps they could end the fighting. Perhaps they could become better men.

When Grymlis returned with the bottle, Oriv quickly unstopped it and poured it into his cup. The old general sat across from him and watched him drain it in a long swallow. Then, Grymlis stood and walked behind Oriv to close the room's open windows one by one.

After, the general went to the door and opened it to let the others in. Oriv looked up at them—four Gray Guard and two Entrolusians he knew he should recognize. They moved into the room quickly as Grymlis shut and locked the door.

"What are you doing?" Oriv demanded, trying to stand but finding that his legs would not carry him. The Gray Guard moved in behind him and held him down in his chair. One of the Entrolusians reached down and took the cup from his hands, placing it on the small table next to the bottle of Firespice. Suddenly, he recognized him. "General Lysias?"

The general said nothing, instead looking to Grymlis. Oriv watched their exchange of glances and tried to stand again. Firm hands held him in place.

"What's this about?" he asked.

Grymlis took a cloth-wrapped bundle from the other Entrolusian and pulled out a long object that Oriv recognized only too well. "What are you doing?"

Grymlis's big hand closed over Oriv's, and now Oriv struggled to keep his white-knuckled grip on the arm of the chair. But the alcohol had numbed him, and Grymlis pried it free easily. Oriv felt the cold wood of the artifact pressed into his hand. He felt the cold iron of the artifact's barrel pressed into the soft tissue between his chin and his throat.

"What are you doing?" he asked again in a voice that sounded more like a whimper than a demand. Only now he knew exactly what Grymlis was doing, and he twisted and turned in the chair in the hopes that it would somehow be enough.

"I'm protecting the light," Grymlis said, his voice heavy and hollow despite the hardness in his eyes.

"But I—"

And in that moment, Oriv found the forgetfulness that no bottle could ever offer him.

Petronus

Petronus crested the last hill and climbed down from his saddle to stretch his legs. Below, the flat, wide river moved sluggishly south, and on its farthest shore the town of tents had shrunk to more of a small village. A few figures moved between the last of the tents and a fleet of wagons. Beyond the tents, the expansive plain that had once been Windwir stretched out, a soup of mud and ash.

Rudolfo dismounted beside him. "It looks quiet," he said.

Of course it *was* quiet. The work had been done for nearly a week. The Entrolusians had been gone for some time now, retreating south to deal with problems within their own borders. Petronus looked at Rudolfo and then back out over the muddy waste. "He's done good work here," he said.

Rudolfo nodded. "He has. There's a captain hidden inside that boy."

Or a Pope, Petronus thought, feeling his stomach sink. The wind stirred, and a few drops of rain spattered on his cheek and hand. "Indeed," he said, glancing again to the Gypsy King.

Behind them, he heard the sound of a small bird rustling as a scout cooed and whispered to it. The brown war-sparrow entered his line of sight with a flutter and shot down the hill to cross the river.

Climbing back into his saddle, Petronus carefully nudged the horse along the muddy track that wound them downhill. When they were halfway to the bottom, Petronus noticed the workers gathering on the far shore. A handful of men boarded the barge they had rigged with ropes and pulleys to serve as a makeshift ferry. Slowly it made its way across the water, and when Petronus and Rudolfo reached the river's edge with their escort, Neb stood waiting.

He's not smiling. This surprised Petronus. The boy—young man now, he realized—seemed taller and more broad-shouldered, but those weren't what caused him to fill out the Androfrancine robes he wore. No, Petronus realized. It was confidence. A quiet confidence, to be sure, but that was the strongest kind.

The boy's face was flat and hard, the jaw set. "Father," Neb said, bowing slightly. "Windwir is laid to rest."

But there is more. Petronus dropped from the horse. "You've done excellent work, Neb."

Neb nodded. "Thank you, Father."

Rudolfo climbed down as well and clapped the young man on the shoulder. "I was telling his Excellency that you have the makings of a fine captain."

With a howl, Sethbert threw himself toward the window, catching the heavy curtains and pushing the thick cloth ahead of him to shield him as the glass and latticework shattered. Plunging into the midnight rain, he leaped from the small balcony and into the Whymer Maze below.

That had been hours ago. He'd used the passages beneath the maze—the ones his father had shown him when he was a boy—and made his escape. The tunnels dropped him into the more colorful quarter of the city, where he'd rolled a drunk for his tattered clothing and a pair of shoes that were too tight for his feet.

At first he'd thought to stow away on one of the boats in the harbor, but with the blockade he was certain to not get far. And it would not take long for Lysias to spread a net for him, putting guards up at

the city gates and along the river bridges.

In the end, he crawled into the sewers and followed them out of the city. Then he worked his way along the coastline until he found the barn.

He stood slowly, mindful of the blisters on his feet and the sharp pain in his ribs and shoulder from last night's hard landing in the garden.

He'd hoped to sleep here, but his mind wouldn't stop racing. Where would he go? What was left for him now? And where had the document pouch gone?

Less than a handful knew about the Rufello box. And its cipher had been passed from father to son for generations. No one else could've possibly known.

Unless.

It had to be Li Tam's bitch-whore of a daughter. But it made no sense. If she had the cipher, why hadn't she taken the documents months ago? She'd shared his bed enough, the pouch tucked safely away. Why would she wait so long? And certainly, if she'd read those documents, she'd understand full well what kind of hero Sethbert truly was.

She's a thousand leagues away, some saner part of him interjected. She'd been gone for months now, working in the far northeast with that damned fop Rudolfo and his paper Pope.

If not Tam, then another Androfrancine lap-slut. But who it was—and how they broke into the ancient lockbox—mattered little. What counted now was survival. Because with the documents now gone, it was clear to Sethbert that there was no place for him left in the Named Lands. They would hunt him down wherever he fled. The weight of that realization caught in his throat.

The Gulf would be at the mercy of the iron armada, cutting off any escape south to the Isles or west to the Emerald Coasts. But east, Sethbert thought, there was a line of small fishing towns along the forested shores of Caldu Bay. Perhaps from there he could steal a boat far from Li Tam's blockade and follow the ragged edge of the Keeper's Wall south, around the Fargoer's horn and into the Churning Wastes.

