

It was shortly after midday and Cadras still had not slept. He threaded his way through the hectic third ring of the palace, toward the captain's station where he would report for guard duty. Lords and ladies were arriving with their travelling parties. Every noble assumed that their needs would be met immediately, and the stewards were scrambling, bowing and nodding, and yelling at their assistants. Cadras was in uniform, but he also knew how to maneuver in a crowd, and every time he saw somebody who wanted something-- be they nobility or bureaucrat-- he picked his route to make sure that he was never the closest person to them.

Wagons full of materials for the feast were rolling slowly down the main avenue, being checked in and directed by the same harried stewards. Travelling nobles, servants, and men-at-arms all wandered in the throng, paying little attention to where they walked, scanning faces for friends they had not seen in years.

Cadras turned the corner into the main square and stopped briefly to take in the scene. In the center of the square, a full-sized galleon was being built on runners. He was nearly run down by a pair of well-dressed adolescents guiding an antiquated chariot poorly through the square. He cursed and took a step back into the shelter of a doorway. He shifted his weight and flexed his shoulders. His neck and back ached. He pulled out a plug of stuff from the alchemist, the gum of the Casper tree, and began to chew it. It was bitter and astringent, but almost immediately Cadras felt his pulse quicken and his desire to close his eyes diminish.

He ground his teeth, thinking back over the hours he had spent with Halvered around dawn, sitting across from the library gate in a tea shop, playing stones. The old thief had showed up happy-- not even seeming to remember that Cadras' treachery had landed him in prison-- which had alarmed Cadras until he realized the man was drunk. Cadras thought back over their conversation about the library.

"How did you get into the library before?" He had asked.

Halvered had shrugged. "Bought myself a cowl. Set fire to the gatehouse. Ran around with a bucket of water for a while, then slipped inside in the confusion."

It had a vulgar kind of elegance to it.

"And how did you get into the Sacred Heart?" Cadras had asked, excited, chewing a plug of casper gum.

"The what?"

"The Sacred Heart of the Library. Where all the greatest treasures are stored."

Halvered had shrugged again, and answered "Never heard of it. I grabbed the first thing I saw with jewels in it, shoved it under my robe and ran like a Southerner." When Cadras had stared blankly at him, the old thief had grinned, spat through his teeth, and added, "Siltian trader paid me thirty weight gold for it, and he was robbing me blind."

Halvered was not a good stones player. Cadras quickly found himself trying out radically experimental openings that he would never play against his father. Cadras had sipped tea, and Halvered had sipped tea and rot gut liquor.

"We'll have to get inside without alerting the knights. We'll go through the gardens to find the side door." Cadras had told Halvered, watching the guards at the gatehouse. They were not knights, and they were not professional. They diced and flirted with the passing women.

"The gardens?" Halvered had asked, with some alarm. "There's panthers in the gardens."

Cadras had scoffed, "The panthers are there because when our esteemed former Emperor was going mad, he brought back a boatload of huge cats from the Southern Isles. When the Master Gardener threw a fit and demanded that the Emperor's cats be removed from the palace, they were sent to the library as a 'protective measure,' much to the dismay of the scribes and priests who were accustomed to taking their walks in the gardens."

Cadras had never done a job that required anything more than soft shoes and lock picks, but he would not admit that to Halvered. Halvered was proving far less knowledgeable than Cadras had hoped, but he was still experienced, and that made him as good a partner as Cadras was likely to find. The Library of the Church of Quelestel in Merendir was built like a fortress, with imposing red brick walls, topped with parapets and knights. Knights held a dangerous combination of muscle headedness, religious fervor, and skill at arms. Inside, it

was a maze, and the Sacred Heart of the library was supposedly impenetrable.

Everything that Cadras knew about the library came from Solinka, the scribe who had founded the Philosophers. Solinka had, of course, been illiterate when he had been recruited as a scribe, but he was incredibly smart and had gradually come to understand the symbols he was transcribing. He had smuggled books out of the library, and the Philosophers had worked out their interpretations of history over cups of tea in the odd hours of the morning. The details were sparse, but it was clear that the written history of the Empire before the reign of Tyrus the Undying had survived, at least in part, and that, with the help of the Church, Tyrus the Undying had built the fortress-like library to conceal it.

There were warhorses tethered outside the captain's station, implying that there were officers or nobles inside. Like most of the administrative offices in the newer third ring of the Imperial Palace, the captain's station inhabited a portion of long low brick building that was neither attractive, nor ugly enough to warrant much attention. As soon as he entered the building, his sargeant barked at him.

"Cadras! In my office."

The sargeant, however, did not head toward his office, but rushed off in the opposite direction. Cadras knew that, possibly at that very moment, Halvered was following Cadras' scribbled map to the sargeant's house, where he would let himself in and wait for the sargeant to return home. His sargeant was not a bad man, or a particularly good man. He was fair, but overzealous. He was judgemental and prone to incoherent outbursts, but-- like the building where he spent his days-- he was too boring to inspire actual dislike. Cadras did not expect to lose sleep over the man's fate.

