C. W. ANDREW

PRINCE OF NO KINGDOM

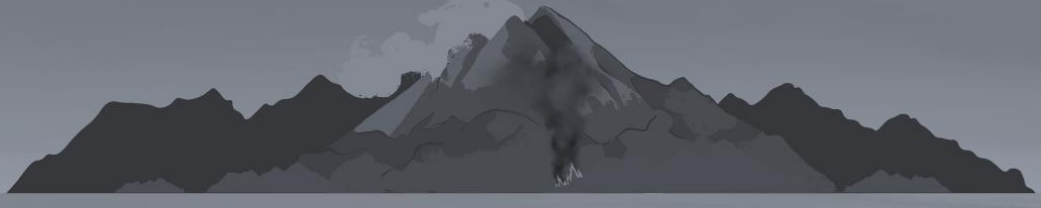
A NOVEL

BOOK 1

Synopsis:

The city of Caso is at a crossroads. Guild-led mercantilism and industry have raised the city to renown. But flourishing trade has led to flourishing greed—even attracting the attention of the distant Careyago Emperor. The eight guilds and their Patzau leaders struggle against circumstances and each other as the richest city in the world grapples with its ever-shrinking reserves and the darker underlying secrets keeping it all afloat.

Born of the Casoyan mountain tribes, cousins Yoharum and Kuta live in two different worlds. Separated as children, Kuta is the first Aginjigaade sorcerer her people have produced in generations, while Yoharum—deprived and vengeful—has turned to crime. Both have returned to Caso, but while Kuta searches for clues to solve her adopted mother's murder, Yoharum plots a murder of his own.



Twins at birth, adversaries as adults—Kida and Yuromi Ashill were born to one of the oldest and most prestigious families in Caso. Their mother, Patzau Ashill, sits on the council of eight and leads the city's soldiers. But as tensions with the criminal gangs hiding in the slums of Mudtown escalates, the twins have different friends with different agendas.

Meanwhile, exiled Prince Ohacha is caught between two uncles: one who would see him crowned, and another who would see him dead. Hunted by the traitor Bartiin, who now leads the Careyago Empire's assassins, Ohacha flees to Caso. His goal is simple: refill his family's coffers and return home with an army of reclaiming his ancestral throne. But Caso is a city built on more than just gold. It has its own secrets, debts, and lethal political machinations.

As unrest in the city crescendos, the tangled web of secrets, spies, and greed ensnares all as the tenuous threads of Casoyan society unravel. For what can you do when all that is hope? Each must choose what it is they truly want in the world, and what they are willing to sacrifice to have it.

Disclaimers:

Prince of no Kingdom is a work of fiction. Any likeness to names, characters, places, and events are the product of the author's imagination and are used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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To my wife, whose thoughtfulness, humour, and curiosity remind me of all the good things in the world. To my parents, who instilled in me a curiosity to learn and appreciation for stories. And to all the libraries that make books accessible to inquisitive and adventurous minds.

Primary Characters

Rolena Yongjaa: Oneran Mercenary
Ohacha Krimas: Exiled Crown Prince of Gaag
Aramuk Krimas: Exiled Prince of Gaag**,** Ohacha's uncle
Yoliim Kulimas: Exiled Noble of Gaag
Gaba'ké: Exiled Aginjigaade of Gaag; and of Ayaan.
Cask Gohara: Exiled Sword-master of Gaag
Belvaas Krimas: Second Governor of Gaag, Ohacha's cousin.
Bartiin Foxstring: Hand of the Governor of Gaag
Yanata Ashill: Patzau of the Casoyan Soldier's Guild
Rake Hadashenta: Patzau of the Casoyan Auction House Guild
Novish Powanati: Patzau of the Casoyan Guild of Finances and Banking
Mellen Minoc Patzau of the Casoyan Guild of Artisans
Murak Adagizhi: Patzau of the Casoyan Guild of Resources
Boral Onudar: Patzau of the Casoyan Guild of Workers
Burrenal Yohati: Patzau of the Casoyan of Internal Affairs
Ada Murocil: Patzau of the Casoyan of External Affairs
Elvi Batari: Chief Aginjigaade; Soldier's Guild, Yanata's Aide
Yuromi Ashill: Patrol Sergeant; Soldier's Guild, daughter of Yanata
Kida Ashill: Administration Sergeant; Soldier's Guild, daughter of Yanata
Kuta: Aginjigaade; Guild of Artisans, Cousin to Yoharum and Jiral
Gal Burm: Nobleman, Squad Captain in the Soldier's Guild
Yoharum: Gangster, brother of Jiral, cousin of Kuta
Janos Tydana: Aginjigaade; Guild of Internal Affairs

Secondary Characters:

Diam Anup: Lord of the Hadiinali State in Onera
Guharo Provis, Disgraced Nobleman of Gaag
Ander Kulimas: Disgraced Nobleman, son of Yoliim Kulimas.
Belvaas Krimas (the Elder): Former Prince of Gaag, first Governor of Gaag under the Careyago. Ohacha's uncle. Belvaas' father.
Hayamadi the Great: Emperor of the Careyago
Atipo Waliimanad: Eyes; Careyago Empire
Hina Durali: Ambassador; Careyago Empire
Viiran: Revolutionary, Gangster
Rozi: Squad Lieutenant; Soldier's Guild
Capu: Squad Sergeant; Soldier's Guild
Seer: Squad Sergeant; Soldier's Guild
Reah Yohati: Noblewoman, Director of the Guild of Internal Affairs
Piitra Hadashenta: Noblewoman
Fera Yohati: Noblewoman, Socialite
Zhenya: Thief, Aginjigaade; The Wax Witch
Madaral: High Judge; Guild of Internal Affairs
Harumal: Father of Yoharum and Jiral
Ahunas: Mother of Yoharum and Jiral
Jiral: Sister to Yoharum, cousin to Kuta
Tahir Akwan: Guildsmen; Artisan's Guild
Hairo Bradel: Guildsman; Artisan's Guild
Wadesh Nider: Guildsmen; Artisan's Guild
Arman Hughir: Manager; Artisan's Guild
Flax: Aginjigaade Squad Leader; Careyago Empire
Raumekh: Crown Prince of the Careyago, eldest son of Hayamadi

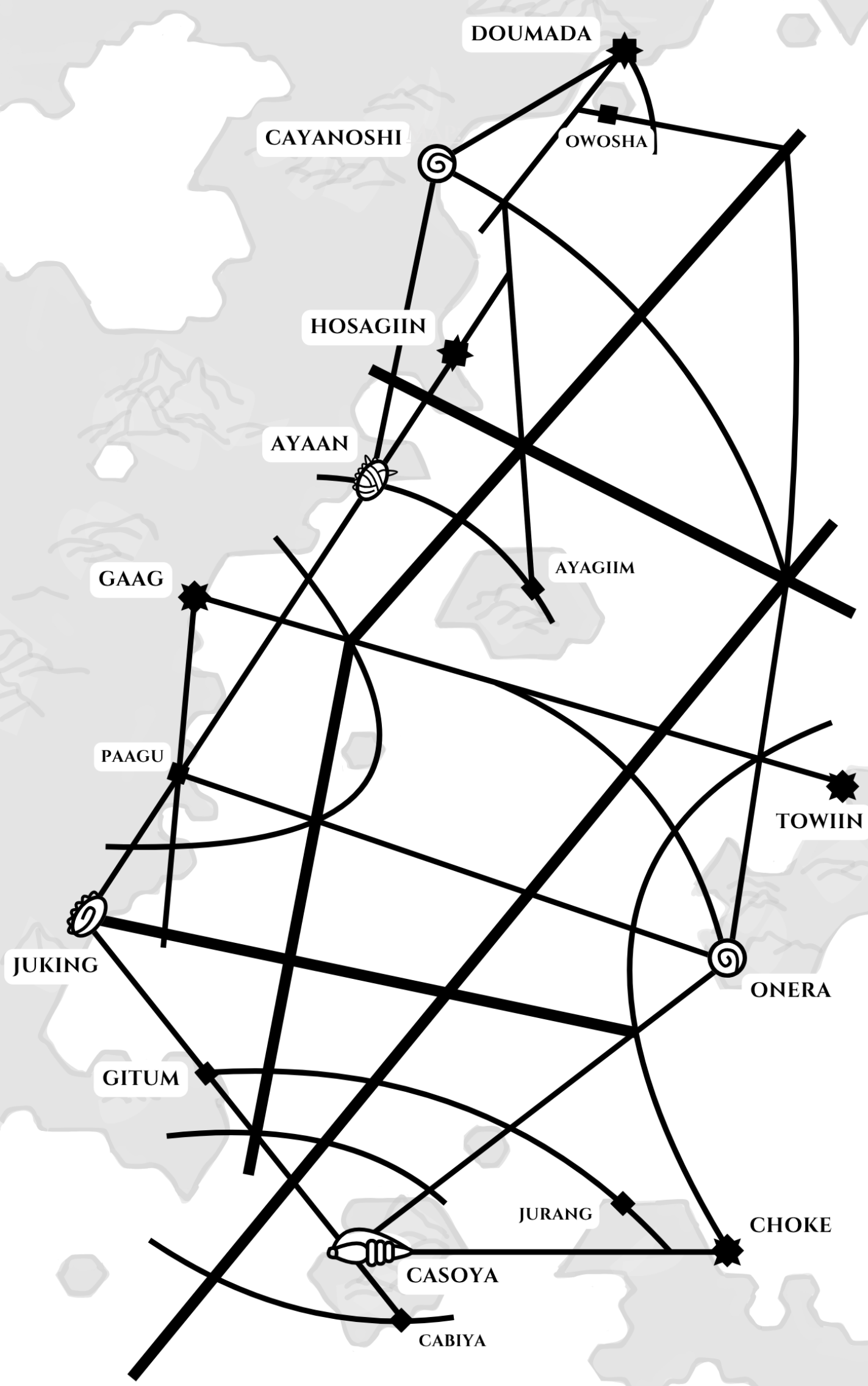
Tertiary Characters

Golan Krimas Last King of Gaag; Ohacha's Father
Zhiigan Krimas: Former King of Gaag, Ohacha's Grandfather
Sora Hiilgagas: Last Queen of Gaag and Ayagiim. Ohacha's Mother
Mira Minoc: Noblewoman, Director of the Artisan's Guild
Yomu: Owner; Yomu's Alehouse
Pola: Server; Yomu's Alehouse
Banzhiigan; Shopkeeper; Guild of Artisans
Gora: Corporal; Casoyan Soldier's Guild
Grim: Casoyan Patrol Soldier
Bila: Casoyan Patrol Soldier
Harul: Casoyan Patrol Soldier
Farzhad: Gangster
Yanello: Chief Commander; Casoyan Soldier's Guild
Darius: Gangster; Thief
Benzha: Soldier; Careyago Empire
Kellen: Soldier; Careyago Empire
Mahmud Riil: Barracks Warden; Casoyan Soldier's Guild
Nol: Arrested Citizen
Horval: Captain; Casoyan Soldier's Guild
Joakim: Captain; Casoyan Soldier's Guild
Bol: Casoyan Doctor
Fix: Gangster
Kawaka Badil: Aginjigaade; Casoyan Auction House Guild
Tin: Arrested Citizen
Wuruk: Aginjigaade; Careyago Empire
Danith Kalmor: Admiral; Careyago Empire

Language and Pronunciation:

The world crafted for this narrative is built upon a tapestry of places, cultures, and linguistic heritages. To imbue the pages with additional distinctiveness and depth, certain terms have been borrowed from real languages such as Ojibwe, Chichewa, and Kawi to name a few. Other words, though fictitious, inherit rules and phonotactics from pre-existing languages. This synthesis is intended to honour the traditions and meaning behind such words while creating a unique and distinct experience for readers.

Note that double vowels are used commonly in this work. This is a feature borrowed from Ojibwe (Anishinaabemowin) and is used to denote sound-units. All words with duplicate vowels, like in the words ***Gaag*** or **Aginjigaade**, elongate the English equivalent sound. An apostrophe (') is used in the place of a space when a name is two words. Instead of separating the name, the apostrophe connects them into one subject. **Gaba'ké** and **Mada'abi** are examples of such names. Some words in this novel use *zh* in place of the letter *j* and vice versa. For the regular reader, they can be used interchangeably.


DOUMADA
CAYANOSHI
OWOSHA
HOSAGIIN
AYAAN
AYAGIIM
GAAG
PAAGU
TOWIIN
JUKING
ONERA
GITUM
JURANG
CHOKE
CASOYA
CABIYA

Chapter 1: The Council

The council chambers were established in the same room the last king of Casoya had once slept in, before the unfortune need to remove him came about. The chamber, wide and well lit, was quiet and had sweeping views across the city into the bay. Due to its size and circular shape, the chamber was imperfect for most uses. But, once the blood had been cleaned up, it became the ideal place from which the original Patzaus could govern. For ninety years, the eight Patzau formed the city's ruling council. One Patzau for each of the eight Casoyan guilds, each representing their constituents in all matters of business, policy, and governance.

Patzau Yanata Ashill, leader of the Casoyan Soldiers' Guild, sat in her place at the round stone table, frustration plain across her face. She ran her fingers through her dark silver-streaked hair. It was down for once, instead of up in her usual military braid; an omen of how tired she was these days. Around the circular table sat six of her seven fellow Patzau. And, like every council meeting these days, the conversation had descended into bickering.

It was Patzau Onudar of the Casoyan Labour Guild, Powanati of the Banking Guild, and Minoc of the Artisan's Guild who resumed their dispute from the last meeting. They sat around the wide circular table surrounded by the others: Patzau Adagizhi of the Resources Guild, Onudar of the Worker's Guild, and Yohati of the Casoyan Guild of Affairs. The only empty seat belonged to the absent Patzau Murocil of the Guild of External Affairs. These were the eight guild leaders—the most powerful and influence people across the isle of Casoya—and their scheduled business was long forgotten.

"That has to be the most imprudent suggestion you've ever tabled" Patzau Minoc challenged. He was typically a jovial man, making the suppressed rage ever plainer across his face.

"Taxing your guild more is the best way to fund resources and initiatives across the city." Patzau Powanati said. "The bankers have reviewed your costs and profits and they are higher than most other sectors across the city."

"That's not quite accurate" Patzau Minoc said, gritting his teeth. "You are manipulating–"

"Your guildsmen are profiteers!" Patzau Onudar shouted, cutting him off mid sentence. "Your guildsmen profit heavily from the hard work the labourers and tradesmen of my guild contribute to this fine city."

"Enough of that" Patzau Yohati scorned, his gaze heavy on Onudar. "I'll not have this discussion descend into madness like last week. No interrupting!"

Patzau Minoc glared at Patzau Onudar and the middle-aged man scowled back. "You forget that my guild funds many of the projects your labourers rely on" Patzau Minoc said, defensively.

"All the guilds fund the city's projects" Onudar said with a sneer.

“Don’t be obtuse” Minoc chided. He tapped his ringed fingers noisily and the clacked against the hard stone. “We all know who really makes this city its money. But I’d like to go back to what Patzau Powanati said a moment ago. He said *most* other sectors implying there’s a guild more profitable than mine” Minoc said, staring directly at Patzau Hadashenta of the Careyago Auction House.

“A deflection tactic” Patzau Hadashenta groaned, exasperated. He then looked to Patzau Yohati for support. Whether or not he got any, Yanata couldn’t tell. “The fact is,” Hadashenta continued, “we need more money to pay for the upkeep of ships and soldiers. To fund infrastructure projects. To increase our presence across the island and suppress these tribal mongrels flocking to the city’s slums.”

Mongrels. Yanata didn’t like that sentiment.

“Then why is *my* guild the only one targeted for tax increases by this proposal?” Patzau Minoc said. “Why not increase taxes on all three of our most profitable guilds?”

“Because your guild makes the most money.” Patzau Powanati repeated with a smirk.

“That doesn’t answer my question!” Patzau Minoc yelled, slamming his large fists on the table. *Spirits,* Yanata thought to herself, *he’s actually angry.* “Your bankers are taxed at a lesser rate. The auction house is taxed at a lesser rate. Quit trying to spoon-feed me this bullshit and just come out and speak the truth” Patzau Minoc growled. “This is a targeted attack. One aimed at weakening the foundations of the artisans and craftsmen in this city. You sprinkle a few coins here and there to hide what you’re doing, but your guild isn’t paying its fair share. Your bankers have become greedy and you most among them. You sell the rest of us out for personal gain, Powanati. My guild brings in the most profit because my guild brings in the most revenue. I have *thousands* of guild members. Yet you, with mere hundreds, bring in near as much and somehow keep far more of it in your greedy little pockets.”

Chaos erupted in the chamber. Patzau Ashill’s eyebrows shot up in surprise at the boldness of the accusation. The men in the room—well, they were all men save for her and Patzau Murocil who’d had the foresight to not be here—yelled over one another to a cacophony of madness. Yanata had half-a-mind to get physical and separate them herself. Half of the group yelled and enflamed the situation while the others worked their best to calm and cool the anger and tension.

“Enough!” Patzau Yohati yelled, finally silencing the room. “And sit down, Mellen” He added, daring Patzau Minoc to challenge the glare of disapproval. The large man did as he was told and slumped back into his chair brining his fat ring clad fingers into his own grasp, as if holding himself back. “You go too far” Patzau Yohati added. “I will have absolutely no more of this from any of you.”

“I motion to present and debate my tax plan at next weeks meeting” Patzau Powanati said, leaning forward on the table as if to challenge Patzau Minoc. The older larger man didn’t take the bait.

“Hands” Patzau Yohati said. Six of the seven hands met the motion including Yanata’s. *There would be no sense in striking down the motion without seeing the details of the plan*. “The motion is carried. Patzau Powanati will present a detailed plan at the next Patzau meeting. Anyone else?”

“I motion to have a trio of independent representatives audit the financials of the banking guild for embezzlement and corruption” Patzau Minoc said coldly.

The room erupted in shouts again but was immediately silenced by Yohati. Powanati looked about ready to strangle the larger man. Patzau Yohati could only sigh

loudly, weighing how to respond. “This is a very serious accusation, Mellen. One that seems built on anger instead of a foundation truth. I understand you and Patzau Powanati do not see eye to eye on many issues, but I will only vote to support this motion if you already possess any shred of evidence supporting this accusation. Do you have any evidence?”

“How am I supposed to provide evidence without an audit?” Mellen asked through gritted teeth. “If he has nothing to hide, then there should be no reason to deny an audit.”

“There’s no reason to entertain your delusions” Powanati muttered, “yet here we sit.”

“I will take that answer as a no” the Yohati said with a sad look. “Hands” he repeated. Only Patzau Minoc’s hand rose. Yanata made eye contact with Minoc and saw the look of disappointment in his eye. “Motion denied” Yohati said. “Next meeting, we will hear the presentation and discuss the immediate revisions or changes we might want to see. Novish, come with a fully prepared and well summarized description of the actions and implications of your proposal. After the full proposal and its modifications are fully laid out, we will return the following week to formally and cordially debate this proposal before final voting. Are we all in accord?”

The room echoed in affirmation and the meeting was adjourned. Standing and stretching her legs, Patzau Ashill rushed eagerly from the council room to the waiting chamber where Elvi sat. Next to her sat another soldier, and Patzau Ashill was surprised to see the face of her daughter, Yuromi.

“How was your meeting, ma’am?” Elvi said, rising to her feet. Yuromi waited where she sat, following the order of rank. Yanata cast her a quick glance then looked over her shoulder at the other Patzau as they exited the chamber, partaking in breakout discussions.

“Eventful” she answered, collecting her sword from Elvi. She hooked the scabbard into groove on her hip then watched as Patzau Minoc sulked away with his new Aginjigaade aide at his side. She watched them as they departed down the steps. “Patzau Minoc is riled up at Powanati’s new taxation proposal” she said, watching the man disappear from view. “I mean proper angry” she added, turning back to face Elvi. “He yelled at Powanati and accused him of corruption.”

“I heard” Elvi said.

Yanata let out a laugh at that. “I suppose you would have” she said. “In the ten years he’s been a Patzau, I’ve never once heard him raise his voice like that.”

“Does his claim have any merit?” Elvi asked.

“I wouldn’t have thought so” she answered. “Powanati has been a strong ally for funding projects for ours and Onudar’s guilds. There’s always a chance I’m missing something. After all, only Yohati has visibility into each of the other guilds, including Powanati’s bankers. But I trust Yohati, and he didn’t seem remotely convinced.”

“Do you think he’s deflecting then?” Elvi asked.

“His guildsmen include a lot of wealthy and powerful families” she answered. “I can’t rule out he’s simply defending them. He’s got a venomous tongue, that Patzau Minoc. I can never tell if he’s just telling me what I want to hear or the actual truth.” Elvi nodded in understanding. “Tell me” Patzau Ashill added. “His new aide, the young Aginjigaade girl. He usually hides her away. But she was here in the waiting room with you. What’s your impression of her?”

“She’s very shy” Elvi said, “I couldn’t get much of a conversation out of her. You already know she’s from one of the rural villages in the mountains.”

“Yes, that’s what I’ve heard. Her sudden appearance at his side has been the subject of much… debate. Is she powerful?”

Elvi concealed her reaction to the question. “You *know* it’s considered rude for Aginjigaade to snoop around another’s agindan. That would be like going up to a stranger and touching their face” Elvi said with an innocence Yanata knew was disingenuous. Yanata tilted her head at her only lifelong friend with unconvinced look. “And?” she pressed.

“And when I *accidently* brushed her,” she said with a sly grin, “her spirit seemed fairly robust. I can’t be certain, but I got the sensation of a solidity in her aspect. If I had to make an educated guess, earth or stones, metals maybe. Those would be safe bets. They’re common enough aspects. Maybe Nyama or Nature could fit what I felt, but certainly not Fire, Light, or Air. Impossible to guess at her abilities though. She appears strong considering her age.”

“Blessings,” Yanata said, “she still looks like a child.”

“I think she’s only a little younger than your *twins*” Elvi countered, casting a quick glace at Yuromi, who was trying not to appear as if she were listening in on the conversation. “You of all people should know how foolish it is to judge a person’s competency on their age and appearance.”

“You’re right” Patzau Ashill said, “It’s just that Minoc’s put a lot of trust in her very quickly. There’re nasty rumours going around about it—that he’s having an affair. That she controls him somehow. It’s the typical bullshit but its far more ubiquitous than I expected” Patzau Ashill said, waving over Yuromi who had been waiting patiently off to the side. “She hasn’t even been around a year.”

“It could be that she’s simply a smart girl and he trusts her judgement. And you know full well why the rumours about her are pervasive” Elvi said, then turning to Yuromi as she joined the conversation.

“Good afternoon, soldier” Yanata said, eyeing her daughter. “Is this guild business or family business?”

“Guild” Yuromi answered.

“And you’re ignoring the chain of command again, why?” Yanata asked, looking for a better answer than last time.

“I am not ignoring the chain of command” Yuromi replied with a scowl, “Captain Joakim sent me to deliver a report.”

“Captain Joakim sent you?” Yanata said, curious. “Well, go on then”

“There has been another incident outside the walls in Mudtown” Yuromi explained. “A group of five soldiers were patrolling the northern market by the lake when they spotted a wanted gang affiliate. They followed the man into a back alley but found themselves outnumbered and surrounded. The gangsters brutalized all five soldiers, beating three of them to death. A local woman found them and went all the way to the South Gate for help. The gate captain sent two full squads to recover the five soldiers. The squads cracked down hard, stirring up more trouble. No more deaths, but a few soldiers were injured in the fighting.”

“They’re getting bolder” Elvi said. “Last week another patrol was attacked not far from the Lake Gate.” And last season there was that riot after that soldier killed that kid throwing stones.”

"There are too many people congregating outside the city from the rural towns and villages." Yuromi said. "It's driving up the cost of food and water. Then there's all the lepers and beggars outside of the city gates. The increase of petty thieves and gang activity–"

"Alright," Yanata said interrupting, "enough! I have not forgotten the unrest outside the city. Is this all you have to report?"

"You're not going to do anything about it?" Yuromi protested. "Good soldiers are dying to the mob of criminals and gangsters outside the gates–"

"Sergeant Ashill!" Yanata interrupted sternly. "Know your place. How we choose to respond to this issue is none of your concern. Your job as a soldier is the follow orders from the chain of command and to mentor and direct the squad members under your care. Do you understand my meaning?"

Yuromi pursed her lips and lowered her gaze. "Yes, Patzau" she said.

"Do not think that because you are my daughter you have a special right to question your superiors." Yanata said. "You are dismissed." Yuromi saluted with a look on her face that was equal parts annoyed and equal parts ashamed. She turned hurriedly and left down the stairs following in the same direction Patzau Minoc had gone.

"You can be tough on her" Elvi said with a soft whistle.

"Save it" Yanata griped.

"Especially when compared to her sister." Elvi pressed.

"Kida has the good graces to listen to me and her superior officers" Yanata snapped, surly with her friend. "Spirits, that's two attacks this week. These gangsters *are* getting bolder."

"Or more desperate. Sooner or later the soldiers are going to figure out that attacks are more common place than everyone thinks." Elvi said. "People are going to die if we don't make changes."

"I know" Yanata said.

"If the problem progresses into the city–"

"It wont." she growled. "The gates are well fortified and well staffed. What we need is to find a way to start routing out these entrenched slum-gangs; a way to pursue a more thorough campaign without having the whole damn tinderbox combust."

"Targeted military operations?" Elvi suggested.

"Too brazen." Yanata said, shaking her head. "All it takes is one quasi-innocent death to ignite the whole situation. We can't be the aggressors or we'll come off collectively as despots."

"I think we're coming off to these people as despots anyway" Elvi said.

"Maybe, but the difference is that we're not despots" Yanata responded. "Not yet anyway. If the violence begins to grow out of control, or it starts to affect the health of the city, then these people will have the unsavoury misfortune of learning how much worse it can get for them. As will we."

"A future I'd like to avoid at all costs." Elvi said.

"Me too" Yanata agreed. "But one that may be inevitable. There is no reasoning with people who take because they can. Schedule a chief-officers meeting. I want a host of potential solutions presented by the end of the week. In the interim, I want the recon teams to rapidly expand their information networks. I want to know more about who these gang leaders and are what they want."

"Yes Patzau" Elvi said. "I've heard the name Viiran before…"

"Not tonight, Elvi. Collect my squad" Yanata said. "I'm going back to my office."

"No, no, no! Yanata!" Elvi urged, stepping out of their official roles like a change of garments. "You've been spending too much time in the fortress. You need to go home. You need to spend time with your girls, not your paperwork. But, more importantly, you need to get some real sleep."

"I'll sleep when I'm dead, *Commander*" Yanata said with heavy emphasis.

"That'll be damn soon with how poorly you care for yourself" Elvi grumbled.

"I bathe and sleep and eat just fine" Yanata said, scowling.

"I'm not talking about just your physical health" Elvi said. "And for the record, you barely hit the minimum requirements for the three you mentioned."

"Enough." Yanata said, silencing Elvi with the wave of a hand. "I'll go without your assistance. You are dismissed, Elvi." Elvi groaned in frustration. Yanata ignored her and turned to make her way down the stairs into the interior of the palace where scores of officials and workers toiled to keep the city functioning.

"And you wonder where Yuromi gets her headstrong rebelliousness from." Elvi shouted after her.

Yanata ignored her and continued down another two flights of stairs, collecting her retinue of regulars assigned to her protection, and exited from the palace and into the cobbled streets. Yanata walked across the city, not because she needed to, but because she enjoyed being on her own two feet. She liked the visibility it gave her to the people in the city; *there goes Patzau Ashill, Patzau and master general. The embodiment of security and safety within the great golden city of Caso.* The thought brought a smile to her face. Almost enough to wipe the memory of Elvi's comments from the back of her mind.

She enjoyed seeing the odd person going about their business. It reminded her of the immense importance of the work she did, both as a leader and as a soldier. It's important to know what you fight for. As Yanata walked the cobbled streets, the reminders were everywhere. Smells of fragrant meats and skewered vegetables, pungent spices, traders with trinkets, knickknacks and toys for children filled the streets. Shops filled with lanterns and other home items filled one shop, while another hung beautiful garments imported from across the starlight sea. A group of older women sat at the mouth of an alleyway, sipping cups of tea and playing the Casoyan dice game, while an older nobleman walked by in the opposite direction leaning on a finely carved walking cane. Further down the cobbled street, a group of workers swept and cleaned the streets, dropping off mud and other street collections into a large wagon. It was all very familiar and comforting.

People moved from her path as she walked briskly through the dense city streets southwards. The narrow shops and homes in the neighbourhood surrounding the Patzau Palace were built from blackened volcanic stone bricks, expertly cut with beautiful tan brick accents and embellishments including faces, animals, florals, and statues. The homes stood three to four stories high with flatter gabled rooftops made of wood-supported clay tiles. The wealthier modern neighbourhood surrounding the palace shifted into the older historic neighbourhood known as The Spires as Patzau Ashill approached Gorini Plaza and the long ascending road up to the Casoyan fortress. The Spires neighbourhood was well established as the oldest part of the city. Here, the architecture shifted from the modern quarried style into structures built of loose stones held together with an old-style of mortar. The Spires took its modern name from the sharp and jagged rooftops that dominated the homes and buildings inside the neighbourhood. Piercing well aged metal finials still stood on many of the rooftops and

pinnacles. Its older name, Thwi Gazen, was old Casoyan, or at least that's what Yanata's mother had told her once. A lifetime ago. The name meant "River mouth by the hill," which had always confused Yanata when she considered that the mouth of the river was further to the north by Dohina Square and Patzau Palace. The district she had just come from.

Passing through the old neighbourhood's narrower streets, Yanata and her guards started the long tiring climb up towards the fortress. *If there were ever army built to advance up a hill against an enemy force, the Casoyan soldiers and officers who slog up this path every day might be the best contenders,* she thought to herself. Sweat pursed her brow as much from the days heat as from the steep incline. Several of the soldiers in her detail noticeably fell behind as they climbed the steep embankment. She turned to see two young strong looking men leaning on their lances for support as they hiked up behind her.

"You'll get used to it, one day." She shouted back with a wiry smile, surprising the group of soldiers who looked up with a jolt.

They didn't respond. She wasn't sure if that was because they didn't have anything to say, or whether they could have said anything through ragged breaths. Yanata easily crested the hill with only a light burn in her thighs and strode towards the main gateway, the only part of the fortress with merlons and crenellations. She crossed the short stone bridge leading to the gatehouse with a curt nod from the soldiers and the on-duty officer.

As she entered the fortress, she drew a cloth to wipe her brow. The sunbaked heat of the day shifted into a cool musty breeze that wafted from the dark hallways and corridors of the angular outer fortress. The outer structure made up the majority of the fortress and was perched atop stone glacis that wrapped around the peak of the mountain in an angular, almost crescent like shape. Short triangular bastions pierced outwards in the locations where the corners would have met. The entire fortress was built of a motley of earthy coloured bricks and was dominated by walls as thick as ten men and covered by flat earthen rooftops. The inner keep, much smaller and separated from the outer structure by a natural trench, sat in the mouth of the open crescent and loomed over the sheer north face of the mountain. Being high above the city, only short parapets—no higher than a man's knee—protected soldiers from the sheer fall over each edge. The top of the keep was the highest point in the city, and overlooked the bay, the harbour, and much of the city and fields beyond. On a clear day, one might even see the top of the smoky mountain that seemed to climb endlessly skyward.

Yanata let the cool air circulating through the dark and dreary corridors of the outer fortress refresh her, but never stopped walking. She had things to do. She continued all the way through the outer keep to the long single-arch bridge that crossed the trench to the inner keep. As she crossed the stone bridge towards the officers keep, Yanata looked over at the city below. Despite herself, something in that moment brought her to a stop only partway across the bridge. Perhaps it was the beauty of the view. She leaned over the railing and took in the sight of the great auction house with its majestic domed roof, and the Patzau Palace across from it. The two great domed buildings dominated the skyline, on dwarfed by the mountains beyond. Two air spirits danced through the air like butterflies before her and she watched them unconsciously. Fatigue overcame her. Not because of the hike up to the fortress. She could handle that. It was something else. Yanata supressed those feelings. She could rest when she accomplished her goals. *Rest is for the dead.*

A familiar voice sounded off to her left coming from the inner keep and Yanata turned at the greeting. “Patzau Ashill” the soldier said, saluting.

“Captain Burm” Yanata said, acknowledging the officer. Two of his junior officers followed behind him, but hung back a few paces. *Probably for the best,* Yanata thought, unable to put names to faces.

“You’re back from your post in the mountains?” Yanata asked.

“Indeed, we are. We were brought back by the Chief General to aid with the situation in Mudtown” Burm answered. “Rozi and Capu” he added, gesturing to the two officers behind him, “were both sergeants with their own patrol squads, but we have recently shifted into a new elite task force role. Hand selected by Chief General himself.”

“Ah, yes.” Yanata said. “Congratulations on your selection. If you’re anything like your father, you’ll do well in this new role.”

“Thank you, Patzau” Captain Burm responded. “My team is the best. I had full confidence in ours being the best choice.”

“So, you say” she responded. *Arrogant like his father too.*

“What has stopped you on the bridge?” he inquired, gesturing towards the view knowing full well that wasn’t the reason.

What had stopped me at the bridge? Yanata wasn’t exactly sure. “We do not know each other well, you and I, do we Captain?” Yanata said, turning back to the city below. “A close friend of mine worries I work to hard” she continued.

The captain stared at her, perhaps not quite sure how to respond. The silence stretched and Yanata feared she had revealed too much of her personal issues, but Captain Burm answered her, “My father used to say, ‘a common man knows when he has reached his limit. A better man knows when he has reached his current limit. The best man knows what he must do to grow past it.’”

“I remember your father” she said, and it was true, “and I will do well remember your father’s wise words. Thank you for your insight, Captain.” She saluted, dismissing him and turned away from the city to complete her trek across the bridge. She passed by the two sergeants as she walked and gave them a sidelong glace. The woman, Rozi, reminded her of her daughters. She looked confident in the armour and in herself. The man, Capu, had a wild look in his eyes. Yanata recognized that look. It was one that stemmed from experiencing terrible things; from fighting and death and war. *It changes some people*. She left Burm and his soldiers behind and ascended the inner keep to her office. *There is still far to go before I hit my limit*, Yanata thought to herself, reinvigorated.

Chapter 2: The Assassins

The soft-footed assassins clambered the cobbled villa wall and tore across the trellises into the manicured gardens below. With a practices ease, a soft click, and the light hum of the crossbow string, a quarrel sped from atop the villa tower and into the first of the four assassins. The attacker crumpled under the impact and the three others turned their heads up to face their assailant, surprised but unperturbed. The three remaining assassins separated as the alarm sounded.

Rushing out into the garden, eight soldiers in heavy leathers and fine curved bronze tulwar blades marched out to meet their quarries. The guards, each one selected for their skill and valor were vigilant, but also overconfident. This was the sixth assassination attempt this season and theses soldiers were well-versed in dealing with the usual miscreants and local thieves contracted to attempt the killings. This time, however, they would find their adversaries of a higher caliber. The assassins moved like extensions of the long afternoon shadows that crept across the gardens. They were upon the villa guards only moments after they appeared.

Rolena aimed down over the edge of the belfry tower, crossbow poised, and took another shot. The assassin dodged the shot with inhuman speed. She fired again, with the same result. They avoided her projectiles even as they engaged the soldiers below. Confidence shifted to grave concern as the first, then second and third heavy soldiers were cut down by the assassins in the garden. In the span of a few short breaths, all eight lay dead or dying. *Shit,* Rolena thought to herself. Unable to squash the growing unease as the assassins slipped into the building below, Rolena slipped the crossbow onto her back and descended the ladder.

Inside the Lord Anup's capital estate, six former lords and princes of Gaag sat around a table debating what action to take next to put Prince Ohacha Krimas of Gaag back on his rightful ancestral throne as King of Gaag. A wine glass smashed loudly on the stone wall as red liquid blossomed into a stain across the cool stone. The men around the table turned to face Lord Guharo Provis as rage warred across his face.

"This is nonsense, Aramuk" the disgraced lord spat. "I am tired of going around in circles. We have been sitting here in this room for months. The boy wants to mount a new attack, you say no. The boy wants to sail to Ayagiim to retake his mother's ancestral throne, you say no. The boy wants to sail to Juking to march an army north, you say no. Is he to be King, or are you?"

Prince Ohacha Krimas pursed his lips, not keen on being referred to as 'the boy.' Lord Yoliim Kulimas, never one to veer far from Aramuk's opinions, turned to the disgraced prince looking for a rebuttal. Ander Kulimas, Yoliim's son, scoffed at the wine now splattered across his face. Aramuk stood abruptly with the sound of scraping wood across the stone floor. He palmed his hands on the table and leaned over to address the group.

“I will not have us follow through on any of these actions without properly considering their purposes, strengths, and weaknesses. You might be too drunk to remember our previous discussions right now but we are not in any position to follow through on any of the plans Ohacha has suggested. He is still young and it is important we understand that actions have consequences, both foreseen and unseen. His ideas are worthy of discussion, but not yet worthy of action. We don’t have the armies to take Gaag and even if we did, the Careyago would march straight south from Ayaan to see our heads on lances. We can’t take Ayagiim because the island is too close to the Careyago navy in Hosagiin. Juking doesn’t have the population to raise an army and we don’t have the ships to sail it north to Gaag leaving us with an impossible two-hundred league march north. We go in circles because we haven’t found our best move.”

“Sit down Provis” Gaba’ké said. “You’ve always been quick to judge and slow to contribute.”

“I swear on the spirits of the seas old man” Provis sneered.

“You couldn’t sense a sea spirit if it swam in your soup” Gaba’ké mocked.

“Enough!” Ohacha said, silencing the room. Provis glared at the old Aginjigaade but Gaba’ké ignored the drunk lord. Aramuk smiled at his nephew. “Uncle, you are correct that my plans have faults but Lord Provis also speaks truth. We cannot sit here forever.”

“Agreed” Lord Kulimas echoed. “My spies back home tell me Belvaas the younger now rules in place of his father. This could be… good timing for us…. Belvaas’ son is untested, and perhaps weaker than his father, your brother…” He trailed off as Aramuk walked over to the wooden doorway and opened it to shout at a servant to come clean the mess on the wall. The men watched the old prince as he resumed his seat at the table, Lord Provis following suit.

“Where else can we find allies to our cause?” Ander asked the group. “There must be another option?”

On the far side of the estate, the three assassins moved through the labyrinth of rooms, avoiding the soldiers obstructing their path whenever possible. Death followed in their wake. Turning into a new room, the first assassin moved with knives in hand to meet the next guard standing in the way. The soldier, a burly woman, drew her bronze tulwar and slashed towards her attacker only to have the assassin’s long thin blade slip under and up into her unprotected armpit while the second knife found the base of her neck. She gasped one last silent breath as the assassin pulled the blades out with a slashing motion, opening the wounds and guaranteeing a swift death. She collapsed.

Rolena ran through the many rooms following the sounds of shouting and fighting, trying desperately to find the assassins inside the estate. Shouting echoed through each and every hallway. Turning through a doorway at full speed, she ran hard into Cask, the Gaagian sword master. She fell with a heavy thud and the swordsman’s blade was at her throat. He pulled the thin blade away from with a lightning-fast efficiency.

“Spirits” he sighed, “I almost skewered you, Rolena.”

“And I’m happy you didn’t.” she answered, picking herself up off the ground.

“Why aren’t you at your post?” Cask asked.

“Why the fuck do you think?” She answered, already beginning her run down the hallway.

“Fair point. What’s happening?” he asked, following at her heel.

"At least three assassins inside" she huffed. "I already killed one from the tower. They're highly skilled. Very deadly. Just two of the three Lord Anup's eight heavies in a handful of seconds."

"Then why are you charging in first?" Cask asked.

"Good point" she said, letting the swordsman pass her.

At the end of the long room, a body tumbled backwards with a gut-wrenching crack as the soldier's head hit the stone floor. Hearing the terrible sound, Rolena was concerned for the man's skull right up until she saw the knife embedded in his throat. He gargled one last breath as two assassins appeared in the doorway. Cask approached at high speed. Rolena drew her crossbow from her back with practiced ease and pulled the latch, launching the quarrel directly at the first assailant. To her dismay, the assassin dodged the projectile. The second assassin, seeing the path blocked, turned away to find another path and disappeared out of sight.

Cask came to a stop just steps away from the assassin and his attacker leaped with incredible agility. Cask lifted his sword and parried a throwing knife Rolena hadn't even seen thrown. The swordsman seemed to glide backwards like a spirit, never letting the knife-wielding assassin close enough to reach him as his swords danced in reaction to the assassin's movements. With a surprising jolt, Cask reversed his movement to step into and around the assassin with a defining swing of his swords. The attacker's body slumped, hitting the hard ground and sliding to Rolena's feet. She jumped back, expecting the assassin to press the attack.

Cask didn't even look back as he ran to chase after the second assassin. Rolena exchanged her crossbow for the short sword on her hip and approached, not quite believing the assassin to be dead. She flipped the body and saw the deep cuts that marred the attacker's torso and legs and the long bisecting gash that had ended the contest. *I would have thought it impossible,* Rolena thought, standing over the body. *Cask managed to cut him each time he pressed the attack.* The speed of the exchange chilled her. *Absolutely terrifying.* Collecting her wits, Rolena set off after Cask. *Two assassins down, two to go.*

On the other side of the mansion, the remaining lords of Gaag sat in comfort entirely unaware of the chaos in the gardens. They heard no alarm bells tolling danger.

"Where the hell are the servants?" Lord Provis asked, interrupting lord Kulimas for the second time. Lord Kulimas glowered at his counterpart but found his look ignored.

"Actually, you raise a valid concern Guharo" Prince Aramuk agreed. "It does not usually take this long for someone to appear. Guharo, can you find somebody? I'm keen on eating soon. Perhaps they're ready to bring food to the table for us."

"Spirits, no. Not me." Lord Provis responded. "Ander, you go, boy."

"Ander is not your servant, Guharo" Lord Kulimas protested.

"It's alright, father" Ander said calmly. "I can go."

"No" Prince Ohacha said, standing up and stretching his limbs. "You all stay. I'll go. I need to visit the latrine anyway. I'll fetch upon the cooks when I return."

Ohacha walked around the table, avoiding the wine still pooling on the floor and stepped out of the room into the wide hallway beyond. Stepping into the large hall that dominated the western wing of the villa, Ohacha peered around at the strangely quiet and vacant space. *Lord Provis is right. Where are all the servants?* he wondered. The hall outside their conference room was large with tall square marble pillars lining the length of the room. Overhead chandeliers boasted the soft glow of illum stones, rather than wax candles, hinting at their benefactor's great wealth and generosity. The fact that this

palace overlooking the sea was only his city home spoke wonders to his influence in the city. *He's not even King of Onera*.

Ohacha turned left and made his way down the long hall towards the western garden. His soft slippers slapped his heels and echoed oddly on the polished floors. Ohacha furrowed his brow, unsure what to make of it. As he exited the hallway into the warm evening, the oddity ceased and so to did Ohacha's thoughts on the matter. At the same moment, a figure appeared from the opposite door and sped towards the conference room where the five lords sat.

Gaba'ké sat up in his chair abruptly. "Shut up!" He barked, then closed his eyes and focused into his agindan sense; the sense gifted to the Aginjigaade. It was something only he could do among these lords, and it was one of the many reasons he had earned a seat at this table.

"Here we go again" Lord Provis groaned. "Old man Gaba'ké always thinks–"

"Stop talking" Gaba'ké hissed, trying to focus. *Something is wrong.*

"Why?" Lord Provis hissed back, his intoxication fueling his less agreeable side. "You've always thought yourself better than us Gaba'ké. Maybe because of your skills as an Aginjigaade or because you're Ayaani, an outsider. You are…"

"Stop talking, Guharo" Prince Aramuk warned sharply, speaking over the drunk lord.

"But *I* think that you think you're better than us because of your friendship with the old King Zhiigan. You're the last of King Zhiigan's old guard. The only son who didn't betray him."

"Enough, Guharo" Aramuk warned again, adding his own anger to the order.

Gaba'ké burst from his seat, reaching for spiritual power. The unnatural musty-earthy smell of Aginjigaade sorcery filled the small room and tinged their nostrils. Aramuk stared in wide-eyed shock at the old Aginjigaade, unable to comprehend what Gaba'ké was about to do. *Spirits, Guharo has finally gone and brought forth the old man's wrath.* Instead of unleashing his sorcery on the drunk lord, Gaba'ké turned towards the door as a figure burst through it. The four other men at the table stood in shock as one of Lord Kulimas' officers swept through the doorway, sweat pursing his brow.

"My lords" the man said through ragged breaths, "There are assassins in the building. They have killed many of Anup's guards and are on their way here now! I have men guarding the rooms leading this way and Captain Hill has soldiers bolstering the gardens. I fear it may not be enough."

Prince Aramuk stared back in silent shock. He looked to the other men in the room, but they too seemed unable to process this new information. '*I fear it may not be enough?' What calamity is upon us?* Lord Kulimas had risen, but remained still, obviously unsure of what to do or where to go. No assassin had ever made it far into the building. *This is impossible*, Aramuk repeated to himself. *Lord Anup's villa is a fortress. Walls and soldiers and battlements.* Gaba'ké didn't wait for the others. The Aginjigaade sorcerer swept out of the room. The earthy smell chased him out the door. The four lords scrambled from their seats and followed him into the hallway, feeling safer next to the old Aginjigaade than without him.

Gaba'ké had been pivotal in ensuring the old King and his royal family escaped safely the night of the great betrayal. He had never waivered in his support of King Golan, and now Golan's only son, Prince Ohacha. Aramuk trusted the sorcerer wholeheartedly, no matter what nonsense Guharo spouted. Ander pulled his dueling sword from his side and helped Gaba'ké vigilantly take point. *Good thing the lad keeps the thing on*

him, Aramuk thought to himself. He felt vulnerable without a weapon of his own. *Not that such a thing would be much use in my unskilled hands.*

"I can sense something" Gaba'ké said "through the stone."

"Where are they?" Lord Provis asked. "How many are there?"

"I have half a mind to leave you behind Guharo" Gaba'ké snapped. "I can't tell how many there are. There are echoes of footsteps throughout the eastern wing. Its impossible for me to know who is friendly and who's an enemy."

"Spirits" Aramuk said, realization dawning on him. "Where is Ohacha?"

"Don't worry about him" Gaba'ké said. "Nothing we can do now will help him."

"I can go after him!" Ander said.

"No." Gaba'ké said. "Protect your father and Prince Aramuk"

"What about me?" Lord Provis beseeched.

"You can protect them too" Gaba'ké answered and the drunk lord scowled.

A loud smash sounded from the eastern wall and on the opposite side of the great hallway. A pair of Kulimas' soldiers backed into the room with a sword wielding assassin giving chase. The two guards fought together, both defending and attacking with the support of the other while the attacker maintained his push into the hallway. The killer's gaze shifted as he saw the noblemen recoiling on the far side of the room. A chill ran down Aramuk's spine.

Feigning an attack, the assassin lunged left and slashed at the hand of the closer soldier, loping it off at the wrist. The man screamed in shock and pain and retreated while the second soldier took the first's place with a fleury of new attacks. Backing out of range and parrying the blows, the assassin lunged for a second strike to match the first that had claimed the hand. The soldier, ready for the attack pulled back only to discover the lunge had also been a faint to draw the retreat. The assassin dodged past the soldier and made a break towards Gaba'ké and the Gaagian Lords.

"Run!" Gaba'ké shouted as he drew forth power. He channeled his power through one of the talismans in his pocket. Several stone missiles shot forward from the marble floor at high-speed. The assassin dove into a slide, narrowly avoiding the bullets. They whizzed past, exploding on impact.

The assassin continued to press the assault, crossing the hall in mere seconds. Gaba'ké changed talismans and channeled through a new spirit. His skin hardened to a lustrous shine, strengthening his body. The shift between channeled spirits was near instantaneous, the mark of a master. It also came just-in-time as the assassin's thrown knife took him square in the chest. Instead of sinking into flesh, the knife bounced harmlessly off his hardened skin.

To Gaba'ké's dismay, a figure darted forward to intercept the assassin. Gaba'ké watched as Lord Kulimas' son, Ander rushed forward, dueling blade drawn, intent on facing the assassin head-on. *Oh, Spirits. No! Don't–* was all he had time to think. For in that same moment, the assassin dodged the precise thrust of Ander's dueling blade with inhuman agility. The assassin's own blade slashed downwards, taking the young lord's head in a single swing. There was no falter, no celebration in defeating an opponent. The assassin pressed his advantage even before Ander's body could hit the cold marble floor. The blade flashed, faster than Gaba'ké felt possible. The sword glanced off of his hardened body with an unnatural singing of metal on stone.

The assassin lurched back, staggered by the blade's refusal to bite into its enemy's neck. More strikes followed as another slash cut along Gaba'ké's chest and another across his exposed thigh. The clothing Gaba'ké wore was splayed wide and the

blade scratched at his harden skin, but Gaba'ké remained standing. He thrust outward with a hardened fist but was far too slow to catch the nimble attacker. Recognizing the effort to be futile, the assassin feinted a decisive blow to the eyes; an Aginjigaade enhancers largest weak point. Gaba'ké reflexively raised his arms to protect against an attack that never came and the assassin slipped past the old sorcerer and straight for the Gaagian captain and the exiled lords behind him.

Aramuk watched, dazed, as the assassin easily slew Ander and then bypassed Gaba'ké on his way towards them; on its way towards him. It moved with inhuman speed, like a vengeful spirit straight out of the ghost stories mothers told their children. Everything happened so fast. Yet it felt like he waited patiently; a forsaken prince and his inevitable death.

The assassin cut down the Lord Kulimas's captain as if he were a child wielding a stick and not a renowned swordsman. Lord Provis, who had remained frozen in fear, finally turned to flee. Aramuk reflected later that it was the wine that had done him in. Lord Provis slipped and slammed his face hard on the polished marble floor. Teeth broken, the loud lord clambered to his knees only for the assassin to unleash another vindictive swing of the blood-stained sword, severing the drunk lord's head from his body.

"Its not possible," Aramuk stammered. "No man wields this much speed and strength."

Gaba'ké ran to catch the assassin but had yielded too much distance in protecting himself. Prince Aramuk Krimas watched in horror as he became the assassin's next target. He closed his eyes, knowing there was no chance for escape. He turned his face, wincing at the anticipation of his own death. Pain blossomed from the arm he brought to shield his face but less pain than he anticipated would accompany death.

The prince opened his eyes a few heartbeats later, fear and shock immobilizing him. His heart beat hard inside his chest. Something warm trickled down his thighs. Pain emanated from his arm and he turned it over slowly to see dark red blood leak from a wound he didn't remember receiving.

Gaba'ké grabbed him by the shoulders and spoke to him. At him. Aramuk stared back but heard nothing. Comprehended nothing. He looked down. There, on the marble floor, was the assassin and the bloody sword that had killed so many. So many in such a short span. He backed away, still terrified. His legs buckled, but Gaba'ké held him upright. He looked back down at the dead assassin.

That was when he saw the object protruding from his attacker's skull. Blood and brain matter had splattered across the cold floor, staining the prince's soft slippers. He looked up to meet Gaba'ké's gaze again. Gaba'ké was shouting across the room and Aramuk followed his old friend's gaze. On the other side of the room stood Rolena, panting, crossbow in hand.

"He's alive" Gaba'ké shouted. It was the first thing Aramuk processed as his mind returned to him. Gaba'ké smacked him softly across the cheek and Aramuk recoiled. An odd unnatural floral scent caught him by nostrils and Aramuk recoiled. Combined with the smell of blood and the acidic smell of liquid running down his legs, Aramuk vomited.

"Aye" Gaba'ké said. "This one was an Aginjigaade. By the way he moved and the smell of the sorcery, an enhancer for certain. Vitality aspected. I've never seen a person move that fast."

"The others moved at the same speed" Rolena said, still catching her breath. Aramuk noticed a new quarrel already sat primed in the groove. The strong zesty smell of sorcery seemed to envelop the dead assassin and Rolena winced at the stench. "Son

of a bitch" she said, bringing her fingers to her nose, "the others didn't smell like this one."

"If they were all that fast, we can only hope now that this one is dead, the others won't be as monstrous" Gaba'ké said. "I don't know how quick it will wear off. It might be immediate, or it might be a slow return to normal strength and speed."

"Where's Ohacha?" Rolena said, glancing around.

"We don't know" Gaba'ké answered. "Where's Cask? I thought he'd be with you."

"I don't know" Rolena answered. "We got separated" she added with worry.

"How many were there?" Aramuk asked. It was the first thing he had said. Both Gaba'ké and Rolena looked to him for the first time. She saw pain and anger in his eyes.

"Four climbed the eastern wall of the garden" Rolena answered. "I killed one in the garden. Cask killed another in the east wing. And…" she gestured down to the body on the floor between them. "Unless more came in a different way, there should be one left."

Gaba'ké watched as Lord Kulimas held the headless body of his son. Blood stained his robes. Heavy sobs suffocated his cries and breaths. "Then we need to find the last one before we're cradling any more slain comrades. We need to find Ohacha right now!"

After relieving himself at the latrine, Ohacha walked at a leisurely pace back towards Lord Anup's villa. The thin line of day teased its final goodbye over the horizon as darkness filled the sky above. The evening air was comfortable and warm. The day had lost its overbearing heat. Large bats whizzed through the air above chasing the insects that circled around the stone lamps glowing in the night. The air smelled like the sea, algal and crisp. It wafted up the cliffs alongside the sound of breaking waves. Other sounds permeated the night, but they were muffled and unrecognizable.

Alone in the gardens, Ohacha spotted a group of spirits and stopped to watch the mysterious creatures. In Gaag, glimpsing most spirits is considered a good omen. Ohacha enjoyed their unique beauty and freedom. It was rare to see so many around people. They were known to vanish before your eyes when approached. Ohacha yearned for Gaba'ké's power. To see all the spirits. To be gifted access to the sorceries of the world. If he had that power, he wouldn't be running from the Careyago and their emperor.

A grumble from his stomach reminded Ohacha of his purpose. *Food*. He turned away from the garden, leavings the spirits and the bats and the sunsets and made his way back towards Lord Anup's palace. He reached the marble steps to the estate and felt an uncomfortable pop in his ears. The sounds of the sea abruptly disappeared and the muffled noises he thought he was imagining became clear as screams and shouts and bells. The shift in soundscapes was jarring and Ohacha recoiled at the unexpected noise, backstepping. The pressure once again changed and the unnatural sounds of alarm disappeared, replaced with the calm sounds of the sea below and the whizzing of bats.

Confused, Ohacha stepped forward again and the soundscape returned to chaos. He crept forward to the door and stared down the long corridor at a figure standing atop a dead body. Ohacha's heart lurched and he froze in place, hoping the figure hadn't heard him approach. The figure turned its head and revealed only a pair of dark eyes that locked on him. Ohacha took a step back and the killer turned and rushed towards him.

A second figure appeared between Ohacha and the intruder. Even without seeing the newcomers face, Ohacha recognized Cask by his posture and stance. The attacker slowed to a halt until they stood just a few paces opposite. Cask stood composed with his

twin blades, while the assassin stood twirling their long knives with practised ease. Ohacha rarely saw the sword master draw both of his famed blades. The two figures stood, each poised and ready to spring, neither willing to make the first move.

The seconds dragged on for an uncomfortable amount of time. Ohacha even considered fleeing to safety. Without warning, the assassin launched down the tight corridor with the speed of an arrow. It covered the distance between them in a heartbeat. The hard ringing of metal pierced Ohacha's ears and he flinched away from the sudden noise as it boomed louder than he thought possible. Looking back up, Cask stood over the dead assassin. He wiped clean and then sheathed his swords. He turned to face Ohacha and even in the dim light, Ohacha could see the blood running down the swordsman's neck where the killer's knife had cut him.

With a strange convergence of pressure, the two worlds of sound collided again into one. The panic and the sea. The shouts and the buzzing insects. Cask let out a heavy sigh and collapsed in the hallway next to his fallen foe. He moved to wipe the blood from the shallow gash on his neck. Instead of the intended effect, he smeared blood across his brown skin. Ohacha approached slowly and the pungent, almost stormy smell of sorcery filled his nose.

Cask looked up at him after staring at his bloody hand, "It's a miracle I found you in time."

"Are you okay?" Ohacha stammered, unsure of what else to say.

"I'll be just fine" the swordsman answered. "Spirits, I am tired though."

"Who was that?" Ohacha asked.

"An Aginjigaade assassin," Cask answered through ragged breaths. "A gift your cousin sent you, I'd wager. It's got Bartiin written all over it too. I hope somebody else caught that last one. I'll lose if I have to face another one."

"There were more than just him?" Ohacha asked.

"*Him* was a her" Cask said, pulled away the face covering to reveal a woman's face. She had foreign features. *Careyago?* Ohacha didn't recognise them nor her lighter bronzy skin. Her face was angular and, in any other context, might have been beautiful. "She was one hell of an Aginjigaade" Cask added.

"She was a sound Aginjigaade?" Ohacha asked. "I've never encountered one before."

"And I hope you never encounter another like her" he added. "There was an enhancer too. All of them were enhanced. Damned fast and super deadly. Belvaas has sent his fare share of assassins but never at this caliber."

"Mada'abi Stone Assassins?" Ohacha asked, curious about the legends.

"No," Cask breathed more than said. "These ones are Careyago. The face…" he added pausing, "not the right face for a Mada'abi. Not Cayanoshi, but one of the other conquered territories, like Gaag."

The sound of boots on stone echoed down the hallway and both Cask and Ohacha looked to see Rolena turn the corner, crossbow at the ready. Ohacha hadn't even seen Cask draw his swords and yet his master had found a moment to draw them in a flash. Rolena lowered her crossbow and walked to close the distance between them. "Thank the spirits you two are alright" she said, approaching.

"You get the last one?" Cask groaned out as he stood back up.

Her expression drained at the question. "I did…" she answered, hesitated, then added "but I wasn't fast enough. Lord Ander and Lord Provis are both dead. Ohacha, your uncle was injured in the fighting but he'll be fine. He's just a little rattled. Lord Kulimas,

on the other hand, is devastated. He's taking it poorly. You both know how much he adored Ander."

"Ander was a gifted pupil. He was far too young for this fate" Cask said somberly, "and Lord Provis was a loyal friend to the true crown. They both deserved better than to die in a foreign land far from home."

"And Gaba'ké?" Ohacha asked.

"He's unharmed but very distraught. The assassin managed to get past him" she said. "He blames himself for their deaths. Cask, you know him best. Talk some sense into him lest that foolish idea linger on and fester into something destructive."

"He's being too hard on himself like usual" Cask said. "These were Aginjigaade, all trained assassins and physically enhanced to make them more deadly. By all accounts, we should all be dead. It's a miracle we're not."

"Let's go find your uncle, Ohacha" Rolena said. "We've lost a lot of men and Lord Anup has lost half his guard."

"To just four assassins?" Ohacha said, still not quite believing it.

"Three" Rolena corrected. "I took one down in the garden as they climbed the walls."

"If that forth one was also an Aginjigaade, who knows what our fate might have been. The advantages they held might have compounded. These weren't just any assassins" Cask added. "I'd wager they're the emperor's own. The ones he sends to topple regimes.

The three of them rushed back to the grand hall. Soldiers and servants were congregating and tending to the wounded. Tensions in the room remained high. Doorways were barricaded. Soldiers dawning shields flanked key choke-points into the room. In the center, Aramuk stood amongst a host of the surviving officers, barking orders. The mood was grave.

Ohacha, Aramuk, and Rolena were admitted and met Aramuk in the center. All heads turned as they approached. Gaba'ké let out a sigh of relief and broke to wrap Ohacha and Cask in his arms. Ohacha tried to extricate himself from the mountainous hug but was unable to remove himself, despite being a head taller.

The Aginjigaade grabbed Ohacha round neck and pulled him in close, planting a respectful nod on the young prince's temple. "Thank the spirts, Ohacha" Gaba'ké said, turning to lead the three towards Aramuk. "I worried for you. Tell me what happened!"

"I got distracted by some spirits in the garden. And then again by the sound barrier just outside of the palace–"

"One of the assassins," Cask cut in, "manipulated a sound barrier to quell noise across the palace. That's why we couldn't hear the alarm."

"I found the edge of the barrier" Ohacha continued. "Once I figured out what was happening, I re-entered the building and Cask defended me and the last assassin. He managed to kill the attacker before she reached me."

"And we're damned lucky he did" Gaba'ké said with a sombre smile. "Not everyone fared so."

"Lord Provis and Ander" Ohacha said. "Rolena told me."

"Right" Gaba'ké said. "Not to mention dozens of soldiers and guards. This was a devastating blow to our strength."

"We *need* to leave Onera" Ohacha said.

"I agree," Aramuk said, joining the conversation. "Nobody will want to stay here after tonight's loss. And I expect Lord Anup will be happy to be rid of us. I fear his kindness

and patience with us will end when he hears of what has happened here. I've already dispatched a runner to inform him and another for the healers. It'll be costly."

"How many dead?" Ohacha asked, looking around the room at the wounded soldiers. Tens filled the space, their voices of dread and pain filling the room to a point of discomfort. Their comrades, the lucky ones, helped in whatever ways they could.

"The numbers are still coming in" Aramuk answered. "The number seems to be twenty or more of Anup's guards and another twenty-five of our own, not including some of the serving staff."

"The killed the serving staff?" Ohacha asked, incredulous.

"No witnesses" Cask answered. "There's probably a dead beggar in the street outside who might have seen them climb the outer wall. That's their style" he added. "How is Lord Kulimas doing?"

"Spirits, the man is a wreck." Aramuk said with a lofty sigh. "And rightly so. You all know I'd be the same if I were the one holding Ohacha's lifeless body in my arms." A solemn silence spread between the group. "I watched him die" Aramuk said, breaking it. "I've never seen a man… die like that. To die in combat yet… beheaded as cleanly as a criminal under the axe. That moment will haunt my sleep."

"We'll build him a grand pyre" Gaba'ké said. "An immense one for the lot of them. They all deserve a pyre of great honour for their sacrifice and service."

"I can't speak for the rest of you, but I won't sleep tonight." Aramuk said, running his hand through his beard. "Cask, Rolena, Gaba'ké, you three are dismissed. Please get some sleep. Or go find a bottle, or a lover—whatever it is you do to recover. Tomorrow we'll reconvene and discuss plans to leave the city."

"I want to come with you. Wherever it is you choose to go next" Rolena blurted.

Prince Aramuk smiled a sad smile. "I'm not sure you do, but I'd be a bloody fool to deny you. After all, you saved my life tonight." Ohacha jerked his gaze at this new information. "We can talk tomorrow about that" Aramuk added, gesturing calm to Ohacha.

"Tomorrow then" Cask said, and he and Rolena turned to take leave, leaving Ohacha, Aramuk and Gaba'ké. *Those two princes have a long night ahead of them,* he mused to himself. *Good sleep is reserved only for the heinous and the wicked.*

The next morning, a great pyre was built and a memorial service to honour those slain was held. Ohacha stood next to his uncle at the front of the rows of soldiers and officers as they watched the pyre catch flame. The pyre of bodies ended up nearly twice the height of a man and ten men shoulder to shoulder. The bodies of the slain Gaagians, as per the custom, were burned with sage and a local tree similar to Gaagian cedar. The flames spread wildly until fire engulphed the pyre. The great flame reached skyward nearly to the height of the villa tower from where Rolena watched the procession.

Lord Anup arrived the following day. Aramuk, seasoned to disaster and gracious to his friends, paid for the funerals for each of Lord Anup's guards and contributed sums to their families. Still, as expected, the Oneran lords' kindness had expired. The Gaagians convened one last time, this time in the gardens where the pyre still smouldered. Wispy tendrils of smoke hung in the air. For the first time, Rolena counted herself amongst the group. Ohacha, Aramuk, Gaba'ké, Lord Kulimas, and Cask seated at the table with her.

"Mina'abik" Gaba'ké suggested to the group. "The city is controlled by the Ohegans. It isn't too far, perhaps 12 days from Onera by sea. It is safe. Peaceful. There may be Aginjigaade there I once knew. Schoolmates from the Ayaani Aginjigaade Academy."

“Mina’abik doesn’t hold any more strategic value than Onera” Aramuk countered. “Perhaps we can find someone amenable to our plight but we stray farther from our goal of reclaiming Gaag from the Careyago. No Aginjigaade acquaintance from the past will help us bolster our armies and navies. With Lord Provis dead, many of his most loyal men will abandon our cause. They’ll slink back to Gaag despite the Careyago.”

“Then we must strike a target” Ohacha suggested, “entice them back by showing we are active in our campaign and willing to move towards our goal. Ayagiim is the only place that makes sense.”

“We could never hold Ayagiim even if we managed to take it” Cask said. “We couldn’t hold out against a siege from the Careyago.”

“I think we are also all forgetting that when we fled from Ayagiim the first time, immediately following your father’s failed invasion of Gaag, we left the city to the Careyago and their fleet pillaged the city” Gaba’ké said.

“All the more reason the people of Ayagiim will support us taking the city back from the Careyago” Ohacha said.

“All the more reason the people of Ayagiim will *not* support us retaking control” Gaba’ké countered. “We abandoned them to the Careyago to save ourselves when we fled to Onera. They will not care that your mother was Princess of Ayagiim, Ohacha. You have as much family left in Ayagiim as in Gaag. Those who remain may not look kindly on us.”

“Why not Casoya?” Rolena suggested nervously. “Caso. The city isn’t far from Onera, still in a wider sphere of influence with Gaag. It’s a major city of trade and industry. It is considered very safe. Good for business.”

“I considered Casoya” Aramuk admitted. “My caution lies with its open ties to the Careyago. With Casoya’s ports open wide to any with coin, the Careyago Emperor, who has an abundance, may be influential within the city. However, the Casoyans are governed by a council of eight. I would be surprised if all eight are happy with imperial interreference. It may be difficult to determine where their allegiances will lie. With us, or with the Careyago who hunt us? I fear we will be vulnerable.”

“What other choice do we have, uncle?” Ohacha asked. “The West; Jurang, Nuneko, Juking, and Choke are each too small. Towiin has an open alliance with the Careyago. You said Mina’abik is too passive, as are most of the cities further east.”

“Casoya is our best option” Lord Kulimas said drawing heads. “Coming here to Onera has been… costly. We need more coin if we’re to continue to pay for soldiers and ships, even the few have remaining. I may not always have agreed with Provis, but he had the coin to speak his mind. Without him…”

“You speak the truth; we can sell what treasures we still possess at the Casoyan Auction.” Aramuk said. “I can try to reach out to a very old friend in the city. When my brothers and I were still boys, we travelled to Casoya with your grandfather, Ohacha. We stayed with a powerful family, the Yohati’s. Perhaps, despite the passing of time, we can still find an ally within the city.”

“Casoyans are ruled by gold more than morals” Gaba’ké said, scornfully. “So long as we spend it, they’ll be happy were in the city.”

“Then its settled” Ohacha announced. “We sail for Caso.”

Chapter 3: The Governor

The midday bell tolled high over Gaag from the tower of the palace grounds. Right on cue, two servants entered the dining hall where Belvaas the younger, provisional Governor of Gaag, and Atipo the Eyes sat at an elongated dining table for the midday meal. The two men paused their private conversation for the entire twenty paces it took the two servants to cross the hall, plates in hand.

With efficiency and grace, the two servants distributed the serving platters between the two men where they sat across from one another. They smiled politely as each heavy plate touched the table with the delicacy of a first kiss. No words were spoken, as was customary, but the standard nods and smiles conveyed the necessary level of thanks and respect. The two servants turned and reversed their course, their shoes lightly clacking against the wooden floorboards until exiting the room. It was a Careyago custom. Belvaas wasn't sure he liked it. The silence felt… dehumanising.

The two men finally reached for the serving utensils and loaded their plates with the various dishes the cooks had prepared to honour their guest. Atipo, ever the careful man, insisted Belvaas take first. Belvaas, unwilling to upset the emperor's emissary, obliged. It was a tactic of Atipo's that had worked wonders in the past. Let the governor see him as an equal and his candor will spill forth. Besides, even a governor of a backwater city like Gaag deserves not to be underestimated.

When Belvaas reached for the leg of the pheasant, Atipo turned the plate to make the action easier. When Belvaas finished serving himself a generous slice of meat pie and his eyes darted next to the fried breads, Atipo passed the plate the governor's direction. It was all deliberate. The boy *would* talk. And he would agree to the emperor's new terms.

Atipo had known the young governor's father. Belvaas the Elder had been a hard man. One his enemy's might call ruthless. But Atipo recognized wisdom where others judged callousness. He was a man that knew what needed to be done and didn't shy away from doing it. It was for that reason he had been elevated to Governor, after all. But his young son was a new variable in the mix. And so it was that Atipo found himself returning to Gaag far sooner than he had expected. It was why he, as Eyes to the Emperor, sat at tables with powerful men and mollified them.

The trick to getting somebody to like you, Atipo reminded himself, *to be attentive. To listen, learn, and echo their own thoughts.* The trick to being good at it is to do so without ever letting them notice. The young governor would never truly know the special care Atipo paid towards keeping appearances. This was the point, after all. This was why the emperor sent him.

Belvaas sat back down in his dining chair, plate piled high, and placed his dish with none of the care or reverence the two servants had displayed. Atipo spooned himself

a modest serving of stew over his plate of pie and sat down himself. The two men took several quick bites and then resumed their conversation.

"As I was saying," Atipo continued, "the other concession the emperor has requested is to have a cultural exchange of craftsman between Gaag and several of the other provinces across the Empire, but also in the Capital, Cayanoshi. It is my understanding Gaag's weavers and woodworkers are most skillful. We can offer apprenticeship exchanges facilitated by the Cayanoshi Shipwrights. The more integrated the empire is, the more benefit we all see. It has long been the emperor's strategy for cohesion."

As is conscripting the able-bodied into the armies and navies until they've lost what sense of home they one had, Belvaas thought callously. His face revealed none of this. "I would agree" he said instead. "An exchange of craftsmen would provide opportunities for the younger workers of Gaag. The ability to travel across the Empire. To learn from our new brothers and sisters. These things are necessary to build Gaag back into its former glory. Doing so would also solidify our ties to the Empire at large. Some people here still whisper fears about the emperor. They fear what they do not yet understand. They fear the uncertainty of what might happen next. But it has been years now, but we are only just drawing people back who once fled into the countryside."

"Then it is settled" Atipo said. *Disappointing. Not quite the man his father was*.

"Not quite" Belvaas cut in. Atipo's eyebrow lifted a fraction. "It is clear we agree on the fundamentals of the emperor's vision for Gaag. But it is necessary that we speak to the details. Payment and insurance sit at the top of my list. Those who leave Gaag for the larger cities in the north on this promise cannot be simply forsaken once outside our territory. We are a small people when compared to our northern brothers but that does not mean we are not able or proud. It is a long way home from the north. It is critical that I can ensure those who leave for these exchanges have the ability and capacity to return home at the end of their exchanges, should they wish it."

"This sounds like an expensive endeavor. What have you in mind?" Atipo asked.

"I want to put out a tender." Belvaas said.

"A tender?" Atipo repeated.

"Yes, a tender" Belvaas explained. "It is clear by the way goods are being shipped into Gaag that the empire has a hunger for timber, food, metals, luxuries. Gaag is a city in the lowlands but to the west, the highlands are ripe for these operations. We have people looking for work beyond farming, and you have merchants hungry for materials. We must align our interests."

"There are mines far closer to the capital than Gaag." Atipo countered. "Why spend years and resources so far south?"

"Why does anyone do anything?" Belvaas asked. "The opportunity to have more. We may be further south, but I intend the terms of any arrangements made to be far more generous than they'll get in other territories. Materials and goods made in Gaag will benefit from cheaper labour and resources. And though we lack proximity to the capital, Cayanoshi, we are primed for trade across the Starlight Isles. Onera, Caso, Towiin, Mada'abi, Juking. Gaag is half way to each of these places. All I ask in return is investment. We must rebuild and expand our port and base industries. And the people of Gaag who leave on this exchange must have means to return home. That becomes much easier when ships sail south with opportunists and return north with cargo."

"You seem to have thought a great deal about this" Atipo said. He was more guarded now. The son was a schemer. *Not quite as tactful as the father, but not a dolt like the emperor feared.*

"I want to ensure that we in Gaag are truly a vital part of this Empire, not some backwater city paying taxes to an Emperor who cares little for us. If we can ensure Gaag is one with the empire and not simply ravaged by it, it will benefit us all, and the emperor most. A land that is stripped of everything sown, in the end reaps only blood. The emperor has paid a price for Gaag and now it is his. A new jewel in the box. I would think he would like it to be of value to him. My father believed so. As do I."

"Yes. Your father…and how is Belvaas the elder?" Atipo asked tactfully.

"He fares poorly." Belvaas admitted, stirring the food on his plate. "He is eating well and he is functioning, as far as the healers can tell. But he sleeps most of the day. When he *is* awake, he babbles like an infant. He does not know where he is nor does he recognise those who come to visit him. Then, last week he took a fall and broke his arm. I made the difficult choice to have the servants strap him in during regular sleeping times to keep him from wandering."

"This must be challenging for you" Atipo said. "We have a saying in Cayanoshi, "The tree that grows tallest has the furthest to fall. There are many who have much respect for your father."

"That is kind thing to say," Belvaas said, "but we both know my father was a pragmatist. He saw the truth bared. My uncles were fools; proud men with haughty ideals. A kingship is worth nothing when you run a desecrated domain. It is better to be a peasant in prosperity than a ruler of ashes."

The door on the far side of the room clicked noisily. The sound echoed through the empty dining hall. Both men turned as a comically large hat entered through the portal on the far side of the room. A hat that sat atop a man. A hat so garish that neither Belvaas nor Atipo found words of greeting as the man, approached the table. Belvaas' eyes remained glued to the hat even as the man removed it from his head with a flamboyant bow. Beneath the hat was a handsome man with a lean face and a dark black moustache that curled around his mouth. Atipo was stunned silent. Belvaas frowned at his old friend.

"What the hell are you wearing?" Belvaas asked, sternly. He deliberately refrained from dismissing the man from his bow.

"This is my uniform" Bartiin said, still bowing respectfully. He gestured towards his officer's tunic and armour. The empty sheath at his hip. The soldier's boots.

"We both know I'm taking about that hat" Belvaas said, pointing to it with his dinner spoon.

You don't like the hat, sir?" Bartiin said. "I had it made just for me. I saw a fascinating gentleman in Onera with a similar hat and knew I had to have one made."

"Do all the men in Onera all where hats like this?" Belvaas asked. There was no effort made to disguise his disdain.

"Oh, spirits no" Bartiin said, "The men are very reserved in Onera. Clean uniforms, simple white and tan colours are popular. No hats. Head scarves sometimes. The man I saw was a foreigner."

"If I didn't know you to be so damned cleaver, I'd think you a fool Bartiin." Belvaas said.

"Now, that's no way to speak to an old friend, Belvy"

Belvaas stood up from the table hastily, the legs of his chair scraping hard against the wooden floor at his feet. He dropped his utensils and the clattered noisily across the dinnerware. Atipo recoiled instinctually. The disrespect shown was enough to have the man flogged. He had been present for previous transgressions. Always they were met with punishment and force. Atipo raised an eyebrow and expected the worst for this man. A silence hung in the air.

Belvaas approached the soldier and took from him the large black hat. He looked it over, brushing his thumb along the dark crows feathers along the brim. He looked it over once before giving it back to the man. The soldier remained motionless, still bowing. *At least he had some good sense.* Belvaas straightened the man out and, to Atipo's astonishment, they embraced in a friendly hug.

"Bartiin," Belvaas said, bringing the soldier forward to join them at the table. "How long has it been?"

Ah. So, this is Bartiin Foxstring? Atipo assessed the man, looking him up and down. Ignoring the hat, he looked rather unremarkable. No different than any other soldier Atipo had passed in the hallways. It was clear he and Belvaas were close. And so that begged the question, *did he earn the trust of Belvaas the Elder for his role or was he gifted it based on his relationship with the son?*

"This is Atipo Waliimanad" Governor Belvaas said. "He's here on behalf of the emperor."

Bartiin smiled charmingly, "Welcome to Gaag, Atipo. I hope you find the city hospitable and the peoples' folksiness charming. I understand, coming from larger cities, Gaag feels small in comparison."

Atipo returned the smile with only mild discomfort. "Yes," Atipo agreed, "you have it right. Gaag does feel small when compared the grander cities of the north."

Bartiin moved to place his hat on the table and was delivered a warning sound from Belvaas, who had retaken his seat to continue eating. "Not on the table" Belvaas said through a mouth full of food. Atipo found the talking with a mouthful off-putting but kept silent.

"Apologies, Belvy" Bartiin said in an insincere jesting tone.

"In fact," Belvaas added, "Just get rid of the damned thing. I'll not have you starting some spirit-forsaken trend amongst the nobility. If I come to find half the court wearing the same stupid hat in the next few weeks… I'll have you're eyeballs plucked out to make damned sure you never see another ugly thing again."

"You would deny me the pleasure–"

"Do *not* finish that jest" Belvaas interrupted.

Despite the words, Belvaas pulled out the chair next to him and grabbed the officer a plate, which the man refused politely. Bartiin instead took a seat and threw the hat away into the empty hall theatrically.

"And Bartiin" Belvaas said, spooning another bite.

"Yes sir?" Bartiin asked.

"Don't call me Belvy. Not in the presence of our guest."

"Yes governor. My apologies." Bartiin said, reaching to pour himself a cup of strawberry wine. He downed the entire glass in one go. *Not good news then,* Atipo surmised.

"Let's move on." Belvaas said. He swallowed his mouthful of food and stared intently at his old friend. "You're back. That can only mean one of two things and the lack of joy on your face tells me something went wrong."

"The Assassins failed" Bartiin said flatly. He poured himself a second cup.

"What do you mean, they failed?" Atipo asked, frowning. "Do you mean, the princes managed to escape again?"

"Worse. That and the emperor's assassins are all dead" Bartiin clarified.

"Impossible!" Belvaas grumbled. "You mean to tell us that the emperor's own assassins, Aginjigaade trained to topple dynasties, failed to kill the likes of my shifty uncle and moronic cousin?" He was shouting now, but not at anyone in particular. "You've got to be fucking kidding me!" he roared, dropping the spoon hard onto his plate with a crash. Atipo didn't flinch and, to his credit, Bartiin too remained unphased. The officer took another casual drink from his glass. Belvaas turned to his friend expectantly, annoyance visible across his face.

"My source says they managed to kill all four assassins" Bartiin said. "Eli went down to an arrow while coming over the wall. The others split up and were killed off one-by-one. I suspect somebody got a lucky blow on Doumbe early, and their enhancements wore off."

"Spirits" Belvaas said. He pressed his palms into his face. "Ridiculous. After all this time, I finally believed we'd be rid of this thorn in the emperor's side. In my side! I can't believe it. Now what? I'm sure you've got a new plan. That's what I pay you for."

"They're going to move again" Bartiin answered, "Lord Anup is displeased. He's lost half his personal guards. They'll leave Onera. The only good news is Provis is dead. His was the largest contingent of their forces. Aramuk will have a hard time keeping Provis' men loyal and committed. Many will abandon the cause. They'll be vulnerable."

"They'll be cautious" Belvaas corrected. "When are they supposed to leave?"

"The day after tomorrow" Bartiin answered.

"What is your plan? Ambush them at the docks? With their full host of remaining soldiers about?" Belvaas jeered.

"I've set up an expendable asset" Bartiin answered. "But it would be best if we could catch them at sea. Their ships are old. Outriggers mostly. A few xebecs and a larger cargo vessel. No war ships. Nothing fast. They'll be no match for the imperial navy."

"That won't be possible" Atipo said. Both men looked to him as if they had forgotten he was present. "Our warships in the south are otherwise occupied picking up important cargo in the north."

Belvaas frowned. "Where's my uncle headed?" Belvaas asked.

"I've got a spy amongst the infantry with wife and child still here in Gaag. He's been leaving helpful little notes. The first scout ship already headed south. There's talk that they're heading for Casoya" Bartiin said. "I plan on sailing directly to Caso myself to speak with Ambassador Durali. We can use her contacts amongst the Casoyans to do the deed. Best chance would be to take them as they come ashore or better yet, at sea outside the city but it could be risky."

"Don't bother" Atipo said. "You've already missed your opportunity. They've already fled. They'll be aboard that first scout ship.

Bartiin gave Atipo a second interested look. "And, how would you know?"

"I don't know it" Atipo said blankly, "but it would be the obvious ruse. You've been at this for years now, Bartiin. They know your patterns." The suppressed scowl on Bartiin's face suggested he disagreed but he didn't argue.

Belvaas didn't seem to notice. He continued on, "Losing Provis will be a blow to their moral." Belvaas said. "The man was a tyrant but deeply loyal to the old King Golan. But the person I'm most worried about is Aramuk" Belvaas said. "Ohacha's father was

strong in all the wrong ways. He was entitled. Quick to anger. Quicker to forgive. He would act on how he felt. He was headstrong and ignored council. He would have burned everything to the ground just to spite whoever was left to rule the ashes. The war he wanted would have been long, bloody, and unwinnable."

"And…" Atipo asked. "Prince Aramuk?"

"Aramuk has a different set of faults. He, like my father, was a pragmatist. But he was loyal to Golan to a fault; idolized him. My father always used to say they were best friends. Much wiser, and much more cunning, Aramuk was bookish. He liked learning things that didn't matter. How many dialects of O'kwiré there are. Accounted histories of the Great Turtle Library. The historical spread of the trader's tongue and its adoption across the continents. I once saw him with a book on the history of the Gurlil Dynasty of Wiisagine Kings. Stuff like that."

"Who were the Wiisagine Kings?"

"Exactly" Belvaas said, taking another drink from his cup. "Aramuk is smart enough to bide his time and wait for the right opportunity." Bartiin nodded in agreement. "My cousin Ohacha is ill suited to lead. He shares all his father's faults. Without Aramuk, he'll find himself abandoned or get himself killed. Aramuk is the real threat. Without Aramuk, my cousin will never make it back to Gaag."

"Which is why," Bartiin said, "I'll be in Caso making sure Aramuk sees an early grave as soon as possible. Aramuk matters most. I plan to leave in the next few days to follow."

"You'll leave tomorrow morning" Belvaas corrected. Bartiin opened his mouth to protest but found it silenced with a stern look. "My uncle may plan on travelling to Caso to instead slip away elsewhere in secret. I need you to make sure they don't disappear. I need you to make sure they're eliminated for good."

Bartiin bit his lip to keep himself from arguing. If the Careyagoan weren't present, he'd have had words for his old friend. *This is becoming pointless. There's nothing left of them. I'll be chasing their ghosts to the ends of the world.*

Atipo spoke up again, "It is plain that Prince Aramuk's strategy has been to hide behind a benefactor's safety. Since assaulting has proven… costly, I suggest you formulate a plan to draw them out. They've gone to Caso for a reason. It can only be the auction house. That will be your bait. Find something valuable to them, a family heirloom, perhaps. Something that will anger them; draw them out from hiding."

"Atipo, you are a cunning man." Bartiin said, grinning. Belvaas was less convinced.

Atipo continued, "Bartiin can facilitate the sale. Once they are drawn out, there will be an opportunity to strike. No walls. No garrisons. It will work, but only with the right bait."

The words came in the same moment Belvaas thought them, "We'll sell the throne."

"You would sell your ancestral throne?" Bartiin asked, incredulous.

"It's just a chair" Belvaas said dismissively. He locked eyes with Atipo, who looked curious for the first time. "Our people need stability, not a throne. They need hope, not a king."

After Bartiin was dismissed and Atipo departed, Belvaas climbed the long stairway through the central tower keep to his father's bedchambers. Belvaas was greeted at the door by one of the servants and led into the wide chamber that housed the bedridden body of Belvaas the elder, his father. The palace healer sat in the corner

at a desk she had moved into the room to keep an eye on the old man. Belvaas smiled as he caught her eye from across the room and she gave him a courteous nod of respect.

"May I have a moment of privacy with him?" Belvaas asked, knowing she wouldn't refuse.

The healer agreed and collected some of the tablets on her desk. She gave Belvaas a pitying smile as she passed by him, closing the door as she left. The young governor walked over to his father's bedside and pulled over a stool. The old man stirred and opened his eyes meeting Belvaas' gaze. Neither of them said anything. One wouldn't, and the other couldn't. A thousand thoughts rolled through Belvaas' mind but none of them ever progressed far enough to become words. His father looked away and then babbled unintelligibly. Belvaas took his fathers hand and sat with him for a long time, letting the once-wise man chatter to himself.

He missed his father. The loved the man before him, but it wasn't the same. The wise man was gone; replaced by an empty impression of what once was and would never again be. Once a hero, now barely a man. It was clear now they would never again debate philosophy. Never again walk the city, or hunt game in the hills, or sail together in the open sea. Regrets have a way of putting a man in a melancholic mood. No, he wouldn't miss this part of his father when he passed. But he would miss the company. He would miss the moments together where he felt he wasn't alone. Life had taken his grandfather and greed had stripped Belvaas of his uncles and cousin. Soon, it would take his father too.

Grief swept over him as the realization sunk in. Here, as his father lay dying and his uncle and cousin were to be murdered by his actions, Belvaas fathomed he would be the last of the Krimas line. The last in an ancient line of kings, queens, and heroes. The grief was almost enough for him to reconsider sending Bartiin after his uncle and cousin again. Just looking at the man, Belvaas knew what his father would say to that, "The right action and the easy action are rarely the same deed." The old man met his gaze, but didn't reply. Belvaas wasn't even sure he had been understood. Instead, he squeezed his father's hand tight and retired alone to his chamber for the night.

Chapter 4: The Sweet Wind

Ohacha woke in an uncomfortable hammock aboard The Sweet Wind, a converted merchant outrigger from Osiidan. The ship was small but nimble over the sea, with a central plank-built hull supported by double-outriggers for stability. There were two small rooms aboard the vessel. One was for the captain and one went to Aramuk. Ohacha, along with the rest of the small crew, slept below deck above the ever-sloshing pools of water that found their way into the bottom of the boat. It was the very antithesis of the flagship he expected to make the trip to Caso in. The only consolation was that the ship still smelled of citrus and tea leaves, rather than fish as he had expected. Over all, the Sweet Wind was the perfect ship to send an advanced party aboard. And thus, it was the perfect ship to smuggle two princes out of a city undetected.

Ohacha scowled as he slipped out of the hammock. His toes sunk to the ankle in the pool of water and the ship lurched under the impact of a wave. The rocking of the ship gave him that queasy feeling that sailing on an empty stomach gave. He climbed the ladder up onto the deck where the small crew was keeping the ship steady and the small crab-claw sails aligned with the wind. Bright sunlight ceded its claim to the huge puffy clouds floating across the sky, dotting the sea with dark shadows and webs of bright blue.

Ohacha wandered around the small vessel towards the helm. The Sweet Wind was originally intended to join the armada sailing to reclaim Gaag with Ohacha's father; a little makeshift transport vessel for soldiers and equipment. But, to the vessel's eventual good fortune, it took on water and had to return to port at Ayagiim for repairs. It had been the only ship from King Golan's invasion fleet to return.

Aramuk and Gaba'ké sat by the rudder with the ship's captain. They had been sailing for Casoya with a hand-picked crew of loyal soldiers disguised as messengers. It was a risk, leaving the bulk of their forces behind, but the swiftness and secrecy of their departure allowed them to escape Onera with haste. The larger force, now led by Lord Kulimas and Cask, would follow in the coming days.

"The island of Casoya lays ahead" Rolena called from the bow. All aboard turned to follow her point. Ohacha turned his head and squinted, but saw nothing more than the endless waves. It took another few moments before he too saw it. For there, clinging to the distant horizon, loomed the island. It was still too far away to be anything to the young princes' eyes but a blob of colours; browns and greens that seemed to disappear into the clouds.

It took the better part of the day to finally reach the island and up close, Ohacha had to admit that Caso was domineering. When compared to the sparse rocky shores of Ayagiim, the crumbly bluffs in Onera, and the rolling lowland plains his home kingdom of Gaag, Caso seemed monumental in size and scale. The rocky cliffs of the island pierced skyward from the sea like towers of earth and stone. They glowed with the fire of the setting sun. Dark rock and dense vegetation covered all that could be seen. Waves lapped

noisily against the prevailing cliff faces. Small coves worn out of the rock revealed beaches of black sands and sapphire bays. Large seabirds launched from outstretched branches over the rocky cliffs and flew over the ship and westward towards the setting sun. It was otherworldly and Ohacha's neck started to hurt from craning it upwards to stare.

Ohacha finished his unsatisfactory evening meal and emerged from below deck looking for a steady place to relax and digest. He spotted Rolena, still at the bow. She sat reclining up at the dark karst cliff faces. Ohacha joined her at the bow and stopped close enough to where she could see he was there, but not so close as to sit next to her. She wore trousers, a wide brimmed sunhat, and a plain overshirt. Ohacha realised this was the first time he had ever seen her without her armour and weapons. He was surprised to find she looked, well, like a normal person without them. She could have been anyone and everyone without them; a baker's daughter, a noble's wife, a stranger at a party. It occurred to him that he didn't really know anything about her. Not who she was nor where she came from before their paths crossed. Or what she was running from, in choosing to follow them across the sea.

"It's beautiful here" Rolena said, tipping up her hat to see him.

"Aye" he said. It was a non-answer.

"How do you feel about having to leave Onera?" she asked.

He pondered for a moment before answering, "It had to happen one day."

"You won't miss it?"

"It's hard to miss a place you never really knew. One where you never felt at home" He answered. "In all the years we lived at Lord Anup's estate, I left the grounds perhaps a dozen times. I must have spent countless days in the gardens looking out over the sea or in the tower staring out across the city. It's a strange life, imagining what the world is like from afar."

"I can only imagine…" Rolena trailed off.

"Have you ever left Onera before?" he asked, curious.

"A few times" she answered. "As a young girl, I spent a several months in Towiin seeing distant family. My father was also a mercenary and he bought us passage through work. Then as a soldier, I went back."

"Then coming with us to Caso won't be entirely unfamiliar" Ohacha remarked.

"Spirits no," Rolena said, "its completely different. This is the first time I ever left my island. The first time I've lost sight of land. The first time I've done anything truly on my own."

"You're not alone." Ohacha refuted.

"You understand my meaning" Rolena said.

"I do" he conceded. "What happened to your father?" he asked.

"He got old" she said, "and then he got hurt. And then he stopped being able to provide for the family and I took his place."

"He's still alive?" Ohacha asked.

"Yes," she said with a hard sigh. "He's still alive. What about you and Ander? You were close friends, right?" Rolena asked. Ohacha's heart skipped a beat.

"Yes" Ohacha answered somberly.

"You haven't said a single word about him since the funeral" she pressed. "If he was your friend, you should talk about him. It's important to let your feelings out when you can. And I'm not saying it has to be now or with me, but he's only truly gone if you let him disappear. For the longest time, I thought he was your older brother."

"He was…" Ohacha croaked, cursing the falter in his voice. He cleared his throat before continuing, "in a way. Ander and my cousin Belvaas were like my older brothers growing up. I didn't have any actual siblings, but they were both my elders. They picked on me a lot, but I miss… they way things used to be."

"I know" she said, sullenly. "And your mother and father, I'm sure."

Ohacha's face soured. "Not really" he grumbled. He spit over the railing. Rolena reeled. She turned to face him, only to see his back turned to her as he leaned over the railing. "They cared more about the throne than me."

"How can you say that?" Rolena asked with genuine concern. Ohacha had always been aloof. She had expected certain aspects of his character. He was a wealthy and well-educated prince of two foreign lands. He commanded lords and soldiers and powerful men. But in that moment, she was reminded just how young he still was.

"He left me behind."

Rolena thought about telling him that wasn't true, but the truth was that she didn't know. Instead, she said, "And I bet his last thought was regret over that choice." Ohacha not-so-subtly wiped tears from his eyes and turned to face her. He seemed vulnerable for the first time and it prompted her to ask a question that had been nagging her for a long time. "What *actually* happened to your parents, Ohacha? How did you end up in Onera? What happened, as you remember it?"

"Well," Ohacha said through red eyes, thinking back, "I remember the Careyago conquering Ayaan. There were lots of refugees and meetings about it. I was young. I didn't really understand. What I do know, is that my uncle Belvaas met with the Careyago afterwards in secret. He betrayed us. My mother and father. The kingdom itself. He organized a coup and tried to kill us but my uncle Aramuk found out his plan. We fled Gaag to my mother's home in Ayagiim. She was a princess there, before marrying my father. My grandmother took us in. You know the rest."

"Your father collected his forces to mount a counter-attack."

"He left me behind."

"But wouldn't you have died with them had you gone?" Rolena asked. "Cask told me they were caught between the walls of the city and the navy at their backs. But how did Aramuk discover Belvaas' treachery?" Rolena asked.

"The way my uncle tells it, luck." Ohacha answered. "The night of the coup, our family was already planning a trip to Ayagiim to visit my grandmother. When the fighting broke out inside the castle, Gaba'ké collected me and Cask protected my parents and uncle long enough for us to escape the castle. The ship was already ready."

"I see. I'm sorry that happened to you, Ohacha." He scowled at the thought of being pitied. Rolena continued, not seeing his change in mood. "After being cooped up so long in Onera, it must be nice to finally see some new scenery." Rolena said, changing the subject. "They say Caso is the city of gold. I know it can't possibly be literal, but I've always imagined it as if the whole city were made of solid gold."

Ohacha didn't answer right away. After a pause he said, "Uncle Aramuk visited back when he was about my age. He told me Caso has the largest port in the world. That it sees traders from all across the independent isles and the from the larger continents to the east and west. I think if the city were made of gold, he would have mentioned it rather than telling me about the weather."

Rolena laughed and looked over at him with a smile. He hadn't noticed, but the light of the day had already begun to fade. "It was nice talking with you, Ohacha. It was

pleasant to just speak with you, person to person. I'll be heading in for the night but if you need anyone shot, or anyone to talk to, you know where to find me."

Ohacha smiled but made no response. It wasn't until after she left that he realized she hadn't referred to him by his title of prince and felt a mix of conflicting emotions about it. He landed on displeased and turned to watch the last of the sunset wink out over the horizon with a frown. Darkness set on fast and the contrast between the light glowing from the ship's lanterns and the deep all-encompassing darkness of a moonless night provided Ohacha with a funny claustrophobic feeling. It felt as if the night sky wished to wrap him so tight in its dark embrace as to crush him. Displeased, and now unsettled, he stocked back towards his uncomfortable hammock to sleep away the night. Tomorrow would be a new day.

At dawn, the isle of gold emerged, its mountain peak blazing like a fiery beacon as the sun crested the horizon. The harsh, golden light forced Ohacha and Gaba'ké to shield their eyes at the bow of the Sweet Wind. Half the island was bathed in a brilliant glow, while the other half remained cloaked in the long shadow of the mountain that pierced the sky.

"The island of Caso is ancient and domineering." Gaba'ké said, not looking at Ohacha. "I have heard tale of an ancient spirit that dwells within the mountain and breathes fire and smoke." He said, gesturing to the largest of the peaks ahead. "There are also stories that say the great spirits of the skies land at the mountain's peak. There is a local belief that when one of the great spirits of the sky leaves the mountain peak, you can hear a thunderclap from their wings from across the island." Ohacha didn't respond to the old Aginjigaade. As per usual, the old sorcerer felt inclined to share his immense collection of wisdom that was anything but useful.

Soon, a smaller chain of islands rose from the sea and the piercing columns and the cliffs of rock from the main island were replaced with smaller and smaller crests. As the land leveled out, the first signs of human activity appeared. Small hamlets with huts and small homes on stilts came into view. Fishing canoes appeared near the shore. Ohacha watched as the movement of people caught his eye.

Gray gulls with black onyx beaks and icy blue feet shrieked high above the outrigger as they followed the Sweet Wind southwards along the island chain that sheltered the lower inlets and bays. Ohacha watched them approach the mast of the Sweet Wind with caution, only to pull away each time the vessel rocked with the crash of another wave. The ship passed a small rocky island covered in hundreds of large stocky animals sunbathing on the rocky surface and Ohacha found it hard not to revel in the excitement of these interesting unfamiliar creatures.

With one final wide break between two larger islands in the long chain, the city of gold, Caso, came into view for the first time. The city wrapped itself around the entirety of the inlet. It was massive, twice the size of Onera, and sparkled in the early morning light. Ohacha's eye was drawn to three distinct points of interest as they approached. A blocky fortress of stone sat perched atop a lonely mountain. The steep cliffs seemed to sprout out of the sea itself and loomed over the city. In the center of the city, two enormous blue-tiled domed buildings pierced high above the city streets. They sparkled in the sun. The bay was packed with ships of varying sizes, shapes and styles. There were hundreds of outriggers, and larger ships with unique sail patterns and colours. Several over the largest ships Ohacha had ever seen, biremes and triremes capable of carrying hundreds, also moored casually amongst the rest. There were more ships in this one bay than Ohacha thought he might have seen in his entire life.

Rolena joined Ohacha and Gaba'ké at the bow of the ship and leaned on the railing. "I really hoped the city would be made of gold" she said with a false disappointment.

"You give the songs and stories too much merit" Gaba'ké said.

"Gold is the blood that runs through Caso's veins, not through its walls"

"Considerably less impressive" she jested. Ohacha smiled despite himself.

Gaba'ké didn't take the hint and continued his sermon, "No I disagree" he said. "More gold changes hands in this city than anywhere else in the world. There are more auction houses in Caso then in all the Careyago Empire." He finished.

"She's trying to be funny" Ohacha said with a condescending tone.

"Ah yes," Gaba'ké said, "of course she is."

"What are the two large domed buildings in the city center?" Ohacha asked, knowing Gaba'ké would have an answer. He always did.

"The one to the north with the single domed roof is the Great Casoyan Auction House." Gaba'ké said, gesturing with his hands. "The one in the center of the city is the old Royal Palace, built by the last dynasty of Casoyan Kings, but is now the seat of the new Casoyan government" he finished.

"New Casoyan Government?" Ohacha asked.

"New is the best equivalent word in Tralang" Gaba'ké said. "A better term would be Dzhali, or recent" he said, picking the word for recent from their native tongue. "The Casoyan Kingdom fell around the time of your grandfather's birth, Ohacha. The Kingdom was maintained by five guilds that supported commerce and prosperity in the city. Eventually, I suppose the guilds realized they didn't need the King anymore or something of the like and overthrew him to have the guild leaders rule as the new kings of Caso."

"I'm amazed they didn't end up infighting after the coup" Ohacha surmised. "It would have been easy for person to step into the old role as King and continue the cycle."

"That's what most people would do" Rolena agreed.

"There was a strong ideology built into the movement to overthrow the King" Aramuk said, walking up from behind. The other turned to stare. "People didn't just dislike the old King of Caso, they despised him enough to sour the entire notion of kings in general. The revolution was built of replacing the King's with the Patzaus, the leaders of each guild, who would rule as a group in the best interest of their separate parts." Aramuk explained. "The Casoyan Kings are a warning to all who lead, no matter a Kingdom or a household, about the dangers of hoarding power and resources. You cannot take without giving some back and you can never lead alone."

The entire city was nestled between the huge monolith of rock, of which the fortress sat atop and the long string of barrier islands that stretched north and protected the inner bays from the storms and the sea. The city itself was surrounded by walls, though Ohacha had a difficult time picking them out from the masses of city blocks. The waterfront was a long continuous array of stone quays and warehoused piers that reached into the bay like long fingers trying to grasp the ocean.

A dance ensued as the Sweet Wind slowly navigated her way towards one of the main ports, looking for an opening large enough to fit the little outrigger while avoiding tangle with other craft. It was obvious from the outset that there would be no space for the larger fleet of ships here. That was a problem to solve later. As they drew closer to the port, Gaba'ké leaned over to Aramuk. Ohacha saw the movement from the corner of his eye and listened as best he could to the conversation,

“Do you two remember how many Aginjigaade I could feel when we first arrived in Onera?” Gaba’ké said.

“No” Aramuk answered. “Remind me, old friend.”

“Back in Onera, I… quested with my agindan and could feel the presence of maybe forty or fifty Aginjigaade in all of Onera. There have to be close to two hundred in this city” Gaba’ké said, excitedly. “I haven’t felt this many presences since I trained at the Aginjigaade school in Ayaan.”

“Do you sense any threats?” Aramuk asked, with delicate concern.

“Not yet” Gaba’ké answered, “But I have been noticed. Consciousnesses fills the air here” Gaba’ké continued. “To me, it feels like I am in a very crowded room of, and each person’s agindan pushes and fills the spaces it can to settle comfortably into the city. They’re spread all across the city. I can sense them on the ships in the bay, some at the fortress, others in taverns, temples, warehouses, inns, private homes.”

“What does that mean?” Ohacha asked, looking over his shoulder

“It doesn’t mean that the Casoyans control two hundred Aginjigaade” Aramuk answered. “Many of them are likely in the same position as us. Visitors with an Aginjigaade in the party or on payroll for protection.”

“A lot of Aginjigaade make good coin as bodyguards.” Rolena said. “You can charge a premium for services you’ll never really have to use. I knew of another mercenary who used to pretend to be one to charge more for his services.”

“Did he ever get caught?” Gaba’ké asked.

“Of course, he did” Rolena answered. “He was an idiot. Got himself hanged for it.”

Ohacha thought about what Gaba’ké said, but couldn’t wrap his mind around it. There were two hundred or so Aginjigaade in Caso. Back in Gaag, there had only been nine; the three Royal Aginjigaade, Joulla, Tozhoo, and Gaba’ké, and their apprentice Vola, all of them trained at the school in Ayaan. He remembered those four as they lived inside the castle. There was the stonemason named Sturdy. There was the old drunk hermit who burned his house down, whom Ohacha only knew of because of that exact story told around the palace. Then there were two children born with the gift and the crazy woman who smelled the storms coming. Ohacha had presumed her insane until Gaba’ké has confirmed that she did indeed have the gift. *Wait*, Ohacha reconsidered, *the old man has an odd sense of humour. Was he joking about that?*

The Sweet Wind furled her sails and oarsmen took control, maneuvering the small craft forward as the captain gracefully navigated the little ship through the crowded harbour. Ohacha and Aramuk went below deck, despite Ohacha’s protests, to ensure the docks were safe upon arrival. The ship found a place to dock and the men aboard expertly brought the boat in safely without much fuss. A wharfinger appeared and inspected the ship quickly, then collected wharfage. The men aboard begun to unload the food, equipment, and personal affects as a messenger carrying a hand-written notice on parchment stamped with the Royal Krimas family seal made their way towards their potential patron’s estate. Aramuk was pulling at a very old connection to try and make this work. If it didn’t, they would have to find less optimal accommodations in the interim.

“Back when I was just a small boy,” Aramuk explained, “My father took me and your uncles to visit Caso as dignitaries of Gaag. I think he hoped that by coming personally, and with our family, he would show that Gaag was open to doing business with the Casoyan Patzau. It took a long time for the people of Caso to become comfortable trading with Kingdoms, as a former Kingdom itself. I think they held the

notion that all kings were as terrible as the last Casoyan dynasty of kings had been. All that said, we stayed with one of the most powerful noble families in Caso, the Yohati's, whose patriarch had been one of the five original Patzau's that had rebelled against the King."

"And you believe this Burrenal Yohati still lives in Caso and will remember you from his youth?" Gaba'ké asked, doubtful.

"I believe its worth a try." Aramuk had said.

And so, they waited for the messenger to return with a reply from the Yohati family. The reply came faster than Ohacha would have wagered. With their destination clear, Rolena and the soldiers led the way as Aramuk, Ohacha, and Gaba'ké marched up the docks and onto land for the first time since they had left Onera.

They had come ashore in the most densely packed area of docks, just south of the northern canal and the warehouses on the pier that lined its edges. Ahead in the distance, they could see one of the two large buildings that towered over the city blocks; the Great Careyago Auction House. The streets themselves were cobbled with dark stones that had worn gray. They were wider than in Onera, allowing for a dozen people to walk shoulder to shoulder, and twice for the streets that bordered the waterfront. Matching Ohacha expectations, the streets were immaculately clean and people walked the streets in fine clothes, locals carrying small wooden parasols to hide them from the late morning heat. There were dozens of people out on the streets and vendors in doorways shouted at passersby in both Casoyan and Tralang selling dishes of food including skewers of meat, buns, breads, and bowls of soup spooned from gigantic pots that bubbled with savoury invitations.

Ohacha's group marched away from the waterfront, passing local soldiers who were relaxed and enjoying drinks and a card game in a nearby restaurant. Ohacha expected them to glance over, but they paid his group no mind. For the first time in years, the tension that had defined their lives began to ease. They were still cautious, of course, but the constant, vigilant edge they had lived with for three years felt lessened. This change was most evident as Gaba'ké leaned in to speak with him. It was a simple, casual gesture he would never make when on-edge.

"Do you see those men ahead of us" he said, point a finger subtly ahead and to the left. "The ones wearing the red robes, surrounded by those guards."

"Yes, I see them" Ohacha said, spotting the three men.

"Those men are from Tulin" Gaba'ké said. "Do you remember your geography?"

"No" Ohacha admitted. Local geography, sure. But distant geography is worth less than stories.

"Tulin is the capital city of the O'kwiré Empire." Gaba'ké said with a wide smile. "How about now?" Does that spring your memory?

"You mean the Empire on the far side across the sea?" Ohacha said, mystified.

"That's the one" Gaba'ké said. "They're O'Kwiran emissaries. The robes give it away. Well, that and their very foreign features" he added. "The furthest east I've ever been is Great Turtle City, and that trip took almost a month at sea. Add another month or two and you'd make it to Tulin in the Sweet Wind. They've come a very long way to be here."

Ohacha could only stare as they passed the men by. The emissaries wore long red robes and unusual hats that covered their heads. They spoke with sounds so foreign to Ohacha, he couldn't even begin to comprehend their conversation. One of the three emissaries turned and locked eyes with the young prince. The man had warm features

and a short face with a beard the colour of sand. Instead of dark pupils, the man's eyes were a vibrant yellowy orange colour that reminded Ohacha of the sun. Their gazes separated and Ohacha passed by, forgetting the strange men for the new oddities appearing on each corner.

Dark quarried stones made fine blocky foundations for all of the buildings they passed by. The streets, though narrow in some of the branching passages, were wide enough for carts and palanquins to pass through side by side as demonstrated as a large ornate palanquin appears further up the road. Even from fifty paces, vibrant golds, greens, and reds reflected off the palanquin to the point where the eye had no choice but to look in that direction.

Gaba'ké halted the group as it approached changed posture. "Aginjigaade" he grumbled, bring the group to a halt and moving to the side of the street to let the vibrant palanquin and the dozen men carrying it pass. Unexpectedly, the men halted right in front of the Gaagians. Rolena reached down for her short sword on her hip and the two soldiers followed suit, placing their hands on their own pommels, ready to draw steel with cautious uncertainty. Another servant appeared and unfolded legs from a hidden location under the Palanquin as well as a set of steps that descended from under the doorway. The twelve burly men carrying the great wooden beast set it down gently. Aramuk turned and waved to ease the soldiers' tension.

The door swung upon and a large hand adorned in numerous rings reached out to clasp the edge of the Palanquin. A large stocky man stepped through the portal and squinted at the bright sunlight, raising a thick ring covered hand to shield his eyes and take stock of the crowd before him. He straightened on the steps to stand to his full height, when combined with his higher position on the steps, made the large man look like a true giant. He wore a clean and expensive looking black and red pearl-buttoned coat adorned with golden silk embroidery that sat atop a long-pleated skirt that hung to the man's ankles. The skirt shared the same black and red colours as the coat. The man stepped down onto the cobbled street and a small woman appeared behind him adorned in a clean white robe that covered her body head to toe. The robe had a high collar that hugged high around her neck and her dark hair was braided back into a bun behind her head. She had large dark eyes, high cheekbones, and a round nose. The Aginjigaade.

"Greetings, envoys of old Gaag" the man said merrily.

"Greetings" Aramuk replied to the portly man, wary.

"Patzau Yohati?" Ohacha asked. The man let out a booming laugh and beamed with a toothy smile.

"No, my boy" he said and Ohacha frowned at being called 'boy.' The man continued, either not noticing or not caring, "I am not Patzau Yohati. My name is Mellen Minoc, Patzau Minoc if you will." He spoke as the woman finally took her place beside him. Ohacha realized that she wasn't actually that small. Patzau Minoc, who stood beside her, just happened to be so large as to make her look miniscule. "Welcome to the great city of Caso!" he finished. It was theatrical, Ohacha had to admit.

"It is a pleasure to receive your welcome, Patzau Minoc" Aramuk said, "although I must ask how you knew who we were and how to find us."

"Ah yes," Patzau Minoc said. "You have a great many enemies. You must fear they would do as I have done but you needn't worry, I have good friends in Onera such as our mutual friend Anup. After all, it is my business to know of worldly events outside of this city and the impacts they may have on… business."

“And how it was you knew to find us?” Gaba’ké pressed. “Not even Patzau Yohati was aware we were coming to see him.”

“Yes, that…” Patzau Minoc said, gesturing to Gaba’ké the Aginjigaade, “is because of you” he smiled. The rings on his fingers glimmered in the gesture. “I’m sure you sensed Kuta here just as she could sense you. It’s not everyday a new Aginjigaade sails into the city.” He gestured to the young woman in white beside him and she gave a polite acknowledgement.

“Well, it is very gracious of you, Patzau Minoc and Aginjigaade Kuta, to grace us with your welcome. You treat us well above our stature these days.” Aramuk said.

Patzau Minoc gave a less-than coy chuckle and brought his left hand up to cover his mouth. “Perhaps, but I have my suspicions as to why you’ve come to Casoya, and… though you may not sit on the throne of Gaag today, it is always wise to treat guests with dignity and respect, especially when they come to do business.”

“That is most courteous.” Aramuk said.

“Besides,” Patzau Minoc continued, “it is plain to those who keep informed that you one day wish to retake your ancestral throne. Perhaps, one day it will come to pass. It is better for business to make friends than enemies.”

“I will never rule Gaag” Aramuk said, looking to Ohacha.

“Oh!” Patzau Minoc said with surprised enthusiasm, “It is the boy then, who will rule if you succeed.”

Anger flared in Ohacha’s eyes at the remark, “I am no boy” he snapped.

“Feisty!” Patzau Minoc announced with a chuckle. “I meant you no offence, boy” he said, punctuating the word. “I understand how you may feel, but to fathers and old men alike, younger men will always be boys until the day we die and very rarely before then.”

Aramuk outwardly smiled at the comment, though he didn’t inwardly agree. This boy has seen more wicked deeds than most men will see across their whole lives. He thought to say so to the Patzau, but changed his mind. Ohacha pursed his lips and did his best to say nothing more, lest he make their time in the city difficult by adding to their long list of enemies.

The Patzau clasped his hands together with the loud metallic clink of rings on rings. “Well then” he said. “Should you have any issues while in the city, come to the Artisan’s Guild and ask for myself or Kuta. If we’re not around, leave a message with an attendant or my wife Mira and we will work something out. I take it, you will be staying with Patzau Yohati?” Patzau Minoc asked.

“That is yet to be determined” Aramuk answered.

“If it doesn’t work out, let me know and I can provide a host of alternatives that would suit your needs. Inns, private estates of friends, the like” he added. “I am also the foremost expert on quality goods and equipment in the city. The armourers and weaponsmiths in Caso are unparallelled.” He smiled. “Bronze casting is our specialty. None in the world are our equals.”

“That would be most appreciated, Patzau Minoc.” Aramuk said. “We will make a point of reaching out for just such recommendations.”

“Excellent” the large man said. “Give Patzau Yohati my best and don’t leave the city walls” Patzau Minoc said, and turned to take the steps back up into his palanquin. The girl gave an embarrassed smile and turned to follow Patzau Minoc into the wooden vehicle. Ohacha watched as the servants returned to their positions and hoisted the

palanquin up and marched off past them towards the waterfront. Gaba'ké eased and sighed audibly. "I didn't like that at all" he said.

"Nor do I" Aramuk agreed. "He must be friendly with Lord Anup. Nobody else knows we were coming here."

"Not only that" Gaba'ké added, "but nobody who knew could have gotten that information here faster than we got here ourselves. This set of events deeply troubles me. He must be bluffing. It seems impossible that he could predict our being here."

"That would make sense." Ohacha said.

"Its still incredibly unlikely" Aramuk said, "and that makes me uneasy. Let's go" he continued, "we're causing a scene."

Ohacha looked around and it was true. Several locals stared at them with new found interest. Ohacha caught the eye of a pair of girls watching from a storefront and he smiled. They turned away franticly, returning to whatever work or shopping they were doing. Ohacha's smile faltered.

The group continued deeper into the city led by the messenger. The tight streets opened into a grand plaza at the foot of the Great Casoyan Auction House. Up close, the building was magnificent in its size and scale. From afar, the building loomed tall over the skyline but up close, the footprint of the thick quarried stone walls amounted to a structure larger than the castle in Gaag. The main bulk of the building loomed taller than even the surrounding city blocks. The great blue-tiled dome on the top pierced upwards out of sight, easily doubling the structures height. Opposite the grand stone building, stalls of merchants crowded together in orderly rows, tempting buyers with unique and expensive wares. The group passed with eyes fixed upwards, marveling at the sparking dome of glazed tiles.

Rolena appeared at Ohacha's side unexpectedly. Her hand shot outwards towards him and Ohacha flinched at the unexpected movement. Her hand caught the outstretched hand of an innocent looking child. The boy, perhaps ten, looked mortified as Rolena held his wrist tight a fingers breadth from Ohacha's sword. At the same moment, as Ohacha flinched, he knocked her hand, loosening her grip. The young child didn't hesitate, using the confusion to escape from Rolena's grasp. Gaba'ké and Aramuk turned at the sudden commotion as the boy picked himself up in a flash of motion, vanishing into the market crowd.

"Pickpocket" Rolena said, eying Ohacha. He seemed rattled by the unexpected commotion. He's used to more deadly attackers, Rolena surmised. She watched the boy disappear into the crowd, knowing she would never catch him.

Moving past the Auction House and its towering dome and long ornamental wings, the group moved southwards towards the central canal. Along the banks, bowed willows arched outwards away from the houses and shops that lined the wide canal walls. They shielded the people and boats below from the mid-day heat. Merchants selling the day's catch, fish, crabs, and clams, bellowed prices at passersby. Boats followed along heading inland, steered by sun-kissed men with oars on the way towards the brackish lake just outside the city.

They reached the end of the street where it curved away from the canal. Their destination, a large, walled estate, hugged the canal's edge. Dense, broad-leafed trees with long trailing creepers loomed over the high stone walls, shading the street. Arriving at the gatehouse, a guard emerged to give them a silent, scrutinizing once-over. Iron studded timber doors standing taller than two men blocked views into the estate. The gate groaned open on loud hinges, forcing them to take a step back. Standing on the

other side stood an older couple and a retinue of personal guards larger than their own host.

The older man stepped forward through the opening and smiled a strange smile. He was shorter than Ohacha expected, and looked well over sixty years. He had tanned skin that could no longer hide the leathery wrinkles of age around his face and neck. Thin an unassuming, he had white salt-and-pepper hair beneath a flat brimless black hat ornamented with a single golden band. Thick black eyebrows famed his dark inset eyes and a square chin outlined his well manicured goatee and moustache. He wore clothes similar to Patzau Minoc's, a finely woven undershirt coloured a seafoam greenish blue with a dark red overcoat with white embroidered accents above dark loose-fitting pants.

"Welcome" he said, passing his gaze across the group to land on Aramuk in particular. "Aramuk Krimas" he said, "it has been many, many years."

"It has" Aramuk said. "It is a pleasure to see you again after all this time, Burrenal."

"Please" Yohati said. "It is Patzau Yohati now. You can use my name inside the house, but I'd like to keep the formalities in public settings."

"Patzau?" Aramuk repeated. "Congratulations on your appointment to the council."

"Oh, please" Yohati said dismissively, "I've been a member of the council for twenty-five years. You're quickly demonstrating how little the Krimases cared to keep up contact with us here in Caso." Ohacha recoiled, not expecting the challenge.

"You are right, Patzau Yohati." Aramuk said graciously. "Gaag has seen its own changes. Please excuse me if I have caused any offence. We've had our hands full with our own… problems these last few years."

"I've heard" the old Patzau said. "You've gone and lost yourself a kingdom."

"I would say that my brother lost himself a kingdom" Aramuk countered. "But that's neither here nor there."

"A technicality" Patzau Yohati responded. "The weakest way to be correct. What happened? Couldn't hold out against the Careyago armies? I heard you barely put up a fight."

"The Careyago navy proved its effectiveness. Can Caso hold against such a force?" Aramuk countered. The older man frowned at the comment. "Let's not stand here and pretend you don't already know what happened" Aramuk said. "If you want some specific details, we can discuss them over dinner and a bottle sometime. We've brought you some of the finest Oneran cases."

"You think a gift of wine will get you through my door?" Patzau Yohati said sternly.

Before Aramuk had the chance to answer, the woman behind him stepped forward. She was handsome, both despite and in spite of her age. She held an air of confidence and expertise that only came from long years of experience. She reminded Ohacha of his mother, if only in this similarity. Unlike his mother, she had dark wavy hair than rested just below her collarbone and a diamond shape face that still managed to remind you that, although she might not still be as young as she once was, she was still every bit as beautiful. There was a grace to her. It permeated the way she existed; her face, her fine clothes, her jewellery. Coming to Patzau Yohati's side, she rested a hand on his shoulder and he looked over at her while she looked past him at Aramuk.

"Now come, dear" she said placatingly. Her voice was soft and inviting. "Many years may have passed, but these men have come a long way to see you. And you know

just as well as I do the circumstances of their arrival. Why cause them distress at the door. You can debate politics over food and wine as promised."

He gave her a long look that Ohacha couldn't decipher. "Bah," he scoffed. "You'll be the death of me, Reah." His words sounded angry, but the placated smile on his face suggested otherwise. He looked to one of the soldiers in his retinue and called a name. A soldier came forward at the call. "See our guests to the small guest house." Turning back to Aramuk, he continued, "You can stay until the end of the season at the very least. We can discuss details and timelines later. I'll be heading out to an important meeting, but my staff will get you settled."

"Thank you for your kindness" Aramuk said.

Yohati waved him silent, "But" he punctuated the word, "I know well of your history in Onera. Unlike your previous host, I plan on living in my house full time. The first time some cutthroat hops my walls and enters my house to take your lives, that'll be it. I'll not have my wife and daughter put in danger for your sakes."

"Understood." Aramuk agreed. Ohacha wanted to argue but wasn't sure when the appropriate time would be or if there ever would be one. We're not inviting them in…

"And, I want a detailed recount of your soldiers, weapons, and that Aginjigaade's abilities" Yohati said, gesturing at Gaba'ké in his robes. "Moreover, I won't go through the effort of burying you if you get yourselves killed here. In fact, I'll make you damn pay for it." With that, the old Patzau and his wife Reah marched outside the walls with his soldiers at his heels.

They were led into the grounds. Ornamented flagstones replaced the cobbled streets beyond the gateway. Ahead, in the gaps between the trees, the grandeur of the main estate mimicked the impressive architecture of the Auction House. It was built of the same dark quarried stone and stood tall above the gardens and trees, like the auction house but without the dome. Ancient looking trees stood above gardens of ferns, flowers and broad-leafed plants. Speckles of bright sunlight danced across the ground as the gentle breeze rustled the canopy above. Small nature spirits danced amongst the gardens and clung to the mosses and leaves.

Instead of following the central road to the main estate, they were led them down a smaller side path. As they came upon the structure hidden in the garden, it became evident that the small guest house was certainly for guests, but certainly not small. Framed by the same ancient trees and their soft weeping mosses, the house was nearly three stories tall and had a terrace that overlooked the canal. Behind, shrubs and walls encircled its own private garden spaces. Its grandeur matched many of the wealthier stone homes and mansions that littered the crooked streets they had passed along the way.

The attendant opened the guest house for them and the group filed in, ready to settle down again after the long journey. Finding a bedroom he liked, Ohacha collapsed on the hard bed and gazed out through the window. Above the canopy of Patzau Yohati's private gardens, Ohacha stared at the lonely mountain peak that stretched so high as to disappear into haze.

Tired from the journey, Ohacha leaned back on the bed and closed his eyes. He dreamed awake of Gaag. Of home. But the Gaag he dreamed of looked strange in his mind, altered. Its features were less defined than he remembered. He thought of his bedroom in the royal castle but could only remember his bedroom in Onera. Once he realized the mistake, he tried again but could only picture his bedroom in Ayagiim. The further I stray from home, the less I can recall. Gaag felt further now that it ever had. Like

they were constantly moving, but somehow travelling in the wrong direction. It feels like the spirits not only want to keep me from my home physically, but also in my dreams. Still, Ohacha was able to recall the long hallway where his grandfathers ornate throne sat. The throne where his father has sat for only a few days. The throne he one day vowed to sit upon. That thought gave him comfort. Hope to feed the dream. Hope to smother the loss.

Stepping back into the palanquin, Patzau Mellen Minoc sighed in relief at the respite from the heat. He grabbed a handkerchief and dabbed his brows, careful not to smudge his powders. Kuta watched silently as he found his usual comfortable spot and settled in for the ride. His meeting with the princes had gone well. They were an interesting group. Perhaps, useful pawns. That was yet to be seen. That they were here to see Yohati was all the more interesting. Mellen prided himself on his knowledge of people and things and for once, he had been surprised to learn something unexpected. There is some kind of history with Yohati, he pondered to himself, and learning of this connection can do nothing but help paint a wider picture of how to proceed. After all, foreigners in their ignorance have just as much use as pawns as politicians and guild bureaucrats do.

The servants lifted the palanquin and the group was off towards the southern port. Mellen lifted the veil that covered the windows of his travelling box to peer out at the blocks of buildings. Kuta remained quiet, waiting for him to be ready to speak rather than pushing the subject. Ever the patient one, Mellen thought. The palanquin and the soldiers crossed over the Grand Canal that bisected the city. Mellen saw riverboats maneuvering their way through as peddlers sold trinkets, food, and clothes out of their small vessels. I wonder how Yohati's guild taxes those boats, Mellen thought to himself. The caravan turned a corner and the new angle made viewing out of the palanquin uncomfortable. Mellen closed the curtain and looked over to Kuta, who remained silent.

"What do you think about them, the princes?" Mellen asked.

"The Gaagian princes?" Kuta repeated. "There is little I can say."

"Well, what can you say?" Mellen asked.

"Their Aginjigaade…" Kuta said. "He seems special"

"Special?" Mellen asked, surprised by her answer. More information to be gleamed, he thought to himself. "How so?" Mellen asked.

Kuta took a few extra moments to find the right words to answer. Then she said, "He hides it very well, but I believe strongly that he has at least two spiritual affinities. Perhaps a third. This would make him an oddity among our kind and certainly a person of interest in the city."

"What does it mean to have two affinities?" Mellen asked. "Like two skills? Or two spirits he can draw power from?

"Well, both" Kuta said. "Following the Ayaani system, most Aginjigaade have an affinity in one of the many spiritual groupings, and usually a single or perhaps a fortunate Aginjigaade might have two branches of that group" Kuta explained.

"I've never fully understood your Aginjigaade jargon" Mellen complained. "In simpler terms. Spare me the history lesson." I can read the histories later.

"I have an affinity towards the spirits of metals. My affinity classification would be within mineral spirits, and my branch of mineral spirits include spirits that like metals. In rare cases, an Aginjigaade might have an affinity to more than one branch in their classification. This would be like me having a metal spirit branch and, as an example, also having a minerals spirit branch or a crystal creatures branch. Having a second branch isn't

too uncommon. Even rarer would be an Aginjigaade possessing a third branch. Very few Aginjigaade living have this fortune. Unfortunately, I unable to learn how many branches an Aginjigaade has access to, the same way you cannot know how many languages a person speaks without asking. But I didn't say that he has two branches, I said I believe he has two affinities."

"Meaning?" Mellen asked, a little confused.

"I suspect he has at least one branch in earthen spirits and another branch in another spirit classification, although I couldn't sense which" Kuta answered. "The earthen spirits were easy to detect for me; they are attracted to stone trinkets he carries on his person. However, there are other spirits that hang around close to him that are not earthen in nature. The spirits he leads are very weak, almost wisps amongst the many spirits that roam the streets. Had I not already been interested in the earthen spirits he has collected; I would never have noticed the other spirits that trail behind him."

Mellen pondered that for a moment before asking, "Is he powerful? Can we use him?"

"That is unclear. My master used to say that old Aginjigaade are either cowards, or strong." Kuta said. "The reckless and the weak are often killed and consumed by the very spirits they hope to control. Many die very young. Lesser Aginjigaade fear spirits. They fear the gift. I would like to meet him again, if it could be arranged."

"If it can be done, I will arrange it." Mellen said. "It may be difficult to organize a meeting without tipping off our interest in him to the other members of the council. Especially with these princes living in Yohati's estate. We will have to chance an interaction when they are about in the city. Will Yohati be able to learn what you just learned?"

"It is not impossible, if his Aginjigaade are present and they share an affinity or branch…" Kuta answered, "then perhaps. One has to know where to look. I am not very familiar with Yohati's Aginjigaade. Is he the one with the air affinity? Or is that someone else?"

"He's the illusionist" Mellen said.

"Then it might be hard for him to notice," Kuta said, "like asking a painter to play music."

"Hmm" Mellen pondered. "I will see to it that we have an informant watch the princes, specifically. I believe we have someone in Yohati's serving staff. The Aginjigaade travels with them. Framing our interest in the princes, rather than the Aginjigaade, should keep our intentions hidden."

"I agree" Kuta said. "I also suggest we send messages to the lords of Onera, especially Anup, asking if they are able to share any information about him. Perhaps there is more to be learned from where they have come that might suggest what it is they want and what they are capable of."

Mellen smiled.

Chapter 5: The Fox and the Thief

The bay of Caso was blanketed in moonlight as the small Careyago trade ship sailed into the harbour. The masts and hulls of the countless ships cast long scars of shadow across the dark water. Illum stone beacons punctuated each vessel's place in the dark. Soft waves lapped along the hull. Aboard, Bartiin Foxstring of Gaag and his troupe of Careyago mercenaries prepared to make land and to finally eliminate Aramuk and Ohacha Krimas. Bartiin stood at the foredeck, magnificent hat perched proudly atop his head. He watched patiently as their small craft maneuvered through the busy port towards the southern docks between the fortress perched high above the clifftop and the blue-domed palaces that glowed in the night.

The boat creaked loudly as it pulled alongside the wooden dock. Half a dozen sailors and soldiers leapt over the gunnels onto the dock with a practiced ease, despite the darkness, and managed to pull her in and tie the ship down. A warm circle of lanternlight revealed an approaching figure. Bartiin descended the gangplank and intercepted the man under the light of the lantern and the moon. It was the wharfinger, as made clear by the ledger, badge, and air of self-importance. Despite the late hour, the man looked eager for someone to hassle.

"Port of origin?" the wharfinger asked in Tralang, stylus at the ready.

Good evening to you too. "Ayaan" Bartiin lied. They had agreed it wiser not to register the ship as Gaagian, lest it raise suspicion from Aramuk. He was ever vigilant.

"Are you the owner or the captain?" The man asked, eyeing the sword at his hip.

"Neither" Bartiin answered. "I'm the merchant who's chartered this vessel."

The wharfinger judged him suspiciously, "What business do you have in Casoya?"

"A bit of everything" Bartiin said, a half truth. "I've got some items to sell at the Casoyan Auction House. I'm looking for some new equipment. And, I've got some old acquaintances in the city that I intend to visit."

The wharfinger gave Bartiin a look that suggested he didn't believe they had anything valuable enough aboard to warrant making it to the auction. To his credit, the man scribbled down on the ledger and kept his comments to himself. "Make sure you book an appointment at the Auction House," he said, not looking up from the ledger, "The guild won't let you show up the day of.

"Of course," Bartiin replied.

"How do you want to pay?" the man asked.

"I've got imperial coins" Bartiin said.

"Careyago?" the man scoffed. "It's two imperial golds per month to dock here in the Spires. That's a hundred-eighty in silver or forty-five a week. If that's too high…"

Bartiin drew out a pouch of coins and drew out a handful of stamped imperial golds and placed two in the man's palm. "These are for the first month, and this one" he added, holding out a second gold coin, "is for you to forgo the inspection of cargo."

The wharfinger eyed Bartiin with new interest. He pocketed the extra coin with greedy fingers.

"Let's go ashore" Bartiin said, gesturing the man away from the ship.

"Got somewhere to be this late?" the wharfinger asked. He glanced a quick side-eye at the ship.

"Asleep" Bartiin answered. "In a real bed." The two men walked together in silence down the dock. Their boots knocked hollow steps along the planks. Waves lapped softly against the wooden piers and perished along the rocks revealed at low tide beneath the cobbled quay wall. The wharfinger turned to enter a little shack on the side of the docks. Inside, a pair of soldiers were playing cards while a third napped with feet perched high on a table. The two soldiers only spared him a momentary glance before returning to their game.

Bartiin ambled alone into the dark and unfamiliar Casoyan streets, led forward only by directions committed to memory. Following the shoreline, Bartiin passed by the numerous sailor's inns and taverns. Sailor's snares stood outside in redolent dresses, their beauty the invitation to merriment and perhaps a little more. But never for free. Other men, drunk on new wages as much as any liquor, often found themselves with little left after the evening was done.

Bartiin kept his eyes fixed ahead. He reached the plaza with the polished black stone obelisk at its heart, the first way-marker on his way to the embassy. It was empty this time of night. No merchants manned the skeleton stalls. Windows remained mostly dark. The few people who milled around in the darkness looked up to no good. Voices and rattles of soldiers echoed from the steep path up to the fortress. At the sound, a dark slender figure slinked into an alleyway. A pair of figures separated, keen on remaining undisturbed.

From the plaza, Bartiin followed the street opposite fortress hill, one hand hovering close to the sword he kept at his side. Two blocks inland, Bartiin found the place he was looking for. The building was old, like the others in the neighbourhood, and had a set of dark stone steps leading to a landing. Above the doorway, burned onto a wooden sign lay the emperor's sigil. *The Careyago Embassy.* He rapped on the firm wooden door with his knuckles and immediately regretted the choice. He hammered with his fist instead and the door flew open despite its heft. A man stood, filling the portal. *Not the ambassador,* Bartiin puzzled, *the ambassador is a woman.*

The stranger spoke to him in a foreign tongue. Bartiin stared back, blank-faced. The man switched languages again. This time, Bartiin recognized the sounds as Careyago but still didn't understand their meaning. Bartiin used the only Careyago phrase he knew, and asked to speak in the trader's tongue.

The man eyed him suspiciously, gaze lingering on the large hat. Bartiin started to wonder if this were a Casoyan normality, or if he simply looked untrustworthy for some reason.

"How can I help you, sir?" the man repeated, this time in Tralang.

"I am here to meet with Ambassador Durali. I've come under the direction of Atipo Waliimanad and Governor Krimas of Gaag" he said, presenting a sealed parchment pulled from his pocket. The parchment was smooth and luxurious and Bartiin felt remorse in having to give it away.

The strange man broke the seal and opened the letter to read its contents. Bartiin stood awkwardly in the doorway as the man read the letter. The man's eyes darted up and down between the parchment and Bartiin's face. He smiled, trying to appear non-

threatening. “Please, come inside” the man said. “I’ll fetch the ambassador. Remove your boots and wait in the parlor.”

“Ah, thank you” Bartiin said, finding a bench in the landing. He sat and removed his boots, then wandered into the parlour. The room was filled with fine wooden furniture and a plush upholstered bench the colour of shallow seas. On the walls hung paintings and maps, indicative of the empire a world away. A few long and quiet minutes later, the man returned with a woman, the two of them descending down the staircase.

“A bit late for a visit” the woman said, entering the room. Her eyes revealed that she had been woken for this, as did the large shawl draped around her body that did little to disguise the fact that she hadn’t been dressed for company. “My name is Hina” she said, “Ambassador of the Careyago Empire to the Casoyan Patzaucracy.”

“I am Bartiin. My sincerest apologies for disturbing you at this late hour” Bartiin said. The two of them spent a moment, sizing each other up in the dim light as she took her seat and settled in to the opposing chair. She was older than he was, but not by much, and had the distinct features of the Careyago of Cayanoshi, the capital. The round face, round eyes, and strong nose prominent with northerners. Her hair was lighter than his own and very curly. He wondered what she saw as she looked at him. Bartiin removed his hat.

“This couldn’t wait until morning?”

“My business here differs from what was written on that parchment” Bartiin explained.

“I know” she responded, “I recognized the code. What is it you’ve actually come here for?”

“A group of men, enemies to the empire, are slated to arrive in Caso very soon” Bartiin said. “I have been tasked with killing them.”

“Who are they?” she asked, leaning back in her seat.

“The last surviving members of the Krimas dynasty” he answered.

“And who has sanctioned this attack?”

“Governor Belvaas the younger–”

“Who has no authority here” she cut in.

“Under the direction of the emperor himself” he finished.

“Ah,” she said, taken aback. “That makes things a little clearer. I saw Atipo’s signature beside your governor’s. This is his plan?”

“He was involved” Bartiin said.

That seemed to satisfy her concern. “What is the threat?”

“They still hold power and loyalty in Gaag” Bartiin said. “So long as they continue to drum up support against imperial rule, there will be a risk of uprising. Their mission is to reclaim Gaag and they have the resources and connections to make an attempt at it. I was there; the last invasion came much closer to succeeding than the imperial historians will ever admit.”

“What is the plan to eliminate them?”

“A local” Bartiin answered. “Somebody capable of getting it done. Preferably one we can make disappear afterwards. The princes have strong bodyguards, including a Ayaani master Aginjigaade. It’s important that you and I have limited direct involvement.” The man who answered the door entered with a cup of water for each of them, placing the hot water on a low central table between them.

Hina looked down but didn’t move to pick up her steaming cup. “I have some contenders in mind, but I can’t be involved in contact” she said. “Gold rules this city. So

long as you have some to spend, I can pull political strings as needed. The Council of Patzaus are generally suspicious of everything Careyago, but they also tend to ignore those hesitations when it comes to favourable business arrangements."

"Thank you for your support. These targets have been… elusive for some time. Our previous assassination attempt utilized the emperor's own assassins."

The ambassador looked aghast. "And these men survived?" she asked.

Bartiin lifted his cup to his mouth and drank, nodding in answer. It was warm to the touch.

"How many assassins?" she asked.

"Four"

"They escaped four of the emperor's assassins?" Hina repeated, disbelieving. "I'm beginning to believe this task is more difficult than you first led on. I'll speak to my contacts and see what options we have. There are a few powerful gangs that control the slums outside the city walls in Mudtown, they'd take the contract in a heartbeat."

Bartiin furrowed his brows, "Perhaps somebody more capable would be better" he suggested.

"You don't understand" Hina said. "The gangs here are at war with the guilds. Like little armies camped under the shadow of the city. You'll find no better killers in Caso. They're more than capable."

"I'd like to meet a representative. A bar or tavern will work. I'll bring the downpayment. I look forward to working with you, Hina" Bartiin said.

Her placid face made it clear she didn't share the sentiment. "Could you do the job yourself, Bartiin?" she asked, gesturing to the sword he'd left at the door by his boots.

"If you're asking if I'm competent with that blade, then the answer is yes. But not competent enough to get past the Aginjigaade who can't be cut" he answered. *Nor competent enough to defeat the sword master who taught me to use it,* he added to himself.

"I see" she said, leading him to the doorway. Bartiin collected his hat, drew on his boots, and attached his fine sword. "We'll speak again soon. I'll send messengers in the future" she said.

"I'll share which inn I'm at once I choose one. Goodnight, ambassador" Bartiin said with a charming smile. She faked one back as he departed, then closed the door behind him.

"I have a bad feeling about this" the man said.

"As do I" she said with a tired sigh.

*

Heavy droplets fell from the low clouds that rolled overhead, obscuring even the rooftops above. The dry packed earth turned slick and muddy under the downpour. Fast flowing rivers formed in the middle of the streets running towards the lake as Yoharum pulled his coat tight around his body and trudged his way towards the lake gate. Turning from the muddy side streets and joining up with the stone city road that led east towards the smaller hamlets and villages out towards the mountain, Yoharum could make out the looming black structure that was the gatehouse even through the fog. Getting into the city was always the hardest part for outsiders. Fortunately, Yoharum was an expert. He had a few tricks up his sleeve to make the process easier.

The rain pattered off his hood and droplets seemed to pool just about anywhere they could. His long brown hair clung to his forehead and the droplets hung about his thick eyebrows and long eyelashes. He reached up with a wet hand to wipe both away to

no great effect. Approaching the lake gate, Yoharum spotted the guards who were just as soaked through as he. Almost nobody was out in the roads today and the six men watched him approach alone. Yoharum removed his hood as he reached the gateway with its large pair of tunnels through the black-stone structure. Above the large wall, obscured by the fog, Yoharum knew there were more guards in the guardhouse.