Sethbert went to the barn door and looked out. He saw nothing between the field and the river's edge. The sun was bright, and the few rain clouds left in the sky were drifting slowly east.

Stomach gurgling with hunger and fear, Sethbert followed the weather.

Rudolfo

Rudolfo rode south alone over the protests of his men. Had Gregoric been alive, he would have never gotten away with it. He'd have disobeyed directly, or at the very least followed from a distance under magicks. Even Aedric might have intervened in some way, but he was already south. The new first captain was working with the Rangers of Pylos to shore up Meirov's eastern and western borders and keep her neighbors' problems in their own backyards.

So he rode alone, his horse magicked for speed and stamina, and he leaned into the slanting rain. He'd sent word before he'd left, carefully coding notes to Jin Li Tam, his head physician, and Aedric. And Petronus had informed Vlad Li Tam on Rudolfo's behalf, asking him to keep watchful eye on the Delta's waterways for the renegade Overseer, and letting his future father-in-law know that he rode to rendezvous with Aedric. He meant his Wandering Army to hunt Sethbert, and he meant to parade that

murderous pig-bugger through the towns of the Named Lands on the long route back to the Ninefold Forest.

He smiled at the thought of it, and whistled his horse faster. If he pushed, he'd only need four days. With the magicks his horse could take that abuse, but no more. Once he reached Aedric and his men, he'd have to trade out for a season. He patted the horse's side. With all he'd been through since Windwir's pyre, this one had earned a break.

We all have.

Hours behind him, the last of the gravediggers' camp was down by now, and the caravan no doubt wound its way northeast. He could have brought some of his men, but he'd not wanted to leave the Pope any more exposed than he already was. Even if the war was all but over, he couldn't afford to take any risks with Petronus's safety.

But deeper than that, something else prompted Rudolfo to solitude. He'd felt a darkness gnawing away inside of him, stirred to life that night he ran with Gregoric on his shoulder. And when that that cloud came over him he found that he couldn't abide anyone's presence.

He was certain it had something to do with the Francine's Fivefold Path of Grief. And he would walk those paths again and again until he finished. It wasn't as if he were a stranger to them. He'd been down these routes before with his brother and with his parents.

But Gregoric. It still stabbed at him.

He shook his head, hoping to clear it. He thought about the work ahead, but found it bored him. He turned his mind instead to Jin Li Tam and their time together, but the memories of that couldn't hold him, either.

But when he thought of Sethbert, he found a white, hot point of light to focus on other than the past.

It was the future. And in it, Sethbert screamed beneath the salted knife.

Rudolfo

Rudolfo dismounted and handed his reins to a Gypsy Scout. There at the edge of Caldas Bay was the shack with its boathouse, surrounded by soldiers of the Wandering Army, his scouts and a squad of Pylos Border Rangers.

They'd received dozens of birds with dozens of reported sightings. Rudolfo had divided his force and scattered them to follow up on each lead. It had paid off.

When they'd first found Sethbert here, the Rangers had inquired around the town and learned that the boathouse Sethbert hid in was none other than that of a certain fisherman, Petros, who was away on business.

Sethbert hadn't put up a fight, but he had insisted that he would only surrender to Rudolfo. The Rangers had quickly sent word to the Gypsy Scouts with Sethbert's demand.

Rudolfo had left immediately, riding with the wagon that his Physicians of Penitent Torture had driven south. It was a large, enclosed structure with wooden sides that could be dropped to properly display the black iron cage furnished with the various tools of their redemptive work.

Rudolfo approached Aedric, the new first captain of his Gypsy Scouts. He was Gregoric's oldest boy—nearly twenty. He would teach his friend's son how to be a strong first captain, and perhaps, if the Gods did not grant him an heir, he would offer his fatherhood to the boy. He wondered how Jin Li Tam would feel about that. He suspected that she would see the value of it, but he realized suddenly that the days of making decisions of such magnitude without speaking with her were gone now. Not because he worried that she would take issue with his decision—he knew she would not. But rather, because he knew her now, knew that she had eyes that could see around corners he never dreamed of. She was a valuable ally.

"First Captain," Rudolfo said, inclining his head slightly.

"General Rudolfo," Aedric said, bowing. "The fugitive Overseer of the Entrolusian City States awaits you."

Rudolfo nodded. "Is he armed?"

"I'm certain of it."

He stroked his mustache. "And do you think he means to harm me?"

Aedric's eyes narrowed. "He means to try, Lord."

Rudolfo unbuckled his sword belt and handed it to a waiting aide. "Lend me your knives," he said to Aedric.

Aedric handed over the belt of scout's knives, and Rudolfo buckled it around his narrow hips.

Rudolfo waited for Aedric to insist he not go in alone, to tell him it was too dangerous. He smiled inwardly when the young first captain did not. "I will whistle for you when I need you." Then, he looked to the two physicians that had driven down in the wagon. "Salt your knives and ready your chains."

Rudolfo went to the door. “Sethbert,” he called out.

He heard scrambling and the sound of things being knocked over. He pulled open the door, and his eyes followed the ray of sunlight as it slanted into the filthy room. The smell overtook him first. Rotten fish and human feces. Rudolfo drew a silk kerchief from his sleeve and held it to his mouth and nose, inhaling the perfumes from it.

“Rudolfo?” The voice was hoarse and far away, laced with something he thought must be madness. More scrambling, and Rudolfo saw a filthy form crawl into the light. Sethbert had already started losing his fat, his clothes hanging off him. He was covered in filth from head to toe, his hair and beard matted with mud, his clothing ripped and gray with grime. His eyes were wide.

“Yes,” Rudolfo said. “I am here. This is over now. Come out.”

Sethbert smiled, relief washing his face. “I will come out. Soon.” He offered an exaggerated wink. “But first, did they not tell you that I intend to hurt you?”

