

Flickering lamplight reflected in the window across the narrow avenue, casting pleasing shadows on the wyrms and stars in the illuminations in the Candle's book. He sat with his own windows open to the mild summer breezes. The day's troubles had been set aside for an old wine and an older text-- a remembrance of a philosopher by the pupils of his school, a school which was now more myth than memory. The Candle had been reading for an hour without pause, when a missing page jolted him back to the quiet city night. Three sheets had been cleanly cut from the book. He pursed his lips and shifted in his chair, suddenly aware of discomfort in his back.

Distracted from his reading, the Candle looked dully out the window. A set of footsteps on the damp cobblestones, muffled by the fog, came and went quickly, and the Candle saw nobody. The pages would have been interesting. The authors had been describing the debate that had discredited the philosopher's mentor. The philosophies in question were steeped in superstition and old beliefs, but the truths uncovered by brilliant men with limited perspectives can still be fascinating when approached with better understanding, and these were the foremost minds of their time. The Candle had sympathy for the mentor, a Tyletian by the name of Ramos, who had left his own school in disgrace and had nearly been burned at the stake. Three hundred years of hindsight made it clear that Ramos was a necessary casualty in the expansion of the Church. At the time, Tyrus the Undying had only recently proclaimed the Empire in the name of Quelestel, and there had been a very real notion that heretics from the north might march in force on the city itself. Those were precisely the days where no stance but the absolute was acceptable. In a public debate against his most brilliant pupil, Ramos had passionately defended plurality and the coexistence of the old rituals with the doctrines of Quelestel. Ramos had lost, but now the account of the debate was gone forever.

The Candle wondered whether the pages had been excised purposefully, or the pages had merely been reclaimed when materials were scarce. The Candle had decreed that no pages should be cut from old texts, but that was a new policy. For many decades, scribes had taken pages from older works and scrubbed them clean when new paper was not available.

The Candle suspected that the pages had been cut from the book because they posed an ideological threat to Church and Empire. The irony of this was that only those who were most devoted to Church and Empire had access to the library, aside from the scribes, who were illiterate by tradition, and the knights, who were dutifully uninquisitive. One of many massive undertakings of the Church and the Empire during the rein of Tyrus the Undying had been to collect and organize the scholarship of man in the impenetrable fortress that was the Library of Merendir. A few old manuscripts or reproductions were still at large, prized in underground circles of men and women who fancied themselves renegade philosophers, but they were considered smoke by most honest people.

There was a slow knock on his door, and the Candle looked at his door curiously, mildly surprised that he had not been startled by having a caller at this hour. He struggled heavily to his feet, went to the door, and threw back the bolt, thinking as he opened the door that he should have thought more for his safety.

It was only the Lash, standing motionless, already stooping in anticipation of moving through the door frame. Perhaps with slight cruelty, born of annoyance at having been disturbed from his reading, the Candle said nothing, and merely watched the Lash, whose mouth hung slightly open, waiting expectantly on the stair. The man was a giant, oddly proportioned, with huge hairy hands and broad shoulders. The Church had convened a Tribunal, and the accused had been given to the Lash, who was an artist of sorts. Tribunals were rare, and yet this was the second in a matter of weeks. The first had ended with the release of the prisoner, on the Candle's orders, complying with the terms of the blackmailers who had threatened to expose the Lord Commander's filthy proclivities. The apparent blackmailer had been caught, and a second Tribunal had been convened to try her.

The Candle had observed the fever with which certain ambitious men had pursued the honor of being appointed to the Tribunals. He had sent a Rider to the the Most Holy Confessor, concerned that the instruments of holy justice where being used to play politics. The Most Holy Confessor had replied that, while the Candle was correct in his concern,

righteous zeal was to be applauded in these days of decadence and turpitude, and that there could be nothing wrong with a Tribunal, which was by nature a truth-seeking entity.

"You said to tell you when I knew something," the Lash said. His voice was a hesitant rumble, gentle and stupid. He seemed to sense that he had done something wrong.

"Please, come in." The Candle stood aside, and the Lash moved through the door, removing his battered hunting cap and straightening to his full, considerable, height. The Candle sighed, confident that the Lash would not perceive the sigh as an insult. He did not bother to explain that the Lash's report might have waited until morning. Such subtleties of instruction confounded the man, and the ensuing circle of explanations left the Lash disheartened and the Candle aggravated.

"Well, what have you discovered?" The Candle asked. The prisoner's guilt had already been established. He was interested now in her motives.

The Lash pushed back a thinning mop of brown hair, which fell immediately back into his face.

"She's in the Order," the Lash offered, hopefully.

"Which Order?" The Candle asked, wearily.

