



A Legend of Leonar Novel

FALLING REIGN

KENNETH COLLINS

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PROLOGUE

The morning sun beat down on the beach sand making it a brilliant white, almost as white as Cador's flowing beard. A warm, gentle breeze blew in with the waves. It was the first day of the month of Rainwane, which would usher in the summer. Temperatures were beginning to rise, flowers would bloom, and timid showers would give way to angry, afternoon thunderstorms. Even knowing the cyclical nature of the seasons, Cador marveled at the unusually pleasant morn.

Cador's mammoth boots sunk inches into the sand with each step. He couldn't help but admire the beautiful horizon; blue, clear sky hanging above the water as far as the eye could see. Seagulls circled near the top of the gray, rocky cliff that towered a hundred feet into the sky behind him.

But something was wrong. Cador could feel it in his massive but aging bones. He stood over seven feet tall, but his body was puny and weak. He had almost no fat or muscle, so even in the beach sun he was forced to wear a thick robe. Despite his bodily flaws, he had a gift, maybe due to an unknown lineage, a tragic childhood, or a power given to him by The Great One to make up for his lack of physical ability.

Regardless of why, he had a gift and it had served him well in his many years of life. How many years, no one could know, even Cador. Cador had forgotten more than

most men would ever know. His hair had fallen out long ago. He barely remembered a time when he had hair, only that in his youth he enjoyed running his fingers through it. With each passing year, his skin wrinkled. Still, Cador looked better than many of the fortunate but few septuagenarians and octogenarians in Corallora despite being their senior. Rumors spread by the local children put him near a hundred years old. The parents' estimates were not much different. Cador had always been in Corallora, and had lived many lifetimes. Each time the story was told, Cador aged a generation.

And who was he to dispute it? He delighted in the stories about him and his many lives. Sometimes at night before drifting off to sleep, Cador would try to remember his parents, relatives, childhood friends. The images his brain mustered were rare, fleeting and likely inaccurate, visualizations planted in his mind based on fiction he'd read or imagined. Rarer still, there were scents, sounds, feelings; these were the true remains of his youth. The memories associated with them had been disconnected and lost, but he took some solace in those little sensations, like the feeling of soft hair flowing between his knuckles. What good would the truth do him? He had given up on that a long, long time ago. He was considered ancient, a treasure, and with that belief came great respect. During his life, he had been the advisor to many kings and queens, consultant to warlords, and considered a seer and wise man in turbulent times. He was always reimbursed well for it.

There was also great responsibility and pain; the pain of knowing what the future would hold and the

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responsibility of recognizing when to change it, or worse, when to let things run their course.

This was one of those times.

Cador slowly bent down and reached a bony finger toward the surface of the incoming waves. Water rolled in around him, soaking his boots. Despite the heat of the sun, he shivered.

His senses wavered with the ebb and flow of the tide. Maybe his senses did not waver; perhaps his own mind blocked them. Maybe the information his gift whispered silently to him was too horrible to bear. Maybe the visual his intuition painted was far worse than anything he could accept.

Cador stood up and stepped back away from another line of waves. His piercing eyes stared over his hooked nose at the sunlight gleaming off the glassy surface of the water, but he saw nothing of the sort. Instead, he saw dead, bloated bodies floating precariously under fathoms of murky water; homes ripped from their foundations with unrivaled force and crumbling into an endless sea; an empty crib violently rushing down what used to be a busy street; legions of soldiers still in formation and weighed down by pounds of armor on the ocean floor.

Then he saw his own submerged face, ghostlike and pale, teetering slowly back and forth. A bubble formed around the lips then floated toward the surface.

Cador shuddered back to reality. The vision was replaced by the summerlike morning; the squawking of birds overhead and crashing waves resumed. Shaking his head, Cador turned away from the sea and started back up the beach. His height allowed only an awkward gait as he

moved through the sand, and then up a gentle grassy slope. He stepped onto the stone road that led back through the village toward the schoolhouse. Bees hovered and hopped from flower to flower on either side of the street. Their quiet buzzing accompanied by the chorus of tweeting birds helped distract Cador from his latest vision.

He was oblivious to three children that had begun to follow him as he passed through their village. The trio circled him as he walked, giggling. As they rotated in front of him, he smiled.

“Well, hello there.” Cador said without changing his stride.

At first, the children were quiet, shyly avoiding eye contact even as they danced around him. Finally, the youngest and bravest, a tiny, fair-haired girl blurted, “You are tall.”

Cador laughed a hearty laugh, as much as his frail body could muster. The pain in his bony ribs was worth the merriment. Cador greatly enjoyed the company of the circles of curious children who would orbit him as he lumbered through the kingdom.

“You are old,” said a small boy as he opened his arms wide, “You are a thousand years old!”

Maybe. Maybe...

DAY ONE

“Melias, wake up.”

He opened his eyes just enough to see the morning light pour in from the bedroom window. His chest and stomach sank into the bed as one arm jutted off the edge; the other disappeared under his pillow. The traces of a dream faded into his memory as his consciousness returned. Grasping his pillow, Melias raised his head.

“Melias, wake up.” A woman’s voice.

Melias rolled onto his back and turned to see Gwynora, his beautiful and very pregnant wife standing beside the bed. He smiled, “I am awake.”

“You managed to sleep through the ringing of the temple bells again. It must have been an awfully good dream.”

“I believe it was, but I cannot for the life of me recall what it was about.”

“Or whom.” She cooed as she moved from the bedside toward the doorway, her gown swaying behind her as she balanced her ever-increasing weight. “You had better get down to the harbor. You know they cannot get anything done without your guidance.”

“I will be there soon enough.”

“Well, breakfast is getting cold on the table.” Gwynora worked her way out of the room and toward the stairs.

The steps creaked as Melias pushed the covers aside, and rolled over and out of bed. The dream came back to him in chunks; large ships, war ships. But what was it about them?

Naked, Melias quickly washed his face in the metal water basin. Shaving his weeks-old scruff would have to wait until another morning. He was already running late. Melias wiped the water from his face and the sleep from his eyes with a cloth as he turned to his dresser. He threw on a loose-fitting blue tunic, and then pulled on his brown work pants. Barefoot, he hurried out of the room and down the steps into the kitchen. The table was already set for the two of them. His pork, eggs, and bread showed signs of cooling, but were appetizing. Gwynora's plate was half-eaten.

