

Cadras was still groggy. Deep blue encroached on the night sky, snuffing out the stars as it went. He was vaguely aware of Stanton and a palace guard chattering beside him as they made their way through the third ring of the Imperial Palace, where the offices of the bureaucracy were housed in rather plain brick buildings, made even plainer by their proximity to gloriously constructed inner rings. There was still at least an hour before dawn. He and Stanton had just been interrogated for two hours by the Captain of the Gaurd himself, Althurre Barwell, in a dingy and airless chamber that smelled of snuff and stale tea. It had gone well. Stanton had been eager to do the talking. He told the Captain that they had been bewitched into a dreamless sleep and that Halvered had turned into a fog and vanished. It was the most excited that Cadras had ever seen Stanton. Cadras had confirmed Stanton's story, but pointed out that they had no way to tell how Halvered had actually escaped, because they had been asleep at the time. This had not changed Stanton's conviction about the fog. The Captain, who seemed tired, was not put off by Stanton's obviously inconsistent story.

Cadras had spoken little, sizing up their interrogator. Since Cadras had begun his service in the City Guard, he had laid eyes on the Captain several times, but had never spoken to him. Althurre Barwell had always seemed to be a reasonable man-- fair, and strict, and uninspired. Now, meeting him in person, Cadras immediately distrusted Barwell. The Captain spoke in a measured way, but his eyes were evasive, sizing up Cadras and Stanton only when he thought they were not looking, and darting back to his papers whenever they returned his gaze. There was something oily in the captain's manner, almost fawning. Cadras thought that Barwell cared nothing for Stanton's story, and little for Halvered's escape. Cadras had assumed a dull countenance and fixed his eyes on the corner of the desk, while his mind raced to figure out what Barwell wanted from him, until the Captain stood and announced officiously, "You may go."

Cadras gathered from Barwell's accent that he came from the Southern Isles, though his skin was light enough to pass as Continental. It was not unheard of for Islanders to be in the service of the Empire, but it was rare for them to achieve rank. Barwell was a central plains

surname, and Althurre was a name given to men in the coastal highlands, presumably derived from the Alturrik, a name ubiquitous north of the Addenines. Cadras deduced that the Captain of the Guard had been born of a Southern woman and an Imperial soldier from the plains, shortly after the invasion of the Southern Isles, and had been named after a soldier from his father's century.

Cadras could not help sneering slightly as he left. The Captain was a santimonious, unimaginative, insecure man. Aside from learning this, the previous two hours had been a complete waste of Cadras' time.

Althurre Barwell had not cared much for what he saw, either. Stanton was a fool, that was obvious, but it was Cadras who had interested him. Cadras was an arrogant youth, enthralled with his own cleverness. He was a second rate thief and confidence man, hiding in plain sight behind a uniform. Cadras was a member of the outlawed, if tacitly tolerated, Poorman's Union. Barwell knew that Cadras had had a hand in Halvered's capture. Cadras was mostly quiet during their meeting, no doubt sullen at having been outsmarted by Halvered-- an older, more clever, thief. Much as Barwell disliked him, Cadras was exactly the man he sought.

When the interrogation ended, Barwell composed a letter to Mardis Dantley, the Captain of the Hidden Guard, praising Cadras' intelligence and discretion, acknowledging the disreputable aspects of his past, but nevertheless recommending enthusiastically that he be removed from his position as a gaoler and promoted to a position within the Hidden Guard, where he could be easily bribed by Barwell's associates.

Cadras started and almost stumbled when he nearly collided with a streak of blue cloth and black hair flying from a doorway. A young woman also stopped, startled. She looked Cadras full in the face, and then she turned and ran. Her feet made mismatched scuffing and slapping noises on the cobblestones as she fled, and Cadras bent to pick up a single slipper, beautifully made from dark satin.

Cadras would not soon forget her face. She was terrified, and there was no hope in her eyes, only pleading.

"The Princess Celani." The palace guard said this as if he were introducing her. Cadras watched as she disappeared from sight.

"The Imperial problem child." Stanton made this proclamation with satisfaction, as if his knowledge of the Imperial court marked him as a man of importance. "Ever since she was a small child, she's been getting into trouble."

