



Daniel Devine

The People Beneath

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Chapter 1

I remember the day when my life changed forever, when my expectations of the future were wiped clean away.

. It was a gray day, like so many winter days are in Alaveth, the swirling clouds so opaque that you could convince yourself there was no sky beyond them. I was sitting upon my favorite hill, book in hand, and from time to time snatching glimpses at those ominous clouds. The wind was cold and sharp, but I was wrapped in my heaviest cloak, and the fresh air made me feel alive.

It must have taken Estevan, my father's page, some time to find me. The thickly built boy was flushed red and audibly breathing hard as he approached. He had quite the sour look on his face, though he hadn't the courage to express his displeasure to me directly.

"My Lord, your presence is required in the great hall."

This summons was expected. From my perch I had seen the column pass along the main road. At first I had been surprised, never before had I seen so many men in our colors. Then I realized that the coat of arms was not quite identical to our own; the Pentar mailed fist, yes, but with spiked-knuckles not smooth.

Recalling the Family heraldry that I had memorized years ago, I placed them as part of my Uncle Thom's household. A more prestigious branch of the Family, but then all of the other branches were more prestigious. I had never seen nor spoken with my uncle, nor even heard anything of him beyond my father's harsh words about his selfish, greedy nature.

Why my uncle would come to our poor, backwater fief, I could not imagine. My father had not mentioned an upcoming visit nor, more tellingly, instructed the staff to prepare for one. Meaning this was likely a surprise to him as well. No doubt he was soiling his breeches about now.

"Time for me to sing and dance for the Marquess of Malaray?" I asked.

Estevan's expression brightened slightly.

"Afraid not, my Lord."

"My father isn't summoning me to meet with my uncle?"

"I could not speak as to the Count's intentions," said the page, which was an outright lie. My father told Estevan everything. Estevan was like the son he'd never had, or rather, the son he'd always wished I'd been. "However, the Marquess was not a part of the contingent that arrived this morning,"

Estevan had always resented that a mere matter of birth held him back from advancing any further despite my father's favor. He was clearly taking what enjoyment he could out of possessing information that I did not and trying to salve the fact that he was nothing more than a puffed-up errand boy; the type who'd be sent out into the cold to go searching for me when I was nowhere sensible to be found.

The page was not entirely able to conceal his smile, but he remained impervious to my questions as we descended the hill and cut across the outskirts of Alaveth to my father's manor. Whatever the news, I had a feeling it wouldn't be good for me. Estevan seemed entirely too pleased.

"Father! I came at once! What service may I provide that your loyal servant had to be sent forth and brave the elements just to fetch me?"

The great hall had proven to contain, quite literally, a small army of my uncle's men. Estevan had rushed me through it to deposit me in a private meeting room at the back before quickly making his escape. The soldiers and diplomats had all stared at me with a concerning intensity as we passed. Not knowing who or what to expect, I was quite happy to find my father seated alone, drinking.

Maric Pentar gave me a disapproving look. He had a face made for them; pock-marked and rough with slightly yellowed teeth. His once thin, dark, and oily hair was receding with age, but his body was still large and strong.

I did not take after him, thank the gods. I had the slight build and full auburn hair of my late mother to go with the uncalled hands of a noble. Maric had led a rough life before buying his way into a Lordship, and had the scars to prove it.

There were many who felt that my father had come by his money in...unethical ways. I was among them. But Alaveth had had little in the way of a peerage to wed its lone Pentar heiress, and the greater Family cared little who ruled this one-goat fief as long as he didn't cause too much trouble. My grandparents hadn't loved Maric either, but had figured he'd at least shown he knew how to make money and keep a hold of it, and they'd seemed happy enough that he'd given them a grandson.

"Did it ever occur to you, Lyric?" asked my father around a sip of wine. "That if you found something constructive to do around town, rather than playing with yourself on a hill, we wouldn't have to waste good people's time tracking you down?"

"That's playing 'by myself', Father," I pointed out, taking a seat beside him at the table. "And you are so hale and hearty that I am sure I have many years yet before I need to devote myself to fully preparing for the duties of leadership."

My father snorted with laughter, causing him to sputter and choke red wine all over the tablecloth. As a rule, my father never found any of my jokes amusing. Usually, such a comment would have instigated a lecture. Not today. Today all of my critics were in an eerily good mood.

“Lryic,” he tried again when he had composed himself. “It’s interesting that you say that. Have you ever given any deep thought to your obligations to the Family? Or to how you might be called upon to serve the Pentars?”

His look implied skepticism that my thoughts had ever ventured out of the shallows to delve into any topic, which was quite unfair. It was my artistic and intellectual nature that he was always berating before entreating me to just go and hit things with sticks like other boys.

“Well, my path has always seemed, quite clear,” I answered cautiously. “When, finally weary of doing the work of so many men, you choose to take your well-earned retirement and spend your days enjoying the prosperity that your careful guidance has brought to Alaveth; I will humbly attempt to take your place, doing my best to follow in your titanic footsteps so that your significant achievements will not be lost.”

He frowned at my flattery.

“And you’ve never considered aiming any higher than this sheep-ridden bowl of mud?”

I blinked in surprise. I had studied the Family lineage fairly intensively when I was a boy. I was fairly certain that a large number of people would have to die to get me out of Alaveth.

Feeling a surge of panic, I studied my father more closely, but failed to penetrate his scowl and gain any more insight. Had he arranged to marry me off to some cousin?

“It seemed unlikely that my birthright would lead me elsewhere, and Alaveth is my home. I love it and our people dearly.”

I wracked my brain. Uncle Thom had no daughters and had only ever sired two sons. One had died young, I couldn’t remember from what. The other, Holday, had been born while Thom was an older man and was a few years my senior. If anything of a fatal nature had happened to him, this was the first I’ve heard of it.

Regardless, even in that event, the Marquess would be able to adopt an heir of his choosing. If he and his son were to die together, a Pentar heir would be appointed by the Elders of the Family. It was difficult to believe that either party would have made me their selection.

I squinted at my father. Would Maric have been able to negotiate some sort of deal to put me within the Marquess’s household? I wasn’t certain how. Alaveth had nothing Thom would need or even want. Besides, I didn’t think my father worried much about me carrying on his legacy. After all, it was my mother’s name that I carried. I wasn’t under the impression that he much cared what I did either before or after he was gone, as long as it didn’t embarrass him or get in his way.

Meaning he would have happily sold me, if he saw some sort of personal profit in it.

Maric watched me as I pondered the rationale behind his questions, looking entertained. He refilled his cup and took another hearty sip. His eyes became vacant, as if he was seeing something from a memory. He scratched at a scar on his cheek. Slowly, his eyes refocused on me. I had the feeling they weren’t overly happy with what they saw.

“Sometimes son, things don’t turn out quite the way you’ve planned.” I opened my mouth to speak but he waved me to silence. “There is a man here from Malaray you need to speak with.”

He rose and opened the door, motioned to someone outside, and came to sit next to me once more. He sighed.

“Look, Lyric. I probably haven’t been the best father I could have been, and I think that even you would admit that you haven’t been the most diligent son. But while you and I may not always have seen eye to eye, I think this is something that may lead to you having a much happier life, and I really wish that for you.”

The ulcer eating away my stomach doubled quickly in size.

“What...” I began, but he placed a hand to his lips. An older man was entering through the door.. His close-cropped silver hair had a military look, but he was dressed in the fine silks of my uncle’s livery. His boots and uniform were crisp and of a better make than anything me or my father owned, despite the fact that the badge on his chest marked him as merely a steward and not a member of the Family proper.

The man strode forward to hover above a chair on the opposite side of the table. Four guards, armed and dressed in mail, followed him in and shut the door. They kept staring at me, glancing away quickly, and then staring again. It was as if they couldn’t help themselves.

My father rose to clasp the man’s hand. I realized that I was being rude by not rising as well, but by the time I had clumsily gained my feet, Maric was telling us all to be seated.

“Palin, allow me to present Lyric Pentar,” said my father with a curt nod in my direction. “Lyric, this is Palin Whitetree. He served your uncle as his head of household for the past forty years.”

“Served?” I asked, noting the past tense.

“The good Marquess has left us, I fear,” said Palin gruffly. I would have sworn he was fighting back a tear. “Only a few nights ago, he succumbed to illness.”

“It grieves me to hear that,” I said. “Hopefully, he did not suffer.”

Palin grimaced, but quickly regained his bland expression.

“At least one can say that his end came quickly,” the steward responded. “Though, it was a shame to lose the Marquess and his son so close together. I think it was the death of young Holday that truly broke him and stole his will to live.”

The room felt as if it was tilting beneath my feet.

“This is a great tragedy,” I stole a quick glance at my father’s grizzled face; it still revealed nothing. “I had not had word of my beloved cousin’s death.”

Palin shrugged.

“As I have said, it preceded the Marquess’ by mere days. There is no reason you would have heard before now.”

“It was good of you to bring us this news,” I put as much false gratitude into my words as I could muster. I could sense the shape of what was transpiring here, but not how or why it had come to be.

I glanced at my father again. What kind of deal had Maric managed to pull off? Obviously, I should have been watching him more closely, and spending less time in the hills.

“It is kind of you to say so,” replied Palin. He was scrutinizing me closely now. “But surely you do not think our contingent traveled all this way just to act as messenger. If that was our goal, it would have been far faster to send a courier.”

I took a deep breath and tried to steady myself. My mind was reeling. With Holday and his father passing so shortly apart, the Council of Elders would have appointed his next successor directly. Greater cities like Vardez, Finnister, and Jackup were practically lousy with my well-heeled cousins. There was no shortage of Pentar nobles currently living off of the Family dole, all of them considered to have better bloodlines and prospects than myself.

Now, my father was the sort of man who could pay you a visit late at night, introduce you to his cudgel, and make you change your mind about things. But trying that with the Family would just get you dead, quickly. Even if my dad had managed to blackmail someone important into doing his bidding, it still wouldn’t explain the current situation.

Given the chance, Maric Pentar would have appointed *himself* Marquess if he had that type of influence. He cared much more about his own happiness than how he would be remembered. Father had little to gain from maneuvering me into the position.

“Well, for whatever aid I can possibly offer you in this dire time, I am at your disposal,” I said. It frustrated me to continue to dance around the topic, but I saw no other choice. Demanding to know if I was being made the Marquess’ heir would make me appear too eager, or worse, absurdly foolish if my read on the situation was wrong.

“You should be careful about making promises when you know not what is being asked,” counseled Palin gravely, though the nod he gave me was an approving one. “For I believe we are about to ask more than you would have ever expected.”

“What is all this about?” I asked, seizing upon the opportunity to ask a direct question.

“Lyric,” said my father. “Always have I known that you were destined for something greater.”

As he said this, one of Maric’s more memorable tirades played through my mind. It involved my chronic lack of attention to detail, my skipping out on diplomatic functions to play in the mud with commoners; how if I preferred goatherds to attending galas, perhaps he would arrange that I become one. I wondered if Palin knew my father well enough to recognize the tone of irony in his voice.

“As your father I am, of course, biased but it is now clear that your nimble mind and strength of character have not escaped the notice of the greater Family.”

“Indeed,” confirmed Palin with a sudden smile. “The Elders, in their infallible wisdom, have appointed you as the new Marquess of Malaray!”

“I am honored,” I said breathlessly. “But more so, I am stunned. I had sought no such higher office, intending only to follow my noble father...”

“Commendable,” said Palin. “And no doubt your humility and dedication were among those fine qualities which guided the Elders’ decision.”

I gulped, tried to think of anyone to whom I should say goodbye. There were my elderly personal servants, Ephraim and Marsha, and also a serving girl I liked to talk to, named Marie. I would like a chance to bid farewell to some of the shepherd boys across the hills whom had been my friends as well.

“When would the, ah, change take place?”

“Technically, it already has,” said Palin. He motioned to a guard who produced a document from a pouch at his belt. Jet black ink scratched atop stark white vellum, the calligraphy so filigreed as to be almost entirely unreadable; the bold red Pentar seal affixed to the paper could not be mistaken, however. “A formal investiture awaits only our arrival. We shall leave for Malaray at once.”

This was all so sudden. Instinct told me to stall, to lobby for time in which to think things through. I turned to Maric.

“Immediately? But Father, who will assist you in my absence? Surely so abrupt a transition...” I trailed off. My father’s smile was widening and I didn’t really want him laughing at my assertions of utility in front of Palin.

“Lyric, worry not,” he said. “It will be a trial for me to lose you, no doubt, but you are on to better things! Besides, Estevan has proven himself more than able as an assistant, has he not? He shall fulfill your duties as my chosen second.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” I replied. This seemed to offer me some clarity. My father most likely had not arranged this event—why it was taking place remained a complete mystery to me—but Maric still had reasons to be delighted with the outcome. I was being placed above him, which was no doubt something of an annoyance, but as a reward he no longer had to deal with me directly and could replace me with the son he’d always wanted.

I doubted Estevan’s long-term prospects, of course. The Family would let Maric rule out his tenure, but some ill-regarded, excess Pentar would likely replace him after he was laid to rest. Even in a land as worthless as Alaveth, they would hesitate to let some peasant boy with no direct ties to the Family rise up and establish his own dynasty.

Not that Estevan would be bright enough to see that. He would be happy until my father died and by then his resulting anger would not be my father’s problem. It was all very Maric.

I bowed my head toward Palin.

“This is truly an enormous honor. I would never have dreamt it would be bestowed upon me, but I shall do my best to live up to its challenges.”

"I am sure the Elders would ask no less," said the old man.

"I should see to the packing of my things then and make sure my retainers are prepared to travel."

The edges of Palin's thin lips bent just ever so slightly downwards.

"My Marquess, anything you need shall be provided for you. I am certain our tailors can provide a wardrobe more fitting of your current rank and we do not lack for willing servants."

Asking me to forgo bringing along no loyal household servants struck me as an unusual request, but I had no idea of the protocols here.

"I understand, of course, and I did not mean to imply otherwise," I said. "But I was wondering if I might retain my personal staff, they have served me since childhood."

Palin made an uncomfortable noise. My father placed a hand upon my shoulder.

"And they have lived here their entire lives as well," he pointed out. "Would you really uproot poor Ephraim and Marsha at this age and force them into so much change? You are a ruler now son. You will need to start thinking of others first!"

I swallowed the irony of that last statement along with a bit of bile.

"You are right, as always, Father," I looked from him to the steward. "Might I be allowed a few minutes to grant farewells?"