Rudolfo’s hands clenched the knife hilt, his eyes on Sethbert’s hands, both splayed out on the muddy boathouse floor. “With what do you intend to hurt me?” he asked.

“With knowledge,” he said.

Rudolfo waited.

Sethbert continued. “I had the evidence. I saw it. I saw the charts and the maps. They intended to use the spell to enslave us.”

Rudolfo laughed. “I thought you were going to hurt me, not amuse me,” he said. “What would the Androfrancines gain from enslaving us?”

“I’m a patriot of the light,” Sethbert said. The madness crept into his eyes now, too, and his face twitched in the shaft of morning sunlight.

Rudolfo scowled. “Enough of this. You’ve run out of time, Sethbert.”

He stepped back and almost missed the next words because Sethbert whispered them, low and with a sharp clarity. “Ask the whore who shares your bed who paid for the coups that killed your parents.”

Rudolfo spun, the knives coming out. “What did you say?”

Sethbert’s eyes met his, but the Overseer did not utter another word.

Later, after the physicians had chained Sethbert into the wagon, Rudolfo rapped on the outside of it with the pommel of his long, narrow sword and ordered the black-robed driver to make the return trip at a leisurely pace, stopping in what towns they could along the way.

He’d hoped he could follow, but he knew now that he could not. Sethbert’s words had chewed at him despite the Overseer’s obvious madness. He’d actually believed that the Androfrancines meant to harm the people they were sworn to protect. In the end, the paranoia of a madman brought down a city.

But this other—it touched on a suspicion he had harbored for a long while now. Everyone had said that his parents’ death was a terrible tragedy, an unseen insurrection that exploded in one night of intense violence that left Rudolfo an orphan. They’d shaken their heads when, even at his young age, Rudolfo suggested an investigation. It had seemed too convenient, and in two thousand years of forest life, there

had never been insurrection. The night his parents died, he stayed up past dawn drafting his strategy for investigation. Gregoric's father was supportive, but the pontiff felt the Physicians of Penitent Torture would better serve the occasion. Rudolfo listened to the pontiff. It was the first and last time he did not follow his instincts.

Even now his instincts led him, and he raced his new horse westward.

Ask the whore who shares your bed who paid for the coups that killed your parents.

No, Rudolfo thought, I will not ask her.

Instead, he would ask her father.

Neb

The mechoservitors fascinated Neb.

Certainly, he'd seen them on occasion in the library—though not often. Now, he could walk among them, talk with them and on occasion work with them as they cataloged and inventoried what pieces of the library lived within their memory scrolls.

Today, he worked with Isaak integrating the inventory of the latest caravan from the summer papal palace. After Resolute's unexpected suicide, the Androfrancines at the Palace had quickly accepted Petronus's invitation to return to the fold. But when a certain Captain Grymlis showed up at the gates with a small contingent of Gray Guard, Petronus turned them away.

"The Gypsy Scouts guard the Son of P' Andro Whym now," he told them. "If you would be true to your vows, obey me now. Bury your uniforms and take up new lives far away from here."

Neb had never seen anything like it. To a man, they stripped naked, buried their uniforms in the forest floor and left.

That had been two weeks ago.

Now, the wagons full of books and artifacts had formed a steady stream, two or three per week. Androfrancine refugees and property from the Emerald Coasts, from the Summer Papal Palace and even a few from the City States on the Delta trickled into the Ninefold Forest. Word of the restoration had spread throughout the Named Lands, and a corps of engineers already worked hard at digging its deep basements.

And Neb worked with Isaak to inventory each wagon so that the information would be recorded on the metal man's memory scroll.

He watched the metal man work, his eye shutters opening and closing rapidly as he wrote. "Sethbert will arrive day after tomorrow," Neb said.

Isaak looked up. "What do you think they will do with him?"

Neb shrugged. "Rudolfo means to keep him on Tormentor's Row, to let his physicians do their redemptive work upon him with their knives."

He'd studied those darker aspects of the Whymer cult, and shuddered to think of what that meant. The varying cuts had names, and each of them folded into the others until they formed a vast Whymer's Maze of lacerations.

When Isaak said nothing, Neb continued, "But Petronus wants to try him for the Desolation of . . ." He saw the mechanical flinch and let the words fall off. "I'm sorry, Isaak."

Isaak shook his head. "You've got nothing to apologize for, Brother Nebios. A part of me thinks he deserves justice for his crimes."

Neb nodded. "When I met Petronus, I was standing under Sethbert's canopy, studying the position of his guards." He paused. Had it really been so many months ago? "I'd stolen scout magicks from Lady Tam, and intended to use them in order to kill Sethbert."

Isaak's eyes flashed. "You knew what he had done?"

Neb nodded. "I did. But Petronus saw me and stopped me."

Isaak pondered this. "You were a boy who survived the spell. Now you're a hero of the Androfrancine Order. Do you believe your restraint led to these things?"

He chuckled, putting down the book he'd just lifted up from the wagon. "I had no restraint of my own. Petronus restrained me."

Isaak fixed his eyes on him again. "But are you glad for it?"

Neb thought about this. "I think so. Yes," he said.

Isaak looked to a point beyond Neb now and stood. "Lady Tam," he said. "An unexpected delight."

Neb looked up and blushed. Lady Tam still radiated beauty, though now it was clear that she wasn't half as pretty as Winters. Still she was beautiful, and when she smiled at him he felt his face grow red. "Hello, Isaak," she said, inclining her head to each of them. "Nebios." She smiled. "How is the inventory?"

Now Neb stood as well. "We've found three mechanicals. Small ones, to be sure, but two of them are still in good repair."

"I should be able to restore the third," Isaak said. "It appears to have slipped a gear."

Jin Li Tam looked to the wagon, and Neb thought for a second that her face registered surprise. He followed her eyes and saw the golden bird in its golden cage, its wings hanging broken and its neck twitching. "Where did this wagon come from?" she asked.

Neb stared at it. Something about the golden bird nagged at him. He suddenly smelled the sulfur and ozone of Windwir's firestorm, and he flinched.

