

The door closed behind the Neldoan diplomats, leaving the Council of Mountains alone in a mood of despair. Six men, plus the queen, made up the group that ruled the little nation of Bæryvun. Dressed in white uniforms with circles of color extending down from the high collars, more bands denoting higher rank and different colors denoting different roles in governing, the men wore their beards long on the sides but shaved on the chin and lips, with their hair braided with ringlets. None of them were without gray in their hair, and four of the six councilmen were almost all gray and balding on top to boot. Rings of gold, silver, and steel decorated their fingers and thin, plain silver circlets topped their aging brows.

Their queen sat in a high-backed, gilded chair at the foot of the oval table that occupied the middle of the room. She wore a stately dress—white, like the men’s uniforms—that bore thin bands of gold from the bodice all the way down to the laced hem of the skirt. Her own hair was graying, but not topped with a silver circlet. Queen t’Salyan Ælfaren wore a golden crown, the Crown of Storms, a gold band with forking lightning bolts wrapping around like thunderous laurels. In the center of the crown, above and between her dark brown eyes, was a winged sword pointing up; the hilts hanging between the lower ends of two lightnings. T’Salyan was a very beautiful woman with high cheekbones and delicate features only improved upon by the way her mouth was shaped; full lips, but not too large, that seemed to always be ready for a smile. Age had not hampered her beauty either, indeed, it gave her a regal bearing befitting of a queen.

“My queen, eh...” Tenth-lord d’Marn Ecard’s nasally voice broke the silence as the rest of the council, and the woman he was addressing, turned their heads from the door to look at him. He cleared his throat and adjusted the silver circlet he wore. “My queen, it would be quite wise of you to agree to their, eh, *requests*, eh, they are very agreeable. Allowing us to import metals after so long would be quite beneficial to the economy and we would be able to tax it by, eh, ah...” The man trailed off and began muttering to himself about tax percentages and royal treasuries and the like. To d’Marn, who oversaw the state treasury, it often seemed that only those numbers were the real world, that nothing outside of what was spent where and how much taxes were collected when was real.

Queen t’Salyan sighed. *Three hundred sixty seven years of Neldoan domination. Almost four hundred years of them watching our every step, recording our every word. And genocide when we break their precious Pact and deign purchase metals from Thalaan.* Once, nearly two hundred years ago, Bæryvunean merchants had purchased fifty stone-weight of bronze from a foreign power. Three months after the fact, Neldoan soldiers had discovered what remained of the unmarked shipment in the capital city of Vunara. Immediately, they had rounded up every merchant in the city and crucified them. One thousand four hundred twenty nine men and woman were hung on wood crosses outside Vunara. A month after that, a legion of Neldoan soldiers was combing Bæryvun and executing anyone who had more than a fingernails worth of the fifty stone-weight of bronze. By the end, nearly a million Bæryvunean citizens were dead.

*And we couldn’t lift a finger to stop them.* “Tenth-lord d’Marn, that sounds wonderful. Please, feel free to provide me with a written estimate of how much the treasury would increase.”

“Hm? Ah, yes, my queen. Estimates... hum. I will have those ready soon.” Standing from his chair,

d'Marn straightened his rumpled uniform coat and ran a hand through thinning white hair. He walked out, continuing to mutter to himself.

"The fool man doesn't even recognize when he's being dismissed." The speaker's voice was filled with disgust as he watched the door close behind d'Marn.

"I don't know, Hiran. I didn't see you make any particularly enlightening observations when the foreigners were here." A third man said.

Hiran began to object but was cut off by t'Salyan. "My lords, I will not have arguing or insulting in this room. Marn Ecard is a very intelligent man and quite well suited to the position he is in. I dismissed him because there are... *matters* we must discuss." Her eyes swept across the five men assembled in front of her. It was evident from the sudden discomfort among them that they knew the 'matters' she spoke of.

"My queen," d'Hiran looked at her over steeped fingers, "I do not believe what you proposed last month is the wisest choice of action. We first would have to expand our military, and even a hint of that would land all of our heads on the chopping block." Tenth-lord d'Hiran Tanevir was the marshall-general of Bæryvun and so oversaw any military action. Which, under the Pact, was limited to basic training of no more than three-thousand men and patrolling the borders they did not share with Neldomark. The rings of color on his uniform were red that represented the blood of soldiers.

The man across from d'Hiran snorted. "I certainly do not wish to lose my head either, but—" Other men cut in and conversation rose to nearly a shouting match. Only t'Salyan and the man who had backhandedly insulted d'Hiran remained silent, the former listening to the energetic debate and the latter staring down at the table.

"Could have seven thousand soldiers ready—"

"—kill us over a missing penny, and not to mention—"

"—which isn't, of course, to say we *couldn't* do this peacefully. However—"

"—certainly! It isn't like the last time we made peace with Neldomark they made us their *vassal*! And don't forget—"

D'Hiran, after a few minutes, was now standing as the other men looked up at him, waving his arms in grand gestures as he described his own military prowess. Before he could tell how he would defeat Neldomark, he was interrupted by "Are you *mad*? The marshall-general of Neldomark is Aryis Kharne! He could beat you in his sleep, not to mention that insane man Enhiras Mekam. *He* would—" And the arguing began anew.