"Miserable day" Yoharum shouted out ahead to the six guards. It was important to be the first to talk. That was the first strategy. *Be the one to set the tone.*

"You've got that right" one of them said as he approached. "Where are you coming from, friend?" the soldier asked.

"Horal" Yoharum lied. "My family's farm is just west of the hamlet. I manage the deliveries to the market in Caso" he said.

"Horal?" the guard repeated. "In this weather?"

"It's been a two-days walk in this weather. I had to stop in a tavern yesterday just to remember what dry feels like."

"What have you got on you?" the soldier asked. "Any weapons?"

"No" Yoharum answered, "Just a few wax tablets to share inventory when I arrive." This part was true, although the writing on each was fabricated. *Have a reasonable story. Don't provide too many details, but have them ready in your back pocket if needed.*

"Take off your cloak" the guard said, "I want to check for weapons."

Even under the archway of the gatehouse, the downpour of rainwater off the gatehouse roof splashed water into the most sheltered of places. Combined with the fog, nowhere felt dry. "Really?" Yoharum asked, "I'll get soaked if we do it here. Its another hour on foot to the market. Can't we do this in the tunnel?" This was also true, should he truly be walking to the central market. *Act like you belong on the other side of the walls. If you act inconvenienced rather than combative or pandering, you'll appear just like any another city dweller.*

"Alright" the guard conceded and Yoharum followed him out of the rain. "Now, remove the coat" the guard said. Yoharum followed instructions, handing his coat to another guard to hold, and revealed his fine clothes underneath. He wore an embroidered emerald coloured undercoat with a wide flowy skirt popular with the noblemen and noblewomen inside the walls. He lifted the coat to reveal his waist. *The final trick, looking the part. Smuggling weapons into the city was the mark of an amateur. It was simple enough finding weapons inside the walls if you knew where to look.* The guard circled around him, looking for knives, axes, or other weapons that might be hidden on his person.

"And open your undercoat" the guard said.

Yoharum snorted in disappointment, acting up the entitlement. He complied and opened up his undercoat, which revealed the wax tablets tied inside to the jacket.

The guard gave him a once over and then gave him the okay. Yoharum collected his raincoat from the other guard and redressed for the heavy rain. "Stay warm" he said with as friendly a voice he could muster, and turned to go. He got most of the way through the tunnel when one of the guards yelled at him from behind. Fear welled in Yoharum's heart and anxiety sent prickles across his skin. He turned to face the guard, unsure what to expect and fearing the worst. Fearing the need for violence, but not his own harm. Instinctively, he reached for his axe. A weapon he always carried, except on days like today where he travelled through the gates. His hand grasped at air where the weapon ought to be. He imagined swinging his fist hard enough to crush the man's face. Taking

the soldier's weapon to deal with the rest. The guard stood only a few paces behind him, and reached towards Yoharum with an outstretched hand.

"You dropped this" the man said, offering one of the wax tablets.

The tension that filled Yoharum's muscles and had his body ready to kill dissipated in an instant. His body relaxed. There would be no need to kill today. There would be no need to hide from the guild's corruptible spies. He reached out and took the tablet from the guard. "Thank you" Yoharum said. "You are a life-saver" he added.

"Be careful" the guard said with a kind smile. "Wouldn't want to lose that."

"Cheers, friend" Yoharum agreed. "May the sprits bless you" he said, thanking the soldier in his most appreciative tone. He didn't believe in such things anyway. Yoharum turned back around and tucked his head under his coat, disappearing into the misty city streets on the enemy's side of the wall.

The heavy rains didn't cease. Long streams of rainwater washed through the city streets, spreading the dirt and grime from the back alleys and side streets everywhere. The rain disturbed the canals and the smell of filth rose from the water. Yoharum walked along the southern canal, the one that cut through the Spires. He wrinkled his nose as he caught a waft of the disgusting water, then tucked his head lower to cover his nose. Along the canal, massive trees loomed overhead, most of them old and decrepit. Ahead, a lonely tree leaned harshly towards the rows of buildings, entirely dissimilar to the others that slumped over the canal. Yoharum stopped under the lone tree and took a gaze around him before proceeding to remove a small sack from the tree's roots. Opening the small sack, he unwrapped and stowed a pocket knife, removing it and giving it a once over for signs of rust. When it revealed none, he stashed it away in his cloak. He returned the other objects, a few extra silvers and some flint, back into the sack and tucked them back under the tree's roots.

Yoharum looked up, thankful for the respite from the downpour and watched as a dozen or so rain spirits danced their shimmering forms through the underbrush of the trees, catching the raindrops that made it through the foliage. He watched them, transfixed by their presence. His mother would have given them a short prayer. Yoharum hadn't inherited her disposition. A large raindrop fell from above and hit him square in the forehead, soaking his face and getting rainwater in his eyes. He wiped his face and grumbled a curse at both the weather and the little spirits above. The spirits ceased their play and drifted away into the rain and Yoharum added himself to the list of those he cursed.

He left the canal behind and walked back the way he had come. As he rounded the bend, a woman turned the corner flanked by guards and servants who corralled a litter of children. The servants carried a tarp overhead to protect the little brats from the rain. The children, unaware of this privilege, reveled in running into the rain and back again, splashing in every puddle they came upon on the way. Yoharum watched as the eldest boy kicked his boots into the flowing stream of water and soaked the two servants in the front with murky water that stained their clothes brown. Yoharum steered clear as he past the kids, lest he be chased from the city a second time, and sympathized for the servants. They looked like him, after all. They always did.

A block past, Yoharum ducked into a portal and the intensity of rain finally lessened. He removed his hood and pushed back the wet dark hair that had clung to his skin and fell past his shoulders. He removed a cloth and wiped the water from his eyes before moving to clear the water from the rest of his face including his dark moustache and beard. The wind gusted and the sign over the door squeaked on metal hinges.

Yoharum hadn't read it as he approached, but already knew it named his destination over a drawing of the great volcano that towered over the island; Yomu's Inn. Yomu of course, being both the powerful volcano spirit revered by the mountain people; his people, as well as the surly barman who owned the joint. Yoharum pulled back the large wooden door and the rain sounds merged with the sounds of life inside the building. The heavy door swung closed behind him and only the sounds of people chatting and drinking remained.

Yomu gazed up from behind the bar and gave Yoharum a friendly nod before going back to his business. Yoharum removed his coat and hung it by the door, then walked to the back of the room to take a table tucked away in the corner. It was busy and all the tables had a few people drinking and conversing. He put his back to the wall and leaned forwards, waiting for his company. The table wobbled and Yoharum cursed. *Somebody switched my table,* he grumbled. Yoharum watched as Yomu sent one of the serving girls his direction with a beautiful green glass bottle and a pair of equally fine stone cups. Yoharum recognized her. She approached him with a playfully scornful stare and Yoharum held her gaze. She was tall and chesty, with a smile that was equal parts inviting and equal parts threatening. She wore a vibrant striped sarong and an indigo blouse complete with sash.

"Somebody switched–" he started.

"Don't get started about how somebody switched your damn table" Pola said, cutting him off. "Yomu knows you hate the wobbly table but if you haven't already noticed, we're damned busy today cause o' the rain. The best he could do with little notice was save you the back table." She placed both of the heavy polished cups down on the table with one swift hand.

"And he thinks the good cups will make up for the damned table?" Yoharum asked.

"He thinks the good *wine* will make up for the damned table" she dismissed. "The good cups are 'because he doesn't have it in 'em to give you good wine in cheap cups."

"I thought he had some crystal cups in the back" Yoharum bantered.

"The way you drink" she scoffed, "you're lucky he lets you hold anything breakable."

The two of them locked eyes, neither willing to break the tension between them. Then, at the same time the broke out laughing.

"Thank you, Pola" Yoharum said.

"Good to see you, Yoharum" she answered. "I don't wanna know why you're here, but I already know it ain't good."

"Every time I'm here its for something good" he countered. "And not just the pretty women" he added, tipping his now filled cup in cheers.

"Boy, I'm old enough to be your mama" Pola responded. She couldn't hide the smile.

"But far too pretty to be her" Yoharum said playfully. "Pola, I'm expecting company" he added in a more serious tone. "A foreigner. Probably a man. I'm not sure what he'll look like but I'm sure they'll come in looking a little lost. Could you point 'em my way?"

"I'll keep my eyes open" Pola said.

"Thanks, Pola" Yoharum said. He brought the cup of palm wine up for a sip as Pola walked away in the direction of the bar. The wine was warm and sweet. Yomu was

right, the wine made up for the table. He turned the stone cup in his hands and watched the room, waiting.

The door opened and heads glanced casually towards the entrance. Even from the far side of the room, Yoharum knew that the foreigner who entered was the man he was waiting for. He was drenched and looked around awkwardly to determine how best to deal with his coat; a military style coat. He wore an outlandishly large hat that looked soaked through. As if on cue, Yomu shouted and Pola appeared with another girl at her heels. Words were exchanged. The man turned and locked eyes with Yoharum from across the small room.

"Welcome," Yoharum said, addressing the foreigner, "Have you eaten?" The words felt clumsy in his mouth. It had taken Yoharum years to get the hang of speaking Casoyan and years more to drop his inlander accent. He'd never needed the trader's tongue much.

"No, I have not come to eat." Bartiin said, pulling his wavy hair back to tie it. Pola appeared with a cloth and the man took it and wiped his face dry. Yoharum sized him up. He was a big man with a lean figure but was comfortably shorter than Yoharum. Most men were. He had an angular jaw and a large crooked nose under small beady eyes. His beard was well kept and his moustache was manicured. Under his military coat he had worn a casual shirt that revealed his chest. He had muscle, but also the clean airs of a nobleman. It was strange to Yoharum. It felt as if the man wished to come dressed in disguise, as if only changing his clothes were enough. *A soldier. Or perhaps a former soldier,* Yoharum reassessed, *from a noble family, maybe.* He was the exact type of person Yoharum usually avoided.

"I am Yoharum" Yoharum said with as little accent as he could muster in Tralang. He wasn't confident in the language.

"Bartiin" the man responded.

"Palm wine?" Yoharum asked, leaning back and gesturing to the bottle between them.

Bartiin hesitated. "Why not?" he said and scooped up the bottle and poured himself a small cup. Bartiin didn't hesitate to down the cup he had poured for himself. He drank it as if it were a harder alcohol. Yoharum watched. He was curious about this man and the new prospective job.

"Too sweet" Bartiin said, picking up the bottle to examine it. He turned it over in his hand, "From Mada'abi?" he asked, rhetorically. "I would have expected the wine to be as disagreeable as the people. I suppose their joy has to be funneled somewhere" he added, with a laugh and a smile that Yoharum found too friendly. Yoharum didn't laugh. He wasn't quite sure what part was supposed to be funny.

"The job…" Yoharum continued.

Bartiin let out a hard sigh and scratched at his beard. "Not one for conversation, are you?" Yoharum remained silent. Bartiin leaned in close and lowered his voice, "Are you involved? in the murders?" he asked, whispering the last word.

Yoharum chewed on his cheek. When it was clear the man actually expected an answer, Yoharum simply answered, "I am involved. I will lead the attack."

"The leader?" Bartiin mused. "Where I come from, leaders don't get involved. Not personally, anyway. They just tell someone else what to do. I like that you get involved. No wonder you come recommended." Bartiin smiled a charming smile, but Yoharum didn't feel charmed. The man spoke far too quickly and his accent made

understanding difficult. “I feel like I’m talking at you, not talking to you. Do you feel like I’m talking at you?” Bartiin asked.

“I do not know of the difference.” Yoharum answered, frustrated. “I do not speak Tralang very well. You do not speak Casoyan?”

“Unfortunately, I do not” Bartiin answered, “If I did, you would surely be right here along with me joining along in my merry humour and quick wit.” He poured himself another cup of wine and downed the liquid. Yoharum watched rather unimpressed.

“Who is the recipient?” Yoharum asked.

“Oh, I like that” Bartiin said. “Recipient of death. Has a good ring to it, that.” When Yoharum didn’t respond, Bartiin frowned and continued, “I need you to take care of a few evil men who seek to kill the current ruler of my homeland. There are two men, an older man and a younger man. They’re disgraced nobles, former princes to be precise. Unfortunately, it seems they’ve already slipped into the city. I was hoping to have you *receive* them when they arrived in the city.”

“Two men.” Yoharum repeated. “I must have names and descriptions.”

“Two men,” Bartiin agreed, “but there are five total in their party. They hail from Gaag like me. They will be dressed like noblemen or princes with soldiers and soldiers. The five men are Aramuk Krimas, Ohacha Krimas, Cask Gohara, Gaba’ké of Ayaan, and Yoliim Kulimas. I need you to eliminate the uncle and the nephew, Aramuk and Ohacha. If you can kill all five, I’ll pay extra.”

“You said two men before” Yoharum pressed.

“Those two princes will have the other three men with them.” Bartiin remarked.

Yoharum frowned, “How many soldiers?”

“Not sure anymore. My last assassins killed *a lot* of them” Bartiin snickered.

“You have sent others before?” Yoharum asked. “I am not the first? And these assassins failed?”

“In one way or another, yes” Bartiin answered.

“What gives you confidence that I will succeed where these others have failed?”

“The game has changed” Bartiin said with a cunning smile. “These men are on the run. In an unfamiliar city with few resources left. They’re desperate. And desperate people make mistakes.”

Yoharum poured himself another cup of the wine, then refilled Bartiin’s. “What do you want us to try?”

“We’ve tried two tactics at this point,” Bartiin said, bringing the cup up to his mouth. His voice had lost the soft concern for secrecy and his increasing volume made Yoharum less and less comfortable. “We’ve tried surprise attacks; a beggar on the street, a traitorous soldier in their ranks, a band of indebteds with nothing to lose. It never worked. Their bodyguards are too competent for that trash. The more successful tactic we’ve tried is assaulting their most defensive positions with trained killers. This also hasn’t worked, but has yielded the most success. Two years ago, there we’re ten men. Now there are but five.”

“You wish to mix the skill of soldiers with surprise” Yoharum guessed.

“Exactly!” Yoharum said, leaning back in his chair. “These men have a habit of hiding behind walls and defenses and soldiers. I have a plan to flush them out. All I need you to do is find the right place, and move in for the kill.” He clinked the two cups together dramatically. “They’ll have money and riches. Make it look like a robbery.”

“Make it look like a robbery?” Yoharum repeated.

"Yeah" Bartiin said, waving off the question. "I don't want it to look like an assassination. You can keep a cut of anything you manage to steal."

Yoharum thought for a moment than gave his answer, "I am interested. How much will you pay to see the job done?"

Bartiin removed a small pouch from a pocket and dropped it hard on the table between them. The jingle of metal on metal revealed its contents. He leaned back and gestured to Yoharum to pick it up. Yoharum leaned forward and picked up the pouch. He drew back the drawstring to reveal the glimmer of gold. They were imperial mint. Careyago coins. Commonly traded amongst Casoyan merchants. Perhaps forty or fifty inside the bag. He pulled one out for a closer look. It was heavier than he expected and glinted softly under the dim candle light. Yoharum did his best to hide his excitement. This was a fortune in Mudtown. He looked up and met Bartiin's fixed stare.

"This one pays for the attempt" Bartiin said. "There'll be three more once it's confirmed you've completed the job. Remember, the two princes matter most. And don't think you can take off with my money. I'll have people watching you. Do we understand each other?"

"I accept" Yoharum said. "There is no preference for method?"

"No preference."

"How soon must this be done? Will they try to leave the city?"

"As soon as you have an opportunity, you take it." Bartiin answered. "As I said before, I have a plan to create an opportunity. I'm not sure how long they plan to stay in the city."

"Where can I find them?" Yoharum asked.

"In one of the rich estates by the palace." Bartiin said. "Someone named Yohati, I think."

"Yohati?" Yoharum repeated. He coughed on the wine he had in his throat. "Like, Patzau Yohati? One of the eight Patzau of Caso. Burrenal Yohati?"

"I don't know" Bartiin answered. "I would presume it's the same person. Is there another Yohati?"

"Patzau Yohati is the most powerful man in the city." Yoharum said. "There is no person sane enough to attempt an assault on his estate. He has dozens of guards and hundreds of servants. His home is a fortress."

"That shouldn't be an issue, then" Bartiin said. "I don't want you to attack his estate. We wait for princes to leave the estate and then take them down when the opportunity arises."

Yoharum stared dumbfounded. These men are staying with Patzau Yohati. Just how powerful and protected are they in truth? What have I agreed to?

"Then I believe we are settled" Bartiin said. "Remember, kill the two princes and you'll see the full payment. I'll be in touch."

Yoharum brought a hand to the gold he had stashed away in his pocket and his worries dissolved. With this much gold, I'll never have to work another day in my life. Even after paying out each cut, this could be the last job I ever pull. "We are settled" Yoharum agreed. He leaned forward and poured the remainder of the wine into the two cups and offered Bartiin's back to him. They clinked glasses, earning a devilish stare from Pola, who happened to walk by every time Yoharum did something against Yomu's rules. Then they drank to their new partnership.

"Thank you for your time" Bartiin said, rising from his seat. "I have great expectations."

"You have come to the right person" Yoharum agreed.

Bartiin rose and left the room, collecting his coat on the way out.

Yoharum carefully slid a small gold coin from his pouch, his hands working to keep the small fortune silent. He scanned the room, but no one seemed to notice him, their attentions fixed on their own private conversations. He didn't trust it. He knew the truth: in a city whose blood runs gold, even good people become leeches. He was certain every person in the room would turn on him for the fortune he carried, given the chance. He gripped the knife in his pocket harder than ever. Outside, the rain continued its onslaught against all things dry. Bartiin covered his head with his coat and moved slowly through the slick cobbled streets. Murky water spilled over the canal in places and pooled across the streets. It took a quarter hour to make it back to the ship through the maze-like city streets. Bartiin waved a polite hello to the soldiers that sat in the same booth at the foot of the docks. They seemed unphased by his comings and goings, but that didn't stop Bartiin feeling uncomfortable with the fact that people were familiar with his habits. Anonymity was preferred. As he walked down the wooden dock towards the ship, a figure watched from the window off one of the sailor's inns that faced the harbour.

Chapter 6: The City of Gold

Cask's return from Onera came with a plethora of ill omens and complications. A wave of desertion delayed departure from Onera. As feared, many of Lord Provis' soldiers abandoned the campaign following their lord's death. Then, at sea, one of the fourteen ships disappeared from the armada. Several accounts from sailor's spoke of a sea-spirit sighting right before the ship's disappearance. Each man and woman gave the same description, despite hailing from different vessels: An enormous dark body breaching the waves with a reef of spines down its back. Morale was low before departure. Now, there was little left. All the way to Casoya, dark clouds followed the convoy of ships and that darkness remained as the fleet sailed into the bay of Caso. Prince Aramuk Krimas had spent the entire week negotiating with anyone he could reach to secure safe and affordable docking for the armada. Each time, he was met instead with astronomical sums. Docking fees and taxes on cargo, personnel, soldiers, it all amounted to a bankrupting quantity of money. And so, after all the time and effort spent sailing to Casoya, the fleet was forced to continue onward elsewhere.

As the fleet sailed back through the straight into the wider sea, the dark storm clouds brought hard ceaseless rains. It was the type of storm that entices regular people to shelter and fools to brave. Ohacha's eager hope to once again return to weapons-practice with Cask remained just that. By the end of the first day of rain, the ground was soft and sodden. By the second day, lakes pooled above the flagstone paths and garden beds. By the third day, any step outside the guesthouse would require sloshing through water higher than a shin. Only the hard work by Yohati's staff kept much of the gardens above water and water flowing steadily like a river into the canal. Three days of tireless rain. When sunlight reappeared at the end of the long storm, with it came relief at the reprieve.

The leaves of the large trees that loomed wide over the manicured gardens dropped fat droplets on unsuspecting targets below. The endless buffeting patter of rain was replaced with birdsong. And for the first time in days, sunlight basked over the city of Caso. Water flooded much of the city. It was a storm for the histories. But to Ohacha, it had simply been an inconvenience. Those vines and creepers that had survived the tireless rains and wind clung onto the last droplets of water as if they were the last. The droplets refracted the warm sunlight. To Ohacha, it was beautiful. Beautiful only because Yohati's oasis estate within the heart of the city had been spared the worst of the storm. Here, separated from the rest of Caso, they had been out of danger from the widespread flooding and mudslides seen elsewhere. Inconvenience, their only qualm

Ohacha had spent the last two days cooped up inside the guesthouse, finding all possible excuses to avoid his uncle Aramuk. It wasn't that Ohacha didn't like his uncle. He did. It was that Aramuk was a man who saw any time not spent learning, training, or improving as a waste. In his meticulous mind, there was no such thing as spare time. And

Ohacha's problem was that this philosophy was often forced upon him as well. While Aramuk could spend days reading dusty texts and strategizing for improbable scenarios, Ohacha simply couldn't. And, with explicitly swordplay forbidden inside the guesthouse, the approved ways to pass the time did little to relieve his boredom. So, as expected, Ohacha spent every opportunity avoiding his uncle, opting to gamble with Rolena or practice knife fighting with Cask instead. The few chances Aramuk managed to distract himself from his planning long enough to fret over Ohacha, the game of hide and seek began anew and Ohacha would ultimately find himself hunched over a book learning histories with Gaba'ké or politics with his uncle. At each lesson's conclusion, Ohacha would use a meal or a walk as an excuse to flee and the whole cycle would begin again.

This all ended on the second day. While practicing swordplay against Aramuk's orders, Ohacha and Cask managed to break a metal illum stone lamp hanging from the wall. Cask had parried Ohacha's thrust, but the practice blade ricocheted and struck the fixture, sending it crashing to the floor. Aramuk and the other soldiers burst into the room expecting an assassin, only to find two idiots with sticks. The game of avoidance was over; Ohacha's freedom was officially gone.

From that point forward. Ohacha wasn't let out of his uncle's sight. Even Rolena was roped into keeping Ohacha occupied. It didn't help that most of the times he had been caught, it was because Aramuk had found the two together playing dice. Her punishment for being involved was to teach Ohacha how to assemble, clean, and disassemble her crossbow as Aramuk watched from the sidelines interjecting with questions that were far too specifically rooted in military history and construction methods.

Despite being guests at Yohati's estate, the old Patzau hadn't spared any real attention towards looking into or after them. Cask and two other soldiers had been dispatched on a mission outside the walls into the city in the pouring rain to buy food. The three men came back drenched and carrying far less than expected. Meats were scarce, as were eggs. Instead, they carried heavy bags of rice, pearl millet, and sorghum for porridges. They also purchased several bags of familiar vegetables including peppers, onions, and okra, and some less familiar ones that Rolena said she recognized from Onera. Despite the exorbitant cost and the lack of variety, the change in diet was an improvement over the long journey south at sea.

The sun's appearance after the storm subsided was a welcome relief. The change in weather meant Ohacha could finally see beyond his window and, more importantly, train outside with Cask and Rolena again. It also meant Aramuk would have a much harder time finding him for unscheduled lessons. Feeling light, Ohacha bounded down the stairs, passed Cask at a table, and collected his own bowl of stew from a large pot. He sat down and was met with a silent acknowledgment from Cask in the form of a brief nod.

"Where's Aramuk?" Ohacha asked, dipping a spoon into his bowl. Cask responded with a shrug as he continued to spoon down his meal through tired eyes. "Gaba'ké?" Ohacha asked.

"In the garden. Behind" Cask answered, gesturing his spoon in the direction of the arched doorways that led out into the sunny patio. Much of the water that had covered the patio had receded overnight, leaving the gardens looking wet but no longer flooded. Rolena appeared from the direction Gaba'ké had pointed. She was in her ordinary clothes and sweat clung to her forehead. Her hair hung loose instead of its usual long braid. Under the glow of the sun, her hair had a fiery radiance.

"Good morning" she said as she strode through the doorway and into the room.

"Morning" Cask mumbled.

"Good morning," Ohacha said, failing to keep his eyes from lingering. Her informal clothes revealed the muscles of her shoulders and arms. She was shorter than him, but she carried herself with confidence and strength that Ohacha envied. He was proud to have her protecting him, but her presence made him feel insecure. She had proved herself capable. She had saved Aramuk's life. But he also knew that despite their differences in age and height, she could probably best him in most contests of strength. And yet it was only his experiences with her in the training yard that gave that notion. Cask, at least, had an overbearing competence and strength in everything he did that served as a clear warning to those looking to pick a fight. But any fool on the street, making the wrong presumptions about Rolena's abilities, would learn that lesson the hard way. Ohacha had.

"It is swelteringly hot outside" Rolena said. "I didn't think the difference would be so significant between Onera and Casoya. All I did was wash my armour and I'm soaked with sweat."

"Lots of water in the air. Have you seen Aramuk?" Cask asked. "Ohacha was asking for him."

"I saw him earlier this morning while he was cooking the stew" she said.

"Aramuk cooked the stew?" Ohacha blurted out.

Cask turned and pointed his spoon with the same daring challenge as he would his sword. "You have a habit of judging people, Ohacha. One day, whether its in a duel with a sword, a conversation with the wrong person, or a battle among armies, doing so will cost you. You must always remember that people are far more complex than you believe."

"Aramuk has never cooked for us before today and I've lived with him all my life" Ohacha countered.

Cask ran his fingers over his scarred scalp, "Never rely on history alone to tell you what the future might bring. You leave yourself blind spots. I bet you also didn't know that I can juggle or that Gaba'ké had a daughter."

"Gaba'ké had a daughter?"

"Shit. Yes" Cask answered, covering his eyes. "And don't you dare mention that I just told you that."

"Why not?" Ohacha said.

"Because I wasn't supposed to say that" Cask said.

"I can lick my nose" Rolena said into the quiet room. Ohacha and Cask turned and stared for a moment. Ohacha then tried and failed to lick his own nose, soliciting a hearty laugh from her as she left towards the stairs.

"Everyone," Cask continued, "has some secret or some hidden skill…"

"Like licking one's nose" Ohacha jested.

"Spirits, Ohacha…" Cask said with a sigh. "Everyone has something that they are good at. Everyone has something about them you don't know. Everyone has a history that extends past the day you met them and will continue beyond the day you part ways. It is better to overestimate everyone, than underestimate them and be wrong."

Rolena stood near the top of the stairs still listening. *Wise words*. *Spoken like a man who has already leaned from unexpected surprises.* She understood. Not wishing to linger, she continued her climb up to her bedroom to change clothes.

Ohacha finished his stew, dawned a pair of sandals, and stepped outside into the sun-baked patio to enjoy the good weather. Sunlight blanketed everything and humid air

made the morning air feel sticky. Beyond the patio, pools of water still filled the gardens and much of the pathways remained covered in dark pools. Ohacha strode forward towards a section of the garden that was eclosed by tall shrubberies. Inside, a long eloquent stone table filled the space and, in the center, sat Gaba'ké, who was reclined in a chair with a tablet in his hand.

"Good morning" Gaba'ké said, not turning to face Ohacha.

"Good morning Gaba'ké."

"It is a beautiful day and I understand how restless you have been. We'll skip lessons today and instead spend some time together after the sun has set. How about that?"

"Thank you, Gaba'ké."

"But–" Gaba'ké interjected. "I want you to be prepared. You uncle left you a book on Casoyan histories on loan from Patzau Yohati. If you haven't already finished the first chapter, I expect you to come to today's lesson with the chapter completed. Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir" Ohacha said. "Have you seen Aramuk? I haven't yet seen him."

"He is meeting with Patzau Yohati" Gaba'ké said. "I expect he will return with more information regarding how long we can stay and what kind of arrangements are expected. More specifically, how much his protection will cost us."

"He went to see Patzau Yohati without me?"

"He went alone. Yes"

"Should I not be there?" Ohacha asked, insulted.

"Yes" Gaba'ké said, finally looking up from his book. "You *should* be there. But instead, you spent most of the past two days dodging your uncle and staying up late gambling away your money with Rolena. You have done little to no preparation to negotiate at this time and your behaviour demonstrates that you have no interest in doing so. I'd consider you unfit to participate at this time."

Ohacha reeled as if struck. The accusational tone, especially from Gaba'ké, was a blow he hadn't anticipated. Shock surged into denial, and then anger. "This is unfair!" Ohacha protested. "I want to speak with my uncle."

"He's gone" Gaba'ké said with a dismissive gesture. "He met with Patzau Yohati over an early breakfast. Aramuk's spryer than a water spirit. The two of them left already, together to speak with another Patzau from the council."

"Which one?" Ohacha asked.

Gaba'ké looked up again, now irritated. "You are a smart young man, Ohacha. You're being educated to rule a kingdom. Surely you can deduce the answer on your own. Instead of reacting, think for yourself. Come to your own reasonable conclusion as to *which* Patzau your uncle would want to meet."

Ohacha almost rose to the baited challenge. Instead, he withdrew, wary of the old Aginjigaade's aptitude for talking circles around him. At least, unlike his uncle, Gaba'ké never made him feel small or inconsequential. Ohacha skulked off, opting instead to let the rage brew inside him. Gaba'ké turned back to his tablet as Ohacha trudged briskly into the gardens, splashing in puddles with each step. With each step, Ohacha passed luscious ferns and broad-leafed plants flowering plants. He didn't know where he was going. That was the point. He walked simply to get away for a while, not caring where he might end up. Not that he could leave. The large stone walls of the complex that towered at twice his height ensured he couldn't go anywhere he wasn't supposed to.

Soon he found himself exiting the small path onto the main walkway that stretched from the guardhouse on the left, and up to the main estate on the right. Unable to proceed left, and unwilling to turn right towards the big house, Ohacha crossed the main roadway following the continuation of the same narrow trail that led towards the other side of the complex. Here, the same tall ancient trees with their wide canopies and broad leaves opened onto a small clearing. Inside there was a pond sunken into the ground with dozens of large beautiful fish. A C-shaped pergola covered in pink roses surrounded pond to the right and a small gazebo on stilts sat atop the pond. Inside sat two women who stared back at Ohacha where he stood on the other side of the clearing. The two women sat in small metal chairs beside a small table with food and drinks perched between them. He recognised one as Reah Yohati.

Ohacha froze, unsure what to do. Was his presence an intrusion? Should he leave? He was about to turn to go to leave them to their privacy when one of the women, the one who wasn't Reah, waved to beckon him forward to them. Ohacha hesitated again, unsure if he was being invited to join them or summoned to be scolded for his intrusion. He walked around the pond and under the flowery pergola, all the while aware of their gazes. He looked down at his clothes, informal, and his feet, exposed and regretted his choices. He walked up the two wooden steps that led to the platform over the pond at which the two women sat. They both wore fine sarong dresses with embroidered blouses over top that covered their shoulders. Reah held the same calm and confident poise she had shown during their first meeting. The other woman had a longer face with farer features. Unlike Reah, she appeared deeply curious at his arrival. Ohacha approached and stood a comfortable distance away, waiting for them to speak first.

"Well," the unknown older woman said in a smooth and very feminine voice, "good morning handsome. And who might you be?" Ohacha looked over at Reah, unsure if he should speak for himself or whether she might introduce him on his behalf and found the same curious look on her face as the other woman's.

"Good morning" Ohacha said, bowing. "Lady Reah" he said, acknowledging his host and then turning to the other woman he said, "I am Prince Ohacha Krimas of Gaag."

"Oh my?" the woman said with surprise. She took a sip from her small cup, "a prince? Where ever did you find this boy?" the woman said, turning to ask Reah.

"Didn't you hear?" Reah said, "Prince Ohacha and his uncle Prince Aramuk were dethroned by none other than Ohacha's other uncle, Prince Aramuk's younger brother." The other woman let out a quick gasp. "Now the young prince here is travelling the world, seeking a way to reclaim his lost throne."

Ohacha scowled at the interpretation. "My city was to be invaded by the Careyago and instead of protecting our way of life from imperialist expansion, my uncle Belvaas let the invaders into the palace to give himself control over the new imperial province."

"I see" the younger woman said. "So, do you have an army? Are you planning to remove the invaders from your homeland?"

"One day" Ohacha said, "I will retake my ancestral throne and remove the Careyago from Gaag."

"That's very noble of you" Reah said. "But I must ask, Prince Ohacha, were you looking for me? Or have you just so happened to stumble upon us in the gardens."

"I just so happened upon you" he said. "I apologize if I am interrupting your conversation."

The other woman let out a quick giggle. “Interrupting?” she said. “Oh my! What a cute boy you are” Ohacha winced at the word but held his tongue. “Why, your very presence has added to the entertainment of our conversation. Wouldn’t you agree, Reah?” to which Reah nodded politely.

“I am sorry, but I do not yet know your name” Ohacha said.

“Oh! Of course,” the woman said. “I do apologize. I sometimes forget that foreigners perhaps aren’t familiar with the Casoyan families. I am Piitra Hadashenta. Patzau Hadashenta is my husband. He’s off with your uncle, I believe.”

“Patzau Hadashenta?” Ohacha repeated, “Of the Auction House?”

“Yes” Piitra answered with a smile, “That’s us.”

“Would you like to stay and chat with us, Ohacha?” Reah asked. “I can have someone bring you a chair and your own drink. Tea? Fruit juice? Wine?”

“No” Ohacha said, politely, “You honour me with your offer but I would be embarrassed to be seen as a trespasser in your time together.” *I’m not sure I have the patience to play nice for an extended period of time.*

“Nonsense” Reah said. “You are more than welcome to accompany us today. You can enjoy the gardens another day with better weather.” She whistled sharply and a servant appeared from just outside of their view, then left to return with a chair and a cup of wine.

“Now, Ohacha” Piitra said, you must tell us more about life in Gaag. We have many merchants from Ayaan and Hosagiin. And many traders from the east as well. These cities and their ways of life are well known to us. But Gaag was always a quiet reserved little kingdom. Tell us about it. You must miss it, right?”

“I do” Ohacha said, the anger in him subsiding. “Gaag is a smaller city than Ayaan, or Hosagiin, or Caso. Perhaps half the size but much older in its roots and history. The city is built on a high ridge surrounded by the sea to the east and by lowlands and wetlands to the west. The land is rich with clay. And–”

“I can read all of that in a book” Piitra cut in. She gave a look that suggested he relax and Ohacha tried. “Tell us about the things you remember that we couldn’t learn from a history.”

Ohacha tried again. He thought of the flat lowlands outside the city that could be seen from the ramparts of the royal castle. He thought of the homes below and their red and orange tiled rooftops. “My family’s castle overlooks the sea. In the evenings, the sun sets over the lands to the west and the lowland rivers and estuaries glow for miles. Birds we call Almingos flock in the hundreds to the river’s edge and spear for little crayfish and minnows. The air smells of smoky earth and cedar because of the brick and charcoal kilns. Every few weeks there’s a large market and farmers and traders and fishermen and all sorts of folks come from all around to sell and barter and trade. I remember being allowed to go once, with my mother, and we went from shop to shop together. We revere our ancestors and life spirits. Seeing one is considered great fortune for any Gaagian. It was… peaceful.”

Ohacha blinked, realizing that he stopped talking. He had gotten lost in his thoughts and let silence linger. It occurred to him that his memories of Gaag seemed less and less real over time. Less like memories with details and more like descriptions he had learned. He wondered how much had changed since he had last been home. The comprehension left him feeling a nostalgic melancholy.

“I’m sorry, Ohacha” Piitra said. He shifted his gaze down to her concerned face. “I asked out of a place of curiosity. I can see by you face that these thoughts are heavy

for you. But I appreciate your willingness to share your memories with us. It sounds like a beautiful place. One very different than our home here in Casoya."

"It is" he said. "A different kind of beauty."

"Have you had a tour of the city yet?" Reah asked. "We could arrange something for you and your friends."

Ohacha pursed his lips, embarrassed. "I am flattered by your offer, but I am forbidden from leaving the estate without permission" Ohacha answered. He realized how pathetic is sounded as the words left his lips. Like a child that still needed his hand held.

"You are forbidden?" Piitra asked. "Your uncle won't let you explore the city? Not even with a guide?"

"It is not that simple" Ohacha explained, trying not to give offence. "My uncle and I are…" *enemies of a foreign empire. Targets for assassination. Tired…* "hunted" Ohacha finished. "Our family has been split into those loyal to the Careyago Emperor and… well, us. Who are not. The emperor sends assassins and cut-throats to ensure we, who hold the rightful claim to the Kingdom of Gaag, never again set foot in the city. Leaving the estate would be an unnecessary risk to my safety, as much as it pains me to decline."

"I thought that all this happened years and years ago?" Reah asked. Her face had gone pallid. "Your enemies still send killers after you?"

"Yes" Ohacha admitted. "It was an attack against us that pushed us to leave Onera for Caso. Assassins from the empire breached the walls and killed dozens…." Ander's lifeless corpse on the white marble, his father's grief filling the hall. Tears began to well in Ohacha's eyes. He forced them down.

"You are far too young to have had such a difficult life" Piitra said. "It's always okay to feel the things you need to feel" Ohacha wasn't sure if her words were for his comfort on her own.

"No" Ohacha exclaimed, trying to regain some control over his emotions. "It is my duty to learn and become stronger. To conquer my own weaknesses. To restore our Kingdom to its former place, free and independent. To lead my people into that future." He not-so-subtly wiped the tears from his eyes and took the glass of wine held out towards him. "Thank you" he said, taking a long sip.

"Am I interrupting something?" a younger woman said, entering from behind him. Ohacha turned over his shoulder to see the newcomer. She stood, almost the spitting image of Reah but far younger. She had the same diamond shaped face, the same confidence and grace, but her father's calculating eyes.

"Ah, Fera" Reah said. "I wasn't expecting to see you this morning. You remember Piitra?"

"Of course," Fera said politely, "I've grown up seeing Piitra more than my own aunts and uncles."

Reah smiled, "And this here is young Prince Ohacha Krimas… from Gaag" she added. Ohacha found her gaze intimidating. The fact that he had just moments ago been holding back tears made him feel all the more insubstantial.

"A pleasure" Fera said, her polite smile revealing that it really wasn't. "Mother, may I have a word with you?"

"Of course, dear" Reah answered. She excused herself and stood, following Reah out into the gardens and away from the pond, leaving Ohacha with Piitra.

Ohacha turned his face back to Piitra. Her face was filled with a giddy excitement that Ohacha immediate distrusted. “How old are you, Ohacha?” Piitra asked. She eyed him like a piece of meat.

“I’m sorry?”

“Your age” she repeated. “How old are you?”

Ohacha had to think for a second about the answer. “This is my twentieth spring”

“Hmm” Piitra said. She spun the wineglass in her hand with a confident ease, the liquid swishing around the clear crystal. “You’re a cute young man, but you might be too young for Fera.”

“For her?” Ohacha asked, surprised by the shift in conversation.

Piitra continued speaking, ignoring him. “Then again, there’s also the fact that you’re a prince with no kingdom. And, as you put it, are an enemy of the Careyago Emperor. On second thought, being too young is the least damaging reason against you.”

Ohacha thought back to Fera’s face and he blushed, not having considered a match. “You’re trying to find her a husband?” Ohacha asked awkwardly.

“Of course,” Piitra said. “Alas, I never had daughters and my two boys are far too much like their father and never let me meddle. I’ve always been like an aunty to Fera, and she’s as close as one finds to a princess in Caso. It’s only right that I help her mother find her a husband soon.”

“And you considered me?” Ohacha asked, blushing.

Piitra covered her mouth with a squeak. It was an odd gesture, almost juvenile. It contrasted against the fact that, despite looking younger than Reah, Piitra was still old enough to be his mother. “I apologize. I get a little carried away with gossip sometimes. Forget I said anything of the sort.” She pulled her cup to her mouth and sipped from it. “It’s a shame, Ohacha. You’re a handsome boy with, what seems like a good head on his shoulders. Finding you a wife will be difficult when it means boldly standing against the Careyago.”

“Finding a wife is the least of my worries” Ohacha admitted into his cup.

Reah returned without her daughter and cast a glance between Ohacha and Piitra. One, still giddy and the other still too embarrassed to make eye contact. Reah sighed and reclaimed her seat, “She tried to play matchmaker again, didn’t she, Ohacha?” Reah smiled as she sipped from her cup and Ohacha’s blush deepened. “You two write it ever so clearly across your faces.”

“Am I so predictable?” Piitra asked with a grin.

“Well,” Reah announced, “I’ve returned to inform you both that unfortunately I cannot stay any longer. A matter of importance has arisen. Please feel free to stay, but I must take my leave.”

“For a woman who doesn’t work” Piitra glowered, “you spend a lot of time working. I thought we’d have time to go shopping today.”

“We’ll find another time” Reah replied. “And I have to stay healthy somehow. Helping Burrenal is the best way.”

“Will Fera be joining us?” Piitra asked cautiously.

“I’m afraid not” Reah said softly. “Fera has plans to visit the Ashill estate today. You remember Yanata’s girls, Kida and Yuromi.”

“Of, course” Piitra said with a smile that hid her disappointment. The two ladies exchanged a kiss, cheek to cheek, and Reah left.

“I should probably leave as well” Ohacha said awkwardly, “I have weapons training today.”

Piitra stared at him, seeing clearly through the excuse. “It was lovely meeting you Ohacha. If your uncle is any bit as charming as you are, and I will ask my husband when I see him later, than it would be a shame not to invite you both to spend an evening with us as our guests. With proper precautions, of course”

“That would be most gracious and an honour” Ohacha said. He meant it too. Ohacha left feeling calmer than he did entering the private pond area. The anger and disappointment from his conversation with Gaba’ke had subsided. In its place, Ohacha now felt inadequate. He wasn’t meeting his elder’s expectations. He wasn’t level-headed enough or strong enough or wise enough to do anything, or so it felt. It made him even angrier. This time, that anger was self-directed. These were things that could change. Things *he* could change. Improve upon. Become wiser. Become stronger. Become a great leader. He just needed the opportunity to prove himself.

Ohacha walked back down the pathway towards the guesthouse ready to put those feelings into actions. And with the return of Cask and good weather, so to had Ohacha’s weapons training. He looked forward to it. Looked forward to hitting something. That would take his mind away from the thoughts that circled around his head.

The afternoon sun basked the small clearing. They stood in a circle of lush and vibrant plants. Ohacha stretched his limbs, the sweat already sticking to his skin. The air was thick with humidity and the fragrance of the gardens. He swung the practice sword a few times, the anger being channeled into focus. Into a desire to swing hard and smash something. He spun the wooden blade with his wrist, warming up for training.

Cask appeared, his bald head reflecting beads of sweat. In his hands, he carried his twin swords, the ones gifted to him by Ohacha’s grandfather. They were marvelous, with the crest of Gaag etched into the ornate pommel. Seeing them gave Ohacha hope. They were a tether, a reminder, of what they were fighting for. Ohacha tightened his own knuckles around his practice blade, eager for Cask’s instruction.

But that was when Ohacha noticed that with Cask wasn’t wearing his training clothes. And following into the clearing was another person. Rolena marched in carrying her own practice sword and round shield. She looked calm as she took up her stance across from him. Back straight, knees poised, her hair tied back so as not to be a hinderance. It took Ohacha a moment to realize she carried the weapons backwards, with the sword in her left hand and her shied in her right.

“What’s she doing here?” Ohacha asked. “Am I supposed to fight Rolena?”

“Who else would you be fighting?” Cask asked.

“You” Ohacha said. “I was getting the hang of it. Surely it would be beneficial to learn from fighting a master such as yourself?”

“You have indeed proven that you understand the foundations, Ohacha” Cask said. “But you have yet to prove you can hold to what you have learned in a real fight. Rolena will serve well. Grab yourself a shield.”

“Warriors of Gaag don’t fight with shields” Ohacha protested. “You’re a master of the twin swords.”

“That’s nonsense” Cask said. “If I ever march into battle, I’ll do it with a shield on my arm or not at all.”

Ohacha stood his ground. “I don’t need one.”

Rolena looked to Cask for assurance but he dismissed her concerns. “So be it” Cask said. “Before we begin, Ohacha. Remember our lessons. Be nimble on your feet and strike fast. The blade is an extension of your body and–”

"I remember" Ohacha said, interrupting. Cask frowned but Ohacha wasn't watching. Cask whispered something to Rolena but Ohacha didn't care to listen. He was ready and focused Even though she was a girl, he wasn't going to go easy on her. Nor would he underestimate her. She was a warrior, after all. *What did she tell me? Her father trained her to fight?*

Rolena stood across the clearing in a foreign stance–not at all the Gaagian style. The short sword looked oddly comfortable in her hand. Ohacha had only ever seen her with her crossbow, but he knew she carried her own blade. Aramuk and Cask both seemed confident she knew how to use it. Her dark eyes surveyed him. *She won't go easy on me either*.

Between them, standing like a statue, was Cask. Despite his calm appearance, his focus was sharp. He was a master among masters and Ohacha had seen his skill first hand more times than he wished to have. Unlike his uncle, Aramuk, Ohacha yearned to be more like Cask. He was strong, confident, and capable. It was like Cask could face no challenge he couldn't overcome. The swords master had been an idol to Ohacha even as a young boy. Cask, who appeared so amiable, roared to life with terrifying skill and passion, like an ember combusting into flame.

"Ready?" Cask bellowed. "Go!"

Ohacha leapt into motion. He raised his sword high and slammed it as hard as he could into Rolena's shield. She grunted under the impact and Ohacha stepped out of range from the counter swing that came from his right. Or so he thought, as the blade slipped further forward than he judged possible and stabbed him painfully in the chest.

"Dead" Cask declared. "Rolena takes the first fight."

Ohacha winced, dumbfounded. The blade wasn't sharpened, but it still hurt. Cask's eyes were on Ohacha, but there was no judgment in them. "This is why we train" Cask said. "Underestimating a real opponent means death. You die here, in this clearing, as many times as it takes for you to understand how not to die out there."

Ohacha nodded. He was embarrassed, but also still stewing in his anger. They fought again and exchanged several blows. Then without his noticing, Rolena managed to switch her shield and sword hands catching him off-guard and exposed. Cask announced her win and Ohacha held his bruised arm where her blade had caught him. Twice, he had lost to her without her breaking a sweat. Or, at least breaking a sweat from the effort. He was mortified. What had all that training been for?

Cask wiped his head and spoke again, "Better! But I can sense that you're in your own head. It's clear that you're angry Ohacha, but you can't let that anger control you. You can use it as fuel for your swings, but never as fuel for your mind. Focus, but don't overthink! Your body knows what to do, you mind just needs to tell it when to react."

Ohacha's gaze shifted momentarily towards Cask, nodding in acknowledgment. *Focus,* he repeated to himself. His mind raced and he did his best to calm himself. She was better than he expected. Or perhaps, he was far worse than he thought. His shoulders tensed and then relaxed. His grip tightened until he could feel the weight of his lonely sword.

"May I take a shield?" Ohacha asked. "I think you were right." *And I was wrong*.

"That's why I'm the master" Cask said, handing Ohacha his own shield. "Only when you are fully confident in your offence can you forgo your defence. Now ready up."

Ohacha retook his place across from Rolena. She shifted her stance, her small eyes narrowing. She grinned, and Ohacha found the expression unnerving. This time, he

wouldn't underestimate her. She was a soldier—her movements calculated and precise, never wasted. She already was what he hoped to become.

The thwack of hardwood echoed across the garden as Ohacha swung his blade in a wide arc, testing the space between them. Rolena parried with a swift but gentle block, her sword moving with a blur, deflecting his strike with little effort. He swung again, this time to the left, testing to see where she would commit her guards. She avoided the swing and parried the next two that followed.

"Much better" Cask's voice broke through the tension again. "But your offense lacks conviction. Testing an opponent helps you learn what they might do, but it also lets them learn how you think as well."

Rolena glowered again as she avoided a more committed swing and then caught the follow up blow on her shield. He tried again with no change. Frustration bubbled inside Ohacha, but he drove it down. *Focus,* he repeated. Getting angry had gotten him killed in the last two bouts. He couldn't afford to let it happen again. Ohacha repositioned, stepping forward with a renewed sense of focus, his shield raised to catch Rolena's blow. He caught her swing high, leaving her sword-hand out of position and he slashed out, aiming at Rolena's exposed shoulder. She deflected it easily with her shield, stepping back until her sword was freed. She pushed him back with a thrust aimed at the same spot in the ribs she had struck earlier. Ohacha sidestepped, his movement fluid but a beat too slow. The attack only barely missed.

"Your attack was far too predictable," Rolena challenged. "At the start, your footwork is good but as you go on, it gets slower and heavier. And you're thinking too much. Trust your instincts more." Ohacha wasn't sure whether she was trying to give genuine advice or if she was taunting him.

His breath caught, but he didn't let it show. He wouldn't falter. Another attack, this time his blade aimed at her head. Rolena moved out of the swords path. She dodged often and committed to defence only when necessary. Her jabs were timely and precise. He swung again slashing low at her legs. She jumped backwards with ease and swung her blade upwards across his face. He stepped out of range, but the sting of the near-miss bit at his pride.

"Now you're getting the hang of it!" Cask bellowed. "Don't think. Feel the rhythm of the fight. The mind sees and reacts, but the body decides the course. You have trained for this."

Rolena stepped in, her eyes flicking to Cask, who gave a slight nod. With that, she moved to engage more aggressively. Her sword came down in a vicious diagonal slash aimed at Ohacha's shoulder. He blocked with his blade, but the strike left him exposed as she reached forward with her empty hand. Except, Ohacha remembered her having a shield in that hand before. She had dropped it, committing everything to this last attack by grabbing his arm with her own.

Rolena twisted and tried to pitch him over her shoulder but Ohacha abandoned his own sword to counter the throw. They grappled, each one trying to trip the other. Rolena still gripped her sword awkwardly between her body and Ohacha's shield. Their hands pulled and grasped for control. Rolena's foot caught Ohacha off-balance but Ohacha held on, ensuring they tumbled to the ground together and her sword didn't skewer him in the process.

Ohacha slipped free of her grasp and both fighters rose at the same instant, Rolena with her sword in hand and Ohacha with his shield. Without a weapon, Rolena pressed forward sword held high. Ohacha didn't think, he simply reacted despite the ache

in his arms and shoulders. He swung the shield and it caught her square in the chest. She flew backwards and hit the ground hard, fighting off the unpleasant sensation of having the wind knocked out of you.

"Good," Cask said, his tone more approving now. "Much better. Now you're getting it."

Rolena rose again. She collected her shield and her lips curled into a grin. Ohacha lowered his blade, taking a steadying breath. Sweat dripped down his face, but there was a spark in his chest that hadn't been there before. It felt like progress, even in the smallest of ways.

"Again, Ohacha. You must ready yourself to face your future. If you truly wish to defeat your father's enemies, then you must first conquer each challenge that comes before," Cask said, stepping forward. "Do you understand?"

Cask's question hung in the air. Ohacha's chest heaved under the strain. His lungs burned. His muscled ached. He was tired. But for the first time since exile, Ohacha found something within him that said, *yes, you can do this.* It felt like hope, perhaps. Or power. A glimpse at a future where he had control and agency. He pictured it; the dream of one day returning to Gaag to reclaim what was stolen from him. "Yes" Ohacha answered, still catching his breath.

"Good," Cask said, "Focus up and go again."

Chapter 7: The Meeting

Yoharum stepped out of the small inn he had been staying at inside the city. It primarily catered to foreigners and the man behind the counter was too detached to ask any questions. Just the way Yoharum liked it. It was already close to mid-day. He'd been out the night before, visiting the usual underground spots that attracted the kind of crooks he had been looking for. Later, he would pick out some thieves and lower tiered scoundrels. They would be used as the first line of fodder. Between his usual crew and the newly hired muscle, Yoharum felt confident. All he needed now was the opportunity.

The sun beat down overhead and even through the loose clothes; he was already feeling the heat. The humid morning air carried the strong aroma of wood smoke, warm bread, and spiced poultry. The scents permeated out from the small restaurant and into the street like an invitation. The restaurant was a little hole-in-the-wall nestled between two of the larger tenements on a narrow side street. Out front were a number of small makeshift chairs and a short wall for patrons to find a seat. A gray-haired man with a thin face tended to the food on the skillet with a long metal spoon in one hand and a metal poker in the other. He wielded the two instruments with a level of skill one might expect of a Mada'abi stone assassin. Yoharum ordered a skewer and some fresh bread and found a place on the half-wall on the opposite side of the street. He had considered the little chairs, but wasn't confident in their ability to support his large frame.

The calm following the storm felt stark in its contrast to the tempest that was his thoughts. Yoharum's mind raced, always calculating the best path to winning. He finished his meal and looked around in disappoint. *How far this city has fallen.* There were only two types of people inside the city's walls these days, rich Casoyans and rich foreigners. *Foreigners,* Yoharum thought, rolling the word over and over so as to punctuate the pejorative taste it left. *Everywhere you look, wealthy fucking foreigners.*

When Yoharum was younger and stupider, he spent his days on the streets robbing rich foreigners to survive. He needed the money. His *parents* needed the money. But a child is no match for a full-grown adult, and his career as a thief was swift and short-lived. He had the long scars on his back to prove it. Had he been older, it would have been a hand. But this harsh lesson taught him an important truth: the dead don't seek revenge. Only the living.

After finishing his meal, Yoharum set off for Patzau Palace. He shot a despicable glance at three foreigners at one of the small street-side tables, but they didn't notice him—they never did. Weaving his way onto the main thoroughfare, he moved among all kinds of people, from those out for a luxurious stroll to others, like him, with places to be and families to feed. In the back of his mind, a dark thought always whispered urges to simply off some nagging, rich bitch or pompous old nobleman. The kind of people who spouted discriminations about people they were too sheltered by wealth to ever

encounter. A passing patrol of guards, with their lances held skyward, served as a charming reminder of why he chose to ignore those thoughts.

Soldiers wandered in packs around the palace and Dohina square, where the entire area was bustling with activity. Children, some the same age he was when he got his big lashing, ran in and out of the palace as messengers. They carried letters and information between important places and people in the city. A younger boy ran at full speed in front of him, a small wax tablet grasped firmly in his hands. It was a common job for young people. Messengers from the palace were paid in meals and coppers, and there was a common agreement among everyone that they were not to be messed with.

Soldiers wandered in packs around the palace and Dohina square. The entire area was bustling with activity. Children, some the same age he'd been when he'd received his big lashing, ran in and out of the palace as messengers. They carried tablets and messages between important places and people across the city. A young boy ran at full speed in front of him, the wax tablet large in his firm grasp. Boys and girls who worked as messengers were paid in meals and coppers and even Yoharum deemed harassing a messenger as deplorable. Most hailed from the

Yoharum crossed the canal along the bridge closest to Yohati's estate. He was here just to scout it out, hoping to catch a glimpse of his targets. Yohati's boathouse came into view, as did the soldiers who stood watchful on the docks. He walked the walls of the estate and found it as impregnable as he feared. A large portion of the estate hugged the canal, while another third was hemmed in by the walls of other large and well-protected castles and villas of the elite. That left only the long stretch of wall along the cobbled street. Yoharum strolled along their length. The walls were twice his height with poor handholds and slick mossy growth. Spikes protruded from the top, and soldiers peered down over the spikes. His original assessment remained valid, the estate would be near impossible to break into. A single gatehouse revealed the only apparent entrance and exit, disregarding the boathouse. There hadn't been any obvious escape routes. No backdoors or openings. It was possible that the adjacent properties shared some kind of secondary exit but Yoharum felt confident he wouldn't find it. He circled the block one more time and returned to the canal bridge once again to reassess.

From his vantage on the bridge, Yoharum leaned over onto the hot stones and pulled out a round pear. He took a juicy bite and looked back over towards the estate. The walls were too high to get a good view, and so he turned his attention towards the row of three- and four-story buildings that occupied the opposite side of the street. If he could gain access to one of those units, he could get a better vantage of his targets inside the walls. That would be the best path, while he waited for Bartiin's plan. Yoharum finished his pear and tossed the core into the canal. It landed with a small splash.

When he looked back up, he spotted a familiar face, "Zhenya?" Yoharum called out to her, but she'd seen him first and was already walking his way. She wore a noblewoman's kebaya with a sash over her long skirt. Without seeing her face, he might have passed her off as any other woman in the city. She was shorter than him, but taller than most women and walked with all the grace of an aristocrat and all the strength of a true Casoyan. Her family was from the mountain villages, same as his, and they had originally met through their specific line of work. She was like him, raised poor and ostracized by city folk despite growing up in Caso. The main difference was she had the gift and the gift made her valuable to thieves and gangs.

"I got your message" Zhenya said as she approached. She closed the distance between them before she continued speaking. She leaned backwards on the railing to

face him, while he leaned forward over the railing to keep an eye on his prize. “So, you’ve got a new job?” she asked.

Yoharum smiled. He and Zhenya had worked together for years and there was nobody Yoharum trusted with his life more than her. She was no amateur. Despite being his senior by more than a decade, she was the only person Yoharum trusted. “A big one” Yoharum answered, switching from city Casoyan to the dialect that the mountain people spoke.

“A big one?” she repeated. “Who’s the client?”

“A foreigner. He’s looking to kill some other foreigners” Yoharum answered, “Seems political. Disgraced princes that have been run out of their castles.”

“Princes?” she repeated. “Sounds like that might stir up a fuss.”

“Not likely”

“Where are they?”

“In there” he said, gesturing to Patzau Yohati’s estate.

“In one of the estates?” she asked. “That’s Yohati’s. You know that one’s Yohati’s right.”

“Correct” he answered.

“I’m out” she said. “There is no reward great enough for the risk it would take to break into one of those estates.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Yoharum said. He reached out to stop her from leaving. “We don’t have to. We’re not breaking into any of the estates.”

“We don’t have to?”

“We’re to jump them after they’ve already left the estate. We make it look like a robbery gone wrong” he said through a wide grin. They’re supposed to be rich too. Might even score some extra coin along the way.”

“If it’s a big job, then there’s some kind of obstacle” Zhenya surmised. “What’s the catch?”

“The bodyguards are the hiccup,” he said, “at least based on the information I’ve been given. We’ve got to kill the two princes, but they’ve got bodyguards.”

“What’s so special about the bodyguards?”

“One’s a famous swordsman and the other is a master Aginjigaade” he said. She frowned at him in response. “Hey” he continued, “I said it was a big job, not an easy one.”

“Spirits” she said, “A master Aginjigaade? Who is it? What’s the affinity? I won’t do if they’re a flamer or an icer. And I know there’s an icer in the city. I’ve felt it.”

“That’s fair” Yoharum said. She had shared stories of an ill-fated encounter with a flamer. The madman burned everything in sight. “I agree, no fire or ice Aginjigaade” Yoharum continued. “The bodyguard is a stone Aginjigaade, famous for his defence. From what I’ve learned, he hardens his skin to protect against physical attacks. The swordsmen, however, can die the same as any other man. That’s why I need your help with the Aginjigaade and to make sure he’s the only one. No surprises.”

“You want me to fight a master Aginjigaade?”

“No, no!” Yoharum said, “I just need him distracted while we kill the others. You use your mental thing and distract him or whatever. Then you pull back and let the grunts do their thieving and the muscle do its murdering.”

“How many people are you getting involved?

“The regular crew and yourself, if you’re still interested. I’m planning on hiring a bunch of extra thugs for numbers. I’ll reach out to Viiran to send us some of the fresh

blood from his gang. Kids they're not afraid of losing. They can serve as the vanguard of the attack. The young ones are always the thirstiest for blood."

"What's the take?" Zhenya asked. Yoharum reached in her direction and placed an object on the stone wall of the bridge. He removed his hand and the golden coin gleamed in the hot sun. Zhenya picked up the coin and studied it.

"Careyago" she said, studying the coin. "They're the clients again?"

"I guess so," Yoharum answered, "and there's plenty more where that came from."

"How much more?" Zhenya asked, returning the gold piece.

"Theres forty more in my pocket" he said, and her eyes ears perked up. Yoharum smiled, "And a hundred more for completing the job, both targets killed."

Zhenya's eyes went wide. "You're serious?" she asked. He nodded. "Spirits, you could buy your own palace for that much. What's the split?"

"Twenty for the crew, and ten more for the gang members. Two of which would go to Viiran. That would leave ten, split between you and me just to attempt it. I'll give a bonus to the crew if we pull it off and split the rest between us sixty-forty" he said. "Sound fair?"

"Sixty for me?" she asked with a sly smile.

"Sixty for me" he countered.

"It seems like a decent job" Zhenya said. "Can we trust your client?"

"Never" Yoharum answered. "I was contacted by the *prime*. The same one who paid us for the Northrock job. So clearly this Bartiin guy has connections in the city. Equal to those of the two princes. Considering our record with them and the discretion associated, the job seems credible." Zhenya let out a long sigh in response. "You disagree?" Yoharum asked.

"No, I'm in." she said. "It sounds almost too good to be true, and that's why I'm hesitant. Either way, regardless of whether or not things go right or wrong, I'm not looking forward to having to leave the city to hide out in some backwater hamlet for the rest of the year."

I could be one of those rich foreigners travelling to far off places, Yoharum thought to himself. "Who knows" he said, "people always say there's more to the world than the isle of Caso. Perhaps we leave this hellhole of a city for a while instead." Or, maybe it's enough to change things for the better.

*

With the sun's departure, the evening air felt cool. Gaba'ké dressed in his most formal of clothes, a set of robes from bygone days spent living in the Krimas castle back in Gaag. The last time Gaba'ké had worn this very outfit, it had been in the weeks before the betrayal. The memories were heavy and they settled firmly over his heart, making it difficult to look forward to the night's merriment. Gaba'ké combed his long white hair and even did his best to fix the shape of his bushy white beard. This was an important night. Aramuk and Ohacha had finally received their formal invitation to dine with the Yohati family. He took one last look at himself in the small reflective glass, and descended the steps to the ground floor.

Gaba'ké had been an Aginjigaade in a king's court for most of his adult life. He was accustomed to the lavish banquets and meals that accompanied important guests and dignitaries. As such, he had some semblance of what to expect as he followed Aramuk and Ohacha across the estate gardens up to the grand front door of Yohati's mansion estate. The princes wore their most esteemed Gaagian attire. They wore sightly

differing maroon tunics with threaded gold patterns. Gold and turquoise accents matched the noble colours of the Krimas family, and those of the Kingdom of Gaag. Ohacha wore, in Gaba'ké's own opinion, far too much jewelry. He wore gold chains, earrings, bracelets, and rings that felt as if the boy were trying too hard to validate his status. One look at Aramuk's face suggested he agreed, but wasn't keen on arguing with Ohacha right before such an important meeting.

The door to the estate opened and a servant with a long face and wide eyes greeted them at the door and led them through the small foyer, down a narrow hall, and into a wide and opulent banquet hall. The room was massive, with high arching ceilings and space enough for two hundred. It was a room built to entertain, and in the center was a table long enough to seat thirty and filled with enough food to feed the same number. Spread across the table were countless silver platters, each complete with steaming dishes that filled even the large room with their enticing aromas. Gaba'ké spotted several whole fish, baked crabs, roasted ducks, prawns, and crystal goblets of wine all surrounding a small but still sizable roasted boar. Vibrant scents danced around the nose – jasmine, coconut, garlic, and savoury nutty smells. It was enough to make Gaba'ké's mouth water. This was a feast more lavish than any he had known. Gaba'ké blinked, thinking perhaps they had misunderstood the invitation. But, sitting on the far side in the middle of the table were only three people, Patzau Yohati, Reah Yohati, and their daughter Fera.

The Patzau and his wife rose from their seats where they had been waiting. Reah swept forward with the charm and grace of a woman who had attended an uncountable number of such gatherings. The compact and unreadable Patzau Yohati ambled behind. Only the daughter, Fera, seemed uninterested in the formality of the occasion. Her eyes lifted from the spread of food before her, but her interest didn't linger on her guests.

Polite greetings were made and soon all were seated along an amusingly small portion of the absurdly long table. To his surprise, Gaba'ké was seated in the middle of the table. The two older men, Aramuk and the Patzau, were placed on his left to share in their own more private conversation while he and Reah served as the buffer between the adults and the children. Ohacha seemed put off at being relegated to a seat as far from the Patzau as possible, and more insulted at the obvious lack of interest his own dinner partner displayed. Their meager polite platitudes felt a strained affair. Servants moved silently though the great space, even the soles of their feet soundless against the hard wooden floor. They cleared shells and bones, refilled goblets and ensured the ensemble of dishes maintained the appearance of being untouched, despite the contrary.

When all were seated, Reah raised her glass. "To old friends," she said, her smile drifting between her husband and Aramuk. "May this evening rekindle a relationship steeped in time, but never forgotten."

"It warms our hearts to be here and to see you so well after all these years," Aramuk responded. "We have important business to attend to here in Caso, and your generosity and hospitality will not go unappreciated or unnoticed. Cheers, to the rekindling of friendships."

Goblets clinked. All drank. But Gaba'ké noticed the old Patzau was yet to smile. He wasn't sure if this was something to be concerned about, or simply the old man's nature. Reah and Aramuk did most of the talking in the beginning. Reah was the kind of woman whose charm seemed to fill the entirety of the room. She spoke openly and asked interesting questions. She reacted in all the subtle ways that made a person feel heard. It made her instantly likeable.

Aramuk was equally pleasant. He had always been the smartest of the three brothers and what he lacked in charm, he made up for in knowledge and wisdom. He steered the conversation effortlessly though a range of complicated topics even Gaba'ké felt he knew little about; Casoyan trade routes, markets, and politics.

Yohati was of a different type of person than his wife. His questions were forthright and direct. It felt as if each question he asked was a test or a quiz. He asked about the minute details and listened with a sharp gaze that felt like he was calculating each and every response. He offered little information in return. There was a tension in his tone and questions that made Gaba'ké feel just the slightest bit uncomfortable. There was a cold undercurrent that even Reah's charm couldn't completely smooth over. From time to time, Gaba'ké would add to the conversation, but his attention was split equally between the two men and Ohacha and Fera on his other side.

While the conversation between the older folks was generally thriving, Ohacha was stumbling through his attempt at conversation with Yohati's daughter. Fera was as graceful as her mother with her words, but as charming as her father, which is to say not at all. Ohacha's earliest attempt at conversation had begun with an attempt to impress Yohati's daughter with tidbits about the interesting places he had been and things he had seen. When that didn't work, he tried talking about Caso, then swordplay, then histories, and even dancing. No matter what Ohacha tried, Fera seemed uninterested. She sat across from him with poise and maturity, but her few responses made it clear she had dismissed Ohacha entirely. Worse, the lack of engagement seemed to be wearing on the boy's nerves. Ohacha was a prince, and had never been so openly disregarded. It wasn't until Reah turned and asked a question to Gaba'ké about his abilities as an Aginjigaade that the girl's interest perked up.

"You're an Aginjigaade?" Fera asked with interest, interrupting Ohacha, who had been mid sentence. She set down the shell of the strange meat she had been eating, ignoring Ohacha, who was now visibly angry. "Were you born in Gaag like Ohama here?"

"Ohacha" Ohacha corrected through gritted teeth. Fera ignored him.

Gaba'ké floundered. She was doing it on purpose. For whatever reason, it was clear she wasn't fond of being sat away from the more important conversation. Ohacha clearly felt the same way, but at least the prince had tried to make something out of it. "No" he answered after a hesitation. "I was born in a small village just the north of Ayaan. I came to Gaag when I was much older."

"What is your Aginjigaade moniker?" Fera asked. "I hear all the Aginjigaade love to take up a name that represents them."

"He is known as the Stone Aginjigaade" Ohacha announced proudly, attempting to reclaim the conversation. Fera continued to ignore him. She turned her full attention to peppering Gaba'ké with questions about his abilities, his travels, and how and why he had come to be in the service of the Krimas family. Gaba'ké answered politely, but did his best to shift the conversation to less personal topics to little result. The girl was as persistent as her father and Ohacha remained relegated to a silently fuming spectator to the point where his ego was clearly bruised and his immaturity was put on full display.

As the meal wound down to its end, Ohacha, lulled by the wine and the constant frustration of being unheard answered carelessly to one of Yohati's questions. The Patzau had asked what their party was looking to purchase with the influx of coin the auction house sale would be enabling. Before Aramuk had the chance to answer, Ohacha chimed in that they were interested in purchasing additional ships for a fleet and to spend it on soldiers. Whether he had been hoping to appeal to Yohati's business acumen, or looking

to impress Fera, Gaba'ké wasn't sure. But a sharp look from Aramuk was enough to make-clear that Ohacha had said more than was appropriate. None saw the flicker of satisfaction that passed across Yohati's face. Despite the gaffe, Aramuk was quick to clarify that the money was for refurbishing the existing fleet and existing retinue of soldiers for the next ten years, which was true in some ways. All eyes shifted to Aramuk in the wake of this new information. Yohati's questions on the subject intensified until Aramuk managed to shift the conversation away at last.

The evening concluded and the endless trays of dishes disappeared into doorways never to be seen again. Gaba'ké couldn't help but wonder what happened to all that food now that they had finished with it. Would it be fed to the serving staff, maids, and cooks, or simply discarded. Part of him feared the truth. As they were led out by the Yohati's, Aramuk was invited to meet with the Patzau again in a more private setting where they could discuss business. Ohacha, once again left out, felt scorned. First, it had been Fera Yohati, now her father and his uncle. Gaba'ké shared in Ohacha's disappointment. Aramuk hadn't even tried to include his nephew in the meeting. Despite his constant declarations that Ohacha was in charge, his actions proved otherwise.

Night had fallen and the large branches from the old trees above cast dark shadows where the moon's light couldn't reach. Even in the darkness, the scowl across Ohacha's face was unmistakable. Gaba'ké wanted to find something to cheer the boy up with, but wasn't sure what he could do. He had little to offer and it was difficult not being able to help. Making matters worse was the fact that Aramuk seemed oblivious to his nephew's feelings. Part of him worried that Aramuk was being dense purposefully because of Ohacha's slipup.

It wasn't until they reached the guest house that Gaba'ké pulled Ohacha away from his uncle to have a moment alone. "I just want to talk for a moment" Gaba'ké said. They retreated into the darkness and found a large stone table a short walk from the house.

"I don't want to talk about the ships thing" Ohacha rebuffed. "I know I made a mistake."

"No, no" Gaba'ké responded. "Not that. I don't care about that."

That seemed to work and Ohacha's face lifted with new interest. "The girl. Fera" he said.

That sunk Ohacha's hoped all over again. "No" Gaba'ké added sternly. "I think she was trying to make you angry."

"Well then she did a good job" Ohacha said derisively.

"Look, I wasn't able to listen to everything you two talked about, but she seemed deliberately abrasive. You brought up a wide range of interesting intellectual topics and she didn't engage with any of them. I think, despite her antagonism, you handled yourself well up until the end."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ohacha chaffed.

Shit, Gaba'ké thought. "That's not what I meant" he corrected. "I'm just trying to let you know that you were great and that some people just aren't great conversationalists."

"She seemed to have a wonderful time asking you all sorts of questions about being an Aginjigaade" Ohacha countered. "I bet if I were an Aginjigaade, she would have been enthralled with me too."

"Again, I think she was trying to upset you" Gaba'ké added a little more sternly than he intended.

"If I were an Aginjigaade, things would be so much easier" Ohacha said.

"And I once thought things would have been easier for me if I were a prince" Gaba'ké countered. "And that's where we're both mistaken."

"You don't understand…"

"No, *you* don't understand!" Gaba'ké contradicted. "You put my kind on too high a pedestal. You see us as powerful, capable of seemingly impossible feats. I can see it in your eyes that you both revere and envy our capabilities and strength. So much so that you see us as greater than. But this is a fallacy. Seeing us in this way blinds you to our humanity. Behind the great feats, we are just people, same as you. We can lie and cheat and steal. We can love and yearn and need. We succumb to all of the same weaknesses of any other man; greed, cruelty, arrogance, apathy. Perhaps even more so. With few exceptions we can die in all the same ways you can and also in several more that you cannot. We can abuse the powers we have been gifted for our own gain. And those powers we presume to control are by most accounts the very same abilities that lead us to early graves."

Ohacha stared back, unsure what to say. Gaba'ké sighed and sat in one of the chairs at the table. Ohacha followed suit. Gaba'ké took a breath and tried again. "When I was just a young boy in Ayaan, still a student at the Aginjigaade academy, I thought my purpose for being there was to learn to control my abilities. To hone them. To become powerful. As an older man, I now realize that what I was taught was not how to be strong but instead how to be a decent person; a member of society in spite of my gift. What you misunderstand is that people look at you the same way you look at me. They see the wealth and the title and the power that being a prince gains you. They see the men, like me, who serve you and lords who fly your colours and miss the same difficult more-complex truth of who you are – your personal strengths and flaws. They may see you too as greater than. They don't see the hardships you have endured. They don't see suffering that you have weathered because of it."

Ohacha nodded, slowly. "I think I understand."

Gaba'ké continued, "You can't control what other people think, or do. Their reverence of you is their choice. And unfortunately, their disinterest in you is also their choice. Their thoughts and feelings are their responsibilities, not yours. What I am trying to tell you is that regardless of what others perceive, or expect of you, your only responsibility is to be yourself and to do what you think is best."

"What if I'm not sure what that is?" Ohacha asked.

"Then you have two choices," Gaba'ké answered, "ask for help from somebody you trust, or try your best to figure it out on your own."

"But what if I make the wrong choice? What if I mess it all up like I did today at dinner."

"You didn't mess everything up, Ohacha" Gaba'ké said calmly. "And the answer to your first question is that you learn from the mistake. You think I was born knowing the answers?" Gaba'ké chuckled. "I made a lot of mistakes when I was your age. Bigger mistakes than you've made, and I turned out alright."

"Like what?" Ohacha asked.

Gaba'ké sighed. "I'll tell you sometime, but not tonight." He placed his hands on his knees and rose to his feet. Extending a hand, he pulled Ohacha to his feet as well. "Let's go inside and get some sleep" he said. "I'm stuffed from that feast."

Chapter 8: Mudtown

To the south of the city, beyond the walls that had been originally erected to protect against raiding tribes and villages in the mountains, lay Mudtown. Or at least, what had once been Mudtown. Built upon the main road, Mudtown had originally been a small hamlet of homes that supported fishermen and farmers. The people relied on Lake Caso for survival and primarily fished the lake and the estuary for fish, crabs, and other mollusks. As the city within the walls grew upwards, old blocks of homes were torn down and people unable to afford it were pushed out of the city and into the surrounding towns and villages. Places that, at one time only housed and few hundred, now grew to communities with thousands. The very mountain people who once raided the city and its inhabitants in centuries past now came down from their villages to suckle at the wealth the city of gold brought. Now they stirred conflict outside the gates with their mouths and wants as much as their knives and violence. A new era of barbarism.

The old quaint village that had once been Mudtown was now a sprawling slum of makeshift shacks and mud-caked poverty. The narrow, winding alleys of Mudtown were churched into a viscous filth by the ceaseless foot traffic of its impoverished inhabitants. At least once a year, the lake would spill over its edges and a layer of brown mud would fill and then settle over the area. The homes here were constructed of salvaged scraps of wood and thatch and perched just high enough to let the floods only tickle the top of floorboards; if the residents were lucky. Everywhere Yuromi looked, she saw poor dirty women in entryways. They had children in their arms or at their backs and they watched her and her companions as they marched down the muddy street.

It was her first week on patrol in Mudtown and she wasn't happy with the change. Yuromi was well aware that her connection to her mother, Patzau Ashill and the Ashill family name awarded her certain perks. Most of which included the fact that she had never before been assigned a patrol in Mudtown or any the other smaller slums. But, ever since the increase in tensions between the gangs outside the city walls and the increased level of violence, crackdowns had been stricter. And, that had required additional soldiers assigned to the area. Her eyes moved from alley to alley, doorway to doorway, ever on the lookout for activity. The shady men who loitered around every alleyway and streetcorner made determining the difference between who looked like trouble and, who would *actually* cause trouble, very difficult. By her account, they all looked like trouble. What she didn't understand was that she looked like trouble to them too.

Children with bare feet and torn clothes ran through the streets, laughing despite the bleakness of their situation. Yuromi led her squad through the quiet streets. There were ten of them, including her as Squad Sergeant. She had Corporal Gora with her and eight patrol guards. Soldiers, each and every one of them. Each soldier wore a thick woven soft body armour stuffed tight with cotton above an undershirt or bare skin,

relative to the individual's preference. Below they wore matching sarong and hard leather shoes to protect their feet. The mud had already caked the shoes making each step a grueling challenge. Each soldier carried a standard issue spear made of ash and a thin dagger-like bladed at the head. Soldiers also carried a hard-wood club on their hip, known as a ghata. As officers, Yuromi and Gora both carried short swords instead of the ghata. The patrol group walked in a tight formation, never allowing any one person to be left alone. White knuckles held tight to each lance. Eyes remained as sharp as the honed tip of each spear.

The group moved with quiet determination. People watched them as they passed with either resignation or in the odd case, defiance. Here in Mudtown, the trees had all been cut down and the hot sun kept an ever-watchful gaze on their activities. The city walls loomed overhead, a constant reminder of the power and protection the city walls had to offer. Yuromi wished nothing more than to return to them early; to end the ceaseless vigilance for danger around every corner. The checking of each set of eyes that dared to meet hers as she marched. Instead, her sense of duty kept her marching forward through the labyrinthine maze of shacks and hovels. She took comfort in knowing that a dozen other squads marched nearby as a show of force.

The path widened once again and the squad stepped back onto one of the main avenues that bisected Mudtown. Here, the threat was lower. Further up the street, Yuromi could see another squad of soldiers emerging from the maze of homes and she and the other officer exchanged a quick signal. They were okay. On the main avenues, business that serviced the community flourished. Homes doubled as storefronts for goods, food, and services.

"Halt here" Yuromi ordered. Her squad followed suit. The tense looks eased now that they were more out in the open. She looked down the other way just as another squad appeared from the inner alleyways. She waited and gave the same 'we're okay' signal to the officer of the second squad.

"Both squads are confirmed" she said to the group. "Let's grab some food and water."

"Thank the spirits" one of her soldiers said. He was a stocky man with a sparse moustache and small eyes. Grim, was his name.

"You out of water already?"

"Piss. I was out of water an hour in." he said.

"Let's hit the well then."

Yuromi led her squad up the street to the main intersection where another squad was already waiting around. There was some kind of disagreement and Yuromi separated from her squad to find out more information.

"We can't drink this" one of the soldiers said. "I guarantee we get sick from this shit" the man said, pouring out the brown water onto the muddy cobblestones.

"How do you think I feel?" a man shouted back. A local. "I have two children and a wife. My family must either drink this water or we must hike outside the city to collect water from one of the mountain streams."

"Boil it" the squad officer said to the local man.

"I can't boil the filth out of the water" the man said. "All of the pumps are like this here."

"Why don't you collect rainwater?" Yuromi asked, shifting attention. The other squad's officer gave her a look and then a nod. She didn't really know the man. He wasn't from one of the prominent families. He was tall with thick arms and legs.

"We do" the man said, "but people have been stealing our water. They have been stealing water from everyone."

"Who has been stealing the water?" the soldier asked.

"I don't know" the man said. "I've never caught them."

"Sounds like an excuse" the soldier said. Frustration flashed across the local man's face and the woman behind him spit over her shoulder at the comment.

"We are dying of thirst" the man said. "We have food aplenty but there is little water."

"Take from the lake" another soldier suggested. "Boil that."

"The lake water is dirtier than the wells are."

"And whose fault is that?" the abrasive soldier countered. "That's what you get for shitting in the lake."

Another round of shouting and arguing broke out after that comment. Yuromi didn't feel like getting in the middle of it and returned to her squad as they watched from further back.

"No luck?" Corporal Gora said. He wore a flat wide brimmed hat straw that kept the sun off his bare shoulders and face.

Yuromi shook her head. "No, the well appears to be dirty. The locals are arguing with the other squad about what to do about it."

"Have they tried collecting rainwater?" Gora asked.

"People are stealing water, apparently" Yuromi answered.

"Damn" one of the other soldiers said. "That's rough. So where are we going to get some water?"

"Why don't we try one of the local restaurants." Yuromi suggested. "They'll probably have water but it'll cost us."

"Beats marching another couple of hours without any." Grim said. He hocked and spit loudly.

"Let's move then" Yuromi ordered. "We can pick any old place on the street."

"Why don't we get a recommendation." Gora said.

"The only thing the people here will recommend to us is to get the fuck out" Grim said with a rude chuckle. "That or the best place to get a knife in the back mid meal."

Yuromi didn't laugh. She felt similarly though she would never say so. Instead, their group wandered down the main avenue. Locals steered clear of them. She preferred it that way. She found a restaurant and ducked in through a cloth doorway. The place was miraculously clean of mud. She paused in the entryway, letting her eyes adjust to the dim light. The dining room was long and narrow. There were tables stretching all the way back towards a kitchen at the very back. The place was mostly empty, save for a few patrons enjoying their lunch. All eyes turned to her and the other soldiers as they filed into the room.

In the back by the kitchen, all manner of activity broke loose as the cooks realized the size and importance of their new arrivals. Yuromi and her soldiers made their way towards a table in a tucked away corner. Gora collect the spears and leaned the weapons against the wall, away from the other patrons. Yuromi watched as a young boy, maybe twelve or so, appeared from the back by the kitchen carrying a bottle of palm wine. He set the bottle down on the table without a word and then scampered back towards the kitchen. One of Yuromi's soldiers reached for the bottle and she signaled for her to wait. A woman appeared from the back and walked to their table.

"Welcome" she said nervously. Her eyes fell on the unopened bottle. "Please consider this bottle a gift. It is not every day we see so many soldiers in our humble home. Today we are serving a fish stew with fried miri-quail eggs. We can also make some extra vegetables for the table if this is not enough food."

"That would be most appreciated" Yuromi said. "We'll take the vegetables too and if you have it, a large bottle of water for the table would be much appreciated."

"Of course," the woman said, and she like the boy scampered off towards the kitchen. Yuromi watcher her go, peering back over her chair. She could here the woman and another man shouting at each other in the mountain dialect. A fact that immediately bred distrust. Yuromi turned back, intending to encourage them not to open the wine only to see the bottle already poured across the table and half gone.

"Well, I'll be damned" Grim said. "This shit's actually pretty good" he said after taking another gulp. "If its cheap I might bring some home with me."

Yuromi frowned. She looked up at the boards in the ceiling and let out a long loud sigh that drew the full attention of her squad. They exchanged a few looks but when she didn't look back down, they returned to their conversation and drink. The serving woman appeared again, carrying a tray with bowls of fish stew. Yuromi brought her wandering thoughts back down from the ceiling and took a large clay jug from the young boy. Yuromi took the jug and looked inside, following the action with a quick sniff. It smelled like water and she poured herself some, ignoring the cup wine that had been poured for her. She wasn't in the right mood to drink. *Spirits, I might hit somebody.* The food was edible but nothing special but the squad seemed to enjoy it. She enjoyed the water and the respite from the hot sun more than anything else.

A crash of pots sounded from the kitchen and Yuromi but Yuromi ignored it, now interested in a story Gora was telling about a gambling den bust that his mate in another squad had taken part in a few weeks back. She nearly jumped from her chair when a hand touched her arm gently. She looked down in alarm as the serving boy looked up at her with wide eyed panic. She noticed she had a table knife at the boy's throat. Yuromi didn't remember picking it up off the table. It had been instinct. He had fallen backwards onto his hands at the unexpected threat of danger. Her eyes of panicked murderous instinct met his eyes of panicked survival.

"Please" the boy croaked. It was almost a whisper. The story stopped as everyone looked, only able to see their sergeant's reaction and not the boy on the ground.

"What?" she asked, not hearing what he had said.

"Please" he repeated with a stronger hiss. "There are men in the back. They have my parents!"

"What?" Yuromi repeated, dumbfounded.

"Men with weapons" the boy repeated. "I don't know how many. They have my mother."

Yuromi stood swiftly but careful not to scrape her chair. She replaced the table knife and reached for her short sword. The blade hissed a soft metallic ring as Yuromi pulled it from the sheath. The boy backed away, still on his hands and knees. Corporal Gora drew his sword and the other members of the squad pulled out their ghata clubs.

"Gora" she said, not looking back. "Take Grim and Bila with your spears around to check out the back of the building. Be extra cautious!" Corporal Gora nodded and moved to collect the lances from their resting place in the corner. Looking down again at the serving boy, he pointed towards the kitchen, terror in his eyes. Yuromi skulked slowly towards the rear of the building and paused on the other side of a gnarled piece of woven

thatch that stood as a sad looking door to the kitchen. On the other side, she could hear voices. She threw up a hand sign to signal her soldiers to wait. She could hear muffled pleading.

"Please" a man's voice said through a thick mountain accent, "We've been paying our tributes. I don't understand."

"Paying to whom?" another man's voice said. A younger voice that seeped arrogance.

"To Farzhad" the first man said. "We pay Farzhad every month. We haven't missed one payment."

"That's where you're mistaken then" the younger voice continued, "you've been paying the wrong person. We're in control this territory now. The Kakulti gang is who you'll be paying from here on out and it's time to pay up." The man laughed and a chorus of voices laughed alongside him.

"Ok. But we've already paid Farzhad. We don't have enough money to pay twice."

A thump sounded and with it came the groan of pain and wheeze of breath. "You pay the tribute *today.* If you don't, I'll take over this establishment and leave you into the swampland to play with the crocodiles. Are you understanding me now?"

"I promise" the man wheezed. "We have no money. We can begin paying next month. I promise this to you."

Another heavy thump and gasped wheeze of pain. For a split second, a woman's shriek broke the silence before being immediately muffled again. Yuromi knew this was her chance. Their attention would be on the woman for the outburst. She cursed the tight space. She would have to go first and alone and prayed they wouldn't expect her attack.

She lunged forward and burst through the sorry excuse of a door with her right shoulder. The thatch exploded into its component parts, too brittle to survive her advance. There were six people inside the small kitchen. Ahead of her stood the older doubled-over man she presumed to be the cook and the younger kid who was his assailant. To her left were two thugs, one of them holding his hand over the serving woman's mouth. To her right, was a sixth man brandishing an axe. In the blink of an eye, she had already poised her blade and rushed forward to stab the sword into the gang leader's ribs near the armpit. The blade bit bone but passed through, sinking deep. She knew in an instant her strike would kill him.

She turned to her right to take the man behind him with the axe. He reeled in shock. She focused solely on killing this man, trusting her squad to handle the other two behind her. Yuromi pulled her blade out from the first thug and it came away crimson. The axeman's shock quickly morphed into rage. He raised the weapon high and swung with all his might. He had the drop on her and she knew it. Instead of bringing up her blade, which she knew she couldn't do in time, she reached high with her empty right hand and caught his right wrist. She didn't have the strength to stop him but she did have the experience to use the split second it gave her to lunge under his attack and bring her sword up and into his abdomen. For the second time, her blade sunk deep into a man's flesh.

However, in catching her attacker's wrist, the axe escaped from his grasp and whirled clumsily, catching her in the shoulder just below where the cotton body armour protected. The blade sliced clean through her shirt and left a long shallow gash. The force of the blow knocked her off balance. She hit the ground flat on her back and the man she had just skewered toppled on top of her.

Yuromi gasped as the air was forcibly expelled her lungs just as much by the falling man as from the impact with the floorboards. Blinding tears welled in her eyes as she fought to inhale a new breath. When breath finally came, she heaved and pushed the man off of her. Her sword had escaped her hand as she had fallen. It was still impaled in the man she had just killed. Yuromi rolled slowly onto her front and vomited out the soup and water she had just eaten. She wiped the tears from her eyes and took in the situation.

Her soldiers controlled the kitchen. She sighed in relief and slowly pulled herself to her feet. The man, the cook who was being extorted, wasn't quite screaming but also wasn't quite crying. A mix of the two. She followed his gaze and saw the reason for his distress. The man who had been holding the waitress hostage had killed her it seemed. She lay on the ground, unmoving. *Fuck*, Yuromi thought.

"Are you okay, Sergeant?" one of her soldiers said. Yuromi could have sworn the man was speaking Mada'abi. She didn't register a word he said. He turned away and shouted and she followed his gaze. That's when she looked at her soldiers. There were two more of them hovering over another body. She took an awkward step forward. Then another one. She stepped on something and looked down. It was the axe that had tried to kill her. She looked back up and saw all of the soldiers in the room looking back at her, expectantly. That's when she saw the dead soldier. Her dead squadmate. *Oh, fuck,* she thought again.

Inside the Casoyan fortress, on the third floor of the inner keep, Yuromi sat hunched over a wooden table. This room was reserved for senior officers meeting, but tonight she had it all to herself. They had stripped her of her weapons and left her here alone after her briefing about the incident. That's what they were calling it now; the restaurant incident. The room was spacious, meant to hold thirty officers but felt empty. To her left, a pair of thin murder holes served as the only excuse for windows. Through one, she could see the last orangey pink hues of sundown and the other, the deeper indigo veil of dusk. A lone illum stone table lamp cast a soft glow in the otherwise dark room. Darkness filled the corners of the room and Yuromi watched as a shy shadowy spirit hovered around the edge of darkness. The spirit seemed to disappear into the darkness and she couldn't tell if it was truly phasing from existence and reappearing or simply slipping too far from the light for her to see it.

Yuromi had returned to the fortress with her whole squad, minus their fallen comrade, and after her individual briefing, she had been separated from the rest of them. At first, she had simply felt this was the order of events but now, after several mind-numbing hours, she felt she was being punished. Or worse, on the verge of being actually punished. Although, she couldn't think of a reason why. She replayed the event over and over again in her head and came to the same conclusions. She had taken the necessary precautions, followed protocol, and acted as befitting her station. They couldn't punish her for a soldier lost in the line of duty, could they? Officially, they had killed eight gang members; the four inside the kitchen and three more who tried to escape out the back onto to find themselves impaled on Casoyan spears. The eighth, as far as the official report was concerned, was the serving woman. To Yuromi's dismay, she was told it would be improper to include any civilians as a casualty in the report. 'Plus, an eight-to-one ratio is better than a seven-to-two', the guild clerk had said. She hadn't argued.

She thought about the dead soldier on the wooden floorboards of the makeshift building that had served as the restaurant's kitchen. The soldier who had died was called Peran. She had been in the guild for two years and was, as far as Yuromi could tell, a good soldier. Although, Yuromi hadn't really known her. She knew her name, not her story. The

sense of loss she felt was connected with her sense of duty and responsibility. It hurt knowing that she failed this member of her squad, not specifically the fact that the woman had died. People die all the time. Her father had died. People die. Things go away. That's just the way the world turns. And yet, she sat here with the fabric of misery stretched across her heart. Not for the soldier, and she felt guilty for that truth, but for the young son of that mother who lay next to the soldier, equally as dead. For the look on his face as he processed what had happened. When he went to her. And Yuromi saw the calm blank look on the dead woman's face. Whom looked almost no different than she had just a shot span ago, before she had taken her last silent breath. For the pain of losing a parent. Of losing somebody so precious to you that the very solidity of the world comes into question and all you can do is feel the weight of that loss in an unfathomable overwhelming pressure of presence that, Yuromi knew, would one day fade to numbness. She would remember that look.

The wooden door latch clinked and the metal hinges squeaked open. Yuromi turned to face the doorway, unsure what to expect. The first person to enter was Chief Commander Yanello, who served under Yuromi's mother as leader of the Patrol and Scout units. He was a scruffy man with a lighter hair, almost almond in colour, and a set of spectacles he used to supplement his actively worsening eyesight. Following Commander Yanello was her squad captain, Captain Horval. Yuromi drew her arms to her chest. She and the Captain didn't get along particularly well. He was straight as an arrow and was meticulous in his fervor to do things by the book. They had clashed numerous times over this fact and only the friendship and support of her lieutenant had spared her from his punishment. They locked eyes, but Yuromi didn't sense any disappointment in them. She was almost surprised. But what truly surprised her was the final two figures who brought up the rear of the group: Patzau Yanata Ashill, her mother, followed by her Aginjigaade Elvi Batari. *What the fuck is happening,* she thought to herself. She sat up straight and Elvi shot her a quick smile.

"Good evening" Commander Yanello said, taking a seat at a chair across from her. He pulled a stone from his pocket and flipped it over. It shone with a bit of extra light and filled the room with a warmer glow. The shadowy spirit vanished, *probably off to find a new patch of darkness,* Yuromi thought.

"Good evening, Commander" Yuromi said, "Captain" she said, gesturing to Captain Horval. She watcher her mother and Elvi take their seats but was still a little too shocked to say anything.

"No welcome for your mother?" Patzau Ashill said.

"Welcome… Patzau Ashill. To what do I owe the honour?"

"To the dead soldier on your squad" Patzau Ashill said flatly. Yuromi stared blankly.

"Look, Yuromi" Commander Yanello said, drawing her attention to him. "You're not here because you're in any specific trouble. We've had conversations with the members of your squad and even a discussion with some trusted locals in Mudtown. We think we have a very good understanding of what happened and we are pleased that you took matters into your own hands to handle the situation as well as you did."

"But…" Yuromi said, knowing it was coming.

"No. No but" Commander Yanello said.

"Yes but" Patzau Ashill cut in. "Somebody died, Yuromi. We understand that this is a risk that all of our guild members take while serving for the greater prosperity and safety of the city but that doesn't mean there will not be consequences."

"Yes" Yanello said, "There will be consequences. We had a discussion with your squad members and they each spoke highly of how you handled the situation. You were thorough, acted quickly but not rash, and showed that you are a capable leader and fighter."

"Then why am I being punished?" Yuromi asked, defensively.

Captain Horval snapped his fingers loud enough to draw the attention of all in the room. Yuromi stared at him, wondering how he did it. "This has always been my struggle with you, Sergeant Ashill" he said, making eye contact with the Patzau, "Think again on the words Patzau Ashill said, there will be consequences. Not punishment. There *is* a difference."

"Thank you, Captain" Yanello said. "We are suspending you from active duty for a month. Use this time to recuperate from your injuries and mourn your loss. You can still come and go from guild spaces at your free will, but there is no expectation for you to arrive for active service. You will be barred from rejoining any squad functions for two weeks, but can volunteer to return after that time."

"Wait, what?" Yuromi asked. "What about my squad?"

"Each of them has already been given the same leave" Yanello answered. "Your small group has now seen more action than most city patrollers see in a year. And, you all handled it well. Enjoy your time off."

Commander Yanello and Captain Horval stood, taking their leave. Yuromi saluted and then turned her attention towards her mother who still sat with Elvi across the table to her left. The three women sat in silence while the two men left the room, closing the small door behind them.

"Did all of you really need to be there for that?" Yuromi asked.

"We are still on guild business." Patzau Ashill snapped. "Please treat this as such."

"Yes, ma'am" Yuromi said.

"What did you think you were doing, moving against those thugs like that?"

"What do you mean?" Yuromi said, taken aback. "It's my job to stop thugs and murderers like those men."

"It's your job to keep the peace! Why were you even in that shit hole?" Patzau Ashill asked.

"The restaurant?"

"Yes."

"It was hot and we needed water" Yuromi said defensively.

"Why didn't you get some from one of the wells?"

"The well water is polluted. We needed food anyway so we stopped."

"Spirits, do you know how much danger you put your squad in by going off alone like that?"

"We weren't in any danger." Yuromi protested. "The gangs don't attack soldiers on the main road and there were other squads nearby." She looked to Elvi for support but the woman stayed quiet.

"That was stupid and you almost got yourself and your squad killed!"

"No!" Yuromi yelled back. "It was the right thing to do and we removed seven gangsters. Men who can no longer intimidate and steal from regular citizens. Scrum that can never again harass our soldiers. And we helped innocent people while doing it."

"You could have died!" Patzau Ashill protested. It finally clicked for Yuromi. The real reason her mother was upset. A bitterness rose up within her.

"And you said this was guild business…" Yuromi said, fighting back tears. "I'm not dad."

Patzau Ashill rose and for a split second, Yuromi thought her mother might hit her.

"And if you wanted me to be safe and overprotected so much, maybe pull your little strings and don't have me transferred to patrols outside the city walls…" Yuromi goaded, "just like you did with Kida."

Elvi caught the hand that moved to strike Yuromi across the face from across the table. Even in at her age and with eight years behind the Patzau's desk, Yuromi knew best how fierce her mother was. She flinched. The hand would have struck her if not for Elvi's intervention.

"I don't have to worry about your twin sister because she listens to me and doesn't do stupidly rash things." Yanata spat. Not Patzau Ashill anymore.

"What are you taking about!?" Yuromi yelled. "*You* were a soldier yourself. You were fighting against the barbarian tribes in the mountain uprisings at our age. Your two daughters live in the safest time period this city has ever known and you can't handle that were on familiar streets keeping the people of this city safe?"

"I just want to protect you" Yanata said, sternly.

"And that's fine" Yuromi said. "Do what you want. You're the one in charge. But you can't have it both ways. You can't try to protect me *and* transfer me to patrol Mudtown. And the truth we both know is that if I let you protect me as much as you wanted, I'll turn out like Kida."

"What's that supposed to mean? What's wrong with your sister?" Yanata demanded.

"Nothing" Yuromi said, "But you and I both know that no person has ever described her as a capable soldier or a leader. If you had it your way, neither of us would end up like you."

"I *don't* want either of you to end up like me." Yanata said. Elvi recoiled at that one, understanding the truth behind those words.

"Maybe that isn't your choice" Yuromi answered. "Am I free to go?"

"Yes" Elvi said. Yanata gave a stern look and to her credit, Yuromi watched Elvi return it.

Yuromi rose and left. The two women watched her go, the door clicking shut behind her.

"Official guild business, huh?"

"Shut up, Elvi" Yanata said. She breathed in deep and buried her hand in her face.

"She's right you know" Elvi said. "Spirits, it's like I'm seeing a spitting image of you."

Yanata sighed into the silence that followed, "That's what I'm worried about."

Chapter 9: The Artisan

The piercing ring of metal on metal echoed through the wide warehouse. Artisans and metalworkers in this particular facility on the north side of the city worked to produce bronze for the guild. The copper was mined here on the island, just a single day's walk south of the city and the cassiterite was shipped in from the nearby cities of Jurang and Choke, from the larger island east of Casoya. Both cities competed to sell their vast wealth of these gemstones to the Artisan's Guild and as such, underbid each other for the richness that came with the business. The cassiterite was then smelted down and the pure tin was extracted. A ton of tin, when mixed with appropriate amount of copper, could be used to produce nearly ten tons of bronze. After being poured into a mold and cooled, the end product could be shipped back to both cities at a marked-up price. Even when factoring in the loss of one out of every hundred ships to storms or raiders, the wealth pouring in was astronomical.

Patzau Mellen Minoc walked through the open warehouse where the already forged bronze was sharpened, touched up, and packaged for travel. Around them stood crates of sickles, knives, axes, spear heads, and short swords. The production of tools and weapons in particular made the Casoyan industry lucrative to nearly all trading partners. *People know of Casoya for the rich and fancy items sold in the auction house, but so much of the gold that enters this city comes from the creation and sale of everyday blades and weapons.*

Mellen had a plethora of, what he referred to as, eyes. Watchers who monitored all incoming ships and their place of origin. There were men and women in his employ who could tell a Careyago caravel from a Miisoso galley from just a blurry outline on the distant horizon. What had started as a system to keep track of ships and business partners had, quite by accident, become a vast network of informants spread across the city. And as information pooled, those who had other information and gossip of their own suddenly found a place where it could be added to the anonymous pool, and paid for in coin.

Thus, it came to be that Patzau Mellen Minoc found himself with a more robust and reliable spy organization that he ever planned or wished for. All by accident. And the things Mellen learned about his fellow Casoyans was every bit as heartwarming, disturbing, wonderful and awful as one could imagine. It was like sitting at the head of his guild, multiplied by a magnitude. Murderers, cheats, thieves, adulterers, drunks; Mellen heard it all. Most of it rumours only, but plenty of it reliable. It had its uses, undeniably, but it was also a burden. One Patzau Minoc took upon himself, and only himself to carry. *For the good of the guilds and the good of the city,* he told himself. *Only for the good of Caso.*

A group of guildsmen pushing a heavy tool cart lumbered by and Patzau Minoc to wait. Hughir, the warehouse manager, and Kuta waited by his side. Mellen believed in

a decentralized operation of his guild. When he had taken control after Patzau Onwii had died, the guild was focused on producing to a level of specificity that was stagnating creativity and success. He believed in a decentralized approach where control was given back to the artisans, smiths, and enterprises. Those who pay their dues should also have the freedom to pave their futures. But with the Guild as the beating heart, opportunities for one can be an opportunity for all. Guild negotiators to ensure fair wages and to connect buyers and sellers. Guild contracts to facilitate collaboration and support apprenticeships. In Minoc's system, everyone reaps the benefits and everyone pays their dues.

"We have six hundred more blades on the way, ready to be sharpened and shipped" Hughir said.

"Excellent. And where is this shipment headed?" Patzau Minoc asked, picking up a short single-handed sword from a crate. The sword was wider near the point and tapered towards the handle. The guard was short and unornamented. A simple wooden handle with a cloth wrap rounded out the sword's grip. The blade shone as he turned it over in his hands. He resisted the urge to swing it, knowing he didn't know how to. He pressed the blades edge to his thumb but its unsharpened bite didn't break his skin.

"This batch is headed to the High Prince of Asere" Hughir said, eager for approval.

"Asere" Patzau Minoc repeated. "I must ask Patzau Murocil if she knows what the High Prince might want two thousand new blades for."

"My guess, as always, is an army" Hughir said.

Patzau Minoc managed not to make a face. *You're as dull as these blades, Hughir. It's always an army. I want to know what he plans to do with the army, you idiot.* "Of course…" was all he said in response. He handed the blade to Kuta. "What do you think?" Patzau Minoc asked. *She would know best.*

Kuta turned the blade over in her hand once and then twice, inspecting the quality of the metal. In a wave, the musty smell of Aginjigaade sorcery emanated from where she stood and it pinched his nostrils with its earthy metallic scent. "The quality of this blade is fine. Adding more tin would create a more ridged structure. There are only minor impurities." She held the blade in her hand and chopped lazily towards the crate the sword had been taken from. It hit the wooden box with a dull thud and she pulled back the sword, inspecting the edge.

"As I said, the blade is not yet sharp" Hughir repeated.

Another surge of sorcery emanated from Kuta as she ran her fingers along the edge of the sword. Patzau Minoc watched expectantly. On him, the bronze sword looked like a toy. But to her, it seemed the right size for her smaller frame. Kuta twisted the blade in her hand and then brought it down on the box with only a little more power than she had during her first swing. The sword bit into the wooden crate and sunk deep. Hughir stood wide-eyed.

"When sharpened, these blades will be more than sufficient" Kuta said. "The High Prince should be pleased, especially when considering the quantity." She passed the blade back to Hughir.

"Thank you, Master Aginjigaade" he said, receiving the weapon. He inspected the newly honed edge and brought up his finger to the blade to inspect it. The edge she had created was so fine that it seemed impossible to see with human eyes. He ran his thumb across the edge with the softest touch and it sliced clean through his calloused skin. Bright red blood welled from the shallow gash on the flat of his thumb and he pulled away instinctively, bringing it up to his mouth to suck on it.

“Good work Hughir. I know that several forges and smiths have been working hard on this order. Please inform me if any of them produce anything you might consider… below guild quality.”

“Yes, Patzau” Hughir said.

Patzau Minoc and Kuta left the warehouse together, Minoc eager to move on to the next item on the itinerary. Kuta followed, ever close and ever quiet. They were an odd duo, the giant man with the giant personality and his small and quiet Aginjigaade assistant. It had been a stroke of luck that had brought them together. It was rare for Aginjigaade to hail from the mountain tribes and villages deep inland. Outside of Caso and especially in the mountain villages, being born an Aginjigaade was considered a death sentence. A curse, not a gift. Aginjigaade from the city were sent out regularly to search for children born with the gift, but Mellen couldn’t remember a single successful occasion in his lifetime.

And so, when Kuta appeared in Caso, barely a woman and gifted like no other untrained Aginjigaade before her, Mellen became intrigued. When it was revealed that her affinity was to spirits of earthen metals, he became invested. And when the scramble to add her to each guilds’ ranks had swung into motion, he had already ensured she would choose the Artisan’s Guild. And now she stood at his side, because he knew exactly what a girl like her wanted. It was something none of the other guilds would offer: opportunity. He would pay her well, like they all would, but he promised her the opportunity to listen and learn. To lead and decide for herself what to make of her life. It was what most of the poor kids that came down from the mountains sought.

It had taken a long time to really earn her trust. She was reserved. Not just with her comments. He watched her sometimes. He could see the odd whisp of a spirit. They lingered in his peripherals and disappeared into thin air when he approached. Flame spirits dancing around a candle lights. Water spirits swimming just below the surface of the city’s canals. Wind spirits dancing through the air like leaves in the wind. But where he could see the occasional spirit, he knew that Kuta could sense them all. She had shared with him once how everywhere she looked; hundreds and hundreds of spirits of countless varieties made up the world around them. She seldom spoke about herself, but Minoc caught her attention snapping to odd places. Her awareness of the world around them was astounding.

“You’ve got something on your mind” Kuta said, as the two of them sat down on opposite sides of the palanquin that would take them to their next destination. “What are you thinking about?”

Patzau Minoc stared back at her for a moment. The silence between them was only broken by the even marching of the servants carrying the palanquin and the retinue of soldiers who led them through the city. He didn’t want to share that he had been thinking of her and her abilities. Part of him still feared the baseless notion that, through her sorcery, she could read his thoughts. He had to remind himself that it was childish to hold onto that fear. He deflected and instead said, “That Aginjigaade we met. The one you said was special. The one with those princes of Gaag.”

“What about him?” Kuta asked. “Do you want me to find out where he is?”

“No,” Mellen said, raising a hand. “There’s no need. They’ve been staying with Patzau Yohati. I know they’re still there.”

Kuta detected a hint of… something in his voice; unease or confusion. She couldn’t quite tell. “Is that a problem?” she asked, trying to discern more.

“A problem?” Mellen repeated. “No. Not a problem. I was surprised, that’s all. I didn’t expect that Yohati would take them in. As far as I can tell, he’s been quite friendly with that ambassador to the Careyago Empire. Taking in these exiled princes of Gaag puts him at odds with her. They must have something he wants and I want to find out what it is. How long until I should expect a response from the Onerans?”

“The inquiries went out yesterday with a shipment of furniture addressed to Lord Diam Anup. Hopefully, with the right winds and willing responders, we receive an answer within two- or three-weeks time” Kuta answered.

Mellen only grunted an acknowledgement. With an unexpected jolt, the palanquin came to a stop and the servants carrying them halted. Mellen pulled the cover on his window. He peered out but couldn’t see discern why they had stopped.

“What’s going on?” Mellen barked. “I have an appointment to make.”

“Message for you, Patzau” one of the soldiers said. He slipped a wax tablet through the window and Patzau Minoc took the small thing in his large hands. Kuta watched on, curious. Mellen squinted, unable to read in the dim light and then held the tablet up to the window to read it better. The servants picked up the palanquin and continued onwards.

Mellen muttered to himself. Kuta looked at him. Her face asked the question and so he explained, “It’s a report from one of my eyes on the docks,” he said. “A new trade ship docked just before the big storm. They paid off the wharfinger to avoid the search and manifest.” Kuta looked at him with concern. “It’s more common than you might think” Mellen elaborated, “but its not commonly paid in brand new Careyago Gold coins.”

“What does that imply?” Kuta asked.

“It means that the Careyago are trying to sneak something into the city. Something or somebody.”

“What would they need to sneak into Caso?” Kuta asked.

“Nothing came off the ship” Mellen said, looking over the tablet for a second time. “Not yet anyway. That’s also strange.”

“What do you think they’re up to?”

“Impossible to know for sure” he answered. Mellen scratched his chin where stubble was already growing in. *But I have my suspicions,* he thought to himself.

Flights of doves scattered as Patzau Minoc’s palanquin moved south towards the fortress. The heavy sounds of spears, armour, and boots marching parted the crowds of people for the detail of soldiers leading the way. Parents held their children tighter, cats and dogs fled into alleyways, and carts moved aside to allow the procession to pass. It was still early by the time they crossed the city and reached Gorini Plaza at the base of the lonely fortress peak. All sixteen servants took up the mantle of carrying the heavy palanquin up the long and steep hill. It was inconvenient, having to make the trip all the way up to the fortress to meet with his fellow Patzau, but Mellen needed her support. The great effort made represented the significance of his need. Or so he hoped it would seem. Yanata was always fickle in nature.

The climb was long and uncomfortable, and Minoc hadn’t even taken any steps. As they reached the crest of the hill, Mellen exited the palanquin the stepped out into the hot sun already drenched in sweat. Kuta stood waiting for him, having elected to walk the steep road alongside the soldiers and servants. Why a person would willingly choose such a thing was beyond his comprehension.

The two of them stared forward at the ashy gray stone fortress. The structure was large and flat with angular stone walls built to make scaling the erection impossible.

The gate house was the only distinct feature along the face, simply because it was the only part of the fortress to host real battlements. Between the steep cliff faces and this small section of walls, no person could enter the ancient Casoyan fortress from any point but this spot. It was impenetrable, but mostly it was an inconvenience. That was all Mellen could think about as he was led inside by an overly friendly gate officer, Kuta at his heels.

The pair were led past a maze of hallways. Passages and staircases seemed to disperse in chaotic directions. The narrow corridors were littered with unadorned brick archways and thin defensible windows. The whole complex was cobbled together over countless years spanning so far back that nobody remembered stories of its original construction. The fortress was simply atop the lonely peak, and as far as anyone could recall, it always had been. Mellen found the entire complex dusty and drab. They crossed an arched bridge that overlooked the city to the central keep, an entirely separate tower in the center of the fortress, and up to the second floor where they were directed into a room where Patzau Ashill and her commanding officers were seated around her desk in discussion. As they entered, the room went silent. All turned to stare at the intrusion. When the oversized Patzau Minoc wiggled his way through the small doorframe, Kuta at his side, the soldiers at the table rose and saluted.

Mellen smiled. He liked soldiers. They were easy to understand and quick to submit to authority. Compared to these men and women, controlling his guildsmen was akin to directing fish. “At ease” Mellen boomed. He played up the imperiousness of his voice for effect, something that elicited an unimpressed look from Kuta. Patzau Ashill remained as stoic as ever, never one to react to his mockery or jests. The soldiers dropped their salutes and Patzau Ashill dismissed her senior officers into the hall, leaving just the three of them. Mellen smiled jubilantly, making friendly eye-contact with each person who passed on their way out. Patzau Ashill watched him the entire time. She wore an outfit heavily inspired by her guild’s officer uniforms, but with far more embellishments. Fine imported fabrics. Lavish embroidery and gold across the shoulders.

Yanata Ashill was lean and stern; a no-nonsense woman with dark hair done up in her usual military braid. She had dark eyes that never seemed to smile. Mellen took a seat across from her and picked up a trinket off her table. It was a small map of the city about the size of Mellen’s hand. It was heavier than it looked and was shaped from cast metal and backlit with small glowing illum stones on the bottom. Perforations in the metal allowed the glow to spread out around key locations. *A nifty piece of artistry.* He intuited its maker at a glance.

“You know, I could have a larger one of these made for you” Mellen said waiving the glowing metal map at her. “Perhaps I could have a table made for you, carved with a map of the city. We could use the same effect to highlight names of key positions like the squares, the gates, the auction house, the government building, your fortress…”

“We both know that’s not why you’ve come today.” Patzau Ashill said, “What do you want, Mellen?”

“Always so quick to business, Yanata.” Mellen said. “Can’t a friend ever offer his services?”

“I’m a busy woman” Patzau Ashill said. “My guild doesn’t run itself like yours always seems to.”

“I will take that as a compliment” Mellen said, placing the small map back on the broad table. “I will pass it on to my hard-working wife and our many dedicated personnel.”

“By all means, send Mira my compliments. Now what do you want?” Patzau Ashill said, punctuating each word.

“Tonight, we have the weekly council meeting” Mellen said. “I’ve come to try to persuade you to vote against your own interests. I want to ensure that Patzau Hadashenta’s proposal to levy additional taxes against my guildsmen is defeated at the vote tonight.”

She smiled at that. Not with her eyes, but a win is a win. “And why would I help you do that?” Patzau Ashill asked. “I’ve seen continuous cuts to my guild’s spending in recent years. Your artisans seem to accumulate plenty of wealth. I believe that it was even proposed that some of the additional revenue would go to supporting my soldiers. Why would I reasonably vote against my own interests?”

“I understand your position” Mellen said, rhythmically tapping his fingers along his thigh, “But I think you may change your mind after listening to what I have to say about the matter.”

“Please” Patzau Ashill said dryly. “Enlighten me.”

“First and foremost,” Mellen said, conjuring as much bravado as he could manage, “I agree with you” he said flatly. The dramatic flare lacked the desired effect as Patzau Ashill sat across from him, still unphased. He felt that she might be overjoyed, bewildered, or downright pissed off and he’d still be unable to read her hard face.

“You agree?” she said, unimpressed. “I thought you were trying to win me to your side.”

“In due time” Mellen sang. “You are right. There *are* artisans in my guild that are making significant profits. But there are far more who are barely earning enough to feed their families, let alone own fund multiple houses, fancy parties, and private galleys. We are doing well, and this is good for everyone, but my guildsmen don’t sit amongst the highest echelons of society. We are seen by the people of Caso as a beacon of success and wealth.”

“Your guild is seen as opulent” Patzau Ashill countered.

“Yes, opulent is perhaps a good word. We have our offenders, same as *all* the guilds” Mellen agreed with a focused gaze that indicated an unspoken implication behind those words. The Ashills were an old and proud family. Far wealthier than the average Casoyan. “But this view of our guild is what sustains our businesses. The people of Caso must see us as successful, to thus see the city as successful. If business is bad for us, how will people feel about their own economic prospects? Our products draw much of the business that comes from the wider world.”

“The auction houses bring in foreign business.” Patzau Ashill said.

“And who do you think provides majority of the goods sold in the Great Casoyan Auctions? Not to mention majority of the goods in the lesser auctions. It is needless to debate which guild is most important. Doing so would be akin to arguing which organ in the human body is the most important. It ultimately doesn’t matter if removing any one kills the host.”

“So, increasing taxes on your guildsmen will destroy this city? Is that what you’re implying?” Yanata asked.

“Of course, not” Mellen said dismissively. “It is a metaphor. My thesis is simply that taxing my guild will not solve the issues we are having.” Mellen took a deep breath. He continued in a slower and more serious tone, “There has been a trend over the last two decades and I am sure you have noticed it with your own eyes. Caso is the wealthiest city in the known world. We are wealthier now than we have ever been before. And yet

regular people in this city seem to be suffering for it. We have mountains of gold and yet droves of people live outside the city in slums, ravaged by gangs and violence and neglect. Inside the walls, the average Casoyan finds it hard to afford food and housing."

He could see it in her eyes. He had her attention now. He dropped his voice low, almost a murmur, "Coin is flowing out of the pockets of the people and into the hands of a select few at an alarming rate. The greed of the old line of kings has reared it ugly head once again. Desperate people are throwing themselves into servitude to pay off debts. We have become so corrupted by greed that we are consuming our very selves."

Patzau Ashill sat pondering. Her silence made Mellen nervous. He still wasn't sure where she might lie on the matter. She was old money, after all. But she was also a pragmatist. All he could do was hope that she might take his concerns seriously. Finally, she spoke, "Explain it to me. How does all of this have to do with your tax increase?"

"My guild is proactive on this issue. We have already implemented measures to keep our wealth from pooling, to spread it between the forges, artists, and craftsmen. This proposed tax increase isn't to provide more funding to the guilds; it's in retaliation to my continuous efforts to reveal the fact that some in this city are becoming absurdly wealthy. You must see clearly the schism that has been widening between the council. Patzau Powanati is unwavering in his greed and his control over the city's wealth is a both a weapon and a boon. He's turned Adagizhi and Hadashenta to his side and they use it to pay for obedience or to ensure those who could stop them turn a blind eye. They are amassing enough wealth and power to supress and undermine the remaining guilds. What I don't understand is why Yohati allows it…"

A long silence hung between them. It lasted long enough to make Mellen uncomfortable. Finally, Yanata spoke, "Spirits, you've gone delusional, Mellen"

He bit his tongue and did his best to bury his brashness. "And how do you suppose that?"

"Where is your proof? You sound like a madman. We vote, all eight of us on matters of governance including taxes and control. If Yohati's auditors aren't ringing any alarm bells, then I'm not concerned. I'll be honest, Mellen, from my vantage it appears as if you're the one seeking more control and power. It feels as if you suddenly woke up one day and decided Powanati was your enemy."

"Proof?" Mellen scoffed. "How can I provide hard proof when those who do all the accounting refuse to let anyone but Yohati's people see the ledgers? We don't even get to know what Yohati's auditor's see. They could be part of it." That comment elicited a scowl, but Mellen didn't care for pretenses any more. He was frustrated and angry that he seemed to be the only person left who cared. "You said it yourself; your guild is being underfunded but always with the promise that more coin will appear soon to keep you placated. Mine is being pilfered for additional taxes. Ada's guild is losing more and more of its duties and powers to Yohati, Powanati, and Hadashenta. They are starving the rest of us, and my guild is the only guild capable of providing alternative funding. The only one capable to tipping the scales."

"What about Adagizhi's guild?" Yanata asked. "He seems unaffected."

"They can't touch Adagizhi" Mellen argued, "because he's had nothing left to take for decades. His guildmembers make dirt compared to your soldiers and my artisans and if they took any more from the poor bastards, they'd riot and the city would starve. If they could skim a little more from Adagizhi, they siphon control from his guild too!"

"Here-say" Patzau Ashill said.

“Caso is the wealthiest city in the world, Yanata. More gold flows through our ports than all the backwater towns and cities of the world combined” Mellen said, angry now. “We are rich because of Hadashenta’s Auction House. And the Careyago Auction House is successful because Patzau Murocil sells the dream of visiting the ‘city of gold’ and getting rich. People travel across the seas to buy and sell and it’s my job to give them something to buy. We have built a system where we produce the worlds finest junk. And with this beautiful junk, we get rich. And others come from faraway lands with their wonderful junk to sell it to our rich people. And then other rich people who can afford to visit also come to buy all the nice junk sold here. And somewhere along the way we stopped caring about the people in this city because riches and junk became all that mattered. And to keep the river of gold and junk flowing, the city needs to be safe and it needs food. Caso is successful because Adagizhi feeds the people and provides raw materials. It is successful because *you* keep the streets safe. But where is our share of the wealth? We are the ones fighting over the leftover scraps. Coin is disappearing, Yanata, and we both know its not disappearing into my guild’s pockets…. It’s clearly not going into yours either.” Mellen added, looking around the dusty office.

“How can you claim that your guild is getting scraps?” Patzau Ashill asked. She was angry too now. Her voice was laced with accusation. “You yourself described your guild as decadent.”

“Opulent”

“What?” Patzau Ashill said.

“The word you and I agreed on was opulent, Yanata” Mellen repeated. “Opulence implies a level of wealth and prestige. Decadence is exactly what I hope to exterminate from this city.”

Patzau Ashill brought her hand to her temples in frustration. “Nobody in this city makes me as irritated as you, Mellen.”

“If it makes you feel any better” Mellen griped, “Nobody irritates me the way I irritate myself either.”

She almost smiled at that. Not with her eyes. He had her thinking about it, and so he pushed the point again, “It would be so damned easy to feign ignorance, Yanata. It would be so fucking easy to just *not* care. After all, you said it yourself, I’m already fucking rich.”

The two Patzau sat in silence for a moment. Neither able to voice the thought inside. Kuta cleared her throat and Patzau Ashill, as if for the first time, looked towards the smaller girl tucked away at the back of the room. Mellen’s Aginjigaade sat as quiet as a mouse.

“For spirits sake, Mellen” Patzau Ashill roared. She rose from her chair and planted her palms on the desk between them with a loud thud. “You didn’t kick her out with my aides?!” she shouted.

“No, she’s with me” Mellen said, as if offended on Kuta’s behalf. “Where I go, she goes. I’d tell her everything about our conversation anyway. Better she’s here to listen for herself.” Kuta froze with a wide-eyed stare.

Patzau Ashill grumbled, considered ordering the girl out, and then relented to more grumbling. “You make it so fucking hard to like you, Mellen” she said, pulling at her hair in frustration. “Girl” she said, addressing Kuta, “tell me your name again?”

“Her name is Kuta” Mellen said.

“I didn’t ask you, Mellen” Patzau Ashill growled. “She can answer herself.”

“I’m Kuta” Kuta squeaked.

“And what type of Aginjigaade are you?” Patzau Ashill asked. “Are you the reading thoughts type? Did you hide yourself to listen in? Phase through the walls? Make me hear things?”

“I’ve got an elemental affinity to metals spirits” Kuta answered.

“Right, you’re the girl from the mountains” Yanata said. “That seems to align well with your like of work. Are you an artisan too?” Patzau Ashill asked.

“Not professionally” Kuta answered.

“Kuta, what changes has Patzau Minoc implemented to improve your guild?”

“I’m sorry?” Kuta answered, perhaps thinking she misheard.

“What has our good friend Patzau Mellen-fucking-Minoc done to improve the lives of his guildsmen like he claims he’s done?”

“Well, I know that Patzau Minoc introduced the dues system to the guild” Kuta answered. Her voice was quiet and cautious, but she picked up confidence as she continued. “All members are required to pay dues to central funds that support guild initiatives that are voted on by members at the forum. Projects funded by the system include negotiated resources contracts to reduce costs, accreditations for apprentices, marks of legitimacy, and organizational supports.”

“Go on. How does this improve the lives of his guildsmen?”

“Well, the guild is now a community of artisans that work together to succeed as a whole, rather than companies competing for shares of the business as I’m told it used to be. The old system rewarded the largest players and snuffed out the embers of innovation and talent. Wealth pooled in larger groups like the Loza Metallurgy Group, which infamously used its power and status to push other artisans out of business. Since Mellen’s reforms, the quality of goods has gone up, there is money set aside for investing in resources, innovations, and upgrades, and profits are higher across the entire guild.”

Yanata frowned. The girl was making sense. She didn’t like it. She turned back to Patzau Minoc to find a pleased grin spread wide across his face. She liked that even less. She sighed angrily. “Go on” she said, “finish your fucking speech. I bet you practiced it a dozen times in the mirror this morning. Wouldn’t want to rob you of your big finale, Mellen.”

“My guild members are wealthy because my guild creates wealth and then shares it” Mellen said. “Yours is a guild that spends Yanata, and I do not fault you for that. It is simply the truth. We, as a society, must spend on soldiers for safety and security and we must spend on bureaucrats and administrators to keep track of everything. It is vital. I would not deny that. My guild, however, is one that earns money. We create and produce and ultimately sell our wares for profit but not before sharing our earnings amongst all of our members and, through the taxes we pay, we share that wealth with you and the rest of the city. Taxing my guildsmen a little more would certainly bring in some extra coin. I’m not so dishonest as to sit here and lie that it wouldn’t.”

“Wrap it up” Yanata said. He was losing her again.

“My point” Mellen said, “Is that certain guilds bring in coin to the city and certain guilds spend it. Myself, Adagizhi, Hadashenta, and Onudar are producers. Yohati, Murocil, yourself and Powanati are spenders. That’s not a judgement, just the reality. But when we take a step back and compare the budgets across the eight guilds, my point becomes clearer. The four guilds with the highest wages are mine, Hadashenta’s, Yohati’s, and Powanati’s. My guild and Hadashenta’s account for half of all the city’s tax income, which seems reasonable as the city’s largest sources of profit. Yohati’s bureaucrats run the city, and we want competent people in charge, so their high budget is also no surprise. That

leaves Powanati's bankers. Like Yohati's administrators, we need the people managing the city's finances to be competent. The difference is that Powanati's bankers cost the city almost as much as your soldiers, and only a little less than Yohati's. This might not sound unreasonable until you remember that Powanati's guild is the smallest. It has a tenth of your membership and a quarter of Yohati's. Where is all that money going?"

Patzau Ashill sat and stewed in the new perspective. The politics of the city always appeared to give her a headache. She was never amidst the political scheming. Mellen liked that about her. She was a competent leader and basically bred for military tactics and leadership. It was those facts that gave him some hope. Finally, Patzau Ashill said, "Okay. I have heard your perspective and I will give it some thought. I don't believe what you implied about Powanati being corrupt. There are far too many safeguards for that to be true. I also think that you and Powanati have different perspectives on what will improve the lives of people, and it's important to remember that different is not wrong. I will consider everything you've said today, but I will make no promises."

"Nor would I expect any from you." Mellen said. "But keep what I have shared with you about Powanati in mind the next time he comes to you with offers and promises. Demand significantly more than he offers. And he will offer."

Mellen moved to stand from his place across the desk, stretching his large arms out as he did so. He looked massive when compared to Patzau Ashill, seated at her desk. Mellen retrieved the small metal map once again and smiled as he tossed it back and forth between his thick fingers. "I think I *will* have somebody make a larger version of this." He set the little metal map back down on the table and turned to go.

That night at the Patzau Council meeting, the motion to tax the Artisan's Guild passed in voting, six votes to two. Yanata sighed in relief. She had mulled over Minoc's words most of the evening and when only Patzau Murocil and Minoc's hands rose for the vote, she was grateful for not having risked anything in siding with the losing side. Unbeknownst to her, her vote would have been the decider.

After visiting her atop the fortress, Minoc met with Adagizhi in his chambers where Adagizhi pledged only to vote against the motion if Patzau Ashill did so first. As hands were raised, Yanata and Adagizhi found each other's gazes across the table and when neither took the lead to object, the motion passed. Minoc, left only with Patzau Murocil's support, leaned back in his chair in disappointment. He wasn't angry. Not this time. He'd been prepared for this.

After the vote's conclusion, Minoc proposed the same increased taxes for both the Auction House and Banking Guilds. Another round of arguments rolled through the round chamber but Yanata wasn't bothered. She left the council meeting feeling satisfied, knowing she had secured more resources and funding for her guild. And, if she supported Minoc's counter proposals, more might be on the way. It was enough to suppress the nagging feeling from Minoc's warning to the back of her mind.

Chapter 10: The Aginjigaade

The morning mist hung cold and heavy over the city of gold as the sun crested the mountains. Its warmth cleansed the fog from the lowlands and city streets. The city sprung to life in the early hours. The once-empty streets now bustled with activity as market stalls and shops adjoined to apartments opened their doors. Inside Yohati's estate, the gardens were thick with the perfume of exotic flowers, a scent powerful enough to attract spirits in staggering numbers. They congregated in numbers that gave Gaba'ké the impression it was purposeful.

It was with that thought that Gaba'ké, master Aginjigaade and lover of walks, slipped from the grounds and into the busy cobbled streets. As the guards closed the gates behind him, he cast his gaze up and down the street. His eyes met those of a large bearded man, who watched him with what Gaba'ké felt was a focused gaze. He quested out the man, curious, but he was no Aginjigaade. Nor was there one in the vicinity. That thought soothed his nervousness. *I'm becoming a paranoid old man,* he mused. Despite himself, he tucked his silver hair into his hood and set off down the cobbled street.

Gaba'ké held his cloak close as he maneuvered between bodies. This was his first solitary journey into the city and it was pleasant being a visitor to a new place. For the first time in a long time, Gaba'ké felt he had the freedom to take advantage of that fact. There would be no attempts made on his old friend or the young prince he thought of like a nephew. Yohati's estate was fall better defended than Lord Anup's had been.

It was a weight off his chest. There had been an uncountable number of days spent under vigilant watchfulness. He and Cask, working around the clock in shifts. It had gotten easier when Rolena was hired on, but it hadn't solved the problem. The remaining loyal soldiers stationed to defend Lord Anup's compound had been worked to destructive combination of fatigue and boredom. There had been too many days where Gaba'ké had focused only on his agindan, ensuring no powerful threat could emerge without his notice. And so it was with great solace that today, he could turn that part of his brain off, at least for a little while.

As he wandered, Gaba'ké noticed the mix of familiar and novel. Unlike Onera, Caso's streets bent and twisted odd angles. They narrowed and widened without reason and only the main thoroughfares seemed to maintain any reasonable thought to design. Narrow crooks in the walls revealed tight alleyways and intricate side streets that made the city feel labyrinthian. Shop signs around this part of city were written predominantly in Tralang, but as Gaba'ké walked further from the coast, more and more of the foreign Casoyan script appeared in its place. Bizarre sights and sounds loomed around each corner. Strange clothes and accents. People wore ornaments of pearl and shell and beads. There were foreigners, like himself, in far greater numbers than he expected. They too came from afar and looked at the city with wonder.

No matter where Gaba'ké walked, the sparking blue domes of the Great Casoyan Auction House and the Palace revealed their beauty between the gaps in the dark stone tenements. The twin monoliths of Caso made navigating around the city simple. Between them and the fortress above the bay, and the mountains to the east, Caso was a city that was hard to get lost in. His plan was to walk and explore, then grab lunch from either the market by the auction house or one of the merchant boats along the grand canal. If he had the energy, he might even make the long trek across the city to the old city with the pointy rooftops and then watch the sunset from atop the cliffs leading to the fortress.

Winding down the street, Gaba'ké brought his attention to his agindan sense. It was a habit, and it wasn't until he had already expanded his spiritual sense outward into the square to check for threats that Gaba'ké remembered he was being overly cautious. He would be able to sense any Aginjigaade that got too close. Instead, the numerous spirits that called the street home appeared to his senses like stars appearing across the night sky. They permeated everything. Orangey-brown clay spirits clung to the bricks and roof tiles. Angular wood spirits nestled themselves within a pile of discarded boxes. Wispy mist spirits lingered meekly in shadows where the early morning fog still remained. Vibrant fire spirits danced alongside the flames of a cook fire. If one knew where to look, there were spirits everywhere. They were ubiquitous.

Gaba'ké took in a breath and felt the stone-spirits that surrounded him. Some were jagged, others angular and smooth like glass. They came in every shape and form imaginable. He reached out, as trained long ago, and used his own spiritual energy to blanket them. He felt those he touched, vast in number but weak individually, submit to his will. Each one unique, each one a conduit to different abilities. In some he recognized the shape his power might take, in others he found the infinity opportunity of mystery. They grasped the lifetimes that could be spent in just this small street understanding each unique spirit. Lifetimes dedicated to testing and understanding what each one might yield. Infinite in possibility.

But just as Gaba'ké could sense and feel the spirits of this place, they too cast their gaze back at him. Alone, each minor spirit was inconsequential, but together with their collective attention and presence, they were as vast as the world. Their attention affected him too. He could feel it, but couldn't describe how. The feeling became a trance. Gaba'ké quested delicately outwards with his senses. He felt beyond this small street, wider and wider until the distant presence of others like him revealed themselves like objects in the periphery. They too had survived the curse and now lived with its gift. Others who could see what he saw and feel what he felt and could channel their power through the spirits that matched their own affinity. Who could destroy him and take away the things he loved and cherished. And so many of them in one place. The realization frightened him and he recoiled back to himself. To safety.

For not since leaving the Aginjigaade academy of Ayaan, just a boy who once boldly called himself a man, did Gaba'ké feel small. There were so many more Aginjigaade in Caso than he was used to. It was uncomfortable and peculiar, both in its familiarity but also in its vulnerability. Aginjigaade, in Gaba'ké's opinion, were predictable. That is to say that they are still human. And it is their humanity that makes them dangerous, as anyone granted power over others can be. He had learned that lesson early. As a young child enrolled at the Aginjigaade Academy of Ayaan, he was familiar with the many types of Aginjigaade out there, and not just their distinct natural affinities. He knew their types, their personalities, and could recognize their relationships with their gift of power. The twisted horrors that power over others has the capacity to produce. He could still picture

the bodies of those who hadn't survived it. It seemed those memories would haunt him forever.

Gaba'ké opened his eyes and found himself stopped in the street. He blinked, returning to his other senses. The spirits in the vicinity reacted to his emotions. To his fear. They recoiled from him. *That was a lifetime ago*. *I've come so far*. He had done what so many dreamed impossible as Aginjigaade, grown old. He was proud of that fact. Not proud of everything done along the way, but proud of where it had taken him. Proud of the good friends made that had steered him here.

The rhythm of the day was in full swing. Gaba'ké reached the wide market plaza in the shadow of the grand auction house as the sun reached its apex. Vegetables, meats, flowers, dishware, fish and eels, clams and water bugs, spices, eggs, fruits, and grains in impressive quantities filled the market stalls. The square was bustling with patrons haggling with hawkers and merchants out of tented stands and carts. Gaba'ké wound his way around the market and then through the continuation that sprawled out onto the grand canal. Walking along the canal opposite Patzau Palace and its luscious gardens and standing between the two great edifices was awe inspiring. Ayaan and Gaag each had their marvels, but little on this scale. The scene reminded him of the city of Turtle, with its Royal Palace and Great Library arranged opposite one another in similar grandeur. Distant memories of a distant place. The domes of both buildings stood high and mighty above the rooftops of the adjacent blocks. Looking around, Gaba'ké spotted a vendor smoking fish out of a long Casoyan canal boat and he purchased a round fluffy flat bread and half of an unfamiliar smoked whitefish stuffed with some sort of oily vegetable salad.

Crossing the canal, Gaba'ké found his way to the gardens in front of Patzau Palace. He found a place to sit on an empty stone bench and ate and watched. The food was delicious. It was cheap, and yet somehow more enjoyable than the wealth of food served at Yohati's dinner. People came and went through the garden pathways up to the great government building. Aides and scribes and messengers hastened while officials and bureaucrats strolled at their own leisure. *Amusing,* Gaba'ké thought, *how people always fall into the same patterns.*

He felt her presence long before he saw her appear. Her agindan, her spirit, brushed up against his own, and Gaba'ké's walls came up on instinct. It was a greeting, gentle and introductory rather than aggressive but Gaba'ké was vigilant from long years on edge. He didn't lower his defences until he saw her appear, Kuta's small frame and bright white cloak. *The portly Patzau's Aginjigaade,* Gaba'ké realized, *the one who met us the day we arrived.*

She made her way down the flight of stone steps leading out of the palace and met his fixed gaze. She was young, perhaps younger than he initially guessed, with brown skin and high cheekbones under round eyes and a bent nose. She had dark eyes that felt impossible to read. There was something there. Something hidden behind her even expression. Anger, or pain, or fear. Something. It was clear as sky one moment and then gone in a flash that left him questioning whether he'd glimpsed anything at all.

"Greetings, Gaba'ké of Ayaan" she said, stopping a few paces away.

"Good morning" he replied cautiously. "I don't recall learning your name when last we met."

"My name is Kuta" she said. "I am Aginjigaade for the Casoyan Guild of Smiths and Artisans."

"And how is it, Kuta, that you've come to know my name?"

To Gaba'ké's surprise, the girl blushed. "May I sit?" she asked. Gaba'ké moved to create space on the bench for her. She sat down next to him and answered, "It was relatively easy to discover your identities once Patzau Minoc confirmed who you are. You're are not unimportant figures in today's world."

"And how did he confirm it?" Gaba'ké asked.

"The new governor of Gaag as well as her lady the ambassador of the Careyago Emperor both requested to be notified if members of your group ever entered this city. They provided your names and descriptions. Gaba'ké of Ayaan, The Stone Aginjigaade of Ayaan. Cask Gohara, master swordsman. Guharo Provis, former lord of the Helmlands. Yoliim Kulimas former lord of Middle Gozhu, Ander Kulimas, sworn swords and lordling of Middle Gozhu. And of course, Prince Aramuk Krimas and former Crown Prince Ohacha Krimas. Details of your entourage are documented within their requests." Gaba'ké furrowed his eyebrows at her words. "Requests…" Kuta continued, "the Patzau Council collectively dismissed as overstepping. Foreign affairs are not our business and we will not be at the mercy of foreign kings and emperors."

Gaba'ké exhaled a held breath. Still, something didn't sit right with him. *There is something she hasn't said. Something feels off about that answer.* Then the reason clicked, "Your answer is far too factual" Gaba'ké concluded. "It hides the real truth." Kuta turned her head in interest. *She does very little to reveal her thoughts*. "I have seen the list you speak of. The King of Onera received the same one" Gaba'ké said. "You have a spy in Onera. One who is familiar enough with us to provide specific and recent information. You did not include Wendii Kulimas on your list, which can only confirm that you already knew of her death." *And, by including Golan and Ander on your list, it affirms that news of their deaths hasn't preceded us. A relief.*

She grinned. "Patzau Minoc is a man of business. He may have some mutual friends in Onera."

"Lord Anup?" Gaba'ké guessed. Kuta maintained her unreadable expression.

"They call you the Stone Aginjigaade" Kuta said, changing topic. "Why is that?"

The new question was surprising and abrupt. His face gave away his apprehension to the sudden change in conversation. "A smart woman like yourself can surely guess without me needing to tell her" Gaba'ké answered.