Sitting at the sargeant's desk was an unfamiliar man, wearing the uniform of a civilian officer. Upon Cadras' entry, the man looked up from a stack of papers and took his time sizing Cadras up. He seemed displeased. He had a day or two of grey stubble around his chin and neck and his hair was shaved most of the way to his head. He was wire thin and tightly

wound. He looked Cadras up and down once more.

"You are Cadras of the Wharf?" He asked. His voice was terse. It had been a long time since anybody had addressed Cadras with his patronymic.

"Yes." Cadras answered.

"Cadras, you will not report for guard duty today. There are matters that I would like to discuss with you. You may sit." He gestured to a chair across the desk from him. Cadras sat.

"You are younger than I thought."

Cadras did not know what to say, so he said nothing. The man rested his elbows on the desk and clasped his hands, looking Cadras in the eyes, and said, "There is more to you than you let on."

Cadras tensed momentarily. If this man knew the things that Cadras did not let on, there could be trouble. Cadras rested his arms on the arms of the chair, and was reassured as he felt steel beneath his shirt, against his wrist. The man looked calmly and pointedly at Cadras' arm where the dagger was concealed and then back to Cadras' face, but said nothing.

Cadras sorted through possible responses. His mind was maddeningly sluggish.

"You smoke tobacco, yes?" The man asked. Cadras nodded and then thanked all the gods he could recall when the man pushed a copper censer filled with glowing coals across the table. The man watched silently as Cadras rolled and lit a cigarette, then continued speaking. "Althurre Barwell believed you to be shrewd-- and discrete. He said as much in a letter that he wrote to me yesterday, shortly before his death."

"His death?" Cadras had been awake long enough that everything seemed a bit surreal. He wanted badly to chew another plug of gum, but his knowledge of alchemy was one of those things that he did not usually let on.

"The Captain suffered an accident at the forge this morning. His untimely death has left me short handed. I would like you to fill his position."

"Captain of the Guard?" Cadras asked incredulously.

"Of course not." The man seemed annoyed, which annoyed Cadras.

"If I knew who you are, or what we're talking about, I might be able to converse more fluently." Cadras snapped, without thinking. Cursing his lack of sleep, he began to roll another cigarette. He thought that he had angered the man, but instead the man laughed. There was no mirth in the laugh, it was like a formal acknowledgment of a humorous situation.

"Fair enough," he agreed. "I am Mardis Dantley. Barwell worked for me. The effectiveness of the guard comes from placing uniformed men prominently around the city, so that people know that they are being watched, and order is kept. You might consider me the captain of another guard-- one with a different philosophy of how to keep the peace."

This was interesting. The existence of a secret guard had long been a rumor around the Poorman's Union, but was widely considered to be a tale invented to scare novices. Grainger would be very interested in this information.

"I have little experience." Cadras said carefully. Mardis nodded.

"I have always known Althurre Barwell's judgement to be impeccable," he said, then added a touch darkly, "in some areas, at least. It is clear that you have curiosity, wits, and energy in great supply. It will be best if I employ them, rather than letting you devote them to other pursuits."

Cadras did not like the way Mardis Dantley emphasized 'other pursuits.'

"What would my duties be?"

"You would continue to take most of your shifts on the watch. None of your colleagues would know that you work for me. You would run sensitive errands for me occasionally. Mostly, you would make it your business to know everything that happens in Merendir and you would provide me with information that I will use to advance the interests of the Emperor. It will require much of your time and thought. Also, any disloyalty will be discovered and punished more severely than you can imagine. You will be well compensated."

"How well compensated?" Cadras asked. He did not want to seem eager.

"Fifteen weight gold a month."

Cadras somehow managed not to react, except for swallowing once. Cadras' father

probably had never seen fifteen weight gold. Of course, the Empire would pay in scrip, but he might still get ten weight in coin after exchange. Cadras pretended to consider the offer, knowing that Mardis Dantley knew that such payment would be irresistible. In truth, Cadras was wondering how much Dantley already knew about him.

"There is one thing that you must know," Cadras said, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms, as if he was bored. "I am a member of the Poorman's Union, and I do not intend to betray them to you."

Mardis sat motionless, with his hands folded on the table in front of him, while he regarded Cadras coolly. "The Poorman's Union is outlawed by the Emperor," he said.

Cadras nodded, lighting one cigarette off of the last, "...and yet Grainger has been known to work closely with the Mouse."

Mardis and Cadras stared at one another, expressionless, for a long time, before Mardis spoke.

"I believe that your access to the Union could be beneficial. The Union's activities are merely a nuisance, yet its eyes and ears are everywhere in the city. Be aware, though. Should a conflict of interest arise, my capacity for revenge is greater even than Grainger's. Now, what else do you wish to tell me?"

"Nothing," Cadras said, without hesitation.

"Very well. You shall begin immediately. I regret that it has been some time since I have had the opportunity to speak with Althurre at length. Other than brief written correspondences-- which, by the way, I expect you to provide daily..." Mardis stopped, and asked "You do know your letters?"

Cadras sneered, "In which language?"

Mardis' eyes narrowed, but he continued. "This week, our main concern is the safety of the visiting nobles. We have little specific reason for concern, aside from Lord Brinehall's typical belligerence-- expressed this time with an excessively large travelling party."

