

SERPENTS AND THE SAGEBRUSH

by

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**DEDICATION**

To my family.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Serpents and the Sagebrush is a short story of the medieval fantasy and political drama genres. The text consists of two parts. The author's note comes first, followed by the short story. The author's note elaborates on the inspirations for the creation of the short story. It also details the research which was done to produce the work. Serpents and the Sagebrush is set in a fictional feudal kingdom, called Urum, and primarily follows a young man named Paul who is the crowned prince. The story explores the intricacies of funeral and marital tradition and ultimately aims to illustrate the turbulent effects of rapid political turnover. Moreover, the work is a criticism of the trope that the young generation will restore the world and secure the future in the wake of centuries of corruption. The story is meant to be timeless, and thus draws inspiration from sources both fictional and nonfictional, written in a variety of time periods throughout the past millennia. The creative component of the work is an abridged portion of a far larger epic fantasy story I have been writing for almost 2 years.

### Author's Note

I couldn't tell you exactly when I began writing my story. When I was in the fifth grade, I began to write a story about a group of school children who learned to do magic. Real Magic. The first one of them to discover this power, the one who distributed it to their circle of friends, was certain they were meant to use their power to change the world... to save it. While their friends were content to use magic for petty tricks and life hacks, this child felt compelled to push the limits of their gift.

During high school, I used to write poetry and short stories. One of the most memorable poems I ever wrote was titled *The Owl*. It was about a dark cloud which shielded the entire surface of the earth from direct sun or moonlight, and a young boy who would dream of the sunny sky when he slept, even though he had never once seen the sun in the waking hours.

Later in high school, I came up with an idea for a book. A science fiction world, with a single circular continent. I imagined different alien races and cultures living there together, with no oceans to separate them. How would all the different cultures coexist? Would they? How long would there be different cultures. How long before one attempts to swallow all the rest. I wasn't two chapters into that story before I realized it was far too complex for my writing acumen at the time.

Then one day, my sophomore year of college, I was sitting on the balcony of my apartment, when I saw a comet trace a trail of sparks across the evening sky. The sight was so moving I felt tears well in my eyes, and for a brief instant, I was having visions of my early childhood. Memories I had all but forgotten came on unwarranted. They weren't happy memories either. No, these were difficult things to process all at once,

things I had experienced and never asked myself why.

I'll never forget that day. That was the day I began to write the story I present to you today. At the time it felt like a completely new and original idea. And let me tell you that was exciting. With each day of writing or even just thinking about my new story, it felt like I was discovering a world that had existed for years. I didn't feel like a god, I felt like an explorer. The more I read other stories by other authors, the more this world in my head evolved and became material. It felt like I was traversing a frontier of my own imagination. I became obsessed with creating authentic landscapes that made the world feel large and effects of human influence seem miniscule by comparison. During this period, I visited Big Bend, Grand Teton, and Yellowstone national parks, and saw things that exceeded even the limits of my imagination.

Serpents and the Sagebrush is the story of a love affair. A love affair which was never found out, and never turned into a public scandal. A love affair which drove wedges between a fathers and sons, brothers, and sisters, and created a vacuum of power for a generation of monarchs. This is the story of how the human heart betrays the body politic, how adults manipulate the lives of their children to make them stronger and in doing so afflict them with a crisis of identity. This is Serpents and the Sagebrush, and though the genre of the narrative has changed, as have the setting and most of the major plot points, deep in my heart I know this is the same story I was trying to write back in the fifth grade. A story about how young people brought into an unjust world are likely to seek out instant gratification through radical change, regardless of whether it leads to meaningful reform or the ultimate exacerbation of societies preexisting conditions. In it, I explore issues related to race, gender, sexual orientation, matrimonial tradition, economic

relations, and the causes of violent warfare in medieval societies.

With the help of Dr. Valencia, I was able to incorporate lessons from popular literature, folk tales, fables, and critiques of keystone works in these genres. We studied the ways in which storytelling has evolved since the classical period, through the medieval and pre-industrial eras. It's important to understand that this short story is not attempting to emulate fables or folktales. *Serpents and the Sagebrush* is meant to be entertaining and politically provocative. Nevertheless, Dr. Valencia and I went to lengths to make sure the depictions of the period are authentic. It cannot be overstated how much books such as *Dune*, *The Pillars of the Earth*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and most importantly *A Song of Ice and Fire* inspired me to try my hand at fiction. The authors of each create lovable recognizable characters and give each the dignity to make their own mistakes. Without that touch of sentience, they are not characters but pawns. The illusion of choice invests the readers in the judgement of the characters they care for. Each book taught me new perspectives on the elements of a story and how to distribute those elements to the reader. More importantly, each one of these stories is an inherently a political story. Each chronicles a period of major political unrest and upheaval. Each shares a unique point of view and style which is taken directly from the author's personal experience. As I continue to develop my own style, I share this part of myself with you all today as a part of effort to elevate the status of fiction and fantasy in the field of political science.

