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Important Relationships and Realistic Dialogue in Fiction

A Thesis Submitted

by

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## **Artist Statement**

### **Background**

As both a Christian and a soldier, I have often felt as though I was trapped in between two very different worlds. My home life and my work are often in stark contrast with each other because of the disparity between people, situations, and worldview. My wife and I have consistently found that we do not fit in well anywhere; we are too Army for church people, and too churchy for Army people. There have been several times that we have experienced relationships with friends and family going sour because of how we straddle two worlds. As a result, we have generally kept to ourselves over the years, with only a few solid relationships that have stood the test of time. Fortunately, those rare friendships that have lasted are extraordinarily strong and have often been invaluable to us.

I decided I wanted to write a story exploring relationships and it has grown into the current version as I continue to examine the ideas of friendship, bonds, and family. Carl Jung's comment, "The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed" (49-50), has stuck with me for many years. Relationships, whether familial or friendly, mean different things to different people, yet they always influence the people involved in some way. I want to use my story to highlight the power of relationships, focusing on people who live nomadic lives and thus have many fleeting relationships, but few strong and enduring ones.

### **Process**

I developed the initial idea for this story a long time ago, but it started out as a simple coming of age story. I intended to write a fantasy novel initially, but as I tinkered with the plot and arc of the main character, I decided that the typical magic and myths of a fantasy world

would not serve well with my initial idea. I decided to make the world very similar to ours, though without modern technology and completely fictional. This world helped me to form the basis of the protagonist's (named Brenin) struggle to find his way in the world as part of a mercenary army, but that was as far as I had gone. Unfortunately, there really was not much more to the character or story, which is why I could never get very far into it before stalling. I had not delved into his motivations or fully developed him in any way. This was all before I started on my path at Liberty, so I was missing some of the critical knowledge and tools this program has given me. As my knowledge and skills grew throughout my study, I began to get a better feel for how to craft this story into something worthwhile. Something was still missing though; I still felt like my story idea was lacking the answer to "so what?" One day, my wife and I were chatting, and the above topic of church relationships versus Army relationships came up. I thought about how our few relationships, both good and bad, have affected the course of our lives, and something clicked within. I needed to focus on my character's relationships.

Human beings inherently desire relationships with others. How could it not be so? Even God exists as three persons in relationship, and He made us in His image. In Genesis, God tells us, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (*New American Standard Bible*, Gen. 2.18), highlighting how social support is an important part of who we are, and has been since the beginning of creation. The relationships we create, nurture, neglect, or destroy have a profound impact on the course our lives take. Because of that, I resolved to utilize my story to emphasize the significance of relationships. Once I decided on relationships as the vehicle for my story to have meaning and potential to reach people, I began to grind out the work necessary to developing a solid plot.

In addition to the general theme of relationships, I wanted to consider the soldier aspect of my character. As a soldier myself, I feel like the stereotypes that exist in our society today do not accurately depict the reality of a soldier's life. One of the things I specifically wanted to address was the depth and variety of relationships between soldiers. Other stories have explored soldier relationships, both on the page and on the screen, but those stories often focus on specific aspects and gloss over some hard truths. One example is *Band of Brothers*, where the story follows the same group of soldiers from initial paratrooper training through the end of WWII. Although very realistic in the portrayal, the episodes still tend to only focus on two aspects of the relationships between soldiers. The first is the back-and-forth banter between soldiers, and the show is very accurate and representative of how soldiers tend to bait and taunt one another. The second is the more traditional close friendships that develop through shared hardship. This becomes an unbreakable bond of loyalty and gives the audience a warm and fuzzy feeling. The reality of relationships is messy and much more complicated, for soldiers the same as the rest of the world. Much like anyone else, soldiers have blind spots for some people as well as irrational dislike for others. There are plenty of soldiers that despise each other no matter how often they help each other in training or combat. Conversely, there are some friendships that are unshakeable, regardless of how despicable or unpleasant one of the soldiers may be.

I had my own relationships to pull from for examples, so I started there. Listing the many meaningful relationships I have had, and their outcomes, was a long and laborious process, but it gave me a feel for the possibilities. The diversity in relationship types, partners, and outcomes was enough to get me started on forming a broad outline. Of course, I did not intend to write only about myself. Relying only upon my own experiences would drastically restrict and narrow the range of possibilities, so I set out to study the relationships of others as well. I accomplished

this through a variety of means. I began with reading online articles and excerpts from books written by professionals. I thought back on fiction novels I had read that had strong examples that stuck in my mind; going back and rereading those novels was very helpful for me to get ideas on how to proceed. I also asked my friends and relatives questions about their relationships, which proved incredibly informative. It was especially helpful when I could get opinions from both parties and compare them, or if I had personal knowledge of events or conversations mentioned during the discussions. This gave me a more unbiased view of things and helped me develop potential concepts for relationships in my own story.

One of the recurring themes that affected relationships in either a positive or a negative way was communication. Often, the people I spoke with identified effective communication as a key foundation for a meaningful relationship, especially in a familial setting. In at least one example from every person I spoke with, there was a situation in which a misunderstanding or miscommunication created a problem. In some of those situations, the problem was exacerbated and blown out of proportion, leading to irreparable damage to the relationship. In many situations, the people involved quickly identified and overcame the misunderstanding with little or no effect on the relationship overall. Although primarily anecdotal, the evidence was overwhelmingly undeniable when it came to identifying communication, especially spoken communication, as a pivotal aspect of relationships.

As I delved more into the spoken aspect of communication, I began to see the importance of conversation. In fiction, the dialogue between characters is just as important. As in reality, the dialogue between characters is a fundamental facet of developing and displaying the relationships between them. How one character views another will obviously inform the dialogue and action between them, just as it does in the real world. In addition to exposing the current

relationship between characters, dialogue can also act as a method to alter that relationship as well. Whether an insult spoken in anger and haste, or a misunderstanding based on different perspectives, it is easy for the spoken word to cause lasting harm to a relationship. Similarly, a kind word or piece of thoughtful advice can be the foundation on which a magnificent relationship is built.

As a reader, I have always enjoyed realistic dialogue immensely, so I have focused on trying to perfect that aspect of the craft as a writer. Writing realistic dialogue can be difficult; it must be believable, both as something you would hear in real life, and as something the character in question would say. Real people are complicated, which means good characters are too, and that makes realistic dialogue anything but simple. In this story, I have concentrated on using realistic dialogue to imitate how conversation affects relationships in real life.

One of the key ways I maintained consistency was to use a character chart depicting relationships between characters as well as the character's goals or desires. Then I would read the dialogue with those aspects of the character as a sounding board or lens for believable and realistic dialogue. Focusing on relationships and exhibiting those relationships through realistic dialogue has given me a strong method of keeping the story interesting enough for my readers to stay engaged and keep turning the pages. Although this is only the first part, the process is well and truly begun.

## **Vision**

My vision for this work is provide an enjoyable story that is in some way relatable to the reader. I love reading a story in which I feel like I know the characters as well as I know any of my real-life friends. I want my readers to feel that way with my characters. Although it is a lofty goal, I would love it if I can get readers to relate with my characters well enough that they feel



like I wrote this story for them specifically. Obviously, not every specific of Brenin's story will apply to everyone. Not everyone has a terrible relationship with a parent, or must leave home abruptly to figure things out on his or her own. The intent is to provide some circumstance or emotion that resonates with readers. Even if there is only one small thing that strikes home, I would consider that a success.

As discussed above, I want to reflect on the importance of relationships and their influence on life. Through this story, I want Brenin's experiences to portray this in a manner that not only allows the readers to relate, but hopefully inspires them to look at their own relationships in a new light. Life is full of conflict; sometimes that conflict is intentional, and sometimes it is a result of misaligned expectations and perceptions. This story explores those situations in the attempt to make sense of the chaos.

### **Literary Context**

Fiction is large and varied with numerous genres and subgenres that overlap each other. This along with the subjectivity resulting from the lack of clear-cut classification guidelines leave many stories able to fit into more than one category. *Blood and Steel* is no exception. In general, it best fits into the new adult category of action/adventure, though it could also reside in a few others depending on who decided on the classification. The focus on relationships and the coming-of-age aspect to the story keep it in line with both young adult and new adult fiction, but Brenin's age and the more serious content push it fully into the new adult category.

New adult fiction is relatively new (introduced in 2009), and there is some controversy surrounding the concept. What is generally accepted as true is it typically follows characters that are late teens to mid-20's, thus targeting that age range of reader. Although somewhat like young adult stories, the increase in age allows for a greater range of topics and issues. New adult fiction

can still be a coming-of-age story, but the dilemmas the protagonist faces deal more with the first steps of adulthood rather than the transition from adolescent to adult. One trend of new adult fiction is that many protagonists are female, and many of their conflicts center around the struggles of establishing themselves in a male-dominated situation. *Blood and Steel* has a male protagonist, deviating from this trend, and hopefully helping to expand the audience. Some of the original submissions to this genre were essentially a cross between YA fiction and romance novels. This has led to some to view the stories as “thinly veiled erotica that took place at university” or “just YA romance novels with more sex” (Peraza-Brown). As the genre continues to evolve, however, it is encompassing a wider range of topics and the sexual aspect is less of a defining feature. Since there is absolutely no sex and very little romance in *Blood and Steel*, I hope to continue this trend of broadening the genre.

Although new adult fiction is relatively new as a genre, there are many books I remember from my teenage years that could fit into the category if written today. A great example that is marketed solely as a fantasy series is Robert Jordan’s *Wheel of Time*. The story follows a group of 18-20 somethings as they make their way into the world and develop their identities along the way. This series is one of my all-time favorites, and Jordan’s writing style greatly influenced my own. He made excellent use of dialogue in both character development and advancing the plot, and I adapted his methods to help me do the same in *Blood and Steel*.

Another series that fits the bill is *Codex Alera* by Jim Butcher, who is also another author I have been a fan of for a very long time. For this series, the protagonist is an underdog; he is the only non-magical person in a realm of magic users. The first book in the series fits more into the YA genre, but the following books quickly progress into the realm of adulthood. The protagonist begins to face adult problems in the second book, as he begins a career as a spy with a marked

disadvantage. The major thing that makes this book stand out in my memory, however, is the setting. In an interview, Butcher says the idea for the book began as an online bet that he could not take two bad ideas and turn them into a good story (Interview). For this bet, the two bad ideas were the lost Roman Legion and Pokémon. Butcher does a masterful job in the world building of this story, mashing the two ideas into a fantastical setting with amazingly rich detail. I took inspiration from his technique of blending real world history into a fictional setting and tried to give *Blood and Steel* some of that same feeling of realism and detail.

Many aspects of life can be major hurdles for someone venturing into the world on their own for the first time, and these are what protagonists should face in new adult fiction. Anthony Ehlers lists four key pillars of new adult fiction as Independence, Identity, College/Careers, and New Relationships (“4 Pillars”). *Blood and Steel* directly tackles one of those four with the focus on relationships. It also addresses the other three with Brenin’s dispossession and new life as a soldier. The life of a soldier contains quite a bit of uncertainty and violence, and this is especially true for a soldier in Brenin’s world. New adult fiction aims to highlight how the protagonist confronts the new doubts and fears of adulthood while developing the morality and motivations that will form his or her identity. Brenin’s service as a soldier provides those opportunities in spades, while providing a unique setting for the reader to discover.

### **Christian Significance**

For me, the significance of this story lies in the exploration of relationships and the power of the spoken word in those relationships. Several verses speak of both topics; you can find comments on just about any type of relationship, and God has always warned of the power of the tongue, for both good and evil. An immediate example is when James warns that, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made

in God's likeness" (Jam. 3.9). Although this story does not fit into the realm of Christian fiction, there are still aspects of Christianity highlighted throughout the story.

One of my favorite books is Proverbs, and chapter 18 has several verses that apply to both relationships and conversation. Verses 1, 10, 16, 19, 22, and 24 all discuss relationships, from platonic to romantic, as well as closing with the most important relationship: the one with God. It reminds us that, "A person of too many friends comes to ruin, But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Prov. 18.24). I do not discuss God directly in *Blood and Steel*, but as I developed the world, I did so with God in mind. Although I do not mention our God anywhere, neither do I have any other deity or religion. Likewise, Brenin's relationship with God is not directly addressed anywhere, but it is in the background as he tries to maneuver through his trials. Without a relationship with God, there is no way to develop and maintain healthy, meaningful relationships with other people. As Brenin navigates his other relationships in the story, that is the one constant that helps him along the way. Like Brenin, I try to base my interactions with others on my relationship with God. Although no one is perfect, relying on Jesus' perfect example is the only possible way to prosper in relationships with other people.

Similarly to James, chapter 18 in Proverbs has eight verses that address how a person speaks as well as the potential consequences of doing so. God does not pull any punches, warning us, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Prov. 18.21). We can do great harm with our words if we are not careful, and it is extraordinarily easy to speak without giving proper thought to our words. Instead, we are encouraged to be "slow to speak, and slow to anger" (Jam. 1.19). In *Blood and Steel*, Brenin is both the victim and perpetrator of hurtful words. He also encounters the opposite, enabling him to grow and mature. As a writer, words are my lifeblood. One of the benefits of the written word over the spoken is the time involved. I cannot mull over

what I have said aloud the way I can when I write it down. There is no revision process for blurting out an insult or hurtful comment. Like Brenin, and probably many people on earth, I struggle with speaking before thinking. This story has helped me to identify some of my strengths and weaknesses in this area, so I hope it can do the same for my readers.

## **Exploring Realistic Dialogue in Fiction**

Some use fiction to escape from real life, others simply as entertainment in those few spare moments between life obligations. Fiction, especially well-written fiction, allows the reader to experience new places and meet new people without ever leaving the comfort of home. Yet, even in showing readers new communities, fiction still maintains familiarity in some way. A primary means of preserving that familiarity is through relationships between characters. No matter the setting, whether on Earth, in space, or in some fantastical magic realm, the relationships between characters are a thread of continuity for readers to grasp. The chief method to reveal the bonds between characters is the dialogue and interaction between them. Beyond that, dialogue is also useful in other aspects, like developing characters and advancing plot. This paper will explore the various uses of realistic dialogue as well as how writers can develop and refine their skill with this versatile tool.

### **Realistic Dialogue Vs. Actual Conversation**

Dialogue in fiction must be realistic, but not real. Our conversations in life are full of boring pleasantries as well as pauses and filler words that bog down the reader if included in dialogue. Author Francine Prose warns writers, “The repetitions, meaningless expressions, stammers, and nonsensical monosyllables with which we express hesitation, along with the clichés and banalities that constitute so much of everyday conversation, cannot and should not be used when our characters are talking” (143). There is little that kills a reader’s interest quicker than boring dialogue between characters. When dialogue imitates real conversations too closely, the story is no longer providing readers with the escape or entertainment they look for in fiction. Author and publisher Sol Stein describes ordinary, everyday conversations as “idiot talk” and warns, “People won’t buy your novel to hear idiot talk” (113), because they can get it for free

every day in real life. Instead of sticking so close to reality, writers should create dialogue that resembles real life while avoiding the aspects of real conversation that do not accomplish anything to advance the story.

There are many great examples of dialogue that maintain this delicate balance between realism and productivity, from classic novels to more modern stories. Ernest Hemingway has long been held as one of the supreme exemplary authors of dialogue. Author and professor Robert Paul Lamb writes about Hemingway's dialogue,

. . . the myriad complexities that inhere in real-life dialogue inhere as well in fictional dialogue, the one great difference being that in fiction there is an author who exercises some control over what is being expressed (or incompletely expressed, as the case may be) . . . Hemingway, with his deceptively simple dialogue, managed to capture these dynamics of real-life speech. (454)

The dialogue Hemingway produced in his stories flows naturally from his characters, fitting with the setting of the story, as well as the voice of the character speaking. In addition, the dialogue between his characters either reveals something about the characters, moves the plot along, or both. Look at this scene from *The Sun Also Rises*, in which Hemingway introduces readers to Brett. She has just arrived at a dancing club with a group of men, and Jacob's disapproval leads to the following conversation.

"It's a fine crowd you're with, Brett," I said.

"Aren't they lovely? And you, my dear. Where did you get it?"

"At the Napolitain."

"And have you had a lovely evening?"

"Oh, priceless," I said.

Brett laughed. "It's wrong of you, Jake. It's an insult to all of us. Look at Frances there, and Jo."

This for Cohn's benefit.

"It's in restraint of trade," Brett said. She laughed again.

"You're wonderfully sober," I said.

"Yes. Aren't I? And when one's with the crowd I'm with, one can drink in such safety, too." (36)

On the surface, there isn't much to the interaction between Jacob and Brett; the conversation seems natural enough, and readers can easily envision it as a realistic scene. Each character is seemingly responding to simple questions with straightforward answers; yet, like much of Hemingway's dialogue, there is as much, if not more, going on that is unsaid. Just one example is how each of them is criticizing the other's choice of companion, thus hinting at the romantic tension between them without either one ever actually saying anything about it aloud. Good dialogue "usually contains as much or even more subtext than it does text. More is going on under the surface than on it" (Prose 143), and this section from Hemingway is a great example of that. He gives readers a feel for Brett's personality as well as hinting at the history and relationship between her and Jacob.

Examples of dialogue that maintain the balance between real conversation and the practical need to keep the plot moving exist in more modern novels as well. In *Vicious*, V. E. Schwab has a scene in which two of the main characters are verbally feeling each other out after just meeting.

"Well," said Victor, once he'd bandaged her up and taken back what was left of the pain.

"Aside from the bullet wound, and a twisted ankle, you seem to be in decent shape."



“Aside from that,” said Sydney drily.

“It’s all relative,” said Victor. “You’re alive.”

“I am.”

“Are you going to tell me what happened to you?” he asked.

“Are you a doctor?” she countered.

“I was supposed to be one. A long time ago.”

“What happened?”

Victor sighed and leaned back against the towel rack. “I’ll trade you. An answer for an answer.” (Kindle Location 570)

Like the example from Hemingway, the questions and comments are straightforward, yet the subtext is easy to understand. The reader can feel the lack of trust and rising tension between Victor and Sydney even though the conversation is rather tame. Each of them wants to use the other for their own purpose, but both are untrusting, and that is hindering the relationship from moving forward.

### **Dialect and Speech Markers**

Differentiating characters from one another is a key aspect separating good dialogue from bad. If the reader does not know who is speaking, or if all the characters sound the same, the dialogue loses its impact. Anne Lamott warns writers of this, mentioning readers “should be able to identify each character by what he or she says. Each one must sound different from the others. And they should not all sound like you; each one must have a self” (63). Writers have several tools available to help with this, though the most common are speech markers and dialect. F. Scott Fitzgerald uses speech markers like “old sport” to great effect in *The Great Gatsby*:

“There’s another little thing,” he said uncertainly, and hesitated.

“Would you rather put it off for a few days?” I asked.

“Oh, it isn’t about that. At least—” He fumbled with a series of beginnings. “Why, I thought—why, look here, old sport, you don’t make much money, do you?”

“Not very much.”

This seemed to reassure him and he continued more confidently.

“I thought you didn’t, if you’ll pardon my—you see, I carry on a little business on the side, a sort of side line, you understand. And I thought that if you don’t make very much—You’re selling bonds, aren’t you, old sport?”

“Trying to.”

“Well, this would interest you. It wouldn’t take up much of your time and you might pick up a nice bit of money. It happens to be a rather confidential sort of thing.” (Chapter 5)

In addition to the speech marker, Gatsby’s diction in phrases like, “It happens to be” and “if you’ll pardon my” contribute to giving him a unique voice. The stammering and false starts also highlight his lack of confidence, lending an aspect of realism to the cadence of the conversation and further helping the reader stay engrossed in the story.

Looking at dialect, there are many examples to examine, but none more iconic than Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Twain was not the first to use dialect well, but he is often considered one of the best, especially in American literature. Mika Turim-Nygren discusses Twain’s use of dialect, and points out “Twain didn’t believe print could ever fully capture speech, either in appearance or in actuality,” but he also mentions that “Twain was obviously invested in the verisimilitude of his written dialect” (127). This written dialect captures the essence of the characters’ southern accent and regional colloquialisms. The scene below is a conversation between Huck and his father:

“Git up! What you ’bout?”

I opened my eyes and looked around, trying to make out where I was. It was after sun-up, and I had been sound asleep. Pap was standing over me looking sour and sick, too. He says:

“What you doin’ with this gun?”

I judged he didn’t know nothing about what he had been doing, so I says:

“Somebody tried to get in, so I was laying for him.”

“Why didn’t you roust me out?”

“Well, I tried to, but I couldn’t; I couldn’t budge you.”

“Well, all right. Don’t stand there palavering all day, but out with you and see if there’s a fish on the lines for breakfast. I’ll be along in a minute.” (Chapter 7)

Twain’s dialect is full of alternate spellings, like “git,” “’bout,” and “doin’” that give the reader an understanding of how the characters would sound. Additionally, he peppered the story with words and phrases that were endemic to the southern U.S. at the time, like “I was laying for him” and “roust me out.” His technique provides vivid characters without detracting from the story in any way. However, Twain also has some dialectical writing that is a little heavier handed too.