"Of course," Palin huffed, perhaps insulted that I had felt the need to ask permission.

In the end my goodbyes did not take long. The news appeared to have already spread through the servants, but I suppose news always did. Ephraim would only bow to me, as if awed by my new title, though I begged him to stop. The tall man's arms and legs were thin and fragile with age and I knew his joints would probably ache for days from crouching down to the floor. He did seem sincerely proud, however. His dowdy wife was less reserved and wrapped me in a buxom hug; assuring me, with a tear, that I'd do well.

I thanked Talia, our family cook, for keeping me so well fed and she joked that she wouldn't mind a move to Malaray if we had an opening. Maria and I smiled at each other, all we'd ever really done, and managed a very awkward goodbye.

I realized, suddenly, that I was ready to leave. This entire manor had been my family, in truth. To make it a point to speak with anyone else would mean that I should really speak with all of them, and I was sure that would be viewed as excessive.

It saddened me a bit that I would not get a chance for a last word with any of the boys from the countryside, for they were my real childhood mates, the ones with whom I'd explored and played games out in muddy fields; but I managed to shrug off the feeling. I was going to Malaray, not Death's Door, after all, and I would be a Marquess.

No doubt it would be poor form to be seen associating with shepherds' sons, but how hard would it be to send a letter to someone at my old home and ask them to pass along a friendly message? Yes, there should be no more delaying the inevitable.

From my room I took a small pack and filled it with a few favorite books and my journal and sketchpad. I stepped to my window and took a moment to study the view of Alaveth, her one main street of shoddy family shops against the backdrop of meandering hills topped with proud pines.

I breathed in the scents of grass and earth and manure, and gave one last, final farewell.

Above all it had been Alaveth that I had really loved, and I would miss her. I would have to find excuses to come and visit. Perhaps I would periodically meddle in my father's affairs, just to irritate him. You never could keep too close an eye on your vassals.

I blew a kiss out the window and turned to go.

Chapter 2

I spent the long march back to Malaray in the comfort of a thickly cushioned litter shared with Palin. We were well insulated from the bumps in the road, but the air in the compartment quickly grew stale, as did the conversation.

Not that my new steward wasn't a ceaseless font of information on my future fiefdom, but after the first hour or two of being lectured my mind refused to take in any more information. I found myself pressed up against a window, watching the wild trees outside recede into organized farmland and then the latter, slowly, into disorganized slums.

The troops at the head of the column shouted sternly. Filthy children and crippled men rushed from the column's path to huddle in shelter as they saw us approach.

"Tell me, dear Palin, are the citizens of Malaray expecting my arrival?"

My question interrupted an ongoing explanation regarding the origins of the feud between the Lovelace and Hewitt families. Palin blinked at me in annoyance then he too gazed out the window to see what must have distracted me. He made a soft noise of disgust.

"Don't let these beggars give you the wrong impression of your new home," he replied. "The slums on the outskirts of the city grow every year despite our best efforts, and Malaray has seen some hard years of late."

He shook his head.

"Hopefully, you can help us find a way to reverse that. In any event, you can rest assured that everyone who matters will be attending your investiture ceremony, if that was the point of your question."

It was clear that in my steward's estimation, this portion of the city did not *matter*.

I said nothing, only continued to watch Malaray pass by outside. The slums seemed to go on forever, and when we finally reached what appeared to be more permanent housing, I noticed that it too showed clear signs of disrepair. In many places, both homes and shops appeared deserted, walls crumbling or broken doors half-hanging from latches. I noticed many buildings were incongruously splashed with vivid red paint.

I asked Palin about the latter.

“Ah yes, I should probably have made mention sooner,” the steward cleared his throat uncomfortably. “The same illness that afflicted your predecessor and his heir has spread throughout the city. We have lost a number of our merchants and workers and this has made it even more difficult for our struggling economy to rebound.”

My impressions of Malaray, to which this was my first visit, had been of a bustling city near the river; a center for trade and the type of high society that free money enabled. In other words, I had imagined it as nearly the opposite of Alaveth.

That was still true to some extent; the buildings here were much taller and denser, the residents clearly more urbane. However, many of the giant factories now stood empty. The river turning their wheels was a brownish green, reeking and clogged with refuse. People on these main streets wore finer clothes, but in somber colors, and none of the residents seemed merry despite the number of venues for diversion and entertainment that we passed. Only the taverns seemed to be doing good business, and the men who shuffled in and out of them looked weary and sullen.

The reasons for my selection as Marquess were beginning to come clear to me.

We passed from the central portion of the city into the lands just outside of the Family estate. Only the non-Pentar nobility and the most prosperous merchants would be allowed to live here. In truth, these mansions were far grander than my father’s own manor, but there was still something down-trodden about them that I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

Crossing through the heart of the city had taken far less time than I had expected. It was clear that what Palin had said about the slums was true. They were growing, but not spreading from Malaray’s edges; they were cannibalizing the center. Poor were not flocking to the city; they were falling from prosperity down into squalor.

“Palin,” I said abruptly. “It had not occurred to ask before, as I had not thought one might refuse the title—forgive my ignorance in such matters—but is it possible that I was not the Family’s initial selection for Marquess?”

The man shifted about unhappily on his seat.

“Why would you even ask such a question, My Lord? I promise you that the Elders would not have chosen you if they did not feel you fully capable of the task. Having spoken with you at some length now, I myself have no doubt as to your suitability, which is not to compare my judgment to that of the Elders...”

I thought it wise to stop him then before he could dissemble further.

“But still, I was not their first choice?”

“I am not really privy to the thoughts of the Council, you understand...”

“How far down the list?” my annoyance added some steel to my voice, and I saw the older man flinch. Good. If I was to be his Marquess, let him know that I would not be so easily put off.

“Again...”

“How far!”

Palin bowed his head. Now when he spoke his words grew passionate and angry.

“They deliberated for a long time, My Lord; weeks, in fact, ever since he fell ill. A number of letters exchanged hands. More than one noble in residence in the area was called in to meet with the Council in person, I understand, only to leave again protesting his or her inadequacy.”

He gave a faint shrug.

“It seems unlikely you were the first choice. Were you the twenty-first, the thirty-first? Who knows?” his eyes searched mine. “What matters is you are the one whose father accepted.”

As he spoke, our litter crossed through the white walled gates of the Family compound. The grounds here were clearly much busier and in better repair. Servants scurried everywhere, though they wore strange hooded white cloaks—almost as if foreigners from some distant desert—and seemed to be the size of children.

There was a soft jolt as our bearers set us down. A panel was opened and a man extended a hand for Palin to grasp.

“Come,” said the steward. “You must bathe and change before we present you to your new subjects.”

My memories of that night’s ceremony are a hectic blur.

Malaray’s ballroom was enormous. You could have fit the majority of my father’s manor house inside of it. However, despite its size and regality, I couldn’t escape the feeling that the room, like the rest of my new fiefdom, was somewhat going to seed.

Everything had been relentlessly cleaned and polished by the small, swarthy-skinned servants—Palin called them the Felle—but upon observing one of the brass fixtures up close, the dents and scratches of long use became obvious. The room was filled with flowers and candles, but if I stepped just a few feet from them into an unadorned corner, I imagined I could catch the faintly musty smell that seemed to permeate my new home.

There was little opportunity for such exploration, as the ball quickly filled with brightly-dressed invitees, each announced at length by a herald. Men and women of merit began to size

up my character, no doubt thinking me a mere boy. Homely, unmarried daughters smiled at me hopefully. Much wine was poured.

I met the best of the local gentry, all of whom toasted me and praised me. Several made offers no doubt intended to win influence; though I lacked sufficient background to fully grasp what scam, exactly, they were trying to pull over on me.

Many people had ragged coughs or seemed shaky on their feet, especially the most elderly. Remembering all of the red marks of plague we had seen during our journey through town, I did my best not to breathe too deeply and stood as far from people as I could without appearing impolite.

I spent most of my time nodding affably, yet agreeing to nothing; all the while silently praying that I would not spill my wine or say anything that would accidentally give insult.

I was not even the party's biggest draw. The ceremony was to be performed by Justicar Lorenzus Pentar, an enormously obese man with a lazy eye. The Justicar said not one word to me beyond what was required by the rites. He had a contingent of personal retainers larger than the column of men that had summoned me from Alaveth, and he spent the entire time hiding behind it.

As a Justicar, Lorenzus was one of the lowest-ranking officials of the Family hierarchy. Still, his presence was a great novelty. No one here would likely see a man of his status in person again in their lives—unless they outlived my rule to attend the next investiture, of course.

In truth, it was the first time that I had ever been that close to a Justicar myself. I am certain it would have made me uncomfortable, if not for the fact he obviously had no interest in me, and was solely focused on finishing the ritual so that he could move on to the next city on his list.

Soon the ceremony proper began. A number of solemn vows were sworn, a number of sacred duties affirmed. Lorenzus had an unexpectedly impressive voice, deep and smooth. He concluded with a touching sermon about the long, dutiful service of my uncle and predecessor. I felt fairly certain the Justicar must never have met the man, but you would not have believed it from the depth of Lorenzus' projected emotion.

He left most of the assembled audience in tears.

I attempted to thank the Justicar afterwards, but he was already turning away by the time I opened my mouth. He disappeared once more into his retinue, who immediately began making preparations to leave.

Suddenly, I found myself seated at a table upon a dais, the officially recognized Marquess of Malaray, facing a rather large crowd. I saw many smiles there, but no one I could call friend. Palin and a number of other ministers, whom I had met but had not yet entirely decoded the functional duties of, sat beside me at my long table but gave me little comfort.

I drank wine of tremendous quality—a fine, vintage red uncorked just for the occasion—much too quickly and waited for someone to leave so that I would not be the first to go. If my cup became empty, a lithe Felle boy refilled it in nearly the same instant. His peers cycled sumptuous dishes across the placemat before me, which I occasionally remembered I should take a bite of, given that several people had no doubt worked hard to prepare them for my benefit. They too were extraordinary, but I would have given anything just then for one of Talia’s plain, freshly baked rolls.

A fair amount of painfully awkward small talk and mingling later, it occurred to me that no one there was going to leave without my permission, lest they make a bad first impression. At that point, I announced quietly to Palin that I intended to turn in.

“Are you certain?” he asked. Did his sharp look convey surprise, disappointment, or some other hint as to how I was breeching good form? I found I didn’t care.

I realized that I wasn’t entirely certain of the protocol for simply leaving and going to bed. It seemed wrong for the Marquess being honored to just stand up and walk out on his supporters, but I had no intention of going person to person to give thanks while fumbling at recalling all of their names.

Fortunately, Palin had the herald make an announcement that I was retiring, was in debt to everyone there, and looked forward to the beginning of a prosperous new era for Malaray. I stood and nodded regally in the general direction of those assembled. A few brave souls delayed my exit by stepping forward to speak with me personally, trying to reinforce whatever arguments they had made to me in earlier conversation. Again, I thanked them for their wise counsel and was careful not to make anything that could be construed as a promise.

Palin had some retainers usher me out a side door toward my quarters, asking if I needed anything else before I took my rest. There was something odd in his voice as he said this, implying that if I had suggested he procure one or two of the girls from the party he may have done so.

I informed him that today had given me much to consider, and I needed time alone to properly reflect upon it. He graciously took the hint, and bothered me no more, returning to the ball which it now appeared would continue for some time in my absence.

A quartet of guardsmen brought me to my rooms, which was fortunate since I had only visited them briefly and would not have been able to locate them on my own in my current, partially sober state. They remained in the hall to protect the approach to my chambers, which seemed a bit excessive, but I saw no reason to argue with protocol.

As I entered my antechamber, a trio of servants snapped to attention. An aged Felle man, his smooth, deeply tanned skin glimmering in the light of a large fire, asked me what I required. I had met him earlier as I was being prepped and preened for the ceremony. He too wore a simple white robe, though his head was adorned by an absurd cylindrical purple hat. I wasn’t yet sure if this was a sign of rank among the servants, or simply a personal affectation.

“Nothing, Vissula, assuming my bed is currently fit for use.”

“The sheets are freshly laundered, My Lord, and have been turned down. It is my hope that the quantity of pillows and the warmth of the blankets shall be to your liking. If not, we can easily supply an ample number or remove them without...”

I waved him to silence.

“I am certain that will suffice,” I nodded to the two maids with him. One was gray-haired and matronly, the other young and very pretty. “In fact, upon closing my inner chamber door, I shall not wish to be disturbed unless I call upon you for assistance.”

The man bowed so deeply that the tip of his hat brushed the floor.

“My Lord, let me just say again that it will be our greatest honor to serve you and we will look upon this day as the dawn...” began Vissula. Thankfully, the door was thick enough to mostly block out his voice when it was closed.

The bed was too tall and too soft for my liking but I am not picky and quickly made do.

With all of the pageantry past, it soon became apparent that a Marquess’ duties would not be as much of an all-encompassing drain on my time as I may have feared.

Oh, there was clearly work to do, given Malaray’s obvious state of decay, but grasping a hold of it was going to be somewhat difficult. Uncle Thom had been an old man; a penny-pinching, paranoid old man, perhaps, but an old man just the same. Over time he had slowly transferred more and more of his fief’s responsibilities to his staff.

That staff had used the short time since my uncle’s death wisely, shoring up their areas of authority. What was being done about the spreading illness in the city? Well, Doctor Maulkin and his experts were studying it and working to quarantine those affected—I really need not involve myself unless someone came to me for guidance. Why were the city’s factories failing? Well, Minister Velour was already arranging loans to fund new industry that would return Malaray’s economy to previous levels and make her vibrant and healthy once more. Surely, I did not wish to so abruptly put a halt to plans lain carefully by my predecessor only after long and thorough study?

It went on and on. In order to make any real changes, I was going to have to remove the people my uncle had put into power. First, I would have to study them and determine which ones I could trust, and that was going to be a long process.

At the moment, my duties were primarily ceremonial. I did listen to daily briefings from my advisors, but they really amounted to me confirming that they should keep on doing what they were doing or that they, indeed, should proceed as they thought was best since I lacked the knowledge to argue against them. I could have made grand, sweeping changes, I suppose, just for the sake of putting my own stamp on things; but I was aware that my decisions would now

have consequences for others—people I may never meet, like those poor children I had seen in the slums, and it did not feel right to act hastily.

Though this left me with little that required my direct attention, there was enough snooping around to keep me busy. I needed to get a feel for each of my current ministers, and also whether any competent souls might be available to replace them if it should become necessary. Also, I needed to get a clearer picture of where I should or shouldn't be sticking my nose in.