"We share an elemental affinity" Kuta pressed. "I'm sure you recognized it just as easily as I did. I can feel the six spirits you keep in vessels inside your cloak. I felt them the day we first met."

"And I can sense the metal spirits that are drawn to what I can only presume are knives hidden in your sleeves as well as that pin in your hair."

He's observant, she thought. "I've had time to think about it, and I think I've even uncovered each of your six vessels uses" Kuta continued, ignoring his counter. It had taken her a long time to figure it out and she was proud of having done so. "It's one vessel for each of the basic properties of minerals; strength, hardness, toughness, density, conductivity, and maybe texture."

"The knives you carry are talismans." Gaba'ké countered. They were close in proximity now and her assertive tone awakened his counter assessment of her totems. "You carry very specific metals and alloys on your person to attract spirits you are familiar with. You string them along, ensuring you have most nearby at all times. It hints towards an understanding or teachings, but the fact that you haven't trapped them inside as vessels suggests either you haven't the opportunity, knowledge, or skill to do so. Your

knives are made of copper, gold, tin, lead, silver, and iron" he added smugly. *I'll not be bested by one as young as yourself*, he thought with confidence.

"You are known as The Stone Aginjigaade, yet you carry a seventh vessel" Kuta said. "This one elementally distinct from your other six." Kuta said, silencing him. Gaba'ké recoiled slightly. He opened his mouth to speak, to retort, but no words came out. Kuta held out her hands calmingly. "I am not your enemy. But I need to know more about your kind of Aginjigaade. I press this matter out of need for information on those who are twin-spirited."

Gaba'ké sat back cautiously. *Who the hell is this girl?* he thought. *Where did Patzau Minoc find her? She can't be older than Ohacha, still just a child, and yet she sensed it*. He was impressed and if being honest, more than a little frightened. Not in many years had another Aginjigaade discovered his seventh totem. And yet, she had noticed it in simple passing and grasped its potential significance. It was alarming. But he was not what she thought he was.

"I have come across one other Aginjigaade…" Kuta continued, slowly. "One I believe to be here in Caso. I have reason to suspect that this person also has a twin-affinity. I promise to keep your secret. I don't need to know anything about you or your abilities but it is vital that I understand how it works."

Gaba'ké smiled sombrely. "You can choose not to believe me, but I don't have a second affinity" he said. She seemed untrusting of his words. "But you are correct. I do keep a seventh vessel." He reached into his cloak and pulled out a small clay jar filled with water. It was barely larger than his thumb and the paint around it was thin and worn. "I lost a dear friend a long, long time ago. I carry this as a reminder." The hope drained from Kuta's eyes. "But…" he added, "as luck would have it, I did once know an Aginjigaade with a second affinity, back in the Ayaani Academy in my youth."

Kuta's eyes perked up again. "Really?" she asked.

"Yes" Gaba'ké said. "But I doubt I'll share anything you haven't already figured out for yourself."

"Who was this person?" she asked, "What were their affinities?"

"Before I begin" Gaba'ké said, holding up a hand, "I'd like to understand why you need this information. You said it was vital."

Kuta's eagerness withered. "I can't tell you why" Kuta said.

"What if I told you I couldn't share this information without understanding why its needed?"

She chewed on her cheek. "Why phrase that question as a hypothetical? Can you tell without me sharing my reasons?"

Gaba'ké stared back at her expectant look, then relented, "I'll tell you what I think you need to know first and then I'll share more about the man I learned these things from" Gaba'ké said. "The most important thing you should know is that having multiple affinities doesn't make an Aginjigaade any more powerful. No multi-affinity Aginjigaade has any power advantage over any other Aginjigaade. They will get tired just as quickly as any other Aginjigaade if too much energy is spent channeling. Only vitality Aginjigaade have that ability to increase overall strength, power, or endurance."

"That's not what I expected" Kuta said.

"Nor I" Gaba'ké agreed. "Consider this. There are hundreds and hundreds of unique spirits of your specific affinity. Perhaps thousands. Learning the general differences, and then testing their unique influences on your power takes considerable time and effort. Most Aginjigaade find a handful of alike spirits they trust and draw them

with a totem or carry the spirit in a vessel. There remain more unfamiliar spirits than familiar ones even after years of hard work. Now consider that a dual-affinity Aginjigaade must do the same for each element. The gap widens. There aren't enough lifetimes to learn all the mysteries and intricacies of one elemental spirit group, let along two or more.

"I see" Kuta said, mulling his words. "It takes additional effort to see any benefit."

"And usually at the cost of depth" Gaba'ké said. "An Aginjigaade with two affinities will rarely be as knowledgeable or skilled as an Aginjigaade with one. They also tend to favour one branch over the other."

"What is the advantage then?" Kuta asked.

Gaba'ké pondered and then said, "The obvious advantage as that an Aginjigaade with two spiritual affinities has twice the number of tools at their disposal to solve problems. This can be difficult to deal with, especially if the change in tactics is unexpected."

"Can casting be done with both affinities at once?" Kuta asked.

"I believe it may be possible" Gaba'ké replied, "but the man I knew couldn't do it. It must take a colossal amount of practice, skill, and concentration. I find that even switching between spirits from my own elemental affinity takes attention and effort."

"I am curious about your friend" Kuta said, "the one with the dual-affinities."

"I never said he was my friend" Gaba'ké interjected. "He was my senior at the academy."

"What were his affinities?"

"He had affinities for both water and ice, specifically those with mist spirits and ice spirits. He was known as a mist Aginjigaade, and kept his ice affinity secret."

"What could he do with the two affinities together?" Kuta asked aloud, but seemed more interested in considering the answer for her self.

Gaba'ké waited a moment for her to contemplate her own question. After a moment, she looked at him expectantly. He answered, "He drew forth mists and then used ice spirits to flash freeze targets caught within the heavy mist. It was a powerful combination. Not because the freezing killed, but because it was painful, disorienting, and nearly impossible to avoid."

"Is he still teaching? What happened to him?"

"He wasn't a teacher" Gaba'ké said, answering the first question, "and I don't know" he lied to the second. *She needn't know that I had to kill him*. "What exactly do you need this information for?" he asked.

"I…" she hesitated, "I need to know how to protect myself."

"I see…" Gaba'ké said, trailing off. *Vague. Too vague. I hope I didn't just make a mistake*.

"Yes. Well, I appreciate how helpful you've been in answering my questions" Kuta said. "As a thank you, I would love to bring you to meet one of our local artisans. I'm sure I can find something unique made here in the city that would serve as a token of my gratitude."

"That is not necessary" Gaba'ké said, but Kuta got to her feet and beckoned him to follow.

"Do you have anything else you're intending to do today?" she asked. "I'd make a good guide. Or perhaps I can instead be of assistance? I've got a keen eye for quality metals. You'll find no better expert in the city."

"I appreciate your hospitality. And there is one thing I'd ask of you."

"Make your request" Kuta said.

“We have many enemies” Gaba’ké said, plainly. “Your words make it clear that you know this truth. What you’ve said also indicates that Patzau Minoc is well connected. The favour I ask is that if you or your Patzau hear any whispers of danger, you warn us.”

Kuta mulled over his words. “I can do that” she replied. “But communicating with you may be complicated, since you are staying with Patzau Yohati. He and Patzau Minoc disagree on many issues. He also tends to be nosy and we are not keen on the idea of his eyes reading each message that reaches you.”

“Patzau Yohati will read messages sent to us?”

“He will” Kuta said. “Consider any message you send in this city public. Do so and nothing you share can be used to hurt you. If you want your secrets to remain secret, use codes. The only other advice I can give is to stay inside the city’s walls. More importantly, you should know that there is a Mada’abi Stone in Caso at the moment. We don’t know if she intends to stay, but if your enemies are as rich and powerful as you claim, then be wary.”

Gaba’ké gulped. “I see. We will remain vigilant. But the code may be another issue.”

“I may have a solution” Kuta said. “Come with me.”

*

The two Aginjigaade stood around the corner from Yohati’s estate at an unassuming three-story tenement. The upper floors of the building were showing signs of age. The right half bore the blackened memories of a past fire, with streaks of soot still clinging to the woodwork despite recent repairs. Three stairs led up to a landing where a wooden door boasted the hand-painted moniker: “Banzhiigan’s.”

Kuta strode forward and opened the door with a charming chime. Kuta stood in the dark portal, holding the door open for him. He stepped through the small doorframe into a cramped shop space. Every inch of the store was filled with furniture. There were tables, chairs, drawers, chests, and stools. Carved wooden knickknacks littered the tops of every flat surface. The store was a collection of masterpieces; the passion of a true craftsman.

“Welcome” a squeaky voice said from behind the counter. Gaba’ké peered over but saw nobody until the face of a young girl appeared amongst the clutter.

Kuta spoke in some sort of unfamiliar greeting until adding, “Is your grandfather here?”

Cassie stared at Gaba’ké with a child’s innocence. He removed his cloak and smiled back at her. She turned away and yelled towards the back of the dark store, “Grampa!”

“I’ll be with you in a minute” a gruff voice echoed back from a dark corner in the back of the long and narrow store. Cassie turned back to Kuta and her guest and smiled wide. Kuta smiled back.

A few heartbeats later, the amble of a man grew louder and the old man who was Cassie’s grandfather stepped into view. He was similar in age and had a dark stubble and bushy eyebrows over a strong nose. His hands were stained a dark brown colour. Wood shavings clung to his clothes and the dark hair on his arms. Gaba’ké immediately recognized the similar features he and Kuta shared that other Casoyans appeared not to.

“Aye, Kuta” the old man said. His face lit up when he saw her. Gaba’ké noticed that he walked with a well-disguised limp. “I didn’t know you’d be coming to say hello today. Who is your friend?”

"This here is Gaba'ké" Kuta said. "He's visiting from outside Caso and staying nearby and it's important that we can communicate without… prying eyes. Messages from myself will come to him through the shop, and if he need find me, he can do so through you. The guild will pay for the arrangements."

"Consider it done" Banzhiigan said. "Anything for the guild. And…" he said, turning his head to acknowledge Gaba'ké, "anything for a friend of yours, Kuta."

Gaba'ké followed Kuta outside and the two of them stood in the street together as people passed them by. "You understand?" Kuta asked. "Banzhiigan will reach out, and will share the message in person."

"Do you trust him?" Gaba'ké asked.

"He's a member of the guild" Kuta said. Gaba'ké eyed her with a look that said, *I'm not foolish enough to buy that answer alone*. "And a friend" she added. "There might not be anyone in the city I'd trust more than Banzhiigan."

"If you trust him, I'll trust him" Gaba'ké said.

"How is it you came to be in the care of Patzau Yohati of all people?" Kuta ventured. "He's a very private man. It was a surprise to all when he let you into his home."

"Prince Aramuk and Patzau Yohati knew each other as children. This was back when Yohati's grandfather was Patzau and Aramuk's father was King of Gaag." Gaba'ké answered.

"And, do you ever get to speak to him? Dine with his family?" Kuta asked.

"We have once" Gaba'ké said, "but more often he's too busy elsewhere. I was told he's dealing with issues outside the walls."

"Mudtown has grown into a problem big enough that neglect can no longer solve."

Gaba'ké raised a brow. This was the first opinion the girl had shared. "Tell me about that."

Kuta looked guarded at his interest, but answered truthfully, "People unable to afford life inside the city have only one place to go: Mudtown. In recent years, the number of people living in the slums has exploded. The council's neglect or ignorance of the problem has allowed crime and violence to flourish. It's awful—what those people are going through."

"Hm. Thank you for your time and assistance, Kuta" Gaba'ké said at last.

"Good day to you, Gaba'ké of Ayaan" Kuta said. "Oh, and one more thing" she said, pulling an object from her sleeve. In her hands was a silver pin, long and tapering to a dull point. "You were half right" she said, "about the totems in my sleeve. But they're not knives."

"Pins?" Gaba'ké asked, not understanding. Each one was long and thin, about the length of wrist to fingertip. He felt her agindan press up against his own as she channeled strength into her sorcery. A tingle of her power crawled across his skin and it gave him a shiver. The distinctly metallic scent of her sorcery tickled his nose. The pins in her hand changed shape rapidly before his eyes; first into a flat metal disk and then into the shape of a small knife. Then into the shape of a small hand fan, and finally back into its original pin shape.

Gaba'ké stared as the metal object, the pin, once again sat in her hand as if nothing had ever taken place. The four consecutive transformations happened in just a few short heartbeats. Gaba'ké looked around, but nobody else on the street had appeared to either notice or care. She smiled at him, and walked away. *Spirits. If I had an iota of her talent at that age, I'd be a very different man. She's barely a woman and*

already her sense and control are akin to mastery. *Whoever that dual-spirited Aginjigaade is, they've made a frightening enemy.*

Gaba'ké turned and walked back towards the estate. On his way towards the gate, amidst the throngs of passersby, Gaba'ké's keen eyes caught sight of a figure, cloaked in shadows and disguised in nondescript attire, loitering with an air of unsettling purpose. From what he could observe, the big man had a dark beard and a hawk nose. A large birthmark marked the man's face under the left eye. The stranger eyed the gate with a fervent intensity. Interest reserved only for those with intentions beyond those of mere curiosity. Gaba'ké walked past the man and avoided making eye contact. He picked up the pace as he approached the gate house. The gates opened for him and, despite his better judgement, he cast one last glance back at the stranger but the man had vanished.

Chapter 11: The Auction House

The Great Casoyan Auction House was everything Prince Ohacha Krimas imagined it would be. Inside, the guild was split into tiers of patronage with common merchants, sellers, and buyers at the bottom, all the way up to the nobility from Caso and the wider world at the top. Only those important and wealthy enough earned an invitation to the Great Auction's highest-level festivities and it was amongst these people that Ohacha felt he belonged. They dressed in rare and exquisite clothes. Beads of precious stones, gold, and shells graced their necks and wrists. They carried themselves with importance and grace. The many servants present treated each person with respect as they meandered through the room catering luxuries like liquors with real chunks of ice, spiced skewered meats, grilled fishes, and candied fruits. Everywhere Ohacha looked, he saw what his life should have been like. He reveled in it. He yearned for it. His uncle did not.

Prince Aramuk Krimas stood out as dull in the otherwise vibrant room. Unlike Ohacha, he dressed conservatively and seemed dour despite the celebrations. While Ohacha and the many others attending the exclusive festivities had the good sense to be merry, Aramuk seemed once again incapable of enjoying himself. He, Lord Kulimas, and Gaba'ké were caught up in a hushed argument and so Ohacha found reason to slip away from his uncle's side to discover his own fun in the wide ballroom before the Auction began.

Cask and Rolena followed at Ohacha's heels dressed in their own ceremonial clothes. For Cask, that meant clean clothes without holes in them and for Rolena, that meant polished leathers and colourful underclothes that matched the Casoyan trends. Where she had found the outfit, Ohacha would never know. All that mattered to him was that the jeweled swords at their hips were displayed prominently. They would serve to further cement his place amongst these people.

Piitra Hadashenta appeared out of the crowd and beelined straight for Ohacha. She wore an exquisite dress that looked as if it were made of scales of jewels and a gaggle of women followed at her heels. "Ohacha!" Piitra shouted and she ran forward and embraced him in an awkward hug. It was far more friendly than Ohacha had anticipated and he found himself blushing under Cask and Rolena's intrigued gazes. "I didn't think you were going to be here?" Piitra said. "You told me that you never go outside." It was an accusation. "Ladies, this is Prince Ohacha Krimas of Gaag." She introduced the women in her entourage one by one but by the time the fourth woman was introduced, he had already forgotten the first three.

Ohacha threw his palms up defensively, "I didn't know we were going to attend until this morning. My uncle changed his mind. And, we've added some of our own family items to the auction to spice things up." Piitra gave an interested squeal. Ohacha deliberately refrained from elaborating that 'some' of the family items meant most of

their collection of relics and valuables smuggled out of Ayagiim. It was his family's history being sold for the chance at giving him back his future. "Piitra," Ohacha added, trying to be polite, "With me are Cask Gohara, the greatest swordsman in the west…." Cask gave a modest bow. Ohacha continued, "and Rolena…"

"Yongjaa" Rolena finished, "Greatest marksman across the starlight isles." Ohacha gave her a furrowed look but Piitra's group of women appeared starstruck and that pleased him.

Piitra spoke with the speed and twitter of an antsy songbird. "You certainly have the most interesting friends" Piitra complimented. "I cannot wait to see the items you've put up for auction. Is this your first time attending? Then the auction will be a spectacle you'll thoroughly enjoy! It was wonderful seeing you again, Ohacha. But I must do my rounds and share my greeting with the many wonderful friends who've come tonight. I will see you inside, I'm sure!"

"Absolutely" Ohacha said, letting Piitra and her followers disappear into the crowd.

"Well, I didn't realize that you'd made a friend" Cask said in a teasing tone. "Nor did I know you considered yourself the greatest marksmen across the starlight isles" he added to Rolena. Rolena only shrugged. "Who was that?" Cask asked.

"That was Piitra Hadashenta" Ohacha said, staring off into the crowd. "She's the wife of Patzau Hadashenta of the Auction House. I met her in the gardens with Reah."

"That explains a lot" Cask said, using the opportunity to grab a skewer of meat from a passing plate.

"We should return to your uncle" Rolena said.

"I'm perfectly safe here with you two" Ohacha said defensively.

"That's not why" Rolena countered. "He's over there talking with Patzau Yohati and Patzau Hadashenta. You told me you want to be more involved. Now seems like a good opportunity."

Ohacha wanted to protest, but doing so would mean arguing against his past self and so he relented. But before making it to his uncle and the two Patzau, Gaba'ké intercepted the group. Ohacha stared down at the old Aginjigaade. He was a head taller than the man now, but that didn't change the fact that Gaba'ké was immovable as a mountain. He appeared enthusiastic.

"Look straight past those people over there" Gaba'ké said, drawing Ohacha to his side. "Over to the left, there's a man in a dark blue coat and blue checkered sarong." Gaba'ké said, pointing. "Do you see him?"

"Yeah" Ohacha said, spotting the man at the edge of the crowd.

"Now, fifteen paces to the left of him" Gaba'ké continued, "The woman wearing a green kebaya"

"I don't know what that is."

"Spirits, the woman in the green blouse, Ohacha" Gaba'ké groaned.

"Okay," he said, "I see her."

"Now, behind you about thirty paces back, there's a woman in military uniform with several other officers. She's the shorter one with the blue lapels on her shoulder."

"I don't understand what you're trying to show me" Ohacha said.

"Including me, that brings the total to four Aginjigaade in just this room. There are three more outside the building in the market square, and nine more spread elsewhere in the auction house building. That's sixteen Aginjigaade in this small area. There are few places in the wide world where you might find such a gathering."

“Do you allude to the cumulative power or wealth?” Lord Kulimas asked. Ohacha stared at the old lord who seemed to have materialized out of nowhere. More than that, Ohacha was surprised by his sudden interest in the conversation. He had been a shell of himself since his son Ander’s death at the hands of the Aginjigaade assassin in Onera. It seemed imprudent to talk of Aginjigaade in front of him.

“I was pointing out the rarity of such a gathering, but I suppose power is the answer to your question” Gaba’ké replied. “I was also trying to demonstrate that like all people, there is diversity and individuality amongst us.”

“How do you mean?” Rolena asked. Gaba’ké watched her hands fiddle with the empty clasp where her crossbow would have sat instead of the sword. She looked uncomfortable without it.

“Even among the four of us in the room,” Gaba’ké gestured, “The woman behind us is a military officer, and a high ranking one by the company she keeps. The man in blue appears to be a local associated with one of the guilds, and the foreign woman in the green kebaya is clearly in charge of her group; perhaps a lady or dignitary from another kingdom.”

Ohacha stared at the lady in the green dress without meaning to. Unlike Ohacha and his troupe from Gaag, she wore an outfit that matched the local customs. He and his stood out in the crowd while she effortlessly blended in despite her foreign features. He found himself wondering where she and her people had come from. How they too had come to be in this room.

“Ohacha!” Rolena repeated, louder this time. He jerked to look at her, startled back to attention, then followed her gaze to where Aramuk approached with the three Yohati’s, Patzau, wife and daughter at his side.

“It begins” Yohati announced. “I will see you upstairs in a moment” Yohati said prompting a confused look from his wife. “Let’s go, darling” he added, leading the way to the second floor. Fera Yohati seemed to scowl at Ohacha as she passed. Or perhaps he had imagined it.

Aramuk turned to address the remaining members of his group. “Patzau Yohati has graciously offered three empty seats in his box to us. Ohacha, myself, and Lord Kulimas will sit upstairs with the Patzau. Gaba’ké, Rolena, Cask, you have seats reserved in the lower lever on the right. Speak with an attendant and you’ll be led inside.”

“My prince,” Lord Kulimas said, “it would be safer to have Gaba’ké at your side.”

“We won’t need protection when seated next to the most important man in the city” Aramuk answered. “It would be proper for you, as a lord of Gaag, to join us upstairs.”

“That is most gracious, my prince.” Lord Kulimas said. Ohacha was inclined to disagree. Gaba’ké’s attendance would be a better display of power and wealth. Lord Kulimas wasn’t even that important when he *was* a lord. It seemed silly to pretend he was now that he wasn’t.

“We’ll meet back here after the auction has ended” Aramuk said, leading the way upstairs.

The illum lights were dimmed using an unfamiliar mechanism right as Ohacha, Aramuk, and Yoliim took their seats next to Yohati and his family. A hidden orchestra begun to play music and a singer appeared, singing in a voice as smooth as silk. The audience clapped and Ohacha right along with them, despite his inability to comprehend her words. The auction master appeared and introduced the items that came up for sale. Ohacha was surprised by the wide breadth of items; everything from properties, contracts, luxury goods, and ships. All the way through the show, attendants appeared

bringing bottles of wine, sweets, and more foods right to their seats. There was a showmanship to the auction, just as Piitra had promised and Ohacha was surprised to learn just how much time had passed when the auction master introduced their own auctioned items.

"Now, for something very special, we have one of the oldest and rarest collections from the west." The auctioneer said. "Please allow me to present to you, the luxurious collections of the Krimas Dynasty of Gaag." A dozen attendants entered carrying trays of precious stones, jewelry, nacre, pearls, sculpted ivory and bronze, and a collection of ceremonial weapons including swords, knives, and shields. One of the best-preserved items of their collection was a tableware set of banded agate. Four plates, four bowls, eight cups, each with gold inlay.

"For those of you unfamiliar with the Krimas Dynasty," The auctioneer continued, "the Krimasian Kings of Gaag have been heralded royalty since the founding of Gaag nine-hundred years ago. That makes their line one of the oldest continuous ruling lineages in the known world and most impressively, the very first Krimasian King is fabled to be Bolinar the Hunter from the legends. Yes! You know the one! Bolinar from the legends of Nottawa the Seafarer. As far as the legends go, Bolinar fell in love with a chief's daughter and in the place where they first met, he built a mighty castle against the sea that could withstand the strength of the ocean storms."

Lord Kulimas leaned over to Ohacha and whispered in his ear. "I recognize your uncle's handiwork when I see it. People want a good story as much as a fancy necklace."

The auctioneer continued on with the trays of goods around him illuminated by hidden lights or mirrors, "… some of the legendary pieces you see before you today once belonged to Bolinar from his legendary journey around the five seas. We will start with the jewelry items and work our way across to some of the more unique pieces."

Ohacha felt drunk. It could have been their success at the auction, but more likely than not it was the second bottle of wine he had polished off. A servant had brought a third bottle but Aramuk had stayed his hand when he had reached for it, killing Ohacha's good spirits. Even the old Lord Kulimas looked elated at the prices the items they had brought were selling for. Thousands of silver coins would soon be theirs to spend on whatever the needed. *A new damned army, for one thing*, Ohacha thought to himself. He peered over the railing down onto the crowd below and spotted Cask, Rolena, and Gaba'ké off to one side of the auction hall watching the show. And it had been a show. Ohacha never expected the Casoyan Auction to be as fun as it had turned out to be. The auctioneer spoke in an easily understood Tralang with no hint of a Casoyan accent. He was witty and charming with the audience and had a candor that felt endearing.

"Thank you!" the Auctioneer shouted to the crowd, and Ohacha had half a mind to shout his cheerfulness back at the man. "Now, for tonight's finale" the auctioneer continued, "we have one last special item from Gaag." Ohacha sat, curious about the final special item. He was too drunk to notice the concerned scowl that appeared on his uncle's face right next to him.

"As many of you are aware. Many of the Krimasian items available today are due to the end of the dynasty several years ago. The final item up for auction, is the true embodiment of this change. Lords and ladies, the Casoyan Auction house is pleased to present to you the lost throne of Gaag!"

Two attendants entered from behind carrying a beautifully carved wooden throne with gold and pearl inlay. The throne was easily two meters tall and had carvings of legendary spirits, one on either shoulder and one on either armrest. The two on the

shoulder were birds with wings spreading out as if they belonged to the sitter, while the two on the armrests depicted hunting cats. The bottom of the throne was sculpted to look like the whole chair sat atop a turtle with a shell as wide as the seat, its four clawed feet supporting the world above it. Ohacha stared down at the throne, astonished. It was beautiful. Everything he remembered it being. But it was his. Or it should have been his. Why sell it? They had enough money now.

Ohacha turned to Aramuk, "Uncle, I didn't know we had the throne" he remarked.

"We don't, Ohacha" Aramuk responded. The scowl was on plain across his uncle's face. Realization dawned. He finally understood what was happening.

"What the hell, who…?" Ohacha asked to nobody and everybody all at once. He turned to see Aramuk whispering tersely with Patzau Yohati.

Lord Kulimas grabbed Ohacha by the shoulder and he turned to face the old lord. "Ohacha," Lord Kulimas said, "Tell your uncle that I've gone to investigate who the seller is. It must be someone from Belvaas' inner circle. He can stay and talk to Patzau Hadashenta if that old bastard is near by. I want a damned good reason as to why this is a surprise to us."

Ohacha sat, stunned as Lord Kulimas stood up and marched out of the auction hall. Only the announcing of a winner snapped him back to what was going on. His mind spun like a sphere on a rocking ship. Ohacha turned back to Aramuk, shocked. He grabbed his uncle by the sleave to get his attention but Aramuk spun with an anger in his eyes.

"Did we buy it?" Ohacha asked.

"Of course we didn't buy the damned chair!"

"Why not!?" Ohacha demanded, shouting more than he meant to and slurring his worlds a little.

"You drunk fool!" Aramuk scolded. "Quiet. What use is a throne without a kingdom?"

"But–"

"Ohacha" Aramuk spat, "You are being incredible disrespectful interrupting my conversation with the Patzau. Go downstairs and wait for me. You're in no state of mind to be helpful right now!" Ohacha huffed and left without saying goodbye or thanks to Patzau Yohati or his family.

Two boxes adjacent, Patzau Yanata Ashill turned at the unusual commotion emanating from Yohati's seats. The privacy curtains made it clear only where the disturbance was coming from, not what was happening. With her sat her twin daughters, Kida and Yuromi, and Elvi Batari, her Aginjigaade. She preferred to avoid these functions of peacocking nobility. Especially when there were flood damages still to clean, but the Ashills were still influential. But her daughters deserved some normalcy. Or, at least that had been the argument that Kida had used to convince her. She insisted it was important to have opportunities to connect with other influential families across the city. To know the future generation of leaders and influential people. Those who might contribute funding and resources towards cleaning up the flood damage and devastation. She found it hard to argue with that. And so, Yanata felt it would be best to go as a family, ordering Yuromi to attend as well.

The girl had spent the entire event unwilling to participate in any of the social aspects of the occasion. She claimed it was poor taste to attend a gala while people suffered. Yanata couldn't argue with that either and then had to resort to rank to maintain order. That backfired as the next argument involved keeping Yuromi from

arriving in her guild uniform. It was always a struggle, finding the balance between those two. It was hard to believe they were sisters, what with how different they were.

And so, as an argument of loud voices and curses filled Yohati's box and disrupted the show, Yanata knew something was awry. She felt obliged to intervene as necessary. To keep the peace. And with one daughter constantly fixated on helping people, ordering Yuromi to check out the situation seemed appropriate. Giving her a normal task would stop the silent rueful obedience.

Yuromi's eyes lit up, while Kida frowned. *Yomu, give me strength,* Yanata thought.

"I'll find out what's going on" Yuromi said, hastening for the stairs. Yanata immediately regretted her choice, knowing the girl's fine dress was about to come back ruined. She would find a way. Kida stared at her mother with silent dissent. Yanata tried to ignore her other daughter. She didn't have the patience to give the girl any more opportunities to complain about nothing. Yet, after an uncomfortable amount of time, she relented. "Fine, you can go too" she grumbled. Kida smiled with pride and chased her sister down the stairs

"I don't understand you sometimes, Yanata." Elvi said. "Those two know how to bring out the best and worst out of you."

"But which one is which" Yanata asked, "I feel like I can't tell sometimes, Elvi."

Outside the theatre, Ohacha hit the bottom of the stairs leading into the foyer with an anger fueled urgency that lacked any source of direction. Cask, Gaba'ké and Rolena were already waiting in the lobby. Gaba'ké extended out a hand and Ohacha came to a stop in front of them.

Before giving anyone a chance to speak, Ohacha raised his voice in anger, "I want to know who the seller is. Only one of my Belvaas' most trusted could bring an object that valuable here. Cask, I want the traitorous lacky found and taken care of."

"Yes, my prince" Cask said.

"Wait, we need to be cautious!" Gaba'ké warned. He was thankful that nobody else was around to hear Ohacha's words. "We can't be hasty, here. Ohacha, if we're behind a man's death there could be big trouble for us; for you."

"I don't care!" Ohacha hissed.

"What if Cask catches and kills your man? What if its just some nobody from Cayanoshi and is then executed for the crime?" Gaba'ké demanded. "You would sacrifice Cask for one death and a chair? Be reasonable; find a smarter way. The risk isn't worth that." Ohacha scowled at the old Aginjigaade. He was angry. He was drunk and angry. But even drunk and angry the old man had a point.

"Gaba'ké's advice is reasonable" Rolena added.

"I didn't ask the hired muscle for advice" Ohacha spat. Rolena breathed deep and bore the insult.

"Don't take it out of her!" Gaba'ké snapped. His voice commanded attention and Ohacha shrank a little. "Think through the situation one more time. We're here to help you think things through. Once you've done that, then give the orders you think are right. We'll carry them out as you see fit."

Breathing in deep, Ohacha's mix of emotions tumbled around his head. He had been so happy and now anger and fear filled every part of him. He wanted to strike out at something. "Rolena, go find Lord Kulimas. He should be speaking with the auction house staff. Speak to whoever you can on your way. See if you can learn who the seller is." Rolena nodded sharply and disappeared into the crowd slowly flowing into the foyer.

As Rolena left, an unfamiliar woman appeared and replaced her. She wore a long dress that flowed from shoulder to ankles with a transparent blouse over her muscular shoulders. A black sash bisected the outfit and made her look taller than she was. Her dark brown hair was cut short to her neck, entirely opposite the trend of long hair seen elsewhere in Caso. Long intricately beaded earrings dangled to her shoulders and her eyes met Ohacha's with a perceptive gaze. Most noticeably, her face boasted a long purple scar that ran prominently from her right eye down to her chin. Nothing she did was in effort to hide the long blemish. In fact, the opposite might have been true. She carried herself with confidence. That prominent scar on her cheek, a blemish another might look to hide, claimed its space on her face more as a badge of distinction rather than one of shame.

"My name is Yuromi" the woman said, drawing close. "I'm an officer in the guild. What seems to be the trouble?"

Ohacha didn't want to deal with whoever this was right now. It wasn't her business. He switched to Gaagian, knowing she wouldn't understand and hoped she'd give up. "Cask, Gaba'ké, I want to talk to Hadashenta. He will know who the seller is. He can lead us to them."

"I know Patzau Hadashenta" Yuromi said, offering to help. Ohacha cursed himself.

He wanted to shout at the girl; *this doesn't concern you!* Instead, he said nothing and stared. A second girl appeared next to Yuromi, a mirrors image. She had the same dark brown hair but with the longer popular hairstyle. Unlike her twin, she stood slightly taller and lacked the prominent scar. Her dress was emerald green blouse with a tight collar and a matching sarong skirt. Accents of gold woven through the fabric created feather-like patterns. Yuromi looked over her shoulder following Ohacha's confused gaze.

"Pleased to meet you" the second twin said, "I am Kida Ashill, Patzau Ashill's daughter and officer of the soldier's guild. This is my twin sister."

At the same moment, the grand double doors to the auction theatre swung open, releasing attendees back into the grand foyer. The group stood at the head of the wave of people. They were chattering happily, but went silent at the sight of Ohacha's mask of anger and shame. Ohacha's eyes darted around at the attendees, desperation in his heart. *Where are you?* He seethed. Yuromi immediately recognized the tension in his stance, the clenched fist. That he was looking for somebody.

"This is Prince Ohacha Krimas" Gaba'ké chimed in, speaking over the crowd. "I am Gaba'ké and this here is Cask, captain of the prince's royal guard."

"Captain now?" Cask whispered. An elbow to the ribs shut him up.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance" Kida said with a smile. Yuromi rolled her eyes and Gaba'ké caught what he thought was a flash of contempt from Kida. She continued as if nothing had happened, "If you don't mind, I've been tasked with better understanding the commotion upstairs. Is everything alright?" Kida asked. Gaba'ké looked to Cask, and Cask back to Gaba'ké.

"Who are you looking for?" Yuromi asked, speaking past the two men directly to Ohacha.

Ohacha turned to face her, "I need to find the seller of that last item in the auction. That throne belonged to my father. It belongs to me. To my family. The bastard that brought it here for sale is a thief and I want them brought to justice."

"I'll speak with the auction house staff about it" Yuromi said, finding an excuse to escape her sister.

“A thief? Oh, you pour thing” Kida said. She had a sweetness to her that Gaba’ké recognised as poisonous. “The disturbance was because somebody here is trying to sell your throne?” Kida asked. Her eyes blinked with innocence.

“Of course!” Ohacha said, raising his voice.

“I’ll do some inquiry as well” Kida said, having what she came for. “Let me go speak with my mother. Perhaps I forgot to mention it. She’s Patzau Ashill. Perhaps we can help resolve this issue.”

Kida’s promise seemed to mollify Ohacha’s stress. At least until Patzau Yohati reappeared with Aramuk at his heels. Ohacha caught only the last words of their conversation but it was enough to rekindle the anger he was harbouring, “As far as I’m concerned, you have no claim to that throne. It was sent here with a direct signature from Belvaas Krimas the Younger, Governor of Gaag, for sale. By our understanding of politics, you do not control Gaag and therefore have no right to intervene in this sale. And the throne has indeed been sold.”

“Please” Aramuk begged, “speak with Patzau Hadashenta with me.”

“I will do no such thing” Yohati barked. “You are guests here in this city. Just because you were once princes, does not mean you wield princely powers.”

Ohacha’s anger flared. Aramuk’s eyes went wide as he spotted his nephew. “The men who came here to sell that throne are murderers, thieves, and traitors. It would be better to lock them up and try them like the criminals they are!”

Yohati stared with antipathy. Nobody spoke to any of the Patzau in this manner. Nobody gave orders to members of the council. Ohacha’s outburst was enough to attract the attention of noble men and ladies, who stared in morbid fascination. It was enough to draw forth a gigantic man from the crowd, who came and stood between Patzau Yohati and the young prince. Ohacha wasn’t particularly short, but even he had to stare up at the big man whose very presence threatened violence. He was clearly a soldier. The muscles of his arms and shoulders were trying to escape the fabrics of his fine clothing. The callouses and scars on his big hands confirmed it.

“Is there a problem here?” the man asked.

“Who the hell are you?” Ohacha barked. He was intimidated, but still angry enough to ignore his better judgement. “Did you sell that throne?” Ohacha asked. The words came out strong, but inwardly he was terrified of the answer.

“My name is Gal” the man said, doing his best to look intimidating. Or perhaps, that was just his default look. “And I think its best you understand, little man, that you can’t speak to our Patzau that way.”

Ohacha froze. No argument made could bypass the line drawn by the big man. Not without insulting all Patzau and alienating himself. It was losing position and even through rage, he recognized the trap. “I apologize” Ohacha said, changing tactics. “I never meant my words as insults or my tone to be critical of any of the Patzau. But that does not make my words untrue. The person who came to sell this item is a thief and a criminal. And I was taught that justice is a pillar that Casoyans hold to with fervor. Is this not true?”

“That is true” a new voice announced. All looked as Patzau Yanata Ashill entered with a proud looking Kida at her heels. “You must be Prince Krimas” Yanata said. *Still just a pup.* Patzau Ashill stepped forward and gave a look that said ‘I can handle this’ to the large man and he backed off, saluting. Ohacha realized his heart had been racing and his pulse hammered heavy at the veins in his neck. “You are correct,” Patzau Ashill continued, “that justice is important to us here in Caso. It is a key tenant of our way of life. But just

because you see this sale as unjust, does not mean we do. Remember that not everyone out there sees the world with the same eyes you do."

"Exactly" Patzau Yohati said in his gruff voice.

"But," Yanata continued, "That does not mean your claim is baseless. I will ensure with the auction house staff that the paperwork provided was sufficient. If it meets our high standards, I must then insist that you acquiesce to our final decision. Do you accept?"

It was a warning as much as an offer of peace. One Ohacha knew he was best to heed. "Yes" he grumbled. Patzau Ashill smiled, but not with her eyes. She left with her daughter and the large soldier followed in tow. Yohati seemed irritated but grumbled silently to his wife rather than aloud. The crowd dispersed, leaving Aramuk to hastily pull Ohacha aside.

"That was stupid" Aramuk hissed. "You cannot let your anger control you."

"We need to find Belvaas' man in the city!"

"You almost destroyed our reputation!"

"We need to strike back" Ohacha said, ignoring his uncle. "I'd bet anything Bartiin is in the city. We need to find and kill him. Cask—"

"No!" Aramuk growled. "We cannot be behind any deaths in this city. You ignore your own words; justice is supreme here in Caso. We will be hanged for it. That's what Belvaas wants.

"You should listen to your uncle" Gaba'ké said. Ohacha shot him an angry look.

"What's the hold up?" Yohati insisted. "Let's get a move on. I want to get home. Soon. I've got things other business to attend to tonight."

"Of course," Aramuk said. "Where are Rolena and Lord Kulimas?" He urged, turning back.

"Lord Kulimas went to speak with the auction house staff" Ohacha recalled. "And then I sent Rolena to look for him."

"What's the hold up?" Patzau Yohati insisted. The room was starting to empty and what little patience the old Patzau had was clearly waning. "I've got men waiting for us outside. If you want your entourage of soldiers like you begged for, we leave right now. If not, you can find your own way back. But don't expect my gates to open with any urgency."

"We go without them" Aramuk said. "They'll find their way back."

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Deep inside the auction house, Yuromi stomped off once again feeling frustrated. She had tried speaking with several auction house staff as promised, but was met with far more obstacles than expected. At first, the constant redirections were annoying. But after several of the same interactions, it became clear that she was being spun-around as a purposeful stall-tactic. One designed to frustrate her into giving up. Once she realized this fact, Yuromi's stubbornness to stay and seek answers switched from an unimportant favour to a matter of principle. A defiance to their audacity. *Who do these bastards think they are?* She hadn't even revealed her trump card yet. The next fool who gave her the spiel would contend with her officer's badge and the bastard who dared to rebuke that would face the fact that she was Patzau Ashill's daughter. It could have all been so simple. She didn't want to have to do it, but if it meant getting a little respect, she would.

As she headed backstage, she caught a glimpse of something out of the ordinary. There, on the far side of a loading area filled with carts and workers packaging and carrying various objects sat four guild soldiers lounging by one of the exits. Two played dice while the other two watched enthusiastically. It wasn't the soldiers that caught her

eye, but the figure slinking behind them. Yuromi watched as the stranger snatched two of the four crossbows from where the soldiers had abandoned them against the wall, and promptly slipped out the exit. It was brazen. And yet none of the soldiers seemed to notice.

All thoughts about the throne went out the window and Yuromi sprinted across the busy room. Workers stopped and stared as she shouted and she pushed them out of her way as she ran, cursing her slippery sandals the entire distance. Only when she was a dozen paces away did the soldiers look up from their gambling.

"Oi!" she shouted again. The four soldiers shared a mix of annoyed and confused as she approached. *Spirits*, she thought, *and these idiots are supposed to be the ones protecting the auction house? What else did this thief get away with?*

"What do you want?" the first soldier asked rather callously.

"Somebody just stole your crossbows, you moron!" Yuromi shouted, still running towards the doorway. He flashed a look of surprise and then checked behind him, indeed finding two of the four crossbows missing. Yuromi slammed into the door so hard it hurt her shoulders. The door crashed open. Daylight blinding her. The soldiers followed her out into the street. She looked around, trying to catch a glimpse of the thief. The soldier next to her seemed only capable of panicking. He already had his hands in his hair, muttering about how screwed he was. She was inclined to agree with him. Then, she caught a glimpse of the thief in the distance.

"You," Yuromi ordered, speaking to the panicked man, "go check with the auction house attendants to see if anything has been stolen. You three, come with me."

Her orders were met with a jumble of arguments, "We have to stay here and guard the exit. Who are you to order us around? Who will guard this entrance?"

Yuromi cursed her mother for not letting her come in uniform. Things were always easier when she was in uniform. She'd heard a rip while sprinting across the backroom and her shoes were not made for running. Now she was going to have to chase down a thief in sandals. "I am sergeant Yuromi Ashill of patrol squad eight" she said. "We're catching that thief or Patzau Hadashenta will have your balls spit-roasting over an open flame." She took off in pursuit, not waiting for agreement. It wasn't until she hit the open streets that she realized she had neglected to find herself a weapon.

Chapter 12: The Raid

Cask stood at the head of the column as men jostled around impatiently. He stood, looking back over the three carts and tens of soldiers arrayed behind him. At the head of the column was Patzau Yohati's personal guard, a retinue of six fierce looking soldiers and bannerman. They were the only soldiers wearing metal cuirasses. The rest of Yohati's personal guard wore shells or metal scraps sewn over leather leg guards and helmets. It was a good tactic when fighting with shields, yet none of the men carried them. All wore wide-brimmed hats or helms to keep the sun off the skin. Behind the six elites were a dozen servants to pull and carry the cart. Inside sat Patzau Yohati, looking increasingly frustrated with the continued delays. Next to him sat his wife, Reah, but where the daughter Fera had disappeared to, Cask wasn't sure.

In the second cart sat Aramuk and Ohacha. Like Yohati's cart, a canvas tent extended over the seats to keep the two princes comfortable in the shade. Lacking the space to seat more than just the two princes, Gaba'ké had elected to walk alongside the cart. With most of the fleet sailed on to Juking, only the small retinue that had come ashore that first day remained. Cask recognized each and every man and women. They were the best soldiers Cask had left. The only soldiers he had left.

The third and final cart in the column was reserved for their cargo. On the way to the auction house, that had meant the precious stones and ancestral heirlooms of the Krimasian dynasty. Now they had exchanged those treasures for silver and gold. A lot of it. Cask had watched the auction house attendants loaded the heavy chests. Each coin stamped with the Casoyan seal on one side and the eight-pointed star of the guilds on the other. It was a fortune, even for a king. It would be enough to pay the men and fund several more years of. . . whatever it was they were doing these days. *Rebelling?* Cask realized wasn't sure anymore.

If it weren't for the guild's gift of forty foot-soldiers, Cask would have advised against attending, despite the great profit. Two parallel rows of twenty soldiers would guard the short trip to Yohati's estate. Some were armed with guild-issued spears and short swords but most carried the wooden ghata used for bashing in skulls. None in the escort wore shields. It seemed an oversight.

Cask looked around one last time for Lord Kulimas and Rolena. Neither had reappeared and now he was starting to grow concerned. *Where in hell did they disappear to?* Cask worried to himself. He flicked his sword out of its sheath with his thumb and the blade slid back in along the oiled sheath. It was a nervous tick. One he tried time and time again to kick.

The men had been ready for a long time now and the lack of movement was trending moral downward. Despite the setting sun, the day was still hot. *The sun saps all men's strength.* Even Cask felt it as sweat collected on the top of his shaved head and clung to his brows. He wiped it away only for the sweat to return moments later.

"Swordsman" Patzau Yohati shouted at him. Cask looked over at the Patzau. *He looks angry.* "I've had enough. Tell your princes were leaving" Yohati said flatly. "Whoever it is we're waiting for isn't worth this nonsense. They can stay behind if they damn well wish but my palanquins and my men are returning to the estate with or without them."

"Yes, Patzau" Cask said. *Lord Kulimas, Rolena, wherever the two of you are I hope know the way home.* He walked down past the soldiers and approached the second cart.

"Patzau Yohati has instructed us to leave or be left behind" Cask said.

Aramuk cursed. "Lord Kulimas is his own man. He can do whatever he well wishes. But where is Rolena? What good is a hired sword if she's not around when you need her."

"Perhaps" Gaba'ké added, standing on the opposite side of the cart, "Rolena is with Lord Kulimas."

Aramuk grunted disdainfully but didn't argue. "Let's get a move on then" Aramuk said.

"Where would you like me in the column, my prince?" Cask asked.

"Here" Aramuk said, "with us."

"Perhaps," Gaba'ké interjected, "it would be best that Cask remains with the treasures. It would be a devastating blow if they were lost along the way. I can protect you two."

"I thought the streets of Caso are said to be the safest in the world?" Ohacha said.

"Safe to those walking down the street without a great fortune in their possession" Gaba'ké countered. "No place is free of greed."

Yohati's cart lurched forward and the soldiers began their march. As the column strode forward without him, Cask stepped into line at the rear and watched as the long precession moved at a slow pace onwards. Most of the Caso's wealthy had already departed the auction. Even with them gone off to their homes and parties elsewhere, droves of people still filled the streets. All parted before Yohati's grand procession.

The air was no longer humid, burned away by a long day of sun. The dry heat felt inescapable. It roasted you from above and then cooked the ground at your feet, making only shaded areas safe. Still, the precession moved through the winding streets, the sounds and smells of the market faded as they moved along quieter streets on their path home. Buildings loomed, casting long dark shadows over the men and women below; a welcomed respite from the sun's gaze, but disorienting to the eye as bright spots contrasted with dark corners.

As Cask walked, the effect worsened until the shadows appeared to twist every so slightly with a subtle life of their own. It felt like the heat was melting his brain. His throat was parched now and he needed water. But at the same time, his unease grew. Something felt wrong and instinctually his senses heightened. He found his hand on his hilt, eyes scanning the dark corners that appeared almost *too* dark.

A pair of eyes appeared in the alleyway to his right. Then two, then ten more. Cask had his blade drawn the moment the torrent of armed men rushed forward, each one brandishing a weapon: long knives, hand axes, crude handmade spears, ghata. One man even carried a set of shears. All carried makeshift shields, mostly made from wicker or wood scraps. Cask flicked his wrist and the first attacker was felled. Other soldiers in the column hadn't been as quick to react. Men clashed and the city's soldiers buckled under the unexpected ambush. The servants carrying the rear palanquin dropped it and fled as the soldiers around them were cut down and drawn into the fighting.

Shouting filled the street. Cask tuned the noise out. He focused on his immediate surroundings. The guild soldiers were better equipped, but not better prepared. The assault caught men unaware and they died in the street. Soon, Cask was among only a handful still upright. He was a fine swordsman, but no man can fight forever outnumbered. The thieves encircled Cask and the remaining soldiers and cut down anyone in their way. A quick twitch let Cask parry a slash from an attacker's short sword and a second slash opened the man's throat. A second attacker used the opening to stab forward with a spear only to find his left hand lopped off at the wrist.

They had him cornered, yet none dared advance. The three dead men and the handless man's screams cemented their fear of him. Worse, Cask couldn't press or escape either. There were too many, and so they stood at an impasse. A commitment to attack would mean death. None were willing, Cask included. He cast a glance up the column, waiting for support only to see it wouldn't come. *Spirits help us*, Cask thought, as he saw the swarms of men and boys hacking their way through what was left of the soldiers in the column. *Ohacha! Aramuk!* Cask thought, belatedly. There was no way he could reach them. With Rolena missing, only Gaba'ké could protect them. All he could do here and now was protect himself and the chest of coins as best he could.

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Gaba'ké walked at a leisurely pace. He was grateful for his choice in shoes, opting for comfort over status. On the rough cobbled streets, his feet thanked him. He wished, for the first time, that he might have earned a place in that cart. He wasn't a young man anymore and the long years were starting to catch up with him. Aramuk and Ohacha rode along on his right side. The line of city soldiers followed on his left. He had tried making conversation with the soldier beside him but the man didn't speak Tralang, only repeating the phrase, "I don't understand" to even the most common questions in a thick Casoyan accent.

As they walked, Gaba'ké felt the softest of nudges against his agindan sense; like a breath on the back of one's neck. He reacted on instinct. He focused inward, pushing all of his fortitude into his spirit and condensing it. His was the spirit of the earth itself. Of mountains, fortresses, and stone and his agindan reflected that solidity. With his spirit secured against attack, he channeled power through one of the vesseled spirits in his breast pocket. His spiritual power surged through the spirit and changed form like light through a prism.

The very makeup of Gaba'ké's body changed. His skin and bones hardened under the effects of his sorcery until he was as tough a stone. Danger danced at the edge of his senses, *there's an Aginjigaade lurking near by*. His eyes scanned the sides of the street for some sign of the other sorcerer. It was very difficult to hide from another Aginjigaade, but never impossible. And some sorceries are best used at a distance. Gaba'ké braced for the Aginjigaade's mental attack. It would come as a torrent of consciousness. He could protect his physical body exceedingly well, but the agindan spirit was a different battlefield; one where focus was the spear and awareness was the shield.

Gaba'ké scanned the alleyways and shop fronts for danger. He found it. Amongst the sparse crowd, Gaba'ké spotted a familiar face; a dangerous face. He couldn't place the man at first, but then the hawked nose and rough beard jogged his memory. It was the man he had seen watching the estate. The big hawk-nosed man stared back at him with the same intense glare. Gaba'ké's heart froze. He turned to give warning. *This is an ambush*.

“Aramuk!” Gaba’ké shouted. He turned to look upon his prince, to give warning, just as the first arrow took Aramuk in the chest. A second followed the first with a sickening thud.

It all occurred in the same instant the mental attack came. Gaba’ké was ready for it. Another consciousness crashed against his own. Fearing for Aramuk and Ohacha, knowing their safety was in his hands, Gaba’ké didn’t hold back. The full force of his own consciousness, honed over decades of experience, slammed against his attacker. He felt the spirit of the Aginjigaade on the other side, as well as her fear as his counter attack overwhelmed her mental defenses. Her consciousness winked out, succumbing to his greater power. He couldn’t tell if he’d killed her or not. Right now, he didn’t care.

Rid of her attack, Gaba’ké lunged into action. Ohacha sat next to his uncle’s body, staring at the twin shafts protruding from Aramuk’s chest. There was terror in his eyes. Gaba’ké followed the direction of the arrow shafts and saw the bowman on the rooftop. He leapt forward and reached out to protect Ohacha as a third arrow plunged into his outstretched hand. It buried itself in his hardened skin and despite the physical enhancement, pain flooded his senses. *Bodkin tipped. Armour piercing heads.* Gaba’ké yanked Ohacha down from the high seat, dragging him over his uncle’s dying body. Ohacha tumbled to the cobbled street just as a fourth arrow struck the seat where he had been seated.

Aramuk coughed violently. The arrows lodged in his torso had pierced his lungs. He drew in painful wheezing breaths. *Hell on earth,* Gaba’ké cursed. He reached up to pull his prince down off the handcart to safety but he didn’t budge. If Aramuk could have, he would have screamed. Instead, the noise came out wet and muffled. It was a horrible sound. The old prince went limp, and Gaba’ké wasn’t sure if he’d passed out or passed on. Ohacha reached for his uncle, desperation in his eyes and Gaba’ké pulled him back down into cover from the archer.

Men continued to pour from the side streets and alleyways on either side. The city guards reacted, drawing their weapons but the sheer number of attackers was staggering. Order yielded to chaos. Men fought and died. Screams of life silenced screams of death. Gaba’ké peered up and saw the bowman on the rooftop looking his direction. He ducked as another arrow exploded on the cobbled street behind him. Gaba’ké turned to see where the projectile had gone. If it had hit Ohacha. In turning, he locked eyes with the hawk-nosed man, who had just slain the last city guard between them.

The man was huge and terrifying. A born killer if Gaba’ké had ever met one. He was tall and muscular, and had dark eyes that seemed bent on destruction. His destruction. In mere seconds, the killer would be upon them. Aramuk, still slumped over, was as good as dead. Gaba’ké made the choice to leave his friend and protect Ohacha with his life. Instead of facing the attacker, Gaba’ké pulled Ohacha to his feet and drew the boy’s sword from its sheath, placing the blade in the boy’s hands. Ohacha grasped the sword with weak fingers.

“Your uncle is gone! Ohacha!” Gaba’ké shouted, “You will survive this! Stay behind me and watch out for that archer.” Ohacha nodded silently. *It would have to be enough.*

Desperations breed mistakes. No person is immune to the crosswinds that are necessity and fear. Even those well-trained and experienced, when facing overwhelming circumstances, can succumb. So, it was with Gaba’ké of Ayaan. Trapped between the mountainous killer and the archer on the roof, turned desperate. Fueled by grief and a need to protect Ohacha above all other concerns, he reached out with his agindan. He

turning not to the vesseled spirits stored on his person, but elsewhere. He needed something offensive. He needed a weapon. Gaba'ké dropped the physical enhancement and hastily selected a spirit from amongst the plethora in the cobbled vicinity. It felt like what he was looking for. He channeled power through it.

He was hoping for a spirit that would allow him to manipulate the shape of the earth. Or one that would allow him to fire shards of stone like missiles, mowing down enemies like insects in the heavy rain. The spirit he found *felt* like the latter. It felt right. Or at least close enough. And with little time to test or investigate, he counted instead on luck and experience. But desperation breeds mistakes.

The spirit Gaba'ké channeled his strength into did not produce the desired effect, backfiring immediately. Instead, the cobbled street between him and the brute advancing on him exploded in all directions. Sheer forces ripped the small stones both apart and out of the earth in a myriad of directions. Shards and flakes of stone scattered in every direction. They impaled everything in the vicinity. Windows shattered. Stones imbed themselves in the wooden cart, window sills, and both men's tender flesh. Small projectiles riddled his body, especially across his left side burying into his arm, thigh and shoulder. Glancing shards sliced his tender skin, drawing blood. Gaba'ké howled in pain and released the sorcery, channeling once again on the familiar enhancement's he used for defence. It didn't stop the pain, nor could is cease the damage already done.

The only consolation was that the hawk-nosed brute had shared in the blast of shrapnel and lay flat on his back. Gaba'ké cursed his stupidity. It was the kind of mistake that gets Aginjigaade killed. The kind of mistake young fools make, not wisened old men. Only when Ohacha appeared unharmed did Gaba'ké forgive himself.

Ohacha gawked at the mayhem around him. Patzau Yohati's palanquin fled from the rest of the column at the first sign of danger. They had been lucky, as the attackers only appeared after their passing instead at their appearance. Five of his six elite soldiers still stood. One of the elites had his own crossbow and was distracting the archer on the rooftop. The guild soldiers who had marched at the front of the column abandoned their brethren at the rear, covering the Patzau's retreat.

Gaba'ké and Ohacha followed in pursuit, hoping to catch up with the Patzau's men and greater safety. The wounds in Gaba'ké's side and leg made running difficult. Ohacha was helping him limp away but to little avail. A pair of thugs gave chase and were closing the distance rapidly. It was clear they would catch up before he and Ohacha reached safety.

"Careful Gaba'ké!" Ohacha shouted.

"I see them" Gaba'ké answered. More trained killers. Bartiin's work, assuredly.

Both attackers closed in together. Unable to escape, Gaba'ké stood firm between them bare handed. In this form, his hands were weapons. As heavy as sledges and as hard as rock. The two killers fanned out around him. They were trying to get closer to Ohacha. Gaba'ké wouldn't let them. He lunged off his good leg towards the thug on his left. The attacker swung a wide slash and Gaba'ké caught the blade in his bare hand. The sharpened edge bit into hardened skin, but Gaba'ké's clasped grip ensured it would stay locked there. He turned on the second attacker, and threw a hardened punch that took the man unaware in the shoulder. He flew backwards under the blow, quickly regaining his feet.

Ohacha tightened his grip on his sword. Panic flashed as he recalled Cask's duel with the assassins in Onera. He felt helpless and he hated the feeling. He remembered the assassin who knew to go for Gaba'ké's eyes. He couldn't let that happened. This time,

he wouldn't sit idle and do nothing. The second attacker managed to pull his sword from Gaba'ké's grasp but the Aginjigaade managed to ward off both attackers all while maintaining the retreat.

A third attacker appeared from Ohacha's left. He was just a kid, younger than Ohacha and clearly battle-drunk. The attack that came from his long knife was sloppy and ravenous. Worse, it was slow. Slower than Rolena had been, and far slower than Cask's quick strikes. Instincts kicked in. Ohacha parried the blow with ease, Cask's training kicking into gear. Ohacha's blade danced around the untrained attacker and cut cleanly down the boy's exposed chest, drawing bright red blood. At the same time, Gaba'ké caught hold of one of the thugs he had been fighting. His iron grip tightened on the man's wrist and the rock-like fist found the man's face with a sickening crunch. The man dropped, face shattered by the blow.

While Gaba'ké was distracted, the second thug skirted around the Aginjigaade's reach and pressed the attack on Ohacha himself. This attack, unlike the boy's, was deadly and precise. Ohacha leapt backward to avoid the arc of the killer's sword. The second attack came in quick succession and Ohacha parried the wider slash that sought his exposed side. Ohacha wished he had a shield.

Gaba'ké bellowed and lunged for the assailant who now stood between them. Ohacha used the distraction to his own advantage, also launching a counter. The man dodged Gaba'ké's hard fist and slashed outwards. The blade clanged noisily against his hardened exterior but didn't bite into flesh. Ohacha's thrust did. His own slash cut clean across the killer's exposed shoulder, incapacitating the arm. The man tried to advance again but Gaba'ké dove painfully and caught the thug by the ankle, knocking him off balance.

The killer hit the ground on his front, losing grasp of his sword along the way. He twisted as Gaba'ké wrestled his way on top of the man. The thug drew a small knife at his hip and thrust it repeatedly into Gaba'ké's side. Each time, the blade hit hardened skin and dulled and bent. The thug stabbed again only to have his hand slip from the hilt, slicing his hand straight down the broken blade. Blood gushed from the wound and the thug, now under the full crushing weight of the Aginjigaade fought back until Ohacha's sword came down to end the struggle. He lay in a mangled mess and both men panted.

Gaba'ké regained his feet. His clothes and face covered in the man's blood. The sight frightened Ohacha for a moment. But when he turned, Gaba'ké's face echoed the same horror. *We will both be haunted by this*. Gaba'ké reached and took Ohacha's hand in his own, leading him away from the bloody scene. They stumbled away from the carnage until they caught up with Patzau Yohati's soldiers. The soldiers raised their weapons, halting both men in their tracks. Thankfully, one of the soldiers recognized them despite the blood that ruined their fine clothes.

"Thank you" Gaba'ké huffed through raspy breaths. "Stay close, Ohacha. We're not out of danger yet." Gaba'ké focused his agindan sense and quested for the Aginjigaade woman who had attacked him earlier. He still couldn't sense her. Maybe she was gone. Maybe he had killed her. It wasn't unheard of. There was another Aginjigaade in the area. *Help is on the way.*

The column was moving fast, soldiers checking alleyways and door ways as quickly as they could manage at the hasty pace. Gaba'ké was struggling to keep up. Alarm bells began to toll in distance. They played a melodic tune. Eight notes. Another picked up the tune. Gradually more and more bells tolled until the entire city was a cacophony

of noise. Soldiers poured through the streets. Soon they reached the gatehouse at the Patzau's estate and the doors opened to allow the remnants of the convoy inside.

Once behind the Patzau's private walls, Ohacha felt some relief. Yohati and his wife descended from their palanquin. The old Patzau was bleeding from a wound on shoulder. Reah was removing her husband's shirt to address the wound. She appeared to be unharmed. Ohacha watched, exhausted as Reah's shaky hands tried to press cloth against the open wound. Gaba'ké sat to the side, his face plastered with the blood of their enemies. The soldiers avoided him. Ohacha didn't blame them, but they hadn't seen what the old Aginjigaade had done for him.

Ohacha stood alone, a solitary figure amongst the disorder of crisis. Attendants and servants swarmed out of the estate with aid for the wounded. Soldiers rearmed and took up the small battlements the gatehouse offered. People ran in every direction. What they might be achieving, Ohacha couldn't say. *Aramuk is gone,* Ohacha realized. *Dead. Murdered in this cursed city. All of our soldiers are dead. Cask is probably dead. Lord Kulimas and Rolena are missing.* He looked to Gaba'ké. The old man looked so tired. *Spirits, It's just me and Gaba'ké now. Are we all that's left?*

A servant appeared with a towel and moved to clean the blood from Ohacha's face. He took it from her hesitant hands and instead led her to Gaba'ké, who needed the attention. Ohacha felt terrified and shaky, but all things considered, he was fine. He seemed to be the only one who was. He and the servant helped remove the large cloak riddled with holes and cut to ribbons that Gaba'ké had been wearing. The old man winced as the bloody pockmarks were revealed. Dozens of small wounds, each one trickling blood. It looked like the old man had walked through a burr bush made of rock.

"Spirits, how did you get these?" Ohacha asked.

"My own stupid fault" Gaba'ké wheezed. "I tried to channel through an unfamiliar spirit; one I thought I recognized. Wasn't careful."

"Meaning?"

"I blew myself up" Gaba'ké coughed. Ohacha kneeled silently as Gaba'ké looked down and painfully removed small pieces of stone from his body.

"Thank you," Ohacha said after a moment of silence. "You saved my life. More than once."

"I'm just doing right by you, Ohacha" Gaba'ké groaned. "You don't deserve this. No person does."

"Uncle Aramuk…" Ohacha said.

"He was a great man" Gaba'ké said. "He didn't deserve this either. What your uncle Belvaas did to this family, his own family, it's monstrous. Your uncles… they could have worked things out without violence."

"Why?" Ohacha croaked.

"Why what?" Gaba'ké asked.

"Why do you think my uncle Belvaas did it? Turned on us? Betrayed my family?"

"I can't say for certain, but I did know the man." Gaba'ké said. "I think he did it for the same reason I blew myself up. He was desperate and thought he saw a solution. He knew your father would go to war against the Careyago. He knew it would be long and bloody. I think he did it because he didn't believe we could win against them. I think we all thought so."

"Would you ruthlessly cull your own family to avoid a war?" Gaba'ké didn't answer. "Why do you stay with us?" Ohacha asked. He had wondered at this question a

long time now. Now, in their darkest moment, seemed as good a time as any to finally brave the question. “After everything we’ve put you through…”

Gaba’ké leaned back, head resting against the wall. He had asked himself the same question before. “In life,” Gaba’ké explained, “it’s important to have something you care about and something you hope to achieve. You and Aramuk are my family. Leaving you would be akin to leaving behind everything and everyone I care about.”

“What about…” Ohacha ventured, “your daughter?”

Gaba’ké sighed. “Cask told you, did he?”

“Not very much” Ohacha admitted.

“She’s long dead, Ohacha” Gaba’ké said gravely. “She’s long gone and my wife with her. She got very sick and died, young and innocent. She would have been about six or seven years older than you are now.”

“I… I never knew” Ohacha said, “why didn’t you tell me?”

“Do you go around announcing to people that your mother and father are dead?” Gaba’ké ventured. “You don’t because no matter how much time has past, it still stings just a little bit and there’s never a right time to talk about it. That… hole that remains in their absence.”

That I can understand, Ohacha thought. He remained silent.

On the other side of the wall, there was loud argument. One that culminated in the gate opening just long enough to allow a long figure through. Cask dragged himself inside, bloody and exhausted. His clothes were tattered and he had a pair of shallow gashes across his right leg just above the knee. Blood splatter covered every inch of his fine armour. He looked around nervously, right until he glimpsed Ohacha and Gaba’ké together.

Chapter 13: The Trap

Bells tolled off to the west first and were soon picked up by the other belltowers. The city quickly descended into an orchestra of panic. Soldiers rose from their stations. Citizens opened their windows at the alarms, only to find reason to shut them tight again. Bartiin cursed to himself as the first bell tolled, knowing he had likely missed his window. He was still a few blocks from the bay. Setting sail now might prove difficult. They could fight their way through. Escape. But that would be an admission of guilt. *And what if the Casoyans sent ships in chase*? *What if they caught us?* He prayed it wouldn't come to that.

With that decision weighing heavily on his mind, Bartiin pressed on. He followed along the grand canal until he met up with his men. They were an odd mix. Careyago mercenaries and Gaagian military men Bartiin had little history with. Neither side liked the other. All tolerated his leadership. Eight soldiers. Sailors and crewmen aboard the ship. All hoping this would be one that would send them home. Bartiin shared their hope.

He had come from the auction house where he had facilitated the sale of the Gaagian throne. He and the ambassador had worked together to whisper the rumours that would make their way to Aramuk, coaxing him from his den. The others had checked in on Yoharum, tracking his actions and keeping tabs on his progress. They knew of the dozens of men who had been snuck inside the city's walls. All it took was confirmation that Aramuk had left the safety of Yohati's estate, and Bartiin's men had given the signal. Then Yoharum's army of thugs would do the rest.

Finally, after years of planning and attempts, threats to the new stronger Gaag would be crushed. A new era of prosperity for Gaag could begin. One under the empire and its hunger for resources and power, yes, but one where a strong leader could use the empire for Gaag's own gain. Belvaas was that leader. He was every bit the man his father was. Equally capable.

The others were already waiting for him when he arrived. New bells joined the ruckus. The echoes of alarm emanated from all sides. The tune was lost to noise. The narrow alleys became even more claustrophobic. Crossing the canal into the southern half of the city, Bartiin and his men let a platoon of soldiers pass. They marched across the bridge with haste in the direction of the Great Auction House. Bartiin held his breath. The streets quickly emptied. Regular citizens became scarce and sought the safety of closed doors.

Without a crowd to blend into, Bartiin felt exposed. Their foreign clothes and faces and armour, once a source of pride for him, now felt as if they drew unwanted attention. Between the noise and the stares, Bartiin felt he was going mad. Each passing face seemed to see past his façade and cast judgement. Each step they took out in the open sought to betray their escape. He could swear they were being followed. Unable to face the stares. The fear. The soldiers on every corner along the wharf. Bartiin deviated

from the plan. He ducked his men into an alleyway. The ship wasn't far now. They could make the rest of the journey without attracting attention. It would be easier that way. Despite the grumbles from his men, they listened and followed Bartiin into the dark alley. As did the figure that had been tailing them.

Out of the eyes of the public, the soldiers under Bartiin's command walked at most in pairs as they navigated the narrower street. With dusk still an hour away, the main cobbled street had been bright and wide despite the setting sun. Now, tucked in between tight buildings, shadows lurked in each corner. The bells tolled on, but their screams were muted here. The men crept around the piles of garbage and junk that had been discarded. Hens clucked away in boxy wire cages. Ahead, a small dog chased a rat across a narrow intersection, yipping the entire way. At the junction, only echoes of the animals remained. The constant noise crept through him like nervous reverberations. He *was* going mad. Anxiety buried itself under his skin. Not for what was done, but for getting caught so close to the end. *Just make it to the ship. Everything will be alright. Soon I'll be home. Safe in bed with my family.*

Squeezing between two black-cobbled buildings, Bartiin finally emerged from the alleyways and onto the wider wharf. They were near the southern dockyards. In the distance, Bartiin thought he could make out his ship. Long storage warehouses reached out to sea. Here, business hadn't ceased. The yards were still a bustle with workers who milled about and supervisors that were failing to keep them on task. Folks held their hands over their ears, annoyed at the disruption.

The fortress atop the stone peak loomed high overhead, a reminder of Bartiin's need to flee. All they needed to do now was walk to the ship. A shrill voice sounded from behind them. A lone figure emerged from the alleyway. Bartiin and his men turned. At first, Bartiin presumed the individual to be a local. Perhaps just somebody they had upset by being careless in the alleyway. Then he noticed the knife in the stranger's hand.

Bartiin's hand went down to the sword at his hip and he placed a firm hand on the scabbard of the thin weapon. His soldiers, seven in total, reached for their own weapons. The man with the knife didn't react. Bartiin's eyes darted left and right, expecting others to appear. No one else did. Bartiin took a closer look at the man with the knife. He was dressed in a dark cloak that hid his features. He had Gaagian features, the thick eyebrows and long face. He looked old and tired but his gaze was intense and murderous. *Lord Kulimas?*

The old Lord Kulimas stood across from them, alone. He was much older now, older than Bartiin thought he'd be. *It has been a few years*, he supposed. The old lord looked more like his uncle, King Zhiigan, than any of the kings' true born sons had. Lord Kulimas shouted to be heard over the bells. He spoke Gaagian, "The bells; they're for you, aren't they? What have you done?" It was strange to hear his mother tongue in such a foreign place.

"I don't know what you're talking about" Bartiin shouted back over the noise.

"Don't play me a fool, Bartiin Foxstring" Kulimas shouted. "I feared for the worst the moment I saw that throne appear on stage at the auction house. And I confirmed those fears when I caught you slinking out of the building. You sent assassins after Aramuk and Ohacha, didn't you?"

Bartiin's smirk was prideful, "I don't know what you're talking about" Bartiin repeated.

"I think you do" Kulimas said. "How many did you send?"

"Enough" one of his men shouted back. Lord Kulimas simply nodded at that.

"What was the purpose? Why sell the throne?" Lord Kulimas asked.

"That was the bait, to bring you to the auction" Bartiin said.

"We didn't know about the throne until after we arrived."

"*You* didn't," Bartiin taunted, "but I made sure Aramuk knew. Didn't you think it odd he changed his mind at the last minute? Very unlike him." That unnerved the old man.

"He'll survive whatever trap you've got in store for him" Lord Kulimas replied.

"You wont" Bartiin sneered. "You made a mistake, coming after us alone Yoliim." Bartin shouted back.

"No, I haven't" Lord Kulimas said. There was no fear in his voice. He believed those words. "I know what I'm doing. I've come to kill you, Bartiin."

"By yourself?" Bartiin shouted back, a little surprised.

"I must admit, I never wanted to believe it was you Belvaas sent" Lord Kulimas shouted. "I knew you were one of his favourite pets, but I didn't take you as foolish enough to waste your life chasing ghosts. But, when I saw you at the auction, I realized it was time. I've had enough. Enough of running from your assassins. Enough of hiding. Enough of waiting and letting you make your moves. It's my turn."

"You've got a lot of guts, old man. Do you really think you can fight all of us?"

Lord Kulimas laughed gravely. "I don't expect to survive this, Bartiin." Lord Kulimas said, calmly. "Aramuk would have tried to stop me. Even after all these brutal years, he's still a good man. Better than you and your governor."

"They're dead men, now" Bartiin taunted. "The bells toll the truth."

It didn't have the desired effect. The old lord appeared to ignore the comment. Unease began to set in. *We're were supposed to be fleeing to the ship. Not standing off against an old traitor.* Now that weapons were drawn, people stopped. They stared. They, like him, watched nervously, unsure of what was about to transpire. Moments passed. The clangour of bells counted down the seconds Bartiin and his men had left to escape.

Bartiin waivered, unsure how to proceed. The easiest action would be cut the old lord down and run for it. It would be quick, but there would be no more hiding. It would be a sprint to the ship and if chance were on their side, they wouldn't pass any soldiers. *It will be risky.* Unable to make a decision, Lord Kulimas made it for him. From behind his back, the older man drew out a slender device. He pointed it directly at Bartiin. With a squeeze of the trigger and a quick snap of the bow string, the crossbow launched a slender quarrel directly at him. A second crossbow appeared with a second click. The first quarrel careened over Bartiin's left shoulder, missing him by a mere finger's length. He felt the wind of it. His body reacted, but far too slow. The second quarrel imbedded itself deep in the shoulder of the soldier who stood in front of him. The man screamed in pain and hit the ground hard on the flat of his back. Bartiin froze. If he had been but a single step to the left, the first bolt would have killed him on the spot. His men, the ones who hadn't just felt death's whisper, charged.

Knife still drawn, Lord Kulimas stepped forward to meet his five attackers. He pulled another weapon from his hip and threw it as he charged the oncoming soldiers. The weapon, an axe, flew silently over the first soldier as he ducked and hit the soldier behind him square in the chest. The man dropped like a stone. Within seconds, the other soldiers were upon him. Lord Kulimas dodged the first sword swing, ducking under and sidestepping left to meet the next attacker. The second soldier was caught unaware as Lord Kulimas' knife slid deep into his belly. The old lord pulled out the knife and stabbed again, but within another heartbeat, he was skewered by the first of the next three

swordsmen who had charged him. Two more blades found their mark in his torso and the old lord cried out in pain.

In his dying breaths, the disgraced lord could only do one last thing. He stabbed the same soldier over and over, blood splattering everywhere. It gurgled from the old man's mouth, from the dying soldier's neck and stomach, from the countless sword wounds that pierced through the dying lord's body. A soldiers wrestled the knife out of his grip. Yoliim Kulimas' hands went to his face, blood smearing as he wailed. Bartiin watched in horror. They stabbed the dying lord again and again. Blood emptied from the deep wounds. Lord Kulimas buckled, no longer able to stand, but Bartiin's men held him upright and took turns sinking their blades into his flesh. He was still upright and long dead as they finished their vengeful butchering. His insides were more outside than in by the time they let his body crumple to the cobblestones.

Screams erupted from the crowd. Bartiin cursed the old lord. *We're screwed.* The soldier who had taken the crossbow bolt to the shoulder was injured, but alive. The man who had taken the axe to the chest stood, miraculously unharmed. The flat of the handle had hit him, rather than the blade. He held his abdomen, probably nursing a broken rib, and looked around at the others in bewilderment. Only the soldier who had been caught by Lord Kulimas and stabbed in the throat was dead. He lay next to the old nobleman in an equally blood heap.

It was a miracle. Bartiin had avoided death. Only one of his men had died in the attack. He had vastly underestimated the old man. If the spirits of luck had favoured him instead of Bartiin, half of Bartiin's men would be dead, himself included. *Bless the spirits who look favourably upon me*. But what the old man failed to accomplish in life, he accomplished in death. Bartiin's plan to avoid attention was as dead as the old lord. There would be no more hiding. Their only hope now was to run for the ship. They would need to set sail immediately.

Local dockhands shouted curses at them in Tralang. Another man shouted in Casoyan. Bartiin ignored them. *I don't have time for any of this*. His men were crowded around the two dead bodies in the streets. The alarm bells continued to toll their incessant noise and the crowd around them grew larger as the shouts and screams and curses grew louder.

"Time to go!" Bartiin ordered.

"What about Benzha?" somebody answered. They stood over their fallen comrade.

"He's dead. We need to leave, now!"

"We can't just leave him here!" somebody argued. He was Careyago like the dead man.

"I can and I will!" Bartiin shouted. The crowd parted for Bartiin. His soldiers followed.

*

Rolena watched from the alleyway as Lord Kulimas' killers turned and fled. She kneeled in the alleyway, a perfect witness to the horrible butchering before her. Lord Kulumas' body lay motionless in a vulgar desecration of his own insides. For the first time in the many years she had served as a hired soldier, Rolena thought she might be sick. As the soldiers fled, locals chased after them. They hurled stones and insults. Rolena wanted to follow. She wanted to give chase. Her legs didn't budge.

In her efforts to find Lord Kulimas, Rolena had inadvertently found herself in a restricted part of the auction house. She had been forcefully removed. The callous guard

escorting her had practically thrown her out the nearest exit. She argued until the man pulled a ghata club on her, waving it threateningly. That shut her up. Then a man, another foreigner, appeared behind the soldier and squeezed through. He wore a large flamboyant hat and the soldier let him pass with only a sneer.

Dusting off her clothes, Rolena had gotten back to her feet. The door slammed and she was forced to walk around the large building to the front. She was stewing in her anger as she left and looked back at the door to give one last hateful look. That was when she spottled Lord Kulimas. She recognized his face, even if she didn't recognize the determined look plain across it. He carried a pair of crossbows, and a single-minded focus. He didn't even glance in her direction and stalked off alone into the city. It was bewilderingly strange. And so, Rolena followed him. He was her employer's vassal. It seemed the right thing to do in the moment. It too was a mistake.

*

Sergeant Yuromi Ashill and the confused soldiers at her heels arrived just in time to witness the brutal public execution of an old man. Yuromi knew the sort of violence displayed from horror stories alone. *Vendetta. Savagery.* She presumed the killers were gangsters and promptly found her presumption incorrect. They were foreigners. *What the bloody-hell did I just stumble upon? Who the hell are these people?*

The figure Yuromi had been tailing through the streets kneeled just a few paces before her. She too had foreign features and warrior's garb. *But no crossbows. So, who is she? And why did she lead me here? What's her connection to all this?*

The crossbows lay abandoned in the street next to the body of the butchered man. The crowd was panicking. Screams of terror fought to be heard over screams of anger. People fled. The killers ran. Someone was calling for soldiers to act. *For me. But what to do about the girl?*

So, Yuromi did what she always did. She doubled down. "Drop your weapons" she ordered. She stood over the foreign woman kneeled before her. It was as commanding a tone as she could muster in a party dress. The foreign woman turned but Yuromi barked at her to stop. The woman raised her hands in surrender. "Empty your pockets! Drop any weapons you're carrying!" Yuromi ordered, drawing close.

"I have nothing!"

"Who are you?" Yuromi demanded. She patted the woman down and found nothing.

"My name is Rolena" the woman replied, her voice cracking. Her accent was thick but her voice was low and smooth.

"What are you doing here? Who are those men? Why were you following them?"

"I… I don't really know" Rolena answered, finding a strange truth in her words.

"Restrain her" Yuromi said, commanding one of the soldiers she had brought. "You keep her here and find out who the two dead men are. You and I," she said, gesturing to the other soldier, "are going to follow and catch those foreigners."

*

Passing by the long piers, Bartiin and his five remaining soldiers finally approached the docks where their merchant ship was moored. The crowd was relentless. Strangers continued to harass them along their journey. Bartiin's hope was wearing thin. There was still chance that they would make it aboard but holding off the mob seemed a dauntless task.

But then, like a ship scraping reef, Bartiin's hopes sank. Slowly at first. Then all at once. The useless Casoyan soldiers that had never so much as spared him a glance as he

had come ashore and passed them as they played cards had decided that *now* was the time they would do their jobs. The three of them had the pier blocked off and a dozen more were running down the esplanade with spears in hand. *Too many*.

Bartiin considered his options. He only had two left. Neither appealed. They were boxed in now. Soldiers at the docks. Soldiers to the south. The mob at their heels. *Curse the bastard Yoliim Kulimas,* Bartiin thought. *We could do it. Fight our way past. Kill again. Make it to the ship. Die trying.* He knew it was foolish. And so that left only one option. The soldiers watched, uneasy as Bartiin and his soldiers approached with the angry mob in tow.

The Casoyans drew their weapons. “Don’t try it” the lead soldier said, eyeing the six men. Bartiin looked back and considered what they saw. Four foreign soldiers covered in blood. One bleeding from a shoulder wound. An angry mob at their heels. And at the front of the pack, leading them was himself. *Yoliim-fucking-Kulimas will be my downfall.* It might have almost been amusing if it weren’t the bloody truth.

“Please,” Bartiin pleaded, offering his sword, “An assassin tried to kill us in the street. We are ambassadors from the Careyago Empire. We surrender ourselves to you for protection. We submit in the name of justice!”

Chapter 14: The Sleepless Night

The night grew old. The silent study was still but Patzau Mellen Minoc sat at his desk unable to sleep. The bells had stopped only an hour prior and the city descended into an eerie silence. On the far side of the room, a pair of spirits glimmered with an ephemeral shine under the soft candle light. One glowed with a flaming orange hue while its partner echoed the shape and colour of the waxy white candle. Patzau Minoc sat alone, lost in his own thoughts and fixated on the two spirits as they danced together across the room. It had been a long time since he last sat still long enough to have spirits appear before him. He hadn't noticed when it had happened, but now he sat transfixed on their strange beauty. A light knock sounded on the door. The spirits vanished. Only the flickering light of the candle remained.

The knock sounded again, harder this time and Mellen said, "Come in." Kuta, his Aginjigaade, entered the room. She wore her white robes. Her dark hair matched her dark eyes and the dark room. But even in the dim light, Mellen could recognize her weariness. Weariness, he realized, that matched his own. *Spirits, its late,* he thought to himself, stretching. An ache lingered in his back. Stretching seemed only to invigorate its presence. The young Aginjigaade closed the door behind her with a soft click and turned to face him.

"Come with me" Kuta said. Mellen furrowed his brow, surprised.

"I've been locked in this office for the past few hours," Patzau Minoc said, "and you can't even do me the courtesy of telling me what has happened?"

"I'll tell you on the way" Kuta said with conviction.

Who is this girl and what has she done with my timid Aginjigaade? Mellen thought, perplexed. "You've never once ordered me to do much of anything, Kuta." Mellen said, "What has happened?"

"This is true. Thus, I expect you understand that the need is great. Grab what you need."

Patzau Minoc lifted himself from his chair and followed Kuta out of the room. Several soldiers were already waiting and fell in step as they descended into the guild lobby. Crossing the marble floors, they exited into the streets where another group of soldiers and messengers lingered with antsy dispositions.

A captain intercepted them. "Patzau, we haven't been given clearance to let you go yet. Until its safe, please stay inside the guild hall."

"No" Kuta challenged "The Patzau is needed elsewhere. If he is in need of protection, assign a squad to guard us."

The captain turned to face Patzau Minoc, unsure how to proceed. Minoc gave the man a shrug in response and the captain appeared unsure which orders to follow. "Fine. Where is it you wish to go?"

Mellen looked to Kuta for the answer. “We’re going to Mudtown” Kuta answered. Both the captain and Patzau Minoc stood, dumbfounded by her answer.

“I… I am not sure I can permit that right now” the captain said.

“And I am sure that you can” Kuta jabbed back. “Assign your soldiers. We leave at once.” The captain looked to Patzau Minoc for support. Minoc seemed just as confused as he did.

Their company walked briskly through the dark city streets. Minoc huffed uncomfortably from their quick pace. He was a walker, not a running man. Two dozen soldiers led the escort. Patzau Minoc noticed that the soldiers were on edge; extra vigilant. They carried spears and swords in hand, not in sheaths. None carried the ghata used for patrol work. *War weapons. What has happened?*

“Talk” Patzau Minoc hissed.

“There was an attempt on Patzau Yohati’s life” Kuta replied.

Patzau Minoc whispered a curse under his breath. “Then why are we going to Mudtown?” he asked through ragged breaths.

“To deescalate.” Kuta said. “Yohati’s bent on a war path. He’s taken control of Ashill’s soldiers and is sending them into Mudtown in retaliation.”

“Why are we trying to stop him?” Mellen asked.

“What?” Kuta asked, incredulous.

“Why are *we* doing this?” he repeated. “You and me?”

“Spirits, for a man I consider to be exceptionally smart, that is an incredibly stupid question.” Kuta spat. Anger flashed across Mellen’s face.

Patzau Minoc grabbed her by the arm and she spun, facing him. The soldiers came to a halt, some fixated on their unexpected stop, others fixated on the shadows they now feared. He looked at her, angry with her tone and she looked back at him, furious at his apathy. Mellen bit his tongue and swallowed that anger. *She’s upset,* Mellen grasped. It was plain across her face*. She’s scared and angry. And because I am opposing her, it is being redirected at me. But it is not for me.*

“You are being unfair to me, Kuta.” Mellen said sternly between panted breaths. “I do not know the details of what has happened—of what *is* happening. You do. I need you to tell me what you know for me to make informed decisions. I trust your intentions, but clearly there is a risk being taken. For spirits sake, there’s fear in these men’s eyes. Armed soldiers looking like they might be set upon by ghosts.”

“Innocent people are being slaughtered” Kuta nearly shouted. Tears began to well in her eyes. “There are so many damned reasons, Mellen. Mudtown is burning. The city will suffer for it. Yohati now controls an army that shouldn’t answer to him and seeks to unleash it on innocents. On regular people who didn’t do anything. Its fucking wrong. Once he crosses this line, the course will be irreversible. Punishing the people outside the walls for this heinous act voices what they’ve always feared; that by living outside the walls they are not seen as equals. As true Casoyans. That they will always be outsiders. That Casoyan justice is weak and corruptible by individuals who hold power. That they are enemies in the eyes of the Patzau.”

Mellen let go of her white robes as she cried in the middle of the street. He looked at her and for the first time in their time together, she looked the child she still was. She was barely older than his own daughter. *And where are her parents?* He wondered. *In Mudtown,* he guessed. *Outside the city’s walls. In Yohati’s crosshairs, that much is certain.* He reached out and wrapped her in his arms. She was tiny thing compared to him. She wept in his arms in the middle of the dark street. The soldiers

waited awkwardly, pretending not to pay attention to the little girl crying in the street. Her tears made it easy to forget the power she wielded. She broke away from him, and he let her. She wiper her eyes with her sleeves.

"Let's move" Patzau Minoc ordered. "We head for The Lake Gate." She was right, of course. *Blood begets blood.* "Now, Kuta" he continued. "Tell me all you know in full detail."

Despite the haste, they arrived too late. By the time Patzau Minoc reached the Lake Gate, Mudtown was already ablaze. Black smoke pillared skyward under the early glow of dawn. As they approached the gate, they were intercepted and lead to the command center. They climbed the narrow staircase inside the Lake Gate and stood atop the city's dark walls overlooking the mess below. Patzau Ashill was there barking orders at different soldiers.

"Patzau Minoc" Patzau Ashill said in surprised greeting. "What are you doing here?"

He glanced at Kuta. She only stared out over Mudtown. "Was this your doing?" He asked.

"Was *what* my doing?" Ashill asked, accusatory.

"This" he said, gesturing towards the wooden hovels that burned.

"I'm cleaning up" she said plainly. "Now is *not* the time to find out what or why or how. Now's the time to fix it and if you're not here to help, I would like you to leave."

"Tell me this, did Yohati order this?" Mellen asked.

"Now's not the time" she insisted.

"Did Yohati do this?" Mellen repeated sternly.

Patzau Ashill let out a hard sigh, "Yes."

"Spirits have mercy on us" Mellen said. He let out a sigh that matched hers. "I never knew the old man had *this* in him."

Kuta spoke, but remained fixed on the burning village, "The lure of evil can be found in both the wickedest and noblest of intentions."

Patzau Minoc stared down at her, his little assistant. His young Aginjigaade. *How does one so young come upon such wise words?* He turned back to Patzau Ashill again. "As you understand it now, what has happened since the first bell tolled and now?" Mellen asked.

"Too many things to count, Mellen."

"Such as?"

"I don't have time for this right now" she said as several officers lined up to share their information.

"I can help you, but not if you won't let me. We're on the same side" Mellen argued.

She rubbed her eyes with her fingers. "Spirits, Mellen, you make it fucking difficult–"

"Fine, I'll let you be, Yanata" Mellen growled. "Where's Elvi? I'll talk to somebody actually willing to help."

"She's fighting the fires" Yanata snapped. "Don't go down there."

"Or what?" Mellen challenged.

"Or I'll be paying my condolences to your wife and daughter when I attend your funeral. Worse, I'll have to contend with supressing my smugness with regret for not convincing you against your own stubborn stupidity." Mellen opened his mouth to speak but she cut him off. "Stay here" she ordered. "I've got things under control. I'll get you

caught up to speed and involved after the fires are doused and tensions are low. You're an arrogant son-of-a-bitch Mellen and I can't fucking stand you."

"But?" he quipped.

"But nothing." Yanata said, almost losing her frown. "How much do you already know?"

"Absolutely nothing" he said, "I arrived back at my office and the alarm bells sounded."

"Sprits." Yanata said, "Well the short of it is that Yohati and those foreign princes of his were attacked after leaving the auction. Ambushed. By thieves or soldiers. I don't know. What I do know is that the attackers were gang affiliated. From the mountains." she added, quickly glancing over at Kuta once. The glance didn't go unnoticed. "I've heard a few versions of the story now, but to me it seems like an assassination attempt meant to look like a robbery. Thugs appeared from the alleyways and raided the carts for valuables, killing all in their way."

"What makes you suspect an assassination?" Mellen asked.

"Multiple recollections include an archer on the rooftop. Highly skilled. Killed several. Something happened at the auction and those foreigners with Yohati were up in arms about it. I actually sent my daughters over to learn more about it…" Yanata realized she had forgotten that detail until now. She felt guilty for forgetting them again. She added, "I don't know what came of that yet."

"I don't understand. Why is this important?" Mellen asked.

"Whatever caused the stir with those princes kept the lot of them at the Auction House late" she explained. "Yohati got tired of waiting and swapped to the lead cart where the princes were supposed to sit. That archer put two shots right into the seat where Yohati was supposed to be. The older prince died in his place. The uncle."

"How do we know it wasn't just an assassination against the princes?" Kuta asked.

"We don't. Nor does it matter" Yanata answered. "Yohati insists he was the intended target. It no longer matters if he was or wasn't."

A fat raindrop fell from the sky. It exploded on the back of Kuta's hand and she looked skyward, feeling her prayers may yet be answered.

"Then how did we get *here*?" Mellen asked, looking out over the burning slums. "To this?"

"Yohati ordered the capture of the perpetrators. He sent his own men alongside the city's soldiers. Their numbers grew as the bells tolled and the chase led to Mudtown. He ordered an assault against all of the crime dens we've been monitoring. As you can guess, all hell broke loose. When I arrived, fires were already spreading. I seized control from Yohati—who had been dictating orders from his estate—and I've been working to cease hostilities and get the fires out ever since."

"

"This is a severe overreach of power" Mellen said. "He can't get away with this."

The rain began to fall in earnest. Both Patzau looked up, welcoming the cool early morning rain. An aide of Patzau Ashills appeared with an umbrella. Yanata waved the girl away. Minoc waved her back his way instead. The poor girl flinched under Yanata's undeserved scowl.

"The man is attacked in the streets and you want him to lose his seat on the council for it?"

“The man seized control of the military and launched an unsanctioned campaign against civilians” Mellen countered. “Don’t play dumb with me and pretend more innocent people will have died this day than guilty ones. We cannot abide by this sort of vigilante justice!”

“It’s not that simple, Mellen” Yanata said.

“Well, it should be” Patzau Minoc said flatly. “If there are no consequences for his actions, they are given legitimacy. And if they are legitimate, then we have given all Patzau to the right to seize control from you when we deem it necessary. And if his right to your powers was lawful, then the damage caused becomes just in the eyes of the eight guilds. If we wish for Casoyans to trust in us, their governors, then these things can not be true. We are supposed to be better than the tyrant kings of old. If we permit this, we become just like them.”

Kuta stood in front of the gate. Most of the soldiers apart of Patzau Ashill’s administration team had retreated into the gate’s large archway as the rain began to fall. Dousing the fires would be much easier under the rain. She stayed out open air, letting the rain envelop her. It washed over her, slowly soaking her to her core. And within the rain, she felt the blessings of the spirits. She felt their justice and mercy with every shiver. Never before had smoke been so bitter and rain been so sweet.

Chapter 15: The Celebration

The sea breeze that often cooled the coast at night was calm. The days of rain had passed. The streams and channels that had once spilled over their banks now returned to their beds. The earth was still wet and sticky. It had rained the night prior, but today the air was warm and the countryside was quiet. Firebugs danced through the air and small bats whizzed overhead to snatch them from the night. Small spirits joined the bats in the sport of catching the small insects, although with far less success. Along the dark roads beyond the city walls and far to the south, fast footsteps moved along the muddy path splashing water as they went. The bright crescent moon danced evasively through the heavy clouds above, casting rare shadows on the runners below. These soldiers were well trained and better paid. Tonight, they had a job to do.

A keen watcher might have heard their boots on the soft earth or have noticed the shapes of the soldiers' shadows appear each time the moon peaked through the clouds. A keen observer might also have heard the light jingle of armour—real heavy armour of metal, rather than common leathers and salt-hardened cloth. The thieves in the small hut were not keen observers this night. Instead, they were drunk on success. They reveled in victory. Their watchman on the road had long abandoned post to join their comrades in drink. He had assumed, incorrectly, that they were far enough from the city to need for vigilance. They all had.

Yoharum stood gloriously amongst his closest friends and allies. Silver and gold coins were strewn about the table in triumph. This score had been big. The biggest he had ever seen or heard of. The small thatch-roofed hut displayed their plunder like a sword of legend wrapped in tattered cloth. Yoharum stared at the wealth, dumbfounded. *All it had taken was the murder of some foreign prince,* he mused. Even without the second half of the payment, there would be enough coin here to ensure none need work for several years. The wealth here was enough to purchase lands, build new houses, claw their way out of the bottom. For Yoharum, this would be his redemption. He could finally return home to the mountains, head held high. He would prove that he was a provider. A leader of the new generation. A man to be taken seriously. No common crook.

Zhenya would be elated. But the fact that still hadn't arrived was becoming a cause for anxiety. *She's probably just laying low while things cool off.* That's what he told himself. It didn't ease his worries. Her involvement was so separated from the rest. It seemed impossible that she would find trouble. More than that, she knew to steer clear if other Aginjigaade were nearby. But Yoharum had felt the effects of her sorcery. It was strange, unlike any he had felt from her before. More impactful and powerful. Distortion of shadows and light, hiding them from the soldiers in the street. Things he didn't know she could do.

And yet, her attack on the Aginjigaade was ineffective. The princes' Aginjigaade bodyguard seemed unincumbered by her attack. Perhaps he was simply that powerful. Yoharum replayed the memory of the silver-haired man catching the arrow out of mid flight with his bare hand and the moment the man's blast of stone sorcery hit him square in the chest, knocking him hard to the ground. Even through his armour, it had hurt. *We were warned.*

She could explain better when next they met. Yoharum leaned back in his chair with the look of overwhelming satisfaction. *We should rob more nobles leaving the Auction House,* he delighted. His crew drank and celebrated in the small cramped two-room hovel they had occupied. The building was old and neglected. The walls were built of as much mud as they were stone. Bits of missing mortar and thatch hinted at years of abandonment and neglect. The floor was flattened earth with a black pit for a hearth. But more importantly, its was far from the city and known only to a few. It was the perfect place to disappear to. Yoharum's chair was crude, but today it felt like a throne.

And yet he couldn't stop thinking about how the younger prince had gotten away. They had killed the older one, the man Bartiin named Aramuk, but seeing how much wealth they had accrued made the regret at not having received the whole prize sting. He wished for that kind of wealth. He wished for that Aginjigaade's power. The means to change things. The strength to dominate without fear of a knife in the back. *Oh, what I could accomplish with that kind of power.*

The door swung open and another member of his inner circle returned—the youngest—Darius. The crew swelled with excitement but Darius didn't seem to hold the same enthusiasm. There was something on his mind, something wrong. Yoharum noticed it immediately. It was in his posture, the way he smiled through pain. Yoharum pulled the younger man close. He was small, not just because of his youth. Next to Yoharum, Darius was just a pup but he was keen and nimble. A capable thief. Between that and their shared hatred of the Casoyans, he was a good addition to the crew.

"What's on your mind?" Yoharum asked, hugging the lad with too tight a grip. Darius was the type of kid who needed reminding whom was in charge.

"There were fires in Mudtown" Darius said. "I don't know. I didn't see it up close but there was a lot of smoke. I could see it from the hills. It looked bad."

"I'm sure it was nothing to worry about" Yoharum said. Nothing Darius need worry about a least. And nothing we should do about it.

"I don't know, Yo" Darius continued. "My family's in Mudtown. I'm concerned, that's all. My brothers and sisters." He pulled out the knife he kept close and stuck it into the table with all the coins. He leaned over, stressing.

"They'll be alright" Yoharum promised. "Tonight is for celebrations. We drink to new riches and new opportunities. This money could support driving the Casoyan dogs from the mountains. Think of the army we could raise. We could unite the tribes and push the bastards from our lands. Take back what rightfully belongs to us."

Darius smiled at that, "I just hope we didn't kick the hornets nest."

"We'll hear the truth of things soon" Yoharum assured him. "Once things have calmed down, we can return to the city. Until then, we just have to wait for news to come to us."

Darius excused himself and slipped out of the back door of the hovel. Unbeknownst to the crew, he had swiftly pocketed a few dozen of the silver coins on his way out of the room. *The greatest thief amongst the greatest thieves,* Darius boasted to himself. All it took was the slightest distraction. Yoharum hadn't even noticed. It was a

risk, of course. The last thing he wanted was the others to find out he was a thief. Well, a thief who stole from his fellow thieves. There was a difference, of course.

There were hard men in Yoharum's group. Killers among them. Yoharum the scariest of them all. That's why he was in charge. It was a risk, but one well calculated and well-worth taking.

The thief turned down and away from the hut and stumbled over a rock he couldn't see in the darkness. He walked twenty paces past the overrun vegetable patch over to a large tree, looked over his shoulder, and then began removing the coins. When he was finished, he looked back, careful to remember this place for his return in the future.

He'd slipped out for a piss; an easy alibi. Darius turned, impressed with himself, and turned to walk back to the shack. He took three short steps and then found an extra coin in his pocket. He must have missed it. He stopped to turn around just in time to hear an object fly by his face, just an arms length from where he stood.

The whoosh surprised him, loosing a small yelp. *Startled by a bat,* he groaned. *How pathetic.* That was when a rustle of sounds made him turn. Shadows moved in the darkness. There was the muffled clinking of armour—of weapons. Several black-clad figures moved in the darkness. They were close. Too close. Darius moved to draw the small blade he kept on hand only to find it missing. *Stuck in the table*. He never got the chance to scream as a heavy hand muffled his cry and a slick blade found its way into his heart.

At the same moment, Yoharum sat soberly. He had seen them too and had chosen to ignore it. The flames that spread over Mudtown. Something had happened and he had chosen to ignore it. But now Darius' words brought forth doubts. The wine, which had once been sweet now tasted like ash. He had expected drunken bravado and a brawl over posturing to end this night's festivities, not his own conscience. It wasn't even his home, but for so many in his crew it was home. It was home for thousands of men and women from the mountain tribes. From the scattered villages on cliffs to the north to the stilted homes across the swamps to the south. From distant Cabiya to his own home just outside Caso. So many came to the city looking for a better life only to end up in Mudtown—in squalor. Yoharum's worries turned back to Zhenya. She was supposed to be here by now. She was his partner in this. Now he was concerned she hadn't made it out of the city at all. That the Casoyan bastards had caught her. That they were torturing her. Had killed her. These were anxious thoughts, not steeped in certainty, yet he found he couldn't suppress them.

It was at that moment the fire erupted. A burning object came through one of the small windows. Heads turned at the sudden bright light. It outshone the dim wax candles that lit the small room. It was there for only a flash. Quick enough that all eyes turned to see the burning pot. Then with a woosh, the pot crashed and flames exploded outwards. The smell of burning oil filled the room. Fire engulfed everything the burning liquid came into contact with. Yoharum leapt up onto the table in the center as fire spread across the floor, silver coils toppling from their towers and clattering into the flames.

Order is a delicate thing. In one moment, it is law. In the next, it is lost. Anarchy erupted as each crew member reacted. The response to chaos is instinct. Some fled the conflagration. Others cast glances, seeking the source of their betrayal. Most, eyed the spilled coins in the center of the room. Yoharum was among the third group. He snarled. This was his bounty to dole out. *And now a traitor seeks to betray the group and take the spoils for themself.* It was the only explanation that Yoharum could fathom.

Those unburned fled towards their closest exit. Those burned by the pitch screamed in paid. Yoharum pulled his axe and snarled menacingly to ward off opportunists. *This is my score. Who has betrayed me for it? Darius is missing. Was the boy capable of this kind of betrayal? Surely not. Zhenya was still gone.* Yoharum buried that thought. A betrayal from Zhenya was more than he could stomach. *Then who?* A thousand thoughts raced through Yoharum's head as the flames reached up from the floor below looking to swallow him whole. He looked around the room, expecting the traitor to appear.

The thatch roof lit up like a beacon in the night. The flames licked at his skin and the smoke began to fill the room at a dizzying speed. Yoharum coughed violently and brought his sleeve over his nose. It did little to help. The smoke stung his eyes and he crouched down from his position atop the table, still looking for his thief. *Someone will make their move for the coins*, he thought. No one came.

Soon, Yoharum was the only one left inside the burning hovel. The flames roared and crackled all around him. It was a sound that seemed to drown out everything else. Even the screams that should have pierced the cool night air. But then, that was what felt wrong. It wasn't that they were drowned out, it was that they were absent. The roar of the fire was loud, but he should still hear the screams and shouts outside the building. Instead, he heard nothing.

In a flash, Yoharum's understanding of the situation flipped. Everyone outside was already dead. The plan wasn't to steal during the distraction; the ploy was to kill everyone and claim the prize from the dead.

One of the central beams holding up the roof cracked audibly and the entire roof sagged, showering sparks and embers. Yoharum grabbed handfuls of coins off the table and stuffed them in his pockets. The metal was hot and it burned at his skin. He looked for an appropriate exit and turned for the back door.

The beam holding up the roof collapsed bringing down a flaming shower of thatch. He narrowly avoided the falling beam, which crushed the table in its descent. The remainder of his treasure was scattered and Yoharum was showered in flames. They singed his hair and ate at his clothes and skin. Searing pain spread across his body. The hair on his arms was aflame, as was his clothing. It felt as if his skin were melting. Time was running thin. He rushed for the back door.

Stumbling into the back room, Yoharum found the rear doorway a portal of pure fire. His skin was boiling. The pain was making it difficult to concentrate. A desperate idea came and he rushed to the corner of the smaller room. In the corner sat a wooden pail of stale water. It reeked but Yoharum didn't care as he dumped the dank water over his head to great relief. Even still, the heat felt near unbearable. It didn't matter. It would have to do. Yoharum held his axe, closed his eyes, and leapt through the portal of flame.

The poor soldier on the other side had no time to react as the stocky axeman leapt through the doorway. Despite having her spear raised, the point missed the big man as Yoharum blindly barreled past the sharpened tip by sheer chance. He crashed into her, sending the two of them tumbling to the ground. Yoharum rolled and regained his feet like a cat. He opened his eyes, expecting to come face to face with whichever crew member had betrayed him. Instead, he locked eyes with a Casoyan soldier. Young, strong, and armoured—she carried the spear and shield of Casoyan heavy infantry. *Elites. Butchers of the mountain.*

The soldier yelled but Yoharum drove his still burning fist directly into her face, breaking her nose. Other Casoyan soldiers turned and rushed towards them. Among

them was one man, larger and meaner than the rest. His face was illuminated by the burning hovel.

Yoharum felt fear for the first time. This was no heist. This was an execution. He was outnumbered, alone, and in excruciating pain. Terror spread through him. Not wishing to chance fate again, he took off with all the haste he could muster.

Yoharum sprinted across the earthy terraced fields until he reached the tree-line. Shouts trailed after him. Whether it was one or many on the hunt behind him, he wasn't certain. What he was certain of was that he didn't plan to find out. He knew this enemy. He feared this enemy. He hated this enemy. The big man illuminated by the flame was none other than Burm the butcher. There were nasty stories of his violent campaigns deep inland in tribal lands. And now Yoharum's vendetta against him was personal.

Yoharum ran into the darkness, despite the lasting blindness from the bright flames. The night, darker and more daunting now than he could ever have imagined it, seemed to swallow him whole. Behind him, the sounds of his pursuers echoed, following the sounds of desperation he made in his flight. Cracking of branches and twigs. The tumbling of stones. The sloshing of water and mud. Hard steps on soft earth.

Yoharum flew into a clearing. The moon appeared casting odd shadows across the grassy knoll. Yoharum ran, crossing the short clearing as a soldier stumbled in after him. A tremendous thud sounded, and Yoharum looked back to see that his hunter had tripped in his haste. He saw the soldier on the ground; dark features lit only by the bright moon. Dark hair, scar under his right eye. The two men stared at one another across the dark expanse for several heartbeats, neither wanting to be the first to move. That was the last glimpse the soldier got of him. Yoharum vanished into the night like the wink of a firefly.

The next morning, Yoharum awoke to the most excruciating pain he had felt in his entire life. The exhausted thief found himself half submerged in a babbling stream. He was covered from chin to ankle in caked-on mud. He sat upright abruptly, cracking his flaky earthen bandages. A wave of searing pain rolled up his body and he did everything in his power not to cry out. It didn't help and tiny whimpers left his lips into the forest around him. He scanned the unfamiliar forest, fearful that his cry had given him away to his hunters. He feared they were still searching for him. He saw no motion through the trees and bushes. The babble of the creek and groaning of the trees were the only sounds nearby.

A crow cackled high overhead. Nothing about this place was familiar. All he could recall was the inferno and the Casoyan soldiers ready on the other side. The pretty face of the woman he'd punched. The demon eyes of Captain Burm and the outline of his figure bathed in firelight.

He had survived. He had survived an ambush from the most dangerous soldiers the bastard Patzaus and their guilds had at hand. He had escaped the butcher himself. *How many of my people can say the same thing? How many weren't as lucky as me? Corrupt bastards,* he cursed. How many villages had Burm's soldiers terrorized? They were the ones who setup checkpoints on key mountain passages and demanded tribute. The one who extorted and pillaged and destroyed for amusement. The very worst of Casoyans, personified. Yoharum swore his revenge.

It took over an hour to find some semblance of familiarity in the steep mountain jungles. General directions were obvious, but his own location remained a mystery. Downhill would lead seaward, west, and uphill would lead him deeper to the mountains, east. Even knowing that, it took a long time to exit the thick brush. He found a game trail

and only following that did he stumble out onto an actual road. The path was bowed and muddy from use. It had rained at some point.

A thousand paces down the trail brought him in sight of a hamlet. The burnt husk of a building on the far side made it clear which hamlet it was. He hadn't gotten far at all. Fear swelled, as did the pain. A shiver ran down his arms and the pain from his burnt flesh flared back up. He looked at his arms, covered in blisters and blood and dirt. He wiped his chin and aggravated a nasty gash where a wayward branch had fought back against his haste and won.

He had a decision to make. A gamble, really, on where to go from here. *They will be looking for me,* Yoharum realized. *They know what I look like. They may even know who I am.* That thought concerned him. And despite that knowledge, Yoharum made a decision.

His size and burns would give him away anywhere else so Yoharum started the long trek inland. He would head east into the mountains, away from the city. He followed the lesser trails that led between the stream-cut ravines. The terrain here had shaped the jungle-rich hills into claws that reached down towards the croplands and pastures below.

It was long trek and dusk began to set in as Yoharum finally reached his destination. He turned off the small sideroad and walked down a lonely path. Ahead, a man and a woman sat on the porch of their household. They watched him approach, weary and exhausted.

Yoharum hobbled, pushing through the pain as best as he could manage. He was almost there. He was almost back. The man on the porch stood and brought his hand to a knife he kept at his belt. The woman approached and saw Yoharum's face and arms, dirty, scratched and painted with blackened blood from where the jungle had clawed at him. She saw the red and brown mud that covered him from head to toe. She saw the tattered clothes that reeked of fire and flesh. She saw the beaten and broken shell of a man, too exhausted to speak, and too weary to take another step.

Only ten short steps from the front steps of the place he once called home, Yoharum blacked out. He collapsed in exhaustion. The old man approached cautiously, the woman following an arm's reach behind. They turned him over and found, through all the blood and dirt, the face of their only son.

*

Rain dripped from the ceiling above the cold and dark holding pen. The floor, like the rest of the room was wet. The roof on the old warehouse did little to fend off the rain. Worse, even after the rain stopped outside, water seeped down the weathered roof into the interior. The warehouse was filled with animals. The smell alone could confirm it. Their cell was little more than an adapted animal pen. For what kind of massive beast, Bartiin couldn't guess. Bartiin and his men were confined for their second night in the dim forgotten room. They sat in miserable discomfort, contemplating their fate. Between the bells that rang most of the first night, and the lack of victors the entire next day, all six men bled hope.

When Bartiin had surrendered, he had expected to be brought somewhere more befitting of his station. It seemed now, sitting in this damp cage with an aching back and soiled clothes, that something must have gone awry. Perhaps, more chaos had erupted than predicted. Bartiin held onto the slim hope that it was a sign of tides in their favour. After all, Aramuk Krimas and his nephew should be dead. Only, the crowd would remember what his men had done.

The fact that he had not swung a blade, made Bartiin confident that he could argue his way out of any trial should the need arise. Unlike his men, he was innocent. Of a sort. Still, this was a grim fate. Far worse than he had expected, all things considered. They had been so close. So close to making it to the ship, ready to flee if necessary. But, if Bartiin had learned anything in the years spent chasing those self-centred princes across the seas, it was that patience is necessary in all things. Patience and readiness. *I have no plans on dying here.*

Dawn broke. The wind picked up and whistled loudly through cracks in the warehouse walls. Bartiin drew his cloak over himself, grateful that the guards who stripped him of his weapons and armour left him with this last shield against the cold. He envied the soldier who had taken the crossbow bolt to the shoulder. He was the only one taken away to a place, Bartiin could only presume, was better than this. Perhaps fed a proper meal in a dry bed away from the smell. He knew it was ridiculous. He didn't really believe those thoughts. Yet they came and he humoured them.

It was mid-morning on the second day when the first Casoyan soldier appeared to check on them. They had taken to drinking drops from a steady leak in the roof. When that petered out, only the dirty puddles on the ground remained. By that second morning, Bartiin shuddered because the once-disgusting pools were starting to look appealing to parched throats. Thankfully, the soldier came with stale bread and a well-worn waterskin. He left them alone to sit and eat in silence.

The five other men still left no longer eyed him favourably. They blamed him for their predicament. The established order was destroyed once they entered the pen together. Bartiin the leader was gone. The dirty looks they gave proved it. The group had barely exchanged words since being thrown in the cell together. A sourness persisted. He could feel their displeasure. Perhaps he even mirrored it, seeing as he was the only one who hadn't killed anyone and yet shared their fate. He presumed that only his seniority and a fear of confrontation kept the other men silent. It turned out he was wrong.

"Three years" Kellan said, quietly at first. "Three years!" he repeated, louder. The other men shared knowing glances.

So, this isn't new for them, Bartiin realized. "Is there a problem, Kel?"

"I've spent three years. Three years away from home, away from my family. Three years under your insane leadership only to wind up rotting in some animal pen on the way to be tried for a man's murder."

"If I recall correctly, it was you who led the butchering of old lord Krimas" Bartiin said. "Don't act like I alone did this to us."

"If I recall correctly, that was because he threw an axe at me" Kellen answered.

"Yeah, and it hit me!" the soldier behind him added angrily. "My ribs still ache."

"Piss on that" Kellan said, turning back to Bartiin, "You surrendered!" Kellen reasoned, pointing a finger at his leader. "We could have fought our way through and out of the city."

"You would have us kill Careyago soldiers like enemies on the battlefield?" Bartiin laughed. "You're a fool if you believe that. It took the lot of you to kill the old man and he didn't even have armour. We could never have fought our way out of the city and lived."

"You're the fool for surrendering" Kellen argued. The other men nodded in agreement. "Look at where your plan got us."

"You're not dead yet, are you? And it's the bastard lord's death that has landed us in this cell, not my leadership or planning" Bartiin said, speaking over the other men. "If you take issue with where we sit, take it up with your reflection, not me."

“Piss off, Bartiin” Kellen said dismissively. “You’ve made it very clear that we don’t matter to you. It’s always about the damned mission and the glory you think you’ll receive when you return home. But let me tell you a damned secret, now that we’ve been successful, they don’t need us anymore. Even if you go free, which we wont, you’ll go home, get your little reward and then be tossed aside same as you’d have done with us.”

“I’ll go free” Bartiin said. “I have no doubts about that.”

“You sound far too confident for a man covered in shit in an animal’s cage.” Kellen said.

“Now, now” a strange voice said from the shadows, “what seems to be all the commotion?” Bartiin and Kellan both shut up. The room was dim, but their eyes had adjusted. Two silhouetted figures moved through the darkness. Birds fluttered about their cages in protest as the figures walked through the dark warehouse. “You sounded particularly angry, or does your foreign tongue naturally sound angry?” the voice said. “I’m not really sure.”

A man walked into view, followed by another man who seemed to be in somewhat of a stupor. Bartiin watched, confused as the two men approached. He didn’t recognise either of them. The man who spoke appeared to be a city soldier, while the other man looked like he was drunk.

“Who are you?” Kellen asked in Tralang.

“A friend of a friend… perhaps” the man added. “Are you Bartiin?” he asked, looking around the dirty faces inside the cage.

“I am” Bartiin said, rising to his feet.

“I’m here on behalf of Patzau Yanata Ashill, Patzau of the Soldier’s Guild” the man said, “You are to come with me at once. This vagabond,” he added, patting the stranger on the shoulder, “is to join the rest of you in there for the time being. Be nice to him. Now, all of you. Turn around and face the back wall. Hands above your heads” he ordered. “I’ll cut you down in a heartbeat if you try me. Am I understood.”

Bartiin and the four men followed the soldier’s orders, turning around as the keys jingled and the lock clicked. The groan of metal sounded behind them and for a split second, Bartiin thought of trying for the escape. He tried to glance over his shoulder but received a stern shout from the soldier, prompting obedience.

“Alright, Bartiin of Gaag.” The soldier said, “Without turning around, take three steps backwards.” Bartiin complied. “Now, turn and exit the cage. Keep your hands on your head.” As Bartiin exited, the other man grunted loudly as he was pushed inside the cage, hitting the cold floor with a thud followed by a loud moan. *Who is that? Why does this feel… wrong.*

Bartiin stood, confused, as the soldier grabbed him and turned him around. He drew close, closer than he would a normal prisoner, and made to whisper in Bartiin’s ear, “It seems you have powerful friends. You’re to be spared from what’s to come.” Bartiin turned and stared, concerned by the haunting message. “Good luck, gentlemen” the soldier said. “They’ll come for you soon.”

The stranger led Bartiin, still unchained, back through the dark warehouse. He looked down at his hands and found himself perplexed by the lack of decorum, the oddity of it all. They walked together, but not in the way a soldier leads a prisoner. The soldier said nothing more. Only the chitter of caged bird and the scuttling of dozens of pigs in tiny cages sounded as the walked.

“You’re not here on behalf of Patzau Ashill” Bartiin said, breaking the silence.

“Of course, not” the soldier said, leading them down a new row of cages and boxes piled high.

“Who are you?” Bartiin asked.

“Doesn’t matter” the soldier said in a gruff voice. “I owe a favour and I’m repaying my debts.”

“To whom?”

He was met with silence. The two of them rounded the corner and the soldier handed him a set of new clothes. “Here, change into these” the man ordered, handing him some clothes.

“What’s going on?” Bartiin asked. The clothes were very Casoyan and very oversized.

“You and your men are about to be brought to the northern barracks for a trial. The judge is less-than impartial at the moment” the soldier explained. “Justice is in short supply right now. Our mutual friend thinks they’re going to hang the lot of you. And so, you need to die. At least, the ledgers need to say you died. Easier to smuggle you out that way.”

“I don’t understand” Bartiin huffed.

“As I said, you’re being spared a most gruesome fate” the stranger said, still waiting for him to dress. “And hurry up. I’m not supposed to be here.”

“What do you mean? They’re going to hang us?” Bartiin hissed.

“After that assassination attempt on Patzau Yohati, the whole city’s gone mad. There was a crackdown on Mudtown two nights ago. Hundreds are dead. Hundreds more arrested. The whole city is begging for blood. Cells are full beyond their limits. The lines to see judges are so long that they’re expediting murder cases. If you’re charged, you’re guilty. And you lot were charged with murder.”

“In self defense” Bartiin argued, “we were attacked in the street!”

“Shh,” the man said, “keep your voice down. And hurry up!”

Bartiin looked down at the clothes he had been given. One piece appeared to be a warn checkerboard patterned towel and the other was a loose-fitting tunic. “How am I supposed to wear these?” Bartiin hissed, turning the blanket-like fabric over in his hands, looking for a place for his legs.

“Spirits of hell, man,” he said, “find the loops. They go on the top. Wrap it twice around you, like a skirt, and use the wrap to tie it. Then put the shirt on over top.”

Bartiin removed his shirt and replaced it with the loose tunic. The idea, in his mind, was that the new tunic would cover his bits enough for him to replace his soiled soldiers’ pants with the skirt. A man’s sarong, as the soldier had called it. What he hadn’t accounted for was that the shirt was oversized and yet barely reached his navel, completely exposing him as he removed his trousers. *Bloody brilliant,* he thought, realizing the miscalculation. The soldier turned away and Bartiin caught the hint of a mocking smile on his face.

The sarong fit poorly. *Stupid design for clothing,* Bartiin chastised. He felt constricted at the waist, and far too unrestricted below that. The soldier came over and helped him adjust the tie around the midsection, “better I re-tie that then you expose yourself to some poor lady on the street. You’ll be back in a cell and all my hard work will have been for nothing.”

It was a joke. Bartiin didn’t laugh. But, after the soldier retied his waist, Bartiin had to admit the fit improved. He looked like a Casoyan in all but face.

"Tie your hair back" the man ordered. "The long unkept hair is very obvious as foreign. I'd cut it–"

"You'll do no such thing" Bartiin warned. The soldier put his hands up defensively. "Who was that stranger, the man you threw in the cell?" Bartiin asked while putting his long hair into a tail. He replaced his heavy soldiering boots with a pair of sandals; a choice he would come to regret in short order

"You haven't figure that out yet?" the soldier scoffed. "Come on, let's go" he said, leading the pair of them through a wooden doorway. They emerged onto the main quay wall that hugged the bay. Bartiin looked back over the bay but could barely make out a dozen of the hundreds of ships that were moored out there. Bartiin recognized the area. He saw just how close he was to his ship. He considered running for it. Instead, the soldier led him down an unfamiliar street. People milled about, but far more cautiously than before. They eyed him with new distrust.

As they walked on, they turned to the right and entered a neighbourhood Bartiin realized he recognised. *The Spires.* The jagged rooftops adorned with finials pierced high like spears raised against the heavens. *After I return home to Gaag, I'm going to retire to a beautiful home outside the city. An orchard or a vineyard. And I'll get Belvaas to make me a local lord so my family can live off the levies in peace. Anything to escape this place,* he thought. *Anything to make it home and see my girls,* is what he meant.

Bartiin paused, realizing the soldier who had been leading him stopped. He followed the man's gaze and looked upon a familiar site. It was the Careyago Embassy. His friend was the Careyago ambassador. She must have used her influence to spare him. He mourned the men he had left behind, all except Kellen. But it was *his* leadership and *his* actions that had saved him. Not theirs. Had they possessed the brains or will to lead, he might be the one still rotting in that cage. The soldier pushed him forward, checking both sides of the streets for unwanted eyes. The door opened, and beckoning him inward stood the ambassador, Hina Durali.

Chapter 16: Pain

Ohacha watched his uncle's body burn. It had been a small funeral. Quiet and within the compounds of the Yohati estate. Reah Yohati made the arrangements for the pyre. She even went so far as to procure needles and herbs for the smoke, as was the custom in Gaag. Outside of Ohacha, Cask, and Gaba'ké, the two women—mother and daughter—were the only other attendees. The way that Reah honoured him spoke volumes to her kindness and generosity. And Fera was there too. As much as Ohacha didn't like her, that counted for something. Patzau Yohati did not make an appearance. Apparently, it was too unimportant a funeral for such an important man. Ohacha stood stone-faced through the entire procession.

After the funeral, Ohacha secluded himself in his room. Once alone and isolated, he let himself unravel. *Aramuk is dead. Ander is dead. Lord Kulimas and Rolena are both missing and likely dead. Lord Provis is dead. My mother is dead. My father is dead.* Ohacha knew a precious few people. And of those few, too many were already ghosts. He wept for the hopes and dreams that died with them.

It poured rain again that night. Ohacha lay in bed long into the darkness, listening to the hard patter of raindrops against the roof tiles and his window. He could still smell the pine smoke and herbs that lingered on his clothes. Death and comfort all rolled up into one strange aroma. He lay, thinking about Lord Kulimas and Rolena. About what might have happened to them. He feared he might not ever see either again. The old lord had been a force of gentle kindness. Always the most devout and loyal proponent to their cause. He would miss the man's calm and caring attitude. Rolena was something… different. She was fierce. A warrior. She was competence and stability. She never compromised her optimism or hope. It had been that unwillingness to give up that had saved Aramuk's life in Onera. It was that same unwillingness that made her a terrible gambler.

A smile cracked through for the briefest of moments but was crushed under the weight of loss. They were gone. To do what Aramuk had set out to do, remove the Careyago from Gaag, now felt impossible. Perhaps, under smarter, stronger, and better leadership but now… with Ohacha alone at the helm? *There is no replacing Uncle Aramuk's steady hand, or Lord Kulimas' whispers from Gaag* Ohacha lamented. *I have lost Ander's ingenuity, Rolena's tactics, and the charisma of my parents. I am a disappointing fragment of everyone taken from me. A hollow echo. Without them, what chance do I have?*

The early morning light poured through the window casting a bright glow throughout the room. Ohacha awoke still slumped in the corner. He stirred and stretched. Pain radiated from his back and neck. He rose, and moved towards the window, closing the blinds and plunging the room into darkness again. Walking over to his bed, he removed his clothes from the day before and slumped into the bed. A knock rapped on

the door but he ignored it. It sounded again but nobody tried to force entry. The door was locked anyway. He didn't want to see anyone. Not today.

"Ohacha" a voice said from the other side of the door.

Ohacha grabbed the pillow and placed it over his face. *Leave me alone,* he thought. *If I ignore them, they'll leave me alone.*

"Ohacha" the voice repeated, louder this time. "Wake up"

Please go away. Please go away.

The knock came louder this time. Gaba'ké's voice came through, louder and clearer. "Ohacha!" Gaba'ké repeated, loudly this time. "I wouldn't be here if it weren't important. Come out into the garden."

Ohacha remained silent. *I just want to stay here in bed.* He lay still, letting his mind empty into oblivion. The knock sounded on the door again, stirring him.

"Ohacha" a new voice said, "It's me, Cask. Wake up!"

"Go away" Ohacha mumbled.

"Good" Cask said, "Now that you're up, freshen up and come downstairs."

"No" Ohacha groaned.

"Its midday Ohacha, you can't stay up here forever."

"Yes, I can."

"Ohacha… please come downstairs. Gaba'ké wasn't trying to deceive you. This is important."

"What's so important?" Ohacha groaned.

Cask sighed audibly. "I didn't want to tell you here, but its about Lord Kulimas."

Ohacha sat up, "Lord Kulimas is back?"

"The Casoyans found his body. He's in the garden" Cask said. "Please come down."

Ohacha dragged himself down the stairs. He wasn't sure what compelled him to go. The small sheltered patio was a place for eating meals inside the lush garden. It was surrounded by beautiful beds of flowers beneath branching fruit trees. He recognized it as the place where Gaba'ké had spoken to him after dinner with the Yohati's. In the center of the space, seated in a chair sat both Gaba'ké and Cask. The two men glanced over as he approached. Atop the stone slab of a table in the center lay Lord Kulimas. He stared at the old lord, pale and ghostly.

"Ohacha" Gaba'ké said standing, "This is Sergeant Yuromi Ashill. Yuromi, this is crown prince Ohacha Krimas."

Ohacha turned. Indeed, another person sat at the table. He hadn't noticed her. She sat off to the side, but it was obvious that the two men had been speaking with her. Ohacha looked at the stranger, puzzled by her presence. She was a soldier and wore a set of Casoyan weave armour. Her helm rested on the table next to Lord Kulimas' cold body. It was her face that stopped him in his tracks. It was familiar. He knew her. He recognized the long ugly scar from eye to chin under her right eye. She had introduced herself briefly at the Auction House.

She appeared comfortable, even familiar with the inside of Yohati's estate. She wore luxurious beaded earrings that hung softly to her neck. Her armour was intricately cross-stitched and was adorned with polished silver fasteners instead of the bronze or copper fasteners found on Yohati's soldiers' uniforms. The clothes she wore beneath the armour were made of a finer dyed colour instead of woven flax. The seams were neat and tidy. *Ashill,* Ohacha repeated to himself, *daughter of Patzau Ashill*.

“Good morning, Yuromi” Ohacha said, clearly not meaning it.” He had a quizzical look on his face. “We have met before, have we not?” he asked. “I think I would recognize your scar anywhere.”

“Please, I am here on Guild business. In Casoya, it is customary to address one another by title when discussing business. Please address me as Sergeant Ashill” she said. “And, you are correct, we spoke briefly at the Auction House. You were looking for someone and I left you with my sister, Kida.” The was she said her sister’s name made it clear they didn’t get along well. “You were telling her about how your throne at the auction was a stolen item.”

“Ah, yes, that…” Ohacha said awkwardly. He had forgotten about the throne. More than that, he didn’t want to be here speaking to her about it. His sourness came through in his tone as he tried to change topic, “then please call me Prince Ohacha” he added with a hint of mockery. She frowned slightly and it made him feel good. “You two—you and your sister—you look very similar, are you–”

“Yes” she interrupted. “We are twins.”

“Which one of you is older?” he asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“Which one of you was born first?” he repeated. “It’s not a hard question.”

Her eyes furrowed. Clearly his barb had her taken aback. Yuromi spoke up, “I wasn’t asking about the difficulty of the question, little prince; I was merely trying to understand why this matters.”

Ohacha frowned at her contempt. “Of course it matters,” he continued, “else I wouldn’t have asked. But I think you’ve already answered the question for me without meaning to.”

“Is that so?” she asked.

“The elder sibling would have told me they were older without hesitation; therefore, you must be the younger twin. You have a bit of that younger, ‘too much to prove’ attitude too. Am I right?” He wanted to hurt her; make her go away so he could leave. He wanted to be alone.

She looked at Cask and Gaba’ké. Both still sat at the table, embarrassed. Neither had been combative during their earlier conversation. *You’re one to talk. Clearly respect and sensibility is lost on princes who have been pampered their whole lives.* She recognized the discomfort in the way they sat. Neither would meet her gaze now. She scoffed once and Ohacha smirked with arrogance.

“Sergeant Ashill,” Gaba’ké said, attempting to change the topic, “is an officer with the guild. Her mother is–”

“Yes” Ohacha said, cutting in. “Her mother is Patzau Ashill. I am well aware. So, what brings you here to see us today, Yuromi.”

She scowled at him now. “I’m the one who found you vassal” she said, gesturing to the man on the table. “Your men were telling me that he was a lord in your service” she added. “You don’t seem especially grateful.”

“And if that’s all you’ve come for then you’ve made me regret leaving my room” Ohacha said dismissively.

Yuromi’s rage boiled over. “What the hell is wrong with you? Who do you think you are?!”

“I am Crown Prince Ohacha Krimas of Gaag!” He shouted back. He wasn’t ready for her to stand up to him, but now he felt the need to double-down. He wanted somebody to hurt as much as he did.

"And does that title grant you the right to be an asshole?" she seethed. "You're as much a prince as I am." Yuromi immediately regretted letting her emotions slip again. *Spirits, I tied so hard too. Screw it, too late now,* she thought. "Is this how you treat guests in your home? Is this how shit-eating princes of Gaag behave? Is this how you grieve your dead?" she challenged. Ohacha recoiled, shocked by her vulgar words as much as the truth behind them. He had been goading her of course, but he hadn't believed she would bite back. She continued, unrelenting, "is this how you honour your uncle? By being a spoiled brat who can't recognize kindness when it is given?"

"And what form of Casoyan kindness have you come to share?" Ohacha seethed back. He felt all the bitterness welling up from within. "We have been abandoned here without so much as a word from the outside. We've survived another assassination attempt. This is my fourth this season. But each time, these bastards murder my family, my friends, my men. And what have you or your Patzaus done about it? Nothing!" he shouted. "No support. No condolences. Your guilds orate endlessly about honour and justice. Is that what you call this? Our soldiers are slain in the very streets you are tasked with keeping safe. An army of thieves and killers is loosed upon us within your walls. My family fortune is gone, pilfered, with no word about its recovery. And you think bringing me back one of the dozens of dead is a kindness? It is the bare minimum. I should ask *you* the very same question, is this how Caso treats its guests?"

A tense silence hung in the air. Long seconds passed as Yuromi stared daggers at the belligerent prince. She sucked in a deep breath through her nose and snorted it out in a huff. "I understand that you're upset, and that you've lost someone–"

"Of course I'm upset!" Ohacha interrupted.

Yuromi continued speaking, louder, "…that you've lost someone—let me finish—and that you feel angry about the speed and manner in which this is all being handled. *But*, taking your anger out on me does little to remedy your situation, especially considering I am the *only* person who has come to bring you information and share condolences. You ask for a representative from the guild, and here I am. If I'm not to your liking, you can go on and continue waiting. So far, I appear to be your only option."

She let those words hang between them as the prince appeared to calm down. *Spirits, is this what my mother had to deal with?* He huffed but remained silent. The two other men remained petrified in their seats.

"And…" Yuromi continued, punctuating the word, "I want it known that if you choose to continue berating me, I'm simply going to leave. And then all the things you just complained about like getting information, being heard, getting justice; they won't happen. And I'll go out of my way to ensure they continue not happening, just to spite you. And I have that kind of influence. "Do we understand each other?"

"Yes" he said through a scowl.

"Good" she said through a stare that could freeze water. She took her seat again, and gestured for Ohacha to do so as well. He complied in a cowed manner, taking a seat at the table next to Gaba'ké and across from her and Cask. "Now it seems our conversation started off on the wrong foot. Let's start again" Yuromi said matter-of-factly. "Perhaps I should have started with, my name is Sergeant Ashill and I have Rolena. She's under the care of one of my lieutenants. And I would be kind enough to return her to you, if you would be kind enough to answer some of *my* questions." Yuromi said turning back to Ohacha.

Gaba'ké and Cask looked pleadingly at him and Ohacha knew she had him by the balls. "Fine" Ohacha relented, annoyed. This time she smiled politely, knowing it would

cut deeper than any smirk. Gaba'ké looked back and forth between the two youths. *Spirits help us,* he thought with a wry inward snicker, *they're the exact same damned stubborn person.*

"First question, apologize." Yuromi said, leaning back casually in her chair.

"That's not a question" Ohacha said flatly.

"Oh, my mistake, I thought you wanted your friend back–"

"Okay!" Ohacha groaned, irritated. The innocent look on her face pissed him off even more. He chewed on his cheek in frustration. He stomached it. *For Rolena*. "I am sorry for the way I treated you. Please accept my humble apology for my behaviour."

"Hmm" she said, stewing over his apology. "I'm not sure I heard the conviction in your words. Take a moment if you need and think about how you would feel if our roles were switched and I came in all riled." She gestured for him to try again.

"You can't be serious?" he grumbled. He bit through his cheek and the metallic taste of blood splashed across his tongue. She maintained her innocent smile, batting her eyelashes as skillfully as she might the sword at her side.

"Spirits" Ohacha muttered under his breath. And then, to his own surprise, found himself actually considering her perspective. After a long sigh and a tense pause, he tried again, "I am deeply sorry for my behaviour. I was disrespectful. My words were unbecoming of me… and worse they were intended as weapons to hurt you. You neither deserved my frustration nor my anger, and it was both unfair and unkind for me to treat you, as our guest and as a person, in this manner. For that I offer my sincere apology." She raised her eyebrows, and he added "Sergeant Ashill."

Cask let out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding in.

"Please," Yuromi said with a malicious twisted smile, "you can call me Yuromi."

Ohacha closed his eyes and sucked in a breath, doing everything in his power not to shout at her again. A conflicted turmoil of emotions warred for control of his spirit. Inside him, anger clashed with sorrow and pain and the wry humour of it all. The resulting reaction was a laugh that held within a portion of all those feelings. And once he started laughing, it became difficult to stop. By the end, he wasn't sure if he was laughing or crying. But what he felt was relief. It felt almost as if he had been holding his breath for a long time and only now took his next one.

Ohacha opened his eyes and wiped away the stray tears that had welled in his eyes and run down his cheeks. He looked up at her, expecting her to think him crazed. Instead, her face mirrored his. She had tears in her eyes and a softness not present prior. *She has lost someone too.* He could tell from her demeanor. She reminded him of Ander and despite the bitter feeling he had for his cousin, she reminded him of the younger Belvaas too. Back when they were children and teased one another, only to forgive and move on the next moment. Before they were made enemies.

"I know its still early, but I think wine is in order" Cask said with a masking smile. "I'll fetch us a bottle and some cups."

"I'll give you a hand" Gaba'ké said, rising from his chair.

Ohacha and Yuromi watched the pair leave towards the house then sat in silence. That silence lingered until Ohacha found the confidence to ask the question he had been chewing on, "Who was it you lost?"

"My dad" Yuromi answered. "When he died, I acted much the same way you were just now. Actually, I was probably much worse; terribly cruel to my mother and sister, as if they hadn't also just lost a husband, a father. I spoke with your men before you came down. They warned me that you'd be…"

“An asshole?” Ohacha said, finishing the sentence.

“In pain” Yuromi corrected. “Hollow. I didn’t think I’d have to face myself.”

Ohacha found himself feeling uncomfortable. He had thought of a response, but hadn’t had the courage in the moment to say it aloud. Now, as the silence stretched between them, it only felt more and more difficult to respond. And what could he say, “*sorry for your loss?”*. Instead, he asked, “How long ago did your father die?”

“Three years past” she responded. “No… four. Spirits. You know, sometimes, I think about him as if he’s still around. I’ll argue with my sister and think *‘Dad can help me get her to understand,’* and then I get sad when I realize he’s gone. He can’t help me anymore.”

“How did he die? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“I don’t really understand it still, but one day he was fine and two weeks later he was vomiting and losing colour. He complained of swelling and stomach pains along with the shakes and then he just didn’t wake up the next morning. I… we didn’t even take him to see a healer. He said he was fine and I believed him.”

Gaba’ké and Cask returned with the wine and poured drinks for the table. Cask toasted the sad group, “All living things must die. It is a detriment to a good life that a person thinks so far ahead as to fear its end, or so far back as to yearn for the past. Live with intention” Cask said, looking at each one of them as he raised his glass.

Yuromi added to the toast, raising her glass in accord, “May we cultivate strength from the principles the dead once championed in life. And may we find the inner peace they have now found in death.” They drank.

“Now” Yuromi said, breaking the silence that followed. “I still have my questions…”

“Ask and I’ll answer as best I can.” Ohacha said. He meant it, despite the weariness inside. That piece of him that wanted to sink underwater and never resurface. It felt… less intrusive now.

“After our conversation at the auction, I went backstage to ask some questions. Instead, I witnessed a thief steal a pair of crossbows and flee out the backdoor. My thief turned out to be Yoliim Kulimas” Yuromi said, gesturing to the dead lord atop the cold table. “Your friend, Rolena, also saw Lord Kulimas take off into the streets. She followed him, while I followed her.”

“Wait, Lord Kulimas stole a crossbow?” Ohacha asked. “What for?”

“He used them to attack a group of foreigners. Men, I gather, who were also at the auction house.” Yuromi added. “He killed one man, before being killed in turn by the others. I want to know who these men were and why he did it.” Ohacha seemed puzzled. Her account seemed nothing like the Lord Kulimas he knew.

“I think,” Gaba’ké ventured, “there is only one person who Yoliim Kulimas would go out of his way to take revenge on. Only one person, he would sacrifice his own life to try and kill.”

“Bartiin?” Cask asked, surprised. “You think he saw Bartiin? Do you think he killed him?”

“Who is Bartiin?” Yuromi asked.

Gaba’ké answered. “He’s the man the Careyago tasked with killing Ohacha and Aramuk.”

“He’s a traitorous bastard” Ohacha growled. “I’d wager anything that he organized the attack that killed my uncle.” Yuromi gave a look that suggested she had a different theory.

"To clarify, is he from Gaag or is he Careyago?" Yuromi asked.

"He's from Gaag" Ohacha explained. "He betrayed us and joined the Careyago."

"Did you order Lord Kulimas to assassinate this man, Bartiin?"

Ohacha seemed taken aback. "I wish. Did he do it? Did he get Bartiin?"

"What Ohacha means to say is no" Gaba'ké answered with a glare at his prince. "We did not instruct Lord Kulimas to do any such thing. Lord Kulimas has his own reasons to seek Bartiin of Gaag. His two sons were both murdered by Bartiin's betrayals. His eldest only a few short weeks ago."

"What happened to Bartiin?" Cask asked.

"After killing your vassal, the remaining soldiers fled. They were caught and arrested but claimed that they only killed in self-defence. There would normally be a trial, but things are a little chaotic right now. I don't know where they are anymore. Presumably, in one of the prisons."