For a variety of reasons, using alternate spellings to indicate dialect is not as common as it was in Twain’s era. In his advice to writers, Stein warns, “today it is seen as a liability for several reasons. Dialect is annoying to the reader. It takes extra effort to derive the meaning of words on the page; that effort deters full involvement in the experience of a story.” (117) He also mentions that, “Dialect is offensive to some readers” (117). It is easy to see this in how Twain writes the dialogue for the runaway slave, Jim.

“Ef you’s got hairy arms en a hairy breas’, it’s a sign dat you’s agwyne to be rich. Well, dey’s some use in a sign like dat, ’kase it’s so fur ahead. You see, maybe you’s got to be po’ a long time fust, en so you might git discourage’ en kill yo’sef ’f you didn’ know by de sign dat you gwyne to be rich bymeby.”

“Have you got hairy arms and a hairy breast, Jim?”

“What’s de use to ax dat question? Don’t you see I has?”

“Well, are you rich?”

“No, but I ben rich wunst, and gwyne to be rich agin. Wunst I had foteen dollars, but I tuck to specalat’n’, en got busted out.” (Chapter 8)

The difference between Jim’s speech and Huck’s is enormous. Turim-Nygren notes that the dialect Twain uses is “rooted in characteristic speech patterns intended to make racial difference visible on the page” (138). Even though the phonetic spelling instantly distinguishes Jim from any other character, it can be a struggle to determine exactly what he is saying sometimes. The exertion needed to work through such unusual language pulls the reader out of total immersion, distracting from the story itself. Stein advises writers to “use word order, omitted words, and other markers” (117) instead of phonetic dialects. Doing so achieves the desired result of differentiating characters without distracting the reader from the plot.

### **Developing Plot Through Conversation**

Every time a character speaks, he should be working toward a goal; the dialogue should be a tool used to achieve an end. James Scott Bell, a successful author, describes dialogue as “weapons used in the plot. Plot is about confrontation. It’s a battle. So verbal weapons are naturally going to be employed by characters who are trying to outmaneuver each other” (*Write* 18). This verbal maneuvering creates tension between the characters, and keeps the reader

interested in the outcome of the situation. The characters in many of Dickens' novels are often using their words to maneuver for a better position or against one another. In looking at Dickens' stories, George Goodin suggests that "personal power is a consistent concern of Dickens" and that Dickens himself, "often points out that an ongoing conversation is a contest or competition" (3). It is easy to see this in several of the interactions in *Great Expectations*, such as the conversation that occurs shortly after Pip comes of age.

"As I have told you before, I am the mere agent. I execute my instructions, and I am paid for doing so. I think them injudicious, but I am not paid for giving any opinion on their merits."

I was beginning to express my gratitude to my benefactor for the great liberality with which I was treated, when Mr. Jaggers stopped me. "I am not paid, Pip," said he, coolly, "to carry your words to any one;" and then gathered up his coat-tails, as he had gathered up the subject, and stood frowning at his boots as if he suspected them of designs against him.

After a pause, I hinted,—

"There was a question just now, Mr. Jaggers, which you desired me to waive for a moment. I hope I am doing nothing wrong in asking it again?"

"What is it?" said he.

I might have known that he would never help me out; but it took me aback to have to shape the question afresh, as if it were quite new. "Is it likely," I said, after hesitating, "that my patron, the fountain-head you have spoken of, Mr. Jaggers, will soon—" there I delicately stopped.

“Will soon what?” asked Mr. Jaggers. “That’s no question as it stands, you know.”

(Chapter 36)

Pip wants to know about his benefactor, while Jaggers has no desire to help Pip or do anything more than what is required of him. Dickens makes Jaggers intentionally obtuse, creating tension between the two characters as they each try to outmaneuver the other. This conversational competition is another way to create tension and keep the readers engaged with the story.

Another of the primary ways dialogue can drive the plot is with misunderstanding and indirect responses. Simple answers and “on the nose” dialogue is boring, and good fiction should never include anything that is boring. Bell gives aspiring writers the advice, “all dialogue should contain tension or conflict” and advocates the adage from Alfred Hitchcock, “Great dialogue has the dull parts taken out” (*Revision* 101). A simple solution to ensure lack of boredom is for characters either to misunderstand each other, or refuse to engage with each other directly. Such events happen on a regular basis in real life, thus also contributing to that sense of realism necessary for success. Unlike in real life though, the author can control and use any misunderstanding in a way needed to propel the story in the desired direction.

Jane Austen uses misunderstanding exceptionally well in many of her novels. One example is in *Sense and Sensibility* when Mrs. Jennings and Elinor have a conversation after Mrs. Jennings witnesses what she incorrectly thinks was Colonel Brandon proposing to Elinor.

"Well, Miss Dashwood," said Mrs. Jennings, sagaciously smiling, as soon as the gentleman had withdrawn, "I do not ask you what the Colonel has been saying to you; for though, upon my honour, I tried to keep out of hearing, I could not help catching enough

to understand his business. And I assure you I never was better pleased in my life, and I wish you joy of it with all my heart."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Elinor. "It is a matter of great joy to me; and I feel the goodness of Colonel Brandon most sensibly. There are not many men who would act as he has done. Few people who have so compassionate a heart! I never was more astonished in my life."

"Lord! my dear, you are very modest. I an't the least astonished at it in the world, for I have often thought of late, there was nothing more likely to happen."

"You judged from your knowledge of the Colonel's general benevolence; but at least you could not foresee that the opportunity would so very soon occur."

"Opportunity!" repeated Mrs. Jennings-"Oh! as to that, when a man has once made up his mind to such a thing, somehow or other he will soon find an opportunity." (Chapter 40)

For the reader, their misunderstanding is obvious and immediately understood. In using this, Austen creates an amusing scene that also keeps the reader interested in what will happen because of the misunderstanding. Ultimately, the characters eventually realize what happened during a future conversation, and share a laugh. Regardless of the actual outcome, the technique is successful because of how it captures the reader's attention. The reader cannot help but generate potential scenarios that could stem from this misunderstanding, and thus is compelled to keep reading to find out what happens.

Dialogue can also support plot development by reinforcing the themes underlying that plot. The intersection of theme and dialogue is important to a story. Prose describes this, mentioning that dialogue has a "mysterious way in which it so frequently seems to echo the themes, the tone, and the voice of the work in which it appears" (191). Like many other writing

skills, using dialogue to support themes requires subtlety. Without getting too side tracked into a discussion of theme, it is worth pointing out that theme can easily kill a novel just like poorly-written dialogue. Bell provides a rule to remember when it comes to theme: “Characters carry theme. Always” (*Write* 131). One of the primary ways they do this is dialogue. Harper Lee provides an excellent example of this in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, using the dialogue between Atticus and Scout to highlight the theme of morality and standing up for what is right. Below are two selections that exhibit this. The first occurs in Chapter 9, shortly after Scout finds out Atticus is representing Tom.

“Atticus, are we going to win it?”

“No, honey.”

“Then why—”

“Simply because we were licked a hundred years before we started is no reason for us not to try to win,” (90)

The second is from a couple chapters later, after Jem has been sent to go apologize to Mrs. Dubose:

“Scout, I couldn’t go to church and worship God if I didn’t try to help that man.”

“Atticus, you must be wrong...”

“How’s that?”

“Well, most folks seem to think they’re right and you’re wrong...”

“They’re certainly entitled to think that, and they’re entitled to full respect for their opinions,” said Atticus, “but before I can live with other folks I’ve got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience.” (125)



Atticus' thoughts on the situation are apparent by both his actions and his conversations with his children, and his stance supports the themes of the story. Lee does a good job of not rubbing the theme in the reader's face, using a natural conversation between father and daughter to convey it more subtly.

### **Characterization Through Conversation**

The last aspect of dialogue to discuss is arguably the most important. The conversations a character has are one of the most illuminating features of a novel. According to novelist Stephen King, dialogue is second only to action for revealing characters; he writes, "talk is sneaky: what people say often conveys their character to others in ways of which they — the speakers — are completely unaware" (180). A great example of this is in the third book of Jordan's Wheel of Time series. Up until this book, Mat Cauthon was a periphery character; in *The Dragon Reborn*, he has his own thread in the story, and Jordan begins to reveal more about him. Shortly after he is healed from a near fatal illness, he has the following exchange with the Amyrlin:

"You mean me to blow it for you. When the Last Battle comes, you mean me to call heroes back from the grave to fight the Dark One for you. Blood and bloody ashes!"

She put an elbow on the arm of the chair and propped her chin on her hand. Her eyes never left him. "Would you prefer the alternative?"

He frowned, then remembered what the alternative was. If someone else had to sound the Horn. . . . "You want me to blow the Horn? Then I'll blow the Horn. I never said I would not, did I?"

The Amyrlin gave an exasperated sigh. "You remind me of my uncle Huan. No one could ever pin him down. He liked to gamble, too, and he'd much rather have fun than work. He died pulling children out of a burning house. He wouldn't stop going back as long as

there was one left inside. Are you like him, Mat? Will you be there when the flames are high?"

He could not meet her eyes. He studied his fingers as they plucked irritably at his blanket.

"I'm no hero. I do what I have to do, but I am no hero." (183-184)

Mat tries to present the image of an uncaring ne'er-do-well, but the Amyrlin suspects there is more to him than that. His final response above lends credence to her opinion, indicating that he is likely to be more responsible than most when it truly counts. Jordan allows readers a glimpse into Mat's true character with this and other conversations, slowly revealing his motivations and ideals through his conversations.

Relationships between characters are also often revealed through the conversations they hold. According to Bell, good dialogue "fills its essential role when it helps reveal character and character relationships" (*Revision* 99). It should present the various facets of a relationship, giving the reader a greater understanding of the characters involved. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's depiction of the relationship between Sherlock Holmes and John Watson is one of the most famous in literature. There are numerous reproductions and adaptations in almost every media format available, yet the baseline of the relationship is always key to the story. Doyle uses the dialogue between these two characters to highlight and expand upon their relationship throughout the stories. A great example is from *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, when Holmes compliments Watson, then almost immediately tells him he was very wrong.

"Really, Watson, you excel yourself," said Holmes, pushing back his chair and lighting a cigarette. "I am bound to say that in all the accounts which you have been so good as to give of my own small achievements you have habitually underrated your own abilities. It may be that you are not yourself luminous, but you are a conductor of light. Some people

without possessing genius have a remarkable power of stimulating it. I confess, my dear fellow, that I am very much in your debt."

...

"Has anything escaped me?" I asked with some self-importance. "I trust that there is nothing of consequence which I have overlooked?"

"I am afraid, my dear Watson, that most of your conclusions were erroneous. When I said that you stimulated me I meant, to be frank, that in noting your fallacies I was occasionally guided towards the truth. Not that you are entirely wrong in this instance. The man is certainly a country practitioner. And he walks a good deal."

"Then I was right."

"To that extent." (Chapter 1)

This exchange is representative of Holmes' typical insensitivity and arrogance; even in his compliment he says that Watson is not "luminous," but rather "a conductor of light." More than just reemphasizing Holmes' characterization, it points to the particulars of the relationship between the two men. Holmes actually does value his friendship with Watson, otherwise he would not bother with even a backhanded compliment. At the same time, Watson places a lot of significance on Holmes' good opinion of him, almost ignoring the negative aspects of the comments that follow the compliment.

Almost as revealing as the words said by characters, are the words left unsaid. Award-winning author Colum McCann recommends writers to "study the silences too, and have them working on the page. You soon find out how loud the silence really is. Everything unsaid leads eventually to what is said" (43). Silences and unspoken opinions help to create subtext and keep

readers interested. Ishiguro does this very well in *The Remains of the Day*, often suborning the opinions and feelings of the narrator behind a mask of servitude like in the example below.

“I’ve been doing a great deal of thinking, Stevens. A great deal of thinking. And I’ve reached my conclusion. We cannot have Jews on the staff here at Darlington Hall.”

“Sir?”

“It’s for the good of this house, Stevens. In the interests of the guests we have staying here. I’ve looked into this carefully, Stevens, and I’m letting you know my conclusion.”

“Very well, sir.”

“Tell me, Stevens, we have a few on the staff at the moment, don’t we? Jews, I mean.”

“I believe two of the present staff members would fall into that category, sir.”

“Ah.” His lordship paused for a moment, staring out of his window. “Of course, you’ll have to let them go.”

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“It’s regrettable, Stevens, but we have no choice. There’s the safety and well-being of my guests to consider. Let me assure you, I’ve looked into this matter and thought it through thoroughly. It’s in all our best interests” (154-155).

It seems obvious from the passage preceding this conversation that Stevens does not approve of Lord Darlington’s decision, but the conversation itself does not specify either way. The reader gets hints of Stevens’ feelings from his responses arriving in the form of questions instead of simple acknowledgement, as well as in their brevity. The lack of “on the nose” dialogue highlights the character’s feelings with the subtext, and creates a greater impact on the reader.

## **Conclusion**

Great fiction novels have a lot more to them than just dialogue; they also need to have

relatable characters and a solid plot. The wonderful and terrifying thing about dialogue is that it can enhance or degrade both of those, and thus make or break a story. A writer's goal should always be to leave a reader disappointed that the book has ended, not struggling to make it to the end. Regardless of whether readers are seeking escape, entertainment, or something completely different, they want the novel to immerse them in the story. Bad dialogue is a quick way to pull a reader out of the story; it either makes the characters unbelievable, or drags the story to a halt by masking or subverting the plot. Good dialogue allows readers to feel like they know the characters, and enables the plot to carry the reader along with it. Writing great fiction may require more than just the ability to incorporate well-written dialogue, but it is absolutely a critical tool in the writer's repertoire.

**Blood and Steel**

By Tim Paddock

## Prologue

The stench of burnt flesh was first thing Akil noticed as he approached the edge of the jungle. Soon after detecting the smell, he could hear the wails and keening of women mourning the loss of a family member. These combined to create a miasma of violence that was thick among the trees long before he could see what was left of Shani or the imperial fort located on a hill at the edge of the town.

As the trees thinned, he caught glimpses of the columns of smoke rising in the early morning sky and the buildings still burning underneath them. Once he passed the last tree before the cleared land around the town, he paused to take it all in. A small smile formed on his lips as he studied his latest and greatest victory against the Ostaxan oppressors. If Sefu's report was accurate, they had wiped out the fort's garrison and captured or killed every imperial citizen that lived within the walls of the fort.

No more would his people suffer the indignity of the imperial invaders and their demands. The minor raids his forces had been executing had done nothing to slow or deter the empire, so he had decided to take it up a notch. Last week they had raided another merchant caravan, but instead of sending the thieving imperials walking shoeless back here to Shani, he had them all executed. This sack of an imperial outpost was the next logical step, especially once he had received that helpful letter.

"Jumla? Is something wrong?" Kitwana asked from behind Akil.

Akil turned to look at the ten men in his honor guard. They wore hardened leather breastplates over the linen shirts dyed and decorated to identify their clan. Today's honor guard came from the Sudi clan. Each of them carried a short horn bow on their back and a war scythe in their hand. They all wore serious looks as they also took in the scene before them. Akil was

certain that this was the first time any of them had seen death on this scale. The question had come from the leader of the group.

“No, Kitwana,” Akil said, allowing his smile to grow larger. “I am happy that we struck such a magnificent blow against our foe.” He looked from man to man, gauging their reactions before continuing. “As your Jumla, I will lead us to even greater victories against our oppressors. This is just the beginning. Come, let’s continue so I can receive a full report from Sefu.”

Akil turned back and started walking again. He heard the honor guard fall in line behind him as they moved onto the road leading into the town. He was happy to see that most of the town was whole and undamaged. Other than the haze of smoke, looking at this side of town, one would never think that a battle had taken place here the night before. Riding through town, he noticed all the doors and shutters of homes and businesses were closed, as wary residents waited for things to settle.

The closer to the fort they traveled, the signs of fighting became more obvious and frequent. The smoke hanging in the air got thicker as they approached the fort, and they could see flames still burning through gaps in the log palisade around the fort. Several of the buildings in town closest to the fort also burned, but most homes and shops were fine.

As they walked past one of the homes that was almost completely destroyed by fire, Akil saw a man and a woman gingerly picking through the char and debris. Closer to the hard packed dirt road, there was a young boy sitting cross legged on the ground staring at the pile of rubble and ash that likely used to be his home. Akil veered over toward the boy, stopping and squatting when he was a few paces away.

“Hello,” he said, attempting to get the boy’s attention without startling him. “What’s your name?”



“Zakio.” The boy looked from Akil to his guard, then to his parents, and back to Akil.

“Are you going to kill us too?”

“Kill you? Of course not. We are here to free you. Why would you think we wanted to kill you?” Akil heard footsteps approaching from the rubble.

“Perhaps my son thinks that because he has seen death dealt by your men this past night.” The man who had been searching through the debris walked up stood next to the boy. Akil looked up at the man from his squatting position and tilted his head to one side.

“My men were here to punish our oppressors, not kill innocent Firati like yourselves.”

“It was only by luck that my wife, son, and I were able to get out of our home before it burned,” the man said, gesturing to the remains of his home. The boy stood up and grabbed his father’s hand, half hiding behind him. “Now, we have nothing left and winter is coming. You may well have just given us a slow death instead of the quick end you gave the Ostaxan soldiers.”

Akil stood slowly as the man spoke. He looked into the man’s eyes and saw both anger and fear. The man was afraid of angering the leader of the rebel forces that just sacked an imperial outpost, but too angry to keep quiet. The courage and fierceness were why Akil loved his people and was unwilling to sit back and watch the empire slowly devour their resources and way of life as they had every other land they conquered.

“I truly am sorry that you have suffered because of this fight, but war is not clean and neat. It is messy, complicated, and almost always results in harm to bystanders as well as the forces involved.” The man did not look mollified, but Akil wasn’t done. “We knew there was likely to be some collateral damage from this attack, so we came prepared.” Akil gesture to the jungle in the direction he had come from. “In a day or two, the revenue from several merchant

caravan raids will arrive. I have instructed the Shara in charge to use the goods to help families who suffered worst here.” The man seemed surprised at this news. After a moment, he smiled and bowed to Akil, tapping his son’s shoulder, and gesturing for him to do so as well.

“We are grateful, Jumla,” the man said. “You are a great leader, as the traveling bards say.”

“I couldn’t let a beautiful family like yours suffer when there is a way to prevent it.” Akil paused, then continued with a sly smile. “You were expecting the ‘vulture of the jungle’ that the imperials decry, weren’t you?” The man looked sheepish and shrugged.

“Who can tell what is truth and what is lies until he sees for himself?”

“Truth,” Akil agreed. “I will leave you to your search, but keep an eye out for the caravan.”

“We will. Thank you again, Jumla.”

As they continued toward the fort, Kitwana caught up to Akil and walked alongside him for a pace or two before glancing back at the family still picking through the rubble of their home.

“Jumla, I thought you told the Shara that the goods from that merchant caravan were prioritized to support the fight against the empire?”

“Your point?”

“You told that family the goods would go to them,” Kitwana said slowly. Akil looked at him out of the corner of his eye as the road began to incline toward the fort.

“Did I?”

“Did you not?” Kitwana looked confused. “I thought that’s what I heard you say.”

“I said *the goods would be used to help* them, and families like them,” Akil said, emphasizing his exact words. “I believe the best help those families can receive is to have the Ostaxan boot lifted from their neck. So . . . that is how we will use the goods to help them.”

“I see.” Kitwana’s face was unreadable as he dropped back to walk alongside his men behind Akil as they approached the gates of the fort.

Akil had been expecting the gates to be damaged, but they appeared to be in perfect working order. Both gates were wide open, and a pair of warriors were standing just outside of the, to the left. They watched Akil and his honor guard approach, but neither spoke until the group was a dozen paces away.

“Welcome, Jumla,” the man on the right said. “With your plan and support, we were able to win a great victory here.”

“Thank you,” Akil said. “Where is Sefu? I would like a full report.”

“I sent a runner to fetch him when we first saw your approach. He established a command cell in a building just inside a bit, so he should be here any moment.”

“Excellent.” Akil turned and looked out over the town slightly below them. From this elevated perspective, he could see more of the damages to the buildings at the edge of town closest to the fort. Every building was wooden construction, and fire was always the worst hazard in towns like this one. Unfortunately, fire and battle were often in each other’s company. He counted only seven buildings that had major fire damage, with perhaps a dozen others with some minor damage. Not a terrible toll, given the circumstances.

“Jumla,” a voice said behind him. He recognized Sefu’s gravelly tones, and turned back to the fort to see his childhood friend. He looked tired, but uninjured.

“Sefu,” Akil said as he walked forward to embrace his lieutenant. “Your victory here gladdens my heart.”

“Thank you,” Sefu replied. “It was not without losses, but they were incredibly light. I believe the surprise and ferocity of our attack carried the day.”

“Excellent. What are the numbers?”

“A dozen killed, and about two score wounded. All but a handful of the wounded will be able to walk out of here when we leave.”

“And the enemy?”

“We haven’t rounded up all the bodies yet, but according to the administrative paperwork, the garrison had two hundred soldiers. We have killed all we’ve found, but I’d bet there are some stragglers out there hiding somewhere.”

“Civilians?”