## Prologue

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The day bloomed phantom grey. Rain wrapped at the castle's front facade as the wind whistled through the narrow gaps in the southern tower wall. The fire burning in the hearth of great hall cast wavering shadows all around the room. In the high seat sat the King stroking his full black beard and chewing his tongue. He was flanked to one side by the Queen, and by the crowned prince to the other side. She was dressed finely, as she always had been, but he was dressed relatively plain. On their faces they wore frowns, both. The young Princess and the little prince were nowhere to be found among the crowd this dark evening.

Along the edges of the room stood the Duke of Eastborough and the Duchess of Westborough, the Marquise of Uvbael, the Counts of Urmon, Jester, and Beldon, and the Earl's and Ladies of several counties, large and small, throughout the Kingdom of Urum. It was silent as the grave. In the center of the room stood the Earl of Basil, arms crossed over the auburn eel embroidered over his chest. He shifted his feet constantly. His eyes grazed restlessly over the other inhabitants of the room. Not once, however, did his eyes reach up to meet the King's.

The massive wooden doors at the opposite end of the hall swung open with a deliberate creak, cutting sharply through the deafening silence. Four guards in chainmail holding spears escorted in a young lad, nearly a man grown, with his wrists in chains.

"Richard!" called the Earl of Basil, taking hasty steps toward the young . As he approached, the two front guards lowered the tips of their spears, blocking the way between him and his son. "Out of my way!" he roared.

“Let him pass,” commanded the King in a voice cool and steady.

The guards stood aside as the great burly man took his gaunt heir into strong embrace. It lasted only a moment before he turned right round and cast a contemptuous look in the King’s direction.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded hotly, forgetting all the courtesies which were typical of a man addressing his liege. “You chain my son as you would a dog? Throw him in a cell like a common convict? What’s happened here?” His voice was demanding but his inquiries went unaddressed. The King simply sat there, on his Wood and Ivory Throne, looking down on the scene with apathetic eyes.

“You ought to guard your tongue, and show more respect when standing before your King, my Lord,” said the queen in a more distinctly malicious tone.

“Leave it, Amanda,” was all the King said to that, not even sparing a look at his wife.

Then he stood.

“Young Richard has been charged with high crimes against the Royal Family. The punishment for those crimes is death,” the King took a moment to allow his words to strike in the minds of his guests.

“Death?” gasped the Earl in exasperation, “He’s committed no crimes! What do you think he did?”

“Earl Robert, your son stands accused of attempting to deflower my daughter, Ines. He was found in her chambers by my own household knight, Ser Joseph Rainwater.”

The Earl’s face blanched, and once again he turned toward his son, his face

contorted in disbelief. The young lordling did not lift his head. His straight greasy brown hair hung down covering the blank face on his limp head, his eyes stuck on his filthy boots.

“This cannot be,” muttered the earl, the anger draining from his voice. Then it promptly returned. “You fool! You bloody fool!” he struck the boy on his cheek, hard and true. It dropped the prisoner to his knees. The lord struck another blow, this time placing his heavy book into his son’s side.

“Enough of this,” said the King. His raised voice halted the commotion in the hall, as it was so rarely heard. “Earl Robert, does your son deny these charges?”

The Earl of Basil seemed lost. His mind was divided between the need to punish his son for putting them in this terrible position and his fear that the king might take away his only son and heir for this dishonorable affront. He hardly heard the question posed to him.

“No,” said a hushed voice. It was young Richard.

“We cannot hear you, boy,” demanded the queen.

For the first time since he raised his eyes toward the dais. “I do not deny the charges against me.” As his eyes met hers, she shifted in discomfort at the sight of his one hemorrhaged red eye. There was rumble of murmurs among the lords of the court which was halted quickly when the Kings raised one hand beside his head.

“You cannot mean to do this. He is my son!”