Isaak looked at the registry. "This one is from the Emerald Coasts," he said. "A private collection."

He saw the bird flying low to the ground, its golden feathers steaming. It was at Windwir, he realized. Neb opened his mouth and a stream of unintelligible words tumbled out, fragments of scripture jumbled together with glossolalia. He closed his mouth quickly and looked at Jin Li Tam.

She stared at him. "Neb?"

He waited for the tension to leave his throat. Finally, he spoke. "I saw this bird at Windwir."

Neb watched her eyes narrow and her jawline tighten. "Really?"

He nodded. "I did."

She nodded, her eyes suddenly far away. "I hope you can fix it," she said. Then, her eyes returned to the present. "Petronus is calling for you both," she said. She paused. "Take him that bird. Tell him I said I will speak to him about it later."

Neb grabbed up his stack of papers. He probably wanted to talk about the council.

The Council of Bishops was just a few weeks away. Many of the gravediggers who had come north with Neb had been put to work building bleachers and crafting the massive tents to contain it. The last birds of invitation were to go out tomorrow.

Neb started toward the manor and the suite of offices they had grown into, then realized he was being rude, and turned to wait for Lady Tam and Isaak.

Isaak held the birdcage in his hands.

Jin Li Tam was staring at it, he realized, and Neb had never seen a more profound look of sadness upon her face.

Petronus

Petronus's office adjoined the converted guest room that Neb and Isaak worked from. The steward had insisted that he have privacy and wouldn't hear of him using his living quarters as his work space. Instead, they moved a small desk, some bookshelves and three chairs into a large walk-in closet. The closet even had a small window that opened out on one of the manor's many gardens. As spring hurried on, Petronus could smell the flowers blooming, though of course he had to stand on his desk to see them.

He looked up the knock on his door. "Come in," he said.

Neb came in first, and Petronus swore that every time he saw the boy he was taller. His shoulders had broadened and he even had the beginnings of a beard, trimmed as neatly as a boy could manage. He wore the robes smartly, though he still walked in them as if they weren't really his, as if he weren't really a member of the Order. "You called for us, Excellency?"

Petronus nodded. The Gypsy King surprised him, abruptly vanishing after Sethbert's capture. Rudolfo was a wily one, but like his father, his sense of duty anchored him. When he concluded with whatever private matter he attended to, Rudolfo would be back to finish the work he'd started here, because like Petronus, he would do what he was made for. "I'm sure he'll turn up," Petronus said.

"Yes, Father." Isaak turned to the door. "If that is all, I have a meeting with the bookbinders to discuss logistics."

Petronus forced a smile. "Thank you, Isaak."

The metal man left, and Petronus relaxed in his chair. Outside he heard a child laughing, and for the briefest moment his nose filled with the smell of salt water and freshly caught fish as the laughter evoked unexpected memory. His feet could nearly feel the warm wood of the boat docks slapping at them as he raced a young Vlad Li Tam for his father's waiting boat.

The sudden image of his friend as a boy flooded Petronus with sadness. Beneath that sadness, he knew, lived a terrible wrath toward someone he once loved as a brother.

"I was made for this," Vlad Li Tam had told him long ago when Petronus had asked him if he ever wondered what his life would've been if he weren't Lord Tam of House Li Tam. Afterward, they'd gone fishing together for the last time, and it had almost touched the magic of earlier days, before destiny had

found and chained them.

I should go fishing, he thought. Surely one of the servants or Gypsy Scouts could point him toward rod and tackle. The river that cut through town was not very wide, but he'd seen deep patches of green beneath the shade of the trees that lined its edge, and he knew that trout rose in it, their brown backs rippling the water as they fed.

But in the end, Petronus stayed at his desk and worked until his eyes blurred and his hand ached, unshackling himself from the desk long after the sound of frogs filled the forest-scented night beyond his window.

"What I was made for," he said quietly to that dark.

Jin Li Tam

Jin Li Tam awoke in the middle of the night to commotion in the halls, and crept to the spyhole in her suite's sitting room to look out over the stairwells and landings of the seventh manor. She saw servants and scouts rushing about as quietly as they could up and down the stairs, in and out of the doors.

She'd slept lightly these last two weeks, apprehension growing inside of her. It was unlike Rudolfo to simply vanish without a word. He'd turned Sethbert over to his Physicians of Penitent Torture, then ridden off without escort and without letting anyone know where he went or why. <Or why.<

One of the Gypsy Scouts had brought word back of Sethbert's capture, and she'd practically interrogated him. The Overseer had surrendered personally to Rudolfo.

Sethbert said something to him. But what? Something about Windwir? Something about the motive for his terrible crime?

Whatever it was, Rudolfo had left without a word and without the Gypsy Scouts whose sworn duty was to protect their king at all times and all costs.

And now, she surmised, he had returned. She slipped into a light silk robe and went to the door that led to the bathing room. She could hear movement in the suites beyond her. Low voices whispered hurried instructions as his room was readied.

He must have caught them unawares. She chuckled. He'd probably used one of the many concealed halls, and now they were scrambling to dress out his room, despite the fact they had done so each and every morning in expectation of his return. Of course, he would've never asked for such a thing. But they knew their king.

The commotion quickly dissipated, and after a few minutes of silence, she heard soft footfalls in the hall. They fell in a measured stride she'd grown to anticipate over the months, and she listened as Rudolfo paused by her door before continuing on down the hall. She heard a door open and close, and she waited another ten minutes.

Quietly, she slipped through the bathing room and into Rudolfo's bedchamber. He wasn't there.

Jin Li Tam moved from room to room, not finding Rudolfo in the den or the sitting room. She went to the main door of his suite and opened it onto the wide hallway that encompassed the row of children's rooms and the main entrance to her own suite.

Of course, she realized. She walked to the door of that first room, the one that had belonged to his brother. She raised her hand to knock and then lowered it. Gently, she turned the knob and pushed the

door open.