“Many tried to help the garrison defend the fort and were killed. We are rounding up any we find and holding them in the main courtyard. There were at least a few hundred there the last time I looked. We should be able to get quite the ransom for the lot of them.”

“Excellent,” Akil said. “How are you keeping them from running away?”

“The main keep was designed as a fort within a fort, so the courtyard in front of it is completely walled in. There is only one entrance, blocked by a lowered portcullis, and the door to the keep, which is barred from the inside.”

“Excellent,” Akil said again. “Let’s go to the keep so I can address the prisoners.”

“Of course,” Sefu said. He gestured to the road leading further into the fort. “It’s straight down this road.”

The two friends walked through the gate with Akil's honor guard trailing a short distance behind. As they entered the fort, Akil saw the bodies of defenders lined up against the wall to the right. Each body appeared to be stripped of armor, weapons, and any other valuables, just as Akil directed.

"I am curious, Jumla," Sefu began. "How was your attack plan so perfect? It is as if you knew exactly where the weakest point in their defense was, and exactly when we should exploit it."

"That is because I did," Akil answered. "I received a letter with information about the defense details, and they proved to be accurate."

"A letter? From whom?"

"I am unsure. Obviously, they did not sign it, and I have been unable to figure out the author yet."

"May I see this letter?"

"I would, but I could not find it this morning when we left the inn in Warfordge."

"It is missing?"

"I feel as though it was stolen for some reason. Some reason other than protecting the identity of the author."

"That is somewhat worrisome."

"I agree. The more I think on it, the more convinced I am that some imperial is attempting to use us in a scheme."

"To the cost of his compatriots here? The loss of life is significant, even to imperial standards."

“Who knows how those slugs really think?” Akil grimaced. “Either way, we will not play into their games. We will forge our own path and force the empire out of our jungle.”

“May it be so.” They reached the entrance to the keep and Sefu stopped. “This is the entrance. There is a balcony in the lord’s suite that overlooks the courtyard; that would probably be the best place to address the prisoners.”

“That sounds perfect. Have some men take every barrel of lamp oil, cooking oil, pitch, anything that burns, up to the walls of around the courtyard. Space them out evenly.”

“Ok?” Sefu said. “What for?”

“All in good time, my friend. Get the men started on that, and then take me to the lord’s suite.”

Sefu nodded and opened the door to the keep, leading them inside. The interior of the keep was mostly bare stone floors and walls, though it was obvious that there had been some tapestries hanging before the battle. Sefu led them down the hall and opened a door on the left that led to a dining room.

Akil turned to Kitwana and said, “You and your men can stay here and get some food. The keep is secure and I will be coming back out this way when we leave.”

Just then, the door on the opposite side of the room opened giving Akil a brief glance into the kitchen. Two servants carried out a platter holding a roasted pig, and carried to a table in the middle of the room. Also on the table were several other dishes holding what appeared to be an assortment of sausages, potatoes, and several vegetables. Kitwana nodded to Akil, then he and his men went to the table holding the pig. Sefu spoke to a couple of soldiers, then he rejoined Akil near the doorway.

“Why don’t I have some food sent up to the lord’s suite?” Sefu asked. “It’ll be a little while before the men can get all those barrels to top of the walls.”

“That sounds like a great idea to me,” Akil replied. Sefu nodded to a soldier that was standing by the door that led to the kitchen. The soldier disappeared into the kitchen as Sefu and Akil went back out into the hallway.

“This way,” Sefu said, gesturing down the hall. They walked a short way, then climbed the stairs up to the fourth floor. Down the hall and around a corner, they arrived at the lord’s suite.

The antechamber was set up as an office or library, with a desk near the middle of the room and shelves of books along the walls. There was a single armchair near the fireplace, but little else in the way of furnishings. They continued through this room to an adjoining private dining room.

The room held a table with six chairs around it and cabinets that likely held the lord’s dishes. On the opposite wall from where they entered was a solid-looking door that likely led to the balcony. Next to that door was a liquor cabinet that appeared to still be well stocked. Akil went to the it and perused the bottles present. The lord here had apparently liked brandy, as there were several varieties present.

“Judging from the presence of alcohol, I’m guessing that you were able to keep the soldiers out of this part of the keep during the fight.”

“Indeed,” Sefu said. “This was one of the last defensive holdouts, so I was able to be here at the end and keep it relatively unlooted.”

“I am going to try some of this cherry brandy, would you like anything?”

“Whatever you have is fine with me.”

Akil poured a little into a glass and took a sip, grunting with approval. He poured two snifters and handed one to Sefu before sitting at the head of the table. After trying the brandy, Sefu sat in the chair to Akil's right. Several servants arrived with food a moment later.

The fare looked like what they had seen below, but with some fresh bread included. Once the servants had loaded up the plates with food, Akil waved them away. The two men dug into the food, all conversation on hold for the moment. Akil relished the roast pork; it reminded him of how his mother had made it when he was a child. He took several slices after the first, pairing them with some of the freshly baked bread. Once he had eaten his fill, he got up and refilled his brandy, then walked to and opened the door leading to the balcony.

"It looks like they are almost ready for us," he said, turning to look at Sefu. His friend was slathering butter onto another piece of bread. "I assume they will send a message once complete?"

"Mm-hmm," Sefu replied before swallowing the mouthful of bread and butter. "What are you going to say to them anyway?"

"These imperial leeches have been sucking us dry for far too long. It's time for us to pluck them out. Since these are the first to be removed, we must set an example."

"I don't think they will respond well to that message."

"How they respond is unimportant, my friend," Akil said. He turned at the sound of the door opening. A young soldier entered, then bowed to Akil.

"Jumla, your commands have been followed," the soldier said.

"Excellent," Akil said, dismissing the soldier. "Come, Sefu. Stand on the balcony with me as we inform the imperials of the new status quo."



The two men walked out onto the balcony and up to the railing. The courtyard below was almost completely filled with the imperial civilians who lived within the fort. Most of them stood or sat looking dejected and apprehensive, but Akil could see a few men standing near the lowered portcullis addressing his soldiers on the other side. They appeared to be attempting to wheedle some sort of concession from the unrelenting Firati.

“Citizens of the Ostaxan Empire!”

Akil’s raised voice bounced off the stone walls, louder than he was expecting. The lord here must have used this balcony to address his people, because it was obviously designed to amplify the sound of someone speaking from it. It was surprisingly quiet in the courtyard, especially given such a large group of people, so Akil’s words had little trouble getting the crowd’s attention. Those that hadn’t noticed were nudged or shushed by neighbors. He waited until most of the faces below him were looking in his direction.

“You have seen your vaunted legionnaires defeated at the hands of my valiant warriors,” Akil began, but the cheers of his own men on the walls interrupted him. He paused a moment, then continued once the cheers died down. “Your imperial oppression is no longer welcome, and today is the first on many victories.” He paused again for more cheers. “Many of you are likely wondering what our plans are for you and this fort you have built on our land. You will be an example for the rest of the empire of what we will do to rid ourselves of your contamination. We will treat you as we would an infection in our body. We will cauterize this wound upon our land and destroy the contagion.”

The citizens below him looked confused, and a murmur began as some asked questions of their neighbors. One older man, a wealthy merchant by his clothes, shouted the question on many tongues, addressing Akil.

“What do you mean?” He stood with his hands on his hips, an arrogant sneer on his face. “Speak plainly, heathen, or shut your mouth. You can’t hold us here forever, and the legions will be here in force soon enough.”

“I’m glad you asked, old man.” Akil ignored the affronted expression on the man’s face, and looked to his men along the walls. “Warriors of Firat! Help me cauterize this wound and burn out the infection upon us. Pour the barrels into the courtyard.”

There were shouts of surprise and alarm as the soldiers on the walls began pouring oil and pitch down into the courtyard and onto the people below. Akil watched as the panic began to grow. The men who were near the portcullis were pounding on the metal bars and pleading with the stone-faced soldiers on the other side.

“Akil,” Sefu said. “Is this the best option?”

“Are you growing soft on me, Sefu?”

“No. Not a chance. I just think the ransom for so many would be useful.”

“Of course, it would. This is better. Trust me.”

“With my life, Jumla.”

“As I would expect,” Akil said. He turned to look Sefu in the eyes. “Fetch me a brand from the fireplace.” Sefu swallowed, then nodded and walked back into the dining room. Akil turned back to watch the pathetic imperials rail against their fate.

Sefu returned a moment later with a piece of kindling that was burning from one end. The panic had grown in the short moments he had been inside. Some men had decided to try and stand on each other’s shoulders to climb the walls. As Akil noticed them, he saw a soldier on the wall opposite shoot his bow and hit the bottom man of the stack. He collapsed instantly, taking

the two men above him to the ground. The soldiers had dumped enough flammable liquid into the courtyard that puddles were starting to form and people were slipping on the cobblestones.

Akil took the makeshift torch from Sefu and stepped up to the railing to look directly below the balcony. He saw fearful faces staring at the burning brand in his hand. Their eyes tracked every miniscule movement of the flaming branch, and he reveled in the disbelief that turned to despair as he let it fall to the oil-soaked ground below. Most of the people who saw the brand falling instinctively moved away to try and avoid the oncoming firestorm. It didn't work.

The brand hit the ground, lighting the oil in a slowly advancing circle. Akil turned away as the screams began to grow louder and more frantic. Sefu was standing slightly behind him, staring down at the rising inferno. There was no expression on his face, but his eyes did not move until Akil spoke.

"Thus, it is begun," Akil said softly. "We will continue to cleanse the filthy imperials from our land."

"This will bring a heavy reprisal from the legions," Sefu said, worry in his eyes. "What is your plan to defend this place against them?"

"Defend? Why would we protect this?" Akil half turned and pointed at the rising flames. "This is what we do to an infection. We cut it out and burn it until it is clean."

"So . . . we just leave now that the imperials are dead?" Sefu glanced at the houses beyond the walls of the keep. "Our people who live here will receive the punishment for our actions."

"We will not 'just leave.' We will burn this entire impurity to prevent the contagion from spreading." Akil walked back into the dining room, beckoning for Sefu to follow him.

“Tomorrow, have the men begin digging a firebreak around the town. How long do you think that will take to complete?”

“I don’t know. I would guess all day and maybe into the next.”

“Very well. Once that is complete, we will raze this town. Spread the word to the residents. They can either follow us, heading to Warfordge or Totbutonzan, or they can join the empire and receive the same fate as the imperial citizens down there.” Sefu stared at Akil for a moment before replying.

“It will be as you say, Jumla.”

*Schunk.* The sound of the arrow sinking into the straw target was immediately followed by the exclamations of the young men watching the contest. Two arrows stood near the center of the target, but only the most recent was touching the black dot marking dead center. Across the courtyard from the target, two young men holding bows stood in front of a small group of their peers. Brenin turned to his opponent, holding out his hand and smiling. The blond man next to Brenin handed the wager over with a grimace.

“This one was closer Brenin; I almost had you,” Mathis said.

“Maybe,” Brenin replied, jingling the coins in the pouch. “Either way, I’m the one walking away with some extra silver in my pocket. Better luck next time.”

Mathis and his friends turned and walked through the archway leading out of the stone-walled courtyard that served as an archery range, leaving only Brenin and his two best friends behind. Brenin leaned his bow against the rack and walked toward Urien and Tekin. He dumped the winnings from the pouch into his hand, dividing it into two separate piles.

“Here you go,” he handed four of the silver coins to the shorter of his two friends. “I don’t know how you got him to take the bet *again*. You’re a master of persuasion, Tekin.”

“Thanks,” Tekin replied with a conspiratorial smile. “Guys like Mathis make things easy. His ego is always bigger than his skill.” Tekin reached over and ruffled the long hair of the third young man. “I simply had to stroke him a bit, while slipping in slight digs at his pride.”

“Hey!” Urien ducked aside from Tekin’s touch and slapped at his hand. “You guys are going to bait the wrong person one of these days.” Urien ran his fingers through his hair trying to fix his styled coiffure.

“Nonsense!” Tekin strolled over to the stairs leading from the courtyard into his family’s manor. “I didn’t ‘bait’ Mathis into this wager. He was already mostly convinced that Brenin had more luck than skill. Either that, or he thought Brenin was cheating somehow.”

“Cheating? How, exactly, would I cheat when hunting or at the Imperial Games?” Brenin and Urien followed Tekin up the stairs.

“I don’t know,” Tekin shrugged and rolled his eyes. “I didn’t say his thoughts were coherent.”

“Moving on,” Urien interrupted. “Are we still good for Antabal at my place this week?”

“I am,” Tekin said. He raised his eyebrows and looked to Brenin when he didn’t immediately respond as well.

“I . . .” Brenin began, then stopped. He fiddled with the coins in his pocket. “I haven’t told my father yet, but I should be good to go.”

“What?! I thought you were going to bring it up a few days ago?” Urien said.

“I was going to!” Brenin could easily see the disappointment written all over Urien’s face. “It wasn’t a good time. He was complaining to Wynfor about the lack of productivity from the western vineyards.”

“You’re the only person I know who has more paternal trouble than me.” Tekin chuckled, shaking his head. “I thought things would be easier once I was officially an adult, but the old man has only become even more overbearing in these last few months.”

“You’re telling me,” Brenin said, turning to grab his bow. “I’m gonna go grab my things and try to exercise some adult autonomy. I’ll meet you at the Hunter in a couple of hours.” He strode out of the courtyard, leaving his friends hoping for the best.

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Brenin stared unseeing into the washbasin, lost in his memories of Antabal from six years in the past. The festival of Antabal was a week filled with hunting, fowling, and spectacular feasts; it was his mother's favorite time of year. She died shortly before the festival half a decade ago, and ever since, Antabal was a bittersweet time in the Cloyd house.

Brenin missed his mother the most during the festival week, and used the festival to honor her memory. Every year, he would dedicate the final hunt of the festival to her memory by donating the largest buck he shot to one of the family's retainers. His father, on the other hand, became even more irritable and belligerent during the celebrations. Trahaearn Cloyd was not known for his charming demeanor amongst the noble houses of the Ostaxan Empire, but during Antabal, even his few friends and family did their best to avoid him.

As Brenin stared at his blurred, watery reflection, his consideration of how to avoid another argument with his father overshadowed any anticipation for the upcoming celebrations. Lately, it seemed like they argued about anything and everything. Brenin decided to quit stalling and face the inevitable; grabbing his bow, quiver, and cape, he strode quickly out of the bedchamber.

The familiar tapestries filled with hunting scenes that lined the walls of the hallway barely registered in Brenin's awareness. He continued down the smooth stone stairs, and as he approached the bottom, the murmur of voices coming from the dining room gave him hope. If his father was in a meeting or deep in conversation, Brenin would have an excuse to just leave a message with one of the servants instead of speaking with his father. Seeing the potential for an escape without confrontation, he quickened his pace, staring straight ahead while walking past the wide doorway leading to the bright dining room. The large wooden door leading to the

freedom of the courtyard loomed large in his vision, but his father's voice stopped him before he was completely past the dining room, and his stomach began to churn with dread.

"Where are *you* going?" Brenin paused, then veered into the dining room at his father's question, stopping just inside the door. He stood near the foot of the wooden table that dominated the room, looking down the long table to see his father seated at his usual place. Dust motes danced through a beam of sunlight shining between them, making it hard for Brenin to see what the papers strewn across the table might be. His oldest brother, Alun, was standing next to their father at the head of the table, looking annoyed at the interruption Brenin represented. The high windows at the east end of the room that bathed them in morning sunlight were his mother's idea; Eirlys loved to start her day at the table with a cup of tea and the reports on whatever project she was involved with at the time.

His father raised an eyebrow and looked expectantly at Brenin. "I'm going to meet Urien and Tekin. We're spending Antabal at the Ketla's hunting lodge." Trahaearn continued looking at Brenin, but said nothing. After a few seconds, Brenin began fidgeting and attempted to resist filling the silence with additional words. No matter how many times he vowed to outlast his father's conversational pauses, Brenin always broke first. "It's the one up in the eastern hills. By the lake."

"I know where it is," Trahaearn said after another long pause. "What I don't know is why you think that a week of worthless hunting with friends is more important than advancing this family's interests at court." Even though he was expecting an argument, the blatant attack on Antabal stunned Brenin.

"I will be *advancing this family's interest* in a few short weeks." His clenched jaw and flushed skin belied the relatively calm tone of his voice; rage at yet another perceived injustice



bubbled just waiting to be released. “I plan to enjoy the limited time I have left. Once I belong to the emperor and his expansionist advisers, you can be sure I’ll fulfill my duty to this family.”

“There it is again! No gratitude for my efforts on your behalf!” Trahaearn’s hands clenched into fists as he stood up and stormed around the table toward his son. The sunlight flashed on his face as he advanced, highlighting the thinning hair and pallid skin that had recently crept up on him. Shaking his finger at Brenin, he shouted, “You’re lucky I was able to secure you a commission in one of the legions, otherwise you’d be on your way to a monastery in the frozen mountains on the southern coast.” Alun nodded in agreement behind his father, but the fact that his father was making sense did nothing to diminish Brenin’s frustration and anger at the situation.

“I’m sure I’ll be thanking you as I march across the desert on my way to a glorious death at the hands of the Azerites.” Brenin’s reply lashed out before his mind even processed that he was speaking. “Hopefully, the *advancement* my death brings will be enough to satisfy you then.” He turned to leave, intent on getting out of the house before the argument escalated any further.

Brenin heard Trahaearn start to follow, but Alun’s said, “Father, let him go. We still need to discuss Izel.”

Brenin slowed in reaction to the name of one of the most powerful noble houses in the empire, but his desire to leave overwhelmed his curiosity. *I wonder what nonsense they are meddling in that involves Izel House.* Cloyd was not one of the Great Houses, like Izel, so his brother’s comment was very curious. Cloyd was always on or near the top of the heap of minor Houses, so perhaps his father was trying to make a play for power? *Oh well. It doesn’t matter. Their intrigues will no longer concern me once I am officially a legionnaire.*

Brenin finally escaped through the massive front door, and took a deep calming breath as he looked around the courtyard at the front of the manor. The crisp morning air was already improving his mood, and Brenin's lips curved into a smile of anticipation as he left the stress of dealing with his father behind the manor door. One of the grooms already had Challenger saddled and ready to go when Brenin walked over to the stable.

"Hey boy, how you feeling? Ready to get some exercise?" Brenin stuffed his cape into one of the saddlebags and turned to the groom. "Thanks, Jack. Any issues?"

"No," Jack replied with a duck of his head. "He has fresh shoes and plenty of rest." Brenin clapped him on the shoulder and stored the bow in the case hanging from the saddle. "Wynfor mentioned you'd prolly be gone a few days, so I put some o' the wife's trail cakes in your bag."

"You're a saint, Jack. My thanks to you and your lovely wife. If you see my older brother, let him know I appreciate both of you looking out for me. I'll see you after the festival, hopefully with some venison or quail to repay your kindness." Jack waved as Brenin trotted out into the street, turning towards the city center.

Passing by the tall manors in the hill district, Brenin always marveled at the varied architecture. From the dome-topped towers reminiscent of Utrad to the peaked and flared roofs commonly found in the snowy lands of Koprus, the homes of the empire's elite varied as much as the nations that made up the empire's conquests. Even more than the diverse architecture, Brenin enjoyed the sundry assortment of food that the empire's residents produced. Ecadian food vied with the hearty pasta and cured meats of Tupral for his favorite, but there was no doubt that Ostaxan ale was unmatched by any other. His favorite thing about the city, however, was

undoubtedly spending an afternoon in the Imperial Library perusing the collected literature of the empire's various scholars, engineers, and philosophers.

*Not today, though.* Brenin thought as he turned aside toward the favored tavern of his group of friends. He dismounted at the gate and led Challenger through the gate into the stable yard of the Defiant Hunter, reaching out to ring the bell that summoned a stableboy. An adolescent boy hurried out of the stable, brushing hay out of his dark hair. He smiled as he saw Brenin and Challenger in the yard.

"Hey boy, how are you?" the groom asked, reaching out to pat Challenger as he grabbed the reins from Brenin. "It's been a bit since you've brought him by, sir," he continued, looking at Brenin.

"I know," Brenin replied. "I have been stuck at home recently. Thankfully, I'll be able to get out of the city for Antabal. Keep him close, please; I probably won't stay long today."

"Aye, sir."

As Brenin opened the door to the taproom, the familiar sounds and smells of his favorite tavern inundated his senses. The smells of roasting meat mixed with Ostaxan ale, reminding him that it had been several hours since his predawn breakfast. As usual, the late morning crowd in the common room consisted of young nobles, university students, and a few of the minor military officers trying to separate themselves from the cheaper taverns frequented by common soldiers. The hubbub of their conversations washed over Brenin, creating an unintelligible din to accompany the crackle of the fire and scrape of wooden dishes and utensils.

Brenin scanned the crowd looking for Urien, noting that there was a new musician standing on the slightly raised platform in the corner. A man playing some well-known lively jigs on the flute had quite a crowd stomping and singing along. Brenin was pleased with the

change, since the last few weeks it had been a pair of women, one of whom played the harp while the other sang. *Not that they weren't talented, but I'm pretty sure they were here so long because the soft music and fair looks kept the rowdiness down.*

Their usual table had a trio of Imperial officers sitting at it, so Urien had moved closer to the center of the room. Brenin walked that direction, acknowledging the waves of several acquaintances. On the way across the room, Brenin signaled Emidio, the barkeep, that he wanted food and ale brought over to them. Emidio acknowledged the request with a nod and turned toward the kitchen.