Regarding the latter, I chose to start by tracking my Uncle Thom's most recent activities. If there was someone that Thom had been checking up on repeatedly, they must either be doing something suspect or something of extreme importance and it logically followed that those areas should receive my greatest attention as well.

Unfortunately, this approach yielded less clear guidance than I had hoped. If what Palin and the others were telling me was true, and I did have some doubts regarding that, then toward the end, Uncle Thom had become increasingly less interested in the governance of his realm and more interested in some sort of personal research.

What exactly had occupied his attention was difficult to discern. The topic tended to make everyone I asked about it uncomfortable, as if he might have become obsessed with some hobby that considered slightly perverted.

It was Doctor Maulkin who proved the most helpful in unraveling this enigma. He was a tall, gaunt man with pale hair and a monocle chained to his belt. He described the Marquess' research as involving 'the properties of aether' and had personally found it 'fascinating.' Unfortunately, he was far too busy a man to discuss it with me in much detail, unless I wanted to change his focus away from treating the sick and retarding the spread of disease? He was, after all, at my service.

The good doctor was able to give me the names of a few books as a primer on the topic, and I thanked him and proceeded on to the estate's private library.

Thus far, the library was the only part of my new realm keeping me sane. I could talk to Palin, of course, but felt in him a growing disappointment that I was not somehow grasping the reins in of control in the fashion he would have preferred.

Vissula would speak voluminously regarding his willingness and that of others to serve me, or in as great a depth as he could muster on any topic about which he was asked, but he seemed incapable of offering a personal opinion. This was still superior to the pair of maidservants who served with him, as neither seemed willing to much as utter a word in my presence.

I tried not to think what this said about their treatment under my uncle.

The library was an elaborate affair—walls and tables of dark mahogany, chairs backed with deep green velvet. Stairways carpeted in the same shade spiraled between three tiers of balconies. Shelves of books lined the walls and covered most of the floor space.

Those freestanding shelves were not all of the same length, nor were they arranged uniformly, and while wandering through their stacks, I was always discovering new hidden reading spots—comfortable seats out of sight of those passing through the main lobby. Uncle Thom must have liked to read in privacy. This suited me as well. I had always felt more comfortable around books than I had around people.

Somehow this library seemed to have escaped the dank mustiness that permeated the rest of my new estate. I attributed this to Nola, the librarian, who obviously treated the collection with great care. She had been up on a ladder oiling the top of a shelf with linseed when I first met her. Given the extent to which the library appeared to be used, this type of attention was the only thing that could have saved the archived tomes from acquiring layers of dust.

Nola was another Felle servant, though for some reason she dressed normally or, that is to say, as my servants had dressed back home in Alaveth. I certainly did not find this a cause for complaint, as the figure that her skirt and tightly-laced gown provided was quite comely. She was a tiny woman, as all of her kind seemed to be, a full foot shorter than me despite my thoroughly average height.

I did my best to recount the book titles that Doctor Maulkin had listed for me, and she nodded in response.

“Ah, those,” she said knowingly. “Right here, My Lord.”

She reached down beneath the counter across which she regarded me and deposited several tomes atop it.

“These are, uh, quite popular, I take it?”

“They were favorites of the late Marquess, My Lord.”

Here she glanced down at the counter, appearing sincerely saddened at his passing. The light of the desk lamp caught in her eyes and her hair, both the same shade of dark brown, almost like the shelves of her library. In that moment, I swallowed, struck by her exotic beauty, my throat suddenly feeling dry.

“He had first read them about a year back and then reread them again and again when he became interested in his research,” she continued. “He would still commonly refer back to them when studying other texts; compare their findings and the like, so it made sense to keep them close at hand.”

She shrugged apologetically.

“I guess I never got around to reshelving them as I should have done. I will see to it, My Lord.”

I dismissed her concerns with a smile.

“Not at all, you had them right here when I needed them, just as I required. You have done well, and I am impressed with your upkeep of the estate’s archives.”

“My Lordship is too kind,” she said with a minute curtsy.

"I mean that not as idle flattery," I told her, for my words had sounded glib to my own ears. "Your care and dedication for your domain and the collection it encompasses is apparent. This may well be the cleanest room I've seen in all of Malaray."

"Hardly, but I do my best, My Lord," she looked away nervously.

I cleared my throat, feeling awkward, and gave the books she had supplied a closer look.

"Unless I am mistaken, there seem to be a few more titles here than I had requested."

"Oh, yes. Forgive me," she said in quick flash of alarm. "There were two other tomes that the Marquess similarly favored: *An Examination of Unexplained Anomalies* and *Teodor's Studies on Elemental Harmony*. Allow me to remove those, my Lord."

"No, no, leave them. I am sure they will be of benefit to me as well, I thank you for supplying them."

She tilted her head in curiosity.

"Will you be continuing the Marquess' research then?"

"Yes, or well, at least to the extent that I wish to try and understand why he thought it was important."

I considered her interest. I did not know much about her or the Felle, but here was a girl who was clearly literate, for she could easily locate titles upon request; a lover of books it appeared, and from her speech she appeared well educated.

"It occurs to me that you must have been quite instrumental in assisting the Marquess in his research."

She looked away again, demurely.

"Surely, My Lordship overstates the case. I did retrieve for him those books he requested if we had them in our collection, and helped to organize his new acquisitions."

"But I suspect that you may have a unique understanding of what he was pursuing?"

She smiled nervously.

"I would never make such an assertion, My Lord," she motioned towards the thick stack of books. "I may be able to read the words in these books if I took the time, but I do not believe I would *understand* them all if you take my meaning. You will upon your perusal."

This implied to me that she had already tried reading them herself.

"But you must have overheard him talking from time to time?" I persisted. "At least about what his goals or his hardships were, even if you did not understand the details."

She nodded hesitantly.

"This place, where Malaray was built, has a reputation as a place of natural power among my people," she hung her head here. "Having originated here, we have many tales of this."

I frowned, observing her tanned skin and minute figure. I had been assuming that the Felle servants must be members of some tribe that my uncle had imported from afar because he had taken a liking to their performance, or perhaps even simply because he had received a bulk

deal on them from a slave trader. Her statement made no obvious sense. The land in all directions was peopled by the descendants of my own ancestors. It was not as if Malaray had a unique climate. I supposed some dark-skinned tribe might possibly have arisen here if this small patch of the land faced temperatures similar to those across great Western Sea, but that was not the case.

I shook my head, filing away the question for later, and tried to stick to the equally unlikely topic at hand.

“Natural power?” I asked her.

She shrugged.

“Forces derived from aspects of the world surrounding us. I apologize, my Lord, I lack even the vocabulary to explain it in your language.”

I waved away her protests.

“You make it sound as if he was studying magic,” I scoffed.

An instant’s annoyance flashed through her eyes, quickly mastered with a servant’s skill.

“Some might name it so,” she allowed. “But does not all science appear magic until you understand it?”

“A good point, I suppose,” I recalled the doctor’s keen interest in the subject. Maulkin hadn’t seemed the type to waste time on crackpot mysticism. There must be more here than I expected.

I regarded the small tower of oft-used books, their bindings worn smooth and glossy in places from much handling. It appeared I had some reading to do.

Thanking Nola for her assistance, I hefted the tomes and staggered off towards one of the reading nooks that I had discovered upon the second tier. I felt very conscious of the librarian’s eyes upon me as I stumbled up the steps, trying not to fumble the texts.

“Very good, it sounds as if you have matters well under control,” I placed my goblet of watered wine on the table and clapped my hands. “A commendable effort, gentlemen.”

My ministers beamed at my approval, smiling at each other and patting themselves on the back, pleased to find their new liege so easy to mollify. Only grumpy old Palin appeared to realize that he was being summarily brushed off.

“There was still the matter of the upcoming border negotiations with Volmir...” he pointed out.

“The matter seems straightforward. I trust you to handle it and contact me if my presence is required,” I said, and I did. Palin seemed loyal to Malaray and solidly competent, if uninspired.

The other fools had done little to impress me. All of their reports were the same, day after day, a sketch of Malaray's steady decay decorated with colorful talk of new strategies they were certain would eliminate the problems.

I was not deceived. The city's decline was accelerating, not reversing. It was obvious to anyone who chose to look.

I knew these men had already formed a quick opinion of me, seeing me as a timid, bookish sort who spent most of his days hiding in the library. I had given them good cause to think such. However, I had also made it a point to walk about the streets of Malaray at least once a week—actually walk, not ride in a litter—accompanied by some retainers chosen by Vissula for their loyalty and their silent nature, but otherwise alone.

That I was putting myself at such personal risk was appalling to my chief servant, though clearly the fact that I might be perceived in such common dress by someone of import horrified him even more.

It had taken me days to convince Vissula to arrange for my escorts, as he rightly objected that my request fell under the scope of Palin's authority and not his own, but I knew the steward would never let me off of the estate without several dozen guardsmen. In the end, the head servant's bluster could not change the fact that he was unwilling to disobey a direct order from his Marquess.

Still, I thought Palin must know, or at least suspect, of my travels. Vissula or someone would have spoken.

Leaving the meeting, I turned several corners quickly, hoping to loose whatever spies Palin and the others may have tailing me.

Vissula awaited me in the next hall. Another Felle, positioned along the wall, glanced behind me and motioned to him that all was clear. I was pulled by Vissula into the servants' passages, where I quickly wrapped myself in the formless, unremarkable robes that he provided.

His chosen men were waiting near the exit of the building's cellar. They nodded to me and we walked out into the cold. A few short minutes later we had passed outside the white gates of the Family estate.

I saw more factories failing. The plague had reduced the number of available workers, shuttering some, while those owners who could afford to find suitable men were increasingly of the mind that they would rather take them and set up shop in a city where death's scythe was not sweeping so freely.

Less production meant less wealth, and the merchants who had clustered here to siphon off their share began to close up their stalls and look elsewhere for business. The local gentry, suddenly finding their books hard to balance, began to tighten their belts and the size of their households was shrinking steadily.

Unemployed workers and long-tenured staff flooded the slums, whose denizens found ample abandoned buildings to expand into. Suddenly, there were more people with lacking for money, but at the same time the food sellers were leaving the city for more prosperous climes. The ensuing starvation led to a weakness that all but assured the spread of disease, which may have been the only thing holding the slums' invasion of the city proper at bay.

Seeing all of this saddened me and filled me with guilt. I somehow had become the one who was responsible for fixing all of this, and I had done next to nothing so far to assist these people. I silently vowed to improve their lot once I had a deeper understanding of the causes.

Old men gazed at us hungrily through jaundiced eyes as we walked the streets of the slums but, despite their numbers, none were up to challenging a pack of strong, healthy men with their weapons displayed openly. The otherwise reckless children also gave us a wide berth, detouring their games around our party with what seemed a natural wariness. A few women shouted catcalls at my bodyguards, whistling through crooked, rotten teeth.

It struck me today as we walked that none of the slum's poor appeared to be members of the Felle. That hadn't surprised me at first, but if what Nola had said of their people being native to the region was true, would not a great number of them live here?

I posed this question to my men. Seeing as they had been selected for their inclination towards silence, I was not surprised when it took them a long time to answer.

"It is true that our people lived on this land long before your kind arrived," said one of the men finally, with a quiet pride. His name was Joren and he was older than me, though younger than my father. He was tall for a Felle, nearly my height, and thick with muscle. He looked down at his feet. "We remain here now, my Lord, have no doubt; just not where you are looking."

That was interesting. I wondered again why I had never heard or read of the Felle in my studies of history. I eyed Joren's bald head and decided he was unlikely to really expound upon the subject further. I made a note to talk with Nola about it in the near future.

The number of red marks splashed across houses seemed to be multiplying at an alarming rate. It made me second guess the safety of these trips, but Doctor Maulkin had repeated stated that one should be mostly safe from the unknown disease if he kept his mouth covered with a scarf and did not come into close contact with others, and I didn't doubt the doctor's assessment.

There was some evidence to suggest that perhaps I should. After all, I had approved vast loans (suggested and arranged by Velour, the Minister of Finance, of course) and shunted all available money into the supplies and men that Maulkin needed to fight against the disease, and yet he was clearly losing. But the man was an intelligent and methodical scientist, and had had some minor successes. The patients he treated directly were living longer and surviving at a higher rate. Unfortunately, the disease was spreading too fast for him to treat them all, and the

symptoms seemed to indicate that the plague was something which no one had ever seen before.

The illness induced no persistent fever, no vomiting, and was often fatal with an unexpected suddenness. Certainly, there were symptoms—sputtering coughs and bouts of fainting, but these seemed to be the result of organs failing rather than some action of the disease. Sufferers tended to experience a terrible, gasping end, as if drowning in the open air. Loved ones would often leave their side for only a moment, only to find their skin a pallid, lifeless blue upon their return.

“It is almost like these people are not ill,” he had confided in me at one point. “But that their bodies simply lose the knack for breathing.”

Such a description seemed eerily accurate for almost all I had seen of Malaray; a place of past glory that had lost her will to live along with her last Marquess.

It made me wonder if perhaps I was naught but a symptom myself, rather than a potential cure.

Chapter 3

The breakthrough came, like so many past catharses, when I realized that I was a complete and total imbecile.

It was late at night, long after most of the estate’s respectable citizens must have turned in, but I was reading by candle nub and continuing to find my study of *Teodor’s Studies on Elemental Harmony* disharmonious.

Further questioning of Nola, Maulkin, and the proper servants had revealed that Uncle Thom had not only been researching obscure theories of energy, but that he had at times tried to put them into practice. A timid young Felle boy who had acted as his assistant in a few of these experiments had, following an in-depth discussion with Vissula in their native tongue, showed me one of my predecessor’s workshops; though I had not been able to discern much beyond the fact that the place smelled rank and was covered with stains in disconcerting shades of green and brown.

I was aware that I was being foolish.

It was hopeless to think that I could peruse these thousands of yellowing pages and surmise what Thom had been attempting, or more importantly, why he thought that it might have helped solve Malaray’s problems. For all I knew, despite its intensity, his research may

not have related to his city's plight at all. He may have thrown himself into it as an avenue to *escape* his problems. The Family knew that I'd been doing that with books all of my life.

Without *someway* to relate the books he had read to the theories that must have existed in his head, I was never going to get anywhere. It was really a pity that he didn't appear to have confided in Nola more, she had overheard much but he'd never deemed her worthy of a *discussion*.

