

Fires of Lomar

from the tales of Leviron

The Nemerom expedition

“There is no more apt a way to put it, than this: they are aboritions of the worst possible kind. They were born of the vile, unholy forms of disgraceful carnality of which the demons of our world are renowned. They are the spawns of the dark masters of the underworld. Many who considered themselves the most blessed, the utmost paragons of our mighty and all-powerful divines, sought to challenged them, and were proven unworthy when faced with the fury of Hell’s demon-fire and the ones who wield it.”

“Never forget, oh ye who seek the mercy of the Gods: our holy protectors give to those who are worthy without repercussion; but the demons give to all who accept, and take all in return. Those with the Unholy Flame burning in their soul live lives lined with death, destruction and cries of the suffering of others. Should the day of judgment come, these men and women will find themselves not at the demons sides, sewing death and destruction further in the next life, but will instead spend the rest of eternity with searing iron collars wrapped around their necks, feeding the evil of the hell-spawn with their torment.”

“I say unto you, my fair brothers: Look not upon the red-eyed southerners with awe, for they are only to be pitied. They sacrifice the purity of the souls they are for brief glory in the wilting life. They are the children of evil, and they will not rest until all the world is transformed into a laid table of suffering and anguish for the demons to feast from.” (*Father Pervor, High Acolyte of Rhoended, 416th year of the Gods*)

“Ever since I first began to understand the meaning of the written word it has been regarded as an absolute truth that the Flame had a fate in store for us all. The beggar, the farmer, the trader, the craftsman, the outlaw, the priest and the king alike, we are all what the Flame chose us to be. As I approach the autumn of my time in this world all the many tomes I have read start to linger in my mind, until they begin to form new thoughts; ideas and concepts never committed to ink. I admit freely, as the wavy lines of my letters leave little room for doubt, my hands tremble as I write, for the words that come to me speak clearly. They go against lessons taught to every child from birth; traditions rooted all the way back to when we first escaped from the clutches of our demon captures. Should the unenlightened mind read these words and see my name, it may very likely mean I will not live into the winter of my life. But if the Flame truly does have a plan for us all, it can be no coincidence that the courage to sit down at my desk and pick up a quill should come upon me at this very time. I grow ever more convinced that the Lords want them to be spoken, and to be heard.”

“In the Brohivian remnants to the north, among the houses that ally themselves to the King in Crylin, war rages on. The great Brohivia continues to divide, though this time it is not the squabbling and bickering of the nobles that brings it on. The new field of battle is hearts of the common folk. The Church of the divine Gods spreads its word to the people, preaching hope and salvation, and turning them away from the King. The prospect of freedom from the King’s restrictions is welcomed by many, hundreds flock to the worshiparies to say prayers to the non-existent entities the priests claim will provide them with a place in paradise. Nobles and knights fall prey to them as well, some out of a desire for the power of control the church wields, yet others, to my great sorrow, out of true faith. Thus war rages between the Crown and the Church, a war fought not over land, but over hearts, and every day it rages on, as many hundreds of people pay the price. And when I hear my fellow priests talk to me, I see the signs of similar war yet to come to my home as well.”

“When I was little, father Gentar told me: ‘This is the way the followers of the false divines are. Those who refuse to accept the blessing of the Flame are doomed to live their lives without the clarity it provides.’ My brothers on the other hand are all devout followers, yet they speak the same things: making and enforcing of laws belong in the hands of the Flame-touched, who have the true clarity to rule. These are identical to the words the northern priests use to draw support to their cause. At first the answer to the conundrum eluded me. Countless nights had I spent awake in thought on this. The answer came to me, where they all usually do: from my time spent among the common folk.”

“On my journey to Riverade I passed through the town of Rushyndar, a small settlement built aside a creek ripe with fish. As I walked through the street I spotted a pair of brothers, arguing over a fishing net. They were screaming at each other, it was escalating to the point where punches would soon start to fly. Thus I stepped up. ‘What seems to be the problem?’ I asked them. They went on to explain to me, that they had been sent down to the river by their father, who had been stricken ill. They were to catch fish from the river, then gut them and collect them in a pale. ‘Father said I was to do the fishing and my brother cut them open.’ ‘That’s not fair!’ the younger brother shouted. ‘I never get to use the net! I want to catch the fish!’ And so I spoke the first thought that came to my mind. ‘Do not be stubborn, children.’ I said. ‘Your father sent you here with a task, and gave you each a part in it. If all you do is bicker about it, and don’t do your own tasks, there will be no fish for you to eat.’ It was not until later that I realized, in that moment the Flame had gifted me with a great revelation.”

“We, the devout of the Flame are the younger brother, though we do not wish to admit it. We would go to arms against the king to be the ones to rule, when that is not the task the Flame has given to us. When the seven lords first united it was not Ruar the first Flame-touched who took up rule, but Huar the Mighty. Huar guided the men of Lomar to a life of harmony through law, and Ruar spent his life giving council, preaching the will of the Flame to all who had not yet come to know it. It was his destiny to guide the soul, and that is the destiny the Flame has in store for us as well. So if it is my fate to be the light in the dark, to be the spark fallen from the realm of the Flame, and not to command armies and rule cities, I shall accept it with pride, and do my part to help my fellow man. And I urge you, reader of my words, to take them to heart, and see the truth in what I say. Let us not bleed our beloved Lomar, just to bicker over a fishnet.”

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The arrival in Nemerón

Lieutenant Igarla woke up unpleasantly again. The world around her was unstable, rocking back and forth. Her stomach ached, and her head was spinning. She fell to the floor from the hammock she was in, landed on the hard wood below nearly hitting her face. She could feel a familiar ghastly sensation in her belly. Grasping at her mouth and breathing as deeply as she could, she stumbled toward the stairs, carefully avoiding the other sleeping soldiers in the room.

As she pushed open the trap door she expected to be hit by the light of day. Instead she was greeted by strong storm clouds blotting out the light of the sun, and raindrops the size of pebbles. She found herself on the deck of the Hongar, one of many ships in the Lomaran fleet that was en route to Nemerón. The floor was wet and slippery. Igarla nearly fell several times before she made it to the edge of the ship, leaned over the siding and belched into the water. She felt a brief moment of relief as the pain in her stomach subsided for a time, before her stomach began to churn once more from the constant rocking of the ship. She could see several of the sailors looking at her with pity, or with sympathy, or some with dismay.

"Still sick?"

Igarla heard a voice come from behind her. She turned to face one of her fellow squad mates. His name was Hrialvin, and he was one of the special soldiers' field physicians. His build was shorter than average, his face round, full and clean shaven, his hair light brown and cut short, and the irises of his red eyes were a light hazel color.

"No, Hrialvin." Igarla replied. "I just decided that my supper was not tasty after all."

"I suspect that to be a lie." Hrialvin gave a small chuckle as he approached her.

"We can't all be as pure and valorous as you..."

Hrialvin reached into a pocket in the inner side of his jacket and pulled out a small pouch. It was full of some kind of herb Igarla did not recognize.

"Have you been drinking the potion I gave you?" Hrialvin asked her as he placed a pinch of the herbs on a leaf, and began rolling it up.

"For a while." Igarla responded. "I ran out three days ago."

"You ran out?" Hrialvin raised his eyebrows.

"Yes. And it didn't work anyway."

"That's not possible. How much did you take at once?"

"Like you said, I took a swig every time the headaches started to come. It was of no use."

"Did you wait for it to take effect before taking the second sip?"

"What? No."

"Well then there's your problem."

Hrialvin tied the rolled up leaf together with some small string, and held it up to Igarla's mouth.

"Here. Inhale these. It'll help."

Igarla put the end in her mouth just as Hrialvin struck up a tinder-twig and lit the other end. Igarla started to breath in the fumes emitted by the burning herbs, and immediately her feelings of nausea started to grow more tolerable. She closed her eyes as the sensation of not feeling like total shit came over her for the first time in several weeks.

"Better?" Hrialvin asked.

"Yes." Igarla said. "Why have you been keeping those weeds a secret all this time?"

"Because when overused they are poisonous. I was worried you would take too much." As he said this, he removed the roll from Igarla's mouth, and put out the embers. "And judging from your use of the seasickness potions, I guess it's a good thing too."

"It's medicine, right? More of it can't be harmful. How was I supposed to know?"

"Because I said so, for one."

Igarla averted her gaze. She felt somewhat ashamed. Hrialvin *did* warn her, she had just forgotten.

"It's fine." Hrialvin smiled. "I'm used to being ignored when I give warnings. The captain always says; 'Never you mind that, Hrialvin, just patch them up when need be. Part of the job, right?'"

"That doesn't sound like something captain Palanor would say. He is a much more cautious man than that."

"He may have just been joking. I can't always tell with him."

"That sounds more like him."

The two stood and starred at the waves for a bit while sailors and deckhands scurried around them. The rain kept pouring, and the wind was kicking up as well. Igarla crossed her arms and began rubbing her sides to try and stay warm. It was a cloudy day, and the view was unremarkable.

"Do you think it will be much longer?" Igarla asked.

"No. We have been at sea for three weeks. Even if the winds are unfair we should be very close by now."

"I get the feeling I'm going to hate Nemerom."

"Hell, Igarla, I could have told you that before we left. Trust me, you'll see. The weather is going to be the best part of our stay."

"Lords help us..."

"Indeed..."

Hrialvin's prediction was right. By midday next day they had sighted the Nemerone shoreline, and by that afternoon the Lomaran ships had docked in the port of the city of Sulhjadavik. It was renowned in Nemerone as the gateway to the world, for it was the coastal city built closest to the colonies in the southern islands. Nothing went to the colonies without passing through Sulhjadavik at one point. As the ships were cast ashore, and Igarla came up on deck to get on dry land, she got her first view of the city from afar. She could see many people scurrying in the docks, carrying crates, sacks and barrels, filling and emptying containers of fish and other goods. Market stalls could be seen all throughout the streets, and armed soldiers were patrolling regularly.

Igarla climbed up on deck right behind her commanding officer, Captain Palanor. He was about Igarla's height, red-haired and green-eyed. His sideburns went all the way down to his jaw, and separated from them he had his beard cut to small size.

“Never thought I'd be seeing this city again.” he said quietly.

“It's quite impressive.” Igarla said, mostly out of politeness to the hosts rather than genuine intrigue.

“The empire aims to impress.”

Palanor said no more, as his eyes were caught by something on the docks. The first of the Lomaran ships, the Red Tide, had already weighed anchor, and a tall, gray-haired man in decorative armor with a long red cape had already walked ashore accompanied by several heavily armored guards. The man was approached by a man and some footsoldiers. The soldiers were clad in steel plate and armed with shields and halberds, while the man wore black robes decorated with golden and silver patterns. He also had a hat on, similar in color and decoration, and he was followed by a young squire, who held an umbrella over his head to protect him from the rain. Igarla recognized the Lomaran as colonel Dolgovar, leader of Lomar's expeditionary forces. The Nemeronean on the other hand she did not know. The two appeared to exchange words on the dock, just as the Hongar pulled up next to the peer. The members of captain Palanor's squad of special soldiers were already lining up behind Igarla in full gear. Igarla took one last second to check behind her for this.

“Ready, lieutenant? Time to go ashore.” Palanor said.

“About time...” Igarla murmured. “I can't take another second of this Lord's damned ship.”

Palanor smirked. The sailors started throwing ropes to men on the dock, who in turn tied them to pillars on the side, and then they brought out a wide plank and laid it down between the ship and the peer. As they finished the sailors moved to the side, and stood up straight. Palanor took the first step off the ship, and Igarla beckoned for the rest to follow her. The special forces unit, known as the Fire City First marched onto the dock in two straight lines. Igarla felt a rush of relief come across her to finally be on stable footing once more. Due to the deluge pouring from above, the term “dry land” did not feel appropriate.

From the ship on the opposite side of the pier, the Red Tide, the one the colonel was aboard, a unit of heavy infantry marched down across their drawbridge and moved up alongside Palanor's unit. The two units marched side by side to the end of the pier, where Dolgovar was waiting. As they arrived in front of him both Palanor and the other captain raised their hand beside them. The units came to a halt.

“Captain Palanor, Fire City First special forces reporting, sir!” Palanor saluted.

“Captain Dareesha, Fire City First heavy infantry reporting, sir!” The woman leading the second force said aloud.

Dolgovar saluted back.

“At ease, soldiers.”

The two captains relaxed their stance, and the colonel came to shake hands with both of them. Dolgovar was a tall man with short silvery hair, brown eyes, and a clean shaven face. His face had a great many wrinkles on it, but only a few from age. Most were the marks of scars he obtained during his service. His decorated armor was spotless. No scratches or signs of dents that had been repaired. The flame pattern on his breastplate was as shiny and complete as the day it was given to him, when he became colonel. The long red cape on his back added a noble, imposing look to every move he made. Igarla remained in silence behind her captain as he spoke to him.

“What’s the plan, sir?” Dareesha asked.

“The gentlemen behind me are members of the welcoming comity. They’re going to lead us to the city square for a short ceremony. The rest I’ll let you know as soon as possible.”

“A ceremony?” Palanor asked.

“That's right. Apparently the emperor Nemeron has come to greet us in person.”

“The emperor is here?” Palanor's eyes widened.

“He is. And it looks like he has a speech prepared and everything. For now follow the gentlemen in the suits of armor behind me.” He gestured with a thumb over his back. “I must see to the other ships.”

“Understood, sir!” Palanor and Dareesha said in unison. They straightened out and saluted.

“Strength and valor!” Dolgovar said.

“Courage and honor!” The two replied.

Igarla couldn't help but let out a smile as the colonel turned his back. Dolgovar was one the most reputable officers in the Fire City, the capital city of Lomar. He was well known for being a man who never held back, whether it be in a fight or a conversation. Igarla herself only rarely spoke to him privately, but it was clear that he had a sense of humor, which he kept at his side at all times. He had demonstrated this, when he called the dignitary's armed guard “gentlemen in the suits of armor”, deliberately avoiding the phrase “soldier” or “man at arms”.

Dolgovar moved on to the other peers followed by his escort. Palanor looked at Dareesha.

“How's your machtar, captain?” he asked her.

“Practically non-existent.” she replied.

“In that case, how about I take the lead? I can do the talking.”

“Knock yourself out.” she gestured forwards and smiled.

Palanor gave the signal to begin moving out, and the two formations of quite diverse troops started to move toward the end of the dock. As they approached the man in the fine black clothes, Palanor took several steps ahead of the rest.

“Allow me to bid you welcome in Sulhajdavik, gentlemen.” The dignitary greeted them with a shallow bow.

Palanor bowed politely and spoke back to him in the dignitary's native tongue of machtar. The man's eyes widened and he let out a smile of relief to hear the captain speaking the language. Igarla recognized only a little of what he was saying. As best she could tell, it was just some greetings and him asking the man to lead the way for them. After a brief conversation the man turned his back and started walking down one of the streets. His escort formed up behind him.

“Move out!” Palanor gave the order.

The Lomaran forces started to march after their leader. The special soldiers and the heavy infantry continued to move side by side in two columns. As they walked across the dirt ground roads of Sulhajdavik Igarla got her first real look at a major Nemeran city. The houses were for the most part made of wood with wooden tiled roofs. The architecture of the homes was uninteresting. Craftsmen's workshops had only the plainest of symbols hanging above their doors, the general look on people's faces were dull and saddened. Although she was unsure if this was the general way things were, or if it was a reaction to seeing Lomaran soldiers in their home. The gazes of the folks who stopped to watch them were mixes of fear, curiosity, and disgust. Lomarans with their red eyes made quite a first impression.

Towards what Igarla guessed was the center of town she could see a large group of seemingly stone buildings, which were elevated above the common districts. No doubt the residences of the wealthy. It was far away, but she believed she could make out a wall surrounding the inner section with several decorative rooftops, as well as a castle, cathedral towers, and other structures. The contrast between the center of town and the rest was quite eye-catching.

The view of the streets did nothing to undo this impression either. Beggars in torn rags sitting in alleys under whatever makeshift shelters they could find were everywhere. The hostile mood was amplified by the pouring rain. This was, without a doubt, not a happy place. Now this was not Igarla's first time abroad, she had taken part of short visits to Crylin and Livador, two countries on the northern border of Lomar. She was well prepared for the fact that Lomaran society

was somewhat unique by the world's standards. Lomarans do not allow poverty to get quite this out of control, and the gaps between the classes are also far narrower. Yet even though she was familiar with foreign culture, this sight was well more disturbing than she expected.

The streets soon started to widen, and before long the dirt ground was replaced by paved stone. The path they were taking led to what looked like the main market square of the city. Boutiques and stalls were erected around the perimeter; however the center area was almost entirely empty. Towering over the whole of the square in the center was a statue of a man in decorative armor riding a warhorse with a drawn sword raised in the air. Igarla recognized the statue as a depiction of the country's founding ruler, Lord Emperor Frodari Nemeron I, a man with a reputation of a cunning, ruthless warlord, who conquered the entire continent of Maradar and united it under a single banner. The empire he founded not more than a few decades ago still bears his name.

The first thing Igarla noted upon looking at the statue was that the armor the Lord Emperor was wearing looked frankly impossible to fight in. The size of the pauldrons on his shoulders would have restricted the movement of his arms far too much, and they didn't even look like they offered that much protection. The rest of the armor pieces gave similar impressions. If the statue was even a somewhat accurate description, this man dressed for theater, not war. Still, he must have been talented in the area of strategy to accomplish all that he has.

Under his statue was a large elevated stone stage, built for occasions like this, no doubt, when important people had speeches to give before the whole of the city. Armed guards were placed all around the sides of it. The marching Lomarans arrived from the right side. The Nemeron soldiers led them directly across, and stopped right at the far end of the stage. Palanor signaled a halt. The Lomarans stopped at once, with the stage on their right side.

"Eyes right!" Dareesha called. Her squad turned to the right, and stood at attention.

"Eyes right!" Palanor gave the same order. The two units now both faced the stage, with the heavy soldiers in the front in a long line, and the special soldiers right behind them. The officers of the groups left their stations to walk up to the center of their lines. Igarla followed right in Palanor's steps. As they walked back in the direction they came, she could see that the rest of the squads were arriving from the same direction as they did. In total the Lomarans had brought six units to Nemeron. The Fire City First and Second special forces, the Fire City Fourth, Fifth and Sixth light infantry, and the Fire City First heavy infantry. All these units were under the command of colonel Dolgovar. One by one they made the same maneuver as the first two did. They lined up behind them and turned to face the stage, in a fine geometrical and choreographic display. Around the square a crowd of townfolk started to gather. Attitudes seemed to vary from interested to terrified. The general reaction Lomarans received outside of their own home. Dolgovar and his officers were the last ones to arrive on the scene. They took up a position at the very front of the assembled army.

The rain continued to pour, and it could be heard clinking off the armor of those standing in front and behind. The special forces did not wear steel armor, so Igarla felt a lot less cold, then she imagined most of her comrades were.

Dolgovar walked up to the dignitary who greeted them at the docks. The two began to talk, but they were too far away for Igarla to be able to hear any of it. She got the impression though, that Dolgovar was impatient. He was constantly looking around as he spoke at the various streets leading to the square, and the man was making calming gestures with both hands, as if to reassure him.

The rain seemed to somewhat clear up in the next five minutes they spent standing at the square. Dolgovar walked up to each of the captains one at a time to exchange a few words. When he arrived at Palanor's squad he said the following:

“Looks like it's not just the weather of Nemerom were facing today, but their punctuality as well.”

“What's the delay?” Palanor asked.

“We're waiting on the Emperor's arrival. He was supposed to be here before us, but it would seem he has been delayed.”

“Understood.”

“Once he gets here he will give us a welcoming speech. Hopefully once this annoyance is dealt with we can get down to business. When he's done, I want you to follow Dareesha down that street.” He pointed to a street leading to the east. “The local barracks is filled, so we'll be setting up camp outside the city walls.”

“Yes sir.” Palanor said.

Dolgovar glanced sideways at Igarla, who was watching the exchange in silence.

“You doing all right, lieutenant?” he asked with a smile.

“Still getting over the seasickness, sir, but otherwise I am. And yourself?”

“Quite good, thank you. Hang in there, all of you.” Dolgovar moved his eyes between Igarla and Palanor. “We will get a chance to rest up soon enough.” with that he saluted at them. Igarla and Palanor did the same.

Once Dolgovar moved on to the rest of the officers, Igarla turned to Palanor.

“Is Nemerom really famous for this?”

“Let's just say, they have a tendency to... overestimate time left.”

“I see.”

Not too much later after that the people on the square started to stir, and a large coach pulled by two white horses came turning around the corner to the north. The coach was a flashing golden color, and the driver dressed in fine clothes. Behind them was a long line of black armored

horsemen. They stopped right behind the stage and came to a halt. Two modestly dressed servants popped out first, and scurried to get a small portable tent roof erected over the door. Once they succeeded a man dressed in flamboyant golden silk stepped out under the umbrella. As he walked up the steps to the top of the stage Igarla got a better look at him. The garb he was wearing was golden with silver and ebony decorative motifs, and a fur lining. He had no armor on, not even a cloak. He was wearing a crown though, a black crown, with what looked to be jade, sapphire and ruby stones embedded in it. The man himself looked rather old, but not frail or weak. His face looked gracefully aged, his beard was well trimmed, as well as his hair; he walked out with a friendly smile on his face, and carried himself with good posture. He reminded Igarla of descriptions she had heard of Amanar, the first consul of Lomar. Less of the warlord type, and more the diplomat, the politician.

Following closely behind the Emperor was a younger man. He looked to be in his early twenties, and he was dressed in a similar fashion, but more subtle. He also had a crown on his head, although it was probably more like a decorative headband of ebony color. Igarla came to the conclusion that this boy was the prince, the Emperor's son.

As the Emperor walked up to the front of the stage the soldiers cleared out of his way, and his son remained several steps behind him, standing still with his arms crossed. He took a stand at the very edge and straightened out. After clearing his throat he began to speak:

“Renowned warriors of Lomar!” he said with a strong Maradar accent, nevertheless flawless grammar and intonation in the Leviron common tongue. His voice was deep and powerful, his rhetoric sharp and well-rehearsed “Allow me to bid you all welcome in my humble homeland! After the many years of tension and conflict between our two peoples in the Islands it is pleasing to me, to be able to host you all here in Sulhajdavik. I am convinced that this is but the first step in the construction of a lasting relationship between the two greatest nations in the world. Let our accomplishments shine as inspiration to the rest of the world, and its people.”

“Attention!” Dolgovar shouted with a voice that carried across the whole square. The Lomaran soldier all locked their feet, put their arms to their sides and stood at attention.

“Present arms!”

At the colonel's second order the army all drew their weapons and raised them in the air.

“Strength and valor!” Dolgovar shouted.

“Courage and honor!” The rest of the army finished. This was the known motto of the Lomaran army, and their greeting as well. The Emperor at first looked somewhat shaken, but quickly recovered, raised his hands to his chest, and bowed lightly.

“You honor me.” he said with humility in his voice. “I hope, and will do my best to insure that for the length of your stay, my country provides you with nothing but the best it has to offer,

just as I am sure you will give your all to accomplish your tasks.”

He paused and the Lomarans sheathed their weapons and stood at ease.

“Now allow me to address my people, who have gathered here to witness your arrival.”

He then turned his gaze away from the gathered army, and began talking to the crowd of townspeople. His machtar, which is generally not a pleasing language to the Lomaran ear, sounded just as fluent and eloquent as his Leviron common. He gestured with his hands in wide motions to accompany what he was saying. Igarla did her best to pay attention, but the vocabulary with which he was talking proved too much for her, as she had not enough time to think on the meanings of words.

“Do you understand him?” Palanor asked her discreetly.

“Not really, sir.” she replied. “I was following up until 'Gathered subjects, I bid you welcome today!' Then I just lost him.”

Palanor watched and listened. After a few sentences he leaned closer to Igarla and started whispering.

“He is basically telling his people not to fear us. That the scripture says bad things of us, but the gods have mercy on all who repent in the end.”

“He's trying to talk his way out of not killing us on sight...” Igarla sighed.

“Yes, but he's doing a much better job of it then I'm making it sound. The man is good with words, I'll give him that.”

The Emperor kept talking for a while, then he cut off, and the crowd cheered for him. He held his hands up to acknowledge the crowds adoring. And then among thunderous applause he took his leave, followed by his son, and got back in his carriage.

“Prepare to move out!” Dolgovar shouted. As per the colonel's former instructions the army started moving towards the street indicated. The march lead them outside the city walls and the outlying houses. Once they reached the open area outside, they began assigning areas to units, then erected tents and set up camp.

Igarla was in the middle of setting up her tent. The task was made all the more annoying by the rain, which though lighter than upon arrival was still dampening both the soil and the spirits. She kept reminding herself, that once she was done, she could get into a dry area at last.

“Can I offer you a hand, my lady?” came a familiar voice from behind her. She turned to see a man wearing similar special forces leather. He had short black hair and a trimmed round beard. He was smiling at Igarla's misfortune.

“Belvar!” Igarla let out a laugh of happiness to see her good friend from the Fire City Second special forces. “I was wondering when you would come to gloat with your superior tent-setting skills.”

“It would be a lot less fun if it wasn't you I was making fun of. One would think a woman like you would be better with her hands.”

“What can I say?” she shrugged and stood up to face him. “We all have our ups and our downs. You pitch a great tent, I actually know how to fight.”

“Ha!” Belvar chuckled. “C'mon. Let's see if we can't get you set up.”

He got down on his knees in front of the materials soon to be Igarla's tent. The two of them together finished quite quickly.

“I must say,” Belvar said once done. “This is not what I expected Nemerom to be like.” The two sat down under the tents open door, which acted as roof over their heads to protect them from the rain. Belvar grabbed a nearby flint and tinder and began trying to light the pile of firewood in front of the tent.

“I've seen no surprises so far.” Igarla said. “Every foreign country we visit it's always the same. Unwelcoming people, hostile environment, and, well... I've just come to expect the weather.”

“I forget. How many times have you been outside home?”

“Five. My first was Crylin during the Reptyl war, and we traveled their twice. Then there was Livador and Crylin again several years later. Tusakaan invasion. Together with this that makes five.”

“Livador... was that where the backbreaking happened?”

“No...” Igarla sighed. “That was Lomar.”

“Buthorhan is a Lomaran town?”

“Crylinian originally, but it has been part of Lomar for... I don't know. A few hundred years, I think.”

“I miss home already.” Belvar got out a small slice of dried meat from his pocket and took a bite. “You want some?” he asked holding out the meat towards her.

“No thanks.” She said. “I'm still recovering from the voyage. It made me sick like never before.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, you appear to be holding together well. Not that any wound has ever seemed to stress you out at all.”

“Thanks. I'll eat when my appetite returns.”

“It's getting late. You should probably get some sleep, no? Should help you get back on your feet.”

“Yeah. That sounds like a good idea.”

“Talk to you tomorrow? Maybe a friendly match or two?”

“I'd like that.” Igarla smiled back at him.

“Well,” Belvar got up. “good night, lieutenant.”

“Pleasant dreams, Sergeant.”

Belvar took his leave, still munching on his dinner. Igarla crawled into her shelter and laid out some fur on the ground. The day had been long, and she was far more tired than she had ever been. The full night of sleep she got that night was a great relief to her.

2

Morning came, and when it did the Lomarans were long since awake. The rain had stopped, but the ground was not yet fully dry. The steps of everyone taken at the early points of the day sank slightly into the soil, also dampening the already somewhat soaked mood of the visitors. The expeditionary soldiers did not expect a warm welcome at all. They were made well aware of the general hatred for their kind in the lands. What they expected though was indifference, not contempt. Despite the supposedly moving and well worded speech given by the Emperor on day one, many would gather before the Lomaran camps cursing and yelling at them all day.

Igarla awoke to this sound. Voices chanting hate filled shouts that she could not understand, yet still comprehend. It was quite a shame, she thought, waking up so terribly after a rest so satisfying. As she walked out of her tent, she had forgotten that she was not wearing a shirt. The morning rays of sunlight and gusts of fresh breezes stroked her skin and welcomed her. Not so much the sudden increase in volume by the chanting voices. Igarla rubbed her eyes. She didn't understand where the noises were coming from yet. She had not quite come to after waking up. When her vision cleared, she saw the masses outside what was marked as the camp borders. Enraged people were waving and gesturing at her, shouting in Maradar's native tongue.

Almost reflexively as she assessed her situation her muscles flexed, getting prepared to protect herself. Soon she noticed something else though. The clam attitude displayed by her other comrades already up and about.

“Morning, lieutenant!” came a female voice from the left of the tent. Igarla turned to see the source. She was a short woman, slender in build but well defined. The tone of her skin was on the darker side, her face round and cheeks full. The entire left side of her head was shaved clear of hair, the right side had locks of dark hair hanging down to her neck. Igarla recognized the woman as her outfit's sergeant, Plerid. She came right under Igarla in the chain of command, lowest ranking officer in the squad.

“Plerid.” Igarla said, still not fully awake. “Did I miss something?” she added, looking to the crowd.

“Some of the locals got rather riled up at us taking this space, it would seem.” Plerid answered. She then looked down at Igarla's bare chest. “You... you should probably put on something.”

Igarla took a second to figure out the problem. Back home this would not have been an issue. She didn't usually bother to put a shirt on after she woke up, and none were bothered by the fact. Quite the contrary. She had nothing to be ashamed of in her mind. She had a healthy muscular figure, strong and defined, but not overblown like the heavy soldiers, who quite often had builds to rival circus strongmen. Of course leather armor only offers so much protection, and she had her fair share of scars, but nothing horribly ugly or disfiguring. If anything they added character.

It took her a good couple of seconds to remember what she learned before she came here. Any kind of public display of the female figure was disgraceful to the gods, and scorned by the populous. As this memory came to her Igarla reached back inside her tent and picked up a pale orange shirt from the ground and put it on. Even though Igarla was not in favor of this local trait, she was always taught to show others the same respect she demanded herself, so she chose to abide by the laws and customs of her hosts. For the most part...

The crowd did not stop cursing at her, but it did shift its attention to others as well.

“Can't believe they didn't want to look at that, huh?” Plerid chuckled.

“Their loss, I guess.” Igarla responded with a yawn.

“Bad sleep?”

“No, the sleep was wonderful. The waking up was what ruined it.” she took a second to collect herself. “What's the situation?”

“We're waiting on our orders. Palanor left an hour ago to go talk to the colonel. Told me not to wake you. He said you could use the rest.”

Igarla smiled.

“Nice of him. Do we have any instructions, or are we to just sit tight till something happens?”

“Yep. Run some laps, swing some swords... chat up some of the locals...”

The two of them looked out at the citizens again.

“And is the atmosphere doomed to stay as it is?”

“We were promised that the city guard would get the situation taken care of. Of course that was more than an hour ago.”

“I'm sure they'll get right on that...”

As far as the eye could see all soldiers were Lomaran. Not a single Nemeran man-at-arms was nearby to do anything.

“Just ignore them.” Plerid said. “I know what could get your mind off them! How about we get right to some sparring? Getting your ass kicked early in the morning is the best thing to get you up and on your feet.”

“You should know, Plerid.” Igarla smirked.

“Take me up on it, and I'll make you eat those words.”

“You're on. Just let me warm up first.”

The two of them made their way to the center of camp, farther away from their Sulhajdaviik viewership, where the temporary training grounds were set up. Most Lomaran military camps had an area like this. Small circular arenas with lines drawn around them in rocks or bits of wood, straw figures and archery targets, with lots of racks stocked with wooden weapons for training purposes. A good many men and women were awake and training already. Sparring with one another, shooting at targets or perfecting weapon techniques on stationary dummies. The camp was busy, even at the early hour.

Igarla and Plerid walked up to one of the few empty arenas.

“Challenger's rules?” Igarla asked.

“No, I'll let you pick this time.” Plerid smiled. Igarla guessed from her expression that she knew already what she was going to choose.

“Very well.” Igarla said. “Armed melee, weapons of choice.”

“Starting out light, huh?” Plerid laughed. “So be it. I'll go with the sword.”

Igarla and Plerid took two wooden swords off the closest rack. Plerid picked a longsword, while Igarla started warming up with a bastard sword. By profession Igarla was a special soldier. She specialized in combat with a shortsword and a dagger, as well as archery. Swordplay was less of a specialization and more of a passion. The bastard sword was her favorite weapon of all. Large enough to wield two-handed, but light enough to be one-handed as well. Mastery took time and patience, and victory over an opponent with it was extremely satisfying.

Igarla took several moments to warm up her limbs and joints. When she felt ready she raised her sword in front of her, and took a steady stance. Plerid started swinging almost immediately. The two had a mid-length, quite tiring duel. Neither of them was using their official weapon, being that Plerid was an archer first and foremost. It didn't take long for Igarla to get the upper hand. Truthfully Plerid never even came close to winning. The few good opportunities she got to lay a hit never made contact as Igarla was dexterous enough to move out of the way with ease. Igarla still let the fight go on mostly for the exercise. She eventually won with a swipe to Plerid's left side. The sword's wooden blade made a clunk as it hit, and she grasped at her side and hissed through her teeth from the pain. She quickly recovered, as the strike was not that hard, just as Igarla had intended.

“All right?” Igarla asked.

“Fine.” Plerid said. “You and your swords...”

“I love my swords. I don't know what I would do without them.” Igarla joked.

“You got your game, now how about we play mine?”

“I'm always up for a little archery.”

“Then what are we standing around for? Come!”

The two gave the arena over to some other soldiers waiting to take their turn. A rack with bows and arrows was nearby. Plerid enthusiastically picked one up along with seven arrows. Igarla observed, and did the same.

“Average of seven then?” she asked.

“Absolutely.”

The line was drawn forty meters from the targets. There were small tables set up at the line in front of each target. Igarla and Plerid laid down their arrows on the tables, took one of them and got ready. Plerid put her hand on a small hourglass that was on the table as well. This was a test of both speed and accuracy. Special soldiers were not common archers. Light infantry archers fired volleys of arrows into enemy lines. Special soldiers always took careful aim to make every shot a hit. This game was a common one. The goal is to fire off sour shots as soon as possible. Any arrows shot after the sands ran out didn't affect the score. The winner was the one who had the most arrows shot with the highest accuracy.

Plerid turned the hourglass and drew her bow. The two started to loose arrows into the target. Plerid's shots were far more frequent. Upsettingly they were also more accurate. By the time Igarla got her third shot off Plerid had already finished with five, and none sprayed out of the first circle. When the glass ran out, Igarla had yet to fire her final arrow, and the winner was obvious.

“Should we have a closer look?” Plerid smirked.

“I think I can see it fine from here.” Igarla replied.

“Good. Care to try again?”

The competition lasted for twelve more rounds. Igarla managed to win a total of two. Plerid never missed her chance to demonstrate her superiority in archery. When they finished they walked back to the camp, Plerid beaming with joy.

“So how about this.” Plerid said. “You and me, to the death, you armed with your bastard sword, me with my bow.”

“We kill them all.” Igarla responded instantly.

“That goes without saying. I mean to the death against each other.”

“I know what you meant. I avoided the question deliberately to not hurt your feelings.”

“Sure you did. Now seriously. Who would win?”

Igarla smiled and looked at her with a sideways glance.

“You think you could get close enough to hit me?” Plerid said.

“I can catch arrows mid-flight bare handed. I've done it before.”

“Not from close up. All I have to do is hold fire until your just shy of sword range and your dead.”

“I've seen Tusker archers who thought the same.”

“Yeah, it's kind of strange, just how proud you got of that whole Buthorhan story lately. I remember you getting downright upset when people called you The Bull.”

“I still do, I just...”

Igarla hesitated.

“You just what?”

“Turns out women are impressed by that story...”

Plerid chuckled hard, until she looked at Igarla's face, and saw that she was not smiling. She was looking at the ground with a morose expression. Plerid immediately calmed herself.

“Right. Sorry. That wound is still fresh. I didn't mean to be...”

“It's fine.” Igarla patted her shoulder. “I can't keep mourning her forever, right?”

“No, but it's perfectly natural to miss her for a while. Don't feel bad about that. I suppose we should talk about something else, no?”

“Please.” Igarla chuckled, forcing back a tear.

After a few more steps toward her tent Igarla noticed something.

“Plerid.” Igarla pointed a finger ahead. Plerid looked to see what she was pointing at. From behind a pile of logs a young boy was watching a group of soldiers sitting around a fire. He had his back at them, and clearly didn't notice them.

“Does that look like one of ours?” Igarla asked making note of the boy's clothing.

“Most definitely not.” Plerid responded.

Igarla made her way to where the boy was hiding. She rounded behind him to avoid his sight, and walked right up behind him. The child was so entranced by what he was watching that he didn't even hear her until she intentionally cleared her throat to get his attention. The boy jumped in fright and turned to face her. He was no older than ten, brown-haired and blue-eyed. He looked up at Igarla with shock and fear. Igarla looked back at him with friendly glance and an eyebrow raised.

“Dro hvara?” Igarla said to the boy in machtar. She spoke only the very little she learned in the two weeks before she left home. The words she said meant “Are you lost?”

The boy looked even more stunned to hear machtar from a Lomaran's mouth. After a short pause he mustered the courage to speak.

“Vrachi me Dro Bar-chagri?” he said with a shaky voice. Igarla recognized the first part of the sentence. Vrachi me Dro was machtar for 'aren't you', but she had never heard that last word before.

“Bar-chagri?” Igarla asked him, and knelt down to meet his eyes.

“Ai.” The boy said. “Vracha Dro nian?” To Igarla's understanding this meant: 'Yes. Are you not?'

“Orch agori Bar-chagri?” she asked him, trying to find out what the word meant.

“Chagroch Barchanen.” He replied. Igarla looked down at the ground and smiled. Barchan was the machtar word for demon. She pieced together that Bar-chagri must mean something along the lines of demon-kin, or demon-born.

“Nie.” She replied to him. “Trech mama dor Lomari.” 'My mother was Lomaran.'

“Trechot papa wracht, bron via roffa sient dor Bar-chagri.” he said with an intrigued look in his eyes. This meant 'My father told me all who's eyes are red are demon-born.'

Igarla decided against answering that. Instead she just said:

“Hal dorche dricht papa?” 'Where is your father?'

The boy said nothing, just shrugged. Igarla slowly reached out a hand towards him and said:

“Kivrichet. Bartek shrech trechot papa.” 'Come. We'll find your father.'

Hesitantly the boy took Igarla's hand. Igarla walked him all the way to the edge of the camp to the yelling people. A small number of city guards arrived to deal with the situation. Igarla walked up to one of them.

“Dechrivat!” she said. 'Excuse me!'

The soldier turned from the crowd he was talking to and faced her.

“Ai...” he said disinterestedly.

“Tra shrecht hla vico met tabrach.” she said. 'I found this boy in the camp.' She spoke much less confidently to the adult.

The guard did not respond, just looked down at the boy. He then proceeded to take the boy's hand away from Igarla and said something to him too fast and slurred for her to understand.

“Dechvid.” He said to her. It meant thank you. With that he aggressively hauled the boy several yards away to a woman who was looking frantically around the camp, likely his mother. The woman gasped at the sight of the child. The guard just left him there with her and didn't say a word before going back to herding the mob. The mother got down on her knees and started to look her boy up and down. They were out of ear's reach, but Igarla could tell he was definitely telling her mother something. The mother looked confused at first. The boy then looked back toward the camp and then pointed to Igarla. The mother looked up to see what her son was showing her. Her eyes met Igarla's, and the woman looked completely perturbed.

Not knowing exactly what to do, Igarla slowly raised her hand and waved at her with an awkward smile. The mother looked back at her son with a furious gaze, and slapped him. He started to cry. The woman then grabbed him in her arms and started to leave hurriedly.

“Was it something I said?” Igarla asked Plerid, who had been watching this whole time.

“I guess it's just in your eyes.” she replied.

“Of course...” Igarla murmured. “It's always the same.”

“You should know this by now, Igarla. No matter where we go or what we do, if we're not in Lomar the people will treat us like monsters. It's just the way things are. Red eyes means demon blood.”

“Even Livador wasn't this bad.”

“Because they live next door. They're used to us. These people have probably never even seen a Lomaran before today.”

“Then you'd expect that mother would think before bringing her son to curse at a camp full of them.”

“Yeah. No argument from me there.”

“You take better care of Ralin, right?”

“I try. It hasn't been easy though. I wish I hadn't had to leave him behind.”

“I'm sure he's being tended to just fine.”

“As am I. I just miss him.” Plerid started to look slightly saddened for the first time that day. Igarla placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Hey!” she said. “How about another round or two at the targets? Beating the crap out of me always seems to lighten your spirits.”

“That... sounds like a wonderful idea.” Plerid replied joyfully.

Eastward

It was not long before the leaders completed discussing the troops deployment. By nightfall on the same day Palanor had already informed Igarla and the rest of his soldiers what the plan was. By daybreak the Fire City First Special Forces were to be ready to march to the province of Estendon, 700 kilometers east of Sulhajdavik. Their destination therein was a military base called Fort Flidenoch, situated on a hilltop just beside the city of Niedlopan. Igarla was already familiar with the mentioned locations. The short studies she took on Nemerom before departure from home included people and locations of note.

Palanor's squad left for the east that same day. At forced march the unit was progressing fifty kilometers per day, spending ten hours a day on the road. As they marched Igarla was given a chance to get a better look at the countryside. It was quite bright and friendly. The road they took lead over hilltops and valleys, across open plains and woods. The weather had dried up, the sun was shining and the pleasant songs of birds filled the air. All together it was actually quite lovely. During the evenings and nights spent camping Igarla found herself often just gazing at the woods and meadows, taking in the landscape, enjoying the relaxing atmosphere.

This soothing effect soon passed every time they arrived at a settlement. There were many of them along the path, and each one had mostly the same look to it. The conditions of the huts and

hovels were tragic, with straw roofs caving in and walls missing. The townsfolk were dreary and depressed looking. They slowly walked with heads tilted down from one task to another. There were no horses, oxes or any other cart-animals, all carts seemed to be moved by hand. Only rarely did one have some beast tied to it. The villagers all had the same reaction to the marching army. Most would run inside and bar the doors and windows, those who remained outside stared with wide eyes, pulling to the side of the street, some straight up flat against a wall. Once or twice there would also be a cursing old man, or a pleading beggar trying to get in their faces. In such cases Palanor always gently talked them down and moved them out of the way.

Occasionally they would come across traders and wanderers on the road. Their reactions were quite similar to those of the village's residents. Still, the traders at least seemed somewhat informed of there being Lomarans in their home. They stared with fear, but not surprise.

After thirteen days of marching their destination finally became visible. On a hilltop about five kilometers away a large fortress crept up from beyond the horizon. Even from that distance the structure was quite impressive. Fort Flidenoch sat on the hill looking down on Niedlopan, its seven large towers standing high above the walls. The Emperor's crest flew on flags from the top of each one. As they approached the path split in two. The road directly ahead lead visibly towards the town entrance, the path breaking off to the right, the one the army went down, lead up the hill in the direction of the fort. As they climbed to the top, the large iron gate to the fort slowly swung open, and the army had reached its destination. The Lomarans were lead into the inner courtyard of the fortress. Barracks buildings were set up all around, with some areas covered in tents. As Igarla looked around she saw surprisingly few training areas. Only three sparring arenas were visible, a single row of archery targets, and almost no training equipment. Likewise, she could see no soldiers actually in training. The only activities pursued by those in sight were drinking and laughing.

The arriving army was greeted by a small group of Nemeran men-at-arms in decorative armor. One in particular stood above all the others. He was considerably taller, and better dressed. He had a long cape down to his boots, and a helmet under his arm. His face was clean shaven, with a few small scars around his mouth. His hair was cut short and brown. It was hard to tell how well built he was under his armor, but his stance was imposing, and his gaze commanding. Igarla believed him to be the senior officer of the fort. This was confirmed when captain Palanor ordered the unit to a halt as they got in front of him. He stood still for a moment, until the officer and his men walked up. The two men shook hands.

“Allow me to be the first to welcome you to Fort Flidenoch, and the Estendon province, captain Palanor.” the man said in flawless Leviran common. Much like Emperor Nemeran II, he had a strong accent, but flawless grammar and annunciation.

“Diaktel!” Palanor thanked him in his native language, and from that moment on the

conversation went on in machtar. Igarla did her best to pay attention, but both Palanor and the officer were talking very fast, and Igarla recognized only a fraction of the words. She discerned that the man Palanor was talking to was named Commander Serjak and the conversation regarded the laws of the fort.

After a good ten minutes of conversation Palanor and Commander Serjak bowed to each other and departed. Palanor walked back to his officers, Igarla and Plerid.

“Is everything alright?” Plerid asked.

“Not quite.” Palanor replied. “The man that met us was Commander Serjak, commander of this fortress. He gave me a rundown of the local rules. Nothing we haven't already been briefed on at camp, so just keep behaving. Unfortunately, the emperor has ordered the reinforcement of the local garrison, which means that there is little room in the barracks houses for us.”

“Little, or...?”

“Basically it was a polite way to say he can't put us in houses until some men are assigned orders elsewhere.”

“Are we setting up tents then?” Igarla asked.

“Yes. An area has been set up for us, and I requested a spot where we can resume regular training. The soldiers can set up camp in the place we were given. The three of us have been assigned a house to stay in.”

“That's fine sir, but I think I'll set up camp with the rest.” Igarla said.

“Sure?” Palanor asked.

“Yes sir. I'll be fine in my tent.”

“If you say so. Sergeant?” Palanor turned to Plerid.

“Oh, I'll take up the offer to stay in the bunkhouse, sir. No commendations for discomfort, right?” She looked at Igarla with a smile. Igarla smiled back.

“That's fine.” Palanor said. “I'll get Hrialvin to set up his medicines inside as well. Igarla. If you're staying outside, I'm putting you in charge of the preparations. Make sure the tents are set up, and get training sites ready for use.” Palanor pointed to a cleared spot near the walls.

“Understood sir. I'll get right on it.” She turned to the soldiers. “Fire City First! On me!”

The soldiers marched after Igarla, as Palanor and Plerid moved towards one of the houses. Hrialvin joined them from the back of the line at Palanor's behest. Igarla quickly got the soldiers working on setting up camp, and got to work herself as well. She pitched her own tent, and got to work on setting up the training grounds. The activities started to draw attention from the hosts. Once the camp was set, training began almost instantly. Igarla started her day off with archery, then moved onto swordplay. When her day was done she lay down in her tent and gazed into nothingness. There were no taverns to visit, nothing remarkable to do at all. She felt like taking a

nap.

She was woken later in the afternoon by Plerid.

“Lieutenant!” Plerid shouted as she entered. Igarla woke up stretching and yawning. Plerid stopped silent. “Oh my! I'm sorry, were you sleeping?”

“I was.” Igarla said. “Don't worry about it. Need me for something?”

“Palanor wanted to see you. Said something about going out for drinks.”

Igarla reluctantly got out of bed. Ever since the voyage Igarla has had nothing to drink but Maradar ale. She hated it. After the pleasures of good Lomaran beer everything else she drank tasted terrible. Nevertheless, she felt like she could use the captain's company.

“I'll be right out.”

She got up and put on her brown leather coat. After a few moments of waking up, she left for the captain's quarters. Palanor was waiting outside for her.

“Captain!” Igarla said.

“Lieutenant.” Palanor replied. “I have a meeting scheduled with the local leaders. They want to speak with me over drinks. I need you to join me.”

“I...” Igarla was unsure of what answer to give. “Yes, sir.”

Palanor started walking.

“Problem?” he asked.

“I'm just, not enthusiastic, captain.”

“Understandable.”

“When Plerid said you wanted to get drinks this is not what I expected. Are we even allowed into the fort's ale-hall?”

“The officers are, yes. We are also the only ones allowed to leave the fort for excursions to town.”

“Then to top off all else I am going to be the only woman in the hall who isn't a bar wench. I had a similar situation on my trip to Crylin. I had drunk men swooning me all damn night. Sure, they were more than happy to buy me drinks, which was nice, but...”

“Lieutenant...” Palanor said, in his tone that signified seriousness.

“Sir?”

“Trust me; I am not looking forward to this any more than you are. We are, however, here to make friends and work together with the local forces. Trust me when I say, my being a man will give me no less of a harder time in there than you will get. Nevertheless, we will both have to be on our best behavior. Can you manage that?”

“Yes, sir.” Igarla answered. “I won't give you any trouble.”