“When do you expect Tekin?” Brenin asked Urien as he pulled out a chair opposite and sat down.

“Anytime now,” Urien answered, raising one eyebrow. “I wasn't expecting you for quite some time. How did you escape so quickly?”

“Father and Alun were neck deep in some new plot or other, so I was lucky not to receive his full attention. Besides the obligatory comments about my irresponsibility, he almost ignored me.”

“What was the new plot?” Urien asked. His fingers tapped in time to the musician's song, while his eyes restlessly scanned the room.

“Who knows? Probably some new potential way to discredit the Anwells or Edris. They're the current recipients of his ire.”

“That makes sense. The Anwells just secured a contract to provide apple brandy for the palace. And Cadel Edri was chosen to fill a vacancy in the Ministry of Duties and Excises.” Urien looked up as the waiter bustled over to their table with a heaping plate and mug of ale for each of them.

“Gents, here is your meal. Today, we have roasted duck and potatoes.” The waiter’s mellow voice carried over the ambient noise of the common room. “Currently on tap, is the ever-popular Zolin Stout.”

Brenin immediately grabbed the ale and downed half of it. “You might as well bring another round.” The waiter nodded and moved away, toward a table filled with university students. Brenin took another swallow of ale, then remembered what Alun said as Brenin left home. “You know, as I was leaving, I overheard them mention something about Izel House, but I’m not sure . . .” Brenin trailed off as Urien’s gaze sharpened.

“What about Izel?” he demanded.

“I don’t know,” Brenin answered quickly, holding his hands up defensively. “Why the sudden interest?”

“I’ve never met an Izel who wasn’t a complete snake. Hearing your father is involved with them somehow, whether in aid or opposition, is not a good thing.”

“Father can’t stand Lord Izel, and Alun knows they are all snakes, so I can’t believe either one would join them in any scheme.” Brenin grinned slyly, and nudged Urien with his elbow. “Besides, Alun still hopes to attract your sister’s attention. He would never endanger his chances of earning your sister’s affection or your father’s approval by aiding a political rival.”

“Even so. Maybe we should try to find out more before we leave.” Urien pursed his lips, staring into the distance as he considered the options.

“No! Please. I need to get away.” Brenin was almost pleading.

“Well,” Urien mused. “Antabal *is* only one week. I haven’t heard any murmurs, so we probably don’t need to worry just yet.”

“Good.” Brenin breathed, as the waiter dropped off the second round of ales. “I’ll help you figure out what’s going on when we get back,” Brenin promised, beginning to eat, and reaching for one of the newly arrived ales. Urien looked at his own first mug, still half full, and frowned at Brenin. As Urien opened his mouth, a hand reached over his shoulder and grabbed the untouched ale sitting in the center of the table.

Tekin took a large swallow and sat down with slumped shoulders. His brows were drawn down and he stared into his ale without speaking. Brenin glanced at Urien, who looked as confused as Brenin felt.

“You all right, Tekin?” Brenin asked.

“Huh?” Tekin looked at him blankly for a second. “Oh. No, not really.” Brenin and Urien looked at him expectantly, but he didn’t say anything else. After a moment, Brenin couldn’t take it anymore.

“What’s wrong?”

“I received some terrible news just before I left home. Our shipment to the western front was attacked between Shani and the military camp near Chandu.”

“How bad?” Urien prompted after a moment. Tekin blinked, then focused on Urien.

“They killed everyone and burned whatever they didn’t steal.” Urien gasped, and Brenin almost choked on a swallow of ale. “It was Ildim’s first solo trip without my uncle.” He shook his head, seeming at a loss for words. Urien reached over and put a hand on his shoulder, giving it a light squeeze. Eventually, Tekin continued, “Fulgen Galbar came to the house and told us what happened. One of their merchants came across the site of the attack a few days after it happened.”

“I’m so sorry,” Urien said, and Brenin murmured agreement. In contrast to the mood at their table, the musician on the far side of the taproom began to play an upbeat jig. Conversations continued at the tables around them, no one noticing the somber air brought on by Tekin’s news.

“I just don’t understand why the Firati killed everyone,” Tekin said, slamming his fist down on the table. “That region has been rife with bandits for years, but they were always content to steal the wagons and send the merchants walking back to Shani.”

“Yours isn’t the first group of merchants killed near there.” Urien absently drew designs in the condensation rings on the table as he spoke. “I overheard my father discussing the situation in Firat the other day, and it’s apparently deteriorating quite quickly.”

“Are you talking about the new leader of the rebellious clans living in the jungle?” Tekin asked.

“You heard about that too?” Brenin chimed in, looking between the two of them. “Wynfor was telling me that one of his drinking companions mentioned potential responses to some new ‘fanatic’ that was causing trouble around Shani.”

“Causing trouble is a bit of an understatement,” Urien noted. He glanced around before leaning in and lowering his voice slightly. “His name is Akil, and he has sworn to ‘eradicate the presence of the empire within Firat.’” Brenin scoffed, rolling his eyes, and taking a drink. “I wouldn’t be so quick to ignore him, Brenin. Since he showed up, there have been over a dozen attacks; each one had few, if any, survivors.”

Brenin’s eyebrows climbed his forehead as he digested this information. “I had no idea it was that bad.”

Tekin drained the rest of his ale, then slammed the mug down on the table. “I hope the legions find that *cuilonpol* and burn him alive. Better yet, they should impale him. No! I hope

they crucify him.” With each new punishment, Tekin’s voice got harsher and louder. The soldiers at a nearby table eyeballed him, judging the noise for potential violence. After a few seconds, they turned back to their own conversations.

“I’ll drink to that,” Brenin agreed, lifting his ale, and taking a long drink. “For Ildim, if nothing else. Your cousin was a good man and didn’t deserve death at the hands of a superstitious zealot.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if the empire did send some sort of military response to Firat soon,” Urien said, after taking a drink as well. “They have to do something at least, but with the war in the west, I don’t know what’s available.”

“I wish they would do the opposite – Hear me out, Tekin.” Brenin held up a hand at the sudden flush in Tekin’s face. “Obviously, I hope they bring this Akil to justice. I just think the empire would be better off abandoning Firat. Let the fanatics have their worthless jungle; the few benefits aren’t worth the effort of holding down the territory.”

“I don’t know about that,” Urien countered.

“Come on,” Brenin said. “Those trees are nothing more—”

“The hardwoods are useful for much more than new furniture for nobles.” Urien cut off Brenin’s typical argument before he even began. The trio had similar discussions frequently, so it wasn’t unexpected. “They are vital to certain industries, not to mention there are veins of ore that have just been identified northeast of Shani.” Before the debate could really get going, a new voice chimed in from behind Brenin.

“Don’t let these wimps get you down,” Mathis said, turning from his own table next to them and looking at Tekin. “I agree with you; the legions should start hanging Firati villagers until they turn over this new charlatan.” His back to Mathis, Brenin rolled his eyes. “Fill the



villages with gibbets, and I bet it won't take long for this Akil to be delivered to the governor in chains."

"Tough words from someone who has never experienced hardship in his life," Brenin said over his shoulder. "Other than repeatedly losing to me in archery competitions, I mean." Urien smiled, but quickly reined it back in to a straight face. Tekin didn't bother to hide his amusement, laughing loudly and slapping the table hard enough to make the empty mugs jump.

"Archery skill has nothing to do with governing unruly people, Brenin. Otherwise, you might actually amount to something other than an embarrassment to your House." Normally, Brenin would ignore Mathis, but his anger had been simmering ever since the argument with his father. He couldn't contain himself any longer.

"Embarrassment?!" Brenin stood up and turned around with a quick movement, causing his chair to tip over. In reaction to Brenin's unusually aggressive move, Mathis also stood, placing the two young men face-to-face. They were of an equal size, though Mathis was fleshy and soft where Brenin was lean and muscled.

"You heard me," Mathis affirmed. He maintained his normal arrogant tone, but a few drops of sweat had popped onto his forehead. The three other young men sitting at Mathis' table watched the confrontation avidly, but Urien shot a worried look over at Emidio to see if the barkeep had noticed the trouble yet. Normally they only watched arguments turn into fights, not participated themselves. Brenin knew he should try to extricate them from the situation, but he just couldn't back down.

"You're one to talk," Brenin spat. "I can't think of a single martial skill in which you've shown proficiency. Maybe that's why your solution is to jump straight to having the army start hanging innocent villagers instead of trying to develop a valid resolution." Brenin jabbed a finger

into Mathis' chest for emphasis. "You can't do anything for yourself, you honor less dog, so you pass it off onto others, and hide behind those stronger than you." Brenin's raised voice began to attract the attention of the tables nearby.

"Let me ask you a question." Mathis smirked confidently as he glanced around at the growing audience. "How many deals have you brokered for your family, hmmm? Business or political, either one?"

"Here we go again." Brenin rolled his eyes. "Simply because I don't conduct family business doesn't mean I don't know how."

"But that's my point. You *don't* have the capability to handle important affairs. There's a reason your father is willing to send you to the legions." The hiss of indrawn breath from the watching crowd was clearly audible. Brenin gritted his teeth and glared at Mathis, but inside his stomach dropped.

Mathis' words echoed the feelings and suspicions that had been eating at Brenin for months. *Why was Father so adamant about me leaving to join the legions?* Other families had third-born, and even fourth-born sons stay at home and manage the family affairs, but Trahaearn always flat out refused to even discuss other options when the idea came up in conversation.

"Alun and Wynfor provide more than enough help for the family. We don't all need Daddy standing behind supervising everything we do in life." Mathis' smirk slipped at Brenin's words, and a sudden flush accompanied the glare that took its place.

"Don't be mad at me because my father wants me to be successful, while yours obviously wants you to die as far from home as possible."

"You couldn't be more wrong, Mathis. My father knows that the legions will give me the best opportunity to display my skill and honor." His father's justifications rang hollow in

Brenin's ears, especially since Mathis' accusations were uncannily similar to his own thoughts on the matter. He felt his hands curling into fists as the anger, embarrassment, dejection, and frustration swirled through him. Brenin desperately wanted to believe his father's words, but they always seemed a little too convenient to be the truth.

"That's your problem, Brenin. You're too focused on individual honor. You don't have the guts to make the tough decisions, and your father knows it." His cheeks were still burning, but Mathis smiled as he delivered a final sting. "Regardless of the lies he told you to make you feel better, Trahaearn Cloyd is too much of a realist to believe anything other than the truth. Your father knows he will never see you again once you leave for the legions, so he is telling you whatever is necessary to ensure you do what he wants you to do."

It was Brenin's turn for color to spread up his neck and into his face, suffusing his skin with a ruddy tinge. His left eye began to twitch slightly, and he opened his mouth to deny the painful truth in Mathis' words. The chuckling from Mathis' friends and the sympathetic look from Urien only made the feelings worse. Brenin could think of nothing to say that might make the situation better.

Time seemed to slow for Brenin as he watched his knuckles traveling through the air between them. Mathis' eyes opened comically wide as Brenin's fist began to dimple his cheek. The shock of impact restored time's flow to normal, and a flash of pain shot up Brenin's arm. Mathis lurched into the table behind him before sprawling to the floor, blinking and spluttering incoherently. The punch didn't improve the situation, but it did release some of the tension building in Brenin.

After a split second of utter stillness, Mathis' three friends surged to their feet. Tekin met them head on, shielding Brenin with arms outstretched, while Urien jumped up and grabbed Brenin by the shoulders to pull him away.

Brenin felt strangely detached as he observed the situation. He let himself be pulled away, and from the corner of his eye, he noticed Emidio walking toward them from the bar. With shoulders that were so wide he needed to turn them to get through most doors, Emidio had no trouble making his way through the crowded taproom on his way to pitch both combatants into the street. Most of the patrons moved quickly out of his way, but those that didn't notice him at first were gently, but firmly, nudged aside by a hand that could almost fully encircle a grown man's throat. Urien shot Brenin a murderous glare as the implacable barkeep continued his advance.

Urien began to push Brenin even harder toward the door, knowing they needed to get outside before Emidio reached them. The people between the barkeep and the two friends were no longer oblivious, and Emidio had a clear path to them, lined with expectant onlookers. Emidio looked at the distance between them and the doors, then glanced over at Mathis. It was clear Brenin and Urien would reach the door in time to evade the barkeep's wrath, so Emidio waved them away in disgust.

Urien and Brenin hurriedly continued out the door and into the stable yard. The late afternoon sun slanted down, creating deep shadows in the corners. Ivy climbed the lower portions of the stable wall, giving it a bearded appearance. The two round windows set near the top of the wall only enhanced the illusion of a face, and Brenin smiled to himself as he noticed.

“It’s a good thing we’re going to be gone for a week,” Urien grumbled, closing the door behind them. “That should be long enough for your nonsense in there to blow over.” A loud cheer roared from inside the tavern, causing Brenin and Urien to both look back toward the taproom. “I hope Tekin didn’t follow your example; he should’ve been right behind us.”

“Tekin is much too intelligent for that. He’s probably just trying to smooth things over with Emidio.” Brenin winced as he flexed his hand.

The groom opened the door of the gatehouse and poked his head out. Seeing them standing in the yard, he slid the rest of his body out and closed the door behind himself. “Ready for your horses, sirs?”

Brenin turned to him, continuing to flex and shake his hand. “Yes, please. Can you bring Tekin’s too? He should be out any moment.” The boy nodded and went to fetch the animals from the stable. A chill wind blew into the stable yard, stirring the yellow and brown leaves collected under the oak tree in the corner.

“Are you just going to ignore what happened in there?” Urien asked, staring at Brenin balefully.

Brenin glanced at Urien, then quickly away. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t even try.” Urien folded his arms across his chest. “You know exactly what I mean.”

“Look-” Brenin began, but Urien didn’t give him a chance to finish.

“Was cracking Mathis in the jaw really worth angering Emidio?”

“Yes. It was.” Brenin replied with quiet intensity. “That egotistical prick is always so sure he is better than everyone else. It was time for someone to bring him down a peg.” At the memory of punching Mathis, Brenin’s expression slowly grew into a spiteful grin. “Besides, you can’t deny you enjoyed seeing the shock on his face when he hit the ground.”

A matching smile grew on Urien’s face. “He did look a bit like a trout I caught this summer.” Urien opened his eyes wide and made an ‘o’ with his mouth, causing Brenin to laugh. The door to the tavern opened and a chuckling Tekin joined them outside.

“That is a sight I am going to cherish for a while,” Tekin chortled. “You both missed Emidio throwing Mathis out of the taproom. It was absolutely the best part, especially since Mathis landed in a pile of steaming horse dung.”

“No!” Urien exclaimed.

“Yes!” Brenin shouted gleefully.

“I swear it’s true.” Tekin promised. All three laughed uproariously as the stableboy came out of the stable, leading Challenger, Urien’s black mare, Laila, and Tekin’s roan, Zera. After a couple of moments, their laughter began to subside, and they walked over to mount their horses.

Brenin glanced toward the sun, then turned to Urien. “I don’t think we’ll make it to the manor before dark.”

“No, but that’s fine. I sent word earlier, warning the staff we were going to be there late tonight. The cook will likely have some stew keeping warm for us.”

“Oh, I love Gala’s stew!” Tekin replied with a big smile. “At least something about this day is looking up.”

Urien flipped a penny to the stableboy as he rode out of the yard and turned west toward the Powder Gate. Brenin and Tekin followed him into the late afternoon crowd. The busy streets prevented the trio from moving any faster than a walk, so it was a good thing they were not in a hurry.

As the three friends slowly maneuvered through the crowded streets, conversation was impossible. The crowds forced them into a single file, and the noise level was high enough to require raised voices. The clatter of cartwheels on the cobblestone street joined the clamor of people talking, bartering, laughing, and arguing. Throw in the occasional shout from city guards and the frequent ringing of temple bells, and the streets were filled with noise. Newcomers to the city often found the raucous cacophony overwhelming, but Brenin took comfort in the familiarity.

He loved to observe the diverse groups of people whenever he was out in the city, so he took advantage of the opportunity as they rode. Dialogue with his companions was impractical, so he eagerly scanned the crowds around them. To his left, a couple of Ecadians in brightly colored dresses perused the wares of a silk merchant, fingering first one bolt of cloth, then another. Just inside an alley on the right, a small crowd of young men in rough spun Utradi tunics were squatting in a circle, playing a dice game of some sort. The results of the game showed through the jubilant grins of the winners and the pained grimaces of the losers.

The trio of friends continued riding west, where the street opened into Powder Square. The crowds around them thinned a bit as they entered the square, allowing Brenin to move up alongside Urien. Ahead of them, the fountain in the center of the square dominated their line of sight. The marble likeness of Maimun Zamani towered close to twenty ells high, with a stone

coffee tree on either side of him. The sculptor depicted Maimun with his hands cupped and outstretched before him, allowing water to pour from his hands into the basin below.

As they started to round the fountain, Brenin noticed a disheveled man sitting alongside the low wall of the basin. He had the pale skin and light hair of a Koprian, though it was difficult to tell with the layer of dirt caked onto both. His threadbare robe and lack of shoes indicated that he was unlikely to survive the winter, even as mild as it typically was in Natac. Brenin reached into his coin purse and grabbed a silver rose to toss to the beggar as they rode past.

Hearing the clop of hooves approaching, the man glanced up at them, reflexively holding out a hand. The despair in his face proclaimed how fruitless such efforts had been previously. Brenin flicked the coin to the man, who fumbled his attempt to catch it. The beggar's eyebrows shot up and his mouth opened as he saw the flash of silver. The clink of the coin striking the cobblestone drew quick glances from those walking nearby, and the beggar quickly tucked the rose away for safekeeping.

Tekin noticed the exchange and rolled his eyes. "You're too soft-hearted."

"Says the man who funds a soup kitchen in the Locust Hills district," Urien murmured.

"That investment is simple self-interest," Tekin claimed, waving a finger at Urien. "Many girls are sympathetic to a charitable young lord, and the soup kitchen is relatively inexpensive in comparison to other options."

"You're incorrigible," Brenin stated, shaking his head. They continued riding the rest of the way across the square, joining the crowd of people squeezing together to pass through the Powder Gate. The limestone city walls loomed twenty-five ells high and were forty ells thick. The babble of conversation echoed off the curved wall as they entered the archway of the gate.



Brenin scanned the stonework above them, attempting to peer into the murder holes and arrow slits.

“You still get nervous?” Urien asked, noticing Brenin’s uneasy glances.

“No,” Brenin denied quickly. “I was just seeing if I could see anyone moving up there.”

“Sure,” Tekin scoffed. “And I’m going to turn my soup kitchen into a chain, ensuring one is located in every district of the city.” Brenin scowled at him, but didn’t reply.

It had been centuries since the city wall encompassed the entire city. Like most large cities, Natac had outgrown its original perimeter. The scenery on the outside of the gate wasn’t much different than inside. There was a similar square just outside the gate; it was a little smaller and had a carved pillar instead of a fountain at the center. The buildings surrounding the square were a little less cared for, appearing slightly run down even though they were generally newer than those inside the walls.

Brenin inhaled deeply, closing his eyes. “It feels good to be outside the city.”

“We won’t really be out of the city for almost another hour,” Urien replied.

“Don’t ruin the moment.”

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Brenin didn’t notice the hazy glow of the lanterns until they were almost at the gate of Urien’s manor. The sun set when they were about halfway to the manor from Natac, and the moon was now only a sliver, low on the horizon behind them. The trio of friends rode through steadily thickening fog that was reducing visibility even further. Conversation between them had slowly died as the muffled stillness increased, so Brenin’s mind was far away from the path they rode, and the sudden light came as a surprise.

“Have we finally arrived?” Tekin asked around a yawn as Urien led them off the road and through the gate of the manor. The courtyard was paved with flagstones and bordered by a stable to the north and a large house to the south. More lanterns hung by the door of each building vainly attempting to push back the mist swirling around the courtyard. The horses’ hooves rang out against the flagstones, and a pair of grooms in Ketla livery came rushing out of the murk from the stable.

“You’re the one that wanted to have a drink before we left,” Urien replied irritably. “You know how long of a ride it is to get out here, and you should have known we would end up staying at the tavern for a while.” Brenin saw Tekin roll his eyes at Urien’s back as they all three dismounted their horses.

“I can’t wait to dig into a bowl of Gala’s stew,” Tekin said, handing the reins to one of the grooms. He turned to Urien, saying, “One of these days I’ll convince her to come work for me instead of you.”

“If you ever hire Gala away from my family, you’ll probably be too fat to leave your house within a week.” Urien stretched, then rubbed his lower back as the grooms led all three horses away.

“Maybe.” Tekin scrunched up his face in contemplation, then grinned broadly. “Totally worth it.” He rushed up the entry stairs and into the house, presumably to the dining room and a bowl of stew. Brenin shook his head as he and Urien followed Tekin into the house at a slower pace.