Rudolfo sat on the small bed. He was wearing nondescript clothing, his curly hair framing his face. He looked younger without the green turban of his office, despite the salt and pepper of his beard. He was holding the small sword in his hands, and he looked up at her.

I will not ask him where he's been. "I'm glad you're home."

His eyes met hers for a split second and then darted away. They had been angry eyes, she saw, and he had not wanted her to see them. "I am glad to be home."

I will not ask him where he's been.

But he started talking as if she had asked him. "I've been to the Emerald Coasts to speak with your father," Rudolfo said. "I've had a lot of time on the way back to think about what I would say to you, the questions I would ask."

More than the words, the very tone of his voice struck her like a fist. It was flat and distant, almost devoid of emotion. She'd heard it before, but only during the worst of his grieving over Gregoric. And those times, it was not so calculated.

He knows now. Some part of her had hoped she was wrong about her father. Some part of her that surprised her, that had never existed before meeting this man.

Before, she would have left no room for flights of fancy. But now she realized how desperately she'd hoped she'd been wrong about what her father had done to Rudolfo to make him the man he was.

She didn't know what else to say. "I'm sorry."

"How long have you known?"

She stepped into the room and pushed the door closed. "I've pieced it together since I've come here."

Rudolfo nodded and stroked his beard, his eyes again meeting hers. "And would you have ever told me?"

She shook her head. "I would not."

"Did you know that your father is leaving the Named Lands?"

"I wondered when I saw his library arrive," she said. "I am no longer in communication with my father."

Rudolfo looked away again. "They are loading the iron armada with livestock and goods. There is another library—a secret library—and your father has burned all of its books." He looked back to her and his eyes narrowed. "You should know that I have vowed to kill him if I see him again."

Jin Li Tam blinked and nodded. I might help him, she realized. She felt anger and sorrow on Rudolfo's behalf, and anger and sorrow of her own. She did not see how her father wasn't involved in the Desolation of Windwir. He had used Sethbert in the same way that the mad Overseer had used Isaak—dancing him on a string. She believed it with all her being.

The flatness in her own voice surprised her when she spoke. "I think he was behind Sethbert's genocide."

Rudolfo looked up, his eyes slightly wider. "You believe your father brought down Windwir?"

She nodded slowly. "I do."

The Gypsy King stared at the child's sword in his hands, then sheathed it and hung the belt back over the peg on the wall. Finally, he looked up at her. "I do not think he did. But he has done enough."

Jin Li Tam swallowed. "What does this mean?"

Rudolfo stood. "Nothing. The Androfrancines will hold their council. We will plan our nuptials. We will rebuild what we can and we will safeguard it." He touched the small turban, tracing his finger over it. "I have another question," he said.

"I will answer it if I can." She shifted, her feet suddenly eager to move.

His eyes were hard and his jaw clenched. "Your father claims you denounced him. He says it is because you have love for me in your heart. Is this true?"

The directness of his question tangled her tongue. She felt small and naked suddenly. Finally, she found words that she had never imagined saying. "It is true," she said in a quiet voice. "I do love you." His silence told her that he could not say the same, but she laid that aside. "What my father did to you is wrong," she continued. "I see this very clearly. But the man you became—he is formidable and strong. He is able to ruthlessly pursue what is right and appropriate."

He nodded. "What you say is true. But it is a hard truth." He picked up the turban and held it to his nose, inhaling. "You know about my brother, then?"

"I do."

He opened his mouth to ask a question, and she knew what it would be. *Was my brother's death a part of this, too?* But then she saw him change his mind. "This was his room," Rudolfo said.

"Tomorrow, I will have it emptied and have his belongings disposed of. I've held on to it for too long."

Tell him. But part of her thought she should wait for a less somber time. Part of her was unsure of how he would react. But tonight was a time for truth. She cleared her voice. "Actually, Lord Rudolfo, I have another idea for this room."

He raised his eyebrows. "Yes?"

She leaned closer to him. "You were wrong about your soldiers."

He looked at her blankly. "My soldiers?"

"Or what if it's becoming true?" Petronus stood.

Rudolfo shook the sudden doubt away, and stood as well.

"Will you take Sethbert off Tormentor's Row and place him in a simple cell?"

Rudolfo felt a twinge. "I will order it so."

"I will see him tomorrow." Petronus walked to the stairs, then turned back to Rudolfo. "We will hold the trial at the conclusion of the Council of Bishops."

Rudolfo nodded. "I concur."

Petronus paused at the top of the stairs. "Do you remember what you said of Neb? That he would make

a fine captain?"

Rudolfo nodded. The boy was intelligent and capable, a strong leader who influenced others without knowing it. That was a blade that could be sharpened into the fine edge of an intentional strategist. "I do. The Order is fortunate to have him."

A dark look crossed Petronus's face and Rudolfo saw loss there. "Remember those words, Rudolfo."

Rudolfo said nothing. He felt a another twinge, something restless moving beneath the surface of this all. He felt his eyes narrowing, but if Petronus noticed, he did not show it.

"Sleep well," the Pope said as he started his descent back into the manor.

"I will," Rudolfo replied. But he knew that he wouldn't. A gnawing feeling of dread grew in his stomach about the coming council, and at the center of it stood a man with a strategy Rudolfo did not yet fully grasp.

Neb

More and more, Neb found himself feeling at home in the Ninefold Forest. The work satisfied him, and the forest Gypsies fascinated him. And the Northern Marshes were just across the Prairie Sea from him.

As the days slipped past, Neb watched the small town fill to overflowing. The last large caravan arrived from the Summer Papal Palace that morning, and yet more tents went up in the large open meadow where the council pavilion stood.

This is all that is left, he thought as he watched the men in their dark robes walking among the rainbow-clad forest Gypsies. It staggered him, remembering a time when this many black robes would have been a relatively small gathering. He'd brought the matter of recruitment up to Petronus several times in the last two months, but the Pope had deflected it. At first, Neb thought it was coincidence combined with the distractions of Petronus's office and the exhaustion he must surely feel. After all, the old man rarely slept these days, poring over page after page of parchment in his office late into the night, arriving early in the morning to do the same all over again.