Gwynora poured water from a carafe into his mug as he approached her.

"Good morning, Nora." He kissed her on the cheek.

"Good morning. I am beginning to worry about you. You are usually up at the crack of dawn until recently."

Melias sat down, broke the bread in two, and shoved half in his mouth. It was almost stale. He made a mental note to pick up fresh rolls at the market after work. He washed it down with a gulp of water.

"Too many hours at the harbor I suspect. General Braskill and King Syrus are eager to get this new vessel afloat. The original masts were cut too short and they had to be redone. Added many hours to our labor it did." Melias eyed her plate. "Are you going to finish your food, Nora?"

"That is my second plate, dear." Melias raised an eyebrow. "I am eating for two now."

"Of course."

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Gwynora took her plate away leaving Melias alone with his food and his thoughts. The dream was coming back to him. He was at sea; two massive war galleons, side-by-side with soldiers jumping and swinging onto the other vessel. Swords clashed. Orders were yelled. Pools of blood formed on the decks, then slid left and right as the ship rocked to and fro.

But it wasn't a nightmare. He did not wake with a feeling of dread or horror. In fact, he welcomed it, maybe even missed it. Was he traumatized by his time in the navy, or did he thirst for it? Perhaps that is why he over-slept. Before he knew it, the plate was empty, the water gone. He reached beside the chair and found his boots. He slid them on, stood up, and headed for the door.

"I am on my way, Nora."

She yelled from another room, "Be careful, Melias. I will see you when you get home."

Melias stepped out into the stone street and closed the door. The roads were narrow, lined with stone and wood buildings and barely allowing the bigger carts and wagons passage. When the occasional wagon did manage to find its way down his street, the many pedestrians, vendors, and peddlers would have to step aside and let it through.

On this cloudless morning, the street was particularly bustling. Fishmongers and farmers were selling their wares on either side of the road, doing everything short of physically grabbing potential customers. Melias paid them no mind, rarely purchasing from these merchants, preferring the Corallora marketplace near the castle, where the wares were historically considered of better quality and the competition led to better deals. The smells of the fish

and butchered animals filled the air. Even so, their street was one of the cleaner ones.

The clanging of armor drew Melias' attention. Twenty to thirty armored soldiers marched toward him. The vendors quieted and pedestrians moved out of the soldiers' way as they noisily moved through. While Melias had great respect for the army, having been a member of the civilian navy, their reputation of unnecessary brutality and violence toward the lower classes was something he had to turn a blind eye toward. Corallora definitely needed order after what the kingdom had been through in recent years. These were soldiers of the conscription variety; not lords but considered nobility. The inconsistent colors and fashions shown between the spaces in their chainmail gave it away. Lords were often seen on horseback with squires, their armor and weapons gleaming in the sunlight. But these were glorified bullies and henchmen to Prince Ravok.

Melias stepped out of their way, but apparently not far enough. The soldier nearest him slammed his shoulder into Melias as he passed. Melias was forced backward and grimaced. They were a cocky bunch. Ten years ago, he would have called the soldier out, settled their grievance with a duel. But now, he had to tolerate it like the other civilians. He could do nothing but watch as the soldiers vanished out of view and the sound of clanging armor faded into the sounds of merchants continuing their pitches.

As much as Melias enjoyed his current life, he couldn't help but think of the old days in the service of the navy. Those days were behind him, no longer a sailor, but a ship builder, husband, and soon-to-be-father.

Melias smiled.

The schoolhouse was small. It had been built by mostly volunteers and untrained laborers led by a handful of carpenters less than a generation ago. There were only two rooms with a short hall to connect them. The roof was thatch, chunks of which were often replaced after strong storms, leaving tiny gaps and overlaps in the ceiling. An outhouse stood beside the school. Most of the students were too frightened to use it alone as it was often overrun with spiders and other creepy-crawlies; majority were of the imaginary kind. The original school was much larger and masterfully designed by the king's personal architects. Built in marble and granite, it was meant to be a local marvel, a sign of the realm's extravagance and dedication to education. It was for that very reason it was quickly targeted during The War of the Ten Lords. Any building that represented a unity among the monarchy was barbarically destroyed regardless of the building's purpose. Even then, decades after the war's end, many of those structures had yet to be replaced. Those that had been rebuilt were crudely thrown together without funding from King Syrus or his tax coffers.

Sixteen young children from the village sat on the floor in front of Cador's desk. Ranging in age from five to fifteen, their occasional visits from Cador would likely be their only education. Getting this time was difficult enough. Many of the children were obligated to help in their parents' shops or to pick fruits and vegetables on the family farm. Only the

nobility had the means to hire tutors. Cador was tendered many offers by lords and ladies to school their children, and could have made a small fortune by accepting. Instead, he would counteroffer; welcome the nobles' children to sit in the modest school and learn beside their lower-class classmates. His offer was never accepted. They'd rather their children grow to be pompous imbeciles than be seen as equals with serfs, even if for only an afternoon.

Cador sat on the edge of his desk, towering leisurely over his students. The kids were unusually silent. Cador always captured their attention.

"Does everyone remember what we went over last time?" he asked. His eyes darted from face to face. Most of his regulars were present, and there were a few new attendees.

"Yes, sir."

Half of the children responded in unison. Several mumbled. Cador extended a long arm holding a book.

"Good. Please pass this around so each of you gets a chance to see it."

A little girl in a brown dress sitting at Cador's feet took the book and opened it. Its leather cover was tattered; its edges folded and chewed up. The writing on the front had long worn away. The pages inside were yellowing and the ink fading, but it was all they had and Cador intended to get use out of it. Within the year, he knew he would have to start borrowing from his personal collection of literature.

The book was passed to the next child and the next. Each studying the drawings and reading what remained of their captions. As the book moved through the room,

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some students mouthed the words as they read, while others spoke them aloud.

One older boy in the back of the room spoke up, “Not the animal book again!” Cador shot him a stern glare, and the boy stammered, “I am sorry, sir, but we have read this book already. Do we have to read it again?”

“Would you rather be in temple? Or pulling potatoes out of the ground? Or perhaps cutting vegetables in the kitchen with the handmaidens?”