"Problem child, nothing..." the guard lowered his voice and beckoned for Stanton and Cadras to lean in close. "She's a witch."

"Witch or no," whispered Stanton, enjoying their little conspiracy immensely, "I'd take her to bed."

I could get your tongue cut out for that, Cadras thought, but he did not say anything, choosing instead to enjoy the notion privately. They were nearing the gates. Cadras was tired of Stanton and the guard, and he had more business to attend to before dawn. He handed the slipper to the guard and picked up his pace, leaving the two men behind.

Outside the palace, the city was beginning to wake. There was a warm, salty, breeze, and Cadras turned into it, winding his way through the back streets toward the bay. This part of the city was packed tightly together, but the buildings were well-built, and the waste was nearly contained in the runoff ditches. Short houses with orange tile roofs stood shoulder to shoulder with two story brick buildings with wrought iron balconies. Through the windows on the top floors, Cadras saw merchants beginning to stir, having their tea before climbing down to their shops. Soon the street would be full of men discussing the prices of this thing or that, or the upcoming horse races. They would call to people who passed, trying to lure them in for a look at their wares. Cadras could smell the brewing tea, dark and acrid, and more fashionable than the sweet, herbacious stuff that he drank in the Valley.

Nearer to the docks, the streets narrowed and darkened. The buildings pressed together and loomed over the street, cracked and augmented with layers of cloth and pieces of wood.

The smells of fish and leather were pervasive, even in the quiet time before dawn. Trails of smoke rose here and there, occasionally from a chimney, but more often haphazardly from cracks and make-shift smoke holes, as people started their fires. A pair of cloaked men, hoods up, ambled lazily uphill toward Cadras. Cadras gave them a mocking salute and one of them laughed, or maybe just coughed. They were Grainger's men.

The street wound back toward the east, and Cadras could see the already bustling docks. The bay was the shape of a half moon, waning just a bit, and tilted so that one corner stretched almost to the horizon, while the other was not very far from Cadras where he stood. The bay was partially enclosed by rocky fingers jutting out from the chalky cliffs. The stout Sea Wall ran along the bars of rock and extended far into the water, leaving only a narrow gap, as wide as three or four galleons, into the bay. The far reaches of the Sea Wall ended in gate houses, from which the iron gates could be extended to seal the bay entirely. The gate houses were topped with mighty beacons, the amplified lights of which could be seen miles out to sea.

The Sea Wall, like the inner rings of the Imperial Palace, far exceeded modern ambitions in engineering. The masonry was smooth and precise, and even after the fiercest storms and the changes of a hundred thousand tides, never so much as a crack had appeared in its facade. The gate was treated with some lost chemical that defied the salt and the sea. The Philosophers' manuscripts held no clues to the wonders, and Cadras had read them all. Cadras smiled widely, since nobody there to see him. Soon, he might know the secret of the Sea Wall.

At the far end of the bay sat most of the Imperial Navy-- five galleons and some thirty long ships, all in a deep red wood foreign to the Empire. They had been built twenty years ago by shipwrights in the Far East, at the behest of Emperor Lushar III. He had directed the brilliant naval conquest of the Southern Isles, at a massive cost to the empire and to his health, before dying of madness and consumption. His chief advisor, the Elder General Malhorren, had finished the campaign, bringing a flood of spices, tea, exotic goods, and refugees into

Merendir. Now most of the navy sat unused in the bay, while the occasional patrol went out to curtail the piratical ambitions of certain disaffected Southern Islanders.

A few ships had arrived during the night and dropped anchor beyond the sealed gates of the Sea Wall. In the gathering light, the gates had opened, and now the vessels glided across the bay toward the massive docks, which teemed already with shoremen, tax men, and merchant crews preparing their own vessels to set sail.

Cadras came to a jumble of wooden stalls built near the piers where small fishing boats were coming in from the bay with the morning catch. Men wrestled nets full of dark writhing shapes off of the boats, heaving them up against their chest and dumping them into barrels. Cadras approached a stall of grey wood. A sinewy man with hollow cheeks and a deeply creased face was sorting fish into shallow troughs built into his counter. A pipe burned next to him, neglected as he stood elbow deep in barrels of brine and wriggling fish.

