

The old man looked down at the city, dark thoughts brewing in his head. He wore light blue robes with the symbol of his office embroidered on them. A golden birch set in a small green hill, leaves in bloom. The sigil of the highest house in his nation. The royal line. His fingers bore several rings; one platinum, three gold, and two silver. The platinum ring had an intricate design on its face; a small, elegantly made sunburst with a very small, delicate sapphire teardrop inlaid at the center. Around the edges of the sunburst was engraved the words 'truth brings tears, tears bring healing'. Another symbol, this one of a different office.

*What shall I do about him?* The old man thought, rotating the sunburst ring around his finger as he pondered. *He has been without reigns for far too long, and has turned my own council against me. Men I trusted for years, for decades! They think that by doing nothing that shall be taken down in history, I have somehow been an incompetent king. All thanks to that damned brother of mine!* The old man sighed, then was overtaken by a coughing fit. He was getting more of those now. Sixty-eight years was certainly taking its toll, and having been somewhat frail in body his whole life didn't help either. When the fit subsided, he adjusted the five-pronged crown on his head and let his eyes drift across the city.

The city was almost a thousand years old, and had never fallen. It was one of the most renowned cities not just in Neldomark, but in the world. A center of culture, science, and architecture, people flocked from nations all over to marvel at the ancient palace, walk the Hall of Honor, and maybe, if they were lucky, catch a glimpse of the Golden Birch in the courtyard of the kings. It was said among the wise that Delcaerë was built on the foundations of the City Without Walls, which had fallen many millennia ago in the Battle of Raining Blood. He was not opposed to the idea, however, it had been such a long since that city had stood that it was unknown where *exactly* it had been. Just that it was somewhere in the modern nation of Neldomark. He thought that Neldoan historians put it in that location in order to make the kings of that nation feel more important, and it had certainly worked. They oftentimes touted having the capital built on the foundations of the City Without Walls as a sign that their rule was holy, blessed by the Great Ones.

The old man snorted. Blessed indeed! Certainly not the last few years of his reign. A struggling economy, increased incursions by the Ursán, and ambassadors getting into shouting matches and nearly coming to blows. Yes, his reign was *very* blessed. *Just by the wrong god.* That much must be true. So many people in those days believed that the Lord of Torment had been fully defeated in the Second of Seven, that the evil in the world was an oily residue left over from his influence. But the old man knew the truth. He knew many truths. That was what he had sworn to do when he had become a knight of Mourning, to find, know, and keep the truth. Even though he was a king, his appointment to that office was largely unknown. He, like so many others before him, had been sent as a young man to be instructed by the Great Orders. Instructed in things such as sword fighting, which he'd never been very good at; tactics, which he could do but didn't excel at; and public speaking, which he hadn't enjoyed in the least. He had also learned more mundane things such as history, literature, and religious... things.

He had chosen to be inducted in the order because, as king, he would learn many things from his

advisers, councilmen, and spy masters. He just would have to discern what was the truth and what were lies. *Now that*, he thought as a small smile cracked his worn face, *I've always been good at.*

His eyes peered into the distance, where he thought he could make out the uneven horizon of the Dawnwalker Mountains, the titanic range far to the west. The sun was just starting to slip beneath them, and its radiant golden rays spilled into the city, reflecting off windows and roofs, statues and signs, fountains and helmets. But the most magnificent thing the sun reflected was the pride and jewel of Delcaerë, the ancient symbol of Neldomark. A massive gold statue of a birch tree stood in the courtyard of the palace, set in a mound of jade. The gilded trunks and boughs caught the rays of the setting sun and splayed them across, illuminating it as night began to fall. The leaves of the tree were made from emerald, and had been crafted by the Nelekín of Antarond, and their kin in Cragstone had supplied the platinum that filled out the veins of the leaves. The emerald leaves also reflected the sun, splashing a faint green tint onto the marble walls of the courtyard.

Soft footsteps sounded behind him. A young woman, half a head shorter than he, walked up to his side. Her face was soft and shaped like a teardrop balanced on its point. Her eyes were a light tint of blue that, at first glance, could be taken for gray. Light chestnut hair cascaded down her back in a precise braid which was topped in a silver, three-pronged crown with a small diamond inlaid in the center. Her dress was pale linen that fell to her knees, split up to her waist for riding and embroidered in spiraling vines with gold leaf. The silver-buckled riding boots she wore had been a stark, midnight black but now bore numerous dirt stains and scuffs.

"Father." Her voice was a strong alto that carried weight and authority, as was natural for a crown heir.

The old man turned his head, taking in her slightly ragged appearance. "Mírren. You're back later than I expected. You were supposed to have returned this morning." He raised a bushy white eyebrow, and Mírren knew that look quite well. It sought an answer.

Her lips scrunched into a thin line and her face pulled into a scowl. "We were attacked two leagues north of the border."

Her father's eyes widened. "Attacked? When? And by whom?"

To answer him, she reached into her belt pouch and removed a ring, tossing it to the ground.

The old man bent to pick it up, and cringed when he saw the symbol on the front. A human skull, with a knife as its tongue and black beads as eyes.

"Father, you told me San'hadar had all been destroyed. You said that *your* father's campaign against them killed them all."

He stared into the abyssal eyes of the ring, speaking quietly. "I did say that, didn't I?"

"They almost killed Marstýs, father. He'll be bed-bound for three weeks yet."

"He's strong, he'll survive." *San'hadar... They fight like rabid animals. How many men did she lose, I wonder.*

As if Mírren could read his mind, she quietly said "More than half the escort was killed, father. Even after losing limbs, the San'hadar *kept fighting.*"

"Is Enarë well?"

A smile played at the edge of Mírren's mouth. "Yes, he's well. His sisters should be proud to have a

brother like him, he swiftly took control of the skirmish after Marstýs was knocked out.”

“He’s quite the swordsman. Twenty-three years old and he has already mastered one of the Forms. Which was it again?”

“Dancing Tiger. He is a Bladesinger, after all.” The smile took hold of her. “Knowing him, he’ll probably want to master Crouching Dragon next.”

Her father chuckled. “Wish him luck with that venture; my father studied Crouching Dragon for fifteen years before he was declared a master in it.”