“Good.” At this point the two of them reached the entrance of the Ale-hall of the outer

courtyard. It was a small building, wooden walls and it stood on a stone foundation. A small flight of stairs stood between them and the door. Palanor walked up and slowly opened the door. “Now let’s get this over with.”

As they walked in, all eyes immediately turned to them. The hall was dimly lit, the windows were all closed by wooden shutters, and only a single chandelier gave out faint candlelight. Scantly clad women were busy serving drinks and food to the soldiers, enduring their howls and gropes. Some actually seemed to enjoy them, though how genuine that was Igarla couldn't tell. The men were clearly having a great time, but to Igarla's eyes, these were far from soldiers.

In Crylin she had already witnessed how differently the term was used in other lands. To Igarla a soldier was one whose profession it was to protect the land. As a profession, most spare time would be dedicated to becoming the best at this task, since the dangers in this world were great. These men however, looked nothing like what she had come to believe soldiers should. They did not carry on their bodies the mark of training. Most had large bellies, no visible muscles, and certainly no manners.

As the first few seconds passed, all eyes had slowly shifted to the entrance.

“Sir,” Igarla whispered to Palanor. “I recommend we find a smaller, secluded place, possibly somewhere in the back.”

“Yes, I think that would be preferable.”

They slowly made their way to an empty table with two chairs. As they did, the tavern inhabitants resumed whatever they had been doing before. Igarla did her best to avoid any incoming gazes. She felt quite a few. As she listened to conversations she tried to listen to a few words. The term Bar-chagri was the one she recognized the most often. Apparently they had stirred up quite a few conversations.

“They are not saying anything good, are they?” she asked.

“Of course not.”

Just as they approached their table Igarla felt a hand on her wrist. She grabbed at it instinctively, and turned to face the owner of the hand. She turned to face a bald man in a short sleeved shirt. There was a great deal of fat on his body, and a smirk on his face. Igarla glared at him without blinking, and the man just smirked back.

“Igarla.” Palanor turned back.

Igarla turned momentarily to face her captain, then looked back at the man. She tossed his arm to the side, and walked on to her table, passing Palanor as she did. Palanor stood there for a while in front of the man, as Igarla took her seat. She could see him exchange words with the soldier, before joining her at the table.

“Patience, lieutenant.” he said. “You know you have nothing to fear from these oafs.”

“I don't fear anything, sir.”

“We all know that.” Palanor smiled. “Speaking of... I heard a few more of our people refer to you as 'the bull' again. I thought you were discouraging it.”

“Recently the story started to fill me with pride rather than embarrassment.”

“What changed?”

“Apparently women like it...”

Palanor looked up at her, and saw that she was just staring at the table. He looked at her for a moment, then just nodded and remained silent. A barmaid approached them timidly.

“What... you like?” she said slowly.

“Djie Alhatech, pridet.” Palanor said, asking kindly for two mugs of ale.

“Kra Oue.” Igarla added. “Only one. Thank you, sir.” The maid nodded and moved off to the bar. Igarla turned to Palanor. “I have no intention of poisoning myself any further with this sludge they call ale around here.”

“Well, the stuffs not that bad, once you get used to it.”

“Sir, it makes the army cooking taste like a royal meal in comparison.”

“Ouch! That's a bit harsh, don't you think?”

“Have you taken a look at these men?” Igarla motioned backwards with her head. “The emperor gives men like these sharpened blades. The way they treat the staff... I don't think I'm being harsh enough in general.”

“Don't be too hard on them. They are just common soldiers.”

“Was I this out of control when I was a common soldier?”

“We mustn't compare ourselves to them.” Palanor sighed. “Look. I know the local ideal of soldier is far less... developed than it is back home. Let's try not to stir up anything, alright? We have to work together with them somehow.”

“I know, sir. I meant nothing by it, just... well, you know.”

Palanor nodded. The barmaid arrived with his mug of ale and placed it on the table in front of him. Palanor reached out of his pocket and pulled out two silver coins.

“<Thank you, young lady.>” He said in machtar as he handed her the money.

“<No need, m'lord.>” she replied also in machtar. “<The commander said all guest are to drink on the house.>”

“<I know.>” Palanor smiled at her. “<He told me. This is for you.>”

“<For me?>” The woman looked surprised. “<Why, m'lord?>”

“<For your excellent service.>” He said as he raised the mug to his lips.

“<I... my deepest thanks, m'lord!>” She pocketed the two silver, and went back to her work.

“That was quite a lousy tip, actually.” Igarla said.

“It's more than she makes in a day.” He answered. “The girls serving here are not here by choice. They are usually sold to the army by their parents at a young age.”

“She's a slave?” Igarla looked horrified.

“No. She gets paid.”

“For less than two silver a day, she might as well be a slave.” Igarla murmured.

The two sat at the table and made small talk for a while. The officers had still yet to show up. After a short time, the soldier who had grabbed Igarla's wrist and two of his friends started to make a line towards the table.

“Sir.” Igarla interrupted the conversation. “What exactly did you tell that man before?”

“I warned him not to kick a wildcat in the ass, unless he was ready to deal with the teeth.”

“Seriously?”

“Absolutely.”

“I think you got him angry. He brought backup this time.”

The man and his two friends stopped a good couple of paces away from the table. He stood still and crossed his arms. Igarla gave him a glare, then turned back to Palanor to try and ignore them. The man said a longer sentence to them in machtar. His tone was insulting, and his friends laughed as he finished. Igarla leaned closer to Palanor and whispered.

“Sir, my machtar is far from fluent, but I'm pretty sure that man just insulted us both as soldiers, and called us both cocksuckers.”

“I heard him.” Palanor replied. “Ironic I suppose, considering neither of us are too attracted to men. Don't let them get to you. It's what they want, to provoke a reaction. We have to show them that we are above petty insults.”

When Igarla and Palanor didn't respond, the man said something else. Igarla understood it all this time. The man made a direct insult at Baranar, second consul of Lomar. He compared his fighting and leadership abilities to that of a rodent. As she heard this, she got a sudden spasm in her cheek. She collected herself, and leaned over to Palanor again.

“Captain, I would like to request permission to... engage in polite discourse with those gentlemen about the topic that was brought up by...”

“Lieutenant.” Palanor said in his serious voice again. Igarla turned her eyes to face him. He had his mug close to his face ready to take a sip. He took a breath and without looking at her said: “Kick their asses.” and he drank from his ale.

Igarla smiled an eager smile. She got up from the table and turned to face her challengers.

“<So...>” she said, as she began unbuttoning her jacket. “<Which one of you will be going first? Or will it be all three at once?>”

The three men looked surprised. This was not the reaction they expected. Well, not

immediately at least. It took them a few seconds to come to, but when they saw Igarla take her jacket off and put it on the table, how else would they have interpreted this? They looked at each other and smiled. Underneath Igarla's jacket was her usual sleeveless orange undershirt, with the traditional Lomaran high collar. The shirt was thinner and tighter than her jacket and did reveal more of her figure. The breasts and thinner waists, the typical female characteristics were visible, but so were here muscular arms and wide shoulders. Also visible on her face was the grin brought about by inevitable success, but the men were far too engulfed in their notions of dominance to notice.

“<Good start.>” the bald man said. “<Now how about you take off the rest as well?>” He reached to stroke Igarla's arm, but as he did, he got a grip of one of her triceps in flexed position. “<My, these arms are thick...>” he murmured under his breath to himself.

Just a second after he laid an arm on Igarla, her other arm traveled swiftly across, landing a backhanded punch to the man's face. He spun on his heel and landed face first on the floor. Seeing this, the other two men leaped into action. The first one tried to get a left punch in on her. The fist ended up deflected by Igarla's palm, and she made a full spin on her right foot, raising her left elbow as she did. The elbow collided with the back of her attacker's head so hard, he fell face first beside his friend. With just one attacker left, Igarla placed herself in a position to receive the next attack. It came in the form of several wild punches, which she blocked with ease. As they flew by her head, she noticed that the last man had compromised his stance by doing so. It was a mere matter of grabbing onto his collar and sweeping his left foot with her right. The man's own weight ended up throwing him on the ground as well, with but a little help from Igarla. With her opponent on the ground, she quickly got down on one knee beside him, and punched his chest to keep him from getting up.

Her last attacker down, she sprung onto her feet again and looked around the bar. Several more men had jumped out of their chairs, but as she got back up they stopped in their tracks. Igarla gave a single glare around the room to the rest of the patrons, then loosened her stance, and went to pick up her jacket. As she walked away, she said a simple sentence in machtar to the dead silent crowd.

“<Insult us, your fine. Insult our heroes, this happens.>” She motioned to the three on the floor as she said it.

“Perfectly executed.” Palanor remarked as Igarla sat back down, and finished buttoning her jacket.

“I've fought training dummies more agile than those three.” She said. Then with a slight smirk: “So much for good relations with Nemerom, huh?”

Palanor smiled back.

“Well... you know what I always say; Diplomacy will only get you so far. Some men understand only one language.”

“I can honestly say; I have never heard you say before.”

“Alright, maybe.” Palanor laughed. “But I have said this to colonel Dolgovar many times: Our mission here is like trying to befriend a wild beast of the wilderness.”

“I can see the truth in that.” Igarla sighed.

“And how does one go about training a wild beast?”

“By demonstrating dominance.” Igarla answered.

“Exactly. Igarla... good job doing just that.” He said as he raised his mug.

It took the local officers a seeming long half an hour to arrive at the tavern. Igarla and Palanor spent the whole time fending off stares and overhearing hushed insults. After the last three attackers were hauled off though, at least they didn't have to worry about any more physical confrontations.

There were three Nemeran officers, when they finally arrived. Igarla recognized the first of them as Commander Serjak, the other two however were unknown. Serjak took a quick glance around the room, noticed Igarla and Palanor sitting in the corner, and made a line towards them. Palanor gave Igarla a look, and nudged his head towards the door. Igarla noticed the arriving men. They were not wearing armor, or any weapons on them. They were dressed in fine silken clothes however, black with golden and silver patterns.

“Causing trouble already, are you?” Serjak said to Palanor.

“Just maintaining discipline, commander.” Palanor finished his ale. “In my country you salute the rank, not the person.”

Serjak glared at the two for a second, then smiled.

“Truthful words.” He said. And pulled up a chair for himself. His fellow officers did the same. “We have not been introduced yet, have we?” he said, looking at Igarla.

“No, I believe not.” Palanor said. “Igarla, this is the man I told you about. Commander Hrakval Serjak, superior officer in charge of the fortress. These two gentlemen are Captain Nian Graston, and Sergeant Duul Vrigeek. Gentlemen, this is my first lieutenant, Igarla.”

Igarla bowed her head politely. The man introduced to her as Captain Graston whispered to the commander in machtar:

“<He looks like a woman.>”

“<I am.>” Igarla said out loud. Graston looked flustered. He clearly didn't expect more than one Lomaran to be able to speak machtar.

“<You can speak...>” Graston began.

“<Only a bit.>” Igarla interrupted. “<I learned for a week before I came.>”

Graston nodded, and turned to his commander. His look conveyed a request for evacuation. Serjak snickered a bit before turning to Palanor and speaking in Leviron common.

“These two are here with me because they are fluent in your tongue. If you wish, we may converse like this.”

“Then let us do so.” Palanor said.

“Agreed.” said Serjak. “I recommend we get down to business straight away. Tell me about your unit, captain. What are your strengths and weaknesses?”

“As a good captain I am obligated to tell you, that we have no weakness. As a man of the real world however, I know better. My soldiers are trained in the use of most melee weapons, including unarmed combat. We can hold our ground in hand-to-hand encounters. We specialize in stealth and infiltration, taking down enemy encampments and outposts by surprise from within.”

“From within?” Sergeant Vrigeck asked.

“Yes. We scout out our target as best we can, search for a crack in the defenses, and exploit it.”

“How many men do you command?” Graston asked.

“Just over 150.” Palanor said. “And 72 women. In total the unit consists of over 200 soldiers, but we are also accompanied by camp personnel, squires, servants and physicians.”

Graston seemingly stopped paying attention after '72 women'. Serjak listened intently.

“What role do you usually act as on the battlefield?” Serjak asked. “So I can more accurately plan for your deployment in the future.”

“On a traditional battlefield the special soldiers are most versatile.” Palanor said. “Every soldier is armed with a bow, so we can provide archery support. The armor we wear is padded with hard leather, and we all are skilled at close range, so if need be we can fight on the front lines as well. Ideally we strike unseen on our own from the cover of night. In other words, commander, where you want us is entirely up to you. We can adapt.”

Graston looked questioningly at the two Lomarans. After a moment of silent contemplation from the commander, the captain spoke:

“A third of your fighters are women?” he asked still stuck at that point in the conversation. Igarla resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

“They are, captain.” Palanor answered.

“And they do actually... fight? There not just there to amuse the men?”

Igarla raised her eyebrows.

“Perhaps you would like a demonstration?” Palanor said. The corners of his mouth curved up ever so slightly.

“I don't engage in petty activities like sparring, sir.” Graston said. This whole time

Commander Serjak leaned back in his chair, very amused by the conversation.

“Then I must respectfully ask you to keep your mouth shut.”

“You what?” Graston's eyes opened wide.

“If you feel the need to insult my soldiers, but don't wish to put your actions where you put your words, then please refrain.”

“Commander!” Graston spoke to Serjak. “Are you going to let this...”

“The Lomaran is right.” Serjak said. “If you feel so passionately that war is a man's sport, prove it to them. Otherwise this conversation is pointless.”

“I have nothing to prove to anyone. Especially not the likes of them. I am a captain! My rank says all that needs to be said!”

“Well I'm a lieutenant.” Igarla interrupted. “I fought in two wars so far. I've killed reptyl twice my size, and am commonly known in the army for breaking a Tusakaan barbarian's back with my bear hands.”

The table fell silent. Graston glared at Igarla, his gaze carried frustration and spite.

“It's true.” Palanor said softly and nodded his head. “Lieutenant Igarla is my unit's top ranked soldier when it comes to unarmed combat. She can hold her own against a fully armored knight wearing nothing but simple clothing, armed with only her fists, and I would still put my money on her coming out victorious.”

“Rubbish!” Graston said. “No man could stand unarmed against a steel-clad footknight, let alone a woman.”

“Do I hear a challenge in those words?” Palanor said.

Graston leaned back and crossed his arms. After a second or two he started to smile.

“Alright. Maybe you do. Would you be willing to test your woman against my best fighter with those terms?”

Igarla chuckled.

“You won't fight her yourself?” Palanor asked quizzically.

“Absolutely not. Surely you would understand. An officer's task is to give orders and command men. *We* don't fight.”

“Maybe not in this land...” Igarla muttered.

“Did you say something?” Graston snapped.

“I said: maybe in this land.” Igarla raised her voice. Graston ignored the comment. Serjak looked very amused indeed.

“I challenge your 'fighter' to make good on her word and defeat a fighter in full armor. What say you, captain?”

“I say if you issue a challenge you should stand by your own words, not have other stand for

you.”

“Officers command. Do you disagree?”

“You command on the battlefield, but this is not the battlefield. This is...”

“I accept.” Igarla interrupted. All at the table turned to her.

“And as I was going to say...” Palanor continued. “Speak to the one you challenge.” He then turned to Igarla. “Are you sure? Would you not have the captain do his own bidding?”

“It makes no difference to me who I beat up.” She said.

“HA!” Vrigeek laughed heartily. “I like you!” he said and pointed at her. Igarla smirked and bowed her head at him.

“It's settled then.” Serjak said. “Captain Palanor, the assignment I have for us takes place in two days from now; we can discuss strategies tomorrow in private. For now I will let Graston have his fun.”

“I will send for Movrik.” Graston said. “He is my best warrior. How soon will you be ready to fight?”

“I am right now.” Igarla replied. “But please, let him take his time and prepare. My fellow combatants have set up training rings for things like these. When Movrik is ready, come find me.”

“Is there a wager involved?” Vrigeek asked.

“Oh, yes!” Igarla said. “Of course, a wager. Thank you for reminding me, sergeant. What are the stakes? Shall we bet in silver coins?”

“Money is all I have.” The captain responded. “I want something I could not acquire otherwise. I want a night with a Lomaran woman.”

Palanor grew an expression of anger. Igarla's face remained unchanged.

“Go on...” Igarla said.

“If you lose, you will agree to willingly tend to my every need for one night of my choosing. And I do mean 'every need'.”

“This is outrageous!” Palanor stated firmly. “I will not allow you to abuse one of my...”

“I'll take that bet.” Igarla said. Palanor looked at her with utter disbelief.

“Excuse me?” he said with a slightly frightened look that only Igarla understood.

“She said she'll take the bet.” Serjak said. Palanor looked once at Serjak, then back to Igarla.

“Lieutenant, I give the orders here and respectfully...”

“You give orders on the battlefield.” She said to him. “This is not the battlefield. There is nothing in the rules about who I can challenge and what I may or may not wager.”

Palanor took a breath, then leaned back and stepped out of the conversation.

“That's my bet taken care of.” Igarla said. “What are you offering?”

“Go ahead and make a request.” Graston said.

“Very well. Let’s turn it around. If I win, you shall do for me the same.”

Palanor's eyes went wide open. Graston's already wide smile got even wider.

“Are you serious?”

“Why not? Something I can never get elsewhere, right? Tell me, what could possibly be more... exclusive than the service of a high ranking Nemeran officer?” Igarla did her best to sneak a little coyness into her voice.

Graston nodded.

“I can't argue with you there.” He said with a feeling of superiority. “I accept.”

“Very well then. To clarify then: Your man, um...Movrik, right? He will meet me at the training ground of the outer courtyards. He will enter armed and armored, I as you see me now. The victor receives a night of unquestioning service from the loser. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

The two shook hands, and Graston got up from his chair.

“I shall go speak to my man immediately. I should hope for the duel to commence while the night is still young.”

The whole table rose, and Graston walked away, saluting his commander beforehand. After he left, Serjak spoke.

“We shall take our leave as well. Captain, we will talk again tomorrow. I will send for you.”

“Understood.” Palanor replied.

“Lieutenant,” Serjak turned to Igarla. “I look forward to watching you in action.”

Igarla said nothing but bowed her head. And the two Nemeran officers walked out of the hall, with Igarla and Palanor shortly behind them.

“What the hell are you doing?” Palanor asked Igarla on the way back to the camp. He made sure that no one was listening to them.

“Fairly obvious, no? Putting the Captain in his place. Establishing dominance.”

“You do know what he wants from you, right?”

“Well, I assumed he wanted me to make his bed and polish his boots.” She said sarcastically, then shifted to seriousness. “Of course I know what he wants. What do you think I am, 7?”

“If you lose, you’re going to have to sleep with him. A man.”

“Listen.” Igarla put a hand on his shoulder. “I appreciate the concern, but I can handle my own bets, thank you.”

“It's not just that, Igarla. There's more at stake here.” Palanor leaned closer. “There could be huge consequences. If it starts to circulate that there are gay soldiers in the Lomaran army, Nemeran soldiers could start to riot. They already are not happy to be working with us.”

“Captain.” Igarla cocked her head and smiled. “You act as if there was a chance of me

losing.”

Palanor sighed. He said nothing more, but acted extremely nervous for the rest of the day.

Graston and his champion arrived later in the afternoon, early evening. Word had spread about the duel to take place, and Igarla's fellow soldiers gathered around the area where the fight would take place. Of course the Nemerom supporters also piled up around the arena. Igarla was sitting on a bench nearby, sharpening her sword.

“There here.” Plerid came shouting.

Igarla got up off the bench, laid the sword down carefully, then walked over to the arena through the crowd. She saw the Nemerom officers coming from the direction of the gate to the inner yard. The same three from the tavern, plus an extra. A man, his face hidden behind the visor of his helmet, but his build was gargantuan. A mountain of meat. He was roughly a foot taller than she was. His armor was full plate, black with silver motifs; clearly a decorated champion. Igarla stepped into the ring, taking her jacket off, like before the tavern fight. She dropped it in front of the string marking the territory of the arena. As she stepped into the ring she began to warm up her joints. Graston stepped to the side of the ring and faced Igarla.

“Lady Igarla! Are you ready to begin the fight?”

“Just Igarla, please.” she said. “And yes, I am. This is Movrik?” she looked at the armored knight.

“Yes. It is.” said the captain. Movrik walked up to her, and lifted up the visor to reveal a rough, leathery face. His eyes were pale blue, and even through the small hole under the visor she could make out the numerous scars that hit his face.

“<It's a pleasure, Movrik.>” Igarla said. “<I am Igarla.>”

“<The pleasure is all mine, I promise.>” Movrik responded in a deep voice. He reached out a hand, and Igarla shook it. “<Shall we begin? I am eager to start.>”

Igarla nodded, took a few steps back, and readied herself. Palanor was visible on the porch of the barracks. He looked even more nervous still. Movrik was handed a blunted sword from one of the squires in the crowd. Igarla loosened her stance, and let out a puff of air in disagreement. She walked right passed the knight, and grabbed a sharpened steel sword of equal size from the squire, and tossed it to him. Movrik caught the sword, and just watched as Igarla walked back to her spot. He gave a glance to his captain, who shrugged back at him, then gave a hand-gesture, basically saying: “Go ahead.”

Movrik gave the sword a swing or two before adopting his ready stance. And the fight began. Igarla strafed around for a bit, keeping the full body of her enemy in her sight. She watched him, studied him for a few short seconds, weighing her best advantages. She was clearly outclassed in strength, the man was huge. As Igarla watched, she saw no flaw in his steps. He was placing his

balance well. After five seconds, Movrik landed his first attack. He swung his greatsword side to side in a slashing motion. Igarla backed up first, then ducked from the second one, and evaded the third slash, by rolling behind him. She got to her feet in the blink of an eye, and continued with her assessment. As she saw her opponent turn to face her, it became clear to her, that the best advantage was the enemy's narrow line of sight from behind the visor.

She spent the next few seconds dodging strikes, landing an occasional punch when she could, always careful to hit with the palm of her hand, not the fist. A mistimed dodge allowed Movrik to scrape her with the tip of the blade, leaving a cut along the outer side of her upper arm. After she felt that she had her enemy figured out, she decided to go for the victory. She waited for the moment after avoiding an overhead strike, and used the momentum to punch the side of his helmet. This gave her the slight second advantage she needed to make her move. She grabbed the knight's wrist with one hand, then danced around him, climbing onto his back with her knee between his shoulder blades, and his arm behind his back. He shouted out in pain as Igarla stretched his arm back, and twisted the sword out of his hand. She spun around, kicking Movrik to the ground, and getting a firm grasp on the sword. As he lay on the ground and managed to turn off of his back, he came face to face with the tip of his own blade.

The knight had one hand on the ground, the other beside his head in a surrendering motion. The Lomaran side of the crowd started to cheer. Igarla lowered the sword and gave the knight her hand. He reluctantly accepted, and grabbed it as Igarla helped him up off the ground. When he was up, she patted him on the shoulder and handed him his sword back. The knight just stood there as Igarla walked passed him to the Captain. He was standing with his arms crossed, shaking his head in frustration. Igarla walked up to him and looked him in the face.

"That was fun." she said.

"I'm not sure how you did that, but..." he paused.

"There is no secret, sir." She responded, after he couldn't seem to find the words. "All that you saw was the result of many years of hard training. It is that simple."

"Of course it is..." he muttered. "Anyway, a deal is a deal." He suddenly changed expressions. "It would seem my services are yours to abuse to your heart's content."

"Yes," Igarla said smiling and licking her lips. "It would seem so."

"Is this the night you wish to take advantage of?" he asked.

"Why wait, no?" She said, and gestured with a finger to follow her. For a split second she caught the commander in the corner of her eye as she walked back to her tent. While most of the Nemeronean viewers were hosting looks of frustration, he had slight smile, and clapped along with the Lomarans. She said nothing and continued to walk towards her tent with the captain behind her.

"So..." he said. "What exactly do you have in mind?"

“Oh, I have some... very exiting ideas.” she said seductively. She walked into her tent, raising a hand to the captain to wait here for her. She came back out with a handful of weapons, and dropped them in the captain arms.

“Um...” Graston was speechless. “I've met women into some wild things before, but...”

“I took these weapons from the children who help maintain our arms. I promised them they could have the day off tomorrow, because a nice captain from Nemerom agreed to do there chores for them.”

The captain's eager expression vanished.

“Do you mean to say that...”

“These and more will need sharpening before tomorrow morning. Better get to it. I'll have another bunch for you in a while.”

She winked at him, then left him beside the grindstone, and walked away, not looking back, with a smirk on her face.

Local culture

The next morning Igarla was in the camps infirmary tent. The cut she had received the previous day was in need of treatment.

“You went to bed like this?” Hrialvin was the one examining the wound.

“It didn't look like much.”

“The same thing you said last time. I warned you then too. I sometimes wonder why I even bother.”

“I listen.”

“The light infection in this cut suggest otherwise.”

Hrialvin opened up a jar of powder and started to place some in the cut. It stung, and Igarla flinched.

“That's what you get.” Hrialvin said. “Trust me. No matter how harmless it looks, these things must always be looked after properly. What if that sword was not cared for right? What if the blade had rust on it? Do you even know what that could lead to?”

“Days of prescribed bed rest?”

“Amputation.”

“Oh. That's not good.”

“No. It isn't.”

Wrapping the cut was easy. The damage was actually far less bad then Hrialvin made it out to be. Igarla knew he just felt overprotective of such things after his brother was killed by infection.

“How did he take it?” He asked.

“Once he realized he had no chance for sex he delegated the chores to a servant. Still, I got a good two and a half hours of labor out of him.”

“He just walked off?”

“I figured he would. Nemeran officers don't seem like the working type.”

“They never were. Most of them never even drew swords. They spent their youth in academies learning strategies and such.”

“But they must have basic combat training.”

“You would think. I would be willing to bet you that Graston never even killed a man before. They are not like us, Igarla. They don't understand the need to have officers shaped by years of front line service... nor to show the smallest decency to their fellow man or woman.”

“You give them a hard time, but it's not that bad. Crylin is less forward than us in such areas, yet I never heard you talk such things about them.”

Hrialvin started messing around with herbs and such on a table. Then turned back to Igarla and started talking.

“Crylin executes black magi. They are relentless in the matter. I know nothing of magic, but even I know the horrors brought forth by the Black Tides. So even though I don't condone the thought of executing mass numbers of magi for black magic, I can understand why some would, and even sympathize with them. Nemeran makes life for every commoner, every man and woman not born rich, into a living nightmare.”

“Nightmare is pushing it...”

“Tell you what, take a walk in Niedlopan, look around, then let's pick up this conversation again afterwards.”

Igarla got up off the table she was sitting on, checked her bandaged arm to make sure it was tied tight and headed for the exit.

“A quick question.” Hrialvin called after her. “If you had lost your fight yesterday... would you have gone through with the bet? Would you have obeyed the captain's wishes?”

Igarla stopped just before the exit. She turned around for just one second and said:

“See you later, Hrialvin.”

And walked out.

Due to formerly agreed upon rules between Nemeran and the visiting Lomaran expedition, most of the Lomaran soldiers were confined to the outer yard of the fortress. Just as with the ale-hall however, officers were allowed extra privileges, one of which was the opportunity to wander freely in the region of Niedlopan. Excursions had to be taken into writing, which was a practice Igarla was already used to. She reported to Palanor before heading out, insuring that she would be within reach of messengers. She dressed herself in her leather jacket, strapped on her short sword,

and went for a walk.

Igarla already had a few preconceived views on foreign society. She herself grew up as the daughter of a merchant, and as such had a good view of the lower and middle classes of Lomaran city folk. Her military service took her to many other regions in the country as well. She saw how the farmers lived in the countryside, as well as the citizens of smaller towns and villages. The difference between Lomaran and foreign civics was explained to her in detail during her training. Lomaran soldiers are all taught to read and write, and are given quick lessons in world history and culture. She knew already that most other nations denied their people certain rights, such as the right to move freely between settlements, the right to elect officials and so on. Before she left for her first visit to the Kingdom of Crylin several years before, she was prepared for the specific cultural differences. She had witnessed a world where despots ruled over the common folk, where nobles and vassals claimed most of the wealth produced for themselves, leaving only a small fraction to those who work it, and where the circumstances of your birth determine how your life progresses. In such light, what she was told about the empire of Nemerom was nothing new to her. She despised the very idea of being forced to live in such a world, but she did her best to be tolerant. After all, it's not like Lomar was a perfect place either.

Even after Hrialvin told her to take a walk in town, she did not expect to discover anything she did not already see walking through here with the army. Niedlopan was a short walk away from the fort. The streets were mostly mud and dirt, only few areas were paved with cobblestone. The houses didn't vary much in architecture. The vast majority were made of wood with tiled roofs. Only trade establishments, shops, inns and taverns had any form of special appearance. Little paint, simple signs, the same level of art that littered the streets of the Fire City's middle class areas was nowhere to be seen.

The people behaved much the same as before. Rushed, uninterested, melancholic and distant towards her. Even though she smiled at them in a friendly manner, they mostly just looked away and went back to whatever they had been doing prior. As she kept her eyes open, she saw other things too. Things she had not seen thus far. She was unsurprised at the presents of beggars in alleys and street corners at first, but after closer examination something about some of them felt off. One particular one, wrapped in cloth from head to toe looked young. Less than ten young. She could not tell if it was a boy or a girl, the features had not yet developed on it. What did not leave her alone was the cold, dead stare emanating from its eyes. Not at her, just straight ahead into nothing. This poor child was blind. And it was not alone.

After a longer walk Igarla noticed several similar children, none older than twelve at the most. They were all starved to the bone, none of them appeared to have eyesight, and when Igarla tried to inquire about their fate none of them did other than mutter incomprehensible sounds,

babytalk to her ears. The one child Igarla spoke to so far in Sulhjadavik was the only person she understood perfectly, so she disregarded the possibility that her machtar was not good enough. These kids never learned to speak.

The mystery of these child beggars kept her busy through most of her walk. One blind, mute child living on the streets she could accept as an isolated incident, but several with the exact same disability? What could the cause be? Some kind of plague? Could parents be putting their sick children outside to protect the rest of the family? If so, why were they allowed to just sit on the street like that? Would they not be quarantined somewhere, or knowing the locals just killed and burned?

Her pondering led her nowhere. After several hours of walking, lost in thought, she stopped at a square where there were benches. She chose to sit down and observe a bit. Across from her where a few market stands selling produce and meat. Trade deals were being struck, and all around armed guards were keeping watch. They were dressed similar to the fort's soldiers, almost identical. This was something Igarla found surprising, for even in Crylin city guards were a separate organization from the royal army. This city seemingly had Imperial soldiers patrolling the streets.

As contemplation took place in her head, a woman on the street looked up at her sitting on the bench, and made a line directly toward her. Igarla looked up from her thoughts. The woman was middle aged, commonly dressed, and seem extremely angry. She dropped the basket of cloths she was carrying and started shouting at her loudly, waving her finger. She was talking far too fast and slurred for Igarla to understand what she was saying. Her first thought was perhaps she had broken some sort of local custom, perhaps the bench was not for sitting on, so she stood up. The lady continued to move towards her, speeding up, as if preparing to charge at her. As she closed in a feeble punch missed Igarla's face, and she grabbed the woman by the shoulders to try to restrain her.

“<Slow down, please!>” Igarla tried to say. “<I can't understand you!>”

The woman would not stop to slow down, she squirmed in Igarla's grasp trying to push or hit her constantly as she rambled on. Several of the bystanders noticed and began to gather. Among the crowd a group of three guards started to push their way through. They took hold of the woman and began to drag her away from Igarla. One of them muttered over to her something along the lines of “Don't concern yourself with her”. As they hauled her away she started shouting to the people around her, her words still no more comprehensible than before. Igarla thought she heard several chants of Demon-born in there somewhere. Then she heard a sentence with the word Nameron in it, to which the crowd gasped, the guards threw her down on the ground, and one of them slapped her across the face. Considering he was wearing plate male gauntlets the slap must have hurt like hell. Igarla watched with concern. After the few short moments of silence the woman, on her knees looked straight into Igarla's eyes, and said a single sentence loudly and articulately:

“<Our emperor now serves the demons.>”

The people around started to look frightened and whispered to each other.

“<Our emperor now serves the demons!>” She shouted again. “<We will all be servants of the hell-spawn!>”

One of the guards beside her reached for the hilt of his sword and drew the blade. The woman was none the wiser, she just kept shouting her curses at Igarla, who got a sudden look of terror on her face, as she saw the guard place the tip on her back.

“<No, wait!>” Igarla shouted at the guard. “<You needn't...>”

The guard shoved his sword through her. The tip came out the other side, blood started to stain the woman's clothes, and she stared down at her chest in horror. Igarla sprinted to her, as the guards walked off without a word. She got down to her knees and picked up the woman's body in her lap. As she did another cough threw more blood out of her mouth. Igarla tore her shirt open to see the wound. By the looks of it the stab missed her spine and her heart. The bastard who put his sword through her was either incompetent or inhumanly cruel. It could be hours before she bled to death. Until then she would lie around in terrible pain.

Igarla tried to calm herself first. *You can still save her.* She told herself. Pressure. She had to apply pressure to the wound. A bit of her clothes should do. She ripped part of the woman's skirt into strips. Rolled two large chunks of it into balls, and with the strips fastened the balls to the two openings.

“<Be brave!>” Igarla said. “<Let me help.>” She could not think of more calming words in machtar as she did this. The woman just stared at her with wide eyes filled with fear. Igarla looked up quickly. To her shock, the crowd had dispersed, and the three guards were nowhere to be seen. It was as though not a person cared.

Igarla dealt with the shock of the situation and returned to bandaging her patient. When she felt the bleeding was stopped as best it could be, she lifted the woman in her arms and started to make her way back to the fort. It was slow. She was trained to move fast over long distances with a heavy load. She ran as best she could, as the poor woman kept gasping for air. She made it back to the fort's gate. The two men on guard watched as she approached. Igarla ignored their curious looks and ran right past them into the courtyard where the Lomaran camp was. Captain Palanor was in the middle of a walk with a few papers in his hands as he saw Igarla running. He immediately pocketed his papers and ran to her side. He ran alongside her and put his arms under the woman to help Igarla carry her.

“What happened?” Palanor asked.

“Later.” Igarla panted. “Hrialvin! Hrialvin!” She shouted.

Hrialvin poked his head out of his tent just as Igarla and Palanor made it there.

“What's wrong?” He said, then looked at the body in Igarla's hands. “What happened to her?” He turned back inside and cleared one of the beds.

“She took a sword threw the chest.” Igarla huffed as she laid her down and Hrialvin started examining.

“Who is she?” Palanor asked.

“I...” Igarla leaned against a table to catch her breath. “I don't know. Just some woman from the town.”

“How did she end up with a sword threw the chest?”

“She was spouting curses at me in the town square. Some of the guards grabbed her and stabbed her...”

“What?” Palanor looked at her, then at the woman then back at Igarla. “They just stabbed her?”

Igarla didn't answer. She was too out of breath. She just continued to lean against the table and pant heavily. Palanor decided to leave her alone. He walked up to the bed and spoke to Hrialvin instead.

“Is it bad?”

“Very.” Hrialvin responded while desperately reaching around him for bandages and trying to keep the bleeding down. “Her heart wasn't hit, but it looks like her lung was. If I can't get a hold of this she's going to drown in her own blood.”

Palanor just remained silent.

“Can you?” Igarla regained her strength.

“I don't think so.”

Igarla and Palanor looked on as Hrialvin tried to work his magic. His hands were moving with great speed, performing several tasks in rapid succession. Still, one could not escape the feeling that there was no hope. After a while he put a blood soaked hand on his forehead and just stood there in silence looking at the woman still coughing and spitting. He turned around and said to the other two:

“She's fading. She's already bled out internally enough to kill her. I'm afraid there's nothing I can do.”

Igarla looked up at the ceiling in frustration then turned her back. Hrialvin continued to talk to Palanor:

“At this rate though it could take at least an hour before she bleeds out entirely. Like I said; drowning in her own blood. I would like to ease her passing, save her the possible hours of pain.”

Palanor looked at Igarla. She had her face buried in her palm, and didn't respond. He looked back at Hrialvin.

“Do it.” he said. “Flame give her peace.”

Hrialvin nodded, and walked back to the table. Palanor went to put a hand Igarla's shoulder.

“I'm sorry.” Palanor said.

“She's dead because of me...” Igarla said.

“No. Don't say that.”

“It was her reaction to seeing me in the town that got her killed by the guards. If I hadn't been there...”

“You bandaged her up and brought her straight to where she could get help. That was the compassionate thing to do. None have command over chance, Igarla. Don't blame yourself.”

“It's hard not to.”

The sound of a dagger slicing through flesh was heard behind her. Igarla closed her eyes tight and walked out of the tent. There was a wooden weapon rack right outside the tent to the side. With a quick winded swipe Igarla smashed at the crossbeam with her fist, ripping the rack in half. The swords and spears leaned against it clattered to the ground, drawing the attention of all those nearby. As Igarla heard Palanor exit the tent, she noticed a few Nemeran soldiers approaching. They were headed by Captain Graston, and as they got closer Igarla recognized them as the three guards from the city. She clenched her fists.

“Captain Palanor.” Graston said. “I understand that your woman brought one of my people back here to your camp.”

“Yes.” Palanor replied. “One of my physicians just euthanized her. I'm sorry, there was no way to save her.”

“That was already decided. I require her body.”

“Already decided?” Igarla asked reprovingly.

“She was executed for a reason. And speak when spoken to, woman.”

“I am a lieutenant, man! And I will not...”

“Lieutenant, please!” Palanor interrupted. “The body is right in there.” He pointed to the tent. “You may have it to provide her a funeral.”

“Funeral?” Graston almost laughed out loud. As two of the men following him went to the tent. “The body is to be displayed publicly.”

“What?” Igarla burst out.

“She spoke blasphemous words of our emperor. There are only few more heinous crimes than that.”

“How about murder?” Igarla asked, her fists clenched even tighter.

Palanor grabbed Igarla by the arm and pulled her closer.

“Lieutenant!” he whispered to her. “She's dead. We tried to save her. Let it go, please!”

He looked at her intently. Igarla looked back. She finally gave a reluctant nod.

“I'm sorry we had to get involved.” Palanor said to Graston.

“No trouble.” Graston said as his men dragged the body out of the tent. “I'm sorry you had to trouble yourselves with pointless attempts at aid.”

“No trouble...” Igarla said looking away with her arms crossed.

“Have a nice day!” Graston said. He turned and walked off, his two men dragging the body behind him. Igarla watched, not moving from her spot.

“Do you see this?” Igarla shouted after him. Graston turned to look at her. Igarla was pointing a finger at the center of her chest, slightly off to the left. He raised a confused eyebrow. “This is where the heart is.” she said. “You might want to teach your men that to. They don't seem able to hit it on a kneeling stationary target.”

Graston did not respond. He walked off without another word.

“Don't do that again.” Palanor said firmly. Igarla turned and looked him in the eye.

“Excuse me? Don't help a dying person? Are you...”

“Don't go up against the local officers like that!”

“The sheer amount of disrespect they had for that poor...”

“I know. I don't like it any more than you, but this is not Lomar. We don't make the rules here, so...”

“Fine. No need to elaborate.” Igarla sighed. “My apologies, captain. It won't happen again.”

“Good. Now listen. I spoke to Serjak. He has an assignment for us. We're to take part in a raid on a rebel compound. I trust what happened today won't interfere with your...”

“It's just death.” Igarla said, and turned away. “I've gotten over it before, I'll get over it again.”

Despite what Igarla told her captain, sleep that night did not help her recover from the day's events, nor did a long chain of competitions against Plerid. She had long since come to terms with the fact that soldiers die. It's the most common hazard of the profession. The two things that Igarla could not stand were civilian deaths, and pointless deaths, or in the present case both at once.

“...and they all just stood by and did nothing.” Igarla recounted the events to Hrialvin later in the day. “No. Worse than that, they acted as if she wasn't even there. They just ignored everything.”

“That's just how things are here.” Hrialvin sighed. “You do not say blasphemous things of the emperor.”

“At the very least they could have given her a clean death. If you hadn't slit her throat she would have lay there dying for hours.”

“Please don't remind me. Hard enough not to think about it as it is. Besides, clean deaths are rare out here when it comes to crimes of heresy. Most common methods include burning at the

steak, drowning, hot oil..."

"Stop! Please!" Igarla turned disgusted towards him.

"I'm being serious. I know it's not a calming thought, but what that lady got was small potatoes compared to what would have happened if you were not the one to get to her first."

Igarla ran a hand across her head.

"They do things differently some places." She said.

"Excuse me?" Hrialvin said.

"People are different. Systems are created to adapt to local environments. Judging them like this would be a mistake. I have been here for less than two weeks."

"I don't think there is a society in the world deserving of the things that go on in Nemeron. The military constantly abusing the people is one thing, but what the people end up doing to themselves tops all."

"What they do to themselves?"

"Tell me, have you seen the mine-children?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm sure you saw them. Niedlopan is just south of the Kerhal Vatochi, the Iron hills. There are at least five mines in those hills and they all require labor. Lots of the shafts are too small for a man to pull the cart in them, so the miners came up with an alternative."

"Wait..." Igarla's eyes widened. "The have children work in mines?"

"Parents, who have no money for food often sell their infant children to the local mine-owners. They put them straight to work pulling carts all day. Once they get to big to fit in the shafts, they dump them in the city and leave them there. The poor things never learned to stand upright in those tunnels. They can't walk, they can barely speak, and most of them never developed sight in the dark."

Igarla looked down at the ground. The realization of what happened to those children she saw in the city just hit her.

"Why..." She could barely find words. "Why don't the parents take them back?"

"For the same reason they got rid of them. They can't afford to feed more mouths."

Igarla didn't feel the strength to continue the conversation. She got up and walked away with Hrialvin sitting on the bench. She tried to make sense of what she had learned. High levels of poverty force people to do drastic things. And after all, many considered the harsh military training the Lomarans underwent to be inhumane. Nobody is perfect. These were the only thoughts that let Igarla get even a wink of sleep that night.

Demonstrating dominance

Serjak had deployed his troops to take care of one of the rebel encampments. His troops had marched out there the next day, and had made camp just before nightfall. He ordered the Lomaran troops to join him there as soon as they were able.

The Nemeran forces came to a halt behind a hill, out of sight of the encampment watchers. From a vantage point on a hilltop the three officers in charge, Serjak, Graston, and Vrigek were standing over a map of the area with a drawing of the fortifications.

“What do we see?” Serjak asked.

“Small encampment.” Graston replied. “Less than two-hundred men. They have a storehouse with all the sacks they looted from the local farms.”

“Weaponry?”

“Makeshift weapons, simple clothing. Nothing unexpected.”

“We have five hundred at our command...” Serjak said. “Here is what we do. Place one line of crossbowmen along the hillside. As they shower the enemy with arrows the main force will mass at the gate and knock it down. There is no need to get too creative here. This is a simple routine task. Overwhelm them. They don't stand a chance.”

“As you command, sir. I'll have the men get ready at once.” Vrigek said. “The Lomarans will be here soon. What should we tell them?”

“Let's set them up on the hill with the archers. They are good at range anyway. They will have an excellent view of the battlefield as well.”

“Good thinking, commander.” Graston said. “We can put on a show for them.”

“That's the idea.”

At that moment Vrigek nudged the commander and pointed to the incline, where Captain Palanor and Igarla were walking up to them.

“<We're not late yet, I trust.>” Palanor said.

“<Right on time, actually.>” Vrigek said. “<We have just agreed on the plan.>”

Palanor looked over the Nemeran officers.

“<Have you?>” he asked.

“<Yes.>” Graston said. “<You and your men will take up a support position atop that hill with our archers, while our main forces storm the gate.>”

Palanor opened his mouth to say something, but then seemed to change his mind. He put his hands behind his back and nodded.

“<Will we be moving out soon?>” he asked.

“<Our troops will be prepared to move in less than half an hour.>” Serjak said. “<Make sure you're ready by then.>”

Palanor repeated his nod, then turned to walk away. Igarla stood in her place looking at him, then back at the officers.

“Um...sir?”

“Let's go, lieutenant.”

Igarla hesitantly followed him. As soon as they were out of ears reach she spoke to him again.

“Did I just not understand that conversation, or are they really going to charge the main gate?”

“They are.”

“But... do they not know about the traps?”

“I don't know.”

“Should we not have told them we scouted out the base as well? They could use the information.”

“Serjak won't care. Spike-traps, and choke points only mean he has to deploy more men. He won't take steps to get around them.”

“He's going to get his men killed. Even with the wiping out of the camp he will have traded in more than...”

“I'm sure he knows that, lieutenant. It's not our place to impose. Trust me. If he found out I went behind his back he would throw a fit.”

Igarla took a second or two to ponder an idea. Palanor noticed the silence.

“What are you thinking?”

“Sir, it occurs to me that this might be another excellent opportunity to... tame the beast?”

Palanor stopped and turned to face her.

“Are you suggesting what I think you are? And right after I told you the commander does not like people going behind his back?”

“What reason would he have to be mad? We could take the camp out ourselves. We know the layout, their numbers, we are ready to move out this moment and we've done this hundreds of times before.”

Palanor shook his head in disapproval, but then right after got a huge smile on his face.

“Tell the troops to move out. Do it silently, and leave the tents up with the servants moving about. Hopefully the Nemeran forces won't notice we are gone.”

Igarla smiled back at him, and nodded.

The Lomaran camp was a hundred yards from the Nemeran camp. Palanor didn't want to spur conflict between the two factions, or take actions that would have helped that. This fact came in handy to Igarla, when she got back to tell Plerid what the plan was. When she heard she instantly

got the same giddy smile that Igarla got when speaking to Palanor. The special forces moved out silently. Palanor was waiting for them near the woods.

“We're ready, sir.” Igarla said, once they were safely hidden in the trees.

“Were you spotted?”

“No, sir. They didn't even blink in our direction.”

“Excellent. Here is the plan. We will take this in three teams. I'll head the first, Igarla will take the second. Plerid, you will head the archers. Igarla and I will take up two positions on the woods edge, I to the southwest, Igarla to the northwest. When you see the boosters in position, Plerid, that's when you take out the watchmen. Once the arrows have struck, we run inside. Do as much damage as you can without being seen. Any questions?”

“Prisoner mentality?” Plerid asked.

“Spare any man who lays down his arms. These are not fighters. When they see they have no chance, they will give up rather quickly. Anything else? No? Then Lords go with us.”

The Lomarans split into three teams and started moving through the trees in different directions. Igarla lead her squad to a position northwest of the camp. They stayed within the cover of the tree-trunks and bushes. The wooden walls were visible in the moonlight, no more than forty yards away. Igarla watched closely at the two visible towers from this side. There were two watchmen in each tower, all of them armed with what looked like hunting bows and quivers on their belts. Igarla pointed to three of her soldiers, and gave them a hand-signal to get ready. She waited for a moment when the watchmen's gazes were focused elsewhere, then motioned for them to move forward. The three darted out of the woods, moving low, quiet and fast. They ran right up to the wall, and crouched down, with their backs to the wood, looking toward Igarla. One of the watchmen in the tower closer to them jerked his head in the direction of the woods. Igarla pulled her head back behind the tree, then slowly poked it out again. The other watchman said something to him. He pointed at the woods, then the two traded words for a second or two. After that they went back to their business. Igarla breathed a sigh of relief. They had not been discovered.

Shortly after Igarla's three troops made it to the wall, three others ran at the wall from Palanor's group to their south. The guards seemed to remain oblivious. Igarla gave the signal to the rest of her men to be ready. Plerid would surely have seen the soldiers ready by the walls, which meant the attack would soon commence. Surely enough, a total of eight arrows shot out of the woods aimed at the guards. With two arrows striking each, the four watchmen went down, and Igarla darted out from behind her cover followed by the rest of her troops. They ran in lines of three, directly at the soldiers crouched at the walls, who were holding their hands, clenched together in front on them. As Igarla and her soldiers got to them, they put their feet in the palms of their hands, and received a boost onto the wooden walls. The boosted soldiers grabbed at the top of the

walls, and pulled themselves up, leaping over to the other side.

Igarla knew she had little time to act, as Palanor was moving on the other side, and their presents would soon be known. The first thing she did was look for cover. She instantly jumped behind a pile of crates and barrels, and the soldiers who followed her did the same. She then started to search for ideal targets. She caught a glimpse a rebel soldier with his back to her. No other men were close. There was however a small group of rebels around a fire. She signaled her soldiers to move into position to take out the group, then drew her knife and walked towards the other soldier. As she got behind him, she quickly threw a hand over his mouth, and in the same moment ran her dagger across his throat. She then pulled the dead body back behind her cover.