“I have not forgotten. The only thing that has been forgotten is for you to teach your heir to behave as nobleman ought,” exasperation began to creep into the King’s manner unbidden. The hour was late, the weather loathsome, and the matter at hand could

turn into a catastrophe for the entire country if the proper tempers were not assuaged. “What would you have me do? In my position how would you respond to such an egregious offense against the physical integrity of my only daughter, a young woman already promised to the heir of a Noble family whose Lady mother stands in this very room.” Heads turned, eyes darting toward the Marquise, a simultaneous discreet cursory glance.

Now, the only thing that showed on the earl’s quivering jowly face was fear. Fear for what was to come.

“What, would you have me do, Robert? Would you be merciful to the man who defiled one of your own daughters?”

Earl Robert studied the tops of his boots for a moment. They were old, stained riding boots, not at all the proper attire for court. Behind him trailed the mud tracks he had left on the floor upon his entrance to the hall. Ever so quietly he uttered a curse, so inaudible that the King, who took note of the motion of his lips, let the moment pass without even a cursory acknowledgment of the offense it implied to his person. Then, with all the venom he could muster in his crestfallen state, he spat, “On with it then. Where will you be havin’ him, my King.”

“I am not so much a fool as to answer a wrong with a wrong and call the matter rectified. I will let him live. But I cannot let this go unpunished,” the king deliberated, speaking in slow rhythmic patterns, as if piecing together the puzzle of justice before the eyes of the court.

“This is most wise, my king,” said the Queen admiringly, with all the pride of a jungle cat.

The King ignored that. “Hornfels,” the king called to the knight on his right, a barrel-chested knight with shining copper hair, who stepped forward with his left hand resting on the hilt of an ornated steel cleaver which clung to the fastenings of his belt. “Bring me the digits of his left hand. That ought to serve as reminder enough of what he’s cost me.”

Hornfels grunted obediently, and the room held a collective breathe as they anxiously waited for justice to be served. Two more men, servants of the house in woolen green coats, brought forward a block of smooth dark wood and set it down at the foot of the dais, where all could see. The guards at young Richards back picked him up off of his knees, and carried him, each holding him under one arm, before the chopping block. The knight stood abruptly and with a grimace he freed the cleaver from its fastening and held it in his right hand. He hovered over the boy, shielding him from view like a city in the shadow of a storm cloud. He looked to the King for assent and began to raise the blade over his head.

“Wait.” Called out the King. His quiet voice cut through the tense silence of the hall as an arrowing whistling its way through wind and armor and flesh. The wind went out of each onlooker, and the breath became too great to bear holding. The king’s hand was outstretched, as if puppeteering the knight, whose face was locked in a deathly veiny grimace. A killing face. “Forgive me, I have erred,” the king solicited as he shook his head. Clearly ruminating on an idea, the king stroked his long ashen beard. The Earl was red face, sweating, and looking faint by the moment. Turning to his son, he said, “the duty is yours. A king must not ask of a thrall what he is not willing to do himself.” “No,” the prince at once came to his feet. His green eyes darting back and forth between

the prisoner, the earl, and the king.

“I will brook to further argument. Be a man, defend the honor of your sister and your house. Go and bring me his hand.”

The prince was a pale shadow, brittle as old bone. He was pale, and for a moment his face was green with sick. Without taking another look at anybody, not the king, not the earl, not the great knight Hornfels, and least of all the prisoner. Hands trembling and off balance, he stepped hesitantly down from the throne platform.

The knight handed the cleaver to his prince with a mailed fist. It hung heavy the grip of his thin arm. He took another step down, begging to step over the Earl's son. For the first time since his confession, the Earl's young son looked up and his executor. The prince kneeled down to put a word in his ear. The look he got in return could have been equal parts fear, and anger. He was an animal in grips of a snare.

He spit with all the venom of a serpent and struck the prince most uncourteously in the eye. Looking back down, he began to convulse in chopping sobs, and snot bubbled from his nostrils.

The prince's arm rose and stayed a most brief hesitation. Then the flash of steel buffeted the air, followed by the thud of a blade embedded in the block, and the howling screams.

## I

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Paul woke with a start, to a distant cacophony of bells. Not the bells of the lark. *It is still dark behind the shutters.* These bells rang with grief. Paul could feel it in his stomach, as if he would be sick of... of what? Nerves? Paul rose from underneath his silk covers, his face dotted with sweat, to meet his brother's wide candle-lit gaze. Then he knew. These were the bells that heralded the death of Kings, and the passing of a crown. Soon their mother's handmaids would come to bring them to their mother, or their uncle, or the perhaps priestess.