There were occasional, excited comments that I encountered along the margins as I went, but one might say 'less oil!' and the next 'no horses!' and I couldn't fathom how either related to an equation for estimating the speed of a fully-loaded galley encountering a heavy gale, for example. I needed something to connect the dots.

I had asked Palin for as much, of course, the day that I'd begun undertaking this foolish quest of tracking my uncle's final project. The steward had been visibly uncomfortable about the request, however; perhaps not a surprise, given the fact that he may have believed his Marquess to be either going insane or performing witchcraft.

Ever the dutiful servant, he had sent a boy to collect a few things and present them to me the next morning. I still had those scraps of paper—many of them charred and noxious. I looked at them now and again and found I was beginning to understand more and more of the strange symbols they contained, but none of them were complete documents, and the damaged pieces were all missing enough key phrases to make them further unintelligible.

As I sat there that night, squinting against the faint illumination, I once again wished that I had access to my uncle's diary; and somehow, the phrasing of that thought, made me realize that Palin had probably never been the proper person to ask for it.

With a rush of adrenaline, I sprang from my bed and opened my chamber door.

Vissula was seated in a chair directly opposite the entrance to my bedroom and began to rise at the sound. Somewhat unnervingly, I saw that he had not only been awake, but already watching the door as if expecting it to open. He did not even blink when I made my appearance.

Given my interactions with the man, it seemed entirely possible that he might spend the totality of his evenings staring at that portal and awaiting a chance to serve his Marquess. He was usually awake before I was, however, so then when did the man sleep?

There were no similar questions about my chambermaids. Neither the pretty one nor the older one, whom I thought of as Vissula's wife though I had not bothered to ask anyone if this was true, even so much as paused in their snoring while the head servant rose to his feet.

"What do you require, My Lord?" he asked melodiously.

"The late Marquess," I asked hurriedly. "Did he keep a diary or a journal as I do?"

Vissula shrugged. The light of the nearby hearth cast strange shadows across his face.

"Not perhaps as you do," he said slowly. "But he did keep something that he referred to as a notebook."

“Ah, very good! Do you know where it currently resides? I would like to read it.”

Frowning, Vissula adjusted his hat nervously.

“As My Lordship knows, it is my sincerest wish to fulfill your every desire, and I would move...”

I rolled my eyes.

“What is the problem?”

He opened his mouth, hesitated for a moment, and then said, “Imagine, My Lord, that one of your ministers were to come to your chambers tomorrow and make the same request for your diary, how would you wish me to respond?”

He was right, of course.

My journal was a very personal document, full of transient, ill-considered thoughts that I would not want others reading. Even after my passing. I thought of my Uncle Thom, I had not known him, but what I knew of him seemed out of synch with that image. I had the impression that if the old Marquess hadn’t liked something, he would have simply told you to your face, happily.

If he had other types of secrets in there, I was likely going to need to know them.

“I see your dilemma, but I think it is easily enough resolved,” I told him.

“Indeed?” replied Vissula.

“Simple. Did the late Marquess ever instruct you not to provide his notebook to anyone who requested it?”

“Err, well,” the head servant’s eyes glanced up at the ceiling as he gave this real thought. “I suppose that he did not.”

“And your current Marquess is giving you an order to produce it. I would think your duty clear,” I tried to make my voice kind but firm.

Vissula pulled at the neck of his garment, glanced into the flames of the hearth as if seeking an answer there.

“His Lordship is correct. His Lordship could have cared less about someone reading his scribbles *after* he was dead,” this came not from Vissula, but the aged chambermaid, who had opened a single eye and directed it at the head servant. She proved to have a raspy, mannish voice. “It would have fanned His ego that someone thought them worth reading.”

“Eleeka!” Vissula snapped, instilling the syllables of her name with a severe disdain.

I continued to stare at him with unrelenting expectation.

The dark-skinned old man sighed.

“Very well, My Lord,” he produced a large bronze key from somewhere on his person. “You will find that the desk within your room has a false bottom in the second drawer on the left hand side; a functionality that I have been remiss in mentioning. A small box within it holds the notebook.”

I took the key and looked at my retainer suspiciously.

“Vissula, are there any other secret compartments or passages within my chambers?”

“Not that I am aware of. I withheld informing you of this one solely out of consideration of the late Marquess’ privacy.”

“I appreciate that, and I will not hold it against you, Vissula,” I saw a brief look of relief cross his face. “I do have one further instruction, however.”

“My Lord?” he asked, somewhat anxiously.

“If anyone ever requests to see my journal, either prior to or following my death, please do not present them with it.”

“As you wish, My Lord.”

I thanked them and returned to my room.

Ever so faintly, I heard the sound of Eleeka’s rough laughter and Vissula’s urgent uttering that she quiet down and not disturb my work.

Uncle Thom’s notebook was fascinating.

My first instinct, of course, had been to jump to the end and identify what project had been of primary importance at the time of his death. However, I found the science in the later pages so complex that, even after my hours of study, I could not entirely decode it.

Instead, I was forced, as always, to start at the beginning. I learned with the Marquess as he proposed theories and had them squashed by his own experiments.

Still, there were certain facts that I could glean instantly. The Marquess’ research ultimately aimed to find a way to reverse Malaray’s decline, which bolstered my confidence that the time I was putting into following his research would not be time wasted. His entries often contained jotted notes, just sidebars really, about how he hoped this or that experiment might help him find a way to revitalize a given industry or the city as a whole.

The sickness currently sweeping the city was not mentioned. It appeared that Thom’s research had begun before the first of his citizens had fallen ill and the Marquess’ research was not intended to improve the physical health of the city, only its economic well being. Given Maulkin’s off-hand interest and some of the scrawls that Thom had made in various margins of what I’d read, I had hoped that the notebook might somehow offer the key to both. Sadly, that would not be the case. But I was not a master of medicine and could only handle the disease indirectly by finding ways to fund men like the good doctor. If this research led me to some economic advantage then that would give me greater resources to devote to the fight.

Or so I rationalized. On some level I am sure I realized that I was taking this tact because I simply had no idea where to begin to confront Malaray’s real problems. My attempts to determine which of my ministers were trustworthy had left me trusting no one and the best

men I could identify to replace them currently seemed more interested in scheduling a rapid departure from the city.

I brought the notebook to Nola that next morning, insisting she look through it with me. At first she was reluctant, but she quickly gained in enthusiasm and became more outspoken as we flipped from entry to entry.

“He seems obsessed with this idea that he can draw energy from the empty air,” I observed as we tried to work our way through his early experiments.

“Oh, yes,” agreed Nola, nodding. “I recall hearing him speak of this often—unlocking the ‘power of the aether’ he called it.”

It still sounded like fantasy to me, magic, but Thom’s notes claimed at least partial successes. I thought back to the evidence of past experiments that I had been shown, the strange burn marks on the walls. Was it possible?

Partway through the book, the Marquess’ writings began to take on a type of paranoia. We began to see mentions that someone was following his experiments; that Thom feared ‘the Watcher’ knew what he was attempting and would act to retard his progress.

“Did he ever speak of these concerns with you?” I asked Nola.

She shook her head.

“People knew, in general, what he was up to. Some did not approve...”

I sighed. That much I already knew. I had hoped she might shed some light on which individual the Marquess was concerned about and why.

“My Lord?” Palin’s stern voice, followed by a disdainful cough. The man had snuck up on us within the stacks without our notice. He observed, with thinly veiled disapproval, the way that Nola was leaning out of her seat, half across my waist, to see the portion of the notebook which we were discussing. The librarian straightened a bit too quickly. “Had you forgotten your appointment with the emissary from Nofrey?”

It was a minor dignity. I was to be present for the signing of a new trade agreement. We would be selling them a few dozen swords each year and, in return, receiving some much needed grain. Only enough to feed a few more families, but every little bit helped, or so I desperately hoped.

“Not at all,” I told him. “But I fear I must have lost track of time.”

Nola had already risen from her seat and begun to back away with a handful of the books we’d been studying. She had fallen back into her quiet shell, clearly ashamed because of my steward’s displeasure with our interaction, and I found this angered me.

“Thank you again for your assistance, Nola,” I told her. “I do enjoy our conversations, I shall come visit you soon so that we may continue them.”

This gained me a sharp look from a frowning Palin, which I ignored.

“Yes, My Lord,” she replied timidly, but her eyes had lost their enthusiasm.

“Palin,” I said, turning, and he fell into step behind me like a good underling.

When we were just out of hearing range of down the hall, he cleared his throat.

"It has not gone unnoticed that Your Lordship has been spending a lot of time in the estate's library."

"I do so love the pursuit of knowledge."

"If I may be frank, My Lord," he said, and I noted that he did not pause a beat to await permission before continuing. "There are a number who fear that it is not knowledge's love that you are pursuing."

I laughed.

"I would not have taken you for the gossiping sort, Palin," I chided. "Nola has merely been aiding me in unraveling the late Marquess' research."

"A research assistant, truly? A woman and a servant at that?"

I shrugged.

"Do you doubt her literacy?" I asked. "She is charged with retrieving and suggesting titles."

"That hardly makes her a scholar," he sniffed.

"Fine," I said, throwing up my arms in mock surrender. "You have found me out."

I shook my head.

"No. The girl is certainly attractive, but she's done no more than debate esoteric theories with me."

I winked at him suggestively.

"At least, so far."

Palin stopped short; a clear sign I had upset him, given that we were already late for our meeting.

"That is exactly what I mean!" he hissed. "Do not even think such things, never mind joke about them aloud! A Marquess having an affair with a Felle servant? It is unthinkable! It would be a disaster. You would immediately lose the support of your nobility."

His dismay was so sincere that I found myself somewhat taken aback.

"Palin, I hesitate to offend your delicate sensibilities with my upcoming suggestion, but is it possible that past Marquesses have at times engaged in relations with their more attractive female retainers?"

"Maids, yes, but Felle? It'd do your reputation less harm if you were to take your horse or a goose from the local market as a consort."

"In truth?" I was more surprised than offended. I had probably spent as much time since my arrival speaking with my Felle staff as anyone else and there was nothing about them at all that struck me as inhuman. "I have been made to understand they had settled here in Malaray before our own forefathers."

"Settled here, yes," scoffed Palin. "But beneath these lands not upon them. They are creatures of filth and darkness, enemies of the sun!"

I found the venom in his words perplexing. Thinking of Vissula and Nola, I wondered if we were even speaking of the same people. There was nothing foul or wild about them, and how could humans live beneath the soil? I imagined Vissula digging through tunnels, constantly stopping to brush dirt from his hat in annoyance. I had to make an effort to keep from laughing.

I wished to ask Palin to elaborate further but he was looking angrily at his timepiece.

“Come, we have tarried too long,” he told me testily, not even remembering my title. “But I urge you to take this seriously. Your decision to continue your uncle’s research has already put many potential supporters off, and we cannot afford for you to alienate even more men of substance given the number already abandoning the city.”

He tugged me forward by the elbow.

This was my first indication that my reign was being met with anything less than unbridled enthusiasm by my subjects.

With the negotiating session successfully concluded, I pointedly dismissed Palin and pondered what to do next. Our prior discussion had been playing through my head repeatedly, and I had been growing more and more incensed with each repetition.

It was fortunate that the emissary present was from such a minor holding, as he must have attributed my irritated aloofness to the natural demeanor of a higher-ranking Marquess and taken no offense.

A Felle boy passed me on his way to a servants’ corridor and the kitchens, carrying away empty glasses that had recently been filled with wine in hospitality to our guest. Unconsciously, I turned to follow his progress. From behind, he was just a tiny form in a shapeless wrap; childlike and vulnerable.

I resolved that I would not let my steward’s prejudice or the opinions of others overly influence my actions.

In honesty, it had always seemed likely that I would be a poor leader and make a mess of things in Alaveth, but it had seemed impossible that I could really do much damage there. This move to Malaray may have changed the consequences of my bad decisions by an order of magnitude, but it had not changed me. It was probably a foregone conclusion that there would eventually be a reason for the people here to hate me, so they might as well hate me for being *myself*.

Having made this decision, I returned directly to the library.

Nola appeared quite surprised to see me so soon. She nodded toward me awkwardly, no doubt torn between seeming overly familiar with me and failing to recognize her liege’s presence. I smiled at her reassuringly and she seemed to relax somewhat.

“Let us return to our work,” I told her. “Come, bring the materials.”

I did not pause to watch her comply, instead mounting the library steps as I heard her rustling about and collecting books behind me. We might as well choose a spot on a higher tier and deeper back into the stacks where my ministers would be unlikely to look. I did not fear their scorn, but I did not want to deal with their interruptions and I also worried about the effect such attention might have on Nora.

I found a seat in a secluded reading nook near a back window. Nola followed, depositing the notebook and some other references on the table, but remained standing stiffly.

“Will My Lordship be requiring anything else?”

She refused to meet my eye as I studied her, choosing to stare down at the books instead. Her carefully blank expression could not hide her strong, attractive features.

“As before, your ignorant Lord seeks your assistance in unraveling this perplexing puzzle,” I did my best to keep my tone light but when I reached out to her, lightly brushing her elbow with my fingers, she leapt like a startled deer.

“My Lord, are you sure that would be appropriate?”

“Appropriate?” I tried to laugh away her concerns, but I sounded false even to my own ears. “Why is it any less appropriate for you to help me now than it was before? If I am to complete my uncle’s work and save Malaray from its current straits, then I shall need the help of good people. You are a well educated and thoughtful woman, and you have unique knowledge about the late Marquess’ studies, so I am asking you to assist me.”

She hesitated a moment before bowing and taking a seat opposite me at the table. I could not read whatever emotions she was masking, but her manner remained more reserved than before Palin had intruded upon us. She continued to avoid my gaze, and as I found our place in Thom’s notebook, I sought a way to get her to open up as she had before.

“Nola, before we begin; might I ask you some questions about your people?”

Her eyes met mine at last; dark and brown, but where they caught the light from the nearby window, they seemed golden. The suspicion they held was less attractive, however.

“My people?”

“Yes, please feel free not to answer if the question makes you uncomfortable,” I urged. “But the Felle are a mystery to me and yet clearly so important to the estate here in Malaray. I had never even heard of you in Alaveth, yet apparently you are older than my own tribe, and now I hear odd rumors that you live underground? That seems nonsensical if I may be so bold.”

“It is true, My Lord,” she said carefully. “And this may explain why...we are known only here in Malaray. My people live in caverns like those beneath this very estate and—outside of this city—we spend little time above ground.”

Her frown was like a sudden storm, clouding her face.

“Why are you looking at me like that...My Lord?”