"Why are things chaotic?" Gaba'ké asked. "What else has happened?"

Yuromi chewed on her lip, as if thinking about how best to explain. "I'm not sure how else to say this, so I'll be blunt. Patzau Yohati's version of events differs from yours. He claims that *he* was the intended assassination target, not Aramuk. That the attack was motivated by his efforts to crackdown on gang-related crime and violence. Most of Caso believes this version of events and there have been violent clashes out in Mudtown in retaliation."

Ohacha stared, blank faced, "How is that even possible? How could they claim the attacks were meant to kill Yohati when he wasn't even targeted? My uncle was the one killed. My fortune was the one stolen. We know Bartiin was in the city"

"We don't know that for certain. Yohati's story is that he switched carts with you and your uncle to lead the column home. He was supposed to be seated where your uncle died. That the arrows that killed Aramuk were meant for him."

"That first part is true, we did switch carts. But the rest doesn't make any sense" Cask reflected. "We were travelling in daylight, out in the open. It was clear who was in each seat."

"After Aramuk took that first arrow, the next ones were aimed at Ohacha" Gaba'ké added.

"Not to mention Patzau Yohati was surrounded by his elite guards in their heavy armour. No competent assassin would make that kind of mistake" Cask added.

"Accounts of what happened after are… chaotic" Yuromi clarified. "Yohati used his influence to direct soldiers into Mudtown. The situation got messy fast. Hundreds are dead including several dozen soldiers. There have been scores of arrests. Men and women are being tossed into cells to face prosecution. The city is in uproar, demanding justice, but nobody can agree what justice looks like."

"He's co-opted the tragedy" Gaba'ké murmured.

"Probably" Yuromi agreed. "Yohati claims these were 'emergency measures.' The complication is that he has overwhelming public support. It's created a political schism. Meanwhile, riots have broken out, fueled by claims that innocents were killed and arrested in the chaos. Our prisons are overflowing. There were riots and crackdowns. The guild has been occupied with restoring order. All that is to say, I've lost your man Bartiin in the chaos. He could be anywhere in the system."

"What happened to Rolena" Ohacha asked. "You said she was there."

“She was arrested alongside Bartiin. I… I didn’t know what to do with her at the time. She was an unknown. I’ll make an effort to find her get her released. It’s the least I can do for her.”

“Why help us?” Ohacha asked. “After how I treated you, why?”

“I didn’t become a soldier to swing a sword or stab a spear. I joined to help people. That’s what my guild was created for. I think, sometimes, people lose sight of that.”

“Thank you, Sergeant Ashill” Ohacha said. “And… again, I am very sorry for my behaviour. I–”

“There’s no need” she interrupted. “It was a good apology. Maybe the best I’ve ever received. I wish mine had been half as decent.”

Chapter 17: Justice

Patzau Yanata Ashill marched into madness. The northern Casoyan barracks teemed with bodies. Soldiers. Prisoners. The dead. It was ghastly. Aginjigaade Elvi followed closely at her side. This was once her place. Long before taking the mantle as Guild leader and Patzau all those years ago, Yanata Ashill was once served as the warden of this very fortress. She hardly recognized it in its current state.

In the wake of the Mudtown raid, the barracks was a mess. The air was thick with the smell of far too many people packed in far too close for far too long. Instead of the wide-open training yard, the stone fortifications penned in prisoners by the scores. They sat chained together in dense circles, still stained with the mud, ash, and blood of days prior. Some sat upright, defiant and proud. Others lay so still they might already be dead. Soldiers loomed over the prisoners, weapons in hand, ready to ensure obedience at a moment's notice. A low undercurrent of fear and tension kept all on edge, prisoners and soldiers alike. The prisoners feared what they knew awaited them. The soldiers feared not getting the chance to enact their own vigilante justice. This day had seen blood. It would see far more.

On their way in, they had passed through a group of protesting citizens outside the barrack's gates. Mothers with babes in their arms and fathers wearing their work uniforms screamed their protests at guards maintaining stoic silence. These were just the ones inside the city. Yanata knew that even now, hundreds more protested and rioted outside the city gates. Most would be Casoyans from the mountain tribes, but there would be locals among them. Those sort who had been pushed outside the city's walls as the city grew and fortunes changed.

In the last few days, that divergence had solidified into a schism. Those people living outside the walls in the shacks and hovels would be forever different, separate to those within. Yanata tried not to think of it that way, but it grew difficult not to. It was her duty to protect all, after all. *But who do you choose to protect when one part of the whole turns on another?*

The soldiers at the city gates would be facing the largest mobs and would be most on edge, fearing that spark of violence. Tight knuckled grips on their shields and spears would be their only solace if things turned ugly—or uglier than things already were. She prayed that better heads would prevail, but the cynic in her knew they rarely did. That was the reason they were in this mess in the first place.

Passing through the courtyard, all heads turned. Elvi stepped a little closer and quickened her step. Yanata thought the action odd considering the power her friend could summon with just a whisper to the wind. Yanata knew there was no real danger. Not here. She was Patzau. These were her soldiers. Men and women of the guild. Regardless of what Yohati had done. *Him, I'll deal with later*, she vowed.

Soldiers parted as Yanata approached the central building. It had been converted from its intended use as a prison into the Administration Guild's courthouse. *And if the rumours are true, the execution block too.* She ascended steps and the doors groaned open, their heavy bronze hinges singing into the open hall beyond. Light flooded into the dim room. No illum stones here. The softer glow of candle flame fled as sunlight poured into the hall, revealing the executioner where he stood poised. His sword came down in a graceful arc, taking the head from the prisoner kneeling before the judge.

The prisoner collapsed and a muffled shudder rippled through the three yet to see judgement. Their chains rattled noisily but they didn't cry out. Yanata watched, unflinching. She had seen it before. She'd swung the sword. But Elvi let loose a muffled gasp that turned all heads in the room. Atop a dais sat High Judge Madaral. He wore the clean cream-coloured robes and the prominent bowl-shaped hat that marked him as High Judge. Yanata recognized him immediately. He was the kind of man that made a smile feel like a scowl. *One of Yohati's men*.

To her surprise, on Madaral's left sat Janos Tydana, Patzau Yohati's primary Aginjigaade. Tydana, a middle-aged man with a well-manicured beard and moustache appeared rather aloof. He wore civilian clothes, a loose-fitting tunic and set of trousers rather than the robes of his fellow guildmembers. He looked like he had come for a dinner party rather than an execution. He didn't even look up as she entered, instead focused on his hands or fingernails.

On the High Judge's right sat the current warden, Mahmud Riil. *One of mine. Or so I thought*. Riil was a mousy-looking man and looked a bit nauseated. Whether it was from the gruesome executions, the discomfort of being made a servant in his own fortress, or the reality that he would now have to defend his actions to her, Yanata couldn't guess. It might have just been his default look.

A sea of blood pooled at the base of the dais below the three men. It stained the dark floors and the grim columns. It seemed to stain everything in the room, save for the three men perched above. Patzau Ashill approached the dais as a pair of soldiers removed the headless prisoner. Her armour clicked softly with each step and Mahmud had the good graces to rise and salute as she approached. High Judge Madaral and Janos Tydana, however, remained seated.

"Welcome, Patzau Ashill" Madaral said, his voice shrill. "How can I help you?"

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Yanata growled.

"Enacting judgement. Prosecuting those who attacked our great city" Madaral said, his voice heavy with righteousness.

"I meant executing criminals here in my hallway?" she asked, annoyed.

"If we executed them outside, there would be chaos. Others waiting their turn would resist more ardently." Madaral said plainly. As if the answer were obvious.

Yanata tilted her head slightly. Something in his words or tone didn't sit right. "What do you mean, others waiting their turn? Are all those people out there here to meet the sword?"

"They're waiting their turn to be judged" he answered nonchalantly.

"Just how many people have you judged here in my hall?" she asked, eyeing the pool of blood.

"Many" Madaral answered. "Why does that matter?"

"Answer the question" Patzau Ashill said, looking around to the other soldiers and attendants present in the room. She locked eyes with Mahmud who cowered under her gaze. None of the three men up on the dais made any sign of responding. None of

the attendants or soldiers moved either. Everyone in the room sat tensely transfixed. All except Janos Tydana, who remained rather disinterested in the whole ordeal. “Mahmud” she said, forcing his attention. “How many people have you tried today?”

“I don’t know the exact number” Mahmud said, withdrawing into his chair.

“Give me an estimate,” Patzau Ashill insisted.

“I really can’t say with any certainty” Mahmud stammered.

Disgraceful little weasel, Patzau Ashill cursed. “Its still early in the morning. Are you telling me you’ve already lost count? I’m not asking for their damned names. Give me your best estimate or I’ll replace you with somebody who will.”

“Perhaps, forty or fifty so far” Mahmud said meekly, eliciting a glare from Madaral.

“And how many yesterday?” she pushed.

“I… well, you see—”

“I swear, if the next words out of your mouth are *‘I don’t know’,* I’ll have you transferred to the mines in the mountains as a damned packman!”

“My best guess is between one-hundred-fifty and two-hundred yesterday. Maybe more” Mahmud croaked. High Judge Madaral seemed annoyed by the lack of beheading this conversation was producing.

“And how many have been executed for their crimes?” she asked, turning to glare at Madaral.

“Well–” Mahmud stammered.

“Not you” Patzau Ashill snapped, interrupting the spineless warden. “High Judge Madaral, how many of the two-hundred to two-hundred-fifty souls have you condemned to die over the past two days?”

“All of them” Madaral announced, proud.

“*All* of them?” Yanata repeated, shocked. “You’ve executed every single person who came before you to be judged? Not a single one left this room alive?”

“Every single criminal who entered this hall met justice” Madaral stated.

This must be some kind of sick joke, Yanata frowned. *This isn’t is a tribunal. It’s a craven spectacle. It’s madness!* “You there!” Patzau Ashill barked, turning to face one of the soldiers behind her. He was an older man with a wiry gray moustache and broad shoulders. “Bring the next criminal to the front” she ordered. She looked back at the next criminal. He was a young man with fear in his eyes. He, like the others, had the obvious features of those born in the mountains; lean and wiry with rounder cheeks and eyes than those born down by the sea; darker skin and darker hair; a patchy beard that revealed just how young he still was. He sat kneeling on his hands and knees with his hands and feet bound together. He looked back at her, scared to death. *Scared of death. Spirits, he’s just a boy. Only a bit younger than my girls.*

“Move” Yanata ordered, climbing the dais to where Madaral sat.

“I am High Justice!” Madaral protested.

“I am not here to do you job” Yanata said dismissively. “Sit in Mahmud’s seat while I ask this boy some questions.”

“I am here under direct orders from Patzau Yohati!” Madaral continued. The look she gave him was far more threatening than any words might have been. He rose, awkwardly as she approached and offered her the chair.

“You sit in my barracks, surrounded by my soldiers, by my grace” Patzau Ashill said balefully. “Do not forget yourself, Madaral… or that my orders are as good as Yohati’s.”

Madaral scowled as he ushered warden Mahmud from his seat. The scared kid was brought before them. He knelt just steps from where the last one had died. Blood stained his hands and knees. It pooled at his feet.

"Tell me your name" Patzau Ashill said.

"I am called Nol" the boy said. He had a thick accent. It was a mix of the mountain tribes and the slang commonly heard down in Mudtown and in the lowlands. *A local.*

"How many people were ahead of you in line to meet with the High Judge?" she asked.

"Six" Nol said, matching the number to outstretched fingers.

"Interesting how the boy knows how to count and yet wardens and judges seem to forget. Tell me, Nol, what questions did the High Judge ask the other prisoners before passing judgement upon them?" Nol stood silent below them, unsure what to answer. A fearful glance to Madaral on her right told her all she needed. "Go ahead," Yanata urged, "You may speak the truth here before me."

"He ask only two questions. He ask 'what is your name?' and he ask which criminal gang we are a part of" Nol answered. His voice was quiet and broken. Spoken through stuttered sobs.

"And the soldier who arrested you, are they present in this room?"

"No" Nol answered.

"And an account of the crime you are on trial for, are you told?" Yanata asked.

"Yes" Nol said. "All us are on trial for the same crime. He says *'You are accused of murder and theft and are sentenced to die.'* We don't even get to say nothing in defense."

Patzau Ashill turned to look at High Judge Madaral on her right. He sat unabashed in his seat in his ceremonial robes. Behind him, Mahmud at least had the good sense to look nervous. She turned to Janos on her left who sat with his feet outstretched with a disinterested gaze.

"And what do you have to say about all this, Janos" Patzau Ashill asked the Aginjigaade.

"About what?" Janos responded, finally looking up from his manicured hands.

"You are Patzau Yohati's right-hand man. His Aginjigaade" Patzau Ashill said. "Is this what your guild calls a trial in this day and age? You condone this?"

"I was there" Janos said, "the day Patzau Yohati was attacked. I recognise each and every one who has come into this hall to face justice."

It was a lie, of course. Yatana wasn't stupid enough to notice Janos hadn't looked up once. All it demonstrated was that Janos was Yohati's man, through and through. Unfortunately, the boy also knew it was a lie and it broke him.

"This is a lie!" Nol shouted through tears. "I have never seen this man. I am no killer. No criminal. I am a guildsman. An apprentice in the workers guild. My father is a builder too. I have never hurt anyone. I–"

Nol froze in place for a moment, and then he began to scream. Yanata watched in horror as the boy continued to scream bloody murder. Then the sharp medicinal smell of Aginjigaade sorcery hit her nostrils. Sharp. Herbaceous. Yanata was trained to recognize all the sorcerous scents and their uniquely unnatural aromas. It oozed from Janos with incredible strength. Yet Janos sat idle in his chair as if nothing at all was happening. Then the screaming ceased and the boy collapsed face down into the pool of blood. Soldiers rushed forward, lifting him up. Blood stained his face and clothes. Yanata wasn't sure if any of it was his or not.

"What did you do!?" she demanded.

"I stopped him from spreading his baseless lies" Janos said, defiantly. "This man was caught with five silver coins in his pocket. The only way he could have that much silver was if he stole it or if he were paid for his role in the plot against Patzau Yohati."

"I asked, **what** did you do to him?" she repeated.

"Nothing permanent. I took away his sight" Janos said, "that's all. Blinded him with a veil of darkness. The absence of light can be a scary thing for those unaccustomed to it."

That wasn't the fear of darkness. Spirits, one thing at a time, Yanata, she told herself. "Don't do that again" she ordered. Turning to Madaral, she added, "From here on out. You will follow the full outlined trial procedures. Every single person who stands before you from this second forward gets an actual trial and the opportunity to speak against your accusations. Each one is identified and logged. Name, age, occupation, neighbourhood, crime committed, and sentence enacted. Am I understood?"

"There are far too many criminals to process" Madaral protested. "It would take far too long. Months even!"

"Your job is to enact justice, not retribution. Nor to sentence indiscriminately"

"We ratify justice for the innocent soldiers murdered at the hands of these lowlife scum" Janos said, not so much a counter argument but more as a separate statement.

"I'll be heading down into the dungeons" Patzau Ashill said, ignoring Janos' comment. Let us hope the people imprisoned down there have enough wits left to help shed some light on what the fuck happened in Mudtown, Patzau Ashill thought. Yohati has more claws in my senior officers than I knew. "You best hope that someone down there still lives… despite your vindictiveness. I'll be back shortly to check on your progress" she said, rising from her chair. "Oh, and if I find out you've been taking shortcuts, Madaral, I'll gather all the damned blood you've spilled today and fill your garden pools with it. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Patzau" Madaral said through clenched teeth.

"And Mahmud" she said, looking at barracks warden, "You best find a logbook and get to writing. If by the end of the day I find your log wanting for detail, I'll make you rue the day you enabled this circus you three had the gall to call a tribunal."

"Yes, Patzau" Mahmud replied.

"Janos, I'd like you to accompany Elvi and I down into the dungeons. If you would come with me, please." The Aginjigaade grumbled, but stood to follow.

Patzau Ashill rose and descended the dais with Janos following loosely her heels, collecting Elvi as she left the hallway. High Judge Madaral sneered at her as he retook his central seat atop the dais. Elvi looked back over her shoulder and caught the unbridled look. With a soft push of her agindan into one of the countless air spirits in the room, she channeled and shot a precise gust sending the high judge's hat flying off his head. It landed in in the pool of blood and she stuck her tongue out at him.

As they descended the dimly lit corridor leading to the holding cells, the smell of sorcery hit Yanata's nose again. It wasn't the pungent ozone smell of Elvi's sorcery, but the medicinal scent of Janos's abilities again. The shadows that crept down the halls seemed to melt away, as if pulling back a curtain. The candle lights that marked the passage suddenly felt as bright as daylight. It looked unnatural, yet felt comfortable. Patzau Ashill turned to face the man and his eyes met hers. They were sharp and calculating, yet focused elsewhere.

"Apologies, Patzau" he said flatly, meeting her gaze. "Force of habit."

"You don't care much for the darkness?" she asked.

"Something like that" he answered. "What exactly are you hoping to gain from coming down here?"

"Answers" Patzau Ashill said, stepping into the cold hall. "Perhaps a different perspective or two." She didn't bother answering his implicit question. *Why bring me?*

The dungeons were alarmingly full. Some beyond that point. The regular chatter of voices was quieted as Janos's sorcery pushed the shadows into withdrawal. Fear rippled through the cells as prisoners stood witness to the unnatural phenomenon. Talk dissipated, replaced by hushed murmurs. Eyes followed expectantly. The hollow taps of heels on stone echoed uninhibited. The smell of Janos' sorcery and the unnatural brightness was enough to silence even the most daring. Only whispers and the odd cough cut through the tense silence. Yanata stopped, turning to face a random cell. Each man returned her gaze, fear plain across their eyes. They smelled the sorcery; its unnatural taste on their tongues and its spice in their noses. They feared it. That was the point.

Yanata signaled. Elvi spoke, "You five, stand and present yourselves." In the quiet room, the soft commands felt bellowed. The five prisoners stood and approached the cell bars. Patzau Ashill eyed them one by one. Each one had the same round cheeks and thick black hair as the boy upstairs. They were all men from the mountains. Tribesmen. Up close, two of them had tattoos around their ears. *Gang affiliated*.

Yanata stepped forward and addressed a man with a thick well-kept beard and long hair, ignoring the men with tattoos. He was covered in purple bruises and had a black eye. "You, what is your name?"

"Hal" the man answered, his accent thick.

"Tell me what you remember from the night you were arrested" she said.

He looked at her, puzzled by the question. "I was walking back home from work and stopped by the market to buy food."

"Where do you work?" she asked, interrupting.

"I work the fields" he answered. His voice was unexpectedly calm. Steady. "We was up at an orchard picking bluefruit" he began.

"You don't have to say nothin' to this bitch" one of the tattooed men jeered. Yanata reached out to stay Elvi's hand. *Violence never begets truths*. She ignored the insult, and waited patiently for the bearded man to continue.

He resumed, more nervous than before, "Suddenly people were yellin' and screaming. And I didn't know what was happening. I only just come back from workin' up in Hilltown. Then, there was a fire and I ran against the crowd. I wanted to help. It was getting dark."

"Go on" Yanata said. "Then what happened?"

"There were soldiers. But, they… they were attacking people. Hittin' em with ghata and then people were throwing stones and bricks back. Then I got hit with something and got knocked down. People were steppin' over me and then the soldiers advanced. I thought they might help me. But then they surrounded me and someone started beating me… kicking and punching. A bunch of 'em joined in. All while people were shoutin' and the fires continued burnin'. They only stopped after I stopped moving. They left me in the street. Next morning I woke up here."

"You didn't say nothin' about how them soldiers was killing people in the streets and lighting those fires themselves. How they butchered people in the streets like

animals" the tattooed man argued. "How guild soldiers are corrupt and greedy bastard dogs!"

"Your tattoos" Patzau Ashill said, turning to the other prisoner. "What gang are you affiliated with?"

"Fuck you" the tattooed man said.

"Perhaps I should expedite your trial" she threatened. "The judge upstairs is quite bloodthirsty."

"You fucking dogs are all bloodthirsty" he yelled. "You steal our lands and put us to work and then punish us for trying to survive. May the spirits of this island curse you and your family" the tattooed man repeated. He spat in her direction.

Patzau Ashill exhaled in frustration. *I am trying to make sure this shit doesn't happen again and you're not making it any easier.* She turned to leave and the man raised his voice again. With a quick nod to Elvi, the man when silent. The space filled with the pungent scent of Elvi's sorcery as she poured her consciousness into the nearby air spirits. The tattooed man grasped for breaths stolen from him.

Panic flooded his eyes but Yanata had already turned away, looking for somebody else to speak with. *Somebody who might reveal enough to tell me what Yohati is truly after. That old man is far too crafty to be this… reactively emotional.* The tattooed man collapsed in the cell behind her and the scent of Elvi's sorcery dissipated as air flowed back into his lungs.

She thought about releasing the man named Hal. He was innocent, that was plain enough. But in the end, she decided against interfering. *One mess at a time. I let him go and then I'm forced to deal with the backlash, the riots, the cleanup and the trials all at once*. *I'm already spread thin enough.* Yanata stopped at another cell further down the hallway and locked eyes with another woman with antagonistic sneer. *Not her either.* She strolled further down the hallway with Janos and Elvi at her heels. Looking right, she stopped abruptly. Staring back at her was a face neither from the city nor from the mountain villages. He stared back at her, but not with contempt but with curiosity. Behind the foreigner were more like him. They were a motley of foreign features from different places. All of them westerners; black hair, strong square jawlines and high cheekbones, small inset eyes and large noses. Despite their differences, they each sported manicured beards and fine clothes. They were nothing like the others down here. *Mercenaries? Careyago?*

Walking up to the bars, she realized they were shorter and stockier than the average Casoyan. Turning to Janos, Patzau Ashill asked in Casoyan, "Who are these men?"

Janos leered at the men, sparing them a simple glance before answering, "Foreigners."

Elvi spoke up instead. "These men were arrested for murdering another foreigner just sound of the grand canal. It happened about the same time as Yohati was attacked."

"Is that so?" she asked. "Who did they kill?"

"I don't know" Elvi answered. "But I can find out for you."

Turning back to the foreign men, Patzau Ashill switched to Tralang and addressed the group. "Which one of you is the leader?" she asked. The five men looked around awkwardly. That was when she realized that one of them wasn't in fact a foreigner but a haggard looking Casoyan.

"I am" the man who had been staring at her said quietly.

"And what is you name?" she asked.

"Kellan" the man said, "and who are you?"

Patzau Ashill eyed Kellan, taking in his stiff posture and the tightness around his eyes. He was trying to project confidence, but the fear in his voice betrayed him. She let the silence stretch out a moment longer before answering. “I am Patzau Ashill of the Soldiers’ Guild. One of the eight.” she said, her voice calm but carrying the weight of authority. “Why are you locked up in my cells?” she asked.

“Murder” the Casoyan man answered truthfully. *Maybe he speaks Casoyan.* The other four stared daggers at him. The strange foreigner looked unabashed in his honestly. Patzau Ashill gave Kellan a curious look. “We we’re attacked” Kellan said defiantly. “We were here on business on behalf of his lordship Belvaas Krimas, lord regent of Gaag, when we were attacked by an assassin in the street sent to kill us.”

“An assassin?” Elvi repeated.

More Gaagians? Patzau Ashill pondered, *now that’s an interesting coincidence*. “How do you know your attacker was an assassin and not some common thief?” Patzau Ashill asked, now on the hunt for answers.

“We–” Kellan stuttered, recognising his need to answer carefully. “The man who attacked us was known to us. He was a disgraced lord.”

“If I recall correctly,” Patzau Ashill said, “Gaag is part of the Empire now. Are you men for the Careyago or against it?”

“For the Careyago” Kellan said. The others nodded.

“Meaning, the lord you speak of must be a loyalist? A supporter of the old monarchy, to the princes staying in the city. Am I correct?” She knew the answer even before he confirmed it.

“Yes!” Kellan said, “The assassin was a man in the princes’ employ.”

Janos interrupted, surprising everyone. “You have the gall to label a seventy-year-old man an assassin? What kind of ignoble bastards are you?” Patzau Ashill looked back at the Aginjigaade, surprised with his familiarity. *Now why might you know that detail?*

“One does not age out of treachery” Kellen snapped back. Yanata had to agree. “That old man killed one my brothers.”

“And then the five of you butchered him in the street for it.”

“What would you have us do?” Kellan sneered, “Nothing? And let the sick old man kill us all? We protected ourselves and enacted justice.”

“Justice…” Patzau Ashill repeated, a dry edge to her voice. “It seems a lot of deeds are wearing that mask lately. Perhaps I should drag that young princeling down here for a trial of my own. What better way to hear all the horrors you’ve enacted upon each other?”

The color drained from Kellan’s face. Yanata leaned in, trying to read the quick mix of surprise and guilt that masked something deeper—a weariness mixed with anger. She noticed the tension and fear in their eyes. Fear and tension radiated from all of them—all except the local man. He was an oddity. An exception from the rule. She honed in on that. “What’s your name?” Yanata asked, looking past Kellan at the disheveled local. “And how are you a part of this?”

“Five men arrested for murder” Janos said, thinking aloud. “And yet from your looks. Not one of you know this man” Janos realized. “Who is he to you?”

The looks they gave were a mix of bitterness and guilt. The guilt must have been what set him off. Janos’s calm demeanor vanished like a candleflame in a gust. Power within him burst forth in a terrifying torrent; shadows clawed out like demons, reaching toward the men in the cell. The light around Janos seemed to disappear, as if he stood in

absolute darkness. His eyes glowed from within with an unnatural intensity that brought forth the terror of a childhood nightmare.

"This one is an imposter!" Janos sneered at the local. Elvi retreated, closing her eyes and focusing only on protecting her consciousness from Janos's unbridled power. "Where is the last man? Where is your true leader?"

Kellan and the others recoiled as if attacked by a vengeful spirit, scrambling to the back of the cell as if distance could spare them. Patzau Ashill watched in horror. Never had she been so close to an Aginjigaade so recklessly unconstrained in their use of power. The scent of it burned at the back of her nose and throat. She thanked the spirits a man with his explosive temperament was gifted a less destructive affinity.

"He's gone" Kellan shouted over the screams.

"Gone where?" Janos demanded. He appeared to walk forwards, drawing a blade Patzau Ashill hadn't noticed was on his hip.

"I don't know" Kellan cried. Janos seemed to melt through the very bars of the cage as if made of water. He walked forward, uncontested and raised his weapon as if to smite each man in a single swinging arc. *Spirits have mercy,* Patzau Ashill thought, frozen in shock at what she was witnessing.

"Wait!" Kellan screamed. "I'll tell you everything!"

And then it ended. The lights. The shadows. The sword in hand. All of it disappeared and Janos was next to her. He was exactly where he had originally been standing. Patzau Ashill looked over at the man, too stunned to speak. The entire cell block had gone silent. Perhaps the whole world had. The sword he had drawn was gone, as if had never existed. And it hadn't. The whole thing had been an illusion. A powerful one. He hadn't moved a finger and yet she could still picture him walking through the bars of the cell like a demon in the darkness. She would have sworn that he was ready to kill each and every prisoner inside. She had seen Elvi produce simple sorceries from time to time, but this was different. Impactful and direct in a way she hadn't before witnessed. It both awed her and terrified her.

Janos walked over to the cell and squatted low, staring at the five men cowering within the dark cell. His eyes still glowed from the small amounts of sorcery he still released. "You had better start talking then."

*

Bartiin awoke to the hard pounding of fist against door. The sound jolted him upright. He looked around the small room. Light filtered in through the window past the hanging curtains to illuminate the shimmering dust lit under the sun's gaze. The room was unfamiliar. It took Bartiin a moment to remember where he was. The room was full of boxes and furniture. The ceiling tapered aggressively on one side where the steep roof slanted down. It was all very… foreign. The knock sounded again, louder this time, and a hand rattled at the knob on the door.

"Bartiin" the muffled voice said, "Time to go!"

Bartiin rose, familiarity returning to him like a memory once forgotten and then anxiously returned. He was in the Careyago Embassy. He had been rescued from imprisonment. He had almost died to a quarrel shot by the old bastard Yoliim Kulimas. He had finally succeeded in his mission. He had killed Prince Aramuk Krimas of Gaag. He crossed the room and opened the door just as the butler pounded again on the door. "What?" Bartiin said, unamused.

“We received a tip” Hina said, standing behind the tall man. She glanced down at Bartiin’s nakedness, before ignoring it further and continuing. “The embassy is going to be raided.”

“Somebody must have figured out you escaped” the butler said. “they’re coming here to look for you.”

“Who is?” Bartiin asked. He was struggling to keep up with their hurried words. He was a newer speaker to the Careyago tongue. He was trying his best to translate as more words came.

“Soldiers from the city” Hina answered.

“What do we do?” Bartiin asked.

“Put on some fucking clothes…” she said in Tralang, “and then we’ll smuggle you out of the city until the raid is over.” Bartiin opened one of the drawers and pulled out a pair of trousers and a shirt. Hina continued as he dressed, “We can smuggle you onto a ship home once this has passed.”

“No!” Bartiin argued, “Why can’t we put me on a ship now?”

“You’ll never make it out of the city” the butler said. “The ports are still locked down because of your… incident. All of my shipments back to Cayanoshi are being delayed” she added with a sour look.

“What am I supposed to do about that now?” he asked.

She scowled at him. “Here” she said, passing him a handful of bronze and silver coins. “This should last you a month. Bradel will take you to a village outside the city where we have a safehouse.”

“Who’s Bradel?” Bartiin asked.

“I am” the butler said.

“I thought you were the butler?” Bartiin asked.

“Oh, spirits give me strength” the man remarked in Casoyan. There were other curses in there too but Bartiin didn’t bother listening after the first dozen.

Hina looked equally annoyed and grumbled, “Bradel is my husband, you shit-eating pig. Now, get out of our house. Bradel will come find you. For some reason, you’re still valuable to somebody or I would have cut you loose ages ago. Wasted a good spy on you…” she grumbled.

At the back of the house, the rear door opened noisily into a shadowy alley. Hina handed him a thick green cloak. Bartiin barely refrained from commenting on its ugliness. A look from the ambassador’s face suggested she would leave him for dead if he dared. He remained silent as the door shut behind them with a loud groan. Bradel, the husband, led the way out of the city.

Chapter 18: The Tower

The fortress halls were still and quiet, but the air outside was vast and fresh the moment Sergeant Yuromi Ashill stepped out onto the arched stone bridge. High above the glittering bay, the bridge offered a view that would freeze most newcomers: the twin domed-palaces looming over the city blocks like beacons of prosperity; the grand canals carving their path through the city; the ships moving across the bay below like little insects; and further east, the blackened scar that had once been Mudtown just outside the city's walls. Beyond Mudtown to the east, the lonely volcano peak faded grey. To the north, dark storm clouds loomed. To Yuromi though, the dizzying drop was just another familiar place. She had grown up here. Wonder had waned to familiarity.

Despite that familiarity, Yuromi was not welcome in the central keep. She had a habit of being in rooms and places that exceeded her station as a junior officer. It was a habit she repeatedly promised to kick when confronted by her superiors and yet found herself ignoring once again as she scampered up the winding steps of the inner keep tower in search of her mother, Patzau Ashill. The tower was a place for the upper echelons of the guild. It was the place where officers of her rank feared being summoned and dreamed of being invited.

In the outer fortress, wax candles burned day and night. The dreary walls of brick and stone were blackened where the hot wicks licked the dark walls. The floors were slippery from years of wax clinging to the polished stones despite all efforts to clean them. But here in the tower, illum stones replaced the dim candle flames and a warm even light filled the halls with a comfortable glow. The stones of the tower were cut and interlocked, instead of the jumbled-together motley one would see in the outer fortress.

Ascending the main stairwell, Yuromi's heart raced with every step. She was nervous. Her mother was known for being a strict leader. Yuromi knew the was far stricter as a mother. Adherence to protocol was compulsory. And in the back of her mind, Yuromi expected punishment for her transgression, despite her good intentions. *With neither Kida nor mother returning home last night, what other choice did I have? A small breach in procedure was necessary.*

Yuromi found her mother's office disappointingly vacant. Where the woman had gone, Yuromi couldn't fathom. There hadn't even been anyone stationed at her door. For a split second, she almost considered entering but voices on the far side of the tower changed her trajectory. *Perhaps she's in a meeting*. Yanata was always in meetings. Approaching, Yuromi listened intently for voices she might recognize. She knew everyone on this floor: Elvi, Yanello, Joakim, Horval, and even the administrators. The hushed voices within didn't match anyone she knew of. Nosy curiosity took hold, supressing the voice within that warns against bad ideas.

The voices within were arguing amongst themselves in low and conspiratorial tones. Pressing herself against the wall beside the door, Yuromi listened intently as she

picked up the conversation, “How could he possibly know how much we took? I say we skim a little off the top for our hard work and then hand the rest over” a man’s voice echoed within the small room.

“To hell with that” another voice echoed, “we could split what’s here six ways and disappear. Live like kings. Never work another day in our lives.”

“You would go rogue?” a new voice countered. “I’m not doing that. I’ve got a family. We’re being paid plenty well for what we done. I’m not running and hiding to some shithole village in the mountains to go and live with the savages just so I can live a bit richer.”

“Not a bit richer” the second voice said, “You could build a castle with this much coin.”

“You’re daft if you think you could run off with that much coin and make it out of the city alive?” The new voice was a woman’s, “You’re scant mad!”

“I think I could do it, yeah” the man responded.

Coin? Yuromi wondered. *Enough to build a castle? What the hell are they talking about?*

“Enough!” A heavy voice cut through the chatter and Yuromi’s blood froze. “We put it to a vote now. Has to be majority. Understood?”

Yuromi covered her mouth with her hand, desperate to stifle her shock. She knew the last voice immediately. *That’s Captain Gal Burm from the heavies.* She and Kida and Burm had been close as children. Their families shared similar status and histories. Different choices had created a rift between them. Burm and Kida on one side. And her, ever-angry Yuromi, was alone on the other. *Spirits, what exactly have I stubbled upon?*

Burm’s voice continued, “I count two hands, Roz, Cap, Seer, and myself have voted against. We ain’t taking it all. But… I think its only fair we take a little off the top. As a bonus. For merit and services rendered.” All voices echoed accord.

And then she understood. *Enough coin for a castle. The assassination. The robbery.* A gasp slipped from Yuromi’s lips. Her mind raced as she struggled to process the implication of what she had overheard. *Burm’s squad caught Yohati’s assassins. They tracked down the thieves*. *They’ve got the stolen fortune.*

Her heart raced so violently she feared its drum might betray her eavesdropping. Pressed flat against the cold stone wall, Yuromi took a breath to steady herself. Disbelief warred with fear. The Burm family was as old, rich, and powerful as her own. What use could a man like Gal Burm have with more coin? The reputational damage alone would far outweigh any value. He was a rising star in the guild. A battle-tested prodigy. It was an affront to see him betray the guild’s principles.

“It’s settled then” Burm said, “We skim a little off the top and deliver the rest as promised. We’ll move the goods after dark, just like before.”

Deliver the rest? As promised to whom? Yuromi pondered. The scratching of chairs on stone and the rustle of heavy armour brought her back to her senses. *Shit. I need to go.* She was still crouched by the door. There was nowhere to hide in the open hallway. Yuromi took a step back from the door and turned to leave. She just needed to slink away. Instead, the door swung open. Yuromi’s heart plummeted.

Captain Burm loomed in the portal. He was a tower of a man and his eyes narrowed in on her. This was it. She hadn’t gone looking for trouble and yet once again trouble had found her. Burm wore an expression that was a mix of alarm and suspicion. Yuromi found herself attempting to peek past him, despite her instincts. She craned her

neck trying to catch a glimpse of the treasure within the small room. Burm shuffled over, blocking her line of sight, then calmly closed the door behind him.

Yuromi opened her mouth to speak but the captain spoke first. “You shouldn’t be here” he said. His voice was loud and authoritative. The shuffling and voices behind him fell silent. “This floor is reserved for senior officers” he added with an intense disdain.

“I’m looking for my mother” Yuromi said, feigning both annoyance and ignorance. *Anything but suspicious*. *It had always worked before.* “Is she in there?” Yuromi asked in a deliberately informal tone. *Better he thinks I’m here as her daughter rather than for guild business.*

“No” Captain Burm answered, looking around. “She’s not here.” he said with a finality. “And I am still your superior officer, sergeant. Do not forget yourself. You will refer to me as such.”

“Well, do you know where she is?” Yuromi demanded impatiently. “I need to speak with her, captain.” She could feel his animosity festering.

“Did you check her office?” Burm asked.

“Of course… I-uh, mean yes, captain” Yuromi answered.

“How long ago did you check?” He asked.

And there it is, the question within the question. “Just a moment ago” she answered, doing her best to speak as naturally as possible. She prayed he would believe her.

“Next time, sergeant” Burm said, “I recommend asking the soldiers at the gatehouse. They always know whether or not the Patzau is inside the fortress. It will save you the trip up here, not that you’re supposed to be here at all. Are you Sergeant? Now leave, and I’ll let you go with just a warning. Am I understood?

Yuromi sucked in air through her teeth. She realized she had been holding her breath. “Yes, Captain” she answered. “Is Elvi in there with you?” she asked.

“No” he answered. “She’s not here either”

“Understood” Yuromi said, “I’m looking for her as well.”

“I haven’t seen her” Burm said dismissively, ending the conversation.

Yuromi saluted, then turned back towards the stairwell. She squeezer her eyes shut as she walked away, pleading he would let her go. Her heart raced so rapidly that it felt as if it might burst from her chest. Only when she reached the stairwell did Yuromi open her eyes. Imaginary embers twinkled around her vision. A wave of lightheaded nausea came and went. To her relief, Burm didn’t follow her. She practically ran out of the tower, only slowing as she approached the bridge back to the outer fortress. There, she slowed, not wanting to appear desperate or panicked. Burm could be watching her, after all.

*

Burm leaned in close to one of the small windows that overlooked the bridge. He watched Yuromi Ashill march across the bridge and through the large entryway into the main fortress. Most of all, he hoped he’d done the right thing. He roared in anger. The others in the room remained quiet. His squad waited for his fury to subside, none wanting to be on the other side of it. There was an unspoken tension. They were all thinking the same thing.

Seer entered the room, closing the door with a soft click. “The whole floor is clear. She was the only one up here” he announced. Burm muttered curses under his breath.

“Do you think she overheard us?” Rozi asked, putting their fears into words.

Burm looked back at his second in command. She looked pale. They had been talking treason openly. *How fucking stupid are we*, he thought. "I don't know… I don't think so" he said after a moment's hesitation.

"Which sister was it?" Capu asked.

"Yuromi" Burm answered.

"The one with the scar" Rozi added and Capu nodded in understanding.

"If it was Kida, it would have been fine. Spirits, damn it!" Burm repeated, slamming his fist on the wooden table. Silver coins fell from their stacks noisily. "How bloody unlucky is that." He shouted. "Anyone else in the entire guild could have walked in on us and I'd have tossed them over the cliff in a heartbeat. But Yanata's bloody daughter of all people!"

"Why didn't you?" Seer asked.

"How do I explain that?" Burm answered angrily. "*Everybody* knows who she is. The sentries would have seen her entering the keep. She could have told somebody she was coming here. How do you explain it if she goes missing? Or worse, somebody sees us fucking toss her." He paced back and forth in the small room. "Fuck! If she heard everything, we're screwed."

"What do we do?" Rozi asked. "We can go after her. Tail her and knife her in the streets if the opportunity arises? Burn the body." She twirled her knife in her hand as she said it.

"That'll be tough" Capu said. "Streets are full of soldiers dealing with the gangsters and sympathizers. People are on edge. They watching the streets from their windows. There's no chance we get an opportunity to stick 'er without her noticing she's being followed or somebody seeing it."

"Crossbow could work" Rozi suggested. "But the body can't disappear."

"Spirits" Seer said, "It'd be all out war if one of the Patzau's daughters was assassinated out in the open. We'd be marching out in war columns within a week."

"Ashill might think it was the gangs" Burm said, thinking aloud. "After another important figure. That might be the solution we're looking for."

*

The storms came again and a muddy brown torrent of water was flooding through the city streets. It had been a slog to make it to the meeting on time. The cleanup was going to be a mess. *One more problem to deal with,* Patzau Minoc thought as he tapped his fingers nervously on the council table. Only one seat remained empty. Patzau Ashill had yet to join them and Mellen was starting to worry. The other six Patzau sat around the circular table in similar discomfort.

Patzau Minoc eyed his fellow Patzau seated around the stone table. Patzau Yohati was his regularly stoic self. He looked unphased, which meant he looked good considering the attempt on his life just days ago. Nor did he seem bothered by the fact that his impulsiveness to act had plunged the city into chaos. Merchants had been scared into hiding. Business was stagnating as citizens and merchants collectively held their breaths. Now food was being horded. Between the floods and the burning of Mudtown, it felt like they were teetering on the edge.

Patzau Adagizhi of the Resources Guild was having a silent conversation with Patzau Murocil, who had returned from her diplomatic trip across the Starlight Sea. With all of the conflict brewing within the city, Mellen regretted not having the opportunity to speak with his old friend sooner. He would catch up with her after the meeting concluded. *So long as I'm not too exhausted*. On the other side of the table, Patzaus Hadashenta and

Onudar were also having a hushed conversation on either side of Patzau Powanati of the Banking Guild. Powanati appeared to be listening to the two men while simultaneously reorganizing and straightening the documents before him with a nervous propensity. Mellen's observations, and then subsequent spying, had identified this was a regular nervous tic for the man. *Good,* he thought to himself, *let the greedy coward squeal*.

The doors to the chamber swung open and a soaking-wet Patzau Ashill clambered into the room, turning heads. She crossed the room and took her seat, two to the right from where Mellen sat. She looked exhausted. In truth, they all looked rough. It had been a difficult week. Despite her appearance, he was selfishly pleased that she still showed face. Losing her support in the votes would be costly for his guildsmen. There were too many greedy hands in the pot these days. No longer was there the air of collaborative problem-solving that had defined the era of Patzau's before… whatever this was.

"Apologies for my tardiness" Patzau Ashill said, taking her seat.

"We appreciate your attendance" Patzau Murocil said with a lighthearted smile.

"Yes" Patzau Yohati said, reaching for his ledger. "Let's move forward with today's agenda."

"I don't think so" Patzau Ashill announced rather coldly. "I invoke my right as commander of the city's defenses to pivot our discussion to the war that is brewing. It is a matter of grave importance that threatens our safety and security. And, if left undiscussed, will be perilous."

"What war?" Patzau Powanati asked. "There is no war."

"Please," Patzau Ashill sneered, "tell *me* the logistics of our military might. Perhaps after, Rake can speak on behalf of our food stores and while we're at it, Mellen can go into detail about Ada's diplomatic mission."

"Yanata, please" Patzau Yohati said, trying to regain control of the conversation. "There is no need for that. We are not at war–"

"We *are* at war and it's your damned fault!" she scolded. "Don't even get me started on *why* were now at war because I swear to the spirits of the mountain and the spirits of the seas that this is an argument you do not want to pursue, Yohati."

"There is no war" Patzau Powanati echoed, still trying to speak over her. "Arresting criminals and cleaning up our city does not a war make."

"Oh, is that so?" Patzau Ashill mocked. "Then perhaps we *do* want to discuss how this all started. How Patzau Yohati was almost assassinated inside our own walls by an unknown aggressor. How he marched our soldiers, bypassing my command and overstepping his authority, against our own citizens–"

"Against criminals!" Powanati shouted.

Yanata ignored him, "How his disastrous arrests have led to riots both inside and outside the city's gates. Our people accuse *me* of treason because of Yohati's actions. His authorization of deadly force and the mass arrests carried out on his orders has led to violence and has endangered every Casoyan. And as a result, the gangs and anti-Casoyan militias linked to the inland tribes are given legitimacy. They're using Yohati's oppression as fuel for their bullshit agendas. They've gone so far as to strike military outposts deep in the remote reaches."

"We know the aggressor was one of the Mudtown gangs." Patzau Yohati said sternly.

"How do you know that?" Yanata asked. "Where is the evidence?"

"There have been trials and convictions" he added. "People have admitted to the crime."

"Don't even get me started on the mockery of justice you call trials" Yanata spat. "I witnessed several of them. I'm surprised your puppet Madaral went as far asking their names before beheading each one. I'm *drowning* in the river of blood he's spilled."

Mellen prided himself on his intelligence network. He was already aware of the escalating conflict and taking precautions. Despite this, he was stunned by what he heard—this was a key piece of gossip that hadn't yet whispered into his network. *Somebody has worked very hard to keep this under wraps. But which was it? Ashill or Yohati?*

"I'm not here to discuss any of that right now" Yanata continued with a warning glare at Patzau Yohati, whom sat across from her. "I'm here to bring forward the following problems that we *will* face. We do not have the soldiers to be everywhere at once. We staff our interior garrisons with enough soldiers to maintain order, but not strong enough to quell insurrection. If violence escalates in the mountains, we do not possess enough soldiers to march and maintain active policing here in Caso, and also support people affected by the flooding. We lack the soldiers."

"I'd like to discuss these trials you've mentioned" Mellen said, interjecting. "What did you mean when you referred to them as mockeries of justice?"

Patzau Ashill cast him a forceful glare. She ignored him and continued, "We will need more coin to support any army sent into the mountains to quell revolts. We are not sufficiently ready for if and when the situation devolves. An extra three-thousand foot-soldiers would suffice."

"It will economically disastrous," Patzau Adagizhi added. "Losing access to the natural resources grown and mined in the mountain regions. My guild's stores of resources will hold for a few months, perhaps a half year with rationing, but the consequences will be damaging, especially if food becomes scarce. Patzau Onudar, perhaps Patzau Ashill can recruit from your members?"

"Most of the workmen apprentices and craftsmen are Casoyan. I'll need them," Patzau Onudar answered. "Most of the labourers in my guild are from the interior. I don't know how much I would trust them in our ranks. These mountain-born are lazy. And the ones who aren't are treacherous. Probably the very type we're hoping to remove. Cons and savages, the whole lot."

Mellen frowned at that.

"Additionally, there isn't enough coin available" Patzau Powanati announced.

"What do you mean?" Yanata pressed. "How is there not enough coin available? We just approved additional taxes on members of Mellen's guild. You made it clear that a large portion of those levies would support my guild's requests for funding. I am asking for that funding *now*. To protect us. To protect you and your business interests. How can we not find the funds?!"

"Pay and food rations for thousands of extra soldiers will cost a fortune. For more than what is levied" he answered. "We simply don't have that kind of coin sitting around; especially to spend on a threat that hasn't reared its head. Your worries are based on conjecture and speculation."

"Speculation?" Mellen scoffed. "What nonsense is this!? Are you so sheltered by enclave of wealthy bankers that you haven't noticed? Or, are you purposefully ignorant to the plight of the common person?"

"Shut your mouth, Mellen" Powanati growled.

"Mellen!" Yohati spat the name venomously. "I *will* initiate a vote" he threatened.

Patzau Minoc ignored Yohati and continued in his contempt, "There have been eruptions of violence outside the city's walls daily since the attack. People are demanding the release of the hundreds taken prisoner" he added, turning to face Yohati. The older man glowered back with a new frustration and a near equal degree of loathing. "Now, after knowing we've executed them all in what one of our very own is calling 'a mockery of justice', we have sealed our own fate. Retribution will come; we'll pay in blood for what you've done."

Novish Powanati gave Mellen a dirty look. "I have done nothing."

"And you seem far too proud of that fact."

"Please" Patzau Adagizhi cut in. "Let us get back on track. Mellen, hold your wicked tongue. Provoking each other won't serve us any good. Yohati, we'll discuss your role in this later. And Novish, it is not your place to debate the validity of Patzau Ashill's accounts. She is telling us that our soldiers cannot handle these protests outside the city *and* any potential uprisings in the mountains while also supporting flood relief efforts. We will need to direct more of Onudar's workers towards supporting flood mitigation and cleanup. That will free up the soldiers."

"Agreed" Patzau Murocil said.

"There is a problem with that solution" Patzau Onudar chimed in. "I don't have spare guildsmen. My top advisors are reporting that my guild's labourers are not appearing for work in the same numbers as needed to sustain us. And I know its these mountain-born beggars who've come and brought their lazy tendencies and backwater beliefs. My guild is drowning in these types. I am certain they are the ones behind this shortage of bodies."

"Or perhaps there is a more probable reason," Yanata Ashill said, "and these people are absent because they are helping to rebuild the scores of homes that Yohati burned in his Mudtown raid or the hundreds more that have been affected by recent floods. We have not sent soldiers to support flood relief efforts outside of the walls and they will not be received well after what happened last time."

"I didn't burn anything" Yohati protested.

"And yet without your intervention, nothing would have burned. Therefore, you are to blame. You have caused this whether you intended to or not." she reprimanded.

"The violence outside the city walls has grown unchecked for years" Yohati countered. "Now, that violence has spread into our city, like a festering wound. Our citizens are no longer safe. The attack against me and my family has proven that the influence these criminal gangs have has grown too strong and is rooted too deep. We cannot afford to be complacent. It will destroy us, if left unchecked."

"You mistake caution and subtlety for complacency" Yanata countered. "I have spent years maintaining peace and order. The gangs and criminals feared us. Yes, they were violent but never before were they so openly defiant. Reflect on where a heavy hand has left us and then come and criticize my policies again. I dare you."

"Do you think that our citizens are safer now? After what has happened?" Patzau Murocil asked. "From my point of view, you have overstepped your station, fueled conflict in the outer territories, put innocent lives in danger, and harmed our economy in one fell swoop."

Mellen spoke into the silence that followed, "Had it been anyone else, Yohati, I'd have expected a resignation." The room fell silent. Breaths held.

Patzau Yohati responded in a calm even tone, “You forget yourself and you forget who it was that cast the first stone. I did not want this, Mellen. I was attacked. My family was attacked” he added, punctuating each word. “Assailed openly in our streets. Guests and soldiers in my care were murdered. Soldiers loyal to this city were murdered. This was an act of war, make no mistake.”

“So, it is war then?” Yanata grumbled.

“My orders to apprehend these vile criminals was necessary. Time was of the essence. To sit idle would have been an affront to justice. I did not order the burning of homes. I did not order the mass arrests or killings. My orders were to catch the perpetrators and empty the crime-dens. I will not apologize for being a man of action.” He glanced pointedly at Minoc. “I *am* a man of action, not complaint. This path was not my choice, but it is our duty to burn away the leeches that make our city bleed. We will raise an additional army, and we will reclaim what these opportunists covet. We will overcome this and emerge stronger.”

Patzau Onudar, Hadashenta, Powanati, and Adagizhi practically cheered. Even Patzau Ashill appeared relieved by Yohati’s promise. *So, this is it*, Mellen thought, staring at Ada. In that single, shared glance, a thousand feelings passed between them. At least he wasn’t alone in facing the end. Lost in himself, Mellen sat un-listening as the city’s Patzau conspired.

How did Yohati do it? Break every law, bypass every safeguard, and start a war only to emerge more powerful for it. Then, revel in it with no remorse. This will mean war. It will be destructive and costly in ways they can’t imagine. Lines will be crossed. And in the end, we will crush them—for fighting back against the wrongs enacted against them. Wrongs we, their leaders, ratified. And in doing so, we destroy ourselves. Because they are us. We are one and the same.

Chapter 19: Understanding

Kuta climbed the polished stone stairway and passed through the hand-carved wooden doors of the Artisan's Guild Headquarters. Inside, an ancient polished mosaic floor depicted the guild seal. As she entered the mezzanine with its grand staircases leading up to the second floor, a familiar face greeted her. Seated upon a plinth was old man Banzhiigan, the shopkeeper. It was strange seeing him outside his shop. Instead of his work attire, he wore clean clothes devoid of wood chips, oil, and varnish. The old man was a long-standing member of the guild, but guild members rarely came outside specific circumstances. He sat to himself, reading notes on a wax tablet. He looked up and smiled as she entered

"Good" Banzhiigan said, "I didn't waste a trip."

"What are you doing here?" Kuta asked, surprised by the unexpected visit.

"You instructed me to pass information back and forth between you and that foreigner. The white-bearded man you brought by my shop."

"Gaba'ké?" she asked, "the one from Gaag?"

"Yes. Him" Banzhiigan answered. "He came to visit me this morning. He said he has some information to share with you about the attack against Patzau Yohati – the one that killed his master." Kuta's surprise prompted Banzhiigan to continue, answering the unspoken question. "I didn't ask the specifics, Kuta" the old shop keep chortled. "I'm just the messenger. He's waiting for you at my place."

"Why didn't he come himself?" she asked. "He could have met me here in the hall."

"You'll have to ask him yourself" Banzhiigan said. "How are you doing?" he pressed. "What with all this Mudtown mess."

"I'm fine" Kuta said, a little too harshly.

"Are you sure?" Banzhiigan asked, switching to their shared ancestral tongue.

"There's nothing I can do about Mudtown" Kuta said, hushing her voice. "It's not my place, uncle. But I thank you for your concern."

Banzhiigan smiled meekly, "I've got a few visits to make today. I'll try and pay you a visit sometime soon. I'll bring some of my daughter's cooking."

"I look forward to it."

Banzhiigan's shop wasn't far from the guild. Kuta followed the streets south past the Golden Plaza where the market spilled into every nook and cranny. Hundreds of sellers gathered under the great blue dome of the Casoyan Auction house, but all seemed tense. Since the attack inside the city, the flooding, and violence outside the walls, the market felt lifeless. People came and went, as they did before, but what was lost was the casualness with which patrons lingered and browsed, talked and gossiped. The temperature was comfortable and the weather was inviting and yet a good part of the market remained vacant.

As she crossed the mountain road towards the auction house, the huge increase in soldiers stood out. No longer did the guild's soldiers linger outside restaurants or mill about while on guard. They stood tall and vigilant, eyeing each person who passed by. Hands remained close to their wooden ghata. Some even carried shields and spears. Despite the lull in the market on the opposite side of the grand avenue and the increase in soldiers, the auction house appeared as lively as ever. Wealthy patrons and their retinues of private guards and soldiers frequented the grand building as if nothing had changed. She supposed, for them, nothing had. It made her feel bitter.

Kuta passed by the auction house's stone façade and stone-faced soldiers and headed for the grand canal. As she approached, mud stains left their marks as a sharp reminder of how bad the flash-flooding had been. Clumps of grasses wrapped their tendrils around low banisters. Sherds of broken pots and other garbage littered the small nooks. A group of filthy young children were scrubbing the mud from one of the buildings on the corner. Kuta watched as they dunked dirty rags into pots of water under the watchful gaze of a man Kuta could only presume to be the building's owner. The middle-aged man watched hawkishly as they cleaned. She spared the man a smile and tipped the children a few coppers, much to the older man's disapproval. She could hear the silent argument written across his face, *'time spent collecting tips was time not spent cleaning.'*

Banzhiigan's shop was covered in the same layer of mud as most of the other buildings around the area. Despite the flooding, the building had sustained minimal damage. The stairs leading up from the cobbled street had even been scrubbed clean, though the rest of the building still bore the grime that stopped just shy of the final step. Kuta wiped her feet and entered the cluttered haven of curiosities. The ringing of a bell announced her. Inside, the warm scent of wood and oil was comforting. Trinkets and furniture filled the space and Kuta hoped one day to have a home of her own where she could have such marvels as these.

Kuta looked around, expecting Banzhiigan's daughter or granddaughter to appear. Neither did. Silence replaced the soft ringing of the door-chime. The storefront appeared empty. *Where is Gaba'ké?* Kuta wondered. Something felt off. She focused on her agindan sense and swept her presence through the store. She felt the countless spirits present. They clung to the fibers and oils in the furniture. They hid within the secret piles of dust left unswept for years. They imbued themselves happily in the wax of the candles and wooden beams that stretched across the ceiling. She brushed her senses across each one, but found no indication of another Aginjigaade. *Has Gaba'ké left?*

Kuta focused harder. She expanded her agindan to encompass not only the store but the floors above. When that yielded nothing, she pushed her domain further. She looked into the adjacent to buildings with similar results. She spread her agindan thinner and thinner until she felt the presence of familiar Casoyan Aginjigaade inside the palace on the other side of the canal. She thought about questing towards Yohati's palace but thought better of it.

All the while, Kuta walked slowly through Banzhiigan's quiet shop. The floorboards groaned under each soft step. She gazed past the fine furniture, looking for… well, she wasn't sure exactly. The aisles were tight and didn't provide visibility clearly across the space. They snaked a little the same way the streets and alleys of the city did. She rounded a corner near the back of the shop and saw a shadowy figure seated in a chair at the back.

Kuta's heart skipped a beat. Seated in the shadows, his presence somehow hidden despite her proximity, sat Gaba'ké. She wrenched her questing agindan sense

back to the shop and brought her consciousness to bear directly at him. She sensed nothing of *his* spirit*. Is he dead?*

Then, as if night flashed to day or a spark erupted into flames, his presence winked into existence. Like a first breath after drowning, he was gone and then he was just… there. Kuta stood immobile. It was impossible. She should have sensed him, felt the distinctive pulse of his agindan the moment she was near the building, but there had been nothing—only an emptiness where his presence should have been.

"Kuta," Gaba'ké began, "I'm glad you came. I didn't know who else to speak to."

"H– How?" she stuttered.

He seemed to think for a moment before answering, "An old man is entitled to his secrets."

"But that's not possible. I have never before heard of an Aginjigaade having this ability" Kuta said. It almost came out as an accusation.

"Nor will you ever again" Gaba'ké answered. "I have chosen to trust you with this little secret of mine. I fear I have little choice. Even now, I fear for my life and Ohacha's life each time I leave Yohati's estate. I have nightmares… about the attack. I know they are… more harmful than helpful and yet I find it difficult to leave the safety of our home" he finished, not knowing what other word to use.

"Why?" Kuta asked. "You have demonstrated that you are incredibly powerful. Far more powerful than me. You may be one of the most powerful Aginjigaade in the city. And with this… ability, what could you possibly fear?"

"There are other things to fear than death, Kuta," Gaba'ké said. "I don't fear an attack on the streets; what I fear is losing the ones I care about. I've lost two men I considered brothers, here in this city. And many good men who remained loyal right until the end; who gave their lives for our cause. I've got two people left in the whole world, and they can die much easier than I can. Even from here, I'll sense any threat of danger."

Kuta frowned, calculating the distance. Yohati's estate is a hundred meters from here. *How powerful is he to maintain his agindan sense at this range? What other secrets does he hold?* "Who is it you fear?" Kuta asked. "Who is it who seeks your deaths?"

"Nobody you can protect us from" Gaba'ké said, shutting down that line of conversation. "Our fight is not your fight. I haven't asked you here for your help in protecting us. I asked you here because I need to share information with your Patzau Minoc. Perhaps, it will help us all."

"Why haven't you shared this information with Patzau Yohati?"

"Patzau Yohati has been elusive" Gaba'ké explained. "I feel we are being stonewalled from seeing him, and I can't understand why. The day you met me in front of Patzau Palace" Gaba'ké began, "Before I left in the morning, I noticed a man watching Yohati's estate. Then as I returned home, I saw him again. Over the days leading up to the auction, and the attack that killed Aramuk. I would look out my window towards the canal or the tenements surrounding Patzau Yohati's estate and I could swear I could see him, out there, watching us. I thought I might be imagining things. That was until the moment prince Aramuk died. When he took that arrow to the chest, I looked around in panic, and I know with all the certainty in my heart that I saw the same man who had been watching us. His face is burned into my memories."

"You've come to tell me about this man?" Kuta asked, confused.

"No, not exactly" Gaba'ké said, "but that context is important for what I'm about to share. I wanted to tell Yohati's Aginjigaade, Janos, but he hasn't been back to the estate

since that night. This is an Aginjigaade matter and you're the only other Aginjigaade I know in the city."

"What is it?" Kuta asked.

"The day of the attack, there were other Aginjigaade involved" he explained. "Right before Aramuk died, somebody attacked me with the full force of their Agindan. It stunned me, for a brief moment. But I fought back against the mental attack, repelling it in time to defend myself from the thieves and murderers that appeared from the alleyways. I was so startled when it came that I pushed back as hard as I could with my own power. I pushed so hard that I felt my consciousness touched Her's"

"Her?" Kuta asked.

"I pushed her so hard that I can still feel the imprint of her spirit on the peripheries of my own. It has stuck with me." Gaba'ké said. "She was a woman. Older than you. Not particularly powerful. The tinge of her sorcery was sharp and acidic; like vinegar. It's a broad description, I know, but I may be enough to identify the culprit. Nyama or Decay. An affinity from one or the other in the pairing. I figured the Patzau would keep tabs on all Aginjigaade inside the city. You might be able to identify her or even find her."

"I must admit" Kuta said, "I have little knowledge regarding the other Aginjigaade inside Caso. I've not met anyone with either affinity, but I am the wrong person to ask. However, I can ask around. Minoc is knowledgeable on many things. Perhaps he knows this Aginjigaade you speak of. It's a lead, at least." Gaba'ké nodded in understanding. She thought back to what he said and asked another question, "Earlier, you said *other* Aginjigaade. Not *another* Aginjigaade. Was there was somebody else?"

"This is the part I'm unsure of" Gaba'ké confessed. "Moments before we were attacked, it felt like we were already under the subtle effects of sorcery. The shadows danced in an unnatural way and felt more… palpable." He scratched at his chin beneath the long white beard. "I couldn't feel a third Aginjigaade at the time but I've witnessed enough sorcery to recognize when the world is being tampered with by Aginjigaade."

"That sounds like Janos' sorcery" Kuta admitted. "He has an affinity to light." *But that wouldn't make sense,* Kuta thought, regretting the words as they left her lips. "Either way, I appreciate you sharing this information with me. I will bring it back to Patzau Minoc, and he will bring it to the council or at least to Patzau Ashill to discuss."

"Thank you for coming to meet with me" Gaba'ké said. He looked tired and worn. His voice matched his appearance. "I wasn't sure that you would" he admitted.

"Why is that?" Kuta asked.

"I don't know" he answered. "Just an odd feeling. Clearly meaningless."

"Oh!" Kuta exclaimed. "The man who was watching you," Kuta said, thinking back on everything Gaba'ké had told her. "What did he look like? I can ask about him too."

Gaba'ké closed his eyes and focused. After a moment, he spoke "He was a tall man, maybe twice your height. He looked a bit like you do, actually, with the rounder cheeks and darker skin. The same dark hair and an unkempt dark beard. He had a prominent hawkish nose. One that's been broken a few times and a round birthmark under his left eye."

"I'll share this information with Patzau Minoc."

"I hope it helps" Gaba'ké said with a hard sigh. He stood to leave. "Prince Ohacha is still mourning his uncle's murder. It is a loss that has shaken us. Justice for Aramuk's death and the return of our stolen fortune would bring some hope back, I reckon."

"Justice…" Kuta repeated. The word echoed in her mind as he left.

*

A warm soft light filtered in through the window. Leaves rustled softly in the breeze. Through the open window, the repetitive dull thud of an axe resonated like the mountain's slow heartbeat. Yoharum's first sensation upon waking was the dull, aching throb of his burns. He was familiar with the pain now. It had been his constant companion, but it was no less excruciating. Yoharum forced his eyes open and blinked against the sunlight streaming into the room. A faint herbal scent lingered in his nostrils and Yoharum looked down at himself. His body was covered in a dark green paste that had been applied over his wounds. He was back in his parents' house, safe for the moment, though the memory of what had happened out in that remote hamlet still haunted him.

He looked around the small bedroom he had shared with his siblings. It looked precisely the same as he remembered it and yet subtly different. Older. Emptier. The dry mud walls were cracked and crumbling from their age. The beds around his, save for one, were empty. His eyes wandered until they settled on the small wooden table beside his bed where a bowl of fresh water and a damp cloth sat waiting. His throat was dry and he reached over with great effort and brought the bowl to his lips.

Memories flooded back to him. Fleeing across the mountainside. Falling before of his parents. Jiral, his youngest sister, tending to him as he waved in and out of consciousness. He felt whole for the first time in a long time. The fog that had clouded his mind since the attack was beginning to lift. He sat up and the movement caused a ripple of pain across his blistered skin. The door creaked open, and Yoharum looked up at his little sister. She looked back at him as if her were a stranger. He realized after a moment that perhaps, to her, he was. She was older and taller than he remembered. When he had left, she was still a girl and now she stood before him as a spitting image of their mother. But it was her, unmistakably. She had the same round cheeks and large bent nose. But she had softer eyes and a rounder chin than he did. She wore a short blouse that revealed her waist and a long skirt down to her ankles. Her hair was pulled back into a braid that ended with a band of colourful fabric. Seeing him awake and alert, she hesitated for a moment before approaching the bed.

"Yoharum," she said softly, her voice trembling with a mix of relief and anxiety. "You're awake." He nodded, though the effort made his head swim. She sat on the edge of the bed, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her skirt. She was trying to be brave, but Yoharum could see the fear in her eyes that wouldn't meet his. "What happened to you?" she asked with concern. "You've been out for so long, and… and you were hurt so badly."

Yoharum closed his eyes and winced in pain. His body instinctively retreated from the question. He didn't want to lie to her, but he wasn't sure she could handle the truth. He wasn't sure *he* could handle telling her the truth either. "It's better if you don't know," he said, his voice raspy. "I got into some trouble. It'll be okay."

Jiral's expression tightened. "I'm not a stupid little girl anymore, Ani" she said sternly. "People talk. I know… we know, that you've been involved with some people. Bad people." He refused to meet her gaze. When he didn't respond, a wave of anger flooded through her. She was tired of this. Of the train of gossip that circled through their little community. Of his selfishness. She shifted around to face him head on–to force him to look at her. He had guilt ridden across his face and seeing it emboldened her. "You were involved in those attacks in the city, weren't you?" Her question hung heavy in the air between them. An accusation.

Yoharum closed his eyes, fighting the wave of shame that washed over him. “Yes,” he admitted, his voice barely audible. “I was involved.”

Jiral’s face fell, her disappointment clear. There was a part of her that had hoped it wasn’t true. That hope died. She stared at him, as if searching for some trace of the brother she had known as a child. The one who had been there to carry her home when she had fallen in the creek. Who had brought her into the forest to catch wild birds for dinner. “What happened?” she repeated.

“We got caught” he said simply. The weight of all those deaths rested on his shoulders. Those who died in the initial attack. Those who had been caught fleeing the city. And those who were killed escaping the burning hut in the hamlet. All those lives extinguished. *And yet I survive. I persist.*

Before either of them could speak again, a shout echoed through the house. It was their mother. Jiral and Yoharum both turned towards the front of the house and the rhythmic wood chopping came to an abrupt stop. Jiral stood and left her brother hunched over the bed. *I do this for her,* he reminded himself. *She may not appreciate it now, but one day she’ll understand*. He brought his hands to his face and found his long beard missing. *They shaved my face*. The realization shocked him as much as the pain. Years growing a war beard, wasted with one defeat.

There was a knock at the door and Yoharum moved to wipe his eyes. A wave of pain shot through him but he fought through it. He had expected his sister again at the door but when he looked up, she wasn’t alone. Another figure loom outside the room behind her. Yoharum’s gaze softened when he realized it was Zhenya.

“Yoharum?” Zhenya said, her voice full of concern.

“You know this woman?” Jiral had a protective look on her face that made him concerned

Yoharum moved to speak, but coughed instead and it set his body ablaze. “Yes” he croaked, “you can let her in. She’s a good friend.” Jiral looked at the other woman venomously. As if she were the reason her brother had turned out this way. As if it were her influence and not his own choices that had brought him down this path. Nothing could be further from the truth but she couldn’t know that. “Please, give us some privacy, Ji” Yoharum said. Jiral scowled at him once then turned and left.

Jiral leered over her shoulder at the tall woman as she left. She didn’t trust the stranger. Something in the way she carried herself. There was a confidence in her step. A look in her eyes that made you feel like she was somebody important. Jiral didn’t like it. She might look like she hailed from the mountains, but she carried herself like a city woman. Jiral stocked out and left the house, scowling the entire way. Stepping out onto the front porch, Jiral met her father, who shared her scorn.

“Who is she?” Harumal asked. “His wife?”

Jiral laughed by mistake. She covered her mouth, realizing she hadn’t considered it. “I don’t think so” she said quickly. “But they definitely know each other.” In unison, both father and daughter muttered the same four words, “I don’t trust her.”

Zhenya stepped into the room and stopped a few paces from Yoharum, who remained seated. He looked up at her and she could see the pain written across his face; all forms of it. His beard was gone, and raw red marks covered his face up to the birthmark under his eye. “I thought you were dead” she said. He noticed the faint bruise on her temple.

“Me too” he said. “How’d you get that?” he asked, pointing to the bruise.

“That Aginjigaade I was supposed to distract;” Zhenya said quietly, “the stone man with the princes. I threw everything I had at him. All of my mental fortitude. The full weight of my agindan power…”

“And?” he said after a pause.

“And he tossed me aside the same way a big man might boot a small dog” she said contemptuously. “He hit me so fast and so hard I lost consciousness immediately. I was standing when it happened. And when I woke up, I had been facedown on the floor for what I can only assume had been hours. I was a child throwing stones at a soldier, Yo. Spirits, there might be two or three other Aginjigaade in the whole city as powerful as that old man. I’m lucky to be alive.”

“Spirits” Yoharum sighed. “Are you okay? What happened after you woke up?”

“I had the most painful headache imaginable” she said, bringing her hand to her temple. “After I collected my wits, I stumbled out of the alleyway into some soldiers. They led me away. Spirits bless being a big woman. I don’t think they once considered I was involved. Then, that night, Mudtown burned. I hid inside the walls for the better part of three days, just trying to stay out of sight. Plus, my headache made it hard doing just about anything.”

“What do you mean Mudtown burned?” Yoharum asked, concern mounting.

She looked at him, confused by the question. “Your burns? Weren’t you caught in the Mudtown fires?” she asked.

“No” he answered. “The crew made it all the way out of the city to the safehouse. What do you mean when you say Mudtown burned? Darius said the same thing. What happened?”

She stared at him, confusion plain across her face. “They burned Mudtown in retaliation for the attack” she said plainly. “I think the soldiers caught one of the gang members we brought on as muscle. They claimed it was an assassination attempt on Patzau Yohati. Soldiers marched on Mudtown at dusk. It was carnage. There were soldiers beating people in the streets. A few were killing indiscriminately. Hundreds were arrested. They hit most of the crime dens. Then the fires got out of control and spread wildly. If it hadn’t rained, most of Mudtown would have been destroyed.”

The full weight of her words hit him with the force of a thousand eruptions. He clenched his fists in anger and despair, despite the pain that coursed through his body. Flakes of the dried herbs that had been plastered across his hands fell to the floor revealing the red damaged flesh below. He winced.

“What happened to the crew?” she asked, delicately. “How did you get your burns?”

“They found us” he said through a hoarse croak. “I don’t know how, but they found us. Then they did the same thing…. They set the safehouse ablaze with us still inside. Then they killed us as we tried to escape the fire. They slaughtered everyone. I… I think I’m the only one who got away.”

“Spirits of the earth” she whispered. “What happened to the take?” she asked.

For the first time, he panicked as he tried to remember what had happened to the silver they had stolen. There had been enough to buy an army. He looked down at his palms and noticed the small circular burns he’d received from the handfuls of coins he had snatched right before he had fled the safehouse. He looked down at himself, hoping to check his pockets only to notice for the first time he wore only a thin pair of undergarments. The rest of his body was plastered with herbal paste.

“Mother!” he yelled. “Bring my mother” he pleaded to Zhenya.

"No need" Zhenya said, "she's listening from the other side of your window." Yoharum tried to turn and did his best considering the pain. All the while, Yoharum's mother, Ahunas, stood slowly from where she had been eavesdropping. She had a guilty look on her face right up until two women met eyes. Zhenya smiled. It was forgiveness. Ahunas smiled back in appreciation and then frowned at her son.

"What is it, Yo?" Ahunas asked her son, still standing at the window. Only her shoulders and head managed to peer through the small portal.

"Where are my clothes?" he pleaded.

"What?" Ahunas asked, sucking her teeth in disdain. "You don't visit. You don't tell me where you are. Not even so much as a 'hello mother, how are you today?' Do you even love your mother?"

"Hello mother" Yoharum groaned. Dealing with her was as painful as any injury.

"That's all you have to say to me?" she said, raising her voice. "You show up covered in burns and bruises and cuts and more burns. You fall down half-dead at my door." She tsked her teeth again. "The spirits gift us mothers patience because our sons are too stubborn to learn good sense."

"Where are my clothes?" Yoharum repeated in frustration

"You mean to ask where is your money? Hm?" His mother scolded. He hesitated for a moment, then answered her with a simple nod. "When we brought you inside you made it sound like somebody was after you. I hid it away, just in case. Are you in trouble?"

"Where is it?"

"Where did you get it?" she fired back. "Spirits, tell me you didn't kill somebody for it."

"I killed somebody for it" he answered.

She reeled in embellished disappointment. "Boy, you are as dense as a mountain. Why would you tell me that. Now some Aginjigaade witch can use her magic to pry the truth from my tortured heart. You have doomed me, child."

"You're being dramatic. And it doesn't work like that. You *know* it doesn't work like that" he said dismissively.

Ahunas frowned. "And how would you know, eh?"

Yoharum turned slightly and cast a signaling glance behind him to where Zhenya still stood behind him. His mother's eyes went wide. Her cheeks flushed and she brought the spiral of her fingers to her lips in a warding gesture. "You invited a witch into my house?!" she shouted. "No offence dear" she added, addressing Zhenya who stood, unphased by the insult. "Oh, why must the spirits of the mountains and rivers be so cruel to an old woman such as me" Ahunas prattled.

"Blood and fire, mother! You are the one who let her in!" Yoharum protested.

"Only because you deceived me" Ahunas wailed. "If you were a better son–"

"Enough" he cut in. "I am sorry that I don't visit. I am a terrible son. Are you happy now?"

"If you are a terrible son, then I must be a terrible mother" she howled and Yoharum pushed his palms into his eyes until he saw spots.

"The coins," Yoharum said, ignoring his mother's theatrics, "Listen to me! Most of it is for you and for Jiral and Da. Da can quit the guild. You can fix the house and buy some more land. Da can plow and plant here at home rather than labour on one of the big Casoyan orchards near the coast. Whatever you want. You won't have to work again." Zhenya raised her eyebrows in interest. Yoharum's mother, on the other hand, seemed unimpressed.

"You think of us so poorly as to need your blood money?" she challenged. "We do just fine."

This was not going the way he had imaging it would. It didn't help that the simple act of breathing felt laborious. "Spirits, mother. Please listen to me" Yoharum said in frustration. "You and Da are fine but how will Jiral do when you're gone. How will she maintain this house with her future husband. So many families have already sold their land to the Casoyans. The city is reaching its claws even this far into the mountains. Soon there will be no trace of us. Of our people and our way of life. These Casoyans, they will starve us and then offer us salvation by buying the shirts off our backs and the land from under our feet. They are greedy and wicked. If we don't have enough money to support ourselves, this community, then they will erode it until we are all living as vagrants in their slums." Ahunas scowled at her son but made no argument. "If you don't want it," Yoharum said, after a moment, "send it to our family deeper in the mountains."

"You are a silver-tongued devil" Ahunas said, her eyes never flinching from her son's gaze. They held that stare for held breath's time. "Fine" she relented. "I'll go get your money. But you cannot call yourself a member of this community any more. You don't hear the stories people tell about you. You have made life hard for us here and I see this as a way to repay your social debt."

She turned and stocked off into the forest. *Typical,* he thought, *she always twists the truth to suit her needs.* He knew his mother well enough not to be surprised: all success was due to her merits, and all failures were the fault of others. It was vain, but he didn't mind. It wasn't his place to judge or chastise.

"I see where you get your spirit" Zhenya teased. "And your headstrong tendencies."

He turned slowly to face her and bit back his argument. "What will you do now?" he asked.

"Stay low" she answered. He gave her a probing look and she sighed. "If you need me. Really truly need me, I'm going to cross the island to Cabiya. I won't stay in the mountains. There are tales brewing. Stories of violence. The usual whispers of uprising. I don't want to be a part of any of it. I've now witnessed the Casoyan thirst for blood. Fighting them is self-destructive."

"Cabiya *is* controlled by the Casoyans" Yoharum countered.

"Exactly" Zhenya said. "They control Cabiya with an iron fist. No army our people can raise could take it or hold it. That means no uprising. And any place without violence is a good place by me."

Zhenya left the next morning. She took her share with her. It wasn't much to add to what she had already earned, but between the silver coins from the dead princes and the gold from Bartiin initial payment, she could make it last a long time. Especially if she chose to live her live simply. She would not. Considering her caliber and skill, a simple life was not one he could picture for her.

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The following night, Yoharum's bedroom door squeaked open once again. He heard the noise but couldn't muster the effort to turn away from the window and look. He waited, expecting words but none came. Jiral or whoever it was walked across the small room and collected the small wooden stool next to the bed. Wood scraped on wood. Then the room returned to silence. Yoharum was confused. Still drowsy, he turned over with great discomfort. He had expected to see his mother, or perhaps Jiral. He was certain it wouldn't be his father. Harumal hadn't spoken to him once in the time he had

been bedridden. It seemed unlikely the old man would break his silent disapproval here and now. So, when Yoharum turned, his brows furrowed. Dusk was settling and the room was dim. It was hard to see. But instead of his mother Ahunas, or his sister Jiral, or even his father, he swore he saw a different familiar face.

"Kuta?" he asked, surprised. "Is that you cousin?"

The silence stretched between them, heavy with the unspoken. Finally, Kuta crushed it, her voice cold, "Hello, Yoharum." She kept silent, and he didn't know what to say to her. There were too many questions, foremost of which being why she was here. But he was too afraid to ask that question. Afraid of both its perceived insult, and its obvious answer. He knew who her master was. Kuta let out a long sigh before speaking again. "I know that you were the one behind the attack in Caso. I want to know who the target was?"

Yoharum's mind raced. *I need an excuse. Any excuse! But what can I say? She already knows. She's already tracked me down. Maybe she's bluffing.* He rolled over and tried to sit up. He had thought to use the movement to buy more time. Instead, a tide of agony that did everything but help him think straight. As he sat upright, her eyes passed over him. The ointment that had been applied the night before dried and flaked away leaving painful pink patches and raw bands across his arms. She saw them, but didn't speak, still waiting for an answer. Yoharum hadn't thought of a better one than the truth.

"I was paid to assassinate a pair of princes. Two men: uncle and nephew" he said plainly.

"That's the truth?" she insisted. "Your target wasn't Patzau Yohati?"

"Patzau Yohati?" he repeated. Then he remembered his conversation with Zhenya. "Spirits, no. Just the two princes and their bodyguards." She seemed to mull over that answer.

"And the money…" she asked. "The coin you stole from the princes?"

It was a question, Yoharum recognized that much from her tone. But he didn't understand what she was asking. "What about it?"

Whatever answer she was looking for, that wasn't it. "I hope it was worth it" Kuta said, dismissively. Her voice oozed scorn. "Your deeds have cost incalculable suffering already."

"Mudtown" he mumbled.

"So, you *do* know what you've done" she accused.

"I didn't do that" he said sternly. "Your Patzaus did that. The fat man you work for, I'm sure he was involved in it. The Casoyans blew the whole thing out of proportion."

"Says the man who works as a hired thug!" she yelled, angry now. He shushed her and for a moment he thought she might slap him. She was half his size but right now, it felt like the wind could topple him. And he knew well enough that she was stronger than just her size suggested. "You are such a hypocrite, Yoharum. You blame the Casoyans for everything and neglect your own part in the way things are. You brought known thieves and murderers inside the city walls and attacked a foreign emissary and then expect it to go without consequences?!"

"And you think your Casoyans are any better? Who steals our lands and strips our people of their wealth and dignity? Were we the ones who came down to their city and took their men for workers and their women for domestics? No! That was them. And those are the ones who get any work. The rest are left with nothing. They join the gangs because they are denied real opportunities. The gangsters and warlords exist because of

their disregard for us: the people left behind. Our people. Now it has come back to bite them."

"No! It has come back to bite *us*!" Kuta countered. "*Our* people are the ones who are suffering from your actions. Not the Casoyans. A handful of dead soldiers is nothing compared to the scar of ash they left across Mudtown. And our people will *continue* to suffer."

"And what are you doing to help our people?" he challenged. "Is playing the Patzau's pet helping anyone yet? You're the strongest Aginjigaade in generations and instead of fighting for us—for your people—you work for the Casoyan dogs! You lick their boots and call them master."

Kuta scowled hard. "You are so ignorant that you don't even realize how foolish you sound. What? You think I should mount an open war because I have an ounce of power more than the average person? My strength pales. I'm just one person—one Aginjigaade. The guild has scores and they would crush me. What good is one sharp knife against a thousand sticks?"

"If I had your power–" Yoharum started

Kuta talked over him to finish her point. "And there is more than one way to fight for our people. Not that I heard you saying as much when you spoke to your friend Zhenya."

The comment about Zhenya caught him off guard. Zhenya was very private with her ability and Yoharum was himself careful not to speak of it. How she possibly knew nagged at him but didn't want to cede the argument by asking questions. "That doesn't matter" he said, dismissing the point instead. "The Casoyans want our people erased, all of them."

"You're wrong" she said quietly. "Not all of them. There are good people out there."

"Have you considered they're only good to you because you're useful to them," he shot back, his voice laced with bitterness. "Where does that leave the rest of us?"

"Bah! You think yourself so much better but you're no different than them, cousin" Kuta seethed. "How many young boys did you sacrifice for your score? How many men did you lure with the promise of riches only to use them as fodder? Ten? Twenty?"

"That's not the same" he growled. "Our people, you included, need to harden for what is to come. There will be war. Soon. Our people must lift our chins in defiance and forge our own future. There will be a real reckoning for the crimes against us. We won't be on our knees forever."

"Good luck with that" Kuta said. She rose from her chair and made for the door.

Yoharum lurched, hoping to stop her but she was already outside his reach. The pain roared through him again and he winced audibly. "Wait" he gasped. Panic flooded through him. "You wont… say anything about me, will you?"

"Spirits! That's what your worried about?" Kuta asked. "You think I'm going to turn you in to the guilds?" A dejected look spread across her face and he realized too late that he had hurt her by asking. "I might disagree with you, Yoharum, but I would never do that to our family. It would destroy them. It would cost your father his position in the guild. I hoped you would have at least that much faith in me."

Kuta exited without another word, leaving the room emptier than when she had arrived.

Chapter 20: The Sunset

The streets had gone quiet. The activity that once teemed through the streets was as lifeless as Ohacha's future hopes. The prince sat by his window and watched the few nervous bodies below. It was calm. The sort of calm felt when two swordsmen squared off, like Cask and the Assassin. There was a tension; the future hanging in the balance. Casoyans no longer wandered the streets or milled about. The streetside eateries were vacant. People came but didn't linger.

The whole city felt apprehensive with the exception of one place; Yohati's estate. The Patzau himself wasn't the culprit. Despite repeated quick sightings, Patzau Yohati was evidently busy. At least, that was the excuse his staffers repeated each time Ohacha tried to meet with the old Patzau—ever avoiding to comment on when he might be back. For the first few days, Ohacha had believed them. Now he knew better. But it was Yohati's socialite daughter at the center of the odd jubilance within the grounds. She had found the time to organize some sort of social gala. A significant number of young and affluent people were arriving in droves to mingle amongst other high-ranking officials from the various guilds. Ohacha could hear their merriment from across the gardens. People had been arriving all day to unload crates of food and fancy decorations and Yohati's staff unloaded it all while whispering stories of missing friends and homes destroyed. Like seeing a cyclone out of the left eye and a rainbow out of the right.

By Rolena's reckoning, the small army of labourers clogging the gates was the only reason she'd managed to get a word in with Yohati's guards to be admitted. Without them, they might have turned her away in an instant by stench alone. Instead, Gaba'ké was fetched and he returned with a gaunt and haggard looking Rolena. Ohacha saw them coming from his window and rushed downstairs to greet her. Sergeant Ashill had followed through on her promise.

Ohacha's face lit up as she lurched into the guesthouse. She smiled softly, but not with her eyes. She was thin and her cheeks were sunken. Her face and hands were caked with dirt and grime and she looked terribly frail. Her long hair, usually clean and braided, was unkept and knotted. Ohacha stood awkwardly, not sure what to say. Until Yuromi's visit, he had thought her dead. Another soul consumed by his family's feud. Now, here she stood. Despite himself, his title, and the smell of death that clung to her, he swept forward and embraced her. Cask and Gaba'ké wrapped them both up in one large embrace.

After a long shower, a good meal, and some much-needed rest, they swapped stories. Ohacha spoke of his uncle's death openly for the first time. He told her about the stolen fortune, the soldiers slaughtered, the visit from Sergeant Ashill, and Yohati's evasiveness. Rolena described her own version of events, starting at the auction house and following through Lord Kulimas' attack against Bartiin. Then her arrest by Yuromi and the devolving nightmare that was her imprisonment. She told them of the terrifying

Aginjigaade that had come and interrogated Bartiin's soldiers and revealed that Bartiin had escaped.

She couldn't bring herself to describe the violence inside the cells or the lingering stench of feces and death. How the soldiers were either overwhelmed and neglectful or vindictively abusive. How the numbers inside the cells never dwindled as new bodies replaced the corpses that were hauled out and discarded. Telling them would make it real.

She finished her tale with her release—how when the soldiers came and hauled her from the cell, "I thought it was finally my turn for the executioner's block. Instead, they hauled me out into the open air. Even with the scent of singed flesh, the air was fresher than I could have dreamed. Crows encircled the walls, waiting to feed on the massive smouldering pyres. The muddy yard was slick with blood." Rolena paused, wiping away tears. "They marched me across the yard and dumped me out onto the street with nothing. I was starving and sleepless. It took me all morning just to find my way back."

Ohacha's grip tightened on his armrest. *Cruelty*. *Savagery.* With each new horrific detail, the illusion of Caso's opulence rotted away. And it was all his fault. It had all been his grand idea. The auction house, the drinking, waiting around for the throne. Now, they had less than what they started with, and Uncle Aramuk was dead. The urge to change the past hurt like a physical ache. He wanted to stop himself from ever going to the auction. He wanted to talk his parents out of sailing for Gaag. He wanted to drag Provis, Ander, and Aramuk back from their early graves. Instead, he just sat there, hollowed out and directionless. It was infuriating.

Its not fair! How dare he treat us this way. Ohacha stewed, his anger churning until it reached a crescendo unlike any before. His rage boiled over. Ohacha stood abruptly and marched out of the room. He marched out of the room, ignoring the questions and calls from his friends and mentors. In moments, he was headed straight down the laneway towards Patzau Yohati's mansion. He passed the an unimpressed-looking Fera on his way but didn't even spare her a glace. This rage was not for her. As Ohacha marched up to the landing, one of Patzau Yohati's guards approached.

Ohacha's frown deepened; he had anticipated obstacles, but now faced with a real person, he felt incapable of simply throwing a punch and rushing past. Instead, he handed the soldier his sword and marched straight through the door, raising a hand to command silence when the young man protested. The guard, unsure how to react, tailed him with sword in hand and tried to speak reason. Ohacha ignored the fool, emboldened by his single-minded mission. Servants appeared and followed the small commotion. Eyes followed his every step as Ohacha marched up to Yohati's third-floor office.

A pair of distracted city-soldiers lounging outside the office doors watched in dismay as Ohacha bustled past them and burst through the double-doors into Patzau Yohati's office. The house staff froze, wide-eyed, while the two embarrassed soldiers bounded in after him.

Burrenal Yohati, Patzau of the Casoyan Guild of Affairs, sat at his desk on the far side of the room. Across from him on the right sat the largest, meanest looking soldier Ohacha had ever laid eyes on. He knew it to be true as he *had* laid eyes on the man prior. He was the mean brute at the Auction House—the one that had defended Patzau Yohati. On the brute's left sat Yohati's Aginjigaade, Janos Tydana. All three men turned at the intrusion. Patzau Yohati maintained his composure, despite the unexpected interruption, while the other two were taken aback.

Ohacha had ruminated over what he might say to the moment he barged into Patzau Yohati's office. He had imagined the moment numerous times. The old man would be reading or scribbling down some notes and he would look up in shame and face him, man to man. He hadn't once considered that the old Patzau mightn't be alone. Ohacha's brazen overconfidence evaporated. He stood awkwardly as everyone stared with stern gazes. The two soldiers caught up and grabbed him by the wrist but Ohacha shook them off as he approached the desk. A pungent perfume hit his nose and he ignored the tingle it left. He stared straight at Patzau Yohati, ignoring the other two men.

Patzau Yohati looked down and then back up again. Then he spoke calmly as if the sudden intrusion was expected. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen, the young prince and I require the room." The three men rose from their seats. Yohati walked Janos and the brute to the door and Yohati's guests maintained baleful looks at him as they left. The two door guards followed them out and muffled shouts followed the closing of the door. "Now, what can I do for you, Prince Krimas?"

"I am done being held at bay with empty words. Since the day Aramuk was murdered, you've avoided us and I am finished with it. Your city is full of rumours and arrests, yet my compatriots and I are left entirely in the dark. I know you made arrests. I know you caught Bartiin Foxstring and let him slip through your fingers. I want to know what is being done to recover our assets. Your indifference is an insult. I demand justice."

"Is that all?" Yohati asked, his face stoic.

"What do you mean *is that all*?"

Yohati returned to his seat and leaned back in his chair, chin high. "Let me be the first to speak honestly with you, little princeling. You are correct. You *don't* matter. The recovery of your stolen fortune is *not* my priority, nor is it this city's priority. I am saddened by your uncle's death, but without him I have no further interest in you." Ohacha stood stunned on the other side of Yohati's desk. He had expected a diplomatic answer. He had expected anger or placating words. Not this. Not blunt truths. "I was going to ignore you a while longer—let you lick your wounds but now you've forced my hand. A week should be more than generous, considering the circumstances" Patzau Yohati continued, "Pack your meager belongings and vacate my estate."

"What?" Ohacha stammered. "Are you serious?"

"You are the very least of my problems. I bare you no ill will, but I scarcely cared for your late uncle. You imagine yourself important, but you're not. There are a dozen families in Caso wealthier and more influential than the kings of Gaag ever were. You're a minnow thinking it deserves the respect of a shark. If we *do* recover your stolen coin, I'll ensure you see it returned but I wouldn't keep my hopes up. It's likely spread across a hundred gambling dens. Now shoo."

Ohacha stormed from the office, slamming the door behind him. He descended the stairs under the wary gazes of guards and servants. None dared bar his path. Reclaiming his sword at the ground floor, he burst out the front door, his mind reeling in furious disbelief. *The brazenness of that depraved old bastard!* Yohati's words replayed like a taunt. *The mastermind behind Aramuk's death had been right within the guild's grasp, and their incompetence had let him slip away with my family fortune—stolen on streets they claimed were the safest in the world.*

Heaviest of all was the knowledge that he had ruined everything, again. Ohacha now had to stomach Yohati's absolute disdain. The man sat at the pinnacle of Casoyan influence, and Ohacha had just made him an enemy—an enemy who was evicting them. As the reality of what was said and done sunk in, Ohacha paled. *Gaba'ké, Cask, and Rolena*

have to know. I have to tell them. He dreaded the moment. *How could I have been so stupid?* Ohacha had always known a life with few allies, but on the shameful walk back to the guesthouse, he had never felt so utterly alone.

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Captain Burm watched with nervous irritation as the princeling barged out of the room. He had been thoroughly startled when the boy had burst into the study. It was an embarrassment that made him look weak, and looking weak made him angry. As the boy retreated down the stairs, Burm cast another spiteful glare onto Capu and Seer. Despite their lineage, they were strong capable warriors. Burm only wished the two idiots were capable of common sense. Letting Ohacha slip past was a catastrophic blunder. They withered under his gaze.

He's going to kill us, Burm thought. *If we lose our pay for their incompetence, I swear by the spirits of fire and vengeance the bastards will rue the day.* Once again, Burm regretted trusting anyone other than Rozi; she might not be the strongest fighter, but at least she was reliable.

The doors opened again and Yohati summoned him and Janos back inside. Burm inhaled slowly, ready to face Yohati's ire. His nose tickled uncomfortably and he wiped a hand across his face for relief. *The boy must have seen the fortune. It was right there.* But when Burm looked at Yohati's desk, it was clear. Not a single coin remained where the stack had once been.

"Gal" Yohati said, commanding his attention. "Please sit"

"Uh, yes Patzau" Captain Burm huffed, reclaiming his chair. He stared at absent pile. A wave of confusion rocked him. *Where? The boy wasn't carrying anything, was he?* Then, right before his eyes the stacks of coins reappeared. Burm blinked, uncomprehending, and then saw Janos' wicked smile.

"An illusion," Patzau Yohati explained sternly, "and a damned good one. I thought the prince was going to sniff us out."

"If Janos weren't here with us," Yohati continued, "we would have been forced to sit here and smile as that bratty little prince walked out the door with his whole damned fortune. Are your soldiers outside my door imbeciles or just fucking incompetent?" Yohati seethed from the other side of his wooden desk. "How could they let the boy past them while we're sitting here divvying up *his* very fortune… I should have the two of them drowned in the canals for their ineptitude."

"We dock their pay" Burm suggested diplomatically. "This mistake should cost them."

"No" Yohati snapped. "All of it. They get nothing. That will teach them a lesson."

Shit, Burm thought, *I'll have a mutiny on my hands if they get nothing for this.* "Patzau, I must ask for leniency. These men, they haven't slept. They've been with the hit squads in Mudtown during the day and then working to bring you the fortune each night. They can't get nothing. Not after their loyalty. I will handle a different punishment in excess of yours."

Yohati made to argue but Janos chimed in, "You can both get what you want. Yohati, you pay these men nothing; drive home the consequences for their fuck-up. But, at the same time, you pay Captain Burm here a bonus out of what these men would have been paid. You, Captain, generously gift your men some of 'your pay' out of the very sweet goodness of your heart. Burm gets to appear the strong and loyal captain, Yohati's punishment is clear and impactful, and the idiots are still paid enough to keep them happy and, more importantly, quiet."

Burm mulled over the suggestion. *Its good*. Patzau Yohati seemed to share the sentiment and nodded his approval. Janos Tydana smiled innocently. *Now that's a smile I can't trust,* Burm thought. Even a smile from Janos was a cunning calculation. *He's a killer,* Burm reckoned. *That much is obvious. As an Aginjigaade, the only question remained was whom.*

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Unable to bear returning home, Ohacha ignored his better judgement and slipped through the gates out onto the cobbled streets. For the first time in his life, Ohacha walked alone. No Cask. No Gaba'ké. No Rolena. No soldiers. Without bodyguards, he hardly warranted a look from others. His mind was a wash of emotions and he found himself bouncing between bouts of anger, misery, frustration, and melancholy. He passed under the auction house with its towering domed roof. He hardly spared it a glace. He was looking for The Sweet Wind but got lost along the way and gave up.

Defeated, he sat on the end of a stony jetty and stared out across the water. The waves lapped softly like the ocean's heartbeat. Ships sailed in every direction. Ohacha could make out the tiny figures of far-off sailors as they hoisted, climbed, and rowed. Seabirds circled specific ships, identifying the fishing boats. They appeared to hover as they rode the sea breeze before diving head-first in daring plunges. He sat and watched and wished for a simpler life. He wished to be one of those sailors, or fishers perhaps. He imagined living their lives. Working each day without fear. Earning a living and returning home at the end of a day to spend times with unbroken families. He longed for that figment. Another life, one without the pain and heartache. It took him along time to notice he wasn't alone anymore. The sun was already setting. The last light of the day touching only the high-looming fortress on the rocky peninsula to the south.

"How do you keep finding me?" Ohacha asked, not turning around.

"You don't exactly blend in" Yuromi Ashill said. "What are you doing here? Where is Cask?" she asked, concerned. He didn't answer. "What about your Aginjigaade, the old fellow, what was his name?"

"Gaba'ké"

"Yes. Where is Gaba'ké? What are you doing out here?!"

"Looking at the sea"

"Why?" Yuromi asked, not understanding.

"Why not?" Ohacha answered, but it didn't feel like enough. "Because I wanted to" he added. "Its pretty." The sun was starting to set between the fortress atop headland cliffs and the long sandy islands that sheltered the bay.

"I recognise that look" Yuromi said, stepping forward and taking a seat beside him. She removed her helmet and set it down next to her. The two of them sat only a few paces apart but he didn't even glance at her as she sat beside him. Following his gaze, she too stared out across the bay. "You're feeling hopeless. Beaten. Overwhelmed."

"And how would you know how I feel?" Ohacha asked calmly

Yuromi turned to look at him. Ohacha felt her gaze on him and despite his best efforts not to, he turned to face her. "You had that same look the day I came to visit you at Yohati's estate. You're angry. Feeling defeated." Whatever thoughts he had in that moment, he wasn't sharing them, so Yuromi tried a different tactic, "I wasn't born with this scar" she said. "I've had my own share of failures." He didn't respond, but at least he glanced at her. Yuromi sighed and looked back out over the sea. She ran a finger down the long scar under her eye, "I told you my father died…" Ohacha nodded. "When he died, I didn't handle it well. I was miserable and turned to fighting against my sister, but

mostly my mother. Then one day, we got into a heated argument and I left in a huff. I was angry and hurting, and in turn I wanted to hurt somebody else. I was mad and picked a fight. I *lost* that fight."

"Who did you fight?" Ohacha asked.

"I have no idea," she answered, "and ultimately it doesn't matter. I got angry and I stopped thinking. It took a long time to recover some sense of my self. My worth. My purpose."

"And what turned it around for you?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" Ohacha repeated.

"Nothing will ever happen to you that changes the way you act and feel. Change comes from within. It's was a personal choice. I decided I didn't want to be miserable any more. I was the one making myself unhappy. I was the one acting out of fear and rage. I mean, it took two broken fingers, a cracked rib, and me almost losing an eye for me to understand that it was my own fault. It took almost a year for the cut across my face to heal right. It was all so stupid, kind of like abandoning your bodyguards to sit and watch the sea when there are killers out there who want you dead."

"I've decided that I no longer care" Ohacha responded. He tossed a pebble into the ocean. "I'm tried of living a sad sheltered life, so afraid of the world as to barely exist within it. Today was the first time I've ever walked anywhere alone. Never have I strayed more than two hundred paces from those closest to me. Never have I been able to escape from my sad sheltered life. Some things ought to be worth the risk."

Yuromi tilted her head slightly, considering his words. "I can understand that feeling," she said quietly. "The desire to take back control, to be a part of the world around you. But this kind of freedom is only an illusion. Putting yourself in danger, simply because you can, isn't wise."

Ohacha frowned, "True," he admitted, "but sitting here, staring out at the water, still might be the best choice I've ever made for myself. I'm tired of being led around, protected, controlled. All my life, other people have had opinions for what I should do, who I should be. But what if I don't want any of it?"

"You think I don't know what that's like?" Yuromi reasoned. "I've lived my whole life under the shadow of expectations. My father was a hero. My sister is the perfect little officer. My mother is one of the eight. We inherit more than looks from our parents. We inherit their responsibilities and expectations – their hopes and dreams."

Ohacha exhaled sharply, shaking his head. "And what if I don't want to be king? What if I don't want to go to war over a kingdom I barely remember. What if I just want to disappear, to live quietly, away from all of this chaos?"

"You can" Yuromi suggested. "Your uncle is dead. Its sad, but it also means that you're the only one left in control. Those men love you. I could see in their eyes that if you led them down that path, they would follow and respect your choice. That swordsman and that Aginjigaade, you have their loyalty. They speak highly of you." Yuromi answered, her eyes softening. "You can do whatever you feel is right, but running away doesn't make your problems disappear."

"Leaving now is akin to admitting defeat. It would be an insult to those who died along the way, giving everything and more to our dream of returning home." Ohacha said. "Their sacrifices would amount to nothing. We came here to fund our future, whatever that may be. Instead, we're devastated and destitute.

Yuromi's eyes snapped open. *The coins. Burm's elite squad recovered the fortune*. "Ohacha," she said, her voice raised with sudden excitement. "Go to the fortress tomorrow. Ask to see my mother and…" She paused, the realization catching in her throat. If she told him why, she'd have to expose the rot hiding within her own guild's walls. She couldn't lay that bare to an outsider. "Actually... never mind the details. Just go see Patzau Ashill tomorrow. If you can't find her, ask for Elvi Batari. They'll both be up in the central tower."

"Why?" he asked, brow furrowing. "What's in the fortress?"

"Just trust me," she said, leaning in. "It'll be worth the trip."

"Alright. I will." And for some reason, he did trust her.

The last sliver of sunlight vanished and the deep blue of night began its earnest chase across the sky in pursuit. "Thank you for releasing Rolena. She's a bit rattled, but I think she'll be okay." He hesitated before saying what was really on his mind, "She shared her experience in the prison… what *your* guild is doing to people behind those walls."

Yuromi leaned back contemplative. "I've heard little whispers myself," she admitted, "thinking about my own role in all of this. I reckon that means they're true." She let out a hard sigh. "Somebody is trying very hard to keep it quiet and it won't work forever. The word will spread. People are angry. 'Anger is often the path to self-destruction.'" she quoted.

"Who said that?" Ohacha asked.

"My father" Yuromi said. Ohacha gave her a look. "The irony isn't lost on me, what with this" she added, gesturing to her scar. "You should go home, Ohacha. Your people will be worried about you."

"Ah yes, home" Ohacha said, looking over at her. "That's why I'm here actually. Patzau Yohati has given us a week to relocate. I've been thinking and I was hoping an apartment, rather than an inn, would be preferrable. Something private. It would only need fit four." *Four,* he thought. *Just four of us left. We were thousands, once.*

"What do you mean? Yohati is kicking you out?" Yuromi asked.

"I believe his exact words were, 'without your uncle, you don't matter.'"

"That can't be right" Yuromi said. "You must have misheard him."

"I did not. He was quite clear on the matter."

"But he's so kind."

"Perhaps to you. But the moment my uncle died, whatever deal they had died with him."

"Aren't you being a bit unfair?" Yuromi asked, "He's dealing with a lot right now. There are surges in violence. There's political unrest. These are trying times to be a leader."

Trying times to be a leader. "Yet he lives like a king and lets his daughter throw lavish galas for the city's elite in his private gardens while said people suffer. I may be an outsider, but that doesn't mean I don't have eyes and ears. You Casoyans put a lot of blind faith in your leaders."

"It's easier to have faith when we, the people, select those who lead us" Yuromi countered. "There are no kings in Caso."

Ohacha let out a bark of a laugh. "No kings? There are eight kings in Caso. Each hoarding their own slice of the city. Seven rulers you will never cast a vote for. Even within the guilds, scores of wealthy bankers wield the same power as the thousands of labourers. And then there's your undesirables: the guildless. Pushed out of sight and given nothing. Bodies to be used for labour and fear, then discarded. Don't act out or

you'll become one of *them*. Look what they're capable of. Let it justify our violence and neglect."

Yuromi frowned. "I think you've gone cynical. You've been burned one too many times and refuse to see the good people are trying to do. Unlike you, I've been out there beyond the walls. I've seen the corruption and violence first hand. Exploitation. Bribery. Theft. Territorial rivalries. Innocent people are the ones caught in the middle and it's gone on far too long. I think he wants to make a difference. To improve lives."

"Both what you say and what I have said can be true at the same time" Ohacha countered.

"Perhaps, but I choose to believe that its all for the greater good."

"Even the parties?"

That gave her pause. It wasn't a counter to her argument. Simply an observation. Ohacha smiled a sad smile and looked back across the bay. "My uncle used to say, '*everyone makes the best decisions based on the information they have.*' I've recently learned that incentives and intent are more influential forces. People will ignore inconvenient truths. I may be the worst offender."

"Returning to your original request, I'll ask around" Yuromi said. "There's bound to be a suitable place for you to stay. But, remember what I suggested earlier, go and find my mother or her Aginjigaade, Elvi Batari. One of the higher-ups. It'll be worth it."

"I will" he said. "Good night, Sergeant Ashill. Thank you for the conversation."

"Be safe, Ohacha Krimas."

Chapter 21: The Farmhand

Bartiin Foxstring, noble sword master of his governor Belvaas the Younger, stood in the sweltering heat of the Casoyan mountains picking fruit like a common man. It would rain off and on as the clouds came over the mountains and deposited their moisture. The work was hard and the humidity made harder. Already his body ached in places he hadn't before experienced. Then men up here in the hills were seemed impervious to the pain. *Maybe they're just used to it.*

Picking fruit next to him was a life-long guildsman named Harumal. He was a burly older man with a shaved head, dark stubble, and the round features of a tribesman. Whether it was out of kindness or out of duty, Harumal was the only man who spoke with him since his unanticipated arrival several days past. The large man moved with a mechanical precision that Bartiin observed with awe. He made the task look deceptively easy, when in fact, picking the oddly shaped tree fruit proved rather difficult. Harumal was a large man but the way he climbed the tree in bare feet for the highest fruit made him seem the lightest man on the island. As Bartiin had tried and failed at the task, he found himself looking over at the older man with a renewed sense of respect.

Despite his best efforts to blend in with the local workers, his foreign accent and looks had set him apart from the group immediately. That would have been an issue if anyone out here gave a damn. As it turned out, they didn't. The younger men stayed well clear. It was obvious that very few foreigners ended up working for the guilds, and far fewer in this capacity. At first, Bartiin had presumed they simply didn't like him. His mind filled in the blanks with a dozen rude or self-deprecating reasons. It was clear from their behaviour that it his neglect was deliberate.

It wasn't until several days had past that Bartiin learned the bizarre truth. They avoided him because they mistakenly thought him from the city; some lords simpering son sent to work the fields as punishment for poor behaviour, as was known to happen on odd occasions. That assumption of caste had driven a wedge between them. It wasn't until Harumal had intervened and clarified to the others that the situation improved.

Bartiin had been a young boy when the trader's tongue was impressed upon his lips. Never before had he troubled for being understood or communicating with others. As it turned out, following work orders was difficult with neither man understood the other. The foreman, a stern man with the mark of years spent under the harsh sun and dark sunken eyes, yelled at him repeatedly that first day. The man yelled, and Bartiin repeated his lack of understanding. Then the dance began anew.

It was Harumal who gave him respite. When the foreman yelled, Harumal translated. When Bartiin followed instructions for the first time and the foreman stopped yelling, Harumal translated that too. It was through this interaction that Bartiin had found himself apprenticed to the large man. Harumal spoke Tralang with decent familiarity. To Bartiin's surprise, he learned that most of the men in the field never learned the trader's

tongue. Nor did the speak common Casoyan. Instead, they spoke a hybrid language that had come from the influence of Casoyan trade and local dialects from the interior. Once the good man Harumal intervened, Bartiin finally started understanding what he was supposed to be doing, rather than blinding following the herd of men as they worked.

As such, instead of the smooth city escape Bartiin had imagined, he broke his back picking fruit. His soldiers had been arrested and what had come of them since then, he could only guess. As their leader, he felt guilty for what happened. He had to remind himself that some things are simply outside your control. His fortunes were brought forth by his deeds, as would be his misfortunes. He was a fugitive now. *So it goes.*

Bradel, Hina's non-butler husband, had said something about a Patzau leaning of his jailbreak. Bartiin didn't really follow the man's retelling. He spoke Careyago with the rapidity of a sugarfinch and the low grumble of a man frustrated with his lot in life. The combination only left room for Bartiin to nod along and agree apologetically.

And while Bradel traced his woes to Bartiin, Bartiin traced his back to Lord Kulimas. *We would have made it.* He was sure of it. Instead, the old lord had gotten his revenge, in a way. When the old lord's crossbows had missed, Bartiin had considered himself blessed. *The spirits must be laughing at my foolish ignorance*, he mused.

When they stopped to rest, Harumal sat next to him. He was a quiet man, most of the time. Quiet, but helpful. He said little, but what he did say was helpful. This included common Casoyan phrases and simple answers like 'yes,' 'no,' and 'I don't understand.' Bartiin repeated them out loud, practicing when the other men overheard and joined in, offering their own recommendations.

Harumal was not enjoying the attention, but he stayed anyway because Bartiin needed him to. However, the phrases the guildsmen recommended included only disparaging comments about the foreman—whom no one liked—or vulgar insults that brought roars of laughter from the men as Bartiin repeated them innocently, only for Harumal to explain that he had called the foreman's mother, "a whore" and not to repeat it.

The men had a right to dislike the foreman. Bartiin agreed that he seemed a nasty piece of work and he didn't even understand the man. He was despised by the workers and prone to both violence and abuse of his station. He pushed them past their limits, expecting impossible quotas despite the shortage of working bodies. Behind his back, the men called the foreman 'Baahugal dii Amak' which translates simply to 'The leech.'

Harumal explained the phrase, "A man who works for greed is not trustworthy. The foreman is the type of man to sell his sister for a taste of Casoyan luxury." Bartiin nodded in understanding and Harumal continued, "We pick fruit or tend fields, plow crops and fix roads. Our wives and sisters and daughters head into the city to attend to wealthy families as servants or cooks. Most of us work to bring money back home to our families. But lots of men here send money to wives and children still living in the mountains. There is no work back home, or the work that *is* there is harder and the pay is worse. Better to sweat picking fruits than breaking stones." Despite his lack of experience in both, Bartiin found himself agreeing.

The days passed in a grueling rhythm. Bartiin moved between fruit farms and vegetable fields, his body growing accustomed to the grueling labour and the oppressive conditions. When the sun beat down with the high heat of summer, they worked. When the steady rain soaked the men to their bones and walking became itself a challenge as knees sunk deep into wet earth, they worked. When another flash storm rocked over the mountain, buffeting the men with hard rain, even then the bastard foreman kept them

working. Bartin would return to the shabby barracks building each night praying tomorrow would be the day someone would come to set him free. Although he would likely be barred from leaving while working the fields, he was not barred from leaving the barracks should he choose. But that fear of missing out when they finally came to free him and send him home was the only thing that kelp Bartiin docile.

Harumal, his older mentor, did not sleep in the barracks. As it turned out, most of the men who worked in the guild returned to their homes at the end of the long work days. The barracks was reserved for those unable to find a place to stay, typically men who had come from across the island with no local relatives. As such, the building reflected the neglect it received in the quality of its construction. The barracks building could more correctly fit the description of a large shack. It was a derelict wooden structure with thin cots and minimal amenities. Inside, the barracks stunk with the smell of sweat and grime. Bartiin found himself outside the barracks as often as he could, but never so far as to miss the advent of a stranger or visitor. Each one, he prayed, would be his Careyago patron returning to fulfil the promise of freedom.

Most nights, Bartiin found himself sitting on the nearby bluff overlooking the fields and orchards below. Far to the south, he could make out the large domes of Caso's great palaces and the odd mountain of stone that pierced high above the bay of Caso. Bartiin imagined himself returning to the city to reclaim his ship to sail back home, knowing that without a crew the task would be impossible. The wide bay, protected by a large barrier island, narrowed north of the city into a lagoon that stretched across most of the western coast, only broken by gaps in the continuous line of cays, atolls, and rocky outcrops. He watched as far below, men in small two-person boats fished the narrow lagoon from seaside huts built nigh on the water. He watched them and wished nothing more than to go home and be at peace. To build a house on a hill overlooking the fields of wheatgrass and vegetables and to fill that house with his family and children. He would teach them to fish one day and share stories of his daring escape from this cursed island.

Despite the harsh conditions, Harumal remained Bartiin's only friend. And it was as a friend that Harumal took pity on the strange foreigner and invited him back to his home in the mountains one night for supper. Bartiin had originally declined the invitation, concerned that he might miss his chance to leave. But Harumal had been convincing. The promise of a proper bath in a local spring and meal had been enough for Bartiin to take the risk. The food in the barracks had been appallingly unappetizing. Worse, the greedy foreman made them pay for it out of their day's pay. Something, Bartiin presumed, the man wasn't permitted to be doing at all. In fact, Bartiin reckoned that if the foreman had his way, he'd be paying all his wages back to the guild for the cot, the food, and even the privilege of taking a shit. Or at least that would be the foreman's excuse as he pocketed the meager wages for himself.

Regardless, it was for this reason that Bartiin found himself hiking inland after their gruelling day's work. Harumal walked the steep and rocky trail with an adeptness that left Bartiin huffing and gasping in his wake. As they climbed steadily higher, the fields of grass and vegetables and orchards of trees were replaced with the denser jungle vegetation. The cool mountain air was a welcome relief from the oppressive heat of the open fields or the city. They hiked, crossing a narrow creek to stop upon an old house upon a flat plateau, surrounded by the forest. A flat dirt path led straight across the clearing to where the house stood on the opposite side, surrounded by hand-planted gardens of vegetables and herbs.

The home was made of uncut stones fitted together with a muted grey mortar. A derelict extension had been added to the small house made of mud walls and a thatch roof. The main roof was built steep and tall, except for the obvious addition and the front where a porch had been constructed. The house reminded him of a smaller version of the homes he had seen in the old Casoyan neighbourhood where the Casoyan embassy had been. It was aged. But it was also beautiful. He wasn't sure what he had expected when accepting the older man's hospitality, but it hadn't been this.

The two men approached the house and ascended the steps to enter through the front door. Even before entering, the warm smell of seared meats and roasting vegetables wafted through the house leaking its inviting aroma. Bartiin followed Harumal's direction and paid his respects to the carved symbols above the doorway. It looked to him like the face of an inhuman being, but Harumal didn't explain and Bartiin didn't ask. Inside, two women stood, one chopping away with a knife while the other tended to the cooking pan. Both turned at their arrival with curious looks about the new face entering their home. Harumal spoke with his wife in their local tongue and Bartiin stood anxiously, lost in the foreign words being exchanged. Meanwhile, the younger girl, presumably Harumal's daughter, peered from behind her mother with an engrossed curiosity. Bartiin caught her staring and smiled sheepishly. She returned the smile with politeness. It was a pretty smile.

"Bartiin," Harumal said, shifting his attention, "this is my wife, Ahunas, and behind her is my youngest daughter, Jiral."

Ahunas smiled with an awkward politeness. Ahunas had a heart shaped face and round cheeks with dark hair braided back behind her head. Unlike her husband, she was slender and tall with the same darker complexion most of the men he had worked with shared. Her daughter was much the same but in a smaller body. Thin and wiry, Jiral had the same round cheeks as her mother but with her father's strong hawk nose, wider chin, and fuller lips. Unlike her mother, she kept her straight black hair down with strands tucked comfortably behind her ears. Bartiin had to admit, the girl was pretty in a familiar way. She strode forward past her mother, still brandishing the knife and stopped a few steps away from him. She gave him a once over before speaking.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Bartiin." Jiral said in heavily accented Tralang, "You're not from around here… so where did my father meet you?" she asked curiously.

Bartiin was surprised by the question. Her accent was sharp, but he hadn't expected to be able to converse with her at all. "I… I work with your father" he answered, "At the guild."

"You're a guildsman?" she asked, surprised.

"Uh, yes" he answered timidly.

"Are you Casoyan born?" she asked, inquisitively. "You don't look much like any Casoyan man I've ever met." She eyed him again and he looked down at the dirty workers clothes he had been given to wear all those days ago.

"No" he answered. Harumal interjected, speaking to his daughter in their tongue and Bartiin understood from his meaning from his tone, rather from words. He was chiding her, though for what reason Bartiin didn't understand

"You are hungry?" Ahunas asked him. Her accent was heavy, almost incomprehensible. Unlike her daughter and husband, it was clear she hadn't learned much Tralang in her years.

"Do you want to eat?" Jiral asked.

“I would be honoured” Bartiin answered. Harumal nodded in approval of his courteousness.

“Food will be ready to serve in many minutes.” Jiral said. “Follow my father, he will take you to the stream to wash yourself.”

Bartiin followed Harumal through the back door and outside the house. But not without casting one last glace behind him at the daughter of his new friend. Harumal slapped him playfully on the head when it was clear he had gotten distracted. The message was lighthearted. But it was also unquestionably a warning. The two men walked down a narrow path through the low jungle canopy that looked as much a game track as any actual real trail.

They came upon a steep embankment. Bartiin watched as Harumal walked down, his feel finding perfect stone steps scattered across the otherwise worn hill. At the bottom, another stream fed into a larger pool of water where curls of steam danced in the small gulley. Mist spirits that had been wading through the steamy vapour disappeared, vanishing into nothingness as the two men approached and disrobed.

Bartiin dipped his hand in and was surprised to find the water warm. Gaag was a flat land. Most of the country was situated on the wide mouth of the Gaagian River. Only the city of Gaag sat on a higher hill closer to the sea. But he had never heard of lands where the rivers and streams ran warm. He submerged himself in the warm embrace of the steam and washed the mud and dirt from his skin. He submerged his body and ran his fingers through his long hair. Harumal did much the same.

After they had bathed, Bartiin found himself drawn to sitting and relaxing. The warm water was comforting. The tightness in his muscles and weariness in his hands and feet and back seemed to reduce, like fat on a skillet. Bartiin looked down at his hands. His fingernails had grown long and had softened in the warm water. Without tools to clip them, he began to chew on them.

“Tell me” Harumal said from the other side of the wispy pool, “who are you really? where are you from? You do not look like us Casoyans and it is clear you do not speak Casoyan. And yet you have found yourself here working the fields like us.”

Bartiin took his nails out of his teeth. “That’s not an easy question” Bartiin answered, elusively.

“Try” Harumal said.

Bartiin considered the question. There was nowhere to hide. And Harumal had been very kind and generous to help him and invite him to his home. It felt wrong to lie. “You are correct, I am not Casoyan” Bartiin explained, avoiding specifics. “I work for a distant lord. A governor in a far away kingdom. I do the things he needs done.”

“And this lord needs you to pick fruit, carry vegetables, and dig ditches in a foreign city?”

Bartiin frowned. He wasn’t keen on sharing the real reason he was here nor the real reason he was hiding outside the city. He liked Harumal, but he didn’t trust the older man yet. “Not exactly” Bartiin said after hesitating. “It is complicated. Things have not gone… as expected. I’ve gotten into a bit of trouble.”

“Trouble?”

“Yes. I’m not sure you would understand.”

“I’m sure it can’t be as bad as the trouble my son has gotten himself into.”

Bartiin grunted in acknowledgement but didn’t wish to argue the point. *I doubt that. I seem to have caused quite a stir.*

Harumal's brows furrowed but he didn't press either. "I had thought," he continued, "that on that first day you joined our group, that you were some sort of spy from the guild. Here to see if we were doing our work or stealing food. I am not sure. But, when it was clear you didn't speak Casoyan, that all seemed unlikely. What good is a spy who can't listen in on the conversations exchanged."

"Wouldn't the best spy pretend not to speak the language?" Bartiin asked without thinking.

Harumal chuckled, acknowledging the argument. "You didn't watch us either. What good is a spy that watches the sea" he said.

"Does the guild do that?" Bartiin asked, "Send spies to listen in on its workers?"

"Oh plenty" Harumal answered with a scoff. "Patzau Onudar is a distrusting man. But most of the spies his guildsmen send are young boys from the interior with little to no money; easy to bribe. They're always a little too eager to speak ill of the guild with the hopes of deceiving men into joining in. Or they wander off carelessly with hopes of catching men eating in the fields or sleeping on the job. I thought maybe, with you, they had changed tactics. At this point, we almost expect something new."

"Why is it that none of the other men speak Tralang? Only you seem to know the trader's tongue" Bartiin asked, chasing a thought.

"My family, we live close to the city" Harumal explained. "Foreigners have been visiting these shores since long before I was born. Even before the King's of Casoya built their twin palaces. Most of us close enough to the city learned enough Tralang to sell and converse. Now, in the city and the surrounding villages, its simply bled into our own language. But the other men working the fields, they hail from deeper in the mountains; further inland where foreigners don't visit. They don't need it because nobody speaks it."

"Somebody told me that your people hate the Casoyans. The ones inside the walls. Is that true?"

Harumal grimaced. "I don't think its true, but that doesn't mean there isn't truth behind it. In the past, we were one people; all of us Casoyans. There were distinct tribes and communities, of course, but we were one people. We lacked the divisions we now define ourselves by. And by defining each other as something different, we have become so; growing apart as if it were true. But are two branches of the same tree different, or are they one once you peer down at the roots?"

Bartiin listened to Harumal's words from across the warm spring. A weight settled over him as he absorbed the meaning and reflected on his own life and choices. Harumal may have been speaking strictly of the divisions in Caso, but his words touched a far more personal place. A place within Bartiin that held conflict. For a brief moment, a wave of shame passed through him. Shame over the choices he'd made. The blood that he had spilled in the name of protecting his people. His branch of the same tree.

"There is wisdom in what you say," Bartiin began quietly, his voice tinged with a bitterness that surprised even him. "I must admit that I am guilty of that same line of thought. I've sown division, and watched brother turn against brother. In my homeland, we are taught to protect what is ours at any cost. Sometimes that cost is a part of us." He looked down at his hands again.

Harumal watched him silently from across the small spring, suddenly absorbed in the younger man's frankness. This was the first time Bartiin had spoken more than a few obscure words about himself, about where he had come from. And by his words, it was now clear he wasn't a simple merchant set upon by hard times or a bad sale. He spoke with weight.

“But I would do it again” Bartiin continued. “I believe we did the right thing, even now. If we hadn’t acted, we’d have watched our kingdom—our people—fall to ruin. Destroyed over one man’s pride. So, I made a choice; a sacrifice. Bartiin met Harumal’s gaze, his expression resolute. “You speak of war as a tool of change, and maybe I’ve wielded it recklessly in the past. But sometimes, when a part of the tree is rotten, you have to lop off a branch to save the trunk.”

Harumal remained silent for many breaths. Enough time where Bartiin didn’t think the older man would respond at all. But Harumal was simply thinking on his words. When he spoke again, he selected his words carefully, “You speak of a complicated history; one I do not understand. But I can sense that you remain conflicted. I can recognise that the world is complicated and that you believe what you have told me. Like any man, you must do what you think is right. But my father taught me that you must never forget that your enemy, whomever they may be, is also a person. And they must be respected as a person, for when your enemy is stripped of their humanity, you invite atrocities. As you have said, sometimes you must cut the branch to save the tree. But wild hacking at the branches can do irreparable damage.”

Bartiin exhaled. The breath pushed the hot steam away from the surface of the water in a gust of mist. “My problems stem from the branches left uncut.”

Harumal rose, stretching his arms and sighing deeply. “Let us dry off and return home to eat. I expect you are as hungry as I am.”

Bartiin nodded, following the old Casoyan out of the spring. The cold air felt sharp after the warmth of the spring. As he dried and redressed, Bartiin praised the effect the pool had on his tired body. For the first time in days, he almost felt at ease.

The two men ascended the steep berm, still dripping, and made the short journey back to the house. As Bartiin entered, Ahunas and Jiral stood speaking with a third person—a man with short hair and an awkward posture. Harumal frowned and avoided the newcomer, heading deeper into the house. Bartiin, unsure whether or not to follow, stood stiffly at the door.

Bartiin noticed the large man had fresh burns across his body. When the newcomer finally turned, he realized with a jolt of surprise that he knew the strange burned face. The long hair and beard were gone, replaced with a thin haggard look, but it was unmistakenly Yoharum. It was the hawk-nosed brute Bartiin had paid to kill Ohacha and Aramuk Krimas. Yoharum turned to face Bartiin, astonishment flooding his eyes. Their gazes locked in mutual recognition. This was the killer Bartiin had met over a month ago in Yomu’s ale house. And, as Bartiin now realized, Yoharum was Harumal’s troublesome son. To his and everyone else’s surprise, Bartiin grinned wide and burst out laughing.

Chapter 22: The Friend

Patzau Mellen Minoc sat in a high-backed chair across from Patzau Murak Adagizhi's empty desk. He sat impatiently, his fingers drumming a slow methodical rhythm on wooden armrest. His ringed fingers elevated what would have been the soft taping to the loud clanking of metal on wood. The chamber was spacious. The stone walls had been covered in plaster and detailed wooden wainscoting and mouldings. There was a pair of narrow windows to on left wall that were just beginning to let light peek into the room. On the right, a painted portrait hung over a bar table brimming with various bottles of wines and liquors. Next to the bar table sat a small sleeping hearth. Over the mantle sat rows of wax tablets, their surfaces erased smooth and resettled. The room still smelled faintly of the sweet oily scent of burnt wood and melted wax. The room was abhorrently foreign in its stylings. The wood was a redwood imported from Cayanoshi. As was the furniture; the desk and chairs. Just from the workmanship, Mellen knew which of his artisans fashioned the office for Adagizhi. The work was good, of course, just not to his specific tastes. In the chair next to him sat Kuta. The girl was always at his side these days and even for her, remained quiet of late.

"He's here" Kuta said, unexpectedly breaking the silence.

Mellen stopped tapping and looked over his shoulder to face the door. A moment later, the door opened and a red-faced Adagizhi entered the room. "Apologies, Mellen" Patzau Adagizhi said, taking a seat across from them. "I've received some bad news and have been working to… remedy the situation."

"What's wrong?" Mellen asked.

"Shipments of raw ores from one of my mines in the mountains—they've stopped coming down altogether." Adagizhi began, his voice gruff and edged with frustration. "There was a missed shipment a few days ago and another one yesterday. The stone isn't a big deal. We've got other quarries across the island. It's the copper that we're missing. Without it, we'll be in a pinch for forging more bronze. Your guild has been buying so much, our stores are dwindling. I'll have to instruct a halt on orders if this continues. I know this will have an impact on your guild; you should be aware."

Mellen nodded, his gaze steady but cold. "Actually, I'm already aware of the situation, Murak. This is why I've come. There have been rumblings in the mountains. In the administered villages, people are restless now that news of Mudtown has reached them."

"Restless?" Adagizhi spat. "From what I was told, these people on the verge of revolt, Mellen. Its treachery and treason. Tell me what you know. Did they destroy my mine?"

"Revolt? no," Minoc said, his voice low and dismissive. "Out there, just as it is here, there are frustrations being voiced but nothing organized or coordinated. I'd wager your shipments are late because men are abandoning their stations to protest just as

Patzau Onudar has complained they are doing. And this is why I have come. We must give these people a resolution. If we meet their violence with more violence, things will only escalate until it truly *is* organized war. We have arrested hundreds and had them tried and judged guilty for crimes against us. We have had our justice. Now it is time for us to make peace."

"You would have us reward these people for insurrection and depraved behaviour?" Patzau Adagizhi sneered.

Mellen leaned forward in his chair and stared challengingly into Patzau Adagizhi's eyes. "I would have peace restored" he said, seriously. "Wars are costly. We are a city, nay a government built on mercantilism; on cooperation, not war. I fear we will learn that, in our love of wealth and luxury, we have not the taste for blood. But by that time, it will be far too late to recork that bottle."

"When did you become a fearful old man?" Adagizhi mocked. "Patzau Ashill has been granted additional men and funds and is recruiting and training more and more soldiers each day. The crime and violence that has poisoned Mudtown has festered for far too long, its removal is far overdue."

"You've seen Yohati's version of justice" Mellen countered. "Even Patzau Ashill says he's gone too far. We cannot punish common citizens for living amidst the gangs and violence."

"These people are not as innocent as you think they are" Adagizhi argued. "Yesterday, the mob hung a soldier from a tree until dead and cheered as he died by the rope. You think these people are civilized? They celebrated as he died and defiled his body. These people support the gangs. With their words and with their money. They're envious. They want to kill each and every last one of us here inside the city. They are invaders and traitors, each and every last one. It is now up to us to route them out, by blood if necessary"

"Oh, please," Mellen ridiculed. "You can't honestly believe the words that just came out of your mouth? You think these people wanted to be ruled by gang leaders? You think they willing give their money? You're right, we have let this problem fester, but we won't solve it through waves of indiscriminate violence. Nor will be solve anything by blaming the victims of our own conceited unwillingness to act."

Patzau Adagizhi sat across from Mellen, staring intently and meeting his gaze. His long fingers tapped rapidly across the desk between them. The rhythm fast and incessant. Finally, Adagizhi spoke, "Yohati is right about you, Mellen" he said disappointingly. "You're a blaggard in fine clothes."

"Excuse me?!" Mellen scoffed.

"We all know you have your spider strings spread across this whole island, watching and listening. We've known each other for years. At one time, I'd have even considered us friends. But to find out you've been paying serving men in my house to keep tabs on me and my family. And to learn you've done the same for so many other people across this city…" Murak put his face in his hands and rubbed his eyes. He looked more stressed now than he had when he walked in.

"I don't pay spies on your staff, Adagizhi" Mellen said, frustration flashing across his face. "Nor do I employ spies in any other homes inside the city."

"You're a damned liar!" Adagizhi growled.

"I am not!" Mellen growled back. *Where has this come from, all of a sudden?* "I collect information; I won't deny that fact. But there is a difference between encouraging information to reach my ears and placing servants in powerful homes to spy. It's not my

fault that people talk and I listen." *Nor is it my fault that control over your own staff is so lacking that you let rumours leak from your home like fish from a tattered net,* Mellen thought bitterly. He refrained from instigating further.

"Here we go again…" Adagizhi said, "its always twisting words and specific definitions with you. You're more elusive with your words than a spirit in a windstorm."

"The information I collect is shared with our council, the Patzau, time and time again. It is for our collective benefit."

"What benefit is there from encouraging dishonesty and eavesdropping?"

"The benefit is that somebody on this council has a damned clue about the things that happen inside this city. About the things that happen out of sight from the guilds. Most of what we know about the gangs is from whispers shared with me."

"The information you shared about the gangs was woefully inaccurate" Adagizhi snapped back.

"And have you ever considered that this is the case because you all collectively asked me to stop listening out for criminal business and 'to let Patzau Ashill focus on the issue'. The information I had was several seasons out of date."

"Your spies are a blight on this city. One that makes the people, including your fellow Patzau, distrust you. There is no benefit to your corruption."

"Corruption?" Mellen reeled. "The benefit is that *your* secrets end up in my hands, not somebody else's, Adagizhi. Someone who thought of you as a friend, and not an enemy. Are you so foolish as to think that whispers occur only because I put my ear up to hear them? That your secrets would simply fade into the wind if we all turned away deafly?

"Rumours have always been nasty things, but you enable them for your own gain."

"And suppress them for yours!" Patzau Minoc challenged, raising his voice. "I have used my influence to aid even you out of tenuous circumstances. Perhaps you've already forgotten you daughter's affair. And thankfully, this city has too. Thanks to my intervention and a few quiet payments made to keep certain servants quiet."

"How could… how could you even dare to speak to me of…" Patzau Adagizhi shouted, irritated and confused. "I… I didn't ask you to…." His tone shifted from embarrassment to anger, "Wait, was that a threat? Are you blackmailing me?"

"Spirit of the storms, no!" Mellen cried, exasperated. "I think that you are, for the most part, a level headed member of our council and you are certainly respectable in leading your guild. Replacing you would have been bad for all of us, for the entire city. If the scandal had gotten out, and it would have, it could have meant you losing your seat on the council."

"That's preposterous."

"You may think so, but I decided it was worth supressing. Better to keep you than lose you."

"I don't like this, Mellen" Murak said, shaking his head. "I don't like it."

"Think critically for a second" Mellen said, chasing an idea. "If not me, someone else will be the one to learn your secrets. Someone who you *really* can't trust. Wouldn't you rather know that I at least have yours and Caso's best interests at heart. I will not apologize for keeping my sails ready for words on the wind."

"That's just it, Mellen. I don't trust you." Patzau Adagizhi said. He cast a side glance at Kuta as he said it. It was only for a fraction of a second, but it was enough. Ah, *so that's how it is,* Mellen thought. A weight settled over Mellen's heart in that moment.

“You’ve always been ambitious,” Murak continued, “but I no longer see it the same way. You’re a plotter and a manipulator; always looking for the advantage. Forever power hungry. Spirits, the way you’re always fighting with Patzau Onudar and Patzau Hadashenta. The way you attacked Yohati in the Patzau Meeting.”

“What are you *talking* about?” Mellen fussed. “Patzau Yohati seized control of the Soldiers Guild and marched this city into bedlam. Our soldiers are fighting to maintain order and people are being beheaded without due trial and *my* deeds are seen as ambitious and untrustworthy?!”

“Those people were criminals, Mellen.”

“And so are we, so long as we choose not to adhere to our own laws. Criminals are tried for their crimes. It’s called justice. It is the mast and keel of society.”

“This is war. There isn’t the time for ceremonial justice. And we are the law.”

Mellen scowled and sat back in his chair. “If we choose to forgo civility, how are we any better than these gangs we hope to destroy? Perhaps you’ve forgotten or history, Murak, but I haven’t. The original five Patzau deposed the last King of Caso for precisely the same justification. He held himself above the law.

“Oh, fuck off, Mellen. He was a tyrant!”

“And you think we don’t sit in our palace, the same one he built, and cast the same shadow?”

“We have built this city up to be the wealthiest and most powerful the world has ever seen. More people have gained from our governance and planning than people thought imaginable back when the Guild’s took control of the city. And these people, these savages, they want to take it from us. Like leeches they’ve descended from their backwater villages to suck the lifeblood from our great city. They must either assimilate with the rest of us, or like leeches, we will burn them out.”

Mellen looked to Kuta. For the very first time he could remember, she was visibly angry. Her body was tense, and her expression was grim. The peculiar metallic scent of her sorcery singed his nostrils. The sensation was so strong that he could almost swear he tasted blood on his tongue. For the briefest of moments, he had the terrifying fear that she might kill him, right here in his own office. Patzau Adagizhi had the same fear and he cowered under her piercing stare. She rose suddenly, and turned abruptly to leave. As she walked towards the door, the hinges screeched audibly in unnatural protest as the door bent and warped open before her.

Mellen turned back to Patzau Murak, who tried to appear unphased by the sudden departure and failed. Echoes of fear still lingered across his face. “Order her back” Patzau Adagizhi said, rather timidly.

“I don’t think you want her in this room right now” Mellen said, disapprovingly. “You’re lucky she’s a good kid with a kind spirit. If I were her, I’d have…” …*killed you for that,* he thought. *Hm, how uncivilized of me.* It was true, though. Or at least he believed so.

“Bring her back” Murak ordered.

Mellen squinted, confused by the sudden urgency in the demand. “No” he answered.

“Mellen, I need her here”

“You need her here?” he huffed. “Then maybe you should have considered that before you called her people backwater savages and leeches. You debase yourself, Murak. And, I think, I’ve overstayed my welcome as well.”

Mellen moved to stand but Murak barked at him to stay seated and Mellen flinched in surprise, still on the edge of his seat. He frowned deeply and found himself chewing on his lip to try and keep himself from saying something regrettable. The taste of blood, real blood this time, splashed across his tongue. It had the opposite effect. Unable to contain himself, Mellen rose, planting his palms on the desk between them. He looked directly into Patzau Adagizhi's eyes as he spoke, "You're pathetic, Murak. I thought you were better than this. I might have expected as much from Onudar or Hadashenta, but not from you. You… you…" Too many thoughts stirred through his mind. Vulgar insults and venomous threats, each less cunning and more spiteful than the last.

"Fuck you, Mellen" Patzau Adagizhi spat. "You're an arrogant bastard and you deserve what's coming to you."

"You better hope to grow a spine in the next few weeks for when things get worse" Mellen said, ignoring the insult. "Because you've cast this net. And when you haul in your own demise, I'll sit idly by and watch with joy as it pulls you under."

"Get out of my office!" Patzau Adagizhi ordered.

"Gladly" Mellen grumbled. He turned and swept from the room, passing a glace at the malformed hinges on the doors. He found himself sniggering as he left. Right up until he hit the ground floor landing and a dozen armed soldiers stood between him and the exit. He moved to pass by the soldiers, but they barred his exit, hands on the hilts of the swords. Swords his guild manufactured.

"What is the meaning of this?" Mellen asked.

The lead soldier before him was a giant of a man. He was even taller than Mellen himself, with broad shoulders and a muscular brutish look to him. He wore the lighter salt-dried cotton armour common across the guild, rather than the heavy plate his squad was famous for. The sword on his hip, to any other man, might have been called a long sword. Mellen recognized the young captain. It would be difficult not to. *Captain Gal Burm,* Mellen thought. As he looked across the squad, he realized that he recognized most of the soldiers within it. Several were sons or daughters of one of the older and more prestigious families across the city.

"Mellen Minoc" Captain Burm said, his voice deep. "Where is your Aginjigaade?"

"Not here" Mellen answered, casting a glace around the hall where others watched in curiosity.

"Where is she?"

"I just told you, not here" Mellen said. He fidgeted nervously with one of the many rings on his hands. Understanding came. He felt afraid, but was trying his best not to show it. He already knew how this would end. *So, this is what you meant when you said I deserved what was coming for me,* he thought. *A fucking coup.* "Which one of them put you up to this Burm? What are they paying you?"

"Mellen Minoc, you are being taken into custody of the Soldier's Guild on suspicion of treason against the City of Caso."