At that moment from another side of the camp the sounds of a fight started to make themselves heard. The men sitting around the fire all got up and turned their heads in that direction. The Lomaran soldiers in position knew that the time to strike was now. They leaped out of the shadows and began cutting down the enemy. Igarla ran out from behind her cover and joined the fight, drawing her sword on the way. The dozen or so men they had taken out thus far were child's-play. Now the real fight would begin.

Back at the camp Serjak and his men were finishing up the finer details of the attack plan, when a hurried messenger ran up to them.

“Commander...” he said. “The Lomarans, sir. They are not in their camp!”

“What?” Serjak exclaimed.

“There is no one left in the Lomaran camps but the servants. The tents are all empty!”

“They left?” Vrigeck looked confused. “Why would they leave?”

“It's not like Lomarans to run from a fight.” Graston added.

The sound of battle cries started to get louder from the direction of the camp, as well as the sound of clattering steel. Serjak looked out at the valley at the lights coming from the wooden fortifications.

“They didn't...” he muttered to himself. “Gods damn it...”

“Did those idiots just charge in by themselves?” Graston asked.

“Why didn't we see them move in?” Vrigeck added.

“Alert the men!” Serjak ordered. “Looks like we have to move in now.”

Within a few minutes the gathered Nemeron force began to march towards the fort. Serjak and the others were mounted on horseback above the common troops. They made their way down the hillside. As they came into a range of 200 yards Serjak ordered the men to charge. They started to run down the hill full speed. In the front a couple of soldiers were carrying a hand held battering ram to bring down the gates with. To their great surprise however, the gates opened just as they were about to move in. The soldiers stopped dead in their tracks when they saw that the men with

their hands on the doors where in fact Lomaran. Serjak rode forward through the crowd of his men, Vrigeek and Graston right behind him. The Lomarans had taken full control of the compound. Their men and women were taking watch positions, searching the buildings and moving a surprisingly large number of prisoners. Palanor was standing in the middle of the camp with Igarla behind him. As the commander and his troops entered he turned to face him and saluted.

“<Commander!>” he said with a smile on his face. “<Your campsite has been cleared. It's lucky we did what we did, else your men would have fallen for that trap right there.>” He pointed at a newly uncovered group holes with wooden spikes sticking out from the bottom. Serjak glared down at the spike-traps, then back at Palanor. Their gazes met. Serjak looked about ready to start chopping heads off, but just before he spoke his expression changed. He smiled, bowed his head and spoke:

“<Very impressive work. >”

“<How the hell did you manage to get a whole squad inside without opening the gates?>” Graston asked.

“<My good Captain,>” Palanor replied. “<these soldiers were trained for this exact type of operation. We knew how handle the mission the moment we laid eyes on the site.>”

“<You should have waited for us.>” Vrigeek said. “<Had we gone in together it would have resulted in fewer casualties.>”

“<Good of you to remind me.>” Palanor said and turned to Igarla, who was busy looking over the battlefield. “Lieutenant! Casualty report!”

Igarla looked up from the corpses on the ground.

“Reports of seven wounded, sir, three of them critical but stable.”

Palanor looked back to the three mounted officers and gave an ever so subtle smirk. He awaited their reaction. Each officer displayed a different emotion; Vrigeek was impressed, Graston was skeptical, and Serjak just kept looking with the same analytical stare visible on him in every situation. Palanor was the center of attention, and this gave Igarla the chance to observe them from the background. They eyed the battlefield for a few seconds, then both Vrigeek and Graston turned to Commander Serjak in the hopes of him telling them what to do next. The commander turned his gaze downward, slightly shaking his head with a half sided smile on his face. The closest Igarla ever saw to this, was the look Plerid had when she was bested in sparring. 'Well played, Lomaran.' was what she imagined he was thinking.

“<Report then, Captain.>” he said finally. “<Lets hear the situation.>”

“<We counted nearly two-hundred resisters. Less than half of them are dead, a dozen are wounded, the rest laid down their arms and surrendered.>” He pointed to a host of men on their knees with their hands on the back of their heads. “<Also, inside the buildings we found captives.

Thirty of them. They have been freed, but confined to the structures until further notice.>”

“<Excellent! Since you have been so eager to resolve the battle on your own, I will allow you and your men the honor of finishing the job. Every prisoner in the camp is to be executed. Kill them all, stack the bodies in a pile and burn the camp to the ground.>”

“<Would it not be a wiser course of action to take the rebels captive, sir?>”

“<I am not just talking about the rebels, captain. Every man in the camp, be he rebel, traitor or captive. Insurrection spreads like disease. We must cleanse it.>”

Palanor lost his word. He looked at the commander disbelievingly with his mouth half open, trying to find something to say. Igarla saw him speechless. She could not understand the majority of the conversation, but what she saw from the faces told her Palanor was losing his ground.

“<But the women are to be spared, I understand?>” he said finally looking at his boots.

“<I did say every man.>” Serjak smiled.

“<Respectfully, commander, I... I do not think...>”

“<Are you going against my orders, captain?>” Serjak's attitude became sterner.

“<You are asking me to commit murder.>”

“<I'm asking you to kill the enemy. A task which you should be accustomed to by now.>”

“<The captive villagers are not the enemy!>”

“<You are here to serve us. Your colonel assigned you to my command! Your enemy is our enemy. Captain Palanor, I have given you an order. Finish up here, and meet us at the camp for debriefing. That is all.>”

Serjak jerked the reigns of his horse and rode out of the camp. Graston gave his commander an admiring smile, then followed after him. Vrigeek remained behind for a few seconds more. He saw the look on Palanor's face as Serjak rode off, and once Igarla had arrived at his side, he spoke to both of them in the common tongue of Leviron:

“Doing the bidding of the Gods is rarely a pleasant task. We must take comfort in knowing that it is divine will, and we shall all be rewarded in the afterlife.”

Palanor looked him in the eye. Neither of them spoke a word, just looked on with similar looks of deep regret. Vrigeek turned away and followed his comrades out of the compound. With him gone Igarla turned to Palanor trying to gauge his emotions. He looked greatly disturbed.

“What was that all about?” she asked.

He took a deep sigh, then said: “I want the men killed and the women brought to the Nemeron camp.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me, lieutenant.” Palanor turned to face her. “Orders from the commander. Every man who's eyes aren't red must die. Right now.”

“I... but, sir. Are they not prisoners of the rebels?”

“Best you not ask questions, Igarla. Just do it.”

“Since when is a Lomaran soldier supposed to not ask...?”

“I said do it!” Palanor scoffed at her and stormed off towards the exit. Igarla was left standing there, dumbfounded, as Lomaran soldiers went around her moving bodies and prisoners. She finally took a breath, and went to find Plerid to give the order.

6

The victorious army arrived back at fort Flidenoch very late in the afternoon. For the Nemeran troops it had been easy pickings, their job had been done for them. The Lomarans returned with their bodies and souls scared. Igarla saw the signs on the soldiers. When ordered to execute the captives they did so without a second thought at the time. They were hesitant to kill the villagers, but followed through none the less. But Lomaran soldiers are not empty vessels. On the field, in the heat of battle they stay calm and emotionless, but once they are done they think on what transpired. It was a trick Igarla had learned on her very first day in the field.

They were civilians. They had to be. If they weren't Palanor would have said so instead of telling her not to ask. To the average eye they seemed like ordinary village folk. Farmers and herders. But why on earth would Serjak order them dead? To Igarla's understanding the rebels only took captives from the villages that were inhabited by people loyal to the Emperor. Did she misunderstand? She had been paying close attention thus far. Misunderstanding something like this was not likely.

Plerid was clearly far more shaken than the others. She spent most of the march massaging the hilt of her dagger in a nervous fashion. She did not speak. She just stared blankly at the road ahead of her. Nothing Igarla could say would get her to talk.

The Lomaran crew returned to business as usual once they made it back to the fort. Palanor waved Igarla and Plerid to follow him. Plerid sheathed her dagger and looked at Igarla, the first seemingly conscious look she had given the whole trip. She then marched with forced haste after the captain. Igarla followed. Once inside Igarla shut the door behind her and Plerid spoke at once.

“Did we kill a camp full of civilians?” Her tone was not curious, but enraged.

“Sergeant,” Palanor said removing his jacket. “mind your tone. We made a move, and the Commander countered perfectly. We're not playing *our* game anymore, we're...”

“I don't give a fuck about your stupid games!” Plerid shouted. “Did we or didn't we kill a camp full of civilians?!”

“For Lords' sakes, keep your voice down!” Palanor exclaimed. “Yes. Yes we did.”

“What the hell!” Plerid turned around and grasped her forehead.

“We tried to outshine the Nemeron forces, and the commander knew exactly where to strike. He sacrificed the camps captives to teach us a lesson.”

“The commander did nothing!” Plerid went on in a rage filled rant. “You did nothing for that matter! It was all us! Our swords that pierced their hearts, our hands that have their blood on them! How the hell could you...”

“And what would you have had me do?” Palanor burst out, and at the same did his best to make sure the sound of his voice did not carry beyond the walls. “We are here to preserve the peace with them through co-operation. I can't disobey his orders without causing tension, something the colonel ordered me specifically not to do!”

“You have got to be kidding me!” Plerid turned back to Igarla, who was still standing beside the door. She had a look of utter disbelief on her face. Igarla did not give her a response. Plerid turned back to Palanor. “What the fuck is the matter with you, captain?”

“Watch your tone!” Palanor said firmly.

“The captain I served for three years would never kill townsfolk and turn innocent women over to have who-knows-what done to them, while hiding behind the feeble excuse of 'I was only following orders'.”

“Well I was! And perhaps it would be best if you started doing the same!”

“Captain!” Igarla scowled. Both pair of eyes turned to her. She had gotten up from her leaning position against the wall and was standing straight up. “That was uncalled for! When I gave Plerid and the soldiers the order they followed through without a second thought! You cannot expect her not to have some later though.”

Palanor lowered his gaze. His hands sank down next to his thighs and a pale expression of stress came over him. He turned around to walk behind his desk with the two women watching him the whole way. Only after he was sitting down and had taken a few seconds to pull himself together was he able to look them in the eye again.

“Look.” his voice was not himself. It did not carry the same authority as it usually did. “I know I fucked up. I expect to have my fair share of restless nights to come. We should have just let them take the base as they planned. That way I would not have forced Serjak's hand as I did. I know this is hard on the troops but I need you all right now, perhaps more than ever. This is not the kind of assignment we can solve the way we usually do. We have to weigh options, pick our fights and remain as tactful as we can. This peace is important. We can't let our own consciences jeopardize it.”

“We are not soldiers of Nemeron.” Plerid said. She had seemingly calmed down, but still not forgiven yet. “We are Lomarans. We fight to protect, not control.”

“We fight to protect the people of Lomar.” Palanor corrected her. “We must never forget

that. As tragic as these people's lives are, we are not here for them. We are here so that our families, our loved ones and everyone else back home needn't suffer through a decade long war with the most powerful nation in the world.”

A dark silence fell upon the room. Plerid's gaze did not leave Palanor's face, and it was just as cold as before. Igarla said nothing.

“However dirty our hands are right now, it is only going to get worse.” Palanor said. “The only way to keep our honor intact is to keep in mind: it's our own people we are fighting for. It will be a challenge, but I need you on my side. Ladies, please.”

Plerid's face lost its hint of anger for the first time since they got home. She sheathed the dagger she had been relentlessly gripping this whole time, and turned to face the door. Disregarding protocol she walked out of the room and slammed it behind her. Palanor turned to look at Igarla. Igarla met his gaze. She knew very well what he was thinking. She had thought first about giving the captain a piece of her mind just like Plerid did, but the reality of the situation changed her mind. Her hands were not clean on this.

She gave the captain a nod, then went to leave through the door. Palanor said nothing to stop her.

Igarla's first action was to find Plerid. As she suspected, the furious sergeant went directly to the archery range to let loose a few arrows at imaginary targets. Plerid had shared this with her a few years back. When she was angry, she would paint a picture of the person who angered her on a target with her mind, then fill his face with holes. She claimed it helped her relax.

“You're not shooting the captain, are you?” She asked as she approached.

“Damn right I am.” Plerid said.

Igarla remained quiet as two more arrows flew across the length of the range, burying their tips into the eyes of the straw dummy.

“You shouldn't.” Igarla said slightly timidly.

“I should, and so should you.” Another arrow hit the target. “He had the balls to cross the commander and attack the base, but none when it came to the lives of the captives.” She fired of the last arrow from her quiver.

“You might want to add me to that target then too.” Igarla said.

“What?” Plerid turned to her and put the bow down. “Why would I do that?”

“Disregarding the commander's orders and attacking the base without permission was my idea.”

Plerid shook her head and looked at the ground.

“I got him into that situation.” Igarla continued. “Just... remember that when your shooting at him, alright?”

Plerid hesitated a while before answering. She put her hands on her hips and looked up at her.

“Look, I may have overreacted. I get that Palanor is not exactly cut out for this kind of political dealing. None of us are. But you can't honestly tell me that you don't find this appalling.”

“I've always hated politics. It's a pain in the ass, but a necessary one.”

“You and Palanor can say that all you want. As far as I'm concerned, there is no justification for the murder or innocent people. And I don't care that their eyes are white.”

After that she pushed Igarla out of the way and stormed off. Igarla almost said something to stop her. If she could only get a full sentence together in her head. Truth be told Plerid was right. Igarla had something of a history with foreigners. She was never one to look down on a person who was not Lomaran. Letting them suffer under the iron fists of the emperor's enforcers didn't feel like something a good Lomaran soldier should allow. And yet here they were. Helping the oppressors keep a leash on their people. The final thought that went through Igarla's mind before she banished the subject from it was: *We must stay vigilant. We must do this for Lomar. If Fara were alive... I would want to protect her.*

Spawns of Hell

Over the next number of days the bandit and rebel activity in the region had subsided. The inhabitants of Fort Flidenoch spent the newly received leisure time with drinks, wenches and songs. The noises from the ail-hall could be heard all night, even in the outer yards. The fort's guests, however, did not drink the days away as the hosts did. Every hour of the day and even a good couple hours of the night the Lomaran camp was active with men and women training on dummies and partners, practicing archery and melee with all sorts of weapons imaginable.

The ail-hall of the outer yards had a good view of the Lomaran camp. The atmosphere of joy and merriment was haunted ever so slightly by the grunts, pants and clashes of blunted steel and wood. Eyes would routinely stray to the windows, catching them in sight. One man in particular had taken up a seat by the window, and kept an eye on them all afternoon long. His silent contemplation was disturbed by his two friends, who had come over to join him. One sat down with a blond haired wench on his knee, the other just stood behind him.

“There you are!” he said aloud as he sat down and firmed his grasp on the woman's waist. He was slightly plump with a shaved head, and a sliced scar on his left cheekbone. “We had been searching for you all morning. Syd and I had quite an exquisite time with young Geddel here, isn't that right, darling?” he groped the girl on his lap, who responded with a giggle and a wink.

“I... just felt like drinking alone.” he replied. Much fun as a romp with the pretty thing would have been, the whole day he had felt quite uneasy.

“What’s gotten into you?” The man the bald one had called Syd asked. “You been sittin’ here all day watching them?” He turned his head out to look at the Lomarans.

“It’s unnerving.” He answered and took a sip from the mug of ail he had before him. “Do you see that one? Right there, the one with the tied up hair holding the wooden sword? She has been training since I woke. When I sat down here she was already swinging, and she continues even now into the late day, and I could swear I saw her take no more than two short breaks.”

The two friends looked out the window for a moment, but it was not obvious whether they had spotted the one he pointed out or not.

“So what?” Syd said after a while. “Just because they spend the day sweating like pigs to be able to die in a prettier fashion that means you can’t have some fun?”

“That’s not why they do it.” The voice was old and weary, and it came from a table to the side. The three turned to see an old veteran warrior sitting by himself. He had a small bit of grey hair on the sides of his head, but the dome was bald. His limbs were thin and weak, but his scars were showing, as the fangs of the dying wolf who’s hunting days are done. “Those creatures are deadly as they come. What they do all day is what makes them more than men. No matter what they might tell you, they are not human. They are the spawns of hell, children of the demons, the ones who could not be held back by the boundaries between hell and earth.”

The three men and the girl changed their position to be able to face the old man. “That’s hogwash!” the bald man said first. “Those are just stories mothers tell their children to scare them from the reds of their eyes.”

“That’s right.” Syd seconded. “Everyone knows that escape from hell is impossible.”

“It was.” The man continued. “Only a few have ever succeeded, and they all escaped with eyes reddened by the fires.”

“I’ve heard this before.” The young Nemeronean said. “The priests would not stop chanting it, but surely... surely this is not truly possible. How could they really be born of demons? The gods banished them to hell long before the kingdoms of men came into existence.”

“They did.” the man said in a hushed tone. “But you can’t banish someone from a place they have never been. Long ago, men lived not in cities of stone but villages of huts and tents. They were simple creatures, more beast than man; hunting, mating, gathering food and living their lives. The scholars say those days were simpler. No kings or Emperors to watch over them, just the small tribes and their families. The inhabitants of southern Leviron were no different. Until the day the demons breached the worlds.”

“They say the earth erupted, and large clouds of thick black smoke flew from beneath the

surface. The demons walked the earth for a thousand years, and in those times they had made servants and slaves out of the tribes they encountered. By the time the gods had banished them from our realm, they had already taken most tribes in the south back to hell with them. And there they lived, bound not by steel chains or ropes, but the will of their masters. They spent their endless days performing labor, for no other purpose than to feed the demons' power with their anguish. They became subject to their will, to their ungodly, filthy desires as well. The demons would take any man or woman and have their way with them. Their suffering kept them powerful, for one day they planned to overthrow the gods, and reign supreme on earth."

"One day, however, the unthinkable happened. Every slave taken below had dropped their work and risen to challenge their evil masters. They had gathered and charged at them, knowing that they had nothing to lose, knowing that this way some of them could escape. For attacking the demons in their own realm is like trying to drown a fish, and even the hordes of risen servants could not even leave a scratch. They could, however, distract their attention. So while the demons' gazes were fixed on the attack, others fled. It is unclear, just how long they had wandered the depths of hell, be it hours or centuries, but one thing is clear as daylight: they had succeeded. After several lifetimes of endless torment they finally saw the light of the sun again."

"But they did not escape unscarred. Remnants of their days in hell were still with them, both in body, and in soul. They had become tainted by the fires they were exposed to, it's corruption burned inside them, and every one of their airs. Their power is the unholy power of their former masters, the power that gives them their longer life, their demonic temper, their inhuman resolve... and it is the reason they will one day rejoin their masters, and lead the crusade to take the world away from the gods."

A smaller crowd had gathered as the old man told his tale. He was surrounded by intent stares, and mouths open in horror.

"By the heavens!" one of the spectators said. "They have started already! They crusade to take our world for the demons!"

"I still think its hogwash." Syd replied.

"You are wrong!" another soldier said. "I was there when they took over that rebel camp. Nobody even saw them approach, and by the time we arrived there, they had taken it all! They were helped by the demonic powers. They must have been!"

"But..." the young man started to ask his question. "If they are the spawns of hell, should we not be fighting them? Why would our emperor have us working with them?"

"Because," the old man said. "Even the emperor fears them. All men do."

A hand from behind reached out and grabbed the old veteran's shoulder. "That's enough out of you." It was the commander. He stood over the table in an imposing fashion. Some wondered

how long he had been listening. “It’s your years of service that save you from the noose, old man. Do not speak such things, for the emperor is the true servant of the gods, and fears nothing.”

“The men must know the truth if they are to take them on one day, commander.” The veteran replied.

“Sir?” One of the men turned to Serjak. “Is it true? Are these Lomarans really the demons’ servants?”

“So say the words of our profits.” The commander replied.

“Then...sir... why does the emperor not have us wipe them out?”

Serjak slowly walked to the window, and leaned on the frame. He watched the Lomarans as they sparred and trained. “Because the emperor is no fool. It is said: ‘Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.’ Whether or not the Lomarans are the spawns of hell, they are a blight on this world either way. Though they had already deserved extinction long ago, delayed doesn’t mean denied. It will not be today, but sooner or later they will get what’s coming to them.”

Many of the customs of people outside Lomar left Igarla puzzled, but few more so than the phobia many seemed to have of the naked human body. After all, did they not all inhabit one? What horrors were they expecting to see? She could still remember the first time foreigners had caught sight of her bare chest. It was in the kingdom of Crylin, during her first visit, when she had helped Lomaran forces set up camp on the outskirts of a local village. A woman and her child had noticed her as she helped carry a barrel of wine on her shoulder. She had just recently awoken and neglected to slip into her undershirt. The passing mother quickly covered her child’s eyes and hurried along. It wasn’t until later that someone had explained it to her, and even then she did not understand. Why would the church of the gods care if someone got glimpse of a woman’s breasts? Surly the child would have seen some anyway when his mother nursed him. What was the reason behind this?

She never received an answer that satisfied her completely. The best she had heard was that the church wanted to keep people safe from temptation, but that just brought on other questions, like why sex would be considered a sin.

One thing was for certain. Most foreign men had one reason they did not like looking at naked Lomaran soldier-women: Envy. Igarla was by no means a strong Lomaran woman. Heavy soldiers were renowned for sporting bodies with muscles like horses, which they needed to carry their full plate suits and massive weapons. And still, even with her average physique, she was more than a match for most men in fort Flidenoch.

She bent her arms, hoisting herself up till her chin touched the wooden bar, then lowered herself and did it again. Igarla loved the feeling of her muscles tightening. The sensation always got

her heart pumping in a satisfying manner, and she could feel the speed of her blood racing, the sweat running across her skin. Every time she was done working out, she felt like she could wrestle a bull.

Her feet stirred the dust as she landed on the ground after releasing the bar. She let her shoulders drop, and shook the tension out of her arms. She had been at it all day. This was perhaps the time to finish. She took a walk over to a bucket of water set out, and threw two hands full of it in her face, then dowsed the rest of her body to wash away the sweat. For the sake of modesty, if nothing else, she had thrown on a sleeveless white undershirt to cover her upper body. The cloth clung to her skin as it got wet.

“Are you finished?” The voice came from the direction leading out of the Lomaran area. It belonged to a young Nemeronean with thick brown hair and a mustache. He was slender for a soldier, though the sidearm he carried did suggest a man-at-arms off duty. His boots, breeches and tunic were simple, yet well cared for, and his accent was light. Igarla took no more than a glance before going back to wash herself.

The boy took a few steps closer, seeming slightly unsure about himself. “Hope you don’t mind me asking. It is hard to tell how long you plan to go on.”

Igarla wiped her face one last time, then reached for her jacket and threw it over her shoulder. “Can I help you?” She turned to face him with a hand on her jacket, and another on her hip.

“You could grant me the pleasure of knowing your name.” The young man walked most of the way towards her stopping within a conversational distance.

“Why would you need that?” she asked.

“It would make addressing you easier.” He smiled.

“I am Igarla.” She replied hesitantly.

“And I am Hrakim Jollad. Hrakim, if it please the lady.” He said with a bow.

“I am a lieutenant, not a lady.” Igarla replied.

“I know that much.” He straightened out. “Many know of the Lomaran lieutenant who bested Graston’s champion. I was watching. Quite impressive, I must say.”

“You never answered my question. Can I help you?”

The boy was trying to court her, she could tell. No matter how hard he tried, his gaze kept dropping to the wet cloth resting atop her breasts. “Well...” he cleared his throat. “I was hoping that perhaps I could persuade you to join me for a pleasant conversation, a few drinks, and perhaps a tumble in my bunk later on.”

Igarla let out a short laugh, and smiled. “That was far more straight forward then I expected.”

“You do not strike me as the kind who has patience for false courtesies. Right down to business, as they say.”

“Well, you are right about that. Which is why my answer is no. But thank you none the less.”

“May I perhaps suggest, that the few drinks and conversation I mentioned might change your mind?”

“It would take well more than just a few drinks.” She was about to make her way back to her tent, when the boy told her the one thing that could get her to think again.

“I know a tavern that has Lomaran beer in stock.”

She paused. The first steps back to the tent had been taken, but the mention of the thing she had been craving since she left home got her to stop. She turned back to him to the sight of a satisfied smile on Hrakim’s face. “Tempting, indeed.” She told him. “But at what price would this come for me?”

“All I ask in return is the pleasure of your company for the afternoon.”

“If by that you mean to say...”

“Merely your company, I promise.”

“Because I can tell you right now, there is nothing you could say or do to change my mind about that tumble. Keep that in mind.”

The boy’s smile grew larger to reveal his teeth. “If you feel that way later as well, I will have no hard feelings. A chance is all I ask.”

Igarla bit her lip. “Very well. Grant me a minute and I shall return.”

She left him on the training grounds while she dropped by her tent to dry off and strap on her swordbelt. She then stopped by Palanor’s quarters to inform him she would be out in town for the afternoon, then found Hrakim right where she had left him. As she arrived, he glanced down at her belt with the weapons strapped to it.

“Lead the way.” She told him.

After a walk through the town and a small attempt of conversation, Igarla and her guide had arrived at an establishment on the very edge. It was not close to any main roads leading into town, nor was it near any markets, squares or other hubs. Not an ideal place to set up trade.

Once inside her impression did not improve. The building was in rather bad condition, old wooden walls and floor that had not been tended to in a while. The furniture was of a similar quality, and there was hardly anything decorating the depressingly empty walls. Nevertheless the patrons seemed to be enjoying themselves. They all sat in close nit groups drinking and laughing at whispered stories. The voices were low, kept almost at a hush for reasons Igarla could not imagine.

At first a few eyes stopped to glance at her, then slowly the whole tavern turned to face her.

Worried eyes leapt between her and Hrakim, some hand seemed to be reaching for weapons. Igarla leaned closer to Hrakim. “Is my being here going to be causing trouble?” she asked him, her hand poised to reach for her sword.

“Not once I introduce you to the owner.” he replied. Closing the door behind him he made his way up to the counter spanning the length of the room. An old looking man with leathery wrinkled skin and a bald head stood behind. As Hrakim approached with Igarla behind him the man gave a snort and spoke. He was brief and unintelligible to Igarla’s ears. Hrakim then turned to introduce her to him. “Igarla,” he turned to her “this is old man Throick. He owns the establishment.”

Igarla did her best to smile and spoke in the machtar tongue. “<Greetings, sir! A pleasure to make you acquaintance.>” Hrakim then went on to speak some more with old man Throick. After a brief conversation the old man looked her in the eye for a moment, then smiled, and gestured to a seat by the bar. At this point the eerie quiet subsided as the patrons seemed to accept her presence, and went back to their conversations.

Igarla and Hrakim sat down next to each other. “A strange place, this.” Igarla said. “Hidden in the back streets of town, no clear sign above the door, people sitting around in silence...” Igarla noticed that she herself had been keeping her voice down as she spoke. “Also, that must be the first time I had seen a local smile at me.”

“How should I put this...” Hrakim stroked his mustache. “You have tasted the difference between the local drinks and you own right? With the existence of an active trade between us and the Lomari colonies, did you not wonder why no taverns here ever serve it?”

“I *have* wondered that very thing, actually.”

“Our emperor is a great man, but he is surrounded by men with... questionable beliefs giving him advice. Lomari drinks are not allowed in Maradar by royal decree. As such, one can only find them in places discrete enough as to not attract the attention of the inquisition.”

“I see. So this place...”

“This place is for men looking to quench certain thirsts the inquisition would rather leave unquenched. Let us leave it at that, and just enjoy the comforts of home.”

By that point the owner had returned from the back room with two mugs and a pitcher. He placed them down on the table before his two customers, and filled them up with a liquid of such fine golden glow as Igarla had not seen for what felt like ages. Once she lifted the mug to her lips and let the contents flow down her throat it felt even longer. The beer was not amazing. It tasted to her like something that the Lomaran master brewers would have created from inferior hops that grew on colonial islands; nevertheless it tasted to her of home, and was a great few steps up from the piss the locals drank. Throick waited till Igarla lowered the mug to see the look on her face as

she let out a long sigh. She nodded at him in approval. The old man gave her a smile, then to Hrakim, and went back to his work.

“You approve?” the young boy asked when they were left alone.

“I most certainly do.” Igarla said, and took another sip.

“You cleared out a third of the mug on that first drink.” he said.

“You don’t truly know how much you love something until your forced to live without is. I haven’t had a good drink of beer since I left Seron.”

“You shouldn’t drink that fast though. It is wiser…”

“Don’t you worry yourself about me.” Igarla chuckled. “I’ve been enjoying beer long before you were enjoying women’s flesh.” She took another gulp. On the edge of her vision she could see Hrakim watching her. The boy had taken a mere couple of sips from his own drink. She glanced sideways at him then lowered her mug from her lips. “Watered down?” she said gesturing at his cup.

“Pardon?”

“I assume your own drink is watered down somewhat, no?”

“I…” the young soldier looked flustered. “Why would I…”

“To get me drunk faster, of course. Why else?” Igarla could see that the smile on her face was confusing him. “I don’t mind. It’s not like it makes any difference. Like I said, I’ve been doing this for a while. I know how to hold my own.”

“Wish I could say the same.” the boy sipped his drink. He suddenly had a harder time looking Igarla in the eye. “I get drunk far too easily. It’s why I…” he stopped when he saw Igarla’s half sided smile and single raised eyebrow. “I am not convincing you at all, am I?”

Igarla shook her head.

“Very well. I confess. I wanted to try and tip the scale in my favor a bit. You have proven to be a relentless foe. I needed something to assist me.”

Igarla chuckled again and finished the first mug. Normally she never drank this fast, but the familiar feeling of her homeland’s finest drink was just too overwhelming. She waved the old man over to fill her mug again.

“You don’t seem too taken aback by my foolish attempt.” Hrakim said.

“The beer is too good for me to hold a grudge. Besides, you pose no threat to me. I have no reason to worry.”

“How does a woman get skills to make her so formidable?”

“My soldiers training started when I was fourteen, and lasted for seven years. Lomar has seen two large-scale wars since the time of my birth, and I fought in both.”

“You trained for seven years?”

“I did. And it was hell. It had to be to prepare us to face our foes. Reptyl, Tusakaani, Tusker... I have friends in other units who have faced the risen armies of the Black Tides.”

“It certainly seems to have left its mark.” Hrakim glanced down at Igarla’s arms. They were hidden away under her jacket at the time, but he surely noticed all the scars that covered them back at the fort.

“Now then...” Igarla took a large gulp out of her mug, then turned her full body to face Hrakim. “...explain this to me: Why have you approached me?”

“You fascinate me. You have a beautiful figure, strong and shapely, the face of a highborn lady, seductive and elegant, and the grace of a dancer.”

“Don’t forget my eyes.”

“Indeed. The last time I can recall seeing such a fine shade of blue was when I gazed upon the clear waters of Danos Isle.”

“Your clear blue waters are however enveloped in demon-fire red.”

“True. The colors do tend to disapprove of one another at first, but the more you look, the more they harmonize.”

“You have a remarkably wide range of words for a soldier of Nemeron.”

“Thank you for the compliment. I traveled a bit in my youth as a bard in the isles. I took quite a liking to your leveroni common tongue.”

In your youth? Igarla was very sure that she did not misjudge this boy’s age. “My being Lomaran does not put you off?” she asked him.

“I can overlook just about anything when I see true beauty.”

Igarla picked her mug up off the counter and swirled the contents around a bit. “For the sake of argument let’s say you manage to seduce me into your bunk. You approached me openly before the eyes of both our peoples. I don’t imagine it would take them long to figure out what was going on. You have no qualms about being hailed as the boy who fucked the demons servant?”

Hrakim’s slowly curving lips made it clear that he liked the direction the conversation was taking. “Subduing a spawn of hell and having my way with her? To me it sounds more worthy of respect than scorn.”

“I see.” Igarla turned back to the counter.

“So...” the boy said withholding his eagerness. “Does that mean you are considering...?”

“I already told you. You are fighting a hopeless battle, boy. You are not my type.”

When it came to the execution of rebel fighters there were many options at Serjak’s disposal. Displayed corpses made for excellent method for setting examples. The fear of death was just about

the strongest force to keep the ranks of the rebels from growing. The amount of dead bodies hanging from gateways and wooden posts in Niedlopan would cause much fear indeed.

Serjak had spent time watching the Lomaran warriors train from the tops of the fort's inner walls. He detested the notion of wooden weapons. Training with weapons that do no harm prepares you for nothing. The purpose of training is to ready a man for what he must face in his battles. The steel of a real opponent becomes less frightening when all that has ever been swung at you was a stick.

The fort commander had a different method for keeping himself in shape. He stood in the inner courtyard, bare chested, unbothered by the rain, both him and his blade covered in blood. Before him stood a line of captive rebels from the keep's dungeon, all with their hands bound, wearing simple iron breastplates. Men-at-arms watched over the restrained prisoners to keep them from trying to flee, while a single prisoner stood armed with a four foot blade and a wooden buckler facing the commander. Serjak wiped a splatter of blood off his chin, rolled his shoulders and motioned for the prisoner to attack him. With hesitation the man gripped his sword and ran shouting towards him, swiping wildly in the commander's direction.

Serjak was not a graceful fighter. He was large and burly, dense hair covered his unguarded chest. His muscles were stiff and bulky, and his movements were far from subtle or graceful. Effective though. The man came rushing at him with all the force he could muster, but the sword strike was blocked by Serjak's blade, and the momentum driven body of the prisoner moved right on, bouncing off of the pile of meat before him, and falling to the ground. The force of the collision hardly made Serjak budge. He swung his sword at the man lying on the ground with more than enough strength to sever a leg and continue on half way through the other one. He left the man lying on the ground next to two other disfigured corpses, one of which was still busy bleeding out.

"Next!" The commander shouted while massaging the spot on his chest and stomach where the man had collided with him. One of the guards picked up a sword from the ground, that had previously belonged to one of the opponents Serjak had slain, pushed it into the palm of the next man in line, then gave him a shove towards the commander. The prisoner looked around worriedly with eyes darting around the yard, which was inhabited only by a few men practicing swordplay on dummies and loosing crossbows. Even most of those had stopped to watch the commander do his work. He knelt down on the ground, his eyes on the commander the whole time, and picked up the shield his predecessor had dropped. With a gulp and a nervous sigh he slowly approached Serjak with his shield in front. The ensuing fight took a bit longer than the one before. The prisoner made a few cautious stabs forward, some of which were too short to hit, others were deflected by Serjak's sword. After half a minute of ineffectual fencing from his opponent, the commander grew tired and struck the man's shield hard enough to launch it ten feet away from the fight. The prisoner was so

distracted by the blow, that he didn't even have enough time to turn his head back in time to see the blade of Serjak's sword fly in the direction of his neck. The next moment his headless body collapsed in a heap beside the others. "Next!"

He continued his exercise, lining up man after man, arming him and cutting him down after whatever resistance his opponent had to offer. He knew very well that he was not a graceful fighter. The Gods had granted him a body padded with muscle, and a size to rival any man. His strength was his greatest combat asset, and he learned very young how to use it in a way that will easily defeat fighters with more refined techniques. One by one, his captured rebel gladiators fell to his blade, a few even deciding to surrender and plead for mercy. He had none.

He was interrupted by captain Graston when half of his assembled training partners had been killed. "My lord!" the captain bowed. "You sent for me?"

Serjak took a moment to exhale and crack his neck. "I did." He stabbed his sword into the ground, and turned to his men. "We're done here!" The guards drove the remaining prisoners back in the direction of the entrance to the dungeon. Serjak himself walked over to the side of the yard, where he had hung his shirt and cloak.

"We have a problem. My agents have returned to me with news of betrayal."

"Who's betrayal, my lord?"

"Lord Delskelad."

"The lord of Threul?"

"Do you know of any other noble family named Delskelad? Yes, the lord of Threul."

"Did his town not come under attack several times this month? Why should he wish to aid the ones sacking his lands?"

"Good question." Serjak began to walk towards the keep, wrapping his cloak around his shoulders. "Since the news was brought to me I've been reviewing our correspondence. His trade caravans had been attacked, produce and raw materials had been stolen. It is the reason he was unable to supply us with his usual shipment of arms and armor. This you already know." He pushed the large oak door of the keep open. The dimly lit corridors inside echoed with every creak as he then shut it behind him.

"What exactly did your agents tell you?" Graston asked.

"The staff of his manner talk of secret meetings being held between lord Delskelad and rebel representatives. I've heard it from enough reliable sources to believe it to be true. At first it occurred to me that the meetings may have been to reacquire what had been stolen from him, but then I looked further. My agents questioned witnesses and discovered that the robbed trade caravans were travelling on different routes. The lord had ordered them changed. The very first one was attacked and looted, as were all of the others traversing this new trade rout. Furthermore, it is not true that

his smiths did not have the materials needed to make their supplies. They have been working tirelessly the whole time. That would not be the case, if the Iron Hills had not sent them ore.”

Graston sneered. “He gifted weapons and armor to the rebels, and at the cost of the lives of his own men none the less.”

“That is indeed the conclusion I came to as well.”

“We must notify the inquisition. That traitor and his family must pay for what they have done!”

The two walked the halls, heading downward along a winding set of stairs and arrived at last in a chamber with a long wooden table in the center, and a hearth at the opposite end. Serjak shut the door behind him.

“Again, that was the first thought that came to my mind.”

Graston looked confused. “And yet not the one you wish to act upon?”

“No.” Serjak sat down at the end of the table closest to the fire blazing in the hearth. “Think of this for a moment. What happens if the inquisition receives word of what lord Delskelad has done?”

Graston sat down in the nearest seat to the commander. “He would be taken away and executed for treason and aiding enemies of the empire.”

“I mean in the long run, captain.”

“Well...” the captain looked slightly less sure of the answer. He reached behind his neck and began to massage.

“There is no way the lord could possibly do such a thing if he was not supported by, at the very least, the craftsmen making the equipment or the traders who change their routes. He has support among the common folk of Threul.”

“All the more reason to inform the inquisition. This is the type of insolence that needs to be purged, like you did with the rebels the Lomarans captured.”

“Is that what you think?” Serjak let out a puff of air as his lips curled up into a slight sneer. “That I ordered them all killed to prevent the spread of their ideals?”

Graston did not answer, he simply gave his commander a look of confusion.

“The Lomarans attacked the rebels to show off the size of their balls. To prove to us, that they are the superior force, that they have methods better and more refined than ours, and that our orders mean nothing to them. I taught them a lesson.” Graston’s expression did not change so Serjak continued. “Lomarans fight and kill soldiers. The lives of *innocent commoners* are precious to them. No Lomaran left that battlefield without scars and a good reason to *never* disregard my authority again.”

“Oh. I see.” The captain gave a response acute to a noble child in a tutor’s chambers after

having received brand new knowledge.

“Now think about our current case the same way.” Serjak placed both his elbows on the table with his fingers woven together in front of him, and leaned closer. “If the inquisition executes the Delskelads and other sympathizers, what truly happens?” After counting to four Graston had still not responded, so he answered in his stead. “Rebels believe that the emperor is a cruel man robbing them of freedoms that they are entitled to. If the inquisition, the hands of his judgment, kill men like lord Delskelad, they are proving just that.”

“They are but commoners. They are entitled to nothing!”

“That is what you believe, and what I believe, but they think differently. You are right, they are commoners. They are not like us. Thus they do not think like us. They think the emperor is not entitled to what is his, so when he kills men who disagree, that only makes them believe it stronger.”

“I disagree.” Graston seemed to find his voice for a moment. “An example is what they need, to see what happens to those who defy Nemeron.”

“And that is a fine method if we have overflowing resources to deal with all of the others, who take away messages of resistance from these examples rather than submission, but as it stands this treason is costing us equipment and rations. Delskelad and his actions make it seem like there are noble-born in Nemeron who see things differently from the emperor. We need to make the people see that they are wrong. They must see that they are alone. That is what gets us what we want, not examples.”

At long last Serjak’s reasoning appeared to force its way into Graston’s head. The captain spent a few seconds in contemplation, digesting what he had heard, then came to a realization. “We must blackmail the man then.”

“Precisely.” Serjak leaned back in his chair, satisfied.

“Perhaps, my lord, if I may suggest, this might be an excellent opportunity to get our new allies and their talents involved.”

The commander raised an eyebrow. “You think? All right. I’m listening. What do you have in mind?”

“My thoughts turn to his family. He has quite a large one, does he not?”

“Are you thinking of taking a hostage?”

“No, my lord. I’m thinking of something better. The man clearly thinks that he covered his tracks or cannot be touched, otherwise he would not have agreed to take up such an endeavor. I suggest we remove his sense of security, and perhaps one or two of his children at the same time.”

“I don’t know how I feel about this.” Igarla was standing in the room Palanor had made his.

“Strictly speaking it is not what we came here to do, but it does technically fall under our responsibility.” Palanor was sitting at his desk, which was covered in papers filled with writing.

“Don’t get me wrong. I feel slightly relieved to be ordered to kill men able to fight back and not just peasants armed with farming tools, but...” Igarla hesitated. “Every time a battle starts to involve other noble houses, things get messy.”

“At least this time the mess will not be ours to deal with. Serjak said the whole unit need not take part. A small group of fighters and archers should do the trick. Can I count on you to see this through?”

“Absolutely, sir. I just wanted to voice my concerns. Also, I would like to request sergeant Plerid accompany me to command the archers.”

“Granted. Sergeant Vrigeek is waiting in the courtyard with the details. Get your briefing from him, assess the situation, and select a team you feel is suitable. I’ll be awaiting your report when you return.”

“Yes, captain.”

Igarla stood at attention and saluted. Palanor rose from his chair to do the same.

“Dismissed.” He said.

The Nemeronean sergeant was waiting, as Palanor had said. His men were assembled behind him, talking, sparring, passing time till the time for their march arrives. They were clad in standard Nemeronean battle attire, steel plates scattered over a coat of chain, armed with blades, axes, spears and shields. Vrigeek was sitting on a large stone in the yard running a whetstone across the edge of his sword. He looked up as Igarla approached him.

“A good morning to you, lieutenant!” He greeted her with a smile.

“Good morning.” She repeated. “I understand we are to be working together.”

“That we are.” He pocketed his whetstone and rose to his feet. His own gear was surprisingly similar to that of his men. His plates were no more dense, his breastplate of no finer craftsmanship, his boots were of the same leather, even his sword showed no sign of embellishment or decoration. If not for the slightly larger size of his pauldrons and a well-made helm with a visor, he would not have looked to be an officer at all. “How much have you been told?”

“Only that we are to deal with members of a house guilty of siding with the rebellion.”

“And so it is.”

“Are there any details I should be aware of?”

“Let me tell it to you, as it was explained to me. The lord of Threul, a man by the name of Delskelad, neglected to provide the arms and armor to Flidenoch they were obligated to, and have been secretly supplying the rebel fighters instead. In order to keep the inquisition out of the matter,

the commander wants us to take hostages from the family.”

“I see...” Igarla was hardly enthusiastic. This was exactly the sort of political meddling she despised. “What about the mission details?”

“Two of the family’s children will be traveling by wagon east out of Threul on the morrow. We are to stop them, kill the guards escorting them, or convince them to lay down arms, and take the lordlings back to Flidenoch before the commander begins correspondence with the family.”

Igarla took a deep breath. Memories of her deployment in Crylin were starting to return to her. The wars against the Reptyl and Tusakaan, despite the danger of the foes themselves, always felt so clean to her. Rampaging monsters pillaging the land, untamed beasts that understood only force, there was a clear course of action, no moral ambiguity, it was all so simple. House squabbles were uncommon in Lomar, a result of the centralized military. She was first exposed to these types of conflicts in the kingdom of Crylin, and she did not like it. Men killing each other over lovers spats, rebelling children, arguments and misunderstandings... she couldn’t help feeling that these tasks were beneath her. The rules compelled her to protect people. She could not see how this was protecting anyone. But she had her priorities, and her orders from captain Palanor.

“I see you are ready.” Igarla glanced over at the Nemeronean forces. “Give me half an hour and I shall have my troops assembled.”

“Very good.” Vrigek sheathed his blade. “I look forward to working with you.”

It took less than the time Igarla requested for the soldiers to ready themselves for marching. She hand-picked a squad of twenty of the units best melee fighters and fifteen archers. One by one the summoned soldiers appeared at the fore of the Lomaran camp with their leathers on and their weapons equipped. As Igarla had expected, Plerid found the mission appalling. She had still not forgiven Palanor for the order to kill all the rebel captives, so needless to say, the idea of taking children hostage to blackmail the Delskelads pleased her about as much. After a number of harsh curses, and the promise of a confrontation with the captain upon their return, Plerid grudgingly reached for her gear.

The march took them all of the day. The ranks were mixed. Lomaran and Nemeronean marched side by side the entire time. The journey lead them through a large forest. Dense trees covered most of the sunlight, the path they followed was largely overgrown with moss and fungi as it winded through the woods, twisting and turning when it crossed paths with a large tree or stone.

After a night of camping they spent half of the next day on the road as well, until they arrived at a larger road perpendicular to the path they had been following.

“This is the place.” Vrigek told her. “Our target will be headed that way,” he pointed eastward down the road “and coming from there.” He gestured the opposite direction. “According to the scouts’ report the commander gave me, there are no patrols in the area, and the lords men will

be through here later in the day. We have until then to prepare.”

Igarla looked over the surroundings. The road was flanked all around by dense shrubs and thick tree trunks. A small patch of ground was elevated over the path from the direction they had come from, there was no other high ground nearby.

“Are you accustomed to setting ambushes?” She asked the sergeant.

“Not quite. I’m more of a frontal assault type of man myself.”

“Might I suggest a few tactics then?”

“Lieutenant, as far as I’m concerned you might as well organize the attack yourself.” Vrigek smiled at her. “I defer to the judgment of the expert.”

Igarla smiled back at him, then motioned for Plerid to join her.

“What do you think?” Igarla asked her as she pulled up beside them, and moved her gaze upwards to the branches.

Plerid started to examine the canopy. “Lots of stable branches up there. Not too well hidden, but far enough up to not draw immediate attention. I can find positions for all of us up there.”

“Um...” Vrigek interrupted. “Are you speaking of climbing the trees?”

“She sure is.” Igarla replied.

“My archers and I will get up above and rain down arrows from the leaves.” Plerid added.

“No need to look so concerned, sir. We do this all the time back home.”

Vrigek saying nothing gave an impressed head nod and backed back out of the conversation.

“The rest of us can take up positions behind the trees and shrubs.” Igarla continued. “The brush is excellent around here, should make for perfect concealment.”

“What about the sergeant’s men?” Plerid asked.

“I would not ask *them* to climb trees.” He chuckled.

“They couldn’t reload their crossbows on the branches anyway.” Igarla responded. “They would do much better up there atop that hill. The swordsmen can wait with us beside the road in cover.” Igarla walked out onto the road and took a few steps up and down the path, turning her head side to side as she scanned the woods. “As they approach the archers can loose their arrows from the treetops, the soldiers with their eyes looking upward will then be unprepared for the soldiers charging in from both sides and the arbalests from the hill.”

“I’ll tell our people.” Plerid said nodding.

“Hold a moment!” Vrigek put out a hand to stop her. “Tell them one other thing as well. We cannot announce our approach, as it would put us in a disadvantage, but the men we are to fight are soldiers of the empire as well. They follow the orders of a traitorous lord, but they themselves may not be aware of this. Any man who lays down arms and surrenders is to be spared. Please let your

warriors know that too.”

Plerid nodded at Vrigeek and went off to deliver a briefing to the Lomarans. Igarla walked back from the road to his side among the trees. As she did, the sergeant reached into a pack on his belt and unfolded a large piece of brown cloth. As the shape unfolded Igarla recognized it to be a simple brown colored linen tabard. Vrigeek noticed the quizzical look she gave him and spoke. “There will be men of the empire on both sides. For your benefit I ordered my men to wear these over their armor so as to stand out from the enemies. Just to make sure your archers don’t kill one of my men by mistake.”

“Oh.” Igarla had not even thought of that until now. “That’s a wise thought. I must admit, the possibility of mixing up your men for theirs did not occur to me.”

“Surprising.” He said as he pulled the cloth over his suit. “You seem to have thought of everything. You give orders and make preparations with such skill and certainty, it is a true pleasure to watch you work.”

“You flatter me, sir, but you have not seen me work yet.”

The skies had been clear all throughout the march, and remained so as the ambushing force hid behind their cover. Igarla had walked up and down the path a few times before to make sure that all the men were truly invisible from the road. She was crouching behind a shrub, peering over the leaves to her archers hiding in the treetops, waiting to see a sign for the approach of the target.