The class chuckled and the boy lowered his eyes.

“No, sir, the animal book is fine.”

“Cador!”

He snapped his head toward the source of the voice. In the doorway, General Braskill and two armed soldiers waited. Cador’s shook his head.

“Class, we are done for today. I will try to come back soon and we can continue our studies.”

The students groaned in disappointment as they stood up and filed out of the classroom. General Braskill and his guards moved toward Cador, as the students passed them.

“Still trying to educate the world, Cador?” General Braskill smiled. “I was told I could find you here.”

“Well, general, we cannot count on our good king to provide for the minds of our young, unless of course they are born into the fortunate families.”

General Braskill was a very strong, tall man, and rarely had to look up to see eye-to-eye with anyone. But this was one of those rare occasions.

“If I did not know better, I would say that was an insult to our wise ruler. King Syrus is looking for you.”

“We would not want to keep him waiting, would we?”

“There is a carriage outside. It will take us to the castle.”

Braskill motioned to Cador, and followed him out into the sun, and then into the carriage. Braskill stared across at Cador as the horses pulled forward and they began to move.

“What is going on, Cador? Something is wrong?”

“What makes you say that, General?”

“You cannot fool me, friend. I have known you for over twenty years. Your eyes betray you.”

Cador sighed, “I have had a vision, Braskill, a horrible vision. You of all people know the credence of my prophecies.”

“I do. Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not yet.”

Braskill nodded and turned his gaze to the passing terrain through the window. The carriage hit a bump as they moved from the old dirt road to the stone road leading to the castle.

The Morning Rain, a substantial transport vessel, could be seen far behind the harbor gates. Its mast and sails towered in the distance over the stone rampart that separated the harbor from the rest of the kingdom. It had been the largest vessel he’d designed and continued to be the vessel with the most hold space ever until The Dreamer was built. Melias had designed that vessel as well, but the Morning Rain was his personal favorite.

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Melias approached the harbor's gatehouse, the only drawbridge the way through the twenty-foot high wall. It was constantly guarded and patrolled by its own corps of men-at-arms. Usually there was a knight on duty, sometimes one of Ravok's conscripts and rarely an actual lord of the realm. Babysitting the harbor was used as a mild form of admonishment for nobles who got on the royals' bad side; punishment by boredom.

Two soldiers approached Melias and proceeded to pat him down. He raised his arms to allow the search. Carrying a weapon, daggers, swords, and the like was common but Melias had not done so regularly in years. Security grew tighter with the increase in rebels, and it was less of a hassle to travel unarmed.

Their search complete, the guards backed away and gave a hand signal to the guardhouse. The drawbridge began to lower slowly toward the water separating them from the shipyard. The chains noisily chattered and Melias stepped toward the guardhouse. It was a beautiful morning, and his was a job of luxury compared to many of the occupations in Corallora. Melias was able to be a boss, work flexible hours, and be outside on days like these. He was very fortunate indeed.

Also, he got to see his creations come to life before his eyes. From his mind to design to model to creation, his ships were his creative outlet as well as a source of income. Without his military education and experience, he could have been a peddler or shopkeeper. No, not even that. He would have been in one of the lower class neighborhoods; perhaps he would have been murdered after a night of

drinking and gambling years ago, or destined to working in the quarries to the west. Neither fate was enviable.

The drawbridge screeched to a stop, interrupting his thoughts. Melias started across it, staring at the enormous vessel docked a hundred feet from him. It would not be long now before his newest creation was completed. The Sea Phantom wasn't the biggest design his brain had conjured, but it was one of the most state-of-the-art war galleons. It might even get him a raise or at least a little praise from the King himself.

Melias reached the end of the drawbridge and stepped off onto the stone boardwalk. A dozen piers were off-shot from the boardwalk, each accommodating boats of all sizes. Sailors and dockworkers scurried about, discharging and loading vessels, preparing for launches, and cleaning barnacles from the areas they could reach. Melias strode along the boardwalk passing *The Morning Rain* to his left. He felt pride for it like a parent feels for their child. The Sea Phantom sat docked at the far end of the boardwalk along the last pier, close to the dry dock where it was born, well, built. With a real offspring on the way, he knew he had to quit thinking of his creations as children.

A group of sailors hurried across the boarding plank from *The Morning Rain*, down the pier, and toward the boardwalk.

Melias waved, "Lavaine!"

"Melias," One of the sailors approached and they shook hands, "How have you been?"

Lavaine wasn't a large man, but what he had was all muscle; muscle built through years of honest labor.

"I am well. You?"

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“I cannot complain. Arrived in port at dawn, and brought quite a few tons of stone from the west. I will tell you, they are starving for timber. We managed to negotiate a few tons of marble too. King Syrus should be able to build another grand statue to himself if he wishes. How is the family? Has Nora given birth?”

Melias shook his head, “No, but any time now. We are prepared.”

“With any good luck, it will be a boy. I was very fortunate; twice.”

They laughed, “Yes, how are Bran and Andulf? They must be so big now.”

“Still have a-ways to go. I am headed home to see Ilsey and the kids now. Also, to get some rest. It was rough seas last night.” Lavaine scratched his head. “Melias, I know you were in the navy and spent a lot of time at sea, but I would bet a thousand kronas you never saw the kinds of waves we encountered. It is a good thing the Rain is so sturdy, or our entire crew would be at the bottom of the ocean.”

“Did you run into a whirlpool or a tempest?”

“No, that is the freak thing; clear skies, bright stars. There was not a reason to be concerned, and then, BAM! The ship gets pelted with this outlandish wave. I swear on my life, it was over a hundred feet tall if it was an inch. A whole series of them followed. The crew was about to panic, trying to gain control of the Rain before the sea flipped us. Luckily, it stopped just as things looked hopeless. You know me, Melias. I do not make this stuff up. I am not an imaginative fellow. I have lived a respectable portion of my life on the ocean and that was a first for me.”

“That is a scary thought, Lavaine. A wave like that would obliterate almost any ship in the king’s fleet, let alone any unlucky civilian or merchant vessel. I do not know what to say other than I am glad you made it through with your lives.”

“It was a peculiar thing indeed. Well, I have to be on my way. We should get together sometime.”

“Yes, that sounds good.”