The only man who had not joined in, the youngest of the five with only a little gray at his temples, was now turning his circlet in his hands. The silver band was decorated with scroll work in imitation of the crown that t'Salyan wore, shallow etchings mirroring the cast lightning on the Crown of Storms. T'Salyan leaned over to him and whispered "Rontar, would you like to add anything?"

D'Rontar Vunoran did not look up from his circlet as he replied. "Not yet. I think I'll let them exhaust themselves and then, when there's a break in conversation, say something profound. That way, they'll think I've been listening this whole time and," a smile cracked his face as he glanced at t'Salyan, "they'll wonder how often I've been listening when it appears I've simply been staring."

"You little rat!" T'Salyan poked his shoulder as he began to chuckle. "You just live for chaos, don't

you?”

“Mm, maybe a little.”

That last bit was said as someone roared “You’re an idiot, Hiran! You’ll get us all killed!” Silence crashed over them like thunder, and all eyes, save Rontar’s, turned to the queen.

She opened her mouth to speak, but was forestalled by Rontar.

“The tree of liberty,” he began softly, not looking up from the circlet slowly turning in his hands, “must from time to time be watered with the blood of tyrants—”

“See! That’s what I said!” Hiran was silenced by a gesture from t’Salyan.

“—the blood of tyrants,” he looked directly at Hiran, “and patriots.” Setting his circlet in front of him, he straightened in his seat and ran his eyes over the little group at the table. “There is a thing you must understand, all of you: people, individuals, change. Man as a whole has never changed and never will. Time goes on and ages come and pass, but that remains certain. We have lived our whole lives not merely under the shadow but also under the sword of Neldomark, fearing it may fall on our necks at any moment, fearing that if one foot goes out of line, if we misplace one penny, they will destroy us.

“We wish for our own freedom? We wish to govern our little nation as we will, without looking fearfully over our shoulder for a Neldoan legion?” He paused, and one by one every man at the table nodded slowly. “Then this also you must know: all things have a price and all decisions have consequences. If we truly wish this thing, if we truly wish to be free, there is a price we must pay. Not a price in gold, jewels, or any other part of material worth. Nor yet a price paid once. The price we must pay is that of the blood of our sons and brothers, from this generation to the next and on and on until the breaking of the world. For freedom, for ownership of our own nation, many *must* lay down their lives. Even some at this table. Perhaps all. There is no other way.

“And there never was.”

Everyone at the table was leaned forward, listening carefully to every word d’Rontar said. D’Hiran sighed and sat back, thumping in his chair. “My lord Vunoran, you tell rightly. I do not wish to die, I wish for my grandchildren to live without terror of an evil empire hanging over their shoulder. I wish for them to trade as the wish. And I wish them to be *free*. Myself, at least, will pay this bill if it comes due.” Standing from his chair, the old general drew a small knife. All eyes were now on him as he recited an ancient oath. “By my word—” he tapped his lips with the flat of the blade “—by my strength—” he tapped his arm “—by my heart—” his chest “—and by my blood—” he drew the blade across his palm, the blade glistening with blood “—I, Tenth-lord d’Hiran Tanevir, swear to defend the nation of Bæryvun and seek the freedom of her people. May my soul be forever damned if I break this word.”

Tension in the room was palpable. “Tenth-lord Marshal-general d’Hiran Tanevir, that is an oath the like of which has not been spoken in this room for almost five hundred years.” T’Salyan’s gaze turned across the other men, and they exchanged glances that spoke more than a thousand words could. As one, all but d’Rontar stood and recited the same oath, complete with the shed blood. D’Rontar sat in his high-backed chair, staring through the table at nothing as his hands once again rotated the silver circlet.

He chuckled softly. “I never thought I would see this day come, my queen. Well, we must all stay together, or we must all die separately.” With a wry smile, he too stood and gave the oath. The five men

turned to the queen expectantly.

Standing, she completed the ancient ceremony. “By your word, by your strength, by your heart, and by your blood, I, Queen t’Salyan Ælfaren hear and accept your oaths. By my rule, by my throne, by my crown, and by my blood, I command you to keep your oaths until the day you die.”

As one, the six people recited the end of the oath. “May our souls be forever damned if we break this word.”

With trembling hands, t’Salyan removed the Crown of Storms from her head proffered it to each man in turn, this a different oath. In turn, they received it and kissed the hilts of the sword inlaid onto it, then drew a line of their blood on a tine of lightning. When lastly d’Rontar stained the lightnings of the crown with his blood, t’Salyan returned it to her head. Now her whole body trembled, and as she sat back down, she dimly noticed that the five men also shook. “My lords, please depart in the knowledge that after today, Bæryvun will be a free nation once more, or will be utterly destroyed.”

And she was right beyond knowing.