But now, these deflections recurred enough that Neb realized Petronus was avoiding the subject. Still, in itself that may have been no more than a desire to take care of the more pressing issues. The mechoservitors worked day and night now to reproduce the library from their memories, their hands blurring as they moved pen across paper. Rudolfo had recruited a half dozen bookbinders and outfitted them in nearby tents while proper facilities could be built. Already, the manor was filling with stacked volumes, its halls and rooms smelling of new paper and fresh ink.

If that weren't enough to keep Petronus's attention on the here and now, there were vast Androfrancine properties that required difficult decisions. A group of one thousand did not have the same needs as a group one hundred times that size, but which holdings should be kept and which should be abandoned or bartered or sold off? Even if the Order planned for recruitment, it had taken two thousand years to build its power, and Neb doubted it could ever come back in the same strength it had before, even bound to the Ninefold Forest Houses.

And then there was the matter of Sethbert and the trial. The thought of the former Overseer rekindled a rage buried deep in Neb. Since the screaming wagon arrived, Neb had stopped dreaming about Winters and the reunion he longed for. Instead, he dreamed of killing Sethbert.

Isaak found him at the edge of town, watching the Androfrancines move about in their small city of tents. “Pope Petronus is calling for you.”

“How is he today?” He’d noticed the dark circles, and had even heard Petronus snap at one of the servants the day before. He had an edge about him that Neb hadn’t seen, even during the worst of their work in Windwir.

Isaak shrugged. “He is exhausted. He seems . . . weighed down.”

Neb nodded. He’d never asked Petronus why he’d left so many years ago, but he couldn’t imagine that coming back was something he’d wanted to do.

I forced him to it. No, he reminded himself, Sethbert’s act of violence had forced Petronus to it. More than that, it was the kind of man that Petronus was.

“We do what we must,” Petronus had told him those times Neb had brought it up. “You did what you had to do and so will I.”

Still, Neb regretted his part in it. He thanked Isaak and made his way back to the seventh “€o the seforest manor.

Petronus’s door was closed when he reached the office. He knocked at it, and a gruff voice answered.

When he saw the look on Petronus’s face, he froze.

He knows about the weapon, he thought. He’d wanted to do what he was told with it. He’d taken it and had gotten halfway to the blacksmith with his fire and hammer, intending to have it broken into pieces and melted down. But he’d ended up in the forest with it, running his hands over it, feeling the history of it. It was probably five hundred years old, rebuilt no doubt from Rufello’s Book of Specifications. It represented something—a part of the light, he supposed—and in the end, he could not bring himself to destroy it. In the end, he’d buried it in its oilcloth beneath the massive, mossy stump, marking the place with a few white rocks.

Neb opened his mouth to explain, but Petronus gestured to a chair and spoke first. “Sit down, Neb.”

Petronus was distracted, shuffling papers on his desk until he found a neatly folded and sealed note. “I wanted to talk with you before I gave you this.”

Neb looked at him, suddenly not so sure it was about the weapon. He saw deep grief on the man’s face, and his eyes were dark. “What is it, Petronus?”

When they were alone, he’d insisted that Neb call him by name, but now Petronus’s eyes hardened. “You will address me now as Excellency or Pope,” he said.

Neb felt his jaw go slack and his stomach lurch. “How may I serve you, Excellency?”

Petronus nodded slowly, closing his eyes. “*Would* you serve me, then, Nebios?”

Neb swallowed. Suddenly, he felt afraid and alone and uncertain. “You know that I would do anything for you, Father.” He wasn’t sure why he’d slipped into the older, more familiar term. Perhaps because he’d heard Isaak use the same. Or perhaps because over the last nine months, the man had played the role.

Petronus nodded again. “Very well then.” He handed the note over to him. “I am rescinding your status in

the Order.”

Stunned, Neb took the note but did not open it. “If this is about—”

Petronus shook his head. “It is not about you.” Their eyes met. “The assignment in Windwir and your work here were only intended to be . . . *temporary*.”

They meant to protect us.

It made sense now. The Androfrancines had ever considered themselves the shepherds of yesterday, guarding the New World from itself and from a past they feared might be repeated.

They meant to protect us.

He felt the tears now, pushing at his eyes, and his thoughts turned suddenly as that greater strategy took form before his very eyes. Someone out there had penetrated Vlad Li Tam’s network of sons and daughters or his closely shielded staff. They had somehow maneuvered the rescripting of the golden bird to implicate Vlad Li Tam in the Desolation of Windwir. A savvy player of queen’s war, when the consort was threatened, would have moved him to a point on the board as far removed from that threat as possible. Vlad Li Tam, dismantling his vast network, had done so.

But who was the other player, that Vlad Li Tam would remove himself utterly from the New World, transferring his wealth to the Androfrancine Order and donating his holdings to the new library, leaving nothing behind but his daughter?

Someone beyond the Named Lands.

Petronus felt his knees go weak.

The Androfrancines had known this, at least some part of them. And they had feared it even to the point of seeking out the terrible song of Xhum Y’Zir to protect the Named Lands from this invisible threat.

In the end, their best intentions for the light had nearly extinguished it.

Perhaps his actions had been justice. Perhaps they had been mercy. Either way, Petronus had done what he had done. Sethbert lay dead and the Order lay dead alongside him. He thought of Grymlis and the Marshier village so long ago.

He put papers in the pouch and put the pouch with the small pile of things he intended to take back with him to Caldus Bay.

By the time he’d finished packing, the tears had already begun.

Jin Li Tam

In the pandemonium that followed Sethbert’s execution, Jin Li Tam slipped from the pavilion. She’d seen something unexpected there—one of the younger Androfrancines looked surprisingly like one of her many siblings, and when their eyes met, he had looked away, and then vanished through one of the three wide entrances.

She followed.