“I will be in town for a few days before the next voyage. We should get a drink one evening at The Borr’s Head?”

“Anytime.”

They shook hands again and Lavaine smiled, “Enjoy that freedom while you can, Melias. Once the baby comes, it is a whole different story. At least I have the sea as my reprieve. I will see you later.”

“Goodbye.”

Lavaine rushed off to catch up with the other sailors who’d almost reached the end of the boardwalk. Melias thought about his newest vessel. Could it withstand the violent barrage of an unforgiving sea? Hopefully, they’d never have to find out.

Melias picked up the pace and neared the Sea Phantom. The sound of hammers banging and men sawing lumber for the masts and planks became louder. It looked as though construction had gone well during the morning hours, even without his supervision. It sat floating, tied to the dock, gentle waves lapping at its hull. Only the upper deck was incomplete. Men moved leisurely from one area to the next, getting materials, measuring, hammering. Despite their laid-back demeanor, work was progressing so Melias could forgive them.

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“Melias, where have you been?”

Melias turned to see the carpenters’ foreman and Melias’ assistant, Hebes. Hebes was much older and shorter than Melias, his gut hung over his trousers making him appear larger. Hebes rolled up his copy of the drafts and tucked them under his arm.

“I overslept. Looks like you did fine without me.”

“The weather has been very favorable. I was starting to get a little concerned.”

“Concerned how?”

“Well, there was a man here looking for you earlier. He seemed very odd.”

“I was not expecting anyone. He seemed odd in what way?”

“Yes, he was constantly looking over his shoulder. I did not recognize him, but I would not doubt he was a member of the rebellion. You are not mixed up with them hooligans, are you?”

“No, of course not. What did he do when you told him I was not here?”

“He ran off. I tried to get more information out of him, but he was out of view before I could get the words out.”

“That is odd, and a cause for apprehension. Do me a favor, Hebes. Do not tell anyone about that man, whoever he was. I do not want anyone assuming anything.”

“Oh, I understand, sir.”

“Thank you.”

General Braskill led Cador down the castle corridor toward the King's private dining chamber. The top of Cador's head grazed the ceiling as he moved behind the general. Despite the magnificent sunlight outside, very few rays penetrated into the castle leaving the rooms dark and cold. A few scattered torches were mounted and lit on the walls doing little to ease the mood or to heat the castle. As they moved, the aroma of onions, peppers, and cloves floated down the hall toward them. They reached the end of the hall and Braskill pushed open the solid, oak door.

King Syrus looked up from his pile of pork and vegetables as the door creaked. He sat facing them from the end of an oblong table. The table could seat nine; six of the seats were empty. Syrus was clean-shaven and only pork grease glistened on his chin. Age-old scars ran along his cheek and forehead. The skin had healed well giving his scars the appearance of mere wrinkles. But each had been earned years before. He had bulked up considerably in the past decades, and was no longer as athletic or agile as in his youth. Not all of the bulk was fat, however. Beneath it laid muscle, and he was as imposing as in his prime.

Prince Ravok sat at his father's left-hand side. Ravok was handsome, getting his looks from his late mother. He was of slight build compared to his father, but had been raised to be an excellent swordsman and given the best available schooling. Yet no amount of schooling could humble him. He was a product of his environment; his cruel, spoiled environment. At eighteen years of age he had unbridled power. His reputation for violence and malice amongst the commoners was legendary. While King Syrus accepted and abused his power as king, Prince Ravok

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reveled in it; the decapitations, murders, tortures, abuses of women, and his drunkenness.

Cador had heard a story involving Ravok. At a tavern, hours after closing time, the barkeep had politely asked him to leave so he could clean up for the next day. Prince Ravok flew into a rage. He grabbed the waitress, whom was the barkeep's own daughter, and slit her throat. Threatening to do the same to his other children, he forced the barkeep to clean her blood from the floorboards and remove the body so he could continue drinking. He was the worst kind of man. King Syrus did nothing to stop his son's actions. After all, they were royalty. They could do whatever they desired.

On the king's right was Lieutenant Tavia, Braskill's protégé. Tavia was a good soldier but too young to remember the years when the kingdom was fractured and destroying itself in civil war. His fresh face and trained body had yet to be tested. His inexperience and naïve, unquestioning loyalty to his king were his only flaws.

Cador and Braskill stepped toward the king, allowing the solid door to stay ajar.

"My liege," Braskill began, "I have brought Cador as you requested."

"Thank you, General." The king shoved another chunk of ham into his mouth, lips smacking as he spoke, "Cador, my sources tell me the rebels are planning something, something large." A glob of slobber and food dripped from the corner of the king's mouth.

"What is it that you wish from me?" Cador asked.

"What are your instincts telling you, the voices in your head or whatever they are? What will the rebels do?"

“That, I cannot sense, my liege. It is becoming difficult to focus. My thoughts have been clouded by a different concern.”

“What is more important than my father’s query?” Prince Ravok sneered. “If my father, your king, wants to know what the rebels are going to do, that should be your concern.”

Cador bit back his disgust, “I apologize, my prince. I did not mean to sound as if my king’s concerns were not of importance. Please forgive my words. I only meant that another grave concern has been interfering with my senses.”

General Braskill interjected, “We will not need Cador’s assistance to find the rebels. Most able-bodied noblemen have been called to arms, and hundreds of the prince’s soldiers of fortune are in full force about the realm. If any uprising were to happen, it would be short-lived and crushed. Lieutenant, I trust all of the battalions have been placed on alert?”

“Yes, sir,” Tavia replied, “And if you do not mind me saying so, I hope the rebels do attempt an attack. We are ready.”

“If I may speak, my liege,” Cador started, “I have been forewarned of a great peril.”

“Go on, Cador.”

“While at the shore, I had a dreadful premonition. One of which may be too late to avoid.”

Prince Ravok yelled, “Out with it!”

“Son, let him speak.”

Cador continued, “A series of great waves threatens all of Corallora. Tens of thousands of lives will be lost. Perhaps

the entire human race will be washed away. Every village and acre of farmland destroyed. It would be a catastrophe unlike anything we have ever seen if it comes to fruition.”

General Braskill stared up at the seer. The conviction with which Cador spoke coupled with the morbid prognosis rendered the general speechless. A chill ran up his spine.

