

The Candle had just started to doze in the back of the chapel, when Lord Dilluther finished his prayers and stood. Although Dilluther was a knight, and admirable in his devotion, he wore the secular emblems of the Imperial army on his black tunic. The Candle pushed himself heavily up from the bench as the old knight walked toward him, his strides still long and his back still straight. The Candle gave a slight bow, which Dilluther returned.

"Good morning to you, Elder General," the Candle said, unsmiling, "I hope you might do me the honor of taking your breakfast with me."

The Candle had never felt that Lord Dilluther liked him particularly, but the Elder General respected the Candle's station. Neither man made frivolous social calls, and so the Elder General nodded without hesitation. The Candle had a carriage waiting and, knowing that the Elder General maintained the ascetic habits of the knighthood, he directed his driver to a pleasant cafe with simple food and excellent tea. He made a nominal effort to exchange pleasantries on the ride, and was relieved when they lapsed into silence. Dilluther pulled back his curtains and watched the street solemnly. He appeared fit and well-rested, the Candle noted with a touch of jealousy.

Only after they had been shown to their seats in the cafe, in the Candle's customary room, and they had been served their tea, did Dilluther ask, "What concerns you this morning, Your Holiness?"

He pronounced the title respectfully and without enthusiasm.

Dilluther had little use for subtlety, a trait which the Candle alternatively admired and despised, so the Candle asked him simply if he was aware of the Order of the Learned Men of Old Blood.

Dilluther shook his head.

The Candle explained, "The members of this order have undertaken to preserve all manners of heretical rites and philosophies. They claim to practice sorcery."

"Why are they allowed to operate?" The Elder General asked. He did not seem overly concerned, and in this he was not alone. Only the oldest, most devout, citizens spared any

worry for sorcerers these days. The rest of the population considered such concerns quaint, if not ludicrous.

The Elder General did not fidget, but his eyes frequently left the Candle's face to make a circuit of the room, at intervals that were probably exactly even. Now he watched somebody approaching their table. The Candle sipped his tea silently as the serving man set a plate of biscuits between them and withdrew immediately.

The Candle took a biscuit and pondered it while he spoke. "Their membership is secret. There seem to be factions within the organization that are at odds with one another. I used to believe that if they posed any threat, it is only to one another. Now, it seems that their influence extends much further than I had imagined-- further than can be tolerated. Far enough to direct the Hidden Guard to arrest and execute a man."

"Only a handful of people know of the Hidden Guard," Dilluther said, raising an eyebrow. The Candle could not recall ever seeing him so expressive.

"Yes," the Candle said, "and one of them is a traitor."

Dilluther pondered this for a long moment and the Candle took the opportunity to take a couple large bites of his biscuit.

Eventually, Dilluther asked with a frown, "What evidence do you have?"

"None," the Candle admitted. "Mardis Dantley confirmed that the man was arrested and executed without trial, but claimed that he did not order it. I bring this to you because your loyalty is beyond reproach." In his faith, his loyalty to the Empire, and his devotion to his family, the Elder General was steadfast in a way that is unique to those who have no imagination.

The Candle could almost hear Dilluther slowly cataloguing all the people who could command the Hidden Guard.

"I will discuss the arrest with Mardis Dantley," Dilluther said as he stood. Their meeting had ended. The Candle had not expected the Elder General to shed any light on the matter, but he thought it was important that somebody on the Imperial Council be made aware of it--

somebody whose values and loyalties were absolute. The Candle had, of course, discussed the matter with Mardis Dantley, but Dantley was a godless man who spent his life enmeshed in intrigue, and was not, to the Candle's mind, above suspicion. The Candle felt greatly relieved to share the burden of watchfulness with the Elder General.

Dilluther opted to walk back to the palace, and the Candle knew that the Elder General preferred the open air and exercise to the confinement of a carriage, but wondered if Dilluther was also pointedly showing the Candle that he could walk the streets of Merendir, alone and unafraid of ambiguous plots by unknown traitors. The Candle drew the curtains in the carriage and closed his eyes to think. Dilluther and the rest of the Imperial family were understandably reticent when it came to matters of sorcery. Although there were always rumors and tall tales, the Emperors had been meticulous in keeping their... odder... family members out of the public eye. The Church ignored the failings of the Imperial family, which, after all, could not be failings, because the Emperor was the Avatar of Quelestel. Anything the Imperial family did was, by definition, the will of the God, so it was convenient-- a relief, almost-- that they kept their matters very private.