They handed their cloaks off to the waiting servant in the entry hall, then headed down the brightly lit hallway toward the dining room. Tekin had left the door partly open behind him,

and Brenin heard the crackling fireplace and murmur of conversation drifting into the hallway. His stomach rumbled as he smelled the stew waiting inside.

“It sounds like a few people are still awake,” Urien said with a note of surprise. “I expected everyone to have given up the wait already.”

“Me too,” Brenin agreed. “But it’s the first night, so they are probably still excited and eager for the hunt tomorrow. Plus, they’re not paying for the booze like they would be in a tavern.”

Urien pushed the door the rest of the way open, and they walked into the dining room. There were a couple of candles on the wall, but the fireplace opposite the door was the main source of light, making the room seem slightly dim after the bright hallway.

As he entered behind Urien, Brenin saw two other people in the room with Tekin. Govril Sakolo’s deep voice boomed out a welcome as he stood up from the long oak table to embrace Urien. His thick black hair and beard was trimmed short, and as usual, he was dressed in expensive clothing. The black shirt he wore had no embroidery, but the quality of the silk was enough to guarantee it was the most valuable clothing item in the room.

Sitting at the table across from Tekin was Celia Joran. Brenin drank in the sight of her as she listened to Tekin recount how Emidio threw Mathis out of the tavern. Celia glanced at Brenin and Urien, but quickly turned her attention back to Tekin’s story. The firelight threw red highlights in her blonde hair, and the shadows played across her cheekbones turning her blue eyes closer to purple and back to blue again. Her red lips were curled up into a slight smile as Tekin regaled her with the comedic events of the afternoon between bites of stew. The dark green dress she wore was cut to show off her magnificent attributes and epitomized the height of

fashion. Or at least Brenin assumed so, since Celia would never be caught wearing anything less than fashionable.

Govril stepped away from Urien and stopped in front of Brenin, interrupting the line of sight to Celia. It was just as well. No matter how much Brenin wished he could make a play for Celia, he knew it would never work out. Govril wrapped his large, solid arms around Brenin engulfing him in a crushing hug. Govril was a full head taller than Brenin, and a hug from his muscled frame felt like being squeezed by a living marble statue. Govril kept one arm around Brenin's shoulders after the hug, ushering him to the table.

"Come, sit," he said. "I'll ask Gala to bring some stew so you can warm the chill from your bones." Brenin sat next to Tekin, smiling at Celia in greeting, but not wanting to interrupt Tekin's story.

Govril walked toward the kitchen, but didn't have to leave the room. The door opened and Gala bustled in carrying two bowls of stew, setting them down in front of Brenin and Urien with a smile. Govril beamed at her and changed direction, heading to the tapped ale barrel in the corner of the room.

"You're such a treasure, Gala," Govril said. "One of these days, I will finally steal you away from Urien."

"Not you too," Urien grumbled. Gala smiled serenely and headed back to the kitchen. Govril filled two mugs, then returned to the table, plunking them in front of Urien and Tekin. He walked around the table and sat in the empty chair next to Celia.

"Get in line, Govril!" Tekin wagged his finger in Govril's direction. "If Gala ever wises up and decides to move up in life, I get the first opportunity to claim her services."

"You wish. Gala loves me, and she knows you're nothing but an insatiable leech."

“You’re both delusional if you think I would ever let either of you woo Gala out of my kitchen,” Urien scoffed. “Her scones alone are worth whatever she asks for. I’d even move all the way to Shani if necessary.” Urien winced immediately and darted a glance at Tekin. “Sorry, Tekin.”

Tekin’s smile dropped and he looked down at his empty bowl, aimlessly moving his spoon around. Govril turned to Urien, his questioning look displaying incomprehension.

“What happened?” Celia asked. “Why are you apologizing for mentioning Shani?” Urien glanced at Tekin again, who was still staring into the empty bowl, showing no inclination to answer.

“Firati rebels attacked one of the Yalaz caravans heading out of Shani.” Urien spoke hesitantly into the silence. “It was Ildim’s first solo trip, and the rebels murdered everyone instead of just stealing the goods like normal.”

“Oh no!” Celia grasped Tekin’s hand. “I’m so sorry.”

“Scum!” Govril snarled. “You have my sympathy on the loss of your cousin.”

“The emperor should do something about these rebels,” Celia decreed furiously. “These attacks have been coming more and more frequently, and now they’re increasing in violence.” Her eyes flashed fiercely, and she flipped her hair back behind her shoulder with a flick of her head.

“Do what though?” Brenin asked around a mouthful of stew. He swallowed and continued, “Other than sending the legions, which are being used on the western border against the Azerites, what can the emperor do to neutralize the rebels?”

“There’s got to be something.” Celia took a drink of her wine and looked at the men around the table.

“I’ll tell you what should happen,” Govril said. “The emperor should send the Blood Regiment to wipe out the rebels and pacify the local populace.” He held up his mug as though toasting to the thought, looking around for agreement from the others.

“Not you too,” Brenin groaned. “Why does everyone think that military action is the way to fix this problem? Violence isn’t always the answer.”

“I’d like to see these rebels hit with some violence,” Tekin interjected, looking up from his bowl. “Especially the leader, Akil.”

“I can understand that,” Brenin hedged. “But I don’t think it’s a long-term solution. Another leader would rise in a couple of years, and we’d be right back where we are now.”

“It would make me feel better.” Tekin’s grip on his spoon turned his knuckles white.

“What would you suggest, Brenin?” Celia asked. Her full attention was on Brenin, but in this instance, he wasn’t happy about it. He knew his opinion would not be popular with his friends, especially considering Tekin’s loss.

“Well,” Brenin began. “I . . . don’t really have a better solution.” Brenin buried his face in his mug and took a drink of ale. Everyone was looking at him, but he only had eyes for Celia. The corner of her mouth turned down slightly, and her disappointment caused Brenin’s stomach to drop.

“What about your argument with Mathis?” Tekin asked. “You said you thought we should just abandon Firat.” Celia and Govril stared in shocked silence for a moment, then Govril laughed loudly.

“Like the empire would ever give back any territory it’s conquered! At least, not without a fight.”

“It seems like the rebels are willing to fight . . .” Brenin shrugged.

“I wouldn’t call that fighting,” Tekin retorted. “Cowardly attacks on merchants, intimidating or extorting villagers, and hiding in the jungle are not honorable warfare.”

“I never said they were honorable.” Brenin sighed, then squared his shoulders. “The honor of Akil is irrelevant. He understands that the ‘honorable’ methods of warfare will get his people killed.” The hearth fire popped loudly in the silence that followed Brenin’s words. He glanced around, watching the shadows dance across the faces before him. No one seemed inclined to interrupt him, and he began to warm to his argument. “Instead of trying to fight an open battle against the seasoned troops of the empire, he executes raids against lightly guarded caravans and steals from wealthy merchants of the empire. He is utilizing a strategy that is undeniably effective.”

“Effective?” Celia asked, her mouth forming a moue of distaste.

“Yes, effective. Repugnant, even abhorrent at times, but absolutely successful.” Brenin paused, looking over at Urien. It was obvious to him that Urien was running the situation through his mind as he stared into the fire. With a speculative look at Brenin, Urien stood up and went to refill his mug from the ale barrel in the corner. Brenin focused back on the others at the table. “Think about what the rebels have accomplished thus far.”

“Besides killing a bunch of merchants and robbing the empire, you mean?” Govril scoffed. “They wouldn’t last thirty minutes in the field against one of the legions.”

“That’s my point!” Brenin shouted, throwing his hands up in the air. He glared at Govril for a second, then looked away. “Sorry,” he began, “it’s just-” he stopped and took a deep breath. As he collected himself, Brenin tilted his head back and stared up into the darkness above. He could just make out the dim outline of the oak rafters overhead. Feeling his heart beat slow down

to a more normal pace, he looked back to Govril, but couldn't decide how to reword his argument.

Urien returned to the table, sliding into his chair. He opened his mouth to speak, but Celia beat him to it.

"I think I'm starting to understand your point," Celia said.

"I'm glad someone does." Govril shook his head, then raised his eyebrows at Tekin, who also shook his head in apparent confusion.

Urien looked at Govril's bewildered expression and pointed to the tapestry hanging on the wall to his left depicting two armies in the midst of battle. "Think of it like the battles in the Silver Crescent. The empire didn't try to win an open sea battle against Lesta. Instead, we used the legions to cut off their supporting ports and conquered them bit by bit."

Govril glanced at the tapestry, but still seemed skeptical. "I don't see how that compares. The Firati aren't even close to conquering anything."

"Look at it this way," Celia explained, brushing her blonde hair back and leaning forward. "The rebels know they can't win in a stand-up fight, so they hit the empire where it's soft. They strike the merchants, especially the large caravans funded by the Great Houses. They know they can overwhelm the guards, providing them with both a martial victory, and the material goods and wealth they steal."

"Makes sense," Tekin mused.

"I get that," Govril said. Celia sat back in her seat, a confident smile on her face. "But I don't see why you feel it is an effective tactic." Celia's smile faltered as Govril looked around the table, still not seeming to comprehend. A flush started to creep up his neck as he realized everyone was staring at him.



“Well, think about what the rebels want,” Urien said. “They don’t care about our opinion of their military. They just want us out of their land.”

“Good so far,” Govril agreed. His brown eyes focused on Urien exclusively.

“They use their small victories as propaganda, then share some of the stolen goods with the local towns to generate support and goodwill. How often do you think the empire distributes wealth to the Firati?”

“More likely they just send the pestilential tax collectors,” Govril snorted.

“Exactly,” Brenin agreed. “These tactics of Akil are going to result in one of two things; either the empire commits to stationing an extensive military presence in the region, or they abandon Firat as not worth the effort to hold.”

“I think the first is more likely than the second,” Tekin said, twisting his large, silver signet ring. “With Great Houses like Izel heavily invested in the procurement of hardwoods from the jungles, the pressure on the emperor will lean toward maintaining a hard line in Firat.” Urien nodded, scowling at the mention of his House’s main rival.

“Maybe,” Brenin conceded. “But there are other sources of hardwood. In fact, I recently purchased some forestry rights on Pamez. That could be a valuable investment if the hardwoods of Firat become unavailable.”

“Pamez!” Celia gaped at Brenin. “The cost of transporting anything from that gods-forsaken island is prohibitive. You’re not likely to turn a profit with that investment.”

“It’s not that bad,” protested Brenin. “And if it’s the only reliable source of hardwood, the cost of transport becomes immaterial.”

“I’m with Tekin on this one,” Govril said. “You’re deluding yourself if you think the empire will give up Firat without a fight.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Brenin said through a yawn as the events of the long day coalesced into exhaustion. His yawn set off a chain reaction, and gaping yawns spread around the table.

“Well, I guess it’s time to get some sleep.”

Brenin was still yawning as he walked into the courtyard the next morning. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath of the crisp air, savoring the cool burn as it traveled down into his chest. Brenin opened his eyes and squinted as he watched the cloud of his breath rise and slowly dissipate in the early morning sunlight that sparkled off the layer of frost covering everything. The tang of winter lingered in his mouth, tantalizing with the promise of the season's first snowfall. Brenin began walking toward the men standing in center of the large courtyard.

Urien stood with his back to Brenin talking to Tekin and Govril, who were already astride their horses. Each of his friends wore drab-colored hunting leathers, with a cloak in their House colors as the only difference in appearance. Brenin wore similar attire, though when viewed against their bright hues, his deep blue cloak was another example of House Cloyd's minor status in the empire.

Govril's cloak was bright blood-red with Sakolo's golden, winged sword sewn on the left breast. Tekin wore the traditional grass-green and eight-spoked wagon wheel of House Yalaz. Urien's cloak was the most elaborate, as befitted his House's status in the top tier of the empire. The sky-blue cloak didn't have a single crest, instead incorporating the teal wave of Ketla into the weave of the fabric.

"Oh! Look who it is," Govril drawled. "Nice of you to join us, Brenin. Everyone else has already ridden out, and we'll be pushing it to get in place before the beaters start driving the boar toward the spear line." Urien turned to face Brenin, causing his cloak to swirl, showing off yet another facet of the magnificent sartorial accomplishment. Metallic silver threads stitched along the top of the wave designs caught the sunlight and reflected it at observers with the slightest movement of the wearer.

“Yeah,” Tekin said. “You’re lucky Urien is such a good friend and didn’t want to leave without you. A few more minutes, and we might have convinced him to ride with us.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Brenin held a hand up as he walked toward the groom holding Challenger’s bridle. “I didn’t sleep well, and I’m dragging a little this morning.”

“That much is obvious,” Urien said, smiling. “You slept through the wager discussion, but I assured everyone you would participate.”

“What’s the pot? I assume largest boar wins?”

“Of course. Your stake is fifty crowns, which brings the pot to five hundred.”

Brenin whistled. “That’s quite a prize. I’m surprised so many of the others were willing to bet against me.”

Tekin’s eyes widened, and he smiled doubtfully at Brenin’s claim. Urien smirked at Brenin’s cocky assurance of success.

“Against *you!*” Govril scoffed, puffing up his chest. “Surely you mean *me*.” He pointed to the crest stitched on his cloak, and continued, “Sakolo’s crest symbolizes victory, and that will be the outcome for me today.” Tekin glanced sidelong at Govril, his doubtful expression evincing even more disbelief at that claim.

Brenin checked Challenger’s saddle girth, ignoring Govril, then grabbed the bridle and ran his hand along the horse’s neck. He turned and noticed Govril’s challenging stare, but only smiled in response.

Urien climbed into his saddle, then called to a grizzled guard standing in a nearby doorway. “Yao, please bring us some boar spears. I think we are finally ready to go.” The guard nodded and ducked into the arms room.

Brenin patted Challenger on the neck one more time, then mounted as Yao came out carrying four spears. Each oak shaft was four ells long topped with a razor-sharp bladed head. The heads were as wide as a man's hand and added another ell to the overall length of the spear. Where the shaft and blade joined, a crosspiece of steel created a solid bar designed to prevent the dying boar from driving itself up the entire shaft and goring the hunter on the other end.

Brenin hefted the spear he was handed, then glanced wistfully up at the second floor of the manor behind him, thinking of his bow leaning against the wall. A long bow wasn't much good in the dense forest, so Brenin knew there was no reason to bring it. Govril noticed the glance, and smirked at Brenin.

"And *that* is why I am confident I'll take the prize today," Govril crowed. "You may be the best with a bow, but that doesn't matter today. Success with a spear requires both courage and skill, making it a true measure of a man."

Brenin raised an eyebrow, commenting, "I'll let Celia know you think the spear is a *man's* weapon."

"You know what I mean!" Govril replied, flushing slightly. The other three laughed at his discomfiture. He wheeled his horse around saying, "Shut up and ride." They followed him out of the courtyard still chuckling.

The four friends rode through the forest at a quick trot. Fallen leaves littered the path, ranging in color from a bright yellow through crimson and into brown. The recent rains and nighttime fog dampened the litter, which in turn, muffled the hooves of the horses. The oak, birch, and aspen trees still had half their leaves, and there were a variety of evergreens spread throughout the forest. As a result, the morning sunlight filtered through the moderate cover in golden diagonal stripes of varying size.

Brenin rode absentmindedly, vaguely registering the early morning scenery. Most of his attention was turned inward as he imagined a triumphal return with a huge boar. The prize money would be nice, but money wasn't much of a motivator for him. No, the real desire to win was rooted in his longing for praise and adoration. He lost himself in images of how his friends would react, from Govril's jealousy and Tekin's congratulations to Celia's admiration.

"Whoa!" Tekin exclaimed, as Brenin almost rode into him. He reined his horse to the right and looked at Brenin. "You awake over there?"

"Sorry," Brenin replied, beginning to blush. "I was lost in thought."

"Well, try to pay more attention when the boar arrives."

Brenin saw Urien and Govril just ahead, next to a small game trail leading off to the left. It was a faint trail; the fallen leaves and wide spacing of the trees in this part of the forest blurred the definition, but it was obviously well-used.

"There are two trails left to choose from." Urien told Govril. "I don't want any claims of cheating later, so you can choose between them. One's for you and Tekin; Brenin and I will take the other. Do you want this trail or the next?"

Govril squinted through the trees, then glanced over to Tekin, who shrugged and gestured for Govril to make the choice. The beaters would be driving the boar from that direction, so all the hunters had to do was find a likely spot along the trail and wait. "We'll take this one," Govril said. He and Tekin dismounted and tied their horses to trees on the far side of the main path.

"Our trail is about a hundred spans further along the path," Urien said, smiling. "Good luck. We'll see you back at the manor for the weigh-in." Brenin and Urien continued riding through the forest for a few minutes until they reached another small trail that branched off from the main path.

“You seemed happy that Govril chose the other trail,” Brenin commented. He could see no discernible difference from the trail Govril had chosen. “Is there a reason you wanted to come to this one?”

“I was out here a few weeks ago, and I saw a *behemoth* of a boar.” Urien and Brenin both dismounted and tied their horses on the far side of the path from their hunting trail. “He turned up this path at my approach, and I’m hoping this is his regular range.”

“How big are we talking?” Brenin ran his hand down the shaft of his spear, ensuring there were no snags to catch on his gloves. The last thing he wanted was to mishandle the spear as a boar was bearing down on him.

“It was easily two hundredweight, but probably closer to three.” Urien took off his cloak, folding it and draping it over his saddle.

“Surely not?” Brenin marveled.

“Absolutely. No exaggeration.” The two men finished checking their gear and began walking down the hunting trail. A hundred spans along the trail they came to a fork. Each way looked clear, indicating similar game usage.

“I obviously didn’t see which way the monster went this far into the woods,” Urien said, stopping short of the fork. “I’ll let you choose which path you take, just to be fair anyway.”

“Thanks, I think.” Brenin paused, looking down both forks. “I’ll go right.”

“Good luck.” Urien raised his spear in salute, then turned down the left-hand trail. Fifty spans further down his own path, Brenin began inspecting his surroundings. The woods were open enough that the boar would not have to stay on the trail. On the other hand, the trail was there because it was the easiest and most familiar path. Once the boar started running from the beaters and their dogs, the perceived danger would likely lead them to the familiar trails.

Brenin's goal was to find a spot close enough to the trail to ensure easy access to the fleeing swine, but hidden enough they would not have time to notice and avoid him.

The location he chose had a steep drop into a ravine on the right side of the trail and a dense stand of fir trees on the left. The trail narrowed as it pinched between these two features, and the evergreen trees provided concealment from any boar approaching. There was a moderate breeze stirring the trees, creating a susurrous undertone, and the wind direction meant Brenin would be downwind. He couldn't imagine a more perfect situation for the morning's hunt.

Brenin settled on his haunches to wait, listening for the sound of baying hounds. He decided against sitting for two reasons. First, he wanted to be able to stand up silently, which the dead leaves would make impossible if he sat. Secondly, he was exhausted; he might fall asleep if he got too comfortable. For a while, all he heard was the wind in the trees. Soon though, barks and howls drifted faintly to his ears.

Brenin shifted, unsuccessfully trying to get a look at the trail through the screen of green needles in front of him. He knew his hearing was his best ally at that moment, but he couldn't overcome his instinct to search with his eyes as well. Giving up the attempt, He closed his eyes and focused on trying to block out the dogs and listen for the closer sounds of running swine.

After a few moments, Brenin heard the crack of a branch and the faint rustle of leaves. He tensed, straining harder to try and determine how close the sounds were. Nothing. *Did it veer off onto another trail? Maybe there's a way down into the ravine. No, I'd still hear it. There!* Over the sound of the breeze in the trees, he heard the faint thud and crackle of hooves on dead leaves. The sounds seemed close, so he decided to check the trail.

Brenin took a step out into the trail, scanning for the boar. *Stars, it's huge! . . . It's also much too close!* Somehow, the boar was only twenty paces away. As soon as it saw Brenin, the



boar let out a squeal and broke into a deceptively fast charge. Brenin's surprise led to haste in setting himself for the impact. As he spread his feet apart to brace, Brenin's right foot slipped on the wet leaves. The ground sloped toward the ravine, causing his foot to continue sliding despite his attempts to steady himself.

Brenin found himself in a half-split with a large angry boar bearing down on him. He thrust the spear weakly at the boar with his right hand, using his left hand to push off the ground and roll toward his collapsing right leg. The spear glanced off the boar's flank, the impact ripping it out of his one-handed grip.

As he rolled, Brenin felt a crushing jolt to his right calf, the pain tearing a hoarse shout from his throat. The blow of the boar's tusk also served to increase his momentum, rolling him around again. The additional revolution took him over the edge of the ravine. He reached out to grasp the edge and stop his fall, but his hand found empty air instead. *Oh no.* There was a brief sensation of falling, followed by an impact and the blackness of oblivion.

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Brenin came awake suddenly, sitting halfway up, before falling back with a groan. He reached up to gingerly feel a lump on the back of his head. *That explains the blackout and the nausea I'm feeling.* He started to roll to his side, but stopped at a wave of excruciating pain in both his right calf and left shoulder. He realized he had dislocated his arm somehow when he fell into the ravine. He struggled to a sitting position, trying to see how badly the fall injured his leg. It appeared to be bleeding steadily, though not enough to signify a life-threatening injury.