"Hello, father." Cadras said, and the fisherman looked up and nodded. "How about a game of stones?"

Cadras' father looked at the sky to gauge the time of day, then wiped his hands on a cloth and picked up his pipe. He puffed it back to life and exhaled a great cloud of smoke.

"Alright."

Cadras' father produced two leather bags and a painted board from beneath the counter. They sat on short stools across an upturned barrel and began to arrange their pieces-- flat, smooth, stones in grey and black. The board was cracked and faded from years of use. Cadras studied the circle, surrounded by eight squares, as he had hundreds of times before. He pulled a conservative number of stones from his bag and placed them in the first square. His father placed stones in a square opposite his, and they alternated, choosing how many of their pieces to deploy to each compass point on the board, imagining how to move their pieces into the circular battlefield, outflank the other, and capture as many pieces as possible. These pieces, along with any they had reserved from their initial placement, would be reset for the second half of the game, where score was kept.

Neither man spoke. Both smoked continually. The game of stones had been around for centuries, at least. Cadras was good at the game. He had an eye for the flow of pieces around the board, for chokepoints that could be used to drive wedges through his opponent's defenses, and for dynamic defensive positions that would not break at the first assault. He almost never played unless he played with his father, and so he usually lost.

They played quickly, as was appropriate for informal games. When the game ended, they did not bother to count stones. Cadras had lost.

"Better get back to work," his father said. They poured the stones back into the bags, and Cadras stood to go.

"See you later," Cadras nodded to his father.

"Sure," his father replied.

There was a faint glow on the horizon. Cadras hoped to make another stop before meeting Halvered. He headed quickly toward the Street of Fools. The city was built on the Merendir river, which flowed south from the Addenine mountains, but turned east before running through the city and into the bay, which fed the South Sea. The oldest parts of the city of Merendir were built on two hills on the south bank of the river. At the summit of the larger of these hills was the Imperial palace, a sprawling compound that housed the Emperor's family and servants, as well as scores of soldiers and bureaucrats. The silver gilded spires of the first ring glowed orange in the rising sun. The central spire, which soared above the others, was plated in gold. It burned in morning sun, and made Cadras think about being rich.

The infamous Street of Fools, named for the entertainers that gathered in and around its numerous taverns, ran the length of both hills on the river side, informally marking the boundary between the Valley and the more decent parts of the city. The Street of Fools was quiet at this hour, but Cadras instinctively changed his gait slightly and took heightened notice of his surroundings.

A squat man pulled a creaking cart of apples huffed laboriously up the street toward Cadras. Cadras showed him a couple bills of scrip, tucked them into the band of the man's

hat and took two apples. The man grumbled "I don't take scrip," but Cadras was already well past him, and the man did not stop.

Cadras stopped in front of a small tavern with a whitewashed sign that said merely "Food and Ale." From the outside, it looked seedy, with shuttered windows and crumbling paint. Inside, it was reasonably clean and cheerily lit. The room was bare, except for a couple long tables with benches, a fireplace, and a cask of ale on a stand. A sour-looking old man was scrubbing one of the tables and a weary hound dog lay in front of the empty fireplace, his face and ears sagging onto the floor like puddles.

"Good morning, Leward," Cadras said, bowing slightly to the old man, who looked up and nodded curtly. When he got no more response, Cadras asked "Is Marta around?"

Leward set down his rag and walked wordlessly out the back door. Cadras waited, and was beginning to think that Leward was not coming back, when he emerged again, now followed by a young woman, and resumed scrubbing as if there had been no interruption. When the old hound saw Marta, he thumped his tail once against the floor without lifting his head, then snorted and closed his eyes.

Marta looked strangely mundane in an apron, with her lively eyes and wild hair. She smirked at Cadras and whispered something in Leward's ear. The old man coughed uncomfortably and nodded, eyeing Cadras. Marta untied her apron and slipped her arm through Cadras' as they walked back out onto the street.

"Leward thinks you should marry me." She said as they left the tavern. Cadras blinked. Marta had had many boyfriends, but never Cadras. She removed her arm from his. He handed her an apple.

"How's the new arrangement working out?" He asked.

