

"Your Holiness, there is an Adept here to see you," a knight announced, stepping into room and closing the door behind him. "Tyner Langste."

The Candle sighed, and turned slightly when one of the Matrons nudged him indelicately. She adjusted something and slid a pin into place. His arms were getting tired from holding them out while a trio of ancient women fussed over his regalia.

"What does he want?" The Candle asked. It had been another restless night, and his digestion had been particularly poor that morning. Now he was trapped, while the Matrons dressed him, and he suspected that this Adept knew as much.

"He did not say," the knight said, "but he appears quite distraught."

The Candle sighed again, and said, "Send him in."

He did not know Tyner Langste, but as a rule he disliked distraught Adepts. Most of the Adepts in Merendir were young men of good birth, born and raised in the city. There was always a moment when they were suddenly faced with the prospect of spending the next five years in some distant backwater, eating fermented mudfish, or some other similarly distasteful local staple. Every Adept hoped that they would get one of the choice appointments-- close to home in the civilized Highlands, or near a coastal town where the winds and waters were still warm and gentle, or even fifteen hundred miles away in the frenetic border metropolis of Valen. But, of course, there were only a handful of these assignments, and

hundreds of less desirable ones. Distraught Adepts had typically just been given their assignments in the barbaric Steppelands, or the stinking eastern marshes, or a hundred miles from anywhere in the middle of the prairie. They all assumed that they had run afoul of somebody powerful, and that they were being punished with their assignment. While it was true that Church leaders sometimes rewarded their favorites with choice posts and punished others with particularly awful ones, in the end every Adept had to do five years of service at some outpost, and there were far more undesirable outposts than good ones.

The Candle looked over his shoulder as Tyner Langste came into the room. The boy was trembling, with tear-stained cheeks and red eyes. The Candle turned away and rolled his eyes, muttering silently to himself. One of the Matrons saw his reaction and grinned toothlessly up at him. He had known the woman for years, and had secretly named her Bald Spot, but he did not know her real name, and they were forbidden from exchanging words.

"I thank you for your time, Your Holiness," Tyner Langste spoke as if he were reading woodenly from a script. "As you must know, a Tribunal was recently convened against... against..." Tyner broke down and started sobbing. Bald Spot glanced excitedly at the other two Matrons and then up at the Candle. She was blocked from Tyner's view by the Candle's considerable girth. Her colleagues showed no expression at all.

The Candle looked around at each of the Matrons, to make sure he would not be stuck by a pin if he moved, and then shooed them back a step

before turning to the weeping Adept.

"Tell me, son," he said, moving quickly to a chair.

The Adept sniffed and brushed away his tears. "I tried to do what was right..."

A circular skylight with a stone fin projected a sundial onto the floor, and the Candle glanced at the time and then nodded sympathetically to Tyner.

"Larie..." Tyner started, then sobbed again, then spent a minute composing himself before he continued. "Larie is a good girl. I've known her forever. It is Lucroy... Gian Lucroy... who is no good. He courted her, and she followed him to the meetings... to the Salon... but it was never in her heart."

The Candle knew both of those names. Gian Lucroy had been arrested for heresy and then released, according to the demands of a blackmailer who threatened to expose the vices of the Lord Commander. That blackmailer turned out to be Larie Cahn, and she was now a guest of the Lash.

"Please spare her," Tyner sobbed. "She does not deserve this. She would never practice dark rituals, or turn to... to... godlessness. I will take responsibility for her. I will take her punishments. I will show her the way."

Larie Cahn had threatened to dishonor the Church and interfered with a Tribunal, and the Candle had little inclination to release her, even if both of these Tribunals smelled of politics. The Candle thought back to

his conversation with the Lash, where he had learned of the Dark Council, and his subsequent correspondence with Mardis Dantley.