“I do not like this.” Vrigeek spoke softly from his position right by her side. “All this stealth and quiet seems wrong.”

“It serves a purpose.” Igarla responded while twirling her dagger in her right hand.

“Spending half a day sitting behind a bush, just waiting for battle to come to us. I would much rather take the fight to the enemy. Every time I kill an unexpected foe I feel like less of a man.”

She was surprised to hear him say that. Even more surprised to find that she did not fully disagree. “If I had to choose between my own pride and the possible lives of the soldiers under my command, I would choose waiting in ambush any day.” She responded after a bit.

“Can I share a thought with you, lieutenant?”

Igarla averted her gaze from the treetops and the road and turned to face Vrigeek. She nodded.

“I tend to think all the world would be a better place if people like you did not exist.”

His words conveyed hostility, but his tone and expression were the same, friendly and thoughtful. “Us demon-born?” She asked him.

“Oh, no. Not like that. I mean ambushers. Warriors of the night.”

Igarla got a grasp of what he was trying to say. “You mean you would prefer if all differences between people were settled clean, out in the open?”

“Exactly! No need for specialization, tactics or subterfuge. Just pure warriors, straight forward, even odds.”

“I believe that is how it once was.” Igarla said. “When nations were small and their warriors few. Back before some men who refused to play by the rules forced others to adapt.”

“A few rotten apples spoil the basket.” Vrigek sighed.

“The bunch.” Igarla corrected him. “Precisely.”

“So you feel the same, I take it?”

“I do my duty.” Igarla turned to face the hiding archers again. “But if I could choose a world to live in, it would be a world before war existed at all, not where it is different.”

“Noble words.” Vrigek chuckled silently. “I wish I could say the same. The truth is I have come to enjoy it. Nothing makes me feel quite as alive than life on the battlefield.”

“I have a friend like that. His...” Igarla was cut off. The sound of hoofs, marching feet and clinking armor started to carry along the winds, and Plerid motioned the arrival of forces to her from the trees. Igarla motioned to Vrigek to stay low, then gave Plerid a hand signal asking for confirmation. Plerid looked to the west and scanned the oncoming force. After a second or two she looked back at Igarla and through signals communicated that the force consisted of a coach, ten mounted knights and fifty footsoldiers. Igarla nodded, and gave her the sign to target the knights first.

“The time has come, sergeant.” She whispered. “Wait for the first volley of arrows to fall, then signal your arbalests. After that we charge them.”

Vrigek turned towards the hill, and raised his hand above his head. The sounds of marching became louder, now accompanied by the creaking of wagon wheels. Soon they were in sight. Just as Serjak’s scouts had informed them, and Plerid confirmed, the force was roughly five dozen soldiers, ten of them on horseback. Igarla did as Vrigek had, and raised her hand above her. Seeing this Plerid removed an arrow from her quiver and drew her bow. The sound of pine-wood bows stretching filled the treetops above them, hearable only to those who knew to listen for them.

The coach had made it into the zone of attack. By now the first line of soldiers and those closest to the coach were surrounded by Igarla’s and Vrigek’s soldiers all but invisible to them. Igarla lowered her hand. At once fifteen arrows flew from the treetops and embedded themselves in the weak spots of the horsemen’s plates. Then all hell broke loose. Soldiers started to cry *ambush* in *machtar* all around, horses were spooked and threw some of their riders off their backs. All eyes turned to the trees, red eyes looming down from the branches, with another volley of arrows being

readied. Before the order could be given for the escorting crossbowmen to raise their weapons, several Nemeronean crossbowmen stood up on the hill and unleashed a hail of bolts from the side. Confusion set in. A single horseman was trying to relay commands to the surprised men, but before he could redirect the attention to all the threats around them, Igarla and the waiting soldiers leapt out from their cover to attack the convoy, just in time for another volley to shower down on them.

Igarla and Vrigeek fought side by side that day, as did the rest of the two forces. Lomaran fighters were quick to adapt, realizing that they could maneuver their way through the ranks of their more heavily armored allies, who were safer when taking hits. Plerid and her archers continued to loose arrows from the trees, causing further disarray. Igarla was pleased to discover Vrigeek to be in possession of a great deal of a skill. He was the only soldier in his unit to not carry a shield, instead relying on his skills with the blade to keep himself protected. Igarla herself tore through her opponents like a whirlwind, shortsword in one hand, dagger in the other, skillfully weaving her way through the gaps between her opponents, not a single slice or stab seemed to not draw blood. The Lomaran soldiers worked off each other with practiced efficiency, and it was not long before the Nemeronean soldiers found their places in the dance. The Special Forces warriors were the ones to take on the toughest fights, while the imperials wiped up behind them, picking off the lighter one-on-one fights, keeping the Lomarans free to seek other engagements.

It was only a few minutes until the first enemy raised his hand at Igarla, and lowered his weapon to the ground. When his ally to his side saw Igarla spare his life, he followed suit. Before long Igarla had her hand in the air, the archers had stopped firing, and the field became silent. The escorting soldiers had their weapons lowered or dropped. Their commander seemed unsure as to what to do. Igarla spoke to Vrigeek. "We have their attention." She said without turning her head from her foes direction, her sword still raised before her. "If you wish to instruct these men to surrender, now is the time."

Vrigeek spoke up in machtar. Igarla did not understand all of what was said; she did make out the message though. He told the commander, that his forces had been commanded by a traitorous lord, and that he and his men would not be harmed if they laid down arms. For a moment the commander looked uncertain, as if he was unsure if the sergeant was telling the truth, seeing though that he was outnumbered and outclassed, he got off his horse and dropped his weapon to the ground. Slowly his men followed the example.

"Descend!" Igarla shouted. Ropes were lowered from the treetops and Lomaran archers came sliding down, landing on the ground with their bows in hand ready to fire. "Keep your arrows ready." She said to Plerid. She then made her way to the coach and opened the door. Inside she saw two passengers: a boy and a girl. They were adolescent, both clean and well kempt, wearing colorful, costly clothing. Their hands were decorated by jewelry of gold and silver, the girl had a

chain of pearls around her neck, and the boy's belt pouch had parchments and a quill sticking out of it, as though he had placed them back inside in a hurry. They were both unarmed and terrified with their hands in the air before them. Igarla stepped to the side and raised her sword pointing it in their direction. "<Out!>" She said, and gestured with a sideways headnod. Her tone was firm but not threatening.

The two looked at one another for a moment, but complied before Igarla had to repeat herself. With the girl in front the two slowly made their way out of the coach to be greeted outside by drawn Nemeronean blades and aimed crossbows. Igarla then pointed to the ground. "<Down!>" she said, in the same tone as before. With their eyes fixed on the crossbows pointed at them, the two got down on their knees, too afraid to say even a single word.

"Are these the ones?" Igarla asked Vrigeek, who had shown up among the soldiers by the door.

"Indeed." He replied. "Those are the Delskelad children."

Plerid had lowered her bow, and joined Igarla at her side. She looked at the two, then at Vrigeek's soldiers with disbelief. "What the hell are you training crossbows at them for?" She said aimed at Vrigeek. "Look at them! Look at their shoes. They won't run. How far do you think they would make it?"

Vrigeek said nothing. He lowered his head, turned away and simultaneously waved a hand in their direction. Before the look of horror and surprise could even appear on either of the Lomaran women's faces, the two children had been peppered with crossbow bolts. With their bodies quivering and their flesh leaking blood they collapsed forward on the ground as the red pools beneath them spread wider.

"Physician!" Plerid cried out, dropping to her knees to inspect the body of the boy. A Lomaran field physician who was treating an injured comrade nearby looked up, then got up from his knees and made a dash toward where she was standing. Vrigeek got in his way though. He held his hand up with his palm out forward and shook his head. The physician stopped and looked toward Igarla for instruction. Igarla was still half in shock. Vrigeek was facing away from her, and did not make eye contact. Looking down at the body in Plerid's arms and the size of the pool of blood below the girl, Igarla could see that it made no difference anymore. She looked back at the physician and shook her head. With hesitation he gave the sergeant one last look before returning to his wounded friend.

"What is wrong with you!?" Plerid shouted at Vrigeek. "What kind of soldier looses bolts at children on their knees!?" She had gotten up off the ground and made a line for the sergeant. She did not yet reach for a weapon, but the men beside their leader began to tense up, reaching for or readjusting their grips on their own.

“This was the task I was sent here to do.” Vrigeck replied, standing straight, not backing away at Plerid’s advance. “I wish it wasn’t, but orders are orders.”

“Fuck your orders and fuck you!” She shouted. “They were children!”

One soldier off to Igarla’s right said in a mumbled voice that only those around him could hear: “<As if she really cares...>”. Igarla’s hand swiped off to her right and slapped the helm right off his head with a back-sided hit. The soldier stumbled down to one knee and the other men around him made aggressive movements in her direction. One glare was all it took from her to settle them back down. Her hand, having collided with a solid steel helm, hurt like hell, but she gave no sign to indicate any pain at all.

All attention had now moved from Plerid and Vrigeck to her. She took advantage. “You mean to tell me came out here to murder two children?”

Vrigeck let out a breath. “The orders were to kill or subjugate the escort and kill the passengers inside the coach. That was all I was told. I’m sorry I misled you, but...”

“We’re done here then.” Igarla said, cutting him off. “Plerid, casualty report!”

Plerid took a moment with her eyes to let the sergeant know she was angry, then she glanced at the physicians and said: “Two dead, three wounded. No serious injuries.” She glanced back down at the two noblelings and added: “Two dead noncombatants.” She walked away from the scene with a shake of the head, pushing the sergeant out of her way as she did. Vrigeck did not respond.

“What of the bodies?” Igarla asked. “Shall we arrange for them to be sent back to their father? Perhaps leave them here for him to find later? What are your orders regarding that?”

Vrigeck looked her in the eye. Her face was free of expression, she left him no clues as to what she might have been thinking, but that fact alone could mean nothing good. He turned his gaze back to the bodies. “Prepare the wounded and captured to be taken back to the fort.” he said finally. “Leave the dead.”

Igarla nodded. “I’ll leave you to it then.” She walked back passed him to the battlefield. The Lomaran physician had laid the bodies of the two warriors they had lost by the side of the road. They were two men, both of the same average height, both with dark brown hair, one short and neat, the other long, tied together in the back. The short haired warrior looked a good decade older than the other, who had very young features. They were both killed by sword strikes to the chest. “Lonvis and Borhealin.” She said to herself. “I’m sorry.”

The bodies were laid neatly by the side of the road, with their hand crossed over their hearts. “Were they in much pain?” Igarla asked the physician.

“Lonvis was dead within seconds.” The man replied. “Borhealin took a while longer. It seemed for a bit that might make it back to Hrialvin, but...” his voice trailed off.

Igarla nodded. “Forgive me for the pain I caused you.” She said placing her hand on

Brohealin's forehead. "You lead worthy lives, and died worthy deaths. With your duties now done, may you find peace in the realm of the Flame, and await the rest of us." She looked up at the men around her. "Gather the bodies. We will send them off when we set camp."

Having left behind them a road stained with the blood of Imperial soldiers and two children of a lord, the unit made their way back along the path to Niedlopan. The Lomarans carried the corpses of their two fallen comrades with them, sharing the load over time. The battle had begun late in the day, and it had quickly gotten dark within the wood soon after. The decision was made to set up camp early.

The very first opportunity they were given, Igarla ordered the construction of two funeral pyres. The Lomarans gathered around to bid farewell to the earthly remains of Lonvis and Borhealin, while the Nemeroneans watched from their spots in the camp. "To die in service to Lomar, for the protection of her through that of her people is the greatest honor any of us can hope for." Igarla said holding the torch in her hand. "Let us bid farewell to our fallen brothers in arms. May the Lords guide them safely to the realm of the Flame. May we one day be reunited with them."

Igarla raised the torch into the air. "Strength and valor!"

"Courage and Honor!" The others chanted. Igarla bent down and lit the kindling under the two pyres and watched as the flames slowly enveloped the bodies. One by one the Lomarans left the pyres to rest by more friendly campfires. Unlike earlier, the Nemeronean and Lomaran soldiers did not mix at all. The campfires were all divided between the two factions.

"This is all a fucking nightmare." Plerid said once she and Igarla had sat down by a fire together. "We should not even be here. I've never doubted my consul before but this..." She let her voice trail off. She was slicing an apple with her knife and paused to take a bite.

"If it were easy, they would not have sent *us* to Maradar." Igarla said biting into her own apple, eating a chunk and swallowing.

"Was Crylin like this too?" Plerid asked.

"Crylin was..." Igarla took a second to think of how to describe it. "I was much less aware then, still very young. We fought armies under the banners of a rebellious house, but the political ramifications were not...present on the battlefield. I didn't think about the consequences of those battles until many years later."

"But your missions consisted of fighting armies. Armed men with training, and not peasants and children, right?"

"Yes. That is true."

"Madams!" Igarla and Plerid both turned behind them to find Vrigeck approaching them. "I

would speak with you, if you will permit me. Might I sit?"

Plerid looked at Igarla. Igarla finished chewing the bite of apple she had in her mouth, than shrugged. "Why not..."

Reluctantly the sergeant sat down on the opposite side of the fire facing the two of them. He cleared his throat a few times, then let out a heavy sigh. "I'd like to sincerely apologize for misleading you." He said. The women remained silent. "I honestly have nothing against you two personally. I was given instructions by commander Serjak himself, and he made me promise I would not give away the true objective of the mission to you. I would not have kept this from you otherwise."

"Anything else your commander thinks we would be better off not knowing?" Igarla asked.

"Not that he told me." The sergeant replied.

"I don't need your apology." Plerid scoffed. "It's those kids you wronged. You should..."

"I have prayed to their souls already." Vrigeck cut in. "I don't know if this sort of thing means anything to you, but we believe the dead can see and hear our prayers in the afterlife. I have begged both them and the Gods for forgiveness for what I have done to wrong them. I am now apologizing for what I have done to wrong you."

Plerid rolled her eyes.

"You are the first Lomarans I have ever met." Vrigeck continued. "You have defied every expectation I had towards you kind. You have demonstrated skill and knowledge with your performance in combat, determination and dedication with your daily routines, and just now compassion." Igarla paid close attention to Vrigeck's body language. Both that and his tone suggested true honesty to her. Plerid remained visibly unshaken. "I felt that we got off to a good start. I would hate to have what happened today ruin all that. I am not a wise man. When my commanders give me orders I have neither the intuition nor the judgment to question them. I simply follow my orders and believe in my cause. It has nothing to do with you."

"I accept your apology." Plerid said slicing off another piece of apple. "But I don't need your friendship. Once this bloody mission is complete we will be headed back home and Flame willing we will never have to return to this Lords forsaken Empire."

Igarla sighed. "I'm angry, sergeant. Angry and shaken up. But your words have reached me. I bare no grudge against you, as you too have thus far defied most of my expectations regarding your people. You are a good commander and you trained your men well. It always pains me to see good men, who have been given bad orders."

Vrigeck let out a sad sigh, and lowered his head.

"But as I have said, I bare no grudge. Your modesty and politeness do you credit. You may consider our relationship untarnished, as far as I am concerned."

“I thank you.” he smiled at her.

“Are you going to kiss now?” Plerid asked sarcastically. Igarla chuckled. The fire crackled on before them as the crickets chirped all throughout the woods. Igarla made out the hoots of an owl, soft and faint among the noise. Then she heard it again from the other direction. Her eyes went wide. She turned to look at Plerid, whose face showed the same expression as hers. Vrigeek looked from one woman to the other, confused. Igarla and Plerid both leapt prone on the ground.

“Ambush!” Igarla shouted.

Several arrows flew from the darkness of the woods, followed by the battlecries of charging men. The Lomarans had sprung to their feet, and though several of them were not wearing their leathers, their weapons were in hand and their attention focused. It took the deaths of several of their comrades before the Nemeronean soldiers got up from the firesides and readied arms. Most of them had no armor on at all, and some fell victim quickly to the first wave of projectiles, arrows, spears and stones. Out of the darkness of the woods came a horde of angry rebel fighters. They were clad in rags and tattered leathers with occasional bits of worn armors. The weapons they carried were crude and base, simple blades and sharpened farming tools. Their numbers were large; the ranks of the Nemeronean side of the camp were overrun by them fast.

Igarla and Plerid ran to the forming Lomaran ranks, Vrigeek drew his sword and leapt to the aid of his own. Igarla clawed her way through three raging peasants with sword and dagger. “Form a line on me!” She shouted. The Lomarans started to shift the course of their fighting to move to her position. Despite the enemy’s overwhelming numbers a formation managed to take shape on their side of the camp, halting the momentum of the rebel advance. The ill equipped peasants bounced right off of the Lomaran line, though their rear was in danger of becoming exposed as the Nemeroneans continued to lose ground.

The battle raged on in the flickering light of the campfires. Sheer numbers and the element of surprise bought the attackers a few moments of superiority. Igarla and Vrigeek were both quick to counteract them though. The Nemeronean ranks had finally formed with Vrigeek’s guidance, the rebel ambush had lost its edge. It was not long before Igarla noticed an increase in her breathing space as the enemy began backing off. The ambush had failed.

Igarla scanned the darkness from where she stood. The rebels had retreated, the camp was safe for the moment. “Casualty report!” She shouted. There was no answer. Igarla turned to the other side of the ranks where she last remembered seeing Plerid. She found her. Plerid was kneeling on the ground, her arms relaxed by her side, her head lowered. The tip of a spear was visible sticking out from the lower side of her back. Slowly she turned her head to look up at Igarla, and with a stream of blood flowing from her mouth, she said quietly: “Help...”

Igarla sprung to her side. “Physician!” she shouted. “The sergeant is down!” Plerid collapsed

to the side into Igarla's arms. The spear had entered through her gut, and penetrated her abdomen fully. The bleeding was heavy, her body quivering and rapidly going limp. The Lomaran physician got down on one knee and began to examine the wound. The look on his face gave all away.

"Is this..." Plerid struggled to speak. "Am I going to die?" Her tone was very quiet, but Igarla could have sworn there was more annoyance than sorrow in it.

Igarla turned to the physician, who simply gave her a sad nod.

"Yes." Igarla said to her. Plerid laid back her head in Igarla's arms, her body trembling.

"Fuck..." she said, her voice becoming ever softer. "In Nemeron... of all places..."

"I'm sorry..." Igarla could feel the life leaving Plerid. She had but precious few moments left to live on this earth, and Igarla was at a loss as to how she should use them, what she should say. Plerid beat her to it.

"Tell... tell Palanor to go fuck himself..." She made a final effort to wrap herself in her arms, as if curling up to go to sleep. "I... see you... in the Flame. We'll spar again one day."

Igarla smiled, holding back tears. Plerid closed her eyes and a few seconds later stopped quivering. Her arms fell to her sides and her head back against Igarla's palm. "Forgive me for the pain I caused you." She said silently. "You lead a worthy life, and died a worthy death. With your duties now done, may you find peace in the realm of the Flame, and await the rest of us." The profits' words came forth almost on their own by now after having seen so many of her soldiers die, but she had always meant every word.

Only after laying Plerid on the ground did Igarla notice that the physician had left her side to help other wounded. In his place now stood Vrigeek, looking over the mournful scene. His face was somber and regretful. Igarla looked up at him only for a second, but gave him no time to speak. She leapt to her feet and turned to her soldiers. "I want sentries along the tree line!" she shouted. "You, you and you!" She pointed at three of her people. "Get after them and take up watch! Make sure they're not coming back, warn us if there are more!"

"Yes, ma'am!" came the response. The soldiers went right to it, dashing into the trees and vanishing from sight.

"Vathor!" she called next to the lead physician who had tried to help Plerid. "I need a casualty report."

"Yes, ma'am." he replied. "Nine dead, two have received serious wounds."

"Will they make it?"

"If the Flame wills it they will, yes."

"Good." Igarla turned to face Vrigeek, who had been waiting patiently for his turn to talk. "How is it possible that we didn't know they were coming? You told us this region was clear of rebel forces."

“You are right.” Vrigeek displayed the same anger as she did. “The report I received from the commander’s scouts said so. I did not think it needed to set watchers, and it cost us heavily.”

“Indeed it did.” Igarla crossed her arms.

“I’ll be expecting answers when we return.” Vrigeek looked back down at Plerid’s corpse. “I’m sorry for your loss. You have my word they will not surprise us again. I’ll make sure of it.”

“I already have. We can continue our march at sunrise. For now... I have more pyres to set.”

By sundown the next day Igarla and Vrigeek had made it back to Niedlopan. The Lomaran contingent was far fewer in numbers than when they left, more so than any had prepared for. Upon arriving at the designated Lomaran campsite Vrigeek and Igarla prepared to split up.

“Despite all that went wrong,” Vrigeek began. “it was still a true pleasure working with you. You are a woman after my own heart.” He reached out a hand to shake with Igarla.

She took it. In the heat of Plerid’s death and the loss of all those fallen in the ambush Igarla had felt some unjust resentment towards Vrigeek, but it had passed. She knew very well he was not to blame for what happened. In fact he had proven to be a fair warrior and a kind man worthy of her respect. *Another good man following the orders of bad people.*

“You are too kind.” She responded as she shook his hand. “Next time we are to work together perhaps your commander might leave the scouting to us as well.”

This amused the sergeant, as he let out a chuckle, but held back any more laughter, feeling he might take Igarla’s attempt to lighten the mood too far. Instead with a small bow of the head he walked off to the gates of the inner courtyard. After having said her farewells Igarla made her way to the building where Palanor had set up office. She found him reading parchments at his desk. “How did it go?” he asked looking up from his work.

Igarla closed the door behind her. The room was lit only by the candle on the desk and a single candle rack by the entrance. Without a word, she reached into her belt pouch and pulled out a rolled up scroll sealed with a length of string, and placed it on the desk before him. “My report.” She said, and took a step back from the desk. She stood straight, legs together, hands behind her back. “I have two things I would like to add.”

Palanor unrolled the scroll and started to read. “Go ahead.”

“Vathor or Nilendar would make the best candidates for sergeant in my opinion.”

Palanor looked back up from the scroll. When he saw no trace of emotion on Igarla’s face he looked back down at the scripture, his eyes glazing quickly over the lines. When he reached a certain point he let out a sigh. “I see.” He said. He knelt an elbow on the side of the desk and began to rub the bridge of his nose. “A rebel ambush?”

“We were caught unawares.” She said. “The information we were acting upon proved to be faulty. Serjak’s scouts missed a rebel army camping in the local wilderness.”

Palanor nodded. “I’ll be sure to have a word with the commander about that. I’m sorry about Plerid.” He looked back at the parchment, his head slightly shaking left and right. “You mentioned something else?”

“Yes, sir. Plerid asked me to relay something to you. Important enough to use up the last of her breath for.”

Palanor looked curious. “What did she say?”

“Go fuck yourself.”

The room fell silent. Igarla maintained her stance, not moving a muscle. Palanor stared at her for a brief moment, then swallowed and looked away. When he had not said anything for a long enough time, Igarla spoke up. “Will there be anything else, captain?”

Palanor replied without looking back at her. “No. That will be all. You are dismissed.” She saluted, turned on her heel, and walked out the door.

Three times the sun had passed across the sky, though one could hardly tell. Its path was hidden from those below by a thick layer of grey storm clouds, that always seemed to want to pour rain down upon them but never actually started more than a drizzle. Igarla had heard from Hrakim and Palanor that this was common place during autumn in Maradar. The lack of sunlight made her feel an increasing gloom the likes of which she had never felt elsewhere, even during times of war.

She trained rigorously, the empty gap in the shape of another lost friend still fresh in her heart. This one was different to her. The loss of Plerid lingered in her soul in a way that no other fallen soldier had before, and Igarla had lost quite a few. She lost close friends the very first time she set foot on the battlefield, and that wasn’t even the first. Even during training she had known the feeling of friends dying by her side. Yet this one time... she could not rid herself of this horrible feeling.

“Was she your sister?” Hrakim woke Igarla from her temporary wondering of mind. Regardless of the type of loss, or the feeling lingering in her soul, nothing managed to lighten the burden like a good tankard of Lomaran beer, or two.

“Yes.” She replied, her eyes only glancing in his direction before returning to their somber numbness. “Not in the way you mean, though.”

“I see. Sister in battle?”

“More than just that. Sister in training.” She took a large swig of her drink. “We train for long periods of time, I myself for seven years. The bonds forged during that time are always the

strongest. With Plerid gone..." she hesitated for a second, then let out a sigh in recognition. "...Only two remain."

"Two from your training days?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry." Hrakim let his posture relax over the counter into a slouch. He clearly didn't know what to say.

"I've dealt with it before." Igarla said to try and help him ease up. "Soldiers die. Not to be done about that but to keep on fighting in their name. Make their deaths matter."

"But I imagine it must be hard the more soldiers you have to fight for."

Igarla chuckled at the wisdom of that remark, then finished her drink. "It's what we are trained for." She stood up from the counter and reached for her belt pouch. "Alas, I fear I must return."

Before she could reach into her coin purse for a handful of silver, Hrakim leapt from his seat and slammed the bartender's payment onto the counter. "I won't hear of it." he said. "You were the guest. This was on me."

Common courtesy commanded Igarla to argue, but she could see the insistence in his eyes. "So be it. But I shall repay it someday."

"I am hoping." The boy gave her a grin as he said it.

Igarla's journey back to the fort was accompanied by introspection. As far as soldiers count, she was still young. Lomarans generally remained in healthy condition up to their eighth decade, some even longer with the proper discipline. She was currently in her thirteenth year of military service, which made her still somewhat green compared to the hardened veterans going into their fourth decade. That was not how she felt. In those thirteen years she felt like she had taken enough scars for a lifetime of service. Painful memories of loved ones lost on and off of the battle field lingered in corners of her mind occasionally showing their faces to her when she least expected it. Some of the older soldiers would tell her at times that it is not the number of losses that become more evident with age. Quite the contrary. The older you get the easier it becomes to detach yourself. That thought scared her more than any foe.

Upon her return she witnessed something that made her stop. A female soldier was exiting the tent just as Igarla walked by. Their eyes met for a brief moment, and in that moment the soldier gave away a brief expression of panic. Her long hair was ruffled up, her overshirt was missing, and her entire appearance was hasty, as though she had dressed herself in a hurry. Her wide eyes gave Igarla the impression that she was trying to come up with an excuse. After a brief moment of silence

she said simply: "Lieutenant."

"Olvra." Igarla responded and raised an eyebrow slowly. The silent second following was enough to get the soldier to start talking.

"I was... I just... you see...."

"You were having sex." Igarla said. "I recognize the signs. What made me stop is that you are trying to hide it. Why would you?"

"Look, I'd appreciate it if you could..."

"Who's there?" came a man's voice from inside the tent. A moment later the flap swung open to reveal, of all people, Belvar. He was naked from the waist up, his jacket hanging thrown over his shoulder. "Well, well!" he said once he noticed her. "Finally back from... wherever, I see!"

Igarla's eyes moved from Belvar to Olvra with an accusatory smile accompanying them. The Panic in Olvra's eyes grew more intense as she looked back. "Please don't tell anyone." she said.

"I'm at a loss for words." Igarla said.

"Dear Oldara was to just a few minutes ago." Belvar walked over to her and put an arm around her shoulder with a smug grin. The arm barely touched her when he received a swift elbow to his gut from his enraged lover. "Damn..." he gasped at his stomach in pain. "That's... no way to treat a superior officer."

"Tell anyone about this, and I swear you will regret it!" She said to him harshly, and walked off, a last pleading look in her eyes towards Igarla.

Igarla crossed her arms. Belvar needed a second or two to recover, his gut still ringing with pain. "Well worth it..." he muttered.

"You're such an ass." Igarla chuckled.

"That's why I always get my way in the end." He smiled.

"It's also why you have never slept with the same woman twice."

"And I would have it no other way. Fish in the sea, and all that."

The two smiled at each other, then advanced practically at the same time to give each other an embrace. "It's good to see you, Belvar."

"You as well. I wasn't sure who it would be."

"You..." Igarla's expression changed. "I don't understand."

"I left the third with orders to take up duties as sergeant for the first. They would tell me

nothing else, but it could not mean many things. It meant either Plerid was dead, or you were and she got promoted to your position.” Igarla nodded. That was sound reasoning. The mood immediately went somber. “Palanor left a while ago to talk to the commander, he didn’t tell me the details. Did she...”

“Spear through the stomach.” Igarla said. “It wasn’t long.”

“Bad way to go.” Belvar shook his head. “Could have been much worse I suppose.”

“You know what I found funny? She honestly seemed more annoyed than anything.” This managed to raise the spirits a bit. She and Belvar both found that to be amusingly true to her.

“So now that means it’s just Galvis, you and me, huh?”

“I was thinking the exact same thing.” Igarla sighed. “I know she was...friendly with him. I don’t look forward to giving him the news back home.”

“Plerid and I got friendly quite a few times to, though.”

“She denied that very strongly.”

“They all do.”

The two managed to laugh off the rest of their grief. Igarla did not expect Belvar to arrive to replace Plerid, but now that it happened, she could think of no better alternative. “It’s good to have you around. Back together again, it seems.”

“The rebels had best start shitting themselves.”

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Palanor. He approached from the direction of the inner courtyard, where he had presumably done talks with the local leadership. His presents was greeted by the customary saluting from her and Belvar alike.

“At ease. Igarla, come with me if you will. Sergeant, you have command till our return.”

“Understood.” Belvar responded. “Going away for long?”

“I’d like the lieutenant to see something. Good day, Belvar!”

“Sir.” Belvar gave Igarla a nod farewell before she and Palanor left in the direction of the stables. The captain lead her straight to two saddled horses that were waiting for them by the entrance.

“Where are we off to, sir?” Igarla asked.

“A small town called Draraka.”

“What awaits us there?”

“You shall see.”

Calling Draraka a town was surely not true by the time they had arrived. Graveyard was more suitable. Igarla and Palanor trotted into town on horseback amidst pillars of smoke and ash. The town’s main street was almost blackened rubble, charred remains of the villagers’ homes, contorted masses of burnt corpses and dried pools of blood. That was not even the truly horrific sight. That would have been the sight of the corpses not strewn about the ashen soil. Among many different sights Igarla made note of headless bodies nailed to the remaining houses front doors, suspended in midair by wooden spears, or displayed in other gruesome ways.

Igarla did her best to remain unshaken by the sight. “Why are we here?”

“Perspective.” Palanor jumped off of his horse. Igarla followed. “This town overlaps a trade route into Niedlopan. The rebels tried to appeal to the locals to help them pilfer goods from the passing caravans, but the elder refused. He loudly claimed loyalty to the emperor.” He gestured at a painted sign staked in the middle of the road. “This was the rebels response.”

The sign was wooden, hastily assembled from scrap boards, and sticks. Written upon it in what may have either been red paint or blood were the machtar words that meant: “Nemeron’s protection is a lie.”

“The rebels are responsible for this?” Igarla felt slightly baffled.

“They are. And this was not the only village to suffer such a fate. A few miles down the road is Lerrust, also on the same trade route. The sight is similar. As it is in many other places as well.”

Igarla scanned the surroundings.

“I know what it seems like, Igarla. I really do. But it is important to remember, these are not freedom fighters we are up against. They are called rebels for a reason. You can see: They are a danger to the common folk as well. Just like they claim of the lords they fight, they will slaughter any who oppose them, if are able.”

“Perspective...” Igarla mumbled. “I see.”

“Look.” Palanor sighed. “I won’t even pretend to know what exactly you think of me right now, but we can’t have doubts. Igarla.” He grabbed her by both shoulders, and looked her in the eye. “I can’t get through this without you. There has never been a challenge we could not overcome if we stood together. I ask you, please, help me get through this as well. Help me to get the job done, so that we may go home back to hunting Tusakaani. Peace at all costs.”

Igarla didn’t know what to say. The only true feeling she had, was that they did not belong

here. Going home. That was all she really wanted there and then.

“Sir.” she said. “Have I ever given you reason to doubt me?”

“No.” Palanor released her. “Never, even in the hardest of times. You are my best soldier, and I maintain that you will make a fine general one day. That is why I need you to see this.”

“I understand.” Igarla said. “We are caught among two evils, fighting for our home. I will do my best to remind myself.” She did her best to smile. “You can count on me.”

Trouble in town

Having Belvar in the unit was a definite blessing. Igarla's spirits were raised considerably. The archery range still felt barren without Plerid emptying a quiver into the bulls-eye every day. Still, as Igarla told Palanor, it was just death. Nothing that didn't happen all the time in their profession. Igarla was slowly beginning to lose count of how many friends she had lost.

For the most part Belvar was his usual self. Joking and sleeping around mostly, but he brought his usual charm with him as well. He would engage in intellectual conversation during the day, and sing hearty songs at night. The soldiers clearly enjoyed having him around as an officer.

Despite being overjoyed to have her good friend back, Igarla spent most of her time in the infirmary with Hrialvin. He was less delightful and funny and more quiet and thoughtful. Having someone to bring back the cheer was all well and good, but Igarla felt that she rather needed someone to share in her sorrow. At least for now.

“It was definitely tragic.” Hrialvin said as he sorted through the vials and books on his table taking stock.

“It was a Lords damned setup, that's what it was.” Igarla replied sitting on an empty patient's bed. “They knew. They must have.”

“I'm not so sure. We have seen the results of their scouting first hand, remember?”

“Missing a hidden trap from a distance at night is one thing. An entire band of armed rebels waiting in ambush?”

“Also hidden, and also at night.”

“I don't buy it. Just because the commander executed his scouts for failure to please us, that doesn't mean shit. We've also seen what value the lives of others have to Serjak. It's all there to fuck with us.”

Hrialvin stayed quiet. He kept rummaging through the supplies on and around his table. He tried to act as though he didn't have anything to say, but one look at his face told Igarla the truth. Hrialvin was right when he told her he had no ability to tell falsehood. Not even with his body-language.

“Just say it.” Igarla said quietly.

“Say what?” Hrialvin did not look up from what he was doing.

“You’re holding back. You don't have to. Not in front of me. You know that.”

“But I do.” Hrialvin said. “Captain’s orders.”

“What?” Igarla jumped off the bed and walked up to the table to face him. He gave a glance at her, but didn't look her in the eye. “What do you mean captain's orders?”

Hrialvin sighed, and turned his eyes to look at her. “You know I take great pride in never having told a lie before, right?”

“Of course.”

“If a word leaves my lips it is because I believe it to be truthful. With you, and with everyone else, no exceptions. So I had a talk with the captain, voicing some concerns. He acknowledged them, and politely asked me to keep them to myself. He added the 'captain's orders' bit to enunciate.”

“What concerns? What didn't he want us to hear?”

“I'm only as good as two things: My mind for medicine and the integrity of my word. So do forgive me if I chose to keep it to myself.”

“Come on, Hrialvin, it's me! You know you can trust me.”

“Trust is not the issue.”

“The captain will not hear word of this, I promise.” Igarla walked closer and leaned on the table, lowering her tone. “Does it have to do with the mission? With Plerid's death?”

“No.” Hrialvin looked closer at book he had in his hand, then rolled his eyes, dropped the book on table and leaned in closer. “Fuck it. Alright. But what I tell you does not leave this tent, understood?”

“Absolutely.” Igarla said.

“Good enough. Igarla, I think we are fighting on the wrong side.” He looked at her with a serious stare. His eyes fixed on hers.

“The wrong...” Igarla let her words trail off. She had herself thought often that helping Nameron was a misguided effort. But that's not what Hrialvin said. No. The wrong side. Implying that they should be fighting... for the rebels?

“You see why the captain wants me silent?” he said.

“You think we should take up arms and defend the rebels?”

“You have been here long enough now to see how the empire stays in power. Their people are exploited and expended. Lulled into being grateful for the miserable lives they live, as though it is their lot in life to suffer for the emperor's glory. If I were living here in these lands, you better believe I would be fighting the highborn for all the suffering and misery they cause while they sit

around in expensive cloth sipping wine all day.”

“I'm sure it's more gray than you make it out to be.”

“So is everyone else.” Hrialvin returned to his work. “That is why Palanor's other soldiers haven't said anything yet. Other than Plerid of course.”

Igarla's eyes widened.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“It's supposed to mean that there are two people with authority who have spoken up against our mission here to Palanor. One of them is me, the other one is dead. And if many more started to share in our doubts, commanding this squad would become a great deal more difficult.”

“Are you...” Igarla leaned back close. “Are you suggesting...”

“I suggest nothing. I state. And I state what I believe to be the truth. That is all I do.”

Igarla leaned back out, taking in all that Hrialvin said. After a short while Hrialvin spoke up again.

“I will admit, the rebels have stepped up their game. With every passing encounter I see that their methods grow more abysmal. They have clearly chosen to combat one form of evil with another. Still... I can't help but hope they succeed, and wish I was allowed to aid them.”

Igarla silently drew out of the conversation. She sat back down on the bed and let her mind wonder. It was Hrialvin's voice that brought her back.

“Plerid... she had a son, right?”

“Yes. Little Ralin.” Igarla answered.

“Did she ever tell you who the father was?”

“She never knew. She said there were just too many men to consider.”

“Is the boy in army care?”

Igarla nodded.

“Well that's good at least. Poor child.”

A moment of silence passed.

“Say, Igarla, are you planning on taking a walk in town anytime soon?”

“No. I could though.”

“I'm running low on some herbs. You should be able to pick them up in the town market. Could you?”

“Sure.” She said and jumped back off the bed. “Didn't have any other business anyway. What do you need?”

“I need oxweed, marlia and some brittlebane. Three larger pieces of marlia, a pouch of the other two. Think you can manage?”

“I think I can.”

“Ok. Marlia is the same in machtar. The word for oxweed is rachlospar, brittlebane is called unaks. You know what they look like?”

“Marlia is what they use for disinfectant. It’s a root, right?”

“Yellowish tinted brown, yes. Ground oxweed and brittlebane are both strongly fragrant, one is green the other a darker bluish. Here.” He picked up two bits of weed from a jar on the floor.

“These are what you are looking for.”

“Got it. I’ll go speak to Palanor right away.”

“Thanks. You’re doing me a favor.”

“It’s nothing.” Igarla smiled. “See you when I get back.”

It was verging upon nighttime when Igarla had finally found all the herbs she needed. The town was starting to prepare to go to sleep, as merchants were clearing their stock from stalls and the streets began to empty. The bag in her hand was filled with light brown colored roots the size of turnips. She counted them as she walked, her leather boots making squashing sounds as they sank a centimeter into the mud. Once she was sure that she had all Hrialvin needed, she tied the pouch back onto her belt, beside her dagger. She could have sworn just a moment ago that a drop of rain hit her on the head. Cloudy though the skies were, there was no sign of rain all day.

Barely had she begun to contemplate as a familiar face drew her attention. Ahead a bit to her left, a small group of three men-at-arms were banging against the door of a hovel, with a fourth man watching over them. Without his helmet, the man was easy to recognize. It was sergeant Vrigek. His back was to her thus he didn't see her approach; he looked quite busy shouting orders to his men.

“<Sergeant!>” Igarla shouted out in machtar at his direction.

Vrigek began looking around trying to find out who called to him. As he laid his eyes on Igarla his stern, irritated expression was replaced by a cheerful smile. “Miss Igarla!” he said, waving a hand to her. His men glanced at her direction, but went right back to their task. “Fancy meeting you here. What brings you to town this evening?”

“Running an errand for a friend.” She walked right up to him, and pointed at the pouches hanging off her belt.

Vrigek's eyes stopped at the sword and the dagger hanging from her side. “Expecting trouble?” he asked.

“I don't take a step without these two.” she replied. Vrigek gave her a nod of approval.

“What, if I may ask, are you busy with?” she said looking back at the hovel.

“Oh, that...” Vrigek turned to face the door for a moment, then looked back to her.

“Annoying business, really. There are a pair of criminals hiding inside. We have been after them for

months, and just now were they reported to us. The only way in is that door, and the entrance is barricaded.”

“Do you require any assistance?” she asked.

“Thank you, but that will not be necessary. Your skills would be wasted on a task this menial. We will have the door down soon enough, no worries.”

“I see. Well, I wish you good luck, sir.” Igarla reached out a hand at him, and he shook it.

“My best wishes, miss.” he replied, and returned to his men.

Igarla started walking away, all ready to return to Hrialvin with the herbs, when something stopped her. She had walked a good thirty paces from the house, and she turned back to take another look. *They could be banging on that door for a while.* she thought to herself. *They certainly don't look like they have the situation under control.* This thought of hers was confirmed when one of the men slipped in the mud and fell to the ground trying to take a run at the door. *There's no harm in lending a hand.*

Igarla took quick look around the street just to make sure she could act unnoticed. She darted quickly and quietly to an alleyway between buildings. She was able to navigate her way to the back of the house under siege. Sounds of the thuds of steel against wood could be heard. She examined the house. No windows or back doors. The front door seemed to be the only way in or out. She took a few steps back, as far as she could before hitting the back of the building behind her. Sure enough, the roof had a spot on it that was missing a few tiles. She could see the woodwork through the hole, and determined that she could indeed fit through.

She braced herself. With a running start she leaped at the wall, putting a foot on it to launch herself towards the roof. She then grabbed the edge, grasping firmly enough to pull herself up. The roof was angled away from the street. She therefore had cover from being seen by anyone from the other side. Slowly but surely she walked across the tiles till she got to the hole in the roof. Glancing down, she saw nothing beneath her but dirt. She got down beside, and dropped down.

She got to her feet instantly after landing. The room was empty. Whatever furniture there was in the house, a bed, a table, a cabinet and a dresser, were all shoved up against the door. There was no wood floor. The dirt under her feet was the same as the dirt on the street. Looking around, Igarla saw no one. There were however footprints in the dirt left by bare feet. As she studied them, she traced them to one of the corners, where there was a door, to a pantry presumably. Igarla drew her sword, and reached for the handle.

She yanked it open. The door made a loud noise as it swung open and hit the wall. The two men were indeed inside. They were young, no older than 15 years, and they were clad in rags. Soot and grime covered their faces, as well as a few cuts and scars. As Igarla discovered them, they huddled together and wrapped their arms around each other. Their eyes filled to the brim with the

fear of death, or worse. After Igarla looked at these boys for a few seconds, something started to bother her. The glare in her eyes started to turn towards confused, then they widened into realization. “Shit...” she murmured.

She hadn't even any time to come up with what to do. A loud crack from behind her indicated that the bar locking the door shut had broken. And within seconds the Sergeant's men were pushing the furniture out of the way. Instinctively Igarla turned to shield the two men with her sword still in her hand. Vrigeck came strolling in, and when he spotted Igarla he looked up with shock. Then he spotted the men hiding in the pantry, and the shock disappeared. “Well, well.” he said. “I guess I stand corrected. I see you have already found them. You and your comrades continue to impress, lieutenant.” Igarla did not respond. She smiled awkwardly, but the grip on her sword did not loosen. “We can take it from here.” He gave his men some orders. One of them marched up towards them, but stopped in his tracks when Igarla did not move out of the way.

“If you don't mind...” Igarla said her voice slightly waning. “What are these men accused of exactly?”

Vrigeck gave her a look of questioning. “You cannot tell?” he asked. Igarla shrugged and shook her head. “They are wanted for ungodly acts of a carnal nature, miss. To be blunt, these men are guilty of fucking each other.”

“I... I see no such evidence.” Igarla's first inclination was to question why that would be a crime, but remembering where she was and what the customs where, she opted against speaking out.

“Not all can tell just on sight, that is true.” he answered. “But trust me, we have witnesses. There can be no question as to their guilt. Now if you will...”

Igarla still did not move. She glanced nervously from one guard to the other desperately trying to think of something to say or do. Vrigeck was visibly growing impatient. “Lieutenant, stand down!”

“I am a part of this arrest.” Igarla said. “I need to be certain that the men I arrest are truly guilty.” Even as the words left her mouth she knew this was a weak attempt.

“Lieutenant, I don't know what has gotten into you, but I will not ask you again. Let my men handle this.”

Trying to buy herself more time to think, she lowered her sword and spoke again. “What will become of them?”

“A lifelong prison sentence. If they survive until sentencing, that is.”

“What do you mean?”

“Heathens and heretics have a tendency to die after arrest. The people of Nemerom can be... quick to act when enemies of the gods are concerned. Now please...”

At that moment, Igarla could think of nothing else to say that would save these boys lives. She sheathed her sword and took two steps to the side. She started walking towards the door, as the sounds of scared cries came from behind her back. Palanor's words were ringing in her ears: *The peace at all costs.*

Vrigeek stood before the two criminals, his men standing right beside him. Two guards had sized them by the wrists.

“<You two unholy miscreants will rue the day you chose to turn from the path of the gods.>” But Vrigeek was cut short by the sound of the door slamming shut, and the hum of a sword being drawn from the sheath. He turned to face the entrance, only to find Igarla standing with the closed door behind her, armed with her sword. She stood there in silence for a bit, a cold stare in her eyes. Vrigeek's chin dropped as he finally understood.

“<Kill her!>” he shouted. “<Kill her, quick!>”

The two boys were dropped to the ground as the four men drew swords. Igarla let go of the handle to the door with her left hand and removed her dagger from its sheath as well. With both weapons in hand, she engaged the men-at-arms. Moving fast and dexterous she dodged blades and swung at weak spots, trying to lay hits on the cracks between armor elements. She did her best to keep them all separated, tripping one then shoving the other. The first man fell when her dagger struck him in his knee from behind. Amidst painful screams he hit the ground and grabbed at his leg. The second died instantly as Igarla's sword slashed between his helmet and his neck-guard, leaving a cut across his throat. Blood sprayed from his neck as he collapsed, choking and gasping, coughing blood. With only two men left standing the attackers' aggression started to wane, and Igarla got room to breathe. Vrigeek was her next victim. She dodged one of his blows that cut her slightly in the shoulder, danced around him, and performed a perfect cut under his armpit. With blood flowing down his armor he grasped at his side and fell to one knee. The last soldier was no match for her one on one.

With all her foes slain and the dirt now muddy with blood, Igarla finished off the two men still breathing. First the one who's knee was injured. She stabbed her sword through his breastplate into his heart, then walked over to Vrigeek. He had fallen on his hands and knees, the loss of blood weakening him. He turned his head up at her, barely able to move his neck. His eyes were filled with hate and fatigue. Thus far Igarla had been unimpressed by the resolve demonstrated by the officers of Nemeron. They all appeared to be pampered lords and lordlings, who never even used their weapons. And yet, for all his misguided ways, Vrigeek was soldier through and through. She was saddened by the respect she felt for him. “For what it's worth...” she said to him. “I wish it hadn't had to end this way.”

He stared at her for a brief moment, then opened his mouth to try and speak, but his strength

failed him. His eyelids began to drop, his elbows shook, and one second later he fell to the ground, dead.

It took a second or two for Igarla's recent deed to sink in. The ambiguity of what she had done started to hit her. But she couldn't let it. Not yet. Sheathing her sword she looked at the two boys, clearly shocked and confused. The fear in their eyes had not yet subsided. It was unclear whether Igarla was their friend or their foe, not to mention the ease with which she dispatched four Nemeronean men-at-arms made her all the more intimidating. She got down on her knees next to them. They cuddled closer to each other as she did. She put one finger to her lips, and motioned with the other hand for them to get up. “<Quickly.>” she said to them. “<Stay silent.>”

Hesitant at first the two obeyed her. Shaking they got on their feet, still holding hands. Igarla dragged the dead bodies into a corner far from the door, and laid a sheet from the bed atop them. Then she made her way to the door, and opened it just a crack to look outside. The streets were under-populated. Only the occasional wanderer could be seen. It had begun to rain, and the already damp ground started to turn slushy. She turned back to the boys and waved them to the door. “<Run!>” she told them. “<Run far!>” and held the door open for them. They looked at each other unsure of what to do. Igarla's voice was starting to get anxious. “<Now! Hurry!>” Finally they came to a decision and ran for the door. They only barely gave her a glance as they rushed passed her, but every instant of it conveyed deep and honest gratitude. Igarla looked outside one more time, then shut the door and looked back at the situation she had left herself in.