Burm bellowed the order. The announcement wasn't for him; Mellen already knew what was happening. It was for everyone else in the room. They would spread the rumour. You're a *fucking hypocrite, Murak,* Mellen thought to himself. *Of course, I suppose I already knew that.*

Mellen raised his voice to match the captains, "For what crime? And under whose authority?" Speaking gave him another thought, a gamble; "Unless Patzau Ashill herself stands across from me, I refuse to comply" he added.

“They have my authority” a voice boomed from behind. Mellen turned to see Patzau Murak Adagizhi standing over the balcony, glaring down at him in the wide hall below.

“I reject your authority” Mellen repeated. “You have no authority over these men or this order.”

“But I am Patzau, leader of the city” Murak said.

“As am I–”

“No longer!” Murak interrupted. “It has come to light that you have been supporting rebellious factions in opposition to your duties as Patzau. You orchestrated the attack on Patzau Yohati. This is grounds for immediate dismissal, and so you are dismissed.”

“What are you talking about?” Mellen huffed. “What evidence do you have of such a crime? Produce it and I think all will plainly see *your* handwriting signing any such confession. The only treason committed today is here and now by–”

A heavy-handed blow to the gut stole the breath from Mellen’s chest. Gasps echoed around the hall. He hit the ground and wheezed for air, then looked up to see Captain Burm standing over him. “If you resist, we will take it as acknowledgment of your duplicity. Run, and we will strike you down for your crimes. Do you understand? If you are innocent, you will have nothing to fear.” Burm added. Again, the words were theatre. Mellen, still lacking breath, hadn’t the opportunity to oppose as strong hands forced him into submission and ropes were produced to bind his hands.

“You claim I will have a chance to speak for my innocence and yet you already treat me as if I have done this. I have not, and know your accusations are baseless. I must know what you claim my crimes are so I may prepare defenses.”

“Innocent men have no need to prepare defenses. Only criminals seek time for ways to hide their duplicity” Murak answered. And in that moment, Mellen knew that his trial would echo the ones Yohati had strung together for the hundreds of poor souls taken prisoner after the Auction House attack. He knew, too, that his trial would be equally fair and just.

*

Light from the street below filtered up and into the room, illuminating the ceiling with the white glow of illum stones. The market below the window of Kuta’s apartment had several luxurious sellers who advertised their services even into the evening; a well-known seamstress and her worker bees, a butcher who imported cured meats from across the Casoyan sea, a bathhouse, four different crockery stores, a woman posing as a fortune teller from Osiidan, and a pair of guildsmen who carved statues and patterned designs into keystones. The street was narrow and unfrequented by foreigners. Even with the violence outside the city, the killings and destruction of blocks of Mudtown, the market was busy.

The day had been muggy and a layer of sweat clung to Kuta’s skin. She had already removed her robes to bathe, only to find the pail of water she paid to have delivered every so often had already run dry. She would need to stop the men on their rounds tomorrow morning. Usually, she could make the water last a few days, longer if she slept at the guild as she did on occasion. She sighed disappointingly. She would have to visit the bathhouse to clean properly. Her hair was already unpinned and hung long and loose down to the small of her back. She would need to tie it back up quickly, prior to leaving.

Kuta redressed and collected a towel only to hear a loud thumping from what sounded like her front door downstairs. It was rare for anyone to visit, let alone visit unannounced. Cautiously, she made her way to the narrow stairs that led directly down to her front door, which opened directly into the market below. *Perhaps it was a mistake. The knocker was intending to visit one of the shops and happened upon the wrong door.* The knocking came again.

Kuta descended the steep steps until she reached the tiny landing before her door. "Who is it?" she shouted. Whoever it was, either didn't hear her or didn't answer as she got no reply. Opening a sliding panel on the door, she peered through. On the other side was the unexpectedly familiar sight of Elvi Batari, Aginjigaade for the Soldiers Guild.

"Aginjigaade Batari?" Kuta asked confused, opening the door. The other woman seemed to take the action as an invitation and she barged inside, pushing the door closed behind her.

"What the hell?" Kuta exclaimed, startled at the intrusion. She was barely clothed and certainly not comfortable with an unexpected visitor. "Can I help you?" Kuta asked in common Casoyan.

"Yes" Elvi said with a seriousness in her eyes. Above her officer's uniform, she wore the lightweight armour most of the guildmembers wore. On her shoulders marked her special rank as Chief Aginjigaade. *This is business*, Kuta realised. Elvi continued, "I need you to answer some questions" she added. Kuta's heart sank. *Spirits, Yoharum's been caught. Or maybe they learned of my relation to him? But he wouldn't say anything. Would he?*

"What kind of questions?" Kuta asked carefully. Kuta brought her wrists to her chest, feeling for the pins she kept hidden up her sleeves. All six of the metal pin talismans were still there, ready to be manipulated with a whim. The only one missing was the one she kept in her hair, which she hadn't the time to put back in. She avoided the instinctual use of her agindan sense. It would be risky in such close proximity. Only if she truly intended to use her abilities would she dare.

Elvi Batari passed her and climbed the steep stairs, letting herself into the small apartment. Kuta wanted to protest but didn't know how. She could only watch with cautious disbelief. She followed the older woman up the stairs and found her gazing around the simple room with curious eyes. Kuta didn't keep anything sentimental or identifying. It was safer that way, as now proven.

"You said you had questions for me?" Kuta asked with a timid nervousness.

"Yes" Elvi answered hastily, turning around abruptly. She hesitated a moment before speaking, "I was hoping you would be able to clarify something for me. Could you help me better understand Patzau Minoc?"

"Patzau Minoc?" Kuta repeated.

"Yes" Elvi said, "I need to better understand him as a person. You are his personal Aginjigaade."

"I work for the guild" Kuta corrected.

"Who else at the guild do you spend time with, then?"

Kuta hesitated, knowing Elvi already knew the answer. "Officially, I work for the guild. I'm an active voting member."

"I understand" Elvi said, "But I need to know more about the man himself. Mellen Minoc. What were his aspirations? What did he value? Who did he trust? What kind of work did you do for him?"

“His aspirations?” Kuta repeated, not understanding. “He’s a father” she said.

“And…?” Elvi dug.

“And, he cares about his daughter. He wants her to grow up in a safe a prosperous home” Kuta answered. Elvi gestured for her to continue. “I… he… He values relationships, and good business deals. He has aspirations for his guildmembers to thrive. He values information.”

“What kind of information?” Elvi asked, pouncing on the detail. Kuta hesitated, which prompted Elvi to add, “Kuta, I know about his web of informants. Patzau Ashill and I were always aware. Can you share with me some of the details?”

“You know?” Kuta said, cautiously.

“Of course, all of the Patzau know… to some degree. Now, tell me more about his web of informants. How does his network actually function.”

“I’m not sure that I have a sufficient answer. Nor whether it is my place to explain” Kuta said.

“That’s fine” Elvi said in a tone that made it clear that wasn’t. “Who did he trust? Besides you, who is in his inner circle?”

“His wife, Mira.” Kuta answered. “She manages a lot of the administration and administrators in the guild. There are a few prominent guildmembers that represent the larger companies of artisans.”

“Who?” Elvi pushed, “I need names.”

“No,” Kuta said, now uncomfortable, “I need to understand why you are here and why you are asking all these questions. In my home, at this hour no less.”

“I promise I’ll tell you, but I just need you to answer a few more questions.” Elvi said sincerely. Or at least it felt sincere. Kuta wasn’t sure anymore. Elvi had always seemed kind enough, but that wasn’t enough to trust her. “What kind of work did you do for Patzau Minoc?” Elvi asked.

“I didn’t do much” Kuta lied. “He asked a lot of questions and thought out loud constantly. Mostly, he talked and I listened. He would have me keep tabs on any anomalies within the city. If a new Aginjigaade arrived or left. I would help him read or write information on tablets. I checked the quality of the metals across the various forges around the city.”

Elvi sighed heavily and kept her gaze focus. The attention made Kuta uncomfortable. It felt as if the other woman were looking through her into her very soul and she didn’t like it. She was afraid of what Elvi might discover. “Did he ever do any business in Mudtown?”

Kuta furrowed her brows, “Not that I’m aware of.”

“So, he might have?”

“No” Kuta said more confidently. “All of the guild members are inside the city save for the new forge being built on the north side.”

“Was Patzau Minoc funneling money or weapons to the gangs in Mudtown?”

Kuta blinked rapidly, unprepared for the question. “What?” was all she could say before her wits returned. “No. Spirits, no. Not that I know of. Where did you hear something like that?” she asked, perplexed.

“Do you support the gangs in Mudtown?” Elvi drilled. “I know you’re from the mountains. Are you sending them weapons or money? Are they extorting you?”

Kuta reeled, shocked and then angered by the sudden twist in the interrogation. “What are you talking about? No. What is going on? Why are you here asking me these questions?”

"You don't support the gangs in Mudtown?" Elvi asked, one last time.

Kuta frowned angrily. "No, I don't support the thieves and criminals who extort and rape and kill innocent people."

"I had to be sure" Elvi said, letting out a deep breath.

"Had to be sure of what!?" Kuta demanded. The anger spilled from her. Memories of Patzau Adagizhi's tirade replayed through her mind. "You had to be sure I'm not some backwater savage who supports murderers and thieves? Had to be sure I'm not corrupt and violent like the rest of them? You want to check that I'm not some leech here to suck the blood from the city; to greedily take more than my share? Is that what you want to know?!"

"No" Elvi stammered, caught off guard by the sudden shift. "That's not what I–"

"I'm so fucking sick of this shit." Kuta yelled through tears. "*You* come into my home and accuse me of… of… this bullshit all because I wasn't born here in Caso? How is it this city welcomes foreigners from across the world but can't stomach a family born on the other side of the same fucking island?"

"I didn't–" Elvi started.

A hard glare from Kuta silenced her. "You didn't what?" Kuta snapped. "Didn't mean it that way? Then what exactly did you mean?" She huffed angry breaths. A few silent seconds passed before Kuta realized she had, in fact, pushed out with her agindan sense. She felt herself, her consciousness, pressed right up against Elvi's, who held her ground defensively. As Kuta calmed and regained control, she perceived the various spirits spread about the room. She could feel how they recoiled from her. In her rage she had drawn them into her orbit and held them, threatening to channel through their power. Just the softest push and the scent of her own sorcery would fill the room. As would Elvi's in response. She felt the apprehension from Elvi's consciousness.

No, I don't want this, she thought. Kuta felt the distress from the spirits she gripped and released them. Then she pulled herself back from Elvi, both spiritually and physically, taking two steps backwards. Elvi remained where she stood, still wary. She looked ready for violence. But Kuta didn't want violence. She just wanted to be free of all the pressure. The pressure to be something less than what she was. To be the model citizen despite the preconceived opinions about her. To quietly ignore the insults and slander. To be 'one of the good ones.'

She cried hard ugly tears. Something warm wrapped her up and Kuta found herself in Elvi's embrace. The sobs came harder and she wished for her familiar arms instead. Arms that would understand her pain. But none were here and so she cried in Elvi's embrace instead. Her sobs slowly subsided, replaced with soft tears and jerky breaths. Elvi spoke, cutting the silence. "What happened?"

"I think it was a mistake" Kuta said through heavy breaths, "coming here, to Caso."

"What makes you say that?" Elvi asked softly.

"People don't want us here," she said. "They want us to farm the fields and dig the ditches. To serve and labour and build. They want to use us. But they don't want *us*, the people. The story keepers and musicians. The artists and poets."

Elvi felt lost and replied, "That's not true." Though she wasn't sure she believed her words.

"We are born, here, on the island of Casoya. But never are we referred to by you as Casoyans." Kuta scowled, "We're the *others*, the mountain people, inlanders, tribalists, backwater brutes, tribal barbarians, leeches, savages."

Elvi looked down at the thin girl in her arms. She was so young. It was easy to forget it when she walked around in her guild cloak. But here, wearing just a thin shift, Elvi was reminded she was just a girl. A girl born with great power, but a young girl all the same.

Elvi led Kuta to a chair and she sat. “I’m sorry” Elvi said, “I didn’t mean to upset you with my words and concerns. But you’ve said far too many specific things for me to think you’re only upset with me. Tell me what happened?”

“Patzau Adagizhi” Kuta answered. “He… he degraded me right to my face. He called us savages and leeches. He said, ‘like leeches, we must burn them out.’ He accused Mellen of being a traitor to the city for having me at his side. He wants us gone. And if not gone, dead.”

“I see” Elvi said carefully. “Kuta, what you have told me is related to the questions I came to ask you tonight; the reason for my visit.” Kuta looked up from where she sat with puffy eyes. Elvi hesitated a moment, then found her voice. “Kuta, Patzau Minoc was arrested earlier today by Patzau Adagizhi and several soldiers. He stands accused of treason. I can’t speak to the specifics because I don’t yet know them. This is something the Patzaus must resolve. But the story that is being circulated is that he has been supporting the gangs and criminal groups in their fight against the city, and…”

“And people think I’m related” Kuta said, finishing Elvi’s sentence. “Patzau Minoc is no traitor, and neither am I!” she added, pushing thoughts of Yoharum’s attack out of her mind.

“I promise you, Kuta” Elvi said, “I didn’t come here to accuse you of anything.”

“That’s not what it felt like” Kuta countered.

“I know. I came to get to you before they can. I can’t speak to Minoc. Nobody can. We need more information. Patzau Ashill and I, we don’t fully understand what is happening. And while she speaks to those making the accusations, I wanted to speak to a person accused.”

“Accused?” Kuta repeated. “Am I in trouble as well? I didn’t do anything!”

“Patzaus Onudar and Hadashenta are calling for your arrest as well” Elvi said. “They claim you escaped arrest, but I find that unlikely considering I found you at home in your night clothes and willing to open your front door to a soldier like me.” Kuta looked shocked. Elvi didn’t blame her.

“I don’t understand,” Kuta wondered aloud, “Was Patzau Ashill not involved in Patzau Minoc’s arrest? Is that legal?”

“It’s not explicitly illegal, no” Elvi answered. “But there isn’t a precedent for a Patzau being accused of treason. I’ll share with you my honest opinion” Elvi said, attracting the girl’s attention again. “I think there’s a conspiracy afoot. One meant to discredit and destroy Patzau Minoc and you by extension. And I think the worst thing you can do is run. If you run, Mellen will be viewed as guilty, as will you.”

“Then what else can I do?” Kuta asked, hugging her legs tight against her chest, “wait for them to come and take me? Wait for them to hunt down my family?” Her mind spun circles around her thoughts. She felt for a moment as if she might cry again. The feeling shamed and embarrassed her.

“Patzau Ashill and I will support you, as will Patzau Murocil. She’s always seen eye to eye with Mellen. But I fear we may have to do so from the shadows. What you need now is protection: political protection. Address your guild and win them to Patzau Minoc’s side. Resist the faction of opposition that is sure to be propped up against you. If you can convince your guild to trust and support you, and if you can convince them this

attack is meant to weaken their place in this city, your guildsmen should be powerful enough to protect you. They caught Patzau Minoc unready. And because Minoc was unready, they've already begun their campaign to discredit him. Ada, Yanata, and I will work to clear his name, but you must be outspoken about your innocence. You must sell the idea that this is an attack meant to seize power and destroy your guild."

Kuta swallowed hard, the weight of her predicament settling in. "And if I fail?" she asked.

Elvi's eyes were hard. "No matter what, you must try. You must try for yourself. To show them that they are wrong. Wrong about you and wrong about Mellen."

"How can I stand up against the most powerful men in Caso?" Kuta asked.

"You will win by reminding them that while they may control the guilds, they do so by the consent of the guildmembers they represent. If people become angry enough with their leaders, they will find new leadership. We have done it before."

"This is impossible" Kuta mumbled.

"If at the end of the day, you find that you have played by their rules and have fought hard. If you have given everything you have and it still isn't enough. Then at that time, if you so choose, you may give up and admit defeat. Run and hide and hope they don't find you. Or let them arrest and execute you if you wish. It's not my choice. What you do is yours. For you, and Patzau Minoc. But if you find giving up leaves a bitter taste in your mouth, it would be wise to remember that you too have the power to change the rules."

Kuta nodded in understanding and wiped the tears from her eyes.

Chapter 23: The Meeting

A smoky haze filled the air and the smell of bunt wood lingered. Last night, the fires glowed red against the low clouds bathing the city in a hellish red glow. There was another incursion into Mudtown, but this time the rain hadn't come to quell the destruction. The haze that lingered tickled the back of the throat and stung the eyes. Prince Ohacha of Gaag moved through the nervous streets. His thoughts were as turbulent as the crowded streets and alleyways. There were rumours spreading through the city that Mudtown had been leveled to the ground. That the fires had burnt every last remaining piece of the dirty slum outside the walls. That there had been real fighting this time instead of rampant arrests. Clashes in the streets between the guild against a real armed and organized counter-force. Whether or not the rumours were true, it was impossible to tell. Either way, most of the city gates had been closed and remained closed. Soldiers manned the walls, keeping an eye for men trying to climb the fortifications or boats trying to bypass the walls by sea. There had been a collision between two ships in the harbour and the bay was clogged to near standstill while sailors worked to repair the damage. It felt to Ohacha that the whole city of Caso sat on a knife's edge. A razor thin line between stability and chaos.

There was, perhaps, no worse time to leave the safety of Patzau Yohati's estate to cross the city. Unfortunately, the choice was not theirs. Ohacha thought that stepping through Patzau Yohati's fortified gate one last time would give him closure. That it might make things easier. It hadn't. Ohacha's argument with the old Patzau had been the final straw in their tenuous relationship. He had expected that finding another patron in Caso would be easy.

Ohacha considered his group powerful, with waning but still significantly deep coin-purses. They had notable tiles and valuable skills. Ohacha's uncle had negotiated many times without issue. However, Ohacha severely underestimated just how difficult the transition would turn out to be. And when he failed again and again in his negotiations to find them a new patron, his confidence fathered. Worries became shame. Shame became doubts. And by the end of their final week, Ohacha found himself out of time and questioning everything. He had never been the best shot with a bow, or the best sailor, or swordsman, or speaker, but Ohacha had always thought himself decent enough in all facets to get by. Now that these presumptions had been put to the test, he felt ashamed at his ineptitude. Time and time again, his requests and parleys were met with "no." His rash choices had left them in a precarious situation and Ohacha felt himself crumbling under the pressure to fix it. *Uncle Aramuk would have handled it better*, Ohacha thought to himself. *He would have negotiated, kept them in the estate*. But Aramuk was dead, and that too felt like his failure.

What Ohacha hadn't considered when he had confronted the old Patzau was the damage Yohati could inflict on his social credibility within the important circles of Caso.

With a few quick messengers, Patzau Yohati had sewn the seeds of distrust against his former beneficiary. It seemed the easiest way to drive someone out of the city. Ohacha had spent nearly the entire week speaking with lord after lord, noble after noble, only to be turned down again and again. The encounters began to mirror one another. Each person met, those who agreed to meet in the first place, echoed the same sentiments and feelings. It got to a point where Ohacha already knew what was about to be said by the look in their eye, well before words were spoken. Each time he sat down to talk, the odds felt stacked against him. When he shared these feelings with Cask, the swordsman suggested the very same thing Ohacha had been considering himself; that Yohati had damaged their reputation in addition to kicking them out. Gaba'ké insisted that people were simply more cautious and on edge due to the current crisis outside the walls. Ohacha wasn't convinced.

It wasn't until their final night that their luck finally turned. Ohacha finally managed to coordinate a meeting with Patzau Hadashenta of the Auction House. It had taken considerable effort to even arrange the meeting. And despite his persistence, once again he was met with a polite but indifferent refusal. Similar to each of his previous meetings, Ohacha left feeling defeated.

However, as he made his way out of Patzau Palace, his luck finally turned. While descending the steps into the gardens outside on the Palace, Ohacha crossed paths with the noblewoman he had met in Patzau Yohati's gardens all those weeks ago; Piitra Hadashenta; Patzau Hadashenta's wife. She was accompanied by several household soldiers and was also on her way to see her husband. Piitra, as it turned out, had both a soft spot for Ohacha and a swaying influence over her husband. Upon hearing of Ohacha's predicament, she marched up angrily to speak with her husband on his behalf. When she returned shortly thereafter, Ohacha was offered the use of her family's residence in The Spires. An apartment, Ohacha would learn later, that the Patzau could not refuse him, as was not his to withhold.

And so it was that Ohacha found himself trekking across the city through the thick smoky haze with Rolena, Gaba'ké, and Cask in toe and one of Piitra Hadashenta's retainers leading the way to their new home. Gaba'ké had departed early in the morning and returned with several young men and a hired cart to help haul their belonging across the city. As they walked, the tension was palpable. Even the young workers who carried their belongings refrained from chit chat. People milled through the streets, coughing. Few conversed.

The haze persisted well into the morning but the sea breeze eventually made ground, pushing the smoke inland. Despite the relief, people coughed noisily everywhere they went. Cask scanned the crowds, his hands never staying far from the hilt of his swords. Each person emerging from the shops and side alleyways struck an anxious chord. Gaba'ké never strayed more than a few paces from Ohacha. Even Rolena, despite her recovering strength, appeared vigilant. Even the servant leading the way looked nervous. Whether or not he and the prince shared the reason for uneasiness, Ohacha couldn't be sure.

As they approached the old spires district, the buildings changed from the modern square cut black stones to walls of dark volcanic river stones. The buildings clung closer together and the alleys on either side grew narrower, just large enough for a single person at a time. Thin doorways and nooks were the only places that allowed strangers to pass. Some of the oldest looking buildings seemed to bend and twist unnaturally, as if time had worn them down in more ways than one. Despite their age, the buildings in The

Spires were stylistically unique. They had a quaint character and architectural flare that the newer tenements lacked in their details but tried to made up for in grandeur.

The party crossed the southern canal and turned south towards the sea at the next crossing. There they came upon their destination. The house, tall and narrow with a sharp roof, appeared unassuming on the outside. Dark stains marred lines of the stonework where water regularly escaped the old eaves. Ivy clung to the south side of the front façade and moss grew atop several of the roof tiles. Piitra's servant opened the door invitingly, then offered the polished bronze key.

Despite its appearance on the outside, Piitra's home was well renovated and extravagant on the inside. The floors were made of polished wood that shined under the reflection of the light filtering in through the narrow windows. The walls were adorned with pieces of art and painted sculptures decorated several of the rooms. The main floor had multiple compact rooms with narrow doorways that led to a servant's kitchen, a dining room, and sitting room. Below the main floor, a set of dark narrow steps led down to a half cellar where jars and pots stored all kinds of preserved foods including pickling vegetables and sacks of rice, bulgar, emmer, and flax. One larger urn contained a store of salt-cured fish and duck eggs.

Four small bedrooms took up the entirety of the second story and a larger fifth bedroom with steep slanted roof-walls filled the entirety of the narrower top floor. As they spread through the house, Ohacha elected to take one of the smaller bedrooms overlooking the older narrow canal below.

Through the window, ivy and creepers clung to the exterior walls of the buildings that backed onto the canal smaller older canal. Layers of pale green moss clung to the canal walls and several small boats moored against the narrow street opposite Ohacha's window. An old tree with gnarly roots grew out of the stone canal walls below and, in the distance, Ohacha could just make out the lonely Casoyan fortress perched atop the sheer stone cliff overlooking the city.

Piitra's home was easily the smallest Ohacha had stayed in. Even the guest house in Patzau Yohati's estate had been larger, even after subtracting the grounds and outdoor spaces. The constricted spaces felt like a novelty to him, and Ohacha found himself drawn to the house with a nostalgia for something he had never before had.

It was past midday when they had finished unpacking their belongings and set forth to ascend the mountain towards the Casoyan Fortress. The conversation with Sergeant Ashill still lingered in Ohacha's mind. There was something in her words that she hadn't been willing to tell him, but he couldn't fathom what or why. With little else to accomplish this day, it felt appropriate to follow through on her advice. Gaba'ké was apprehensive. He thought it remiss to expose Ohacha to the public more than necessary, arguing "we have already been attacked in these streets once. It is unwise. We take unnecessary risks in leaving the safety of the house so regularly." Cask took the opposite stance, encouraging Ohacha's confidence. Rolena, as always, neglected to take a side. Despite her lack of comment, her face revealed a distrust of the Casoyan military and Ohacha found it hard to fault her for it.

After redonning their weapons and armour, they set out in haste. Enormous cotton-wad clouds dotted the sky and their steady creep cast dark shadows that shifted the ambiance of the neighbourhood between cheery and gloomy. The dark stones and darker shadows made the narrow streets of the Spires feel claustrophobic. Fortunately, it wasn't far until they reached the oldest and smallest of Caso's public squares, Gorini Plaza. The plaza was lopsidedly hexagonal and was surrounded on five of its six sides with

rows of tall narrow houses with the same spearpoint rooftops. Flowing canvas canopies reached outwards to cover small merchant stalls and carts. In a ring around the center, two dozen massive old palm trees stretched out of breaks in the cobbles to reach their pinnated leaves skyward like the rooftops that surrounded them. Several, aged and dying, remained as lonely trunks. In the center of the plaza, a black obelisk carved of a single piece of stone pierced skyward, casting a dark uninterrupted shadow across the dark cobbles that had been worn over the years to a near glossy shine.

On the sixth side of the plaza, a long-ramped roadway, known as the climb rose up the old Casoyan fortress atop the steep cliff. Ohacha followed the road with his eyes. At the summit, unseen from the plaza below, Ohacha knew the imposing fortress loomed large. The Casoyan fortress, like the two palaces and the city's grand walls, stood as the final imposing structure of the city. It was perhaps the only building that could be seen from anywhere in the city. Ohacha considered the effort it would require to storm and capture a building that well positioned and fortified, and quickly determined the task just shy of impossible. The only hope a general might have would involve starving the enemy out. That, or scaling the hundred-foot cliff face in the hopes of infiltrating undetected.

As they passed through the old plaza, Ohacha noticed that most of the stalls were empty. Many of the merchants had closed shop already. As the sun reappeared from behind one of the large clouds, sweltering heat returned. With the humidity baked away, it felt hot enough to fry an egg on his armour. Worse, the ascent up to the fortress was grueling. The steep road felt endless. Sweat dripped down from his brows into his eyes. It clung to his nose and mouth and chin. Ohacha looked over to see Cask rather delighted by the burn in his legs. Rolena, at least, shared in his struggle. Gaba'ké fared worst of all. Ohacha encouraged regular breaks to quench their thirst, but mostly he wanted to give his old friend some much-needed rest.

As the summited the long road, the gatehouse to the fortress loomed. It was a large two-story structure manned by a dozen soldiers that watched with keen eyes. Ohacha turned and saw Gaba'ké huffing several steps behind. The older Aginjigaade looked near ready to collapse. Large sweat stains clung to his chest and back, visible even through his thick robes.

A few steps further and the low brush gave way to reveal the vast expanse of the city below and the island beyond. It was spectacular. The city of gold wrapped around the sparkling bay below like the crescent moon. Never before had Ohacha stood in a place so extraordinary in its magnificence. From here, Ohacha could make out the distinct forms of the palace and the auction house. Coiling around the city like a snake were the grand stone walls built to defend against raiders long vanquished. Outside the walls, farms and hamlets dotted the landscape as far as the eye could see. The mountain beyond, brimming with jungle trees and stark cliff faces, loomed tall as if endlessly stretching into the horizon. Clouds shrouded its distant peak.

It was a sight, Ohacha felt, he could look upon for a lifetime and forever glimpse something new. That was until he peered down over the nearby cliff face. A violent wave of vertigo came and flooded him with discomfort. His mind spun. When comprehension came as to just how high he stood and just how far and deadly the descent would be, it filled him with fear and an unnatural dread. Lord Anup's estate atop the headlands of Onera was but a scarp when compared to the precipice before him. And Gaag, his true home, was a flatter land still.

Rolena grasped Ohacha's shoulder. The action brought much needed stability. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Ohacha released a breath and nodded, “I’ve never before been this high.”

“May I be frank,” Rolena asked. Ohacha’s brows creased but he nodded assent. “I don’t feel comfortable going inside. Not after…” her words trailed but Ohacha understood. “You won’t need me in there” she continued. “Not with Cask and Gaba’ké by your side. With your permission, I’d like to wait out here until you’re finished.”

“I understand” Ohacha said. “You’ll be okay out here by yourself?”

“Of course,” Rolena said, gesturing with her head towards the scenic view, “I’ll be fine.”

Once Gaba’ké regained his breath, the three men left Rolena at the outlook and crossed the small stone bridge that led to the gate. The fortress was built from layers of earth-coloured bricks. The bricks were aged and crumbling in places. Dark stains ran down from the crenellations. Two soldiers stepped out from the gatehouse with bemused expressions. Several more watched from inside the building and four more leaned over the battlements above with curiosity. One brandished a loaded crossbow. It did enough to serve as a casual warning.

“Can we help you?” the first soldier asked, his accent thick. Both soldiers wore salt-hardened padded armour that covered their chests and shoulders. Ohacha eyed the garments longingly, now understanding why plate and mail were uncommon. Bronze grieves protected their legs. Both men carried short two-handed spears with sword-catching prongs below the blade.

“I’m here to speak with Patzau Ashill” Ohacha said, stopping a few short steps from the two men. “My name is Prince Ohacha Krimas. This is Gaba’ké, the Stone Aginjigaade and my sword master, Cask.”

“This isn’t a place one can simply walk inside. Our Patzau is a busy woman.” the man said. “Do you have a scheduled meeting?”

“No,” Ohacha admitted, “but it is very important we speak with her.”

The two men shared a look that Ohacha couldn’t decipher. “Patzau Ashill isn’t here” the soldier continued. “You should return another time.”

Ohacha turned to Gaba’ké and swapped to Gaagian so that the soldiers wouldn’t understand their conversation. “Can you feel her? The Aginjigaade Yuromi mentioned? Is she here?”

Gaba’ké answered, “I don’t know for certain it’s her, but there is an Aginjigaade inside the fortress. It seems reasonable that it would be the woman you were told to seek in place of the Patzau.”

“Send for Elvi Batari” Ohacha said, turning back to face the soldiers. “I know she is inside the fortress. I was advised that she can pass on my message to the Patzau.” The two soldiers shared another look and then instructed Ohacha to wait. A few minutes later, Gaba’ké revealed that the Aginjigaade inside the fortress was on their way. And just as he advised, a woman in unform appeared shortly after.

Aginjigaade Elvi Batari had a diamond shaped face and small tired-looking eyes. She moved with an earnest youthful strength, but as she drew closer it was easy to see the age on her face sun-kissed. As she approached, the other soldiers split ranks to let her through. She held a neutral stare, but it was clear from her untidy appearance that she hadn’t slept well. Not for some time. She stopped just behind the two soldiers and put a hand on a shoulder, indicating she would take it from here.

She looked back and forth, assessing the odd and unfamiliar group. Then, she addressed Ohacha, who stood at the head, “You are Prince Krimas.” It wasn’t a question. “What do you want with Patzau Ashill?” she repeated.

“Her daughter, Yuromi, has become an unexpected friend to us. It was under her recommendation that we have come to speak with Patzau Ashill” Ohacha said, hiding the frustrating truth that she had refused to explain why it was so important. “She told me it was a matter of importance.”

Elvi rubbed a finger in her right eye and muttered softly to herself. “Are you able to share with me the details of what makes your visit important?”

“I cannot say” Ohacha answered, and it was true. “Sergeant Ashill simply indicated that the information we have compliments the information you have. And that sitting down to speak would be to our mutual benefit.” That wasn’t exactly how their conversation had gone, but Ohacha wasn’t willing to turn around now.

Elvi seemed to ponder his words, then turned and exchanged a few words in Casoyan with the solders behind her. They answered and Elvi turned her attention back to Ohacha, “Good news, Sergeant Ashill is here, inside the fortress. She can explain herself. Follow me inside, and I’ll have her join in on our little conversation. Please, leave your weapons with the men here at the gates. They will take good care of them and will be returned upon your departure.”

Ohacha stripped of his sword belt and handed it over to a soldier, who eyed the unfamiliar curved holster with curiosity. Cask followed suit. The Casoyan swords that the soldiers wore were shorter and fatter than the longer thinner blades Gaag was known for; the style Cask was a master of. When Gaba’ké produced no weapon of his own, the soldier searched him hesitantly. Elvi watched the whole while.

After they were finished, they followed Elvi inside through the fortress gate into a dark corridor. Carrying on, they emerged out the other side of the fortress atop a second and more impressive bridge that crossed to a central keep. The view out across the city was even better here than atop the cliff’s outside. Even more of the city was revealed to the eye, but so too increased the vertigo Ohacha felt. The entire city glowed under the late afternoon sun, but Ohacha kept back enough to keep himself from looking down.

They entered the round tower and Elvi led them into a large room on the main floor. The room was lit by several illum stone lamps. The small windows that faced outwards seemed more for airflow than for light or looking through. “Please, make yourselves comfortable” Elvi said, gesturing to several chairs on the opposite side of a large table in the center of the room.

The table was covered in several blank wax tablets and writing styluses. Elvi moved them aside as they took their seats. Ohacha caught her making curious glances, primarily at Gaba’ké. *These Aginjigaade always have their unpredictable customs and conduct,* he thought to himself. After they were seated, Elvi took a seat across from them and spoke, “As you are clearly aware, I am Elvi Batari; High Aginjigaade to the Soldier’s Guild. It is a pleasure to meet with you, Prince Ohacha and friends. Introductions are necessary, I think.”

“I am Ohacha Krimas, rightful King of Gaag.” Ohacha said. “This is Gaba’ké, the Stone Aginjigaade. And to my other side is Cask Gohara, the greatest swordsman Gaag has ever known.”

“You flatter me, my Prince” Cask said, casually leaning back in his chair.

Elvi looked them over back and forth. “It is a pleasure to meet you both” she said. “And the soldier outside, the woman, she won’t be joining us today?”

Ohacha looked to Gaba'ké for support. Gaba'ké answered diplomatically, "No, she said she preferred the view outside. Remarkable marksman. Less comfortable as a diplomat."

"I see" Elvi said evenly. "I'll cut straight to the point. You asked for a conversation and I'm here to have one. But you also told me that you have information that would help me. I believe in equivalent exchange, so let us start there."

Ohacha shared a look with Gaba'ké, who gave a supportive nod. "You want information about the criminals who attacked… Patzau Yohati" Ohacha suggested. He resented the reframing of the attack. *Patzau Yohati was never in any danger,* Ohacha thought derisively.

"Go on" Elvi said.

Gaba'ké spoke, "During the attack there was an Aginjigaade present. Maybe two" he half realized as he spoke the words. "Right before the attackers sprung from the side streets, there was some kind of Aginjigaade interference. The air seemed to warp and blur. Then another Aginjigaade attacked me with the full force of their agindan. I think they intended to immobilize me or knock me unconscious. To my good fortune, I was already on edge due to the impairment on my vision. When the attack came, I was ready. I countered with my full strength."

"Did you pierce her agindan?" Elvi asked. Ohacha frowned, not understanding her meaning.

"No" Gaba'ké answered. "She's alive."

"Was there imprinting? Could you discern an affinity? If you could, it would narrow down who we might be looking for. I have a list of all the Aginjigaade in the city."

"Yes" Gaba'ké answered, sighing. "But the imprint was weak. I think, because the Aginjigaade herself was quite weak. She wasn't channeling any power. The only impression I had was the general scent. It was sharp and acidic, suggesting either decay: poison, wilt, or rot. Or Nyama: fibers, waxes, oils, and bones."

"That's a lot of overlap" Elvi said.

"These are broad classes, I know. But more concerning to me was the second Aginjigaade. I could feel their influence, but not sense their proximity.

"But if there had been a second, and they were coordinating, I see no reason why only one would attack you mentally" Elvi said. "I would expect that any additional Aginjigaade would have worked in tandem with the first. You would be the largest threat to their plan, it would think it foolish to expect a lone and, by your account, weak Aginjigaade could handle you alone. Especially as no other Aginjigaade was with you to divide their attention."

"What you say is reasonable" Gaba'ké said, who dismissed Ohacha's confusion with just a look. Ohacha frowned, unhappy with feeling left out of the conversation. "But the real world rarely tracks to soundness."

"I must admit, what you share has use. A few soldiers who were there mentioned anomalies in their accounts, but what you say confirms their stories and points me in the right directions. There should be enough here for me to identify potential matches. Is there anything else?" Elvi asked.

"Yes" Ohacha said, rather eagerly. "But first, I want to understand more information about Bartiin Foxstring. The leaders of those soldiers you arrested from Gaag. I heard he's escaped your prison."

Elvi frowned this time. "Where did you hear that?" she asked. "Janos?" Ohacha remained silent long enough to demonstrate he wasn't going to answer. "Fine" Elvi said,

sternly. “The man Bartiin did escape. He was aided by one of our soldiers, abandoning his men, and was replaced with an imposter. Whover sprung him free had knowledge of the trials–” she stopped speaking abruptly. “Never mind. That’s not important to you. Because we caught his men, under questioning they were able to give enough information to identify the corrupt soldier who released him. However, that lead is dead.”

“How so?” Ohacha asked.

“He’s literally dead” Elvi answered. “We found him yesterday. It looked a lot like a suicide, which makes me more convinced it wasn’t. It’s my guess that whoever paid him to release Bartiin, didn’t want that information leaking out.”

“And Bartiin?” Cask asked.

“Bartiin has likely fled the city. I’d wager he’s on a ship halfway home by now. We stumbled onto his disappearance rather by accident” Elvi admitted. “If we hadn’t been visiting the cells for another purpose, I don’t think we would have ever noticed his absence. Which, must have been the point.”

Gaba’ké spoke, his voice low and thoughtful, “That begs the question as to who in Caso had the power, influence, and motive to have him freed and his liberator killed. You must have an idea…”

“We conducted a raid on the Careyago Ambassador’s residence” Elvi admitted. “She seemed the obvious benefactor. It was clear, however, that she knew we were coming. Bartiin’s men didn’t reveal much, but they knew about Ambassador Durali. Their testimonies exposed that Bartiin had met with her at least once. However, our raid revealed no evidence that supported that the ambassador provided any kind of aid to Bartiin or his men, nor that she had those kinds of connections to the city’s underbelly.”

It was at that moment that a knock came from the door behind Elvi. It opened, and Yuromi Ashill stepped inside. Only when a second Yuromi Ashill followed the first in did Ohacha realize that the first entrant was in fact the twin sister he had once met, Kida. Yuromi looked bashful, a look Ohacha had never seen on her. Her twin, however, looked rather confused by the summons. They were spitting images of each other. The only difference between them seemed to be the cut of their hair, a subtle difference in height, and the long scar that marked Yuromi’s face and unblemished her sister’s.

“Now this is unexpected” Elvi said, turning to face the twins. “Has there been a mistake or were you also looking to speak with me, Kida?”

“You didn’t request to see me?” Kida asked, a glint of annoyance flashing across her face.

“No” Elvi said frankly and Kida frowned. My understanding is that Yuromi was the one who suggested these gentlemen seek out your mother for a meeting. Is this true, Sergeant?”

“Yes” Yuromi admitted. “I had hoped they would be able to reach mom–”

“Patzau Ashill” Kida cut in, correcting her sister. Yuromi scowled and Kida returned the glare.

“I had hoped these men would be able to reach the Patzau or yourself with regards to the recovered silver.” Yuromi explained, deliberately hoping not to draw attention to how she had come about that information. It didn’t work. Elvi furrowed her brow in confusion. Ohacha’s eyes lit up from across the small table.

“What do you mean when you say, ‘the recovered silver?’” Elvi asked. Yuromi opened her mouth to speak then hesitated, closing her mouth again. It was clear to even Ohacha that she was uncomfortable elaborating. Kida’s disappointed frown slowly twisted into anger.

“What did you do?” Kida interrogated. “I know you and I know that look.” If there was a hint of guilt on Yuromi’s face, Ohacha wasn’t able to recognise it. Clearly, Kida could. “You snuck into the tower again, didn’t you?” Kida said in stern accusation.

“Elvi” Yuromi interrupted. “Kida doesn’t need to be here. Please dismiss her.” Now the guilt was plain across her face.

“Spirits! You did, didn’t you” Kida shouted. “How many times–”

“Enough” Elvi said, cutting Kida off. The two sisters looked about ready to strangle one another. Ohacha watched with impatient energy. “Sergeant, there’s no point hiding it” Elvi said. “I’ve caught you myself a dozen times. Now’s not the time to worry about the transgression, now’s the time to share where you heard that kind of information.

“I was only looking for mom” Yuromi complained.

Elvi silenced her with a hand, “We will deal with your transgression at a later time. I want to know now what exactly you are referring to. What silver?”

“The stolen silver” Yuromi answered, confused by the question. “The fortune stolen from Prince Ohacha. There were soldiers on the top floor counting it. They were in one of the meeting rooms. It sounded like they’d recovered it.” When Elvi maintained her confused look, Yuromi’s confidence faltered. “What else could they have been counting?”

“I don’t know” Elvi answered. “I honestly don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve heard no news regarding the prince’s stolen fortune. Are you absolutely sure that’s what you saw? You say it *sounded* like a lot?”

Yuromi thought back to her encounter with the brutish captain. Burm had been obvious in his concern as to with whether or not she had overheard any of his conversation. And with good reason. His squad of elites had been discussing skimming money off the top of the recovered silver. And they had been intending to turn it in to the guild… weren’t they? She wasn’t so sure about that part any more.

Yuromi’s heart sank. She knew, once again, she had made a bad decision in staying quiet. The decision to do so now felt corrosive, as if her spirit was being deteriorated by regret. She had refrained from acting. Fear of Burm and the risk of pitting her word against his would bring. The Burms were a powerful and well-connected family. One as old and influential as her own and held sway in the city’s politics. *Crossing him would have been dangerous. He’s a vengeful man,* Yuromi reasoned. She knew it was an excuse.

And from that fear she had stayed silent. But to find out that the captain had never returned the coin at all spoke to a larger betrayal than Yuromi imagined possible. It was one thing to skim a little coin off the top. Most soldiers took bribes. Pocketing a few coppers, they’d look the other way or venture elsewhere in their patrol rounds. Yuromi felt it right to refrain from such things herself, but never judged others for their own choices. Not everyone had money like her family did. Even in her own squad, she knew who would, wouldn’t, and did. But she never expected Burm wouldn’t return the money to the guild. *But if they were skimming silver off the top, that implies somebody else was going to get it. And if Burm hadn’t kept it, and the guild doesn’t have it… then who does?*

“What was the question?” Yuromi asked.

“Are you sure there were soldiers counting silver on the top floor?” Elvi repeated. “You saw this?”

Yuromi frowned. She hadn't seen it, but she was certain that was what was happening. "Yes, to the first question. No to the second. Where is Captain Burm?"

Elvi seemed perplexed by the question. "What? What does Burm have to do with it?"

"Where is he?" she asked again, more urgently. "Is he still inside the city?"

"As far as I know, he is" Elvi answered. "Why do you ask? Was he the one you saw with the silver?"

"When I… when I crossed the bridge to the keep, I went straight up to mom's office" Yuromi explained, ignoring the hateful look on her sister's face. "When she wasn't there, I started looking around for her in the meeting rooms. I stumbled across Captain Burm and some of his soldiers on the third floor. They were counting silver coins and talking about skimming some off the top."

"You're shameless" Kida sneered. "I know you and Burm don't get along, but to go so far as to slander the man… You're beyond–"

"Enough!" Elvi ordered. Her voice boomed, propelled by a gust of wind. The room went silent.

"And you saw this?" Elvi asked sternly. "This is a serious accusation. You know for certain it was Captain Gal Burm and the fortune he had was Prince Krimas'?"

"I… didn't see the silver" she admitted. "I overheard them talking about 'enough silver to buy a castle.' Then Burm caught me in the hallway as I tried to slip away. He reprimanded me for being in the keep. I know it was him, but I don't know who else was with him." She remembered their being names, but couldn't for the life of her recall them. "I think there were six of them in total" she added.

"But you didn't see the silver?" Kida asked.

"Well, no." Yuromi said, "But they were talking about–"

"So, you don't know for certain they had anything inside that room" Kida said challengingly. "For all you know, they could have been talking about what they would do with a great sum of wealth. The lost Gaagian treasure is the subject of much talk these days. A modern treasure hunt frenzy." Ohacha's heart sank at those words.

"Elvi" Yuromi pleaded. "Dismiss her. You know that Kida harbours a personal distrust." '*Of me'* were the two additional words missing but implied. "It influences her opinions and skews her judgement. She hasn't even given me time to explain without interrupting and making accusations of her own."

"I don't trust you, sister, because you have proven yourself untrustworthy time and time again" Kida said with disdain. "You're supposed to be on leave and instead your caught breaking the rules… again. Not to mention attacking those gangsters in Mudtown!"

Ohacha curiously wondered what the gangsters in Mudtown comment meant. Elvi brought up her hand once again and Kida fell silent. "I think, Yuromi is right in this instance. Your continued goading of her is unproductive to the conversation I wish to have. Thank you for coming, Sergeant, but you are dismissed."

Kida stared daggers at Elvi for a moment. She looked ready to argue further but wisely held her tongue. "Yes ma'am" she said and left the room. Yuromi sniggered.

"And you, Sergeant Ashill, wipe that grin off your face. I'll need a word with you after we're finished here with the prince and his men." The sergeants smile vanished in an instant.

"You're both sergeants?" Cask asked. "Isn't that confusing?"

“It wouldn’t be an issue if I got that promotion to lieutenant” Yuromi nudged. “I’d sooner demote you to corporal” Elvi countered. Yuromi’s face soured. “Yuromi is a Patrol Sergeant, and Kida is Sergeant in the Barracks” Elvi explained. “They are different ranks in our tongue. Tralang has little nuance.”

“Can we get back to Captain Burm and how he supposedly has my silver?” Ohacha asked. “Is he not required to hand it over to the city?”

“That’s why I want to ensure he’s still in the city” Yuromi said eagerly. “What if he fled with the whole treasure?”

“Then there would be repercussions” Elvi said. “But there is no sense dwelling on speculations. How is it you are so certain he has the coin?”

Yuromi drew in a deep breath. “The first part of the conversation I overheard was a debate” she explained. “The soldiers inside were debating whether or not to return the money. That’s not a subject I would debate if having it were only fantasy. They voted to return it, but to skim some off the top. That’s why I encouraged Ohacha to come to see mom. I thought the silver would have been turned over to The Guild already.”

“But it hasn’t” Elvi finished.

“Then they stole it” Ohacha said hurriedly.

“Perhaps” Elvi said. “Yuromi, you truly didn’t see the silver?”

“I tried to get a look inside the room but Burm deliberately obstructed my view” she explained. “But I promise what I’ve repeated here today is the truth. What reason would I have to lie about this?”

“I understand” Elvi said, “and I believe you. But without proof it will be very difficult to verify anything. It will be your word against his. And if it can’t be proven, there will be significant consequences. Are you sure you don’t recall who else was in the room with the captain?”

Yuromi brought her hands to her face and rubbed her eyes. “No” she groaned. “I think, maybe if I heard the names again but I don’t remember them now.”

“What is the risk of simply bringing Captain Burm here to answer questions?” Ohacha asked. “Surely with just this information there should be sufficient cause to bring him in for questioning. Or better yet, arrest him under suspicions of theft.”

“Your being here makes it difficult for me to speak honestly” Elvi admitted. “But what I can tell you, is that doing so would be complicated and risky. “What you need to understand is that our system of guild governance is complicated. The eight Patzau share rulership over the city and the surrounding territories, but each Patzau is raised to their position through the support of their guild. There is a duality of leadership. The Patzau leads the guild, and by leading the guild, they represent the guild and its members in the council that leads the city. Each of the eight guilds have their own rules and internal politics.”

“Do the laws that govern action and consequence differ for each citizen?” Gaba’ké asked.

“No, that’s not what I mean” Elvi replied. “What I’m trying to explain is that our guild is different than the other seven.”

“How so?” Ohacha asked. Gaba’ké leaned forward in interest.

Elvi continued, “After the fall of the last Casoyan king, the original Patzau wanted make it difficult for any future commander of the city’s soldiers to leverage their military control in efforts to gain more power or to conquer the other guilds. The original Guildmaster for our Soldier’s guild shared this concern for his future successors. Perhaps not the first or second person to follow him as Patzau, but eventually down the line there

would be one seeking the position for the power it could grant as commander of the military. And so, they placed rules and restrictions that make the role of Patzau of the Soldiers' Guild an easier position to find oneself removed from. Later amendments also detached the financial management of the guild from the guild itself, placing it in the shared control of the entire council, but primarily the Administration Guild."

"So, functionally, the Patzau of the Soldiers' Guild is the least powerful of the eight" Cask said.

"Exactly" Elvi answered. "Patzau Ashill is a brilliant leader and has maintained steady control over our guild for more than a decade now. But Patzau Ashill is the only Patzau who must satisfy not only her own guild members, but must maintain support from the wider city populus. This is a harder line to hold. At this time, there are many allies of convenience that simply tolerate her. More than that, there is a small but vocal minority that has been campaigning for a more steadfast leader in her position; one that will take a harder stance on certain issues. She has many allies, but there are significant players who could use their power and influence to erode her support should they choose. The Burms are the greatest among this group. Their family is old, wealthy, and well connected. Gal Burm's great grandfather was the second Patzau of the Soldiers' Guild and members of the Burm family have continuously held high positions inside our ranks. If they warred over this perceived slight, there is a good chance Patzau Ashill could lose her position as Patzau of the guild and be replaced by someone else."

"Then how exactly do you plan to verify the validity of these claims?" Ohacha demanded. "If we can't arrest the man for his crimes, and we can't confront him for information, what option are we left with?"

The room sat in silence for several long breathes. "He can't have acted alone" Gaba'ké said. "Yuromi mentioned their being others present in that room. There is no such thing as a secret once more than one person knows it. People talk and people show signs. Instead of focusing on the captain, perhaps it is wiser to identify his co-conspirators and target them for information instead."

"This is a wise solution" Elvi acknowledged. "Yuromi, I will collect the names of the members in his squad. Perhaps one or more will jog your memory. We can focus those persons first. It seems more than likely that one of them was involved in this conspiracy. I think it would be wise for Sergeant Ashill to visit Patzau Minoc in this matter. Go directly to his home. Don't go to the guild."

"Patzau Minoc?" Ohacha asked, confused. *The portly Patzau with the fancy rings? The one would wouldn't stop calling me boy,* Ohacha thought crossly. "I thought Patzau Minoc was the leader of the Artisans Guild?" Ohacha asked. "How is he supposed to be of help to us?"

Elvi danced carefully with her words, "The guild system of government lacks certain… specific professions that don't fit neatly. There are some jobs in society that require doing nonetheless. Such jobs are therefore done in an unofficial capacity. Do you follow?" Ohacha didn't. But he found himself too embarrassed to ask for further clarification as she moved on. "Patzau Minoc will be able to assist in our search."

"Elvi, I would like to send someone with Sergeant Ashill to see Patzau Minoc tomorrow. I want us to be more involved in this investigation and recovery. This is my family's legacy and fortune, after all." *I'd be a disgrace to uncle Aramuk's memory if I failed here.*

"I won't object so long as Sergeant Ashill is comfortable with it." Elvi said.

"Where are you staying?" Yuromi asked.

“In the Spires” Ohacha answered. “Piitra Hadashenta’s old house.”

Yuromi looked surprised by that answer. “I’m okay with it” she said. “I’ll drop by tomorrow morning to get you?” she suggested.

“Actually, I’ll be sending Rolena with you” Ohacha said. “She’ll be the least conspicuous.”

“I must make one stipulation” Elvi announced. “Our services in supporting you, Prince Ohacha, cannot be done for nothing. With troubles looming, money is already tight. If and when we are successful in recovering your stolen money, I ask that my guild takes two percent. This should cover the costs the guild will incur. I also intend for this money to go to the soldiers’ families that died attempting to protect you. I believe this is reasonable request.”

Ohacha looked to Gaba’ké, who nodded. “Two percent seems reasonable” Ohacha agreed.

Elvi spoke, “Then I wish you and Sergeant Ashill good fortune tomorrow and safe travels tonight.”

Ohacha rose and reached out for Elvi’s hand, which she offered reluctantly. He clasped her hand inside both of his and placed his forehead to it. It was a Gaagian custom. One of binding respect to an agreement. He cared not whether she fully understood its meaning. It was for him, as much as it was for her. She seemed to comprehend the gestures meaning despite her initial perplexion. Cask and Gaba’ké repeated the motion in turn.

Yuromi smiled and bid them goodnight as they left. After which, Yuromi turned back around to Elvi with a sober smile. “That went well, I think” she said. “If there’s nothing else, Elvi, I think I’ll collect my things from the barracks and head home myself.”

“Not so fast” Elvi said. “Don’t think I haven’t forgotten your transgressions.”

“Elvi” Yuromi pleaded, “Please.”

“You can’t keep doing this” Elvi scolded. “It’s hurting your reputation, and it’s hurting your mother’s reputation. If she can’t keep you in check, others will see it as a sign of weakness.”

“I understand there is decorum for soldiers in our guild, and I apologize for circumventing the rules.” Yuromi said softly. “I don’t do it from a place of contempt, I promise. But with dad gone, and with Kida always…. I just don’t have anyone else to turn to. Do you understand. Half the time she doesn’t even come home at night. She’s always tired and always stressed. You know as well as anyone that she works so hard. I just worry about her. And sometimes, I need her too. And it feels so selfish, since she has so much responsibility to bare. But I’m her daughter. I just want her back sometimes.”

A silence hung between the two women. The soft glow of the illum stones above shadowed Yuromi’s face in darkness as she hung her head. Finally, Elvi responded softly, “You know that you can come to me too. If you ever need someone or something, you know you can count on me. I’ll always be here to help you out.”

Tears welled in Yuromi’s eyes. She let out a sound that was half-laugh half-sob. “I know” she said, wiping the tears from her face. “And I appreciate everything you’ve done, Elvi.” Yuromi said. “For me and for her. I don’t know what we would have done without you. But sometimes, I just need my mother back.”

“Me too” Elvi agreed.

Chapter 24: Mada'abi Stone

The descent back down from the fortress on the hill was, to Gaba'ké's dismay, not much easier than the ascent up the hill had been. Night had fallen and the darkness on the steep road down the mountain made what would have been easy steps into treacherous careful ones. That would have been the case on any odd night, but tonight the moon secreted itself and the darkness felt as thick as wool over their eyes. He regretted not having the foresight to bring a candle or illum stone to light the way.

Gaba'ké drew upon his agindan sense as he descended. It helped him sense the slope as it descended away from him, but did little to aid against the burn in his calves and the slipperiness of the stones beneath his sandals. Yet, even with his extra sense, the others fared better. Gaba'ké chalked it up to their youth. He wasn't the young man he had once been, nor did he want to be, but he was quick to think fondly of youth's long-absent advantages.

Their meeting with Elvi Batari, Aginjigaade of the Soldiers' Guild, had gone remarkably well. That was until the moment the sergeant Yuromi had revealed treachery within the guild's own ranks. What was stolen once was stolen again, and this time by soldiers of the guild itself. Still, this new information was a lead and for the first time in weeks, a direction in which to focus. Tomorrow, Rolena would accompany Sergeant Ashill on her visit to Patzau Minoc.

Minoc, it appears, collects more than just physical luxuries. He was the spider at the center of the city's web of informants. Elvi had all but confirmed it outright. In hindsight, the revelation felt obvious. Gaba'ké had suspected there was more to the eccentric Patzau than his jovial demeanor suggested. He had known them the day the had arrived. That was hint enough. What he feared now was the cost associated with procuring such sensitive information. *Perhaps Kuta would be willing to assist on our behalf. I could always negotiate with mine own secrets…* He tried not to fret the details now. This was a tomorrow problem.

And so, it was with great relief and a considerable amount of fatigue that Gaba'ké lumbered by the dark stone obelisk in the plaza at the bottom of the mountain. From here, Piitra's apartment was near and the road less treacherous. Dimly lit windows spilled light into the street and for the first time, Gaba'ké could see where he stepped. He yearned for the comfort of a bed and the time to rest his tired feet. It had been long and hard day, and nothing more would make him happier than to see it end. But as Gaba'ké approached the apartment by the old canals, Gaba'ké understood his hopes of getting rest tonight were slim. There was something wrong inside.

He waved a hand to stop Ohacha and Rolena mid conversation. They went silent, suddenly on guard. Rolena reached for her crossbow. Cask drew one of his blades with a metallic whisper. They scanned the streets for signs of danger.

"What is it?" Cask asked.

Gaba'ké focused. "Something is wrong" he replied. His awareness was instinctual. Too many years spent in vigilance. "Theres somebody inside the house" Gaba'ké said carefully.

"You're sure?" Rolena asked, turning her attention ahead. They were still out of sight from the house. It lay just around the corner ahead.

"How do you know?" Ohacha asked. "I can't even see the apartment yet."

At the approach of humans, spirits disappear. They retreat into walls and vanish into thin air. It was this final distinction—the total unnatural retreat of every spirit in the house—that revealed the intruders within. Only a human inside the house would have scared all the spirits into hiding.

Gaba'ké frowned. This was a difficult concept to describe and he was caught between his own physical exhaustion and the sudden alertness the danger warrants. "I sense the presence of spirits" he began, "and I also sense spirits that hide themselves from people; the ones that melt away as you enter a room or disappear into the surroundings. To you, they're gone. Imperceptible. But to me, I sense their hidden presence. They don't leave. Only hide away. The spirits inside the house are hiding. There's somebody inside."

"What do we do?" Ohacha asked. "Who is it?"

"Its another assassin" Cask said.

"We don't know that" Gaba'ké said without confidence.

"We should try and catch whoever it is" Ohacha said. "Maybe we'll get some answers."

"We could try" Cask ventured. "But it would be a risk."

"We could try to scare them away" Rolena suggested. "Or get help from the guild?"

Ohacha frowned, "After this week, I wouldn't trust the guild to be helpful. They can't even sort out their own problems. We have the element of surprise. There won't be a better opportunity to seize an advantage and learn more about our enemies." Cask nodded his support.

"I'm concerned that whoever we find up in that house will be far deadlier than we expect" Gaba'ké said. "I don't want a repeat of Onera" he warned. "But whoever *is* in there isn't an Aginjigaade. I would be able to sense them."

"I want them caught" Ohacha said firmly. "There has to be a way to accomplish it."

*

Gaba'ké walked through the dark night towards Piitra's apartment as conspicuously as he could manage. As he approached, he had both eyes trained towards the upper floor windows that looked down over the street. He couldn't sense anything up there, but he had the uneasy feeling of being watched. He channeled power, hardening his body. If an attack came, he would be ready. Ohacha walked nervously at his side. *I am the hook, Ohacha is the bait. Any assassin will try for Ohacha.* Cask followed a few steps behind. The swordsman kept a hand on his hilt.

They ascended the steps up to the front door and Cask unlocked it as Gaba'ké kept his eyes peeled outwards at the dark and empty street. The door unlocked with a click and Gaba'ké let out a held breath. He and Cask locked eyes. Then Gaba'ké swept inside.

The plan swung into motion. Gaba'ké led the way, scanning for signs of danger. He cleared the ground floor as Cask steered Ohacha to the cellar. Gaba'ké had found a candle and was ascending the dark staircase to the second floor as Cask reemerged from below. Despite his skin and bone hardening techniques, Gaba'ké was terrified. He knew better than most that he wasn't invincible. Knives and arrows were ineffective but shock weapons like hammers and clubs would maim and kill just as effectively as they would any man. More than that, he shared the same weakness as all Aginjigaade enhancers: his eyes. His was a powerful technique, but no power is insurmountable and no defence is unassailable.

Gaba'ké silenced the part of his mind that repeated those fears. He braved his way up the stairs in spite of them. *Better me than Cask or Rolena.* The top wooden step groaned under his weight and he froze. The silence that lingered made his knees weak. The soft candle flame in his outstretched hand brought light, but also left shadows at its edges. Looking down the hall, there were four doors, one for each bedroom, and a smaller fifth that led to the privy over the canal. Ahead, a second staircase led to the largest bedroom on the top floor. Each room remained shadowy and motionless. The tension made his hands tremble.

It was one thing to be startled. The body chooses how to react on instinct. Whether to fight or fly. Expecting surprise is a different experience. He walked forward, fear and anticipation corroding what little confidence he had mustered. He moved slowly, his body unwilling to cooperate. Breathing in deeply, He tried the first room on the right. Ohacha's room. It seemed the most obvious place for the intruder to hide. It was also one of the two rooms overlooking the street. If the intruder had witnessed their approach, it was likely from this vantage.

The room was dark. Gaba'ké spotted Ohacha's trunks where they sat unopened on the bed. He braced himself and stepped through the doorway, candlelight filling the room. Nothing happened. Nothing seemed amiss. Nobody stirred. Ohacha's room remained still. Gaba'ké leaned over a lit the sconce on the wall. The wick lit and additional light filled the small room, driving back the shadows. The only place a person could hide now was under the bed or behind the wardrobe. Neither seemed a prime choice for a surprise attack. He left them unchecked, and moved onto the next room across the hall.

Cask's stern face looked up at his from the stairwell. Gaba'ké shook his head and tried his own room next. His door was ajar, but that was how he remembered leaving it. He reached forward, candle in hand, and pushed the wooden door open. The room slowly warmed to the candle's glow. He took a step forward and then, in a wink, the flame was snuffed. The strike that came from the darkness struck Gaba'ké's outstretched hand with blinding speed. The candlestick was knocked from his hand, and clattered to the ground as whatever hit him, bit through his hardened skin into his flesh. Gaba'ké shouted in surprise and pain and stumbled back into the hall. He pulled his hand away in reflex and with it came the strange long knife, still imbedded in his stony skin. It came free as he stumbled and clattered nosily as it and the candlestick hit the floor. Blood welled from the gash.

His attacker showed themself. The figure wore black clothes. A dark mask with snarled teeth, long whiskers, and angry eyes covered the face. They brandished a second long knife that matched the first. The blade was about the length of a forearm and curved at the tip. The edge of the knife glinted in the low light. Gaba'ké could see eyes beneath the mask and she looked as surprised as he was. Had he been any other man, her slash would have taken his hand. The assassin's hesitation dissolved. She pressed forward with

the second knife, this time aiming for his face. She knew already, in that single exchange, what he was and where he was weakest.

Gaba'ké hurled himself forward in answer. She was quick, but few have ever fought a man unafraid of leaving themself exposed. Her knife took him in the sternum. It was a blow that would condemn any other man to impalement. The knife grazed hardened skin but didn't have the strength to puncture. The grinding sound of metal on stone was shrill. She changed posture, aiming again for the face but wasn't precise enough to find his eyes. The knife caught him next in the collar. It glanced off as he barreled into her. The two tumbled.

Gaba'ké came down on top of her. He grasped and had his strong hands on her black clothes but she was nimble and wriggled out from underneath him, twisting. He tried to get a better hold, but she slipped free. She came up, but the knife she had used against him was nowhere to be seen. Gaba'ké drove himself upwards as she pulled a smaller dagger from a hidden place. In the tight space, he was faster enough and brought a hardened fist hard into her chest, feeling ribs crack.

The assassin gasped as air was forcibly expelled from her lungs. She remained upright, despite the heavy blow and threw the smaller knife defensively. Gaba'ké pulled back and found himself staggered by the sudden blur of her attack. The throwing knife raced towards his face, filling his vision. He blinked and jerked, no other reactions remotely fast enough to match the knife's speed. The knife took Gaba'ké in the face, just under the left eye. The throw was near-perfect. Just a finger's breadth away from lethal. But only perfect would do. The blade ricocheted off his eye socket. Gaba'ké had his hands defensively to his face a split second later.

By the time he opened his eyes again, she was already halfway out of the open window. Gaba'ké raced forward, catching a glimpse of her as she clambered atop one of the tree branches that bowed over the old canal. Then, with an unmistakable and solid thud, the assassin careened backwards. She tumbled and hit the water below with an unmistakable splash.

Gaba'ké reached the window a moment later. Even in the dim light, the water rippled where the assassin had fallen into the canal. The fall from tree to canal was just over two-stories. A fall like that could do real damage. Even if the assassin had managed to right herself before hitting the water, it would have hurt; especially after the blow he had dealt to her ribs. Their plan had worked, mostly. The blood that ran steady down his arm was an unwelcome surprise. It dripped steadily off his fingertips onto the wooden floorboards. He tore his sleeve and haphazardly wrapped the wound.

Relinquishing his physical enhancement, Gaba'ké focused his sorcery into a new spirit. As the enhancement dissipated, other places where the knife had grazed his hardened flesh welled thin lines of blood. He paid them no mind. Instead, he focused on channeling, expanding his agindan consciousness and isolating stone spirits that could yield the intended result: physical manipulation. Not wanting a repeat of the auction house attack, Gaba'ké carefully selected a familiar spirit and channeled his power through it like a lens. He felt his well of spiritual power drain.

Physical manipulations were simply mentally, but physically taxing. Pushing and pulling were simple concepts, but moving a ton of rock was no easy feet when the rock feels no compulsion to be moved. The strain was the very opposite of Gaba'ké's physical enhancement abilities. He would need to draw forth additional power. All he could manage, if possible. Once focused, he moved the interlocked canal stones, shaping them to his will. The canal closed, first downstream on the left, and then upstream on the right.

The rocks themselves moved under his strain, forming new hard canal walls and separating the small section behind the house into its own basin. There would be no escape for the assassin now. Her only option for escape would be to clamber up out of the canal where Rolena was already ready and waiting. She was trapped, the metaphorical fish in a barrel.

Gaba'ké let the power dissipate, exhausted. He had little left to give. He released the channeled spirit and it fled from him. He turned slowly and lumbered out of his bedroom. A wave of exhaustion rolled over him and he nearly fainted. He blinked away the spots that dotted his vision and breathed deep. "I'm okay!" he shouted down at Cask, who was waiting for the signal. "Assassin! Escaped out the window. Rolena took her with a quarrel. She's trapped in the canal."

"Rolena's in the canal?" Cask shouted back, confused.

"The assassin was a woman" Gaba'ké huffed, lumbering down the stairs. "She's in the canal. I've sealed it off. Go help Rolena. I'll get Ohacha." By the time Gaba'ké reached the main floor, Cask was already gone, running around to aid Rolena. Ohacha peered up at him expectantly from atop the cellar stairs."

You're supposed to be hiding" Gaba'ké said.

"I heard you say the assassin's gone" Ohacha replied. "We've caught him?"

"Her" Gaba'ké corrected, "and we will see."

"Let's go then" Ohacha said. Gaba'ké watched the prince frown as eyes shifted down to Gaba'ké's bloody arm. The blade had cut through his hardened skin and bit all the way to the bone on his wrist. It hurt terribly and he could no longer move his thumb on the hand. He was still holding a piece of his ripped sleeve against the wound and the blood had soaked through the thin cloth.

"Spirits, are you alright?" Ohacha asked.

"I'll be fine" Gaba'ké said with a confidence that was quickly fleeting. He wanted it to be true but something felt wrong. Not being able to move his thumb or pointer finger made fear well inside him. He ignored it for the time being and tried to brush past the prince for the front door.

"Here" Ohacha said, removing his own fine shirt. Before Gaba'ké had a chance to protest, Ohacha had ripped the fine fabric and was preparing to wrap the wound. He sighed and removed his hand, letting the prince replace his makeshift bandage with the expensive silk. It was a waste, and a poor choice for a bandage, but protesting kindness wasn't in his capabilities. However, both men froze when they saw the wound. The blood was red and flowing, but the skin below was starting to turn an unnatural purple colour.

"Poison" Ohacha gulped. Gaba'ké nodded. He tried his best to remain calm. "Maybe the assassin has the antidote" the prince suggested, trying to appear hopeful. Gaba'ké didn't share his initial confidence. *One thing at a time,* he thought.

"Let's go" Ohacha said.

"No," Gaba'ké protested, "You stay here."

"And what if there's a second assassin?" Ohacha argued, "Did you check every room? I'll be here alone and unprotected. Better to be with you both."

Gaba'ké scowled and relented. "Fine" he said, ignoring the pain spreading across his arm.

The two men followed in Cask's steps. Ohacha seemed eager, but Gaba'ké felt too weary to walk, let alone run the short distance. Multiple times, he stopped to clear his mind from the weight that had settled over his body. He felt as if fighting for wakefulness was as fruitless as pushing back the tides. Ohacha had no choice but to stay

close, and hold Gaba'ké's good arm as they went. They rounded the corner to the small bridge that crossed the canal and followed the narrow street on the opposite side of the canal.

As they approached, it was clear that Rolena and Cask loomed over a sopping body in the street. The stranger was sprawled out on her stomach, elbows above her shoulders and hands on the back of her head. Rolena had her crossbow trained on the assassin, while Cask stood a little closer with both swords drawn. Gaba'ké and Ohacha approached slowly. The mask that had covered her face was gone and she was dripping wet. She held an intense look—one that was equal parts hatred, fear, and pain. Gaba'ké could see why. One of Rolena's crossbow quarrels had pierced her thigh just above the knee. The tip was dark with blood.

"Are you okay?" Rolena asked, her voice full of concern. Her eyes locked on Gaba'ké's.

He met her gaze and lied, "I'm fine."

"He's been poisoned" Ohacha said hastily. Gaba'ké gave a resigned smile. It was hard to reprimand acts of kindness. *But now isn't the time to worry about me,* Gaba'ké thought.

"I'll be okay" he repeated. Another round of dizziness rocked him and he squeezed his eyes shut to quell the sensation.

"No, this is serious" Rolena insisted "You saw the mask, no?"

"I saw it" he admitted. He was too tired to think about it. "Does it mean something to you?"

"She's a stone assassin" Rolena said. Her tone was heavy, "Mada'abi Stone Assassin. I recognize the mask" she added.

If Gaba'ké had any energy left, he might have reacted with alarm. Instead, the verdict hit him no harder than the exhaustion already felt. He knew the stories—everyone did. The Mada'abi were the ghosts of the east. Once, their small kingdom had been famous for its proud warrior class. Now, it was infamous for the cabal of assassins that had replaced them. With no enemies left within, acolytes of the Mada'abi Stone were loosed elsewhere across the islands of the starlight sea to finish their bloody training. They were the premier blades for hire—prohibitively expensive, and an absolute death sentence to anyone who crossed their path.

"How do you know she's not a fake?" Ohacha blurted. Gaba'ké pressed his hands to his face. Another wave of exhaustion rocked him. He felt nauseous but the wave passed.

"When I was a mercenary in Nuneko, my company was hired to siege a rebel stronghold," Rolena said. "When we failed to breach the walls, the King of Towiin lost patience. Furious at our failure, the King of Towiin tore up our contract and brought in a pair of Mada'abi stone assassins—a master and an apprentice. The King wanted the lord alive, so that first night, the assassins murdered his four children. When the man still refused to yield, they took his wife. They murdered her right beside him as he slept. We were still packing our gear when the assassins strolled back into camp. I saw the master with my own eyes. He was carrying the lady's head—and he wore the exact same mask."

"Do all of the acolytes wear them?" Ohacha asked. He wasn't aware of this piece of lore. He too had heard the stories, but there were few known cases of a Stone Assassins straying further west than Onera. And no known stories of any of their kind in his homeland. He found himself off kilter. Not sure to be excited or horrified by the unexpected turn of events.

“No,” Rolena answered nervously. “Not the acolytes. Keep back from her. Ohacha, keep behind Cask and Gaba’ké. She’s still dangerous.”

Gaba’ké forced himself to focus. She was dangerous—the poison and the near-miss on his arm proved that. Approaching her was a risk. Keeping her alive was a risk. He had ignored Kuta’s warning of a Mada’abi Assassin in the city. It was going to cost him his life. But it didn’t have to cost them theirs. To keep her breathing for interrogation while protecting the group, he had only one choice. Gathering his remaining power, Gaba’ké channeled, anchoring her to the spot. She sank into the stone street like a plunging ship, panic flashing in her eyes as her limbs vanished into the earth. Trapped to the shoulders, escape was impossible. The effort broke him. True exhaustion crashed over his mind, and his knees buckled, his consciousness hanging by a single, fraying thread. It snapped and Gaba’ké dropped unconscious.

Ohacha watched in horror as Gaba’ké crumpled to the street at his feet. Rolena rushed forward and the two of them rolled the old Aginjigaade onto his back. Beads of sweat clung to his forehead. His face was pale and drained. He didn’t stir as they moved him. Meanwhile, Cask kept his eyes focused on the assassin buried in the street. She didn’t seem capable of striking from her position, but he wasn’t about to give her an opportunity to prove him wrong.

“The poison is already spreading through his body” the assassin said. Her accent was thick and foreign. When she spoke, she emphasized unusual sounds in the trader’s tongue. It took Ohacha a moment to understand what she had said at all. Everything below her shoulders had been submerged by Gaba’ké’s sorcery. Her hands were free, but she kept them behind her head despite the unexpected change in position. He didn’t trust that they were empty. Her face was pained and her breaths were rapid and shallow. He could only imagine her discomfort. “I have the antidote on my person” she baited. “It’s on my hip. You’ll have to free me to save him.”

“If he dies, you die” Ohacha replied. *I can’t let him die*. *There has to be a way.*

“Let us negotiate then” the assassin said. “You captured me alive. Therefore, you must want something besides the antidote.”

“Who sent you?” Ohacha demanded.

“That is a strange ask” the assassin answered. “Most know whom wants them dead.”

Ohacha huffed, “Perhaps you’ve failed to consider that I have more than one enemy.”

“I see, I see” she said, “You must know *which* enemy—where to retaliate.” Ohacha nodded eagerly. The assassin smiled a wicked smile. “Unfortunately, this is something I cannot do. It is against our creed.”

“Then you die” Ohacha said.

“Then your friend dies too” the assassin gloated.

“Not even if I pay you more?” Ohacha asked. Cask’s eyes flicked upwards.

The assassin smiled again. “Not even then, I’m afraid.”

“Then keeping you alive is worth nothing to me” Ohacha said. “You won’t answer my questions nor will you cooperate. You have now confirmed that killing you and taking the antidote from your corpse is the best path forward–”

“No, no” the assassin cut in, “I didn’t say anything of the sort. Besides, killing me would help you very little. I carry multiple poisons and antidotes on my person and–”

The slash that came from Cask's sword was swift and ruthless. It was a blur that cut straight past the assassin's neck, cutting her no deeper than a cat's scratch. She froze and her eyes bulged. Blood welled from the shallow wound.

"Ohacha" Cask said, not taking his eyes of the assassin. "Let me kill her. This was a mistake. She'll never tell us what we wished to learn and without Gaba'ké, we can't search her for an antidote, assuming she even has one. We should end this now and remove Gaba'ké's hand to ensure the poison can't spread."

"Its already spread" Rolena protested. "Didn't you see him collapse?"

"The poison wasn't the cause for his collapse," Cask said, "He's overexerted himself."

The assassin moved past her shock and glared up at him. "You cut me!" she growled.

"Keep quiet" Cask snapped, "or I'll cut you for real."

"How can you be sure?" Rolena countered. "You would gamble with Gaba'ké's life?"

"I'm not gambling. He'll survive. The real gamble would be trusting anything she says. I'd wager she doesn't even have an antidote. It's a ruse. The right course is to find Gaba'ké what help we can" Cask said. Ohacha nodded.

"How can you both be so sure?" Rolena asked. "If you're wrong–"

"I'm not wrong!" Cask said.

"But if you are, consider what we lose" Rolena hissed. "This is Gaba'ké!"

"I asked for Ohacha's permission, not yours" Cask snapped.

Ohacha frowned. *It wasn't supposed to happen this way.* He looked down at the assassin. She looked like venom personified. Her hands sprouted from the ground like mortal flowers. "This is your last chance to tell the truth," he warned. "If you won't tell us anything, I'll hear your last words in stead."

She wrinkled her nose and then spit towards Cask's feet. The assassin then spoke in a foreign tongue Ohacha. It was an angry mix of sounds and Ohacha wasn't sure if that were her, or the language itself. When she seemed finished, he nodded to Cask and her head rolled.

It happened so fast that Rolena gasped a full second later. "Now we'll never know who sent her" she hissed. "This was all for nothing!"

Ohacha snapped at her challenge, "It was not for nothing! We agreed on a plan and we worked to see it to conclusion. We cannot judge the present based on hindsight. We hoped for information, and despite her silence, information I have gained. What's important now is getting Gaba'ké to a healer." He shifted closer to the old Aginjigaade. He was still unconscious on the cobblestones. Beads of sweat clung to his brow.

Ohacha knelt and Cask used his blade to cut away the full sleeve of Gaba'ké's robe, exposing the arm. Ohacha removed the makeshift bandage that had come from his shirt. The thin fabric was soaked through and came away sticky. The wound was a thumb's length up the wrist from the hand. The skin around the wound was an unnatural dark purple colour that radiated outwards. The cut was deep and Ohacha could see the white of bone where the assassin's blade had struck and lodged itself. Rolena bent down and checked Gaba'ké's breathing.

"I don't recognize this poison," she said, "but I'm not an expert to begin with."

"These Mada'abi killers are supposed to be the best" Cask said. "I wouldn't count on finding an antidote. We should amputate the hand. Stop the spread. Now. Best to do it before he loses the whole arm or it spreads to his heart."

"That's barbaric" Rolena protested. "We *need* to get him to a doctor. If the doctor doesn't have an antidote, then we can talk about amputation."

"I agree with Rolena" Ohacha said. "We have to try." Cask nodded.

"Alight. And what do we do about her?" Rolena asked, gesturing to the headless corpse emerging from the ground and the severed head that lolled near it.

Ohacha wanted to vomit. Instead, he said, "Cask and I will handle the assassin and take care of Gaba'ké" Ohacha instructed. "You find a doctor. We will monitor the spread of the poison."

"Where should I go?"

Ohacha frowned, not sure of an answer. "Head towards the plaza with the obelisk. We passed an ale house. Any good barman will know where to find a doctor." Rolena left them by the canal, heading back the way they had come.

"We should take the hand now" Cask said once Rolena was out of earshot. "It would be the safest course."

"No. We have to give Rolena time to try" Ohacha insisted. "We'll make the call if she hasn't come back. What do you suggest we do about her?" The assassins head still sat in a pool of blood. Her face held an ominous scowl in death that made Ohacha's skin shiver.

"We could toss the head in the canal and let the fish at it" Cask suggested.

"We can't risk somebody finding a severed head" Ohacha countered. "Plus, that doesn't help with the rest of her…" He looked to the stump of neck and limp hands that protruded from the street. He swallowed down the bile that came up.

Cask rubbed his face in thought, "The canal is still an absolute mess. Gaba'ké wasn't exactly subtle. Let's put something over her body. We can bring the head with us. We can figure out what to do with her later."

Ohacha agreed. Cask tossed a box over the decapitated body and then scooped up Gaba'ké in his arms. Ohacha lingered a moment longer by the canal. The stone barrier that Gaba'ké had erected was still in place, creating a break in the canal. *That's not something we can fix without Gaba'ké,* Ohacha ruminated. Then, in the canal he spotted something floating in the water, its eyes staring up at him. He walked forward and saw that it was a wooden mask. *The Mada'abi Assassin's* mask. *The one Rolena and Gaba'ké had been referring to.*

Ohacha walked forward and collected the mask from the canal. It was carved from soft wood that flexed with his touch. The mask's face stared back up at him with overly-large eyes atop high cheekbones. The face narrowed to a strong pointy chin. It bore no resemblance to its owner. Cask beckoned and, not knowing what else to do, Ohacha walked back to the assassin's corpse and retrieved the severed head by her short hair. He carried it and the mask back with him towards the house.

Inside, Cask laid Gaba'ké down on the table in the sitting room by the front door. The old man didn't stir. Cask drew one of his swords and swept upstairs, well aware that Gaba'ké had been attacked before finishing his search of the house. Cask felt in no mood to take risks. That left Ohacha holding a severed head as he stared down at the dying body of an indestructible man. Two unbelievable scenarios. Not knowing what else to do with them, he set the mask down on a table and then found a large ceramic bowl for the head.

The sounds of Cask ruffling about upstairs, closing windows and locking doors echoed from above. Ohacha returned to Gaba'ké's side. He reached forward and grasped his mentor's hand. For the first time in Ohacha's life, Gaba'ké looked frail. Never before

had the old Aginjigaade appeared anything but solid; the boulder that splits the stream. Ohacha, never one for faith or prayers, whispered one anyway for his old mentor.

Cask swept back down the stairs. His face was flushed, "How is he?"

"I don't know. He's still asleep."

"I see…" Cask said. "How long do you want to wait?" Ohacha only grunted in confusion. "For Rolena to return." Cask clarified. He pulled a cloth and handed it to Ohacha.

Ohacha didn't answer right away. Instead, he wiped the sweat from the Gaba'ké's brow. Cask opened the old man's shirt and revealed white chest hairs and a body that had left youth behind a long time ago. He was sweating profusely. His clothes clung to his skin and Ohacha dabbed there too. Cask put his ear to his chest and listened to his breathing.

"Well?" Cask asked, insistent.

"Not yet." Ohacha replied. "We need to give her time."

Cask seemed intent on protesting but held his tongue. Instead, he asked, "What did you learn? You said earlier that you had gained information."

"I know who sent her" Ohacha said. Cask looked at him but Ohacha's gaze remained locked on Gaba'ké's face. "Something she said helped me figure it out. Back in Onera, it took more than six weeks for the first assassination attempt. For a year it was street vagrants and bribed servants. It was all crude—no trained killers—because Onera didn't have any."

"I follow," Cask said, "but what does that have to do with our assassin?"

Ohacha continued, "The Onerans abhor political violence and instability. Onerans destroy their enemies socially; through isolation, selective disclosure, traps, and binds. In Onera, there was no established system for having a person assassinated because that was never the Oneran method for wielding political power or influence. But here, in Casoya, things are different and we were fools to think otherwise. We let our guards down and Bartiin's first attack was far swifter and far deadlier than anything we experienced in Onera. But Bartiin could never have organized that kind of attack so swiftly. Not alone. And yet it came, which means that he must have had help. The enemy that has acted against must therefore be somebody who has been in Caso long enough to be familiar with its criminal underbelly. And with Bartiin fled or hiding, it would need be someone who would follow through with his mission despite his absence."

"The Careyago Ambassador?" Cask asked.

"Who else would have the means, the funds, and the motive?" Ohacha asked. "If their ambassador is anything like the ambassador we had removed from Gaag, they're the type to meddle in politics *and*…"

"Use criminals as tools for influence and profit," Cask finished, finally understanding. "Somebody with enough power and influence to organize the local gangs and hire a Mada'abi Stone."

"It should have taken Bartiin months to organize the Auction House attack" Ohacha continued. "Aramuk only let us go because he believed we had a window where Bartiin wouldn't yet be ready. None of us expected the speed and might the local ambassador could muster."

A loud knock sounded from the door and both men went silent. Ohacha watched Cask's hand slowly reach for the blade at his side. A second knock, more urgent than the first sounded.

"Cask, open up! it's me!" Rolena's voice sounded from the other side of the door.

“Upstairs” Cask hissed. “Go check from the window. I’m not taking any chances tonight.”

Ohacha climbed the stairs and turned right into his room. He pushed aside his trunks of belongings and pressed his face against the window. Two figures stood on the staircase below. One was Rolena, though her figure was warped by the old glass. The other figure was larger man. Nothing seemed awry and Ohacha shouted down at Cask, then watched as the two figures disappeared inside.

Peering from the stairwell, Ohacha ignored Cask’s silent gesture to retreat and stepped down into the sitting room. There, a portly Casoyan with thinning grey-streaked hair and a round, aging face turned from Gaba’ké’s side to look at him. “Ah. This is my son” Cask said, starring intently at Ohacha as he spoke the lie. “Please, is there anything you can do for my master?” he asked. “I think he’s been poisoned.”

“Our master is a very important Aginjigaade from… Ayaan” Rolena reiterated.

“I’ll see what I can do” the man said in a groggy voice. “You have coin?”

“Yes, certainly” Cask replied.

Cask gave Rolena a look. She swept across to Ohacha’s side and not-so-subtly lead him up the stairs and away from the doctor tending to Gaba’ké. Once they were out of earshot, he addressed her in an urgent whisper, “How did you get back so fast?”

Rolena led him into her dark room, leaving the door ajar by a sliver. “I was fortunate,” she whispered eagerly, unlatching her small trunk. “I ran to that alehouse you mentioned. I was leaning over the counter asking the barman for a doctor, and the man I was leaning over *was* the doctor. What a stroke of good fortune!”

“What did you tell him?” Ohacha asked, watching her silhouette ruffle through the trunk. “That Gaba’ké is an Aginjigaade? That he’s poisoned?”

“Of course!” Rolena exclaimed, moving her hands undo her long braid. “Why lie to a man we’ve asked for help?” she continued. “In my experience, if a doctor’s any good, they seem to figure out the truth anyway. And if they’re not very good, they’ll believe the lie and do more harm than good.”

As her straighter wavey hair spilled loose, Rolena unbuckled her bracers and then pulled her armoured chest piece over her head. Ohacha’s throat went dry. He tried to grasp for a question to anchor himself. “Do you think he can help?”

“Better than you or I,” she answered, stripping off her undershirt.

Ohacha caught a flash of her curves and the muscle of her back before he looked away, his cheeks burning in the dark. He prayed she couldn't hear the sudden racing of his heart.

Rolena pulled a fresh tunic over her head, catching him facing the wall. A smile tugged at her lips. It was endearing. Her years as a mercenary had hardened her to the leering eyes of soldiers and drunks, and modesty was a luxury she’d discarded long ago on the march. But she had forgotten, sometimes, that this western prince came from a softer world.

“Let’s go back,” Rolena said, stepping closer. Ohacha turned, and though she caught the lingering flush on his face, she pretended not to notice. She tapped his arm, gesturing to his torn sleeve. “You should change, too.”

Ohacha had forgotten about his ripped shirt. It been an afterthought. But, thinking back, the shirt might have been the reason for the odd look on the doctor’s face. He slipped into his room and changed while Rolena waited at the top of the stairs. When they arrived back downstairs, Gaba’ké was sitting up straight with the doctor supporting him. His hands covered his face.

“He’s just come to” Cask said in a hushed voice. “The poison has spread but not by much.”

“What happened to the assassin’s knives?” Ohacha asked.

“They might still be upstairs,” Rolena said. “Let me check.”

Ohacha watched her ascend the stairs, his eyes lingering a fraction too long before he turned back to meet Cask’s quizzical look. He ignored the swordsman. “Perhaps if we have a sample of the poison, the doctor might recognize it?”

“Should we show him the mask?” Cask asked. “Maybe Mada’abi all use the same poison? I can run back to the canal and fetch it.”

“No need” Ohacha said, “Its sitting on the table” Ohacha added. Cask peered over and, to his surprise, the mask sat exactly where Ohacha indicated. Before he could ask, Ohacha clapped a hand on his shoulder and added calmly, “I brought the head, too. It’s in a pot in the kitchen. Don’t let the doctor in there until you’ve had a chance to move it.”

“Ohacha” Gaba’ké said, pulling both men from their conversation.

“How do you feel?” Ohacha asked as he approached. He hoped it was better than he looked.

“Exhausted” Gaba’ké said. “The arm’s hurting pretty bad. Not sure if it’s the cut–” he grunted in pain and doctor Bol apologized. “Not sure if it’s the cut or the poison” Gaba’ké finished.

“You passed out” Cask said. “It was exhaustion, correct?” The doctor shifted awkwardly. It was clear that he was listening in on their conversation.

“Let us switch tongues” Ohacha said, switching to Gaagian. “The doctor is listening and I have private questions I wish to ask.”

“I understand,” Gaba’ké murmured in Gaagian. “To your question, Gohara Cask, I say yes. The binding of the canal took from me a toll greater than I anticipated. Had the assassin found opportunity to strike from the earth—even trapped as she was—there was little I could do to intervene. Your safety was the weight upon my heart, my prince. I spent the final sliver of my strength to that end.”

“Thank you, master Aginjigaade” Ohacha said. “The assassin remains entombed in the stone. She spoke of an antidote on her person. However, it is unclear if her words were poison themselves. Do you have the will to try?”

Gaba’ké winced again. “The will, yes. But, I have not the energy nor the hope that she spoke to truth. I must ask for your forgiveness, Ohacha. As your loyal friend and guardian, Ohacha.” Ohacha leaned in intently. Gaba’ké continued, “I know that Aramuk and I were not your parents, but to us you have been our child since that dreadful day.”

“No, you don’t have to say anything. You’re going to be okay. We’ve brought you a doctor,” Ohacha interjected. He needed to believe.

“That is not what I meant” Gaba’ké said. His face was a mask of exhaustion. “I knew the risk of my decision. I knew that there was a strong chance I lost myself for good when using my abilities that last time; to bury the assassin. To use my Aginjigaade abilities, my spirit must be stronger. It must overwhelm the spirits I hope to channel my power through. I almost lost my last contest. Had I lost, it would have meant my death. The very end of my spirit. I was weary and desperate. And to be truthful, I feared the poison would claim my life. I thought my actions noble. but it was a reckless thing. Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive” Ohacha urged. The doctor leaned over and touched carefully at Gaba’ké’s would and he recoiled with a jolt of pain.

Tears ran down the old mans face, “I did it to protect you at any cost–”

“Its okay” Ohacha said, squeezing Gaba’ké’s hand. “I forgive you. And I will always forgive you. You have always been a protector. Your heart, Gaba’ké, has always been in the right place. You did what you thought was right, and I will never fault you for that.”

Gaba’ké’s eyes glanced past him and Ohacha noticed Rolena had returned. She was waiting silently, behind them. “Doctor Bol” Rolena said, getting the man’s attention. “This was the knife used against my master. I believe some of the assassin’s poison remains coated along on the blade.”

Ohacha watched as Rolena presented the doctor the knife. The blade was single-edged. Narrower at the hilt, the blade widened along its length before ending in a hooked tip; a uniquely foreign style. Rolena held the knife outstretched towards him, but did not remove her hand from the grip.

Doctor Bol stared wide-eyed at the blade. His voice waivered as he drew away from her. “Please” he quivered, “Take that away from me… and be very careful with it! This… assassin…” he added nervously, “You are certain that they are dead?”

“Yes” Cask said with confident disdain. “The bitch is dead.”

“And you understand the significance? You understand who it is you have slain?”

“Yes” Cask repeated. “She was Mada’abi.”

Doctor Bol gulped. “I need assurance. How are you certain its dead?”

Cask looked at Ohacha, and then at Gaba’ké who also seemed interested in the answer. “Her head is sitting in a pot in the kitchen” Cask said, no longer interested in hiding anything.

Doctor Bol swallowed hard, looking distinctly squeamish. He collected himself, his voice softening. “There is no antidote for this poison in Caso—the Mada’abi guard their secrets well. I suspect the blade is coated in venom, though from what beast I could not guess. We must amputate the hand. If we don’t, the poison will reach his heart within hours.”

Rolena covered a gasp with her hand while Cask stared at the floor. “I feared it would come to this,” the swordsman muttered.

“Consider yourselves blessed,” Doctor Bol urged as Gaba’ké let out a low, ragged moan. The doctor leaned closer to his patient, catching his weary eyes. “You are a lucky man, master Aginjigaade. A cut to your torso or neck, and we would not be having this conversation.”

“Gaba’ké” Ohacha said, switching back to Gaagian again. “Tell me, do you wish recover enough to check the body for an antidote or listen to the doctor and amputate now?”

“Ohacha” Gaba’ké almost whispered. “That killer never had an antidote. Take the hand and let us be done with this.”

Ohacha turned to the doctor and addressed the man. A cold fury boiled beneath his even tone, “My master wishes to have the hand removed at once. Tell us how to prepare; how to ensure the wound will not fester.”

“Of course,” Doctor Bol said, gathering his instruments.

While the doctor set to work, Cask pulled Ohacha into the corner of the room. “The day after tomorrow” he said in a hushed voice, “Once Gaba’ké is stable, send me to the Careyago Embassy. Let me extract a confession and end this once and for all. Rolena can protect you while I’m out.”

Ohacha first instinct was to protest. Sending Cask as an assassin was a revolting thought. But he looked at Gaba’ké, reading himself for amputation and his confidence in

that assessment waivered. *Strike now to buy months of safety. Sever the hand that wields the knife.* There was a logic to it. Only the knowledge that neither Aramuk nor Gaba'ké would have approved. *But uncle Aramuk is dead and Gaba'ké is poisoned. Look where their principles landed them.*

"Do it" Ohacha said.

Chapter 25: The Guest

Yoharum froze. The ceramic cup of water slipped from his grip, hitting the carpeted floor. It bounced, refusing to shatter despite the impact. There in the doorway of his childhood home stood the man who had offered Yoharum his last job: the one that had destroyed his crew and left him burned and disfigured. The job that had sent him against an Aginjigaade immune to blades and a swordsman that reaped men like grain. He was the catalyst for all that had happened; for the destruction of everything he had worked for. It seemed inconceivable. This was the one place he felt safe; detached from his life down in the city. Now that illusion of safety was shattered. And the bastard laughed.

Thoughts came like a torrent. Questions of how and why filled Yoharum's mind until an idea settled that chilled him to his core. *We were set up,* he realized. *We must have been set up from that very first meeting at Yomu's winehouse. The offer of riches; of gold and silver. It was a lure. An offer too enticing to ignore. Bait to encourage us to do their dirty work and then destroy the evidence and take the winnings for themselves. But I survived and now he's come to finish it.*

In that moment, Yoharum only had one concern: *I have to protect Ji.* He pushed down the fear and gritted through the pain of his raw blistering skin. As always, his fear yielded to the rage within. Anger and hatred filled the empty places within and those feelings fueled him into action. He pushed past his sister and pocketed a knife on the countertop. It was small, but would do.

Bartiin continued to laugh. *Even if it kills me, I won't let my family suffer for my mistakes.* He urged himself towards the laughing man. Upon his approach, Bartiin stopped laughing. Yoharum held back the urge to stick the knife straight in the man's eye. *Not yet, not in front of Jiral or Harumal. She shouldn't fear me. And I won't give him more reasons to hate me.* Anticipation made Yoharum's stomach lurch. *He'll be armed*. *He's a killer too*. He couldn't give him a chance to strike first. He rushed forward led the foreigner outside and into the cool night air.

Back inside, Harumal's eyes furrowed. *They know each other. I've made a terrible mistake bringing this stranger here,* he thought. A seed of distrust formed between Harumal and the strange foreigner Bartiin. The man hadn't told the full truth. Worse, he knew Yoharum and his band of bastards and thieves.

Outside, Yoharum fumed. "How are you here? How you find me?" Yoharum *demanded* in hushed anger and broken Tralang. Bartiin was still recovering from his hysteria. Yoharum couldn't fathom what was funny. He gripped the pocketed knife with white knuckles, splitting the burned skin on his fingers. He ignored the pain, "What is funny?" he hissed, trying to get an answer out of Bartiin's smug face. He readied the knife, just in case.

"You won't believe it" Bartiin said, calming himself, "but I wasn't looking for you at all."

"I don't believe you. How did you find–" Yoharum caught himself before he finished that sentence. *Not home. Don't say home.* "…this place?" he corrected, scowling.

Bartiin appeared non-fussed, "Why do you *think* I find this is so damned funny?" he asked rhetorically. "What are the fucking chances that of all the men I happen to befriend out in the fields, the one I meet turns out to be *your* father. Spirits, it seems impossible." He laughed again.

It wasn't funny to Yoharum. Anger seethed within. Anger at being betrayed, at losing his crew. At losing Zhenya. "You… fucking… you set us up!" Yoharum accused through gritted teeth. He pulled the knife and had it against Bartiin's throat in an instant. His blisters cracked and oozed. Yoharum gritted through the pain and Bartiin's laughter faded in an instant.

"Whoa!" he reacted. He raised his palms in a placating manner. "What do you mean I set you up?" Bartiin said, speaking slowly. "Put the knife down."

"My people. My crew. They are all dead" Yoharum spat. "You sold me!?"

"What are you talking about?" Bartiin said, his posture stiff. "Put the knife down, Yoharum. I didn't do anything."

"You betrayed me!"

"I didn't betray you!" Bartiin pleaded. "I promise, whatever you think I did. I didn't do it."

"And now you come to kill me" Yoharum growled. The knife still hovered by Bartiin's throat. "Kill me and finish the job. No survivors."

"Do you think I'd come alone if I wanted to kill you?" Bartiin asked. "Spirits, even in your sorry state you've got a knife at my throat." He waved his hands passively. "I swear I'm telling the truth. Yoharum, please!" Bartiin finally clocked the venom in Yoharum's look and understood the danger he was in. This man would kill him, right here and now with no hesitations. "Things… they didn't go well for us either" Bartiin continued. "The soldiers, they came for me too."

"You are a liar!" Yoharum hissed, he pressed the blade firm against Bartiin's neck. He held him firm with a massive hand.

"I swear it!" Bartiin said. "My men are dead too!" That part, he wasn't certain was true but it felt like the right thing to say. *Spirits of the earth he's strong.*

"How did you come here?" Yoharum hissed. He looked over Bartiin's shoulder, making sure their conversation was still private. "How you find this place?"

Bartiin pulled his neck back as the blade nicked him, drawing blood. "I escaped the city and then met your father. But I didn't know he was your father. He invited me for dinner. I just want to get off this damned island."

"I don't understand" Yoharum said. He understood the words but not their connection.

"I escaped!" Bartiin repeated sternly. "I'm hiding from the Casoyans, like you!"

Corrupt Casoyans. Yoharum slowly lowered the knife. "How did you meet Harumal?"

Bartiin chuckled and scratched his chin. "I've been hiding out in a workers' barracks just outside the city." He pointed in a direction that he figured was close to right. "Pretending to be a labourer. You know? A worker. Picking fruit. Plowing fields." He mimed the actions. "Your father was my partner. Teaching me the work."

"You think I believe that?" Yoharum demanded.

Bartiin glanced down. The knife no longer lingered at his throat but it was still close enough to end his life. And, despite Yoharum's diminished and grisly appearance, his grip remained firm. "Ask your father…" Bartiin insisted, "I'm telling the truth."

Yoharum held his gaze. The burned man's eyes pierced him with their own vengeful spirit. Finally, the huge man released him and the tension eased from his wiry neck. Bartiin felt his muscles relax and let out a long sigh that puffed wispy tendrils of breath into the cool night air. They stood, observing one another.

"What happened?" Bartiin asked, indicating to Yoharum's burned figure. "Mudtown?"

Yoharum didn't answer immediately. He said, "We killed the older prince, Aramuk Krimas. And we steal the money. But the man with the sword. He killed many. And the Aginjigaade of stone, he would not die. My sword could not cut Aginjigaade skin. He protects the little prince." Bartiin remained quiet. The big man seemed to be pondering how best to continue. He continued, "Made it away… safe. Into mountains. But soldiers find us. Casoyans. They use fire to catch and kill us."

"They came for you?" Bartiin repeated.

"I escaped. I thought you betray us. Send soldiers so you don't have to pay. They took the money. I will destroy Casoyans. Save my people."

"Save your people from what?" Bartiin asked.

"From the Casoyans"

"I thought you were Casoyan."

The venomous look Yoharum returned avowed the opposite. "My people live in the mountains. We were free. My great grandmother was free. Free to walk the mountains. Free to farm and hunt and gather. Free from soldiers. Of checkpoints. No need for bribes. Free of hard labour. No serving. No Mudtown. No slums."

"This is your family. Are you not worried the soldiers will find you?" Bartiin asked.

"Are you?"

Bartiin had to admit he wasn't. "What did your parents say when you showed up covered in burns?" Bartiin asked. "Didn't they ask questions?"

"I don't know. I don't remember. My mother, I think, healed me" Yoharum answered. He wanted to say more, but found it tiresome searching for the words in Tralang. What could he say? *My father hates me. We haven't spoken in years. He sees me as a common crook and disowns me for it. My mother refuses to talk about it, too afraid of the truth. Only my sister Jiral sees me for who I am, a freedom fighter. Only she doesn't spurn me but that may be because she has little else up here in the mountains. Her friends have left to find work in the city. She sees the truth. She remains to witness the devastation at Casoyan hands. They are taking everything from us. Year by year, we are stripped of what little they let us keep. She will be here to witness when they take the last of what was left.* Instead, Yoharum said, "Do not speak of my family to me."

"Okay" Bartiin said, afraid of asking more questions.

"You told me that your men are all dead. Tell me this story. I want to know what happened. Why are Casoyans looking for you?" Yoharum spit, after the word Casoyans.

Bartiin grimaced. "One of the princes' men came up with the same idea we did."

"They sent men to kill you in the street?" Yoharum clarified.

"Not men. One man" Bartiin admitted. "He attacked us on a suicide mission."

Yoharum's brow furrowed. "Suicide? I do not know this word."

"He knew he would die," Bartiin explained. "He forced us to kill him in front of other people. It was a crowded spectacle."

"Why do this?"

"To ruin us. To get us in trouble with the guilds. My men cut him down and it started a riot. The people turned on us. Chased us. The soldiers came and we were outnumbered so we surrendered. Claimed it was self-defence. I thought they would let us go free once people told them we were the ones attacked."

"If you think you will go free, then why need escape?" Yoharum asked.

"My friends in Caso didn't share my optimism," Bartiin said. "They believed the Casoyans would execute us for it."

"Your friends were right. Surrender is stupid. Die fighting, like a warrior."

Bartiin didn't wish to argue the point. *Some people have more to live for.* "Then it's fortunate that they broke me free" he said.

"Who are these friends? People who can free you," Yoharum asked, his curiosity piqued.

Bartiin's face hardened, realizing perhaps he had said too much. "Nobody important," he lied. "A soldier who owed me a favour. Now I'm laying low until they stop looking for me. Then I can get to my ship and get off this damned island."

"You will never make it" Yoharum scoffed. "The city is guarded now."

"I'll find a way" Bartiin countered with more confidence than he felt.

"Okay, then where is your ship?" Yoharum asked.

Bartiin gave him a puzzled look, "My guess would be right where I left it"

"Casoyans are pigs. Greedy bastards" Yoharum said. "If they arrest you, then they took your ship. It will not be there. You will need another way. I can help you."

"You can help me?"

"I can help you get in. I can help you get a ship. And I will help you if *you* help me."

Bartiin didn't like the sound of that. "Help you with what?" he asked cautiously.

"I want revenge. You help me get it, and I will get you on a ship home," Yoharum replied.

A soft voice came from the door and a pretty young face stared out at them expectantly. She spoke and then repeated her words. "Food is ready" Yoharum's sister said, looking back and forth between the two men. Her accent was more natural than Yoharum's.

"We should go eat" Bartiin suggested. He wasn't ready to commit to whatever revenge Yoharum had in mind. *I'll play along and see if I need him or not*. "It smelled delightful."

Yoharum grunted and gestured for Bartiin to lead the way inside. The big man followed behind, his body burning with each step. He was a furnace of rage and the Casoyan's had fueled him with enough hatred for a lifetime. As Yoharum followed Bartiin into the kitchen, his mother and sister stared. They stood with expectant looks that demanded explanation. Yoharum tried to look oblivious and spotted Harumal already at the table eating alone. The old man ignored him, like always. Bartiin came in with a politician's grace. He spoke quickly with a charisma and charm that was disarming. Yoharum couldn't follow the quick conversation but Jiral seemed eased in mere moments, and transferred those same feelings to her mother in quick translations. Bartiin accepted a plate of food from the two women as if nothing strange had even happened.

Yoharum approached the kitchen and Jiral stepped in close. "What the hell was that?" she asked in a hushed whisper. Yoharum looked down at her and met her gaze. She stared daggers in his direction. "Who is that?" she hissed. "How do you know him?"

"Drinking buddy" Yoharum lied, not elaborating. He kicked himself for not preparing a story they could both tell for when they came inside. Hopefully, Bartiin wouldn't say anything that betrayed the truth. It was clear from her face that Jiral didn't believe him. She eyed his burns and gave him a warning glance.

"Then what was the knife for?" Jiral asked.

Damn, Yoharum thought. *She's getting too smart for her own good.* He grunted and gave it back to her and she seemed annoyed that he didn't provide any further explanation. He tried to think of a way to placate her, but nothing came to mind.

In the dining room, Harumal ignored Bartiin as the foreigner took a seat at his table. The friendly attitude between them had vanished. To his credit, Bartiin didn't seem phased by the change in Harumal's attitude. He acted as if nothing had happened and instead, chatted emphatically with Yoharum's mother despite the language barrier. Ahunas seemed engrossed by the foreigner's charm and blind to her husbands shift in demeanor. Dishes were served and the family sat together for the first time in ages. Yoharum sat as far from his father as he could manage and ate in tense silence until Harumal finished his plate and got up from the table, leaving the room. Yoharum finished his meat and then pushed the remaining food around his plate aimlessly. Eventually, he worked up the courage and broke the silence.

"Once I am healed" Yoharum said in Tralang, "I am going to leave. I won't come back."

Ahunas and Jiral both froze at his words. They looked up at him with surprise. Jiral's had the taste of disappointment. Bartiin did the opposite, looking down at his food and avoiding their gazes. Ahunas turned on Bartiin, who still remained engrossed in his plate of food, and gave him a whack on the shoulder with a swatter she had made appear from seemingly nowhere.

"What did you do to my boy?" she asked accusingly. Her accent was heavy and Jiral translated just in case. "You show up, all charming-like with my husband, and suddenly it seems like you two know each other and everything's changed. Who are you?"

"Mother!" Jiral said, trying to interject.

Yoharum reached out and grabbed his mother's arm protects to keep her from swinging again. "Stop" he cut in, switching back to their language. "My decision has nothing to do with him."

"Sure, it doesn't" Ahunas replied, not believing him. "You tell me you're leaving like this? Nuh uh! This is the last excuse I'll take from your lips. What is it? You being hunted by the Casoyans eh? Finally caught up with your little gang of crooks? In too deep this time? What is it? You just want to protect us?"

"Ma!" Jiral shouted again.

"Enough outa you," Ahunas said, silencing her daughter. "You're always protecting him. As if he isn't your elder brother and can't take care of himself. Well, what is it, Yo? What are you running from this time? Decided you've finally had enough?"

Bartiin no longer understood the words but he understood the tone. He sunk deeper into his chair to avoid becoming the subject of Yoharum's mother's wrath. Yoharum scowled. His mother's accusations cut deep. She was right, in a way. He *was* running. He was the fisherman hunting the leviathan, knowing its maw would end his life if it ever caught him first. But it was a necessary hunt. It was his burden. If he didn't, the Casoyans would continue to prowl their lands. He needed to hurt the beast. But admitting that to her felt like losing the argument. "There's no fighting these people

head on" Yoharum said instead, ignoring her question. "If there were a real chance of changing things, I'd be first to sign up and fight. But the Casoyans are merciless. Do you really want to know how I got these burns?!" he asked in challenge. She smirked victoriously. He realized immediately that he had played right into her hand.

"Of course I do!" she wailed. "My own son shows up half dead at my door and then won't talk about what happened. Your father and I ain't fools, boy. You and your friend here are clearly in trouble. You're all cut and burned like a roast hen. And him," she said, waiting a spoon in Bartiin's direction, "what kind of foreigner comes and works the fields? Tell me the truth. How'd you get those burns I spent my days treating?"

Jiral looked expectantly at her brother. He ignored her and answered sourly, "No. I don't want to get you in any trouble."

"Are you stupid or just dumb?" Ahunas said. She clocked him over the head with her spoon. "If a band of Casoyan soldiers banged down my door looking right now, you think they would spare us because we don't know *why* you're burned and running. You think ignorance spares us? Tell me what happened, baby" she pleaded.

Yoharum slammed his fist on the table. The plates and cutlery jumped noisily. "They killed everyone!" Yoharum yelled. Jiral and Ahunas froze in the silence that followed the outburst. "They killed everyone, mom" Yoharum repeated. "Burned us alive and slew the ones who tried to escape. They butchered us. They were this close to catching me" he said, holding finger to thumb. "But I escaped and the bastards will rue the day they let it happen. They will cower at my feet as I watch that city burn. Then we can build something better, for us! With real jobs for us."

"There are real jobs" Ahunas argued. "Your father works with the guild–"

"And he's killing himself over coppers" Yoharum shouted. "How can you be okay with the way we live? They seize our villages and take our lands. They pay off our elders and chiefs to play nice and dispose of the ones who don't. They bring in city folk to work the best jobs and push our youngest to leave for the city for the chance at something better. But that promise is empty, and instead the men work as labourers and plow fields. And the women serve in their mansions and palaces for pittances. They are killing us, literally and metaphorically. And somehow, I'm the only one who seems to give a shit. For the first time I feel like there *is* no fight we can win. Not fairly. And not with the lot of us acting like nothing is wrong, happy to sit in squalor and call it life. For each deplorable choice you think I've have made, I'm met a Casoyan willing to commit far more heinous acts…"

"You're a coward" Harumal said, entering the room from where he had been listening.

"Me?" Yoharum shouted. "At least I tried to do something. How many Casoyans have you killed?"

"How many of our people have died because of those Casoyans *you* killed?" Harumal asked. "Ten men I've worked with for year were taken that day. It's been weeks. There are hundreds missing. Hundreds more homeless. People desperately searching for family members because you had to go and play savior. You caused this mess and now you're tucking your tail like a coward."

Yoharum rose from his seat and held himself back from hurling his plate across the small dining room at his father. Jiral seemed to shrink into her chair expecting the sudden violence.

“Get out” Harumal said in Tralang. His voice was a low growl. “Both of you. You understand?” he asked, looking at Bartiin. “If you’re still here by mid-day tomorrow, I’ll go to the guild myself and bring them here to arrest you. Do you understand me?”

Yoharum scowled. “You were always the real coward. At least I tried to make a difference. You were never brave enough to do anything but keep your head down. One day, you’ll look back and wish you had done as I have. Stood up. United. Resisted.” Yoharum stormed out of the dining room, leaving Bartiin cowering in his chair.

The next morning, right at dawn, Yoharum stepped into Jiral’s room. It was dark and she appeared to be sound asleep. Yoharum walked over across the small room and stooped over, planting a soft kiss on her temple.

“You’re leaving?” she said softly, startling him.

“You’re awake?”

“Where will you go?”

“Back to Caso” Yoharum answered. “I’ll go to Viiran, probably.” He expected her to protest but she didn’t.

“Will I see you again?” she asked. The question hurt.

“One day,” Yoharum promised, “when you’re free.” He gave her another soft kiss and left the room. He would have gone to his mother too, but not with his father in the room. Despite their misgivings, she had done well for them. Yoharum left, meeting Bartiin outside in the garden. Together, the two men set off down the mountain back towards the city.

Chapter 26: The Candidates

A knock sounded from the hardwood door at the front of the house and Rolena stirred awake. She had fallen asleep on the fine upholstered chair in the sitting room. The room was unfamiliar and dim and a wave of unfamiliar terror rolled through her as the knock sounded again, louder. She wiped her hand across her face, removing the drool that had collected on her lip as she had slept. Exhaustion had taken her. As to when, she couldn't recall. Somebody had placed a blanket over her at some point.

Roused from her slumber, she looked around the room expectantly and found it empty. Gaba'ké, who's arm they had worked with the doctor to remove, was gone. Back in his bed to recover she hoped. Also missing were Ohacha and Cask. She vaguely remembered that she and the prince had fallen asleep together, shoulder to shoulder. He must have gone up to his bed at some point in the night. What wasn't gone was the blood.

Across the room, dark red stains covered much of the room. In the darkness, it had been difficult to see where it had gotten. They had cleaned what they could but now, with night's veil removed, it was clear they had missed a lot. The fine wood table where Cask had cleaved the hand away—just below the elbow—and the doctor had cauterized the wound looked newly stained. The blood had dried in ominous streaks. Looking down at her hands, they too still carried stains from what they had done last night. Despite that, it was the single best amputation Rolena had ever witnessed. Though, when compared to the first and only amputation she had ever had the displeasure of watching, it wasn't much of a competition. It had been clean and efficient. Gaba'ké had already been drugged and the hot iron was pre-emptively ready to staunch the bleeding. There had been no mud or grime. And Cask's swing was, as always, beautiful; even in its tragedy.

As she rose from the chair, Rolena found herself still wearing bloody clothes. Streaks covered her in odd places, now dark and dried. She scowled at her own sloppiness as a third knock came from the door. *Who could that be?* Rolena thought, crossing the room towards the door. *The doctor?* She approached the door and shouted, "One minute" not knowing if their guest had heard or understood. As she moved for the stairs, Cask appeared coming down. He looked drained in a way she had never seen before. Even during the attack in Onera, he hadn't looked this emotionally empty.

"It's a soldier" he said, rushing past her, "a woman."

Rolena swung around and followed him to the door. Cask readied himself and then urged her to open it. She did and greeting her from the other side of the door was a familiar scarred face. It was Yuromi Ashill, her once captor, dressed in her guild armour. The Casoyan woman stood alone and smiled awkwardly. The scar didn't make her look any friendlier.

Rolena supressed the urge to slam the door in the woman's face. The memory of Lord Kulimas' butchering came to mind. With it came the painful memory of her week

spent inside a Casoyan prison. *Blood and hunger and fear and death. All because of this scar-faced bitch.* Rolena smiled back despite the resentment she felt. She gave Cask a look that asked, 'what's she doing here?' but he seemed not to notice.

"Sergeant Ashill," Rolena announced in an overly-friendly tone. She was met with silence.

This was clearly the wrong response. The scarred sergeant returned a horrified look. But then, Rolena followed her gaze and understood what the sergeant was seeing. The blood stains were obvious on her clothes. Her hair was a mess, making her appearance all the wilder.

"We spoke last night" Yuromi recalled slowly, "Ohacha and I agreed that you and I were to meet with Patzau Minoc this morning. Are you ready to leave? Did he tell you? What…?"

"Ah, that's right!" Rolena said, kicking herself for her stupidity. So much had happened that she had forgotten about being volunteered to visit Patzau Minoc with the sergeant. "Well, about that…" she continued, not knowing how to respond in the slightest. *Had last night's debacle changed their plans for today?* she wondered. No part of her wished to follow through. Spending the day with Yuromi was somewhere near the bottom of the list of things she hoped to do today.

"Please, come inside" Cask said, as if his brain had only just caught up. Ohacha followed close by. "Rolena, close the door" Cask added as he ushered Yuromi into the dim apartment. Rolena stepped aside to allow Yuromi through and did as bid. She turned and saw the chaos Yuromi was being invited into. She seemed apprehensive. *We're idiots.*

Ohacha, to his credit or perhaps to his blatant ignorance, seemed oblivious to the way Yuromi tensed as she inspected the room. Cask noticed the change immediately. It was the way her posture stiffened and her hand came down to rest above the sword at her hip. Even in the dim light, the blood splatters across the floor were unmistakable. Rolena couldn't even remember when or where the trail of blood had come from. Yuromi appeared transfixed and Rolena followed her gaze across the room to where, on obvious display, sat the Mada'abi assassin's mask. Next to it sat the assassins' short blade. The one that almost killed Gaba'ké.

"I know we only spoke yesterday" Ohacha continued, "but so much has happened…"

"Perhaps" Cask interjected, "we start with why the apartment is covered in blood so as to release some of the tension in our guest's face."

Yuromi exhaled, as if she had only just realized she had been holding her breath. Ohacha, for the first time, seemed to notice her unease and smiled reassuringly in the awkwardly charming way only he could get away with. *Princes,* Rolena thought.

"It's okay now" Ohacha said, "We had a bit of an incident last night" he added.

'A bit of an incident' was a phrase about as insufficient as Rolena could imagine.

Yuromi strode slowly across the room directly towards the mask. She reached for it and then stopped, hand outstretched. As if touching the strange mask might curse her. "A bit of an incident…" she breathed, "is not how a normal person would describe *this*." She held up the mask and turned it in her hands. She set it down and reached for the handle of the strange blade. Her hand froze, hovering over the cursed weapon. She seemingly unable, or perhaps unwilling, to cross that line into holding it.

"Its clean" Cask said. His words seemed to spook her hand away from the hilt. "I removed the poison and washed the blade last night. The doctor has a sample."

“What… the… hell” she mumbled, slowly annunciating each word. She turned around to face them. “Whose blood is this?” she asked. “The assassins?” Rolena stayed silent. To be honest, she wasn’t sure she knew herself.

“The blood on the stairs and in the kitchen is Gaba’ké’s. The rest was the assassin’s” Cask answered. “Her head is…” he trailed off, realizing he was saying entirely too much. Rolena shivered, picturing the head in the basin.

“Let’s start again” Yuromi said, trying to slow her shallow breaths. “What the fuck happened last night?”

Rolena listened silently as Cask and Ohacha retold the story of the previous night’s attack. She gave an impressed look over at Rolena when Cask explained how they had captured the assassin and a nervous look when hearing how Gaba’ké had collapsed. She became concerned as they explained how, with the doctor’s help, they had removed his arm.

“And where is Gaba’ké?” she ventured to ask.

“Upstairs. Resting. He agreed that the hand had to be removed” Ohacha answered. “Once again, I owe him my life. Each of you” Ohacha added, looking first to Rolena and then Cask.

“I owed your father and your uncle mine” Cask said.

Rolena smiled but remained silent. Now wasn’t the time to remind him that he was paying her a handsomely for her continued services. *And with significantly less risk than Gaba’ké and Cask endured*.

“Who sent the assassin?” Yuromi asked. “Was it Bartiin?”

“The assassin refused to tell us,” Ohacha said a little too urgently. “We don’t know.”

Rolena furrowed her brow. *He’s lying*, she realized. *But the first part is true, so how does he know who it was? And if he did, why hasn’t he told me?* She looked to Cask and realized he also knew. *They’re hiding something.*

“We believe it was Bartiin” Cask said with a finality that ended that line of questioning.

Yuromi’s expression suggested that she too felt there was something off with their answers. She itched her nose with the back of her knuckles and said “Okay,” letting the word linger. “And what are you going to do about it?”

Ohacha looked to Cask, who looked to Rolena, who was then met with a look from Yuromi. All three faces stared in her direction. Rolena stared back at them, unsure why they all looked to her. “What?” she asked. “Am I supposed to answer that?”

“We need more information. We will decide how to proceed after you see Patzau Minoc” Ohacha said. “Bartiin may be on the run, be he is clearly still capable of trying to harm us. Now that he’s failed again, he’ll need some time to arrange another strike. We need to use this window find him and stop him for good.”

Cask added, “Without knowing where he’s hiding and coordinating from, there’s not much we *can* do. I doubt he’ll be able send another Mada’abi Stone Assassin after us.”

“Is there another one in the city?” Rolena asked nervously.

“I didn’t think there were any in Caso at all” Yuromi answered. “They’re banned from the city. I’ll have to ask Patzau Minoc when we see him.”

“Please do” Ohacha said. He looked back at Rolena.

She was reminded that she was, in fact, still covered in gore and unready to depart. Beyond her messy hair and the previous day’s clothes, she felt stiff from the chair

and her skin felt sticky and grimy from the hiking and fighting and doctoring. She moved unconsciously to fix her hair under Ohacha's gaze and felt embarrassed by her appearance. "I'll need a moment to clean myself up" Rolena said. "Last night was taxing. Once I'm more presentable, we can go" she added, smiling half-heartedly at Yuromi. The sergeant returned the pleasantry.

Rolena used what little water remained in their tub to scrub her skin clean and rinse her hair. She didn't have the time to comb or braid it and conceded to putting it in a tail. The problem was that unbraided, it came down to her behind and tangled itself easily. She peeked across the hall at Gaba'ké, whom remained asleep in bed with bandages over the stump at his arm. She whispered a prayer to the spirits for him. Even with her detour, she was back downstairs and ready to leave in a haste that would have made her old company commander proud.

"Let's go" Rolena said, even before hitting the bottom step. It was clear from everyone's expressions that she had interrupted their conversation.

Cask cleared his voice and continued, "What happened in Gaag was less civil war and more coup" he continued. "So, I'm afraid that the information we share may not provide you with whatever it is you hoped to learn."

"That's okay" Yuromi said softly. "What you have told me already has been incredibly helpful. I think it's important that I understand what happened and how. I want to know what signs to look out for."

"Don't trust the Careyago" Ohacha said disdainfully.

Cask ignored Ohacha's comment and continued, "Ohacha's uncle Belvaas met with a vocal minority in Gaag. This was right after the fall of Ayaan, Gaba'ké's home city. It was the last big city between the Careyago and Gaag. This minority was adamant that the Careyago would continue to push their armies south.

"And they did," Yuromi said rhetorically. "The Careyago now control Gaag."

"Not in the way you think," Cask replied. "There were two factions. Ohacha's father Golan—the new king—believed the Careyago wouldn't come straight away. Ayaan had fallen, yes, but not without cost to the Careyago. We didn't know it until much later, but it had taken a manufactured schism within the Ayaani Aginjigaade Academy to change the tides. King Golan believed we had time and resources to bolster defenses and reinforce key positions along the sea and across the Gaagian river. On the other side, Belvaas and his group of dissenting nobles believed that war against the Careyago was inevitable and unwinnable; that war would be a death sentence to all of them. And so, they met with the Careyago in secret and concocted a plan to depose Golan and replace him with Belvaas. Once Belvaas was King of Gaag, he would then surrender the city to Careyago without conflict."

"Okay. I can see the difference you spoke of," Yuromi said after a few breaths. "We were the ones that spread into the mountains. The guilds have expanded their control and influence and now, for the first time, their grip is slipping. All worsened by the council's provocation of the gangs and rebels into violence. I'm torn, is all. My beliefs are at odds. I was raised to believe that Caso's soldiers were for keeping the peace. But now, as you say, the tides have turned. My apologies, I never intended to bother you with my unfinished thoughts" Yuromi added with a frustrated huff, "I just… don't know anymore."

"My uncle Belvaas murdered my father and mother, and now my uncle. Bartiin is just the hand swinging his sword. But now he's gone and my cousin now rules. But he wasn't the one who betrayed us. He didn't commit those original treasons. And yet, to

reclaim my rightful place, I know must depose him; a brother in all but name. A childhood friend. Part of me knows that to take his place, he cannot survive. But I don't know if I could do it. If he were here, before me right now. Could I raise my sword and strike him down? It wasn't his crime. And yet…"

"We should go" Yuromi said into the silence that followed. She looked to Rolena, who still stood at the bottom of the stairs. "Patzau Minoc has a most unsavoury habit of never being where you can expect find him. The sooner we get going, the better our chances are of finding him today."

The two women rose and walked towards the entryway. Cask moved and opened the door for them. "I'll pray for Gaba'ké's health" Yuromi said, placing her helm atop her head and fixing her sword into her belt. Rolena, a head shorter and dressed in her shabby hand-me-down armour and no crossbow, felt inadequate in comparison. She carried only a short sword on her hip. Never in her life had she owned a helmet, let alone one cast from bronze. She cast a sheepish smile at Ohacha and Cask before closing the door and following the sergeant into the city.

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Rolena and Yuromi finally arrived after an endless slog from the southern Spires district. Rolena's legs still burned from yesterday's trek; hiking countless steps was a brutality she hadn't faced since her mercenary days. Years spent in Onera serving the Krimas princes had left her soft to the realities of the average soldier. In crossing the city, it became remarkably clear how the atmosphere of Caso had shifted since that first day she had arrived. Fewer souls walked the streets. Soldiers roamed with real weapons—spears and shields—rather than ghata. Common goods and food princes had surged and there was an air of distrust that seemed to linger. The Sergeant Yuromi, however, seemed immune. Or perhaps she was already used to this new normal.

Rolena considered conversing with the Casoyan sergeant, so as not to seem standoffish, which she was. The problem was that she didn't know what to say and subsequently found herself irresolute to the point of inaction. By the time the pair reached the Artisan's Guild, the opportunity felt missed and sullen silence seemed to be their only mutual friend. As they entered the Artisan's Guild, it was clear that the time for needless personal questions had lapsed.

The Guild Hall was a blackstone building on the north side of the city adorned with statues, geometric tile work, friezes, and ornate metalwork. The building was as hideous as it was lavish, and it was exceptionally lavish. It wasn't that the works were poor, in fact it was quite the opposite. It was that none of the artistic works blended or complimented the others, leaving the entire structure hideously garish. Chaotic was the word that came to mind. Adding to that chaos, the guild hall was filled to the brim with far too many people. Arguments filled the large foyer and spilled outside into the courtyard. From their vantage at the gate before the gathered crowd, their task of finding Patzau Minoc seemed impossible.

A group of children of varying ages loitered off to the side and Yuromi approached them, though Rolena couldn't fathom why. They perked up at her approach and extended their hands out greedily. The sergeant said words to the group and they in turn answered whatever question she had asked until she seemed satisfied, tossing several a few copper coins.

Rolena waited expectantly for a translation or explanation. It didn't come. Instead, Yuromi walked tenaciously into the crowd. Rolena huffed in disdain and followed, now annoyed with the lack of information. Not knowing what else to do, she

set her mind to spotting the portly Patzau Minoc. From memory, he would be loud, large, and important. *Finding him can't be very hard… can it? Surely somebody in the crowd knows where he's hiding.* Yuromi, dressed in her soldier's uniform, found it easy to navigate through and into the hall. Rolena followed but with more difficulty as elbows and shoulders seemed to find their way back into her path and into her ribs. Yuromi found a pocket within the crowd and Rolena squeezed her way through stand beside her.

"Do you see her?" Yuromi asked.

"Her?" Rolena repeated.

"Kuta" Yuromi said, still scanning the room. Rolena gave a baffled squint that went unnoticed until she gave up. She then followed Yuromi's lead and searched for Patzau Minoc's Aginjigaade. She barely remembered what the girl looked like. They had only met the once. *White cloak. Brownish black hair.* Rolena groaned in frustration. *Spirits, finding a tiny girl in a throng is going to be impossible.* A task all the more foolish when Minoc himself was so tall and large.

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Yuromi continued scanning the crowd. She was looking for anybody who knew what the hell was going on and why Minoc wasn't here. Instead, she was drowning in a sea of unimportant faces that shared her confusion. A horn sounded through the open guild hall. The conversations and arguments stifled until a murmured silence remained. Yuromi looked up to see Mira, Patzau Minoc's wife, standing above the crowd on the mezzanine. Mira addressed the crowd with the same regal Casoyan intonation Yuromi had worked so hard to kick. She frowned, knowing full-well the prince's bodyguard wouldn't understand a word of Mira's speech and would pester her with questions the moment she got the chance.

"Thank you for coming, fellow guildsmen" Mira began. Her voice came out loud and clear over the room. She was short with wide hips and dark hair. She was immaculately dressed, just as her husband always was. She wore a black sarong with accents of gold jewelry. Pearls the size of fingernails dangled from her neck and intricate beads accented her sash. "You know me. I am Mira Minoc," she continued, "I am one of the dozens of high administrators who keep our guild running smoothly. Patzau Minoc has worked for years to bring prosperity to *all* of our guild's members and to grow and share the wealth we all create together with you, our guildsmen, and your families. Our family. We are the guild of Casoyan prosperity. You build, create, and invent and this guild sees you rewarded; made wealthy for your creativity and passions. Mellen and I have always stood as supporters of this guild and today, the artisans of Caso are reveled across the world. But we are here today because the other guilds seem bent on tearing down our ways. Whether they are fearful of our influence, jealous of our wealth, or envious of our success, I cannot say. Your Patzau, my husband, has been unjustly imprisoned. It is no secret that Mellen has fought for this guild each and every day, and that has made him unpopular amongst others on the council. There are rumours circulating about him. I ask you to think carefully before you believe them, and carefully before you consider spreading them. I have heard… terrible accusations and I ask that you wait for the truth to emerge in the trial he has been promised before casting judgment. I know my husband is innocent. It is my hope that each of you gives him the chance to prove it to you as well."

Rolena looked to Yuromi in earnest and Yuromi did her best to ignore the Oneran woman at her side. Not dissuaded by being ignored, Rolena tugged on Yuromi's shoulder to get her attention. Yuromi, annoyed by the disruption, silenced her with a glare and a gesture to wait.

"Our guild needs a leader" Mira continued, "But it has always been the guild who promotes one of our own to take up the mantle as Patzau. We must never let an outside dictate our ways. We must choose amongst ourselves, who our temporary representative is to be on the council until such time as Mellen's name is cleared. Yesterday, our preliminary vote yielded the following persons as candidates for leadership: Hairo Bradel, company master of the Northern Forges."

Yuromi watched as Hairo Bradel, an older looking gray-haired man, stepped forward and smiled to the hall below. He had a charm and charisma to him that was clear to even her eyes. A raucous applause followed Hairo's appearance. After it died down, Mira continued, "Next is Tahir Akwan, current Guild Negotiator with the Banking Guild."

A middle-aged man appeared and was met with a similar degree of applause. He had a friendly face with a wiry moustache and a receding hairline. He waved awkwardly as the sea of guildmembers cheered. "Third, is Wadesh Nider, Director of the Whitesmiths Company" Mira announced. Another smaller set of cheers and claps echoed through the guild hall.

"Fourth, is Arman Hughir, Manager of the Guild Warehouses in the docklands." A round of raucous cheers echoed from a very specific section of the hall and sparsely anywhere else. The proud looking man scowled as the applause he had expected failed to materialize.

"Finally, the fifth elected candidate was myself. Another round of cheers came but Mira was quick to silence them. "However," she continued, "I will be removing my name from candidacy. My duty is to my families first. My focus will be on supporting my husband through this ordeal and ensuring our daughter is healthy." The round of applause that followed Mira's announcement was sparse and came with its own mix of murmurs.

Rolena turned and tugged on Yuromi's sleeve again, hoping desperately for answers. "What the hell is going on?" she hissed. "I thought we were here for Patzau Minoc?"

"I don't know the details" Yuromi said nervously. "But we're not going to find Patzau Minoc today. He's been arrested by…." Yuromi blinked. She realized, mid sentence, that she had no idea who had arrested Patzau Minoc. *My mother?* She wondered. The thought that Yanata Ashill, a fanatic for order, had done something as drastic as arrest another Patzau without a public statement seemed farfetched. "I don't know" she hissed back. "He's been arrested."

"How is it that possible?" Rolena said accusingly. "Your mother is Patzau of the guards, soldiers, and prisons. If anyone should know what crime he's been accused of–"

"I told you I don't know" Yuromi snapped. "This is the first I'm hearing of it, but it sounds like the guild has known since yesterday or maybe the night before. Just… shut up so I can listen."

A voice cut through their conversation and echoed out over the crowd. The middle-aged man, Tahir, was standing where Mira had been and was addressing the crowd, "Thank you all for your nomination. As lead negotiator with the Banking Guild, I already represent our guild when it comes to finances, materials, and projects. My family, the Akwan's, have been proud members of this guild even before the age of kings ended. I promise, if elected, to continue the strong work Patzau Minoc started to encourage growth and prosperity within our guild. I will ensure that each and every guild member is able to live good and reasonable lives within our great city. Mira and Mellen Minoc are good friends and I wish Patzau Minoc a safe return. Thank you." A round of applause

echoed as Tahir smiled, waved, and stepped back from the makeshift podium. Hughir stepped forward and looked down at a tablet in his hands. Yuromi didn't wait for his speech. She turned to Rolena and pulled her outside the crowd and back towards the front gate.

"What do we do now?" Rolena asked as they reached fresh air.

"Just… wait a minute" Yuromi said. Her mind raced. It was like trying to glimpse lightning in a downpour; thoughts flashed and were gone before she had a moment to grasp them. She needed to slow down and think, and preferably not in Tralang. She closed her eyes and focused for a few breaths, and then marched back over the children she had passed on their way inside. *They told me that Patzau Minoc had been arrested,* Yuromi thought in frustration, *and I scoffed.* Yuromi reached the child she had spoken to on the way in and tossed a silver coin into a waiting hand that grabbed it from the air.

"Run to the Soldier's Guild and deliver a message to the soldiers on duty" Yuromi ordered. "Tell them that Patzau Minoc has been arrested and ensure they spread the message to the guild's leaders. Tell them the candidates for Patzau are Hairo Bradel, Tahir Akwan, Wadesh Nadir, and Arman Hughir. This message is from Sergeant Yuromi Ashill of the Soldier's Guild."

The child repeated the message back to her and then ran out into the city. Yuromi picked a second messenger for safety and sent them along after the first with the same message. She turned and found Rolena waiting impatiently. Yuromi ignored her and turned around again to march back into the guild hall.

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The Sergeant finished whatever business she had with the children outside the guild hall and promptly marched her way back inside without so much as a word. Rolena was trying to calm her frustrations by enjoying a trio of colourful birds that pecked at palm over her head. When she looked back down, Yuromi was gone.

Rolena turned and found the soldier half way back to the guild hall. She had to jog to catch up, grumbling the entire distance. "What was that about?" she asked, now frustrated with how little she was being told.

Yuromi answered without breaking stride, "I sent messengers to my guild" she explained. "Something is wrong. We need to speak with Mira. Or Kuta," she added.

"I don't understand what is happening" Rolena insisted.

Yuromi turned around suddenly and Rolena almost ran into her. Yuromi was taller, but even without the difference in height, the armour and scar across the sergeant's face made Rolena feel small in her presence. It didn't help that Yuromi was clearly very familiar with the ornate sword she carried and Rolena felt naked without her crossbow. "If you keep asking questions, I'm going to get a headache" Yuromi complained. "I can only think in one language at a time. Unless you have something to share. Keep quiet and listen. I'll fill you in when I have answers."

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To Yuromi's relief, Rolena frowned but didn't argue. She considered the matter settled for the time being and pushed her way back into the guild hall. They caught the very end of Wadesh Nider's speech as he thanked everyone for listening and nominating him. The hall burst into applause and the clapping hands and cheering voices promptly eliminated her chances of spotting anyone familiar in the crowd. She knew now, however, that Mira was on the second floor and so that was where she went with Rolena still fighting to keep close behind. Hairo Bradel took the podium and began his speech. The

first words that came out of his mouth caught Yuromi off guard and she froze in place and craned her neck to put a face to words.

"Patzau Minoc was a weak man and a puppet" Hairo announced. "And while my guild brothers have each stood here and touted his supposed greatness and innocence; none have stopped to consider the fact that Minoc may truly be guilty of the crimes he is accused of. And if Minoc *is* a criminal, it is in our best interest to stay away from such a man and those who supported him. I have known Patzau Minoc for more than twenty years, and ignoring of his criminal accusations, it is my opinion that he was too soft to lead this guild and too soft to lead this city. These are difficult times. And Minoc should bear blame for it. Crime has overridden our city. Food is expensive. Thieves prowl our streets. The merchants who come, they see the poor condition weak leaders like Patzau Minoc have left us in and sail for other shores to do their business. Yet despite Minoc's incompetence, my forges are largest employer in Caso and we have remained strong and profitable despite these hard times. Under my leadership, you can expect a man who will represent your best interest; not through pretty words but through hard actions. I will repeal this nonsense war-tax that Minoc has allowed the other guilds to place on us. I will slash the taxes this guild takes and will leave more coin in your pockets. A vote for me, is a vote for stronger richer artisans. Thank you."

Yuromi stared in shock as a surprisingly large portion of the hall erupted into cheers and the rest into chaos. Mira returned to the balcony and responded to Hairo's speech. "We will vote tomorrow for a new *temporary* Patzau" she announced, emphasizing the word temporary. "And to those of you considering Hairo's words, remember that Patzau Minoc has not yet been charged with any crime. Nor has he been found guilty by judge or jury under Casoyan law. Until such time, I would advise those of you with petty words to keep your baseless slander to yourself." Mira hissed the final words while Hairo made a show of scorning her words.

Talk flooded into the hall and it soon became difficult to hear anything through the crowd. Yuromi pushed her way up the final steps and onto the mezzanine where Mira had stood just moments earlier. To her dismay, Mira seemed to have vanished into the crowd. Yuromi found herself looking around anxiously, hoping glimpse her. She struggled against the crowd but relented as people surged down the stairwell. Yuromi turned, hoping to find support from Rolena and found herself alone. *Bloody useless,* she thought. Then she spotted Rolena again in the crowd. She was talking to somebody. *Kuta?*

"I found Kuta" Rolena said smugly as Yuromi joined the conversation.

"But it was I who recognized you" Kuta said curiously. Yuromi and Rolena shared silent looks that spoke scores. Kuta tossed her gaze back and forth between the two soldiers, picking up on the strange animosity between them.

"Great" Yuromi said dismissively. "Aginjigaade Kuta, is there a place we can speak?"

Kuta looked around and then nodded in agreement. They followed as Kuta led the way through the sea of people. They stepped through a doorway into a narrower passageway outside the main hall. On either side of the passage, various doors and paintings lined the walls. They passed other guild administrators who gave the trio queer looks. Kuta led them down a diverging corridor, up a flight of stairs, and into a large and regal office that Yuromi realized must belong to one Patzau Minoc. Rolena seemed enamoured by the fancy trinkets displayed around the room and found herself distracted by them. She stood a gawked, rather than taking her seat as Kuta and Yuromi had done.