He pulled his dagger from the sheath at his waist, silently thankful it was still there. Brenin cut off a section of his pant leg to get a better look at the slice from the boar's tusk. He

knew he needed to staunch the blood flow, so he pressed the cloth into the wound. He winced as every slight motion that jarred his left arm sent fire surging through the nerves of his arm.

“Well, this is just perfect.” Brenin looked around, noting the path of disturbed earth and crushed brush that marked his tumble down the ravine. He listened, but didn’t hear any sounds indicating the boar was still up there. *Wonder how long I was out?* There were also no sounds indicating any humans were nearby, so he was on his own for now.

After a few minutes, Brenin could tell the blood flow had slowed enough that he could stop holding pressure on the cloth. He used the knife to cut another strip of cloth from the pantleg to create a makeshift bandage. Only having the use of one hand made it awkward to tie the strip around his leg, but he was able to do it after a little bit of struggling. But now he had no idea what he was going to do about his arm.

Brenin looked around for some sort of inspiration, but came up empty. Even if he could pop his shoulder back into place, he doubted he would be in any condition to try and climb the steeply sloping walls of the ravine. He looked up the ravine, then down, but there didn’t appear to be any way up in either direction. *Down or up? Up is more likely to have shorter sides, but down will be an easier trek. Hmm. Down is also toward the main trail.*

“Down it is. Now I just have to stand up.” Brenin slowly struggled to his feet, pausing a couple of times when the pain or dizziness threatened to overwhelm him. Once on his feet, he turned and began picking his way through the underbrush choking the bottom of the ravine. Within a few spans he had to stop, breathing heavily through clenched teeth. “Well, this is gonna be abysmal.”

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Brenin wasn't sure how long he had been struggling through the pain and making his way along the ravine. The sun was still high in the sky, so it couldn't have been more than a few hours, but it felt like days. He had just stopped to rest for the third or fourth time, and was sitting on a large rock, wishing there had been more rain recently. That way, at least the ravine wouldn't be dry and he could get a drink of water. *Of course, my luck what it is, I would probably have landed face first in the stream when I fell, and drowned without anyone ever finding my body.* The wind had basically stopped, and any breeze that did exist didn't reach Brenin down in the ravine. Brenin wiped the sweat from his face and sighed as he prepared to stand back up. *Wait. What was that?* He went still and listened intently, hoping it wasn't just his imagination again. He definitely heard something. Someone was moving through the brush. Or, maybe it was an animal. *Only one way to find out.*

"Is someone up there?" Brenin shouted.

"Brenin? Is that you?" Urien replied.

"Yes!" Brenin laughed in relief. "I'm down in the ravine." Urien's head popped into view looking down into the ravine.

"What in the world are you doing down there?"

"Oh, you know," Brenin said. "Just looking for boar." He attempted to shrug nonchalantly, then winced in pain. "I lost my footing when your behemoth charged me. I ended up down here with a dislocated shoulder and a knot the size of an ostrich egg on my head."

"You saw him?" Urien gaped. "Did you get him?" he asked, with a look of disappointment on his face.

"No! Of course I didn't get him." Brenin rolled his eyes when Urien sighed in relief. "Do you think I'd be limping along in this ravine if I had been able to kill that monster?"

“Right. I wasn’t thinking.” Urien peered down and looked Brenin over. “You don’t look that bad. Why don’t you quit fooling around down there so we can head back to the manor.”

“Did you not hear me? Dislocated shoulder! Ostrich egg lump on my head!”

“Quit being a child. Besides, an ostrich egg is bigger than your head.” Urien looked back down the ravine. “If you keep going, the side of the ravine collapsed a bit. It’s about three or four hundred paces further down. I’ll meet you there.” He turned back the way he came and disappeared from Brenin’s line of sight.

“Wai-” Brenin huffed in annoyance. He stood up and slowly started picking his way to meet Urien. He hoped Urien wasn’t underestimating the distance, because the continued blood loss was really starting to affect him. The lightheadedness was getting worse, leading to his rests getting closer together and lasting longer. When he reached the area Urien told him about, he saw Urien slowly picking his way down the collapsed side of the ravine. Brenin saw a conveniently placed log and decided to sit before his legs made the decision for him. Urien started talking, but Brenin couldn’t understand what he was saying over the buzzing in his ears. His vision was also starting to narrow, turning white around the edges.

“I think I’m gonna pass out.” Brenin knew he should do something, but he couldn’t think clearly. Urien appeared in front of him, grabbed him by the shoulders and started to shake him.

“No, you d-”

“Aaahrg!” The flash of pain brought Brenin back to full clarity with a vengeance. “My. Shoulder Is. Dislocated!”

“Oops.” Urien flinched and grimaced, then let his hands drop. “Sorry . . .”

“I hate you.”

“Here, let me look at your leg.” Urien knelt and inspected the makeshift bandage wrapped around Brenin’s calf. “Eh, that looks a little loose.” He looked up at Brenin regretfully.

“I am going to tighten it up bit to slow the bleeding more. It’s going to hurt.”

“Just do it. My shoulder hurts enough I probably won’t even notice.” The last word ended in a hiss of pain as Urien tightened the bandage.

“There. That should hold ‘til we get back.”

“I don’t think I can make it up to the trail with my shoulder.”

“Well,” Urien began as he grabbed his spear from where he had leant it against the side of the ravine. “We’ll just have to pop it back into place.”

“Oh, no.”

“Don’t worry, I watched our surgeon do it for my brother; it’s not difficult.”

“You sure know how to inspire confidence.”

“I can leave you here if you prefer?” Urien looked at Brenin. “Thought not.” He stabbed his spear into the ground at an angle, putting the butt at about shoulder height.

“We’re really doing this?”

“Stand up.” Urien reached down and helped Brenin stand facing the spear. He positioned the butt of the spear directly against Brenin’s shoulder. “Ok, just hold still. I will force your shoulder into the spear, and it should pop right back into place.”

“We’re really doing this.” Brenin took a deep breath and let it out. As soon as he exhaled, Urien shoved his shoulder from behind. The pain flared up to new heights until there was a sickening pop. The sudden relief from pain overwhelmed Brenin, and he sank to his knees.

“Are you ok? Did it work?” Urien’s last question whipped Brenin’s head around to stare at him incredulously.

“You mean you weren’t sure?” Brenin shook his head in disbelief, then gingerly rotated his shoulder and moved his arm back and forth. He winced, but said, “It’s still sore, but that worked.”

“As expected,” Urien said as he pulled the spear from the ground and handed it to Brenin. “Use this as a walking stick to get up the slope.”

“Yeah.” Brenin grabbed the spear with his uninjured arm and leveraged himself upright. The two friends slowly climbed up the slope. Urien hovered behind Brenin, ready to assist if needed. Once at the top, Brenin paused and leaned against a tree.

“Why don’t you wait here while I go get the horses?”

“Yeah,” Brenin huffed.

“Don’t die, I’ll be right back.” Urien continued back down the trail toward where they had tied the horses.

Brenin slowly sank down until he was sitting, leaning his head back against the rough bark and closing his eyes. If it wasn’t for the ache in his shoulder and his calf throbbing in time to his heartbeat, he could easily have taken a nap. *Eh. Probably better to stay awake anyway. Wouldn’t want that boar to come back and catch me unawares.* Within minutes, the adrenaline that had been pumping through Brenin’s system slowed and stopped. Fatigue crashed down on him immediately, and he was soon unconscious.

Acalan Ezzoh's bright yellow robe of office flapped around his ankles as he strode through the halls of the imperial palace. As befitted the empire's seat of power, gilded finery on display filled the hallway. Vibrant tapestries lined the dark stone walls, many of them showing important moments in Ostaxan history. Interspersed along the hallway were lamps illuminating the niches and display cases containing baubles and curios from various outlying lands invaded or conquered by the empire. Acalan ignored it all, focusing instead on how he would frame the difficult conversation he was about to have with the emperor.

While lost in his thoughts, he ran his fingers over the portfolio he carried. The symbol embossed in the center of the cover was a quill crossed with a key, identifying Acalan as the Imperial Secretary of Information. Every document in the portfolio contained valuable and sensitive information, but there was one report responsible for his current visit to the emperor. He nodded to the two guards standing outside the emperor's study, then entered through the heavy oak door, shutting it behind him. He ran a nervous hand over his close-shorn silver hair, then turned to face the emperor.

"Sire," Acalan began, waiting for the emperor to finish reading and look up. "I received a report with details regarding the recent massacre perpetrated by Akil's Firati rebels."

"Yes?" The emperor's jet-black eyebrows rose as the silence stretched. "You're not usually one to beat around the bush. What's the bad news?"

"House Cloyd colluded with Akil to sabotage House Izel's interests in the region. Trahaearn Cloyd is a traitor to the empire."

The emperor sat back in his chair with a sigh. Acalan stood silently, maintaining a neutral expression on his face. He knew he had to tread lightly here.

“How reliable?”

“Indisputable, sire.” He reached into the portfolio and took out two sheets of parchment to hand to the emperor. “The top document is the report from the agent who investigated the site of the massacre. The other is a document he recovered from a captured Firati.”

The emperor took the sheets and read each one completely before speaking again.

“Sorry, Cal. I had to be sure.” The emperor handed the documents back to Acalan.

“I understand, sire.” He tucked the sheets back into the portfolio. “I knew you would, so I verified the information and had the agent double check his report before I brought it to you.”

The emperor stood up and walked over to the window that looked out over the palace gardens. Acalan doubted he was able to see anything this late at night, but it was a familiar scene. The emperor often stared out the window when Acalan brought him a difficult decision.

“Your recommendation?”

“I . . .,” Acalan hesitated. “Send a squad of guards to escort Cloyd here to provide an answer.”

“You think he’ll have a suitable justification?”

“I think he’ll have some sort of excuse.”

The emperor grunted noncommittally, then turned and walked to the door set into the west wall of the office. He opened the door and stuck his head through, speaking softly to someone on the other side. After a short conversation, he shut the door and turned back to face Acalan.

“Sergeant Yash will bring Trahaearn here to have a conversation with me.” He paused, looking intently at Acalan. “Can you handle being present for it?”

“Of course,” Acalan said, attempting to look offended.



“Cal,” the emperor said. “We’ve been friends for decades. I know you well enough that I must ask.”

“I can be neutral if needed.”

“Not when it comes to Trahaearn Cloyd, you can’t.” The emperor went to a group of armchairs by the fireplace and sat. He gestured to another chair and continued, “I don’t blame you, but we both know you despise him.”

“Ah, you’re not wrong.” Acalan dropped into the chair. “Even so, I can keep quiet and watch. A second set of eyes and ears can only help.”

“Fair enough.” The emperor reached over and rang a bell to summon a steward. “Shall we have a drink while we wait?”

“Do you still have that Ecadian whiskey?”

“Bring that and the cigars,” the emperor said to the steward who had answered the summons.

“I admit, I’m curious to hear what Cloyd has to say for himself. I can’t imagine what excuse he could use to get out of this.”

“Curious? More like giddy.”

“Giddy is probably a little too strong.” Acalan smiled and rubbed his hands together anxiously. “Let’s go with hopeful. Maybe cautiously optimistic.” The emperor chuckled and shook his head.

The steward returned, carrying a tray with the whiskey and cigars. The two men soon had a glass of whiskey in one hand and a lit cigar in the other. They sat in companionable silence, enjoying the bite of the liquor and the smooth flavor of the smoke. After a short wait, there was a knock on the door, followed by one of the guards poking his head in.

“Sire, Sergeant Yash has returned with Lord Cloyd?”

“Send them in.”

The door opened the rest of the way, allowing Trahaearn to enter, followed by Yash. Trahaearn, as usual, dressed impeccably in the colors of his house. Silver satin trimmed his dark blue coat, with the fox symbol also embroidered in silver. He walked to the center of the room, while Yash stepped to the side of the door and stood waiting. Trahaearn frowned at the sight of Acalan, then bowed to the emperor.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your summons, sire?”

“Trahaearn! Thanks for coming out so late.” The emperor set his glass down on a small side table and stood up. He wobbled a little as he stood, before catching his balance. “Acalan here brought me a report from one of our agents, and I would like your opinion on it.”

Trahaearn tilted his head, but stayed silent. The emperor walked over to Trahaearn and clapped him on the shoulder, eliciting a slight wince. Acalan hid a smile at the emperor’s feigned tipsy mannerisms; there was no way the glass and a half of whiskey was affecting him that much already. The emperor turned and shuffled crookedly to his desk, then picked up a folder from the top of a stack. He opened it and squinted at the document inside while Trahaearn slowly drifted closer, looking on. Acalan wondered what the document was, since the sheets in question were back in the portfolio on the table next to him, and had been there since the emperor had given them back to him.

“Ah, yes. Here we are.” The emperor closed the folder and set it back down. “Have you ever been to Irida?”

“What? Uh- the island?” Trahaearn seemed utterly caught off guard by the question. Acalan wasn’t too sure himself where the emperor was going with the question.

“Yes.”

“I went there when I was younger, but it’s been at least a decade.”

“I love to fish off the coast there. But it’s been a while for me too.” The emperor swayed, then steadied himself against the desk.

“Sire, perhaps if I could read the report?” Trahaearn reached toward the folder, but the emperor put his hand on top of it.

“No,” he said. “Confidentiality and all. You understand, right?”

“Of course, sire.” Trahaearn straightened, but continued to glance at the folder. “So, what can I do to help?”

“You know,” The emperor drawled. “There was another island nearby that had pretty good shoals to fish as well. What was it called . . .?”

“Must be Ezlan,” Acalan interjected. He realized the emperor was trying to lull Trahaearn, so he decided to play along.

“No, no, no. That’s at least a few hundred leagues too far south.” The emperor winked at Acalan when Trahaearn wasn’t looking.

“Ah, I believe you’re thinking of Pamez,” Trahaearn said. Acalan wanted to wipe the smug look off his face, but contented himself to wait for the emperor’s move. “I’ve also fished those shoals before, and caught some very large Stripers doing it.”

“Right! Pamez.” The emperor smiled at Trahaearn and clapped his hands. “It was a pretty boring island if I remember right. Nothing but logging camps and a couple fishing villages.”

“That sounds right to me, sire.” Trahaearn glanced down at the folder again. “But, going back to the reason you summoned me?”

“Ah, yes. Do you have any land or business interests on Irida?”

“No, I don’t believe I do.”

“Hmm, well.” The emperor looked distracted for a moment before focusing on Trahaearn again. “I thought you did.”

“No, sire.” Trahaearn said with a smile. “I’m sorry I can’t be of service. Did something happen on Irida?”

The emperor didn’t answer immediately. He picked up the folder and turned to stare out the window. The silence dragged on into awkwardness, but just as Trahaearn opened his mouth to speak again, the emperor turned around.

“What about Pamez, Trahaearn?” The emperor lost all pretense of drunkenness, his eyes staring intently, almost demanding an answer. Trahaearn was obviously taken aback for a second.

“Er—” He blinked rapidly, then squinted with a suspicious look on his face. “I have not purchased land or invested in anything on Pamez.” Acalan smiled slightly, sure that the emperor had just caught Cloyd in a lie. “However, I do remember hearing my sons discussing something about Pamez the other day. I can’t recall exactly what was said, so it is possible one of them is working on something.”

“I see.” The emperor walked back to the desk and sat down. “So, you don’t know anything about the sudden purchase of all lumber rights on Pamez?”

“No, not at all.” Trahaearn looked surprised. “Why would anyone not local want lumber rights from that island? The shoals make shipping costs exorbitant and essentially negate any potential profit.”

“True,” The emperor agreed, nodding. “Especially with the almost unlimited Firati jungle much closer and cheaper to harvest.”

“Exactly.”

Acalan was fairly certain that Trahaearn’s was feigning his surprise, but he was doing an admirable job of maintaining a neutral expression of mild interest. The emperor stared at him for a moment longer, but there were no obvious holes in Trahaearn’s explanation.

“I have one other question for you.”

“Yes, sire?”

“Have you corresponded with any of the Firati outside of the empire’s enclave in Shani?”

“No.”

“Fine. I need to speak with your sons.” The emperor stood up and walked to the table with his glass of whiskey.

“Sire, I will send for them, but will you finally tell me what this is about?”

“Not yet.” The emperor paused to down the remainder of his drink. “Let me get to the bottom of this, and then I will explain.”

“Of course, sire.” Trahaearn nodded. “I’ll go get my boys – well, except Brenin. He is celebrating Antabal out at the Ketla manor.”

“No, you stay here.” The emperor looked at Yash, and gestured to the door. “Sergeant, you go get the Cloyds and bring them here.” Yash bowed and left the room.

“What about Brenin?” Trahaearn asked.

“If I need to talk to him after the others, I’ll send someone.” The emperor sat down again, then gestured for Trahaearn to sit as well.

Trahaearn looked at the empty chair next to Acalan, then turned and sat in the chair next to the emperor instead. The emperor refilled his whiskey before holding the bottle out to Trahaearn in invitation.

“Grab a glass while we wait.” The emperor settled back into his chair once Trahaearn took the bottle to pour. To his credit, Trahaearn looked utterly calm and composed. Either the reports were wrong, or he was convinced the emperor would not catch him in any wrongdoing.

Acalan continued to sip his whiskey while he stared into the low fire burning in the fireplace. He could not come up with a logical reason for Trahaearn to be so calm. If he was honest, he was also a quite disappointed he was not witnessing Trahaearn squirm a bit. He glanced over at Trahaearn out of the corner of his eye, but the dancing shadows prevented him from gaining any insight.

“Alun and Wynfor are both at home?” The emperor broke the silence, looking over at Trahaearn.

“Yes, though Wynfor is going to make a trip down to Nenetl soon to audit the mine.”

“And Nia? I assume she is still in Zelco?”

Trahaearn nodded. “Her last letter mentioned a plan for a summer trip back to visit. I have a feeling she will likely be too far pregnant by then, but we will see.”

“You’re a lucky man, Trahaearn.” The emperor sighed. “I wish we were all so blessed with children as you.”

“Thank you, sire.”

Acalan drained his glass, then stood and walked to the window on the far side of the room. He grabbed the bottle of whiskey on his way, refilling his glass. He had been wrong before; the gardens had several torches along the paths, allowing him glimpses of the hedges and flowering bushes strategically placed throughout.

Acalan’s last pleasant memory of walking through those gardens was over two decades old. The conversation between Trahaearn and the emperor faded into the background as he

relived that wonderful morning. It had been in the spring, and the new growth and flower buds had captivated Eirlys. He led her down the paths to the fountain near the center because he knew it was her favorite. The look of joy on her face when he told her that he had received approval to marry her was etched into his mind. In those days, Acalan had been naïve enough to think they could have a future together. He would also never forget how all their dreams shattered a few days later when her father announced her betrothal to the swine sitting in a chair behind him.

Acalan saw a flicker of movement in the shadows that slowly resolved into three men as they walked into a pool of light cast by a torch. It was Yash and Trahaearn's two sons walking down the path toward the palace. Unlike their father, the Cloyd sons wore much more casual clothing; to judge from the loose shirts, plain pants, and scuffed boots, they obviously had not expected to be going anywhere, let alone the palace. They faded away as they passed beyond the torch's reach, then slowly materialized again as they reached the next. Acalan watched them approach until they reached the door, then turned back and returned to his seat by the fire.

"They should be arriving momentarily," he informed the emperor as he sat.

"Excellent. I'd like to get this over with and go spend some time with my lovely wife before bed." The door opened and the same guard from earlier poked his head in again.

"Sergeant Yash and two visitors here for you, sire."

"Let them in."

The guard nodded and opened the door the rest of the way, waving the three waiting men inside. Like their father, the Cloyd heirs walked into the room and bowed to the emperor.

"Yes, yes. Stand up." The emperor responded in an irritated tone. The young men looked nervously between their father and their ruler. "I have some questions for you." He paused,

staring at them until he was sure they were paying attention. “Have either of you had any business dealings involving Pamez?”

“No, sire,” they responded in unison.

“How about correspondence with any Firati outside of Shani?”

“No, sire.”

“I know you wouldn’t lie to your emperor, but please think carefully. Is there anything either of you know about either Pamez or the Firati that you think I should know?”

The two young men glanced at their father, then at each other, before shaking their heads.

“No, sire.”

“Well.” The emperor sighed and looked at Trahaearn. “I guess I will be sending someone to fetch Brenin. You said he is at the Ketla manor?”

“Yes, sire.”

“Yash, fetch me the duty officer.” The sergeant bowed and left from the side door.

“Trahaearn, you and your sons can go home. It’s too late for Brenin to make it back here tonight, so I will just have to postpone this matter until tomorrow morning.”

“Sire, I will gladly send my sons home, but please tell me what this is about.”

“No, Trahaearn. It is better to wait until I have all the information.”

“Yes, sire.” Trahaearn waved his sons toward the door, and all three of them filed out of the room.

“Did that go as you expected?” The emperor turned to Acalan after the door had shut behind the Cloyds.

“Yes and no.” Acalan took a sip of his whiskey, then continued. “I expected him to deny everything, but I was hopeful I would see him squirm when you showed him the evidence.”



“I know, but I must rule out all the boys before I make an accusation against him.

Imagine if I accused him of treason, only to find out it was Brenin all along.”

“Brenin?” Acalan scoffed at the thought of the least political Cloyd getting involved in a plot as convoluted as this one seemed to be.