"What do you know of a man named Shervin?" The Candle asked. Tyner just shook his head, blankly. The Candle pursed his lips. Larie Cahn believed that Shervin had been responsible for her arrest. Shervin had then been taken and executed by the Hidden Guard, but it was not clear on whose orders, and Mardis Dantley was livid.

The Candle chewed his lip and Tyner, mistaking this for indecision, knelt before the Candle and clutched the hem of his robe to his lips. Bald Spot shuffled over quickly for a woman who must have seen eight decades, and pulled the weeping Adept off of the Candles meticulously arranged robes.

It was nearly time for the Candle to address the congregation. He struggled to his feet and resumed his pose, arms raised, in the center of the room. The Matrons came over to finish dressing him, and Tyner watched him hopefully.

"Thank you for coming to me, son," the Candle smiled. "I promise you that Larie Cahn's punishment will be commensurate with her transgressions."

The Candle turned away abruptly and began mouthing some of the more emphatic parts of his upcoming sermon. His audience tonight would come from across the Empire. In addition to the faithful of Merendir, there would be dozens of lords and ladies, and even more of their servants and men-at-arms. Many would be faithful, but many more would just be curious.

Out in the provinces, even when people did worship Quelestel, they often honored their old gods as well.

The Candle heard a final small sob from Tyner, and then the door opened and closed again. The Matrons spun him around slowly, examining his elaborate finery. Bald Spot licked her thumb and straightened the Candle's eyebrows. The other Matrons left silently, but the Candle stopped Bald Spot with a touch and nodded to a tray of lemon honey cakes that somebody had sent him. Bald Spot blew him a kiss, took the tray of cakes, and hobbled out.

The Candle began to sweat as he took the short hallway to the door at the back of dais. He could hear the echoing murmurs of the assembled crowd. The dapper young choirmaster leaned against the doorframe, tapping his palm rhythmically and squinting at the floor, singing silently to himself. The Candle did not interrupt him.

The familiar blast of cool air hit the Candle as he stepped through the door and out onto the dais at the front of the cavernous basilica. The hall quieted as the Candle stepped forward and surveyed his followers. They were surprisingly few.

Long after his sermon, after the choir's performance, and after all of the blessings for the travellers, the Candle was dozing fitfully in his armchair at home when he was woken by a knock at the door.

He staggered, blinking and scratching his neck, to the door, and

asked, "Who's there?"

He was surprised to hear the voice of a young woman.

"I have a message from the Matriarch, Your Holiness."

He opened the door to a lanky, flushed, girl-- a child, really-- in damp travelling cloak. She shook the rain from her hands and reached into her cloak to hand him a sealed scroll.

"Wait here," the Candle mumbled, confused, and went to look for a silver piece to give the girl. He could not find coin, so he gave her five weight in scrip. She bowed and thanked him, but did not leave. He blinked at her, frowning.

"Would you like me to wait, sir?" She asked. "In case you have a response?"

The Candle nodded, wiped his eyes, and yawned. Like the rest of the Matrons, the Matriarch was forbidden to speak to men, but she alone was allowed to communicate important matters to the priests in writing, and to receive letters herself. The Candle cracked the seal, which showed a dying hearth, and opened the letter. The message within was written with an elegant hand. The Candle wondered, not for the first time, who the Matriarch had been in her previous life. He turned up his lamp and held the letter against its glow.

How far will an ambitious man go for honor? How

far will a young man go for love? When a man

cannot bear to see his rival surpass him, how  
vulnerable is he to the dark council of wicked  
men?

The Candle had never met the Matriarch in person. It was not forbidden for them to meet, but she preferred not to leave the Matrons' cloisters, and he was not allowed inside. He knew only that she was very old, that she had a prodigious sweet tooth, and that she was far too well-educated to confuse 'council' for 'counsel.'

He had nothing to give the Matriarch. She could not accept money, and he had no sweets in his apartment to send her. The Matriarch's courier stood in the doorway, studiously patient and still. The Candle went to his table and wrote out a quick note that said only:

Tell me more.