The Patzau's large chair made the small Aginjigaade look miniscule. His desk, to Rolena's intrigue, was a birds-eye map of the city that identified the major streets, squares, and buildings. Most impressively, illum stones lit the table from below the carvings. The words seemed to glow in a manner she had never before seen. Even without being able to read the strange Casoyan script, she recognized the city with a strange familiarity. Her hours spent looking over the city from the Casoyan fortress made the landmarks obvious. She marveled until Yuromi coughed, suggesting she sit.

"What is it you wished to speak about?" Kuta asked calmly in Tralang. Rolena looked curiously to Yuromi, expecting the soldier to protest and switch to Casoyan but no objection came.

"Let's start with why we have come" Yuromi said, "and then we can discuss what is happening with your guild and Patzau Minoc." She removed her helmet and set it down noisily on the table. The metal screeched horribly on the thin pane of glass. Rolena hadn't even noticed it until the shrill noise.

Kuta suppressed a wince. "That sounds agreeable" she said.

"Who control's Patzau Minoc's information network now?" Yuromi asked.

Kuta's face didn't change, but she fidgeted uncomfortably in the chair. "I'm not–"

"Don't play coy with me. My mother's a Patzau. It's not a secret to me."

"I do" she admitted, after a moment's hesitation. "Mira is continuing to support the network through her family's wealth. She believes, like Minoc, it is a tool that can be used for good. I intend to keep it that way."

"That's good to know" Yuromi said plainly. "Congratulations, you've now become the most important person in Caso besides the eight Patzau."

"Seven Patzau" Kuta corrected.

"Yes, seven" Yuromi repeated.

"Then I take it our conversation will revolve around information? You have coin?"

"Yes" Rolena and Yuromi said together. Both side-eyed the other.

"Then we negotiate by Minoc's rules," Kuta said. "The cost is gold. I will also agree to information I deem valuable in exchange. Although I lack Minoc's full breadth of knowledge, anything I don't know, I will work to uncover. Are these terms agreeable?"

"I accept" Rolena announced. "Let's start with who has my prince's fortune?"

"I lack names," Kuta admitted, "but I have credible theories."

Rolena removed a pouch and placed a single coin on the glass tabletop. It leapt into Kuta's palm. Both women jolted back in surprise.

Kuta straightened up, "Somebody high up in the Soldier's Guild likely has your prince's fortune." She cast a lingering look on Yuromi.

"You think my mother has the fortune?" Yuromi scoffed. "My mother is a stickler for rules. She wouldn't go to sleep without signing the proper paperwork if necessary. Plus, my family is already rich. We don't need money and we certainly wouldn't need to steal it if we did."

"I don't think your mother has the fortune" Kuta said after a moment. "But I thought it possible that she knew who did, but no. I know which gang was hired to complete the theft and I know which guild squad suddenly appeared and killed them all, taking it."

"Burm's elite squad" Yuromi said. "I know that."

"Which gang was it?" Rolena asked. She held up another coin.

"It doesn't matter anymore" Kuta said, refusing. "They're all dead. Down to the last man. But yes, Burm's elite squad was the one that recovered the stolen fortune. Several of that squads' members have made unusually large purchases in recent days. But if Yanata isn't the one holding the leash, someone else must be."

"So, you really don't know who has it?" Rolena asked, disappointed.

"Some things are secret, and some things are kept secret" Kuta replied. Rolena stared back in confusion. *What's the difference?* she thought. Rolena looked to Yuromi for support.

"That idiom doesn't translate well into Tralang" Yuromi advised. "It just means that some secrets are hidden deeper than others."

"I apologize" Kuta said. "The streets are filled with rumours regarding the fortune. Plenty of young men appeared with heavy pockets that night and disappeared into Casoyan cells the next morning. Officially, the guild has recovered nothing. But certain soldiers making certain arrests of certain young men have also been observed with heavier pockets."

"So, they recovered pieces of it and hid the spoils" Yuromi hummed.

"Then who sent the Mada'abi Assassin to kill Ohacha last night?" Rolena demanded.

Kuta went rigid. "Is… he…?"

"Ohacha lives" Rolena answered defiantly. "The assassin's dead."

"Tell me…" Yuromi asked sternly, "how many Mada'abi Assassins are in the city?" She placed her own coin down on the table.

"As far as Patzau Minoc was aware, just one. Her name–"

"I don't want to know her name" Rolena cut in bluntly.

Kuta let out a breath through her nose. "I was not aware the Mada'abi Assassin was sent against Prince Ohacha. Is that why the southern canal was found blocked this morning?" Rolena didn't have to respond for Kuta to get her answer. She smiled strangely. "Spirits, that solves one mystery today. I was certain it was Gaba'ké's sorcery, but I couldn't fathom why he'd done it. Tell me this story" she insisted. The coin in her hand floated back across the table and slotted itself back into Rolena's coin pouch.

Kuta and Yuromi listened attentively to Rolena's recollection. Kuta was most impressed with how Gaba'ké had discerned an intruder inside the building. She asked questions Rolena didn't know how to answer. She was horrified as the tale closed with the amputation required to save Gaba'ké's life from the assassin's poison. When Rolena had finished, Kuta leaned back in Patzau Minoc's chair.

"I'm relieved to hear Gaba'ké survived. But more so, I'm pleased the assassin is dead."

"Why was she allowed into the city in the first place?" Yuromi demanded. "Why wasn't *my guild* informed she had been brought inside the walls. Mada'abi Assassins are forbidden entry."

Kuta sighed. "Minoc found out she was in Caso after she had already arrived. He was trying to figure out who had brought her here. Revealing her to the wider guilds would have only served to drive her underground, beyond our watch."

"What good was Minoc's watch when the assassin was allowed to be sent against Prince Ohacha last night?" Yuromi demanded. "It was Minoc's responsibility as Patzau to protect the people inside the city. In keeping her secret, he has betrayed us."

“Minoc’s in prison” Kuta countered harshly. It was the first time Kuta had ever seemed upset and it surprised them, like a puppy dog with fangs. “How was he supposed to warn anyone?” She calmed herself after a moment before continuing, “It was never his intention to betray anyone. He wished to know who had hired her. Besides, the entire council was made aware.”

“My mother knew?” Yuromi asked astounded. “My mother knew there was a Mada’abi Assassin inside the walls. What else hasn’t she told anyone?”

“Then who hired her?” Rolena asked eagerly. “That’s why I’ve come.”

“I– I don’t know” Kuta admitted. *I suspect Mellen knew*. *But all they have is me instead.*

“Then what was the damned point?” Yuromi growled.

“What about Bartiin Foxstring?” Rolena asked. “Do you know where he is?”

“I don’t know where the fugitive Bartiin of Gaag is” Kuta admitted. “I know the soldier who freed him from his cell was found dead. I also know that his fellow soldiers were executed after it was discovered they covered up his escape. I am also reasonably sure he did not leave the city by ship, meaning he either remains hidden inside the city or has fled out to the countryside. His ship remains docked in the harbour; I can direct you to it.”

“That would be useful” Rolena agreed. “How much to have men look for him?”

“I can arrange a watch” Kuta admitted. Rolena slid a pair of coins across the table and Kuta left them there. “I can also arrange to have watchmen monitor your apartment and the surrounding neighbourhood, if you still feel unsafe” Kuta suggested.

“I was not given that instruction,” Rolena admitted.

“Then what are your prince’s requests?” Kuta asked.

“We want informants watching Gal Burm and his elite squad members” Rolena answered. “Perhaps they can lead us to finding out who has my master’s fortune.”

Rolena lifted the pouch to remove more coins but Kuta waved a hand dismissively “Consider it done” Kuta said, “in exchange for the information provided.” Kuta accepted the metal and Yuromi caught the faintest flicker of something in Kuta’s eyes. “Is there anything else I can help you with today?” Kuta asked.

“No” Rolena answered. “Thank you for your help. Please, come visit us sometime. I’m sure there are other useful things we can learn from one another.”

“I just might” Kuta responded.

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Kuta remained pinned to the Patzau’s chair long after the two women left, finally burying her face in her hands. *Spirits,* she thought, *how does Minoc do this?* Talking to people was Mellen’s forte. She felt as though the guild meeting and conversation had leeched the strength from inside her. She had tried to wrap herself in the old Patzau’s confidence, but instead felt instead like a child in an oversized chair. *Maybe I’m not built for this,* she realized. But the though of Minoc in prison, languishing because she refused to step up and help him, didn’t sit right. She wouldn’t quit. She couldn’t. After a heavy, jagged sigh, she breathed in a little more of Minoc’s borrowed confidence and got back to work.

Chapter 27: The Rebel

The Mountain Gate was the largest and most important of Caso's great fortifications. The neighbourhood outside of the city centered around the Mountain Gate was planned and purposeful. The homes here were constructed, rather than cobbled. The people didn't share stresses with their neighbours down by Lake Casoya. In all ways but taxes, the Mountain Gate neighbourhood was an extension of the city. And now it was in shambles. A warning for what was to come.

The cleaner cobbled streets on the mountain road north were no longer filled with travellers. The palm trees that lined the avenue leading out of the city were charred and blackened to stumps from the fires. Buildings and inns along the corridor, purposefully built to take advantage of the cheaper taxes outside the city, now withered without Caso's walled protection. Vandals had smashed and destroyed much of what they could get their hands on during the last riot. Several shops and homes now stood as blackened skeletons. The people left avoided them like the plagued.

Soldiers patrolled in small groups. Gone were the ghata clubs the Soldier's Guild was known for. Now they carried spears with rattan shields. Some even carried crossbows and swords. Blood had been spilled and everything had changed. Kuta watched with distrust as they not-so-randomly dragged people out of the crowd to stop and search. She pulled her hood over her head and kept her head down. She was leaving the city, after all. Leaving shouldn't be a hassle. It would be returning that might prove difficult. A scream rang through the street and Kuta could do nothing but turn towards the horrible sound. The soldiers she had passed now stood over a body. A man's corpse. One soldier subdued a woman who was screaming in grief. *Spirits, guide me safely,* Kuta prayed. She did it for strength and resolve. Instead, she felt guilt.

Kuta looked down at the piece of parchment she clutched in her fingers. She had destroyed most of it. The part about who it was from and what is had said. Keeping those details on her would be tantamount to treason. Moreover, it would have been a betrayal against family. All that remained now was the address of a man she had only heard whispers of. The letter no longer read his name, but everyone in Caso had long heard whispers; Viiran, leader of the mountain independence movement. The 'gang-leader' most wanted by the Casoyans. Without Jiral's letter, Kuta wasn't even sure Minoc's network of spies had the resources to find the hideout. But apparently, rebellious girls in the mountains afraid for their brother's safety did.

And so Kuta walked alone, trusting her cousin's written word. She repeated the dictation of Murak's arrest in her mind, "You have been supporting rebellious factions in opposition to your duties as Patzau and orchestrated the attack on Patzau Yohati." It was all a lie, just as Minoc said it was. A coup. Kuta only hoped that Jiral's letter would help her find the two men who could prove Patzau Minoc's innocence. Bartiin, the man who had orchestrated the attack. And Yoharum, her own cousin, the one who had carried it

out. Only they could prove Minoc's innocence. *Yoharum said so himself*, *Patzau Yohati hadn't even been their target*.

Back towards the city, far above and beyond the dark city walls, the Casoyan fortress loomed high. It towered above even the two great domed palaces. That would be where they held Patzau Minoc. She worried for him. For his looming trial. Her mind traced the problem, never able to colour in the full picture. *Nobody will believe me, not without evidence.* And so, evidence she would find. One way or another.

What was she willing to sacrifice for Patzau Minoc? Kuta still wasn't sure. More than anything, she wished to speak with the portly Patzau. He was the one soul she trusted to navigate his way through this mess to a reasonable solution. Without his guidance, she felt blind, and if she failed to free him, that feeling would become permanent. He had been good to her. More than that, he was a good man deep down. She felt she owed it to him.

Stopping atop a terrace, the landscape below revealed itself to her. Lake Caso stretched alongside the city's walls out towards Mudtown further south. Muddy water gave way to a sea of muddy shacks. Most of the year, the lake was more of a marshland than a real lake but with the recent floods, dirty water spilled out into the streets. It pooled below the stilted hovels and shacks assembled by those too poor or unwelcome to life inside the city. The trees that had once speckled the farmlands and pastures were long cleared. Those that remained clung desperately to the ever-eroding hillsides. Kuta hiked down from the terrace following a winding trail. She passed by decreasingly smaller homes until she reached edge of the lake.

The odour was unpleasant. Kuta's shoes squelched in the sludge that seemed to cake everything in sight. Up close, it was clear the muck wasn't all mud. Garbage littered the streets. Broken glass and plates, discarded food, ripped clothes, and pottery sherds speckled the muck. The soiled corpse of a waterbird lay half buried at her feet and Kuta nearly retched at the sight of the maggots. Her clothes were already splattered in the filth. She paused a moment on the side of the pathway and closed her eyes, willing the queasy feeling to pass. It did. She opened her eyes and watched four figures appear. Unlike her, the filth of this place seemed a part of them. If she was splattered in it, they were covered in it. And just like the filth, their faces were uninviting. They quickly surrounded her.

Two men stood before her, eyeing her with wolfish grins. On her right stood a third man. A woman watched from her left side. And behind her, a fifth figure loitered on the trail she had just finished descending, blocking her escape. Kuta muttered a curse under her breath. She looked ahead at the two men and committed to trying to pass casually. Both men stepped into her path.

"Are you lost, little miss?" the man on the left said. He spoke city Casoyan with a heavy mountain accent. Kuta looked up at him from under her hood and could see a wildness in his eyes. He had dark slicked-back hair that fell to his shoulders and a swollen nose that looked recently broken. A fresh burn-scar was visible on his neck. On his hip, she could see the hilt of a crude knife. Kuta ignored him and tried to pass again. This time, the man on the right stepped in front of her and held his arms wide.

"My friend here asked you a question" the second man demanded, "I thought ladies from the city were supposed to be kind and proper, Eh?"

Kuta looked up at the second man who blocked her path. He had the same thick accent and dark look, but with a tall and wiry frame. He had a puckered face with a thin and splotchy moustache that made him look younger than her, despite his height.

"You should leave me alone" Kuta said.

"Hey now" the tall thin man continued, "we just wanna know what a well-dressed gal like yourself thinks she's doing down here."

"Please, let me pass" Kuta repeated, ignoring the question.

"Little bitch" the thin man cursed. It took Kuta a moment to realize he hadn't said it in Casoyan, but in a mountain dialect. Their shared native tongue. Or at least a version of it.

The broken-nosed man put a hand on his friend's shoulder and also spoke in their native language, "We'll have to teach this girl some manners, eh cousin?"

"This girl knows her manners" Kuta said sternly, switching tongues to match. "If anything, it's you two who need a lesson in manners. I won't ask again, let me pass."

The two men stared at her in surprise. Kuta still had the hood over most of her face. "Nah, nah" the tall and thin man stammered, "Who are you?"

Kuta didn't answer. She didn't want to answer. She wasn't even sure how to answer.

The slick-haired man spoke this time, "He asked who you are, girl. You speakin' like you one of us but you dress like a Casoyan. Which tribe are you from?"

Kuta looked to the woman on her right for help but to her disappointment, she looked hungrier for blood than the two men in her path. "My ancestral home is outside Cabiya" Kuta said, switching the conversation back to Casoyan.

"Cabiya?" the broken-nosed man repeated. "I don't believe you."

"That doesn't change the fact that its true."

"Who fucking cares" the woman on Kuta's right cut in. She spoke the mountain tongue with the same confrontational tone Yoharum did. "Look at the way the bitch is dressed. You think a Cabiyan would look like her? She's a fucking traitor. Gut her and let's get out of here."

"You have some nerve," Kuta retorted timidly, "when you're so bent on–"

"What's that?" the taller thin man interrupted. "Speak up, I can't hear you."

Kuta got angry. She growled out the words that followed, "I said, that you have some nerve calling me a traitor when you would kill a fellow mountain-girl over… what? Money? Ego?"

"Bitch, I will kill you simply because I don't like you" the woman said, walking over to stand in line with the two other men. She smiled and waived a knife in Kuta's face. Kuta remained unphased. "Now, hand over everything you've got and maybe we let you leave with a few small scars on that pretty little face. Or we can leave your corpse in the lake for the animals."

"That's it then?" Kuta asked scowling. "You're set on violence. You won't let me go?"

"What? Are you stupid too?" the woman sneered.

Kuta sighed. She poured her consciousness into her agindan. The spirits around her appeared to her senses like candles lit in the darkness. She collected power and poured it into a familiar spirit. There were several to choose from. She channelled her spiritual power through the spirit like a lens and into the knife in the woman's hand. She became one with the metal in the blade. She knew it as intimately as a mother knows her child. She saw the impurities. She sensed the knicks and bends on the unsharpened edge. She felt the rust eating away at the metal. All of these senses flooded through her in the blink of an eye. Then, she pushed.

The metal within the blade collapsed into a ball and then expanded outwards like an urchin, utterly destroying the wooden handle and impaling the woman's hand and fingers. She yelped. Kuta shifted spirits, channelling through a new lens. Still focused on the urchin, she pulled the weapon back to her. It ripped itself from the woman's hand as it flew towards her and hovered just above her own hand, where it stayed. Drops of blood dripped down from the spikey flail of metal that hovered over her palm. The man behind Kuta took off at a run up the stairs. He had no other metal on him and, not wanting to take her attention off the four in front of her, she resigned to let him go.

The other three men stood frozen while the woman screamed on the muddy ground in agony. Her hand that had once held the blade was mangled and blood flowed from the wounds. The man to Kuta's right drew his own small knife and Kuta ripped it from his grasp, bringing it to the same spot above her hand where the bronze urchin floated. The metallic smell of her sorcery spread outwards and the three men cowered. It was too late now.

"You should have let me pass" Kuta pleaded.

"Please" the thin man groveled, dropping to his knees. "Grant us mercy, great Aginjigaade. We didn't know you were *her*."

"We would never have harmed you" the broken-nosed man begged. "It was all to scare you. We're thieves, not killers." He switched to the mountain tongue, "Please, cousin. We beg for mercy and forgiveness." He pulled his own knife from his belt and made to throw it in the lake. Kuta caught it with her agindan, and drew it too into her grasp of control.

"I'm sorry," Kuta said with disappointment, "but I cannot grant forgiveness without repentance." The men's faces fell. "I could have been anyone. Had I been any other girl, would you have granted *her* mercy." Terror flooded through them. Only the woman, whom sat on her knees with hatred in her eyes looked unapologetic. The woman lunged. The attack was in desperation and hatred and fear. The mixture that yields the worst outcomes. Kuta was ready for her. The metals melded together and pierced outwards like a giant needle. It pierced the woman's body and retracted just as suddenly as it came. The woman crumpled into the mud, dead.

The man to the right took the same opportunity to throw a stone and run. Kuta ducked, letting the rock sail past her and focused her attention on him. Attacking was his second-to-last mistake. His final mistake was forgetting the chain he wore around his neck. Kuta grasped it and clotheslined the man. He crumpled to the ground. Kuta hoped she hadn't killed him.

"I didn't want to do that" Kuta said. "I just wanted to pass. We solve nothing this way."

The two remaining men cowered in the mud. Kuta saw their eyes dart towards the woman's lifeless body and to their other friend unconscious in the mud. They groveled before her. Kuta focused on the metals floating above her hand, she channeled them into two solid masses, and then altered their shapes into cleavers—wide flat blades perfect for slicing through meat and bone. She reached up and grabbed both blades by the handles, then tossed them towards the two men still on their knees. Their newly honed edges shone with razer sharpness.

"Remove a hand… each" Kuta ordered. "You can choose which. At the wrist. Do so, and you'll go free to live with my forgiveness. Refuse, and join your friends in death."

The older broken-nosed man grabbed his blade without hesitation. He set his left hand down atop a muddy brick and raised the blade.

"Wait!" Kuta ordered. He looked up at her, wide-eyed. "Together…" she said. He looked to the younger man who met his gaze. The younger man looked over his shoulder at the headless body behind him, and picked up the second cleaver. His hand trembled as he held the blade. He looked up at her, fearful. Her gaze never faltered. She focused. The men raised their blades high. "Together" Kuta repeated. The two men looked apprehensively at each other. They held the impossibly sharp cleavers overhead, counted, and chopped in unison.

The men screamed in pain and shock and anguish. The blades struck with a hard slap. Kuta had channeled as they swung and both cleavers changed shape, folding flat. By the time they found flesh, they were as flat as spatulas. It was painful, but no hands came away separated. *Second chances change lives.* Kuta believed it. She needed to. The two men screamed for the phantom pain they imagined, not the real pain they felt. It took moments for them to realize they still had working hands and trembling fingers. They stared wide eyed at each other, then up at Kuta.

"Leave the city" Kuta commanded. "If I catch you again, I'll do more than take those hands." She left them behind in the mud.

Around the block, Kuta dry heaved. She wanted to vomit but it wouldn't come. She stood stooped against a mud-crusted hut a short distance from where she left the woman's corpse. The thought of it made her sick and she gagged again. She had killed, once before. But this was the first time she had done it intentionally; the first time she hadn't needed to, and chose to anyway. She told herself it had been the fear. *She was going to kill me. They all were. Weren't they?* It felt terrible. But it also felt powerful. And the surge of adrenaline she felt was as frightening as the act itself. The woman had died so quickly. One moment she was charging forward and the next Kuta had ended her life like a fly under the swatter.

Not for the first time in her life, Kuta's feared her abilities. She feared herself. She wiped her mouth with her sleeve. It too was mud stained. A group of children ran past, each one covered in the yellowish-brown muck, giggling as they ran. They seemed unperturbed. Giddy even. Kuta prayed they wouldn't stumble upon the scene she'd left behind.

She rose and turned. There, an unfamiliar man stood a few paces away. He leaned casually on one of the other wooden shacks and Kuta pulled back defensively. "I've been waiting for you" the man said. Kuta eyed the stranger. He was average in both height and build. He had a small head and wideset eyes. His hair was cut short to stubble, while his beard and moustache were both dark and well trimmed. The clothes he wore were unassuming, but he wore war paint in the old style and there was a spark in his eyes that told her he was telling the truth.

"And you are?" Kuta asked, sizing him up and checking for obvious weapons.

"My birth name will hold no meaning to you. But you may know me as Viiran" the man answered. "And I believe that you are looking for me as well."

Kuta scowled, "And how could you know that I'm looking for you?"

"Because I know you" Viiran answered. "Not personally," he clarified, "but all people of the mountains have heard of you. Kuta, the only Aginjigaade seen in a generation. You're a beacon of hope to some of us; a sign that change is coming."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"There are a few among us who know not only of who you are, but where you've come from and which families you share relations to. I consider your cousin Yoharum a friend and I write to his sister on occasion to ease her worries."

Jiral? And he knows Yoharum? "Is my cousin with you?" Kuta asked.

"Yoharum is safe" Viiran answered. "He and the foreigner are with me."

"The foreigner…" Kuta repeated. *Bartiin*? *Or someone else?* "Will you take me to them?"

Viiran scratched his chin with long fingernails. "Of course," he said. "But I have one stipulation. I'll take you most of the way, but I must blindfold you for the last leg. I believe you to be a person of great honour, but this is a matter of security and safety. I hope you understand."

A person of great honour, Kuta repeated. She didn't feel very honourable. Turning to Caso's criminal underbelly to save Patzau Minoc seemed the opposite, in fact. "I consent."

"Then, I will lead the way."

Viiran led her through a maze of narrow alleyways where the air was still sticky and smelled burnt. It was so pungent that on first whiff Kuta believed for a split second there could be Aginjigaade sorcery afoot. As they walked, Kuta caught glimpses of men and women loitering in alleyways and at intersections. Besides their wayward glances, each person looked unassuming to the eye. But under the scrutiny of her agindan sense, she could sense the weapons they hid within. Kuta counted them. First two and three, then another pair and two more after that. Viiran wasn't just leading her through a gang of thugs, but a small army.

Viiran stopped in an unassuming crossroad and pulled a cloth. She turned and let him place it over her eyes. *This is stupid,* she thought. Using her agindan, she could sense the spirits around her and keep track of their route should she wish. *Regular people are ignorant of our skills and strengths.* Viiran led her forward, deeper into the shadier parts of Mudtown. They climbed as the buildings here stacked atop one another along the eroded hill. Finally, they stopped and Viiran removed the blindfold. They stood in front of a small unassuming doorway and Viiran knocked once. A watchman with huge muscles and a lazy eye looked her once over. Kuta shifted uncomfortably under his gaze. That and the giant chert-studded war club he held with one hand. The door opened and Kuta stepped through the portal into a small house, then through a back door into a long and narrow hallway.

"I'd prefer if Yoharum came to me" Kuta said trying to keep the discomfort from her tone.

"It's not far from here" Viiran replied dismissively.

He wasn't lying. They turned and then emerged into a large hall about as large as her local bathhouse. The room was far larger than Kuta had expected. It was larger than she believed possible in Mudtown. She thought back to a memory with Patzau Minoc. The two of them standing high above the Lake Gate and looking down over the walls into Mudtown. Kuta couldn't remember once seeing a structure large enough to contain a room this large. Around them, dozens of people lingered and milled about. They looked up with reverence as Viiran strode across the room and suspicion as Kuta, dressed in her Casoyan robes, followed behind him.

To his credit, Viiran didn't waste time. He brought her across the room straight to where Yoharum sat, still covered in bandages and reddened skin. Across from him sat another man with his back to her. Yoharum didn't smile as Viiran approached, but neither did he smile upon seeing her behind him. Whatever conversation he and the other man were having was cut short as Yoharum rose hurriedly to his feet and strode towards them.

Behind, the other man, the foreigner, turned and Kuta examined his face. He was rather handsome. He had a diamond shaped face with a dark moustache and thick trimmed beard that complimented his jawline. Curly hair danced its way down to his shoulders and he looked at her with a cunning curiosity. She, of course, recognized him immediately by description alone. This was her cousin's patron and accomplice, escaped suspected murderer, and catalyst for all of the fire, death, and destruction that had rocked this city over the last few weeks. Worse, he was the man whose crimes had landed Patzau Minoc in prison; Bartiin Foxstring of Gaag. Or, the Careyago? She wasn't certain. He met her gaze and smiled sweetly. Kuta expected the gesture to revolt her, but it didn't. She didn't return the smile and turned instead to face her cousin who brought his hands to her shoulders.

"What are you doing here?" Yoharum asked. He pulled her aside as the other two watched.

Kuta cast a glance over at Viiran, then looked back at her cousin. The outrage returned, rekindled like coal stoked with new fuel. "What are *you* doing here?" she asked accusatorily. "Come to ensure the rest of Mudtown burns too?"

Yoharum's scowl deepened. "How did you know I was here? How do you even *know* about this place? Kuta, go home!"

"I'm not Jiral, Yo!" Kuta hissed. "I can take care of myself! I've been taking care of myself all my life. Besides, I came for your help; something only you can do. And I expect it in exchange for not ratting you out to the Casoyans."

"That's not asking for help" Yoharum scowled. "That's blackmail."

"Is there a difference to thieves and murderers?" Kuta chided. "I wasn't aware."

"How did you find this place?" Yoharum asked.

"Your help" Kuta repeated.

"You said you were never *going* to rat me out to the Casoyans" Yoharum argued.

"All the more reason for you owe me a favour" Kuta emphasized.

Yoharum huffed, chewing on words to say before relenting. "Fine, what do you want?"

"Patzau Minoc has been arrested" Kuta said.

"And…?" Yoharum said.

"For *your* crimes" Kuta repeated. "The other Patzau believe he was the one who ordered the assassination against Yohati. You and I both know he didn't do it. I need your help coming up with a way to prove his innocence." To her surprise, Yoharum burst into laughter. Kuta scowled and tucked her head into her shoulders as people in the room seemed to stare. There were tears in her cousin's eyes and pain written across his face as he slowed his breaths. "What the muddy hell is so funny?" she sneered.

"Why the hell would I help your Patzau, Kuta?" Yoharum wheezed. "Let the bastards kill each other. We'd be better for it."

Kuta sucked in a breath and tried again, skipping the bullshit. "Give me Bartiin of Gaag" she hissed. "I don't need you to do anything if I can take him. What is he to you? To family? I can turn him over as a witness and get Minoc freed. He'll go down for it, not you. We *need* Patzau Minoc back. He's the only Patzau on our side."

"Don't give me that bullshit" Yoharum scoffed. "None of them bastards are on our side."

"Patzau Minoc is an ally, why else would I work for him?" Kuta hissed. "If I can free him, we have somebody powerful on our side. One who owes us a favour."

"No" Yoharum said decisively.

"What?" Kuta exclaimed in surprise. "What do you mean no?"

"I said no, Kuta" Yoharum repeated. "I won't give you Bartiin."

"Who is he to you?" Kuta hissed. "I am you family! Why the hell not?" Her temper boiled over and she hammered a half-hearted fist towards Yoharum who caught it in his large hands before it ever hit him. She tried to pull away but he held her wrist firmly.

Yoharum wiped his face with his hand and smeared something dark across his stubbled chin. It was strange seeing him so hairless. The smear was distracting but Kuta tried to ignore it. "Kuta, I have always believed you were the smartest among us…" Yoharum said, speaking slowly, "certainly smarter than I am… than I've been. Even without your gifts—curse—you'd be a force. But right now, you're being really fucking stupid. You're being blinded by desperation."

"Stupid!? What's that supposed to mean?" Kuta yelled angrily, still trying to pull away.

"It means that giving you Bartiin the Fox won't help your Patzau, Kuta" Yoharum insisted. "Even if I walked in there myself and admitted I killed the fuckin prince myself, those Casoyan bastards won't listen for a single second. Oh, they'd kill me for it too and it would be a grand celebration of their justice and honour, but the other Patzau don't think for a second that Mellen-fucking-Minoc orchestrated an assassination coup against Patzau Yohati. Don't be daft. They're not fools. They're the ones orchestrating the coup against him. And the more you tie yourself to him, the quicker you'll drown as he sinks."

Kuta stopped fighting. She wished her hands were free so she could punch him in his smug little face. It would feel really satisfying. More satisfying than the realization that he was right. And the fact that he was right made her all the angrier. It was so obvious. Spirits, she had believed so foolishly. Yoharum let her hand go.

"The other fault in your plan is thinking you could force a man like Bartiin to go with you, and then admit to any such conspiracy. You'd be asking the man to testify against himself. He'll never admit to anything. What was your plan to get a confession out of him? How were you going to get him back into the city?"

"I don't know…" Kuta said in exasperation, "I guess I thought I could turn him over to a friend in the military and she might know a way of getting a confession out of him."

"And how do you know this person isn't in on the plot to remove Minoc?" Yoharum asked. "They're all schemers. Every damned Casoyan is looking for some advantage over their friends and neighbour. They're deceitful, treacherous, greedy little–"

"I don't know" Kuta said harshly. "It was stupid. I was stupid…" Frustrated tears welled in her eyes and she blinked them away. She wanted to cry. She wanted to punch something. She wanted to cry while punching something.

Yoharum put his hands back on her shoulders and Kuta looked up at him. "You're a lot of things, Kuta" Yoharum said, "but stupid isn't one of them. I know you. You'll think of something." He waited for her to steady her breaths before asking, "Did you mean what you said about Patzau Minoc? Is Minoc really the ally you claim he is?"

Kuta thought about it again. "He's on the right path" she admitted, "He's a strange man, but he has a good heart. He cares deeply about people. And fairness, and justice. Real justice, not the Casoyan kind."

"Then I take back what I said about him. I hope you think of something."

Chapter 28: The Betrayal

The room was hazy and unfamiliar. As was the man who leaned over him. Gaba'ké tried to open his eyes and found they were already open, but he was simply having trouble seeing. He blinked rapidly and found it did little to help. The haze clouded his mind, not his eyes. Gaba'ké leaned forward, hoping to prop himself up and fell awkwardly to the right. He tried to speak but only a jumble of moaning sounds escaped his dry lips. Looking down, even through the fog of his mind, it was clear what had happened, or perhaps not happened. His right hand was missing, as was most of his right arm. The unfamiliar man's face was suddenly very close to him, speaking words that sailed by like figures in the fog. Gaba'ké heard them, understood none, and yet followed the doctor's direction. He drank deep. The water dribbled down his chin and into his beard. He fell back into sleep.

That haze over his mind had lessened but persisted when Gaba'ké awoke the next morning. He brought the bandaged stump of his arm up to his face and stared at it. He felt nothing. They had given him something and whatever it had been, it left him numb. He had expected the numbness to feel like absence. Instead, it was all consuming. It pressed down on him with its full weight. Gaba'ké's eyes wandered around the unfamiliar room. The doctor was gone, though for how long, he couldn't recall. He couldn't even tell how long he'd been in bed. His back ached but so did everything else. He looked over at the pair of windows on his left. They were familiar but the memory attached to them was ethereal, dancing away each time he tried to remember. A young man slept in the armchair across from the bed. Gaba'ké's heart fluttered at the sight of his friend, King Golan.

But then the young man stirred and his features didn't hold up to closer scrutiny. Instead, the young man reminded Gaba'ké of a princess he once knew and now missed dearly. As he slept, Ohacha Krimas looked more like his mother than his father. He had her long face, rounded chin, and darker curly hair.

The sadness of loss hit him hard. Even in numbness, it was a feeling that never faded away. It pierced through the fog of his mind and roused him into full consciousness. It wasn't self pity, but regret over the irreversible choices in life. He began to cry softly. He wiped the right side of his face awkwardly with his left hand. His only hand. Gaba'ké's eyes continued their journey around the unfamiliar room until they landed on the bowl of soup steaming on bedside table. Hunger joined sadness. He reached for the bowl awkwardly with his left hand and, unable to use the spoon, opted to drink straight from the rim.

The door opened inward and Rolena entered the room. "You're awake?" Rolena said.

"Good" Doctor Bol said, following her in. "Gaba'ké, you can understand me, yes?"

Gaba'ké heard the words and understood their meaning but found it difficult to form words of his own. His response was slurred and unfamiliar. He moved the bowl from his left hand to his right only to spill the remnants of the soup down the side of his bed. The hand he intended to guide the bowl down had never materialised. "I'm sorry" Gaba'ké said, or at least that's what he had attempted to say. Neither the doctor nor Rolena responded as they moved to clean the mess.

"Gaba'ké" Doctor Bol said, gesturing in a manner that fixed the Aginjigaade's attention. "I gave you medicine for the amputation and to help relieve the pain during your recovery. Do you understand me?" Gaba'ké nodded awkwardly. His lips felt funny and he chewed on them with his teeth. Doctor Bol reached over and grabbed him unexpectedly by the jaw to stop the chewing.

"Don't do that" the doctor scolded. Gaba'ké looked up at the man, upset by the gesture. He liked chewing on his lips. At least, he liked it right now. Doctor Bol ignored the sour look he was given and continued, "the medicine will wear off within the next day or so. When it does, the pain will return. It doesn't mean things are getting worse. Do not remove the bandage without Rolena, she knows how to do it right to ensure you don't get sick. Do you understand?"

Gaba'ké couldn't remember agreeing but realized that he must have since doctor Bol had tucked him back into bed and then turned away from him. He could hear the doctor speaking with Rolena. The haze in his mind felt turbulent, as if he lay aboard a ship that rocked across wide ocean waves. He looked at his right hand, or what used to be his right hand. There was pain there, distant and throbbing. It was his pain, and yet it was detached. It reminded him of the spirits he drew on. They felt much the same way as he channeled power through them; they were a part of him and yet distant. Those strange thoughts kept him company as his mind drifted back to sleep.

The room was dark the next time Gaba'ké awoke. The pain that had once felt distant now throbbed intrusively. Gaba'ké looked down, the fuzziness gone, and examined his stumped wrist. He turned it over, almost as if expecting the hand to be just out of view. He blinked and cleared the crustiness from his eyes with his left hand; his good hand now. Well, his only hand. Ohacha was no longer in the armchair. Moonlight shone in through the window and bathed the room in a soft blue light. A spirit of light hovered softly above the armchair, its form round and ethereal in the moonlight. It phased out of sight as Gaba'ké rose awkwardly. Hunger rumbled within and he shifted out of bed towards the door. A warm candle illuminated the ground floor below and hushed voices echoed softly up to where Gaba'ké stood in his doorway. Rolena and Cask were arguing.

"I don't want to hear it" Rolena said, a tinge of anger in her voice. "I'm not stupid, Cask."

"I never said you were stupid" Cask said.

"Then stop acting like I am!" Rolena hissed. "You really expect me to believe that you didn't do it? She just happened to be murdered the day after the assassin came?"

"Coincidences do not beget facts" Cask said dismissively.

"Spirits, I don't understand why you're lying to me. I'm on your side, Cask" Rolena scoffed. "I overheard you and Ohacha talking about it the night of the attack. You two talked about her being the one to send the assassins and so you went and killed her while I was away with the doctor. Worse, you left Ohacha unprotected. How could you two be so irresponsible?"

"You misheard us" Cask said dismissively "and I did no such thing."

“What seems to be the commotion?” Gaba’ké asked, navigating the last few steps down the stairs. He emerged into the sitting room where Rolena stood over Cask, who sat in the arm chair. Both of them turned in surprise as he stepped down towards them.

“You’re up?” Cask said, rising from his chair. “Do you need anything?”

“No, no. Thank you, old friend” Gaba’ké said, waving off Cask’s worries. “The hand hurts but I’ll be okay, I’m sure. Still, it’s an odd thing” he added, lifting the wrist for them to see. “I would, however, like to know a little bit more about what it is you two are debating.”

“It’s nothing–”

“Cask murdered the Careyago ambassador” Rolena blurted. “Her and her husband we’re found dead in the embassy this afternoon.”

“I did no such thing” Cask retorted. Rolena growled in frustration.

The lie was obvious. Cask had done it. Gaba’ké frowned in disappointment. He sighed audibly, “Was it Ohacha’s idea or yours?” *Please tell me it wasn’t the boys idea. I have tried so hard to keep him off the path of vengeance.* Cask didn’t answer immediately. It was clear he was brainstorming a way to cut himself away from the conversation. “Should I go ask Ohacha?” Gaba’ké added. “He’ll tell me the truth.”

“It was my idea” Cask admitted briskly.

A shout rose in Rolena’s chest and Gaba’ké sent her a look to silence her forthcoming outburst. The look said, *I’ll deal with this.* She simmered in her anger. “But Ohacha knew? He approved it?” Gaba’ké asked.

“Of course,” Cask said. “Ohacha was the one who reasoned the assassin had been sent by the ambassador. I advised him that now was about time to ensure it wouldn’t happen again. That nobody else needed to get hurt.”

“You used what happened to me to manipulate him” Gaba’ké said calmly. It was an accusation.

“I reminded him that it is his prerogative to protect himself, just as much as it is our job to protect him. You and Aramuk were always too passive. Had we sought to eliminate Bartiin first, even back in Onera, Aramuk would still be alive. You would still have your hand.”

“Had we acted against Bartiin, another would have taken his place. Ohacha status as a threat to the Empire’s control over Gaag would have been heightened.”

“We’ve already been attacked by the emperor’s own assassins!” Cask argued, raising his voice. “What threat level is higher than that? Killers hide around every street corner in every city. We *already* rank amongst our enemy’s highest threats. The time to pretend otherwise died with Aramuk. We need to properly defend ourselves, and in this moment, striking back at our enemies served as the best defence.”

“For spirits’ sake Cask, striking now puts all of us in jeopardy” Gaba’ké said angrily.

“That’s a bit dramatic, even for you Gab” Cask said dismissively. “We eliminated an enemy. She was a threat to Ohacha’s safety. To yours and Rolena’s. The Ambassador hired a Mada’abi Assassin! She took your hand for spirits’ sake!”

“I don’t mourn her death, Cask” Gaba’ké said. “I mourn our future. There will be consequences, I assure you. You should know that. We’ve talked about this a hundred times. By acting, you’ve put Ohacha at risk. You’ve put all of us at risk. Even without the ambassador, the Careyago hold sway and power here.”

“How so?” Cask jeered.

"There are powerful guildsmen with ties to the Careyago Empire. Even if the ambassador had died choking on a fish bone, her death is leverage enough to be used against us under the guise of justice. They will find motive to pin this on us. We'll be served up to the Careyago Emperor on a golden platter. We should leave Caso. Right now, while we still have the chance."

"Ohacha agreed with my plan" Cask argued. "*He* is my prince. Not you. He's a man grown and can make his own decisions."

"That's easy to say when he's repeating *your* ideas back to you. You took advantage of being his sole council," Rolena countered. "You knew that neither of us would approve." Cask waved off her concerns dismissively.

"Rolena is right. It's not just that you gave Ohacha council I disagree with," Gaba'ké continued, "It's that you did so in a way that avoided alternative ideas or critique. You pounced on your shared outrage and my injury to get what you felt was best and it was reckless."

"Don't lecture me on recklessness" Cask said. "I've always been Ohacha's last line of defence. I'm doing what I've always done: whatever is needed to keep him safe. Just as his father tasked me. I've lost count of how many people I've killed for that boy."

"You think we don't share your burden? I'm missing a damned hand!" Gaba'ké roared. The two men stared daggers at each other in the silence that followed. "You speak of his family's wishes and yet fail to acknowledge that Aramuk would never have approved of what you've done."

"Well, Aramuk is dead," Cask shouted, "and Ohacha's not."

Gaba'ké seethed. "You forget yourself."

"Gaag is gone" Cask continued, "Everything I've ever known and loved is gone. All I've got left is the damned kid. All I can do now is protect him. Nothing else matters."

"*Everything* else matters!" Gaba'ké shouted back. "We're a sad fucking lot; I won't deny it. But that doesn't mean we should stop trying to be decent people."

Gaba'ké brought up his hands to cover his face and was once again reminded of his missing hand. It throbbed painfully. Frustration churned and he wished desperately to have something in hand with which he could smash with his full temper. The spirits around him pulled away instinctively. They had nothing to fear. He wouldn't reach for their power. Even in anger, he was stronger than that. Better than that. "I can't keep having this conversation" Gaba'ké grimaced. "You two can go on arguing about it if you want, but I'm going out for some air." He stocked across the room, opened the front door, and disappeared into the night. Ohacha sat at the top of the stairs, listening. He was certain, before, that he had done the right thing. Now he wasn't so sure.

*

Outside the Hadashenta apartment, news of Hina Durali's murder spread through the higher social circles like fire through parched fields. The murder of the Careyago Ambassador sent a shockwave through those politically connected to the distant empire and the ramifications were immediate. A powerful and vocal minority reeled at the Council of Patzau's. An immediate inquiry into the ambassador's death was issued. The council, preoccupied with the ongoing turmoil outside the city and the worsening shortages of goods and resources, deferred the issue to a single Patzau who elected to take on the task. The intention was to settle the issue swiftly and to appease the Careyago Emperor, who would demand answers once news reached his distant capital. As such, the inquisitors were instructed to launch their investigation into the most likely culprits. That group, when apprehended and removed, would serve as both a

symbolic gesture of goodwill to the foreign emperor, but would also resolve a personal grievance with the lead inquisitor. The next morning, soldiers filed ranks and marched on Piitra Hadashenta's apartment to arrest Prince Ohacha Krimas of Gaag for the murder of Hina Durali.

Ohacha sat on his bed and stared down into the street below. Soldiers, four abreast and six columns deep filled the cobbled street outside the apartment. Rolena stood next to him, one hand pulling her hair back in stress. Cask was down in the basement ensuring the dead assassin's belongings remained hidden. The knife and the mask now joined the severed head inside a large sack of salt down in the basement's pantry of supplies. "The blood is cleaned. We can only hope they aren't thorough in their search" Rolena said. Ohacha didn't reply. He stared down at the street below. The pounding on the door came. Ohacha descended the stairs with Rolena at his heels. *They have no proof,* Ohacha repeated to himself. *They have no proof that you ordered it. You're just the obvious suspect. Gaba'ké is overly cautious. They have no proof.* Ohacha stopped in front of the door and waited to see Cask emerge from the basement. The knocking came a second time, louder and more urgent. Ohacha opened the door.

"Prince Ohacha Krimas?" a soldier asked. Ohacha eyed her. She was older than him by perhaps a decade. She had dark short hair that didn't quite reach her shoulders and a face that narrowed into a sharp chin. The soldier also had an heir of confidence to her that seemed to almost dare him to try something. The fact that she wore heavy armour and carried a sheathed sword added to her confidence.

Ohacha stood in the doorway, his face unreadable, but his mind racing. His first instinct was to challenge them, to demand the grounds for their intrusion, but he knew the moment would come. To do so now would be too soon. "Aye" Ohacha said, "Is there something I can help you with today?"

"Yes" the soldier said, "My name is Captain Rozi. I am here on behalf of the council of Patzaus. You are to be taken into custody. You are accused of orchestrating the murder of Careyago Ambassador Hina Durali. You–"

"This is preposterous!" Ohacha interrupted, raising his voice. "I am insulted. I am a prince of Gaag, not some back-alley killer. Where did you get such a ridiculous idea?"

"Please, Ohacha" a voice said, stepping forward from the crowd. It was Patzau Yohati, dressed in his Patzaus robes. "This is simply a formality" Yohati said, stepping up to where the captain stood. "Two people have been murdered. Due to the nature of your relationship with the Careyago, and with your history–"

"What history?" Ohacha demanded.

Yohati's nose crinkled in derision. "Do not interrupt me," Yohati warned cooly. "Your vassal, Lord Yoliim Kulimas, murdered another Careyago soldier by the harbour not far from here. There is known enmity between you and the Careyago and I will not have your petty squabbles bring any more disorder to my city."

"I don't recall you taking near as much effort when my uncle was murdered in your streets" Ohacha snapped back. "You were there. You saw what the Careyago did to us. Where is the justice for *his* murder? Or for all the Casoyan soldiers killed that day? Ohacha demanded. His tone oozed accusation and resentment.

"Arrest him" Yohati said, no longer willing to bother with the pretense. He gestured and Captain Rozi and her soldiers surged forward.

"Get your hands off me!" Ohacha demanded, struggling against the hands that were now laid on him. "We have had nothing to do with this nonsense. This is unlawful!" He glanced back to see Rolena behind him. Her face was cold as the Casoyan soldiers

surged forward and placed her in chains. Cask still stood in the doorway, one hand on the sword at his hip. Ohacha glared at him, expecting the swordsman to protect him again, like he always had. Instead, Cask lifted his hands high and the soldiers disarmed him and placed him under arrest. Ohacha struggled as Rolena and Cask were pushed past him and led away from the house.

Ohacha watched other soldiers flood into the house as they restrained him. He struggled as they bound his hands. To his relief, the soldiers returned empty handed after a quick sweep of the house. Yohati stood off to the side with captain Rozi and a third man that Ohacha didn't recognize. The stranger wear neither the ceremonial robes of the Patzau, nor soldiers garb, yet stood among the group as an equal. He had dark hair that was braided tight to his scalp and foreign features; a tall face and wide ears with thin almost purple lips.

Yohati returned after a moment. "Where is the Aginjigaade?" he demanded. Ohacha looked closer and could see the concern written across the older man's face.

"I don't know" Ohacha said.

"I can't sense him" the unfamiliar man said. *An Aginjigaade,* Ohacha grasped.

"He's in the city" Yohati ordered, "Find him!" The man nodded and left.

"You have no proof. We didn't do this" Ohacha shouted at Yohati. The older Patzau gave a quick look over to Rozi. She approached and Ohacha found the wind knocked from his lungs as she punched him hard in the gut. He wheezed and tears welled in the corner of his eyes. The soldiers restraining him held him up. Without them, he would have crumpled to his knees.

When Ohacha opened his eyes again, he found Yohati's face very close to his. The old Patzau spoke so softly that to Ohacha, it was nearly a whisper, "What you don't understand, little prince, is that I *am* the law. I don't need proof. I you did it and you did. At least your uncle was smart enough to understand that."

"You can't!" Ohacha said, but found his own words rang hollow.

Yohati's face took on a cruel smile. "Who's going to rally against me? You have no allies here. You're an unimportant dishonoured prince of a kingdom that no longer exists, accused of a crime I say you committed? Nobody will stand by you. You have been a thorn in my side for far too long, and its time for you to disappear from my list of headaches."

Ohacha railed, livid beyond belief, but couldn't find words to express his dismay. So many thoughts and feelings churned within but Yohati was already gone and the chance to say any of them vanished. Instead, Ohacha yelled. He bellowed in frustration as the soldiers hauled him to his feet, "This is mistake! We're innocent! You have no proof." As he shouted, people in the street stopped and stared. One woman leaned out a window and he met her gaze. She turned away and closed her windows. "We're innocent!" He repeated one last time before a gag went over his mouth.

Ohacha struggled against the muzzle right until a hard open-handed blow took him unexpectedly across the face. The strike made his ears ring. Blood began to fill his mouth from the place where his teeth had bit into his cheek. *You have no proof,* he thought, ears still ringing. A bag went over his head. Soldiers escorted them blindly through the streets like common criminals. The long and familiar climb made their final destination easily deduced. Without seeing where to step, Ohacha tripped constantly. The soldiers dragged and pushed at him to climb faster; a feat impossible for one stripped of sight. The heat sapped at his energy and sweat clung to his clothes. The blindfold collected his sweat and stung at his eyes. But worse than the sweat and heat was the cold

that replaced it. The bowels of the fortress smelled of must and dank. Their footsteps echoed through the chilly air. Chains rattled in the darkness. It all felt surreal.

He was separated from Cask and Rolena and was funneled his own cell block. The blindfold was removed, but the darkness remained. The gag followed and Ohacha shouted into the darkness only once, only to have another fist purge the air from his lungs. He crumpled to the cold ground. The door closed behind him with a hard thud and his jailors left him there. The cell was dim and stone blocks penned the room on all sides. The cell was long and narrow with a single reinforced wooden door on the one side. The door had only a small window, barely larger than Ohacha's open palm. The anger set in immediately and Ohacha shouted into the darkness until hoarse. After exhaustion came the fear and guilt.

A shadowy face lit by a candle appeared at the window. It startled Ohacha, causing him to stumble backwards and fall. "Best be quiet, boy" a hoarse voice warned. "If you start wailing, I'm going to come in there and break your jaw."

The light disappeared with the guard, leaving Ohacha in darkness. Hours passed in cold silence. A silence broken only by the occasional soldier stalking the corridor and the echo of their footsteps on hard ground and the irregular splash of water droplets dripping from the ceiling. A morosely rhythmic clock to mark time's passing. Ohacha stewed over Yohati's words, "*I say it happened and it did*." He repeated those words over in his mind until all meaning was lost. He finally understood what Gaba'ké had meant. The Casoyans hadn't known the ambassador's death was their doing—his doing. What Yohati had needed was a reason to turn against him, and Ohacha had given him one. Gaba'ké had been right, again. Ohacha felt ashamed for ignoring his council and warning. Now they were doomed to die and it was his fault. The guilt was soul-crushing.

A careful voice came from the void of darkness "Hello?" it said in a hissed whisper. Ohacha felt he was imagining things. But then, a slew of other words came. The trouble was, Ohacha didn't understand them. Still, Ohacha walked to the small cell window. He looked out but saw nothing in the dim.

"Hello?" Ohacha called out softly. "Who is there?" he asked, speaking the trader's tongue.

"The rotation of guards slows at night" the voice said, "We have, perhaps, a half-hour before they come next to check on us. Tell me, what day is it?"

Ohacha frowned. He wasn't sure himself. He hadn't been following the calendar. Not since Gaba'ké's injury. "I think it's the fourteenth or fifteenth day of the season" Ohacha admitted.

"You're not Casoyan. You're that foreign prince, aren't you?" the voice contemplated.

Ohacha furrowed his brows, "Yes," he admitted. "And who are you that knows me?"

"You and I have met the day you arrived in Caso, though I never expected either of us to end up here of all places" the man said with lament.

"Who are you?" Ohacha repeated more earnestly.

"I'm disappointed, boy" the man said with a hollow joviality. "I was once Patzau, but now I languish in disgrace for a crime I didn't commit. A crime against you, of all people. And it appears I am to die for it just as you are to die for surviving it."

"Patzau Minoc?" Ohacha asked.

"Patzau no longer" Minoc lamented. "You may call me Mellen now, I suppose."

Ohacha was confused, "Why are you down here? I thought you ruled this city."

Mellen giggled in a strange way, “As did I” he answered. “As I said, it seems my opinions and actions in Casoyan politics created adversaries out of colleagues. I hoped to inspire progress and instead I have inspired envy and distrust. I have become a piece to be removed from the game for another’s gain. And what did you do to end up down here?”

“Yohati claims I ordered the murder of the Careyago Ambassador” Ohacha said, carefully.

“Well, *did* you?” Mellen asked.

“It appears I was to end up in the cell regardless,” Ohacha said, avoiding the truth.

“Well, that makes us a perfect pair then…” Mellen said trailing off. “This unplanned and unaccompanied period has provided me plenty of opportunity to plot and ponder. I’ve come to realize that what I did, and I mean the specific actions I took, never really mattered. My being here is just the means to an end.”

Ohacha swallowed hard. “You almost sound okay with it…”

“No, no,” Mellen said. “You misunderstand me. What I’m trying to say is that my desire to improve things was not backed by the will to do so at any cost. I played by the rules. My rivals did not. I was unwilling to stoop as low. And, for both being in the way and staying my hand, it seems I will lose my head.”

“Don’t you regret it?” Ohacha asked. The words were out before he realized the judgement behind them. “Apologies, I presume too much.”

“No,” Mellen said after a pause, “I don’t regret my choices. I am disappointed in the result, but not in my chosen path. To do as the other Patzau have done would have spared me this fate, but at the cost of my dignity. If I had lied and cheated and corrupted to win, then I’d have been no better. If I had prevailed using the same tactics brought against me, what moral ground would remain for me to stand on?”

“Even if it meant doing good and saving your own life in the process?”

“What I’ve come to learn, Ohacha, is that everyone believes they act in the name of what is good. Patzau Adagizhi, who betrayed me most, believes what he did to me is for the greater good” Mellen added. “Perhaps, I was wrong and he was right. Maybe this is the best path. Or perhaps, he is wrong and mine was the path. There is no knowing until the present is upon us. And even then, sometimes, not until that moment has long passed.”

Ohacha chewed on Mellen’s words and found himself disagreeing with them, “That sounds a lot like doubt and regret in your actions.”

“I believe that no act of evil can be made righteous. Even if the outcome is for someone’s idea of a greater good.”

“I must admit, I don’t follow your argument” Ohacha said. “If the act is predetermined to be evil, then of course it remains evil. But what we are discussing are actions that exist between absolute good and evil. A leader must make hard decisions that will harm some for the greater good of all. Conscripting soldiers to fight back an invading army that comes to conquer your lands and pillage your cities is necessary, though individual families may be harmed by your action. Is the draft made evil because it condemns some to die?”

“Perhaps,” Mellen said cautiously, “If we are debating hypotheticals, then the course of greatest good would be to raise no army and relinquish all to one’s invaders, for then perhaps none need die and no destruction need befalls one’s homeland.”

“That’s nonsense” Ohacha said dismissively. “Conquest is the act of taking by force. Yielding all you possess to those willing to kill for it protects nothing and no one.

There is no promise of mercy simply because none died in the transition of power. A land that submits will be stripped of its identity, value, and resources."

"But perhaps, when compared to a war where hundreds or thousands die and these things happen anyway, this remains the greater good?" Mellen pondered. "Resources can be recollected and regrown. Identity can be reestablished."

"Identity can never be reestablished under the thumb of an oppressor. Rebuilding can never be done when there is nothing left. There is a right, in all of us, to exist. And condemnation to slavery and subservience is not an existence. It is the greater evil."

"You speak of Casoya" Mellen sighed.

"And you speak of Gaag" Ohacha said bitterly. "My uncle's betrayal and the death of my father during his counter-invasion. Were those deaths necessary for the greater good? My uncle's betrayal resulted in civil war. One every bit as destructive as any Careyago invasion."

"Only because he failed. But if your uncle *had* succeeded, the transition to the Careyago would have been peaceful. Far more men died because he failed and far more would have died if he had never betrayed you at all," Mellen trailed off.

"I refuse to believe what my uncle did was good and just" Ohacha growled.

"Then we agree" Mellen said with a sad confidence. "No evil act can be made righteous, even if it results in a greater good. There is a threshold for what means can justify an end."

"I do not" Ohacha said, perplexed. "Sometimes, the actions we take are forced upon us as opposition to others misdeeds. I cannot believe they make us evil, because they are necessary to protect ourselves from threats. How many times have you stood across an enemy who seeks your life? Where you must kill or be killed."

"Fewer than you, I suspect," Mellen cooed, "but that does not change my point."

"And what is your point, exactly?" Ohacha demanded.

Mellen hesitated a moment, and then spoke, "My point is that by becoming like our enemies, we degrade ourselves. We slowly corrupt our own morality. Justifying one atrocity makes it easier to justify the next until one day, we realize we have become the very thing we first sought to destroy. Or, more often and far worse, we never realize it at all."

"It's easy to hold to morals when they don't have to be tested" Ohacha remarked.

"I ruled as Patzau for more than a decade" Mellen countered. "I would question your judgement if you truly believe that my morals have never been tested. My being down here in this very cell should be enough evidence to the contrary."

Ohacha scowled. Mellen was right, at least on this count. "I apologize" he whispered. "You are right. That was naive of me. But there is a difference between directing another person's actions and your own. Ordering a death is different than swinging the sword."

"And how many people have you slain with your sword?"

"How many have you slain with your words?"

"I take your point" Mellen conceded.

"I was blindsided today," Ohacha continued, "by Yohati's betrayal today. I knew he thought little of me, but to learn he would discard me for political favour…"

Mellen scoffed, "I told you the day we met that you should come to me if you had issues. Almost everyone in Caso had an incentive to oppose you from before the moment you came ashore. The only person who didn't grasp the danger was you. The

powerful here are motivated by luxuries, money, and power. That Careyago Ambassador, Hina, she had he claws in all sorts of people with influence and the Careyago and their traders have always been amongst Caso's wealthiest clientele. Their emperor is a regular buyer at the auction. When you told me that you were staying with Patzau Yohati, I presumed you had him to shield you from the sharks."

"The moment my uncle died, Yohati's protections vanished," Ohacha admitted sourly.

"Then it sounds like Yohati wanted something from your uncle" Mellen said plainly. "And then he either got it, or your uncle's death meant he couldn't have it anymore."

"He's a snake of a man" Ohacha cursed. "He has a venomous tongue."

"Bah!" Mellen chortled, "He would always say those exact words about me. Yohati has always been sensible, but ruthlessly so. He was the only one I trusted not to betray me… and yet, in sitting here, I am faced with the fact that he must have been the one to turn on me."

A silence hung heavy between them. After a long pause, Ohacha finally spoke, his voice quieter, more contemplative. "All my life, my enemies have been obvious. Killers, thugs, assassins. Easy to spot. A man with a knife. Direction confrontation. Kill or be killed. I wasn't ready for the poisoned promises and knives hidden behind smiles."

Mellen replied, "'In battle, the true enemy is rarely the one you see before you.' That's a quote from some book I read. Can't remember for the life of me who, but it seemed relevant."

Ohacha's expression softened, his mind swirling with the realization of how much he still had to learn. He thought of the Careyago Emperor. *He was the one behind Belvaas' betrayal, was he not?* "I think I've been wrong about a lot of things," Ohacha muttered, mostly to himself.

"Perhaps," Mellen agreed, "but you're learning. And that's what matters."

"It will matter very little when I'm dead."

"But it *will* matter significantly if you survive."

Chapter 29: The Trial

The dull thud of boots on damp stone signaled dawn. Each morning, a soldier came to swap the guttering candles for fresh wax. The room's dying light was reborn anew, and the slow countdown to the dark began again. So, when a key slid noisily into the lock on his cell door, Mellen knew that the day he had feared had come. His cell door swung open on screaming hinges and a pair of soldiers appeared carrying an illum-stone lantern. The light was blinding and Mellen had to shield his eyes against it. The soldiers came and dragged him out of his cell. Manacles bound his wrists and he was led up a set of unremarkable stairs out of the dungeons. The pains of hunger dissipated as Mellen climbed shakily up the stairs. His body was frail and weary, but his mind remained sharp. He remained focused on the fight ahead. From the moment of his arrest, he knew this day would come.

His thighs burned with the pain of disuse as Mellen emerged into the first semblance of natural light. His eyes refused to adjust. He looked down and was shocked to see how much weight he had lost. He was proud of his stature, his size. Now he felt small, as if the dungeons had stolen his vigor. His heart beat heavily in his chest, whether from the nerves or the exertion, he wasn't sure. But when he walked into that trial chamber for the first time, Mellen made sure he would hold his chin high.

The doors opened and Mellen was paraded across the chamber as seven of his once-closest comrades sat opposite the lonely chair reserved for the accused; his chair. He was seated facing them; seven Patzau. The combined wisdom of their small but great city sat opposite in an imposing semicircle; their eyes focused on him. Patzau Powanati, Patzau Hadashenta, and Patzau Adagizhi looked pleased; as if this spectacle they had organized was to be their entertainment. Yohati at least had the decency to look fretful. Patzau Murocil and Patzau Yanata both looked anxious for what was to come, while Patzau Onudar's face remained neutral and stoic.

Before any opportunity to speak, the door opened and Mellen turned to see High Judge Madaral stride forward into the room. This, at least, he anticipated. Mellen smiled at the man, and hoped the pleasant gesture would be off-putting to the barbarian. Some part of him knew the odds would be stacked against him, but that didn't make the reveal any easier. *If this is the justice I hope to appeal to, I may be well and truly fucked.*

Madaral didn't return the smile. The gaze he returned was cold. He took his place by a lectern and cleared his throat. "Mellen Minoc" he began, his voice rich with a pompous self-importance, "you stand accused of treason, conspiracy to commit murder, supporting enemies of the guilds, aiding criminals and gang enterprises that now threaten the safety of our city, and directing guild-allocated funds into both your personal treasury as well as the aforementioned criminal enterprises. Do you wish, at this time, to make a statement in regards to these charges?"

Minoc took a deep breath and gathered all the strength he could muster, “I speak now to *you* specifically, Ada Murocil, Yanata Ashill, Boral Onudar, and even you Murak Adagizhi. These charges brought against me are false. Over the course of this trial, look for real credible evidence. Not to anecdotes from biased parties. I disagree with Hadashenta, Powanati, and Yohati on a number of issues, but the reason I am here tonight is because I object to the consolidation of power their three guilds have accrued in recent months and years. These men have made it their priority to remove me from this council by any means necessary, including by deception and lies. I have been a critic of their policies and actions, and for these criticisms, I am to be silenced. Judge me, if you will, but also consider if their claims should mean my death. This title of Patzau–”

“Please spare us, Mellen” Patzau Powanati said, interrupting. “Wasting our time will only hurt your chances. Don’t make us regret watching you destroy yourself.”

Mellen ignored the interruption and continued louder, despite the pain the stemmed from his hoarse throat. “This title of Patzau was built upon the legacy of improving the lives of the people within this city. We exist to defend them from the tyranny of kings. I have always believed in this legacy, for *all* of our people, and I agree that this legacy *is* worth my dying for. Whatever evidence they bring forth, whomever appears to give testimony, I ask that you look past the fears they have preyed upon to bring us here. Instead, focus on the facts: the evidence. Thank you.”

As he finished, Mellen rubbed his throat and swallowed uncomfortably. *They haven’t even given me water in the last day*, he realized. *Spirits, they’ll do anything to add wind to their sails.*

“We have heard your statement” Madaral announced. “Now, we hear from the witnesses.”

Mellen turned to watch a young unfamiliar man enter through the door. His eyes were glazed and the soldiers had to practically carry him into the room. Mellen felt thin, but the man being hoisted in was all bones. The stranger had dark bushy hair and sunken round cheeks. When he finally looked up, it was clear he was one the men arrested from the sleepless night.

“Please state your name” Madaral said from the lectern.

The man looked up, as if surprised to be there, and then looked more surprised as he eyed the well-dressed faces in the semi-circle across from him. “I am… I… I am Tin” the man said shakily. He avoided eye contact with the Patzau.

“Tin was arrested during the initial Mudtown raid after the assassination attempt on Patzau Yohati. Tin was one of the men who had been hired to attack the convoy after the Auction House. Would you say that was correct?”

“Yes” Tin answered. “I was part of the group who attacked the convoy.”

“And what was your job during the attack?” Madaral asked.

“My job was… was to distract the guards and kill them if possible” Tin answered.

“What were you distracting from?” Madaral pressed.

“From the real target,” Tin said softly. “It was an assassination first, and a robbery second. There was an arbalest on the roof.”

“And who was the target?” Madaral asked.

“I don’t know” Tin answered. “Wasn’t mine to know. Some rich bloke.”

“Do you know who paid you to take part in this plan?”

“I was hired by a gangster named Fix” Tin answered. “Fix died in the fighting. Killed by that foreign swordsman. But Fix said the job came from a Patzau. I didn’t really believe–”

"And which Patzau did Fix say paid for the job?" Madaral interrupted.

Tin hesitated for moment before answering, "Minoc."

Mellen clenched his jaw, holding his composure. *This is the first lie*. He had never met with any gangbangers, nor had he paid anyone to assassinate anyone else. But the words hung in the air like poison, and the Judge didn't hesitate to accept them as truth. "This is absurd," Minoc said, his voice firm, though his stomach churned. "This man is lying. What day did this nonsense supposedly occur? More over, the testimony this man provides is hearsay. He has just admitted that they're not his own experiences."

"Silence!" Madaral shouted. "You will have your turn, but I will not let you badger our witnesses. Bring out the next witness."

"Then when will I get my turn?" Mellen asked, but Madaral ignored him. Tin was dragged from the room and a familiar face took his place–one of Mellen's former colleagues. Hairo Bradel walked into the room with a confidence that signaled danger. He was well-dressed and his grey hair had been combed forward to appear more striking. Mellen watched Hairo stride in as if among peers, and then it clicked that Hairo soon might be.

"You look good, Hairo" Mellen said, trying to unnerve his longtime rival. "Your spineless greed will mesh nicely with Powanati and Hadashenta's. Am I right gentlemen?" If Powanati's eyes were daggers, Mellen would already be dead.

"Good to see you too, Mellen" Hairo said, getting the words out before Madaral could protest. "I'd say the guild misses you but the overwhelming support I've received since your arrest would suggest otherwise."

"I think it should be clear to the judge and council that Hairo and I do not share much love for each other. I submit to the council that no testimony this man brings forth with come without bias nor without its own overexaggerations and lies. He has everything to gain by my dismissal."

"He was a high-ranking member of your guild" Patzau Adagizhi questioned, "you claim now that you don't trust or like him?"

"I have never trusted or liked Hairo" Mellen admitted, "but that is not a good enough reason to bar him or his fellows from opportunity and access to my guild. Destroying those who oppose or disagree with me is tyrannical."

"No, instead you have us followed and employ spies in our homes instead" Hairo jeered.

"I have never employed spies–"

"This point is not one of the charges laid against you and so we will not spend time debating it here" Madaral said, interrupting.

"But this is a lie spread to defame me!" Mellen argued. "I–"

"If you continue to interrupt, I will have you gagged until the appropriate times in which you are permitted to speak. Do you understand?"

Mellen bit his tongue and chewed on his lip hoping the pain would distract from the anger.

"Now, Hairo" Madaral started, "Please share the information you were able to collect with the council as discussed."

"Of course, High Judge" Hairo said with a bow, "Council. As you are aware, Patzau Minoc and his wife Mira controlled the Artisan's Guild with a heavy hand. After Mellen's arrest, it was difficult to wrestle access to the guild's information away from Mira's grubby hands and I submit that she too is a conspirator to be investigated."

Mellen leapt forward out of his chair. He wished nothing more than to reach Hairo and to crush the liar's neck with his bare hands. The chains held and he barely made it an arm's length from where he had been seated. Patzau Adagizhi and Patzau Murocil both jumped in surprise at the sudden ferocity as Mellen trashed against his shackles. "Don't you fucking dare! You fucking liar!" Mellen seethes. "I know you hate me but leave my family out of this, you filthy scoundrel."

"And this man represented this council," Hairo remarked with disdain. "Tsk tsk."

"Hairo, I hope the spirits damn your soul for this" Mellen cursed. He spat in Hairo's direction. Soldiers pulled Mellen back into the chair and an arm found its way under his neck and began to squeeze, cutting the air from his throat. Mellen struggled until he couldn't any longer and relaxed as the arm came loose and fresh air entered his lungs. He coughed and then continued coughing until Patzau Ashill shouted at the soldiers to bring him some water.

"As I was saying," Hairo continued, "I was able to obtain messages sent from foreign dignitaries and emissaries that bypass the existing channels and ignore Patzau Murocil and her guild's jurisdictions. Beyond that, there are correspondences will all manner of people from across this island including persons who we believe are anti-guild in alignment."

"You have evidence that he was communicating with rebellious factions?" Yohati asked.

"It appears so" Hairo affirmed. "These communications included the addition of one young Aginjigaade from the far side of the island to his staff. The girl, Kuta."

"I took her away from them" Mellen wheezed. "She could have been a threat, dangerous to us; this council, this city. She's powerful and I ensured she would grow up here, with our ideals. As an ally, not our enemy."

"And who asked you to do that?" Powanati asked.

Mellen ignored him, "And I tried so hard to ensure she was seen as one of us. And you, Adagizhi, gave her every fucking reason to hate us. You made her your enemy, you fool."

"She's a jungle rat," Adagizhi dismissed. "Nothing our own Aginjigaade can't handle."

"You have no idea how powerful she is" Mellen said.

"And why is it that you yourself did not share with this council that Kuta was as powerful as you say she is?" Madaral asked.

"Because she's a child!" Mellen urged. "She's barely older than my daughter, younger than Yanata's. She's young and shy and afraid like so many little girls, and she has no one. And by showing her that we fear her, we push her away. If she thinks we see her as a tool or a weapon to be used, she'll fear and resent us in turn. But if she becomes one of us, she's of no threat."

Adagizhi spoke next, "She's also no threat if she's dead. And in not informing the rest of the council, it can only appear to us like you wished to control her yourself, Mellen."

"And in ordering my death, it can only appear as if you wish to control this council yourself, Murak" Mellen mocked. "I am yet to hear any real evidence that I have committed any crimes."

"Please" Judge Madaral interrupted, "We are getting off track. Hairo, please continue."

"Lastly, I was able to identify payments made from the Guild treasury to unknown recipients across the island. It appears there were hundreds of payments made to people in remote villages in the mountains. I worked with members of Patzau Powanati's guild and our investigation shows these payments were made to bribe and pay for information including to sources less than reputable."

"Less than reputable?" Madaral said, "please be more specific."

"Rebels and criminal gangs" Hairo answered.

"I'd like to hear Mellen explain these payments" Patzau Murocil said, adjusting her seat. "I would also like to hear how *unknown* recipients suddenly become rebels and criminal gangs? Care to explain how you made this connection, Hairo?"

"Of course, Patzau Murocil" Hairo said. "Um, none of these payments made were to known or reputable sources within each village. They were made to individuals on a person-by-person basis and in territories where known rebellious activity occurs."

"May I?" Mellen asked, speaking to Judge Madaral.

"No, not right now" The High Judge said.

"I believe Patzau Murocil requested I speak to these payments" Mellen urged.

"I told you to wait your turn" Madaral sneered.

"Is that all the evidence you have, Hairo?" Patzau Murocil asked.

"Actually" Patzau Yohati chimed in, "I have more information that may be beneficial to this very topic. Powanati and I have been working together to track the movement of currency into and out of the city and we have seen an uptick in illegal weapons being smuggled into several mountain territories. These remote towns and villages appear to have more money and resources than ever before, despite our efforts to supress these regions. This could be one way in which funds leave our city and find their way into the hands of gangs and criminals."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Mellen contended. Judge Madaral whirled on him but Mellen ignored the man and spoke over him. "Hairo! Hairo, tell us all… Tell the Patzau how much money was spent. Show us the receipts that you've claimed as evidence."

"Mellen, you have been warned!" Madaral screamed.

Mellen ignored him, "The invoices are for small art pieces that we buy from remote places and upsell at the Auction House. This program you claim is illegal funding or weapons smuggling or whatever bullshit will have Patzau Hadashenta's name on it too. He's the one funding that project, you avaricious snake! Rake, tell them…"

But when Mellen looked over at Patzau Hadashenta, his face fell. Hadashenta's eyes were downcast. He looked ashamed as he spoke up, "I don't recall any such project."

"Oh, fuck this" Mellen scoffed, "I want counter-witnesses to all claims. This is bullshit."

Madaral waved a dismissive hand, his lips curling into a sneer. "The court will not entertain your request for counter-witnesses. We are dealing with facts; not witnesses you can bribe."

"Are you calling Patzau Hadashenta a liar, Mellen?" Powanati asked.

Mellen scowled, recognizing the trap. "I think that Patzau Hadashenta is misremembering. But I know that we submitted financial logs to your guild, Powanati, that should have records of payments made from the Auction House to my guild for the purpose of purchasing said art. All dealings are audited by your bankers, so it seems reasonable to suggest that all funds were properly allocated. Wouldn't you agree?"

Powanati's smile turned fake. "I will have to check our records."

"You should check your records *before* you bring them forward as criminal evidence. And before you tamper with them, remember that my guild also has copies you should tamper with too. It would be amateur to not ensure both sets match" Mellen taunted. "Oh wait, I'm forgetting that real evidence hasn't once made an appearance in this trial, so that shouldn't matter. Silly me."

"Mellen" Yohati said raising his voice condescendingly. "That's enough."

"Fuck you, Yohati" Mellen spat venomously, "After this farce you get to go home to your wife and daughter and sleep happy and rich in your palace entirely separated from the reality of this world and I'll get fucking thrown back in a cell. I'll speak to you like the bastard you are if its going to be that last thing I ever do."

Yohati gave a subtle signal and Judge Madaral ordered the gag. Mellen struggled against it, but it did no good. He could only watch in painful silence as the witnesses continued, each testimony more fabricated than the last. He could hear the manipulation at play, the tactful sails of the defamatory outrigger flapping in the wind. Each time a new witness appeared, Madaral allowed their lies to land like daggers in the cloth. There were so many holes in their stories, but it didn't matter so long as Mellen's ship never sailed again. The rest of the council watched. They were complicit in the spectacle, either out of fear, ambition, or sheer apathy.

Minoc's body felt heavy with frustration and exhaustion. His only chance of escaping the persecution was through the unlikely coalition of Adagizhi, Onudar, Ashill, and Murocil in combined vote for his innocence. It only took one of the four to vote alongside Yohati's core three to condemn him. With each new witness, Mellen felt his chances of leaving alive slip through his fingers. He glanced at Patzau Ashill and Patzau Onudar. Both regarded him with tense looks and conflicted faces. Murocil's gaze met his and he could at least see the anger and disdain in her eyes. Not for him alone, but for what she was being subject to. She was the only one asking questions, the only one who still had his back and he wished now that she would simply give up lest they widen the grave to two. But he knew, when Murak Adagizhi finally met his gaze, that guilty was the only verdict he was ever going to hear. In the end Mellen closed his eyes and disregarded his own trial.

He was shaken awake. A soldier and the judge were both shouting his name. Mellen sat up and saw the council staring back at him. To his chagrin, Yohati, Powanati, Adagizhi, and Hadashenta looked angry with his lack of decorum. Ashill's smile made it clear that she understood the significance of the gesture. Onudar appeared annoyed. Only Patzau Murocil stood out from the rest as irritated. Irritation not reserved for him.

High Judge Madaral spoke, "As I was saying, before the accused so rudely interrupted with his disrespectful gesture, I will now hear final statements from any who wish to give them."

"I wish to speak" Patzau Murocil said, looking to Yohati to ensure she was permitted.

"Please" Judge Madaral said, "The floor is yours." Mellen perked up.

"I will leave this room today and regret my part in this sham of a trial for the rest of my life. This wasn't justice. It was a kangaroo court. And yet, today a man you once considered your friend will be condemned to die to satiate your ravenous desires for wealth and power. This was cowardice at its finest. I expected better from you all. I expected better from us. The people out there, they expect better from us."

"How can you listen to all of those testimonies and not understand that Minoc is a traitor?" Adagizhi shouted. "His own Aginjigaade, his right hand, was spotted in

Mudtown. She was seen with suspected extremist just days ago. The one they call Viiran. There's a story circulating that she's a murderer. And Minoc had been spying on us and collecting our secrets for years!"

"We cannot convict a man based on hearsay!" Ada shouted. "Perhaps these people are telling the truth, I would like to see the evidence they so readily claim to have and then so repeatedly fail to produce. You all made your mind up long before hearing any of this bullshit."

Patzau Yohati spoke next, his voice dripping with disdain. "I have seen the evidence, Ada. I understand you and Minoc are close friends, but we cannot continue to allow Mellen to damage our city through corruption and treason. Are you truly so set on ignoring the plethora of evidence shown today. Are you so blind to his misdeeds?"

Patzau Murocil's face flushed with anger, but to her credit, she didn't back down. "I will not be part of this farce. This trial is a mockery of justice, and you know it."

High Judge Madaral's voice boomed, silencing the room. "Enough! If you will not take this seriously, you are free to leave." His eyes flickered with fury as he fixed his gaze on Patzau Murocil.

Patzau Murocil stood abruptly, "I will not be complicit," she spat. "If you are to destroy him, then you do so without my consent. I vote innocent."

Patzau Murocil turned and stormed across the room and out through the exit. Mellen smiled. Then he saw Patzau Ashill's face and watched her mouth the words *I'm sorry* and that brief moment of joy vanished. His mind raced with the injustice of it all. He knew, as he sat in the center of the courtroom, that the outcome was inevitable. The council cast their votes, and Minoc predicted the result. Yohati, Hadashenta, Powanati, Onudar, and Adagizhi raised their hands high. Patzau Ashill followed suit and as angry as he felt, he knew she had done it to protect herself. Only Ada had voted for his innocence. The die was cast. He'd lost.

Mellen was made to kneel before the council as the sentence was read. High Judge Madaral made a point of standing directly over him as he addressed the six remaining Patzau. "Mellen Minoc, you are hereby convicted by the jury of your fellow Patzau for the crimes with which you were tried. Yours is a stark reminder of how treachery and deceitfulness can corrupt anyone, even those intended to guide and protect our great city. It is our duty as citizens to root out this evil whenever possible. The punishment for your many crimes will be death. Your death will be public, to ensure all within our city understand the severity of your crimes. But also, to ensure that all know and understand that to betray this city is to invite death, no matter one's status. Your execution will be carried out in one week hence. Do you have any final words at this time?"

Only muffled grunts escaped as Mellen struggled against the gag that remained in his mouth. Powanati snickered as Mellen yelled in silence. He prayed that even if they couldn't hear the venom of his words, they understood the hatred in his soul. He struggled until the council grew tired of it and the soldiers came to take him away. As they led him out of the room, Mellen gave each remaining member of the council one last dirty look. He held his head high as they marched him out of the room and back down to the dungeons.

Chapter 30: The New Patzau

The vast crowd spilled out of the guild hall and into the streets. It felt as if every inch of space was filled by a body. Even with the ongoing skirmishes outside the city walls, people appeared for the spectacle that was the crowning of a new Patzau. The election had spiked in intrigue after the news of Patzau Minoc's condemnation swept through the city. It had been a decade since the last time a new Patzau joined the council. People from all corners of Caso appeared to watch the spectacle and to hear which of the three remaining candidates would take up the mantle.

Kuta stood inside the guild hall atop the mezzanine overlooking the vast crowd below. She did not share their excitement. She hadn't even dressed up for the event. Her heart was still heavy with the tragedy that was Patzau Minoc's betrayal. The news had spread so swiftly that even without Minoc's network of spies and informants, Kuta would have known in the same moment it had happened. The impact of Minoc's guilty verdict felt like poison seeping through her veins. As if it were slowly killing her will to act and feel. Mellen Minoc, the man who had been her mentor had been condemned to die for treason. Treason, Kuta knew with absolutely certainty, he hadn't committed. And thus, the coup had succeeded. Mellen's downfall was assured. It was nothing more than a carefully orchestrated surgery. An opportunity to cobble the way for new blood and new direction. The announcement had been social suicide to those who had once been close to him, herself included. Though Kuta knew she had never been on a sturdy deck to begin with.

Hairo Bradel stood across the hall speaking passionately with the other two candidates, Wadesh Nadir and Tahir Akwan. Hairo hadn't even officially won and yet he was already influencing both men to join his side. Patzau Minoc's guilt had been the final nail in the coffin for the other two candidates. They had aligned themselves closely with Minoc and now that stance had ruined their credibility and upended their political aspirations. All they could do now was damage control. Kuta felt for them. She was in the same boat. She had worked tirelessly to free Minoc and ensure Hairo's defeat and it had all come undone in one fell swoop. Only the deaf and the ignorant hadn't already heard Hairo had won. Today was about announcing it publicly. Nothing more. *A celebration of betrayal.*

The crowed thundered as Mira Minoc took the stage. An uncomfortable mix of cheers and jeers and boos could be heard from crowd, especially the general public outside the guild hall. To her credit, Mira remained calm. *I couldn't do it; be as strong or brave as her is in this moment*. Her husband sat in a cell awaiting execution and she was paraded in front of the mob that sought his blood to announce his replacement. It seemed cruel. But then, so much of life in Caso felt cruel these days.

The crowd cheered as Hairo took the podium for the first time and addressed the crowd. Kuta felt numb. She knew it was coming and yet the wrongness of it still made her

body freeze. Hairo Bradel was a con. A man with ambitions as vast as the sea and loyalties as thin as parchment. He would have done anything for Mellen's seat on the council. He had aligned himself with Patzau Powanati and Kuta was confident he had been a part of Mellen's destined fall. Now, he stood above the crowd and announced himself as Patzau, and the public roared its approval.

The room felt suddenly felt constricting. The faces of guildsmen once loyal to Patzau Minoc flocked to their new leader, ready to serve and be rewarded. Kuta could picture Yohati, Hadashenta, and Powanati sitting in their offices in smug satisfaction. They would toast to their new puppet and drink to Mellen's ruin. And hers next, should she give them the chance. The crowd's applause echoed in Kuta's ears as Hairo finished his victory speech. His tongue was sharp and his promises were grand. He spoke to all the things the crowd hoped to hear: being tougher on the other guilds, tougher on the gangs and criminals who threatened Caso. His voice boomed with authority, but Kuta could hear the underlying emptiness in his rhetoric. None of his promises mattered. This was a consolidation of power. And when Hairo dismissed Mira from her position as high administrator, promising to rebuild the guild into something "greater," Kuta's stomach churned. His actions were a promise, a clear signal that everything that once was would be no more. And then, to Kuta's surprise, it was her name he spoke next.

"Lastly, I would like to speak of our dear Aginjigaade, Kuta." Hairo said, gesturing in her direction. A tidal wave of eyes shifted in her direction and Kuta's shock fought against her instinct to run. Instead, she was urged forward until she stood almost at Hairo's side. He looked down on her with an eager hungry look. A look that made her skin crawl. "Kuta, for those of you who haven't been graced by her presence, has been critical to ensuring the continued prosperity of this great guild" Hairo continued. "Kuta, although young, has used her knowledge and Aginjigaade skills with metals to propel Casoyan forges ahead decades. Our knowledge of alloys, common and uncommon, is worlds ahead of other cities of the world. And with Kuta's help, our guild will lead."

So that's the stance he's taking, Kuta thought. *He wants to control me. He offers me his protection, protection from the rest of the council, in exchange for my loyalty.*

Hairo lowered his voice, speaking not to the crowd but now solely to her. Yet, his voice carried just loud enough for those around them to hear, "Kuta, please meet with me before the celebrations begin. It is of utmost importance to me that you are part of this new era of our guild."

Kuta stared in shock. Her instincts screamed to refuse, to walk out the door. To turn her back on it all. She had no intention of working for a bastard like Hairo. Especially not when the job would entail undoing the progress that Patzau Minoc had painstakingly worked years to achieve. His vision for the guild was twisted. Destroy the protections created for smaller guild enterprises. Award Auction House contracts to only those groups in support of his schemes. It was a consolidation of power for his closed group of insiders. Aligning with Hairo felt like a betrayal.

It was Mira who, after the speech ended managed to speak some sense into her. "You have to go" Mira urged. "You have to go and at least hear him out. By ignoring him, you ostracize yourself to the rest of the guild. You will look ungrateful. People will question your loyalty. It may be a trap, yes. But you owe it to Mellen to at least find out. Perhaps some good will come of it. You can't know unless you go."

And so Kuta reluctantly agreed. The party had already started in the guild hall but Kuta ignored the celebrations, walking to the end of the hall where Mellen's Office was. Hairo's office now. She knocked lightly and the door opened, revealing the small familiar

room. She had expected Hairo to remove Mellen's belongings but most of the room remained untouched. The only new additions were a pair of soldiers standing on either side of the door. She couldn't help but notice that neither wore metal of any kind. Nor did they carry weapons made of metal. *So much for trust,* Kuta thought. Hairo sat in Mellen's chair and compared to the great man, looked small in it. He looked calm, but the nervous twitch of his fingers and the pair of guards revealed his calm demeanor to be a simple fiction.

"You have soldiers to protect you from me?" Kuta asked. "That doesn't seem to match well with your proclamation that I am needed in your new guild order." *Not that they could have stopped me. I carry my own metals.* She thought of the woman who had attacker her with the knife and quickly supressed the memory. *Never again. Not of it can be avoided.*

"What you say is true" Hairo admitted. "Leave us" he ordered. The two guards left the room and closed the door behind them.

"Ah I get it now" Kuta said, "I was confused by them at first. Why bother? But now I understand. The soldiers are props. You demonstrate to me that you know my strengths and weaknesses while also showing that you don't need to rely on them. It makes you look tougher. That's a good touch. Mellen would be proud."

"You're take after the sly old man. I see why he selected you" Hairo admitted. "But I was told you're not much of a talker." Kuta tilted her head in acknowledgement but waited patiently for Hairo to continue. "I see" he added, after a moment. He leaned forward over the desk, his voice low and charming, "I won't waste your time, Kuta. I want your support. Mellen and I were never on great terms but that doesn't mean I like what happened to him. I *have* risen from his downfall and I won't lie to you and say I regret that it happened. Patzau Minoc was a traitor, and now he is gone. But *you* and I persist. I see your talents. I see your contributions to this guild. I trust that Mellen chose you for a good reason, because Mellen was a lot of things but a fool was never one of them. You display wisdom, and I would welcome you a place amongst my inner circle. A foil against my rash tendencies. With you beside me, we could truly reshape this guild and this city for the better."

Kuta was quiet for a moment. She thought carefully about his offer and the words left unsaid. "I must admit that I'm surprised to hear you speak so plainly" Kuta replied carefully. She supressed the deep seeded disdain she held for the man across from her. "Yet, you cast aside Mira without hesitation. How can I trust you will not to do the same to me? Mira has been the backbone of this guild, and yet you dismiss her as if she means nothing."

"Mira is tainted" Hairo said flatly. "I wish I could keep her but I can't. I don't doubt her dedication and loyalty, but she was Mellen's wife. The people now know of Minoc's treachery. There is no redeeming her from the stain of it. For you, on the other hand, there remains a chance. I recognize that he was… a mentor to you, but your reputation can be salvaged if you and I stick together. Join me. I can protect you. Then nobody can threaten your loyalty or safety inside these walls. I swear it. Let us work together."

Kuta had expected many things, but not this. Her mind raced as she processed his words. She wanted to scream. He still had one hand on the knife in Mellen's back, and he sought to shake her hand with the other. It was vile. And it wasn't about protecting her. It was subjugation. This is what the Casoyans had done to her people for generations. *Do what I want and continue as things were. Turn against me and I'll turn them all against you.* The part not discussed was that continuing as things were meant

slowly yielding control to him. He wanted her as a tool, a weapon to wield as necessary. He wanted an Aginjigaade in his pocket like the other guilds had. The way the other Patzau did. She would be a there to do his bidding and reinforce his grasp on power.

Kuta's eyes narrowed. "I heard your campaign; I know what you claim to think and want to achieve. What if I told you I shared Patzau Minoc's beliefs about the guild?"

"Then we can have real conversations around policy. Your knowledge paired with my vision. Understanding what we have now, and what I wish for us to have in the future" Hairo answered. "We need a new direction. You know as well as I do that the guild cannot continue the way it has. We need change, Kuta. Real change."

"You would condemn a man to die for this change?" Kuta challenged.

"A Patzau must see the big picture" Hairo quoted, then added, "We must lead Caso forward with a unified vision. Discord leads to unrest and stagnation. For all leaders, hard choices are necessary."

"I wasn't asking hypothetically" Kuta added. "I know you testified against him. I know what you said in that tribunal, and which parts were fabricated. I've even got copies of the records that disprove your claims."

Hairo's calm facade slipped for a moment. His voice lowered to that of a whisper, "You're smart, Kuta. Smart enough to know that without the guild's support, you'll be outcast. Leaving now with Minoc's stain on your reputation, no other guild will take you. No one in Caso will stand by you. And if you remain unaligned… I think we can agree that it would be a fatal mistake."

It was a threat, plain and simple. *This is the real Hairo*. The veiled menace in his words sent a chill down her spine. But Kuta was no stranger to threats. She had faced worse in her life. Worse threats. Worse men. And she was tired of being used.

Kuta focused inward and channeled her spiritual power into one of the metal pins she kept up her sleeve. The metallic scent of her sorcery filled the small room. She prayed the guards outside wouldn't smell it. She raised her hand, and with a flick of her fingers, she manipulated the small tendril of metal until it's took on the shape of an orb. It floated between them just above her palm.

Hairo recoiled, his face going pale. "What—what are you doing?"

"I believed in Patzau Minoc's vision" Kuta said calmly, still focused on the metal hovering between them. "He was a good man, and you and I both know he was no traitor. But you are. And that's why I will decline your offer, Hairo.

Hairo's composure shattered for an instant. She saw the fear in his eyes, but it didn't last. It was replaced by a flash of irritation. By anger. "I don't know what you're talking about," he sneered. "I never betrayed Patzau Minoc."

Kuta's gaze bore into him, "Don't make me your enemy Hairo. I know everything. I know that your campaign was financed by funds pulled directly from your businesses and donations from your friend Patzau Powanati. I know you were one of the witnesses called to testify against Patzau Minoc. I know that after the trial, you met with Patzau Yohati who pledged his support. I know what route you took down from the fortress that night and what time you got home and kissed your wife goodnight. I even know about the little stop you made on your way home."

"You bitch!" Hairo snarled. So Mellen really *did* have a network."

She would show him what a true display of power looked like. No more veiled threats. The orb of metal between them became a perfect square, and then a triangle, and then a knife, and then a needle with a tip so fine it couldn't be seen by the human eye. Kuta ignored him and the orb above her palm continued to changed shape.

She pushed on, “I know you snuck in this office three nights ago. I know you were looking for information on Mellen’s informant network. I know two days before that, you gave concessions to Patzau Adagizhi and Powanati’s bankers, limiting your power in exchange for support. I know Yohati helped you discredit the other candidates. I know everything about you, Hairo Bradel.” Kuta revelled in his terror. “Patzau Minoc did have this network, but unlike him, I plan to use it. No veiled threats. I see you for who you really are, and I’ll expose you to the world. I reject your offer for protection. And in doing so, I’ll offer you a new deal, one I think you’ll very much like considering my contempt.”

“And what deal is that?” Hairo asked, fury plain across his face. This was not a man who liked being threatened.

“You will leave me alone, and I will leave you alone.” Kuta answered. “It’s as simple as that. So long as you ignore me, and continue to echo that I am not a threat, I will let you have your victory and your Patzau title and all the glory you so desire. But if you don’t, I will ruin you. If you search for me, I will ruin you. If you share one word of this conversation, I… will… ruin you. Do you understand the terms of our agreement?”

“Yes” Hairo snarled. “You will ruin me.”

“Good” Kuta said, sitting back down in the chair opposite Hairo. “Now, do you have any alterations you wish made to our agreement before we settle the matter?”

“Am I in any position to negotiate?” Hairo asked, looking to the floating chunk of metal between them. It was in the shape of a spear head, then transformed into shears before his eyes.

“If you think any of the terms are unfair, now is the time to say so” Kuta said innocently.

“No, we have an accord” Hairo said through gritted teeth.

“That’s good to hear” Kuta said with a half-hearted smile. “I hope you understand that if I suddenly appear on the city’s watch list, I will presume you are behind the action and will take counteraction accordingly. This is only my opinion but, I believe it is in your best interest to keep me off any such lists. Now, please don’t let me ruin your big day. I’ll be away and you can enjoy your party.”

Hairo could only watch with malice as Kuta left him sitting alone in the office. The smell of her metallic sorcery stung his nostrils and made it feel like there was blood in his nose. He wanted desperately to order the soldiers outside after her but knew it would be inauspicious to stain this day in blood. *Tomorrow,* he decided. *A new dawn for a new era.*

Minoc had spoken truth, she was powerful. And now he knew she was a threat. Had she just acquiesced, things could have been different. *A wild mountain bitch controlling the city’s spy network won’t do. Minoc’s network should be mine, by all accounts. No, in her hands it will bring devastation. For the longevity and stability of this great city, Kuta the Aginjigaade has to die*. *My great city*, he realized, now that he was Patzau.

Hairo’s fingers twitched towards the stylus. His heart was fueled with a desire for justice. Justice and malice. She had underestimated him. He would not be so easily placated. He would ensure that Kuta—too dangerous to be left unchecked—was removed. He was so close to the place and power he had always dreamed of. One last step, and he would solidify his control over the guild. Minoc’s fancy metal stylus glided across the page, signing the order. *Kuta must go.*

That night, Patzau Hairo Bradel died in his home. Rumours and conspiracies spread like wildfire through the city. Whispers of curses and murder circulated through markets and alehouses, brothels and bathhouses. Hairo Bradel became known as the

Patzau-for-a-day. The conspiracies worsened when it was revealed that Hairo had been having a secret affair and had fathered a child with a former servant in his staff, a woman from the mountain tribes. Conflict over inheritance fueled the fire and the rumour mill spun back into motion. The following evening a notorious Mudtown gangster boasted that he had been the one to kill the Patzau for a day. News of the celebration made its way inside the walls and was met with heavy condemnations. The crook was found lynched from the parapet of the Lake Gate the morning hence. The Guilds denied any involvement.

Chapter 31: The Resistance

The air was thick with the stench of people and smoke. It was the kind of smell that clung to everything. It permeated the hidden hideout that was Viiran's resistance bunker under Mudtown. That's what they we're calling it now, Viiran's Resistance. Bartiin got the impression that not everyone was keen on the name and that the cooperation required to keep the various groups, tribes, and gangs united against their common enemy stood on shaky legs at best.

Between the vast complex of connected houses and the grand hall underground, the compound was a hive of activity. There was enough space for a hundred bodies. So, in Mudtown fashion, double that number filled the cramped hall every day and with each new day that passed, it felt as if more and more people flocked to Viiran's cause. Bartiin coughed as smoke filled the hall for the third time in two days. Some new fool had lit a fire inside and Viiran's officers, Yoharum among them, moved swiftly to reprimand the culprit. *We're going to die down here,* Bartiin mused. *Suffocate from our own stupidity.*

The air was already plenty thick without fires being lit. Violence had reared its ugly head the last time the officers stepped in. Bartiin wished only to be elsewhere when it happened again. He could feel the tension and eagerness in the atmosphere. There was a palpable thirst for violence. The men and women who came, and they were mostly men, appeared angry for justice and hungry for blood. They came in small groups, boasting ancestry to small hamlets and unimportant villages. Places so far inland that even those who'd grown up in Mudtown had never heard of them. Yet they swaggered with abundant enthusiasm that made one think they were all descendants of kings.

The newcomers brought strange accents and stranger clothing. Men and women wore clothes patterned with feathers and beads instead of shells. The stories they brought were queerer still. Some, especially the young, didn't speak the Trader's language at all and Bartiin would require help from Yoharum or one of the other men to interpret. The stories were sometimes innocent, but many troubled him deeply. The newcomers would boast of brutality that made his gut wrench and violence that turned blood to ice. Atrocities committed for the cause were heralded as great victories. Secret killings under the cover of darkness. Bodies paraded through the streets with an aura of twisted pride. And yet all shared the belief that such violence was necessary. But Bartiin knew first hand, as both a soldier and former radical, that fighting with righteousness cloaked in arrogance enables blindness to cruelties. *Evil festers most not where it is unseen, but where it is seen by all and then permitted to continue*.

Somewhere along the way, this campaign for retribution against the Casoyans would cast off its disguise of justice. Worse, Bartiin was growing apprehensive to the idea that Viiran already knew that truth. He wondered if Yoharum knew it too. He seemed the type not to care. If they did, they endorsed it by feeding the army's ire with makeshift weapons and the promise of righteousness. Men inside the camp boasted of their ties to

the gangs and of criminal successes. These things were lorded as badges of honour instead of stains on their character. It was a backwards place. A place where the nobility were regarded as criminals and the criminals were heralded as noble.

It was unrecognizable from the coup he had been apart of. Belvaas the Elder had been intentional; do only what was necessary. His son governed with the same purposefulness. They had deposed King Golan to avoid war and bloodshed. Viiran's resistance fighters desired it. They were forged not by discipline, but by desperation. Just being amongst them, Bartiin was far deeper in their mess than he dared to admit and Yoharum continued to push him deeper into the thick of it. Subtle hints to aid them in more than small ways. Stories circulated of the glorious rebellion in Gaag, none of which matched the reality of what happened. Bartiin was seen as a hero, a freedom fighter, a man who had already done everything they dreamed of. None of it was true. And Bartiin was quickly realizing that escaping to a ship was the hook that kept him here, tethered to these people. There would be no escape without their help, but neither would it come without their blessing.

After the smoke from the fire dissipated within the large hall, Bartiin sat amongst the unfamiliar crowd and ignored the stares from the curious men and women who believed themselves unseen. Yoharum returned and took his seat. "Idiots" Yoharum grumbled with a scowl. Bartiin looked up at the big burned man. Yoharum's skin was still red and cracked. It was peeling in most places. He looked more like an evil spirit than a man. Hulking and bandaged and red. "Where did they think the smoke would go?" Yoharum continued. "Almost killed us all."

"When can we get to my ship?" Bartiin asked point blank.

"I am not sure" Yoharum said through breathy grunts. "The day of the attack, my guess."

"And when is that going to be?" Bartiin pressed.

"Hm. Won't be long now."

"Can you be a little more specific?" Bartiin urged. "Long meaning what? A few days? A few weeks? A few months?"

Yoharum hunched over and drew close. Bartiin knew the man wasn't trying to intimidate him, but his sheer size and look accomplished the task. "A few days from today" Yoharum whispered. "Plans, my friend." He clasped a huge hand over Bartiin's shoulder and smiled a devilish gap-toothed smile. "The bastards will get what's coming to 'em. You will go home."

Bartiin met Yoharum's gaze and found no trace of deception. "Alright" he said.

"You are soldier" Yoharum ventured. "My people, they have passion. They need training. Discipline. They need a man like you. A person has done this before; overthrown an empire."

"I don't know where you're getting these stories about me but it has to stop" Bartiin said. "Spirits, the way they stare at me gives me the creeps. I'm not the man you think I am. I never overthrew an empire. You're right that these people need training and discipline. But they won't get it in time for your attack. Nor am I the right person to train them."

"Why?" Yoharum asked.

"Because I don't believe in your cause." Bartiin hissed.

"What do you mean?" Yoharum asked. He seemed offended.

"I fought my war…" Bartiin said, "You make it sound glorious but it was awful. And even all these years later, I seem to be the only one left still fighting it. Cursed, never to escape it."

Yoharum's expression hardened, but there was no sign of retreat. "This is different. This is fight for justice. Fight for freedom. Fight to destroy terrible people. The Casoyans—"

"I've met your bloody Casoyans and you're outmatched," Bartiin interrupted bitterly. He had no patience for the idealistic speech that would follow.

"We have twice as many soldiers as them" Yoharum argued.

Bartiin glanced around, noting how ragged and unprepared the people here looked. "You have twice as many *people* as them. That's not the same. They're well trained, armed, and armoured. They have walls and towers. You have a mob. If you march these people on the city gates, they'll be slaughtered." *And even if by miracle you made it into the city, this group will destroy everything worth anything and then cannibalize itself over the scraps.*

"You are wrong," Yoharum said, his tone sharp but earnest. "My people are ready and we will take this city. No matter the cost."

"That's easy to say before it comes time to pay up" Bartiin countered.

Shouts of chaos erupted in the hall. Fighters scattered in a blind panic. As Yoharum turned to bolt, Bartiin caught his arm, anchoring him. "What's going on?"

"Casoyans" Yoharum growled.

Bartiin followed Yoharum through an unfamiliar passageway into fresh air. The panic persisted. Instead of beelining into the fray, Yoharum fled inland followed by a group of fighters. Bartiin followed up an embankment towards the outskirts of the slums through muddy streets lined with homes perched over the hillside. As they ran, women pulled children off the streets. Others, grabbed their travel packs and their families and fled. All gave way to Yoharum and his men.

They reached a lookout and surveyed the mess below. The walls of the city loomed in the distance and Mudtown stretched from the north around the lake, through the lowlands, and out towards the coast hugging the city. Emerging from the south and lake gates were hosts of soldiers.

"Oh, sweet spirits" Bartiin muttered under his breath. The soldiers, Casoyan guild soldiers, marched in numbers beyond his count. It was an army. They bore spears and shields and marched in rank and file. People fled in droves, but people also came in droves to hurl rocks and insults. At the head of the column, a woman marched with a company of protectors. The Aginjigaade mowed down enemies in her path, firing projectiles into the crowd. Only later would Bartiin learn that the ammunition she fired consisted of sharpened bone fragments.

One of Yoharum's soldiers pulled a mirror from his belongings. Yoharum spoke back and forth with the soldier and the mirror signaled flashes across the valley. Meanwhile, Viiran's mob surged through the streets towards the encroaching armies. It was a tide of anger. Bodies surged between the shacks and homes with the same furiousness as the floodwaters had. They met their enemies with disconcerting enthusiasm. Especially once the killing started. Men and women, most of them untrained and undisciplined, ran to their deaths. They swarmed the columns of soldiers and broke upon them like waves upon the rocks. They had numbers, Yoharum had been correct, but the guilds' training and discipline proved itself effective. For each Casoyan killed, more died at their hands. Their cries carrying across the valley.

“Behind us!” Yoharum yelled, his voice booming across the rooftop. “Ready yourselves!”

Bartiin’s heart skipped a beat. He whipped around. It had been difficult to watch the carnage below, but his gut sank as he realized he was to participate. Three Casoyan heavies pressed in from behind. More came appeared at the heads of other roads and trails, closing the net on those hoping to escape. It was brilliant. The heavy soldiers advanced, blades drawn and shields raised and Bartiin knew they were in danger. Yoharum didn’t seem to share his fears. The large man wasted no time. With a roar, he pulled one of his axes from his back and held it high above his head in challenge. The rest of his ragtag group of warriors followed his lead, their provisional weapons raised in defense, but they were far from being a match for the well-equipped Casoyan heavies closing in.

Bartiin felt trapped. He was the only one without a weapon. He hadn’t thought to bring one. His gaze flickered to the men around him. The men he prayed would protect him. They were gangbangers. Kids that thought a blade made you tough. They weren’t soldiers. They wore no armour and carried whatever crude weapons they had been given by Yoharum and Viiran. Among them they had a crude spear with a flint-mapped tip, a Casoyan spear, a long cudgel and a dented shield, and two long bronze knives. Only Yoharum, wielding a pair of hand axes, looked ready for a fight.

The Casoyan soldiers wore cast bonze plate and pressed forward with chilling confidence. These men were killers. They were outnumbered, but that wasn’t a concern. The heavies raised their swords and shields. Bartiin saw the glint of their sharpened bronze blades and felt the knot tighten in his stomach. His eyes darted around in desperation, but there was no way out. Their rooftop offered the perfect vantage over the slums, but it left no escape. A leap from here would risk grave injury or death.

Yoharum charged forward. He hurled his first axe with brutal force. It caught the middle Casoyan square on. The man was knocked hard off his feet despite taking the blow to the shield. Yoharum’s power was undeniable, even as injured as he was. Bartiin recognized the sheer strength his strange new friend wielded. Another one of Yoharum’s soldiers, the one wielding the stone spear, darted in. His thrust was direct, aimed squarely at a heavily armored soldier’s chest. It was a foolish attack. The blow glanced off the soldier’s bronze plate and the stone tip of the spear shattered. The Casoyan heavy seemed unperturbed. With brutal speed, the heavy countered with his own sword swing. It came down in a deadly arc. The blade cut through the spearman and he screamed in death.

The second standing Casoyan heavy blocked the cudgel on his shield and managed to slash his attacker’s thigh, opening a wound that Bartiin recognized as fatal. Yoharum’s warrior collapsed onto one knee and only a quick swing of Yoharum’s axe saved the man from a quicker death at the heavy’s hands. The soldier Yoharum had knocked down was back on his feet and with one already dead, and one more incapacitated, the Casoyans pressed their advantage. They closed in, shields raised and swords poised. The fervor that was present in Yoharum’s warriors just moments earlier had evaporated. If there was a place to run to, these men would have scattered. But penned in, they had no choice but to stand and fight. Fight or die.

Yoharum, his rage building, swung again. The Casoyans kept well clear of him. Even armoured, they recognized his threat. Yoharum’s axe cut the air in front of him with all the fury and rage he could muster. They kept their distance, too cautious to be caught by his wide killing blows. The rebel on Yoharum’s left lunged with his knife. It was a

desperate counterattack and the Casoyan soldier parried the blow with his shield. He followed the parry with his own counter, which came around in a vicious swing. The sword cut through the man's side and he keeled over as blood spilled from his body. The soldier turned and gave the bloody warrior a kick that sent him over the side of the building. He crashed into houses below.

Yoharum roared and charged for the heavy that had just kicked the tribesman. The other two heavies, distracted with their own fights, were unable to intervene as Yoharum barreled forward. Yoharum pushed all his strength into the under-swing of his axe. The soldier was quick enough to raise his shield to dampen the blow, but still took the hefty force of it square on and stumbled backwards over the edge himself. He screamed in terror as he fell and hit the building below with a sickening crunch.

Bartiin watched in silent horror as the heavy furthest from Yoharum decapitated the woman who had been fighting him off. She had stuck her knife into his leg only to lose the weapon and her head alongside it. The Casoyan reeled in pain as he pulled the knife out and tossed it aside. The decapitated woman was the only one standing between the Casoyan heavy and the man bleeding out from the thigh wound. Unable to crawl away, the Casoyan soldier ran the poor man through with the point of his blade.

To Bartiin's relief, the bloody knife the soldier had cast away had bounced. It skidded to a stop just an arm's span from where he stood. Bartiin seized the small weapon and held it out defensively. The Casoyans advanced, unconcerned. It was three on two now, and only Yoharum kept them at bay.

Yoharum swung wildly. The sole surviving warrior at his side used his own spear to keep the soldiers at bay, always aiming for exposed limbs. The heavy furthest from Yoharum, the one with the bloodied leg, lunged and stabbed the spearman with the point of his sword, burying the tip of the blade in the man's shoulder. The rebel's spear found the man's other leg and he collapsed as it pierced through his other thigh. Both men wrestled on the ground, neither close to dying from their traded injuries. They clawed and wrestled as the heavy drew a knife and pushed with all of his weight to bury the blade inside his opponent's chest. The spearman twisted and the heavy's knife caught in the man's loose clothes. Bartiin seized the moment to strike. His sword master had taught him patience. He rushed forward, bloody knife in hand and plunged it into the heavy's exposed neck again and again. The man stopped struggling and the spearman wriggled his way out from under the dead heavy. Yoharum drove his axe down against the final Casoyan. His height and reach allowed the blade to arc over the heavy's shield. The axe cleaved straight through the man's helmet with a sickening crunch and a horrifying spray of blood and brain matter. It was the single worst thing Bartiin had ever witnessed, and yet he roared in triumph as the terror of dying was replaced by the exhilaration of living another day.

Yoharum turned, his face a splattering of blood. Bartiin helped the spearman to his feet and the man groaned in pain. The shoulder wound he had sustained from the Casoyan soldier was bleeding steadily but didn't appear grave. Bartiin's heart raced. All three men huffed in silence. Blood covered Bartiin's hands. He had killed again; taken another life this day.

"Take their weapons and armour" Yoharum ordered, already working to remove the bronze scale armour from the Casoyan heavy he had just slain. Bartiin froze, not sure whether to follow the order or not. This wasn't his fight. He looked to the injured spearman, who seemed more focused on stopping the bleeding from his shoulder "Now!" Yoharum barked.

"For fuck's safe, man!" Bartiin yelled, "He's trying to bandage his wound!"

"There is maybe more of them!" Yoharum growled, looting a fine bronze war knife from the dead heavy's corpse and stashing it. He threw the shiny armour over his torso and the plate looked small on hulking frame. "Strip the armour from that one. Get the swords and shield. I'm going down for the third man."

Bartiin wanted to protest, but Yoharum was already jogging off of the roof to find a way down the house below where the soldier had fallen. *Where he had been pushed,* Bartiin corrected.

"Thank you" the spearman said, now that they were alone. The stranger was shorter than him, but muscular. He had a wrestler's build and wore his dark hair back in braids adorned with shells and beads. His accent was heavy and now that he was facing Bartiin, it was clear that the wound on his shoulder was far from the only wound he had taken over the course of their short skirmish. "I… I think that dog would have killed me… had you not killed him first. I owe you life debt, foreigner."

"No, no debt" Bartiin said, removing the plate from the dead Casoyan. "I killed to save my life. Yours is a bonus." Bartiin presented the armour to the spearman but the man pulled away.

"No!" The man refused, "I cannot take this. This was your kill. Spoils are yours."

Bartiin frowned, unfamiliar with whatever custom this man had and unsure how to bypass it. "I don't want this armour" Bartiin said, thinking to his own armour the Casoyans had taken from him during his arrest.

"Then this sword" the man insisted, offering the Casoyan made blade to him instead.

"For spirits sake, no." Bartiin said. "I don't want any part of this."

"I see," the man said. Bartiin wasn't sure he did. "I am grateful that you were" the spearman said at last. "Let us go to Yoharum. I no longer wish to be here."

Bartiin found it hard to disagree. He took one last glance out over the chaos below. Billows of smoke plumed across Mudtown. Flames spread rapidly from building to building. Wind propelled the fire away from the lake and towards the coast, the entirety of the slum in their path. At the city gates, the Casoyan's were in retreat. Viiran's fighters rallied as if they had won a great victory. Bartiin knew they hadn't. There would be no containing the blaze now.

They followed the path that Yoharum had taken down from the rooftop lookout. Veering off the main road, they slid down a grassy incline. The two men could hear Yoharum before they could see him. There was a hole in the roof of the clay-tiled house below them and Yoharum's voice echoed up through it. Bartiin followed the spearmen around to the front door. They entered the dwelling to see Yoharum leaning over the Casoyan heavy.

The huge warrior leaned over the broken heavy. Bartiin was shocked to see the man still lived. Although, the state of his mangled body made him feel sick. The Casoyan was on his back, face up. His arms bent in unnatural angles. He wheezed sickeningly and spat blood towards Yoharum. His helmet was missing and his dark hair hung loose. Bartiin stood in the doorway with the spearman, not sure what would happen next. Yoharum was speaking with the dying man. They were going back and forth, though the bloody coughing made the Casoyan man's words sparse. Yoharum was angry, though he always seemed angry.

"What are they saying?" Bartiin asked the spearman.

"This man was one of the soldiers who slew Yoharum's crew" the spearman answered. "Yoharum is asking him how the Casoyans found them that night. They are negotiating."

"Negotiating for what?"

"Yoharum wishes for an answer and the soldier wishes to die quickly. He is broken."

They continued to listen to the exchange, and then the spearmen furrowed his brow. Yoharum grew angrier and huffed off, leaving the dying soldier in his agony. "Let's go" Yoharum ordered. "This was a waste of time." He carried the man's blade in his hand. It was bent.

"The soldier said something peculiar" the spearman admitted after Yoharum was out of range. "He said that Yoharum was not a thief, but a messenger. Hm, maybe a currier. The word, it doesn't match in Tralang. It is used for the children that run messages in the city. It is specific to these children, not a big person."

"The man called him a child?" Bartiin asked, not following.

"No. The meaning is different. It means what you say but it also means that Yoharum was expendable. I don't fully understand."

Bartiin did. He was the one to grimace now. He understood the message behind those words. He had been the one to use them during his original meeting with the ambassador. *A local. Somebody capable of getting it done. Preferably one that can disappear afterwards.* Bartiin had meant a killer who could leave the city once it was over. She had taken his words literally. Or maybe that was what he told himself now that he knew the man. Maybe he had meant it that way. Either way, Bartiin was now certain that Careyago Ambassador Hina Durali had been the one to send the guild's elite squad after Yoharum. *Spirits have mercy. May he never learn that truth.*

"Let's go" Yoharum's voice boomed from outside.

Bartiin's stomach lurched. He *was* the one who betrayed Yoharum. Just as Yoharum had feared that night in the mountains. Yoharum had been right the whole time. A new fear blossomed: that the hulking killer might learn that truth. Or worse, figure it out. Bartiin marched on in Yoharum's shadow, praying his secrets remained in the dark.

Chapter 32: The Old Patzau

She sat high atop the monolithic peak, ever watchful over the city of gold below. She was cobbled together over a long period of time and it was a testament to her fortitude that she was even keeping upright. The long years had eroded at her foundations. A maze of dark warrens and unexpected turns obfuscated her insides. To advance was to step into darkness, and trust the choice made. Cold and tough, few knew her well enough to navigate the dead-ends and dangers.

Patzau Ashill sat at her desk atop the Casoyan Fortress. The wind howled fiercely and the windows whistled with the wind's eagerness to explore the high tower. The even glow of an illum stone lamp illuminated the desk. Notes, contracts, and ledgers lay arranged before her, a display of how costly this prolonged campaign against Mudtown was becoming. The glow produced long shadows on the far wall and reflected off the chamber's well polished stone floor.

It had been weeks since the attempt on Patzau Yohati's life and the Patzau's original campaign against the thieves and murderers responsible. The resulting chaos had spiraled into the greatest challenge of Yanata Ashill's long career. The problem was one of delicacy. Policing the city or marching against an enemy were trivial tasks for a woman of her rank and expertise, but unravelling a rebellion where the guilty and the innocent were knotted together was another matter entirely. In a city strangled by unrest by fires, floods, political instability, and famine, there were no clear lines to hold. This was the truest test of command, and Ashill knew she was failing.

Quelling revolt was a difficult task in its own right. Now it felt as if the city itself was coming apart at the seams. Since Yohati's failed assassination, political violence was on the upswing culminating in the murder of Careyago Ambassador Durali and her partner. So it was with no surprise that the sudden and suspicious death of Minoc's replacement, Patzau Hairo Bradel, Yanata found herself stretched too thin. Worse, she was distracted. Minoc languished in the depths of this very fortress, her fortress, and his sham of a trial gnawed at her thoughts. It kept her up at night. At least, those nights she chose sleep. He was innocent. It hadn't even taken much of an effort to prove it. That was the worst part. She had tasked Elvi with looking into the council's claims and the woman hadn't even needed a full day.

She wasn't so foolish as to think him incapable. Her time as prison warden had taught her the hard lesson that fine-seeming folks were capable of terrible things. Character alone tracks poorly with innocence. And now Yanata knew how that felt. She too was no longer innocent. She had sat there, listening to all the bullshit and yet she had remained silent. Only Ada had stood up for Mellen. She told herself that it had been exhaustion that had silenced her. That a lack of information had kept her from speaking up. But lies only work when you believe them and the stain on her heart was painted in regret.

A sharp rap on the door broke her from her reverie. Surprised by the late hour, Yanata stood and crossed to the door. When she opened it, Patzau Yohati stood in the hallway, his face set in its usual inscrutable expression. “It’s late, Yohati” Yanata replied, not bothering to hide her surprise. “What brings you here?”

“Yanata,” Yohati said, his voice low but firm. “I’ve come to speak with you about our ongoing predicament. May I come in?”

“Please” she said, opening the door wider in invitation.

Yohati stepped inside, his fine slippers pattering on the polished floor. “I have a matter of great importance to discuss” he began. He did not wait for her to sit before speaking, “The campaign in Mudtown. It has become too high a burden for us to continue to bear as we have been. The criminals in the slums are growing bolder. Innocent people are being hurt by our unwillingness to commit. If we don’t act decisively, this cost in lives will only escalate.”

“Hard when our enemies shroud themselves amongst true Casoyans” Yanata said carefully.

“I agree. Which is why we must raze Mudtown.”

Yanata drew in a gasped breath. She had expected something, but this wasn’t it.

“We must destroy the slums entirely. It is a problem we can no longer ignore. You’ve heard the stories. People are getting sick inside the city from the filth of the place. Children are being coerced into petty crime for gang lords and business are being extorted by bandits. This was before all of the chaos of the last few weeks. Now conditions are a thousand times worse.”

Yanata grunted. The thought of annihilating the slum entirely wasn’t what she had expected from Yohati’s proposal. He had always been the most wise and impartial of the council. Although it wasn’t spoken, she understood the true cost of his suggestion and it was difficult to stomach.

“We will give warning of course,” Yohati continued, “and encourage innocents to take shelter elsewhere. But in the end, we must dismantle the bastion of crime and oppression. They have made a fortress out of innocent bodies. We must tear it down. Force them out of their dens. Only then can we strike without fear of hostages. Only then will we have the opportunity to rebuild, properly, with the city’s infrastructure rather than the shanties these people call homes.”

“What you suggest is respectable in theory, but many won’t leave. They will turn against us over of this decision. We will be destroying homes and families. And where will they go during the campaign?”

Yohati sighed. “We can work out those details later. We have no better choice” He spoke so plainly. And with the calm demeanor of righteousness, it maddened her. “I hate to admit it,” he continued, “but we are at an impasse. I would not suggest this course if I thought there was a better way forward.”

“I will issue the order,” Yanata said, her voice flat as she reached for a wax tablet. On second thought, she stood and collected parchment from a cabinet in the corner and an ink well.

“Good idea” Yohati said calmly, “More official. Can’t be easily erased or altered like wax.”

As she wrote, Yanata’s hand felt heavy. The words on the page felt more like a sentence than a decree. Her thoughts drifted for a brief moment. Then the memory of her daughter, Yuromi, bloodied after leaving Mudtown popped into her mind as she signed the decree. Yohati poured the hot wax for her and Yanata stamped the orange

liquid with her guild's signet, her fist clenched. She held the military decree in her hand and stared at it in wonder. *What will become of all those people?* She wondered. *Will all this truly bring about a greater good?* She didn't know, and so she hoped instead.

She handed the order to Yohati, who took it without a word of thanks. "Do you have someone in mind to lead the assault?" Yohati asked. Yanata thought for an instant she saw his eyes a gleam with satisfaction as he reviewed the parchment.

"No" She answered. The fervor with which she had written the order disappeared and exhaustion took its place. She felt drained and stifled a yawn.

"Might I suggest, Captain Gal Burm for the task" Yohati said.

"Sure" she said, no longer interested.

"Good night, Ashill" Yohati said. Yohati slipped from the room like a shadow.

After he left, Yanata remained, staring down at the empty chair across from her desk. She could hear her own slow breaths, as if the very air had thickened with her shame. *What have I become?* After an indeterminate amount of time, she stood and walked out. She needed air. Her office felt suffocating. The fortress felt suffocating. She ascended the stairwell that led to the roof of the officer's tower. The hatch whistled loudly in the wind. Yanata opened it and a gust kicked the wooden trapdoor open with a loud bang. The roof was vacant and the night air was cold. It rushed by in great gusts that rustled the small trees that clung to the high cliff rocks. The sky was dark and only a sliver of distant daylight clung to the distant horizon.

Yanata walked to the edge and looked across the bay towards the city. The twin domes of the Auction House and the Palace glowed a soft blue. The rest of the city looked dark by comparison. City streets looked like cracks of light upon the dark landscape. Lanterns glowed in distant windows and down streets and alleyways. The walls of the city hugged the city like a dark ring and beyond the walls, Mudtown sat in the low-lands due east. From her high vantage over the city, it looked peaceful and quiet. Yanata tried to imaging what it might one day look like if they succeeded. An expansion of the city like never before seen. Real homes. Safe streets. Clean water. It seemed right. But it felt so wrong.

So, she tried not to think about it. Her mind instead wandered to her other regrets: Not asking more questions in Patzau Minoc's trial. Not being as stalwart as Ada. Not being a better leader for her guildsmen. Not being a better mother to her girls. Her thoughts drifted back to the conversation she had had in this very tower with Patzau Minoc a month prior. He had warned her that Powanati and Hadashenta were consolidating power and wealth. He had told her that he planned on making a stand against it. And now he withered away in *her* prison, condemned to die. *This is all madness. It can only be madness*, Yanata thought. *We have been consumed by it. Madness and greed… just as Minoc had warned me.*

The wind stopped unexpectedly and the silence that replaced the howling was deafening. It left her unprotected from her thoughts. Vulnerable to her doubts. Yanata turned and Elvi stood beside her. She wasn't sure if Elvi had approached silently or if she had simply remained distracted. Being snuck-up on unnerved her. The pungent smell of Elvi's sorcery lingered without the wind to carry it away. It smelled like a clear sky on a cold day up in the mountains. Or perhaps it was a bit medicinal, like soothing herbs. Yanata couldn't place it, but it was familiar and calming.

"I hope you don't mind," Elvi said quietly.

"No, I appreciate the sentiment," she replied.

"Wouldn't want you to blow off the roof."

"It'd take more than a big gust to kill me, El" Yanata replied flatly.

"Well, out with it," Elvi said.

"Out with what?"

"Whatever it is that's got you troubled."

Yanata scowled. Elvi had always been good at being attuned to her emotions, sensing even the subtlest change in her mood. "It seems I'm wearing my inner conflict across my face" Yanata said after a moment. "Spirits, where do I even start?"

"Is it Mudtown or Minoc?" Elvi asked.

"How are you husbandless? If you can handle me, you can handle any man."

"Just haven't found the right one" Elvi said. "So, its Minoc that's got you up here, hm?"

"You should have been a fortune teller instead of a soldier" Yanata quipped. "You'd have made a lot more money. Used your Aginjigaade skills to add to the showmanship of it all."

"You're stalling"

"Oh, for spirits sake." Yanata growled. She met Elvi's sly smile with one of her own. "He didn't do it" she said after a quiet moment. "You did all that work investigating and not once did Minoc come up as a suspect. No connections. No evidence. No associations. If it were Powanati, I'd have less difficulty believing it, I've heard those two yell at one another…"

"We've all heard those two yell at each other" Elvi admitted.

"Damn it! I'm just so tired. And that shouldn't be an excuse, that's my problem. I shouldn't have let that circus of a trial continue. It was bullshit, Elvi. The whole thing felt like a song and dance and I sat there and played my fucking tambourine. I mean they gagged the fucking man at his own trial for spirits sake. I feel dirty for having been a part of it."

Elvi remained quiet, giving her friend the space to think. Yanata took a deep breath and let out a hard sigh. "Yohati came to see me tonight" she said.

"Yohati came all the way here *again*?" Elvi asked, feigning surprise.

"He wanted me to order an escalation to the campaign. He wanted me to give the order to raze Mudtown" Yanata admitted.

"And you said no?" Elvi asked.

"No, I fucking signed it" Yanata whispered, as if confessing to a crime.

"You signed it?" Elvi asked again, astonished. "I don't understand."

"I realized that, if I refused, the council will vote to remove me" Yanata said. "I'm not entrenched like Minoc and the other Patzau. It's so easy to get me out of their way. I realized that, if I didn't do it, they'll just replace me with somebody else who would make things a hundred times worse for those people. It was a moment of weakness; of desperation. I thought it was smart. That I can do things, little acts of recourse, to try and make things better. But now… I've come to realize just how foolish it was." A silence stretched between them. Elvi seemed ready to argue, but no words came. "I should have resigned" Yanata continued. "I've stamped my authorization on the murder of innocents. I've compromised my ideals to cling on to what little power I have left."

"Its not the same–" Elvi argued, but Yanata cut her off.

"It *is* the same" she said. "Sure, it's the power to try and do what I think is right, but it is still a compromise to maintain power; to have control. I tell myself that I'll be better than whoever they replace me with but do the things I abhor anyway to maintain control. I don't think I'm fit to lead this guild any longer."

"That's nonsense, Yanata" Elvi said eagerly. "Do you truly think whoever they replace you with will do a fraction of good when compared to you? You can't give up now. This city will crumble without you."

"I'm not so sure that's true," Yanata admitted, "but it's nice to hear that you think so."

"Just give it more time" Elvi urged. "I'll work on the smaller unimportant issues. The Gaagians. The Ambassador. Hairo's death. I'll get somebody else to handle Minoc's execution. You just focus on Mudtown and ensuring it doesn't all go to shit."

After a long pause, Patzau Ashill finally answered her with, "Okay." Relief flooded Elvi's face. "Go home, Elvi. You need your sleep as much as I do. We can talk more tomorrow."

It was clear that Elvi wanted to protest, but didn't. She left and Yanata stood alone with the wind and a new mission. Elvi didn't know it, she couldn't know it, but their conversation had helped Yanata in more ways than one. Descending from the roof, Yanata entered one of her senior officer's offices and nicked a bottle of plum wine she knew he had stashed in his desk. She took one of his candles too. Crossing the bridge, she wound her way through the fortresses' maze of warrens. Her footsteps echoed in the quiet of the empty halls. As she descended, the air grew colder and the stone walls grew older and darker. She enterer the jailer's office and surprised the older man who sat lounging in the cramped room with only a book and a candle light. He jolted upright in surprise as the door opened and then again to attention as he realized who is unexpected visitor was.

"Patzau Ashill" he stammered. "W– What?"

"Take the next few days off, Trundle" Yanata said casually. "Full pay. I'll handle guard duty tonight and find you a replacement for tomorrow and the day after."

"I don't understand" Trundle said, almost more surprised she knew his name than the strange words that came from her mouth.

"I can't sleep" she lied. She tossed him a small pouch and then said, "Go home. Forget you saw me here tonight and you can keep that." Trundle opened the pouch, closed his mouth, saluted, and left with a giddiness Yanata envied. *It can be so easy to change a person's life*, she realized. *Maybe I'm as bad as they are.* She tried not to dwell down that path. Regrets were not among the things she lacked.

It was easy finding Patzau Minoc's cell. He was one of only two prisoners in the deepest bowels of the fortress' prison. He stirred as the cell door clicked open and she pulled up a chair. "I know you're awake, Mellen" Yanata said calmly. He turned, surprised to hear from her. He seemed just as shocked to see her.

"Now this is a surprise" Mellen said, "I thought you were the jailer, doing his rounds."

"I am your jailer" Yanata said coldly.

"I suppose that's true" Mellen admitted. He sat up and somehow looked even thinner than he did the day prior. "You brought me a going-to-die present?" He asked, looking at the bottle.

"Something like that" Yanata said. She uncorked the bottle of wine and poured two glasses. "Don't break that" she warned as placed one in front of him, her eyes meeting his.

"Poisoned I'd expect?" He asked with a mirth that seemed out of place. He gulped the wine down eagerly and then smiled up at her. Yanata couldn't help but smile back. "So, what brings you down here to a sorry place like this?" he asked as she refilled

his glass. “You doing rounds for all the prisoners now? Because the young man a few cells over is a lovely conversationalist.”

“I came to do what you asked” Yanata answered. “I’ve come to listen to what you’ve been trying to tell me for the past month. But no flowery bullshit this time. Give me the hard truths.”

And he did.

*

Days later, Patzau Ashill stood alone atop the fortress keep overlooking the city. She wore a cloak against the mountain winds and it flapped haphazardly behind her. The hour was late and the sky dark, save for the glow of fires emanating from the slums far below. The city itself, alive with the bright glow of its twin domed buildings, seemed pristine in its quiet majesty. But in the shadow of the mountains, the still sprawling conflagration was a reminder of what she had done.

The wind had calmed much since the sun had set, but the fires burned hot enough to spread uncontrolled even without its influence. They left the city bathed in ginger light, as if the sun had never finished setting on this terrible day. Smoke billowed so thick and black that even the infinite night sky appeared bright by comparison. Yes, the Casoyan Fortress, perched high atop the volcanic plug, offered a commanding view from which Yanata could bask in her own failure. She stared down at Mudtown. Her face was steely and composed, and hid well the remorse she felt.

She clenched the resignation letter in her fist, the curled parchment crumpling under the force of her grip. It was left on her desk by her daughter. Yuromi had rejected her position in the guild. Her letter was more a denouncement than resignation. *Ashamed to call myself a soldier,* the letter had read. *Ashamed to bare the reputation of Ashill.* Yanata’s breath caught as she ruminated over her daughter’s words. Worse, found herself agreeing. The difference was, she was supposed to be in charge. The fires, the destruction, the targeting of civilians; they were no accident. Soldiers, her soldiers, had carried out wanton destruction and massacres.

Yuromi had always been smart. Maybe not the cold tactical smarts her twin sister Kida had, but smart enough to recognize she no longer supported what the guild was becoming and brave enough to walk away. It had taken Yanata until this very moment to see it herself. She felt betrayed, just like Minoc. Worse, she knew she had betrayed herself in the process. Betrayed Yuromi. Betrayed Caso. She had sacrifice everything she believed in to retain control, and now she stood looking out over the city with nothing left. Not even that control.

It had Patzau Yohati written all over it. He had been the one to pressure her to order the attack. He had agreed to her stipulations, and they had agreed that the destruction of Mudtown was necessary. But he and Burm had promised it wouldn’t be like this. It was to be controlled. Systematic. Yanata felt a fool for believing them. Especially after Minoc’s betrayal. *Fire is the madman’s weapon.* They lied to her and now she was poised to take the fall. Her soldiers had retreated in defeat, thwarted by the fires they had lit. Hundreds were dead and dying. More were burning and suffocating. And she could do nothing but watch it unfold from atop her tower. *My greatest failure and my lasting legacy,* she lamented. The weight in her chest threatened to crush her. But before she could hesitate any further, quiet footfalls sounded behind her.

“Yuromi?” she asked readily. Eager to apologize to the daughter she had betrayed.

“Not this time, mother” Kida said.

Her other daughter walked forward to stand at her side. They stood together in silence, Yanata, confused by Kida's presence and Kida, absorbed by the immense inferno below. The glow of the flames lit Kida's face. It gave her an ominous look. Yanata felt a chill but passed it off as the wind. Kida's eyes glittered with the same unflinching resolve that had always marked her.

"The fire is beautiful, isn't it?" Kida asked, her voice low, almost reverent.

"Beautiful?" Yanata repeated, surprised by the comment.

"Yes, beautiful" Kida repeated. She seemed enchanted by the distant flames. "It's a demonstration of our might, of Casoyan power. A warning to these tribes of thieves and criminals that Casoyan justice is swift and Casoyan justice is exacting. They'll think again before they disrespect the order of things."

Yanata turned sharply, her face a mask of quiet disdain and horror. "You find this spectacle beautiful?" She took a step forward. Her voice was laced with an edge of pain as she spoke, "This is not beauty. This is devastation. This… this is my greatest failure."

Kida met her gaze with defiance, disappointment appearing across her young face. It was a mirror of Yanata's own. "Failure?" she scoffed, "What are you talking about? This is a lesson to those who oppose us, Mother. A lesson they'll not soon forget. There is no peace without respect for order, and so we show these people what true disorder looks like. *This* is what they deserve."

Yanata's hand rose without warning. She struck Kida across the face with a force that rang through the air like the crack of a whip. Kida reeled, her expression one of shock, before her eyes narrowed in fury. "If you see this city burning as anything but a failure," Yanata growled, her voice low and dangerous, "you don't deserve your position in this guild."

For a moment, Kida stood motionless, still processing the blow. Then, her eyes flared with fury, and she stormed forward, her voice rising. "Unbelievable. I didn't want to accept it. What they say about you is true. You've grown weak! You've lost your edge! You've forgotten what it means to command—to *rule*! Those people hate you. They want you dead. They want us all dead and yet you mourn them? You're fucking pathetic."

Yanata's breath came quick, her chest tight with emotion. "Go home right now, Kida," she said, the command sharp and unyielding. "You will do well to remember that I am not only your mother, but your superior. Think wisely before you come to me with such foolish arrogance again. And remember this, *you* are not the one who has to live with the consequences of these choices. We will pay for this in blood, mark my words."

Kida spat on the ground; her eyes full of contempt. "You've lost yourself, Mother. And in doing so, you'll lose us this city: our home. I'll make sure they know it's you they should blame."

"Good luck with that" Yanata spat. They already plan to blame me, she thought, stewing in her anger and frustrations. *They won't need your help, you ungrateful little witch*. *What happened to my sweet little girl? What happened to my Kida. When did she become this monster?*

Kida called out back to her as she stood in the stairwell, one hand on the hatch, "You shame yourself, and you disgrace the Ashill name. Your time is up, mother." She slammed the trapdoor behind her, disappearing into the tower with the last word.

Yanata cursed under her breath. *They judge you weak when showing mercy and tyrannical when displaying strength. You, my daughter, understand nothing about the paradox of leadership.*

The silence that followed was heavy. Patzau Ashill stood motionless, staring down at the flames below. Kida's words stung. She replayed them over and over in her mind as the world burned. Her regrets fell not on the choices she had made as a general, save for this last proclamation. Instead, her regrets were for the choices she'd made as a mother. She had failed both her daughters, in opposite ways. *A candle lit from both ends.*

The only thing that Yanata could imagine might be worse on a night like this was more company. She got it. Five more figures ascended the tower to join her atop the roof not long after Kida had departed. *Never a spare moment to wallow in my own dark thoughts,* Yanata sighed. She turned and saw Patzau Adagizhi, Patzau Hadashenta, and Patzau Powanati, their silhouettes framed by moonlight. Behind them, Guild Aginjigaade. The man on the left was Kawaka Bedil of Powanati's guild, and the other was Janos Tydana of Yohati's. She turned back to face the fires below and waited for the moment she feared most."

"Patzau Ashill" Adagizhi said, his voice stern.

"Have you come to watch Mudtown burn with me?"

"No" Adagizhi replied.

"Then you've come to twist the knife."

She turned, and the five men stood still a few paces behind her. The three bastards she could kill with her bare hands. It wouldn't even be that hard. No wonder they had brought the Aginjigaade. Needed to feel safe while facing down an old woman.

None responded. Their silence angered her, "Well, for fuck's sake Murak, get on with it."

Adagizhi's eyes were cold, his voice sharp as he spoke. "Patzau Yanata Ashill, by the order of the Patzau's Council, you are hereby removed from your position as Leader of the Soldiers Guild. Your failure to properly execute your orders today has brought ruin to the guild and shame to our great city. We've come to relieve you of your command."

Yanata's gaze flickered briefly to the empty space beside them. "Yohati couldn't be here to twist the knife himself?" she chucked bitterly.

Patzau Hadashenta ignored the remark, his gaze fixed on her. "The position of Patzau has been reassigned. Captain Gal Burm will assume your role. He will serve Casoyans well."

Yanata's mind raced, and a bitter laugh escaped her lips. *Gal will serve you well, maybe.* "Gal Burm? He's not even close to making commander, let alone Patzau." She chewed on her lip for a moment longer, Mulling over the appointment. "But now that I think about it, Burm makes sense. You always wanted a puppet who can be controlled. It's too risky to have a Patzau who might actually be able to lead this fucking guild."

"Careful. You sound like Minoc" Powanati said. It was a threat.

"Well unlike Minoc, you don't have to fucking crucify me to get me to leave. Consider me gone." Yanata spat. Frustration bubbled over and contempt spilled into her words, "I'll get my things and let you enjoy your new council. One where you can ruin this city as much as you want. No hard feelings. Wish you all the best."

Yanata Ashill, Patzau no more, turned from the gathered group and made her way down to her office. They let her go unimpeded. Back in her office, she collected a few personal belongings. She grabbed a token from her late husband, her sword and coat, and a few sealed reports. She looked around the room, and thought about her decisions here. She knew at least, the very last one she had made would do some good. *Be free old friend.*

Yanata descended the steps and stopped halfway across the bridge, looking back at the fortress and the city beyond. And for the first time in many years, she felt the weight of everything she given and now lost. The Guild was her life. It was her passion. He hopes and dreams. It was also her bane. And it was her home. She had given everything to the guild; to Caso. Her husband, her children, her life. Now it all felt empty. The thought was unbearably depressing. So much so that Yanata turned around and stalked back across the bridge and up to the top floor to ransack another bottle of wine for the journey home. Finding a pair of Yintal wines, she swiped both, knowing nobody would ever believe her the culprit.