The calm of the library took many forms, some soothing, some gloomy, some tiring, and the Candle knew them all. At this hour of the morning, the rooms along the east wall were filled with pale, dusty, sunlight. The Candle took a moment on his way to the great hall to browse a shelf that he had never noticed. He often thought that the worst part of mortality was that he would die with so many books unread. So few people would ever encounter the knowledge within these walls, or even know what existed here. The Candle ran his fingers down the spine of a thin volume, A Treatise On The Utility Of Passion, and smiled to himself. The scholarship from that period had been a waste, in his opinion, except insofar as the records of songs they had left-- songs that had formed the basis for many of the hymns still sung today.

The Candle tread quietly into the great hall. The air smelled like paper, and the scratching

of quills was the only sound, except for a far away scraping of metal as a knight made his rounds. Far beneath the vaulted brick ceiling, a couple dozen scribes sat scattered among the long tables, dilligently copying texts they could not read. The scribes were dressed alike, in brown wool and slippers. Most were tamed hermits, brought as children from the mountains or the steppes to the city, where they were fed and clothed and taught the faith. Occasionally, somebody would join the order because they longed service and temperance, but were too gentle for knighthood. The Candle recognized a younger man as one of the latter, and approached him. Reluctant to break the quiet, the Candle nodded to the man, took a tablet and chalk and wrote out the phrases that interested him. The scribe bowed solemnly and left the hall.

The Candle marvelled at the waste of intelligence-- that a scribe could memorize long sequences of symbols, and know where they fit in the elaborate system of categorization in the library, without any notion of what any of it meant. He sat in the scribe's seat and compared the page that was being written to the original text. Every nuance of every character was the same. The Candle supposed that that would be impossible for a literate scribe.

The text concerned the campaigns that Tyrus the Undying led in his first incarnation against the bandit lords of the plains. The illuminations were faded and cracked and showed worn supplicants who were raised to the glory of knighthood. There were some in the Church who considered references to the first incarnation of Tyrus the Undying to be heretical, because his first incarnation predated the proclamation of the Empire, and hence predated history. The Candle was more tolerant. All of Tyrus the Undying's incarnations were avatars of Quelestel, and everything written about the first incarnation was myth and hyperbole, anyway.

Tyrus brought order to a world in upheaval, and eager volunteers joined his ranks in every village and farmhouse, even though Tyrus' discipline was harsh. His progress across the plains could be tracked by a steady trail of shallow graves, where his own men were beheaded and interred for crimes such as praying to an ancestor, or possessing jewelry. All

the spoils of his wars went to the coffers of a newly founded order dedicated to the exclusive worship of Quelestel. That was the discipline that was needed to heal a world crippled by decadence and senseless cruelty.

This text could safely be transcribed and sold to a nobleman, who would feel the thrill of forbidden knowledge and at the same time a greater empathy for the Church. The nobleman would learn nothing that might present a true ideological crisis. He would die without ever learning about Quelestel's humble origins as one among many in the pantheon of the lost City of Silver. He would not know about how Tyrus the Undying-- the true Tyrus, who had proclaimed the Empire in the name of Quelestel-- had been determined to destroy the library at Merendir, an event that was narrowly averted by his advisors. The nobleman would never learn that the Scribes Rebellion against the Tyrus and the newly proclaimed Empire was not started by scribes, but by knights acting in the name of Quelestel himself, and that these knights had merely found awkward allies in a handful of scholars who were advocating a violent renaissance. In the aftermath of the Scribes Rebellion, hundreds of scholars were murdered and dozens of lesser libraries burned. Though the thought was certainly heretical, the Candle could not help but consider this a blight on the history of man. Whoever bought this transcription, however, would not be confronted with such agonies of conscience.

The atrocities of the past-- in the time before history-- had been caused by the arrogance of men who believed that, through a more perfect understanding of the physical world, the power of the gods might be within the reach of man. These men, who would pursue any base philosophy in the name of progress, built greater and greater wonders until the only great deeds left of them were those of destruction. This body of knowledge was what the Candle, like so many before him, could never allow in the hands of the common man, and yet could never allow to be erased. The library contained what remained of the mysteries of a lost civilization-- mysteries that Tyrus the Undying sought to destroy. These were the mysteries that had raised such wonders as the Sea Wall and the Palace In Merendir, and these were the mysteries that had destroyed an entire race of men and turned the City of Silver to dust.