The king’s posture straightened and he slammed a slab of ham to his plate.

“That is quite a nightmare. What sort of stories do you read before going to bed? What is it you suggest I do? Pile my subjects into ships and head out to sea on a voyage into the great unknown?”

The king let out a thunderous bellow that Tavia and Prince Ravok soon mimicked. The general and Cador were not amused.

“With all due respect, my liege, that is exactly what I would suggest. It is at the very least an option. I can think of no other course of action.”

The king slammed his fist into the table, “Cador, you have aided me for many moons for which I will always be thankful. You have supported me against all who have wished to do my family and I harm, and a sizable portion of my success can be attributed to you. However, the current threat is the rebels, not the sea. Maybe when the rebels are neutralized we can worry about waves and tides. But for now, you concern yourself with helping me defeat the rebels!”

“I understand, my liege, but I am hopeful you will take heed of my visions as they are rarely without merit. With such dire consequences, I pray to The Great One my warnings are not falling on deaf ears. I do not know when

to expect this disaster, but I doubt there is much time to prepare.”

Braskill nodded, “My king, it might not be a bad idea to have a few vessels loaded with supplies in case of an emergency.”

“Are you saying you are afraid of this fantasy storm?” Ravok taunted. “The great general wants to raise anchor and run away every time a raindrop falls from the heavens.”

The king waved, “Enough! I do not want to hear any more of this talk. I want to hear more ideas on how to find Darrius and his other rebel cohort. Go, Cador, and return when you have something useful.”

General Braskill grabbed the tall seer’s arm, “Leave the king in peace, Cador. Come with me.”

Braskill led the seer back through the door which they entered. As the door closed behind them, Ravok stood up.

“A waste is what he is, Father, this...this ancient, frail freak of nature! I do not trust him or his visions. I question where his true interests lie. We should not rely on his counsel or hold him in such esteem.”

The king put up his hand.

“Son! You have said your piece, but you listen and you listen well! This is my kingdom! No rebels, no seer, no great wave, and no son,” Ravok glared as the latter word hung in the air, “Will tell me how to run my kingdom. I earned my crown in the War of the Ten Lords; not you, not Braskill, not Cador. I united the petty fiefdoms throughout this land before you were born!”

The room grew silent, even Ravok lowered his eyes and said nothing. Lieutenant Tavia started to excuse himself

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from the table when the king exclaimed, “My kingdom; not yours, not Cador’s, and certainly nor the sea’s!”

The sun was setting and the road outside was getting quieter. Gwynora strolled over to the open kitchen window and peered out. The vendors were packing up their carts and merchandise, fabrics and trinkets and other wares. The earlier crowd of shoppers and laborers was replaced by silence and the occasional saunter of someone on their way home.

Gwynora shut the window, cutting off a pleasant summer breeze midway. The chores were done, dishes cleaned, clothes drying. She was adjusting well to the homebody lifestyle, but as the end of her pregnancy came within sight, her contempt for it grew. While she would never wish to go back to the way things used to be before marrying Melias, there were aspects she missed. There was independence, excitement, adventure, and the misadventures.

But the black eyes, bruises, and not knowing where her next meal would come from were not things she missed. During the War of the Ten Lords, her village had been pillaged and erased from the map. Only a handful survived and as a teenager with nowhere to go, Gwynora fell in with a bad batch of people.

Some nomads took her under their wing and protected her; at least that is what they would tell her. They would travel from town to town, village to village, mingling with the seedy underbellies of each, crossing paths with some of

the most immoral men and women known. There were gamblers, drunkards, ruffians, and highwaymen. But she was protected...

Gwynora started up the stairs toward the bedroom. No, she would not trade the life Melias offered her for anything, but this housewife stuff was not in her blood. She had many great nights with the nomads and criminals partying, drinking, and totally carefree. They answered to no one. When they were short on clothes or food, they stole it. When they needed money, they would rob.

But when no one was around to cheat, steal from, or hurt, they would hurt each other. Being the youngest and newest of their group and being one of the few women, she was regularly abused, especially during their drunken binges. On occasion, they would bruise her so bad or break a bone, and she thought of leaving them, but there was nowhere else to go.

After all, they protected her.

She reached the top of the steps, balancing her weight on the railing. Gwynora was amazed at how her life had turned out, how she came from nothing, to being in with the nomads, to finding Melias. She was thankful for him. Surely she'd have been dead years ago had she stayed with the nomads.

When the nomads arrived at the capital of Corallora, Gwynora was recovering from a particularly brutal attack by three of the men. Even they knew they had gone too far and had refused to acknowledge her the following morning; couldn't even look her in the eyes. She snuck away from the group and visited a doctor who was shocked to see her

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condition and offered to bandage her wounds. Her pride wanted to turn him away but even that had been broken.

The doctor fixed her up nicely but warned her not to return to the group of nomads. The beatings were getting fiercer and one more might leave her dead. She knew no other life, but saw opportunities in Corallora. Surely, someone would hire her. She could be a barmaid, a midwife, anything. Surely, someone could use her help. The doctor hid Gwynora in his office for two nights until the nomads moved on without her. She doubted they even looked for her or missed her. She never saw them again.

The door downstairs opened and shut. Melias must have arrived. Normally she would go to greet him, but ascending the stairs had taken a lot out of her. She fell back onto the bed.

Without the nomads and their so-called protection, she had nothing but the disheveled clothes on her back. Gwynora went to every tavern and hostel in town but no one was hiring. Again, she was tempted by necessity and by bad influences.

A woman named Zeeva that worked at one of the many taverns put her in contact with a group of women who were always looking for new blood. They were prostitutes, but considering her time with the nomads, it was a cakewalk. The beatings she took were no longer physical, only emotional. Looking back on it, she did not know which was worse.

Then she met Melias, a naval officer on leave. His morals were rare in Corallora and hit her with a sense of arrogance that repelled her at first, but she quickly warmed up to him. He seemed to be the only person she'd met since

losing her home that wanted nothing from her but her company, her friendship. They got along but he refused her services, no matter how much she wanted him.

Finally, after months of on and off communication, Melias decided he wanted her too, but only if she would give up the profession.

They were married shortly after.

“Gwynora,” Melias stepped into the room and saw her on the bed. “Is everything alright? Are you feeling well?”