"I am sorry; it is very impolite of me. I just cannot imagine you or, say, Vissula growing up in some dusty, murky cave."

"Then what you are imagining is likely inaccurate," she said, sounding slightly offended.

"No doubt you are in the right. You will have to show me your home some day, as it is hard for me to picture. You are clearly the same as I, yet you and your family must have lived so differently!"

These words seemed to please her somehow, for her expression softened.

"We were not always so different from you. For many years, we lived as you do now, or so I have been told, but we moved away from the skies many generations ago."

"Why?" I asked. I could not fathom why one would do such a thing, or how one would convince others to follow. "And what is special about Malaray that you make yourselves known here?"

She shrugged, smiling at me sheepishly. It was good to see her smile again.

"I can tell you only what I have been taught; and how likely is that to be true? Our priests teach that The Prophet saw in a vision a great evil that would swoop down upon us from the sky; and he led his people to safety as our gods demanded."

"And what was this evil?" I asked.

"Some say it has not yet come," she hesitated then met my eyes again, boldly this time. "Some say The Prophet foretold the coming of your people—that you were a terror from which we were saved."

I cleared my throat uncomfortably.

"Is this something that you believe?"

She gave a quick snort of laughter.

"I am not so old, My Lord, but I was able to serve your uncle for the last few years. I do not think he was some ungodly demon, just a man."

"Men have done terrible things," I pointed out.

"Just so, My Lord," she conceded. "And maybe The Prophet saved us from a horrific war with your kind, but I find myself thinking not."

She considered me, remained amused by whatever she saw.

"It seems odd that our Prophet would have hid us from the sky generations before your people came, when we were hardly strangers to bloodshed before you arrived."

I suppose that I should have reprimanded her here for taking the threat of the mighty Pentars so lightly. However, I myself was a bit biased. I felt there were things more dangerous than the Family's army. Our governance was one. Was I not living proof?

So instead, I pushed the conversation in the other direction.

"And Malaray? You have not explained what makes our city so special."

She made a vague gesture with one hand.

“Not your uncle, nor his father, but his father’s father once did a great service to one of my own ancestors,” she said. “In return that ancestor offered the servitude of our clan.”

“Until when?” I asked.

“Until the end of time,” she said, with a look that said this should have been obvious.

“It must have been quite the favor,” I joked weakly.

Nola seemed to take the implied question seriously.

“It is hard to say. The legends about it aren’t very specific, but they involve your relative being a powerful wizard.”

“First I have heard of it,” I admitted. “But we Pentars are a very mixed bag and we tend to surprise you.”

“So I am finding, My Lord,” she said, with a wink that stopped my heart for a second. How could *any man* find it strange to see this woman as attractive?

“It worries me a bit to learn that so many servants are offering me their loyalty based upon a vow which is now somewhat of a hazy cultural memory.”

Her eyes widened and the mirth of a moment ago evaporated. I was struck again by the sharpness of her features. Had I been composing a poem at that moment, I would have described her as regal. There was a certain irony there.

“Do not mistake me,” she said ominously. I noted she had forgotten my honorific but did not interrupt. “The vow is quite clear; it its origin that is ill remembered.”

She laughed again then, but it was at herself, a sound that was equal parts humor and bitterness.

“You are speaking of a people who have hid in holes in the ground for three lifetimes because their Prophet once told them to do so. We are not about to break a promise or disobey an order. I assure you of this, My Lord.”

She did not sound especially proud of this fact.

I hesitated for a long moment, not knowing what to say and certain if I did speak, it would only be to say exactly the wrong thing. Eventually, the silence stretched too long.

“Well, you sound faithful, at least,” I sighed. “Which is more than can be said for us idiots stumbling about on the grass above you.”

She smiled, and I felt from that moment onwards, we got on quite well.

A large easel had been dragged into the meeting room. The streets and neighborhoods of Malaray were sketched upon its canvas in impressive detail, if with little artistic sensibility. I suspected that Maulkin had prepared the entire thing in his own careful hand. The Family knew when he had found the time.

The map with its bright colored symbols, dates, and figures made the assemblage feel like a war council. I suppose, in a way, it was.

“If the disease is as hard to transmit as you say,” I said to the good doctor. “Why have your efforts to impose quarantines not been effective in stopping the spread?”

Maulkin frowned and scratched irritably at his scalp.

“One option is that people are managing to escape their confinement, but we are keeping a careful headcount and I don’t believe that this can be the case.”

Milton, my Minister General, nodded his mute assent. He should have been aware of any attempts to escape the imposed quarantines.

I didn’t know if I’d ever heard the Minister General speak, which made him my favorite minister by far. Unfortunately, I suspected the feeling wasn’t mutual. Milton didn’t seem apt to take a liking to me until I started telling him it was okay for his boys to go and start killing things.

“Another is that there is a reservoir of the disease,” Maulkin continued. “Most likely a non-human source, located elsewhere within the city.”

He looked at his map of outbreaks and cleared his throat, a dry sound. There were many areas of dark red.

“Perhaps several of them.”

“What do you need, doctor, to identify these?” I inquired. “More of Milton’s men, more men with a medical background, what?”

There were hardly any more of Milton’s men available, it had been a long time since there’d be four idle bodies lying about guard my bedroom—I’d made certain of that. And the Family knew where we’d find more doctors, perhaps literally. I had exhausted all options by burning money to draw men of medicine away from the neighboring towns. Eventually, you had bought everyone who was willing to be bought. I had had to write an appeal to the Elders for direct assistance from the Family, though I had not heard back and feared I never would.

Across the table, Minister Velour gave me a queasy look at the mere suggestion I might expect him to find more money to borrow.

“What I need,” hissed Maulkin sharply. “Is to find the causative agent. Without it I wouldn’t even know what to have any more men *do*.”

He shook his head.

“Perhaps more medical minds would be of assistance if we could find some good ones. I have been entirely unable to identify any contaminant in the blood or fluids of the victims that I have studied which should be capable of causing the disease. A new eye may see something I have not.”

Unless the Pentar Family took my pleas to heart and delivered us a scientist, this seemed unlikely. The few men we had been able to hire were obviously below Maulkin’s level of skill and learning, and any untapped dregs remaining were likely to be worse.

Maulkin cleaned his monocle on his sleeve and I could see him willing himself into calmness.

“But My Lordship makes a good point,” he said—generously considering that I had done no such thing. “If we do not seek, we shall not find. With your approval, Minister General, we shall reassign some of your troops from quarantine duty and have them search for signs of animal infestations or unsanitary conditions common to the areas that been hardest hit.”

Maulkin, warming to the subject, scratched at his chin.

“Perhaps, all men that can write, or at least draw, if you have some to spare; they can take detailed notes on what they see in each location and then we can check them against each other for consistency, a common cause.”

I followed the doctor’s eyes to the easel. Red quarantine marks clustered most often on small rises and higher elevations, could that be some type of clue? Was some certain animal or plant common to those areas somehow to blame?

Milton made a skeptical face and grunted. He didn’t strike me as a patron of artists and historians. Still, any army had its clerks.

“I’m not certain I’m comfortable with that plan,” announced Palin, surprising everyone. Dissent was unusual in these meetings. When debates did happen, I always had the nagging sense that they had been scripted ut beforehand for my benefit.

“Why is that precisely?” I prompted.

Palin took a moment to select his words before replying.

“That strategy would possibly locate the source of the disease,” he conceded. “But if it is something being acquired from a non-human source, we would be exposing a much greater number of our soldiers to it. There is a good chance that they would then end up brining it back inside of our own walls.”

In other words, Palin was against it because could work, but it might put us danger rather than just the slums. I wondered what his reaction must have been to Thom and Holday falling ill. Perhaps it was simply his fear of that memory that was driving him now.

“That is a valid consideration, I suppose,” admitted Maulkin.

“Is that really true?” My voice carried more emotion than I had intended and the ministers cast surprised looks in my direction. “If I understand correctly, we would be increasing the chances that some search party stumbles on the disease’s cause, and they may not even realize it when it occurs.

“If so, they would become ill and this would indeed be unfortunate. However, once they are infected, they are no more likely to spread the disease among us than the other workers like Doctor Maulkin who are already interacting with quarantined patients. The increase in risk should not be so dramatic.”

There was silence for a moment. Maulkin broke it by clearing his throat.

"I believe Our Lordship has the right of it," he said. "Unless the causative agent proves more transmittable in its original state, the protocols already in place should keep the plague from becoming an epidemic, and this approach would offer *some* hope of find a way to eliminate the disease."

"It does not sound as if we are certain that will be the case," persisted Palin. "I still object."

"What we can be certain of is that if we do nothing, this confounded thing will destroy us all." I told him. "I prefer a small risk to sitting idle. Some hope is better than none."

Palin continued to grumble but the debate had ended. The other ministers agreed to devote men to hunt for a non-human origin to the disease and we moved on to other business.

It felt good to have had some direct influence over the struggle against Malaray's decline, though there was no telling if this new approach I had helped author would prove any more effective than the last. Maulkin had shown some enthusiasm for the idea, which was mainly what gave me hope.

My official duties concluded, I snuck into a servant's corridor when no one was looking and made my way toward the library. The passing Felle errand boys and maids were used to this type of behavior by now, and I no longer had to worry about people shouting in surprise or bowing abruptly and spilling or shattering any dinnerware they were carrying.

Nola seemed pleased rather than concerned about my arrival, which I took as a good sign, and one that neither Palin nor the others had approached her about our continued relationship behind my back.

"My Lord, you will want to see this!" she called out as soon as she saw me, lifting Thom's notebook from her lap.

"You've been reading ahead without me!" I pouted. My tone was playful, but she looked momentarily alarmed. "Relax, relax. I am not at all bothered that you have done so, it is but a further sign of your dedication to curing Malaray."

I crossed to her desk.

"What is it that you have found?"

She flipped the book back a few pages to the start of the section she had been reading.

"This entry here..."

I leaned in closely to better decrypt my uncle's scrawled handwriting. Our cheeks almost touched, and I could feel the heat of her blush, but she did not pull away.

Thom's entry began with a declaration that he would be putting one of his theories to test that day and continued on to a complex engineering diagram covered with equations and measurements. Arrows arching out from items circled in the picture pointed to text explaining

how given components had been designed or obtained while some equations referenced what appeared to be page numbers and the names of books or authors.

Enough of the formulae were already familiar that I hoped I could approximate the machine's purpose.

"This portion looks like it is calculating the supposed amount of energy contained in a given volume of aether." I pointed towards the left side of the diagram before traveling across it to the far side with a finger. "This I recognize as basic physics, my tutor back in Alaveth would be proud."

I frowned at the muddle of equations in between them. Several referenced titles that were not among those we had been studying. From what I could follow, I guessed that they were trying to relate the left half of the diagram to the right. The eventual appearance of more conventional mathematical symbols within them seemed to support this.

"Is this a converter of some type?" I wondered aloud. "To create a motor that would run off of aether?"

"Very good, My Lord!" from the surprise in her eyes I could tell that Nola was sincerely impressed. "The Marquess describes it as an energy storage device, and likens it to the wound gears on his watch, but he attaches it to a factory's conveyor belt to power it in place of its waterwheel, just as you say. Read on."

It seemed an impossible idea, powering factories by the use of common air. If such a machine could be created, the possibilities were endless. Malaray would certainly become the center of the country's industry, if such a ubiquitous energy source could be tapped and such a secret could be kept. It made sense of some of the outlandish comments that Thom had scrawled in the other books, though I wasn't sure yet that it made any of them any more plausible or saner.

I did as Nola had suggested and read along. The handwriting was somewhat wild and it was clear that Thom himself was excited and detailing events as they occurred. He recounted how he had chosen a site on the river to trial his new device and cunningly arranged a way for it to replace the force being output by the waterwheel.

Caught up in his enthusiasm, I skimmed along, following my uncle's narrative.

"There's an address!"

"Yes," Nola nodded. "Perhaps you could learn something there, but there is much more to the tale."

The entry was perhaps the longest and most detailed that I had yet read. If Thom's chronicle could be believed, his fanciful machine was a success. A halting, unstable one at first and he recorded his fears that the thing would fail spectacularly as it shot sparks and creaked ominously. He hastily ordered his assistants to make adjustments here or there. The triumph in his written word was palpable as he at last corrected for some unknown variable between the symbols that he'd encountered in his books and the real world.

Head spinning, I returned my attention from the past to the present and leaned back from the notebook's pages.

"Wait. How could this be true? If my uncle had been successful, these inventions should be commonplace by now."

"Keep reading!" urged Nola impatiently, her eyes flashing gloriously gold in the light. Recalling herself and her station, she added, "The passage will answer your questions far better than I could, My Lord."

I smirked at this and found the place where I had left off. Despite his exuberance, Uncle Thom did not lose his head and continued to carefully measure the output of his experiment. As he slowly increased the power being drawn from his aether storage device, the factory was reaching levels of production they had never been able to achieve utilizing the river as their power source.

Strangely, as the magnitude of the Marquess' success became apparent, his writing turned darker and more suspicious.

'I feel the Watcher's eyes upon us.' He wrote suddenly, interrupting a paragraph he had not yet completed. 'It sees what we have accomplished, and is angered by our successes.'

Who could this observer be that they worried a Marquess so? The description itself was somewhat eerie. Assuming he knew not even the spy's gender, why 'it' and not 'they'? Surely my uncle did not believe he was being watched by objects or animals? If that was the case it hardly made the rest of the entry trustworthy. Perhaps 'it' referred to some type of institution, such as the Family? I could imagine he might not want to name them directly, especially in writing—even in a private journal, if that was the case.

Of course, if it was true that the Pentars were for some reason against this, my choice to study my predecessor's research may have already placed me in danger. I gulped audibly.

Nola could not have known my thoughts, but my discomfort must have been obvious enough.

"There is something... unsettling about it, My Lord, is there not?"

I nodded silently, it appeared I had only a few more pages and was anxious to complete them.

Thom's paranoia grew more intense and he fretted about shutting the whole thing down, but the machine was close to reaching its limits and he obviously thought it would be quite valuable to observe them.

Knowing, as I did, that Malaray had no aether powering its lathes and mills, I feared some sort of dramatic end to the scene. My uncle's machine would explode, I knew, or overheat and set the factory aflame.

These fears went unrealized, however. My uncle dryly noted reaching a point where demanding more from the device simply overtaxed it and caused everything it was running to fail. He then summoned his assistants and began slowly disconnecting it from the factory so he

could bring the device back to one of his private labs to study any damage from the stresses that had been placed on the machine by its use.