She uncorked the first bottle with her teeth and took a large swig. The drink felt like a relief. *Medicine for a broken heart*. She knew the feeling well. It had been a very long time and yet, far too recent. It would feel even better not to feel anything. *Soon*, she promised herself. Bitter, she set off to drown herself in her new prizes in the comfortable emptiness of her own home.

Chapter 33: The Fortress

Without guards coming in frequent intervals, time slipped into the abstract. Ohacha sat in total darkness. No one came to replace the candles that once lit the dark corridors outside his cell. Neither did they bring more food or water. His stomach groaned at the mere thought of the bland porridge served prior. Thirst made his throat sticky. Patzau Minoc's visitor was the last person to descend into the deep bowels of the fortress. It had been silent silence then. *How long has it been? Three days? Ten?* Ohacha wasn't sure any more. The crawl of time twisted into disorienting emptiness. When left with nothing but time, only thoughts remain. Anxieties crawled their way in, eating away at them. He had been abandoned, again. Left to die in darkness. Forgotten in the depths of this terrible place.

Ohacha felt confident Minoc's visitor had been Patzau Ashill. It was strange to think of her as Yuromi's mother. The Patzau had a similar timbre to her voice, one that felt familiar. Yet at the same time it was distinct; hoarse, older, sadder. Maybe even a little melancholic, although perhaps he was projecting that feeling on to her words. She had come late into the night. It had been long after their evening meal—back when those still came—and Ohacha had listened with interest to their conversation. She had come seeking answers, and Minoc had woven her a tale so grandiose, Ohacha found it hard to comprehend it all. The big Patzau spoke in Tralang and had lost his jubilant vibrato. He too sounded tired and diminished.

When he finished, the voice in the darkness echoed his disappointment. "It seems I've fallen into the same trappings." She sighed heavily, "Always making promises outside the council chambers. Promises and trust under the guise of progress."

"In the beginning, it was the same for me" Mellen explained. "And for a while, I played along. But I don't blame you. Yours has always been the most precarious position."

"What changed?" she asked. Ohacha leaned closer to his cell door to listen.

"I stopped believing what I was being told and started looking for the truth" Mellen answered. He explained how, years ago, a pair of newly promoted bankers from Powanati's guild had discovered accounting errors. Funds disappearing. Miscounts on ledgers. Errors that, when raised to their seniors, were first ignored, then stonewalled, then disciplined for. With nowhere to turn, they agreed to go to Yohati's auditors. The banker who went died unexpectedly that same night in a mugging. "That was when I first heard about it" Mellen admitted. "The remaining banker fled the city. I sailed to Juking in secret to meet her. I heard the whole story from her, and then came back to look into it myself. I had already started my network of spies, so it wasn't difficult to collect rumours. Everything I've collected on accounting errors is hidden in a false drawer inside my kitchen cabinet. Left hand side, under the bowls, there's a hidden latch. Inside are copies of the account notations on parchment dating back years."

"Why didn't you bring this forward to the council? Yanata asked.

"The council is behind it" Mellen explained. "I only ever found proof against Powanati and Hadashenta, but those two were paying bribes to Adagizhi and Onudar. I always suspected Yohati was either involved or willing to turn a blind eye. Regardless, that's majority. I needed more evidence and I needed more support."

"And instead, you got caught."

"No," Mellen scoffed. "I'm not that stupid. I got bolder. And that was enough. But there's one more thing I found. Not only were taxes disappearing from accounts, extra money has been flowing into our friend's pockets. Careyago eyes are upon our city. Their influence in our politics has risen. Money, favours, business. Their current Emperor is an expansionist. Ju-Nayo, the Aandarri, the Ohegan Sea Kings, the Thalang, the Mar. They're at constant war, rotating peace treaties and hostilities like a gambler rolling dice. The City States across the isles don't facilitate enough trade to feed the empire's hunger. Between the northern storms and the Ohegans raiding trade, Caso has become the last bastion with which the Careyago can import goods from the far east. It is the emperor's prerogative to ensure this final door remains open, at any cost."

Patzau Ashill hadn't asked any more questions after that, simply stewing over his words. As did Ohacha. Minoc's speech was also meant for him. For first time, he understood his enemy's weaknesses. Minoc had laid it all bare for him. But it was Minoc's final words that would leave a lasting impression, "Hopes are for the feeble—an indulgence. When led by truth, forged by virtue, and tempered by patience, purpose is the greatest weapon. Only with purpose can one master fate."

Ohacha awoke the next morning to an unsettling silence. The candles had wicked out, and no one had come to replace them. Breakfast remained undelivered. Minoc was gone. Only ghosts shared his dark prison. He called out, timidly at first but soon with vigorous croaking screams. Still, no one came. As the silence deepened, so too did Ohacha's despair. He clung to the small misguided hope that this was all a mistake. A misunderstanding. That he wasn't really alone.

Ravenous hunger told him days had passed when next the silence was shattered. Soldiers shuffled noisily as they descended into the darkness. The candle cast shadows that spilled through the small window. The light and sounds stirred Ohacha from numb stillness. The murmur of voices and the clattering of keys down the hall indicated they had come for Minoc at last. But Minoc was gone. And only as panicked and angry shouts filled the hall did Ohacha realize Minoc's departure that night wasn't planned. Patzau Ashill had freed him.

*

Elvi Batari sat alone in her office. Unreviewed reports scattered her desk but her nerves made it hard to read them. Patzau Ashill was missing. Gone. Absent. There had been no directions from the top following the latest incursion into Mudtown. The fighting had left scores of dead, and the guild hospitals were already choking on the plethora of wounded. From the lowest clerks to the high commanders, everyone was on edge. Elvi was desperate for Patzau Ashill's return. But her absence made her anxieties all the more powerful. *Where are you, Yanata?*

A building roar of voices shattered the tense silence. It drew Elvi to her window. Below, a lone figure led a surge of bodies in its wake across the bridge to the central keep. The crowd swept forward with a terrifying urgency. Concerned, and more than a little curious, Elvi abandoned her desk and joined the throng of people starting to congregate in the officer's tower. Soldiers filled the hall and at their helm marched Gal Burm with

Janos Tydana at his side. They were an unnatural pair. Both men wore the same look—an ominous, merciless ferocity. A look, Elvi realized, they had directed at her.

"Aginjigaade Batari" Burm announced, his eyes fixed on hers. He was upset about something, and Elvi really didn't want to deal with him at the moment. "We need a word" Burm said, drawing closer. "In your office, now." It was an order, which was bizarre. But all eyes trained on her and Elvi felt that making a scene wouldn't help the anxious tension. Confused and a little annoyed, Elvi smiled politely and opened her door to the large Captain and the shadowy Janos. Burm slammed the door behind him, the sound amplifying Elvi's irritation.

"What's going on? What is the meaning of this?" Elvi demanded, her voice steady.

"Where are they?" Burm demanded, his voice thick with contained rage. "Where are Ashill and Minoc?"

"What? What are you talking about?" Elvi countered; her brow furrowed.

"Don't play innocent," Burm snapped. "Patzau Minoc is gone. Missing from his cell. Yanata too. Where did they go?"

Elvi's eyes widened, a flicker of genuine surprise crossing her face. "Gone? How?"

"You tell us," Janos suggested calmly, his voice laced with accusation.

"You think I had something to do with it?" Elvi asked, insulted.

"Of course!" Janos said sternly. "Tell us what she did with him! Where is Yanata?"

"I don't know" Elvi said. She was distracted, contemplating if Patzau Ashill really might have done what they were accusing.

"You're lying, Batari" Burm said accusingly, pulling her back from her thoughts. "You've always been close with Ashill. What has she done? Where is Minoc?"

"How should I know?" Elvi's anger flared, her voice rising. "She's Patzau, not me. I had no idea Minoc was gone until you barged in just now!"

Burm stepped closer, his presence looming. He was big. Elvi only ever remembered his big personality. She hadn't seen him much in the short time he'd been back from the interior. A cruel smile played across his lips as he said, "You seem to be the last to know, then." A grim satisfaction was clear across his face. "Yanata was removed from her position by the council. The decision came this morning after last night's failed incursion." He paused, savoring the moment. "And I have been selected as the new Patzau of the Soldier's Guild."

The shock came as a physical blow. Elvi did her best to keep her face impassive. She failed. She cursed the unbelievable idea of Burm being Patzau. Her disgust turned to rage. "I spoke with Yanata after she approved the attack" Elvi said, her voice low, "Last night's incursion was led by you! How is it the council promotes you off the same failure that saw her stripped of her rank?"

Burm's smile faltered. "Don't…" he warned.

Elvi ignored him and pressed further, "And how is it that you—a captain—and not one of our several outranking commanders was selected for the role of Patzau? Daddy's connections get you the job? Or perhaps you spread your cheeks wide enough for the council to gift the new title?"

"Enough" Janos snapped, stepping between Burm who looked ready to strangle her. Elvi met his gaze in defiance.

"Do not make an enemy out of me, Batari." Burm warned. "Being Yanata's favourite won't protect you any longer. *I* am your Patzau now."

*

Far below, a low vibration shuddered through the cold floor. Ohacha could feel the strange sensation long before he heard the slow grinding sound the emanated from the wall. Too tired to do anything else, he shuffled to stare into the blackness. *I'm going insane. The walls are talking to me.* But then a hole opened and a dim light spread into the cell. The light was tossed through the hole and tumbled across the floor, filling the room with a white glow. *An illum stone?* Ohacha had to shield his eyes as he got to his feet.

Gaba'ké crawled through the hole, a wide smile across his face. Ohacha stared with a hollow disbelieving look as the old Aginjigaade—plastered in dirt and debris—swept forward. Ohacha stumbled as he tried to cross the small room but Gaba'ké's sturdy arms locked him in a tight embrace. Gaba'ké held him, despite being a head shorter and a hand short. Ohacha collapsed into his old mentor and the tears welled in his eyes. A wave of shame and relief came. All of his anxieties retreated under the love and gratitude he held for the old man, his other uncle in all but blood. A friend who came back for him, despite Ohacha's betrayal. They held each other in the silent darkness and it was a long time before Ohacha overcame his emotions and wiped the tears from his eyes.

"You came back?" Ohacha croaked, his voice soft and self-deprecating.

"Of course I did" Gaba'ké said, straightening Ohacha's shoulders.

Ohacha's looked at his old mentor. He was noticeably tired. Dirt covered his hair and face. His white hair was stained with the earth. Ohacha's eyes landed on Gaba'ké's missing hand and he pulled away reflexively, then felt ashamed by his actions. He felt responsible. "Your hand…" Ohacha stammered. "Is it healing?"

"Its healing" Gaba'ké replied with a gruff dismissiveness. "I'm still getting used to it."

"But–" Ohacha stammered, "It was my fault. All of this was my fault. And then, with the ambassador… you were right. I made things so much worse."

Gaba'ké placed his left hand on Ohacha's shoulder and Ohacha met his gaze. "You, Ohacha, are my pride and joy; my future king. You made a mistake. But I know you to be a man who learns from mistakes. A man who thinks hard about doing the right thing, even when that choice is near impossible. What you and Cask decided went against my advice and guidance, but that doesn't mean that you are a bad person."

"I'm so sorry" Ohacha repeated. "I understand now what you and Aramuk meant when you said the Careyago had claws in this city."

"It is a lesson then," Gaba'ké said with a sober smile. "One you won't soon repeat. By taking action, we lost our neutrality. You gave those who might have defended us no choice but to stand aside. Actions have consequences. But where I have failed you, is in ignoring that inactions too have their consequences. In retrospect, the ambassador's allies were planning to come for us anyway. Your counterattack only accelerated their plans, but you were right to want for action. In my reservations for your safety, I left us vulnerable."

Ohacha nodded slowly. "What about Cask and Rolena?"

"I've already found them" Gaba'ké said, his eyes closed. "I had to expend a lot of energy to tunnel in. I don't have much left in me. I've been at it for a long time. We'll need to go on foot."

"What about other Aginjigaade?" Ohacha asked nervously. "Can't they sense you?"

"They could, if they knew to look. But it seems to be our good fortune that they are on the far side of the fortress and are distracted for the time being. Go on" Gaba'ké

insisted towards the door. Ohacha pushed lightly and the door swung outwards, as if it had never been locked. The stone that used to catch the bolt came away like melted wax, soft and brittle. A soft creaking sound echoed through the empty hall.

The two men stepped out into the dimly lit hallway and passed the other cells and up the stairs. The fortress, especially its lower levels, seemed labyrinthian. Shadows clung to the walls between sconces. The stonework was a strange mix of cut stones and various bricks that made the structure a patchwork of history. They turned left, descended another half level, and then ascended again after another turn, only pausing to allow the soft echo of voices to pass ahead. The soldiers passed, and Gaba'ké led Ohacha down a curving hallway to a plain looking locked door. Ohacha pushed lightly and the door opened softly with the same crumbling lock-stop. Gaba'ké gave a prideful smile.

Rolena stood with her back to the door. She was staring out a small window that let in real daylight. The door groaned and she whipped around defensively. Her face lit up as she spotted Ohacha and Gaba'ké in the doorway. She ran across the room and embraced the pair of them in one great hug.

"How did you find me?" Rolena asked, excitedly.

Gaba'ké held his finger to his lips and answered softly, "I'll tell you later. Cask first. Before our window to come and go disappears." He led them out towards Casks cell. It opened the same as the last two. Inside, the gruff looking swordsman was asleep in the corner. Rolena moved to take a step forward and Ohacha stopped her before she could enter.

"It's us" Ohacha said. "You can stop pretending."

Cask winked open one of his eyes, then rose to his feet energetically. "I thought you were one of the guards" he said.

"And you planned on us and fighting your way out alone?" Ohacha asked.

"Well, no. But I wanted to give myself the option," Cask said awkwardly scratching his scarred bald head. "But when you put it that way…" Gaba'ké appeared behind Ohacha and Rolena. Cask stared at his old friend. "I wasn't sure you'd come back for us" he said humbly.

"That's nonsense" Gaba'ké said smiling. "You knew I would try." The two men embraced in a tight hug. "I lost a hand, not my spirit. Where else would I go?" Gaba'ké asked jovially.

He was all smiles, but Ohacha could see the exhaustion seeping in. He moved slower and was taking rough breaths. The dig had taken more out of the man than he cared to admit. And for the first time, Ohacha wondered just how long he'd been down there tunneling. *Hours? Days?* Cask sensed much the same and they made eyes.

"Let's get you three out of here" Gaba'ké announced.

*

Elvi, her patience exhausted, had made to escape from Burm and Janos, lest she truly lose her temper. Unfortunately, the two men hadn't taken well to being ignored. She had slipped past them into the hallway and they had chased her. Too many bodies filled the stairs and Burm had quickly caught up. Their continued argument now drew onlookers whose faces were a mix of concerned and pallid.

Elvi turned in frustration. "My loyalties lie with the guild!" she yelled, "And with Caso!"

"And yet you refuse to cooperate" Burm blurted. "Instead, you're trying to protect Yanata from the repercussions of her actions and in doing so, you're lying to me; your new Patzau. You're a damned traitor Elvi!"

"You accuse *me* of treason?" Elvi shouted, her voice echoing through the hallway for all to hear. "You're the one who's been orchestrating this ousting of Patzau Ashill and using your family connections to place you in this new Patzau role. I didn't choose you. None of the people in this room voted for you take her place. And there are two dozen people who deserve that post more than you do. Half of them are in this room!"

"Elvi!" Janos warned, his voice venomous. Captains and commanders peered their heads out of doorways, their faces curious and apprehensive.

Elvi ignored Janos. *What the hell is he doing here anyway? If they want a public spat, I'll give them a public spat*. "You're nothing but a puppet!" Elvi declared, her voice contemptuous. "A pawn for the Council to manipulate. You've been handed your title through nepotistic bullshit instead of advancing through experience. You wouldn't have even been in the running, had there been a vote."

Janos looked defeated, "You've crossed a line, Elvi. You are hereby–"

Burm had other plans. His face flushed crimson interrupted Janos' announcement to roar, "Under arrest for treason! You are a disgrace to this guild and our great city. You are guilty of aiding Patzau Ashill in her treasons and will await trial for your crimes!"

The room froze. Elvi froze. Janos froze. Only Burm seemed capable of emotion, and his was rage plain and clear. "I said arrest her!" he bellowed to the surrounding soldiers. Nobody dared move. "Fine, I'll do it myself." The slow ringing of metal came as Burm drew the giant sword at his hip. The reality of what Burm had done—was doing—hit Elvi like gale. Janos, who seemed disappointed moments before, now appeared energized. His consciousness slammed into hers and only years of training kept him from crushing her with his agindan spirit alone.

Elvi stabilized, keeping Janos's powerful consciousness at bay. She selected a spirit and primed herself to channel through it. *The wind is everywhere*. One of the soldiers on Elvi's right took a cautious step forward and Elvi jumped away from him, floating backwards an inhuman distance as if immune to gravity's pull. She touched down, light as air and the scent of her sorcery filled the room, pungent.

Janos channeled in reply and she smelled his sorcery join hers in a tangle. Theirs were alike; light and air. The softest amongst the Aginjigaade scents. His was more medicinal than hers while Elvi's was stickier on the nose, crisp like ozone.

"Submit yourself" Burm growled, sword brandished. Elvi eyed the blade nervously.

"I've done nothing wrong" Elvi shouted back. "Your accusations are baseless and–"

"And yet you resist!" Burm countered. "Had you nothing to hide, you would submit and face trial. If you are truly innocent, all will be revealed."

"You drew your sword on me! On a fellow soldier. Don't speak to me of justice. If you truly wanted answers, you wouldn't have barged in with a mouth full of accusations and ears closed to listening. You have no proof because your charges are fictions. But if we're here to reveal each other's crimes, I've got lots to say about you, Gal. I have proof your squad took bribes from different tribes to butcher their rivals. I know you extorted money from illegal checkpoints. I know you recovered the auction house fortune and didn't report it to Yanata, keeping it for yourself. You're a brute and a thief, and so long as you are Patzau, there will be no justice in these halls."

Burm charged. He was quick for a big man, but Elvi was a step ahead. She channeled her energy and pushed back at Burm, the very wind resisting his movements

like a man fighting against a gale. She dodged him with ease, evading his bulk in the corridor. Her hands flew down to her side where she carried her sword and found it missing. *Shit,* Elvi thought, *I left it in the office when I stormed out.*

Burm's figure split into two, and then three. *Illusions.* The three Burm's charged from three sides. *Janos,* Elvi thought. She pushed backwards and away from all three Burms. They advanced again, each one with its blade drawn. She focused hard, reading the subtle patterns in the air. She dodged right and stepped right through the second illusion of Burm as it chopped down at her.

"Four on one hardly seems fair" Elvi taunted. She tried her best to sound calm, but inside she was a mess of panic. Soldiers spilled into the hall. They blocked the doorways and exits. Burm's minions blocked the stairs and watched with baleful looks. *No weapon. No shield. Exits blocked. Spirits, I'm in trouble!*

"You've crossed a line, Elvi" Janos said from the far side of the corridor.

"I've crossed a line!?" Elvi shouted back, avoiding another advance from Burm. "I'm unarmed! Burm is swinging his fucking sword like he aims to kill me. What happened to my promise of a trial? I'd say *you two* have crossed a fucking line!"

"A trial would have resolved this" Janos shouted back.

That drove her into a rage of indignation. "I saw how you conduct a trial!" Elvi roared. "Where you and Madaral executed hundreds of people without hearing anything but their fucking names!? You're insane if you think I would *ever* trust you to handle matters of justice."

*

Ohacha trailed behind Gaba'ké, Cask, and Rolena. His legs trembled with every step. The old Aginjigaade led the way back down into the warrens of the fortress. There was a foreboding sense of unease in the silent halls. The fortress seemed barren. Ohacha had expected a jailbreak to include sneaking around every corner and guards giving chase. Instead, they passed only empty corridors and long shadows. They moved unimpeded, the eerie silence of the fortress pressing down on them. There was no time to wonder where the guards had vanished to; only a frantic desire to reach the tunnel. Gaba'ké pressed on, guiding them down a steep, pitch-black stairwell that led into the lower dungeons—the dark place Ohacha had been abandoned. *How long has it been?* He wondered, his hand following the slimy wall for balance and direction. *Days? Weeks?*

Ohacha's cell glowed unnaturally. The illum stone Gaba'ké had brought filled the small cell. But as Gaba'ké pushed his way in, he froze. Ohacha ran right into him, causing both to stumble. "What is it?" Ohacha hissed, fearing the worst. Gaba'ké had turned up to faced in what felt like a random direction. He focused intently, ignoring Ohacha's question.

Cask and Rolena stood awkwardly in the open hallway. They looked around anxiously, not wanting to be caught here and now of all times and places. "What's going on?" Cask hissed, after a moment. He cast a nervous glance back towards the stairs.

"There are two Aginjigaade inside the tower" Gaba'ké said, his voice frightened.

"And?" Ohacha urged impatiently. *This hardly seemed the moment to stop and reflect on that.* "You already told me that" Ohacha whispered urgently.

His face ashen, Gaba'ké said, "They're fighting"

*

Elvi stood in the hallway, her back against the wall, and darkness descended over her eyes. She had witnessed Janos use this ability once before, deep in the prisons of the Northern Barracks. She had expected it, and still it unnerved her. She prayed that Burm

too was blinded by the effect. The patterns of movement in the air suggested otherwise. He continued his advance towards her. Elvi dashed, using the wind and the sounds in the room as her eyes and was blinded by the light as she escaped Janos' sphere of darkness. Burm chased, sword drawn, and the dark orb followed her like some kind of otherworldly demon. They were corralling her.

Elvi focused on where Janos stood. He was right in front of her office door and a desperate idea sprung to her mind as his orb of darkness enveloped her once again. She switched spirits, losing her sense of the wind, and forced a burst of air through her office door. It hit him hard in the back and the darkness disappeared for a fraction of time. But that fraction was just enough for her to see Burm's lumbering body and the arcing swing of his sword. She slipped underneath the huge man's blade and scrambled away.

"For a person you intend to arrest, you're certainly swinging to kill" Elvi taunted, still trying to buy herself time for escape.

She just needed a window. Janos was back on his feet and clearly angered by the unexpected blow. Elvi had hoped she might have hit him hard enough to knock him out or something. Anything that might give her a chance to escape the tower. Instead, only Janos' pride seemed wounded. Burm bellowed again, stabbing forward with his blade. Elvi blew herself away again and found herself backed into the stairwell that led to the roof hatch. *The roof!*

Elvi breezed up the steep and narrow stairs that led to the roof hatch. She had just enough time to scramble up and mustered a huge gust of wind to blow open the trapdoors. They crashed into the flat stone roof with a bang and Elvi followed through the gap. Burm was already right behind her, one hand on his huge sword. But now she stood with all the spirits of the skies at her back. Elvi channeled with as much power as she could muster and a gale blew down the narrow hatchway. Burm was hit with the full blast of her power and he tumbled backwards down the stairs, hitting the bottom with a hard crack. He didn't stir. Elvi panted, praying it was over. Instead, Janos's dark eyes looked up at her from below.

Another hard wave of agindan consciousness slammed into her and Elvi winced, doing her best to keep her mind closed and her spirit strong. It was agonizing. He was strong. Far stronger than Elvi ever imagined. It felt as if his very will could crush hers. She struggled under his assault. Elvi had been a soldier near all her life, but never had she fought another Aginjigaade. It was clear at once that Janos had that experience she lacked. Elvi dropped to her knee and focused everything she had on withstanding his mental barrage.

After what felt like an eternity, the pressure eased. Elvi opened one eye and saw Janos on the roof, approaching. *How is that possible?* Her heart was pounding and she panted hard, trying to keep herself together. Janos appeared unfettered. *How is he this powerful?*

"It's just you and me now" Janos said. His voice was a blur.

Janos was still several steps away but Elvi knew it wise to fear his approach. She dug deep and tried with all her might to break free of the lessened pressure of his spiritual assault. She channeled, sending another surge downward like the palm of the heavens, crushing him under the pressure of the atmos. Janos fought to stay standing. Elvi held on as best she could but tired fast, having no choice but to ease the pressure or faint.

The wind subsided. Janos slowly regained his feet. Elvi was panting, sweat dripping down her brow. Janos seemed unperturbed. *Why didn't he attack with his full strength down below when Burm was swinging? It would have been easy for them.* Elvi

didn't have time to wonder. Instead, she was just thankful he hadn't gone all out, knowing it would have spelled her demise. Her eyes darted across the rooftop, but there wasn't anywhere to go. Behind Janos was the hatch that led back into the tower and the fortress. Behind her was the long drop down the steep cliff face to the sea below. She was cornered. *Buy time,* Elvi repeated to herself, a mantra for survival.

"This was pre-planned, wasn't it?" Elvi asked, getting back to her feat.

Janos looked behind him before saying, "Yes, it was I'm afraid."

Elvi blinked at his honesty, "The trial would have found me guilty, same as Minoc?"

"That was the plan" Janos admitted, "But Burm was never supposed to let you out of your office. He underestimated you. He thinks very highly of himself. I don't think he understands what you and I are capable of. He doesn't understand our kind, Aginjigaade."

"Why are you telling me this?" Elvi asked.

"Because I can and it won't matter. You have to die" Janos said. He spoke the words not as a threat, but as an inevitability. He walked over to the trapdoor behind him and closed it, something appeared between the bars, locking the trapdoor closed. "You cannot be allowed to leave, or to join Ashill, wherever it is she's gone with Minoc. It could mean chaos, instability."

"And what we have now isn't instability?" Elvi said accusatorily.

"I misspoke" Janos said calmly, "It could mean splitting this city down the center, civil war and unrest. It cannot be allowed to happen. Not now, with so many enemies on our doorsteps."

"I won't die peacefully" Elvi said, not sure what else to say.

Janos' smile was wicked. "I never hoped you would. Where would be the fun in that?"

Light appeared around Janos and it blinded her. Elvi turned away instinctively, and he rushed in towards her. Elvi jumped away, feeling his movements through the wind. She drew up a curtain of hot air from the sun-baked rooftop in front of her and used the refraction to bend and refract the intense light. He became blurry, but blurry was better than invisible. It was much easier to react to his movements when she could see something, rather than rely on her senses alone. It required too much focus.

He approached, but like her was empty handed. That scared Elvi most of all. For Janos moved like a man that knew what he would do when he caught her and yet Elvi couldn't fathom what his plan might be. As she continued to evade, it became clear to Janos that his blinding trick wasn't working. He released the blinding light and the rooftop plunged into darkness. Elvi's senses told her to panic. Her mind kept her from following through. As the epicenter, Elvi blasted air outwards in all directions in a sudden gust. She could feel him, turbulence in the airstream she smothered him with. He stood his ground, unmoving. She tightened the focus of her stream, but felt the drain of continuous focus start to pull on her mind. *I can't keep this up. I still need to escape.* The darkness lapsed. Elvi stared across at Janos. He smiled. *He's enjoying this.* The thought unnerved her.

"How many Aginjigaade have you killed?" Elvi asked.

"Fewer than I would have wished" Janos said, his eyes sharp. "Some escaped. Some I've had to leave be. Others I let go to make the hunt more enjoyable once they've fully… developed."

"You're sick!" Elvi shouted. She was panting hard.

"Batari," Janos said, raising his hands to the sky, "You have been granted a power greater than mere mortals. Yet you treat it like it's nothing. You lack ambition. You serve those beneath you. You and I have been given power, power far beyond what regular souls can comprehend. And you squander it. I have witnessed what true power looks like, and I hope one day to reach that great achievement."

"And what does true power look like?" Elvi asked. *Buy more time. Think!*

"Have you never left this city?" Janos asked.

Elvi wiped her brow. Her hand came away covered in sweat. "No" she admitted.

"You've never sailed the seas or climbed the great mountain?" Janos asked.

"The mountains?" Elvi repeated.

"The great Casoyan mountain! The volcano!" Janos shouted, "Have you never felt the presence of the ancient spirit that dwells within the Volcano, the one the filthy mountain ilk worship? The one they call Yomu?"

"No" Elvi said softly. *Yomu?* She recognized that name.

"Bah! You bind yourself to ignorance" Janos said condescendingly. "Why the spirits gave you the gift, I'll never fathom. You, who has never felt the true power of the ancient spirits of seas and skies. Spirits of thunder, powerful enough to waste this fortress with the beat of a wing. Spirits of the deep oceans, large enough to pull down a O'Kwiran War Galley. Spirits of the forest, as large as the auction hall."

"Myths and legends" Elvi scoffed. "Stories told to children."

"Says the woman who has never left this small city. What you believe matters little to me" Janos spat. "You'll be dead soon anyway."

A flash of light blinded Elvi again. When she opened her eyes, dozens of illusions filled the rooftop. Duplicates of Janos Tydana. Elvi blinked and more seemed to appear. She focused again. *If I can find you in the darkness, finding you through some illusions will be no different.*

Elvi channelled power and blasted air outwards in a stream. She found his real body immediately. Her stream of air crashed against him, pinning his body in place. Then all Janos illusions rushed her at once, despite the onslaught. She increased the pressure, trying to hold him back. Instead, a tingle on her neck gave the faintest warning that something was awry. She relented and rechanneled, trying to gauge what had given her the odd feeling. She felt the air to her right shift with movement.

Elvi moved on instincts alone. Her senses felt the strangeness of the illusion before it ever reached her. She locked eyes with it, and the look in its eyes felt so real. And then it grabbed at her with a real hand. The shock was instantaneous. Elvi tried to evade, to pull herself away beyond the illusion's grasp. But then an odd and painful feeling spread through her chest like fire.

A sudden blast of air propelled Elvi across the roof away from Janos, who was somehow not an illusion. She rolled painfully, and looked down at her chest where Janos' touch had frozen her. The pain was immense and instantiations. It felt as if her organs had been set on fire. Elvi clawed at her own skin under her clothes, finding herself frozen solid where Janos' hand had touched her. Yet he had only grasped her for a fraction of a second.

"You managed to escape?" Janos remarked. His cold face took on a tone of surprise. "I've never faced an Aginjigaade of your affinity before" he admitted. "You have been more… elusive that I expected. I was hoping to stop your heart."

Elvi screamed. The pain was like nothing she had ever felt before. *What was fuck was that?* she panted. "How the hell did you do that?"

Janos sucked on his teeth. “Oh, Elvi. You weren’t supposed to survive long enough to ask questions.” A bang from the trapdoor rattled nosily and both Janos and Elvi turned as a muffled voice screamed through the barred hatchway. “Looks like Burm is awake. Should I let him up?” Janos taunted.

“You…” Elvi said, pain spreading through her core. “You have two affinities, don’t you?” she asked, incredulous. The smell of his second sorcery hit her. It was cold and bracing, like frost on the trees. Not at all like the smell of his light sorcery. “That’s not possible!” *Is it?*

“I told you that you blind yourself in ignorance” Janos mocked. “Your blasts of wind certainly helped to keep my efforts disguised” he added with an unsettling laugh. Elvi looked over to where she though Janos had been, the place where she had been focusing her power and a statue of ice stood where Janos had once been. “But this won’t do. Not a living soul knows about my second affinity, Elvi” Janos said with a smirk. “So, it’s a secret you’re going to have to carry to your grave.”

He charged again. This time, he didn’t hide his intentions with tricks of light or a sudden blanket of darkness, and somehow, that made everything worse. Elvi scrambled to her feet. Fear flooded her body. She feared him and she feared death. She hadn’t even found her escape route.

Not knowing what else to do, Elvi turned and leapt from the tower. She wasn’t sure which way she’d jumped. Only the sea below and the long sheer cliffs gave any indication. Elvi committed to the one option she had feared most. She focused on trying to survive the fall. She would need everything left to slow her descent. Then all she could do next was pray she’d miss the rocks. The deep blue of the sea below approached with terrifying speed. She already grasped the right spirit, ready to channel. Ready to slow her descent when the moment came. The sea hurtled towards her. The wind whipped by her face. She readied.

And then something hit her from behind. She tumbled, no longer in control. Unready, as the ice spear launched by Janos impaled her body. Then she hit the water.

Janos watched from above as Elvi’s body hit the sea below. They were so high up, he could barely make out the splash amongst the waves. *Damn it. This wasn’t supposed to be how it happened.* He was certain that he had hit her. Her tumble confirmed it. But she was never supposed to jump. They would need to recover her body. The sooner the better.

The difficulty now would require keeping the whole ordeal contained. They would need the right story. *A guilty suicide.* Janos turned and opened the hatch, dissolving his icicle bar that had frozen the door shut. Burm burst through, sword drawn. Blood was smeared across his face from where he had wiped it with his hand. A small trickle of blood ran down from his hairline. More than that, there was fury in his eyes. He was angry. Bloodthirsty.

“Where is she?” Burm demanded, looking around.

“She jumped” Janos said. “To tell you the truth, I didn’t think she had it in her.”

“Jumped?” Burm growled through gritted teeth. “Could she have survived?”

“No” Janos said.

“She’s an Aginjigaade!” Burm said, turning on him. “With an air affinity! What if she… flew or something.”

“She’s dead!” Janos snapped. “I watched her fall. She hit the water. Surviving a fall from that height is impossible, even for her. But *you* need to get on top of this, right now.” Janos said, meeting Burm’s angry eyes. “Get the story out that she jumped. Make

it clear that you and I approached her about crimes she committed, freeing Minoc or whatever. She seemed to know a lot about your history. Which means somebody else knows your dark past too. Find out who. Clean it up. Put them on her record if you have to. I don't care. Make it clear that she was guilty and jumped to escape punishment, rather than face judgement."

"But she did" Burm said.

"Exactly…" Janos said, trying not to strangle the brute of a man. "But make sure alternative stories are snuffed before they can do damage. Quell conspiracies. Control the narrative. We can't have an investigation that damages either of our reputations. In the meantime, send someone you trust out to look for her body. They'll need a boat."

"Don't order me around, Tydana. I'm Patzau of this guild" Burm growled.

"And I'm telling you how to keep your fucking title" Janos hissed back. "If we weren't at war right now, this would have been your downfall. Pulling your sword on her? What the fuck were you thinking!? Hopefully with all the other bullshit going on, we can keep this under wraps." Janos turned and left Burm without waiting for his response. Burm stood distracted at the edge of the tower, eyes fixed on the see below.

*

Gaba'ké held his heart. He had kept a watchful gaze on the battle unfolding far above atop the fortress tower. He recognized Elvi from their encounter, and now he recognized the strange dual-affinitied Aginjigaade who had beaten her and sent her to a watery grave. She had been channeling at full power. She had given everything and more in her clash, but it hadn't been enough.

Gaba'ké understood how that felt. She seemed a good person and he would mourn her. But with equal importance, he had remained to bear witness to her final moments. Her had bore witness to the identify of her murderer; the man with two affinities; the one Kuta sought in vengeance. The murderer who had slain her mentor. More disconcerting, he was a man Gaba'ké had stood face-to-face with a near dozen times. Not once had he suspected the wickedness within. Elvi's murderer was none other than Patzau Yohati's Aginjigaade, Janos Tydana.

Chapter 34: Changes

Yuromi's footsteps echoed softly on the deserted cobblestones, a stark contrast the regular bustle of Caso's streets and avenues. It was painful to grasp just how far Caso could fall in such a short period of time. The city, once a vibrant tapestry of people from across the starlight sea, now felt like a shell of its former self; an echo of how she too felt. She walked in sandals, dressed in civilian clothes she hadn't worn in years. Her resignation from the Soldiers Guild had been the hardest decision of her life and yet, it was also the easiest. It was difficult to explain, how both feelings, opposites, were true. Just as how she both regretted the choice, and yet knew it to be the right path. No longer would she be a tool for abuse and death. Yet, without the guild, she felt empty. It had been her everything, her very self. Her friends, her family, her second home.

Now she drifted like a ship without a rudder in the only direction she could think of; to the only place where she had friends who weren't associated to the guild. She walked through the empty streets until the buildings became older and narrower, where the rooftops pierce skywards. She crossed the smaller southern canal and stopped in front of the Gaagian homebase within the spires. She needed to talk through her muddled thoughts. She knocked hard against the ornate old wooden door. Silence met her efforts.

"He's not here," a soft voice said from behind her. Yuromi turned in surprise to find a familiar face. Kuta, Minoc's Aginjigaade stood behind her clothed in her white robes. Yuromi looked down at her own clothes, feeling embarrassed by her disheveled appearance. "You look good" Kuta said, following Yuromi's gaze.

Yuromi shrugged, "I didn't realize you had poor eyesight."

"I didn't mean the clothes" Kuta said. "You look… less burdened."

Yuromi sighed, "I don't feel less burdened. Where have they gone?" Yuromi asked.

Kuta hesitated for a moment before saying, "I sent Gaba'ké to fetch them. They'll be back later. Tonight maybe" Yuromi detected something unspoken in her words. "Come," Kuta continued, "I know where we'll be able to find them."

"Where to?" Yuromi asked, hesitantly.

"To my place" Kuta said. "We can chat while we wait."

The journey to Kuta's apartment was uncomfortable. It wasn't the lack of conversation, but the lack of all conversations. The normal bustle was gone. Empty shops and food stalls. Boarded up windows lined each street. Shops appeared closed, a reminder of growing scarcities. People were hoarding. Windows were shuttered. Stalls were as vacant as the eyes of the few people still about. The ones they passed didn't stroll. Only soldiers loitered outside in the hot sun. It all felt lifeless. The only place with any semblance of a crowd was the neighbourhood fountain, where people were lined up in a tangled maze to stockpile as much water as each family could carry.

Kuta led Yuromi to an unfamiliar neighbourhood. It wasn't as nice as the one her home was in and despite being newer, it appeared more run down than even the spires. After a while she noticed that the young Aginjigaade was leading her in circles at times. It took another small detour for Yuromi to realize that Kuta was purposefully avoiding the roaming bands of soldiers and those loitering shaded streetcorners. The realization puzzled her.

Then, she grasped why. Yuromi watched from the corner of her eyes as a pair of soldiers stalked an unsuspecting man as he tried to walk by. Yuromi couldn't help herself and she stopped to watch. A knot of anger tightened in her stomach as they harassed the stranger. It made her sick to watch. The soldiers confiscated several items in broad daylight, as if they were doing a great service to the city by looting fruit. Their eyes swiveled to Yuromi, watching from a distance and Kuta's pull was the only thing that kept her from marching over and…. *And what? I'm not a soldier anymore. What could I have done?*

"Kuta" Yuromi said as they ducked into a narrow alleyway. "What is happening to this city?" Yuromi asked rhetorically. "How did it get so…"

"Bad?" Kuta finished. Yuromi nodded. "It's always been a bit like this" Kuta said softly, her eyes fixed ahead on the alleyway. "It was just harder to notice amongst the good things that have since disappeared." Yuromi thought on that. She had trouble accepting them as truth. "You've never been in places like this before, have you?" Kuta asked. "Beyond the main avenues, in the forgotten corners? Back here, this is how it's always been."

"But you're not even from here" Yuromi protested, not wanting to believe it.

"My cousins' family…" Kuta said carefully, "lived around Caso. They've been here as long as Caso has been free of kings. Only some things changed when the Guilds took over."

The two women stepped from the alleyway and spotted another pair of soldiers loitering ahead, blocking their path. "That's the apartment" Kuda whispered, pointing to a building next to the two soldiers. "We'll need to go around" she added, trying to pull Yuromi back into the shadows.

"Nonsense" Yuromi said, "Its too hot today. Let's just walk past them. What are they going to do? We don't have anything."

"No. No. No!" Kuta insisted as Yuromi stepped out into the street. "You don't understand," she pleaded, "there is always something they can take."

Yuromi ignored her friend and continued walking. Kuta scurried up next to her and hissed under her hood, "They might not bother you, but me…. Once they see my face, there'll be trouble."

"For what?" Yuromi scoffed. Kuta didn't have the words to answer such a heavy question.

The pair of soldiers noticed them at once. "You two," they said, approaching, "Where are you off to in such a hurry? Scurrying around alleyways is not place for fine respectable ladies" They stopped just a few paces ahead, blocking the path. The one soldier leaned casually on a post that held no awning, while the other smiled with a charm that Yuromi could only describe as slimy. "And what are you trying to hide under those hoods of yours? Pretty faces I hope."

"I am Sergeant Ashill" Yuromi announced in her most commanding voice. She removed her hood, trying to be the diplomat. "What are your names and guild ranks?"

"Ah, so you are." the slimy man said, eyeing her like a piece of meat. "Look at that scar" he added, gesturing to the other soldier. "And who is this with you, Sergeant?"

Kuta tried to shrink into her cloak, her face still hooded. Yuromi spoke, putting her hand over Kuta's shoulder. "This is my cousin" Yuromi lied. "We're headed to my uncle's." She gestured across the street to the building ahead.

"Oh, is that so?" the soldier leaning on the post said. He had light brown hair that was straight to his ears and then wavy down to his chin. He had a handsome face, but something in his eyes gave Yuromi a bad feeling. "You see, there's been a lot of contraband entering this neighbourhood recently," the man said, his smirk unabashed, "We'll need to search you to make sure you're not smuggling anything in."

"I am a member of the guild" Yuromi countered, astounded. "You'll do no such thing."

"Even guild members can be prone to naughty behaviour."

Yuromi's skin crawled. "You admit that you know who I am," Yuromi said, "and yet you speak with such brazen disrespect? I could have you stripped of rank and kicked out of the guild!"

"My word!" the slimy man said, still approaching. He stepped in close enough to make both girls uncomfortable and they retreated backwards towards the alleyway. "Is that so? You going to say something like, 'do you know who my mummy is?'" he mocked. "Ashill isn't Patzau anymore. You've lost your special privileges. No more free rides to the top for you, Sergeant." The two men giggled at her rank, as if it were funny. Yuromi soon found out why.

"That's right," the wavy-haired man agreed, "there's a rumour going around that you quit being a soldier like. Something about being all wishy washy about cleaning up the Mudtown scum. And if you're not a soldier no more, then impersonating one is a serious offence, if I'm not mistaken."

"I think you're right about that!" the other man agreed, taunting. Kuta recoiled away, stepping behind Yuromi. The two men continued forward, hemming them in.

Yuromi frowned. "What do you mean Ashill's not Patzau anymore?"

"Oh, my. Now isn't that sweet!?" the slimy man said with a grin. He licked his lips. "Didn't you hear? Patzau Ashill was removed by the council. They've got Burm as the new Patzau. Things are changing."

"I don't believe you" Yuromi said, taking a defensive stance. They now stood in the mouth of the alleyway, boxed in.

The wavy-haired man snatched his hand forward and pulled away Kuta's hood to reveal the face within. Both men seemed surprised as Kuta's long dark hair and features were revealed and three things became apparent to them in that instant. First, the unhooded girl bore zero resemblance to Yuromi, her alleged cousin. Second, the girl revealed wasn't city Casoyan, but a girl of the mountain tribes. Finally, that Yuromi had lied to them. Their faces soured. The perverse pleasure they were getting out of the exchange evaporated and they reached for their weapons.

The moment Kuta was fearing had arrived. She closed her eyes and focused her agindan on the spirits drawn to the purity of her metal pins. They were always nearby, following. She spread her consciousness out, drawing them in and selecting the appropriate channel for her power. *Harm, not kill. Something to escape. Something to protect us*. She found the right spirit in mere heartbeats. She channeled; blinking open her eyes.

The slimy man was already out cold on the cobbles. Yuromi's fist had connected with his chin and he lay sprawled in the dirt at her feet. The wavy-haired man recoiled at the speed of her blow. He drew on his blade but Kuta was faster. She channeled and expanded the bronze of his weapon outwards, piercing the leather sheath like teeth on a sawblade. *Don't kill,* she reminded herself. He pulled, but the blade wouldn't draw.

Yuromi was on him before he could resist. She slipped past his guard and had her arm around his neck, locking him in a chokehold. He was bigger than her, but she was a fighter. Realizing he couldn't extradite himself, the man toppled backwards taking Yuromi down with him. They fell to the ground together, the blow knocking the breath from Yuromi's lungs, but it wasn't enough. Yuromi refused to release her squeeze on his throat. She held him until he went limp, and then several long seconds after.

Kuta watched, impressed and scared. She wasn't sure what she would have done alone. Killing them would have been so much easier. That was what terrified her most. "Let's get out of here" Kuta urged.

Yuromi pulled herself to her feet. "Not yet" Yuromi said, pulling a knife from the slimy man's belt. She looked around. The odd face had watched the exchange, but none seemed keen on intervening. They averted their eyes at her gaze. "I'm going to take a finger from each of them!" she huffed, anger rolling across her face.

"No" Kuta said.

"This will be the last time these bastards can harass anyone" Yuromi prattled, ignoring Kuta's dissent. "I'll cut off their thumbs… cut a branding into their fucking foreheads."

"No," Kuta urged, raising her voice. Yuromi turned in surprise. "We need to go. Now!"

"It'll just take a second" Yuromi whined.

"No!" Kuta ordered. "You're not thinking. What if more soldiers come? What if somebody reports you. What if they wake up? We leave, now, while we still can."

Yuromi twirled the small dagger in her hands. She yearned to hurt them. It would be so easy; a lesson to remind them for the rest of their miserable lives. *And also, a death wish. They know who I am. I should go further! Ruin their worthless lives like they would have done to mine.* But she didn't. Behind the anger, she knew she couldn't go through with it. Who was she to distribute vigilante justice? How would this make her any different than them… or any better than a man like Burm?

"Fine. Let's get to your apartment" she huffed, slipping the soldier's dagger into her sleeve.

"No longer an option" Kuta said. "You just told them where we were going!"

"No, I didn't" Yuromi argued. She looked across the street. Thankfully, it was basically empty but the longer they stayed over the two unconscious men, the worse things looked.

"You did" Kuta insisted. "You gestured to your 'uncle's apartment.'" Yuromi's face twisted, realizing she had in fact done that. Kuta pulled on Yuromi's arm and led her back into the alleyway. "We need to hide elsewhere."

Yuromi scratched at her scar. *Where else in this city where we be alone, with nobody around to bother us?* The solution was obvious. "Alright. Follow me. I know a place," Yuromi said. "Somewhere nobody will be." She pulled Kuta away from the unconscious soldiers and back towards the city center.

Kuta paused to take in the opulence of the gateway while Yuromi casually pushed her way through a metal door Kuta hadn't even noticed. A pair of finely sculpted tree

trunks formed the supporting columns of the arched gateway. Their branches reached over the arch and tangled together to form several old symbols Kuta was unfamiliar with. The trees and the symbols looked ancient and weathered, older than most of the surrounding tenements. The metal gate was wide enough for a pair of palanquins and through their oxidized bars Kuta could make out a large stone mansion looming in the distance. Yuromi used a weathered key to lock the smaller door behind them and led Kuta through rows of ancient looking trees and unattended gardens towards the lonely structure.

"What is this place?" Kuta asked. She paused, looking around. She had never noticed the old gateway before and the wider grounds were obstructed by other buildings between the gardens and the street. She never before seen the lonely mansion. She hadn't known it existed.

"This is the Ashill estate" Yuromi said matter-of-factly.

"You live here?" Kuta blurted. Kuta figured she could fit her entire apartment more than a thousand times in the gardens alone.

"I guess so" Yuromi said, waiting for Kuta to catch up.

Kuta understood on some level that there were mansions in the lusher garden districts in the heart of the city. Patzau Palace, the auction house, and walls along the canals hinted at their private existence. Private soldiers and guards stood erect at their entrances, a visual recommendation to move along. Kuta had even been once to Patzau Minoc's estate, where he and Mira lived in what she could only have described as fantastical opulence. The size and scale of Minoc's mansion paled in comparison to the Ashill estate. The privacy, size, and secrecy expressed a degree of wealth and power that Kuta had difficulty imagining. It was old and powerful, like the trees above the gateway. It seemed impossible that a single family lived in this great empty space.

Inside, the mansion was eerily silent. A fact made all the clearer by the high vaulted ceilings in each room that made an echo out of every small sound. Kuta had expected a bustle of servants or soldiers, like she had seen at Minoc's. Instead, they were conspicuously absent.

"The servants are gone" Yuromi said, her voice an echo. Kuta wasn't sure if that was a statement of normality or abnormality. Yuromi led her into a sitting room and asked, "Can I get you anything to eat?"

Kuta nodded and settled into a plush chair while Yuromi disappeared. She looked around the room in awe. There were tapestries and statues. On walls and shelves were items Kuta couldn't even begin to recognize. Yuromi returned with a basket of foreign looking fruit and cups with water. She used the soldier's stolen dagger to skillfully skin and slice several, handing each piece to Kuta as if these were regular foods Kuta would have been able to find outside in the markets. She wondered what these strange fruits were and how much they cost. She wondered who had picked them and under what tense. She wondered if her uncle had picked any before.

"The rumor the soldiers mentioned," Kuta ventured, her voice barely above a murmur. "About you leaving the Guild. Is it true?" Yuromi took another bite of fruit, then nodded. Kuta leaned forward slightly. "Why?"

Yuromi sighed softly and pushed her hair back. "I hit my limit. The guild is all I've known. It's woven into my family's fabric—a part of me and my sister since the day we were born. And I still want to be there. I feel empty without it. I want to protect people, to stand by my squad. It hurts to feel like I've abandoned them. But I won't walk that

path. Not when the guild's priorities have diverged so far from my own. I'm ashamed of what the guild has become."

Kuta ate, letting silence ask more than words. The conflict played across Yuromi's face.

"I just wanted to help people" Yuromi confessed. "I wanted to make a difference."

Kuta asked, "When did things change?"

"I don't know…" Yuromi lied. "We went from trying to rid the slums of crime to trying to rid the city of the slums and, along the way, it stopped being about helping people at all."

"So why quit?" Kuta asked. "Wouldn't it be better to lead by example? You're the Patzau's daughter. Your actions and your decisions hold influence. Show people what the right way is."

"It doesn't work that way" Yuromi argued, twirling the knife in her hands anxiously. "Kida's always been the respected one and she's even more hardcore than mum is. I'm not cut out to the lead anyone or anything. All I do is fuck things up."

"You were a squad sergeant" Kida said quizzically. "You led a patrol squad."

"That's different. Supervising a handful of misfits with sharp sticks is nothing like real leadership. I'm not cut out of the real stuff" she added. "I'll just make things worse." The knife twirled out of her fingers and clattered across the floor. "Besides," Yuromi continued, "I've lost my faith in the guild. The reverence I held for it as a little girl is gone."

"Sometimes, leadership is giving others direction; where to point their efforts, not doing the work yourself. What makes you think you would make things worse?" Kuta asked.

"Because I always do" Yuromi said. She picked up the knife and began to twirl it again.

"Give me an example."

"Just before the assassination of Prince Ohacha's uncle, I was in Mudtown with my squad and we stopped at a restaurant for food and water. Inside, I overheard some gangsters extorting the restaurant owner for money. She didn't have any and so the gangsters were threatening them. I acted impulsively without thinking and intervened. It cost one of my soldiers their lives."

"That doesn't sound like your fault" Kuta said.

"I thought I was doing the right thing," Yuromi said through shallow breaths. "I thought I was helping. But I'm a fool. I heard that the gangs burned that restaurant to the ground the next night. They lynched the old man and hung him up with a sign that read 'Traitor.'"

"Again, you didn't do that. That's not your fault. You were trying to help."

"Then what if I told you that the guild has known where most of the gang leaders live for the past eight months. That they could have acted long ago and chose not to. That the gangsters who attacked Patzau Yohati were included on that list and this all could have been avoided. And more, I *had* that information. Every time I took my squad into Mudtown, I could have '*accidentally*' stumbled in and done some good. But I didn't. I chose to stay in line and follow orders and its cost us so many innocent lives."

"That's–"

"Exactly!" Yuromi huffed. "I break the rules and make things worse. I follow the rules and I make things worse. No matter what I do, the choices I make are the wrong ones. I left the auction house to chase a thief and the only thing I managed to accomplish

was imprisoning an innocent girl inside a death-camp because I didn't know what else to do with her in the moment. She sat as a witness, starved and neglected, for the bloodiest week in Casoyan history because of my foolish mistake. Now when I see her, it in her eyes. She loathes me for it and I don't even blame her."

"You're right" Kuta said flatly, "You are being foolish. Foolish for thinking it's fair to blame yourself for everything that's happened or not happened. Even more so for happenings outside your control."

"But had I not–"

"Blaming yourself takes away the responsibility of others" Kuta said, her eyes empathetic. "Other people have agency. You alone did not lead us here. Those gang members, Yohati, your mother, the council, each individual soldier and citizen. Everyone makes their own choices, acts for their own reasons, and reacts according to their own beliefs."

"But I was the catalyst" Yuromi insisted. She wanted to cry.

"You think too highly of yourself" Kuta said. "That's like watching the sun set and claiming it was your fault that night came; because you didn't stop it. You didn't do this. No one person did this. And by thinking you did, you disregard the countless choices that led us here. Choices made by more important and more influential people than you. We are here because of hundreds of years of history and trade, war and spoliation. There are infinite past moments where one could look back and find fault, but finding them changes nothing. They don't matter. Not unless the aim is understanding how best to move forward."

Yuromi had set down the knife and was wiping tears from her eyes. Then ran down her long scar like water through a gulley. "You're really smart" Yuromi sniffed. "How do you know so much about everything?"

"I've had good teachers" Kuta admitted. "Minoc was only the latest."

"Do you think he did it?" Yuromi ventured.

"I know he didn't" Kuta answered.

"Still," Yuromi continued, "what a fall from grace. Minoc went from Patzau to social pariah in weeks. By the end, nobody amongst the city's elites trusted him."

"They feared him" Kuta said. "It's impossible to trust a person you fear, even if the fears are unfounded. They feared that he knew their secrets. They feared he would use them. They feared him because they knew that in his place, they would have used them. But Minoc wasn't that type of man; he was better than that."

"My mother always said he had a venomous tongue."

"That's ironic," Kuta said, "those are Yohati's words." She fought off an inner agitation. "I'll be the first to admit that Minoc had a way with words. He could flip your opinions to his own, then leave you feeling like you'd been outsmarted by agreeing with him." She paused, thinking about her mentor and where he might be now. Deep in some cold cell, she presumed. "He was very convincing" she said at last. "Sometimes, I think back and wonder if he tricked me into joining the Artisan's Guild; if we were ever truly aligned or he just managed to convince me we were."

"I never really knew him" Yuromi admitted. "I sort of just… trusted the rumours."

Kuta sighed. "Never trust rumours. The person spreading them always wants something. And I wish you did get a chance to know him. I wish more people knew him the way I did. They'd understand that he was a decent man, once you got past his eccentricities. He's a far better man than most of the upper guildsmen in Caso. A far better man than this city deserved."

Yuromi frowned at that. She wasn't Kuta had meant the comment as an insult but her words still evoked disapproval. A thought struck Yuromi's and she asked hastily, "What happened to Patzau Bradel?" Kuta stopped chewing. When she didn't answer right away, Yuromi continued her thought aloud, "Surely you know something? I imagine his death was rife with rumours and speculations, especially if he was murdered."

"Bradel was a pathetic bastard" Kuta said. "I haven't heard anything other than speculation to suggest he was murdered. No poisons in him. No obvious wounds or injuries. No signs of illness. Seems he just… died." She sipped at her cup of water.

"You didn't like him?" Yuromi asked. It was more a statement than a question.

"No," Kuta admitted, "I didn't like Bradel. But either of the other two will serve well. They're not very charismatic, but neither are they problematic. They're status quo."

"Is that what the guild needs? Status quo?" Yuromi asked.

"No," Kuta answered, "but it's better than regression, even if it is a bit uninspiring."

A shattering crash sounded outside and both women startled. An angry shout Yuromi to her feet and into the library next door. Kuta followed anxiously at her heels. The library was large with high vaulted ceilings. A lavish indoor balcony looked down upon the old and well-preserved mosaic floor. The motif was of a tree atop a hill, enclosed by native birds and animals. Around the room towered ornate shelves of polished wood. Dozens of books, rare with their thick leather bindings and real parchment were displayed across shelves. Other novelties filled the empty spaces. Kuta spotted a crocodile skull, gilded nautilus shells carved with motifs, and foreign looking war masks, shields, and daggers. A big sword hung on the wall, its pommel emblazoned with the largest gemstone Kuta had ever seen. The grandeur of the room was almost enough to distract from the figure slumped against a wall. A shattered bottle of wine bloomed around her feet, running along the cracks like a geometric web. Amber glass was strewn about the mosaic. The smell was strong and sweet.

"Mother?" Yuromi asked, worried and angry and confused all at once.

Yanata Ashill had her eyes closed. They opened sluggishly as Yuromi approached. She stepped carefully around the shattered glass. "Come to yell at me again?" Yanata slurred, lifting the broken bottle by the neck and pointing it outwards in accusation.

"What?" The word came more as a breath. "Mom it's me, Yuromi. Have you been drinking?" She asked, her tone laden with disapproval.

"Yuromi?" Yanata repeated with surprise. Her eyes widened. She waved the bottle neck aimlessly. "Drinking" she repeated. "Yes. I am drinking. I thought you were…" the rest of her sentence slurred unintelligibly. There was dejection in her voice.

Kuta watched as Yanata glanced up at the balcony every so often. "Help me get her up" Yuromi pleaded to Kuta. "And watch your step." The two women pulled Yanata to her feet. She was heavy. They half-carried-half-dragged the old Patzau to the closest chair, avoiding the broken glass. Wine had stained her clothes.

"I am sorry" Patzau Ashill said, as Yuromi heaved her down. Her limbs slumped awkwardly and Kuta helped sit her up straight. "I am so sorry" she repeated, looking now at Kuta. "I've been… uh, terrible." Yanata slurred.

"I thought you quit drinking!" Yuromi accused. She was on the verge of tears herself. Angry ones. "You assured me" she seethed.

"I haven't… had any in years" Yanata said defensively. "Just… today and…"

"Don't you dare!" Yuromi seethed, her words angry with disappointment. "Not after dad! Not after our deal! You promised to stop if I got my shit together. You promised!"

Yanata sighed, thinking slowly. "I broke my promise… for Minoc. He… he needed it. We drank, and then I… let him go."

"You what?" both women said in unison.

"When the bastards cut me from the council and replaced me with Burm," She stuck her tongue out in derision at the captain's name, "I decided I deserved another drink. One for me. I took this bottle–"

"Not that," Yuromi said, interrupting. "The part about Patzau Minoc."

"Oh, I let Mellen go. I freed him." Yanata said, a wide smile spreading across her face. "One last 'fuck you' to the council. Treacherous jackals."

"You freed Patzau Minoc?" Kuta repeated, her eyes lighting up. "Where is he now?"

"I don't know" Yanata said, trying to sit up and having difficulties. "On a boat. Sailing away. Have you seen aunty Elvi?" Yanata asked, changing the subject. "She hasn't come to visit."

Yuromi wasn't sure whether to be anxious or impressed. "You freed Minoc from prison?"

"Of course!" Yanata said with pride. "He was an arrogant pompous self-important twat… but he wasn't a traitor. Minoc being free, somewhere out there, will haunt Yohati till the day he dies." She beamed at that thought. "Best thing I've done for this city in years."

"Do they know you did it?" Kuta asked, concern spreading across her face.

"No, but they'll figure out it was me" she said dismissively. "I wasn't careful. Or maybe they blame me for it anyway. Yes, they will do that. You shouldn't be here when they come," she added. "I plan on denying it, but…" She started to laugh as what she had said was a joke.

"I can't believe you would do something so unwise" Yuromi said. She was hurting inside. "Why sacrifice yourself for *him*! He wouldn't have done the same for you."

"Why not run?" Kuta urged.

"I think Minoc would have, actually. And run?" Yanata said with a snort. "I don't think so. You two should run though. Especially you, Kuta. The council despises you. They blame you for Minoc. They think you corrupted Minoc; used your Aginjigaade powers or your woman's parts to bend him to treachery." She smiled a sad smile. "It's all bullshit" Yanata continued, reaching for Kuta's face. "You're just a girl. Its not fair. So young and innocent. I doubt you could hurt anyone." Kuta looked away, trying to hide her shame.

Yanata was too drunk to notice. She looked back to her daughter. "They'll come for me soon. They'll want a public execution. I won't let that happen. But I need you and your sister to leave Caso before then." She hesitated, her words catching. "I've been a lousy mother. You girls deserved better. I didn't handle your father's death well. I chose anger and self-pity. I retreated."

"Stop!" Yuromi pleaded. "Stop apologizing like you're dying. Leave with us!"

"Then you and Kida grew up and I stopped paying attention" Yanata continued. "I fell into my role and…" she trailed off. "I was a coward. I stopped fighting for what was right and I stopped prioritizing you two—my own girls. I was too busy playing politics… and look where that got us." She was crying now. And Yuromi was sobbing too, kneeling

before her mother. “I just wanted you to know that I’m sorry. That I’ll die with those regrets.”

“No! Don’t say that” Yuromi pleaded. “You can leave. Come with us! You don’t get to just die and pretend that will fix anything!” she yelled.

Yanata laughed. It was a challenge. “I’m no pushover like Minoc. I might be an old woman, but I’m a fighter. A warrior! Just like you. Just like your grandparents. I’m not looking to die, Romi. I’m looking for a fight. And I intend to win it. But you and I both know that you can lose a fight you intend to win.” She traced Yuromi’s scar with a gentle thumb.

“This is madness! You’re just drunk!”

“Aye, perhaps I am a bit mad” Yanata conceded. “I hoped on sending Elvi with you two. But I can’t find her. And you are smart enough girls to manage without her.”

“No!” Yuromi cried. Tears ran down her face. “I’m not leaving you to fight this alone.”

Yanata raised her hand and slapped Yuromi across her tear streamed face. The slap was hard, and Kuta recoiled at the savagery of the unexpected blow. Yuromi fell backwards, stunned. Then Yanata leaned forward and kissed the top of Yuromi’s head. She brought her daughter in close, holding her like the most precious thing in the world. “That’s an order, soldier.”

“That fucking hurt!” Yuromi shrieked.

“Good!” Yanata spat back. Yuromi squirmed but her mother’s muscular arms held her in place. “I hope I knocked some sense into your thick skull. Now go get what you need.”

And to Kuta’s surprise, Yuromi followed the order, leaving in a huff. Kuta remained behind with the Patzau. “You’re going to fight them drunk?” Kuta asked. Part of her knew not to underestimate the former Patzau, but she couldn’t help but worry for the older woman.

“Not a chance” Yanata said. “I’ll be sober tomorrow when they come for me. You two need to be long gone by then. Promise me, Kuta. Get yourselves out of Caso tonight. Tomorrow morning at the very latest.”

“You also know then” Kuta said softly. She met Yanata’s gaze.

Yanata’s eyes perked up, suddenly guileful. “Look at that. Just as crafty as Minoc” she said with a tilt of a smile. “I should have guessed that you would know what’s coming. He chose well with you. Have you heard how they plan to do it?”

“No” Kuta admitted, “Only the whispers that they’ll try tomorrow. Personally, I don’t think they’ll make it past the city’s walls.”

“Nor do I” Yanata said. “But underestimating people has always been the Casoyan way. And it’s not my problem anymore. Let the fool in charge handle it. I’ve got my own fight ahead.”

“You could warn people” Kuta said. “People will die if they get past the walls.”

“As could you” Yanata countered. “Its not too late for either of us to make that decision.”

Kuta found no response to that. She felt guilt for not feeling guilty.

After Yuromi and Kida slipped away into the night, Yanata sat alone in the dark library. She had long since dismissed the plethora of servants that once filled the grand estate. Now the house remained dark and empty; as hollow as she felt. A new bottle served as her only companion. Her last bottle. It was one pulled deep from within the cellars. It was the only bottle priceless enough to keep despite her promise to Yuromi all those years ago. She peeled away the wax from the top and took a swig from the clear

wine within. It wasn't very good. But it had been a gift, and that made it the best company on this loneliest of nights.

A detached voice spoke from the darkness, "What do you think you're doing?" It was even and emotionless. Yanata lowered the bottle and squinted. A figure emerged, its face in shadow.

"Kida?" Yanata asked, leaning forward. "Is that you?"

"I asked you a question, mother" Kida said, stepping forward. "I see that you've taken up drinking again" she added with condescension. "Any other betrayals you'd like to admit to?"

Yanata looked up and even through the fog in her vision, she could see the disgust written across her daughter's face. "How long have you been home?"

"Long enough," Kida replied.

"Long enough," Yanata repeated. "So, that *was* you on the balcony. How much did you overhear?"

"Enough."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" Yanata goaded. "Come to tell me off again? Or maybe you wanted to gloat a little before you ran off to tattle to Burm or Yohati? I'm sure they'll give you a fine reward for your blind devotion."

"I just don't understand what happened to you" Kida said. She stood eerily still. "You were our Patzau. Our general. Head of this family. Now look at you. You've destroyed yourself. You've destroyed your legacy. You've ruined this family and our noble lineage. And for what?"

"To save a life" Yanata said. "I can live with that."

"But *I am* the one who has to live with it!" Kida shouted. "*I* will be the one left picking up the pieces! You destroy not only yourself. And with you crumbles everything. You've betrayed *me* just as much as you have this city. It is *my* future you have tarnished alongside yours!"

"It's always about you!" Yanata spat. "I spoiled you too much. Put you on a pedestal when your sister was misbehaving and it went to your damned head. You can't even see how rotten the elitist snobs you call friends are. They care about you only as far as they can use you. They're leeches! You're twice as smart as your sister and even she figured that much out."

"There it is" Kida said, her voice trembling, "It's always about me versus Yuromi. All our lives you'd pit us against each other. Compare us. But you always favoured her. She comes to you and you apologize like she never did anything wrong. I was the one here for you all those years while she sulked and fucked off. But when I come, you berate me like I'm still a child."

"Then don't act like a fucking child!" Yanata growled. "Until the other night atop the fortress, I hadn't worried once about you. You were strong, assured, and charismatic… like your father. But your sister, she was like me and that scared me the most. She was impulsive, quick to anger, and long to forgive."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I retreated from both of you. It was wrong. I was supposed to be your mother! It was a coward's choice. I should have been there for you both. But unlike Yuromi, I let you be because I had faith in your ability to succeed. You were clever and driven. That like your father, you would do good. That night, you made me realize that I mistook your assuredness with virtue. Instead of fears I anticipated, you became something worse than I ever fathomed: heartless and self-centered. All you care about is legacy, status, and

wealth. You don't give a shit about anyone else. All the people you hurt along the way. You don't care about the people you swore to serve as a soldier."

"You're so fucking arrogant!" Kida roared back, rage plain across her face. "You don't know a damned thing about me anymore. So don't try to blame me for your own failings. You ruined yourself and now you have to sit and face judgement for your mistakes. For years, you've let your problems eat away at your cliffs like a rising tide, crumbling the earth at your feet. Now, in your arrogant righteousness, you see toppling the tower as the solution when you could just shore up the walls. I assumed you were oblivious, but it's worse than I feared. You're willfully ignorant of the damage you've done. You can't even acknowledge the laws you've broken, the rules you've bent because you think yourself above them!"

Yanata threw her bottle of wine across the room at Kida. It sailed over Kida's head as she ducked, crashing loudly against the mosaic floor. Her voice was full of gravelly bitterness as she said, "You know *nothing* of the laws being bent in this tainted city. Your idols are its greatest offenders; thieves and backstabbers. I'll not sit here and heed the naïve judgements of a brat who's been handed everything in life." Yanata leaned back in her chair, tears streaming down her cheeks, anger collapsing into disgust. "I was a terrible mother, Kida, but you've become a terrible person. One that's not welcome here any longer. Pack your things. Get the hell out!"

Yanata slowly wiped the tears from her eyes. She sat, devastated by the truth of her own words. *My own daughter.* She didn't see when Kida dove forward. Yanata was forcibly driven back into her chair, the air expelled from her lungs. The suddenness of the attack, and the shock of it didn't register. And when she gazed up through watery eyes, Kida loomed over her. Her knife plunged deep into Yanata's chest.

Yanata tried to reel against her daughter but her reflexes felt slow. Her arms were already so heavy. Too heavy. Perhaps, she knew it was too late. Perhaps it was an unwillingness to fight back. Yanata sat and stared up at her daughter as the fight drained out of her. Yanata pictured a castle toppling over a cliff. "My girl," she croaked. Those were her last words.

Kida cried over her mother's body. Tears ran down her cheeks. She held her close as Yanata Ashill died in her arms. Kida spoke through the tears, her voice barely a broken whisper. "I'm so sorry, mother" she murmured, her voice trembling. Her heart though, it was resolved. "This was the only way. The only way to fix everything. I loved you."

Chapter 35: Dawn

Dawn lingered beyond the edge of the world. Bartiin watched anxiously as men, warriors from the high mountains, scaled the sheer outer walls of the city under the cover of darkness. A dozen warriors, each hand-selected for the task, disappeared into the shadows. Yoharum stood by, his scarred and burnt grimace eager for the violence that this day would see. It sent a shiver down Bartiin's spine. But it was a means to an end. Today, after months and years, Bartiin would finally sail for home. *For good this time.*

The climbers scaled the walls with an expertise that was dizzying. Bartiin couldn't imagine being in their position, holding on to the slippery stones with only emptiness below. The warriors below did all but cheer as they braved the ascent. Yoharum boasted that even if one slipped, no sound would escape their lips, such was their devotion. Bartiin wasn't sure he believed that. Nor did a chance come to test that claim. They warriors their prowess. The first figure crested the wall. Her silhouette was black on indigo, formless to all but those who knew where to look. More followed her over the parapet, their skills undeniable. Now all the warriors could do was wait and pray. The soldiers selected were strong climbers, but inlanders through and through. No Casoyan would mistake them as local soldiers. Nor did they speak Tralang or common Casoyan. Viiran's entire plan hinged on their reaching the gatehouse and dispatching the guards without raising alarm. One small misfortune, and it could all be over before it started. There wouldn't be a second opportunity. Bartiin chewed on his cheek, fearing failure meant losing his chance.

"Time. Now go" Yoharum mumbled softly, his tone unable to hide his zeal. Bartiin followed Yoharum and his warriors through the muddy alleys of Mudtown towards the gatehouse. There were no cobbled roads or streets here. Only paths trodden into the mud and the stench of char and filth. There wasn't much left of Mudtown after the fires, but what remained was smouldering with resentment and anger. Viiran's rebels drew strength from it. They moved towards the South Gate guised in the looted armour of their enemies. Once the climbers took the gate, fake soldiers would man it until the next gate opened; the Lake Gate. Where all of Mudtown would be ready to rush inside.

They waited under shadows, just out of sight. Bartiin held his breath. The south gate was the smallest of the five. It was the only one with no need for a garrison barracks, being so close to the fortress. Like the walls, the structure was made of large cut black stones. It was thirty spans wide and ten deep with three portals, each one barred shut. The central portal was the largest, but unbreachable once closed. The symmetrical side portals were kill-chambers. Both had hard corners and narrow choke-points designed for withstanding large assaults. Great for halting attackers, but ineffective to a force taking control from within the walls. Bartiin watched eagerly. All remained quiet. He glanced up past the gate. After several long silent minutes, the signal came. A figure appeared from

one of the two smaller gates and waved them in. *This is it,* Bartiin thought. *Now we burn a city.*

Forty figures in pilfered guild uniforms scurried across the darkness towards the gate. Bartiin followed at the rear with the rest of Yoharum's assault team and forty more undisguised warriors. The next phase of the assault would involve taking the Lake Gate and sewing chaos. The fake soldiers would hold the garrison, and the remaining soldiers—Bartiin among them—would assault key points across the city. The strike teams moved together at first, but diverged along the way. Some headed for the auction house. Others for the mountain gate and the palace. All aimed to be in place, ready to strike as the gates opened at dawn. Then the real attack would start.

It was a terrible plan. Bartiin could think of a hundred vulnerabilities. All of their hopes hinged on a small number of critical successes. Taking the wall was just the first. The lake gate was next. Perils were as abundant as the notches in their old weapons. If Viiran's plan was written in feelings, desperation would have been its ink. Yet the plan moved forward with each step taken. And they would persevere until no more steps could be taken.

Yoharum led his warriors through the dark streets into The Spires. He was one of the few that knew the city well. For many, this was their first time inside the walls. They moved in nervous silence; calm before the chaos. Bartiin had been here, in this unique silence, twice before. It was the moment to reflect and pray for life. It was a tradition beyond cultures. Each warrior around him would be doing the same, trusting in those things in life that offered strength and resolve. For Bartiin, they were his home and family.

How long since I dozed by the hearth with my daughter on my chest? When was the last time I spent more than fleeting moments with my wife and children. I left them as cooing infants and now they look on me with the curious eyes of strangers instead of admiration for a father. Life can be cruel. To spend years in dedication only to be denied the prize once the work is done. Aramuk Krimas is dead. And Instead of the peace I've longed for, I march with men I don't know to a battle I want not for a cause I don't believe in. Bartin let out a resigned sigh. He finished the prayer, *deliver me the strength required to make it home.* He hoped it would be enough.

Dawn crowned the great volcanic peak to the east, chasing the curtain of night towards the horizon. As light took hold, Bartiin stowed his hopes until tomorrow. Worn on his heart, they wouldn't survive this day of reckoning. Once again, to earn the peace and freedom he craved, he needed first endure the fight ahead. "Anticipation is the enemy of satisfaction," he whispered. It was the mantra of a man he once revered, then murdered. They were Prince Aramuk's words. Saviour and traitor. Architect and ruin.

Yoharum stopped in a wide alley junction and gave a speech. Bartiin understood none of the words, yet all of their meaning. The men brandished only weapons that could be hidden; ghata, axes, and short swords. One carried a bow and quiver. Bartiin stared around at the group of strangers. Most wore workers clothes, plain and unremarkable. Had Viiran not forbidden it, Bartiin expected all would have entered the city in full war-paint and regalia. The shells and beads braided into their hair served as their only warrior's symbols.

High above them, the finials and high slanted rooftops brought Bartiin back to the day of his escape from the embassy. That moment stood lodged in his memories as a turning point. The *what if* moment. How things might have gone had he tried to flee by ship rather than into the countryside. Where he might be now instead of here. Bartiin felt ashamed. Ashamed for using these men for his own means. But not enough so to stop it.

Then recognition hit him and Bartiin's gut twisted.

There was a reason he thought of that day. He knew this place. He looked down and noticed Yoharum's warriors staring. Yoharum too held his gaze. A weight settled on Bartiin's chest as he was painfully reminded that it was he who had betrayed the burnt warrior across from him. He and the ambassador. The ambassador whose house they now crowded outside. Fear and suspicion coiled around Bartiin like a python. Yoharum ascended the steps and knocked soundly on the backdoor. *This is bad.* Bartiin considered running. Better to run than face Yoharum's rage. He held no doubts that the brute would kill him when the truth came out. His betrayal had been the catalyst for Yoharum's downfall; the fuel for his fiery vengeance.

The time to run disappeared as the lock on the door gave. Warriors flooded inside. Yoharum would either learn the truth or he wouldn't. There was little Bartiin could do to stop it now. He was pulled inside the embassy. There was a commotion as warriors swept through the house. Bartiin stood awkwardly, the only one left unaware. Yoharum reappeared looking rather disappointed. Clearly, the ambassador wasn't home.

Hope returned and with it, courage. "What are we doing here?" Bartiin asked. "I don't remember this being a part of Viiran's plan."

Yoharum eyed him suspiciously. All of his expelled anxieties returned in a flash. There was something in Yoharum's eyes that hinted danger. An unspoken threat. Anger and frustration all captured in the venomous snarl that curled across Yoharum's scabbed lips. Ever more layers to the conspiracy. Ever one step behind.

"Where is she?" Yoharum demanded. He came in close to where Bartiin stood. Their eyes locked and Bartiin found he could not look away. Like staring down a wild dog. All eyes one moment and all teeth the next.

"Who?" Bartiin asked calmly.

"Don't play dumb to me" Yoharum growled. "Where is the… the woman. Where is she!"

"How should I know?" Bartiin asked.

"Because she is the friend you say to me. The one who gets you out of prison." For the briefest of moments, Bartiin feared that Yoharum would act on his rage-fueled impulses alone. No need for proof. Instead, he stomped his foot in anger.

A warrior appeared and he and Yoharum poke. Bartiin was made to follow them upstairs. The thing the warrior wished for Yoharum to see was the blood. There was plenty of it still visible. Whoever had been here to clean up had done a decent job, but the stain across the bed had been left untouched. From there, it was easy enough spotting the small splatters across the room and on the ceiling. Whatever had happened here, it hadn't been pretty.

Bartiin stood at the door, taking in the horror. If Hina wasn't dead, then somebody else had died in her bed. Yoharum turned and faced him. *He knows,* Bartiin guessed. *Or at least he suspects it was me. But how? And when?* He tried to remain calm. He was desperate to keep the fear and guilt off his face. Yoharum held his gaze a moment longer and then pushed his way past in a huff. He stomped out of the room and back down the stairs. He barked orders and the men followed. Bartiin cast one last look around the bloody room, and then trailed behind. It was settled; he needed to extradite himself from this foolishness. If he didn't, he'd meet a fate worse than Hina's.

The problem with escaping from a group of unfamiliar warriors who don't speak your language is that they communicate through tugs and eyes and gestures. "Go this way. Follow me. Stay close." Never was he more than an arms span from any of the

warriors. Never would they let him out of their sight. They ran along a narrow canal. The way was dark and unpleasant. It smelled of moss, decay, and filth. The smell was so strong that Bartiin began to suspect there was an Aginjigaade among the men. But nothing sprang from the darkness and the scent disappeared as they stepped out before the bay.

Yoharum stopped and surveyed the endless foray of merchant vessels. Hundreds of ships. Countless docks and wharves. Warehouses perched above the water atop thick timber piers. Muscles and barnacles clung to everything within reach of the sea. Far across the bay, the wide channel that connected the bay of Caso with the wider sea teased of freedom. Bartiin vowed to sail that straight this night. But while Bartiin stared seaward, Yoharum and his men stared skyward.

Yoharum drew close and spoke directly to him, "At end of the week," he pronounced, "that tower will fall to the water." Bartiin followed Yoharum's gaze up to the fortress. It loomed high and overlooked the city. The lonely tower stood atop a smaller pinnacle connected by a bridge.

"If you take the city, you'll need to starve them out" Bartiin advised. "It will take months."

"When" Yoharum corrected, brows furrowed. "When I take this city. I will kill all man and women that hides there. My axe will be the last thing they see."

Then the fortress blazed to light as the sun cast its first glimpse over the mountain. Dawn had come. The gates would open. The chaos would begin. Yoharum led his men north away from the fortress. They reached the first of guard station. There would be one for each lane, and a wharfinger at each. The plan was the same for each one. Kill the guards. Rob the wharfinger. Move to the next. Slit throats were all that remained after Yoharum's warriors set upon the first guard post. They pocketed the coins in a sack. Bartiin inspected their handiwork. The murders were savage. No mercy was spared for these men. Bartiin recognized the dead wharfinger. He was the man Bartiin had paid that first night in Caso. This was where he had docked his ship. He looked for it but didn't see it amongst the docked vessels. *Damn, Yoharum was right.* Bartiin spotted one last soldier at the end of the docks. A hand over his mouth and a knife in his back was all it took. The same befell a poor sailor who stepped from his ship at the wrong instant. His shouts were lost to the sea.

As they moved to the next dock post, the men within died much the same as the last. Yoharum sent men down the docks and they came back soon after. And, so it went. But as they rushed towards the third guard post, the plan explained to Bartiin deviated from the plan unfolding. Smoke appeared behind them, black against the new light of day. Bartiin turned in concern. He climbed a post and saw the flames spreading across most of the ships moored behind them.

"Fire!" he exclaimed.

A heavy hand dragged him down and he was suddenly in Yoharum's grasp. The man towered above him. The eyes that looked down on his were filled with vindictive madness. "This is the way" he said. It was a warning as much as an explanation. "Caso must fear us. They must not escape. You understand?" Bartiin opened his mouth to protest. No words came. "Once we win, then you get your ship."

Bartiin nodded in understanding. Not in acceptance. He knew Yoharum's promise was empty. Just as his own promises had been. This was a betrayal akin to Bartiin's own. No, it was an understanding of the new paradigm between them. The threat unspoken. Yoharum was going to have his revenge. Bartiin was among enemies now. Yoharum's men severed mooring lines and disabled rudders, then pushed them out to brave the

waves. Others they burned, lighting anything that would take a flame. Fire was the weapon used against them and fire was their answer in turn.

And then the bells tolled.

Birds took flight as the chorus erupted across the city. Their echoes sounded off the hard cliffs to the south and brought forth the chaos Yoharum desired. The time for secrecy was over. Yoharum's warrior tribesmen raced towards the next post with their brutal leader at the head of his war pack. Bartiin was forced along, an unwilling witness to the death and destruction to follow. The warriors destroyed anything they could get their blades into and took everything they could get their hands on. Axes chopped away mooring ropes. Fires were lit wanton. Death was handed out generously. People appeared and watched as fights broke out, then fled as the killing followed.

Yoharum reveled in it. He'd stolen himself a proper military shield and brandished his war axe. More soldiers appeared and Yoharum met them with a vicious smile. He parried the spear thrust that came his direction and drove his axe into the Casoyan soldier's shield so hard the shield split beneath the blow. The guildsmen stood no chance against the bloodlust. The chaos Viiran's rebels sought had arrived and the bells tolling became their own assault on sanity.

"Burn them all!" Yoharum roared. His thirst for ruin stood equal to his thirsts for blood and revenge. Fires were spreading across more and more ships now.

"No!" Bartiin protested, but his outcry was smothered by the bells and the bedlam. He ran to Yoharum and the giant man turned on him, weapons raised. "This is madness!" Bartiin yelled. "You'll cripple yourselves if you destroy all the ships! It will take years to rebuild. How will you trade? How will you build alliances?"

"Alliances?" Yoharum rounded on him, his eyes blazing with fury. "We need no alliances. Not with foreigners who helped the Casoyan dogs take everything from us." He brought his face in menacingly close. "You among them! Do not forget your place, Bartiin!"

"And what *is* my place here?" Bartiin demanded, suddenly emboldened.

Yoharum smiled and the burns and scars made the gesture unnerving. "Your time is ended. No more can you use me; use us. You are a liar. You and your far away king and your ambassador. No more. Your place is here as witness. You will see what you have made of us."

"Destroying everything doesn't avenge anyone if it hurts you most in the end" Bartiin pleaded. "Killing Casoyans, burning ships… it won't change anything. It won't fix the past. Destruction doesn't build futures."

"I did think we were the same" Yoharum said, circling him. "I was wrong. You speak like a coward. I will bring the justice this city deserves. I will decide what my revenge looks like. Each ship burned is for a village destroyed. Each life taken is for a family killed. Each death feeds a future for *my* people! One where we are on top! No longer slaves!" Yoharum's control snapped. Fueled by hatred and bitterness, he tossed another torch on the nearest ship. The pitch-treated wood caught, flames erupting like angry spirits. "Now witness!"

"Please, Yoharum…" Bartiin begged. The hatred in Yoharum's eyes destroyed what little hope Bartiin had clung on to.

"Watch them burn, Bartiin" Yoharum said jovially. "Witness and tell the world. This is what we do to enemies that wish to use us."

A fat man in rich clothes was tossed at Yoharum's feet. The fear was plain across the Casoyan's face. Bartiin shared that fear. They both had every right to it. Yoharum

exchanged words with the two warriors who had brought him. The wicked smile on Yoharum's face grew. Patzau was the only word Bartiin recognized. Bartiin cowered beside the Patzau, both men sharing the same defeat. Resignation to the end. Bartiin was stripped on his weapons. The sword he never swung came willingly from his grasp.

"You stay and witness, Bartiin. Watch Caso burn" Yoharum goaded. "I'm taking my prize to Viiran. But I'll be back for you" Yoharum led the Patzau away. The two soldiers that had brought him turned their gazes his direction. *I'm fucked,* Bartiin thought.

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Viiran's assault team held their breaths in the shadows of Patzau Palace. They had encountered more trouble than he had anticipated; twice they had lured away soldiers in their path. Even more often, they had needed wait for windows of opportunity. It had taken twice as long as Viiran had planned but now they were ready. It would all be worth it. His people, once divided, now united in hatred, stood ready to take for themselves the city of gold. Years of planning hinged on the next few minutes. From narrow alcoves and dark alleyways, they waited for his signal.

Taking the palace was pivotal to success. It was the center of powers. The Resources Guild, the Banking Guild, and the Guild of Casoyan Affairs each administered from within. The hope was to capture any Patzaus inside, cutting the heads off the hydra. And with the palace under rebel control, Viiran would have hostages and a defensible position. And as the riots spread across the city, all would crumble to the chaos and Viiran's new authority would rise from the ashes.

Instead, the bells tolled early.

This was a possibility planned for, yet still came as a disappointment. They need to strike was now. No longer could they wait. The bells tolled low and rumbled distinctly. Other towers joined in the chorus. And Viiran, who was once a guild soldier, understood where the failure had occurred. *The South Gate.* It was about the right time for the changing of the guard. His soldiers must have been discovered as imposters. He had hoped for more time, but fate insists.

Viiran gave the signal.

His warriors rushed the palace. The guards posted were already nervous. They too heard the bells. They knew of the trouble at the Lake Gate, but were ill prepared for the ambush at their doorstep. The attack was swift and inevitable. Warriors flooded into the palace. They swept through the halls and administration wings, killing those who needed killing and captured the rest. Viiran marched like a king through the empty halls. Those still alive cowered as he passed. He paid them no mind. They would be his vassals once this was over. *His men* once he ruled. All that remained was to claim the council chambers. He ascended the grand staircase to the highest level with his warriors in toe. None barred his path. He pushed open the large chamber doors revealing the circular council table in the center. Eight seats sat vacant. He marveled in it. *I made it.*

"Bar the doors" Viiran ordered. "We hold the palace as our stronghold. The rioters will sweep through the city soon enough. In the meantime, we hold here. Send men to find and bring me the remaining Patzau. Dawn has risen on a new Caso."

The men with him nodded in assent and left him. Viiran surveyed his surroundings. Warm light filled the chamber through the large arched windows. Viiran looked out towards the bay. Ships burned smoke plumed. *Good. Yoharum has been busy.* He couldn't smell it from here. The room smelled clean in an unnatural herbaceous way. It was a smell that made his nose wrinkle. *These lords and their perfumes.*

Viiran took a seat in one of the ornate council chairs across from the large door. “This will be the place,” he surmised, mumbling “where I will either be crowned a king or killed a traitor.”

An ethereal voice spoke as if from nowhere. “You are right about that” it said wolfishly. A man seemed to appear as if from thin air. Viiran leapt out of his seat, drawing his sword. “Now, now…” he said. “I was hoping to talk a bit before it came to that.” The door closed and was latched with a soft click. The stranger was trapping Viiran inside the room. The man’s voice was icy and calm. He spoke Casoyan, but with the faintest hint of foreign inflections.

“You’re an Aginjigaade” Viiran said cautiously.

“Very astute” Janos said, turning to face him. He took a seat at the council table across from where Viiran stood, knife drawn. “And you must be Viiran. Please, sit. Let’s have a chat.”

Viiran did not sit. Every hair on body stood upright. His knuckles turned white as he clutched the knife with a laden grip. “Who are you?” Viiran asked. He needed time to think. He hadn’t expected anything like this. Now he was alone, vulnerable. *They’ve played me.*

“I wanted to thank you” Janos said, ignoring the question. “It has been difficult for us, you see, organizing all of this. You played your part wonderfully. You are a delightfully brilliant man and we had to place a lot of trust in you getting here today.”

Viiran’s mind raced. “What do you mean, organizing this?”

“Your being here” Janos answered. “The whole rebellion. It was a necessary evil. But one required for our ambitions. We hoped that you, or someone like you would appear and you did.”

“You knew we would come?” Viiran asked, astounded by the idea.

“Of course!” Janos said. “We counted on it. You see, it takes a grave threat to force change upon a populace. Without it, people tend to be very resistant. A rebellion was the perfect catalyst, especially one led by *your* people. The conditions were already there, perfect kindling to light and watch grow into flames of passion.”

“I don’t understand” Viiran said. His eyes shifted nervously around the room.

“You don’t need to” Janos said.

Chapter 36: The Panic

Harul stepped out into the darkness of early morning with an ache in his back and the taste of stale bread in his mouth. It was a short walk to his post. Working early mornings was tough enough without rationing food and water. But that was for the council to resolve. All he needed to do was relieve the poor souls that worked the twilight shift. Better early mornings than long nights.

He trudged through the dark and empty streets stifling a yawn with one hand and his ghata in the other. The bigger constellations still dotted the night sky. Ahead, a dog scampered through the streets. It knocked a pot over with a crash and Harul lifted his club defensively. He waved it menacingly at the empty street and let out a hard sigh. *Too many strange things about lately to not act jumpy.*

As Harul approached the Southern Gate, one of his guildmates ambled slowly towards him from another street. They exchanged polite greetings and then walked together the rest of the short distance. Her name was Noma and Harul both liked and respected her. She was an older lady like the Patzau—the old Patzau. He liked her because she carried herself with a strength that outpaced her years. That and her confident no-bullshit attitude. It scared off some of the younger guildies but behind her large size and sour face, it she was generous and cheerful. More than that, she would keep the younger lads in line. That is to say, shifts were easier when Noma was around.

They were decent enough friends, as far as colleagues went. They didn't meet outside work and he suspected neither would they ever. She wouldn't hound him with naïve questions intended to circle the conversation to youthful boasting. Nor was she the sort to join the guild in the hopes of impressing a potential lover. Neither did she lust for violence or blood. She was ordinary. And ordinary was how Harul preferred things.

They walked together in comfortable silence as, ahead, one of the younger guildsmen on their shift opened up the door that led up to the gatehouse. Harul and Noma were still twenty paces out when the door burst opened again and the younger soldier spilled out into the night air. A low agonizing sound escaped his lips as he hit the ground backwards, hard. The door he tumbled through swung back to closed only to burst opened again. A different soldier stepped forward and stabbed the downed man straight through the chest with a sword.

Harul and Noma froze. The soldier with the sword froze. The man who had been stabbed froze, though he froze because he was dead. All three of them stared at the lifeless body. Then Noma was drawing her blade and the soldier who had killed the other man was shouting up the steps. And before Harul had the good senses to understand any of what was happening a crossbow bolt took Noma in the leg and she reeled in pain.

"Sound the alarm" Noma shouted. Harul stared, dumbfounded. Noma had no time for it. She pushed him and repeated the order, "Sound the fucking alarm, Harul!"

Harul blinked and took off in a dash. She wasn't his superior, but he knew sense enough to listen. The sound of metal on metal rang out behind him as blades clashed in the darkness. Trusting blindly, Harul fled and didn't look back. He wanted to, but couldn't bring himself to do it. He ran and his mind replayed the moment the sword sunk into the soldier's chest again and again. The nearest alarm bell was in Dohina square and Harul was there before he knew it. He heaved breath and limbs as he raced up the wooden ladder to the bell nest. He'd never been up here. Few had. It was littered with dust and droppings. Harul didn't care. He dragged himself onto the rickety landing with everything he had left and gaped at the eight bells arrayed before him. Eight bells. Eight notes. Thousands of possible songs of warning. He knew only a handful. He played the one for danger at the South Gate. He rang and rang until the whole city took up the chorus.

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Ohacha jolted awake to the sound of bells. The lonely song was urgent and unfamiliar. It brought back a torrent of unwanted memories. Of Aramuk dying in the seat next to him. Of spilled blood in the street. The tune multiplied as another set of bells joined in. Panic ensued. The room was dark and claustrophobic. He reached out and touched cold hard stone walls and for a brief moment he worried their escape had been a twisted dream. That he remained locked away inside the dark Casoyan prison. Then a warm hand clasped his arm and Ohacha faced Rolena in the darkness. He had been breathing fast and shallow. Cask and Gaba'ké were there too and Ohacha remembered where they were.

It had taken Gaba'ké the better part of the day to tunnel his way into the prison. It had been physically and mentally exhausting. A sorcery that required significant concentration and control. Even to a Stone Aginjigaade, moving mountains was a feat. As such, Gaba'ké was spent by the time they touched sunlight again. Ohacha had thought that his first steps out into daylight after being locked away would be emancipating. He was wrong. The fear persisted. His body, underfed and malnourished, struggled through the narrow tunnel. The daylight was blinding. They were all thin and weakened, anxious at each unfamiliar sound. Making matters worse, Gaba'ké was barely able to walk in the end. They were a group of half-starved half-conscious fools. It was a miracle they made it down the monolithic peak. He walked on unsteady feet and was barely conscious. It was a daunting task for anyone, let alone three starved prisoners.

It had taken most of the day to reach the bottom. They had worked in silent need. All suffered. None complained. They braved the steep slope and thick vegetation, just as Gaba'ké had on his way up. To Ohacha, it was the price of freedom. He would pay it a thousand times over. They stopped when Gaba'ké needed it, and continued when the old man was ready. All the while, they dreaded the moment the alarms would sound and soldiers would announce their pursuit. Even as slipped back into the city's streets, it was a fear that ate away at their hopes. Once in the city, they had returned to Piitra's apartment to see what they could recover. As it turned out, most of their belongings remained. Their trunks had been ransacked and their valuables were missing, but much more remained discarded in piles and strewn across the bedrooms. Their weapons were gone, save for Rolena's crossbow, which she had stowed above a bureau. Also unpilfered was the assassin's blade, hidden alongside her mask and head in the salt basket in the basement. Overall, the apartment remained stocked with enough food and supplies for the night. And so, exhausted and unwilling to push their luck, they locked themselves in the cellar amongst a nest of blankets and tried to recover.

And that was where they awoke as the bells tolled. It was dark. Almost no light filtered into the dark crawlspace and Ohacha crawled on three limbs, his arm outstretched, seeking the staircase. “Where are we?” Gaba’ké asked. He sat up and brought his hand up to his temple, wincing. “My head is throbbing.”

“We’re in the cellar of the apartment” Cask answered. He began climbing up the dark stairs to the main floor. He reached the landing and unlatched the cellar door. It opened and a faint early morning light filled the stairwell.

“Why?” Gaba’ké protested. “Why aren’t we at the ship?” He made to stand, and then held himself steady to fend off the rush of blood to the head.

“We were all too exhausted” Ohacha said with a tone that suggested this was not a point to argue. “It was a risk, but one I decided was better than the alternative. It was just for the night.”

“This is the first place they would look!” Gaba’ké insisted. The bells continued tolling, adding to his urgency to be gone from this place.

“And if we’d run into soldiers, what were we to do?” Cask added, speaking up. “None of us had weapons. The three of us hadn’t eaten in days and you were so far gone I was starting to worry you’d been poisoned again. We’d never have made it.”

“It was just for the night” Ohacha repeated.

Gaba’ké looked down at his missing hand and turned his wrist over, as if the appendage was simply hiding. He sighed in frustration and pushed his remaining hand into his temple. “You should have left me” Gaba’ké said. “You would have made it. Those bells. They’ll be after us now.”

“You don’t know that” Cask argued. “Those bells have gone off a number of times since we’ve been in the city. They tolled each time there was fighting in the slums.”

“Escaped prisoners is a good reason to ring the alarm” Rolena countered.

“Then we need to be gone from this place as soon as we can” Gaba’ké urged.

Cask disappeared up the stairs as Ohacha, Rolena, and Gaba’ké collected what little they could carry and followed. The bells were more pronounced up above. Everyone in the city would be awake now. Cask came barreling back down the stairs at a breakneck pace and all three turned as he launched himself into the room.

“Somethings on fire” Cask announced in a huff. “Smoke all along the coast. Spirits, it looks to me like a damned invasion. I’d bet the bells are tolling for that.”

Gaba’ké shook his head. “Better to assume they know you’re all missing” he insisted. “We can’t stay here. We should go now while we have a chance. Grab what we can.”

Cask looked to Ohacha and the prince nodded. He too wanted to be far away from here. Ascending the stairs to his room, he looked around at the mess of clothes. Ceremonial outfits from Gaag mixed with summer clothes from Ayagiim and silks from Onera. The mess was a motley of places and times in Ohacha’s life. Each felt representative and impactful, yet none stood out as important. He had worn these clothes, but none felt important enough sacrifice for. In the end, he abandoned them all, sticking to the clean outfit he had chosen in last night’s darkness.

A knock sounded on the door and Gaba’ké poked his head in, “We have company.”

Gaba’ké disappeared before Ohacha had a chance to inquire further. A knock came from the front door and Ohacha peered down at the two figures dressed in dark clothes at the stoop. The doors opened, admitting them, and Ohacha rushed down, eager to know who had come and how Gaba’ké had known. The short round-faced girl Ohacha

recognized as Minoc's Aginjigaade. She wore a long skirt and a sash around her waste and shoulder. It was different, more colourful than her white guild robes. The woman next to Kuta was much taller and was dressed in similar clothes. It wasn't until she turned that Ohacha realized it was Sergeant Ashill. Ohacha met her gaze and Yuromi looked anxiously in his direction. *Something is wrong*. *More than just the tolling bells.* Her sour look made it obvious. Ohacha also couldn't also help but notice the eager way in which Cask ogled the spare sword on Yuromi's hip.

"Kuta" Gaba'ké announced. "It's a pleasure to have you with us today."

"We're ready" Kuta said. That was when Ohacha noticed the rucksacks.

"Thank you" Gaba'ké said sincerely. "Thank you for helping me."

"It was no trouble," Kuta said politely. "I am impressed with your success and relieved to see you back safe. I must admit to having concerns."

"What is she talking about?" Ohacha asked, interjecting. He stared at the young Aginjigaade suspiciously. "You sent him to retrieve us?" he asked.

Gaba'ké turned to face Ohacha. "I never told you. After I stormed out that morning Cask and I argued, I wandered the city to clear my mind." He exhaled and looked down at his still-bandaged stump. "Losing my hand," he continued, "it was unanticipated. After so many years, I foolishly thought myself immune. I never once fathomed finding myself crippled, but that's not the point I'm trying to make. I found myself frustrated and drunk at a winehouse. I woke up the next afternoon in an inn and stumbled my way back here. But, instead of finding you three, the house was empty. I just about panicked until Kuta showed up and told me what happened. She even told me where I might find you, right down to the cell blocks. Without her, I'm not sure I would have known what to do, let alone how to find you."

"Oh" Ohacha said in a disarming tone. "Well, thank you for that" he added awkwardly. "I think it is fair to say that we owe you our freedom, and perhaps our lives. I– we, we are truly grateful. If there is anything I can do…"

"There is something" Kuta said flatly, "and this is why Yuromi and I have come."

"Oh?" Ohacha said again, immediately apprehensive. *Played me like a drum.*

"We need a way out of the city" Kuta explained. "We wish to leave as soon as possible; a sentiment I expect that you share."

Ohacha looked to his trio for support. He could think of no reason to deny them. Even Rolena seemed unwilling to complain. "Of course," Ohacha agreed. "Consider it done."

"Good. We need to leave. Right now!" Yuromi announced eagerly.

"As in this very moment?" Gaba'ké asked. "We're not quite finished packing."

"Our window is closing" Kuta announced. "The fighting has begun. Soon it will spread through the entire city. Rebels and rioters have already entered the city. The guild soldiers will seek to drive them back. This will be a day of violence and blood and if we don't wish to be caught up in it, we need to leave right now." Yuromi nodded keenly in agreement.

Ohacha covered his mouth with his hand and reflected on this new information. "How long do we have?" he asked.

"It's best to assume we have none," Yuromi said. "Here" Yuromi added, presenting Cask her spare sword. It was unornamented; one of a thousand identical forged Casoyan blades and nothing like the curved Gaagian swords Cask loved. He beamed as he accepted the sword and examined its pommel and edge.

"Thank you," he said graciously. "Then let's not dally."

Gaba'ké hesitated, hard truths urging themselves to be told. He forced himself silent. He wanted to tell Yuromi about Elvi's last stand against Janos in the fortress and Kuta that Janos was the dual-affinitied Aginjigaade she had been hunting. But those truths were luxuries their escape couldn't afford. For Yuromi, the knowledge would only serve as a distraction and grief. There was nothing she could do now. But for Kuta, his concern was the opposite. She could and would act and that was what terrified him. *There will be an opportunity,* Gaba'ké assured himself. *Later.*

In less time than it takes to boil a kettle, they were out of the apartment and moving hastily through the streets. The city was drowning in noise. The bells no longer tolled a single tune but several as more bells echoed off the walls and suffocated the world in noise. Kuta and Yuromi led the way as the others lagged behind. Ohacha held his ears as they passed under a belltower. He was already tired and his heart was beating hard against his chest. He needed more time to rest and recover. They all did, but need drove them on anyway.

Yuromi carried her mother's sword at her hip, the blade hidden under a fold in her skirt. Rolena had her crossbow and Cask his new Casoyan sword, which left Ohacha with the assassin's long knife. He clutched it close as shouts echoed down a side street to their right. Two crowds were exchanging shouts and insults in a standoff. They looked like civilians, yet both groups were armed with crude weapons. A woman had pushed her way to the front and was screaming in the face of one of the armed men in outrate. Others tried to pull her back and deescalate. Ohacha didn't linger. But when her screams of hatred were replaced with screams of terror, he couldn't help but glance back to see her body fall as words failed. A tug on his sleeve pulled him reluctantly away as the scene turned ugly. Rolena met his eyes and, meeting his horrified look, shook her head no.

Further ahead, a squad of Casoyan soldiers turned down their street in haste. There were about twenty, each with shields and spears. They marched forward in more of a flood than a military line. People ducked away and fled at their approach. Doors were shut and latches were clicked. Yuromi, at the head of the group, funneled their group down a narrow alleyway at first sight to avoid crossing paths. The soldiers ambled past with little interest in the six bodies that disappeared into the shadowy alleyway.

The tight space was a mess of jumbled crates and junk left about discarded. The back street smelled of garbage and waste. There were empty bird cages, tattered woven baskets, and discarded vegetable boxes. As they pushed down the narrow passage, woodsmoke joined the cadre of scents. Both Kuta and Gaba'ké gave warning at the same moment and the group stopped abruptly. Ohacha looked ahead, but couldn't see much of anything. He caught the stray whiff of urine and winced. A cat scurried between his feet carrying a fish in its snaggle-toothed snarl. Whatever they had waited for passed and they continued onward.

They left the alleyway behind and hurried across one of the major avenues. Yuromi led and the rest followed. The smoke was thicker now that they were closer to the bay. Ohacha felt his throat growing dry and scratchy. As they crossed the street, Kuta and Gaba'ké stopped on the far side, their eyes glued southwards. Ohacha followed their gazes and saw the distant wall of people.

The mob postured down the street. They brandished weapons, smashing down doors and tossing cobbles and bricks through windows. Men in warpaint hurled rocks and insults at the few soldiers keeping their distance. Every so often, a warrior would break from the column and make a challenge those soldiers, beating their chests and snarling

with all their teeth. The entire column would cheer as the Casoyans retreated before their challengers. Only when a lone figure stood in opposition to the crowd did their advance slow. Like a wine cork holding back a river, the lone figure held its ground before the advancing mob. Several soldiers waited on the edges of the street with shields ready.

A bright flash of light made Ohacha cover his eyes. When he opened them again, fire was all that remained of the mob's front line. This wasn't the sort of fire that burned within a hearth or a atop a wick, but something hotter and more powerful; a true conflagration. Ohacha heard the crack and felt the distant heat on his face. Nothing remained in the blast area. The fire was snuffed almost as quickly as it appeared, leaving only dark ash between the lone Aginjigaade and the mob beyond the range of the explosion.

"We should leave" Kuta said hastily.

Something kept Ohacha rooted in place. Perhaps it was awe, or perhaps it was horror. The smell of smoke and char drifted on the wind. It was mixed with an unnatural spicy-smoky smell from the sorcery itself. Beyond, the rebels on the front lines scattered and then reformed ranks at range. The nearby soldiers pushed forward, shields raised and led the Aginjigaade away from the crowd. It was the right call as slingers and archers volleyed projectiles at the retreating Casoyans.

"They won't fall into that trap again" Gaba'ké said, tugging Ohacha away and into the next alleyway Yuromi, Cask, and Rolena were already halfway through.

"What… overwhelming power" Ohacha gawked.

"Nobody is infallible" Gaba'ké said. "I'd bet he's got two, at best three more of those in him before he passes out or drops dead of exhaustion."

"That was Kawaka" Kuta said quietly from Ohacha's side. He hadn't even realized she was there. "He's a flamer. Aginjigaade for the Banking Guild. We should stay clear."

"Why does the banking guild need an Aginjigaade like that?" Ohacha asked, incredulous.

"Would you try to steal from a man like that?" Kuta asked. "Each guild has at least one Aginjigaade. Most serve as protectors for their Patzau."

"What about Janos Tydana?" Gaba'ké asked carefully. Ohacha stared into Gaba'ké's eyes but the old Aginjigaade seemed intent. Ahead and out of earshot, Rolena and Cask still followed close behind Yuromi who squeezed into the next alleyway away from the fighting behind them.

Kuta trailed with Ohacha and Gaba'ké at her heels. "He's Aginjigaade to Yohati's guild…" Kuta said. She was nearly shouting over the tolling bells. "Why?"

"Has there been any bad blood between him and Elvi in the past?" Gaba'ké pressed.

"Janos isn't one for friends but…" Kuta said, peering over her shoulder. The shame on Gaba'ké's face made her freeze in her tracks. "Why do you ask?" she pressed, suddenly serious.

Gaba'ké hesitated a moment before speaking. "When I rescued Ohacha from the fortress, there were two Aginjigaade fighting atop the tower. One of the Aginjigaade was Elvi. I'm fairly certain the other was Janos."

Kuta blinked rapidly, her brows furrowed. "What do you mean when you say fighting?" she asked anxiously. Ohacha looked back and forth between the two Aginjigaade nervously. "How do you know it was them?"

“Kuta, I think he killed her” Gaba’ké said plainly. She opened her mouth to speak but he interrupted adding, “and I think Janos is the dual-affinity Aginjigaade you’ve been looking for.”

“What?” Kuta stammered.

“You told me one that you were looking for an Aginjigaade with two affinities. What affinity does Janos Tydana have?”

A series of emotions rolled across her face. “He… he has a light affinity” she answered. “He can’t be the one.”

“Is he fully aspected?” Gaba’ké asked. “Are they any others with the same affinity?”

“Yes and no” Kuta answered. “He’s the only one.”

“Are there any ice Aginjigaade in Caso?”

“Ice?” she repeated. “No. Not to my knowledge” Kuta said.

“Then that settles it. Janos was the one who attacked Elvi” Gaba’ké said. “His second affinity is ice, though I don’t yet understand where he was able to draw spiritual power from. Unless he carries some kind of totem or talisman I hadn’t noticed before.”

“You’re absolutely sure there wasn’t a second Aginjigaade there with him?” Kuta asked.

“No,” Gaba’ké admitted, “but sometimes you have to trust your instincts.”

“Stop!” Ohacha said, interrupting. “Why are we talking about Janos right now?”

Gaba’ké and Kuta shared an understanding look.

Kuta explained, “Life as a young Aginjigaade is perilous. It’s like giving an infant fire. Those lucky enough will stay warm; but most will fall in, not recognising the danger. Without a mentor to protect and guide you, few of us survive to adolescence. It’s rare to see an Aginjigaade live to adulthood on their own. My people call it *the curse*, because there are no Aginjigaade in the mountains. It is a death sentence. Which is why, as a little girl, my birth mother travelled across the island to Cabiya and left me to be raised by another woman—an Aginjigaade. Two years ago, my Aginjigaade mother was murdered. The killer was a Casoyan Aginjigaade with two spiritual affinities. I came to Caso to find and kill that person.”

“Janos is that Aginjigaade” Gaba’ké said. “But I cannot advise you go after him.”

“If what you have told me is true, then it is not a question of choice. I am compelled by love and bound by duty,” Kuta replied. “Not only for my teacher, but for Elvi. And for Yuromi and Yanata who loved her and were *her* family.”

“You can’t turn back,” Ohacha blurted out. “Its not safe out there. We can’t wait for you.”

“Nor should you” Kuta said. “I need to do this.”

Kuta broke off towards the city center without so much as a goodbye. Ohacha watched, dumbfounded, as the young Aginjigaade seemed to disappear into the smoky streets. Rolena, Yuromi, and Cask returned. Their cheeks were pink above the tears of fabric they used to shield their lungs against the smoke.

“What’s going on?” Yuromi asked. “Why did you stop and where is Kuta going?”

“Kuta has something she needs to do…” Gaba’ké said, not elaborating.

“What!? Now?” Yuromi grilled.

“And she will need my help if she is to succeed…” Gaba’ké said, the realization sweeping him as he spoke the words. “You four need to get to The Sweet Wind. Have the captain prepare the ship to leave. Kuta and I will catch up. I promise.” Gaba’ké followed Kuta into the haze.

"Where are they going?" Rolena asked, honing in on Ohacha as he stared blankly.

Ohacha turned and met Yuromi's gaze. His heart sank as he assessed the destructive power Gaba'ké's truth would bring. *Elvi was murdered. What would I do if I were her?* Ohacha knew the answer instantly. *I would run headlong into the chaos after them. I would chase a fight I'm ill equipped to handle because I want to be helpful. And like me, she would recklessly do the same despite the certainty that we would just make things worse*. In the end, he winced and kept the truth from her. Speaking it aloud would do more harm than help. He put his trust in the two Aginjigaade answering, "They'll catch up with us." He forced his feet forward. "Let's keep moving." Rolena opened her mouth to protest but a pleading look from Ohacha stressed that now was not the time.

They continued down the alleyway and turned out onto the main avenue. They blended in with others fleeing until a crowd ahead brought their pace to an awkward halt. People fleeing the south had bottlenecked against a battalion of soldiers crossing the bridge. Carts and palanquins were bogged against the sheer number of people pushing in all directions. The soldiers jostled across the bridge as those closest to them tried to move aside, but the people at the back shoved and surged the crowd until the entire crossing stood motionless.

Ohacha moved to join the crowd only for Yuromi to drag him out painfully by a hand on his shirt collar. "Don't go in there" she yelled over the noise. Ohacha more read her lips than heard her words.

"Why not?" he yelled back.

Cask and Rolena leaned in close to listen, "At best we get separated. At worst, we get trampled," Yuromi warned. "Those rioters weren't that far behind us. If they suddenly round that corner, this crowd will panic. People will die. Crowds can get ugly really fast."

Ohacha looked at the chaos unfolding. Ahead, a man hoisted his children, one-at-a-time, and surrendered them to the crowd. Arms hoisted skyward ferried the two children across the mob like ships on a sea of hands. Three men leapt over the canal railing to swim through the murky water to reach the other side. Others clambered atop boats and barges that moored along the canal walls. A larger barge careened into another boat and the crossers chancing their way atop both ships were tossed violently into the water below. It was the kind of crowd where you could jump and there would be no guarantee when your feet might hit solid ground again. *And she doesn't consider this an ugly crowd,* Ohacha worried.

"Where do we go then?" Cask asked, eyeing up and down the long canal. Patzau Palace loomed to the east. Even through the smoky haze, it glowed in the morning sun. Towards the bay, the mouth of the canal opened up to the sea and a taller arched bridge appeared equally as full of bodies. Cask made the call, "The bridge over there has a taller arch. No wagons or palanquins can cross it. That's our best chance."

Their group reached the arched bridge over the mouth of the canal and laboured the steep semi-circle of steps. The crowd was thicker here, but at least it was moving. By the time they reached the apex, Yuromi's nightmare came to be and the sound of mass panic erupted up the canal. The crowd at the bottlenecked bridge surged like a swell upon a rocky coast. People pushed in terror, abandoning their belongings, clinging only to the desperate hope of escape from the rampaging warriors. People leapt into the canal in greater numbers. The city soldiers, most trapped within the mass of bodies, were forced back; crushed and immobilized by the very people they sought to protect.

Ohacha coughed as the gritty taste of smoke and oil scratched at his throat. He was thirsty, but hadn't any water. In the bay, ships seeking to flee seaward became a tangled mess of ropes and oars and rigging as they collided with each other. Seamen fought to protect their ships and, when possible, douse the stray embers carried by the wind. Refugees clung desperately as a larger ship cast off, holding to the gunnels with white-knuckled grips as their feet were left dangling over the dark water. Those who tried to scramble aboard were knocked savagely back into the sea by the sailors above. Behind them, black plumes drifted skyward above charred staves and sailors battled the flames with buckets and desperation.

Ahead, Ohacha spotted The Sweet Wind where it remained moored in the main marina. Whoever was setting fires had yet to reach that far north, nor would they as droves of fleeing Casoyans flocked to the marina in hopes of gaining passage out of Caso. Ohacha scrambled down the arched bridge, pulling up the rear of the group. Rolena had waited at the bottom, while Yuromi and Cask pulled ahead, lost in the madness. As he and Rolena ran together, dark blood stained the cobbles where bodies had been slain along their path. They were a mix of soldiers and civilians and it seemed unfathomable that the violence behind them had reached this far into the city.

They traced the soft curve of the bay until the marina lay ahead. They were so close now, the number of steps to freedom shrinking with each stride. This was the place Ohacha had first come ashore in Caso, all those months ago. This smaller square led inland straight to the Great Auction House and beyond to the mountain gate and inland passes. In other words, this was a crossroads as those seeking safety inland fought against the tide of those seeking safety at sea.

Ohacha ignored the bitter taste in his mouth and the sweat dripping down his back and pressed onward, suddenly invigorated by the taste of escape. His legs and lungs burned from the effort of running. He wanted out. Away from this city of hellish nightmares. Away from his unravelling future. Away from the reminder of his failures.

And then he saw Bartiin.

Thoughts of escape crumbled like dust in the wind. Ohacha had imagined a moment like this a thousand times. An instance where he would come face to face with the man who had sworn himself to Gaag and destroyed it instead. The architect of his family's betrayal and destruction. Belvaas' right hand. Aramuk's murderer. Lord Kulimas's murder. Ander's murderer. Provis' murderer. The source of the endless fear and stalking assassins. An evil spirit in the flesh.

Ohacha didn't think; he moved. The world narrowed until it contained only a single blade and a single heart to drive it through. Exhaustion vanished. Time disappeared. The twenty paces between them shrunk to five. Ohacha roared. It was a sound of grief and hatred, purest of essence. Bartiin spun. Ohacha swung. The blade fell. Bartiin dodged. He swung again. Bartiin drew his own blade and parried. His voice was hoarse and desperate as he stepped in to take the next swing.

"I'll kill you!" Ohacha screamed.

Chapter 37: Emptiness

The ringing of the bells soured Burm's mood. Ever since taking his rightful place as Patzau, Burm found himself pulled in every conceivable direction. The tolling alarm bells were just another layer to the muck he found himself trodding through. It had started the moment he was appointed Patzau. The order had come from the council and yet he had been immediately met with opposition from within his guild's ranks. Perhaps, his ascent to Patzau had been swift in the wake of Yanata's removal but it was necessary. *And deserved*. None else amongst the guild's elite had necessary commanding experience to serve as Patzau in this troubled time. None of the strategists had ever seen real combat. They were daft if they believed a lifetime behind a desk qualified them to lead an army against these savages. Burm knew.

He knew how to defeat the tribal fools. He had lived amongst them. He knew their weaknesses. He knew these things and he had the tenacity to hold the guild together. That, and the right family connections. That was, after all, why the council had chosen him in the first place. It was why he had worked so closely with Patzau Yohati these past few years. Bypassing the established hierarchy was necessary when those above know only how to police the common peasants, not win a war.

Still, there had been many that had dared to voice their objections. More than he had anticipated. Some had been bought, their silence secured with simple coin. Those were the smart ones, simply playing the game to win in their own way. Others, like Elvi Batari, had chosen treason. Her loyalty to the old Patzau was her fatal flaw. Now she was dead. Suicide. *Better than she deserved for her treachery*. A loose end neatly handled, for which Burm felt no remorse. There were still others, those loyal to the old Patzau that needed culling. *Their time will come.*

A runner approached red-faced with a message from one of his officers. Messenger children followed him around like flies these days. Each time he left the fortress, they would hover around him like beggars. They had to scare the brats off to ensure their destination this morning remained discreet. The boy who approached now was young and big for his youth. He had a cocky confidence in his smile, as if he already knew he had done a good job.

"Message for you Patzau" the boy said, "from the South Gate."

"I can hear the bells" Burm said dismissively.

"The message is from Captain Rozi, sir" the boy said.

This piqued Burm's attention and he turned. Capu and Seer also stopped to listen in on their former squadmates message. Burm gave the two lads a sneer and they backed away a step, understanding the message was for him. "What is it?"

The boy drew in a deep breath. "She says, 'The southern gate fell to Mudtown soldiers early this morning, but she has since retaken the gate with a full contingent of soldiers from the fortress. However, scores of rioters from Mudtown entered the city

before they were able to close the gate and are wreaking havoc. She also wishes to tell you that a captured a warrior revealed that armed squads of Mudtown soldiers have snuck into the city to capture and kill key targets, including the Patzau. She believes the riots are just a distraction."

Burm snorted in derision. *Real threat,* he thought, repeating the phrase. *That seems hardly likely.* He dismissed the boy without a tip, an action that brought a scowl to the boy's face. At least he was smart enough not to grumble about it. Burm chewed on the message. The gate was already recaptured and closed. The warning about strike teams in the city was the most important piece of information, but Burm doubted the backwater Mudtown fools could manage to inflict any real damage to the city. They had barely managed to kill that Prince of Gaag. No, Burm wasn't worried. These people were beneath his concerns, simply a persistent annoyance. His soldiers were better trained, better armed, and more than capable of handling a few wayward fanatics. *It will be simple enough to mop up the lingering trouble makers after the riots have ended* and *the appetite for Mudtown's destruction will be strongest*. But Mudtown wasn't important. Not now. His gaze was fixed on a bigger threat.

With a hand-picked detail of his most loyal soldiers, Burm approached Ashill Mansion. He had come expecting a fight but the gates stood open and unmanned. No soldiers. No guards. No servants. The silence was off-putting. The Ashills and the Burms were old and prominent families, dating back even before the Patzau rebellion and the fall of the last Casoyan king. Families that were pivotal in that part of history. Burm walked through the unmanned gate cautiously. He had memories of this place from a lifetime ago. Capu and Seer led the way in he and the others took up the rear. All wore the heavy bronze plate rather than the salt-hardened cotton armour. As they approached the mansion, Burm couldn't help but observe just how lavish the structure was and how decrepit the grounds looked. The Ashill's were as old-money as it came in Caso. *And old things need die sometimes.*

The palace was quiet and opulent. A stark contrast to the normal tenements just beyond the private walls. Burm had been to countless dinner parties and balls at the invitation of other prominent families across the city but the Ashill's had always kept to themselves. His mother had always claimed it was because of the ill fortune the family seemed to suffer with unexpected deaths. Kida always claimed that the Ashill's simply thought themselves better than everyone else. Burm had to agree. Patzau Ashill considered herself above all the socializing and politicking.

As Burm stared up at the dark quarried stone and the intricate carvings detailed into the old building, he reaffirmed that belief. The door was unlocked and yawned open on silent hinges. The foyer was empty and the halls were quiet. Despite himself, Burm found one hand on his sword. Inside the wide octagonal foyer, a grand stairway up to a lavish indoor balcony. The stone inside was polished and shone with the pearlescence. Mosaic friezes decorated the floors, depicting sailing and other motifs common amongst the old houses of Caso. As they moved from room to room, the mansion remained silent and empty. Something about the building gave Burm the creeps. It had the feel of something once-great gone sour. Inside, there were signs of life that suggested Ashill had abandoned the place. That was until they entered the library and found her body.

"Spirits of death" one of the soldiers murmured. Burm ignored the unlucky curse. He stood over the Patzau's lifeless body. The knife used to kill her was still buried deep in her chest. There was wine and blood everywhere. It was hard to tell which stain was which. Both soaked the fine sofa in which she laid awkwardly broken.

"Well…" he said flatly, "not much of fight left in her then."

"Who killed her?" Seer said, looking around the room. "Couldn't have been a robbery, all of her fancy junk is still here."

"Do you think its like Rozi said," Capu added. "That the tribesmen got her?"

"They wouldn't have been able to resist the riches, greedy bastards" Burm said, willing the two soldiers to shup up. "No. She's been dead since yesterday. Take a look around the house. Somebody's been here and I want to know who."

The soldiers spread out through the house. He took a seat across from Yanata and stared at her lifeless corpse. A few minutes later, the soldiers returned with Kida. His friend came in with her head held high. She didn't even cast a glance at her mother's body. *Ah, well this is a surprise. I didn't think you had it in you.*

"Patzau Burm" Kida said, addressed him. She saluted. "How may I be of service?"

"We came to speak with your mother," Burm replied.

Kida looked the soldiers up and down before speaking. "You seem well armed for a simple chat. Not interested in whatever racket is sounding down at the south gate?" she asked.

"We were here to question your mother about the release of Patzau Minoc" Burm said, ignoring the question. "I suspect she freed him before she was removed by the council."

"Don't play coy with me Gal" Kida said, suddenly impatient. "I've known you since we were kids. You came to remove her from play. Arrest her and send her to the same execution block that Minoc was sentence to." The sour look on his face was enough confirmation. Kida snorted derisively. "Well, I've saved you the hassle. She freed Minoc. She confessed to it—was fucking proud of herself too, as if she weren't a fucking traitor. I handled it for you. Its done."

The bitterness in her words came as a shock. "You killed her?" Burm asked. He already knew the answer, but he needed to hear her say it. He needed others to hear her say it.

"I'm a proud Casoyan," Kida said, her voice flat, "and a proud officer of the guild. It is my duty to eliminate traitors and threats to Caso. I just wish I had caught Minoc first. I could have slit his throat too. Before he ever had the chance to corrupt her with his patronizing bullshit. Before he… drove her into these delusions." Kida met his stare, her eyes hard. "I've set things right."

A ripple of genuine unfeigned surprise passed over him. *Her own daughter,* Burm thought. He couldn't imagine himself finding the same strength if he were confronted with the same betrayal. She was remarkable. Admiration flooded him. He calculated his next steps. This wasn't exactly what had been planned, but he could work with this version of events. Especially with Kida's testimony, the kickback would be minimal and the proof would be more damning coming from Yanata's own daughter. This was much simpler. Cleaner. No need for a trial. And more significantly, there would be no need to cow the remaining loyalists. Without Yanata, there would be no figurehead to flock to. *My position as Patzau is undisputable, cemented by her treasonous death*. He smiled at that. Now there was only one last loose end to tie.

Burm's thought shifted to the next name on his list of problematic traitors, Patzau Minoc's Aginjigaade. The one that the fool Adagizhi let slip through his fingers. She and Kida's twin sister had assaulted a pair of his soldiers yesterday. The same sister who had listened in and revealed his recovery of the Auction House treasure. *She will need to disappear too.* He hadn't intended to bring up the matter with Kida, but her loyalties to

the guild seemed unquestionable considering recent circumstances. His opinion of her had improved. Besides, he didn't have to tell her his intentions. All he needed was her whereabouts.

"Kida," Burm said addressing her, "Have you seen your sister recently?" He was careful to keep his voice neutral. Her expression remained unreadable but something tensed within her at that name. With their history, it was impossible to know what the gesture meant to her.

"No," Kida lied, her voice unwavering. "Not for some time." She added, "Yuromi made friends with that stupid prince that lost his uncle and his fortune. Its just like her, to find another broken unwanted person. They'd be perfect for each other. People who could have mattered."

"Are they together?" Burm asked, pressing the matter. "A couple?"

"How should I know?" Kida asked. She hoped not.

Burm's gaze sharpened. There was a flicker of suspicion in his eyes. It disappeared as quick as it had come. "It's Minoc's Aginjigaade that I'm looking for. That little tribal girl he always had at his side. Kuta," he explained. "They were reportedly seen together."

But Kida, already one-foot into the lie, continued to maintain her deception. "I haven't seen her" she said simply. She felt no grief for her mother, whose weakness she despised, but neither did she feel any particular fondness for Yuromi. And so, it came as a surprise to her when she lied for her twin sister. Even Kida didn't understand the sudden, unbidden impulse.

Burm relented. "You did well, Kida" he said, a rare note of approval in his voice. "Sometimes, we are forced into impossible situations. It is the mark of a true and loyal Casoyan that you would choose to uphold our values; decency itself." He gave her a curt nod. "After the mess at the gates is remedied, find me. I will ensure your loyalty does not go unrewarded." Kida smiled at that and he saw the predator she was in her eyes. *I can use her. Her name. Her ambition. I see a weapon, ready to be used. All I need do is point her in the right direction.*

Burm left, soldiers at his heels. They marched through the hollow home, the sound of their boots echoing across the empty halls. The cacophony of bells joined them at the door. Gone was the tune for the South Gate. Gone was the semblance of information, of direction. Racket remained.

"Why didn't you press that Yuromi was seen with Minoc's Aginjigaade?" Seer asked as they marched through the garden. "She might also be a traitor like Patzau Ashill– er, Yanata."

"It doesn't matter if Kida knows her sister is a traitor" Burm said. "Yuromi be handled soon enough." He pushed his way out through the gate. People were running through the streets. A boy in the crowd ran straight into him. He staggered and then Burm pushed the boy to the ground out of his way. "Move" he ordered.

A woman collected the boy and Burm scowled at her as she hurried away. *Yuromi has her mother's propensity to cause trouble*. *Another threat to be removed when advantageous.* Dealing with her would also relieve that inner nagging feeling that ate away in the back of Burm's mind. Elvi had nearly revealed his misdealings with Patzau Yohati. There was only one person whom she might have learned it from.

*

Kida rushed from the room. She couldn't bare the sight of her mother's corpse. She told herself it was because she couldn't bare the reminder of her mother's treachery.

Kida rushed up her bedroom. She closed herself off, fighting against the tremors that shook her body. She raked her nails against her forearms, willing the pain to replace the shakes. Dry heaving sobs rushed to the surface. And when they slipped out, the anger within burst out savagely to punish everything breakable in proximity. Frustration ate at what little composure she had left. Lifting her illum stone lamp, Kida removed the stone within and hurled it across the room at a mirror on her wall. Both shattered and the illum stone exploded into a flurry of glowing particles that rose towards the high ceiling. Kida looked at her broken reflection in the mirror. *Why does my body betray me in this way? She got what she deserved.*

Her breaths came hard and deep. Silent sobs filled the silent mansion. No one remained. No servants. No guards. No gardeners or washers. No cooks or cleaners. Just Kida Ashill; last of a dynasty. Kida had heard her mother's conversation. The traitor had told Yuromi and Kuta to leave the city. She had practically begged. *Even Minoc's mountain whore was worth her care. But not me. I should have killed her too. And Yuromi. Each and every one of those filthy traitors*.

The muffled sounds of rebellion grew closer. Kida seethed and fumed as the city burned. She closed herself off, lost in her private torment. But the distant rumble grew steadily until it was a roaring tide. She rose in a stupor and peered through her bedroom window as a wave of people flooded into the grounds through the gatehouse. They wielded weapons, torches, and anger. They streamed towards the estate with vindictive purpose until they were almost at the front door. Kida stared, uncomprehending, and then panic replaced numbness. The will to live took control. Kida latched her door, and then, thinking better of it, toppled her clothes dresser down in front of the door too. Crashes and destruction echoed through the house. She hurried about the room, tossing more objects on the pile at the door. A rock crashed through her bedroom window and she let out a scream. The latch on the door jiggled on the other side. Kida snatched a pair of scissors and gripped it tight in her hands, as if it might save her. Shouts echoed from the other side of the door. Strange words and anger. Kida clutched the scissors close to her chest. Her hands shook, as did the door as a body slammed against it. The latch held, but for how much longer, Kida wasn't sure.

*

The tolling bells were more a nuisance than a concern to Patzau Yohati. He sat at his desk in his study and let them drone on. Today would be a difficult day. One of loss and tragedy. But a necessity for what was to come next. Yohati sat with absolute composure, surrounded by his family. They didn't share his relaxed comfort. To them, today's events would be disconcerting. If only they understood what this sacrifice was for. Instead, his wife and daughter lounged in the corner of the room and looked uncomfortable. Why? Yohati couldn't fathom. They were surrounded by a full company of soldiers. Yohati's guards, hand-bribed for their loyalty, defended every conceivable entrance. It was a private fortress; the most secure palace in the city and when Viiran's assassins came, he wanted to remain undisturbed. There was nothing more he could do for today; all Yohati could do now was plan for tomorrow. That, and document his actions for future generations to revere. All would know the tale of how Patzau Burrenal Yohati saved Caso.

A knock sounded from the door. The pattern matched the code. Yohati looked up from his musings and nodded at his most-trusted servants. They unlatched the door and received a wax tablet from a disembodied hand. It was brought to his desk. *Good*, Yohati thought to himself, *the ships must have been spotted.* He received the

message and read the carved words to himself. It was an update from the city watch, who had repelled an incursion from the North Gate. *No ships.*

Fera's voice bit into the silence. "Aren't you going to share what's going on, father?" Yohati set down his stylus and peered over the desk at his daughter. She met his gaze with a determined look. She continued, "Yesterday I thought you had gone mad. You wouldn't let me attend Jira Powanati's party and you wouldn't explain why. Now I understand why. You knew."

"Fera" Reah sat, trying to cajole her daughter into quiet obedience.

Fera's accusation hung there in the silence. She was right, of course. Yohati had known this was coming. Bribes can elicit all kinds of secret information, especially to the right people. He took a quiet sip from a glass of water before addressing her assertion, "I had some knowledge, yes, that suggested the rioters in Mudtown might make a fuss today" Yohati said dismissively.

"A fuss?" Fera repeated. "A fuss that requires a doubling of our guard?"

Yohati smiled at his daughter. She was wily like her mother, but tenacious like himself. It was easy to try as dismiss her as young and spoiled, and he had done so many times over the past few years, but tactful arguments like this cemented his pride in his parenting. "Do I look worried?"

She chewed on the question. "No," Fera answered. "But you could have told us."

"If my information was wrong, you might have told others and then there would have been a panic" Yohati countered. "Better to prepare silently and let the Soldier's Guild handle the problem if it comes. A good leader anticipates and prepares, but a great leader knows who and what to trust with full confidence. Caso will endure this trouble."

"It sounds like the rioters are already inside the city" Fera said. Reah remained quiet, but matched her daughter's concerned look. "The bells have been tolling madness for hours."

"All will be well" Yohati said in a soothing voice. "Help is on the way."

A second knock interrupted. The door opened for a second time and another message was presented to the servant. Yohati received it. Anticipation flickered in his eyes as he took the message. It was parchment this time, but that hadn't seemed odd in the moment of anticipation. So many different bits of news were expected today. Their arrival, Yanata's arrest, Viiran's capture. But as Yohati turned the scrolled parchment over, he noticed the wax on the letter remained unsigned or sealed, unmarked by guild, family, or crest. He broke the seal and swept his gaze over the words. As he read, his expression shifted from curious to concerned. The script, although unsigned, was immediately recognizable. Yohati's posture stiffened with his demeanor as he read on. The lines of his jaw tightened. The letter read:

Burrenal Yohati,

I write you these words from exile; a disgrace you so diligently orchestrated. Yet, even from this vantage point, clarity, it seems, remains a luxury denied you. Despite our history, let me impart some clarity one last time.

Treachery is unbecoming on you. Despite how clever and insurmountable you may feel in this moment, the truth of what you have done and what it has cost will be revealed. As I have learned, no secret remains so forever. My time alone following your betrayal rendered certain enlightenments. Looking back, it is clear that you spent years, if not decades, working to this end. I see it clearly in the path you walked, the votes you orchestrated, the schemes you enacted, and the fellow Patzau you manipulated. I expect, like me, they too will be removed when convenient.

You have sold your integrity and cast aside the Casoyan way, undermining the foundations of what the original five Patzau achieved after overthrowing the last Casoyan King. Like him, you will one day learn the error of your ways. You may parade your pragmatism as necessary, but in your deeds, I only see a grotesque vanity. You have sacrificed not just the lives and ways of our people, but the very essence of what made Caso successful and wealthy over the last millennia. You envision a new Caso. One in which you will build yourself a throne for your ambitions. A Kingdom like the one of old, built upon the ashes of prosperity and atop a foundation of greed and arrogance. I will not allow it.

Let this letter serve as my vow: I shall dedicate every fiber of my being to dismantling your new Kingdom of tyranny and oppression. Every lie you whisper will be exposed. Each person pushed aside and discarded will be avenged. My ghost will haunt you until your final breath. The new future you envision will be but a blip in the grand history of what once came and what will one day be. I will fight you until Caso breathes free once more, unsullied by your corrupt hand.

Your friend,

Mellen Minoc

Yohati stared down at Minoc's words and scowled. Not at the insults or the insinuations, but at the failure in which Mellen Minoc was allowed to escape. He cursed the mishap and Yanata's cowardly betrayal. Minoc's words felt like ash in his mouth. *The fat viper will be a problem now, and it will be a long and patient time before he reveals his fangs.* And yet, for all his intelligence and blustering, Minoc still failed to grasp the true scope of Yohati's ambition. He didn't yearn for a crown. He had been king of this city without one for decades. No, Yohati sought a far grander prize, a more secure mantle of power and legacy. He had orchestrated this very string of events for that very purpose, and Mellen Minoc underestimated just how impossible his declaration would prove to be.

The reveal of Minoc's pledged defiance soured the Patzau's mood entirely. The unfettered composure he had felt all morning, despite the bells and chaos, dissolved. It was replaced by a simmering rage. Reah, ever attuned to her husband's moods, sensed the subtle change in Yohati's silence. The nervous stillness in the study was replaced with an unspoken tension. The two servants also noticed their master's change. They watched him as Fera, ignorant of her father's temper, read the spines from the many rare books shelved across the walls. Reah furrowed her brow with delicate concern, before tentatively breaking the tense silence.

"Burrenal?" Reah asked, her voice feigning composure, "What was written on that letter?"

Yohati looked up at his wife, sitting comfortable across the room. He smiled, despite his inner turmoil. "Just a letter." he answered, evasive with the truth. "Nothing worth worrying about today, and certainly nothing I can't handle" he added with a smile.

He believed those words. *Nothing I can't handle. Minoc's ignorance renders his bluster meaningless.* He smiled again, trying to reassure the two women who meant most to him in this world. All they need do now was wait out the storm and wait for the soldiers to restore order. Then, the next phase could begin.

Chapter 38: The Council Chamber

Frenzied shouts and acrid smoke filled the air. Each streetcorner marked its own unique take on the violence and depravity that had overcome the panicked city. Gaba'ké ducked under a destroyed awning as a pair of looters on his right stepped through the wide hole where a display-window once welcomed merchants and customers. Now the ravaged storefront was a burnt shell of itself, its merchandise stolen.

Kuta ignored the looters. She ignored the panic and the ambient violence bleeding into the streets. Her single-minded focus remained on finding and killing Janos Tydana. Gaba'ké did his best simply to keep her in sight; not that he could truly lose her. That was the strange catch about being an Aginjigaade; hiding from one of their own was like trying to hide a tree in an empty field. Finding Janos hadn't taken long. It was simply a matter of looking for the right spiritual imprint on the world. They both knew its shape, and Janos wasn't hiding. He was high above the chaos in Patzau Palace. Right in the rotten heart of Caso.

Gaba'ké collided hard with a man running with a heavy travel bag, sending both men and the luggage crashing onto the cobbles. On instinct, Gaba'ké threw out both hands to break his fall. The problem was he only had one left and the raw stump at his wrist collided with the stones and a wave of pain tore through him. He didn't remember screaming, but the flinching faces of the crowd suggested he had. As he splayed out in the road, wincing, an unfamiliar face loomed over him and spoke in rapid unintelligible Casoyan. The stranger helped him out of the street. He had scraped his knees and cheek in the fall, but that was inconsequential compared to the sharp agonizing pain that radiated from the reopened wound where his hand had once been. Blood soaked the bandage in heartbeats. The stranger repeated the same apologetic sounding phrase until Gaba'ké shood the Casoyan and he disappeared into the crowd.

Gaba'ké sat in a daze. His mind, once free from the overwhelming pain, slid back to his anxieties; to Kuta. Frantic worry gnawed at him. He saw her resolve. He recognized the rage and determination. It was a passion he understood, one he knew well enough to fear. Now he wouldn't catch her. Not in time to stop her, to dissuade her, to protect her, to help her. He feared the very real possibility that he had sent her to her death; straight into a fight she wasn't ready for. But just as real was the fear of what might happen should she succeed, like he had. But as he looked up, ready to rise and try again, she was there before him.

"Kuta" he said, surprised by her appearance.

"What happened?" Kuta asked, staring at the bloody stump and the scrape across his cheek.

"I fell" he said plainly. "You came back."

"Why are you following me?" she demanded. There was a look in her eye that Gaba'ké couldn't pinpoint. It was as if she were angry, or sad, or hurt but none quite matched the complex expression on her face.

"I thought you might need my help" Gaba'ké said, standing straight. His arms felt weak. There would be dark bruises on his skin tomorrow. Kuta remained silent. Gaba'ké quietly added, "I wanted to try to stop you from going."