"It's dull." Marta wrinkled her nose. "It's dull scrubbing dishes. It's dull serving ale to dull old men. Sometimes they grab me and then I spit in their drinks, but I don't really enjoy it. It's dull tormenting poor old Leward. Even the dog is dull. I'm going to try to stay on through the winter, though. I can put up with a lot for a warm room." She looked Cadras up and down and

bit into her apple. "You look like an opium addict."

"I had a long night." Cadras said, giving her a frowning look from corner of his eye. He had indeed smoked a powder derived from opium-- the powder that he had used to knock out Stanton and then smoked himself.

Marta gave him a smug smirk. She walked fast and talked faster. "Everybody's saying that the bodies on the docks were Islanders, but I think they were Lighthall's men," she said.

Cadras frowned, "Bodies?"

Marta rolled her eyes and snatched the cigarette from Cadras' hand before he could protest.

"Are you serious? There were twelve bodies on the docks and a ship burning in the harbor. You're losing your edge, old man."

Marta was no more than two years younger than Cadras. Marta remembered his mother, and Cadras barely remembered her himself. Cadras started to roll another cigarette.

Lighthall was one of the most influential men in Merendir. Of all the merchants in the city, he was the most pious-- if such things were measured in extravagant public donations to the Church of Quelestel. He was rumored to have Imperial blood, but was quick to assure everybody that he was just a humble man. He was widely recognized as a canny and generous businessman. In the best circles, he was appreciated for his charm and wit. Lighthall loaned money to those less fortunate than himself, and naturally had to employ many men to keep track of these accounts. These men were routinely seen in groups of two and three throughout the city, notable in a crowd for their height and girth. Lighthall was one of the few common-born with sufficient assets to be allowed to employ men-at-arms. His men carried swords and iron cudgels, to complement their below average intelligences and above average tempers. Lighthall had a number of other vocations, including providing protection for lesser merchants, de facto governance of the race track, the sale of various scarce materials, and-- it was rumored-- the sale of men and women for use aboard merchant galleys.

"Why do you think they were Lighthall's men?" Cadras asked. If twelve of Lighthall's men



had been killed at once, then somebody powerful in Merendir no longer respected his authority.

Marta grinned at him as they walked. She loved this stuff. "A bunch of Lighthall's men were in a rush to get to the dock just after it happened-- I saw them. Anyway, I think they bribed the guards to tell everybody that they were Islanders, because nobody heard that part until later. The ship that burned was Lighthall's. Do you remember Sael? He and his brothers were out in their canoes all night dousing the rubble so it wouldn't ignite anything else, and he saw the mast head. It belonged to the Fire of Dawn. Funny, huh? I mean, I guess it's not really funny, but it's a fitting name, right?" She gave him a moment to digest this, whistling something cheerful.

"The bodies might not have anything to do with the burning ship." Cadras said.

Marta shrugged, and switched topics. "Everybody's talking about the Emperor's races, too. People are saying that he's going to flood the arena, like Charus II used to do, and have a mock sea battle. It would be a great excuse to show off that navy again before all the ships get dusty."

"Um..." Marta said, and bit her lip before starting again, "There's a rumor that Raker's gone lame, but nobody important is saying anything. People think that the next best horse is Swallow, and he's Lighthall's, too, but other people think that this might be Fury's chance, and of course you can't discount a veteran like Archer, even if he is a little old, especially if it stays dry..." Marta paused for breath and Cadras looked down the hill toward the bay. It was fully dawn. A Squire of the Coffers passed them, with long, dirty, hair and a gold-embroidered tunic, asking silently for tithes to Quelestel with a bowl held in outstretched arms. They ignored him.

Marta continued, "Grainger is having that party when his son comes of age. It sounds like he's going to try to put on a spectacle to rival the Emperor."

Grainger ran the Poorman's Union-- a confederation of men and women of questionable vocation. The Union's territory extended over most of the city, but their ties were on the

Street of Fools and in the Valley. The Union was tolerated, maybe even appreciated, in the Valley because a nominal fee could insure that residents went unmolested, while the Union members brought wealth down the hill to distribute liberally among the local taverns and brothels. The Union was tolerated by the Empire, because the Mouse could negotiate with Grainger, and Grainger could hold the Union members in check. The Union was even responsible for the security of the docks, after a bizarre accord between Grainger and the Mouse, whereby the Poorman's Union would provide security for the docks, and, in exchange for this privilege, every nobleman to visit Merendir would also be assured protection by, and from, the Union.