It was then that an alarm was raised and my uncle first learned that a pair of his assistants were dead.

‘There were no marks upon them of any kind.’ The Marquees wrote. ‘But their skin was a ghastly, ghoulish blue. It was as if they had simply lain down peacefully and released the spirit of life from their bodies. I thought this could only be the work of the Watcher and shuddered.’

The passage ended there. I looked at Nola with my mouth open and saw my own fear and confusion mirrored there.

“Do you think...?” she asked, trailing off.

“The plague?” I responded, not needing her words to catch her meaning. “I think it likely. It reminds me strongly of something that Doctor Maulkin once said.”

I placed a hand over hers. She did not recoil my touch but did glanced about nervously, as if to make sure that no one had snuck into the library to observe us.

“A coincidence, I am sure, that the plague would strike at such a moment. Likely it means nothing.” I thumped the open notebook as a though struck me. “But I will show it to the good doctor, and see what he thinks. In fact, I will have him take me to the address listed here. Maybe I can learn something from the site of the experiment.”

She smiled weakly. There was no happiness in her eyes. But she surprised me by suddenly moving very close, her hair brushing softly against my skin. However, whatever her intentions, seemed to think better of them then; stepping back and removing her hand from mine.

“Be careful, My Lord,” she said quickly. “It would not want the same type of fate to befall you.”

“I will take the utmost caution,” I assured her. When this made her look even more nervous, I decided to my leave.

“Absolutely not, My Lord! Are you suicidal?”

Unfortunately, Palin had happened into Maulkin’s office just as I was discussing my plans for a visit to the city. I got the distinct impression that this was not a coincidence.

The map of the epidemic that had been present during our last council had been moved here and lie against a wall behind the doctor’s desk. I eyed the location of the Langarm factory. High atop a rise on the edges of the slums where the river first poured down into Malaray, it and the area around it were marked in bloody red.

"I think there is something to be learned here," I said firmly. "And I mean to investigate."

"Feel free to have it *investigated*," answered the steward. "But there is no need for you to go in person! Isn't this exactly the reason that you assigned more men to Doctor Maulkin? To assist in just this type of search?"

"Yes, but..." I began, but faltered. But what? But I wanted to see if I could sense whether something magical had happened there?

"I see nothing so extraordinary about this so called revelation that you have found in the late Marquess' notes," continued Palin. I had not shown either the notebook, instead implying that I had discovered something in the papers that Palin himself had supplied. The notebook felt like a secret, both Thom's and my own, and secrets should be guarded.

Was it possible that Palin had been the one watching Thom? He seemed the one most opposed to continuing with my uncle's research and to my changes to the plan for countering the disease as well.

He motioned toward the map.

"The Marquess first encountered the illness in one of the areas that is the most heavily affected. It is only logical that this would be the case, no doubt some of the men assisting him were locals drafted to help and were sick long before he encountered them."

This was a completely rational explanation, I had to admit. Far more likely than my uncle's Watcher causing the deaths.

"Besides, My Lord," added Maulkin. "We do not know for certain that the deaths he recorded were related to the disease. It seems possible but we cannot be sure."

I had read them verbatim my uncle's description of the dead, and not just those from the experiment in the Langarm factory. I had read additional entries last night and found that from that first appearance in his notes, the epidemic quickly began to spread. However, as Palin had just suggested, that did not prove that the disease had not existed prior to the Marquess becoming aware of it, even if Thom had quickly become certain that it was a sign of the Watcher working against him.

Beneath their stern gazes, my enthusiasm for exploration slowly died away.

"Fine," I said, somewhat hotly. "Have Milton send men there right away. My predecessor believed the disease was born there and that place seems as likely as any other."

Maulkin inclined his head in silent assent.

"I will make it so at once, My Lord."

Palin beamed over his minor victory.

I felt dejected but was uncertain why. What had I hoped to find in that place?

I had been reading my uncle's notebook too much, I decided. He clearly believed that someone or something was out to get both himself and his city, but just because he believed it

did not make it so. Still, his words had begun to cast a shadow of threat over everything for me. I needed to shake it off.

Perhaps the device that my uncle had built was still somewhere within the estate grounds. I did not recall seeing it on my tour of his laboratories, but it was possible it had been too large to store there.

Even if Palin aimed to trap me inside these white walls, there must be some action that I could take.

Interviews with Thom's research assistant taught me nothing. He recalled the experiment but not what had been done with the device. We toured every storeroom, closet, and attic the boy could think of but came up empty. I began to wonder if the late Marquess had had the thing disassembled.

It didn't appear again in his notebook.

Indeed, despite the success of that experiment his research seemed to change in focus. There was more and more talk of the Watcher, and the sickness, and that the former was trying to use the latter to destroy him. New equations began to appear, but I wanted to discuss them with Nola and have her pull some new books. From what I could discern, Thom's equations were now trying to *block out* the energy from the aether rather than to draw it in.

"No luck, My Lord?" asked Nola when she next saw me. I wondered what it was about my appearance that had tipped her off. It looked as if she already knew what I had been up to, but then word probably traveled fast among the Felle. I self-consciously brushed some dust from my robes that I must have obtained while perusing moldy crates in a long forgotten attic.

"None, though men will be examining the site of the experiment and reporting back to me," I said. I produced the notebook. "There are some other questions I wanted to run by you, and I was wondering if you could locate for me a few more books."

I handed her a short list of titles. A few were from the newer work that my uncle had pursued following the deaths at the factory. Another was from that fated passage itself, something related to the design of the storage device.

Sinister Energies and *Defense Against the Elements* did nothing to assuage my fears. These books appeared to be filled with the type of nonsensical mysticism that I had first expected to encounter when I began following my uncle's personal research. Demons, pentagrams, and dark gods featured heavily. They were just the sort of unsavory works that my ministers had been speaking of when they worried about his mental health. It was clear from their subject matter that something that had happened that day had thrown Thom back onto the defensive and made him more suspicious that this Watcher was out to get him, and apparently he thought the Watcher possessing of some type of supernatural power.

I could not entirely convince myself that the old man hadn't simply been going crazy. I didn't even know if I could trust his depiction of his experiment at the factory. Would he really have abandoned such a valuable invention after successfully testing it?

At least the pages of these books that his own notebook cited seemed the most sensible. That is, they were not pages filled with philosophical babble, but the portions of the books where the authors were dealing with hard numbers or recounting firsthand experiences from their own alchemical laboratories.

The blandly named *Theories of Natural Power*, was another case entirely. The moment I opened it, I sat bolt upright in my seat. Nola, paging through another book to my left, looked over in interest.

"What is it, My Lord?"

I turned the book so she could see the page more clearly. The illustration it held was the design for the Marquess' energy storage device almost exactly. There were pieces missing, as the portion connecting it to a practical machine for real world use was omitted, but that must have been of my uncle's own devising. Otherwise, the overall similarity was inescapable. The only other thing it lacked were Thom's notes as to how he'd actually managed to craft the individual pieces.

I saw her dark eyes widen, she pointed to some of the equations accompanying the design. I studied them more closely. They used a different notation than my uncle or the books we had previously studied, but it was easy enough to substitute one symbol for another. I wondered what about the strange letters had caught her attention, watched her run a finger over them, mouthing syllables.

"You know that writing?" I asked.

"It is Felle," she answered in astonishment.

"Hmm," I flipped quickly through the book's introduction and afterword. There was little information about the author himself. I pointed towards the work's signature.

"Does the name 'Falin' strike you as familiar?"

Biting her lip, Nola shook her head.

"No, but remember, just because he is Felle does not mean he is from Malaray. My people have other homes."

"Of course," I said, feeling a bit embarrassed. It was a stupid question. It wasn't as if I knew everyone in tiny Alaveth by name, for example.

"Your people, though; it seems possible they know something of this science? This Watcher?"

Nola nodded cautiously, fearing to promise too much.

"Anything is possible, My Lord."

"Fair enough," I replied. "It is decided, you will take me to see your people."

"My...My Lord?" she stuttered, uncertain how to respond.

“You are my loyal subjects, are you not?”

She bowed her head, unwilling to respond.

“Then it is past time I paid your people the proper respect and asked for their help and guidance against the plague.”

Chapter 4

That evening I found myself descending a back stairway with Nola, Vissula, and my older maid Eleeka. My visit to the Felle caverns beneath the estates would not be an official one, at least in the sense that none of my ministers would be aware of it.

This would not have been possible had I not dismissed my personal guards to aid in the struggle against the epidemic some time ago. Otherwise, I was sure that Palin would have gotten word and stopped me.

Sneaking out without Vissula being aware was impossible, of course, and I thought it beneficial to have him included in the discussion as well. In truth, I worried that if the Felle were somehow insulted by my visit, the blame would all fall upon poor Nola who clearly had no authority to deny my request. In this way, I hoped to spread the blame if this trip had some unforeseen consequences.

No one seemed entirely happy with my decision but they all seemed afraid to stop me. Vissula had tried fairly energetically to dissuade me, his statements punctuated by long hissing discussions with the women in their own speech, but when I persisted he was unwilling to refuse me.

We reached the cellars at a point directly beneath my chambers, crossed nearly deserted corridors into a back hall I had never bothered investigating. A couple of Felle servants eyed us with obvious surprise but it did not interrupt our progress.

Another stairway dropped us beneath the cellars, to a level of the estate I had not even known existed. I wondered if any of my ministers were aware of it.

There were no braziers or wall sconces here, and we had to rely upon Vissula's lantern to guide the way. The light could not penetrate the darkness of the doorways that we passed, making them seem vast and cavernous. I wanted to ask the others what was stored down here, but their unyielding silence stayed my own tongue.

Suddenly, the walls to either side disappeared as the hall we had been following terminated in some greater chamber. Looking up I realized that the ceiling was no longer

within the range of our lamplight. We walked between marbled pillars and the texture of the floor beneath my feet was smooth, like tile.

We marched across that chamber for a long time. I was just about to ask my guides about the nature of this place when we reached another set of steps and began to descend. I had expected the entrance to the Felle's quarters beneath the city to be guarded but, unless someone watched us from the darkness, we were entirely alone. Apparently my kind's ignorance and disinterest provided security enough.

These stairs had clearly once been grand. Though made of plain, sturdy stone, they were wider than the reach of our lantern and carved with an intricate whirling design that spiraled down the steps along with us. I did not study the pattern in detail, however, as I found doing so quickly made me dizzy.

The descent was steep and fairly long, but not so long as the columned room that we had just crossed. The steps corkscrewed slowly first to the right and then to the left for no reason I could fathom. We came around a final sharp curve, and into light.

After having spent so long in the gloom of a single lantern, the light was a shocking surprise. I do not know that I had firm picture in my head from what Nola had said of her home; but I had expected narrow, dark caves filled naught but dirt and insects.

What I saw before me was a cavern that seemed as wide as Alaveth, and everywhere it shone. The roof of the cave above twinkled with what looked to be a million chipped diamonds, as if the night sky hung so close that you literally could climb up and reach the heavens. But these were only a part of the display, as the ground and the walls of the nearby buildings were made of a similar material and all glittered in kind, leaving one lost in a sea of stars.

We stood now in a broad street; one of many that formed an orderly grid about the homes of the Felle stretching from where we stood until the stony horizon in all directions. These structures were clearly formed from the same stone as the cavern in which they resided, but no matter their size—large or small—they sported steeples and towers as if each was its own cathedral.

Atop each building, and in a number of pits out in the open streets, fires blazed. Indeed, the air was warm enough that I had begun to sweat. I realized that it was the fires' light, reflected back and forth endlessly by the crystals in the cavern's stone that gave the place its day-like illumination.

I reached down to touch the street and was surprised to find it smooth and slightly tacky, as if some sealant had been spread across the natural rock. Instead of a natural cave filled with dust and debris, I found a road cleaner than any in Malaray above. Indeed, I would have sworn a Felle I could see a short ways off was sweeping at the street with a broom.

Nola and Eleeka were not even bothering to hide their amusement at my reaction, though Vissula wore only an expression of fierce pride.

“What do you think of our dank caves now, My Lord?” asked the librarian, her laugh echoing softly.

“Amazing,” I replied, speaking the simple truth. “The fires...”

I do not even know what I intended to say. I had not expected them, or the brightness. Vissula answered regardless, as if I had managed a coherent question.

“My people believe that fires purify the air,” he said. “And of course they protect us from the dark and the cold; but some of these fires were lit on the day that the Prophet led us from the sky, and they have burned every hour since.”

I shook my head at the shining city. It had to be nearly as large as Malaray above. How ironic that those who lived here away from the sun would know only day and not night.

“Funny, I would worry for just that reason. I would expect the fire to eat up all of your air.”

He gestured toward the shimmering ceiling.

“It would, were it not for thin vents drilled to reach through to the world above.”

“My people have an interesting relationship with the outside world, My Lord,” said Nola sourly. “Despite our best efforts, it does not seem we can remove ourselves from it completely.”

I nodded, uncertain what to say next. Somehow it had not occurred to me until now to ask how I should present myself to their tribe. I had been anticipating finding people lying about on blankets or in tents, thinking they were merely my servants after all. I expected that I would simply ask questions of the huddled crowd and demand answers, but the reality was far grander than some underground lodging for the estate’s staff and I had no idea where to begin.

But a place this well organized must have a leader, I reasoned; maybe someone who was essentially my peer as Marquess, someone to whom I should formally announce myself. In retrospect, it seemed strange that these Felle who had waited upon me would have done so without such an endorsement if they could have simply chosen to dwell in this place instead.

“What do we do now?” I asked, figuring the best approach was to seek counsel.

Eleeka snorted.

“My Lordship was the one who pestered us into bringing him down here, you would think he had a plan.”

Vissula shushed her, casting an apologetic look in my direction.

“I have an aunt who is a historian,” Nola said, smiling at the thought of the woman. “I learned to read at her knee, in fact. She is one of the wisest of our people. If anyone knows what you seek, she will.”

The young woman looked at me expectantly. I hesitated to answer, not wanting to insult her. I was sure that Nola’s relative was a brilliant woman, who had likely nurtured the librarian’s own love of books, but given the eccentric nature of our research I wasn’t certain I wanted to rely solely on the knowledge of someone’s aunt.

“The girl speaks true, My Lord,” said Vissula, sensing my doubt. “Her aunt, Lanore, is one of our Seers.”

The reverence that he attached to this term put me in mind of the Family’s Council of Elders.

“Who rules here?” I asked, recalling my earlier thoughts.