Four dead bodies, all fully armed and armored, each with sword wounds on them. These men were too well armed to have been taken down by those two, and many on the streets would have seen them trying to barge inside. Once they discovered that they were taken down in combat, she could become a prime suspect, being the only Lomaran outside the fort. She had to hide the wounds. *Fire.* she thought to herself. *I need to burn them.* It was already dark. If they were going out late they would likely have brought a torch or two with them. She searched the equipment the men had on them. Surely enough she ended up finding an unlit torch and some fire-starting equipment. She laid them out on the floor beside her, then moved the straw bed into the corner and placed the bodies on top, wrapping them up in whatever cloth she could find. She then pushed the table into the center of the room. She took one last look around. All was set. This was as good as she could hope to do. She lit the torch, and threw it onto the bed. The straw and cloth caught fire immediately. Before the flames had time to spread she jumped on the table, then leapt up to grab onto the crossbeam above her. She was then able to pull herself up and climb out of the hole she entered through. By the time she had reached the ground outside the house in the back alley, the rain had already started to fall hard. This was good. It would make the fire less likely to spread to the neighboring houses. The smoke was making its way out through the hole. It would take little time

for it to start attracting attention. Igarla hurried away through the back streets and joined the main road as carefully as she could. Maintaining her composure she walked back to the fort, ignoring the scared cries that were coming from behind her.

Half an hour later she found herself back at the fort. She was wet and cold from the rain and the wind. Hurriedly she went to Hrialvin's tent. She found the physician sitting at his desk reading a piece of paper. He looked up as she walked in. It was dark. The only source of light was a candle on his desk. Everyone else had likely gone to bed, with the exception of the occasional soldier getting some extra training in before calling it a day. The sickbeds were empty; there was no one else inside but them.

“Your back.” he said rolling up the paper and getting up from his table. “That took longer than expected. Complications?”

“Um...yes.” Igarla's hands were shaking as she reached for the three pouches on her belt. “The...um...I had a hard time getting the merchants to understand me. They kept trying to push... flowers or something on me.”

“I see.” Hrialvin's voice conveyed a small amount of suspicion. “The temperature drop?” he added looking at Igarla's trembling hands.

“Heavy rain came in.” She said and handed the herbs to him. He took them from her one by one and inspected their contents. After checking them all he nodded and smiled.

“Thank you. You've saved me a lot of trouble with this.”

“Any time.” she replied and hastily turned to leave the tent.

“You want some tea before...?” she heard Hrialvin say after her, but before he could finish she walked out of the tent. She walked right to her tent stopping nowhere along the way. After closing the front entrance to it she collapsed on the floor in a ball, quaking and shuddering. Were this any other situation she would have fallen asleep safe in the knowledge that she had done the right thing, saving those helpless boys. It took her a long time to get tired enough to shut her eyes. Acting right was a scary thing all of a sudden.

Commander Serjak was not the kind of person to appreciate early mornings. As a man of service he rose at any hour demanded of him, but if such an hour was before the call of the rooster, he was most unpleasant company. His servants were reminded of this when they delivered him the message that a house had burned down the night before, and four charred corpses had been discovered inside. Captain Graston sent word to him immediately, since Vrigeek and four of his men had not been seen in Fort Flidenoch since the day before.

The rain continued to pour as Serjak entered the smoldering ruins. He had neglected to dawn

his plate for the trip into the town. He walked among his escort wearing nothing but his casual silks, leather boots and a jerkin to protect from the mild chill. The only soldier's equipment he carried with him was his sword, an ornate black-steel blade with a golden hilt wrapped in boiled leather strips at its grip. He ignored his officers' insistence to wear his armor for the sake of appearance. "I do not dress myself for the sake of the people watching me." he had told Captain Durjen before leaving the fort. "I assure you I command the same authority in my bare skin that I command in a suit of plate. What I do not command at the moment, is the same patients for insubordination I have when woken at a humane hour of the morning." The captain spoke not another word to him from then on.

Serjak looked around the remains of the house. The tops of the walls had all but burned down. The roof had caved in, and most of the wooden tiles had turned to ash. The smoking coals of the thick wooden crossbeams were all that remained of it. Once the roof was gone the rain had gotten in to the rest of the house. Between that and the townsfolk hauling buckets of water, the fire had gone out before it could eat all of the walls. What was left of a few bits of furniture were also visible among the wreckage. In the middle of what looked like a collapsed bed-frame Serjak saw the four bodies piled on top of each other. Their flesh and clothes burned beyond recognition, but the soot blackened elements of armor gave away the identity of the victims. The only men of his that hadn't reported back to the fort.

"Has anyone touched anything?" Serjak asked Captain Durjen.

"No, commander." the man answered. "As soon as it was reported we placed guards around the house and sent directly for you."

Serjak got down by the bodies to take a closer look. There was no wooden floor to this house, yet the bed was obviously placed in the corner. The fire could not have spread to this location. The pile of corpses was where the fire was first lit.

"They were out hunting a pair of heathens." Durjen said. "The bastards must have trapped them inside and burned them alive."

"And now you see why the regent hasn't made you commander yet." Serjak said without looking up from the bodies. "You are of too simple a mind for the job." Captain Durjen let out a quiet snort of resentment, which the commander ignored. "A man on fire does not lie still."

"Dead men do. After they were burned they were stacked in the corner." Durjen replied.

"Unless you lied to me before that is not possible. This is how we found them. Unless the assailants were standing in the midst of this and we simply did not notice them, they would not have had the opportunity to move them after they were burned." He rolled one of the bodies off the pile onto its back and started to examine the armor more closely. "They could have moved them here before the fire was started though."

“The heathens burned the corpses after they killed them? Why would they feel the need?”

“The question I feel the need to ask is: How did two boys, who are claimed to be no older than 15, overpower four of our armed warriors?”

Durjen scratched his head. Serjak went on to look at the bodies one by one. Even on close inspection he could not see the likenesses of the men. The fire had done away with that. The armor though left some interesting clues.

“They didn't.” Serjak said, answering his own question. “It was someone else.”

“Someone else?” Durjen said, his voice and face covered in questioning.

“Look at this.” Serjak stood up and pointed at one of the bodies he had laid out. His finger was pointed to the man's breastplate. Durjen walked up beside him and looked right down at the spot. There was an unmistakable gash in the center of the chest. The bent edges of the cut made it clear that whatever pierced it broke through from the inside out.

“He was stabbed in the back.” Durjen said.

“Stabbed in the back with enough force to go right through his front and back armor. And directly through his heart, no less. And that's not all.” Serjak knelt down next to another body and raised its arm. The flesh made crunching sounds as it moved. “The chainmail under this one's arm was sliced as well. Hit him right in the armpit. He would have bled out fast. A lot of blood flows through here. And again, the weapon sliced right through a suit of chainmail.”

“What does this mean?” Durjen was getting more and more confused by the second. “Could the rebels have done this?”

“Certainly not the fags Vrigeek came here to arrest. These soldiers were cut down by men who knew how to fight, and were well equipped to do it. These men were not killed by the flames. They were killed by swords. But why... why burn the bodies?”

“To hide their identities?” Durjen suggested.

“Fire burns flesh, not metal. We could tell who these men were by the armor they wear. If they wanted the men to look like common folk they should have removed the armor as well.” Then a sudden idea came to him. He frowned and looked closer at the hole in the first body's breastplate. “Unless the fire was not meant to hide who the victims were, but how they were killed.”

“I don't understand, sir.”

“Nor did I expect you to, captain.” He turned and started making his way out of the house. “I want you to send your men to every household in the district. Ask around, and get me witness accounts of what went down here last evening!”

“As you command, sir!”

Serjak strolled off with his guard back towards the fort, with the intention of having a word with the captain of his guests.

Igarla felt no calmer the next day than before. Her idle moments were still filled with the images of what had transpired in that hovel the night before. The scornful look in the soldiers' eyes as they looked upon the two boys, the terrified looks on their faces as she cut them down one by one, and Vrigek's hateful, betrayed eyes. Even though she believed in her heart that she done what her duty compelled her to do, she could take no comfort in it. Truthfully she was more worried for herself. Afraid of the price she would have to pay if her actions were to be discovered.

Not that she was in any danger of being discovered, she thought. She made sure of it. She made sure the fight could not be seen from outside. She burned the corpses to hide the cause of their deaths. She made sure she was not seen by anyone around the house. There was no way anyone could find proof of her involvement.

To relax her mind, Igarla spent the whole day training with her sword. As it always did, the fluent dance of the sword masters brought a small measure of peace to her heart. There was no Lomar, no Nemeron, no conflicts or rebellions, no heartache. It was just her and the blade in her hands gliding through the air. Or at least it was, until she was interrupted.

“You dance beautifully.” The voice came from behind her. It was deep, booming and spoke with a strong accent. As Igarla lowered the sword and turned to face it her heart skipped a step. Facing her was the commander of the fort, a stern look and slight smile on his face. “A shame that I cannot join you in it, but I detest the notion of wielding a blunt blade.”

Igarla put the sword up against a rack. She was trembling ever so slightly, she noticed as she put it there. She couldn't help but wonder if he noticed as well. She made an effort to compose herself. “A fine afternoon to you, commander.”

“If only it were.” he said. “I fear this will not be a conversation of a pleasant nature.”

“No?” Igarla said growing ever more nervous.

“Four of my men were found dead this morning in a house in town. Four men that had gone to apprehend a pair of heretics hiding out there. The house was burned down, their dead bodies within.”

He looked Igarla directly in the eyes. It took great effort not to look away, but Igarla managed to maintain her gaze. “They died in the fire, you say?” she made an effort to put as much shock and sorrow into her voice as she could. “How awful. Tell me; was this the group lead by Sergeant Vrigek?” She was no fool. She knew exactly why Serjak was talking to her. No doubt he had spoken to Palanor and found out that she had been in town that night. She also knew that she was seen talking to the men before they broke in to the house.

“Yes.” Serjak said sounding surprised. “I was going to ask if you knew anything about the incident, but I take it you do?”

“I met the sergeant in town, yes. They were trying to break down the door of a house. I spoke to him, briefly.”

“And what exactly did you speak of?”

“He told me they were hunting a pair of criminals. That they were hiding inside and had barricaded themselves in. I offered my assistance, but he kindly declined, so I left him to his work.”

“I see.” Serjak did not lower his gaze for a second. His eyes seemed to be looking into her soul, reading each word in her eyes, looking for the truth behind them. Igarla felt the man analyzing her. It was starting to make her feel more uneasy. “And if you don't mind my asking, what were you doing in town that night?”

“Our physician sent me on an errand to acquire herbs from the local merchants.” she replied instantly.

“And you encountered him on the way there?”

“No. On the way back.”

“Oh. You saw or heard nothing unusual as you left?”

“No.” Igarla said with as much faked honesty as she could muster. “Nothing.”

Serjak kept up his analytical stare for a few more moments. Igarla felt tiny drops of sweat forming on her forehead. Lucky she was that it blended in with the rain. Finally Serjak's eyes looked away and he nodded slowly. “Thank you for your time then, lieutenant. I'm sorry to have interrupted your dance.”

“Vrigeek was a good soldier. He was a man truly dedicated to duty. His death saddens me greatly.” These words at least were spoken without a shred of dishonesty.

“And I assure you, his murderer will face swift justice.” This was the last look he gave her before turning away to leave. Even after he was gone Igarla felt the heavy stare gazing into her heart, as if it had never left. The commander knew. She was sure of it. He had arrived with suspicions, and Igarla gifted him with certainty before he left. Time and time again her fellow soldiers would remind her how terrible she was at bluffing, and the commander read people like an open book. *He has no proof.* she thought to herself. *There is no way he can prove any of it.*

She failed to calm herself. Holding back an outbreak of panic, Igarla made a line straight for Palanor's quarters. She knocked on the door. Palanor answered. Igarla was breathing heavily, constantly giving of tiny glances to either side. She kept opening her mouth to speak. Words didn't leave it. Finally she managed to let out single sentence: “I'm in big trouble, captain.”

Palanor looked at her with a look of disappointment. By the looks of it Serjak had told him what had happened, when he asked for the list of soldiers in town from him. The captain looked around behind her. “Come inside. Quickly.”

And so she recounted the events of the previous evening and her conversation with the

commander just before. She had been sitting on the side of his bed while Palanor paced up and down, one hand on his hip, the other rubbing his forehead. Once done, the captain took a few long breaths. “What in the Lords' name were you thinking?”

“They would have killed them!” Igarla protested. “I simply couldn't let that happen. Not after everything we've done already.”

“None of this is our concern!”

“I was in the room with them when they threatened their lives!”

“Exactly! Why? What were you doing there? Why didn't you just walk back to the fort when Vrigek said he didn't need your help?”

“Because I observed the situation, and came to the conclusion that I could help him do his job more efficiently without causing harm to anyone. It was a sound observation. I was inside the house well before they broke the door down.”

“I warned you about this.” Palanor's temper was rising. Igarla got the impression he would have been shouting her head off, if he wasn't worried about being heard from outside. “We are not here to get tangled in local politics. We are here to do a job. Military operations.”

“You mean like political assassinations?” Igarla snapped at him.

“Military operations!” Palanor reiterated. “We follow our orders, and no more, lest we get into trouble. Did I not warn you?”

Igarla glared at him. At this moment she did not recognize this man. For so many years she had served under captain Palanor. He was always a noble, calculating and dependent leader. A man to look up to. And yet even though she was sitting down and he standing, she felt her gaze looking down into her commanding officer's eyes. “You absolutely did.” she said, blank and emotionless. Palanor said many words but Igarla heard only three. All he was saying basically boiled down to 'Ignorance is bliss'. A phrase that both Igarla's original drill instructor and the captain himself had deemed as a principle unworthy of a Lomaran soldier. She felt like calling him out on this sudden change of attitude, but then thought better. She was not in the mood for any more arguing. Not today anyway.

Palanor paced away from her a bit, shaking his head and sighing. Then after a while he seemed to calm down. “Walk me through this again. You told the commander what, exactly?”

“The truth, up to the moment I turned around to enter the back alley.”

“So as far as you told him, Vrigek declined your aide, and you walked right back to the fort.”

“Correct.”

“And your absolutely certain he can't link you to the murders in any way?”

“I made sure there were no witnesses who saw me. I entered through the roof, and left the

same way. My approach was via the back streets. There was no one about, save on the main road.”

“Could someone have seen you on the roofs?”

“It angled away from the street. I'm not green, captain.”

“Alright.” He sat down on the bed beside her. “Then we have a chance to get away with this. Stick to your story. As long as there is no evidence, the commander can make all the accusations he wants. He wouldn't risk angering the colonel over a matter like this by executing a Lomaran without proof of her crime.” Igarla nodded. “Also, I hope this served as a lesson as well. From now on stick to doing your duty, alright?”

Igarla stood up. She came to the captain trying to restrain fright, she was now restraining rage. “I will do as you command, captain. But I did do my duty.” She did not wait for an answer. She left, eager to get back to her dance, and calm herself of the anger building up.

That eve, even if for no more than an instant, Igarla first considered giving herself to a man. After the month she had had, losing Plerid, murdering townsfolk, and putting her life on the line against the emperor's justice, she might have cut her wrists if she could not get a drink of something decent. One by one the mugs were emptied and refilled, Hrakim getting left far behind.

“I don't think I have ever seen a woman drink like you do.” he said. As usual Igarla couldn't place his words as compliment or complaint.

“That's because you've never seen a *real* woman in your life.” Igarla could feel the alcohol getting to her. The tiniest haze started to form in the corners of her vision. This was the sign that it was time to stop. She elected to finish this last mug, and then call it a day.

“I have seen *you*.” Hrakim replied to her with an attempt at a seductive smile.

“Sometimes I doubt if I'm a real woman.” she said leaning on the bar. “A real woman would have stood up against injustice and not faltered when fear reared its head. As Plerid would...” she cut off herself and took a large swig of her drink.

Hrakim fell silent. He clearly didn't want to bring up the subject of Igarla's fallen comrade. “I have never met a woman like you before, but every day I talk to you I find myself wishing more and more of my countries women were.”

“Gods forbid.” She said with a sarcastic grin on her face. “Lest the men of the empire should need to fear the day when they no longer control their women like cattle.”

“I meant...”

“You meant that you wish more women had some muscle on their bones, but still were compelled to follow along with your whims and wishes like they do now.” She closed her eyes, the smile now gone. “Forgive me. That was undeserved.”

“No.” he said. “It wasn't. It was actually quite accurate.” Hrakim looked down at his own drink. Igarla noticed the clear look of shame in his eyes. “What can I say? Trying to get women to like you is hard work. So hard, in fact, that most men stick to just avoiding it all together. Take what they want and get it over with. Time and effort saved.” He drank. “I like to think I am different, but... none of us are truly different, are we? Not really.”

Igarla was put aback by this sudden confession, yet at the same time pleasantly surprised by the honesty of it. “Don't be ashamed of what you feel.” she told him. “It is our Lords... or gods given intuitions that make us who we truly are. Be proud of the fact that you have overcome your nature, and stuck with the harder route. Even if sometimes it bears no fruit.”

Hrakim looked sideways at her. “Does that mean you still haven't changed your mind?”

Igarla smiled at him, taking the second to last sip of beer out of her mug. “You sound surprised.”

“Well, I always believed that when women say 'no', what they really mean is 'you're not trying hard enough'.”

“For the women of Nemerom that may be so. I happen to be a person who knows what she wants, and makes no secret of it.” She saw the disappointed look on Hrakim's face, and added; “I'm sorry.”

“Me too.” he drank again. “I don't regret it, mind you. I have enjoyed your company greatly. I would have enjoyed it in my bed as well, but we can't have everything, I suppose.”

A brief silence fell over their area of the bar. The bartender came over to Igarla, pointed at her nearly empty mug and looked at her questioningly. Igarla shook her head, and the bartender went back to his business.

“Is it my eyes?” Hrakim asked.

“Sorry?” Igarla said to him.

“If my eyes were red, would you maybe have thought differently about us?”

“No.” Igarla said with another smile. “My first love was a foreigner.”

“If not that, then what? Forgive me for asking but I have to know what I could have done better.”

“You did everything to the best of your abilities. You offered me good beer, which is the fastest way to my heart I can think of. You have been kind and polite, even in your brutal honesty. If you were my type, I would have bedded you in a heartbeat.”

“Your type.” Hrakim lingered on the words a bit. “You've said that before. What exactly is your type?”

“I want to stay friends with you, so forgive me if I don't respond to that.”

This got Hrakim's attention. “What are you saying?”

Igarla sighed. "Let me ask you this: If knowing the truth about me would ultimately lead to resentment, would you still want to know it?"

"Have I not always told you all my hard truths?"

Igarla had not thought of that. He was right. He had confessed all his views to her, regardless of the backlash that could have followed. He had given her nothing but the truth, and he deserved the same as well. Igarla reached for the locket hanging around her neck.

"The love of my life gave me this." She told him as she opened it and gazed on Fara's face. "We shared a love that ended when an angry spouse committed murder in rage." she handed the locket over to him with the chain still around her neck.

Hrakim took the golden locket in his hands and looked down at the small painting, as a woman with ebony black hair smiled back at him. He looked up at Igarla, then back at the painting. He swallowed slowly, closed the locket and turned back to his drink, avoiding eye contact. "I... see."

Igarla watched the emotions on his face with sadness. The same sadness she felt when she killed Vrigek. "Do you want me to go?" She asked.

Hrakim still did not look at her. "Yes. That would probably be for the best."

She nodded, putting back the locket under her shirt. She reached for a pouch on her belt and took out a handful of silver coins. "Today was on me." She said, and turned to walk away, saddened by the fact she had lost a friend she made in a foreign land. A land which she could see was just as full of good people and bad people as her own. It only made her blood boil more in anger of the bad men responsible for misguiding the good ones.

The commander's chamber of council was a dark place. It was in the underground level of the main keep in the fort. No widows, only a small amount of torchlight to brighten the room. At the same time sound did not carry out of there. What was discussed there remained there.

"My money is still on rebels." one of the present officers said. Commander Serjak was in the midst of a meeting with Captains Graston and Durjen, as well as two others.

"The bitch did it." Serjak said loudly. They were all sitting at a table. Serjak looked nowhere in particular, his eyes burning. "That little bitch killed Vrigek and his men-at-arms."

"Witnesses saw her talking to the sergeant for sure, but nothing suggests she..."

"It was her!" Serjak burst out in a shout. "She was in town at the right time, she admitted to seeing Vrigek moments before it happened. I looked her in the eye and listened to her lies myself. I promise you, it was her."

The chamber fell silent. When the commander was this self-assured, he never had any

opposition.

“How could she have done it? She was not seen...” One of his officers tried to say.

“None of the red eyed fuckers were seen the night they stormed the rebel encampment. And there were a dozen sentries keeping watch. Not being seen is what they excel at.”

“But why would she do it? Why kill them?”

“Somehow she must have found out what Vrigek was arresting those men for.”

“She would kill Vrigek for trying to arrest a pair of fags?”

“Half the bloody Lomaran army is filled with fags.” Captain Graston interrupted. “They think that it’s a natural thing we need to accept.”

Durjen and the other two officers looked at each other in disbelief, but when they saw Serjak nodding in silence their faces turned serious.

“And I’ll wager she’s one of them.” the commander said. “When they first arrived the lieutenant introduced herself by beating the shit out of three of our men, and she did so without breaking a sweat. She further demonstrated her prowess by besting Movrik and in such an arrogant fashion as well, arming him with a real sword. She clobbered the men who insulted her consul, and rushed a stabbed heathen to her physician trying to save her life. Igarla is a self-righteous cunt, who fancies other cunts. You best believe she would hack the head off a man who tried to kill her fellow fags.”

After a short moment of silence it was clear that not all men in the room were in agreement. Nonetheless, there were no objections. The commander had made his case.

“We should have her executed.” Graston said. “She can’t be allowed to get away with what she has done.”

“We have no proof.” Another officer said. “We have to convince her captain of the deed to get approval from the expeditionary colonel. We can, however, not do so.”

“Palanor likely already knows.” Serjak said. “There all of one mind when it comes to this. As long as he can he will cover for his lieutenant. Red eyed son of a whore...” He growled. “Get out. Now.” His officers stood up from the table one by one and made for the door. “Graston.” he said before the captain could follow the others. “Not you.”

The room was empty save the two top ranking men. Graston had already got up from the table and turned around half way to the door. Serjak stood up and leaned over the hearth, its pale light scarcely any brighter than the few torches. His voice was quiet. What was said could never be heard outside of the room, and still he spoke as though he feared being overheard. “Do you know why I asked you to stay?”

“I believe I do.” Graston answered with a sly grin.

“I want you to take care of it. We cannot be implicated. The bitch took great care to cover

her tracks. You must be as cautious.”

“Am I authorized to do whatever I see fit?”

“Yes. Should Palanor receive a gut feeling his lieutenant's death is on our hands, I would not care. All the better, in fact. Just make sure he cannot prove it.”

Graston bowed. “As you command, my lord. I'll see to it she is punished for her crime.”

A week after the incident in town, Igarla was slowly starting feel reassured. The commander had not returned to investigate her; the whole affair had seemingly died down. Her days were spent swinging practice weapons with Belvar. Unlike Plerid, Belvar was a true equal to her when it came to melee combat. His weapon of choice was the mace, a rather unusual choice for a man of the special forces. Not a subtle weapon to be sure. The fights were not as one sided as when she was fighting Plerid. Belvar would regularly knock her on her ass, just as often as she would him. He was an agile fighter, quick to move out of harm's way, and to strike when she left an opening.

Training with Belvar and conversing with Hrialvin was all she did day to day. Only a single mission came by, hunting down a raiding group of bandits. The Lomarans were given free rein to pursue the task as they saw fit. It was hardly a challenge.

She was taking a break from her usual morning ritual of exercise when of all people to show up, Hrakim came by. Igarla was sitting on a bench wiping the sweat off her brow. She was dressed down, wearing only a pair of trousers and an orange undershirt. Hrakim approached her awkwardly. “Good morning.”

“Hrakim.” Igarla panted. “I didn't think I'd be seeing you here any time soon.”

The boy scratched his head. “I know. I just... I wanted to apologize. It was wrong of me to cut that last meeting of ours short. You... well, you caught me off guard, is all.”

Igarla gave him a smile and leaned forward in her seat. “I hold no grudge. I'm glad this did not come between us.”

“I'm still disturbed by what you told me, mind you.” he went on with his usual honesty. “But I think I've come to know you well enough to try not to judge. I mean, we all have our flaws, right?”

Igarla was not sure how to feel about this. “So, you believe my interests to be a flaw?”

“I suppose not.” he replied. “‘Inconvenience’ works better. From my point of view, of course. Do forgive me. I am trying my best to speak frankly and not offend at the same time.”

“As I've already said,” Igarla got up from her bench and put a hand on his shoulder, “I hold no grudge.”

“Thank you.” He said. “How do you feel about getting a drink?”

Igarla raised an eyebrow. "You still want to have a drink with me?"

"It would be lie if I told you I wasn't upset by my failed attempts to seduce you. But despite that, I have always enjoyed your company. Just as I would the company of a good friend."

Igarla smiled again. "That's kind of you to say. Very well. I'd love to have drink with you."

After having checked in with Palanor Igarla and Hrakim walked down the familiar road to the tavern at the side of town. "I must admit," Igarla said on the way. "I had believed that last time we spoke would be the last." Hrakim smiled halfheartedly. Despite Igarla's repeated attempts to start conversation, he was rather reluctant. Perhaps he had not gotten over their last meeting quite yet. Still, she appreciated the effort on his part to come to terms with it. It was no easy task for a man raised in the ways of Maradar, even one as well travelled as Hrakim.

They were greeted with an unpleasant surprise when they reached their favorite inn. Not a noise was heard from within, the doors and windows had been shut, and a wooden plaque was nailed to the entrance. Igarla tried to read the text, which was written in an alphabet she was familiar with, but not with most of the words. "What in the world?" She exclaimed.

"Closed due to pending investigation by the inquisition." Hrakim said after studying the sign.

"The inquisition closed the inn?"

"It would seem so."

"Wonderful." Igarla's voice trailed off into a somber silence. She had warmed up to the idea of having a good mug of beer again. "That takes care of that I suppose."

"Well, actually..." Hrakim looked as though he didn't know whether to finish. He eventually opted to. "We might still be able to get what we came for."

"Oh?" Igarla raised an eyebrow. Something about the way he said it made her suspicious.

"I happen to know the secret storehouse outside of town where the innkeeper kept his supply of Lomaran beer. He confided in me once."

Igarla got a slightly uneasy feeling. "What are you saying?"

"We could get our beer right from the source. If the inn is closed by the inquisition it would likely all go to waste anyway. There's no real harm, right?"

"Are you suggesting we steal some beer from the inn's store?"

"Why not? Just a drink or two. We've given the inn a fair bit of business already, I'd say. And again, the inn will not be needing it for a while anyway."

Something about the boy's behavior was off. She could not quite put her finger on it. Obviously having noticed her hesitance Hrakim smiled and started walking. He made a motion over his shoulder for her to follow. „It'll be fine. Trust me."

Though with quite a bit of reluctance, Igarla's allowed the desire for a strong drink to get the

better of her. She ran a few hurried steps to catch up with him, then slowed back to a walking pace. She followed his lead through increasingly narrower streets, until the edge of town became plainly visible. “Are we going far?”

“Half a mile passed those tree’s.” he responded. “It’s a small wooden building. We’ll get there shortly.”

There was no road leading to where they were headed. For a number of yards there was just open planes up to the edge of the nearby woods.

“Do you mind me asking a personal question?” Hrakim asked after a few minutes of silence.

“Only if you don’t mind me possibly not answering it.”

Hrakim kept his eyes on the path ahead. “That woman of yours. You mentioned a spouse murdering her.”

“That’s right.” Igarla said.

“So... Was it your spouse... or hers?”

Igarla stayed silent. She looked at his face, still fixed on the road ahead. When the answer didn’t come, Hrakim turned to look at her. At first it seemed as though he didn’t know what to expect from her, like he was worried to have caused offense. Yet Igarla could swear she saw a hint of fear. Why? “Hers.” She replied at last. They had passed the line of trees. “She was married. To a man.” She felt the need to add the last part.

“Oh.” Hrakim turned back to watch his step. There was no path to follow; he therefor had to constantly avoid undergrowth, roots and rocks. “And that’s not a crime in Lomar?”

“Lots of women marry men.” Igarla said partially with sarcasm, knowing well what he meant. “But to answer your real question, no it isn’t. It’s frowned upon, but not punishable by law.”

“Right.”

Once again, the tone with which the boy spoke was simply off. She had been noticing it since they had stepped foot outside the fort. Hrakim was nervous, and very much so. Was it her presents? Perhaps he felt intimidated. Maybe knowing the truth about her made him weary being close to her for fear of collusion with a heretic. No. There was something more pressing on his mind. Igarla pondered this as she ducked under branches and stepped over rocks.

Then after a few paces she stopped and laid a firm grip on her dagger. Hrakim noticed that she had stopped following and turned to see what was the matter. Igarla stood facing him with fire in her red eyes. Her legs stood a shoulders length apart and her arms were loosened, ready to draw weapons. Instantly a look of terror came over him.

“Really, Hrakim?” she said, more annoyed then angry. The reaction he had displayed gave her all the evidence she needed. “You would throw your life away this easily, just for a chance to lure me into an ambush?”

The boy swallowed. He turned his whole body to face her and put a hand on his sword hilt. "I don't know what you're..."

"You have armor on." she said glancing at the bits of boiled leather that hung out from under his tunic.

"Well what did you expect?" His tone took a sudden change. "You confess to me of all the ungodly, amoral acts you have committed, you murder soldiers of the emperor, and expect to get away unpunished?"

Igarla drew her shortsword and raised it before her in a combat stance. "Serjak's words, I take it. Did he claim I killed Vrigek?"

"Do you deny it? He was arresting men of your kind. Everyone saw you at the house. Am I supposed to believe it was all chance?"

"I hear the men coming." Igarla said. "How many are waiting to kill me?"

"More than you can handle. I would give up and make this easy on yourself."

"I bet you would." Igarla advanced two steps in his direction. Hrakim drew his sword and took two steps back. "I thought you better than this."

"I thought you better as well."

"Before I kill the men about to attack me, you will be the first to die." The sounds of approaching footsteps started to become louder. The clinging of steel plates and chain shirts followed them. "I'll let you chose how that happens. Face me, and I will send you to your gods in a way worthy of a man who calls himself a soldier. Run, try to reach your friends, and you will die a cowards death, with my dagger in your back."

Hrakim stood still, sweat dripping off his brow. Igarla's searing red eyes glared with anticipation. Then having weighed his options, the boy tried to dart into a sprint away from her. No sooner had he turned his back, than Igarla's dagger freed itself of its sheath, and flew into the back of his head. That was the moment when the men appeared.

But these were not soldiers of Nemerom. The suits of armor they wore were crude and unmaintained. In fact only few had actual armor on. The arms they carried consisted mostly of pitchforks, spades, pickaxes and scythes. It took Igarla less than a few seconds to recognize her attackers as members of the rebellion.

As they spotted her they stood still, holding their arms in front of them in a threatening motion. She counted a dozen at least, with possibly more of them nearby. They were slowly surrounding her, but not attacking. She looked around her for a way to flee. Untrained and inexperienced as they were, she could not hope to hold her own against so many by herself. As she stood waiting for an opening, a single figure pushed through the line of weaponized tools to the front. It was a woman. Or at least Igarla thought it was. She looked well over seven feet tall, with

thick, toned muscles, a regular beast of a woman. She wore only a slight few pieces of animal hide on her body, with thick skins wrapped around her feet, and a helmet of leather. Her tanned skin was covered in patterns made of red body paint, and the few hide clothing she wore was decorated with the tusks and fangs of what looked to have belonged to great beasts. It was the small amount of clothing that made it even marginally clear to Igarla that this was a woman at all; that and the smooth, beardless face and wavy, shoulder-length dark hair.

The rebels seemed to look anxious as she approached Igarla. First thing she did was look down at the body of Hrakim, then back at her. As she glanced at her drawn sword a fearless, wide smile crossed her face. She began to close the distance between them. Igarla saw no sign of any weapons in her hands. She reminded her of a Tusakaan barbarian. Only she had never seen one of their women before. She was told that women of the Tusakaan Iles were short and plump, with the only duties of breeding and picking fruits. Igarla's grip tightened as this colossal woman came closer. She stopped just shy of the tip of the extended sword.

Igarla could tell she was being taunted. An unarmed and unarmored target stood right at the end of her blade. There was no way this was not a trick. “<What do you want?>” Igarla asked in machtar, and began to circle her opponent slowly.

“I was asked to take you with me.” The woman said in her own tongue, yet with a strong accent the likes of which she had never heard before. “But I *want* you to attack me.”

Igarla looked confused. “Why?”

“Because if you attack me, I get to knock you out first.” The woman grinned. “So to persuade you to attack, I've told the men to let you go if you kill me.”

“You lie.” She said.

“I have no need to lie. But do as you want.”

Igarla took a few looks at the rebels. They were standing at a safe distance. Igarla took her time to consider her options. If the woman was telling the truth, then she had a chance to escape. But it was not her she was worried about. In truth she was not the least bit intimidated by her. It was the dozen armed peasants. Having no better course to follow, Igarla made a decision. She struck with her sword.

In the same instant as she did she was greeted by a strong pain in the stomach, as the barbarian woman dodged with ease, and rammed a knee into her. Igarla crumpled down in pain. Never before had she been struck so hard before, nor had she seen any person of that size move so fast. A hand with the grasp of a titan picked her up by the collar of her shirt, and pressed her back against the tree. The giant woman stared her in the eyes, still grinning with satisfaction. “As I thought.” she said. “Just like all the rest, a weakling.” Then Igarla was robbed of her consciousness by a colossal blow to the head.

A combination of three distinct feelings woke Igarla from her sleep; the dull pain from a recent blow to the head, the sharp pain of a cracked rib, and the cold touch of a steel collar around her neck. She rose slowly from a straw covered floor with her hand on her head. The world around her spun as she did, and the pain was strong. Her jacket and belt were gone, her sword and dagger with them. She reached for her ankle. The hidden knife she kept in her boot was gone as well. Under her shirt she felt a length of bandages wrapped around her torso at rib height. She took in her surroundings. She was in a cage. Iron bars surrounded her in what looked to be an underground cavern of some sort. There was one way leading out into a dark space, unlit by the torches that provided the light to the room she was in. The dirt below her was covered with straw; an empty bowl lay at her feet, and a pitcher of water. In the cave outside her cage were several other empty cages. Well, empty in the sense that there were no captives in them, live ones at any rate. Igarla could see human bones in one of them, as well as the distinct smell of death occurred a long time ago, but still not long enough for the smell of decay to completely vanish. She kept looking, expecting to see devices of torture, yet she found none. A bench sat on the far side of the room, as well as a few empty wall shelves, and nothing else. She was the only one in here.

Why was she here? Hrakim had clearly wanted to lure her into an ambush, she had presumed by the commander's men, as retribution for her killing Vrigeek and his men. Yet the people who captured her were rebels. She found it unlikely for Hrakim to have been a rebel in secret the whole time. The commander taking advantage of her friendship with him to get revenge made much more sense.

She decided that now was not the time to ponder such things. Getting out should be her first goal. She first examined the chain and metal collar keeping her tied to the wall. After a few hard tugs she determined that it was bolted to the wall sturdily enough to keep her inside. The length of chain allowed her to get right up to the bars of her three by three meter cage. Escape would likely mean getting close up to her captor and taking the keys off his body. She could not see any other way out at the time.

"Good afternoon!" Igarla spun around to face the entrance to the cavern. She saw a middle aged man, 170 centimeters tall, clad in an ornate gray robe with sewn patterns of fine quality, similar to the garments she had seen on highborn Nemeronean men, yet different enough to draw question. Under his robe he wore a suit of metal splints, and he had a longsword strapped to his side. His short trimmed dark hair was showing signs of turning gray, as did the beard he had trimmed to a sharp point at his chin. He was carrying a plate with a few slices of bread and some fruit. "Sonek said you had awoken. Sorry about the rib. Daxa can get a little liberal when

interpreting my orders.” He spoke the common tongue of Leviron well, with but the slightest hint of an accent. She could swear that she heard it before, but still could not place it.

As the man walked in Igarla stayed silent. He placed the plate of food at the edge of her cage just outside the bars. “Eat. You look hungry.” he said with a rather friendly smile considering the circumstances. Igarla backed up from the cage, got down on her knees and sat down on her heels, watching him intently the whole time. She said nothing.

“My name is Dynon Deastmos.” the man said. “Might I know yours?” Igarla did not answer. She kept watching him with calm eyes. She had already examined his belt and concluded that he was not carrying any keys. The time for her to attempt escape had not yet come. “No?” Dynon said after a bit. “So be it. Perhaps later. Will you not eat? We have left you some water too, should you feel thirsty.” Igarla did not respond. She sat still. “I imagine you are confused. You must be wondering who I am and what you are doing here. Suffice to say you are not here as a prisoner, but a guest.”

Igarla looked around at the bars surrounding her, then back at him.

“Not quite what it looks like, I know.” Dynon said smiling. “Looks deceive, as you learned earlier today with your friend. I will give you some time to rest and eat. We will talk when you are more comfortable. Sonek!” A poorly dressed man carrying a rusty spear entered the room. “Sonek speaks your language. He will be watching you. Let him know when you are ready to have a discussion with me.”

Dynon turned and left. Sonek sat down on the bench and leaned his spear against the wall. Igarla examined him. He had no belt to carry a keychain, and there was no place nearby to put one. She remained seated in the back of her cage and didn’t budge for hours. Sonek peered in her direction every once in a while. He seemed uninterested in his prisoner. After quite a long time had passed, Sonek was replaced by someone else. Someone familiar.

The bored guard nearly dozed off when he was tapped on the shoulder by the giant woman Igarla encountered in the woods near Niedlopan. The one Deastmos referred to as Daxa. She muttered something to him, after which he got up from his bench and walked around the corner to the exit. Daxa did not sit down. She walked right up to the cage and leaned against the bars, looking at her. Her head was almost as high as the top of the cage. She was wearing only her skins and hides. The hard leather helmet and shoulder guard she had on earlier where nowhere to be seen. She did not speak, just stared at her with an annoyingly satisfying smirk that made Igarla want to strangle her. She tried to keep her frustration hidden. She did not want to give the bitch the satisfaction.

“You going to eat that?” Daxa motioned with her head to the plate full of food that Igarla hadn’t touched. Igarla did not answer. She maintained her silence. Daxa sat down on the floor with

her legs crossed, picked up an apple from the plate and chomped into it greedily. “I don’t really care if you starve yourself.” she said as she did it. “But if you think this makes them think you’re strong, you are a fool.”

“Fuck off.” Igarla broke her silence to deliver this short message.

“M-m.” Daxa shook her head, swallowed and took another bite. “Can’t. Sorry. One person has to be here, in case you decide to open up. It’s quite ungrateful of you, you know, letting all this food go to waste. Dynon took this from the food he gives to his people. Some don’t eat this much in days.” She finished up the apple and went to eat the loaf of bread. “Weak as they are, it’s not like they could feed themselves.”

She went on to eat the entire plate of food Igarla had been given and lick her fingers afterwards. Meanwhile Igarla was still trying to place her. The more she thought about it the more she was sure this woman was not from the Tusakaan Iles. Something about her complexion and speech. Tusakaan barbarians had never been heard speaking the common tongue of Leviron, and Daxa spoke it with ease. She was built like a giant. Muscles as big as Igarla had seen on heavy soldiers covered her entire body as well as the marks of a great many wounds, marks left by weapons, claws and teeth. The animal wounds looked old and healed, but many of the blade marks seemed relatively recent.

“Who are you?” Igarla could not contain her curiosity any longer. Also, it was clear that Daxa couldn’t care less about her silent treatment.

Daxa looked up at her from the meal, smiled and answered while still chewing her bite. “I am called Daxa of Del’iri.”

“Are you a Tusker?” Igarla asked. The Tusker were a smaller Tusakaan tribe of warriors. They were known to be more intelligent than their cousins, often attacking on bidding for those who offered them treasure. Every man in the tribe who became a warrior had to pass a trial by slaying a massive beast called an Akelu, also known as the great tusked shorestrider. Warriors would then decorate their clothing with the claws and teeth of the beast, and make tools and weapons from the ivory of the tusks.

“A what now?” Daxa asked.

“A Tusker.” Igarla repeated. “The more vicious of the Tusakaan tribes.”

“Ah, one of those. No, I am not. I am an Ayaesy of the Del’iri. A guard of borders, if you will, for the tribe I come from.”

“You’re a native of the Archipelago?”

“That’s what your kind called it, yes. The islands. The homes of the thousand tribes now settled and inhabited by yours and theirs.” Daxa pointed once to her and once behind her back.

“How did an island tribe girl end up in Maradar?”

“Girl?” Daxa laughed heartily. “Is that what you see me as? A girl?” She stood up and began to walk away. “I enjoyed our talk, weakling. You are amusing. My tale however, is not for you to hear. I’ll send Sonek back in. I’ve been asked to knock you out if you try to escape, so please... please do.” And with the same huge smile as before she turned her back and walked out.

Time went on at an uncertain pace. Igarla was unsure just how many days had passed, but based on how weak she was beginning to feel, she guessed it must have been around four days. She had refused to eat any of the food she was given or drink any water. It became clear to her that escape was not possible. They kept a close eye on her at all times, the keys to her cell were never present, and worst of all, the giant Daxa was always close by. Deastmos did not come to see her at all during the time she was there. Daxa on the other hand was there more often than she would have liked.

On one particular occasion the giant came to visit, she had walked right around the corner humming a tune and twirling a key ring on her finger. This got Igarla’s attention immediately. Daxa proceeded to walk right up to her cage and seat herself in front of her with her legs crossed. “This is what you have been looking for, right?” She said grinning. “Every time I see someone enter you search them with your eyes. Looking for your way out, right? Well...” She started to select each of the four keys on the ring one by one. “This one here is the one to open the cage door. This one opens the lock on your neck. Also, there is a door at the end of the corridor around that corner. It has two locks on it. This key opens the lock on top, and this opens the lower one.” She then placed the ring on the sash around her waist and looked at Igarla expectantly.

This was as good opportunity to escape as ever. The keys would likely never be this close to her again, judging by the care her captives took to make sure. Igarla remained seated on her legs with her hands on her thighs. Daxa grinned at her with anticipation.

“I’m not going to try and take them.” she said finally.

“No?” Daxa asked. “If you don’t start eating you will likely not live long enough to see them again. You sure you will not take this one chance?”

“I know you think I’m weak, but do you also think I’m stupid? A smart person does not trip twice over the same stone.”

Daxa let out a hearty laugh. “I was not sure if you were stupid. I did think you might be getting desperate though. Why bother starving yourself?”

“Take a message to your master. Tell him...”

“I have no master, weakling.” For the first time Daxa’s smile started to dissipate.

“Then to whoever gives you orders.”

“I ignore orders. Dynon asks for favors. I comply because I have nothing better to do. Now

what is your message?"

"Tell mister Deastmos that I have no intention of giving him anything. He might as well kill me now, for I will not give him any information, nor will my colonel negotiate for my life. Both he and you are wasting your time."

Daxa nodded and got up off the ground.

"One more thing." Igarla shouted after her. "If I do get out of here you will be the first one I kill."

The giant glanced back at her with a smile of disbelief, then walked out around the corner. Several minutes later she came back following right behind Dynon Deastmos. The man came right up to the cage and opened the lock to the cage door. "Daxa tells me you are unwilling to talk." he said to her. He then threw the key ring to her. It laded right at her feet. "Perhaps we started off on the wrong foot..." he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small pin with a circular sigil on it. Igarla recognized her own officer's badge. "...lieutenant."

"Are you trying to trick me?" Igarla said to him still not moving from her position.

"I must admit I am surprised you did not ask to see me, more so for your sake than mine. I would have thought you had many questions. Is there nothing you would ask of me?" Igarla looked at him in silence. "I have kept you down here for days, made no attempt to torture you or kill you, brought you regular meals, tended to your wounds..."

"You are keeping me hostage." She told him. "On Serjak's behest, or hoping for something in return for me from my kin. You will receive nothing."

"I can see how you would think that. The soldier you killed did lead you into an ambush set by his comrades. We got there first however, and set an ambush for the ambushers. The boy did not know he was leading you to us."

"And just how did you know to be there?"

"Once Serjak wanted you dead I was among the first to know." He walked into the cage and sat down in front of her. "Keeping this rebellion in shape needs me to know everything as soon it happens. Captain Graston is nowhere near as subtle as he thinks."

Igarla needed no more incentive. Once he had walked into the cage she immediately got up and grabbed him. The speed with which she moved caught Deastmos off guard. Once she had her arm around his neck, she drew his sword and put it to his throat. She turned to face Daxa.

The giant did not seem at all fazed by this. She stood there with her arms crossed and a grin on her face. "Get out of here now, or I will kill him." Igarla ordered her.

"Release him now, or I will kill you." Daxa replied.

"Do you think I won't do it?"

"I am hoping you will." Daxa said. "Go on. Give me a reason."

“There is no need for this.” Dynon said. “Lieutenant, Daxa is not loyal to our cause. She places no value on my life. Killing me will not accomplish anything. Put down my sword, and let us talk, like civilized people.”

Igarla hesitated. Her options were not looking good. The collar was still around her neck, and she could not get it off with Daxa waiting for an opening to jump at her. What’s more, she clearly didn’t give a fuck about Dynon. There was nothing left to do, but admit defeat. She lowered the sword and let go of him.

Deastmos rubbed the bruised part of his neck. “All right. We got off on the wrong foot again. Perhaps third times the charm?”

“What do you want?” Igarla threw the sword to the ground.

“Just to talk. For starters, you know our names now, may we know yours?”

“...Igarla.”

“Thank you. It is a pleasure to meet you, lieutenant Igarla.”

“The feeling is not mutual.” Igarla reached down and picked up an apple from the plate by her cage, and started eating for the first time since her capture. She savored the large bite she took, letting the sensation of the ripe juices flow down her throat and giving her a renewed sense of strength. “You went through a great deal to take me captive. Why bother if you were not planning on ransoming me to my commanding officer?”

“Would you like to take a walk with me?” Dynon picked up the key ring from the ground and reached it out to her. Igarla took it and, remembering what Daxa had told her, selected the key to open her collar. The padlock made a satisfying clink and fell to the floor. Igarla cracked her neck to each side and loosened her shoulders.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“I want to show you my keep. It is not much, I admit, but it provides me and my followers with shelter and safety.”

“I take it she will be coming as well.” Igarla looked Daxa in the eye. “Just in case I get the urge to run?”

“Until some mutual trust is established, I see it as a necessity. You understand.”

Igarla nodded. “Lead on then.”

Deastmos smiled approvingly, and turned out of the cage toward the exit. Igarla followed right behind him with Daxa in the rear. Every step she took she could feel the colossal wench’s eyes on her, ready to pounce at the first sign of trouble. Her capture was a wise man to keep her around. Though her motivation was a mystery to Igarla, considering she seemed to share no love for the rebels fight. Dynon lead her out of the cavern. Around the corner was a short hallway of paved stone walls. A castle dungeon or something of the likes. Beyond the door at the end was a flight of

stairs atop of which a trap door lead to a large chamber. There were no windows, just torches in scones on the walls. Tattered remains of what must once have been banners hung from drapes on every wall. Giant stone pillars supported the roof looming a great many feet up above her. The hall felt like it belonged to a castle of a great lord, and had been abandoned by him for a long time.

The chamber was filled with people of all sorts. Men and women walking about performing tasks of all measures. Straight to her left a woman was sewing a patch on a piece of torn leather spaulders, to the other side a young boy was cleaning blood off a rusted breastplate. A forge had been set up on the far side, where a burly looking man was hammering a soon to be sword blade. Ingots of metal and blacksmithing tools were strewn about all around him, and he had a little girl, twelve or thirteen by her looks, running about grabbing tools for him and putting finished woks on racks nearby. Yet for every man, woman or child scurrying about their business there was at least one person sitting by idly, either twirling his thumbs or staring down at the floor in sorrow. Igarla noticed quite a few of them had horrifying disfigurements undoubtedly inflicted by weapons of Nemerón's army.

"Welcome to what is left of Castle Synat, lieutenant Igarla, home of the free children of Maradar." Igarla was greeted with a similar variety of looks as in the towns and cities of Nemerón. Fear, hate, confusion, intrigue, spite, disgust. Deastmos waved to some of the working rebels, who all smiled or waved or nodded back at him. "What do you think?" he asked.

"You have made good use of the space." Igarla replied.

"This is the castle's main hall." he said. "The doors you see lead to the other areas of the ruins. More space we have made good use of. Come! I will show you."