"You remember that guy you asked about, Halvered of Tyletos?" Marta asked. Cadras nodded, looking away from her. "Well, he got arrested last night, but he escaped," Marta paused for dramatic effect. "The best explanation the City Guard can come up with is that he's a sorcerer!" This amused her immensely. Cadras wondered how she could possibly have known that already.

It was time for him to go meet Halvered.

"I..." he began, but got no further.

"Lords and Ladies from the provinces have already started arriving for the races and the festival. The Brinehalls are set to arrive with three hundred armed men, and the Emperor is furious. They'll keep the brothels busy, though. Oh, and, I'm pretty sure that the Lord Commander is screwing one of the choir boys. I've suspected it for a while, but then I saw the Lord Commander going into the Wayfarer's Beacon and then while later a carriage arrived and a scribe took a boy in there-- the smallest one, Northern-looking, with black hair and blue eyes."

"I should..." Cadras started again.

"Grainger is looking for somebody who broke into Jareck's place and stole almost twenty weight worth of jewelry, plus a ham. Word is that the Mouse might have to start paying more attention to the Union again, what with Lighthall has been whining so much, so Grainger has

to make sure that everybody who pays their dues gets protected."

"It's almost..." Cadras began.

"I have to go," Marta interrupted. She cocked her head, thinking over everything she had told him, and then nodded. "Yeah, that's everything."

Cadras muttered goodbye and quickly turned to go. Marta cleared her throat.

"You seem to be forgetting that this is a business relationship." She had her hands on her hips and her eyebrows arched in an imitation of indignation.

Cadras fumbled too quickly with his coin purse, spilling coins onto the ground, which amused Marta greatly. He felt his ears burning as he bent to retrieve his coins. He straightened and met her gaze, unamused. He placed two silver pieces in her waiting palm, and she smiled at him.

"Get some sleep, you look like shit," she patted him on the cheek, and then she was gone.

Cadras took a deep breath and tried to compose himself. Halvered would be waiting for him just around the corner. He lit a cigarette, assumed an impassive face, walked confidently around the corner, and stopped short.

Halvered was there, pacing heavily back and forth in front of the Furled Standard. His face was discolored with rage. Cadras swallowed and then swaggered toward him, hoping that the Men of Earth and Dust were worth their salt. When Halvered saw Cadras, he planted his feet and gathered the full force of his wrath into the most malignant stare that Cadras had ever seen. Cadras strode forward unflinchingly.

"You set me up." Halvered hissed when Cadras was close. His skin burned red around his oozing cuts, and the bruises on his face and neck had turned black.

"We'll talk inside." Cadras walked past Halvered and into the tavern, feeling the heat of Halvered's eyes on his back. Cadras did not look back at the man until they reached a corner table far from the few patrons that were eating their breakfasts.

"Food?" Cadras asked, seating himself in the corner, where he could see everybody in the room. Halvered glared, and said nothing, so Cadras held up two fingers and the proprietor

nodded from across the room. Cadras pulled out his tobacco pouch, nearly empty, and started rolling cigarettes. The familiar activity kept his hands from shaking. The proprietor delivered two cups of unpleasant brown tea. Only then did Cadras speak.

"I did not set you up, I merely saw an opportunity to benefit from your capture." This was not true. It was Cadras who had discovered where Halvered lived and reported it to his sargeant. Halvered was important for Cadras' plans in more than one way. Halvered narrowed his eyes and stared hard at Cadras. He did not seem convinced. Cadras feigned indifference, sipping his tea and lighting another cigarette from the stubby candle that sat on the table. The night had taken a toll on him. He felt slow and unconvincing. Cadras took a long sip of the scalding tea.