“Yes, Melias,” she grinned, “I am great.”

Under the cover of darkness, they crept. Between trees and bushes toward the clearing, it grew ever closer. Only the light of the moon threatened their plans. His blood was pumping hard, and he could feel it in his ears. Darrius always became anxious before a raid. Sometimes the other men would see his anxiety as fear, but they never dared to question his nerve. He was never afraid to fight.

The undergrowth near him stirred and a figure shrouded in black slunk beside him.

“Darrius, the change of the guard has begun. We have only a few minutes to act.”

Pushing some branches aside, Darrius gazed out into the clearing. A one-story building sat in the center of the field, fifty or more yards away. It was an auxiliary armory for the king’s army. Inside were more swords, daggers, spears, and halberds than they could carry. Outside the armory, several tired guards waited patiently for their replacements to suit up.

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“The second group is already inside?” Darrius whispered.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure, Kelvin? How long have they been inside?”

“I am positive, sir. They have just arrived, no more than three minutes. It is time.”

The tired and bored guards were thinking of nothing but going back to the barracks to sleep, and the new guards were barely armed and unprepared. Darrius’ men were few and poorly equipped but they had the element of surprise. If they won the night, it would be a huge morale boost, and also replenish their decreasing number of weapons.

“All the men are in position?”

“Yes, sir, we are just waiting on your order.”

Darrius grabbed the hilt of a long dagger on his hip and unsheathed it. Putting his arm in the air for his hidden fighters to see, he hesitated for only a beat.

Clutching his dagger hard, he brought his fist down with conviction. A dark wave of rebels quietly pounced out of the forest and toward the armory. They wore very little and were lightly armed which aided their swift and silent raid. Many were shirtless, some naked. Their war paint was hardly visible in the darkness but it was there; on their faces and chests, black, red, and blue designs. Like moths to a flame, the rebels hurried toward the stone building; only glimmers of light coming out of the windows from the oil lamps within. Against the pitch-black surroundings, however, it made a clear target. There was no way the guards could hear them, but once halfway through the field their silhouettes became visible rushing toward them.

“Rebels!” The guards jumped to their ready positions, swords and spears drawn. Guards hurried out of the armory and formed a defensive line feet outside the door. A barrage of rushed, wild arrows flew down from the ramparts of the armory toward the oncoming attackers.

“Archers! Spread out!” Most of the arrows landed harmlessly between the rebels. Darrius glared at Kelvin beside him as they ran. “Our spy said nothing of archers!”

“His information must be old,” Kelvin spoke quickly, breathing hard, “Pray to The Great One the rest is accurate.”

One more cloud of arrows descended toward them as the rebels reached the armory, this time with deadly precision. An unfortunate few crumpled to the ground, arrows protruding from legs, chests, and torsos. Their cries filled the night air. Darrius looked away as a man close to him was hit. He pressed on.

The first and fastest of the rebels ran headlong into the stationary line of guards. A small number of men were instantly cut down by a wall of thrusting spears, but the remainders quickly overwhelmed the defenders. Daggers were plunged between their ribs or sliced across their throats until there was no one standing between them and the armory door.

Darrius pulled his bloody blade from the intestines of a guard and rushed at the doorway. Two soldiers slammed the thick, wooden door from the inside. Darrius reached the door a second after. He pressed his body against it, dug his heels into the dirt and pushed. The door would not budge. The rest of the rebels rushed to their leader’s side

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and threw their bodies into it. The door shuddered, but it wouldn't crack.

The last eight rebels bringing up the rear carried with them a tree trunk. It had been cut down and the bark removed; a contingency for that very possibility. Darrius motioned his men away from the door and battering ram was launched again and again. Darrius and Kelvin doubted the door would splinter; however, the brackets that held the piece of wood that kept the door from swinging inward were weak. At least that is what their inside source had told them. The anticipation of years of rust and disrepair proved true. With each strike, the door was pushed slightly further. The brackets were failing.

With a crash the brackets fell from the wall, the door sprung open. The ram was dropped and Darrius led his men into the armory. A lone archer stood in front of him, arrow ready to release. Darrius flung his dagger end over end. It found its mark in the eye of the archer, who fell dead. His arrow whizzed past Darrius' ear.

The entry opened up to a short hall, which led to the weapons storage on the left and the guards' room to the right. The stairs at the end of the hall led to the roof. He couldn't see them, but Darrius could hear the second shift of guards shuffling in their quarters and in the armory. He could also hear their panicked voices and the clanging of metal.

Darrius turned to his followers, "Hurry, get them while they are still arming!"

Kelvin took the lead, "You heard him! Take no prisoners!"

They rushed through the hall and poured into the guards' quarters, and then the armory. It was butchery at its very cruelest. A dozen soldiers hacked down mercilessly, most unarmed and trying to surrender. Some pled with their attackers for leniency. But they found no compassion in the eyes or hearts of the rebels. Streams of blood flowed through the cracks in the stone walkways.

Bypassing the carnage, Darrius ran up the steps to the roof. The archers were gone. He knew a portion had come downstairs to help their comrades, but there had been others. Darrius strained his eyes into the darkness as he walked the perimeter of the rooftop. Barely visible, a handful of the defenders ran off into the night, having jumped off the roof to evade the rebels.

Darrius grabbed a bow and pulled an arrow from the quiver of a dead archer at his feet. He readied the arrow, aimed above one of their heads, and let it fly. The arrow disappeared into the sky and then arced back toward the ground. It struck its target in the neck and he crumpled into a heap. One was dead but there were others, out of range or invisible in the darkness. It would only be a matter of hours, maybe less, before General Braskill was notified and on their trail.

He threw down the bow and hurried back down the steps into the armory.

"Did you see the swords, Darrius?" Kelvin stood next to him, grinning like a child who stole cookies from the cookie jar without being seen. "They are of amazing quality and there is a ton of them!"

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“We must be quick. They will be coming for us. Tell the men to take as many daggers and swords as they can carry, and throw on anything that can be worn.”

The rebels did not need to be told. They were already trying on their spoils. Helmets, chain-mail tunics, leather boots, and everything else they could find was quickly absorbed. Many of the men put on two or three layers. The smaller daggers and maces were loaded into massive sacks. Swords and armor were loaded into chests to be carried by two men. The halberds and spears were carried by hand.