“No one person, My Lord,” answered Vissula. “Our Seers meet in conclave to make decisions, or handle small judgments on their own.”

He made a face, gestured awkwardly with his hands.

“We do not have rulers in the same sense you do. Anyone with enough aptitude can become a Seer, anyone who acts foolishly enough can cease to be one.”

That last rule seemed like one that could benefit the Pentars.

“And why have I met none of these Seers, if they are willing to offer me their people’s servitude? It seems a great deal for them to take on faith.”

Eleeka cackled in response. Nola too, seemed amused, but she hid her smile politely behind a hand.

“We serve you based upon the strength of our oath to your ancestor,” responded Vissula gravely, ignoring the women’s conduct. “But do not think that the Seers have not taken your measure.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“What this old goat means, Your Lordship,” explained Eleeka with an elbow to Vissula’s ribs. “Is that he is one of the longest serving Seers in our tribe.”

“I have had that honor,” said Vissula in his usual deadpan tone, giving a slight inclination of his head.

Of course, the strange elaborateness of his dress, the deference that the other Felle showed him; it was not merely because he was the head of my servants. It was because he was a head of their clan. Had Palin and my ministers known this and simply never informed me? Or were they ignorant to what the Felle really represented?

Thinking back to my discussion with Palin about their inhumanity, I imagined it must be the latter.

I nodded toward Nola.

“Lead the way.”

We entered the Felle city proper, and did not find the streets deserted. Felle walked back and forth between buildings despite the late hour. Some congregated in the streets. I supposed that if the fires were always burning here, one could set one’s own hours.

Our party drew many curious glances from those who we encountered. With my unusual height and strange garb, I must have stood out from a distance. People shifted from our path, voicing things in their native tongue that I took to be blessings. The Felle did not prostrate themselves, as they might have in my halls above, but all gave us respectful nods. After a time,

it occurred to me to wonder whether it wasn't Vissula who was the true object of their deference.

Lanore's home proved larger than those around it, two-storied, and close to the size of my father's. It was clear she was someone of import. Vissula's knock was answered by a butler of some type, who seemed to recognize the man. A runner was sent at once to summon his mistress, as we were led to a small sitting room. There was no wooden furniture, just scattered cushions stitched from some type of animal hide, but comfortable enough for all of that.

We had not been sitting long when Lanore made her appearance. Even without foreknowledge that she was Nola's aunt, I likely would have wondered at a possible relation, as she seemed a slightly older, plumper replica. Lanore wore a gown of a deep, royal purple which precisely matched the shade of her many-tiered purple headdress, identical to Vissula's.

She looked us over with a bemused smile.

"Vissula, this is an unexpected surprise," she said to my head servant, with a polite nod of her head.

I tried to decide if this failure to address me indicated an intentional slight. It was not as if Lanore could have been oblivious to my light skin and royal clothing. The footing here was very uncertain, however. I told myself to remain calm. Vissula was her direct peer, but while he was my servant, I did not know how Felle chose or were chosen to serve in Malaray.

"We are sorry to intrude, my good friend," said Vissula smoothly. If he felt she had breached protocol, his voice gave no indication. "My Marquess, sought to learn from the teachings of our own scholars."

He winced in apology.

"All agreed that you are our tribe's greatest resource of such lore."

Lanore shook her head but her smile broadened.

"Surely, the tales of your golden tongue are naught but understated," she said. "What a lovely way to say that everyone thinks I am a long-winded bore."

She quickly shushed Vissula's attempts at a rebuttal.

"Besides, any excuse to visit with my beautiful, but rarely glimpsed, niece is a good one." Lanore crossed the room, reaching up to hug Nola. The pair embraced affectionately until the older woman released her to enwrap the somewhat surprised Eleeka in a similar fashion.

"Is this old sack of bones treating you well enough?" she asked the elderly maidservant. Eleeka gave an uneven shrug.

"I try not to complain," she wheezed, laughing. "But I don't really succeed."

Lanore smiled warmly in response, but her flowering happiness seemed to wilt upon her face as she finally turned to regard me.

"And you are this baby-faced new Marquess who I have heard so much about," she said. Lanore eyed me suspiciously. "I suppose you have to be better than that last one, at least you had the good sense to show your face here."

"I would have come sooner," I told her, a sudden surge of guilt souring my stomach. "I am in awe of what I have seen of your home so far. Since my arrival in Malaray, the Felle have been something of a mystery, none of my men were willing to tell me anything about you. I begin to believe that none of them *know*, though I cannot imagine how this could be possible. Only by pressuring my loyal friends here did I even learn of this place's existence."

Larone's eyes narrowed and passed over me to Vissula and Nola. She frowned at their silent nods.

"One might observe," said Lanore coolly. "That it is a ruler's duty to *find out* the things he does not know. If his advisors cannot supply this information then it falls on him to find better advisors. Ultimately, he bears all responsibility."

Her scowl receded slightly.

"Still, you are here now. And I have heard some favorable things about you, enough that I support the upkeep of our oath to your ancestor."

This was the first that I had heard the matter was up to a vote. Vissula and Nola had given the impression that the breaking of their oath would be unthinkable.

Lanore looked to her niece and sighed.

"Very well then, what is it that you wish to know?"

Her tone was exasperated but the dourness had passed through her like a summer storm. I had the impression that sternness was not truly in her nature.

"We, that is, Nola and I," I nodded toward her niece. "Had been performing some research in her library and came across a book by a scholar named Falin. She realized that a portion of his writing was in Felle, and it caused me to wonder if your tribe might know more about the subject than my own."

"Falin?" she asked, eyes narrowing immediately, as if the name had unsavory connotations. "Whatever could you have been studying that would have led you to him?"

"You must know of the situation in Malaray?" I asked. She tilted her head in response, making a face I could not interpret. "Given the way both its citizens and the city itself were wasting away, I thought it might be best to find out what my uncle, the late Marquess, had been doing to combat the decline."

"But it turned out his last days had been spent performing experiments in some esoteric field, one some might even term is magic."

Lanore frowned and shook her head.

"If his experiments involved work along the line of Falin's, you would do well to avoid them entirely."

"Who was he, auntie?" asked Nola. "I could not recall you ever mentioning his name."

Lanore favored her with a forgiving smile.

"I never did. In fact, I've spent much of my time as Seer ensuring that no one ever would."

This announcement was met with confusion by everyone, including Vissula, which struck me as odd given his supposed seniority among the Seers.

“He was one of our greatest minds, from before the time of the Exodus,” she explained. “It was Falin’s theories that the Prophet believed would most likely lead to our destruction.”

She gave me a measuring glance.

“I, too, believe this to be true. Promise me that you will abandon any plans which would rely upon his teachings.”

I swallowed, throat dry.

“What *type* of dangers are we discussing?” I asked. “What would happen if one of his theories had been put into practice?”

Her eyes widened in anger.

“By the Prophet,” she said, making some warding gesture about her forehead. “What have you done!”

It was Nola who answered, her face having gone as white as a sheet.

“It wasn’t him, it was the old Marquess! He assembled one of the devices from Falin’s book, used it to draw power from the sky.”

Lanore gave a strangled laugh, slumped down on a cushion.

:And you were right there in his library the entire time and never thought to tell me of this?”

Looking amongst ourselves, we hunched down around her.

“I’m sorry, auntie!” pleaded Nola. “I did not know it was forbidden or I never would have stopped the Marquess somehow.”

The Seer waved a hand.

“I am the one to blame child. I decided to keep your generation ignorant of the threat, so that they would not play with it carelessly as a child might with fire, but in doing so I failed to warn you against it so that you could act as you saw fit.”

She shook her head.

“Regardless, it is done now. Much is made clear,” she looked to me. “You realize then that the plague in your city is not some natural ill as I had assumed.”

“It began at the moment my uncle tested Falin’s device,” I confirmed.

She drew two quick diagonal lines across her forehead with the fingers of her right hand.

“The Prophet spoke true,” she said.

The others made similar gestures. A doomed silence fell over us, but I could not keep it. My mind held too many nagging questions.

“Forgive my ignorance,” I said. “But what exactly does this all mean?”

Lanore looked at me blankly then leered unexpectedly, more a savage showing of teeth than a grin.

“Tell me, young Marquess, do you believe in spirits and demons?”

“I do not find myself so inclined,” I answered honestly. “Though some I spoke to seemed to think that my uncle was tempting them.”

“Well, you perhaps should believe!” the Seer snapped harshly, taking a moment to calm herself before trying again. “Look, I am about to say something which will sound like sheer arrogance, but I say it as someone who knows more about these matters than most.

“Our people lived in this land long before yours and our science is more advanced than your own. The brightest of our scholars unveiled truths that yours have only begun to dream to imagine. They probed the laws governing the very forces of nature.”

Perhaps I should have been offended for the learned men of my culture, but I found myself willing to accept this premise. Was I not something of an expert on this topic given my recent work with Nola? I had seen many books where our authors grasped at the edges of the truth, but only one where a man had seen it in full. Where others had offered formulas and airy possibilities, Falin had given my uncle diagrams and clear instructions.

“What we did not expect,” continued Lanore darkly. “Was that nature would probe back.”

I scowled, wondering at her meaning, and saw that Nola wore a look that seemed to mirror my own; though the two elder Felle nodded as if listening to a friend recount a familiar story.

“We mastered the potential of earth and fire, you have no doubt noticed their overabundance here,” her self-deprecating scorn reminded me strongly of her niece. “Water proved far trickier, though as long as we did nothing to anger the oceans, it seemed to pose little danger.”

“But, of course, my uncle and Falin were studying the aether,” I replied in an attempt to speed along her narrative.

“Yes, and the more we studied the sky above and the air around us, the more we... saw strange results. Inconsistent findings, simple experiments requiring far more energy than our formulas would predict, almost as if the air were resisting.”

If the Felle had moved underground as long ago as Nola and the others had told me, Lanore must be speaking from her knowledge of their history, but spoke as if she had lived her tale.

“It was not long before the scientists began to joke about the spirits of the air being against us; and soon these statements were no longer jokes at all but a widely shared concern.”

She paused to regard the others.

“You will all have heard this before, though distorted by the priests’ sacred dressings. What you won’t know is what followed.”

Lanore bowed her head, closed her eyes for a moment. I saw Vissula lean forward with interest.

“There were a series oddities, it is hard to separate the real from the imagined. Those tasked with studying the properties of the sky began to show signs of paranoia, began to believe that *they* were the ones who were constantly observed.”

Nola and I shared a glance; thinking of Thom’s frequently cited Watcher.

“These would likely have been brushed off as madness,” said Lanore. “Except for their consistency—to a man, each of Falin’s students reported the feel otherworldly eyes upon them.

“The deaths that soon followed have been downplayed in our histories. Many seemed to be laboratory accidents and public was allowed to believe this at the time to stave off panic.

“Falin and some of his comrades had been found dead far from their laboratories or experiments, as if something had singled them out for destruction and taken them wherever they hid. There was no sign as to what had killed them. It was as if some otherworldly force had simply torn through the fabric of reality and stolen their souls. That was what forced our Prophet’s hand, I believe.

“He made his famous case for our people to flee from the sky and surround ourselves with earth instead, and the Seers at the time were swayed.”

She trailed off into a mournful silence.

“I had wondered what fear or rationale could move an entire people underground,” I admitted finally. “It seems a solid decision from what your Prophet must have observed.”

Lanore nodded, I thought I detected in her a slight hint of her approval.

“My uncle unknowingly repeated the sin of your ancestors,” I said. “His desire for wealth led him to build a machine directly from Falin’s plans. The deaths in Malaray began that day. He must have attracted the attention of the same creatures.”

I shook my head in dismay.

“Had I not come here to speak with you, I would have likely tried to repeat it.”

I reached out to grasp the sleeve of Lanore’s gown and tugged upon it, begging.

“What can be done to stop these sky demons?” I asked. “How do I fix things?”

The Seer’s only response was a sorrowful laugh. She buried her head in her hands.

“If we knew the answer to that question,” replied Vissula. “Do you think we would have simply abandoned our land? That we would be raising our children who may never see the sun?”

It was far more anger than I had ever heard him express in the world above.

“But there must be something!” I pleaded. Numbly, I noticed Nola moving closer, placing a hand on my shoulder. All I could think of was Doctor Maulkin working so hard to identify the cause of a disease that did not exist, sending in more and more of the men I had hired. They would be able to do nothing, unless one counted being unfortunate enough to be noticed by these spirits from beyond our world, in which case they too would die.

Lanore signed loudly, raising her face from her palms.

“I am sorry. If there is a way to stop them we have not found it,” she said. “And we have been trying in secret for decades.”

She wept.

“I can say only that these deaths will not stop, they will continue, and spread throughout your people. If you are fortunate, those escaping Malaray have not already brought other cities to the spirits’ attention.”

Her words struck me with the weight of stone.

Because of the hour and our state of mind, Lanore insisted that we rest a few hours before making the trek back to the estate above. After some refreshment, which I consumed but did not even taste, her servants came and led us to beds within her spare rooms.

I was awakened by the soft creak of my door.

Blinking against my interrupted sleep, I struggled to make anything out in the darkness. It took me a moment to remember where I was, why I lay almost upon the floor. Lanore’s guest rooms had mattresses but not beds, and large closets but little furniture. The bedroom’s only other adornment was a small, stone table and chair.

A shadow moved towards me, stepping so lightly it was silent, enhancing the sense that it was really some shade or ghost.

It drew closer and my eyes began to adjust to the scant light of the room, which crept through cracks in the curtains from bonfires dancing outside. A hazy cloud, a slightly deeper black than its surroundings, began to take on a more distinct shape as it hovered above me.

Despite my vantage point, just inches off the floor, the figure still looked small and frail.

“Nola?” I asked, sitting upright. It felt as if it had only been a few moments since I had lay down and drifted off, but could it already be morning? The house was silent and the hall behind her dark, but the light from the fire outside remained a constant regardless of the hour. “What is it?”

She bent close to my face so that I could make out the detail of her own—monotone in the low light but still striking, beautiful.

Instead of speaking, she merely pressed a finger to my lips. Even in the dark, I could see the faint gleam of something, perhaps mischief, in her eyes. Her free hand drew her blouse over her head, she wore no corset beneath.

I opened my mouth, I think to foolishly ask what she was doing, but she silenced me with a kiss as she slipped warmly into my sheets beside me, her skin smelling sweet with unfamiliar spices.

My hands explored wonders hidden by the darkness and more clothing was hastily removed.