Igarla followed him passed peasants working on sharpening blades and shining armor pieces. Most of what they had seemed scavenged off corpses of dead men-at-arms. By the look of the smith on the other end of the hall, he was not practiced in forging arms of his own. They came up to a few men practicing with swords, swinging at each other with their blades wrapped in cloth. Igarla couldn't help but smirk at them. They played around with the blades like children on the streets with sticks, striking mostly at the others weapons rather than their bodies. Dynon waved to one of the larger boys and walked over to pat him on the shoulder. The combatants lowered their weapons and greeted him, the boy he spoke to wrapped his arms around him. His expression changed when he spotted her though. He pointed to her and spoke in an accusatory manner, in machtar so slurred and unintelligible, that Igarla didn't even attempt to try and understand. Besides, it's not like his body language didn't give away his thoughts well enough. After a brief conversation Dynon turned to Igarla.

"This is Veck, one of our more accomplished warriors. He has slain three of the enemy's troops, and lived to tell about it."

“Mhm.” Igarla was not impressed.

“He says your kin murdered his oldest friend, and he is asking me for a chance at revenge. Do you mind?”

Igarla raised an eyebrow. “You feel the need to ask? Will she break my neck if I resist?” Igarla gestured toward Daxa. Deastmos smiled at the giant and shook his head. “By all means then. Let the boy strike his beast blow.”

Dynon patted the boy on the back and said in machtar: “<Go ahead.>” The boy took the blunted weapon in his hand and swung it overhead at Igarla. A sidestep and a kick later he had fallen back on his behind and his sword fell to the ground. Dynon got down beside the boy and called his mate over to give him a hand. When they had him in their care, he turned to Igarla. “Reckless children only learn the hard way.”

“He killed three men at arms?” Igarla asked.

“The boy does not lack courage nor enthusiasm. But he has only been wielding a sword since his father was taken away by the inquisition five months ago. He was the son of a baker.” The walk continued. Igarla was lead through a door into a circular corridor with rooms every ten feet. The first few seemed like sleeping and storage areas, with piles of straw and laid out furs for sleeping on, and barrels and crates stacked atop one another. One room was particularly larger than the rest though. It was the infirmary. Deastmos lead Igarla in. The room was filled with furs and straw piles like the rest, here however they were all occupied by wounded men. Most of them seemed to have returned recently from the field. They were young and old, ranging from children barely able to wield a club, all the way to old men no longer able to. Their bodies were filled with slash and stab wounds, bandages and cloths were soaking red, the cries and painful moans were loud and unpleasant. Tending to the wounded was a group of healers, mostly women with few exceptions. They were rubbing balms on flesh, wrapping bleeding gashes in crude bandages and feeding potions.

Her first thoughts were of Hrialvin. If he had been here with her he would have been appalled by the terrible organization of the sickroom. She could hear his voice in her head, yelling and complaining at the staff who seemed to wonder from one patient to the other without any knowledge of what they should do. She did not fault them for this. They were likely as green as the boy who she knocked on his ass. Igarla was starting to fathom the reason she had been kept alive.

Dynon approached an old crone at the back of the room. By first glance she looked likely as old as the castle they were in. Her skin sagged on her face, unkempt strands of gray hair flopped around where ever they saw fit, and there could not have been more than seven teeth in her mouth. She looked up at Dynon as he leaned on the table she was standing behind. Her hands were deep in a green colored mush she was mixing in a wooden bowl. She spoke slow and articulate enough for

Igarla to understand the greeting she gave him.

“<How fair you?>” Dynon asked her.

“<Not well, m’lord.>” She replied. Igarla made out from the conversation they had, that there had been some sort of attack somewhere, and most of the wounded brought from there did not survive, many were maimed into uselessness. Deastmos ended the conversation by patting her on the shoulder reassuringly.

“Come!” he said to Igarla. “There is one more place in particular I wish to show you.”

The other end of the circular corridor ended up leading back to the main hall via a different door. Once inside, Deastmos led her to another doorway. A short hall led to an ascending flight of spiral steps. Igarla counted sixty before they finally came to a wooden door with a bar across it. Dynon lifted it, and pulled the door open. At first the sunlight hurt her eyes. She squinted and put a hand in front of her face. After her eyes had adjusted she could see that they were atop a tower. The clouds were dense, and as always it looked like approaching rain. On the horizon Igarla could see the outline of several villages as well as rising pillars of smoke, some small and grey, others taller and dark.

“Where are we?” She walked over to the edge and leaned on the side of the wall.

“This is Castle Synat, an old ruin of a once magnificent structure.” Deastmos leaned on the wall beside her. Daxa took up a spot near the door leading back down, and leaned against the wall. “Estendon was once a monarchy ruled by Leris Synat and his bloodline. As far as the eye can see, and beyond those hills even, all this belonged to the house of Synat. From this castle the king would ride before his mighty army to fight the enemies of the realm, and protect his lands from invaders. The grandchild of king Leris, Kychel was the last to mobilize the troops from here fifty years ago. He aspired to be the one to halt the advancing forces led by the lord Frodari. I don’t think I need tell you what became of his dreams.”

And he was right. It was known that during the march of Frodari Nemeron there was not a single battle from start to finish where the lord Emperor did not eventually emerge victorious. More known was the fate he dished out to those who dared oppose him. Nemeron the First faced his greatest challenge against a lord by the name of Lorald Athkin. The battle between the two forces lasted three weeks, and with every hour Nemeron’s patience grew ever shorter. By the time the battle had been won he had grown so furious that he ordered Athkin’s captured soldiers to be locked up and starved. After he deemed them sufficiently hungry, he had the lord Lorald tied to a post released the starving prisoners on him, who by that point were more than happy to feast on the flesh of their former commander. One could only assume a similar fate befell the lord Synat as well, depending on how long he held his own in battle.

“Back in the days before the empire this castle was a place of great strength. The banners

atop these towers brought safety and comfort to all who saw them. After Kychel Synat's death the Emperor ordered the city to be raised. The realm lost its significance and the ruined castle was abandoned. It has stood here for five decades as a symbol of a dead past. I hope for it to one day be the place from where the past shall rise again, and the movement that brought the tyrants to their knees shall take flight."

"And who are you to wish for such things?" Igarla posed the question. "You do not strike me as a man invested in the fate of the common folk. You do not even strike me as a man native to Maradar."

"How very keen of you to notice." Dynon smiled. "Was it my clothing that gave me away? My speech perhaps? I had come to believe that I spoke the common tongue of Leviron flawlessly. But it is of no matter. You are right, Lieutenant. I am not a native of Maradar's mainland. I am in fact a man born and raised in the great city of Namar, the last bastion of the past untouched by the Emperors influence."

"You're a Namari? That explains a lot."

"I urge you not to jump to conclusions. I am in deed Namari, but I can tell you for certain, and with great disdain and sorrow, that I do not reside here on behest of the viscount."

"With sorrow? You would have Namar officially challenge the emperor? Is a war a thing you wish for as well?"

"Wars are but a necessary part in the process of change. I no more want a war than I want pain in my head the morning after getting drunk. Yet I have taken on the struggles of these people as my own and I wish to see them freed of their torment. If there is no other way to achieve this than through war, then that is how I shall see it done."

"Very bold words coming from the man who sits in his castle giving orders to peasants, cripples and children to attack armies of knights and burn down villages."

"It would seem that way from where you stand, I imagine. Make no mistake though. I may not put my body in the way of harm, but if this rebellion should fail, my head will fall just as fast as the heads of those who follow me, and faster. I have been denounced by my city as a traitor and a bandit; I have neither family nor fortune to return to. Any and all family, friends and possessions I have are right here. I shall see these people led to victory or I shall gaze upon the streets of the great city Kichmord from a pike atop the palace walls."

"One of those seems far more likely than the other."

"So I have been told time and time again."

"Is that why you decided to keep me alive? Are you hoping to use me to sway the Lomarans to your side?"

The Namari let out a long sigh. His eyes became fixed on the horizon as the sky began to

darken. “I traveled the Islands for quite a few years, you know.” Dynon’s voice grew somber, his eyes tired. “I’ve met and spoken to many diverse people. The Lomaran colonists I remember especially fondly. Ninantarol, have you ever been there?”

Igarla shook her head. “I have never been farther south than Rhan’s Gaze.”

“I hope you get to see it one day. A once dangerous, uninhabited island made into a paradise by your people. Beautiful sun bathed shores with clear waters washing the beaches, towers of wood and stone watching over the houses of Pioneers’ Landing. A city, which would in no way rival the size and glory of Gormon, Riverade or the City of Fire, but all the more their beauty. It was there that I met the soldiers. The spawns of hell that fight to spread the fires of corruption. I have never in my life met more honorable beings. They befriended me, listened to me talk about my home and told me about theirs. It was there that I learned about the soldiers rules.” He turned around and leaned with his back to the wall. “‘Honor separates the warrior from the barbarian. What separates the soldier from the warrior is the Rules.’ they would tell me. A wise set of words these rules, forged in the fires of compassion and reason. Until this rebellion I had never seen Lomarans forsake them.”

“Watch what you say!” Igarla raised her voice and clenched a fist. Out of the corner of her eye she could glimpse Daxa uncrossing her arms.

“Does the first rule not state, and forgive me if I do not remember the exact words, that ‘a soldier’s actions must always work towards a single goal: to protect those who cannot do so themselves.’?”

“The soldier is the greatest of servants, the highest of paragons; for the soldier always acts in consideration of their highest objective, the most holy of goals: the protection of Lomar through that of her people from all that would do them harm or injustice.” Had Igarla been awoken from her sleep she would still have been able to remember these words with ease. Her instructors made sure of it. It was said long ago by the wise Grimmlar of Gormon that soldiers without a code of reason and a mind to help them follow it were no more than tools of the powerful against the powerless. In accordance the rules had been born, and for the past millennia the soldiers of Lomar had lived their lives and followed their commands with the rules in their hearts.

“Yes.” Dynon nodded. “From those who would do them harm or injustice. Look at this place, Lieutenant. Gaze into the eyes of the people the castle shelters. I guarantee you shall not find a single soul who has not suffered some form of the two. Spoiled, fattening noblemen send hoards of metal clad monsters to rob these people of what little they have. Any who question this as being the natural way of things is taken away by the inquisition and left to their mercy. Some return corrected, cured, broken, but most simply vanish. Do you know what happens here if a young girl picks up a wooden stick to play swords with the boys?” For the first time Igarla had trouble maintaining eye contact. “Women like you or like Daxa here never live to see adulthood. Girls who

do not accept their roles as wives, priests or whores are disowned, sold as servants or just left in the woods to be eaten by wolves. Men and women who sin nothing greater than surrendering their bodies to one another in heat outside of holy matrimony suffer similar fates. And woe unto those who dare take a stand against the men of the army when they demand the property of a commoner or the company of a maiden. Look around you, lieutenant, and tell me that what you see here is not harmful or unjust.”

Igarla turned away. She fixed her sight on the setting sun, just barely visible from behind the dense layer of clouds. She wanted to say things. Many things. Dynon spoke true. His words brought voice to what she had been feeling since she had woken the first day in this new land. Yet in the end, when it finally came time for her to speak, she reached a hand to her chest, where Fara’s locket would have been, and remembered the part of the rules Palanor had emphasized. “...the most holy of goals: the protection of Lomar through that of *her* people.” And she turned back to face him.

“Right.” Dynon bowed his head. “In the strict sense you are not acting against your rules by killing *our* people. Since this does keep the truce between the two nations alive, you keep the people of Lomar safe. I see.” The look he gave her conveyed the feeling that he didn’t think Igarla believed her own words, but he made no more of it. “The fact of the matter is, that your presents here is no mere act of convenience, but a consciences decision of the emperor. The people are getting tired of the shackles they are forced to wear, and it is showing more and more every day. Our numbers grew, and we had even started to get allies among the nobility. The emperor’s soldiers are men that can be easily outsmarted and outmaneuvered, if one knows how to do it. The same cannot be said for you though. Ever since the Lomarans got involved our support had been dwindling. You operate and kill with the efficiency of a plague. This does of course weaken the people’s faith in the emperor, since he did ally himself with those we believe to be the servants of hell, but what they believe is unimportant if they are dead.”

“A philosophy your men proved at Draraka or Lerrust.” Igarla recalled the burnt villages Palanor had shown her after Plerid’s death.

“I make no choice lightly, nor do I make any apologies. We have used the enemies weapons against him on many an occasion, but that does not make him any less our enemy. You have been brought into this conflict, but I do not consider you an enemy, and do not wish you to become one. So let me ask you this: If I let you go, what will you do?”

Igarla gave thought to lying to him, but did not think he would believe a sudden change of heart if she faked one. “I would head back to Niedlopan, rejoin my unit and return to my duty.”

Deastmos nodded. “I expected as much.” He sighed and shrugged. “You shall be released in time. However, since an opportunity like this does rarely present itself to us, I cannot let it happen right away. For the time you shall stay in my hold. By day you will be free to explore the castle as

you wish. Daxa will keep watch over you, and escort you back to your cell by night. If your stay does nothing to persuade you otherwise, you may return to your people and resume slaughter of my men.”

He glanced at the last light of the sun as it vanished over the top of the hills to the west. “But now it grows late. I shall retire and see you again on the morrow. Daxa, would you take our guest back to her chambers?”

Daxa opened the door to the main hall. Igarla left Dynon atop the tower and made her way back to the cells where she was kept. As they ascended the last set of stairs and passed through the door to the dungeon Igarla got curious. “So where do you come in?” The islander did not respond. “I understand Deastmos and why he takes up this banner, but what are you doing here? You harbor no love for the man; you don’t claim to fight for their cause. What do you get out of this?”

The giant put a hand on Igarla’s back and pushed her into the open cage, then shut the door, and locked it. “I get to kill iron men.” She said, put the keyring on her sash and walked out, leaving Igarla alone.

Morning arrived. Igarla awoke to the sound of padlock coming loose. Daxa of Del’iri stood before the door holding it open. “The sun has risen. Dynon has meals prepared up top for you to share in, should you wish.”

Igarla pushed herself off the floor and stretched. Daxa did not wait for her answer; she just went to take a seat on the bench. Igarla jumped up and grabbed the bars above her. Bending her arms she hoisted herself up till her head touched the iron, sunk back down then went to repeat over and over again. The islander grinned in amusement watching Igarla exercise. After she felt her arms tire enough she dropped down to the floor and stretched her arms.

“Are you going to be following me everywhere?”

“Yes.”

“What if I just kill you?” Igarla jumped back up to the bars, pulled her legs up and hung down by her feet upside down. She then put her hands on the back of her head and started moving her torso up and down.

“You are more than welcome to try.”

“I am known for killing things much larger than me.” She said panting as she flexed and relaxed her abdominal muscles.

“Me too.” Daxa replied.

“I have been training to kill things since I was fifteen.”

“My father taught me to hunt savage animals of the wilds since I was able to walk.”

“I killed my first reptyl warrior when I was twenty-one.”

“I broke the neck of a wild wolf just after my seventh birthday.”

Igarla released the bars with her legs and landed on her feet with a flip. “I fought two barbarians of the Tusakaan Iles without a weapon, and broke the back of one.”

Daxa looked at the single leather shoulderguard she had on, and the three large animal tusks decorating it. “I’ve killed entire families of Akelu that nested too close to our village without weapons. Every foe I have slain I fought without a weapon. I have broken the skulls of iron men while their helms were still on. Go ahead and list off the meaningless victories you’ve won, they will gain you nothing. If you chose to attack me, you will fail. You are free to try.”

Igarla had finished her workout. She walked to the exit of the cavern, and as she did, she patted Daxa on the shoulder. “Come on. Time to follow me around all day.”

The main hall of Castle Synat had a large dining table in the center. It was old and in disrepair, full of scratches and missing chunks. Igarla saw a number of them gathered around it, men and women of all sorts. They had far too little food before them to have it called a feast. Most plates had less food on them than the portions Igarla was given in her cell. A line had formed before the hall’s hearth where some kind of hot soup was being served. She had half a mind to get in line with the rest of them, until she noticed Deastmos waving her over from the far side of the table.

“Glad you chose to join us.” he said as she got near. “I have taken the liberty of saving a portion of stew for you.” he pointed to a bowl next to him filled with a thick liquid. Bits of meat and carrots were swimming around inside. The portion itself was rather small, yet larger than the ones Igarla saw the rest of the men eating. She took a seat beside him, and not seeing a spoon, picked up the bowl in her hands and started to drink the contents. It tasted rather poor. It lacked any form of seasoning, the chunks of meat and vegetables were few and she only barely tasted any salt. She remembered Daxa’s words the other day, of how little they had to eat most times. Daxa herself had remained at the hearth where there was what looked like the charred remains of a boar. She tore a leg off of it and started to eat.

“I trust you slept well?” Deastmos said.

“As could be expected.” she replied.

“A small band of our fighters have taken off to ambush some carts with supplies to the local lords. Gods willing you will have a more tasty breakfast tomorrow.”

“Don’t concern yourself with pleasing my stomach, my lord. I am used to bad food.”

The Namari smiled. Igarla finished her stew. “Daxa does not serve your cause?” She asked him.

“No.” He said swallowing the bite of bread he had taken. “The Del’iri woman has a grudge against the emperor’s soldiers. She stays with us for the thrill of the fight and the opportunity to kill what she calls the iron men. But she is not a loyal devoted rebel. An ally only, but a valuable one.”

“She sure does boast a lot.”

“Only when challenged. She fears nothing and no one, and is by far the most dangerous person I know. A few months back we had been gifted a stroke of luck by the Gods, and managed to capture a traveling nobleman. After failed attempts to win a ransom or an ally he requested a trial by combat to win his freedom. We armed and armored him up, and handed him over to Daxa. She danced out of reach of every blow he threw, and in the end he died impaled on the hilt of his own sword.”

“The hilt you say?”

“Our dragonslayer disarmed him with ease when she had tired of toying with him. She stabbed the blade into the ground, then hoisted him into the air and slammed him down gut first on the blunt pommel of the hilt, and she did it so fast it sank right into his belly. He twitched around for minutes before moving on to meet the Gods.”

Igarla looked back at the giant as she finished cleaning the meat from the leg of the boar, and tore a chunk from its breast next.

“So is that why she gets a full boar to herself while the rest of the rebels feed on crumbs and morsels?”

“Oh no.” Dynon replied having finished his bread. “She rose before the sun had gone up, wondered off and hunted down that boar herself. The only thing we give her is a place to rest her head. She does not eat our food. Sometimes she allows us to eat what is left of her meal when she finishes.”

Igarla looked around the hall. It was much less lively then it was the evening before. People were slowly emerging from the rooms around to get their morning meals, but all the workstations, the forge and armories were unmanned. Deastmos took a handkerchief from within his robes and whipped his mouth.

“I am about to see to the fighters practicing. Care to join?”

“May I leave afterwards?” She asked.

Deastmos laughed. “Patience. When the time is right you shall return to your people. You have my word. All I ask is that you get to know us, our fight and our situation a bit from this side.”

“You are wasting your time, my lord.” he rose from the table and Igarla got up to follow him. Back at the hearth Daxa dropped the bone she was picking clean on the floor and followed after. “There is nothing you could tell me that I don’t already know.”

“Exactly.” he told her. “Which is why I wish you to remain and experience it first.”

Through a series of corridors and stone hallways Deastmos eventually lead Igarla out to the remains of a courtyard. It was walled off from the outside and overgrown by plants. Weapon racks and other supplies were strewn about close to the edges, straw dummies and circular archery targets

had been set up. The scene gave Igarla a pleasant sense of familiarity. There were men wearing battered and worn bits of armor and clothing swinging at each other with blunted blades. Most of them looked like they had just arrived from the plowing fields. They were underbuilt and underfed to be clad in the heavy armor they had on. Without an experienced tanner or leatherworker, bits of scavenged armor off dead Nemeronean soldiers was likely the best they could hope for. Igarla also noticed among the fighters watching the duels one or two women holding weapons as well, looking even more unsuited to the equipment they carried than the farmers.

Deastmos was greeted by bows and salutes by the men in the yard. Igarla remained a few steps behind, not sure what they would do if she got too close. He exchanged words with a few more outstanding fighters with more winters under their belts, who looked more like men with experience in combat. Old veterans and mercenaries likely, who had no more future in the army and dedicated themselves to preparing the rebels against the men of the Emperor. Soon after, the training commenced. The trainers each coached a pair of combatants while the rest of the fighters stood by watching. Deastmos stood back where Igarla had remained and watched over the proceedings. Despite the veterans giving advice and explaining tactics to the fighters, Igarla could see that these men were not cut out for these kind of things. Igarla was reminded of tournament fights in the City of Fire, where the fighters would stage well-choreographed fights to amuse the audience. Such fighters would strike in ways that were easy to deflect or dodge in visually pleasing ways. Like there, most blows struck would not have hit even were they not deflected.

“What do you think of our fighting forces?” Deastmos asked.

“I was equally unimpressed when I fought them on the field.” she responded. She was trying to mask her true feelings. It was no lie that she was not impressed by the skill these men demonstrated, but she did not feel like she should. These were not soldiers, they were commoners. Men and women abandoned by those whose duty it should be to keep them safe. In truth she felt sad. With every move the fighters took, she could see members of the Imperial army countering and jabbing blades through them, or worse, her own comrades doing the same.

“They were never cut out for this.” Dynon said. “They are all weak.” He turned and winked at Daxa, then continued observing the fights. “But I must show no sign of disbelief. If they sense that their leaders have no faith in them, their spirits dampen, and they will lose faith in themselves. Self-belief is just about the only sharp weapon we have to wield out here.”

“With all the folk you have rallied have you no smiths or suppliers on your side?” Igarla asked.

“Absolutely. Many in fact. Village blacksmiths who make tools and shoe horses. Poor men have been called in to arm rebels, but they don’t know the first thing about forging weapons. Old master Zhath is the most experienced craftsman in our service. He has been trying hard to learn the

ways of weapon forging, but at his age learning new things is much harder.”

Fighters changed places and took turns fighting each other. Elsewhere archers would loose arrows at the targets.

“So how did you get involved in all this, my lord?” Igarla asked Deastmos.

“That is a long story.” The Namari sighed. “I was born a wealthy man in Namar. Not nobility, but merchants in Namar tend to make great fortunes. My father had a future in store for me. He was planning to leave me in charge of the manufactory he owned. He was in the business of producing fine quality carpets of dyed thread. I visited the manufactory one day and saw the conditions the employees were forced to work in. So I left. I wanted no part in any of it. I traveled the islands for a long time, meeting colonies of both Nemeronean and Lomaran and getting to know their people. I came face to face with the contrast between the lives people of the Nemeronean colonies and the ones the Lomaran colonies lived. When I saw how much happier the Lomarans were, I slowly became more and more convinced that Nemeronean was a horrible place. I had to do something to help them. By then there had already been smaller uprisings on the mainland. I joined them, tried to get them organized, established connections between revolting groups trying to unify them. And behold: the fruits of my labor.” he opened his arms towards the courtyard filled with people.

“You must be very proud.”

“You jest, but I am. It takes only a small amount of courage for a man like me to take up leading these people. Giving orders and organizing is what I was meant to do, what I have been doing all my life. Most people you see here were born to raise cattle or plow fields. The bravery they have all exhibited by taking up arms to fight for their rights... My pride knows no limits.” Deastmos turned away from the fighters and faced Igarla directly. “You may laugh at the measly abilities they display, but every man in this castle with my exception is a braver person than you or any of your comrades, I dare say even more than Baranar himself.”

Igarla felt an urge to punch him. One did not just go saying things like that about the man who had defended Lomar from countless foes over the past fifty years. Alas, Deastmos was not insulting her hero, but commending his own. Moreover, he was not entirely incorrect. *Who is truly braver? She found herself thinking. The man who rides to war against a marauding race of undead because he was trained for it, or the one who does so without all the experience and skill solely out of a sense of duty?*

At one point one of the few girls in the crowd got into the center to practice. She eagerly tried to follow the trainer’s instructions; nevertheless she was taken out by her opponent quicker than the others. The man opposing her was instructed to put power behind his blows. His sword came crashing down upon the girl’s extended blade, she was able to parry, but the force of the strike knocked her back on the ground. Her decent was accompanied by laughs and pointing fingers. She

rose, brushing the mud off of her leather tunic, and readied her blade again. She was defeated three more times before the trainer declared it time for a change of combatants. The girl walked off with her head hung low and a hand grasping her side. She did not join the crowd again, but instead went off to a single straw dummy somewhere far from them to take some swings.

Igarla watched for a second or two, then after a sudden impulse started to walk in her direction. Deastmos and Daxa both followed her from a distance. The girl swiped at the dummy over and over again not with technique, but with rage and frustration. Igarla approached slowly.

“<Can you dance?>” she called out to her. The girl whirled around and jumped in fright at the sight of her. The young girl could not have been older than fifteen; she was thin in shape with long dark hair tied in a tail behind her. She had seemingly been taken by Igarla’s appearance to remember the question posed. “<Can you dance?>” Igarla repeated. “<Do you understand?>”

The girl nodded and said something to her in machtar. Igarla was about to ask her to repeat, when to the side Deastmos spoke up: “I have danced with boys every year on the harvest festival.” He translated. Igarla was pleased to not have to strain her memory by remembering machtar words. She went to reach for the girl’s arm. When she pulled back, Igarla raised her other hand to reassure her, and took hold of her upper arm.

“You are not strong.” she told her, with Deastmos interpreting her every word to her. “But strength is not everything. You should try to dance.”

The girl stared at her with her mouth slightly open and her brow wrinkled. Igarla could tell that she did not understand. She took a few paces back and motioned with her hands for the girl to attack her. The girl nervously looked to Deastmos, who nodded in approval. Grasping her sword in both hands she struck hard at Igarla from over her head. Igarla turned on her right heel and felt the wind of the sword as it hit the mud. The power strike had sent the attacker two steps behind her, and Igarla finished her spin by facing the back of her foe. Grasping her sword again the girl started to strike diagonally at her again and again. Igarla carefully moved her weight from one leg to the other as she bent her body out of reach of each blow. When the fourth strike came towards her direction, Igarla put out a foot right in the girl’s path, who stumbled a few steps forward as Igarla wound up behind her again, and put the side of her opened hand on the back of her neck.

The girl turned to look at her panting heavily. Igarla put a hand on her shoulder and said: “Enemies who attack with unchecked power become weapons against themselves. All the strength in the world is useless if you cannot hit your target with it.” Deastmos continued to translate what she said. “Next time you have to fight, try dancing.”

Thinking hard on what Igarla had told her, the young lady went back to her training, although this time she spent less time hitting the dummy and more time with choreographed footwork, swinging her short blade as an extension of dance moves. Igarla observed her from afar.

She was lucky. In basic training Lomaran soldiers used to spend months mastering the art of good balance and movement. Fjorla, she had learned from Deastmos, had already gotten most of the basic knowledge she needed from all those festival dances, and was improvising quite well. When next her turn to fight came, she was no longer trying to forcefully block her opponents attacks, and it did her much good. Instead she tried to mimic what Igarla had done before, diving and juking, striking at her foe when he left himself vulnerable. It was now her opponent who was coached and advised more than her. In the end she was still defeated. She ended up taking a wrong step and found herself in the path of a sideways slash that hit her in the shoulder with force strong enough to slice her arm off, had the blade not been wrapped in cloth and blunted. And yet this time when she rose from the mud there were no laughs, no mocking japes, no pointing fingers.

“Fjorla learns well, would you not agree, Daxa?” Deastmos asked the islander, who had spent most of the time leaning against the wall in silence. “Perhaps there is hope for those who are not strong after all.”

“Strength is more than muscle.” Daxa said in response. “Strength is body and mind. It is not determined by training, but by who is left alive. The day I become weak is the day I pass to the spirit world.”

“She had best start fast if she does not want to be cut down in her first battle.” Igarla said. “So should they all. Akelu-woman! Come. I’m going for a walk.”

Igarla walked through the open door to the corridor leading back to the main hall. Daxa snorted at her, then followed, after giving Deastmos a scornful look on the way out.

Battles of the mind

It took no more than two days before Igarla started to realize that Deastmos was getting what he wanted. A regular mental exercise Lomaran soldiers performed was the mind-battle; visualizing your opponent and imagining in detail the moves and techniques to take him down. Igarla had fought many foes in her days. Her first kill that wasn’t a part of her training was also the first time she was sent to war. It was back in year 721 of the Gods, the native reptyl of the islands to the west had invaded Leviron in force. Giant reptilian men ranging from six to ten feet in height, with sharp claws and muscles in their jaws strong enough to bite a horse’s leg clean off its body. It was said that new recruits did not tend to live long when going up against them for the first time, and this could likely have been the case with her as well, had she not been fighting from afar armed with her bow. As the years went by her foes became more and more varied. At times she would hunt packs of wild beasts causing unrest in local villages, rogue clans of centaur from the southern woods of Lebren, wild tribes from the mountains, bands of looters or bandits and others. She had killed

armored knights with weapons bigger than themselves during her missions in the kingdoms of Crylin and Livador, knights who had belonged to rebellious houses. When the Barbarians of the Tusakaan Iles attacked she was right there in the center of the conflict, making a name for herself when she allowed two of their elite tribesmen to disarm her, and proceeded to fight and kill them both with nothing but her wits, body and will. She had even taken on magi, what she considered to be the most dangerous of enemies due to their unpredictable nature and the arsenal of tricks they had at their disposal. For each and every one of these foes there were practiced methods of taking them down, techniques that Igarla had practiced for a total of six years growing up, then continued to perfect them with every enemy to fall before her. “A clear and focused mind is just as important as a steady sword-arm.” her drill instructor had told her once. “Your mind must know what to do the moment it sees its target, for if you must spend time to think, that is time gifted to your enemy.” As such Igarla routinely rehearsed her battles in her mind, till they became instinctive and reflexive. During her morning and evening mind-battles the generally faceless targets started to grow features. Over and over again she found herself putting a dagger through the throats, backs and hearts of the rebels she had gotten to know. And for the first time in her life, she had started to hesitate before the final blow.

On the second morning of her captivity, she was awakened by a group of rebels waiting outside her cage for her to awake. Igarla did not stop to count, but she guessed perhaps a dozen, give or take. She recognized a few faces that she associated with combat moves and failures performed during training the day before, Fjorla was the only name she could assign to one of them. When she opened her eyes and came face to face with them they all stood before her in silence, with awkward expressions on their faces. In the back was Daxa, still sitting on her bench with her arms crossed. When Igarla looked at her, expecting to get an explanation as to why there was a crowd waiting before her, the Akelu-slayer just shrugged.

Two of the younger boys nudged one of the others, who started shifting timidly trying to think of what to say. “We... we...” he struggled to even look her in the eyes. “...wish you good morning.” Igarla kept looking at the boy expectantly. “We come... ask you favor.”

“A favor?” Igarla rose to her feet.

“Fjorla say...” he pointed to the dark haired girl to his side. “...you help she fight learn. Say help she... her.” Fjorla tried to stay as invisible as possible, as though she was trying to make her already slim body thin enough to vanish. “We fight not know. Want learn. Fjorla say you know well.” The boy seemed to slowly find his voice, taking less time to think about words.

“<You wish to learn from me?>” Igarla said in machtar, she imagined with just a bit more confidence than the lad. She pointed at herself just to make sure there were as few misunderstandings as possible. They all slowly nodded at this. Igarla did not know what to say.

Having learned that Igarla spoke machtar the lad changed up his language. He spoke to her for a full breath in a single sentence. Igarla did not understand. She shook her head and raised her shoulders. The boy started to think again, when in the back of the room Daxa rolled her eyes and said:

“They lack trust in Ardtin and Nalhat. Those are the men who train them. They say they are doubtful towards them, for they have never seen them demonstrate the moves they teach. The girl told the rest that you showed her what to do yourself, and she understood much better.”

The recruits stood before her like children come to ask their mother for a treat. They waited nervously for her response. *They want me to train them? That would be like betraying my fellow fighters*, she thought. Every tip she passed on could serve to help one of these recruits kill a soldier on the other side, her friends. But as she looked across their faces she could see the truth. There was no turning this band into warriors. Nothing she could teach them in a few sessions would matter when going up against Lomaran special soldiers of far superior skill. *It's not so much knowledge they ask for, but hope.*

And so it came that Igarla spent the half of the day after morning meals in the courtyard, training rebels to fight. She gave personal advice to every man who stood opposite her in the ring. Most men came with spears and bucklers, as spears were easy to create by straightening the blades on scythes, and any old barrel's lid or wagon wheel could serve as a small shield. She instructed the recruits on how to use their own strengths to their advantage, how every attribute could be used to win against an opponent if used correctly. In Igarla's case this was finesse, but she was stronger than any of the lot assembled, which made it easy for her to demonstrate strength based techniques as well. Good thing too, since her knowledge of machtar proved to be far too little compared to what she would have needed, thus she had to rely on showing them what to do, rather than explaining. In the process she picked up and used weapons that she hadn't trained with in a long while, such as clubs, warhammers, mallets, spears, axes and quarterstaves. She was saddened slightly by how much she had forgotten, though none who fought her seemed to notice. She also noted the improvement Fjorla had gone through. The young girl could barely swing the sword she clung to when they first fought, yet now she had embraced her nimble nature rather than try to use strength she did not have.

Igarla was made weary only by the stares she received when glancing out toward Daxa. Ever since they had met the giant would always look upon her with a sense of superiority, that constant sideways grin. Now it was nowhere to be seen. *She feels challenged.* Before Igarla had heard rebels refer to her as Daxa Dragonslayer. They have clearly seen her in action many times and held her in high regard. She was clearly the most dangerous foe present in the castle. And though she claimed no devotion to the rebellion of the common folks of Nemerom, the fact that she had competition was clearly getting to her. Weary as Igarla was towards the islander, she could not help but feel satisfied.

Deastmos appeared at one point during the training. He had been summoned by Nalhat, the elder of the warriors responsible for training newcomers. No doubt Igarla had stepped upon a few pairs of boots by taking over their job, and doing it so much better. The Namari watched with interest as fights proceeded, shirking off all protests from both Ardtin and Nalhat. When it had come time for lunch, Igarla left the recruits to their practice. The other trainers stepped in almost immediately to take over.

“After so much resistance this was the last thing I expected, when Nalhat came looking for me.” Deastmos said as Igarla made her way to the exit.

Igarla did not speak. She walked passed him. The Namari was smart, and it bothered her very much. His entire goal had been to awaken her sympathies, if not towards their goal or their cause, then the participants themselves, and it was working. She felt that she should have gone back to her cage and sit there until she was released or killed. That was the first time she had considered that maybe sometimes ignorance is bliss. And the moment the thought came to her she remembered Palanor’s words, and Plerid. She took walks in the halls of castle Synat, inspecting the daily routines of the inhabitants, and trying to talk to them. Most attempts would be met with failure due to either the lack of communications skills or the attitude displayed towards her by the ones she tried to greet. She watched the blacksmith hammer at a scythe blade, removing it and attaching it back to the shaft turned upward. She watched the healers apply leaches, stitches and balms to massive wounds. The party sent out to ambush the supply caravan had returned with the goods, but in bad shape. They paid dearly for the boxes and crates they brought back with them.

Amidst the healers there was a small girl that caught Igarla’s attention. She was assisting the old woman in charge of watching over the infirmary, a young thing, roughly twelve or thirteen. She was dressed in black clothes and her eyes stared blankly ahead. She would hand bandages and other items to the old woman when asked for them, and she would reach out a hand to the table where they were kept and hand them over without so much as glancing that way. The reason the girl attracted Igarla’s attention was because at one point she had walked out of the hall, with her hands patting the wall the whole way. A group of three younger boys noticed her, and for sport started picking up small, pebble-sized debris from the floor and tossing it at her direction. *Playing jokes on the blind girl.* Igarla was angered, and nearly went over to step in, but Daxa got to her first. “Stay here.” She said, and she pushed Igarla to the side and made a line to the three boys. As soon as they spotted her they got up and tried to make a run for it. It did them no good. Daxa may have been the size of mid-height reptyl, but she moved like a wildcat. With a dash she got to the boys before they had a chance to scarper, and the only reason one was able to get away was because Daxa had only two hands.

She grabbed them by the collar and hoisted them both up into the air and propped them up against the wall. Igarla was left speechless. The boys cried out to her, shouting phrases with the words for “We’re sorry” and “Mercy” in there a few times. Daxa made a harsh threat, and tossed them both to the floor. They flew a good ten feet before hitting the ground, and once they did, they hurriedly got to their feet and made a dash for the main hall.

Daxa knelt right down to the girl and gently put a hand on her shoulder. “<It’s all right, Eili.>” Igarla heard her say. “<Some boys were throwing stones. Are you hurt?>” The little blind girl took a few breaths and raised her head in Daxa’s direction. She shook her head. “<Good.>” Daxa said. “<You go finish what you were doing.>”

As Eili patted her way to another room in the hall Daxa stood up and walked back to Igarla. “Missed your chance to escape, weakling.” she said.

“I would have hated to give you the satisfaction of trying.” Igarla responded.

At the end of the day there she sat, on the dirt floor of her cage, fighting her mind battles. And it became evident to her that this could not go on. The Lomaran army had ignored this issue ever since the landing. Plerid and Hrialvin had both stood up against this, and it was more than likely that similar concerns were rising in the other five units scattered throughout the region. Something had to be done.

She had managed to catch Deastmos the next day during his morning meal. With Daxa escorting her every step of the way, she ignored the line for food and went to sit down beside him.

“We should probably talk.”

Deastmos looked up from his bowl of soup. “I welcome it.” he said.

“I want to make it clear that I am uncertain of your character.” she started. “For all I know you could be hoping to use this rebellion to become the new king, but judging from the risk this uprising represents, to everyone involved, I am willing to wager you can be trusted.”

“I am glad.” he said taking another spoonful of soup. “I hope not to disappoint you.”

“Don’t you worry about me. It is those who follow you who require your concern. I have been a guest for both sides by now. You have done despicable things to fight the empire, things I cannot condone, at the same time...” Igarla paused. “I have experienced firsthand some of the circumstances that forced you to get so desperate. I am bound by duty to follow the rules, but I am Lomaran. Where I born here, I would likely be taking orders from you.”

Deastmos emptied his bowl. “So where does that leave us?”

“I don’t know.” Igarla sighed. “I can tell you only what I feel. Where the circumstances any different, I would likely take up arms, and help you fight the emperor’s men. Yet I am Lomaran to the bone, and... I could not find myself capable of standing against my home.”

“I am not looking to recruit you, lieutenant.”

“Nor did I think you did. But you were hoping I could help. By convincing the expeditionary forces of your right, I assume.”

“More or less.” The Namari said. “You were the only Lomaran we had been able to capture alive. I had hoped to gain new allies, or at the very least, remove the Lomarans from the conflict. It was not till your involvement that things started to decline rapidly.”

“I carry little authority. Appealing to my captain is all I can really do. He might agree to take the matter to the colonel, more likely he will dismiss it, and order me to return to my business. We take our duty for our home and our people very seriously.”

“I understand.” Dynon nodded. “Then perhaps there are some other words you might take to your captain as well.”

“What words?”

“Peace between your two empires may be good in the short run. But if the emperor no longer has the uprising to worry about, his troops will be free to march on other targets.”

“I doubt the consul and the colonel didn’t weigh that as a factor when sending us here.”

“Nevertheless it is true. Inner instability keeps a leash around the emperor for now. His father’s empire was nice and stable while news of won battles kept arriving to keep the people happy. The empire has not won a good renowned victory in a long while, and folks are getting restless. Soon Nemerom will want for a new victory to feed his empire, especially if the younger Nemerom is to be crowned, for the father grows old.” Deastmos sighed and stood up. “Lieutenant, you are free to go when you wish. A storm rages outside at the moment, so I would hold off until tomorrow with leaving, in your shoes. Regardless of what you choose to do upon your return, I ask that you do not forget about us. I’m sure you have made a few friends among this company.”

“Not sure my escort agrees.” Igarla looked back at Daxa.

“I’m sure she will miss you greatly.” the Namari joked.

“I will definitely miss her.” Igarla said.

Having heard the claps of thunder and seen the courtyard soaked in heavy rain, Igarla chose to take Dynon’s advice and rest a night longer before making her way back to Niedlopan. She fell asleep to the faint sounds of thunder and raindrops crashing to the surface above. The thunder that woke her was all the louder.

She had opted to sleep on the bench outside her cage instead of the pile of straw inside of it. She woke with a start when the screams started to come. Within an instant she had leapt off the bench and thrown on her coat. The screams were silenced by the sounds of steel piercing flesh. Igarla went flat against the wall, reached to the one shelf for her swordbelt, fastened it on and

readied the dagger. Mere seconds after the hall had gone silent, something started slamming into the door. A loud crunch indicated that the wooden door had given in. The voices coming from around the corner were accompanied by the sounds of rattling chainmail. Igarla readied the dagger in her left hand, and stayed flat against the wall on the right edge of the opening. Igarla could swear she was hearing three sets of armor making noise. Three men, chain armor at least, her alone, a sword and a dagger. Cakewalk.

Two men walked into the cavern first followed by one more. They were looking straight forward, and their sight was constrained by the narrow slits on their bassinet helmets. They had swords and shields out and ready. They stopped dead when they saw the empty cages before them. The moment they stopped to think Igarla pounced on the one in the rear. Fast as the wind, she grabbed the soldier's head from behind and jabbed the dagger in the eye slit of his helmet. Amidst cries of pain he fell to the ground with his hand on his face, taking Igarla's dagger down with him. Igarla drew the shortsword and readied herself to fight. The two men had turned the moment their comrade let out the first sound, but they had yet to react. Their momentary hesitation gave Igarla enough time for one strike. She made the most of it. Before the soldiers knew what was happening Igarla's sword had gone through the second man's throat, right where the armor was weak. She had to dodge the third man's swipe before she could wrench the blade back out. The strike was rushed and only served to strike his own comrade's helmet on the side. With her sword ready to strike, she hugged the last living man, and thrust the blade up his gut between the bottom of the chest plate and the codpiece, then she twisted. Blood was leaking out from under the armor, then from under the bucket helmet as well. He then went limp in her arms. She let him drop to the ground lifeless. After wiping the blood from her face and twisting her dagger out of the first soldier's eye, she cautiously made her way to the entrance. The sound of rain and thunder had mixed together with the clashing of steel, the crunching of wood, the screaming of women, and the crackling of fire. Just outside of the doorway she found Sonek's body impaled by his own spear to the wooden wall beside the door. She stopped just long enough to be sure he was dead, and taking the spear out of his body, before moving on to investigate the rest of the castle.

The trap door at the end of the hall had been flung open; the sounds of fighting could be heard, getting louder as she approached. She held the spear in both hands and stretched it out in front of her as she moved up the steps. She encountered no resistance as she made her way up and into the hall. Once up there she could see just how bad things had become. The Emperor's soldiers had arrived in force, and all around her they were killing the rebels. They did not make due with killing just those fighting back. They were more than happy to run through anyone who did not wear the same armor as they did. To Igarla's luck the fighting was spread out. Groups were clashing all around the hall, but no one cluster was in the way. She had to find a path.

The first soldier noticed her. She twirled the spear as one would a quarterstaff, landed one disorienting hit on his head, spun around to trip his legs, then leapt up and with the force of her entire bodyweight chucked the spear through his chest, then withdrew it to block an attack from the next soldier to engage her. *I have to get out of here.* She moved her head from left to right after slitting the second man's neck with the blade of the spear, looking for a safe path. *If I take too long they will all come at me. I can't hope to take them all on.* The main doors were a bad choice. There were likely to be more of them outside. She would have to try to make an exit through the courtyard to the back. *And get as many survivors to come with me as I can.*

The kettle helm worn by Igarla's last immediate opponent had no visor, which made it the easiest thing in the world for her to ram the tip in his face. This was the first time she had truly been able to appreciate the effectiveness and range of the simple spear. She did have more space to fight than she usually did, this weapon would have been useless to her in a tight situation, but had she taken these three on with her sword and dagger, it would have taken her much more effort to bring them all down. When she saw she was momentarily out of danger she darted for the door to the courtyard. As she went she could see other fights taking place in the hall. A group of four soldiers had ganged up on one of the new recruits, one of the boys that had learned from her a few days ago. He never had a chance to land a blow, before one of the four bashed his head to the wall with a morningstar. Zhath the blacksmith swung a cleaver at a foe, slicing right through the metal of his helm, and likely half way through his head as well. It was the last act of defiance he could show before a sword from another knight pierced his chest. All throughout the hall rebels were dying and soldiers far more rarely. Igarla resisted the urge to rush in and help the few remaining fighters, knowing well that she would only be putting herself in an outmatched situation. Trying to evade enemy eyes she rushed for the door to the circular corridor and slid through, closing it behind her.

More fighting from within. Much more. The hallway was empty but from within every room there were sounds of screams and steel. Just as Igarla entered the hall she saw a door burst into splinters as a Nemeronean soldier flew through it backwards and slammed against the opposite wall. For a second Igarla contemplated what had just happened. That door belonged to the infirmary, and from within came the distinct sound of a woman's cries; not cries of fear, but of rage. Igarla ran to the wrecked heap of splinters with the spear stretched out in front.

She did not need it. When she rounded the corner she was greeted by an unexpected sight. Most of the nurses and patients had been killed. All but one. Eili, the little blind girl was huddled up against the wall curled up and crying, as soldiers tried to get to her and failed. Four armed men were still standing, but only barely. Five more of their comrades lay dead on the ground, with dents in their armor and limbs twisted in unnatural poses. The four remaining men were trying to take down Daxa, whose face was twisted in rage and drenched in blood. She had several cuts on her and a

knife in her shoulder. Igarla entered just in time to see the giant woman kick a soldier's knee hard enough to bend his calf backwards. As he fell to the ground she stomped on his head. The helm deformed, his skull made a crunching sound, blood and some other liquid started to leak out from underneath.

Igarla jumped into the action. She darted forward ramming the tip of the spear through a soldier with his back to her. Meanwhile Daxa had grabbed a swinging axe from the hand of an attacking soldier, and hacked it into the man on her opposite side, ignoring steel plates as the head of the axe sunk into the area between his shoulder and his neck. The man whose axe she took tried to escape, but ran right into Igarla's range, who tripped him with the shaft of her weapon, spun around on her heel and stabbed him on the ground. The last man standing swung his sword at Daxa. The giant caught the sword by the blade, and kicked at his stomach, staggering him long enough for Igarla finish him off from behind.

The two women looked over the carnage. Daxa was covered in blood, but it was not clear how much of it was her own. The wounds she had taken looked actually rather light, as though the soldiers could only barely hit at times. Igarla also took these few seconds to observe the men Daxa had killed on her own before she arrived. Without any assistance from her, the islander had on her own killed six men at arms, and she did so seemingly with only her hands and feet, and the occasional weapon she removed from its owner. In that moment all the disdain and annoyance Igarla felt toward Daxa was set aside, appearances suggested the same on her account as well. She gave Igarla a quick nod before rushing over to check on Eili.

"The castle is compromised." Igarla told her. "We have to find a way out of here. Where is Dynon?"

"Dead." Daxa replied, picking Eili up in her arms and removing the knife from her shoulder. "They attacked him in his bed and killed him before he knew what was happening. I found his body bloody under the sheets."

"Shit..." Igarla murmured.

"<Eili, darling.>" Daxa spoke to the blind girl who had thrown her arms around her neck. "<We are leaving. Do you understand?>"

"<Where are we going?>" The girl spoke slowly, even for a child.

"<Somewhere safe.>" The giant turned to Igarla. "More will come soon. Follow me."

Daxa led the way through the corridor to the courtyard. The door had been split in half, and the emperor's men had swarmed the yard. A small number of fighters were trying to hold their own against them, but to little avail. *We should help them.* Igarla wanted to say, but there were too many of them. While they were occupied with the fighters they had a chance to get away over the courtyards walls. There was a stack of crates to their left that could provide the height they needed

to climb over. Daxa rushed towards it, Igarla followed.

“Get up top and wait there!” Daxa told her. Igarla gave her an uncertain look, but followed through. She jumped up on the crates and hoisted herself up on top of the stone. When she got to the top, she sat atop it waiting. Daxa grabbed Eili in her two hands and raised her up to Igarla, who took hold of her and sat her down beside her. On the opposite side, the ground was a long way down. She knew she could jump down herself, but with the girl in her hand she could not land safely. Fortunately it seemed Daxa had the answer. She took a running start and leaped from one crate to the next, vaulting over the wall and arriving on the other side with a thud on her feet. She straightened out and reached her hands out towards her.