Darius and Kelvin rushed the men out of the armory and back into the cover of night. As always, they would be the hunted, but that night they were the aggressors. They had to enjoy it as those moments were few and far between.

“General Braskill! General!”

Loud pounding on his chamber door abruptly woke him. Braskill grabbed a candle from the bedside stand and forced himself to his feet. His chamber was larger than most, but had no windows and few furnishings. He preferred a life of prudence, rarely indulging, as most noblemen were accustomed. His soldiers spent many nights in tiny beds with minimal comforts, often miles away from their families for weeks at a time. Braskill felt it was fitting to spend his nights the same way, barrack-like. At least they had families to return to when their duties were over.

The candle's flame danced, providing just enough light to guide Braskill toward the door. The pounding in his head continued, as did the pounding on the door.

"General, there has been an attack!" The words found their way through the wood and into the room. Braskill pulled the door inward, revealing Lieutenant Tavia in full armor.

"What happened, Lieutenant?"

"The rebels, sir, they attacked our armory west of the capital."

"Losses?"

"It is bad, General. Almost the entire regiment was killed. Only a lucky few managed to escape. The place was ransacked. They took from our stores of swords and armor, even off some of the dead."

Braskill looked down and noticed drying blood on Tavia's boots. Droplets trailed into the hall.

"You have been there already. How long ago did the attack happen? Why was I not notified sooner?"

Braskill turned and approached his armor stand in the opposite corner of the chamber. Tavia answered as Braskill threw on his chainmail tunic and strapped on his scabbard.

"A little over an hour ago, but I did not want to disturb you so I went out there myself with some men-at-arms..."

"We are wasting too much time!" Braskill lifted his helmet onto his head. "If we had hurried we could have caught up with them. Now it will be difficult even to find their tracks. You should have notified me first! What were you thinking, Lieutenant?"

"I am sorry, sir..."

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“I know what you were thinking; trying to make a name for yourself, impress the prince. Your ambition does not go unnoticed. Ambition is a worthy trait, but you need to couple it with experience and intellect. Otherwise, you may find yourself in over your head. Lead the way.”

Tavia and Braskill stormed into the hall, leaving the door wide open. As they marched, Tavia cleared his throat and spoke.

“General, I have already sent a group of handpicked scouts into the woods to track them. I have confidence my men will pick up their scent.”

“If I know Darrius, your scouts are already maggot bait. Prepare a full cavalry battalion along with any knights who are readily available, the good ones, none of Ravok’s mercenaries. We will lead them into the woods ourselves.”

“Yes, sir.”

The crumbling façade of the temple held a secret. It sat hidden deep in the forest far west of the castle and farther than many of the peasants would ever travel in their lifetimes. Half of the front wall was missing leaving the steeple teetering. Moss had grown up slowly over many years, covering much of the stone exterior. It was a stunning, gothic sight with the bright moon hanging precariously above the steeple. From the outside, any rare passerby might admire the structure but would never guess its latest role. No longer were services to The Great One held there, nor were The Great Tenets recited ad nauseam; it served only the rebels.

Gasping for air, Darrius hopped over a fallen tree and his ankle turned. Pain shot up his leg, but it was not sprained or broken. His dagger dripped bright blood, fresh blood. The others would be inside, celebrating their victory, and memorializing their fallen comrades.

Darrius had stayed in the darkness, choosing to lay in wait along the trail alone. One by one, he silently slew the scouts who'd been following them. The first scout must have been the most talented tracker. He was headed straight for the temple when Darrius slit his throat from behind. The second was clueless, wandering aimlessly, but had to be dealt with. He was too close to risk leaving alive. The third scout was savvier; always watching his flanks, circling back around, his eyes probing each shadow with an icy stare. Darrius leapt upon him from tree branch, removing him from his horse, and then quickly dispatching him with a stab at the base of the skull. Only with their deaths could Darrius return to the sanctuary of the temple. His hands shook in an aftershock of anxiety as he slid the dagger back into the sheath on his hip.

Stained glass cracked under his feet as he stepped into the ruins. The sky and surrounding forest were very visible through the substantial holes in the temple's walls and ceiling. There were more missing stones than remaining ones. As with the wood from the pews, most were looted years before. Yet the pulpit remained. It was warped from rain and chewed on by termites, but it stood at the front of the ruin; a defiant reminder of the past. Darrius approached a trapdoor in the corner of the ruin, obscured at all times of day and night. He stomped on it three times with the heel of his boot. Whether it had been a wine cellar for the

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monks who spent their lives there many moons ago, a private study for a priest, or a secret shelter from bands of marauders, Darrius could not know. Its original purpose had been long buried beneath the sands of time.

Chains rattled under the floorboards and the trapdoor sprung open. Kelvin's head rose from the opening. A weak ray of light also shone toward the starry night sky.

"Sir, we were starting to get worried. You are hurt."

It was true. One of the scouts had managed to get a quick slice into the underside of his forearm with a sword before he was killed. The bleeding had stopped and the wound was beginning to scab.

"A mild injury. I will be fine."

"I will get you a bandage. Come on down and join us." Kelvin disappeared back down the hole and Darrius started down behind him. The narrow stairwell had been carved directly into the foundation. The steps were hard, but aged and inconsistent in width and length. Chunks of the stairs were missing requiring some balance and dexterity to navigate.

At the bottom of the steps, the area opened up into a series of connected rooms; ten or more. The ceiling was very low, and forced a few of the taller men to lean or hunch over. Roots and vines poked through, reaching for and grazing their scalps. The walls were a mixture of wood support pillars, clay, and stone, whatever had been available during the time of its construction. Barrels of mead and wine sat in the corner. The nearest was open. Dozens of rebels stood throughout the chambers, clay mugs in hand. They drank and talked, telling their embellished

accounts of the battle as well as cursing the king and his son.

Kelvin led Darrius toward the back rooms where many of the wives, daughters, sisters, and widows of the rebellion tended to the wounded. Kelvin waved to a group of women.

“Frieda, Darrius is hurt.”

Immediately, a young woman no older than twenty years of age approached Darrius and began wrapping his arm with a bandage up to his elbow. The pressure reopened the wound. Darrius winced as droplets of blood began to form around the edges of his scab.