Sometime later, I could not say how long given the constancy of the room's faint light, we lay comfortably entwined. I felt happy, and warm, and connected; as if I could not tell where the tangle of my own limbs ended and hers began.

"I must admit, that was somewhat unexpected," I hazarded softly.

Laughing, she replied, "I hope you are not going to claim you did not enjoy it."

I smiled.

"That would be as great a lie as I have ever told," I assured her. "My real question is, why now?"

She lifted herself upon one elbow, tuned so that she might study my face.

"You are not like your uncle," she said, avoiding the question.

"I should think not," I responded. "I hope you did not give him the same evaluation."

I watched her expression change quickly; initially surprise then annoyance, but I could tell she knew I was just being playful and that she was not really insulted. Still, she scowled a bit as she spoke so that I knew she was serious.

"I shudder at the mere thought. But I knew from the first day that you were different from most of your people. When you looked upon me, you saw me, and did not care that I was a lowly Felle librarian and not some pampered Pentar princess."

"I care," I retorted. "For it is a part of who you are."

"But you did not count it as a negative," she persisted.

"I suppose, but I see no reason why I should have. You have met some of my Family?"

"You asked me why, and that is why," she said. She opened her mouth and began to say more, but suddenly hesitated, lay silent for a moment, as if listening. "I should return to my own quarters."

I had heard nothing. The dim quiet of the house seemed unchanged, eternal, as I now wished this night could be.

"Don't go."

"It would not be proper for me to be found here, especially in my aunt's home," she told me, already pulling away.

"Then stay just a little longer."

She smiled at this, kissed me, but still pulled away.

I stared at the door for a time after she left, thinking of Palin's anger at our mere flirtation, his assertion that the people of Malaray would disown me for what had taken place here tonight.

I knew in my heart that I could never turn my back on Nola now, but I tried to imagine what kind of future might lay ahead for the two of us.

Slowly, a plan began to form in my mind.

Chapter 5

My assembled ministers regarded me across the council room's table, shifting nervously. It was unusual for me to call an impromptu meeting and unprecedented, in my short reign, to do so without announcing the cause. Some, like Maulkin and Velour had brought papers they could fidget with, presumably in case they were called on to give some sort of report. Most had brought nothing and as I hesitated, lacking the words to begin, they peered at me with a variety of emotions; most faces wore anxiety, Milton's a stoic boredom, Palin's impatience and annoyance.

I took a deep breath.

"Dr. Maulkin, I take it that you have made no progress in finding a cure?"

The man frowned, squinting around his monocle—no doubt wondering if he was to be singled out for criticism. His hands paged through the report before him but his eyes did not leave my own.

"I would not say that, My Lord! Your suggestion to search for an environmental cause seemed to bare some fruit..."

"Meaning, I assume, that it managed to sicken some of Milton's men?"

Maulkin pursed his lips at this uncharacteristic interruption. He looked at the Minister General, who shrugged mutely back at him. I felt a slight tremor go through my ministers. They could not read my mood and they did not know why. Perhaps they feared I was about to dissolve my cabinet. I sensed, for once, something of the feeling of power and majesty that a Marquess was supposed to wear about them constantly like a cloak. We would soon see just how much authority my word carried with these men.

The doctor spoke slowly and cautiously.

"A few, My Lordship is very astute; but as you yourself suggested, we believe their infection may well help us locate the cause so that I may develop a cure."

"You will find no cure," I said baldly and then to soften the blow added, "Though this is through no fault of your own."

"There is no cure. We have been perceiving the problem incorrectly. We see the deaths and weakness inflicted upon Malaray as a disease, but they are not, they are a type of attack."

The doctor laid his hands before him on the table and took a long moment before speaking. His words when he spoke were impressively calm.

"I am sorry, My Lord, but I do not follow. Have you somehow uncovered new information regarding the illness of which I am unaware?"

Despite his polite tone, there was no way to miss his real meaning: did I now fancy myself a greater expert in his own field, at a problem that he had been trying to solve, tirelessly, for months?

“New information? Yes, of I type,” I said, and paused to regard the room. The eyes that watched me were filled with suspicion, but not suspicion alone. There was also a good deal of curiosity there. They may have a low opinion of me, but they knew a Marquess may have access to resources that they did not and they wondered what I might have learned.

I struggled with how to bring the Felle into this. Palin, I knew, would try to discredit anything their Seers had told me, and I was uncertain if the others would be any more likely to pay them heed.

My other line of argument would be no more compelling, but at least I would not be telling them anything that they did not already know.

“As I believe most of you are aware, I have been reviewing the research that the late Marquess conducted prior to his death in hopes of restoring Malaray’s industry.”

This seemed to surprise no one, and it was clear from the rumbling assent that Palin and at least a few of the others were not enthusiastic about the topic.

“Through his diary I was able to pinpoint the moment of what I believe to be the first deaths, and thus to determine their cause, which is not the type of contagion that our good doctor has sought after for so long now.”

Maulkin perked up at this news. His scientific curiosity was stronger than his ego, I realized, and he really was a good man. He cared more about knowing the cause than being the one who found it.

“This is wonderful news, My Lord! Might I see what you have uncovered?”

“Later, perhaps,” I told him, not wanting to become sidetracked over debating entries in Thom’s notebook. “But the important part is this.

“Some time ago, the late Marquess performed an experiment in the Langarm factory, high upon the river. While doing so he attempted to access forces he did not understand to power its equipment. It is possible these forces saw his actions as a type of assault. They struck back and killed two of our men. From that point on the deaths have continued, and unaware of the cause, we have termed them a disease.”

As I spoke, Palin’s face had been reddening steadily. Finally, reaching the color of an overripe strawberry, he exploded.

“This is preposterous! What unknown army assails us? How have they gained entry to our city? Why would they use weapons that slowly sicken instead of simply cutting us down?

“Apologies, My Lord, but your assertions make no sense!”

“I will grant you that, Palin,” I sighed. “These are no conventional foes, and they cannot be fought with sword and dagger. Still, my uncle was aware of them, called them only ‘the Watcher’ and for a long time I did not know to believe if they were real.

“But I have spoken with those who assure me that they are, and that these types of deaths have happened before.”

My ministers glanced at themselves uncertainly, though whether they doubted the validity of my claims or simply my sanity, I could not tell.

“Who are these experts of whom you speak, My Lord?” challenged Palin. “Why have you not brought them forth to speak with us sooner? Would not Doctor Maulkin, for example, have been able to help validate their claims?”

I stared at him until he looked away, knowing that I was going to need to assert my status as Marquess to lead these men anywhere. They were not going to be swayed by my words alone. I did not know if anything I could conceive of would convince Palin, or rest of them, for that matter.

“I have only now just now come to the conclusion that this Watcher was real. For a time, I worried it was naught a paranoid imagining...”

“As are we!” interrupted Palin hotly. I took pains to ignore him.

“Even then, their existence struck me as too fantastical. We see only the symptoms of our battles, and not the cause, because our foes strike at us from another plane.”

The men in the room blinked at me in dismay, trying their best to hide their reactions. Maulkin cleared his throat loudly, perhaps of the words he wished to say. It was Palin who finally spoke; he seemed the least concerned about offending me.

“Ghosts and snipes? That is My Lordship’s revelation? That the plague is the work of some goblin, stealing our souls?”

I winced, aware how close this was to an accurate summary of my claims. I summoned as much gravity as I could muster.

“The facts of these occurrences have been studied by men of science with qualifications as vast as our own Doctor Maulkin’s. Many of these men died as a result of their research. It is not the first time that deaths have occurred in this fashion, and I fear we lack a way to stop them, having conferred with one of the leading scholars on the subject.”

“May I ask the name of this expert, My Lord?” asked Maulkin quietly.

“A woman by the name of Lanore,” I began, hesitating when I realized that I did not even know if she and Nola had an associated family name.

“I am afraid I have not heard of her,” replied the doctor softly.

“Some misguided mystic, no doubt!” shouted Palin triumphantly. He added, in placating tones, “My Lord, you cannot fault yourself, for many a man has been deceived by such a cunning charlatan, but I recommend that you allow us to help you look into the expertise of this so-called expert more thoroughly, and in the meantime, allow Maulkin and the rest of us to continue on our current course.”

The others nodded in silent assent, except for Milton, who somehow stood apart, his expression that of a man being well entertained by a troupe of performers.

“You would not have heard of her,” I said, addressing Maulkin as if my steward had not spoken. “For she lives among the Felle and does not travel here to... the surface.”

I gave that a moment to sink.

“She is one of their wisest, their leaders.”

There was a stunned silence.

“She is a servant then! Or rather, a member of their race not even suited to serve!” howled Palin incredulously. “Do you intend to replace this council with the whims of some witchdoctor?”

I sighed again, tired. It did not matter how long I kept up this argument, I did not see a path by which I could win it.

“She has convinced me,” I said simply. “That Malaray is lost. The deaths shall only worsen and spread. They will likely reach across the Family’s lands soon if we do not act”

I rose.

“We shall abandon the city.”

I had hoped to stride from the room magisterially then, give them no room to debate the order, but they clamored noisily and physically blocked my way.

“What? My Lord, this is madness,” persisted Palin. “Abandon it for where?”

“If the healthy have homes or relatives in other fiefs, they will be free to travel there, but I would not risk moving the sick,” I told him. “Those that wish to stay in Malaray will be welcomed by the Felle in the caverns beneath the city.”

“Living like rats!” cursed Palin. “Felle-lover! This is her influence, isn’t it? I warned you against it and now she has driven you mad.”

“My orders are clear,” I told him through gritted teeth.

“I will speak with the Council! The Elders will see to your removal. Your words here today are less binding than the air upon which they are spoken!”

“Do as you must,” I told him. “But you seal your own fate.”

“What do you think?” asked Nola, her smile slowly fading as she watched me studying the room. “I know it is far from as grand as your chambers above.”

I hugged her tightly and kissed her.

“Don’t be foolish,” I said. “This is to be our home together, and your presence is worth ten times as many rooms or a thousand fancy pillows.”

She smiled in return.

“Only a thousand pillows?”

I did not bother to offer a defense. With wives, I was deciding, more words only led only to more problems.

We had been married now only a few weeks, and having finally acquired a home of our own, this was the first time that we could be truly alone. Until now, we had been Lanore's houseguests, welcome but awkward.

My status here in general was rather complex, and I felt much more comfortable when it was just Nola and I together.

The Felle, like Nola, who had been assigned to fulfill their generations-old oath to my ancestor would still have served me despite my migration. They cared little for what the Family decided about Malaray's fate, as far as they were concerned, I was its rightful ruler. But I had declared their oath void in return for shelter for refugees from my city, and the Seers had accepted, placing us on equal terms.

Down in this new world, my people were a bit like children. We had to be taught the simplest things, and we were slow to pick up concepts that most Felle grasped instinctively. It must have chafed many of my people that they received shelter and sustenance only at the whim of the Seers, and that they had to struggle and beg to find work. The tables certainly had turned when they followed me beneath the earth.

In a way, it was fortunate that the upper class had resisted me so staunchly. I saw now that they only would have caused more difficulties, would never have been able to move past their sense of superiority.

It was the men and women of the slums who had really believed in me as a Marquess, and followed me despite the naysayers. Their lives and those of their children were destined for naught but sorrow, they figured, so wherever I was leading them could be no worse.

Though they may have found living among the estate's former servants strange, they did not try to hold themselves above their hosts. The people of the slums had spent too long being treated as inferiors to scoff at the idea that they had more to learn, and they were far more willing to take the chance to work hard and create a new and better life when it was presented.

Technically, I was no longer these people's Marquess. The Felle still occasionally sent agents to the world above to trade for food and materials and they had brought word of my dismissal by the Pentars. The histories would read that my predecessor had been struck down by disease, my self by madness.

I did not even know who ruled up above now. Palin had been installed immediately as Regent, but he died before the month was out. His replacement did not last much longer. The deaths were begging to spread and accelerate, and I can't imagine that any of my cousin's would have been excited to take up my mantle given the number who had jilted it before it reached me. No doubt the Elders would find another ignorant soul eventually.

I still had some hope that we would find a way to calm or conquer whatever air spirits that my uncle had angered with his device.

A short time ago we had received an unexpected, but welcome, visitor at Lanore's home. Palin's successor had dismissed my entire council of ministers, to better pin the failures of the past upon them and start anew.

Upon his dismissal, Doctor Maulkin had sought us out. After I had left, he said, he had refocused his work and kept coming back to the fact that he simply could not pinpoint an agent for the disease. He had at least wanted to meet Lanore and hear her out.

Once he had heard her argument, he had stayed. Maulkin believed there might still be some way to counteract the air spirits actions and save the others who still tarried above, and he had poured himself of late into books so esoteric they went far beyond those that I and Nola had studied. I had heard whispers that if he kept this up, he may soon be made a Seer.

No one seemed to think I was worthy of such an honor. Indeed, since I had nullified their obligation to me, the Seers tended to treat me little different than others among my people. It was strange to suddenly think of Vissula as being my de facto ruler.

I suppose the fall from power might have stung some, but I had never hoped to be a Marquess, and found I was much happier without a title. I had always dreaded the day my father might move on and place me in charge of Alaveth, and could have easily imagined myself slipping out of the public eye with Nola and becoming just some unspectacular, average man.

This was not to be, however. Despite my dreams of irresponsibility, I maintained a type of nominal authority. The townsfolk who had followed me still regarded me as their leader, even if no one else did, and having led them here I could not dismiss my obligation toward their happiness and safety. Besides, they sincerely seemed to approve of the change. Their underground homes were cleaner and safer than the slums, and even if Malaray above were to be proclaimed safe, I felt uncertain how many of them would have returned there.

Of course, this was entirely the work of the Felle but, perhaps misguidedly, my supporters assigned me the credit.

I had quickly become something of a liaison between the Felle and my own tribe, and as time passed, my confidence was growing that this would actually work out and those following my mad lead would prosper. The Seers seemed willing to find ways to put everyone to work, and I suspected we would be accepted here as part of the tribe before long.

Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I still blamed myself for my failure to protect the city above; or to at least guide all of its citizens to safety. With every death I was belatedly brought news of, I still felt a little twinge of guilt.

For now I would have to be content to do what I could and ensure that my people were treated fairly here. My marriage to a Seer's daughter was no small boon in that regard.

I would assist Maulkin in his studies and learn more of this Prophet of the Felle.

Who knew? Perhaps one day, we would drive back the spirits from the air, and reclaim the land above for all of our peoples. Until then, we would learn, raise new families, band together, and survive.

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