"The Order of Learned Men of Old Blood. They call it 'The Order.'"

The Candle knew vaguely of this group. As he understood it, the Order of the Learned Men of Old Blood was a loose confederation of heretics and superstitious peasants who claimed to preserve long forgotten customs and rituals and dabbled in every dark art that came their way. They were enthralled with secrecy, and they posed no ideological threat.

"What else?" The Candle asked.

"She has enemies."

"And who are they?"

"It's confusing."

Most things were, to the Lash.

"Try to explain it," the Candle said, asking Quelestel silently for patience.

"They're in the Order, too. That's what she calls the Order of Learned Men of Old Blood, 'The Order.' But she calls her enemies 'The Cult.' She says they had her arrested."

"Hmm..." the Candle said, only mildly interested.

"Then somebody broke in to try to get her out," the Lash said matter-of-factly, relaying his discoveries in chronological order. "...so I subdued him, and questioned him, too." The Candle could only stare at him, a bemused smile forming itself on his face. The Lash's interrogation chambers were far below the ground, in the middle of the compound outside the city walls that housed the administrative and training facilities for the knights.

When the Lash said nothing for a long moment, the Candle asked, "And?"

"He's her friend. He told her the Council will get them out, because he wanted to make her feel better. Then I moved him to another room, where they can't talk, but they can still hear each other scream."

"The Imperial Council?" The Candle asked.

"The Dark Council," the Lash looked slightly ashamed for having to correct the Candle.

"How would the Dark Council get them released?" The Candle had learned how to interrogate the Lash-- methodically questioning, covering each nuance separately. He could only imagine that this was how the Lash had interrogated his guests.

"The Dark Council would tell the Church to release them."

The Candle frowned and looked into the Lash's face for a moment before asking, "What is the Dark Council?"

The Lash took a deep breath, nodding, and answered, "The Dark Council is a group of wise men. Her uncle is in it. Crowley. He's an alchemist. They run the Order. They run the Empire. They arrange marriages."

"They run the Empire?" The Candle began to wonder if this whole line of questioning was useless.

The Lash screwed up his face and chewed his lip for a while, and then said, "They run the Hidden Gaurd."

"The Hidden Gaurd?" The Candle asked, eyebrows raised. The Lash should not have known of the Hidden Gaurd. Only a few people did.

"It's like the City Gaurd, but they don't wear uniforms," the Lash told him, "Most people don't know that they're real. They can take people and kill them."

"Did they take somebody and kill him?" The Candle asked, now only half-listening to the Lash, wondering about these prisoners, and the Dark Council, and the Hidden Gaurd.

"Yes." The Lash said.

"Who?" The Candle asked.

"Shervin. The man in the Cult. The man who got her arrested."

The Candle frowned. It was Loche Mendlekker who had petitioned to convene the Tribunal that was trying the prisoner. The Candle knew nobody named Shervin.

"What else?" The Candle asked. The Lash shrugged, brushing his hair out of his eyes and looking at the Candle with huge, watery, eyes.

If it was true that the Hidden Gaurd had arrested and executed a man named Shervin, Mardis Dantley would know. The Candle wrote a note to Mardis, admiring the elegance of his script, sealed the hot wax with his stamp, and gave it to the Lash.

"Deliver this to Mardis Dantley's quarters, please. Do not wake him. You may leave it in his doorway."

The Lash nodded, and stood staring at the Candle for a while, until the Candle said, "You may go."

The Candle returned to his book and his glass of wine, but just found himself staring out the window at the drifting fog. He asked himself what it was that troubled him about the Lash's account. He did not believe that any of the heretical organizations in Merendir posed any threat to the Church, but somebody had-- supposedly-- mobilized the Hidden Guard. That would mean that somebody extremely well-placed in the Imperial bureaucracy had loyalties other than to the Empire or the Church. More specifically, that person had loyalties to the Learned Men of Old Blood and to this Dark Council.

The Candle wondered about the Order, about the Council, and about the Cult. He was very tired. He sipped his wine. He was confident that these were trifling conspiracies, but there was at least one man among them who held position of authority. Mardis Dantley would root him out, and the Candle would see him punished, swiftly and viciously. Perhaps that would earn him a reprieve from the Most Holy Confessor, who seemed to have become obsessed of late with deterring heresy.

The Candle sighed. As tired as he was, he doubted that he would sleep that night. He sat with his book in his lap, staring out the window at the slowly lightening sky. Eventually, still sitting in his chair by the window, a restless half-sleep came upon him, and as the street outside began to wake, it was with conspiracies inside conspiracies, and he wrote letter after letter to the Most Holy Confessor, going over each word again and again, unable to break his obsession, and every word he wrote condemned another man to death.