There was a room, in the very heart of the library, that could not be opened. There was a single door to the room, and no mechanism to open it. The Candle had spent long hours searching for a hidden trigger, pulling, and pushing, and prodding, and even-- in occasional moments of weakness-- attempting to force the door in more unseemly ways. The room had to have windows, but he had never seen into it from outside. He had taken to counting windows on his walks home, when windows in this area were lit, and he could never make his counts from the outside match his counts from the inside. The library was a labyrinth, though, and it was impossible to know exactly once he had wound his way into its depths.

The scribe returned, laden with scrolls and crumbling volumes-- everything the library held about the Order of Learned Men of Old Blood. The accounts were varied and ambiguous, and many were old enough that the language was difficult. The moon had traversed half the sky, the scribes had long returned to their chambers, and the Candle was burning his third jar of oil when he returned the last sheaf of scrolls to its case.

The Order seemed to be an ever-shifting collection of countless underground societies, linked by tenuously connected beliefs in old wisdom, or sorcery, or in heresy for its own sake. It had been formed during the Scribes' Rebellion-- called "The Great Purge" in some accounts. There were no references to a "Dark Council," but the Candle found "The Cult," or "The Cult of Stelmarren," everywhere.

One relatively recent treatise on ritual and religion, sympathetic to the heretical, used the Cult to illustrate how an aberrant society justifies otherwise unreasonable oversight from the Church. An alarmist pamphlet about the Cult spoke of abductions and tortures so outlandish that the it was almost humorous. An evil volume, laden with hideous illuminations of violence and depravity, named Stelmarren the greatest of scholars, discoverer of the eighth element, the Bringer of Rain, the Ever Young, and the True God of Men. A history of warfare in the east spoke of Stelmarren as yet another general whose successful campaigns in the northern mountains and on the plains were subsequently ruined by a failed invasion of Fellnia. A Fellnian scroll, which the Candle deciphered slowly and incompletely, being clumsy in that

language, called Stelmarren the Child of Nothing, the Body of Kerashavid, and the Pretender to That Which Lies Between.

For all of the linguistic flourishes and descriptions in the newer histories, it was a first-hand prehistorical account-- long predating the first incarnation of Tyrus, in the dry and stilted language characteristic of writing in that period-- that made the Candle pause and shiver and close his books.

On the plains, we reforged our tools into swords against the host of the Ever Young. Our own brothers came against us first, naked and maddened, and those slaughtered in the contest were many.

The Candle blew out his lantern and left his books on the table to be reshelved. The moonlight through the high windows cast a pure dim light across the worn tables and the Candle felt very much alone. He wanted to hurry, to be outside as quickly as possible, but found himself treading slowly and quietly, watching and listening. He listened for the grinding metal of patrolling knights-- a sound that typically aggravated him-- and heard nothing. The Candle paused, his heart now pounding, before turning into a windowless corridor and walking quickly, running his fingers over the spines of books that he passed. When he reached the door, he threw it open, close to panic, and saw the outline of a man in front of him.

"Hello, Candle," said a quiet voice.

Ashir Corvyne, the Seer, stood before him, his reading lenses low on his nose, inspecting a shelf that, if memory served, contained texts concerned with the classification of edible flora.

"Good night, Lord Corvyne," the Candle said, fighting a tremor in his voice, and bowed slightly as he passed. The Seer returned his bow, and a moment later, the Candle was out in the night air with his carriage waiting on the street. His coachman, an ancient knight, far too artheritic to hold a sword, was asleep inside the carriage. The Candle had to pounded on the door for a long while, until the knight stirred and slowly extracted himself from the cushions

and opened the door, grinning toothlessly.

"Home!" The Candle yelled, loud enough for the deaf knight to hear. The Candle worried about his driver's eyesight, but thus far had had no complaints about his driving. The Candle climbed into the carriage and was dozing almost as soon as he had settled into the cushions.

Inside the library, the Seer Corvyne flipped through a few more pages in the book he had picked at random after encountering the Candle, noting that potatoes from a single region in the northeast were classified with names derived from three separate languages. He returned the book to its shelf and went to the great hall, where he lit a lantern, picked up an accessible book, and listened for an approaching knight. When he heard the armored footstep of the knight, he rose and ambled toward him. The knight saluted as he passed, and Corvyne nodded. Once they had passed one another, Corvyne hurried up the stairs, past several rooms filled with shelves, to an empty corridor that contained a single unmarked door. Corvyne looked around and listened carefully before placing his palm in a circle engraved in the center of the door. A familiar tingle pulsed through him. It felt for a moment as if somebody was blowing on his palm, and then the door slid open. Corvyne went into the room and the door closed behind him.