“I know, but again . . .”

“I know, I know. You must be sure.” Acalan waved acknowledgement. “I do think that the sons and Trahaearn were hiding something.”

“You saw the looks between them as well, huh?” The emperor ran a hand through his hair and took a deep breath. “I guess we will have to wait and see what we learn from Brenin.”

There was a knock at the side door, which immediately opened to admit a young officer. He was wearing highly polished riding boots, signifying he was a cavalry officer by trade.

“Alain, I didn’t realize you had the duty tonight,” the emperor said to him.

“Yes, sire.” Alain quickly scanned Acalan, his eyes pausing briefly on the chain of office around his neck. “You have a mission for the platoon tonight?”

“Acalan, have you had the pleasure of meeting our rising cavalry star?”

“No, sire. I don’t believe I have.” Acalan set his glass down and stood up to shake hands with Alain.

“A pleasure, sir.” Alain shook perfunctorily, and turned his attention back to the emperor while Acalan sat back down.

“I need you to send a squad out east to the Ketla hunting manor and bring back Brenin Cloyd.”

“Yes, sire.” Alain replied. “Arrest him? Or just escort?”

“Just escort him,” The emperor hesitated, then continued, “but ensure he understands that accompanying you back here is the only option.”

“Of course, sire. Is this at all possible speed?”

“Er- no, not really.”

“If that’s all, sire?”

The emperor waved a hand, and Alain bowed before exiting the same direction he entered. Acalan was pretty sure he had been hoping for an affirmative answer to that last question. As a cavalry officer, he likely looked for any excuse to use the imperial relay stations so he could continuously gallop fresh horses on whatever task the emperor gave him.

“Well, I guess that’s on hold for now.” The emperor finished the last of his drink, and looked at Acalan. “Unless you have anything else for me, I am going to see if my wife is still awake.”

“No, sire.” Acalan also drained his glass, then stood up with his portfolio in hand.

“Would you like me around tomorrow for the conversation with Brenin?”

“No, I’ll send for you after. We can work out a way forward once we know Trahaearn is the only person to look at for this.”

“Very well, sire. Have a nice night.”

“Hopefully,” the emperor replied with a grin. “You too.”

Acalan left, nodding to the guards as he went through the door. He walked down the hall, and turned the corner to return to his office. He still needed to send a few messages before he retired for the evening. Once he was a few hallways away from the emperor’s area of the palace, the hallways became very dark. The servants had been through them, extinguishing some of the

lamps and turning the rest down. The effect created a pool of light every so often, with the rest of the hallway in shadows.

Acalan preferred walking through the palace late at night like this. The strobe effect of walking into and out of the pools of light was soothing after a long day of reading and analyzing reports. He saw no one on the long walk back to his office in the southern wing, so he was able to lose himself in his musings on what Trahaearn's possible game could be in this situation. He entered his office and noted that his secretary had gone home while he was with the emperor.

He passed through the outer office and into his sanctum. There were three new messages waiting on his desk, which was less than he was expecting. Two were obviously messages that had arrived from the dovecote, but the third was a simple piece of parchment folded and sealed with an unmarked blob of wax.

Acalan picked up the message and inspected the wax seal. There was no crest or marking of any sort impressed into the wax. In fact, it looked like someone had just tipped a candle over and poured wax onto the parchment. He broke the seal and read the short message. Twice.

*The Firati incident is not what you think. Cloyd is being set up to take the fall.*

*Keep looking.*

Brenin opened his eyes to the sight of the early morning sun shining into a bedroom that looked vaguely familiar. He looked around slowly and took stock of his situation. He eventually recognized the room as the one he had slept in at Urien's manor the night before. *Or, I guess, two nights ago? Does passing out from blood loss count as sleep?* He ran a hand over his face and gathered his energy to get up. He could still feel a deep ache in his injured shoulder, and a consistent throb from his calf. *The rest of this week is not going to be very enjoyable.*

Brenin tossed the blanket off, then swung his legs around to the floor and sat up. His lack of a shirt allowed him an easy peek at his shoulder. There was a little bruising and swelling, but it seemed like Urien's relocation technique was successful. He also noticed that he wasn't wearing any pants, but his friends had left his underclothes on, leaving him with some dignity. *Silver linings, I guess.* His calf had a real bandage on it now, and looked like a professional had cleaned and dressed it. The pile of dirty leather scraps in the corner was probably what was left of his pants. *Good riddance. They're probably not worth saving.* This made his first task to get some clean clothes from the wardrobe.

He stood up slowly, testing his leg to make sure it was able to support his weight. He winced at the pain, but it wasn't unbearable. *Yes, this is gonna be a rough week. Especially with all the stairs here.* He shuffled over to the wardrobe and grabbed a pair of loose, black linen pants and a clean, white shirt. He sat on the lone wooden chair, and began the painful process of getting dressed. The shirt was the hardest to manage, but eventually he finished dressing and was ready.

Brenin reached up and wiped a hand across his forehead, removing the light sweat that had popped up because of the pain. *Now to conquer the stairs without falling on my face.* He

stood and left the room, limping slowly down the hall to the top of the stairs. He paused at the top, and before he started going down, he heard someone coming up. A couple of seconds later, Tekin came up around the corner. He stopped on the landing there when he saw Brenin standing above him.

“Hey!” He said with a smile. “Glad to see you awake. I was just coming up to check on you.”

“Thanks.” Brenin took a tentative step down, hiding his wince. “I’m alright, just a little hungry.”

“I imagine so. You’ve been out for almost a full day.” Tekin waited for Brenin to reach the landing, then turned and continued down with him.

“Well, at least I caught up on my sleep.”

“The pain is pretty bad, huh?”

“What?” Brenin said. “No, it’s not too bad. It’s bearable.”

“Liar.”

“I’m alright, I promise.”

“I never said you weren’t, but you aren’t hiding the pain as well as you think.”

“Guess I’ll have to try harder.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were just hunting for Celia’s sympathy.”

“Never.” Brenin swayed as they reached the bottom of the stairwell, holding his arms out for balance. Tekin reached out to support him, an alarmed look on his face. Brenin smiled and stood up straight. “Gotcha.”

“Fine, jerk.” Tekin scowled at Brenin. “Now, I’m not going to tell you what Celia said while you were unconscious.”

“What do you mean?” Brenin asked. “Did she say something about me?”

“She did. And I was going to tell you what the first words were when she saw you passed out and draped over the saddle of your horse.”

“So . . .?” Brenin lightly nudged Tekin with his shoulder. “Come on, just tell me. I was only messing with you.”

“Fine.” Tekin rolled his eyes. He stopped and turned to face Brenin, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “She said, ‘How’d that idiot get so drunk out in the middle of the forest?’” Tekin started sniggering as he finished, and Brenin punched him in the shoulder.

“Fine, be that way.” Brenin kept walking toward the dining room, with Tekin chuckling as he followed a step or two behind. He pushed open the door and entered to find Urien standing near the entrance at the other end of the room, facing a man wearing the uniform of the imperial army. The tall boots, lack of armor, and the saber at his hip identified him as a light cavalry soldier, but Brenin could not see the rank on his shoulders.

Urien stood with his arms crossed, apparently waiting for a response from the soldier. Govril and Celia were both also in the room. They sat at the table looking at Urien and the soldier, seemingly engrossed in whatever conversation was occurring. As Brenin walked into the dining room, followed shortly by Tekin, the soldier glanced over Urien’s shoulder, taking them in immediately. His glance was quick, but Brenin doubted the soldier missed much, if anything.

“Ah,” the soldier said, gesturing to Brenin and Tekin. “Perhaps one of these gentlemen is Brenin Cloyd?” Something must have shown on Brenin’s face, because the soldier smiled and addressed him, “I see that you are.” Urien glanced over his shoulder and saw the new arrivals, but quickly turned back to the soldier. Govril and Celia looked over and saw them as well, resulting in Celia jumping up out of her chair to rush over and give Brenin a hug.

“I’m glad you’re awake,” she said. “Are you well? Are you good to be up and walking around? Maybe you should come sit down? Are you hungry?” Brenin returned her hug, then chuckled as her obvious worry increased with each question.

“I’m fine,” Brenin said, making calming motions with his hands. “I’m just a little sore. And yes, I am hungry, but maybe that should wait until I find out what the good captain here wants from me.” Celia turned to face the soldier, but kept hold of Brenin’s arm.

“It’s lieutenant, actually. Lieutenant Alain Kuzmin, at your service.” Alain stepped past Urien and offered his hand to Brenin, then Tekin. Brenin reluctantly disengaged from Celia and shook the offered hand. Alain stepped back and gestured to Urien before speaking again, “I was just telling Lord Ketla—”

“The lieutenant has come to escort you back to Ostaxa,” Urien interrupted, icily calm, but not taking his eyes from the lieutenant’s face. “He was just about to explain to me why, and on whose authority, before you came down.”

“Actually,” Alain began. “I was about to tell you that I cannot disclose the reason. You have no need for such knowledge.” Urien’s face began to look more like a thunderhead as Alain continued speaking calmly. “And, I do not have the knowledge to pass along even if you did.” Alain shrugged and looked apologetic. “As for the authority, I am here on the emperor’s business.”

“Obviously,” Urien scoffed. “Everything you do is the emperor’s business. I want to know who sent you to take Brenin back to the city.”

“I told you,” Alain said. Urien continued to stare at him with an expectant look on his face. Alain sighed, then said, “The emperor sent me.”

“Why would the emperor want to speak with me?” Brenin asked.

“I’m sure I don’t know, but you’ll find out when we arrive back at the palace.” Alain waved his hand toward the door. “Now, we have a long ride back, so let’s get going.”

“Hold on, I’m still not satisfied—”

“Lord Ketla,” Alain said quietly, cutting Urien off. “I do apologize if you are unhappy with the circumstances of my visit.” He looked directly into Urien’s eyes as he spoke. “However, I will be leaving here with Lord Brenin Cloyd in the next 10 minutes, as the emperor commands. You are welcome to accompany us and request an audience with him to address your grievance.” Alain raised his eyebrows with a questioning look. “No? Then please do not interfere anymore.”

“Let me grab my things from upstairs, and I’ll meet you in the courtyard.” Brenin said to Alain, who nodded and turned to leave.

“Brenin—” Urien started to speak, but Brenin interrupted.

“It’ll fine, don’t worry,” Brenin said, turning to head back upstairs to his room.

“I’m not so sure,” Urien replied, following him out of the dining room and into the hallway. “What if this is a trap?”

“Oh, come on. Why would someone go to such lengths to try and abduct or kill me? If it were you, we might have reason to be suspicious, but me? I’m not important enough for subterfuge like this.”

“Well, then what possible reason is there for the emperor to send a squad of guards to fetch you?” Urien strode next to Brenin, and lowered his voice to just above a whisper. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“Of course not!” Brenin said. “I have no idea what’s going on, but I do know Kuzmin is a real cavalry lieutenant. He is too arrogant not to be, and I’ve seen him in the palace before.”

“It could still be some sort of plot.”



“You’re too accustomed to the intrigue of the court. I’m not important enough for such an elaborate ruse, especially one involving a real lieutenant and so many witnesses. Besides, what would be the goal?”

“Well—” Urien began, but paused, thinking. The two of them started up the stairs, and he still hadn’t said anything by the time they reached the halfway landing.

“Exactly,” Brenin said. “Anyone who had the resources to pull off something like this wouldn’t need anything I or my father could provide. We’re too far below the great houses to justify so much effort. It’d be easier just to hire some bandits to ambush me during one of the hunts or on the way back to the city next week.”

“Ok, ok. You’re probably right.” Urien stopped at the top of the stairs and grabbed Brenin’s arm, pulling him around so they were face to face. “I still don’t have a good feeling about this. It’s too unusual to be anything good.”

“You’re paranoid,” Brenin said. “You know that right?” He turned away and heard Urien sigh. They both went down the hall and into Brenin’s room. Brenin started to take his clothes from the wardrobe and stuff them into his saddlebags, but he struggled because his left arm was still weak and sore.

“Here, let me help,” Urien said moving from the doorway and taking the shirt from Brenin. “You’re going to have a rough time on the ride back.”

“Thanks,” Brenin said and went to grab his unstrung bow from where it leaned in the corner by the window. “Agreed; I do wish the good lieutenant had come yesterday before my ignominious defeat at the hooves and tusks of your monster boar.”

Brenin looked out the window and saw Alain standing next to his horse and looking up at the second floor. He wasn’t looking at Brenin yet, but he appeared to be scanning all the

windows overlooking the courtyard. There were nine other soldiers already astride horses in the courtyard as well, so it appeared the lieutenant had brought a full squad along with him. Brenin saw a groom had saddled Challenger, and was standing at the edge of the courtyard holding the reins and eyeing the waiting soldiers.

Alain's scan reached Brenin's window, and Brenin waved to him before turning away from the window. Urien had just finished packing the saddle bags, and lifted them to his shoulder.

"I'll carry these down for you."

"Thanks," Brenin replied as he scanned the room, making sure he hadn't forgotten anything.

"You gonna string that thing?" Urien asked, pointing to Brenin's bow.

"No point. There's no way I'd be able to draw it. I'd probably be better off trying to use it as a walking stick with the way I'm limping."

They left the room and made their way downstairs. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Urien turned toward the dining room instead of taking the direct route to the front door.

"Let's swing by the kitchen. I bet Gala has something she can pack up to give you a better lunch than whatever the lieutenant has planned."

"Sounds good to me," Brenin said.

As they approached the dining room, he heard the murmur of his other friends talking. When they entered the room though, the conversation halted abruptly.

"Hey guys, sorry . . ." Brenin stopped speaking and looked around the table where Tekin, Celia, and Govril sat, but none of them were looking in his direction. "What's going on?" After a pause, Tekin was the first to look up and answer.

“Nothing,” he said. “We were just trying to figure out why the emperor would send a squad of guards to escort you back to the city.” Even as he spoke to Brenin, he didn’t look him in the eye, looking instead at the fireplace.

“Yeah, we were wondering the same thing,” Brenin said slowly. “We couldn’t think of anything. How about you?” Brenin glanced over at Urien and saw he was glaring at Govril.

“Not really,” Tekin answered.

“Really?” Urien asked. “It looks like you came up with something, but you’re too ashamed to say it out loud.”

“What? No.” Tekin said, but still didn’t look in their direction. Brenin wasn’t sure what Urien was suggesting, but he had a sinking feeling in his stomach.

“I cannot believe you,” Urien continued. “You all know Brenin. You should know better.”

“Oh, come off it, Urien,” Govril burst out. “The only way you’d know what we were thinking was if you had the thought yourself.” Urien flushed, but continued glaring. “Besides, it does make a certain amount of sense.”

“What? How?” Urien seemed confused.

“The best traitors are ones that no one suspects,” Govril said, and shot a glance at Brenin before quickly looking back at Urien.

“Traitor?!” Brenin exclaimed. “You think I’m a traitor?”

“No – well – . . . Who really knows?” Tekin said. He glanced at Brenin, but looked down at his hands resting on the table before continuing. “Govril brought up the good point that the emperor only sends his guards out to fetch people for serious issues. And the most common is treason.”

Brenin stared at Tekin, too shocked to say or do anything. How could his friends think he could commit treason? His friends. *I thought they were friends.* That flush at Govril's accusation likely meant that even Urien must have had the idea cross his mind. Urien asking if there was something Brenin hadn't told him during the walk to Brenin's room took on a new connotation.

"You know what? Don't listen to them, Brenin." Urien glared at the other three again. "They don't know what they're talking about. Let's grab you some food from the kitchen so you can go find out what the emperor really wants." Urien put an arm around Brenin's shoulder and started to guide him to the kitchen.

"No thanks, *Lord Ketla*," Brenin said, pulling away. Urien flinched at the venom in Brenin's voice. "If you'll hand me my saddlebags, I'll see myself out. I wouldn't want anyone here tainted by association with me."

"Please, Brenin." Celia's words froze Brenin. She was the last person he wanted to hear link him to the idea of treason. "No one here thinks you're a traitor."

"It seems like all of you do to me."

"We don't. We just can't think of any other reason for the emperor to send guards out here to get you." Tekin nodded, and Govril shrugged in agreement at this statement. "On the other hand, the lieutenant didn't say anything about arresting you, just escorting you."

"Yeah," Tekin chimed in. "If there was proof of treason things would have been less cordial. But I still think it's likely that treason is involved in some way. Maybe someone else is a traitor, and the emperor wants some information from you to help prove it."

"Oh, that's much better." Brenin shook his head in disbelief. "You don't think I'm a traitor, just someone I know. Which really means a family member, since my friends are all here with me." The look between Tekin and Govril confirmed Brenin was on the right track.

“Brenin, we know you’re nothing like your father, but you can’t deny he is obsessed with trying to make Cloyd the eleventh Great House.” Tekin shrugged, making an apologetic face. “If he or one of your brothers did something devious or underhanded, the emperor might want to see what you knew about it.”

“I know my father is no saint, but I can’t believe he is a traitor.” Brenin shook his head in denial. “As for my brothers, Alun wouldn’t do anything without my father’s approval, and it is inconceivable that Wynfor is a traitor.”

“We’ve all seen some of the schemes your father came up with, Brenin.” Govril’s tone was unforgiving. “I can easily imagine him thinking he is above the law.”

“And what about that Izel comment you overheard?” Urien asked. “Those snakes are capable of anything, and if your father is embroiled in something with them . . .”

The more Brenin’s friends spoke, the more sense they were making. He didn’t want to believe his family was capable of treason, but he couldn’t deny the points made. *Plus, I’m just glad they don’t believe I’m a traitor.*

“Brenin—” Tekin started to say.

“No, you know what?” Brenin looked around at his friends, and realized he was acting immature. “You’re probably right. I’m sorry for overreacting.” There was a short and slightly awkward silence, then Celia stood up and walked over to Brenin.

“No apology necessary,” she said as she gave him a hug. She turned and looked at the others. “Right, guys?” Tekin and Govril murmured agreement, but Urien still looked upset.

“Urien?” Celia prompted him.

Urien stared at Brenin for a moment, then took a deep breath. As he breathed out slowly, he shook his head in negation and addressed Brenin.

“I disagree. An apology is necessary. I forgive your idiocy this time.” He gave Brenin a slight smile. “Just don’t forget who your friends are next time.”

“Deal,” Brenin agreed

“Next time?” Celia asked. “There better not be a next time.”

“Of course not. You know what I meant,” Urien said.

Gala came into the dining room from the kitchen, carrying a satchel and a wineskin. “I prepared something for the road since you didn’t get to eat yet this morning.”

“Thanks, Gala.” Brenin accepted the food and drink, then reached out to take the saddlebags from Urien. “I’d better get going before the lieutenant gets impatient and decides to arrest me after all.”

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The ride back to Ostaxa was long, painful, and uneventful, but that was no more or less than Brenin expected. The only consolation was the scenery; it allowed Brenin to forget about the pain to a small degree. He loved riding through the countryside with the trees and fields full of autumn colors and smells. The path through the forest around Urien’s manor was one of his favorites because of the riot of color. The trees formed an arch above them with leaves ranging from green-yellow all the way to a deep red.

He tried to engage Alain in conversation early on, but the lieutenant was unable, or unwilling, to divulge any more details on the reason for Brenin’s summons. Alain was willing to chat about inconsequential things, but nothing involving his mission to fetch Brenin. The conversations they had also helped to distract Brenin from the pain for a little while.

Much to his surprise, Brenin actually found himself starting to like the stern lieutenant. They both enjoyed hunting and horses, and Brenin discovered a similar sense of humor under the

lieutenant's duty-first mentality. Alain had several incredible and humorous hunting stories to rival Brenin's encounter with the boar the previous day.

"I wish I was able to celebrate this Antabal," Alain said after telling Brenin about a time an ostrich's kick nearly disemboweled him. "This is the first time I have not been able to hunt during Antabal since I was old enough to draw a bow."

"Despite the mishap on day one, and this current interruption, I still hope to finish up the festival back at Urien's."

"I wish you the best of luck if that works in your favor," Alain said in a neutral tone.

They stopped for lunch along a short time later, sitting in a sunny clearing not far from a stream. After he had finished eating, Brenin started to ache and stiffen up. He stood up and stretched, then strolled slowly around the clearing.

"Have you ever ridden an Urrezko?" Brenin asked. They had been discussing the qualities of various horse breeds before stopping for lunch. Brenin and Alain seemed to have similar tastes, and this seemed like a decent topic to start a pain-distracting conversation again.

"No, of course not," Alain said after he spat out a seed from the apple he was eating. "The only time I've even seen one was in a parade, from about 200 paces away."

"The equinox parades? About . . . three years ago?"

"That sounds right," Alain said, sounding surprised. "How'd you know?"

"There aren't that many Golden Horses around that I would forget when one led a parade in the city." Brenin completed his circle of the clearing and leaned against a tree not far from where Alain was sitting. "Besides, I got to ride her."

"You rode that horse? The one from the parade?"

"She was a beauty."

“I’m jealous. How’d you pull that?”

“That was the year I won the archery contest at the imperial games. The horse belonged to the emperor’s brother, and when I saw her at the ceremony after the parade, I complimented him on her. He offered to let me ride her.”