She raised her voice, the anger bubbling up to the surface. "To stop me?" Kuta scolded. "You don't understand anything!" she snapped. "He murdered her! He took her! I was fifteen!"

Gaba'ké's voice faltered, unable to articulate his own fears. "Revenge takes more than it gives, Kuta," he pleaded. "You think I don't understand, but I do. You can't see it now, but it will consume you."

"You think you understand me but you don't!" Kuta seethed. Tears welled in her eyes, "You don't understand what they've done to us."

"Then help me understand!" Gaba'ké pleaded.

"You don't know what these monsters have done to us" Kuta said. "Growing up as an Aginjigaade is dangerous enough, but the Guilds have been culling us for decades. My people. Our Aginjigaade. Our children! They've been sending their own, people like Janos, across the island to pull the weeds. They find us and make sure that we can never become a threat to Caso. They've been doing it for generations, Gaba'ké."

"Tell me about her" Gaba'ké said, "the woman who raised you. The Aginjigaade he killed."

Kuta frowned. "Her name was Hiri. She wasn't my birth mother…" she spoke slowly. Gaba'ké listened, knowing not to interrupt, "but she raised me. She was wise and kind. She was my teacher, my mentor. When I started showing signs of the curse, my mother took me away from Caso and across the mountains. She carried me, an infant, all the way to Cabiya. She found Hiri and Hiri raised me. She taught me how to protect myself, especially from myself, and how to understand the world that only we can see. And then…" she trailed off.

"…he murdered her" Gaba'ké finished.

Kuta nodded, tears streaking down her cheeks. "I wasn't there. I wasn't there to help her; to protect her. I could have helped her. I should have been there!"

"You're not being fair to yourself" Gaba'ké soothed. "You can't live your life carrying the burden of what might have been."

"What do *you* know?" Kuta sobbed. "How can you say that?"

"Because I have been that man" Gaba'ké replied calmly. "I see my own failures reflected back at me everywhere I go. I've spent most of my older years trying to protect others from the mistakes I made. It's why I don't think you should face Janos. But, it's also why I won't stop you. If you know the cost and think facing him is righteous, I'll trust you and be right there by your side. For you, and for Elvi. And for all the other people he's hurt. But *only* if you think its right."

Kuta sniffled and wiped away tears. "You would fight him with me?"

He nodded. "I would."

"But you don't even know me."

"That's true" Gaba'ké admitted. "But that doesn't change the fact that I think helping you is the right thing to do. The weight of the world can never be carried on one back alone."

Kuta stewed on those words. People ran past in panic. Eventually, she found the courage to ask the question she had been pondering. “What did you mean when you said we’re *that* man?”

Gaba’ké sighed and smiled bitterly. “Like you, I couldn’t protect somebody dear to me,” Gaba’ké admitted, his voice small. “I believed that having power meant the same as being invincible. And I wasn’t ready for the moment that belief was proven false. In my grief, I got angry and made impulsive decisions—decisions that made things worse, rather than better. I lost my grasp on what little remained, the things that mattered. Most of my life passed me by and I missed it. I found myself an old man before I found any healing. Grief, anger, vengeance… they feel like fuel but they burn too hot and leave you empty.”

“We’re not the same” Kuta grimaced.

“I never said we were the same,” Gaba’ké said defensively. “Only that I’ve felt similar pains and sought similar vendettas. Anger consumed me, and it took a long time to understand that it was just a symptom of the powerlessness I felt. If I had a second chance and knew what I know now, I wouldn’t walk that path. I don’t wish for you—or Ohacha—or anyone to walk that path. It is the path of self-destruction.”

“Then what changed?” Kuta asked, her eyes pleading. “How did you find healing? How did you rebuild after everything was taken from you? How do you choose between two impossibilities?”

“The hard truth is that I can’t answer that” Gaba’ké said with a bitter sigh. “For me, it was finding new ways to love, rather than hate, and that took time. But for you, or someone else, another path may be offered. I ran away from my problems. I ended up in Gaag and found work with Ohacha’s grandfather, the old King. He accepted me into his home, knowing I was a broken man, and he never tried to fix me. But he treated me with the dignity and respect I had lost for myself.”

“Would you be disappointed in me if I said I still needed to face him?”

Gaba’ké chuckled ruefully. “No. All I need to hear from you is that you think facing Janos is both right, and wise. If you can do that, I’ll follow you up there and fight at your side.”

Kuta thought about it and then nodded in affirmation. “I can’t say with certainty that it’s wise, but I know its right.” She pulled him back to his feet.

Gaba’ké dusted himself off, then said, “Lead the way.”

*

The grand façade of the Patzau Palace was remarkably untouched in the panic and chaos. The doors to the palace, wide enough to invite large wagons and great beasts, remained closed. Those fleeing the rampage and riots to the south seemed to avoid the large building in their flight north across the canal. The palace, usually adorned with ceremonial guards and soldiers felt naked without their presence. Something was amiss. Kuta and Gaba’ké approached the grand domed building without any trouble. They climbed the steady steps up to the entrance and approached the smaller reinforced doors reserved for foot traffic.

Gaba’ké felt the activation of Kuta’s sorcery. So close, he could feel her willpower focused on the spirits around them. The barred door opened as if recognizing her right to enter. He expected soldiers on the other side. He was wrong about which side they would belong to. Six warriors, each armed with spears and shields, jolted alert and pointed weapons in their direction. They wore no guild armour or crests. Instead, they were covered in war paint and their shields and spears were adorned with beads and feathers.

The rebels have already taken the palace, Gaba'ké realized. *I underestimated them. The Casoyans have underestimated them. But then why is Janos here of all places?*

Kuta stepped forward and addressed the six men. She spoke with confidence of an equal. They listened. Gaba'ké felt their eyes measuring his presence but they lowered their weapons as Kuta walked in. Gaba'ké followed as promised. Without any assistance, the large wooden door closed behind them with a heavy creak. It clicked as the metallic bolt once again slipped into place.

Inside, the space expanded into a vast hall, dominated by colossal square pillars that supported a magnificent barrel-vaulted ceiling. Balconies lined the margins of the space and peered down over the grand hall between the domineering columns. Portals lined the walls on both floors, leading unseen chambers and offices. At the far end of the hall, a great archway marked the passage into the central atrium, where the palace intersected to form a massive cross. Kuta hastened towards the nexus. In the center of the palace, stairs beckoned skyward to where Janos waited.

Gaba'ké frowned. He could sense the agindan above them. It felt like Janos, yet his being here felt wrong. *Perhaps he has hidden himself from the rebels. Or perhaps he has barred himself behind a door.* Kuta must have shared his feelings, for she too looked troubled as they ascended. As they crested the long staircase, they stopped just outside an ornate door.

"This is the Patzau's Council Chambers" Kuta said nervously. She hesitated at the door. Voices echoed from inside, loud and angry. "He's in there."

Gaba'ké held his breath. *No guards at the door. No signs of struggle at all. Perhaps the rebels had captured him?* "I'm right here with you"

Kuta pushed open the door and Gaba'ké entered and surveyed the strange scene. The council chamber was a large oblong room with tall narrow windows. The walls swept dramatically upward into a great vaulted ceiling, from which hung a large chandelier adorned with soft glowing illum stones. In the center of the room, an ornate circular table was ringed with eight equidistant wooden chairs. Janos stood on the far side of the room. At his feet cowered a man. The stranger was mountain-born and wore a sleek looking military uniform that might have suggested power had he been standing and unbloodied. He looked as if he had taken a beating and a glance down at Janos' knuckled confirmed it. The bruises and blood across his face subtracted from the visage.

Opposite Janos were two men with their backs to the door. The first was a massive man, clad in armour. His blood stained clothes and weapons emphasized his severity. He looked more like a butcher than a soldier. The axe in his hand showed signs of extensive use. At the butcher's feet knelt a plump man whom the butcher clutched by his lavish shirt-collar. He was clearly somebody of wealth, but it was only as the plump man turned to face them that Gaba'ké recognized him as one of the eight Patzau. The man was Patzau Adagizhi of the Resources Guild. Terror filled the soft man's eyes. The butcher was shouting across the room at Janos, though Gaba'ké couldn't understand the words. Janos held the butcher's man, and the butcher held Patzau Adagizhi. They had interrupted what was, evidently, a stand-off.

All turned as they entered. Gaba'ké expanded his agindan sense outwards in a bubble of consciousness. Kuta's agindan joined his and they filled the room until theirs pressed against Janos', like fighters testing reach, or rams squaring horns. Janos held his own against their combined probing mental strength. They could feel the impressions of one each other's consciousnesses. Kuta's spirit was steadfast in its resolve. She embodied determination. Janos' spirit was different. It embodied desire. A yearning. Hunger

perhaps. The clash of wills happened in a mere instant. As far as the other two men in the room were aware, nothing had happened. And yet everything was laid bare at once.

Patzau Adagizhi's face lit up. He looked pitiful and tears came as he began to beg. A harsh yank from the butcher silenced him, but the big man turned to face the newcomers. The butcher's face twisted into a smile and Gaba'ké stared at the hawk-nosed face with a profound, icy dread blossoming from the pit of his stomach. The face, unmistakable, was a ruin of gore and scars and blisters. Uncertainty faded like mist before the sun as Gaba'ké recognized the hawk-nosed butcher. He was the man that had scouted Yohati's estate and murder him in the street the day of the Auction House attack; Bartiin's local attack-dog.

The desire for vengeance rekindled as if the fire within him had never been snuffed. Gaba'ké reverted to a part of him he had kept buried for decades. The part that yearned for justice and retribution, and would claim it at any cost. It was a visceral feeling and Gaba'ké, already primed for violence, acted on instinct. He wouldn't let this man escape a second time. He reached out and channeled power. And in that frenzy, he overlooked the triumphant satisfaction plastered across Janos Tydana's face.

*

Kuta entered the room with Gaba'ké at her side and froze. Janos stood on the far side of the room with Viiran at his feet, bloodied and bruised. More shocking was that Yoharum stood across from him, as if an equal. In her cousin's study hands was Patzau Adagizhi. He was in poor shape. Yoharum was shouting at Janos. "If you kill him" he threatened, "I'll kill Adagizhi and you next! My revenge will be swifter than a summer storm! Your deaths will serve as payment for countless years of injustice…"

Patzau Adagizhi spotted her and begged for his life. Yoharum yanked the Patzau back by his collar, forcefully silencing him. The shift in attention was enough to draw her cousin's eye away from his enemy. There was a dangerous look on Yoharum's face. His teeth were snarled like a beast's. The blood and burn marks made him resemble a demon; frightening, even to her. She who knew him like a brother. Insurmountable hatred and rage were all that seemed left. For the first time, she saw him as the violent warlord her uncle saw within his son.

He turned to her with that rage on his face, but as they locked eyes, his anger dulled. The savage snarl disappeared as the spark of recognition and kinship replaced the odium. In that moment, she saw the same boy she had grown up with as a child. Even without an agindan spirit, Kuta could sense his inner being. There was a bond between them, one of kin; family. Somewhere in there, he was the same kid that had eagerly brought her along to catch frogs and chase wild hens. He was the same boy who led her out of the house with an uplifting smile when her mother closed the door to hide her tears. It would be that brief look on his face, the one devoid of the anger and hatred, that would stick with her in the years that followed. It would also be her last.

A blur of speed raced past with sickening speed. It left only a headless corpse towering above a blood-splattered Patzau Adagizhi. A frightening crash sounded as whatever shot past exploded noisily against the wall. Kuta blinked and the world changed. Yoharum was dead. Dust and debris rained outwards and the room went still. Kuta stared, uncomprehending. Adagizhi whimpered; Yoharum's blood had splattered across his face and his fine clothes. Her cousin's headless figure stood there for what felt an impossible amount of time until slumping onto the polished tiles with a heavy thud.

"Oh! Thank you!" Patzau Adagizhi whimpered into the silent room. He crawled forward on his hands and knees to where Kuta stood frozen. "Thank you both" he added,

taking her hand while on his knees. “If you two hadn’t come… that brute would have killed me. Thank you, thank you!” Kuta looked down at Patzau Adagizhi with disgust. She pulled her hand out of his clammy grasp. He continued to ramble, ignorant of her feelings. “I knew you were one of the good ones, Kuta. Janos!” Adagizhi hollered, hoisting himself up onto his feet, “Janos, kill that mongrel you’ve got there and let’s get out of here. I’ll reward the three of you handsomely for this. Janos!”

Janos didn’t move. He held Viiran tight in his grasp, but he didn’t come at Adagizhi’s call.

Kuta blinked. Later, she would recognize that it was the shock of the moment. She had too many thoughts flowing too fast to comprehend; like a cupping a hand into a waterfall and hoping to draw out a drink. She didn’t even remember killing Adagizhi. All she remembered was the overwhelming grief and how thoroughly it mixed with her anger and hurt. And in all of those feelings, Adagizhi had reminded her at exactly the wrong moment why she loathed the man. He had betrayed her twice already. He betrayed Minoc. He was a fervent enemy opposed to everything that made Kuta who she was. But worse than all of that, he was shameless. She knew he would go on pretending. Act as if he had never said all those terrible things about her people. About her.

In the end, the Patzau signet on his finger was the death of him. It was made of gold and bent easily to her will. Patzau Adagizhi still wore the look of surprized triumph on his face as he dropped to the floor dead next to Yoharum’s corpse. The happiness on his face troubled her. She regretted letting him die with a smile. It was better than he deserved.

Gaba’ké’s demeanor metamorphized. His spirit changed from an unshakable mountain, unyielding and protective, to that of molten earth and its all-consuming rage. His power was terrifying and it was hard to imagine the old man she had helped to his feet back on the streets was the same man capable of this power and fury. The old Aginjigaade turned his attention to Janos, who remained snickering across the room. Kuta bore into Gaba’ké with her own hurt and rage. She drew power but stayed her hand. *How do I choose between two evils. The one killed my master. The other my cousin.*

His spirit flinched at her grief. “When this is over,” he implored, “you and I can resolve the hatred you have for me in this moment. But only after we face Janos. Not now. Not while he still lives.”

Kuta’s fingers twitched. She sensed the silver necklace at his collar, the pewter buttons on his coat. With a single pulse of her affinity, she could skewer him the same way she had Adagizhi. He had sworn to help her. Instead, he had murdered Yoharum. There was a desperate desire to rage at him for it. Every fiber of her being screamed for it. *Kill him, and Janos next! Kill all the traitorous bastards!*

“I didn’t know,” Gaba’ké rasped. His eyes remained fixed on Janos ahead. “Not until it was too late and I felt that part of your spirit tear away with his. I don’t know who he was to you, but he killed Aramuk. He took my oldest friend from me. And I am sorry.”

“He was my cousin.” The words fell from her lips, lifeless.

“I didn’t know”

“I grew up with him,” Kuta stammered. Breath didn’t seem to come. Emptiness formed in the pit of her stomach. “Before I left for Cabiya… before Hiri. We used to chase wild hens…”

“You were close.”

"Once," she replied after a suffocating silence. His blood splattered the floor. "We were close once. We made different choices… and we had different choices made for us."

"Kuta!" Gaba'ké's voice cut through the fog. He had been repeating her name before she finally blinked. She looked up at him, her mind glossy. Janos seemed to be enjoying this strange turn of events. Kuta squeezed her eyes shut and willed the world to move on without her. It didn't.

Janos spoke from across the large chamber. "Gaba'ké of Ayaan. I never thought to expect you here of all places and times. Where is your little princeling? Not gotten himself killed, I hope. Shouldn't you be at his side like the loyal dog you appear to be?"

"Funny, I was going to ask you the same thing about Yohati" Gaba'ké replied.

Janos' face remained emplaced and his voice cold, "Yohati and I have a mutually beneficial partnership. We both get what we want."

"That's precisely what all loyal dogs think," Gaba'ké goaded.

Janos scowled. "It's the other way around. Yohati is the tool I use to get what I want!" he snapped. "These are *my* plans now fruiting. I will be the one to come out on top."

"Unless I kill you today" Kuta said emotionlessly.

Janos cocked his head in interest. Suddenly he was directly in front of her face and his close proximity startled her. "You sound mighty confident, child." Janos's voice seemed to echo around the large room. It felt as if it came from everywhere and nowhere all at once, icy and cold. "How did you expect to barter for your dear Viiran's life now that you've killed Adagizhi? It's hard to have a rebellion without your precious leader."

"It's just an illusion" Gaba'ké's said reassuringly.

Kuta heard his voice and focused only on Gaba'ké, ignoring the uncomfortable presence that she knew wasn't really there. "I've not come here for Viiran" Kuta answered. "I'm not with the rebellion. You can threaten him all you like. It won't save you."

Janos' illusion dissipated and he was once again opposite the large stone table on the other side of the room. "Oh?" he said, taunting. "Not with the rebellion? No love for your own people? I have your blessing to kill him then?" he asked, gesturing to a desperate looking Viiran at his feet.

"Viiran is dead" Gaba'ké said. "He was dead before we ever entered the room."

Janos' wicked smile widened. "Oh, thank goodness" he said, letting the illusion drop. His hands were smeared with blood. "You know, I killed the poor man right in front of Yoharum and he couldn't even tell I'd done it. Remarkable, how invisible the world is to those too blind to see."

"I don't want to hear it!" Kuta demanded.

"Fair enough" Janos said with a shrug, "I suppose then, based on what has transpired, that you came here to murder poor old Patzau Adagizhi in retribution for trying to have you branded as a traitor. It's a shame about what just happened with your cousin. Although, it is strange that you never mentioned to your friend Gaba'ké that you knew your cousin was the one who killed his prince and stole their fortune. That's a cruel secret to keep from a friend, don't you think?"

Gaba'ké frowned and cast a quick glance in Kuta's direction. Kuta opened her mouth to protest but couldn't bring herself to speak.

"Is that true?" Gaba'ké asked. She could tell by his face that he knew the answer.

It *was* true. She hadn't told him. In protecting Yoharum, she had betrayed Gaba'ké's kindness. And in leaving that truth unspoken, Yoharum was killed for it. Regret filled her. *What if there had been a way? Had I trusted him, would Yoharum still be alive? Is his death my fault? I could have trusted him. He's always been kind, hasn't he?* But then she remembered the swift ferocity of Yoharum's death and questions that thought.

"Of course, its true" Janos taunted. "Kuta here is quite the little secret keeper. She's been privy to all kinds of information she hasn't deemed worth sharing with those who need it most. Isn't that right, Kuta?"

Kuta met Gaba'ké's disappointed gaze and spoke plainly, "Yes, its true. I knew Yoharum was one of the men who tried to kill you, who killed your prince. I found out after it had happened."

"You didn't know before hand?" Gaba'ké asked.

Kuta shook her head. "No. Only after. I didn't tell you because it didn't matter anymore. Yoharum lost your fortune when his masters betrayed him to cover their tracks. Every man who killed your prince is dead."

Gaba'ké stared back with an unreadable look. His lack of expression made her feel worse, somehow. "Thank you for being honest with me" Gaba'ké said. He turned his gaze back on Janos, who looked delighted with himself. "I have two questions for you as well, Janos. Promise me you'll answer them."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because, if I like your answers I won't try to kill you. I'll leave."

"Go on then" Janos said.

"Why did you kill Elvi?"

Janos seemed taken-aback. "I don't know–"

"Don't lie to me. I was there." Gaba'ké said. "You attacked her on the roof."

Janos' brows furrowed. "You were there? I doubt that. I would have sensed you."

"I was there," Gaba'ké assured him. "In addition to your illusions, you control an ice affinity. How else could I know these things?"

The Casoyan Aginjigaade seemed to chew on those words for a moment. Instead of answering, he asked, "Was that before or after you lost your hand?"

"After. You're avoiding my question."

"I killed her because she was in my way…" Janos answered. "Now, I'd like to know how the impervious Stone Aginjigaade lost himself a hand?"

"You promised two answers," Gaba'ké replied. "For my second question, I like to understand how *you* came to learn that Kuta's cousin was one of the men hired to kill Aramuk and Ohacha?" Janos mouth shut tight. The silence that followed was remarkably informative.

Kuta's eyes widened as she made the connection, "You knew!" she shouted. "You knew about the plot!" She blinked rapidly, her mind racing. "You were the one working with the Careyago Ambassador. You used Burm to clean up the evidence!"

Suspicions confirmed, Gaba'ké began putting the pieces together himself. "And since the dog told us who his master was. Yohati also knew. He knew there would be assassins waiting for us. He planned for it. You used your illusions to hide those thugs in the shadows the day of Aramuk's death. You helped them try to kill us. To kill me. You and the Careyago Ambassador crippled us, stole our fortune, and setup the crackdown in Mudtown all in one fell swoop."

"You were more resilient than I expected" Janos admitted. "I altered you senses and then that weakling wax-witch waved her agindan at you and you swatted her away

like an insect. Then, you survived the hired killers and I knew right then and there that you were the prize I have been waiting for. *You* are what I get out of all of this. Both of you are my prizes. Best of all, you came to me willingly."

"I don't understand" Kuta muttered. "You want to fight us? You want to determine which of us is the strongest Aginjigaade?"

It was Gaba'ké who answered. "No. I understand now. He wants to add our power to his."

Janos smiled coldly. It sent shivers down Kuta's back. "He can do that? Is that possible?"

"There is a way" Gaba'ké said. "He would need a third affinity. Am I right, Janos?"

A slow clap echoed through the expansive chamber. Janos held his gaze steady and answered, "Colour me impressed, Gaba'ké. People always speak highly of Ayaani Aginjigaade but I must admit, I am enthralled with the depth of your knowledge. What other great secrets did they teach you? And how did you hide yourself from me?"

"I wish you could have studied there," Gaba'ké remarked, "you'd never have become this."

"I still don't understand," Kuta said anxiously.

"Janos has a third affinity," Gaba'ké said simply, "not just two. On top of his light and ice affinities, he's a siphon…. A spirit sucker."

"A siphon?" Kuta asked.

"It's one of two very rare abilities" Gaba'ké explained. "Linked to spirits of vitality and spirits of decay: Amplification and Siphoning. Amplifiers can boost an Aginjigaade's power. Siphons can steal power from other Aginjigaade to make themselves stronger, though I've never heard of the effects being permanent."

"That's because an Aginjigaade who's power has been siphoned regains their siphoned power over time. The cup refills" Janos explained. "But… a dead Aginjigaade…"

"Then with Hiri…" Kuta trailed off.

"Yes," Gaba'ké said, "and maybe with Elvi too. And likely many more before them."

"I have always volunteered to silence undesirable Aginjigaade. Especially those nasty little seedlings from your people, Kuta. To this day, Yohati remains none the wiser to my true intentions. And, Aginjigaade are known to disappear from time to time in Caso" he boasted. "There are many wealthy benefactors from across the world. Leaving a patron is not unheard of." He smiled impishly. "But I wouldn't worry about any of that now. You should worry about me!"

Janos' consciousness, still pressed against theirs, exploded outwards. It felt as if the weight of the sky pressed down on Gaba'ké's mind and yet his first instinct was to protect Kuta from Janos's sudden and powerful attack. He rushed to her with his physical body and put himself between Janos' overwhelming strength and Kuta's still blossoming power. The pressure against his mind was at a degree of agindan power Gaba'ké could barely fathom. He felt, for the first time in a long time, remarkably insignificant. It was everything Janos could muster and it took red-faced strain to keep the Casoyan from crushing them both right then and there.

Shielded from most of the onslaught, Kuta recovered and channeled. The metal pins she kept in her hair and sleeves shot out towards Janos like invisible missiles. They struck the place where Janos stood and pierced his body. Yet he didn't react to their deadly touch.

"He's… not… there." Gaba'ké strained to get out the words, fearful that any escape of breath might collapse his strength to Janos' conscious battering.

The agindan onslaught ended as quick as it had come and Gaba'ké found himself wheezing for breath despite his instinct to remain vigilant. He fought against his own body's convulsive urge to recover, knowing Janos was already moving for his next attack. Ignoring exhaustion, Gaba'ké pushed his consciousness outwards, searching for the right spirit. Power, his power, spread out and overwhelmed the numerous stone spirits imbued in the polished floors, table, and walls until he found the one he was looking for. He channeled. Gaba'ké felt what the stones felt, as if they were an extension of his skin. The wave of vibrations expanded outwards rapidly, a hurried heartbeat spent on feeling each polished stone tile. One by one, Gaba'ké felt for Janos, the real Janos. Not the one on the other side of the room that had ignored Kuta's attack. The real one, who stepped with real weight that could be felt if not seen. The one just a few short paces from where Gaba'ké and Kuta sheltered.

Invisible, but not undetectable, Gaba'ké mused. *I'll have only an instant before he's in reach.* He released the spirit, knowing it would once again render Janos invisible to him, but confident he would have the time to react. He searched for the same spirit he had used against Yoharum.

But Gaba'ké had gravely misjudged Janos's plan when he'd sensed him drawing near. *He's out of reach,* he had assured himself. He miscalculated. Janos materialized before him in a terrifying flash. He *was* out of reach for a man attacking with sword or bare hand. Janos had neither. Instead, a long crystalline spear of ice formed in his hands and grew outwards towards him. Gaba'ké found his desired spirit too late. Janos thrust the spear of ice forward. Gaba'ké's reacted instinctually, switching spirits to harden his skin against the blow aimed at his exposed chest. But Janos's attack twisted upwards to Gaba'ké's face. He was vulnerable as the crystal tip speared into his left eye.

Chapter 39: Vengeance

Yoharum's mountain soldiers moved covertly through the panicked crowd, protected by the privacy chaos permitted. Blending in was easy in guild uniforms. They waited as a contingent of Casoyan spearmen marched past, heading south. Bartiin looked for his exit but a tug on his arm suggested the moment had vanished. He was corralled with the other warriors across the marina square in a deliberate and unhurried rush. Of the original sixteen warriors and Bartiin, only seven remained. Yoharum had left. Two women and a man had died in skirmishes with soldiers, but most had been separated and abandoned. Unity was a luxury afforded to those who could keep up.

They continued inland through the crowds. What they intended to accomplish further with six tired warriors, Bartiin couldn't guess. Soldiers were everywhere now and each time they passed, Bartiin feared the moment the ruse faltered. Behind them, the Auction House towered over the neighbouring blocks. It stood indomitable. Opposite the grand structure, remains of what had once been a market littered the cobbled streets. Broken and empty stalls stood like skeletons of forest after fire. The shops around the square hadn't yet been damaged or looted, but that would change soon. People flooded north, escaping the carnage and chaos of the south.

And then the moment came. A stranger collided with the warrior who had been leading Bartiin and the man fell. Bartiin was unhanded. The others were separated by the tide of the crowd. Bartiin saw the warrior on the ground. He was down and the crowd was trampling him. Another person stepped on him and he winced, reaching his hand up for help. Bartiin looked at the outstretched hand, met the warrior's pleading gaze, and ran.

Bartiin pushed through the crowd, trying desperately to fly. He could still make out the ships in the harbour. The tallest and proudest among them stood as his guide to freedom. He ducked and pushed through the desperate mob. He came out the other side along the wide harbourfront. Desperate and panicked, people crowded each ship at berth pleading for a place aboard. Sailors loaded their ships with a frantic hurriedness. Others fought off the desperate mob. Bartiin looked around. Freedom was at hand. He just needed a ship. A Careyago ship. There had to be one. He searched the docks, looking frantically for any sign.

A sound caught his attention. It was a bit like his name and Bartiin turned, expecting one of Yoharum's warriors. It wasn't. A young man was rushing at him. A glint on the blade's edge in the morning sun was his only warning. Decades of training kicked in. He dodged the sudden strike. Bartiin blinked in vague comprehension. *Evade. Defend. Gaagian. Angry.* He had his own weapon in his hand in a flash. He raised it to meet the boy's blade. Metal clashed on metal and it rung clear. The force of the smaller heavier blade brought painful tingles to his fingertips. Had he been a fraction slower, the stranger's weapon would have cleaved his skull in two.

"I'll kill you!" the young man roared.

The boy swung again, the style unmistakably familiar. Gaagian. The blade, however, was not. Shorter and without a curve, the weapon was ill suited to the style. The boy's attacks also lacked finesse. They were raw and visceral. Obvious in their killing intent. Bartiin's own blade felt clumsy in his hand. It was a Casoyan sword. Straighter and heavier than he was used to. He parried another, and then a third strike. The boy was older than Bartiin expected. He had his mother's thin features but his father's stubborn expression. Ohacha Krimas raised the strange blade in threat. *Not a Casoyan weapon, that one*. There was a lust for blood in the boy's eyes. He swung to kill. He would never get the chance.

Bartiin tightened his grip. He was a swordsman and this was a duel to the death. *I won't die here. Not so close to freedom*. Not to the boy prince whose life had stood in the way of that freedom for years. Now was his chance. One he never imagined he would have. An order he was moments away from walking away from. He thought back to his last fight in the open street. Lord Kulimas had ruined his plans to abscond. He had almost died in that fight.

Doubts crept in. *Why is this important? How does this boy threaten the future of Gaag? How can he stand against the new Gaag? One under the protection of the Careyago Empire. He can't even wield that blade properly. Is this a danger worth braving when I alone bare the risks? How does this help my family*? It doesn't. Bartiin made up his mind and fled.

*

Ohacha blinked in stunned silence as Bartiin turned and ran. He had imagined this moment countless times; the day he finally faced and killed Bartiin Foxstring. This was the man who had hunted him his whole life, who had killed his uncle, and Ander, and so many others. Who had destroyed his family, and their kingdom. He had imagined their duel to be noble and righteous. He would slowly best his enemy with skill and expertise. And then, once Bartiin was beaten and at his feet, the bastard would plead for mercy. And Ohacha would not grant it. And Bartiin's death would serve as the first step towards his vengeance against his uncle Belvaas.

He had never once imagined Bartiin might flee at his challenge. He felt disrespected. But more than that, he felt emboldened. Single-minded resolve drove him after Bartiin. And as he pursued, Ohacha stepped one foot deeper into the darker emotions beyond anger. A hatred so pure, concentrated, and self-righteous that no other thoughts could possibly penetrate his focus. Catching and killing Bartiin became his sole focus and he raced into the crowd. He pushed and shoved his way past faceless strangers, locked onto Bartiin's figure as they rushed through the massive crowd. Bartiin tousled through a mix of broken market stalls and Ohacha followed, gaining with each step. Bartiin turned. Ohacha followed. Bartiin scrambled under a handcart and Ohacha matched his stride, ducking his head and catching his balance on his hands. He stumbled back to his feet as fast as he could manage. Nothing would stop him. Not when revenge was so close at hand. A woman ran out in front of him and Ohacha barreled through her. He stumbled, regained his balance, and ignored the unfortunate soul. He didn't spare her a glace. Looking up, he barely caught a glimpse of Bartiin ducking into an alleyway. *This is no time for apologies. She would understand*.

As Ohacha rounded the alley, Bartiin was stopped at a dead-end pulling desperately on a door. When it didn't budge, he turned to face his pursuer. Ohacha panted heavily. He stood at the mouth of the alleyway, blocking Bartiin's only escape.

Bartiin eyed his surroundings, looking for an escape. When he didn't find one, he met Ohacha's gaze.

Ohacha raised the assassin's sword in challenge. "You coward!" he shouted.

"The last time I killed one of you in public, the Casoyans tried to hang me" Bartiin replied. "I'm not looking to make that same mistake. But now we're alone. No one can rescue you."

"I'll have no need of rescue. You'll be dead at my feet" Ohacha challenged.

"You sound very confident" Bartiin said. "Do you really think you can best me without Cask or Gaba'ké protecting you? You're nothing without them. Just a spoiled kid."

The insult stung in exactly the way Bartiin intended. Ohacha peered over his shoulder and grasped for the first time that he was indeed alone. No Cask. No Rolena. No Yuromi. No Gaba'ké. He hadn't thought of them before charging after Bartiin. "I don't need them. I can claim my revenge on my own" Ohacha replied. He hoped he sounded more confident that he felt.

"Revenge?" Bartiin repeated the word as if surprised by it. "For your traitor of an uncle?"

"For Aramuk, and for Ander. For Lord Kulimas, and for my parents!" Ohacha replied. "For all the people you've murdered for your revolution."

"I'd do it all again to keep your lunatic father from dooming us to an unwinnable war."

"My father wasn't a lunatic!" Ohacha shouted.

"Your father was the worst thing that ever happened to Gaag" Bartiin scorned. "He refused to see reason. His own power and position as king mattered more than Gaag itself—more than the lives of our people. His arrogance and ignorance landed him in an early grave. All he needed to do was capitulate."

"A cowards move!" Ohacha countered, confident in his argument. A sense of pride welled inside him. That confidence vanished as Bartiin laughed aloud.

"You must be jesting" he said through wheezed breaths. "That's comical!" Bartiin finally said, "really… a cowards move?" Ohacha frowned, not wishing to be patronized again. "Then by your own pronouncement, Aramuk Krimas was the biggest coward of them all. It was *his* idea to capitulate to the Careyago armies. It was his council your father ignored, and his actions that led to your father's betrayal."

"I don't believe you! Aramuk wouldn't have done that. He was a good man."

"The way you speak of him, I'm not sure you really knew your uncle at all" Bartiin provoked. "It was Aramuk's idea to depose your father after King Golan insisted on war. It was Aramuk who planned the coup."

"You're lying!" Ohacha shouted, angry now.

"He was the one who talked his brother into the plan. I was there! Aramuk planned to overthrow your father." Bartiin continued, ignoring Ohacha's protest, "Although, he wanted to do it without any bloodshed. Your uncles planned the whole thing together and then, when Aramuk realized there was no bloodless alternative, he played the coward again. He warned your tyrant father and betrayed the whole plan. Instead of peace and stability, his actions plunged us into a destructive civil war."

"You're a liar!" Ohacha repeated. "We *should* have fought the Careyago! We should have defended Gaag from their imperial control, not handed them the kingdom on a silver platter. My father fought for a free and independent Gaag!"

"Your father fought only for his own selfish gains! And it's a damn pity he fooled so many people into dying needlessly for that vain pride." Bartiin spoke, now serious,

“You speak with the confidence of the ignorant. A boy then and a still a boy now. When we yielded Gaag to the Careyago, the soldiers in their armies equaled all the people in Gaag. The imperial navy is sixty warships strong. They conquered the Hosagiin, The Ayaanis, Bengazho, Ayagiim, Halimar, Romar, and still had the armies and navies to crush us next. There is no fighting a force that large and that strong. You would condemn us, the same as your father tried to. I have no personal ill will against you or your father, Ohacha. But I love the people of Gaag more than I need a King.”

Bartiin grasped that their conversation had ended and raised his own sword defensively. It was apparent that Ohacha wasn’t listening anymore. His words were falling on disinclined ears. *You can’t teach reason,* Bartin thought with regret. It didn’t matter anyway. He would kill the boy and finally escape this cursed city. Ohacha’s knuckles were tight around the grip of his little sword and his teeth were gnashed in rage. He was upset. His attack would be overly aggressive. It would be his downfall. Distant screams and shouts filled the otherwise silent alleyway. The walls seemed to narrow in anticipation. For Ohacha, six years of terror and hatred culminated in this precise moment. He felt his heart hammering against his ribs, the war drum beating to the rage within.

Bartiin took in a deep breath and let it out, trying to steady his breathing. His heart beat steadily now. He wouldn’t run this time. Now he was sure this was the right path. *The boy is exactly like his father. Impetuous, unreasonable, and enamoured by his own self-interested ideals. He knows nothing of what it means to be a man of the people. Of Gaag. And our people will fare better without him.* This was the opportunity to rid Gaag of its last self-centered despot and send himself home after all these years.

He made no move, no aggressive gesture. Bartiin stood poised. Yet, in that stillness, in the careful set of his shoulders and the unblinking assessment in his gaze, was the undeniable weight of experience. The world seemed to hold its breath. The distant sounds of the riot faded to a muffled thrum against the taut silence between two men. Two enemies.

Ohacha charged forward. Fury, pure and blinding, drove him. Bartiin held his breath and braced with his muscles. As Ohacha closed the distance, Bartiin exploded outward like a coiled spring. Ohacha’s blow came from high overhead, just as it had in the square. Bartiin remained low, ducking under Ohacha’s slash and brought his own sword up into Ohacha’s exposed side. The boy tried to dodge, but the blade cut true, slicing through fabric and flesh with ease, biting into Ohacha’s rib. Surprise flashed across his face as Bartiin pulled back the sword, elongating the gash, and raised it in time to parry the unruly swing that sought to slash his face. Bartiin withdrew and readied himself again for their next exchange

“You share your father’s arrogance” Bartiin said, trying to provoke another attack.

Ohacha didn’t respond. He seemed stunned by the injury he had taken. *Perhaps he’s never been cut before,* Bartiin considered. *Or perhaps he’s come to realize how lacking his skill is.* The boy stood there like a statue; eyes locked on the ground and sword raised defensively. Bartiin let out a held breath and tried to slow his heart rate. He needed it under control. The duel wasn’t over until the boy was dead.

Pain blossomed in Ohacha’s side. He staggered backward as blood seeped steadily from the fresh wound at his side. He reached across his body and held tight to where Bartiin’s blade had cut him. The blood was warm and sticky on his fingers. His blood. And with the blood came pain. He hadn’t been prepared to lose their first exchange. Nor was he prepared to die. His confidence vanished. A hollow feeling

overwhelmed him and Ohacha felt immobilized by indecision. Fear returned, extinguishing the rage. Fear and shame, shame in how swift his defeat had come.

Ohacha retreated back slowly, and then rested awkwardly against the alley wall. Bartiin remained poised. All the rage he felt, all the years and months of simmering vengeance felt inconsequential. All the days spent training to wield a sword with Cask felt wasted. When it mattered most, he'd ignored everything he'd ever learned. All of the lessons Cask had drilled into him regarding patience, control, and speed had gone unheeded. *Why did I do that? I had the lesser range. The smaller weapon. Now I'm going to die for that mistake*.

Bartiin advanced slowly and Ohacha raised the assassin's blade as best he could manage, backing away down the alley. Even now, Bartiin maintained his patience and composure, unwilling to be baited into attacking prematurely. Ohacha envied Bartiin. He was like Cask. He was the kind of swordsman Ohacha wished to be. Yet at the same time he cursed him, spitting at his enemy as he approached. Bartiin ignored the insult, pushing Ohacha further and further down the alleyway. It was Ohacha's turn to consider running. But he knew he'd never escape. Not in this state. It was all he could do to stay upright.

Bartiin tested outward with his blade and Ohacha managed to parry his blow despite the pain. Bartiin tried again, and Ohacha continued to back out of Bartiin's reach, only parrying the blows that risked reaching his limbs. Then the real attack came, and Ohacha let go of his side, parrying the first strike and countering with a piercing attack of his own. Bartiin was ready for it. The swordman slammed his heavier blade down hard against Ohacha's strange sword. It came free from his grasp and Ohacha stumbled backward onto the ground. He crawled backwards, desperate to live on. It was all he could do now that he was disarmed.

This is it, Ohacha realized. *This is where I die.* Regrets consumed him. He thought of all the things he wished he'd done. All the things he wished he hadn't. Those were his final thoughts and they brought shame with them.

Then Bartiin hesitated.

He was looking past Ohacha now, no longer focused on the defeated prince. A familiar voice pierced through the fog of pain and defeat. "Ohacha!" Cask said. Ohacha continued to back away as rapidly as he could manage. Once there was enough space between them, he cast a quick and hopeful glance over his shoulder to where Cask stood close behind. Tears came. Whether from the excruciating pain at his side, or the resurrection of hope, Ohacha wasn't certain. Perhaps both.

"Bartiin" Cask said, addressing his former pupil.

"Cask" Bartiin answered. He kept a firm grip on the blade he carried, but noticed that Cask only carried one sword, like his own. *Where are his blades?* He wondered.

"I'm taking Ohacha" Cask said, raising his weapon. "Don't follow us."

Seeing Cask without his swords brought a boost to Bartiin's conviction. Without them, Bartiin almost felt confident in his chances against his old teacher. The fear of being forced into a contest against his former sword master dissipated, as did the compulsion to flee. "You seem to be missing your swords" Bartiin said. *Testing strike.*

"I said," Cask repeated, "I'm taking the boy."

Cautious parry, Bartiin determined. "And why do you think I'll let you do that? He tried to kill me." He twirled the large Casoyan sword in his hand as a show of strength. *Second test.*

"I use this now" Cask replied, showing off the Casoyan blade. "It's a stronger symbol of my skill as a warrior. I've created a new style. One that merges ours and the Casoyan way."

Bartiin scowled. *Unexpected deflection. Symbol of skill? New style?* Bartiin focused more intently on the blade in Cask's hands. There didn't appear to be anything special about the blade. *He's bluffing,* he concluded. *Show strength when you lack for it.* A calm smile returned to his face. "I never knew you to be one for lies" Bartiin challenged.

"Do you want to try me and find out?" Cask said flatly, ending the measure. "I've got my sword and you've got yours. We could fight it out, but I'd rather not."

Cask's admission surprised him. *'I'd rather not'.* Those words felt strange and unfamiliar coming from Cask. Yet Bartiin shared the same feeling. *I was going to leave and not look back. Can I beat Cask? Do I risk everything when I'm so close?* He came to the same conclusion and cautiously lowered his sword, "I always thought you would try to kill me on the spot after all that happened."

"I always thought so too" Cask replied. "Things change."

"Things change" Bartiin agreed.

"I'm not done" Ohacha said, picking himself up off the ground. Both men turned. Cask went to the boy, blade still raised at Bartiin, and Ohacha threw up a hand to hold him back, then gestured for Cask's blade. The swordsman hesitated. "Your sword, Cask" Ohacha demanded.

"No," Cask said. "This is stupid. You've already lost."

Ohacha gestured again, never taking his eyes off Bartiin, who eyed the pair suspiciously. "Cask" Ohacha repeated. "I haven't lost yet. I need to do this. For Aramuk and Ander."

"Let me fight in your stead, if it must be" Cask urged. "I can avenge them."

"No" Ohacha declined. "This is something I must do for them, but for me as well."

Bartiin watched the boy intensely. Blood continued to bloom beneath his trembling fingers, spilling down his side. It would be foolish to try it again. But Ohacha's gaze had lost the rage, and now held a focused determination. To Bartiin's disbelief, Cask yielded the sword, leaving himself defenseless. There would be no contest now when the boy fell.

"I'm ready to continue" Ohacha said, addressing Bartiin. He tested the Casoyan blade.

"You're both fools" Bartiin scoffed. He raised his sword again.

Ohacha advanced. His strikes were no faster than before, but they were more intentional and precise. Bartiin parried and dodged without too much trouble, but the boy gained ground and was pressuring him back down the alleyway. The wound that, just moments ago seemed so debilitating, was disregarded. The sharp clang of metal rung through the narrow street as Ohacha held his ground against Bartiin's superior technique and experience.

Cask held his breath. Their blades shrieked. Ohacha felt his advantage waning as Bartiin grew better at predicting his attacks and begun countering with his own strikes. Soon Ohacha found himself on the backfoot as Bartiin gained momentum. His lungs burned. His muscles ached. He was tiring. Bartiin pressed until Ohacha felt he had no better choice than to give everything in the next moment. *Bartiin is the better swordsman. He knows my style. He expects my strikes. And so, I must reach him another way.*

Ohacha trusted his instincts. His feint came down in a vicious diagonal slash aimed at Bartiin's shoulder. Bartiin parried the strike effortlessly, sending Ohacha's blade careening away. But the move left him exposed to Ohacha's extended left hand. *No shield.* Ohacha grasped Bartiin at the collar and twisted, pitching the swordsman forward over his own body. Bartiin was pulled off his feet and over his back and onto the cobblestones in a solid thud.

It worked, but it bloody hurt. Ohacha's sides screamed as they fell together, but he came down on top. Without a sword, he didn't know what else to do other than pummel the man beneath him. His left hand held Bartiin's sword arm down as his fist connected with Bartiin's face. Bartiin raised his arm defensively and Ohacha switched to elbows. They connected and tore gashes into Bartiin's handsome face. The bigger man tried to buck him but a wayward strike connected with Bartiin's temple and he went limp.

He connected with one last strike before a pair of hands pulled him back. He was being dragged off the unconscious man's boy. Ohacha struggled but against Cask's strong hands, there was no contest. "Let me kill him!" Ohacha screamed. Cask did no such thing. He continued to protest. He wasn't finished. He scooped up the small Mada'abi blade and swung it madly in Bartiin's direction, begging Cask to let him go—begging him to let him finish it. The way Bartiin would have.

Bartiin awoke and his face throbbed. Blood poured from a gash over his left eye and it blinded him. He pitched himself upward and wiped at it. It smeared, rather than returned any vision. He stared with one good eye as Cask dragged the thrashing prince away. Bartiin groaned in agony, slowly returning to his feet. Blood splattered the cobblestones. His blood. The world spun. He didn't understand what had happened. *Did I lose*? *If so, then why am I alive?* The prince seemed equally intent on that answer as he screamed in protest.

Cask ignored the boy. "Don't follow us" he warned. They disappeared.

Bartiin stared down the alley long after both men were gone. He remained alone, brooding over the moment. He had lost. The boy's skill was wanting and yet he had been beaten. Worse, the brat had slipped through his fingers. And they had let him live. *Why?* It ate at him.

His head pounded. Pain lanced through his face and his head felt foggy. He wasn't going to chase. He was done. Finished. In more ways than one. He stumbled over his first step, but regained his balance. *Spirits, it hurts.* Bartiin collected his blade. It was still marked with the prince's blood. *Home*, was his first thought. *I'm going home.*

He would soon learn that he would be wrong on that count.

Chapter 40: The Siphon

The Patzau Council chamber, already scarred by battle and strewn with debris, erupted with power. Kuta stared, mouth agape, as Janos materialized above the stone table. She watched in stunned horror as the spear of crystalline ice formed in his hands. As he rushed forward, he thrust the summoned weapon towards Gaba'ké's exposed figure. The weapon moved blindingly fast, changing directions suddenly, to strike at the older man's exposed face.

Gaba'ké's rock-hardened hands came up. He caught the spear in his grasp in the last possible moment before death, but also a moment too late. The icy tip of the spear pierced his eye. The eye ruptured and blood splattered. Gaba'ké crushed the icy weapon in his bare hands and reeled backwards, blood pouring from his destroyed left eye. He tumbled away from Janos and launched polished floor tiles wildly to give himself time. It was desperate.

Kuta caught a glimpse of Gaba'ké's pallid face and the terrible wound and shivered. Her wits finally caught up with her. *This is a fight to the death*. It became painfully obvious that, without Gaba'ké, she had little chance of winning it. Kuta had believed herself strong. Powerful. Competent enough to handle a lowly trickster like Janos. Now she was certain that she had underestimated him. Had Gaba'ké not come, it would have been her speared by that first exchange—dead on the floor next to Yoharum. She needed a plan. More than that, she needed another source of metals. She had shot all six of her sleeve pins across the room at Janos' illusion. In doing so, she had left herself little to work with. She looked around desperately and Yoharum's great axe caught her eye.

Kuta channeled, pulling the blade towards her. The heavy bronze axe head came at her summons, dragging the wooden handle across the floor with a resonating rattle until it reached her hands. Kuta had seen this exact axe hundreds of times before. Her guild made them. It should have been heavy in her small hands, yet with her sorcery, it felt weightless.

Kuta reached outwards with her agindan. Her consciousness rushed over the various spirits drawn to the sharpened bronze blade in her hands. They waited in the peripheries, always nearby. Forever drawn by the handiwork of the city's artisans and metallurgists. They loomed inside the wall sconces, in the knives and cleavers that saw everyday use. They thrummed with the very essences of her element, familiar and pliable. She focused on one, and dismantled pieces of the great war axe in mere heartbeats. From its form, Kuta created hundreds of new pins. New ammunition. All in a matter of seconds. Now she just needed a target.

A flash of blinding light made Kuta flinch. She covered her eyes instinctually and, fearing the same fate as Gaba'ké, stumbled backwards in her blindness. Her hope was to put extra distance between her and Janos. She bumped into the heavy door they had

come through and braced herself against it as she launched several of her needles blindly across the room as a deterrent. The blinding light vanished and Kuta opened her eyes again as Gaba'ké rush forward and placed his hands on stone table slab. The table began to spin under his influence. It revolved like a spinning top; impossibly fast for its massive size. Janos, who stood atop the table with his ice spear in hand, was thrown outward. He struck a side wall, hard. Kuta locked on to his position and shot several of her metal pins directly where Janos lay dazed. A shield of ice appeared and then he disappeared from her sight again, leaving her suspect.

Opposite to the blinding light from before, all the light in the room seemed to disappear without warning. The darkness was disorientating. Only the grinding sound of the spinning table and the endlessly tolling bells remained. Kuta listened, hoping to locate Janos by sound alone. She didn't have to. The darkness subsided a moment later.

Gaba'ké now stood in front of her. How he had confidently known the way in the disorienting darkness, she couldn't fathom. She hadn't even heard his approach. Yet, his intuition had been solid. Janos stood on the far side of the room and launched his own volley of deadly projectiles in their direction. Kuta cowered behind Gaba'ké as spikes of ice burst outwards in all directions. Gaba'ké remained as still as a statue, careful to cover his eyes. The deadly frozen knives disintegrated harmlessly into a rainbow of ice crystals against his petrified flesh. It was mesmerizing and terrifying.

Kuta focused. The cold specks of ice danced around her, lighter than air. They kissed her skin with cold lips and Kuta wiped them away, fearful of their icy touch. She prepared her own counter attack, waiting for the right opportunity. *There's no sense aiming at a target I can't see,* Kuta realized, *better to hit everywhere at once.* As the last crash of ice dissipated, Kuta burst out from behind Gaba'ké and let loose her own metallic hell. She pushed with everything she could muster. Three hundred razer thin needles scatter-shot across the room in a wide spray of death.

A translucent shield of ice was already waiting for her attack. Janos held firm as Kuta's metal projectiles imbedded themselves in his icy defence. Metal quills protruded from the frosty shield. They peppered the wall in a wide radius around him. He resembled the dhole foolish enough to hunt the porcupine. Janos lowered his shield, revealing an icy glare. He was going to kill her the moment he had the chance. As he stood, the damage she had inflicted became clear. He had blocked most of her attacks, but a hole in his ear and several wounds around his legs revealed the true extent of the damage. She caught just a hint of a wince across his face as Janos once again disappeared from view.

Unless it was an illusion, Kuta reconsidered. *Is what I'm seeing real?* She thought back to Janos' bold admission over killing Viiran right in front of Yoharum. *If its not real, how can I possibly know?* Gaba'ké charged forward again. Kuta could only watch, still recovering from the significant effort expended on her last attack. He reached the table in the center and leapt atop its still grinding surface. He placed his left palm and right stump down and the smooth stone table flattened under his touch. It expanded outwards like hot wax under a seal. The edge of the table, once wide and smooth, spread out like a giant stone blade and filled the round room. *Something unavoidable,* Kuta comprehended.

Gaba'ké roared. Kuta ducked. The stone table expanded out and cut into the surrounding walls. The grinding ceased as stone bit into stone. The impact destroyed the stone table-blade and it crumbled, too thin to withstand the force. What little remained crumbled under its own thin weight. Janos was gone again. Hidden by his illusions and trickery. He must have avoided the attack or she'd have spotted his corpse.

Another flash of blinding light made Kuta blink and turn away. She opened her eyes again to see Janos, visible again, on the far side of the room. Another spear of ice coalesced in his hands, the crystals rapidly knitting together as if sewn from the moisture in the air itself. Kuta let out a terrified scream as he hurled it towards her like a javelin. She ducked instinctively. The bronze pins she controlled followed that same defensive instinct, coalescing into a thin barrier before her. The spear of ice exploded against the shield, piecing through the thin metal but stopping the weapon's momentum there. Kuta was hurled backwards by the blow. She slammed into the door hard and winced as the pain tingled through her back and down her arms into her fingertips.

Kuta opened her eyes as a bloodied Janos charged towards Gaba'ké. Kuta expected the old Aginjigaade to launch more attacks at Janos as he approached. Anything to keep him away, but Gaba'ké stumbled backward as if immobilized. Kuta pushed her agindan sense outward and felt only the faintest hint of his power. Gaba'ké, who had felt like a mountain only seconds before, now seemed cavernous; empty.

A siphon. This was Janos's doing. This was the moment. Janos was going to kill Gaba'ké and steal his strength. Kuta turned her attention to her enemy and felt the overwhelming draw of power as Janos suppressed Gaba'ké's sorcery, adding his power to his own. Kuta finally understood what being a siphon meant. *He's the perfect counter to any Aginjigaade. He leaves us defenceless. Without our sorcery, we're no different than anyone else.*

She feared him. She feared the threat of powerlessness. She needed to save Gaba'ké to save herself. *But how?* Janos swept forward, icy spear in hand. Gaba'ké retreated back. There was no time to think and far too much distance between them for her to intercede. Kuta acted on instinct. She launched her broken shield of metal towards Janos, leaving herself defenseless. The circular shield spun as it sliced across the room. Janos caught a glimpse of the metal disk and dodged while keeping his grasp on Gaba'ké's siphoned power. The disk of metal passed harmlessly.

A triumphant smirk crossed his lips. "Stupid bitch. You wait your turn! Once I kill the Stone Aginjigaade, you can be next."

Kuta held on. It had taken everything in her spirit to catch the disk at such a speed and distance but it remained, hovering in the air just behind his back. A guttural noise erupted from Kuta's throat as she channeled with every remaining fiber of her spirit. Her scream became the conduit for all of the pain and powerlessness she felt. All of the feelings she buried beneath her calm and quiet persona. Her loves and angers and fears and resentments. Her sadness, joys, and desires. All of it was channeled into the expansion of the round metal shield that had protected her from death. Yoharum's last gift to her. The disk expanded outwards, its very bonds severing violently under her strain. The shield became thinner and deadlier than any razer. It burst outwards right behind of Janos' cruel smile.

Janos held his hands high. His spear was poised to deal the killing blow as Gaba'ké withered at his feet. He didn't feel it when the microscopic metal disk sliced through him. The pain came after, sudden and insurmountable. As if his body were aflame and that pain was concentrated straight through his abdomen. Uncomprehending, he remained standing. He turned back on the girl. She had screamed. She had done something to him. *But what?* He felt wrong. Everything felt wrong. He touched his abdomen. His shirt tattered away, as if severed in two. He touched his abdomen but felt nothing amiss.

A powerful fist was driven into his lungs. Janos flew backwards and lay sprawled out across the floor. He felt empty. Gaba'ké was standing. In his lapse in concentration,

he had released the siphon. The fist that had taken his breath away was imbued with the weight and dexterity of solid rock. It had crushed his ribs as it connected. Perhaps that was why he felt so weak. But then Janos saw his torso. And beyond his torso, he saw his legs. He blinked. For the problem was that the two were no longer connected. He was sprawled out across the chamber floor, but his legs hadn't come with him. They remained across the room. As did, what he could only imagine, were his lower organs. They had spilled out of him. Janos brought his hands to his stomach only to feel the emptiness of where they were supposed to be.

Gaba'ké stared wide-eyed at the two halves of Janos Tydana. He had never punched a man in half before. Nor did he imagine such a thing was possible. He looked to Kuta, who appeared equally as shocked. It was a disgusting sight. A terrible thing to see up close, let alone have been a part of.

Kuta stared at Janos's lifeless halves. She found herself unable to release control of her sorcery. Silence replaced the screams and pain and violence. Besides Kuta and Gaba'ké's ragged breaths, only the distant sounds of the bells remained. Them and the pandemonium elsewhere in the city, a backdrop to the day's chaos. She collapsed to her knees, utterly drained. Never had she channeled so far beyond the point of exhaustion. She felt like a shell of herself. A wayward gust of wind from the broken windows could topple her. Her very spirit felt ripped at the seems, an echo of the destruction she had wrought. She had survived, but this thing before her was not something she felt she could call victory. Gaba'ké had been right to caution her. She felt no triumph. She only felt broken. Empty.

"He's dead" she said. Gaba'ké nodded, also unable to look away from what they had done.

Hiri is avenged. She tested the thought. It felt wrong. If this was retribution, it was sour and disappointing. *Was Yoharum's life worth this? Was Viiran's? Was any of it?* She wasn't sure and that made it worse. Hard ugly tears came. She cried for all the people she couldn't protect and the ones she had hurt in the process. She cried for Elvi; who's kindness was there for her when she needed it most. She cried for Yoharum, who had once been just a boy, still able to smile at the world. She cried for what that same world had made him into. She cried for Hiri; who had lifted her up and allowed her stand on her own two feet; who had taught her that she was a person worthy of more than fear and loathing and what being a mother really meant. She cried for her birth mother, who hadn't been ready to raise a normal child, let alone an Aginjigaade. She cried for all the parents who lost children like her to the curse simply because they hadn't the tools or knowledge. She cried for the ones who did and lost them anyway. To murderers, like Janos, and the heartless, like Adagizhi. She cried because people refused to see one another as worthy of regard and respect. But in the end, the person she cried for most was herself—for being a monster. No living soul capable of doing what she had just done to another human could be a person. She *was* the very thing they feared. A cursed child. Bringer of death. Spirits, it hurt.

Kuta cried for what felt like ages. She cried until a gentle hand was placed on her shoulder. It sobered her from her pitying trace. She looked up at Gaba'ké. He looked like he'd been crying too. The effect was horrifying as blood ran like tears from his missing eye. Kuta looked up at him and wanted to rage at him; to hate him. *He murdered Yoharum! Didn't he?* His remaining eye met her gaze with a sobering mixture of pride and sorrow and profound exhaustion. He too was in pain, and for so many reasons. He let out a long and hard sigh as he straightened up and began to pull her to her feet.

"You saved my life" Gaba'ké said at last. "Its time I repay that debt."

"Leave me alone!" Her voice was sharp and vindictive. She barely recognized herself.

"You needed a moment," Gaba'ké said calmly, "but now that time is being taken from us." He turned to face the window that looked out over the sea. "The Careyago are here."

Kuta looked up but saw nothing but the sky through the large windows. She stood on shaky legs and followed Gaba'ké's gaze out over the city and across the water. Through the smoke and chaos, a massive fleet of ships clogged the mouth of the bay. These were not the regular vessels of trade that frequented Casoyan shores, but warships. Their imperial yellow flags perceptible even from this great distance. *The Imperial Navy*. Kuta's eyes widened. She stared out across the water as the warships spread out into the bay, their black hulls like stains across the canvas of the sea.

"Why?" was all she could stammer out.

"Janos told us they were coming" Gaba'ké said. "It was the last thing he said before he attacked. They planned for this."

"They planned for what?" Kuta asked.

"They arranged for the Careyago to come… to liberate the city from Viiran's rebellion" Gaba'ké surmised. "It was all for this. An invasion, just not the one we anticipated."

"I still don't understand why," Kuta repeated.

"I don't think you or I will get that answer any time soon" Gaba'ké answered. "All I know now, is that we shouldn't be here when they come ashore." He tried to reach for her again, but Kuta brushed him away.

"Why would I do that?" Kuta asked. "I'm no enemy of the Careyago."

Gaba'ké opened his mouth to protest, but reconsidered. "That may be true" he said, "but the Careyago are not like the Casoyans. Theirs is a hungry war machine. And you, being Aginjigaade, cannot escape their notice. So, you have a few options: Stay here and join them; Stay here and fight them; or flee."

"What about Yohati?" Kuta asked. "What about getting you back to Ohacha?"

Gaba'ké turned again to face the warships steadily approaching. "My choice to aid you was a blessing in more than one way. Alone, Janos would have surely killed you and had I stayed with Ohacha, my presence would have cursed him to capture. I can't go back to him now" he said with a dejected finality. "Without me, he may escape Caso. But with me at his side, the Careyago will surely take notice and board, looking for me. The Imperial Aginjigaade are with the fleet. Quest across the bay. Feel their distant approach. They hunt our kind."

Kuta listened and quested outwards, spreading her Agindan sense as thin as she could manage. She felt the distant thrum of Aginjigaade aboard several of the ships. Worse than that, they felt her too. She recoiled back to herself, heart pounding once again. She felt like passing out.

"You need to escape" Gaba'ké said. He was holding her up. His one-eyed gaze was intense and his voice was steady and serious. "Flee into the mountains, be the woman Patzau Minoc and Hiri would have wished for you to be. Use your gifts to build something better. Live!"

"What about you?" Kuta asked. Like so many mentors before him, Kuta felt betrayed. Her question wasn't stem from concern for his safety, but from a place of fear.

The fear of being abandoned again. She asked, *what about you,* but meant, *what about me?*

"You already said it" Gaba'ké said. "I'll go after Yohati."

"I'll help you" Kuta said, tears welling in her eyes again.

"Not this time" Gaba'ké said. "You're exhausted, emotionally and physically. Without you there, I won't need to worry about protecting you. Besides, I'm not worried about surviving if things go awry."

"I can protect myself" Kuta argued.

"Yes," Gaba'ké agreed, "you can. By running and getting stronger. By rebuilding and helping the countless people who have lost everything. Are losing everything, right now. The ones who will be fleeing alongside you. I'm not asking you to run because it's the easy thing to do, I'm asking you to run because it's the hardest thing to do. To know when to step back and try again." Kuta sniffled and wiped her face. She wanted to protest. She wanted to do so many things and yet her body and mind failed her. Thoughts felt slow and cumbersome. Movements felt heavy. "Kuta" Gaba'ké said. She turned to face him again. "I want you to know that I'm truly sorry. I don't expect you to forgive me, because I know I wouldn't have forgiven me. Like several other moments, this one, I think, I will haunt me until the day I die." *Today may be that day.* "I killed someone dear to you, and I wish I hadn't. I left my own advice unheeded: actions have consequences."

Kuta didn't respond right away. She didn't know how to. Instead, she said, "After you've killed Yohati" she said, "you need to promise me that you'll try to follow. Head up the mountain road. Head for Cabiya."

"Okay" Gaba'ké said, knowing this was a promise he was destined to break. "I'll try."

A quiet resolve settled over him. Ohacha would need go on without him. As would Kuta. Perhaps now was the best time for such separations. They were ready. It was time to let go. Time to let them walk their own paths. There was acceptance in that. But also, dignity and redemption. For the first time in his life, Gaba'ké was ready to face the unbearable with inner peace.

Chapter 41: The Ships

The crowd churned as people moved in panicked eddies. Ships cast off from their berths, leaving pallid faces behind. For others, the chaos was an opportunity. Sailor's tossed cheap wares overboard into the harbour in exchange for those with the sudden will to leave and the coin to make it happen. People gathered in crowds for the mere opportunity to be gouged by the slick merchants poised to make a quick profit. A desperate crowd followed in the wake of a noble family. Escorted by armed guards, the family and their servants loaded boxes of valuables aboard a sleek sailing craft. The guards kept the rabble at bay with the implicit threat of violence. One man, fearful and desperate, pushed his way through. He knew the family. He had worked for them for years. The guards held him back. But when he fought to push through, he found a sword in his gut. The crowd panicked, dispersing in terror. The family left him there to bleed out on the docks.

Everywhere Rolena looked, there was desperation. Families shepherded their children through the frightened crowd. The line of burning ships to the south had driven everyone north and now the marina was packed with far too many bodies. It was a nightmare. Unimaginable. As a veteran of two campaigns in Towiin, Rolena had seen war before. Even with her contract to Ohacha and Aramuk, she had been a witness to difficult and upsetting moments. Nothing could have prepared her for this. Violence and death are inseparable from war. They are anticipated. But the savagery displayed by regular Casoyans against their own neighbours was far harder to stomach. Everywhere she looked, people seemed to be fighting themselves as much as trying to flee. A wagon blocked a narrow street to her right and a pair of men were beating the Wagoneer rather than helping him unblock the road. Thieves snatched belongings from strangers. People ignored the bodies of those already trampled in the chaos. There were children among them. It made her sick.

Unwilling echoes of the violence witnessed during her time in Casoyan prison came unbridled. Finally freed after days without food or trial, she was escorted past the piles of bodies the Casoyans had created in the name of justice. Hundreds of dead, discarded like meat. She could only conclude the same disposition infected Casoyans at large. Not just the soldiery. It sent a shiver down her spine. *An evil lurks in this place. Something awful beneath the opulence.* Her desire to be gone from Caso was desperate. She wormed through the crowds, leading Yuromi to the prince's ship, the Sweet Wind. She prayed the captain was still aboard. She hoped he was loyal enough to wait for them. They would need sailors too. Men to handle the oars and rigging. Experienced workers were going to be in short supply. A difficulty considering the overwhelming number of people trying to leave at once. The bay was already a tangle of ships.

A firm hand grabbed Rolena by the shoulder and tugged her around. She had to supress her instinct to fight back. Yuromi was the person attached to the outstretched

hand. There was concern written across her scarred face. Inwardly, Rolena's mood soured. "What?" she grumbled, but already knew the answer. Ohacha was missing. Cask was missing. Both men had been behind them, following, and now neither were visible among the crowd.

"The prince and the swordsman!" Yuromi said.

"Where did they go?" Rolena asked. It came out more like an accusation.

If Yuromi detected the bitterness in Rolena's voice, she didn't let it show. "I don't know" she said. "They were right behind me a minute ago."

Rolena cursed under her breath. They had been travelling as a group and now they were isolated. Not to mention, separated from the one person she was being paid to protect. *If Ohacha dies in the crowd, I gain nothing. All of this time spent in this hellish city and I'll have nothing to bring home to my family. A year of my life wasted in the service of nothing.* Rolena craned her neck, trying to get a better view over the crowd.

"What do we do?" Yuromi asked.

The hell if I know, Rolena thought. Yuromi looked to her expectantly. "We carry on," she answered. It seemed the right thing to say. "To the ship. Whatever it is they've gotten themselves into, at the end they'll head for the ship. Gaba'ké too."

Rolena turned to leave and Yuromi took her hand, interlocking their fingers. There was an instant of shock, as Rolena processed the gesture. Oneran women never held hands in public, nor did Rolena particularly like Yuromi after everything she had endured here in Caso. This stranger had been the one to arrest her after the auction. It was her damned fault that Rolena had spent that terrible week in that overcrowded prison. The place she had witnessed Casoyan brutality first hand. She had quietly tolerated her addition to the group, but wasn't keen on being the rich soldier's new best friend. But when Rolena turned to confront her about it, the worried look on Yuromi's face too closely mirrored her own fears. And, she realized, linked together it would be harder for them to become separated in the crowd. There was something desperate in Yuromi's face that said, '*just this once*' and Rolena couldn't find a good reason to say no. So, she didn't and they continued ahead, hand in hand.

They reached the pier where the Osiidani outrigger, the Sweet Wind, remained docked. The ship was smaller than most of the vessels alongside it and bobbed innocently amidst the chaos of the docks. The air here was thick with the smoke and stench of burnt pitch wafting up from the south. A larger black-hulled xebec with Ohegan flags on it had teams of burly sailors untying ropes and preparing for immanent departure. Droves of desperate people shouted up at the sailors from below. One woman held an infant high over her head, desperate for someone take pity and save the child. Rolena and Yuromi squeezed by the group and scrambled aboard their own ship deck.

The captain appeared. He approached angrily and waved a rigging knife threateningly. He tried to shoo the two women off the boat, but wavered as he saw the sword on Yuromi's hip. It was only when he saw Rolena with the crossbow on her back that he recognized her. He slurred his words mind rant and changed tune, desperate for answers.

"Miss Rolena, where is Prince Ohacha?" he spoke slowly with a heavy western accent.

"They're on their way" she hoped. "Get ready to cast off." The captain grunted in approval.

"What can I do to help?" Yuromi asked, looking awkward the crew moved about the decks.

The larger xebec cast away from the docks. A desperate Casoyan jumped and clung onto the railing until a sailor knocked him into the water with an oar. Rolena saw the woman who had been hoisting the child still held it above her head. The crowd around the xebec, still desperate, turned its attention to the newly awakened deck of the Sweet Wind. *Oh shit.*

"You speak Casoyan. Keep these people off of the ship" Rolena ordered. "Tell them to wait. Ohacha can decide who comes aboard when he arrives." *When he arrives. If he arrives. Fuck.*

Yuromi nodded and went to deal with the growing and desperate crowd of people. They pleaded for passage; their meager belongings still clutched in their anxious hands. "How many can we take?" Yuromi asked.

"We'll need folks who can row" Rolena said, knowing they had planned to hire rowers eventually. Past that, she wasn't sure. "Ohacha will be here soon. We need to wait for him."

"These people are desperate, Rolena!" Yuromi shouted back. "There are families; children here. We have to help these people!"

"We need to wait!" Rolena insisted, "It's not our ship and therefore, not our choice!"

"It's for the greater good!" Yuromi argued.

"It does no greater good to anyone if we run out of food or water at sea. It does no greater good if we run aground over a reef because we sit too low in the water!" Rolena countered. "I know you want to help people. I do too. But we just need to be ready and patient!"

Rolena turned her attention back to the ship, following the captain's orders and helping the crew as much as possible. Each time she could, she cast her gaze inland, hoping to catch a glimpse of Ohacha and Cask on their way. Instead, she saw Yuromi increasingly raising her voice to calm the crowd as it grew increasingly more and more agitated. The next time she peered over her shoulder a knot of dread formed in her stomach. A well-dressed guildsman pushed two small children in front of him as his personal soldiers pushed their way though the crowd. The crowd, already on edge, balked at the burly soldiers and their brandished weapons. The nobleman paid them no heed as he squeezed his way through the crowd, righteousness written across his contemptuous face. He reached Yuromi and the two began talking. Rolena watched as the negotiations soured fast, encouraging the man to bypass Yuromi as negotiator. The man spoke loud enough for all aboard the ship to hear him, ignoring Yuromi and the crowd behind him.

"I've got coin. How much for this ship?" he asked. "I have enough gold to buy it. Answer now. I don't have all day. You can be rich!"

Rolena turned to face the man and his eyes glazed over her, looking for somebody else. Whoever he believed to be in charge. Rolena walked over to speak to the man and he turned to face her, expectantly. She leaned over the gunnel to get close enough to hear the man clearly.

"Are you the owner?" he demanded. There was contempt in his voice.

"No" Rolena answered flatly. "But at the moment, the captain is busy and I rank second. If you want aboard, you're going to have to get to the back of that line behind you."

The man sneered as if insulted. "Want aboard? Line?" he gawked, "How much does your master want for this ship? I'll buy it from him right now at double its value. I'll still bring him and the lot of you along until we reach the next port."

Rolena raised her eyebrows. “You want to buy this ship?” she repeated.

“That’s what I just said” the man jeered, “are you deaf, girl?”

“Ships not for sale” Rolena said flatly.

Rolena stood, intending to walk away. Instead, she froze. Shouts of commotion rose through the crowds. The crew aboard and crowd below followed her gaze westward. People peered over one another, fear churning into more fear as a flotilla of black-hulled warships emblazoned with imperial yellow flags poured through the channel into the bay. The ships, sleek and ominous, boasted massive boarding bridges capable of transporting soldiers directly from the fore-deck to shore without the need for docks. Lined atop the decks were scores and scores of soldiers. They brandished large circular shields with axes, swords, and spears. It was an invasion force. The one Rolena’s people had whispered fears over for the last half decade. The Imperial Careyago Navy sailed unobstructed into Caso.

A cold dread settled in, but especially the crew of the Sweet Wind. They had been evading the Careyago for years. None aboard wished to tangle with the empire that stole their homeland. Rolena matched their quiet unease. This was her nightmare unfolding, the fear of losing her home to the Careyago like so many before her. “Spirits help us” she whispered. And then the unexpected happened. The shouts of chaos were joined and then replaced by a new distinct group. Not fearful or panicked, but expectant.

“We’re saved!” they cried. “The Careyago have come to save us!”

The people applauded their invaders as heroes and liberators. Yuromi watched with a shattered expression, unable to look away as the great black warships lowered their prows and the first wave of soldiers came ashore. Cheers of applause sounded, as if the foreign army were a blessing.

“So, this is it then…” Yuromi murmured, “we relinquish our responsibilities along with our freedoms at the first sign of hardship… because it’s easier than fixing anything ourselves. Foreigners march on Caso and we call it salvation.”

*

Cask stooped, resting Ohacha’s limp body against a black stone wall. He cast a glance about one last time to ensure they hadn’t been followed. He knelt over Ohacha as he breathed in ragged breaths. He ripped off Ohacha’s torn shirt and applied pressure to the bleeding wound at his side. Bartiin’s sword had cut into the rib. Any higher or lower and Ohacha would already be dead. Cask did his best to wrap the wound to staunch the flow of blood. Ohacha groaned in pain, his eyes lulling back. Cask slapped lightly across the face to try and bring him back.

“Stay awake!” Cask ordered desperately. He continued tightening the bandages and Ohacha moaned again. “You fool,” he grumbled, more to himself. “I can’t believe you went after Bartiin alone! What were you thinking?”

Ohacha didn’t respond. His head rolled awkwardly on his neck. He made a few sounds that felt like attempts at words but everything the boy hoped to say seemed to get stuck in his throat. Ohacha coughed and then reeled from the pain, his breath coming in ragged gasps. He *hadn’t* been thinking. That had been his undoing. The humiliation of the encounter was a sour in his mouth. He had lost. He wouldn’t call this pain a win.

“That should hold” Cask announced, standing again. He pulled Ohacha back to his feet despite the boy’s grunted protest. “We have to move,” Cask urged, trying to get Ohacha to stand on his own. “Now. Before we find any more trouble.”

The sounds of the riot seemed louder than they had before. It felt as if with each new breath, the intensity and panic surged closer like a building swell. Ohacha leaned

heavily on Cask but managed to get his feel underneath him. Cask held his prince up and the two of them began the slow and, for Ohacha, painful walk back to the docks. Cask used the Auction House to guide him. It was his beacon out of the maze of small streets and alleyways. From there, it was as straight shot to the bay. They turned one final corner and Cask breathed out the tension he had been feeling. His next breath felt lighter. Hope returned. His spirit regained some strength.

Turning that corner and seeing Ohacha weaponless and bleeding had been soul destroying. Cask knew that if he had arrived even a moment later, Ohacha would have been slain at Bartiin's hand. The years he spent trying to protect the boy would have amounted to nothing. His dream of one day returning, a liberator for his people, would die. That same dream had barely endured Golan's death all those years ago, and then Aramuk's death only recently. Ohacha was his last hope. His last hold on the desperate ambition of getting it all back. And, like a fool, the boy had very nearly thrown it all away.

Why Ohacha had chased after the man who was trying to kill him baffled Cask. He knew Bartiin's strength and skill. Bartiin had been *his* pupil. The man was an accomplished swordsman and a great tactician. The very things Ohacha seemed intent on proving he was not. It was risky and reckless. *And to leave us all behind without warning….* It was the first time Cask questioned his place at the boy's side. He knew Ohacha wanted revenge. Cask shared the sentiment, but never did he expect Ohacha to make such a stupid decision at such an inopportune moment with no thought spared for the consequences. It left Cask feeling naive. Naïve and furious.

That fury was compounded by all the efforts Aramuk and Gaba'ké had taken to instill wisdom in him. Lessons that had just gone unheeded. And that fury led him to the realization that he too had loaded all his hopes on the young prince's shoulders. They'd never spoken of it. None of them had. It had always been expected that Ohacha would burden their hopes and dreams. Ever since his father's death. He was the heir. The crown prince. And for the first time, Cask contemplated the idea that Ohacha's continued arrogance and rebellion weren't solely failures of discipline, they were a mirror of his own flaws. In the same way that Ohacha's self-righteousness was a mirror of Aramuk's and his inability to escape a past that defined him was a mirror of Gaba'ké's. The boy *was* them. All three of them. But mostly him.

Ohacha had always rejected Aramuk's disposition. He had loved his uncle, but never did he want to be like Aramuk. He revered Gaba'ké, but more for his abilities and power than the wealth of wisdom that lay deeper. Cask comprehended for the first time that, in the absence of his father, *he* was the man that Ohacha emulated most. Ohacha's mindset was a reflection of Cask's own. The realization was soul-crushing. It came as a blend of pride and shame. Cask hadn't just ignored Ohacha's flaws, he had cultivated them. He had forgiven skipping lessons and retaliating against authorities. He had encouraged the belief that rules were secondary to his will. That conflict is binary. That being right is a justification for aggression and confrontation. He had desired Ohacha to become a man of strength and courage, and had inadvertently nurtured that irresponsible recklessness. He had demanded a man's resolve from a boy who shared his scars but none of his experience or maturity. While they had lost much the same, Ohacha lacked the independence and self-awareness required to weather all that crushing guilt and responsibility. The rage and the disappointment. The burden of dreams. And in that hard and arduous trek back to the Sweet Wind, Cask vowed that vengeance would never come to define the man Ohacha would one day become. It was Ohacha's place to discover the type of man he wished to be. Not his.

*

Amidst the crowd, Rolena finally spotted the morose swordsman carrying his prince. Ohacha was pale. There was pain across his face and blood smeared across his clothes. He walked with an awkward gate, one hand over Cask's shoulder and the other hand clenched tight against his left side. Cask fought his way through the madness. Rolena shouted to them. They couldn't hear her. Yuromi noticed and joined in. But when she saw their sorry state, she leapt over the railing and pushed her way through the pleading crowd. She reached Cask and added her own strength to his, leading the pair back to the ship.

"Clear the way!" she roared, pushing through the crowd.

She ignored the fuming nobleman and his retinue of guards. The mass of people continued shouting their pleas for rescue. Rolena met them at the gunnel and helped pull Ohacha up from above. Pleading hands and desperate faces followed them aboard.

"What happened?" Rolena asked, looking expectantly to Cask.

He didn't answer. Instead, he stared down the bay where the dozens of Careyago warships had made their landing. Hundreds of Careyago Soldiers advanced into the city. Even from here, it was clear that the crowd of rioters and rebels was being quickly subdued and dispersed by the fresher, better equipped, and more seasoned army. Rolena had to shout again to get his attention. Cask whipped around to face her, his face still ghostly pale.

"What happened to Ohacha?" she repeated, now bent over the boy and taking a quick look at the wound at his side. He was barely conscious. The wound didn't appear to be bleeding any longer, but long streaks soaked his side and pants. Yuromi listened in intently.

"We ran into Bartiin" Cask said, not elaborating.

Rolena frowned, unhappy with his answer, but understanding she wouldn't get any more information now. "Have you seen Gaba'ké or Kuta?" she asked, changing subjects. "The sooner they return, the sooner we can leave."

"No," Cask answered plainly. "Nor will we see them again."

"What do you mean?" Rolena asked sternly. "Are they dead?"

"No, surely not" Cask replied insistent, "I doubt it. But with the Careyago here, they can't come with us anymore…. We have to leave. Gaba'ké would agree. He'd understand. He'll take Kuta somewhere safe. Somewhere away from the Careyago."

"What do you mean they can't come with us?" Yuromi grilled. She was upset. Mortified even. Cask tried to dodge the question but Yuromi was insistent, pinning him to the side of the ship. "What do you mean?" she insisted. Cask let out a weary sigh.

"The Careyago always bring a retinue of Aginjigaade," he explained. "Trained fighters, defenders, killers, and trackers. Men and women accustomed to facing other Aginjigaade and protecting troops in battle. They'll be here, with the army, to catch or kill every Aginjigaade in the city. They'll be able to sense him if he comes with us. They might even recognize him. It'll doom the rest of us."

"You don't know that!" Yuromi countered. "I won't leave Kuta behind."

"I *do* know that!" Cask boomed back. "Gaba'ké knows it too. He won't return. He'll take Kuta somewhere safe, get them both away from us and away from the Careyago. Returning would risk our safety; Ohacha's safety. As long as the Careyago are near, they'll able to track him. There's no sense waiting any longer. We leave. Now!"

"You're absolutely sure?" Rolena demanded. It felt like a betrayal. To leave Gaba'ké behind to fend for himself against an army. It felt cruel. She wished Ohacha were

conscious so that he could protest with her. She hated this feeling of helplessness. Yuromi matched her disapproval. But neither outranked Cask.

"Yes, I'm sure" the swordsman said dismissively. "Are we ready to cast off?"

Across the bay, other captains had come to the same conclusion. Fleeing Caso and fleet of grand warships became a priority. Those still here when the Careyago took the city would not be granted the same freedom to leave at will. Their best chance was to scatter now amongst the rest.

"I've spoke with the captain, and we're short by eight rowers" Rolena said. "We've got enough water aboard to last us comfortably to any of the neighboring ports, but we won't have enough food to sail anywhere further than Gitum or Jurang if we ration. We'll need to stop."

"We should head to Cabiya" Yuromi suggested. "It's the closest major port where we can resupply. We can help more people here and now, and resupply before heading elsewhere."

"Cabiya's to the east, on the other side of the island" Cask countered. "We need to go west. The army still loyal to Ohacha is in Juking" Cask replied. *Assuming they'll still be there. And assuming they'll remain loyal to Ohacha without his uncle. But those are tomorrow's worries.*

"We can debate our destination once we have some rowers aboard" Rolena cut in.

Those selected came aboard with families and meager belongings. Among them was the wealthy nobleman who had tried to buy the ship. Rolena disapproved but said nothing. Those left behind were made to look elsewhere. A grim resolve settled over the crew. The last mooring lines were hauled in, the oars were dropped, and the Sweet Wind began to pull away from the shore. Soon the forsaken faces of those left behind became too small to differentiate. Rolena watched the dock disappear behind them. She expected Gaba'ké or Kuta to appear with faces filled with betrayal at being deserted. Instead, Careyago soldiers reached their dock. *Cask was right,* she thought, *Gaba'ké and Kuta wouldn't have made it.*

Behind the Sweet Wind, the sounds of the chaos and chanting ebbed away, leaving only the towering plumes of smoke and the distinct black warships and their golden flags of conquest. Caso, once a jewel of trade, industry, and commerce, burned. It was a sight that would haunt her for the rest of her days. *Fitting,* Rolena eulogized, *Imperial gold would come, in the end, to claim the city with which it shared a name.*

Chapter 42: Old Friend

Pain that had been easy to ignore under the intense adrenaline of combat washed over Gaba'ké and made his head spin. With only one good eye and a bruised and battered body, the act of leaving Patzau Palace had been more difficult than he anticipated. The blood leaking from his missing left eye refused to relent. It wept down his face, staining his white beard red. Kuta walked with him, equally exhausted by their duel with Janos. He wondered how she felt in this moment. He couldn't even begin to imagine. She had fought and killed the man who had murdered her adopted mother. And at the same time, she had lost her cousin to Gaba'ké's short-tempered rage. He had betrayed her and she had stomached that betrayal in order to work together.

Gaba'ké was burdened with the impossible urge to turn back time; to undo all the pain he had caused. He wanted to protect her and support her triumph all at once, but neither were possible. Contradictions that stifled one another into a numb hollowness. Worst of all, he couldn't read how she was feeling anymore. She ambled forward with an emptiness that mirrored his own. They helped each other down the winding stairwell and out of the palace, leaving behind the warriors that had lost their confident bravado. She was recovering her strength quickly and Gaba'ké found that he was proud of her. He walked on, ready to face one last challenge. But most significantly, he walked on ready to face his own demise. There was something comforting in recognizing that fact without fear or regret. He was ready.

They navigated the choked streets. One invading army had been enough to send the people into a frenzy. Two armies seemed to add little more to the chaos. Those who were fleeing, were already fleeing. Those intent in weathering the storm were already doing so. The only difference now would be the ease in which the Casoyan troops fell to their new adversaries. No longer were they the better trained and equipped. The emperor's Imperial Navy was built for conquest and masters of that craft they had become.

The grand canal appeared black, reflecting the dark smoke choked the city. By the time he and Kuta reached the wide bridge to cross to the north, Gaba'ké was certain their luck had run out. Kuta knew it too. The Careyago were on their way. They could sense them, not far behind. *Such is the gift. Such is the curse*. Time was already short, and he had to make a choice. He couldn't protect Kuta and pursue Yohati. He had to choose.

He readied Kuta for what was to come. Gaba'ké had spent decades honing the art of masking his agindan. It was that skill, more than any other, that had saved his life most. It was a technique dreamt by a younger man's desperate desire to abandon his responsibilities and vanish. There was a bitter irony in the recognition that his former cowardice amounted to his greatest achievement as an Aginjigaade. To their kind, the world was a tapestry. And where others saw patterns, Aginjigaade saw the threads. The trick Gaba'ké had discovered was to blend in and weave one's spirit into the design of the

world. Aginjigaade rarely looked carefully at spirits unaligned to their own elemental affinity and examining every last spirit would take a lifetime. His technique exploited that blind spot. By mimicking the specificity of a single spirit and letting it draw from you, instead of you from it, and you became invisible. Camouflage your distinctiveness. Become one amongst the uncountable.

The trouble now was his lack of spiritual energy and focus. Maintaining his technique would be near impossible. His eye throbbed painfully. His body was week. He was a frayed thread; exhausted and exposed. Unconcealed, he and Kuta stood out like islands amongst the ocean. Even unseen, waves and currents revealed their presence. He could feel the Careyago drawing closer. Enemies with powerful presences. They travelled in groups of four, twelve total Aginjigaade trained to find, catch, and kill people like them. And with no ability to hide, the only option left was to draw their attention elsewhere and give Kuta a chance at escape.

After they crossed the canal next to Yohati's estate, and Gaba'ké drew Kuta's attention. He tried to speak but his voice came our weak and raspy. "I once demonstrated a skill in front of you, back at Banzhiigan's shop." He pointed to the little store just around the corner. "The skill to hide your spirit from other Aginjigaade. It is my greatest achievement, and yet it is also a perilous art. I want to pass down this skill to you, for it is not a technique restricted to any one element or affinity or spirit. It is a skill of the agindan. To hide your presence, you must open your agindan and allow a foreign spirit to channel through you, using your power. You must let it reside within you. It will channel power through you in the same way you might channel power through it. This is a dangerous dance, for some spirits are hungry and opportunistic, greedy to draw more power than you offer. It leaves you vulnerable. You let the spirit in, but must never let it consume you."

He showed her with succinct haste how to focus her own spirit, and how to create a sanctuary within the self to draw a spirit inside. A human totem. "I cannot help you choose a spirit for you, for only you can evaluate a spirit's temperament. All I can caution is that you choose carefully. Once drawn inside, you will emulate your chosen spirits essence instead of your own. You are not undetectable. You can be seen. A skilled or careful Aginjigaade will still be able to sense you. But in this state, you become easily overlooked. Do you understand?"

Kute nodded. She looked exhausted. Gaba'ké could only hope he looked better. He knew he didn't. Satisfied, he ordered her onwards. "Go!" he said. "Escape this city and live on."

"Why me?" Kuta asked. The question seemed so out of place that he answered with a puzzled look. "Why am I worthy?" she clarified. "Why did you come with me to fight Janos? You were willing to die for me, and for my choices and I just don't understand you. Who *am* I to you? Why go through *all* this? she asked, gesturing to Gaba'ké's still bleeding empty socket. "For what?" she added. "Why?"

Gaba'ké inhaled sharply and then let it out through his nose. He was pondering her questions. "Because," he said, "I thought you might benefit from a little help. Because that's all people need sometimes. They need to see there is a path to making things better. You asked me earlier what helped me get better… what helped me heal. I think it happened because I was shown that kindness. And, in helping you, and others, I can only help others find that path. Now go," he urged. "They're coming. I'll keep them from chasing after you."

"What about Yohati?" Kuta asked.

"Not all battles need be fought at once." *Besides, protecting you will do more good than killing him. And if I fail here, you'll need all the head-start you can get.*

He watched as she disappeared from sight into the throngs of people. He let out a hard cough, and waited for them to come. It took longer than he expected. They had found other prey on their way. Still, Gaba'ké stood like a statue in defense of the bridge, resolute and calm as the first Aginjigaade appeared. The lone presence he had felt earlier, solidified into several figures that drew nearer and then stopped on the opposite side of the bridge. At the head of the group was an Aginjigaade. He was dressed in the golden imperial robes of the very Empire that had once conquered their shared home. With the man marched a small retinue of foot soldiers. The Aginjigaade waved them aside and they stepped back, on guard as he approached the bridge.

Age had made a stranger of the man across from him, but Gaba'ké knew the man's spirit. "Hello, Flax" Gaba'ké said, greeting his old classmate in their native tongue. It had been many years since he had spoken Ayaani, and the language came back to him as if only yesterday had he last used it. It felt good to speak his mother tongue, even in circumstances like these.

Flax had been Gaba'ké's junior at the Ayaani Academy. They had been young men back then. Still boys. It was a time long past. Before the Careyago. Now, the man before him had thinning short white hair and a face that had spent a lot of time in the sun. He had a kind face. It was a feature that was in direct conflict with the two-handed blade he held at his side. Flax was a water elemental Aginjigaade, known famously as the water swordsman. Made entirely from water, the sword Flax carried shimmered as if the power of a waterfall were contained within the long thin blade. Even when they had been young men, Flax had been able to cut just about anything with his strange technique. Gaba'ké feared what decades of honing that skill in combat had amounted to.

"Gaba'ké" Flax responded cordially. "I must admit, I didn't expect to find *you* here."

"Nor I, you" Gaba'ké replied.

A warm smile touched Flax's expression. "Wow. It really *is* you" he said. "Your spirit, even diminished, is unmistakable. How many years has it been?" Flax asked.

"Oh my… forty?" Gaba'ké guessed. He tried to project strength and confidence, but the cough that followed his words undermined that hope. He spat blood. *That's not good,* he thought.

Flax observed Gaba'ké's injuries; the missing hand, the bloody eye socket, the tired spirit. "You seem to have had a rough day" he remarked.

"Minor inconveniences, old friend" Gaba'ké said dismissively. "Life leaves its scars."

Flax chucked, and lifted his shirt to reveal a great scar across his abdomen that reached up to his left shoulder. "That it does" he agreed. "You've aged well, it seems. Lived a long life."

"Indeed" Gaba'ké concurred. "Age has weathered down the rougher edges I had as a young man. Even with that scar, time seems to have been far kinder to you."

Flax smiled. "You're very kind. Where's Sana? Are you here alone?"

Flax's question reopened long scarred wounds. The question seemed innocent enough, but Gaba'ké understood the undertone. *Now the game has begun.* "Yes and no" he lied, "She's gone. I've been working for a merchant out of Onera."

“Is that so?” Flax replied affably. “Last I heard, you were still working for those exiled princes of Gaag. You know, the ones the emperor and his new governor are after. The uncle and the cousin.”

Gaba’ké suppressed a frown. “I was” he said, “but unfortunately, I failed in that aim. They’re dead.” He held up his missing right hand, hoping it would aid in the ruse.

Flax’s smile remained polite. “I see. Who was the other Aginjigaade you were with not long ago? The one fleeing north. A… metals Aginjigaade I’d wager. Wounded too.”

Gaba’ké’s forced smile faltered. “I’m sorry. I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, come now, Gaba’ké” Flax said. “We’re not young men any more. I’m just curious.”

“I’ll answer your question if you answer mine” Gaba’ké suggested. He needed to buy time. Flax nodded in ascent. “Was Patzau Yohati the one who organized this little invasion?”

“Liberation” Flax corrected. He lifted his arms dramatically. “We’ve come in aid of the people of Caso. Expel the inland invaders and whatnot.”

Gaba’ké didn’t care to debate the specifics, “liberation…” he conceded, “What does Patzau Yohati gain from the Careyago out of all this?”

“We’re saving his city from rebels and savages” Flax replied, as if that were the only truth.

Gaba’ké tried not to show his displeasure. “Come now” Gaba’ké said, repeating Flax’s words back to him, “We’re not young men anymore. I’m just curious.”

Flax smiled wide. It was a genuine hearty smile. “You seem to know a lot about secretive Casoyan politics for a man working for a foreign merchant.”

Gaba’ké didn’t take the bait. He wouldn’t allow the conversation to shift without an answer. He waited patiently for Flax to continue.

“Our force is led by Crown Prince Raumekh himself,” Flax relented.

Gaba’ké waited for him to elaborate, but Flax seemed unwilling to do so. “What does that mean, exactly?” Gaba’ké asked.

“I’m afraid I can’t say any more than that” Flax said, “Only that the prince has come in person for a reason.”

Gaba’ké mulled on his words. *What reason would the crown prince have for visiting Caso?*

“Now to my question,” Flax said, “who was the other Aginjigaade?”

“A local girl,” Gaba’ké answered. “I told her the truth about you.”

For the first time, Flax’s smile faltered. “And what truth is that?”

“That she only had three options” he answered. “Like you, Flax. She had the same choice. Run, fight, or join. It seems fighting strangers for a foreign emperor didn’t appeal to her.”

“I hope you warned her truthfully, about what running means” Flax said, a sad look on his face. “They caught nearly everyone who ran from the academy, in the end” he rued.

“Yet here I stand”

Behind Flax, three more Aginjigaade appeared wearing the same golden robes. They walked with the strutted confidence being powerful affords the young. Gaba’ké remembered being the same way, once. That confidence. That feeling of invincibility.

Flax followed Gaba'ké's stare and his smile faded a little. "Our time is up, I'm afraid. It was nice catching up with an old friend." Flax said. He switched to Tralang to allow his comrades to understand, "Surrender, Gaba'ké. Let us bring you in."

"You and I both know that they won't let me live" Gaba'ké replied. "Let's not pretend."

The three younger Aginjigaade stopped next to Flax and surveyed the old man on the opposite side of the bridge. There were two younger boys and a tall middle-aged woman with broad shoulders. The boys, one short and stocky and the other taller with darker skin, both looked hungry. They stared him down like predators, honing in for the hunt. Gaba'ké brushed their agindans, trying to gauge their affinities. They mimicked the gesture, gauging his strength.

"What are we waiting for" the one boy said impatiently. There was a fire in his eyes. "He's an injured old man. The four of us can take him down with ease."

"We don't have to fight" Gaba'ké said. The fear was finally settling in. He was so tired. The four of them could probably have broken him with just their spiritual pressure.

"Gaba'ké" Flax said with earnest. "Last chance. I'm confident my blade will cut through your hardened skin. You were never a good match against me. This is a fight you can't win."

The brash Aginjigaade, impatient and arrogant, didn't wait for Gaba'ké's response. He channeled power and a torrent of flame erupted from his palms. The attack was near instantaneous, aimed at incinerating Gaba'ké where he stood even from across the canal. The flamer walked slowly forward, attempting to concentrate the hottest part of his attack at his opponent.

Gaba'ké channeled defensively. He carried a stone on hand for just such an opponent. His skin changed not to one of the harder stones he carried, but to his softest and waxiest. Gaba'ké covered his eyes with his arm and let the flames sweep over him. He felt the heat singe away his clothes. It left him feeling raw and uncomfortable, like in a bath drawn too hot. But he knew he'd live so long as the flames relented. And after what felt an eternity, they did. Knowing he would have to counter before the next attack came, Gaba'ké channeled with what little strength he had left. He roared, the sound broken and primal, and it vibrated through the cobblestones at his feet. He focused on full-scale destruction. The stone bridge, the very ground between them crossing the canal, blew outward in an earth-shattering detonation of power. Splinters of rock flew in all directions, raining rocky debris. Wayward pieces smashed roof tiles and crashed through windows. Chucks tore through nearby boats. The canal was awash with splashes and ripples as the debris that had once been a bridge reached its apex and began its descent back down to the canal.

The fire Aginjigaade cried out as he was blown backward by the powerful blast. The bridge collapsed sending water over the canal walls and capsizing the nearby canal boats. It was almost everything Gaba'ké could muster in that moment. He was ready to collapse. Nothing was left. He fought onto consciousness with what little he had left and failed, blacking out for a moment. He awoke on his knees. He closed his eyes tight, willing the wave of dizziness to pass.

The woman Aginjigaade on the opposite side of the canal channeled. From her feet branched a tree, unnaturally fast, decades of growth bypassed in mere seconds. Its branches grew outwards and wove into a natural bridge, reconnecting the two sides of the canal. Gnarled branches and roots dug deep into the earth, solidifying themselves. The living wood stitched the bridge back into existence as if Gaba'ké had never destroyed

it. And as Flax and his three other Aginjigaade began to cross, Gaba'ké knew he was finished. They seemed to know it too. Flax approached, sword in hand. Beside him, the others followed close. The fire Aginjigaade trailed at the rear. He was angry and embarrassed, bleeding from a head wound where a piece of shrapnel must have caught him when the bridge exploded. A ball of flame hovered in his palm, ready to be unleashed.

Gaba'ké fought to stand again and lost. A wave of dizziness washed over him again as the blood rushed to his head. He nearly toppled, but managed to keep his balance, still on his knees. They were nearly across now, and Gaba'ké knew when they reached him, that would be the end. He backed away as fast as he could manage, which turned out to be not at all. He barely had time to react as a second torrent came and bathed him in fire. He channeled, but not before feeling the hot lick of pain as the fire burned his unprotected skin. He stood in his petrified form, the flames searing the very air.

The heat was more painful and less bearable than before. He held on as the flames grew hotter, waiting for the moment of release. It came and Gaba'ké tried in one last desperate attempt. He needed to kill the flamer. He wouldn't survive another bathing. He needed to shoot a missile of rock. He needed to kill the boy the same way he had killed Yoharum. Instead, he found himself immobilized as vines twisted from the ground and wrapped their grip around his arms and legs. He was already so weak. The flamer seemed vindicated and he smiled a sinister grin.

Flax, on the other hand, seemed saddened. "I'm sorry, old friend" the water swordsman said in Ayanni. It was as good as a farewell as he would get. The blade shimmered, its liquid form moving imperceptibly fast as if pulsating. Condensed power swirled within its small confines. Flax raised the sword over his head. Gaba'ké channeled, hardening his skin. He drew on nothing. The effort felt monumental, and yet still he tried. One last glimpse of power came, and his skin hardened. The sword fell. Flax's warning rang true. The water blade sliced straight through his hardened skin, carving through his rocky flesh as if it were mist.

Gaba'ké shuddered as he felt his spirit die. *I pray it was enough,* he thought.

Flax knelt over his fallen elder. His face was etched with a profound sadness. He closed his eyes, placed a hand over Gaba'ké's head, and silently prayed to the spirits to guide Gaba'ké's soul onward. The fire Aginjigaade, still fuming, stamped around impatiently.

"Let's go!" Wuruk urged, "This guy was too easy. He barely put up a fight."

Flax opened his eyes; his gaze still focused on Gaba'ké's lifeless body. "Too easy?" he murmured. There was a cold rebuke in his tone. He stood, turning to face the hot-headed boy. "That old man nearly killed you. He was immune to your fire. Even in this weakened state, if Nampa hadn't caught you, you'd be unconscious down there drowning in the canal."

Wuruk scowled. "He wasn't that strong" he countered belligerently.

"When we were sailing into the bay, could you feel the clash of power emanating from the heart of the city?" Flax asked. "Did you miss the part where our opponent was missing an eye and barely had the energy to stand, and yet managed to blow up the bridge?"

Wuruk's scowl deepened, sheepishly.

"I felt it" Nampa said.

Wuruk turned and scowled at her too. "What's the big deal?" he asked.

Flax sighed, “I knew this man, once, long ago” he said. “He was very strong. Far more talented and powerful than me. Perhaps, at his best, more powerful than all of us together. Had we the misfortune of fighting against him at his full strength, I’m not confident enough to say we’d have all have survived the encounter.”

“Bullshit” Wuruk said. “Four on one? There’s no chance.”

“I believe Flax believes what he said to be the truth” Reynal said. Flax was surprised. The other boy rarely spoke. Reynal continued, “Had he not faced other enemies before us, our victory would not be so guaranteed.”

Flax nodded, “Never underestimate an enemy. For an enemy that still breathes still has the means to make yours your last.” He turned, no longer smiling, and looked towards the mountains. *Whoever you are young metals Aginjigaade,* Flax thought, *you are blessed to have a warrior like him die for you. I pray you live a good life… and may we never need meet.*

“Whatever” Wuruk added dismissively. “There’s another one over there. I want us to beat Melzi’s squad this time! We’re better than those shits.”

Flax turned away, and held back the impulse to backhand the brat. *Hurting them doesn’t make them listen,* he reminded himself. Flax had known too many like him in his many years. Too many young Aginjigaade infatuated with their own power. *Eager to get themselves killed*. *But then again, this is the military… what else should I expect?* Flax sighed, resigning himself to silence on the matter. “Alright, let’s move” he ordered. This day would be long. Their conquest had only just begun.

Chapter 43: The Princess

High above the city where the hills still rolled. Just below of the mountain's tendrils that reached down with fingers of steep rock and dense brush, a blanket of orchards, grasslands, and fields blanketed the lands. Across the landscape, as far as the eye could see, a long train of people—refugees from Caso—wound its way up the hillside. The air was hot and specks of ash danced through the wind as smoke, funneled up the hillside by the breeze, caught in the lungs of those fleeing the city. Kuta had stopped at a brook and filled her water canteen. She took a drink and turned round to look upon the city she had escaped. She stood amongst hundreds, perhaps thousands, all making their way up the mountain road. They sought safety; any promise of sanctuary they could find. The line stretched so far that the figures still fleeing out of the Mountain Gate far below looked like specks.

Kuta had never witnessed so many people outside the city walls. The hillside was teeming with bodies. She wondered how many of them had ever hiked this far up the mountain. How many would be taking their first steps into one of the dozens of small hamlets that dotted the hillsides. Villages that stretched all along the west coast from the distant cliffs to the north to the mangrove forests in the south. Villages of tens, perhaps hundreds at most would soon be overwhelmed with those fleeing the city. *And then what?* Kuta wondered. She wasn't certain of the details, but what she was certain of was that there were going to be far too many people. Too many new mouths to feed. Too many wild and selfish, ready to turn on one another for survival. That those desperate enough would push deeper into the mountains until they reached the tribes and clan. But once they reached her people, that was where her certainties ended.

How will my people react to so many desperate new faces, weary and starving? How will they react to the appearance of their oppressors, eager for aid. Kuta wasn't sure. *There will be violence*, she reasoned, *but who will begin the conflict?*

A distant thunderous boom reverberated over the hills, turning heads. She felt the small tremor in her weary legs. Kuta was pulled out of her thoughts and joined the refugees staring down at the city below. A cloud of dust and debris, different than the wispy clouds of smoke, rose up around one of the city's blocks by the grand canal, just west of the palace. *Gaba'ké,* she thought. Kuta squinted through the harsh sun and recognized the spot as the bridge where they had parted ways. The cloud of debris was already clearing and the bridge that had once crossed the canal was gone, destroyed in an instant. Kuta was tired. Tired from the hike, tired from the duel, and tired of the heartache. And yet, she understood that this was a moment to be witnessed.

Kuta reached into herself and focused on her agindan sense. She had been keeping her consciousness close tight to her body. Her defences were strongest when close at hand. She shuttered at the thought of opening herself back up again. Reverberations of Janos' spiritual attack echoed across her spirit. It left an imprint that

felt like a stain. She could still feel the resonance of his cold and uncaring malice. It sent a chill down her spine despite the day's heat. It took several moments for Kuta to ready herself. Each time she felt prepared, her heart would relent. It was hard. And the fact that something that had once been so natural now felt insurmountable made her feel frustrated and heartbroken. She felt weak.

But despite those feelings, Kuta continued. Each time she panicked, she refocused and took a new breath with the knowledge that eventually, so long as she tried again, she would take that first step. And eventually she did. Kuta expanded her agindan sense and the spiritual world opened up to her again. Spirits of the flowers swayed on long blue petals in the breeze. Spirits of the smoke danced among their brethren of the air. Three mud spirits sunk deep into a wet place sheltered from the sun like animals in a den. She sensed the vast array of spirits as they, ignorant of all the pain and suffering around them, enjoyed the natural beauty in the world.

She looked beyond them and spread her spirit thin, questing as far as she could handle. Hers was but the faintest of touches on the distant city; unfocused. She felt him, Gaba'ké. His spirit was like an ember, still glowing and hot but without any fuel left to burn. He was empty and exhausted. Far more so than she felt. She felt his spirit and it sang of hope. And then, like a splash on hot coals, he was gone.

A profound emptiness settled over her, and Kuta drew her spirit back to herself once again. Gaba'ké was gone, and as he had done for Elvi, she had been there to witness his spirit. *Disappear? Move on?* She wasn't sure. She'd never thought about it before. She'd never witnessed an Aginjigaade pass on. He had made his stand; given everything of himself. It was a sad moment, and she thought that she should feel sad for him, but she just couldn't find the emotion within herself. *Perhaps I'm just too tired to feel,* she thought to herself. *Perhaps you're more like Janos that you think,* a deep seeded fear whispered.

From her vantage high above the city, Kuta watched the fall of Caso. Soldiers spread outward from the large black Careyago warships. Warehouses on the bay where she and Mellen had once readied shipments for distant ports became overrun by their enemy. That felt a lifetime ago. Almost every other ship not ablaze appeared to be leaving in haste. She wondered if Yuromi and the prince had made it onto one of them. She would miss her new friend's absence. One of the warships lingering in the mouth of the bay turned and hunted one of the fleeing ships down. She quested carefully and sensed another Aginjigaade spirit being extinguished.

The Careyago flowed through the city like a tide. The yellow imperial uniforms moved swiftly through the streets, disciplined and unyielding. Those still loyal to Viiran's doomed rebellion were swiftly routed. Those caught were summarily crushed. The surge of soldiers and rioters so keen on taking the city had turned tail at the sign of organized and powerful resistance. They fled, abandoning their weapons and the city through the gates into the desolate lowlands and wasted remnants of what used to be Mudtown. Pockets of smoke continued to swell from neighbourhoods on the devastated south side of the city. Kuta knew it would be days before all the fires were quelled. Her eyes drifted over the city, taking it all in. *How did it come to this?*

Kuta wished, not for the first time, Minoc were here to give his council. *He'd say something sharp and witty. Or something cynical and wise. Perhaps all four at once.* She could imagine his voice in her mind, a queer joviality that masked his immense brilliance. She muttered the worlds aloud to herself, mimicking his cadence, "The board has changed, Kuta. And all forms of change invite opportunities to those willing to take

risks." *He'd expect me to press on,* she admitted. *As he would. No matter the obstacle. Continue the fight. But for what?* She wasn't sure anymore. A wry smile crossed her face as she pondered, not for the first time, where exactly Patzau Ashill had sent him after freeing him from his cell. With a final, lingering look, Kuta turned her back on Caso. She marched among a silent and weary stream of refugees deeper into the mountains. It was time to go home.

*

The world as Fera Yohati knew it, flipped on its head in a matter of three days. She had been a princess of Caso in all but name, but now… it was difficult for her to put words to her deep feelings of loss. Everything she had ever known and expected had been taken from her. It had all started the day before the invasion in an unexpected summons to her father's study.

As Patzau, her father was an influential and busy man. Fera had witnessed first had the level of respect and admiration that many people who came to visit bestowed upon him. Other Patzau would come to his study for private meetings, as would foreign dignitaries and influential people from across the seas as far as Tulin. As such, her father's study had always been off limits as a girl. Of course, Fera and her mother would appear at the dinner table to converse with the powerful and brilliant minds who had been invited to sup with her father, but never were family matters discussed within the confines of the study. It was a place of business and importance. That was why, when the summons came to see her father *inside* his study, Fera grew concerned. Never before had her father requested her presence inside his most sacred space. Never before had she been worthy.

One of the house servants, a woman Fera referred to privately as Fish due to her wide eyes and long face, appeared while Fera was sharing a morning meal in the garden with her mother. They had been breaking their fast with the normal array of fruits, pastries, and jams. Fera looked to her mother for support but found her mother strangely unwilling to intervene. There was something peculiar with the way her she looked away absentmindedly, and it wasn't until Fera had already stood and followed Fish inside that she realized that her mother already knew whatever it was her father wanted to speak to her about. Something important enough to require a formal summons. Her concerns weren't left to stew as, upon reaching the highest floor at the top of the landing, she was promptly admitted to her father's study where he sat at his desk, writing. He wore his writing spectacles, a treasured gift from the old Artisan's Patzau before Minoc, and looked up as she entered the room. The heavy door closed behind her with an audible thud.

"Fera, my darling" Yohati said, standing and smiling. It was a smile her father seldom used. One she recognized as reserved for those he wanted to placate. In that knowing, it did the opposite.

"For what do I owe the honour?" Fera said, taking a comfortable seat across from her father, who tucked the papers away into a drawer.

"There's something important I wish to discuss" Yohati began. Which meant, *there's something important I wish for you to listen quietly to and accept.* Fera leaned forward in interest. He had a look on his face that seemed genuinely excited about whatever news he was about to reveal. He continued in earnest excitement, "I have found you a suitable match."

Fera blinked, uncomprehending. *A suitable match?* "Pardon me?" she said, not sure if she heard her father's words right. "What do you mean, a suitable match?"

"I have secured you a suitable candidate for a husband" Yohati beamed proudly. "You will meet him in a few days when he comes to… visit."

Fera's mouth opened to respond, but no words came. *A husband? He's found me a husband?* Fera found some semblance of decorum. She had years of practice since childhood and her happy face appeared, despite her inner concerns. "That's wonderful!" she exclaimed. "I didn't know you were looking for a husband for me" she added. "I wish I had been aware, since I too have been looking for a suitable man at all these parties I've been attending. Had I known you were going to choose one for me, I'dn't have made all that effort." The smile that followed came out a little bit fake, but she wasn't sure her father noticed. Perhaps he'd simply ignored it. He had always demonstrated a soft spot for her, and Fera knew how to abuse it.

"I am certain I found you the best possible candidate" he said confidently. "He's a prince."

Fera's heart dropped. The only prince she knew of inside Caso was the uninteresting welp of a boy they had shared dinner with. The one who's uncle was murdered. *What a terrible fellow. What a terribly unimportant kingdom*. *Which one was it?* She scowled as she tried to recall. "From Gaag?" she asked in concern, the name of the place coming to her suddenly.

"Spirits, no" Yohati snubbed. "A real prince, with real lands and titles. As I said, he'll be in Caso soon. It will be of the utmost importance that you are here, at home, for the next few days to ensure introductions are well made. Do you understand me?" Yohati asked. His Patzau voice came through on that last question, suggesting obedience was strictly required in this matter.

Fera nodded silently, and was subsequently dismissed. She didn't remember much of the rest of that day, her mind singularly focused on the fact that she was, as far as her father was concerned, about to meet her future husband. She could do nothing but linger on the matter. And the more she lingered, the less she liked the idea. *How could he know what kind of man I should like? He should be running the city instead of focusing on which bachelors I should spend my time with. So much effort and planning. So many hints and suggestions planted in carefully calculated social events, all wasted. And why a foreigner? There are plenty of suitable bachelors amongst the Casoyan nobility and I could have whichever one I like. Perhaps a second on the side.* The remained of the day was spent sulking on the matter. For the first time, the life of Fera Yohati, princess of Caso, had been truly upended.

But the next morning, everyone's lives were upended. The bells pealed in their insistent nagging tone. Fera stuffed the heavy pillows over her ears to drown out the noise. It was only after a servant came to dress her and bring her to her father's study for the second time in two days, did she understand the significance of the moment. Messengers came in constant supply, bringing back unfiltered military reports and messages that told of barbarians inside the city. Savage tribesman from the mountains and the criminals of Mudtown had worked together to infiltrate and murder and rampage. They were looting, killing, and pillaging everything in sight. Fires were out of control, ships were burning, innocent citizens were being slaughtered. Sitting in her father's office, holding her mother's hand, hearing the reports from the messengers, it was the most terrified Fera had been in her life.

It sounded like the end of days. Half of the city was being overrun. Thousands, mostly innocent Casoyans, were being brutally murdered by the evil invaders. By all the reports coming in, it seemed as good as certain to suggest the city had fallen. Soldiers

were caught unprepared. The fortress had been sundered from the rest of the city and the soldiery was cut off from the citizens they were supposed to protect. And then, when all was most dire, the Careyago navy appeared. To Fera, the message of the black ships flying the golden imperial standard suggested the end. Not the end as she had imagined it hours prior. But a worse end, one where death or worse came to each and every one of them. To his credit, her father didn't seem much surprised by the news. In that moment, the respect she had for her father's composure was vast. She had believed him to be unwaveringly stoic in the face of chaos. He proved it that day.

It was only later in conversations that Fera recognised her foolishness in those moments. Her father was composed because he had expected their arrival. But in that moment, as the Careyago Navy sailed into the city uncontested, Fera surrendered hope. They had escaped the storm, only to wreck on the rocks. The Careyago Ships unloaded swaths of soldiers in golden armour and claimed the city right out from under the rebels' greedy fingers. By the end of the day, The Careyago had claimed the city and the savages had been driven back into the hills.

And on the third and final day, Fera's changed irrevocably for the third and final time. The morning following the invasion of Caso began with an eerily silence. The streets were empty of the living. People hid inside their homes, watching from windows with nervous anticipation. Not a living soul roamed the streets. Only the Casoyans in their golden uniforms, brandishing their long silver spears, seemed to patrol the streets. Once or twice, a group of the foreign soldiers would approach the family estate and were admitted to meet with her father. Fera could only infer, having been confined to her room after the invasion had ended. But even from her confinement, Fera witnessed as the foreign soldiers came and went. It was just past noon when a new group of soldiers approached, this time bringing with them a face Fera knew all too well. Even from her vantage high above the garden, her friend Kida's face was distinctly familiar.

Fera had, just days ago, contemplated cutting her once-friend entirely out of her social circles. It seemed the right move following Patzau Ashill's disgraced resignation and the rumours of deeper treachery. Kida's social status would have fallen irreparably in the aftermath. Therefore, it was only right for Fera to distance herself. Kida would either succumb or rise above the scandal and only then would Fera reevaluate. None of that came to pass.

Both girls were confined together in her room, and Fera was simply happy to have a friend. There was a sad emptiness in Kida's eyes. Despite herself, Fera indulged and let the sad girl embrace her. It was nice to have a friend in these difficult times, but it was also important to establish boundaries. But, as it went, Fera's gift of friendship did not go unrepaid. Kida was quick to share the juiciest gossip following the most unbearable silence Fera had ever endured. It was in Kida's retelling of the last day that Fera learned that her father, Patzau Yohati, was the last real Patzau left in Caso. Kida had started with, least interestingly, news that the Careyago had rescued her from her home, where she had barred the door against the savage invaders as they destroyed and looted the place bare. She recalled how the savages had killed Patzau Ashill in front of her and how she had barely managed to escape to her room and that her annoying sister was still missing. Fera added the annoying part, but she was certain Kida would agree on a normal day. She tried her very best to display sympathy for her sad friend. Losing her mother and sister would be hard, but it was Fera's own opinion that Kida had a better future without them. No, a disgraced Patzau of a mother and the unlikable twin sister with the unsightly scar

would have held Kida back. They were stains on a smart girl like Kida's future prospects. *Better this way*, Fera believed. *Though she would never say so to her friend's face.*

After the retelling of her brave rescue, Kida provided updates on the status of the city. It seemed like the Careyago were here to aid Caso after all, and not oppressive conquerors. Their foreign liberators had been working with their Casoyan counterparts rescue people, put out fires, and help wherever possible. They were reestablishing order inside the city. It took far too long to get the most interesting gossip from Kida's lips. That being the news of Patzau Onudar and Hadashenta's deaths at the hands of the savage mob. How their lifeless bodies had been paraded around the streets like banners of barbarity. Fera audibly gasped, mostly for effect, as Kida shared the accounts of witnesses. Unlike Onudar and Hadashenta, Adagizhi was found dead inside the council chambers alongside two of the barbarian leaders and the Aginjigaade Janos Tydana.

With no witnesses to the events inside the palace, rumours were running wild. Apparently, the chamber was completely destroyed. The Careyago Aginjigaade claimed to have killed the rogue Aginjigaade who killed Patzau Adagizhi and Janos Tydana, but the fact that they won't reveal who it was made Fera skeptical. She had mulled over the scenario herself and now believed the Careyago had secretly killed Tydana, thinking him an enemy. Now they were simply trying to cover up the mistake. It seemed the more likely scenario. Janos never seemed particularly strong or likeable as an Aginjigaade anyway. She had always wondered why her father bothered to keep him around so long when others displayed more skill and power.

Accounting for the three disgraced Patzau—Mellen Minoc, the traitor; Yanata Ashill, Kida's mother; and Hairo Bradel, the Patzau for a day—only Patzaus Murocil, Powanati, Burm, and her father survived the day. And, with Patzau Murocil having retired from her position, and with reports that Patzau Powanati had effectively fled the city, that left only her father and Burm in any real position of power. *And Burm, bless his heart, is a puppet.*

A knock came from the door and, of all people, her mother stood on the other side, flanked by the serving woman, Fish. It was rare for her mother to visit in person. More often, one of the servants, cooks, or maids would be sent on the errand. "Bathe and get dressed" Reah ordered. "Wear the gold dress I had made for you last month." Fish strolled through the room, ignoring Kida, and disappeared into the closet. She reappeared with the garment in hand. Fera did as bid, and shortly found herself amongst an armoured procession heading towards the Palace.

Crowds of people filled the streets all headed in the same direction. They approached Dohina Square and the dais where public announcements were performed. Fera followed her father's lead and took her place amongst the retinue of important politicians, both Casoyan and Careyago alike. As she stood next to her mother and father atop the public dais, the smell of smoke still lingered on the wind. The crowd that filled the square before them had an odd feel. Perhaps it was simply how fresh the wounds felt from the previous two days still felt. Perhaps it was the fact that this was a summons, rather than a rally. Or perhaps, it was the fact that two hundred full armoured Casoyan soldiers stood rank and file before the dais in support of their leaders, who were also present before the crowd. There were plenty of people who cheered and shouted in support, but there were plenty more who seemed only to hold a somber silence in their stares. Fera felt for them. She too felt like an unwilling participant in whatever grand spectacle was about to unfold. Looking around the men and women around her, only Burm's face was familiar. He had a new scar on his chin and one of his arms was in a sling

but he looked otherwise unharmed. He smiled at her when her caught her looking but she didn't smile back. He was missing another tooth. *No, thank you.*

Kida's information proved accurate. Aside from her father, no other Patzau graced the stage. Fera was smart enough to recognize that Burm, being a pawn, didn't count. Instead, the stage was filled most of all with the golden uniforms of the Careyago. Fera had met the odd nobleman or trader from Careyago before. This was on occasions where her father hosted guests and dignitaries. But standing atop the steps serving as the entrance to Patzau Palace and looking into a sea of foreign soldiers brought a new host of emotions to Fera's mind.

The Casoyan soldiers before her were arrayed in perfect formation. They were the epitome of order. Amongst them was a fascinating mixture of peoples from places she could only imagine. They were a vast array of faces and features, skin hues and hair styles. It was difficult to believe they all hailed from the same vast empire. Without the golden uniforms, they would portray none of that same harmony. The guests Fera had met prior shared the same features Fera had come to associate with the Careyago. They had tall builds, round faces, round eyes, and wider noses. Their lighter brown hair neither waved nor curled. They looked like the handsome warrior standing to the left of her father. This was, as she now understood, how those who hailed from the capital city, Cayanoshi, tended to look and not a reflection of the Empire's population at large.

Beside the handsome Cayanoshi warrior was an old man with short white hair and a weathered face. He was immediately recognizable as hailing from one of the outer territories. He was also clearly an Aginjigaade. There was a confidence to their kind that was unique to them. It was as if they saw the world in an entirely different way than everyone else. Next to the Aginjigaade was another man in the most ostentatious naval uniform. He had a thick moustache and a wide nose and could only be the Admiral her mother had mentioned. The crowd settled as Patzau Yohati took the stage. He addressed the mass of people below with his ever-present calm confidence. He spoke to the Casoyans first, and then repeated his words into Tralang for the visiting soldiers. He started his speech by welcoming and thanking, "our friends from the Careyago, who came in our time of need." Fera saw right through her father's measured words and was impressed. He told the crowd a heroic version of the previous day's events. One that was clear in its praise of the Careyago soldiers who fought bravely against the hoards of savage invaders. It was a far more favourable retelling of events than what Fera had been privy to. But that was the point. People needed to remember this version of the story more than the truth. The lines of Careyago soldiers roared as they received their thanks. Then, as if handing his own soldier's a boon, Yohati asked the crowd to thank and cheer their own guild soldiers who fought hard to protect this city, "A cheer for the mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, and children who gave their own lives to preserve the great city of Caso."

It was masterful and the crowd was soon reinvigorated. Renewed by the promise from their strong leader that this was in fact a victory. Caso's victory. Fera couldn't help but smile. Nor, as she noticed, could the Careyago leadership. *They want this as much as my father does.* It was curious. *But why?* It didn't take long for Fera to get her answer. Her father introduced the handsome warrior on the stage as Crown Prince Raumekh, eldest son of Careyago Emperor Hayamadi. Prince Raumekh took the stage next to her father and raised his hand in triumph. The crowd erupted in applause. Cheers of "Hero" and "Saviour" erupted from the crowd. *Plants, of course*. *People to set the tone.* Prince Raumekh was far taller than the older Patzau, but together, both men exuded a

commanding presence. They belonged there. It felt right, having them at the front of this crowd. It was magnanimous.

This was the height of achievement for most. To be celebrated by thousands in cheers and applause. To face strangers and brothers alike and to be revered. And yet, in that moment of triumph, Prince Raumekh revealed his inner self to her. All the pieces clicked into place at once and Fera grasped the wider game her father was playing. Instead of basking in the applause, Prince Raumekh turned his head away from the crowd and had looked for her. It was apparent by the way his eyes snapped to hers. He had wanted to see, in his moment of triumph, if she was watching. He wanted to see if the woman he had come to meet, and perhaps marry, was impressed. He had that weakness, the one found in many men, that desired recognition.

Fera blushed, simply because she knew the handsome prince would like that from her. He didn't know it yet, but they were playing *her* game now. Inside, a fire was lit within Fera's soul. It wasn't the fire of lust or love. Nor any other form of desire. It was the passion to finally face a challenge worthy of her. *I will rule this man,* she thought, meeting his gaze. She smiled sweetly, but not so expressively as to suggest she was easily impressed. *This, is going to be fun.*

The remainder of her father's speech sought to normalize the presence of foreign leaders and a foreign army within Casoyan walls. His words were hidden beneath the staunch message that retaliation was necessary. That Caso needed to rebuild and that Casoyans needed to come together to help their friends and neighbours. His message sent the crowd into a frenzy of applause. And hidden beneath his words was the obvious implications that the Careyago were here to stay. That they should be embraced as heroes and liberators. That the prince would be welcome to sit on the council until new Patzau could be found to replace those who had died. It was perfect, or so Fera thought.

But then Prince Raumekh stepped forward once again, interjecting into Yohati's applause. He had a sly smile on his lips. "I will do no such thing" Raumekh announced, eliciting surprise from the unsuspecting crowd. "Caso is to be governed by Casoyans!" he declared loudly. More impressively, he did so in Casoyan and not Tralang. A thunder of real genuine applause met the prince's words. The roar was louder than any cheer given prior. He then turned and gestured emphatically to Patzau Yohati, and the crowd changed their chant to that of her father's name. Raumekh smiled widely at the crowd as they continued to chant. "With Patzau Burm recovering from injury, Patzau Yohati," Raumekh proclaimed, "will be the sole governor of Caso until such time as replacements for the council can be found!" The crowd continued their cheers.

Fera amended her previous opinion. *This* was perfect. Casoyans hated kings, but they seemed to have no problem with a leader who was a king in all but name. It was brilliant. She immediately grasped the hidden truth in the prince's words. *There will be no efforts made to select new Patzau*. Her father would remain as the sole governor of Caso. He would use the retaliatory war and reconstruction efforts as an excuse for the indefinite extensions of his single-handed control—all sponsored by the largest empire in the known world. And that deal backed by the presence of Crown Prince Raumekh, who took Fera's hand in his and raised it calmly to his lips.

Raumekh addressed the crowd once more and concluded, "I thank you all for your hospitality. I am honoured to have been called upon to defend the beautiful and peaceful city of Caso… I am blessed to know that I made it in time to protect all of you from the terrors of your enemies in the mountains. I am privileged to know that my efforts may have saved the life of my new betrothed."

Fera turned and faced the crowd. She had been ready for it and smiled warmly to the sea of onlookers. The applause washed over her and she basked in it. This was what Fera Yohati had been born for. This was what she deserved. She would be empress.

*

A cool, sweet breeze brushed Ohacha's face. It carried with it the scent of the sea. The ship rocked steadily on untroubled waters. Ohacha eyes fluttered open and a soft ray of light let particles of dust dance before his eyes. A spirit played in the rays; its translucent form soaking in the sunlight. Ohacha stirred, but groaned as pain blossomed in his abdomen. It was a sharp reminder of his recent failure. Despite the pain, he rose into a seated position, feet dangling over the hard bed. The effort, combined with the pain had brought sweat to his brow. He wiped it away with the back of a hand. Ohacha touched his tender side. Bartiin's blade had nearly killed him. He knew how close he had been to death. He thought back to those moments. He had beaten Bartiin. And yet, Cask had stopped him. Spared their enemy. *Why? And why had Bartiin run in the first place? Why did I think it wise to chase him alone? And, how much of what he said about Aramuk was true? Surely… none of it. It was all bait. Words said to make me angry. Weren't they?*

The door to his private quarters opened and the spirit vanished. Yuromi stood in the doorway. She carried a tray and, upon seeing Ohacha upright, frowned deeply. Ohacha looked up as she entered and noted the mixture of concern and relief and disappointment written across her face. "Don't move," Yuromi whispered. She pulled a wet cloth from the tray of food and water and pressed it gently to Ohacha's forehead, wiping away the sweat. "Get back into that bed" she ordered. "If you open that wound again, Rolena will kill you herself in frustration."

Ohacha submitted to her orders and settled back into the small bed after a sip of water. Yuromi slipped forward into the place where Ohacha had been, and leaned over to inspect the bandages at his side. Ohacha recognized the room. They were aboard the Sweet Wind. This was Aramuk's room. *My room now.* Hopefully they were far from the hellscape that had been the city of Caso. He remembered little beyond his duel. Yuromi recounted the events that had transpired to the best of her ability. She started with their split in the crowd, the swarm of refugees, the arrival of the fleet, and the cheers that had greeted the Careyago as they came ashore. Ohacha remembered none of it. Only the blood on his hands and the wound on his side. He remained quiet after she finished. He hadn't asked yet, but Yuromi knew he would.

"What about Gaba'ké?" he asked delicately. "Did he make it back?"

Yuromi pursed her lips and shook her head. "No. But I'm sure Gaba'ké's fine" Yuromi said, trying her best to sound reassuring. "He and Kuta are together. They're the strongest Aginjigaade I've ever met. I'm sure they managed to escape before the Careyago invaded."

Ohacha wasn't so sure, but he didn't see the need in arguing over hypotheticals. Gaba'ké's sacrifice for him had already been far greater than Ohacha felt he could demand. And then, at the end of it all, they had abandoned the old man to fend for himself. It hardly seemed right. Regrets bubbled to the surface of Ohacha's minds. Things he wished he could do over with his wise mentor.

Yuromi broke the silence, her tone more forceful than Ohacha was expecting. "Why did you do it, Ohacha?" she asked, her voice firm. "Why did you go after him alone? After Bartiin?"

Ohacha stared at the wooden ceiling of the cabin. His throat felt tight and, despite the sip of water, his tongue felt dry and heavy. After a moment he replied, "Like

that evening when you and I were sitting on that pier. I wanted to try to take back my own destiny. I thought I could beat him and overcome it all. I thought…" his voice broke.

"I remember" Yuromi said calmly. "But why did you have to do it alone? The four of us, together, Bartiin wouldn't have stood a chance. You could have called for help and led us against him and… that choice would have given you just as much agency as facing him alone. And with vastly better results."

Her words hung in the silence. Ohacha closed his eyes and rubbed at them with his fingers. There was an obvious and uncomfortable truth to her words. His desire for vengeance and freedom had almost cost him everything. *If Cask hadn't arrived….* There was a painful irony in understanding that in his desperation for control, he had ceded it entirely. Yuromi gently squeezed his arm before rising. "I'll give you some space" she murmured.

She rose, leaving him alone with his regrets. Ohacha pushed his fingers into his eyes until he saw spots. She was right, again, and it made him feel inadequate. He had been so confident in his decisions in Caso, and nearly all of them had ended in disaster. The sting of that failure was a bitter companion. As the boat rocked rhythmically on the calm waters, Ohacha thought long and hard, finally seeing a pattern to his plentiful mistakes. Only a few of his decisions hadn't ended in ruin: his choices to apologize and to listen. He wondered what might have been if, in that moment of anger and loss, he had remained hurt and vindictive and sent Yuromi away. *Rolena would still be in jail. We would never have learned about the stolen fortune. We wouldn't have made it out of Caso alive.* In that moment of humility, he recognized the ghost of his uncle's guidance. Aramuk had always been the one to emphasize the responsibility of honour. It was profoundly fitting that the sole decision Ohacha made with his uncle's influence, and not his own reckless pride, was the one that had yielded the best results.

He realized, that Cask's decision to stop Ohacha and spare Bartiin had served the same purpose. It was the honourable thing to do. With new and painful clarity, Ohacha let go of the anger that had served as his compass for so long. He hadn't even known it was there pushing him, nearly sweeping him away. It hadn't led him anywhere worth going. And it hadn't helped anyone worth helping. He was disappointed in himself and he was humbled. But that didn't mean he was finished. He knew what he needed to do next. Ohacha swore to step out of the current of vengeance. To never let it steer his decisions again. And despite the pain at his side, he felt at peace.

Epilogue

The door before him swung open on smooth hinges and Mellen Minoc entered the private office. The room was small, but such were the constraints of a city as populous as Caso built into an island a fraction of the size. There were no wide avenues here, nor were there grand open plazas. The only exception to both of these rules was the opulent garden square atop the high plateau that stood between the Royal Palace and the Great Turtle Library where Mellen now was. Turtle was notably old and rife with myths and legends. Some believed the city of was named for the sea creatures that shared the city's name. Others claimed the city was built on the back of an ancient spirit that took the shape of a turtle. There were such things, Mellen knew, but it seemed impossible that a city of this size could be one of them.

The librarian who had led him closed the door politely behind him. The small office was filled beyond its capacity with all manners of books and trinkets and contraptions. They crowded the shelves and desk. Books and papers were stacked high into the bay window that looked out over the city below. The scene through the window was as beautiful as a painting. The rooftops of the houses and buildings below were a confusion of ochre coloured roof tiles. Further below, the deep sea sparkled in the afternoon light and the dark hulls and bright sails of the ships below dotted the marine blue canvas. The old man, who had his face pressed into a diagram of some kind, lifted his nose from the page and gave a warm smile.

"You must be Mellen Minoc" the older man said. He rocked to his feet with a youthfulness unexpected of one so ancient. "Please, take a seat," he said, lifting the stack of books that had been piled atop the guests' chair. He shifted the stack to the floor. A book from the pile spilled to the ground, but the man made no effort to restack it. There were many such objects left in this state.

"Grandmaster Redd?" Mellen asked cautiously. He wasn't sure what he had been expecting from the head librarian in the oldest library in the known world, but the energetic old man before him simultaneously matched precisely and yet also contrasted heavily against his expectations. Mellen took a seat and the chair was far too small for his large frame. It squeezed at his thighs.

"You may call me Redd" the older man said. "No need for haughty titles here or we'll spend all day in compliments and honorifics and never get to real words."

Mellen smiled. He liked that. "It is a pleasure to meet you finally" Mellen said. "We've exchanged many letters over the years, but I never expected to actually meet you in person."

"Nor did I" Redd said. His smile vanished. "I've heard all of the things that have happened in Caso and I must admit, it has caused quite as stir here in Turtle. This city is a fortress with a moat the size of the sea, but even we fear how bold the Careyago are becoming."

"This was not the work of the Careyago alone, I'm afraid" Mellen said. He explained how Patzau Yohati had manipulated the course of events that had led to his consolidation of power. How the old Casoyan Patzau had convinced his own people to perpetrate the acts that had culminated in his rise to power. The old librarian listened attentively through the whole retelling. How the council was turned against itself. How additional powers were granted in the turmoil. How Mellen was framed as a traitor, and then saved from execution. How he had been rescued from his doomed fate by Patzau Ashill.

When Mellen finished, Redd lifted his gaze and sighed. "It seems you've played Yohati's game and lost. Tea?" Without waiting for an answer, Redd pulled a kettle from somewhere behind the desk and poured a cup for each of them.

"Yohati outsmarted me" Mellen confessed. "I figured out far too late he was the enemy that had been harrying me. And then, even after I discovered his treachery, I underestimated his intentions. I thought his greed was for a throne, a pretty crown of his own and a kingdom under his rule. But his vision was far grander and far more sinister than I imagined. He never wanted to be king. He wanted his grandchild to rule the empire. He was playing a longer game."

"You may not know this," Redd said softly, "but I met Burrenal Yohati when we were both far younger men. He wasn't yet Patzau on the council, and I wasn't yet Grandmaster of the Library. We were both young, but rather ambitious men and Yohati travelled to Turtle with his father to learn how the library organized our centuries of information and other administrative details. He was an Administrator… you know that of course. Most often, I find the administrative types to be rather stiff. But Yohati always stood out as a cunning person. Thinking back, I believe now that he understood even from a young age just how much power administrators can wield. But, to manipulate conflict and bloodshed to seize additional power. And to sell his city and his people for a bloodline… this is a grave betrayal," Redd admitted. "I would have underestimated him too."

Minoc's smile faded to a grim line. "I thought about…" Minoc started hesitantly. His resolve faded and he took a deep breath, hoping the man across from him would understand the truth he was about to share. Mellen tried again. "After we left Caso, I was angry. I had been framed for a crime I hadn't committed and the people who knew me best, my colleagues, had condemned me to die for it. It still pains me. At night I wonder which ones were part of the conspiracy, and which ones simply believed the lie they had been fed."

"Does it matter?" Redd asked, his question genuine.

"I suppose not" Mellen replied. The break in the retelling had resettled his nerves, as had the tea. "By the time I reached Onera, I was filled with rage. I had considered a thousand different ways of retaliating. I had pictured a hundred ways in which an assassin might appear to snuff the life of the man who had tried to take mine from me. I wrote him a letter and had it sent to Caso to make him fearful. To make him fear me and the retribution I promised. I wanted that fear to eat away at him. But then, I figured out Yohati's real plan. The plan to wed his daughter to the emperor's son. I realized how wrong I had been, and the perfect plan for revenge came to me."

"And what was that?" Redd asked. He held judgement in his wisened gaze.

"The best way to hurt him would be to assassinate Yohati's daughter. To do it right in front of him and his future son; to rip the future he so desired from his hands and watch his love and aspirations crumble to death in the same moment. It would have been

poetic. I imagined the moment over and over again—his victory snatched away at the most devastating second."

The silence that followed was heavy. Grandmaster Redd shifted awkwardly in the chair across from him. He was seeing a glimpse into Minoc's mind. A glimpse few would ever see. "So why didn't you?" he asked. His tone had lost the whimsical energy it had carried through the beginning of the conversation. This time, his question was serious and filled with probing curiosity. "You had the chance. You had the connections. Why let him have his victory?"

Mellen cast an accusatory glance at Redd. He wondered whether the old man had let slip that bit of secret knowledge on purpose or not. He decided the old man had. Mellen looked down at his palms in contemplation. "I couldn't bring myself to do it," he whispered. "That dark and evil part of me wanted too so desperately." The truth of those words stung. "But I realized I couldn't live with myself; that to stoop to such an act of evil, would make me no better than him. I have my own daughter. To order such an act of evil would be to welcome the same evil against me. I couldn't fathom cursing my family in that way."

Redd stirred in his chair and took a sip from his tea. "What you say is wise, perhaps" the librarian said after quiet contemplation. "But it is also weak. By allowing Yohati this victory and in letting him solidify this alliance, you have only solidified his position. Before, I would have believed you smart enough and clever enough to be a worthy adversary to Yohati's cleverness, but I would not make the same declaration now that he is supported so strongly by the Careyago."

Mellen's smile returned, though it held no mirth. "This is where you and I disagree" he said, leaning back in the small chair. "I have learned from my enemy how best to defeat him, and that is by leaving him unsuspecting. Yohati will expect assassins, and so I will not send them. He knows I am out here, bent on his destruction. And so, he will do everything he can to find me and protect himself against me. Except, I will do nothing. And that fear will eat at him endlessly. There will be no idle peace where he does not suspect my treacherous hand."

"I fail to see how inaction serves your end goal" Redd said, sipping from his teacup.

"Yohati will remain so focused on me, that he will forget to fear the monster he himself created. *That* will be my revenge. And he will not see it coming until it is far too late to stop her."

The End

About the Author

C.W. Andrew is a Canadian author from Toronto, Canada. Prince of no Kingdom, started in 2024, is the first of several works set in the world of the Aginjigaade. Cameron began writing stories in 2015 and is an avid reader of all genres, but especially fantasy. With a degree in geography, experience in archaeology, and a diverse range of cities around the world he has had the privilege of calling home, Cameron draws on a wide breadth of inspirations to craft his worlds. He currently lives and works in Brisbane, Australia.

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