“I am sorry, sir. Please forgive me.”

Darrius was displeased, not at the girl but at himself for visibly flinching.

“I am fine. Thank you.”

Frieda finished with the bandage and Darrius flexed his arm to test its mobility. The bandage inhibited his range of motion slightly, but not enough to be of concern. The wound would be healed before the next battle if things went according to Darrius’ plan.

Kelvin approached them with a goblet of mead.

“Frieda, leave us. I have business to discuss with our commander.” She lowered her eyes and turned. As instructed, the young girl stepped away. Kelvin led Darrius into a separate room with a wooden table, two chairs, and a map of the kingdom nailed to the clay wall.

The map was crudely drawn in charcoal on parchment, but was accurate down to the smallest detail. Every village and town was marked with a dot or circle depending on its population or strategic value. Rivers were mapped out with snaking lines, and mountains as triangles, mostly to the

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west near the quarries. Corallora castle was shown larger than scale near the southeast corner of the continent; its ramparts and interior blown up to show some detail. The moat, the drawbridge, and the keep were all visible though small. Not far to the east along the coast was the harbor. Tiny sailboats were drawn headed out to sea; Kelvin delighted in passing the time by adding more ships when he was bored.

“So, what do you think?” Kelvin said with a smirk.

“What do I think about what?”

“Frieda? She is young, very attractive face, and takes orders well. She listens. You know how hard it is to find women like that now?”

“Kelvin, she is close to half my age, and I do not have the luxury or desire to be bothered with starting another family.”

“Darrius, you are a hero to these people. Women throw themselves at you for attention. Can you not see it? You are strong, handsome, and powerful. If things go as planned, you could be king of Corallora. And every king needs a queen. Frieda would be more than suitable. She works at the pub as a bar maid...”

Darrius held up a hand, stopping him.

“Oh,” Kelvin began, “I am sorry. You are not over Ash yet. I understand.”

“I am focusing my emotions into bringing down the monarchy. Maybe when I get some closure, I can spend more energy on women.”

“What happened to Ashara was a tragedy. I wholeheartedly sympathize with you. If I did not, I would not be

at your side today. But it cannot be changed. And frankly, I think you could use some feminine influences in your life.”

Darrius let out a long sigh and sat at the table, his eyes glued to the map on the wall, but his attention elsewhere.

“Ash was special.”

“Yes. Yes, she was.” Kelvin spun his seat around and straddled it, facing Darrius. “But she would want you to be happy. That is all she ever wanted for you.”

“Kelvin,” he paused, “I admire your attempts to help me, but I am not ready. Can we please concentrate on the business at hand? Let me have just one night to bathe in triumph without getting sucked into the past.”

Nodding, “Okay, I understand. I did not mean to bring you down.” Kelvin turned his attention to the map on the wall. “What is the next objective?”

“Did you meet with the ship-builder?”

“No, he was not at the harbor, and I dared not stay long. I believe my presence was raising suspicion. I do not think we have many supporters working the king’s fleet. They are all too far removed from the horrors of the lower classes’ plight.”

“I must meet with him tomorrow. If we cannot get Melias alone at the harbor, perhaps we need to bring him to us.”

They were dead, as Braskill had expected. Braskill stared down from his horse and their five lifeless bodies, bloodied and efficiently killed. Minimal strikes were used. They had fallen victim to one of Darrius’ notorious

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ambushes. All of the scouts were killed within a short distance of one another, yet likely unaware of the others' fates. Darrius was silent, and those men did not suffer long.

General Braskill hated to admit that he felt a pang of pride in knowing his star pupil had taken good notes. Unfortunately, that led to the deaths of five more good men-at-arms. It was a shame things had turned out the way they did. Darrius could have been the next great general after Braskill; certainly a better candidate than Tavia. Few men in the history of the kingdom rose in the ranks of the military as fast as Darrius, especially for a commoner. It took a lot for a peasant to surpass a nobleman when it came to swordsmanship and horseback riding, and it was frowned upon by many of the older, more conservative nobles even to train a peasant. Despite all that, Darrius' skills were undeniable and Braskill took it upon himself to nurture those skills. Darrius did not disappoint. He took Braskill's lessons and used them to gain the respect of the most cynical doubters. Darrius was using his lessons against the realm. Braskill pushed those thoughts away. Darrius was a criminal, and would have to pay for his crimes at the end of a noose.

"Gather their arms and find their horses. We will send others to retrieve the bodies. Darrius did this alone. He did not take their horses or weapons. He was worried it would slow him down. And these wounds are fresh. He cannot be far."

Lieutenant Tavia and the rest of the cavalry rode off into the forest, leaving Braskill to himself. For a moment, he wondered if Darrius might still be lurking in the wilderness, waiting for his opportunity to strike. But deep

down he knew that Darrius had long-since fled to his retreat, wherever that was. As much as he would have liked to scour the forest, at that hour and with so few men it would be suicide. While the rebels as a rule were mostly uneducated with no military training, Darrius was the exception that made all the difference. Without the brunt of multiple brigades, fighting Darrius where he had knowledge of the landscape was not a good idea. Darrius always found ways to keep the rebels on the fringe of society where they could make the most impact without revealing themselves to repercussions. He had charisma and cunning, and that made him all the more dangerous. “We found the horses, sir,” Lieutenant Tavia led them by their reins out of the darkness. “They were down by the creek.”

“And their weapons?”

“We have gathered them all, but one. They were still in their sheaths. Their deaths were swift without a chance to defend.”

Their eyes darted into the brush at their horses’ hooves. A glimmer of metal on the ground near Braskill caught his eye. The general dismounted his horse and reached down. It was the missing sword.

“There is blood on the blade.”

“Do you think Darrius is hurt badly? Perhaps there is a trail of blood that will lead us to him.”

“No, the blood is already dried and sparse. It was a mere flesh wound. If there was a trail, Darrius would have covered his tracks, or circled back around until the bleeding stopped. He is too clever for that.”

There was relief in his voice.

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“Sir?”

“While there is nothing I would like to see more than the rebellion crushed, I pray to The Great One that when Darrius is finally defeated, and he will be, that he falls by my sword or on the gallows.”

They had played their game of cat and mouse for so long, it would only be fitting they both be involved in its conclusion.