“Wow. Lucky.”

“Yeah,” Brenin agreed, then chuckled. At Alain’s questioning glance, he said, “I am pretty sure he was a little drunk when he made the offer. The next day he still followed up on his offer and let me take her out.”

“I bet he was sweating like a river smuggler in front of the tax collector the whole time you had her out.”

Brenin nodded and they both laughed at the image of a nervous prince anxiously waiting for Brenin to return. Alain finished the last of his apple, then stood up and walked over to his horse. He fed the core to his horse and looked around at the rest of the squad. Everyone had finished eating, and seemed to be enjoying the sunshine.

“Time to go, gents,” Alain said, and mounted his horse.

Brenin limped over to mount Challenger while the soldiers all clambered to their feet and began mounting as well. Once everyone was ready, they headed to the road to continue the journey. Brenin trotted Challenger up beside Alain, while the rest of the squad fell into two columns behind them.

“I’d say we have an hour to an hour and a half left until we reach the city,” Brenin said.

“Yep, almost there.” Alain smiled, then looked back at his squad. “We’ll drop you off at the palace, and then have the rest of the day off before we cycle back onto the duty roster.”

“Are you sure you can’t give me any idea what this is all about?”



“Sorry, Brenin,” Alain said, shaking his head. “I really don’t know what the emperor wants. But I wouldn’t tell you even if I did.”

Brenin sighed, then said, “I thought you’d say something like that, but I had to try.”

“You should know better, especially if you plan to be successful when you join the legions. As a noble, you’ll obviously be an officer.” Alain stated the last sentence with some significance.

“I have no desire to be a soldier. Since I don’t have a choice, though, I will put forth every effort to be successful once I am on the rolls.” Brenin glanced over to see Alain’s reaction, but the lieutenant’s face did not betray his thoughts. “Until then, I am simply the third son of a minor house, so I won’t go out of my way to live up to standards that don’t apply.”

“I can’t relate,” Alain said, shaking his head. “I’ve wanted to be a cavalry soldier since I was a little boy.”

“Well, depending on the outcome of this trip, I might not have to worry about joining the legions.” Brenin smiled half-heartedly, but talking about his future as a soldier was not the direction he wanted this conversation to go. “I’m guessing from your tone when you commented on my nobility that you are not noble yourself?”

“No, my father is a horse merchant.”

“That actually makes sense.”

“Meaning?” Alain’s voice had a slight edge to it.

“It’s rare to meet someone who can hold an intelligent conversation about horses. I figured it was because you’re a cavalry officer.” Brenin finished with a shrug, and noticed the loosening of Alain’s expression. “Did you think I was going to insult your birth?”

“Er – I–” Alain stammered, looking chagrined. “You wouldn’t be the first.”

“I know we just met, but surely you don’t think so poorly of me?”

“Sorry,” Alain said, and gestured to the soldiers behind them. “My boys tell me I am too sensitive, and it appears they are correct.”

“No harm, no foul.” Brenin smiled and flicked his hand in negation to wave the whole situation away.

They settled into a companionable silence, and Brenin busied himself trying to come up with potential scenarios for when they finally arrived at the palace. Unfortunately, each successive theory was either wildly unlikely or circled back to the idea of treason. Despite his protests to his friends, now that the idea of treason was in his mind, he was thinking it was the only logical option.

The biggest issue with treason was that Brenin knew he hadn’t done anything that anyone could consider treasonous. That left his family. His brothers were completely out of the question. He knew both almost as well as he knew himself, and he was sure they were incapable of treason. The only option left was his father. As much as they butted heads, Brenin couldn’t imagine Trahaearn Cloyd as a traitor. His father might do some questionable things, perhaps even some illegal things, but treason? It seemed very unlikely to Brenin. The risk was too high for the reward.

Eventually, the farmland slowly melded into the mixture of mills, inns, and shops that made up the patchwork of buildings at the outskirts of the city. As the buildings got closer together, the crowds also got thicker. The squad had been riding in a loose double column, but tightened up to stay close in the increasing press of bodies.

Unlike the trip out to Urien’s manor, when Brenin and his friends were forced to fight the crowd single file, the solid column of soldiers had no trouble. Although the crowd pressed in

somewhat close, they parted easily, allowing the horses to continue without slowing very much. Some in the crowds eyed the group of soldiers escorting a nobleman, but most simply continued about their day, moving aside if necessary.

Brenin saw the walls of the city approaching and started mentally preparing himself for the passage through the Powder Gate. He was already starting to sweat, and he could feel his heart beating faster. The last thing he wanted to do right now was embarrass himself in front of these soldiers, but he was having flashbacks from his childhood. When he was little, he was playing hide and seek with his siblings, and he got stuck in a tiny crawlspace under an unused barn. He laid there, trapped, for hours before Wynfor had found him and helped him get free. Ever since then, small or tight spaces had made him very anxious.

No one could really call the Powder Gate a small space, but the press of the crowd and the echoes off the arched tunnel still made Brenin nervous. The murder holes compounded the anxiety racing through Brenin's system. The same year of barn incident, Alun had pulled a prank on Brenin where he had told Brenin that their father had paid a witch to make it so that liars couldn't enter their family castle. Any who tried would find himself trapped between the two portcullises and have burning hot oil poured on them from the murder holes in the ceiling.

Brenin still remembered the morning that week when he had lied to his father, and Alun knew it. Somehow, Alun arranged to be waiting with his friends up in the room above the gate. When Brenin came in the gate, both portcullises dropped, trapping him between them. Brenin started to panic, looking up and seeing the glow from the fires heating the pots of oil.

He pounded on the inside portcullis, yelling for someone to come help him, but there was no one around. He heard the creak of a hinge and looked up, fully expecting to hot oil pouring out to burn him alive. Instead, he got a stream of cold well water right to the face. Because of his

expectation, he initially thought the water was burning oil and he screamed in (imagined) pain. He realized it was cold water about the same time he heard Alun and his friends laughing above him.

Brenin took a deep breath as they entered the Gate, but refused to look up at the murder holes threatening above. He saw Alain glance over at him and frown. It looked like the lieutenant wanted to say something to him, but the echoes and reverberations of the tunnel made conversation very difficult. Brenin refocused his attention on the beckoning daylight slowly drawing closer. Right before they made it through and into the city, Brenin couldn't help but raise his eyes to regard the iron spikes of the portcullis waiting above.

"I like you Brenin," Alain said, breaking into Brenin's rumination about hot oil and descending iron gates. "But if you are contemplating running for it, I advise against it."

"What?" Brenin asked, confused by the sudden change in tone. He noticed that Alain seemed suddenly tense, as if ready to grab Challenger's reins. "What do you mean? Why would I run now?"

"Well . . ." Alain tilted his head and squinted at Brenin. "You tensed up a lot as we entered the city, so it looked like you were preparing to run away."

"Oh," Brenin said. He obviously hadn't hidden his anxiety as well as he wanted. His mind was scrambling to come up with a justification that wouldn't make him seem like a coward or a criminal. "I was just thinking; trying to come up with reasons for this summons."

"I see." Alain didn't sound convinced, but he didn't press the issue.

"I always love coming back to the city after being away for a time. Of course, this time it was only a couple of days, but still."

“Not me,” Alain said. “I prefer the open country where I can get my horse up to speeds above a slow walk.”

“That’s fair, I suppose.”

It was late afternoon, so the crowds in the streets were starting to thin out, though still quite large. Most of the shops stayed open until sunset in the summer, but now that it was autumn, they started staying open a little past dusk. The shops in this part of the city were a mélange of grocers, coopers, taverns, and inns. The blacksmiths and armorers maintained shops in a district not far from where they rode, in a section of the city close to the river.

As they rode closer to the palace, the shops lining the streets were those that catered to the wealthy nobles. As the prices of goods and services offered increased, the number of customers decreased, resulting in the crowds slowly thinning as they rode further into the city. They rode past tailors and leatherworkers on one street, then past silver and goldsmiths on another. Closest to the palace were the city residences of the noble houses, and the most expensive shops were on the streets near them. Few besides nobles could afford to buy books, so all the booksellers did business in this part of the city.

Brenin realized the route they were taking to the palace must have purposely avoided passing near the Cloyd manor in the city. The fastest route from the Powder Gate to the palace would have taken them within one street of it. Instead, they had circled a bit and approached the palace from several blocks north.

“You really are concerned I’m gonna try to run, aren’t you?”

“Eh,” Alain said with a shrug. “I’m just a cautious man by nature. Better not to provide you with temptation or opportunity.”

“A cautious cavalryman?” Brenin laughed and shook his head. “You’d be the first I’ve ever heard of.” Alain made a face, but didn’t respond. Brenin chuckled again. “Caution from a cavalryman is like getting pears from an elm.”

They turned the corner, and Brenin went quiet as he saw the palace gates. He’d been to the palace many times in his life, but never under uncertain circumstances like this. The circumstances along with some dark rainclouds amassing in the distance gave the palace a sinister feel. He knew it was illogical, but the butterflies that started in his stomach didn’t care about logic.

They reached the gate and Alain spoke to the sergeant in charge. After a word from the lieutenant, the sergeant waved Brenin and the rest of the squad inside. The lieutenant led them to the stables situated just inside the gate to the left. Brenin saw a page take off from the guard post toward the palace as they were dismounting. *The emperor will know we’re here momentarily. Hopefully, I can soon find out what this is all about.*

“Go get some rest, boys. I’ll find out when we’re on next and send word.” Alain dismissed the squad with a wave of his hand. “Hopefully there will be enough of a break for some rest, but until we know, don’t get too rowdy.” He turned to Brenin and held out a hand.

“You’re not too bad, for a tight-lipped jailor,” Brenin said as he shook Alain’s hand.

“Jailor? I was merely a polite escort, ensuring your safety between the Ketla manor and our great city.”

“Ah, there’s that cautious cavalryman again,” Brenin said with a smile. He saw a page come out and stand waiting at the top of the steps leading to the palace entrance. “Well, I had better not keep the emperor waiting,” he said, gesturing to the page. Alain turned and looked, then nodded to the page.

“Agreed. That is Seve, he is one of the pages that waits directly on the emperor, so he will likely take you directly there.” Alain turned back to Brenin, looking him in the eye. “Good luck. I truly don’t know what exactly is going on, but I hope it all works out for you.”

“Thanks. I’m sure it will just be some sort of misunderstanding. Maybe I’ll even finish in time to meet you for a drink tonight, and we can have a laugh about the whole thing.”

“Maybe,” Alain said with raised eyebrows. “I hope so.” With a last nod, he headed for the barracks. Brenin took a deep breath, looking around the courtyard. The afternoon sun was starting to fade as the thunderclouds slowly moved in front of it. Brenin sighed as the courtyard took on the gray hue of the storm, then walked across to the stairs.

“Please follow me, sir,” the page said, turning and heading inside the palace. Brenin started up the stairs just as the first raindrops fell on his head.

Contrary to Alain's assertion that Brenin would go straight to meet the emperor, the marshal on duty subjected him to an interview, as well as a once-over by a pair of guards. Once the guards finished inspecting him, they planted him in an antechamber and told him to wait until he was summoned.

Brenin looked around the well-appointed room, but no one else was present. There were several chairs in the room, with a pair by the window to the right and a few more around the fireplace to the left. A small end table holding two pitchers and several glasses sat near each of the groups of chairs. Another door stood in the corner by the fireplace, but he didn't think it would be a good idea to open it and see where it led. He was a little too restless and didn't want to sit just yet, so he wandered over to the massive tapestry hanging directly across from the door.

The tapestry depicted a maritime scene of some sort, but Brenin wasn't sure what it was at first. The tapestry had a very intricate border surrounding a tableau showing a sea battle between ships of the empire and some other ships that he couldn't identify. The border had large symbols in the middle of each side, and Brenin did recognize all four of those. The bottom symbol was the flaming serpent symbol of the empire, and the top symbol the personal emblem of Emperor Locne III. The left and right symbols were a bit trickier, but once he realized that the symbol on the right was the triple moon of Lesta, the final symbol clicked into place in his mind.

He reached out and ran his finger over the phoenix that was Lord General Calin Izel's personal sigil. Stepping back, he looked over the battle scene again. Knowing the players and the time in history of the battle, he now recognized it as a portrayal of the final victory in the Silver Crescent. Calin Izel had led the forces that conquered Lesta for the empire 150 years ago, and the



military academies still taught this final battle as the example of pitting strength against weakness instead of going head-to-head with an enemy.

Brenin was intently studying the intricate details of soldiers and sailors fighting on the decks of the ships in the foreground of the tapestry when someone opened the second door into the anteroom. He snapped his neck around to his left at the sound of the door rebounding off the stone wall, surprised by the noise and the forcefulness used to open the door.

The silhouette of Emperor Yolizoh, first of his name, almost completely filled the doorframe. The soldier's physique of his youth was starting to fade, but he was still a large and muscular man. He wore his dark hair in a traditional soldier's braid that hung just below his shoulders. He was looking over his shoulder, talking to someone behind him, so Brenin had an excellent view of his profile. *The golden crowns are a really good likeness. Whichever engraver created the stamp for the mint, he earned every penny.* The emperor turned his rugged face toward Brenin, and suddenly thinking about coins seemed a bit frivolous.

"Brenin Cloyd," the emperor began, then seemed to register the startled look on Brenin's face. The stern visage softened a slight amount. "Sorry about the door; I didn't mean to alarm you." He shut the door behind himself, then looked at Brenin again.

"Of course, sire," Brenin replied, bowing. "It was nothing."

The emperor moved to the chairs by the fireplace and gestured for Brenin to sit across from him. He grabbed a poker, and stoked the fire before sitting back in the chair. Brenin sat across from him, but couldn't make himself relax enough to do more than perch on the edge of the plush cushion.

"Do you have any idea why you're here?"

“No, sire.” Brenin could feel the sweat beading on his palms. Logically, he knew that he had done nothing wrong. Yet, sitting in front of this imposing man, Brenin kept thinking of ever more improbable ways he might have earned the emperor’s ire.

“I have two questions for you.” The emperor paused, staring into Brenin’s eyes. Brenin nodded his understanding, but waited for the emperor to continue. “First, do you have any business holdings or interests on Pamez?”

“Pamez?” Brenin’s heartbeat kicked up a notch at the island’s mention. “Yes, sire. I recently invested in the lumber production from the island.” Brenin saw the emperor’s eyebrows rise at his affirmative answer. It appeared he expected Brenin to say no. The butterflies in Brenin’s stomach increased their frantic fluttering, and the sweat started to form on his brow as well as his palms.

“You did?” The emperor studied Brenin for a second before asking, “Why?”

“Well . . .” Brenin didn’t really want to discuss foreign policy decisions and predictions with the emperor, especially since his opinions were directly contrary to the current policy. “I thought there might be a profit to be had since the Firati have increased their raids.”

“Really. Hm.” The emperor continued to study Brenin for a few seconds that lasted an eternity. “Speaking of the Firati, have you had any contact with any of them? Outside of official channels in Shani, I mean?”

“No, sire.” Brenin said immediately. “I have never met, or corresponded with, anyone in Firat at all. Alun handles all our dealings with the family factor in Shani.”

“Hm.” The emperor squinted at Brenin, then scratched his chin and stared into the fire. “You’ve put me in a dilemma, Brenin.” Brenin’s heart jumped up to lodge in his throat.

“Si—” Brenin started to say, but was interrupted by a cough. He couldn’t get the words past his throat that suddenly felt bone dry. He reached for the pitcher on the table, and poured himself a glass of water. After taking a drink and clearing his throat, he was able to continue. “I’m sorry, but I’m not sure I understand.”

“Well, before I go into any more detail, I think we need Acalan to join us. I don’t want to cause undue alarm, and he has some pertinent information that will hopefully help us get to the bottom of this situation.”

“Yes, sire.” The mention of the empire’s spymaster did the exact opposite of easing Brenin’s anxiety. He didn’t think his heart could possibly beat any faster without exploding, and the roiling in his gut was threatening to bring up his lunch.

The emperor stood and walked over to the door he had entered from earlier. He opened it and spoke softly to the guard waiting outside. The only words Brenin heard over the heartbeat drumming in his ears were “Acalan” and “Firati,” but those were bad enough. He didn’t know what was going on, but somehow, he was linked to Pamez, Firat, and the spymaster. *This is not good. Did I somehow unknowingly commit treason? Were the others right about why I’m here?*

“Brenin?” The emperor was sitting across from him again and had obviously asked a question that Brenin hadn’t heard.

“Sorry, what was that sire?”

“I asked how you came by your injuries. Alain’s report said something about a hunting accident?”

“Ah, yes.” Brenin wiped the sweat from his brow, then took another drink from his glass of water. “The first hunt of Antabal did not go as planned. I slipped on some wet leaves when a boar charged me. I got lucky this isn’t any worse.” He lifted his right leg. “A tusk took a chunk

out of my calf, and I dislocated my shoulder when I fell into a ravine, but it could have been much worse.”

“That reminds me of one of my own hunting mishaps,” the emperor said. “I haven’t been hunting nearly as often as I’d like the past few years.”

“Well, at least Antabal will give you a chance for that. The royal hunt is at the end of the week, right?”

“Bah!” The emperor made a disgusted face. “If only. The royal hunt is just another setting for lords and courtiers to seek a decision or favor. I can’t get any real hunting done.”

“Oh. I didn’t realize.”

“Not many do.” The emperor shook his head, then reached forward to grab the other pitcher on the table. He poured himself a glass of wine and held up the pitcher toward Brenin.

“You want some of this? Or sticking to water?”

Brenin looked at his water, then shrugged and swallowed the last of it before holding out his glass for some wine. *Maybe it will help settle my nerves. But, no more than one glass.* The emperor filled Brenin’s glass, then set the pitcher down and leaned back in his chair once more.

“Well, I’m glad the injuries were minor.” Clearly the emperor had no desire to think or talk about the royal hunt any longer.

“Yes, sire.” Brenin felt like he should say something else, but he couldn’t think of anything to say. The silence stretched into awkwardness. After a couple of endless minutes, there was a knock at the door Brenin had entered from.

“Come,” the emperor said in a loud voice.

Acalan entered the room, and seeing them seated by the fire, walked over. He was wearing his normal yellow robe and chain of office. The firelight winked off the golden chain

that was his only adornment, casting spots of light onto the brown leather portfolio he carried in his arms.

“Sire,” Acalan said, bowing to the emperor briefly. He turned and looked at Brenin, giving him a slight nod. “Lord Brenin.”

“Lord Ezzoh,” Brenin replied with a nod.

“Do you have that Firati report with you?” the emperor asked Acalan.

“Yes, sire.” Acalan opened the portfolio and extracted several pieces of parchment bundled together with a piece of string. “Do you want something in particular, or the entire report?”

“Actually,” the emperor said. “Please have a seat so I can fill you in.”

“Of course, sire.” Acalan sat in an open chair, and listened to the emperor relay the conversation about Pamez and Shani from earlier. “I see,” he said once the emperor stopped speaking. “I’m guessing you want to use the letter here?”

“That was my thought. We can compare the handwriting, and if not a match, perhaps Brenin will recognize the hand that wrote it.”

“That seems like an excellent plan, sire.” Acalan took out another sheet of parchment from his portfolio, along with a pen and a bottle of ink. He handed them to Brenin and slid the end table around in front of him. “I am going to ask you to write a sentence for me; please just write normally, as if this is a letter to a friend.”

“Ok,” Brenin said. He wasn’t sure what was going on exactly, but writing a sentence seemed simple enough.

“Write this: ‘The shift change happens four hours after sunset.’” Brenin wrote the sentence and handed the sheet to Acalan, who compared it to one of the documents from the mysterious Firati report.

“Well?” the emperor asked. “What do you think?”

“Sire . . .” Acalan hesitated, then continued speaking. “I have to say that it looks like a match.”

“That is . . . surprising.” The emperor turned his head to regard Brenin. “I never would have pegged you as the traitor, Brenin.”

“Traitor?” At that word, Brenin felt a lead weight form in his stomach. His worst fears were solidifying in front of him, and he still had no idea what was going on. “I’m not a traitor. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Come now, Brenin,” the emperor said. “We have your letter to Akil. Simply communicating with the rebels in Firat is enough of a crime, but your letter provides information that allowed them to sack Shani.”

“What? Shani? What information? I don’t know anything.”

“You knew enough about the weaknesses of the fortress to tell the rebels where and when to attack.”

“No!” Brenin could not believe what he was hearing. “Why would I do any of that, even if I could? This makes no sense.”

“It’s no secret that Cloyd is trying to make the leap from minor power to Great House,” Acalan chimed in. “Eroding Izel’s hold over such an important resource is a logical move, especially if you factor in the lumber rights on Pamez.”

“I—” With each new piece of information, Brenin felt that lead weight in his gut growing heavier. “I swear I haven’t done anything you think I have. Other than buy the lumber rights on Pamez. But I don’t know anything about Shani.”

“Enough,” the emperor said, frowning. He stood up and walked to the same door as before. He opened it, and waved the guards inside. “Take Lord Brenin to one of the Noble’s cells in Velburg Tower. On your way, send Marshal Ran here so I can discuss the situation with him.”

“Yes, sire.”

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