She felt no anger over Sethbert’s death. He would’ve died regardless, she realized. As she realized despite the years she spent with him, at no time had she forged any kind of bond with the man. She had

no more doubt that he had brought down Windwir than that her father's hand was intricately tied to all of these events, right down to the execution that for all practical purposes ended the Androfrancine Order's legitimacy. Certainly, those few who remained—the Remnant—could try to come back from this, but it would never be successful. And what could they come back to? She had no doubt that Petronus had wrapped the Order's loose strings before disqualifying himself from the Papacy by wetting his hands with Sethbert's blood.

She wondered if that were her father's work as well.

The thought of her father brought her back to the moment, and she pressed her way through the gathering crowd. She caught sight of the young Androfrancine moving quickly ahead of her and she quickened her pace. But when she caught up to him, it wasn't her brother after all.

"I'm sorry," she said, slipping back into the crowd and looking around.

You want to see someone from House Li Tam, she realized. She thought about this. Why? Over the past few months, her anger had ebbed and flowed like the tidewaters of Tam Bay in her home city. When the anger rolled out from her, the sand in her heart filled in with grief to the point that she longed for the anger's return. Inevitably, the wave crashed back to enrage her all over again.

But suddenly, now, at the end of it all, it was as if both her anger and her grief toward her father had vanished beneath the tip of Petronus's knife. Rudolfo had told her once that people spent their lives living with a thousand insignificant injustices, and that sometimes seeing justice served on one great evil could move them forward from the path where they'd been stuck. That sudden death, both of Sethbert and the Androfrancine Order, left her hollow and spent, thinking only of the better world she hoped to give her baby.

She took her time returning to the manor. She knew she should wait for Rudolfo, but she felt a sudden craving for solitude, and knew that his work for the night was just beginning. There would be uproar to quell, fears to assuage and assurances to offer to what little remained of P' Andro Whym's lineage.

It was near dark when she approached the hidden doorway near the rear garden, and she stopped. The door was open, and a figure stood in the shadows of the concealed passage. She drew closer and stopped again, suddenly afraid and uncertain and alone.

Her father broke from the shadows, dressed in a deep gray archeologist's robe. He said nothing, his face unreadable and hard though his eyes were soft. She said nothing, certain that her own face matched his own and equally certain that her eyes did not. She thought she would feel the anger again at the sight of him, but absolutely nothing stirred inside of her.

Their eyes met, and he nodded once, slowly. Then he moved. Then he past her, his shoulder brushing hers as he went. She turned around to watch him go, and she thought he walked more slowly and with less confidence.

She considered calling after him, but she did not know what to say. Instead, she watched him walk away, and after he'd gone, she went into her new home and closed the door. She had a life to build with Rudolfo and their unborn son.

She did not find her father's note until much later. She had not thought to look for it, though she could not remember a time when he'd ever failed to leave word for her. It was simple, scrawled quickly and without code.

For my forty-second daughter, the title read, upon the celebration of her nuptials and the birth of

her son, Jakob.

It was a poem about a father's love for his daughter. At the end of it, the father sailed into the waiting night and the daughter learned a new way of life.

Neb

The crowd caught Neb up and moved him. By the time he disentangled himself from it, most had left the pavilion to gather in the field outside. Voices buzzed, rising in an ever-growing noise. He stayed by the entrance watching Rudolfo speak with a handful of the Androfrancine bishops, even while his Gypsy Scouts loaded Sethbert's body onto a stretcher to carry it off.

I would have done it for you, he thought. But he knew that Petronus buried his own dead in his own way and that he'd intended better things for Neb. Just as he also knew that the old man had no more wanted to kill Sethbert than he had wanted to take back the ring.

We do what must be done.

Isaak limped out of the pavilion. "Brother Nebios," he said. "Have you seen Father Petronus?"

Petronus no longer wore the title, but Neb didn't have the heart to remind Isaak of that. Instead, he shook his head. "He left quickly."

Isaak's eyes fluttered and flashed. "I am alarmed by the events of this day."

Neb nodded. "I am too, Isaak."

Isaak continued. "I know that what I have seen is wrong. I know that it goes against the teachings of P' Andro Whym. I also know that it must surely mean an end to the Order that brought me into this world. And yet I feel an unexpected satisfaction."

Neb studied him, unsure of what to say. His own satisfaction came from knowing that the man who killed his father would never harm anyone again. But another man—Petronus—had made him an orphan all over again, bringing down what little remained of the only family he had ever known.

You were always an orphan, some voice deep inside of him said. He looked at Isaak again. He was an orphan, too, Neb supposed.

"I will look for him in his office," Isaak said. "I must speak with him about what has transpired here today."

Neb walked with him in silence, certain that they would not find Petronus in his office. He doubted they would find him at all, at least not around here. The old man's work was done now, for better or for ill, and the world must now move forward from it.

They passed the canopy with its long trestle tables and benches, stacks of paper and bottles of ink. Even now, a few of the mechoservitors sat, gears humming and eyes flashing, as they wrote down the events of the council so that it might be preserved in the Great Library.

At Neb's questioning look, Isaak paused. "I sent them out right away to record it all. I thought it could be important someday."

Neb said nothing, and they continued without further words.

The office was dark and the door closed when they approached. The lamp was still warm when Neb relit, it and most of the papers had been neatly arranged on the desk for the next day's filing. He saw an envelope with his name on it, and he took it, breaking the seal.

I'm sorry, it read. You were made for more than backward dreaming.

Isaak's eyes dimmed, and his bellows pumped. "What does it mean?"

Neb lay the note back on the desk and leaned over the other pages. Notes and receipts of transfer, letters of credit, disposal of excess properties. All signed and sealed with the papal signet, and waiting for whoever would find them first. "It means the work goes on," he said in a quiet voice. "It means we lament what light is lost and honor what remains."

Leaving Isaak, he wandered the hallways and finally escaped into the gathering darkness. He ran into the woods as far as his feet could carry him, then found a stone and sat on it. He had no tears. He felt no anger. He simply *was*.

"I was always an orphan," he said to that darkness as it drew in close around him.