“<Over there!>” Igarla heard from behind her. The Nemeroneans had spotted them, and several crossbowmen were notching bolts. Igarla held Eili out in front of her, and dropped her down towards Daxa, who caught her in her arms without difficulty. Igarla then slid off the edge as two bolts whizzed by where her head had just been a second ago, and landed on the other side with a roll on the ground.

“Hurry!” she shouted to the other two. “To the woods!”

As they ran for the cover of the trees, drenched in the rainwater and covered in Nemeronean blood, Igarla could just barely make out the two figures scrambling atop the wall, a few bolts sinking into the mud several yards short of them. In the cover of darkness they reached the safety of the woods without any more problems. After they had ran far enough, they chose a spot to rest. They found a small natural shelter under a large rock, that lent some cover from the rain.

Daxa gently laid down Eili against the stone, and swept the rainwater from her forehead. The young girl’s state of being was hard to judge. By this point Igarla had figured out that she was a mine-child, taken in by someone in the castle and taught to speak. A lesser miracle. What her connection to Daxa was though, Igarla could only guess.

“They saw us flee.” Igarla said. “It is not safe here for us. Not so close to the castle.”

“We shall be fine until sunrise.” Daxa rose from her position beside Eili and faced Igarla.

“The iron men have not the courage to venture into the wilds in a storm.”

“You can’t be sure of that.”

“If you want to go on, then go.” Daxa scoffed. “Dynon is dead, he has no more need of you, and last I spoke to him he set you free anyhow. I care no more what you chose to do.”

“Care...” Igarla shook her head in resentment. “Just what do you care about? That castle was full of people. People who looked up to you! Who admired you for your strength! You left them there to die!”

“There fight was not mine!” Daxa raised her voice to match Igarla’s tone.

“They took you in!”

“I did not need their hospitality! I have been surviving on my own since I was a child! My stay was a gift to them, not me.”

“You are all words after all, aren’t you?”

Daxa crossed her arms. “I beg your pardon?”

“You think yourself the only strong one, don’t you? You are the feeblest of all of them! If you were as strong as you say you would have helped those who needed you!”

“Don’t talk to me as though your truths are the only ones! I refuse to be called a coward by a woman who kills from the shadows like a snake!”

At this point the heated argument had drawn a whimper from Eili, huddling away in her corner. Daxa broke off from the argument instantly to kneel at her side and console her. “<There, there, little one. It’s all right. There is no danger here.>” Daxa wrapped the babe in her arms and turned back to Igarla. “Think what you will. Do what you wish. I have no more concern. But Eili needs her rest, there will be no more fighting here tonight.”

The sound of pebble-sized raindrops crashing against the leaves and rocks dominated the silence. The calm gradually crept back into Eili’s pale, worried eyes. Daxa kept her in her arms, gently stroking her head as she tried to lull her to sleep. *No more reason to argue.* Igarla thought. *Come morning I will leave them both behind. And good riddance.* She got down on the cold, damp soil beneath the rock and laid back against the wall, hoping that it would not be the sound of clattering mail that woke her.

The Bull awakens

Rays of sunlight poked their way through the forest crown and warmed Igarla’s face. She opened her eyes to find herself in the same spot from the night before. The suddenness of transpired events made her feel like waking from a bad dream, a hope that shattered when she saw the young mine-girl curled up beside her. The blind child was all that was left of the rebels of Castle Synat. Not counting... *Daxa.*

Igarla brushed away the morning drowsiness when she noticed that the Akelu woman was not under the shelter. After all the trouble she had gone through to keep Eili safe it seemed unlikely that she would just leave her behind. Sure enough, just outside of the shelter, behind a boulder was a small pillar of smoke. Igarla jumped to her feet. Daxa was kneeling by a campfire with a partially roasted hair on a spit above the flames. Seeing her approach she glanced in her direction then just went back to cooking her breakfast.

“Good morning.” Daxa said uninterested.

“Are you mad?” Igarla snapped.

Daxa rolled her eyes. “What is your complaint this time?” She said with ever increasing disdain.

“The soldiers saw us run into the forest! If they come even close to where we hid that smoke will lead them right to us.”

Daxa got up, turned to face Igarla and took a large bite from the meat of the half cooked animal. “They would not waste their time sending men to search for just two rebels.” She answered.

“Unless those two rebels were able to kill more of their soldiers than any of the other rebels combined.”

Daxa shook her head, and continued to eat her meal. Igarla’s patience was growing ever thinner. She had expected that a woman so fierce in battle would at least acknowledge the one way most enemies would try to take her down would be by surprise, yet the level of carelessness from her she found staggering, not at all what she thought to see from one who had been surviving on her own for Lords know how long. She thought to give Daxa a piece of her mind, but judged it to be of no matter.

“Fine.” She said. “Do as you will, as shall I. I have been anxiously awaiting the moment of our parting anyway. Farewell.”

She heard no reply from Daxa as she turned towards the direction of Niedlopan and walked into the shadows of the trees. It was finally over. She could now begin the days-long journey back to the fort. Hopefully her absence hadn’t caused too much trouble. She wondered how it had effected Belvar above all. Losing two of his closest friends in the span of a few weeks would have been devastating, even for one used to the loss of comrades.

She found herself less concerned with how Palanor felt. In truth, ever since they arrived in Maradar her respect for her commanding officer had done nothing but wane. The things he had been telling her, the orders he had given, the acts he had committed, none of them were anything like what she had come to expect from him. In her eyes he had been losing his compassion, his cleverness and his backbone. In all her years she had never seen a foreign person walk all over him in the way that Serjak did. From the very start he had been probing him for weaknesses, and winning mind battles against the Lomarans. This was the true nature of the Nemeronean idea of war, she had come to learn, and Serjak had proven to be a master at it. The coward’s way. They would rather whittle away at their foes with mind games than face them head on. Igarla stopped in her tracks for a brief second as she recognized the line of thought that formed in her head. The coward’s way. What did that make her?

Amidst the chirping of birds and the rustling of the leaves to the soft morning winds, another sound made itself heard to her. The moment she recognized the snapping of a crossbow-string from behind her she rolled forward, drawing her sword as she dashed behind the cover of a tree trunk.

She had no time to judge by how much the bolt had missed her, all she cared about was spotting the man who loosed it. From the direction the sound came from she could spot three men, two armed with swords and bucklers, one in the process of restringing a crossbow. In the second that she noticed them she had to make a decision: fight or run. There was enough Nemeronean blood on her hands. Back in the dark of the castle halls, midst the chaos of battle she could act without much worry of being recognized. If she let these men close to her in the daylight, they would no doubt remember her face, and report back to their commander if she failed to kill them all. Considering there could also be more of them, the chances of that were slim at best. *Run it is then.*

She darted away from them, still hearing their shouts from behind her. She did not get far. As she leapt over stones and tree roots four more armed men appeared from behind the shrubs and stones in front of her. She skidded to a halt. She found herself face to face with two spearmen, a swordsman, and one man at arms carrying a large axe. They brandished their weapons at her, standing a careful distance from both her, and each other. Igarla held her sword at the ready, her other hand grasped the hilt of her dagger. The footsteps of the other three behind her were getting louder as well. She was surrounded.

Igarla cursed quietly for allowing herself to be ambushed so easily. The men were obviously scouts and were not wearing overlapping metals, thus there would be no clattering to give them away. Still, even though they were protected by little more than boiled leather and wooden shields, she should have been listening well enough to make out their footsteps. This line of conjecture was futile however. They caught her, and she now had to figure a way out of this situation. The three from before had caught up taking up positions behind her. She was quite literally surrounded with spears, swords, an axe and a crossbow readied at her. For the moment, at least, they did not attack. This did not come as much of a shock. Igarla was unsure if the soldiers were from Fort Flidenoch or some other regional garrison, they would nonetheless likely be aware that Lomaran soldiers in the land were here as their allies. Igarla maintained her ready stance.

The swordsman before her glanced towards his two sides at his mates. He then looked back at her and pointed on the ground, making a grunting noise as he did. Igarla squinted, not sure what he meant. Her answer came right away as he pointed to her stretched out sword, then back to the ground again. She took another second to contemplate. If she went along they might take her back to the fort, or at least some place she could make contact with her unit again. The possibility seemed less and less favorable though, as she remembered what Vrigeek had told her before she killed him. They saw her fleeing the castle, maybe even fighting their comrades. Out here in the wilds there was no authority to worry about, they could kill her and deny it later, and she knew how much the locals hated her kind. Without a hint of fear in her eyes she glared back at the man and shook her head.

The swordsman, who she made out to be the leader, gripped his weapon in both hands and took a deep breath. Igarla knew very well what came next. She was overcome by a very familiar feeling, one she had felt many years ago during that one battle against the Tusakaani. She let loose a smirk and said out loud the only idiom she had managed to learn in machtar: “<If you anger the bull, you must be prepared to face its horns.>”

The crossbowman was first to act. Igarla expected as much. She leapt to the side in hopes of being fast enough to evade the shot. Alas, at this close range her odds were not good. The shot grazed her in the back hard enough to leave a cut on her jacket and a long scar on her left shoulder blade. *One more for the collection.*

The stinging pain caused her to let out a cry. In that moment she could feel the anger in her limbs, the desire to wrap her hands around a neck and choke the life out of it. With a sudden spin, she slashed to her side in a wide swipe with her sword, missing entirely. At the same moment however, her left hand drew the dagger from its sheath and hurled it across the distance between her and the man who shot her. She made due with the sound of the blade burrowing its way into his flesh, she had no time to investigate the outcome, many more foes needed her attention. She had aimed for his face, that much would suffice for now.

She sprung to one side to avoid the falling heavy axe as it sunk into the damp earth where she had stood before. This brought her within wrestling distance of the swordsman, who clearly had no skill when things got up close and personal. One punch and a throw later Igarla had twisted the longsword out of his hand, dropped her own shortsword to ground and grasped the new weapon in both hands. At this point she had managed to maneuver all her foes to her front, no more could they stab her in the back. Several spears came jabbing in her direction. A midst her dodges and deflections one or two managed to pierce her flesh. The blood began to flow from her wounds, but the pain did nothing to slow her down. To the attackers' fright, every successful attack just seemed to enrage her further. She cried out in anger as the blade of the longsword hacked its way inches deep into the side of one of the spearmen.

It had been years since Igarla trained in the way of the swordmasters. Yet to this day, she had never used what she learned in the field. Now that she had the chance, now that all she had at her side was the sword in her hand, for the first time in battle she felt... fulfilled. “Pain is an excellent teacher.” Her trainer would tell her. Her foes were too numerous for her to avoid all damage entirely, but with every cut on her skin she felt angrier and wiser. Back when she joined the army this was what she had in mind. Her body ached, her wounds stung and her temper grew ever angrier, but she honestly loved every second of the fight.

Much as she hated to admit it, despite the two out of seven that she had killed and the one she had wounded thus far, she was losing. On her own, no surprise on her side, even she had little

hope to win. Plerid's dying words crept into her mind: "In Nemerom of all places." It was beginning to seem like she would meet her end here as well. A break occurred in the fight. Her foes had positioned themselves around her, once more surrounding her. They took a moment to catch a breath, holding their weapons at the ready the whole time. Igarla was breathing heavily, her leathers slowly turning red in large spots. She had one hand grasping a cut on her side; the other had a firm grip on her sword. The look in her enemies' eyes showed no sign of backing off. *Even odds.* She thought to herself. She would either win or die. If this was to be her death, she would make them all pay dearly for it.

A roar emanated from the path she had come from. The roar of a woman. Daxa came charging from the cover of the rock Igarla had been ambushed from. The giant grabbed the blade of a sword frantically swung in her direction, then proceeded to grab the soldier by the collar and toss him to the side. Igarla honestly never thought she would be glad to see her again. The fight resumed, this time with the tides turning swiftly in their favor. Igarla may have been worn out by the blood leaking from her vanes, but Daxa had no such grievances. The battle waged on as the Nemerom scouts tried desperately to salvage the situation, but all for naught. As only two men were left standing, another roar came from the woods. This one was much deeper than the one before, fierce and bestial in nature. Igarla, Daxa and the two men still alive turned to face the noise, and found themselves face to face with a brown coated forest bear, massive in size, its teeth showing in a grizzly growl.

Without warning the beast dashed forward, swinging its huge claws from side to side. The two scouts burst into a panic. They completely forgot about the two women, who had likewise turned their attention away from them. The bear pounced in their direction. Igarla and Daxa dived in opposite directions avoiding its landing spot, where the creature succeeded in catching one of the men, and sinking its teeth into the flesh around his neck. Before the second scout could react, a large furry maw swiped in his direction, cleaving his body and leaving four deep gauges in his chest. In a bloody heap he fell to the ground. Tossing the bitten scout to the side the bear turned to growl at Daxa. The islander's muscles tensed as she growled back at it with ferocity to match. The bear swiped a might claw in her direction. To Igarla's amazement Daxa actually blocked the swipe by raising an arm, avoiding the sharp claws entirely. Though the sheer strength of the blow was enough to stagger her slightly, she had enough strength in her to land a punch on its head in return. The beast shook its head and roared at her, swiping at her again and again.

Igarla was behind the bear, out of danger for the moment. There was no way she could measure up to Daxa's strength, but she had to find a way to bring down the beast. Speedily grabbing one of the spears from the dead scouts, she cried out and rushed forward with the head of the spear stretched out before her. The beast let out a roar of pain and anger as the head of the weapon sank

into its rump. It turned to face her. Daxa tried to attack it in that moment, but the back of the bear's paw struck her in the chest, sending her flying back a few feet. She was unhurt, but before she could get back up and into the fight the beast had already set its eyes on Igarla. It rose up on its hind legs with its claws in the air. This had been the moment Igarla was waiting for. As the massive creature came down upon her like an avalanche, Igarla planted the rear of the spear in the dirt by her feet, and raised the tip in the air. Surely enough the bear came barreling down with the spear hitting it square in the chest. As soon as Igarla felt the moment of contact, she kicked herself away with both feet, rolling across the ground as the bear impaled itself on the spear. She just barely managed to avoid the bear crushing her under its weight. With a thud and a slight shake of the ground beneath her Igarla turned to see the creature breathe its very last.

The bloodlust had lifted. Igarla was panting heavily, the wounds across her body starting to feel ever more painful. She felt exhausted, drained, sore... and powerful as a bull. Daxa had risen meanwhile, and walked up to Igarla, who was still on the ground sitting sideways. With a smile and a nod the islander reached out her hand to Igarla. She took it, and Daxa pulled her up on her feet, and gave her a pat on the shoulder.

"Well fought!" She said.

"You have my thanks." Igarla replied.

"Are you wounded?" she asked her.

Igarla was only slightly annoyed by the question, as she quite clearly was. Nevertheless she knew what Daxa was truly asking: whether or not she was hurt seriously. "I'll live." Igarla said finally. "Just let me bandage myself up."

Daxa gave her another nod, a slap on the shoulder then made her way to the slayed bear. Igarla, her hands still firmly pressuring the largest of the cuts received, forced herself over to the cool shade of a large oak. Leaning against the trunk, she began to unbutton her jacket. She muttered a silent curse in thought of the extra waking time she would have to spend mending it, with the army leatherworkers not at her disposal to do it properly. As the crisp morning air brushed over her bare arms with the jacket now off, she was made aware of Daxa once again by the sound of colliding stones. The islander was sitting beside the bear's carcass banging a dark stone with another one. Igarla quickly realized that she was trying to create a cutting tool. This was the hunter's habit: never let a kill go to waste. As Igarla did before she felt yet again the urge to warn Daxa of the many dangers that could spring on them while she took the hours needed to strip the bear of skins and flanks, but thought better of it. The scouting party was dead to the last man, and after the rescue that Daxa performed for her she was in no position to berate her.

"Daxa!" Igarla called out. The giant looked up from her task and turned to face her. Igarla leaned over to corpse of the first man she had killed that day, and yanked her dagger from his face,

right where she expected it to be. She then tossed it towards her. The short steel blade spun in the air and finally stuck in the flesh of the bear's paw. Daxa grabbed the weapon by the hilt, raised it at Igarla as thanks, then went to work making the first cuts on the beast's hide.

"Fear not." She said. "I will take only a few patches of fur and enough meat for a day or two. I won't be here all day."

Igarla nodded to her having read her mind, and got to work on her own task of treating her bleeding body. She removed her linen undershirt and started to tear off long strips.

"Is the girl..." Igarla started to ask.

"Hiding at the camp." Daxa replied. "She is safe."

Igarla nodded.

"Where did you learn how to kill a bear?" Daxa asked her.

"In training." Igarla responded.

"You were taught how to kill a bear in soldier's training?"

"If a beast attacks you have to know how to kill it. It was one of many things we are prepared for."

"You have done this before then?"

"Well... no. This was my first bear. 'Till this day I had not killed any beast larger than a wildcat."

Daxa chuckled as she started to make a long cut along the skin.

"I did care for them." Daxa spoke up again, all the while still in the process of skinning the bear. "Having been wronged by the iron men, it would have been hard to not care for them." She sounded uncharacteristically somber to Igarla, before she remembered just how little she knew of what was characteristic for Daxa. "I knew, as did you, I suspect, that their cause was a lost one. I had not the..." She paused. Her hand froze for a moment as well, then as she spoke once more went back to their work. "...the strength to come to care for them. To many I care for are dead."

Igarla was wrapping her upper right arm in the cloth of her shirt, but her focus was on Daxa. The tone and posture she was demonstrating was unlike anything she had exhibited before. Igarla was taken off guard.

"I was still a girl when it happened." Daxa continued. "My father and I were hunting Akelu when we first saw the ships. It was the first time I had seen anything that large on the water. I remember being in awe. Giant wooden things with large red sails moving in the wind..." Igarla could predict the rest of the story. It was not uncommon, from what she heard, that the Nemeronean forces landed on islands in the archipelago and forced the natives out of their... *red sails?*

"You... Met my people?"

"I did. The Deteari... the Lomarans spent close to a year as our neighbors."

“And they...” Igarla felt slightly horrified at what she was about to ask. “...they killed your people?”

“No, but they might as well have.” Daxa removed a large patch of fur from the bear’s side then started to cut chunks of meat off of its bones. “At first they were a pleasure to get to know. We got along fine. They had men who could speak our tongue and they taught us theirs as well. They asked only for a plot of land on the shore to build their homes, and our permission to cut wood in our forests and dig for metals under our island’s soil. We spoke often, traded, mated...” Igarla winced slightly at the unexpected final addition to that sentence. It did make sense that sex would be part of what brought people of different lands together, likely the most effective way honestly. “Then one morning they were gone. Without warning, without a farewell or anything, they got on their ships and left. At first we didn’t understand. Three days later the iron men came in their ships, and they were not near as polite. They did not come to live with us in harmony, they came to rule. They had our men do their cutting and digging. Anyone to resist was killed, many were hauled off in ships and sold as slaves to wealthy nobles.” Daxa’s strokes became ever more aggressive. Igarla started to feel sorry for the bear. “They soon found out that you cannot enslave an Aya’esi.”

Igarla slowly finished bandaging herself. For the first time Daxa seemed very small to her. It may have been the fact that she was hunched over the carcass on her knees, more likely that she seemed... normal. Just another human, no longer a beast.

“You are as me.” Igarla told her. Daxa turned her head over to her somewhat surprised. “I understand that the Aya’esi hunt beasts that are a danger to the village. I do the same.”

“Perhaps.” Daxa said. “The word becomes meaningless when there is no more a village.”

Igarla sighed, as she finally felt like she understood her. “Why are you telling me this all of a sudden? Why did you come back to save me, for that matter?”

“I heard the iron men approach and ordered Eili to hide.” She said. “I wanted to see them kill you.” Igarla’s eyes widened slightly. “Yes. I expected them to get the better of you.”

“The only reason they didn’t was because you showed up.”

“I misjudged you.” Daxa stabbed the dagger into the beast’s flesh and turned to face Igarla head on. “When you spoke to me of having trained since you were a child, killing men bare handed and what else, I thought you were lying to scare me. Today I have truly seen you for the first time. You are a warrior worthy of respect, I know that now. I called you a snake before, when you are more of a...”

“A bull?” Igarla found herself finishing. She herself was surprised.

“I do not know what that is.” Daxa responded.

“They have them here I believe.” Igarla responded. “A male cow. Large, four-legged beast, the size of a horse with large horns on its head.”

“Oh. Yes. I suppose that would be fitting. Though a wolf or a prowler would be more so.” Igarla did not disagree. Ever since Fara had enjoyed the story of how she got the name Bull she had grown to like the name, but wolf or wildcat implied a bit of elegance along with warlike ferocity. Still, there is no helping what name sticks in the end. “The one thing I do not understand is this: Why would a wolf, a prowler or a... bull be pretending to be a snake?” Daxa resumed her work on the carcass, but kept half her attention in the conversation.

“Let me ask you something to.” Igarla responded. “You needn't tell me what it is, but do you have one thing, that you believe in above all else? Something you consider to be always true, that you try to shape your actions by?”

Daxa smiled and nodded, to herself really, before giving her answer. “Indeed, I do.”

“I do as well: The powerful have a responsibility to protect the weak. I learned to believe this when I was a child, and carried it with me all my life. It is why I became a soldier. Those who trained me wanted me for the special forces, because I showed promise, and good special soldiers are always needed. Many aspire to be swordmasters, but...” Igarla could tell by the look on Daxa's face that all the Lomaran military factions were confusing Daxa. She adjusted her speech. “I wanted to learn to fight like a wolf, from the best of the wolves. Many do. I was told though, and I believed them at the time, that to help keep our people safe sometimes we need snakes. Many can learn to fight like wolves, but few have what it takes to be good snakes. Back then I thought that was a good thing.” She sighed loudly. “And it made sense. I'm a soldier not a warrior...”

Daxa looked up again confused. “What is the difference?”

Once again, Igarla summoned the words she had learned at the start of her training. “Warriors have skill and ferocity, but no code to guide them. Soldiers have the rules. We learn them early on from our trainers, and they are what we look to for guidance.”

“Hmm.” Daxa smirked. “I think what that means is that soldiers need to be told what to do, while warriors follow their own sense of honor.” Igarla thought to respond to this, but the statement actually got her thinking. She never looked at it that way before. Ever since she arrived in Nemeran she had made several choices that the rules did not agree with fully, but that felt right to her. An innate sense of honor. “But in the end these are all meaningless words, soldier, warrior... Your actions earn you my respect, and my friendship, if you want it.”

“Does that matter?” Igarla asked puzzled. “I doubt we will ever see each other again once we part ways.”

“You are likely correct, but the future is a mystery. I think I know you enough now to make the offer. If you would rather not accept, I hold no ill will.”

Igarla took a moment to think. “Dragonslayer...” she said out loud. “Did Dynon not call you...”

“Some of them did at times.” Daxa chuckled.

“Did you really slay a dragon?”

“The island where I came from had these large reptiles. Almost as big as wolves, with sharp teeth and forked tongues, but they could neither fly, nor breath fire. Nevertheless, when they heard large lizard they could only think dragon.”

“I think the name suits you.” Igarla said.

The woman rose from her spot with a bunch of meat wrapped in a bearfur pouch. “Shall we make our way on? I shall go with you to the city you came from, just to be sure you do not lose your way.”

Igarla rose from her spot. “It would be my honor.”

It took the better part of two days to reach the outskirts of Niedlopan. Avoiding the paths and roads proved more of a hindrance than Igarla had anticipated. Not to mention Eili, who could hardly keep up until Daxa hoisted her up onto her shoulders, and carried her. Beyond the city Igarla could see the fort looming over it atop its hill with the black banners blowing in the wind. At the edge of the forest Daxa came to a halt.

“This is as far as I dare go.” she said.

Igarla stopped. “This is as far as I dare let you follow me.” She said. Daxa chuckled.

“What is your plan?”

“I shall demand entry through the front gate.”

“Are you certain? They tried to kill you once. Would a more silent approach not be...?”

“My people are still inside. If a Lomaran was killed before the front gates on sight my captain would throw a fit. The commander wouldn’t dare risk it.”

“As you say.” Daxa said reaching out a hand. “Best of luck to you, bull.”

Igarla grabbed the woman’s large palm with both hands and shook. “To you as well, dragon slayer. May you find what you seek.”

“And may you find out what you seek.”

Daxa’s last reply left her a bit puzzled. Igarla gave one final farewell to Eili in machtar. The young girl slowly raised a hand in her general direction and gave a shy wave. With a final nod to the both of them she walked out of the cover of the trees and made her way to the fort through town.

The gate was open when she got near. As the men stationed to stand watch saw her approach they got up from their positions leaning against the walls of the fort by the gate, and grasped their halberds in both hands. Igarla planned to walk right between them without a sideways glance, but they crossed their weapons before her to block her path. As she was forced to stop she glared at them. “<I am lieutenant with the Lomarans.>” she said in her fragmented machtar. Normally she

would have been bothered by how bad her words would have sounded to the native speakers, but by now she had stopped caring. She did indeed sound like a foreigner, but what she was saying could not be misunderstood, and her voice exuded force and authority. Igarla was quite surprised herself.

The two guards just looked at each other, unsure of what to do. Igarla could not tell if perhaps Serjak had given them warning or not. When they did not speak, she widened her eyes and raised her voice. “<Will you let me pass?>” Her tone implied less of a question and more of a statement. One of the men began to pull back his halberd, but Igarla grabbed the shafts of the two weapons and pushed them aside herself before they could finish themselves, and walked right through the gate.

Her unit was going about their usual business; training and practicing. Belvar was in one of the arenas fighting an opponent, when suddenly he looked out of the fight to see her. He dropped his wooden weapon and ran right up to her. As he did the soldiers behind him all turned to look. As they saw her they started to talk and whisper, but none came over to her.

“By the Lords, Igarla, is that you?” Belvar joined her. She was not stopping; she barely even glanced at him, just kept moving in the general direction of the captain’s quarters. “We were just starting to lose hope. What happened?”

“Long story, Belvar.” She replied. “I’ll tell you later. Now I have to see Palanor.”

“The captain is in his room, but he is in the middle of something. We were not supposed to...”

“Who’s with him? The commander?”

“And captain Graston, and Hrialvin, I think.”

“Good. This concerns them too.”

Igarla walked up the steps to the door to Palanor’s room. She could hear voices from inside, the unmistakable booming of Serjak’s tone. She opened the door. All eyes were upon her. Palanor was sitting behind his desk, Serjak looming above him on the other side, to one side stood captain Graston and Hrialvin on the other. As she walked in Palanor’s jaw dropped, and Serjak grew an expression of surprise, then rage.

“My Lords, Lieutenant!” Palanor jumped up from his chair. “What the hell happened?”

Igarla turned to look at Serjak. “Would you perhaps care to answer the captain?”

Serjak’s eyes narrowed. “Your lieutenant murdered a number of my men, then went off to aid the Emperor’s enemies.”

Igarla walked right up to him. The commander was a tall man, a foot taller than her, but at this moment she did not feel at all small. “I killed precisely one of your men: the one who threatened to kill me. Your ambushers were killed by the rebels who took me captive. Apparently captain Graston is not as good at keeping secrets as you believed, if they had enough time to

ambush the ambushers.”

“I will have none of your lies!” Graston shouted.

“Captain, your lieutenant has admitted to murdering one of my men!” Serjak turned to Palanor. “I demand that you hand her and your physician over to me so that I may serve the Emperor’s justice.”

What does Hrialvin have to do with this? She thought. “I admitted to killing an armed man who threatened my life.” Igarla responded, still focused on Serjak. “And don’t just gloss over the fact that you lured me into a trap to kill me for that blasted incident in town! I had nothing to do with what happened there, you have nothing to prove otherwise, and we both know it.”

“We did not back then, but we do now.”

Serjak silenced the room. Igarla stared into his eyes. He was not bluffing.

“They caught them, Igarla.” Hrialvin was the one to speak up. “The boys I told you about. The ones I helped.” Igarla gave him a strange look. Hrialvin spoke to her with complete calmness in his voice.

“The heretics were captured by a patrol down the south road.” Serjak continued. “They admitted to have been rescued from the sergeant and his men by a Lomaran of your description, then two days later they received healing for the wounds they had suffered, from him.” Serjak pointed to Hrialvin.

“What were their exact words?” Hrialvin asked. The commander turned to him.

“Why does that matter?”

“You said a Lomaran of her description. I wish to hear the description.”

Serjak stood in silence for a second. “They described a person with red eyes, black hair and a high pitched voice, carrying a sword and a dagger.”

“As I thought.” Hrialvin said. “To the foreign eyes Lomaran men and women are hard to tell apart. This is even more the case with me, since I have no beard, and as you can hear, my voice does not quite match yours in imposing nature. It was I who killed your men, and I who helped those boys two days later.” Igarla’s eyes widened. She was about to say something, when Hrialvin hurriedly cut her off. “I told Igarla about the boys, but I had her believe the attackers were simple thugs. She was the only one I spoke to about the matter.”

“You lie!” Graston said. “She was there! She admitted to being there right before it happened!”

“She was. I had sent her to the market to collect herbs for me. After I had done so, I realized that I forgot to mention one more item I was running short of, so I decided to go after her. The rest you know. The lieutenant had nothing to do with the whole thing.”

Igarla could not believe her ears.

“<He’s lying, commander.>” Graston continued. “<You know it was her. We all know it was her. The physician is lying.>”

“I never lie.” Hrialvin snapped. “I take great pride in having lived my whole life without having spoken falsehood. You may ask anyone.”

“And just how does a healer know how to take on four armed men?” Serjak asked.

“I am soldier and physician both, commander.” he answered. “I am physician on the battlefield as well. I must be able to defend myself as any of my comrades would.”

Serjak turned furiously to Igarla. “And when you found out what I had told you about the attack you did not think tell me about what your friend had done?”

“You...” Igarla was unsure what to say.

“Perhaps if she had not been kidnapped the next day, she would have come to you with the information.” Hrialvin answered for her.

Palanor had remained silent this whole time. As Igarla looked to him, she could see a face filled with suppressed panic. Serjak was still glaring at her.

“<You cannot let her get away with this, sir!>” Graston pleaded to his commander.

But soon Serjak’s glare diminished. He looked away from her and back to Palanor. “Captain, I request you hand over the physician to my custody. I raise no accusations against the lieutenant.”

“What?!” Graston exclaimed, but shut his mouth when Serjak gave him a glance.

“I... My superior will want to...” Palanor tried to reply.

“The colonel knows the rules, as do you all. The physician knew them when he attacked my men. The heretics are to hang on the morrow and I intend to have the murderer of my men hang with them. This is only formally a request, captain. Not in true.”

Igarla stepped between him and the captain. Serjak’s eyes narrowed again.

“There is no need to do anything hasty, Igarla.” Hrialvin stepped in. “I submit myself to your cruel emperor’s justice.” He told the commander. “I do not intend to resist.”

Hrialvin removed his dagger from its hilt and placed it on the captain’s desk. Igarla looked at him with a desperate, sad look. Hrialvin merely shook his head at her. Serjak waved Graston over, and the captain gave out a snort of anger before guiding Hrialvin out with a hand on his back. As they made their way to the door Palanor collapsed in his seat and ran his hands over his head. Igarla watched them walk out, as Hrialvin turned to give a single wink at her and small smile before he was removed from the house. Serjak was the last one to leave. Just before closing the door, with only the three of them to hear what he had to say, he gave them a last sentence. “Thank your false lords, bitch. Your friend just saved your life.” Then the door slammed shut.

It took Igarla a few seconds to wake from the shock. When she did she turned to Palanor, who was still starring at his desk with his hands on his head.

“Are you aware of what just happened?” Igarla’s blood pressure was rising. The captain did not move. “Captain? What the fuck?”

Palanor slowly raised his eyes up to her. “You saw it. There was nothing I could do.”

“You let them take Hrialvin away to be executed!”

“He admitted to the crimes!” The captain raised his voice, and got up from the chair. “He knew the price, and admitted anyway. He gave me no chance to put up a fight for him.”

“So that’s it? You’re just going to let him die?”

“I’ll send a letter to Sulhajdavik, inform Dolgovar and ask for...”

“The execution will be on the morrow, his word will never get back in time!”

Palanor dipped his quill in ink and unrolled some paper. Without responding to his lieutenant he started to run the tip along the surface, writing his note to colonel Dolgovar. Igarla pushed herself away from the desk, giving it a slight shake as she did so. She slammed the door behind her as she left the captain inside.

“They just left with Hrialvin.” Belvar was right outside where she left him. “What the hell is going on?”

“I need your help.” she answered him. “Can I count on you?”

“You know you can. Has Hrialvin been arrested?”

“Come with me.” Igarla tugged on his sleeve and dragged him towards her tent. Once inside Igarla made sure they were not being listened to, then turned to her friend. “I trust you to keep quiet what I’m about to tell you.”

Within an hour, Igarla recounted all the events leading up to that day, starting with the death of Plerid, then her short lived friendship with Hrakim, the fight against Vrigeek and his men, the ambush in the woods, and lastly her captivity in castle Synat. All the while Belvar had been listening, his expression changing from word to word.

By the end she could tell he was dumbfounded. He was clearly trying to speak, but words failed him. Igarla could see he was at a loss, so she broke the silence in his stead. “We have to do something! We cannot let them kill Hrialvin.”

“I always knew that idiot’s inability to lie would end up getting him into trouble one day.”

“It’s not inability, it is unwillingness. The only lie he ever spoke was to save my life.”

“Still... why would he do that? Why admit to the crimes if he knew he would be killed for it?”

“I think it has to do with Palanor.” Igarla stood up and started to pace. “Hrialvin spoke to me once about how he believed us to be fighting on the wrong side. I was on the fence myself, until I saw the rebels in person. I think he’s trying to send a message to Palanor. He’s telling him that we can’t ignore the moral issues involved in our deployment here any longer.”

“At the cost of his life though? Surely there must be a better way.”

“I get the feeling he has already tried everything else.” Igarla stopped pacing, and gave a quick shake of her head, as if to wake up from a daydream. “But that is not important right now. We have to save him before they take him into the town square tomorrow and hang him.”

“What do you propose?”

She sat back down. “I don’t know. The dungeon of fort Flidenoch is in the center courtyard. I’ve spent time around the walls. I think we should be able to get inside with enough ease. There is a section on the northwestern side of the wall where...”

“Wait. You want to break him out?” Belvar raised his eyebrows in doubt.

“Yes. Why?”

“Think about that for a minute. I know we could easily get inside the castle if we work at it, but then what? Do you know where he is being kept? Do you know how we will get him out? He doesn’t have our training to scale stone walls and infiltrate dungeons. Then there is the issue of covering our tracks. We will have to kill or incapacitate any guards we run into, and when they discover them and the missing prisoner, it will not take them even a second of thought to find out who is responsible. Lastly, if we do somehow manage to get him out, and evade Nemerom suspicion, then what? Where do we hide him? You think the Lomaran campsite won’t be the first place they look?”

“What other choice do we have? Palanor's message will not make it in time for the colonel to be able to do anything.”

“So we have to delay Serjak. Dolgovar would set the bastard straight, I'm sure of it.”

A thought came to her. “There is only one thing Serjak wants that he does not yet have.” She told Belvar. “Me. He can not prove it, but he knows I killed Vrigeck and his men. He want me to pay the price. Perhaps that could be to our advantage.”

“If you give yourself up that helps no one. He will kill you and him.”

“I was taught a bit of Nemerom law before we departed Seron. I think I remember something that might work. Serjak can have his revenge if he can kill me himself.”

“What?” Belvar got up from his seat. “What are you planning?”

“I'll tell you. I will need you support, as well as that of everyone.”

The sun had risen. Niedlopan's main square was packed despite the early hour. There was no rain, only a slight drizzle to keep the inhabitants reminded of where they lived. The crowd had gathered before a wooden stage built to host the execution. Armed guards were stationed all about the square and around the stage. Serjak and Graston were present as well, both clad in fine armor. To the side were the prisoners, bound by their hands.

Palanor was also in attendance. He took up a position in the crowd towards the front. He had a constant look of helplessness, his arms where crossed, and his fingers tapped frantically on his sides. What was there to do? It was all out of his hand at this point.

“<Let the execution commence!>” Serjak's voice boomed from the top of the stage. “<Let us hear the charges!>”

A man wearing courtly robes and a pair of spectacles unrolled a scrolled up parchment and began to read aloud. “<Let it be heard that we bare witness today to the sentencing of these three men. Garek and Faltav have been pronounced guilty of carnal acts of an abominable and ungodly nature, and Hrialvin of the Lomaran army of attempting to aiding them in their escape at the cost of the lives of four good soldiers of Flidenoch. For all three of the accused the sentence is death by hanging. May the Gods judge them fairly!>”

With that he rolled up his scroll, and the prisoners where moved into position under the hanging ropes. One by one they all had a bag placed on their heads, and the rope fastened around their necks. The executioner looked over the knots on all the nooses, then walked over to the lever on the side of the stage. At the same time at the back of the square the crowd began to stir. Palanor turned to see what was causing the increasing commotion, when he saw the crowd of townsfolk part and give way to his own troops marching down the center, with Igarla at their front. They were armed, and clad in their field leathers.

As Igarla and Belvar lead the troops up to the front of the square Palanor came rushing up to her. “What the hell are you doing?” he asked her in panic.

“Shut up and get out of my way.” she said. “I don't have time to deal with you right now.” She pushed Palanor away, who was to surprised to offer resistance, and continued forward, until the only ones standing between her and the prisoners were the guards. The she stopped, and the soldiers formed a line behind her.

At the sight of this Graston cried out in anger: “What is the meaning of this?!”

“We have come to put an end to this.” Igarla said. The crown around her was murmuring and gasping.

Graston opened his mouth to respond, but was silenced by a gesture from Serjak. He seemed surprised to be sure, but he was calm as he always seemed to be. “Am I to take it you wish to stop my executing these crime-burdened men?” He said.

“What you do to your citizens it your business.” She said. “If you wish to enact your cruel gods' justice, do so as you wish, but I will not allow you to kill one of our own.”

“You have no right to be telling us...” Graston began, but was silenced once again by Serjak, by a gesture and glare this time around.

“So you would have me just release him? After he killed one of my finest officers? That

seems hardly just, would you not say?" Serjak's tone was calm and patronizing.

"You and I both know the truth." Igarla said.

"Do we now...?"

"You are a monster among men, commander. You are everything that is wrong with the godly in this world. But because I am ordered to keep good relations with your people I have a proposition you will find to your benefit."

Serjak's eyes narrowed, but the corners of his lips turned into a slight smile. "Go on."

"I am the one you want dead. I would like to give you the chance." She slowly drew her sword. Several guards reached for their weapons, but as the rest of the Lomarans still had theirs in their sheaths, and they had been given no orders, they remained as they were. "If you plan to treat my comrade with the justice of your own gods, then do so in full right. As his superior I demand him a trial by combat, with me standing as his champion."

Graston turned his head to Serjak with wide eyes. The commander raised an eyebrow, his interest peeked. Igarla continued.

"If you succeed, you get him and me. I give you a chance to win everything you want, if you are able."

As she finished she remained there with her sword in her hand, waiting for his response. Surely enough, with a unnerving smile, Serjak slowly drew his own massive sword from his belt. He held it firmly in his hand and eyed the blade, then looked back at her. *Now we shall see how worthy of your command you are.* Igarla thought to herself. The commander took a few steps forward to where the executioner was standing.

"Bold demand." he said. "Placing both your lives within the reach of my arm. You clearly know how to tempt a man. A trial by combat... Alas..." he said as he lowered his head for an instant, then looked back up at her. "This is an execution, not a trial. Your friends guilt has already been determined. As has his fate!" As he said the last words he swung his sword, and with the flat side of the blade hitting the lever, forcing it to open the trap doors on which the three prisoners were standing.

Many things happened in the seconds to follow. Firstly, the Lomaran soldiers all drew swords, to which the guards did as well. Both sides then stood with weapons in hand staring down one another. Simultaneously Igarla made a mad attempt to dash forward and leap up on the stage, but found a hand grasping her arm. She turned. It was Palanor. Before he could say anything Igarla threw a massive punch at his face. Her captain released his hold immediately, allowing Igarla to finish what she planned to do. Before any of the guards would get to her, she jumped up on the stage ignoring anyone else up there. She ran right to Hrialvin's side, sliced the rope with her sword, and caught the falling body in her other arm, all the while cries of astonishment echoed from the crowd.

She laid his body on the ground and pulled the sack off of his head. His face was motionless. She put a finger on his neck. Nothing. It was too late. She closed her eyes and knelt there for a second or two, when she heard footsteps to her side. Instinctively she gripped her sword stronger. Serjak loomed above her, his sword still in his hand, and a disgusting look of satisfaction on his face. "Perhaps now you will have learned your lesson." He said.

Igarla had never wanted to kill anyone as much as she did in that moment. Rage tensened the muscles of her swordarm as she stood up and looked up in his eyes with burning rage. He did not move, just glared at her as he always did.

"Igarla!" Igarla was wakened by a voice calling her name. She looked to the side expecting to see Palanor, but it was not him. Belvar had jumped between the Lomaran and Nemeronean soldiers and defused the situation. As he called out to her, and she turned to look at him, he simply shook his head. She looked back up at Serjak. She hated letting him win, letting him get away with what he had done. But in truth, at this point it did not matter. Hrialvin was dead, and there was nothing more she could do to help him. Reluctantly, she took a step back, and sheathed her sword.

Without a word she leaned down, threw Hrialvin's corps over her shoulder and walked off the stage. As she walked back through the crowd towards the fort, the Lomarans all slowly followed her, with Palanor being the very last.

Days went by. The Lomaran camp had become an isolated location within the fort. All Nemeronean inhabitants avoided the site like the plague, even more so than before. There had been no word of assignments, the Lomaran special soldiers spent the days with harsh training and little else.

The most bothering thing to Igarla was that Palanor had remained tight lipped about the reaction Hrialvin's murder. He refused to tell her other than that there had been no answer from the colonel. Igarla found that hard to believe. Lomaran units communicated using trained falcons who carried messages to and fro. If the captain had sent word to Dolgovar in the day of the execution, a response could easily have arrived several times over by now. Fortunately for her, Harvid the falcon master was easier to get talking, and what she learned from him finally made her understand. There had been no answer because Palanor had sent no message to begin with.

Igarla found herself at struggle with herself. Her first inclination was to confront her captain about this. And yet when she considered the outcome she remembered all the other times he had come face to face with the issues of their mission. Deflection, rationalization. He would just explain it away, and try to make her seem the fool in the process. It pained her to finally admit it, but at this point there was no other conclusion. Palanor had become unworthy of his command, and it was up to her to act.

She approached the captain's quarters a day later in the evening. Palanor was busy, as usual, with the large amount of parchments scrawled out before him.

“Yes, lieutenant?” He said not even looking up to face her. His voice was the same blank, emotionless tone as it had been for days now.

Igarla walked right up to the desk and held out her hand, which contained a rolled up piece of parchment. “This is for you.” She said.

“Very well. Place it there. I'll get to it later.” He said, and continued scrawling on the empty one before him.

“With respect, sir,” Igarla did not place the parchment on the table. “You should read this now. I wrote it myself, and it is not addressed to you.”

Palanor stopped writing. He looked up at Igarla with a quizzical expression. Her face was as stern and her posture straight. After a second or two of eye contact, he reached out to take the parchment from her, unrolled it and started reading. Already upon the name of the recipient Igarla could tell the note had an effect.

Esteemed Colonel Dolgovar!

It is with regret that I find myself in the position of having to inform you on my own initiative, as my commanding officer, Captain Palanor, has chosen to shirk his duties in this regard. Recently Hrialvin, the lead physician of the Fire City First special forces unit was apprehended by the commander of the fort, which hosted us, under charges of the murder of four Nemeronean footmen and the aid of two wanted criminals. Hrialvin did not deny charges as a way of protecting his fellow soldier, namely myself.

Previously, within the local city of Niedlopan I had aided the afore mentioned footmen in breaching a barricade to a house where these two criminals had been hiding. It became apparent to me, that the two young men in question were criminalized in the eyes of the local inhabitants for their sexual orientation, and had done nothing harmful to earn them the sentence they would have received. I killed the soldiers and helped the young men escape. This action was spurred by the moment, yet upon reflection I can truthfully and proudly say I would do so again should the situation arise. Hrialvin encountered them only later and aided them in the treatment of wounds, but when the two were eventually captured, he chose, against my wishes, to take the blame for both his own involvement and mine as well.

I have enclosed with this note several reports I recreated from memory, the likes of which I gave to my captain earlier, detailing the events leading up to the incident, and I am willing to elaborate more in person should it be required, as I am also willing to accept full responsibility for

my actions. However I write this to you now because I have come to the conclusion, that captain Palanor has become unfit to lead the Fire City First special forces unit on our mission in Maradar. His desire for diplomatic stability has given in to submission, and thus has lead to the deaths of numerous local civilians, and even the voluntary execution of a soldier under his command, which he not only did nothing to prevent, but also chose to leave unreported to his superior.

I will continue to serve under his command regardless, and leave the matter of his case, and mine, in your capable hands.

*With respect and admiration
lieutenant Igarla,
Fire City First special forces*

“What the hell is this?” Palanor burst out as he finished.

“My letter do colonel Dolgovar.” Igarla remained stiff.

“Don't play smart with me!” Palanor had stood up and slammed his hands on the table.

“What are you thinking?”

“I don't believe my point needs any more explanation that what is already in the letter, sir.”

“This is not going to Dolgovar, lieutenant! I do not authorize this.”

“I'm afraid your authorization is irrelevant, captain. I have already sent the message via one of Harvid's falcons this morning. I imagine it should arrive in Sulhajdavik shortly.”

“You...” Palanor's face went blank. “You did what?”

“I wasn't willing to risk you preventing my sending it, but I did not want to go behind your back. I brought you this copy so that you know exactly what I told the colonel word for word. As for my reports, you should still have those.”

“This is... You have outstepped your boundaries, Igarla!” He was trying to stay angry, but Igarla could see he was sweating.

“Not at all, captain.” Igarla did not let her emotions show. “I disobeyed army protocol to bring to light important information. I made no attack against you, I disobeyed no orders, I simply did my duty.” She enunciated the last three words especially. Palanor slunk back down in his chair and whipped the sweat from his forehead. “If you are guiltless, captain, than you have nothing to fear. Dolgovar will reprimand me for disorderly conduct, and you will go untouched.” But when Palanor said nothing she could not resist adding: “Though I think we both know that's not the case.”

Palanor took two deep breaths, then looked back up at her. “Get out of my sight.”

Igarla saluted, turned on her heel, and left.

Several days later Igarla's training was interrupted by the sound of the main gate being raised. Men from atop were shouting orders at the gate-tenders, and the whole crew began to scramble in a chaotic fashion. These were the common signs of an unexpected arrival of some importance. As the wooden doors were pulled aside and the metal bars were raised they gave way to the sight of a dozen mounted Lomaran soldiers in decorated armor. Igarla immediately recognized them as Colonel Dolgovar and his escort.

Igarla found herself in the middle of Lomaran training grounds wearing leather boots, trousers, a sleeveless undershirt, and nothing else. Hardly appropriate attire for the reception of a commanding officer of his stature, yet she had not the time to change. Dolgovar rode at the head of his cohort straight to where he saw her. Igarla stood up straight and saluted. "Colonel, sir!"

Dolgovar dismounted, as did the first four members of his escort. "Lieutenant." He said as he leaped off his horse. Before he said anything else to her, he grabbed one of the Nemeronean soldiers from the small crowd assembled to witness his arrival, and spoke to him in machtar. "<Send word to the commander of this fort, that the colonel of the Lomaran expedition summons him to appear at the Lomaran captain's quarters right away.>"

The soldier stood in silence for a moment. He had no reason to not understand, the colonel's machtar was flawless. "<I dont...>"

"<Is this how you address your betters, soldier?>" Dolgovar snapped at him. When the man did not but look around in confusion, the colonel drew his sword, and slapped his leg with the flat side of his blade. The man grasped at his thigh, then quickly stood at attention with his arms at his sides. "<Now do as I command!>"

"<But colonel...>" the man responded. "<I am not allowed at...>"

"<Then find someone who is! Get word to the commander before I lose my patience.>"

With panic in his eyes, the soldier ran off in the direction of main castle. Dolgovar sheathed his sword, and turned to Igarla. "Where is the Captain?" he asked.

"In his quarters last I checked, sir."

"Good. Take me to him."

Igarla did as she was told. She walked before the general all the way to the wooden building serving as Palanor's quarters, then stood firm at the stairs leading up to the door. "He is inside, sir." She said.