"Whether you believe me is no concern of mine," Cadras told Halvered flatly. "Hear me out, and I think you'll find that cooperating with me will bring no small benefit to yourself." When Halvered did not react, Cadras set down his tea and digressed, lowering his voice. "It's my sargeant who's been after you. You're his most prized quarry. Halvered-- thief, assassin, and sorcerer. He was the one who ordered your beating. I'll help you kill him." Cadras flicked his wrist and a brutally sharp piece of metal, half-wrapped in cloth to form a handle, shot into his hand. He started to clean his fingernails with in.

At this point, Halvered gave Cadras an unfriendly smile and took one of the cigarettes that Cadras had rolled. Cadras brought out his alchemist's vial and removed the stopper. He held the column of flame in front of Halvered and lit his cigarette.

"How many games are you playing, boy?" Halvered asked, coldly, exhaling.

"As many as I can get into." Cadras met his eyes through the cloud of smoke between them.

Halvered spoke quietly now, shrewd calculation in his eyes. His rage was gone, but he did not like Cadras. "You said you want a book. What's this book and what's the benefit to me?"

Cadras wanted to sigh with relief, but he showed no reaction. Halvered had let him get this far without putting the contract to the test. Now, if he had judged the man correctly, Cadras

would hook him.

"For all 363 years of recorded history," Cadras said, "the Emperors have descended in an unbroken line from Tyrus the Undying, who proclaimed the Empire in the name of our just and mighty God, Quelestel. Upon Tyrus' death, the Church proclaimed that he had become an Aspect of Quelestel, and that the next Emperor, as his heir, was therefore also an Aspect of Quelestel-- the reincarnation of Tyrus, and the earthly embodiment of the god.

"It's a convoluted bit of theology," Cadras smirked, as he often did when he was about to utter the worst kind of heresy. "It doesn't really stand up before an inquiring mind, but Merendir is not exactly full of inquiring minds, particularly at the basilica."

Cadras saw just a hint of the familiar wild-eyed fear in Halvered, the expression that every good citizen wore when confronted with heresy, or philosophy, or critical thought.

Cadras sneered at Halvered, and said, "It's all smoke, right?"

Halvered snarled back at him, "Get to the point."

"The point," Cadras emphasized the word, and then paused to light a cigarette, letting Halvered hang on his words, "is that the Emperors of Merendir rule by divine right, as Aspects of Quelestel, and incarnations of Tyrus the Undying. Mightily lords humble themselves before our Emperors, in deference to their divinity."

Halvered was getting restless. Cadras took his time.

"The Church of Quelestel," Cadras continued, "both legitimizes, and is legitimized by, the divine Emperor of Merendir. The Church also guard the collected scholarly, philosophical, and theological works of man. Its library holds tens of thousands of volumes, collected and stored during the reign of Tyrus. The people are not allowed into the library, and no books are allowed to leave. The scribes cannot read. Only a few members of the Church ever see and understand the texts inside the Library. The Knights of Quelestel are the most powerful in the world. The first part of their charter is to guard the library.

"Those rare people who wonder why our notion of history is so sparse, buy into the notion that a catastrophic war destroyed the legendary City of Silver, and with it the library that

contained the collective knowledge of men prior to the founding of the Empire. I don't think that's true. I think that the history exists, but that the public's understanding of our history is kept purposefully opaque."

Cadras had all but lost Halvered's interest. History, knowledge, and heresy were bound tightly together in the minds of the people of this great Empire-- irrelevant nonsense, easily dismissed as smoke. Cadras' small circle of Philosophers were lonely in their rejection of ignorance, and they had few resources. In one of their recently acquired books, there was a small citation to which none of the other Philosophers gave any particular notice. Cadras had noticed it, though he had not bothered to share its importance with the others.

Cadras leaned across the table and whispered. "I have reason to believe that the library of the Church of Quelestel contains a book called The Lives and Lineages of the Emperors of Merendir."

"So?" Halvered was unimpressed.

Cadras paused for dramatic effect. "The book is 1,000 years old."

Slowly, understanding came to Halvered. History did not begin with Tyrus the Undying proclaiming the Empire in the name of Quelestel. The divine right of the Emperors was a relatively recent invention, and the Church was responsible for keeping that secret. Halvered's malice dissolved into a broad grin. He slapped the table hard with his palm.

"You son of a bitch," Halvered whispered, "you're going to blackmail the Emperor."

Cadras smiled back at him and said casually, "...and the Church."