He remembered Petronus's note. *You were made for more than backward dreaming.*

Perhaps he was. Neb thought about Winters. He thought of the dream where above them, a large brown world filled the sky. *This is our home*, she had said, laying naked beside him, and he believed her. Somewhere beyond this time, a new home arose.

Someday, in the fullness of time, he would help them find it. But until then, he would stay here in the Ninefold Forest. Perhaps Rudolfo would let him serve the library in some fashion.

"Are you still here?" he asked the empty forest.

Nebios ben Hebda heard the soft grunt and the slightest stirring from somewhere nearby, and he smiled.

Rudolfo

Rudolfo caught up with Petronus on the road to Caldas Bay on the evening of the following day. He'd spent most of a night and a day soothing his shaken guests. When he heard that the old man had slipped quietly out of the city the night before, he called for his fastest stallion. He waved off his Gypsy Scouts, and Aedric didn't balk when he saw the anger in Rudolfo's eyes.

He pushed his stallion hard, riding low and feeling the wind tug at his cloak and hair. He inhaled the smell of the forest, the smell of the horse, and the smell of the plains ahead.

When he spotted the old man and his old horse two leagues into the prairie, he felt for the hilt of his narrow sword and clicked his tongue at his steed. He pounded ahead, overtaking Petronus, and spun his horse. He whipped out his blade and pointed its tip at the old man.

Petronus looked up, and Rudolfo lowered his sword when he saw the look of devastation on the old man's face. Those bloodstained eyes, he realized, looked too much like the red sky he'd seen over the smoldering ruins and blackened bones of Windwir.

The old man did not speak.

Rudolfo danced the stallion closer to ask a question that he already knew the answer to. "Why?"

“I did what I must.” Petronus’s jaw clenched firmly. “Because if I didn’t, everything else I did would be a lie.”

“We all do what we must.” Rudolfo sheathed his sword, the anger draining out of him. “When did you know? When did you decide to do this?”

Petronus sighed. “Some part of me knew it when I saw the column of smoke. Another part knew it when I saw the field of bones and ash.”

Rudolfo pondered this and nodded slowly, searching for the right words to say. When he couldn’t find them, he spurred his horse forward and left the old man alone with his tears with his.

Rudolfo raced the plains until the moon rose and stars scattered the warm, dark night. At some point, everything fell away but a false sense of freedom that Rudolfo embraced for the moment because he knew it would pass soon. He sped through the darkness, feeling the stallion move beneath him, hearing its hooves on the ground and the snorting of its breath. It was he and his horse and the wide open prairie, with no House Li Tam, no library, no Androfrancines, no nuptials and no heir. And though he knew it was false, Rudolfo honored the lie of it until he saw the forest on his right. Then he slowed the stallion and turned for the trees, eventually slipping from the saddle and leading the horse on foot back in the direction of what was true.

He took the less familiar paths, and thought about his life. He thought about the days before Windwir fell and the days after. He thought of nights spent in the supply wagon because he preferred it to a bed. He thought of days spent in the saddle instead of his study. Beds shared with more women than he could count and the one woman he knew he must have.

My life has changed, he told himself, and he realized that it would not have if he had not wished it so. He had chosen to rebuild the library, to keep something good in the world of its philosophies, art, drama, history, poetry and song. He had also chosen to align himself with Jin Li Tam, a beautiful and formidable woman that today he could respect, and one day he would love. Between them, they would bring forward a life who would also, if Rudolfo had his way, be formidable and beautiful. And he would inherit the light and be a shepherd of it as his father was.

Rudolfo thought of these things, and he thought of the old man making his way towards the coast, tears wetting his white beard. He thought of his friend Isaak limping about on his mangled leg and wearing his Androfrancine robes. He thought of the boy, Neb, who had stood when Petronus bid someone kill for the light. He thought of Vlad Li Tam at his bonfire, burning the record of his family’s work.

The Desolation of Windwir has reached us all, he thought.

It no longer mattered why. It mattered that it never happen again. And Rudolfo saw clearly his part in that, and he saw how a lamentation could become a hymn.

The less familiar paths fell away, spilling him onto the road. He crossed it, still leading his horse, and stayed to the forest, though he could see the lights of his sleeping city now. He continued on, approaching the library hill from the southern side.

He would stable his horse. He would let himself into the manor. He would approach Jin Li Tam in her

bedchamber, and he would whisper quietly with her into the morning about a forward dream that they could share between them. In the morning he would give the order to dismantle Tormentor's Row, and let go of that backward dream so that his son, Jakob, and his metal friend, Isaak, could build something better. But first, he had to see the small part that he had started for them.

Ahead, he heard soft voices, a low humming, and a whispering sound he could not quite place. Leaving the horse, he stepped forward, silent as one of his own Gypsy Scouts, to pull aside the foliage that blocked his view.

The bookmakers' tent lay open before him, its silk walls rolled up to let in the night. The soft voices were those few of the remnant who had stayed behind to help, moving from table to table, laying out parchment and fresh quills. The metal men worked at those tables, their gears and bellows humming and their jeweled eyes throwing back the lamplight.

Rudolfo stayed for an hour, sitting in grass that grew damp with dew, soothed by the sound he couldn't place before.

It was the sound of their pens whispering across the pages.

It is a bird, and it has been dead for a month but does not know it. Its snapped neck leaves the head hanging limp as its wings pound the sky.

It flies over a hillside beneath a blue green moon and perches for a moment on a fresh-hewn cornerstone.

It flies over a field of ash beside a river, and it opens its beak to taste the memory of war and bones upon the wind.

It flies over an ocean, an armada of ships gathering at its edge, steam from their engines fogging the bird's dead eyes.

It flies homeward, this dead messenger, at the Watcher's bidding.

The bird enters a small window. It lands upon a scarlet sleeve, and when it opens its beak, a metallic whisper leaks out.

“Thus shall the sins of P’Andro Whym be visited upon his children,” the kin-raven tells its master.

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Ken Scholes

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