Dolgovar instructed his guard to remain at the training ground. "Lets go." He said. "You too, Lieutenant." He walked up the few steps to the door. With a large sigh Igarla followed. This was unexpected. She did not think that the colonel would make the trip to Niedlopan himself to resolve the matter. Rather she had expected instructions to arrive by note, and perhaps a more formal approach when they returned to Sulhajdavik. Palanor was sitting at his desk when the colonel

walked in to his room with Igarla behind him. He jumped up immediately and saluted. “Colonel Dolgovar, sir. This is most unexpected, I...”

“Be silent, captain.” The colonel removed his cloak and his gloves, and found a chair nearby on which to lay them. “If you did not expect this, then I wonder what you thought would happen.”

Igarla closed the door behind her, and stood beside Palanor's desk. The colonel, having removed his heavy attire, turned to face them. Palanor was silent. He did not respond.

“Do you know why I have come, captain?”

Palanor said nothing, just looked at the ground.

“I showed the captain a copy of the message I wrote, colonel.” Igarla said after a moment of silence from Palanor.

“I see.” He said as he paced up and down a bit. “So then you do know why I am here, is that not right, captain?”

“Might we discuss this in private, sir?”

“We might not.” The colonel replied firmly. “From what I have read Igarla is tied up greatly in this matter, I want her here.”

Palanor glanced at Igarla. It was brief, but enough to clearly convey what he felt. He was angry. “Very well. Sir, the lieutenant's words were born from a strong insensitivity to the delicate nature of our mission here. In the int-”

“I don't honestly care what made her write what she wrote. Is what she wrote true? Answer me that!”

Palanor hesitated. “I strongly contest the notion that I am unfit for my command...”

“Your command?” Dolgovar raised both his voice and his brow in disbelief. “Are all the trees keeping you from seeing the bloody forest, captain? I want to know if the events described in the note and the reports she sent me are true. Because none of those events are present in any of the reports you sent to me.”

“We... we did lose our head physician, sir.”

“Palanor, I am starting to run out of patience.” Dolgovar's tone changed from surprised to angered. “I am starting to already think Igarla's claim is just. You are acting like a coward, unworthy of a Lomaran soldier. Now answer me directly: Is it true that you allowed Serjak to execute your man, made no effort to stop him, and neglected to report this to me?” Palanor glanced at Igarla again. “You already know what she thinks, Captain! Don't look away from me! Answer the question!”

“Hrialvin was executed, sir. But I did try to prevent it from happening. When he accepted the charges he left me no options. If he had denied his involvement I would have...”

“Enough!” Dolgovar waved a hand to silence the room. “I did not want to believe it. This

sort of conduct is unacceptable!”

“Sir, hear me out.” Palanor said.

“Fine. I want to hear you justify this.” Dolgovar shifted his weight to one leg and crossed his arms.

“I had already previously defended Igarla when...”

“You did no such thing!” Igarla interrupted.

“Silence, Igarla!” Dolgovar exclaimed. “We'll get to you in a moment, don't you worry. Continue, captain.” Igarla let a look of disgust come across her face, but stayed silent.

“Thank you, sir. I had defended Igarla when she came to me about what happened in town, but already my concern was the possible effect this would have on our relationship with Nemeron. Hrialvin confessed to committing a crime, and denying justice would have been disregarding the local laws. I felt that in the interest of peace, allowing them to perform the sentence was the only option. I wish it had gone differently. Lieutenant Igarla's numerous actions caused me great distress in regards to maintaining good relations.”

“Sir, permission to speak!” Igarla exclaimed.

“Denied. Is there more, captain?” Dolgovar responded.

“Yes, sir. Igarla and Plerid both regularly questioned orders and challenged my authority. Despite a thorough warning, they continued to jeopardize the peace. The tension had escalated to such a level, that I feared Hrialvin fleeing justice would have been the last straw. It would have driven the Nemeronean command off the edge, and...”

“And what, captain?” Dolgovar asked. Palanor tried to speak, but nothing escaped his mouth. “What would they have done?”

The room fell silent. Dolgovar seemed to wait for Palanor's response. When nothing was said, he spoke himself. “Now you may speak, lieutenant. What do you have to add?”

“First of all, sir, Palanor agreed to keep silent about the truth behind the four soldiers' deaths. That hardly fits the term 'defended', in my opinion. Secondly, while it is true, that both Plerid and myself raised our concerns to the captain, we never questioned orders. Quite the opposite. When the captain commanded us to slaughter a camp full of captured civilians, we did so with out a second glance. When...”

“Igarla!” Palanor shouted.

“Captain, be silent!” Dolgovar snapped. “You have had your say.”

“You get the point, sir.” Igarla continued. “We questioned orders AFTER they had been carried out, as is our duty. I also lead a group of our men to protest Hrialvin's execution, and make an attempt to save him. And before you open your mouth, captain, you never gave me an order to stop, and no one was hurt. I just did the only thing left within my power to save him, since I could

not count on you to do it for me. That is all, sir. The rest you know.”

“I believe I do.” The colonel said. “Igarla, the captain is right. You're actions were reckless. You involved yourself far more than you should have. That is what lead to this mess.”

“Sir, I refused to stand by while innocents...”

“Don't interrupt me. You should never have gotten mixed up in that whole affair. You would not have earned the commander's hate, he would not have ambushed you, and you would never have ended up in captivity. None of this would have happened if you had kept your nose out of it.”

As he said all of that, Igarla felt something very odd for the first time. She pictured the alternate line of events that would have occurred if she had not entered that house that evening. What she realized, was that she felt no regret. Even with the possibility of avoiding Hrialvin's death, she still felt like she would not have done otherwise.

“Answer me this, lieutenant. Why did you not stand up for him?”

“Sir,” she imagined that Palanor would have expected the colonel's question to take her by surprise. Yet she knew exactly why she did what she did. “Hrialvin had barely finished taking responsibility for the events when I had already taken a breath to correct him. He shut me down. During the conversation he dug the hole ever deeper. Made it absolutely clear that he wanted the blame. He spoke to me. Not through words, but through his eyes. I did not understand why at the time.”

“And now?” Dolgovar asked, sensing more.

“Now I believe it to be a final attempt of communication to the captain, and an act of pragmatism.”

“I don't follow.” The colonel uncrossed his arms. She had apparently peeked his interest.

“Earlier Hrialvin had shared concerns with me in private.” She said. “He seemed to suggest, that we should be helping the rebels rather than the imperials, though he never said so directly. He even told me that he had spoken to the captain about this, but that he had told him to keep it to himself. Hrialvin is not the kind of man, who would let his ideals be buried, but since he had no other means of getting through to the captain, he thought he would force him to take a stand. It would seem he failed.” Igarla looked over Palanor. He did not look back at her. His eyes were fixed on the floor. “Also, he was clearly ready to die for what he believed in, as any true soldier would be. And since he was, he thought he would take my sins to the grave with him. We all knew him well for having never told a lie his entire life. The one time he did was to save mine.” She glanced over at the captain as she said one more thing. “Lords know you would not have been there for me if they tried to take me away too.”

“I see.” Dolgovar said. “Very well, I understand. The matter remains that you should not have been in that situation in the first place. If you can't do whats right, best not to get involved at

all. You wrote in your letter, that you are willing to take responsibility for your actions, and you best believe there will be consequences. Do not be under the illusion that you had no part in your healer's death.”

Igarla had to admit, that that was true. “Yes, sir. And I stand by my words.” She sighed.

“However,” Dolgovar changed his tone. “your mistakes, at the very least, are mistakes I can not honestly say I wouldn't have made myself.” He turned to Palanor. “You, on the other hand...”

“Sir, I...” Palanor began to say.

“You let the commander walk all over you. You let him demand the life of your soldier, and you gave it to him without putting up a fight.”

“I had no grounds on which to stand, sir.”

“What about the fact that Hrialvin was a foreign soldier under the command of foreign colonel of an army with its own regulations and protocols? How does that ground sound to you?”

“I did not want...”

“What did you not want?”

“I did not want to drag you into it.”

Dolgovar's mouth remained open. “I'm sorry?”

“I...” Palanor had the look of a man one foot in the grave, where every step he could take was just one more shovel full of dirt he kept digging. “I thought you might... make things worse.”

Dolgovar took two steps forward and put both hands down on the table. “You neglected to mention this to me, because you thought I would make things worse?” He was losing his patience.

“I told you, sir. All I had in my mind was the peace. You... you have a reputation, sir. I was worried that your... temper... would...”

The knocking of boots against wood could be heard as someone ascended the steps to the door. The three turned to face it as it opened to reveal the commander and captain Graston. Serjak was wearing what looked to be under-armor leathers, the captain was in his officers plate. They looked like they had been interrupted in some activity, as they certainly were not dressed for business.

“Colonel Dolgovar.” Serjak said. “This is most inappropriate of you.”

Dolgovar gave Palanor one last look before turning to confront Serjak. “Commander Serjak, I presume.” Standing before him, his own suit of Lomaran officer's armor stood in stark contrast to the commander's carefree look. Though a full head shorter than him, and looking quite a bit older as well, the very first utterance from the colonel made it clear who was in charge. “I will assume your quite frankly deplorable appearance is your way of showing a respect for not wasting my time with changing. I have many things to do, so I will make this quick and simple. A member of my army was executed by your order. Is this so?”

Serjak narrowed his eyes, but resisted the urge to reply to the colonel's remark about his attire. "Yes. He confessed to crimes against the..."

"Silence." Dolgovar snapped. "Was my consent sought out?"

Graston looked aghast at Dolgovar's complete disrespect for his commander's authority. The corners of Serjak's mouth twitched slightly. He spoke with barely contained anger. "As he did not deny his involvement in..."

"WAS..." The room fell silent when Dolgovar practically shouted the first word of his sentence then proceeded to all but whisper the rest. "my consent sought out?"

"I made the decision to commence the execution when I did, so..."

Before he could finish his sentence something happened that Igarla imagined must have been Palanor's worst fear. The commander's words were cut off by a loud snap, as the back of Dolgovar's hand flew across Serjak's face. The impact was so strong and so sudden, that the commander stumbled back, and was forced to prop up one arm against the wall to avoid falling to the ground. The other hand grasped his face, which now had a large red spot across his cheek. Graston shuddered from the shock, a mixed expression of fear, anger and surprise followed.

"Now listen very carefully, because as my soldiers can tell you, few things anger me more than having to repeat myself." Dolgovar began to say, as Serjak had still not risen to his feet. "Ever since I arrived at this rain-soaked, mud-buried, sorry excuse for a land, all I have been doing is dealing with noblemen and officers, who all think they will be the gods' next big demon slayer. All high and mighty, all thinking themselves absolutely untouchable. After all the time I spent doing this, my patience has shrunk down to a shred, so If I end up having to ask you the same question for a fourth time, the next time I strike you I will not do so unarmed! Now answer me, simply: Did you seek out my permission to execute one of my soldiers? Yes or no."

Serjak removed his hand from his face, and stood back up straight. He towered over Dolgovar, as he did over anyone else, with an unmistakable scowl. The colonel did not budge.

"No." He said finally. "I did not."

Dolgovar nodded. "As I suspected. I came here today to discipline my officers. If I ever get word of you acting like this without my approval again, I will come for your head."

"You will have to take it yourself." Serjak said.

"Do not tempt me. The state of your fortress alone would get a man executed where I come from."

"Your soldier confessed to killing four of my men!" Serjak said.

"I don't care if he confessed to murdering half the men in this fort, and fucking the other half!" Dolgovar burst out. "You do not so much as lay a finger on a member of the Lomaran army unless I allow you to. Is that clear?" Serjak glared for a second. "Am I going to have to repeat

myself again?”

“No.” Serjak said. “I heard you. You can rest assured. The next time I kill your men...” He said looking at Igarla “... you will know of it first.”

“Good. Now get out of my sight.” Dolgovar turned his back at the commander, who left without another word, grasping his face when the colonel was not looking. Dolgovar turned back to the captain as the door slammed shut. “Anyway, captain Palanor, I believe we were discussing my temper.”

Palanor closed his eyes. “Sir, I...”

“I don't care what your reasons were. Keeping me informed of occurrences in my army in your duty. When were you going to tell me, captain? Did you think I would not find out? Or did you perhaps hope to write him off as a casualty of some random operation?”

Palanor remained silent. Dolgovar closed his eyes and shook his head. He turned away from them rubbing his forehead. When he did speak at last, his tone had gone much softer. “None of you want to make my job any easier, do you?” Igarla and Palanor both looked confused. “Or did you think after half a year in Maradar your unit was the only one to get at odds with the locals? I meant what I told the commander. My job this past months had been traveling from outpost to outpost cleaning up all the messes. There are deaths and injuries everywhere, and we are always the first ones suspected of wrongdoing. The first two weeks of us being here I was summoned to Brenvik. Five Nemeronean lower ranking officers tried to rape captain Dareesha.”

Palanor and Igarla looked at each other. After a brief moment of silence Igarla was the one to ask the question they both had on their mind: “Are they alright?”

“No, they are not alright.” Dolgovar responded, as if annoyed the question was even asked. “Three are dead the other two maimed beyond walking. The outpost's leader has been asking for her head ever since, and there I am in the middle of all this having to explain to a bunch of groomed nobles and commanders that raping a woman is wrong.”

“Permission to speak freely, sir.” Igarla said.

“Lords help me, there isn't more, is there?”

“This mission is unsustainable, sir. Much of what we do here contradicts what the rules teach us, and...” Igarla knew she was about to tread on dangerous waters by using the colonel's own words against him, but as a result of the past few weeks, she no longer felt any fear. “...if we can not do what's right, perhaps it's best not to get involved at all.”

Dolgovar did not turn to face her, just slowly let out a breath. After a few seconds of silence he spoke once again. “Palanor. I trust any more soldiers dying outside of combat I will not hear about from your subordinates?”

“Y...Yes, sir.”

“Lieutenant, you will mind your involvement from here on out?”

“I have already washed my hands of the blood of the Nemeroneans, sir. I am incapable of carrying there fate on my shoulders along with that of my own kin.”

“Then I expect you two to make sure this does not happen again. And I can promise you once more, you will both face the consequences for what has transpired here. Count on it.”

“Yes, sir.” Igarla and Palanor answered in unison.

“Then I shall take my leave.” Dolgovar reached for his gloves and cloak. “I foresee little rest in my near future.”

Sulhajdavik was never exactly a welcoming city, but especially not so in the late night, when Dolgovar arrived back from Niedlopan. The magic of the rainwater glimmering of the rooftops in the moonlight had lost its charm on day four. All that the mind remembered in the end was it trickling down into the unpaved streets of the lower city, collecting in naturally formed gutters in the middle of the road. The locals had never gotten accustomed to their presents, the fear and hostility had never died down. Not that Dolgovar expected otherwise. He had spent most of his career operating abroad, both on the continent and the colonies, and become desensitized to all the the hate from non-lomarans. No matter how much good they did anywhere, they would never wash away the appearance of demons.

For the length of the entire trip Igarla's words rang in his ear. Before he had departed the lieutenant stopped him for a brief word at the gate. “Colonel.” she had told him. “I was hoping I could take one last minute of your time before you head back to the city.” Though he had been reluctant to discuss anything before dozens of possible listening ears, he allowed it. “The leader of the rebellion I mentioned in my report, the one that was killed of late, we spoke on many an occasion. His final request to me was that I relay a message to my superiors. As fate has brought you here now, I would take the opportunity. His goal was to attempt to dissuade us from fighting on the side of the Nemeroneans, but the words he relayed to me did ring true, so I would leave them with you to judge: The inner instability in Maradar holds Nemeron back, but should the rebellion come to an end, the enslaved people will crave news of greater victories. A victory over Lomar would bring the next emperor the power he needs.” And she was not wrong. The thought had been conveyed to him when the consuls briefed him back home, and every passing day seemed to carry ever more proof that they did not belong in this fight. Perhaps it was time to seek a way out. Dolgovar was not a praying sort, but he would soon come contemplate becoming one, once he found out what the day would have in store for him in the few remaining hours before midnight.

He almost scoffed out loud when upon return to Sulhajdavik's main military fortress he was immediately greeted by a court messenger. He stood in the middle of the fort's courtyard, so as to be

noticed instantly by anyone let in through the gates. He wore his rain-soaked fanciful clothes and large hat with the utmost dignity, as if to give off an air of superiority beside the colonel's travel worn, thick attire.

“<Welcome back to the city, colonel Dolgovar!>” He spoke up in a high brow fashion. “<I have been sent here to inform the colonel that his Imperial Majesty, Frodari Nemeron II wishes for him to appear before him at his private residence at his earliest convenience.>”

Dolgovar repressed a scowl. The imperial residence was on the clear other side of the royal quarter. In Lomar a message like this would have been given to him at the city gates, so as to be spared the unnecessary trip. *This is why military should not be run by nobility...* He thought to himself before answering the messenger in as polite a manner as he could muster after days of fast paced riding in Maradar weather. “<I shall do so in due course. He will not be kept waiting.>”

A short consultation with his staff, a conformation of the latest reports from his units, and he mounted right back up to make his way to the emperor. During his stay he had found himself before the emperor on many an occasion. The lengths to which he involved himself in the affairs of his lands actually surprised Dolgovar. He had been alive and in active duty back when the first emperor Nemeron was in power. It was widely known about him among the Lomaran command, that he was a ruthless commander, cruel in both victory and defeat. Despite his numerous military victories he was not a man with the patience of a politician, keeping his people and nobility in line with fear, as is common for most ruling warlords. When it came to his son, however, Dolgovar had to admit that the apple had in fact fallen very far from the tree. The second Frodari was a much more measured man than his father's reputation gave way to him. He was no expert strategist, this was for sure, but he had a remarkable wit, and a good sense of which piece of advice was the right one to head. This had become apparent from the exchanges Dolgovar had witnessed between the emperor, and his commanders. This was an unexpected situation for him. He did not expect to feel much respect for any of the statesmen of Maradar.

The approach to the palace of Sulhajdavik was glimmering as the wet cobblestones and trimmed hedges sparkled in the light given of by the hooded torches atop the light pillars. The colonel's horse and escort was lead to a proper lodging out of the way of the rain, and he himself was politely invited to enter through the main gate. A single servant walked him up stairs and through corridors, to an area of the palace that seemed small and confining compared to the wide open first impression left by the main hall. This was not the usual place he was brought to speak to the emperor. This almost seemed literally like a private residence.

His impression was not off by much. The servant came to a halt before a door at the end of a corridor. The last guards they had passed where all the way around the corner where they came from. To his recollection, he had never seen the emperor separated from his guards before. The

servant bowed and gestured to the door. Dolgovar looked once to each side before reaching for the handle and slowly turning the knob. The room inside was exactly what the messenger had told him it was. To one side of the room was a window overlooking the harbor to the west, underneath it was a oaken desk with large bookcases to either side. In the center of the room was a fairly large and ornate bed, that though sizable, struck Dolgovar as quite modest for a man as powerful and highly regarded as the emperor of Nemeran. The whole room felt this way, in fact. The ceilings were not overwhelmingly high up, hardly anything was covered in gold decor, it seemed almost merchant classed. Also in the room were dressers, chests, cupboards, a padded armchair, a table with three chairs, and above the bed in the most decorated spot of the whole room, a portrait of a finely dressed noblewoman with jeweled, braided hair.

The servant did not follow him inside, merely silently closed the door behind him. The emperor was sitting at his desk, leaning over a note by the light of a single candle. It was one of a slight few sources of light in the whole space. The man had a look of fatigue on his face, as he rubbed his temple. He was dressed in far simpler clothes than the previous times they had met, though still not nearly simple enough to seem a commoner. As he heard the door creak shut slowly, he looked up from his note.

“Dolgovar!” he said, and got up from his chair. “I was beginning to worry you may have had trouble along the road. Forgive me, I did not expect my request to arrive to you so late into the day.” He reached out a hand to the colonel. As Dolgovar had come to expect, the emperor spoke Leviron's common tongue with the strong accent of a man who had not heard it spoken much from its natives, but had still striven to master it none the less. Dolgovar shook his hand.

“I hope I have not kept you waiting too long, your majesty.”

“Colonel, allow me to make a request. This is my private chamber, the one place in the whole of the palace where none watch, and none listen. Would you honor me and address me by my given name?”

Dolgovar did not allow the surprise he felt to show. “I am not against it, Frodari.” he said, only somewhat reluctantly. “Provided I will not be executed for blasphemy.”

The emperor chuckled. “No, no. Nothing of the like. That was my dearly departed father's way of earning loyalty. Many of my vassals still use it, but I have never ordered such a thing in all my life. You must be tired. The matter you had to attend to, did it go well? Are you perhaps thirty or hungry?”

“You are kind, but you needn't concern yourself with my hunger. As for the situation in Estendon, I have dealt with the matter as I had to.”

“Would it surprise you to find out, that the commander of Fort Flidenoch is demanding I take action against you for disrespecting him? You don't mind if I drink though, I hope?”

“Not at all, to both. Is that the reason I'm here?”

“Oh, no. I just thought I'd mention it. The missive just arrived a few hours ago.” The emperor walked over to the table on the other side of the room, upon which lay a tray of goblets and pitcher of what looked to be white wine. He filled one of the goblets and simultaneously picked up a rolled up parchment from the top of the dresser as he did. “This, Dolgovar, is the reason I asked you here. This note will soon be given to a courier, who will be on a ship headed for the Leviron mainland soon. It awaits only my seal. Once you read the contents, you will understand why I wanted you to hear this as soon as was possible.”

He held out the parchment with one hand and took a sip from the goblet. Dolgovar slowly reached out and took it from him. He walked over to one of the chests of drawers, to be able to see under the candlelight, and unrolled the note. It was not a long message, but it managed to catch him off guard:

To Amanar, respected first Consul of Lomar,

it is with both pleasure and gratitude that I can finally say the uprising in Nemerom has been laid to rest for good. Your nation's troops performed valiantly, making an invaluable contribution to our eventual victory. I hereby hold your end of our agreement fulfilled. You can rely on Nemerom honoring our part of the arrangement as was discussed.

I hope for this to be one of many shared victories to come. May the suns of your two great empires shine long and bright for all to see!

Sincerely,

Emperor Frodari Nemerom II

Dolgovar had to read through the letter a second time before he could believe what he was seeing.

“I must admit,” the emperor spoke up. “I expected something more along the line of joy upon hearing this news.”

Dolgovar waited a moment more before answering. “Your m... Frodari, it's just that... well, bluntly put, this is a lie.” The emperor smiled slightly, then sipped his goblet once more. “The rebellion is far from quelled.”

“You are correct, of course, however with the defeat of both lord Neigand, Vraan the Wild and the sacking of castle Synat, we have won enough major victories so as I can proclaim the

rebellion a failure. Groups will continue to contest me, this is a given, but the hardest part of the fight has ended. Also, I honestly meant what I wrote about your troops. This would not have been possible without them.”

“You are sending us away?” Dolgovar said surprised.

“Would that upset you?”

“I...” he took a breath before responding. “I don't make a habit of leaving tasks unfinished. That is all.”

“Considering all that has happened over the months you spent here, I would have thought the prospect of returning home would bring you more joy than what you are showing.”

“So that's it then? The tension our presents causes? Are we too much trouble?”

“Quite the contrary. We are too much trouble for you.” The emperor smiled as he took yet another sip. “Do you know why you and your soldiers are here, Dolgovar?”

“Very simple. I am here because I was ordered to be.”

“Let me rephrase. Do you know why I chose to turn to Lomar of all nations for aide?”

“It seems obvious. There is no force in the world can match up to us, and I can say that as an objective truth.”

“And I do not dispute this, but let me ask you, have you actually seen these rebels?”

Dolgovar now had to realize, perhaps for the first time, that he had not. He shook his head.

“If you had,” the emperor continued. “you would likely come to the conclusion that the training of the forces we bring in is not of much consequence. We have other allies with whom our cultural differences are far less... severe. I still chose to contact Amanar. Do you know why?”

Dolgovar pondered for a second. He had no answer. Frodari paced slowly towards his desk and looked out the window. “It might surprise you to find out, I actually mostly consider myself a colony man. My father was always occupied with his conquest, but never seemed to feel a need to be a father as well. As a child he would leave me here in the city for months on end in the care of his second wife. She would never stop telling me that all I did was remind her of my mother, and she detested being in charge of my care. When I came of age she had me shipped away to study at the academy in Namar, which is where I spent most of my youth. I didn't return home until my father was on his deathbed. I inherited his empire, which was in danger of crumbling. The fear the people felt for him was dying down as he got older. After he passed away, his former advisers would council me to make a show of force. Turns out conquering a continent is easy, but keeping it together is far more difficult.”

Even before he began to speak the emperor had begun to look quite small to Dolgovar's eyes.

“My father's legacy was an empire held together by death and pain. Despite that I love my

country, and see great potential in it. But if history has taught us anything, its that empires are not long lived in this state. I made it my life's goal to take what my father had created and forge it into something lasting. My tools would not be hatred and steal, but diplomacy and economy. As I labored in my task, I discovered what had become the new mortar keeping Nemerom in one piece: our collective hatred of you.”

The emperor emptied his goblet and placed it down on the desk. His eyes remained stuck on the parchment he had been studying when Dolgovar arrived.

“I took trips in the colonies while I was studying. I met many of your people there. They were decent folk, like any other I had come to know. I was convinced that the lack of contact our peoples shared was the reason for the tension.”

“I would actually recommend taking up the issue with your church.” Dolgovar spoke, for what felt like the first time in hours.

The emperor laughed. “Oh, you can rest assured I have. Most of those fools would deny their own mothers if the scrolls told them to. To them you are the demons incarnate, and they will preach nothing else. No, the task of freeing the minds of the common folk from fear was mine, and mine alone. I had hoped that creating contact would be the key. That by meeting actual Lomarans my people would eventually come to the same conclusion I came to. But alas... It would seem my failure is now complete.”

Dolgovar was speechless. He kept his emotions under lock, as he always did, but the new light in which he saw the emperor caught him off guard. A long sigh escaped Frodari's lungs.

“There is one more thing I would like to share with you, if you will allow it.” He said, and picked up the parchment from the desk. “This is the latest entry in the correspondence between myself and a professor of healing from the Sulhajdavik Royal academy. I think you will find it interesting to read.”

He extended his hand with the note in it. Dolgovar took it from him and read it. It was written in machtar with formal phrasing. When he read the whole note much had become clear to him.

“You are now the third person to know the information within that letter.” The emperor told him.

“How much time do you have left?” Dolgovar asked hesitantly.

“By the time you arrive back home I may already be dead.”

“I'm... sorry to hear that.”

“Now you understand my need for urgency in fixing my father's mess. My son will become emperor when I am gone, and he has sadly not inherited my point of view. The desire to bring Lomar down to ruin, that so many of my people share, has planted its seed in him. All my work will

have been for not, and my life will have served no purpose at all.”

Silence fell upon the room for a while. A look of resignation came over the emperor. Dolgovar could only imagine the daunting task of maintaining the facade before his constituents.

“I do not give you this information in confidence, Dolgovar. You will likely want to share it with your consuls when you get home. I imagine they will want to act on this in some way.”

“I'm not sure why I ask, but... is there anything I can do to help?”

“I doubt you would stand a chance where the brightest medical minds of the empire all failed. I am told, that if I was younger my body might have fought off the affliction, but alas. It would appear the gods call me to my end.”

In the next few moments the two stood silent unsure of what to say, or even if there was anything left to say. The noise of pouring raindrops sounded muffled from the outside, the rooms dim candlelight echoing the sweet and somber nature of the news received. It was time to go home.

“If there is nothing else...” Dolgovar began.

“There is not.” Nameron said detecting the colonel's polite hesitation. “I believe I have taken up enough of your time as is. Thank you for your swift response, and for all that you have done for us in service of your country.”

“Duty does not require thanks.” Dolgovar bowed. “I shall draft orders to have my troops withdrawn from the provinces. The voyage back to Lomar must be prepared.”

“Do not hesitate to turn to me if I can assist in this matter, Dolgovar.” The emperor reached out a hand. “I shall append my letter to Amanar to commend you personally for all the hard work you have done.”

Dolgovar shook the man's hand.

“It is about time.” Graston said. “They have already long overstayed their welcome anyways.”

The council room of fort Flidenoch was filled with the garrison's leaders upon the news from Sulhajdavik. Serjak was leaning over the chamber's hearth, his right arm over the mantle, and his free hand rubbing the temple of his forehead to sooth a headache.

“Say what you will, captain, but this hurts us more than you admit.” The response came from captain Leiget, the man sent to replace Vrigek. He was a man of common stock, but good intellect. Rose from the ranks of northern mercenaries, and proved both an excellent soldier and commander. Serjak was not disappointed with the man's resolve, he had spent a great deal of time acclimating himself and getting work done, but he also brought with him some uncommon views, ones which he was not shy about sharing.

“It was a mistake to have them here in the first place. They are not needed here, nor in fact wanted either.”

“From your perspective perhaps, but I have been in contact with the men. Many fear the Lomarans, true, but their skill in battle has not gone unseen. There has been talk before of how easy recent operations have become with their troops fighting for us. Tasks are quicker accomplished, losses are down, and some of our officers have even learned from them.”

“What are you suggesting?” Serjak interrupted. “They are leaving. Like it or not, it is beyond our control.”

“I understand that, commander. Nevertheless, it would be a grave mistake to assume their departure a blessing. We must be prepared for what will follow.”

“And what might that be?” Graston asked him.

“Tension should drop, of that I have no doubt. But at the same time we will begin to lose more men, rebel ambushes will become more frequent...”

“The rebellion is over!” Graston exclaimed. “We whipped out their forces in castle Synat, and executed their leadership.”

“On information given to us by Lomaran trackers, I might add. The rebellion is more than just one castle, captain. If you had headed my council and taken them alive rather than killed everyone on the spot I would perhaps think otherwise, yet...”

“They served no purpose to us as prisoners.”

“And instead they now serve the rebellion in death. They stand as martyrs, who heroically gave their lives for their cause. More will rally behind their sacrifice, and while they will be less dangerous for lack of organization, their numbers will not dwindle. We also know they have allies in the nobility, for it had been so in the past.”

“Lieutenant...” Serjak began, but was interrupted by him.

“Do not misunderstand me, sir. I am not sad to see them go. I am merely saying we must take precautions to make sure we don't lose control with them gone. I recommend starting by making a request for more troops, from neighboring provinces perhaps. We could start offering scout's training to local huntsmen, who know the lay of the land well, so that we might...”

“You have no grounds on which to make such demands!” Graston was starting to lose his temper.

“I make recommendations, captain. I am well aware of my standing, and wish to do only what I can. You are free to ignore my council as you see fit.”

“That's enough.” Serjak interjected, but not in his usual way. He sounded less commanding than he normally would have, but that did not change the reaction of his officers. If anything it just caught them off guard, and made them more afraid. “Lieutenant, put your recommendations to

parchment and have it sent to me in the morning. I will take them under consideration.”

“Commander, with respect...” Graston began.

“The man speaks out of turn, but wisely. I will not miss the demon spawned bastards, though I would relish a chance to put that whore on a steak before they left. We see them for what they are, but the common soldier see's far less. They will be less taken by the joy of their departure and more by the sudden increase in casualties. This is a matter we must tend to. I will not have my fort compromised.”

Graston sighed, and followed with a nod. Serjak could see that his words found purchase. Graston was one of the many highborn who was convinced that his heritage was what made him superior. Such men are easy to appease, just appeal to their sense of vanity. Authority was just as effective a tool, but Serjak was not in such a mood that night.

“That will be all for now. The demons move fast, their captain assures me they will be on the march shortly after first light. At least our troubles with them will be over by the morrow. A thought we can all take comfort in, I think.”

All at the table exchanged slow nods, then one by one got up and left. Serjak remained. He closed his eyes and listened to the crackling of the fire blazing in the hearth. His head was swimming in thoughts and emotions. He was uneasy to notice that he was not at peace with the news. All he wanted from day one was for the Lomarans to be gone, though dead would have pleased him ever more, but just gone would have been enough. He took pleasure in the torment of his enemies, he had always known this, and he did manage to find amusement in disheartening the demon-spawn by forcing them act against their rules. It was a good enough way to sate his hatred for them and still keep to his orders, and it was working perfectly at the start. He tortured them enough for his own pleasure, and managed to keep his head where it belonged. Once they left he would have been happy in having stayed true to himself without violating his station. It was all going so well. But Igarla...

Serjak felt his fist clench at the thought of her. She did it. Somehow she had done what he thought impossible. She challenged him, resisted his attempts, and most unbelievably made it personal. He hated them. All of them. But her he hated above all the others. From the first moment she tried to lie to him he could feel his resentment grow. Every time she refused to die, either through stubbornness or through the luck of having more loyal friends than she deserved, served only to anger him further. Now the thought of the Lomarans leaving brought only one thought to mind: Igarla. On the morrow she would be gone, out of the reach of his anger. So many times he envisioned what he would do if he had the chance. He would have raped her to tears, just to see the look of resignation on her face, as she was put in her place before he wrapped his hands around her neck and slowly, beautifully choked the last gust of life out of her body. Now all he had was the act

of having killed her comrade before her on the town square. But even as he spoke the words to her, as he reminded her of her place, he saw the look in her eyes. She was not defeated. Far from it. This was not the same Igarla that arrived half a year ago. Before a wound like that would have broken her. This time it only made her stronger, and with it caused his rage to climb ever higher. If only...

“So... this is the famous chamber...”

Serjak half thought he was dreaming when he heard the voice. As if the gods had chosen to further their insult, just as he stood there boiling in the anger he felt towards that one cursed Lomaran woman, there she stood in the chamber with him. She was absent her special forces leathers, but her sword and dagger were right there at her sides. The door to the chamber behind her was closed, and her eyes were wondering about the walls. It took Serjak a moment to come to his senses, and even then he was unsure if what he was seeing was real.

“During my short lived friendship with a man of yours I learned about this room. The secrets these stones could tell... The great Emperor Frodari Nemerom I himself sat in this very room when he spoke the battle plan that toppled the kingdoms of Estendon. Here it was that he condemned his enemies to death after victory. Kings and queens, lords and commanders, so many have fallen because of the words exchanged in this room.” Her wondering gaze met Serjak for the first time. The defiance in her eyes made his face twitch ever so slightly. He found himself hoping she did not notice. “I almost feel honored.”

Questions flooded his mind. Only a few seconds passed in silence, but to him they felt like years. How long had he been lost in thought? Was this really happening right now, or was this just a mad vision of a mind obsessed with revenge? When he finally spoke, he asked the only thing he felt comfortable asking: “How could you possibly get in here?”

Igarla chuckled. “You seem to forget: You house the best trained infiltration force in the known world as your honored guests. We could get inside any stronghold in our sleep.”

Serjak did not avert his gaze, but made a note in his mind where he had placed his sword to rest against the wall behind him. “I could have my guards arrest you.”

“You could.” Igarla started to walk around the table, one slow pace at a time. “But you won't.”

“Are you quite sure of that?”

“It is rather remarkable just how sure I have become of late.” To Serjak's increasing displeasure, he could now see she was smiling. He could feel his face going red. She continued. “I take it you have spoken to my captain? You've heard the news?”

“You leave for Lomar at first light.”

“Indeed. Such a pleasure, and yet at the same time... such a shame, would you not agree? Just when things were getting good.”

Serjak furled his brow, as if he was unsure what she was talking about. “What do you want?” He asked. “Why risk coming here?”

“To tell you the truth it started out as a plan to kill you.” she spoke so casually. “Finish what I started at the square. You made me quite cross, you see. I thought I was handing you a chance to get what you wanted. Please correct me if I'm wrong, but all you've wanted to do ever since I killed those men of yours, was to end my life.” Serjak flinched. Igarla had never admitted to him what she had done. Yet now it came so naturally from her lips, as though she had nothing in the world to fear. It vexed him. By now she had finished walking the remaining steps towards him, and stopped less than an arms reach away. “There was much I did not know then.”

“You are not foolish enough to try and kill me in here.” He said looking down on her, though for the first time it did not feel like that.

“You are right, sadly. It would bring you so much joy though, would it not?” She slowly moved a hand up to his shoulder and began caressing it with the tip of her fingers. She was trying to make him feel uncomfortable. He would not show weakness. “No. You would not. Not any more. Once I thought you would, but now I know the truth.”

“And what might that be?”

“The reason you declined my challenge. The reason you do not call your guards.” As she spoke her face came ever closer to his, until the next words she spoke were whispers in his ear. “You fear me.”

Serjak tried not to react. Truth be told, she was making him feel uncomfortable. He had imagined feeling the warmth of her flesh from close as he fucked her before he strangled her to death. It was as if she knew. As if she was tempting him with all he had ever wanted. Her head backed away, her hand now moved from caressing his shoulder to petting his chest with slow motions. “Of all the people you have ever met, it is I who bring fear to your heart. I don't think you even stand a chance against me, and I think you know that too.”

“You flatter yourself.” He faked a chuckle.

“Do I?” She removed her hand. “Did you hear me enter the room? What about the time I entered your personal chamber when you slept?”

“You have never been there.” He said with only half certainty.

“But can you know that for certain? You had me doubting myself for so long, but I realize now you are the most fearful one of all. I could easily best you.”

“Then what holds you back?”

“Gratitude.” She said.

Serjak raised an eyebrow. “Gratitude? For what?”

“I was lost. For so long now I have been lost. Living by the needs of others, denying my true

self. Pretending to be a snake.” She turned away from him, and slowly stroked the surface of the table in the middle of the room. For a brief moment Serjak imagined putting her own dagger in her exposed back. “If it was not for you, and what you have done, I never would have come face to face with my inner self. The beast in my heart. The wolf.” She glanced at him briefly over her shoulder before continuing. “You see, when I killed your soldiers at castle Synat, and those who pursued me into the forest, it changed me. They cut me, bruised me, bled me and broke my bones. A snake would have fled. As my end encroached on me I feared the weight of my impending death. I feared how it would crush me into despair. But with every landing blow, every ounce of pain, I grew stronger. The closer I came to death, the more powerful I felt, until the beast I had laid to rest all those years ago finally woke. And this time...” She turned to face him. “...she will sleep no more.”

Serjak did everything in his power to resist leaping at her. *None of this is real.* He found himself thinking. *It can not be.* “A moving speech...” he said sarcastically.

“There is of course also the small matter that if you were found dead blame would instantly shift to us.” Igarla said with a wide smile. “Make no mistake, Serjak. All I want is to kill you. A feeling I suspect we share. You are responsible for many of the deaths among us. The rules forbid, but I personally crave vengeance. For the first time, I actually find myself hoping our countries do go to war, so that I may live in the hopes of finding you on the battlefield and put your boasting to the test one last time.” She turned to walk towards the door. “But alas, you are a coward who commands from the rear anyway. The only place we would ever meet is at your beheading.”

Igarla opened the door, and turned around to face Serjak one last time before leaving. No more words were exchanged. Merely a glance. Then she was gone out the door.

Serjak wasted no time. He walked right after her. As he opened the door, there was no sign of her. Just an empty hall. *Impossible.* He thought. A look of rage came over him as he slammed the door shut.

Fair winds and kind weather carried the Lomaran ships swiftly along the northern edge of the archipelago. Almost as though through divine providence the rain-clouds parted and gave way to the sun over the ocean only a few days after the Hongar left the Sulhajdavik port. Igarla's feelings could not have been better summarized. Out of that bleak, soggy, Lords forsaken land, and back to sunlit Lomar. She longed for home and all that meant. The warm rays of the sun on her face, the artful architecture of the City of Fire... the beer. Yes, drinks would definitely be needed.

The fleet made a stop on one of the farther colonies called Ghaliga, a settlement built on the northern side of an island covered in dense jungles. The voyage had taken them five weeks, and there was just about that much time left of the journey home. Of all the lands the Lomarans settled

this was by far the most dangerous. Indigenous tribes from neighboring isles gave it terrifying names, and collectively believed it harbored evil spirits. It had sources of fresh water, fertile soil and fairly rich mineral deposits, which made it worth the effort to brave the danger. The settlers came to discover that the island was home to a species of large worm-like creatures that feasted on warm flesh, and while the initial encounters with them proved lethal and gruesome, experienced Lomaran hunters soon found ways to scare off the pests, and keep the important locations free of them. The soldiers were nevertheless warned not to wander beyond the city limits.

The ships were resupplied, and the crews were given the chance for some much needed shore leave. This went for the troops as well. The soldiers spent the few days spent in port fraternizing with the locals, engaging in celebrations and games, and other such heartening activities. Igarla particularly enjoyed the clear night sky, and would spend hours upon hours gazing at the moon and stars sat on the edge of the peer. Change was upon her. She could feel it. Even without knowledge of what the future would bring, without knowing if war with Nemerom was certain to come, she knew for a fact that this expedition to Maradar would become one of the most important episodes of her life.

“I cant wait to go back to fighting Livadorian brigands.” Belvar was her most frequent company. He would more likely be found in the company of several tavern wenches, where he could be pleased to find women who were not used to his usual tricks.

“Agreed. Back to brigands, beasts and giant lizards. A welcome change of pace.”

“May we never see these gray armored bastards again.”

“On the same side, at any rate...”

Belvar let out a laugh. He had clearly made use of the fact that the islands were stocked with real Lomaran drinks. When he saw that Igarla was not smiling, he let the chuckle dissipate.

“You started out wanting to make friends.” He said with a somber smile.

“Every friend I made there I lost, even the ones I had before. All but you. Plerid, Hrialvin... Palanor...”

“He still refuses to speak to you?”

Igarla nodded. “After the first week I gave up trying.”

“You know you did nothing wrong, right?”

“I have no doubt. I do not blame myself. This is on Nemerom. And Serjak...”

The two of them let the conversation trail off into silence. Igarla clasped her amulet in her right hand, rubbing it gently. They were interrupted by the sound of a child's footsteps on the planks.

“Lieutenant?” Igarla and Belvar turned to see a young girl squire standing behind them. “Colonel Dolgovar summons you to appear before him in his quarters on board the Red Tide.”

Igarla looked at Belvar, then let out a sigh. She knew this time would come. Whatever punishment was in store for her would come to light now. Slowly she pushed herself up off the ground. "Time to face tribunal..." she said with a chuckle to Belvar.

"Let me know how it goes." He replied.

Igarla nodded, and followed the girl in the direction of the moored ships.

As she walked up to the boarding plank she saw a familiar figure leaving. It was Palanor. His pace was fast, and his eyes narrowed as his glance met Igarla's for a fraction of a second. He looked away almost immediately.

"Captain?" She said. He ignored her. Without a word he walked right by her. Igarla followed him with her eyes for a bit. No change. This had been her relationship with the man since the day Dolgovar came to visit in fort Flidenoch. No conversation at all, and barely any words exchanged besides orders and refusals to her attempts to initiate communication. If this were any other occasion she would not have made much of it, but this felt different. To find him leaving the leaving the colonel's ship just as she was on her way to speak to him herself did not strike her as a coincidence. Also, though in the dark of the night she could not be sure, it seemed to her that the captain was absent his captain's mark. Igarla feared the worst.

The squire remained standing by the entrance to the aft quarters where the colonel took up residence. Igarla took a breath, and opened the door. The colonel was looking out the window at the sky, his hands resting on his sides. As the door opened he turned. "Igarla. Thank you for coming so quickly."

Igarla closed the door behind her, and stood at attention. "Sir."

"At ease." Igarla relaxed. "Under normal circumstances this matter would likely have been discussed after we made landfall back home." The colonel walked behind his desk. "The losses of so many key personnel, however, force me to begin some restructuring, which means I have to take care of them on my own, and as soon as I am able. Before we begin, is there anything you wish to say?"

Igarla thought for a moment. "I saw the captain leave a minute earlier, sir. May I inquire what happened?"

Dolgovar let out a long breath. "Captain no longer, I'm afraid."

Igarla's eyes widened. It seemed she was not seeing things after all. "Demotion?"

"Suspension."

"Suspension?" Igarla was genuinely shocked. "Why?"

"Suffice it to say it was not my intention to remove him from his command. His attitude left me no choice. You should know that he blames you for everything."

"That is not news to me, sir. I am responsible for much of what happened."

“You are responsible for what you did, but not what he did. Or rather what he neglected to do. He blames you for everything, and I do mean everything. Even after all this time has passed, he refuses to take responsibility for what he has done. I honestly can't even recognize the man.” The colonel was not alone in that. “Beyond that, anything he wishes to share with you is up to him. But I think it time we got back to your case. I'll ask again: Do you wish to say anything?”

“Nothing I have not already said before, sir.”

“Right. My decision is made then. Lieutenant, I'm going to have to ask you to hand over your mark.”

Igarla closed her eyes and sighed. It was as she feared. She reached above her left breast and unhooked her round lieutenant's mark from her jacket. Doing her best to withhold emotion she extended her hand and placed it in the colonel's open palm.

“Thank you. You may now replace it with this one.” Dolgovar extended a fist in Igarla's direction. Looking somewhat puzzled, she opened a hand beneath it, and let Dolgovar drop her new badge into it. It was not round. The new mark was diamond shaped, red outlined with a single red line across. A captain's mark.

“Sir?” Igarla was even more shocked than before. “I don't understand.”

“I'm promoting you, captain.” Dolgovar said with a smile. *Captain*. It felt so strange to hear him call her that.

“No, sir. It's the reasoning I do not understand. I killed Nemerone's soldiers. I violated orders.”

“Igarla, to tell you the truth, I don't care about the Nemeroneans. They make it far too much work for me to care for them. I expect soldiers to make diplomatic mistakes, as it is not in their training. You took a stand to defend your fellow soldiers, even when held back. You went against your captain when he failed his duty. While I am not pleased with what you got yourself into, I was most impressed with how you handled the commander and the captain. The troops are willing to follow you. You have proven that.”

Igarla gazed at the mark in her hand, still not sure if she was dreaming. She had already felt vindicated on her own, but it was a new feeling entirely to be rewarded as well. She caressed the edge of the badge with her thumb, a smile forming on her lips. The sound of waves crashing against the hull filled the moment. She found though, that the thought of commanding the Fire City first special forces did not bring her satisfaction. And for once, she knew exactly why.

She extended the hand back to the colonel. “I can not accept this.” she said.

“Of course you can.” The colonel replied.

“You misunderstand me, sir.” She said. “I am honored that you see me as fit for command, I find myself feeling the same. But I can not let this continue. I wish to request a transfer.”

“A transfer?” The colonel looked surprised.

“Yes sir. To the infantry.”

“The infantry?” his eyes widened.

“Yes sir. It need not be an officers position and I am willing to undergo retraining, if need be.”

“Special soldiers need never undergo retraining, Igarla, but this is most unexpected. No special soldier under my command has ever requested transfer before, not do I recall hearing of such a case from others. You would give up a captain's promotion to become common footsoldier?”

“Sir,” Igarla let her hand down to her side. “I was recommended into the special forces during training, told that promising recruits were few and in high demand. It made me feel special at the time. Looking back though I can honestly say that it never felt fulfilling. Thrilling at times, yes, but never fulfilling. Buthorhan was an exception, as was castle Synat. It was in moments like those that my true nature became clear to me. Soldier by trade, but a warrior at heart. A wolf. Not a snake.”

Dolgovar crossed his arms and looked at the desk. “It seems not much is going as foreseen tonight.”

“Are you denying my request, sir?”

“No. I guess not.” Dolgovar looked back at her. His expression conveyed disappointment mixed with understanding and respect. “I will say this once: I think you are making a mistake. You are one of the best special soldiers to ever have served under me, and what your instructors told you back then is still true: Good special soldiers are hard to come by. But if this is what you wish, you have earned the right to make this call. Is it worth trying to dissuade you?”

“No, sir. My mind is made up.”

“So be it then. Hold on to that mark for now. You have command of the first till we make arrive home. No infantry units under my command are in need of captains as of right now, but I shall make some inquiries back in the City of Fire. See if I cant find you a position worthy of your abilities.”

Igarla smiled. She quickly pinned the mark on the spot previously occupied by the lieutenants badge. “Will there be anything else, sir?”

“No, that will be all, captain. Enjoy the rest of the evening. We sail at dawn.”

“Yes, sir!” She saluted. He did too. And so she left.

As Igarla walked out onto the deck of the Red Tide she caught sight of her shadow by the moonlight. She climbed the ship's aft castle, and leaned on the far railing. The pale white light shown on the waves, the ocean glistened with silver sparkles. A smile came across her face.

Captain Igarla. She thought. I like the way that sounds.