Cadras nodded. He had no doubt that he could get information on Brinehall's soldiers once

they were dispersed amongst the city's taverns and brothels.

"Obviously," Mardis Dantley continued, "visiting nobles will be off-limits to the Poorman's Union, and it is unlikely that they will stray far enough into the city to be the target of random thuggery, but we must watch for targeted robberies and confidence schemes. I hope that your contacts in the Valley will be useful in this respect."

"Grainger has little tolerance for freelancers," Cadras observed.

"Grainger's influence in the Valley is not absolute, is it?" Mardis asked with a long, knowing, look that Cadras disliked.

"Very well," Cadras said, shortly, "what else?"

"There is one other matter-- a courtesy to the Church-- the matter of the Dark Council," Mardis said.

Cadras snickered, "The Dark Council?"

"Night, dark arts, secrecy... The name is apt. Be dismissive if you want. The Dark Council seems to be the governing body for a group called the Order of Learned Men of Old Blood. They are considered highly undesirable by the Church, and they may have undue influence inside the government. There is no doubt that they practice unholy rituals. Our concern is whether they have the means and desire to subvert the Empire. There is an alchemist among them... he has a shop west of the Street of Fools, south of Soapbox Square... Crowley."

Cadras did not think that he reacted to the name, but Mardis Dantley feigned surprise and asked, "You know him?"

Cadras shook his head and began to roll another cigarette. Sorcery was an ambiguous crime that was seldom prosecuted except for political reasons. Mardis seemed too sensible for church, so Cadras pointed out, "A peasant who rubs salt on his threshold to relieve his chills could be considered to be 'practicing unholy rituals.'"

"Nevertheless," Mardis said, brusquely, standing, "this is an important matter to me, and so you will take it seriously. There are other matters now that require my attention. I will show you to Captain Barwell's study. I imagine that he kept notes that will be useful to you."

It was clear that Mardis Dantley had not given him the complete story about the Dark Council, but Cadras did not press the issue. They walked in silence across a courtyard surrounded by buildings that housed the administrative offices of the city guard. The day had grown sticky and warm and the noises of revelry from outside had become subdued. Cadras reminded himself that only three days remained for him to get his bets prepared for the races. He had already placed several bets, but not nearly enough. He hoped to place several bets on each horse, wherever he could get good odds. Then, after the race was run, he just had to find his debtors faster than his creditors found him.

Mardis nodded to Cadras and left him alone in the dead man's office. Cadras pulled out his alchemist's vial, uncorked it, and lit a cigarette from the blue flame that issued from the top. He surveyed the room. It looked the same as it had when he and Stanton had been interviewed. Althurre Barwell's office was sparsely furnished and tidily arranged. The top of the desk was clear, other than a quill, an inkwell, and a stack of flattened parchment scrolls. A young woman gazed-- a bit mournfully, Cadras thought-- from a framed portrait on the wall opposite the desk. A military trunk sat in one corner of the room and above it a few shelves full of neatly stacked scroll cases. Beside the scroll cases sat a finely crafted crystal decanter and a pair of matching tumblers. Cadras went over to the shelf, poured himself a glass of amber liquid, and sat at the desk.

Cadras examined the contents of the desk drawers and found nothing remarkable. Cadras decided that Althurre Barwell had been a secretive, but not imaginative, man. Cadras bent down and felt beneath the desk. Behind one of the drawers a narrow shelf had been added. Cadras smiled to himself and withdrew a small wooden box from the hiding place. The box was patterned with light and dark wood, but had no lid, or even seams. Cadras shook it slightly and heard the muted rattle of several small objects.

Cadras set the box on the desk and contemplated it. He took a long sip from the tumbler. The liquor was sweet and piney, and it burned in his empty stomach. Cadras twisted the box gently this way and that. He pushed each of the panels. There was no movement anywhere

on the box. He pushed all of the light panels at once, but with no result. He tried to push all the dark panels at once, but even his long fingers could not reach around the box far enough to press them all. He pulled out three small coins and arranged them on the table. He set the box on top them, positioned his fingers on the dark panels on the sides and top of the box, and pressed them as he pressed the box down onto the coins. There was a small click and each of the panels sunk almost imperceptibly into the box. Cadras raised his hands gently, lifting the top portion of the box with him, and grinned at his good fortune.

Inside the box, laying on scraps of parchment, were several large diamonds. Cadras took a glass from one of his pouches and examined one of the diamonds in the light. It was perfectly cut. The bets that he was going to place on the races seemed suddenly irrelevant. Cadras removed the diamonds delicately from the box, wrapped them in a piece of cloth, and put them in a pocket inside his cloak. He looked back to the box and something on one of the scraps of parchment caught his eye. There, written in a precise hand, was his own name.

The parchment had a dozen names on it. One of them was circled and a few were crossed out. Stanton's name was on the list, crossed out. The other names were guards, too-- goalers and gatekeepers. Cadras examined the other piece of parchment. It was a list of places around the city, taverns and public spaces, along with dates and times. One of the entries, dated with today's date, read "The Spotted Goose."

Chapter One