Paul began to dress, and Marcus followed suit. They took care not to make any noise, so as to wake Sam. Their youngest brother had been blessed this evening with dreams at the very least deep, if not sweet. Paul figured it would be a kindness to let him sleep until light. *He might not rest this well again for many moons.* As they pulled slippers over their feet and fastened their robes it proved to be their uncle who came with the summons. They left Sam to his dreams at Paul's insistence.

Their mother and father's apartments were brightly lit with candles, to beat the black sky back behind the curtains. Their father was expectedly absent. Their mother sat in the chair beside their bed, puffy eyed and sniffing. She had not seen them come in. But when her eyes met theirs, she straightened, wiping tears and snot from her nose. They came closer.

"Paul, where is your brother?" she asked with a cursory glance.

"We left him sleeping."

She pondered the carpet beneath her sandals. "It'd be best if you wake him."

As he turned, his mother took his hand. He saw she had reached for Marcus as well, but he had flinched at that. His eyes went wide again, and he looked to Paul, as if for help, then he appealed to the carpet, then his mother. It was as if...*as if he had only just realized why we are here.*

“Grandfather is dead” Marcus choked on the last word and tears welled in his eyes. This time he let their mother grab his hand.

“My sweet boy,” she tried to mask her grief with sympathy.

She pulled him closer, but he held her at an arm’s length for long enough to ask, “Where has father gone?” Now he was afraid. “Has he ridden off to War? Has he gone?” Their mother was confused now. Even a bit fearful herself but that soon turned to disbelief. “There is no war here sweet child. The King is attending to his father’s body.” At that Marc gave in to his mother’s embrace. She turned her head to look at Paul. “Bring Sam, my dear.” She managed a sad smile and he turned once more to go.

Paul found Sam awake inside their bedchamber, looking toward the window carved in stone. Outside it was still dark and would be so for some time to come. “Sam get dressed. You have to come with me to see mother.” Paul’s youngest brother simply blinked at him. He was twelve years of age, six years his junior, but of a height with him and still growing. However, in this sleep deprived state he looked frail.

“I heard the bells. Is it true?”

Paul nodded. “That’s the way of it. Get dressed.” Sam blinked once more at him, slowly obliging his brother. Paul looked around the hazy bedchamber, warm with candlelit air. Paul wouldn’t likely sleep there anymore, he knew. Somehow that thought had brought him his first wave of grief. He had often found the cramped room to be a

great annoyance. However, he had at the very least grown accustomed to the furnishings and the window.

The window was enormous and many times throughout the past several years had been Paul's chief source of entertainment, within the royal palace. It faced north and west toward the river, the city of Urum flanking it on either side. The city that had once been two. With its open market and docks all down the serpents back, it looked a proper city now, like the old cities of the east. A high wall blocked his view of the bridge that crossed over from the castle on the opposite bank the buildings shone where a wall had once stood and once been torn down. Downstream, beyond the reach of his eyes, there stood a half-ruined manse where the serpents neck became its head. Suddenly all Paul could have wished for was another hour, even a few precious moments of sleep.

Instead he brought Sam to their mother. He had been solemn along the walk, as if stubbornly trying to resist discussing the issue at hand. But when he saw his mother sitting there, another gave way to tears and the air was well saturated with salt. She cradled his head with its long brown waves and doted, stating it ought to be cut before he was called forth to take his grandfather to his tomb.

"When will we be permitted to see father?" Sam pleaded with his mother.

"Likely not until he is crowned. Your father has inherited more responsibility than any man can bear alone. He will need you, Sam. And your brothers will need you and you them."

"Will we see grandfather?" Paul knew this was folly.

"Your Father has commanded that only he and your uncle are permitted to within your grandfather's apartments. That is his decision to make, and you'd best not ask any

different of him. You will take your grandfather to his tomb, that is your right and your duty.”

“When will we put Grandfather beneath the Titan?” Paul heard himself ask before Sam had time to argue. At this time of year, the walk would be dreadfully hot, and Paul had felt unease at every mention of the entombment rituals to which he was bound to attend. Even so, he had not meant for the apprehension to show so plainly in his voice.

“Your father has expressed to the clergy that he wishes for the entombment to be performed at once. It shall be so. You and your brothers will needs choose arms and totems. Your uncle Aden will assist the three of you in this.” Paul had scarce considered a totem nor arms. Nor was he in any mood to consider what color his banner and cloak and shroud would be.

Their mother took them to break their fast as the sun rose, enjoying the company of the Holy Lady Arielle. “Adrian was wise as wise can be, beyond a doubt. You father is very powerful, and wise too. He will be a great King and he will receive all the blessings of God to protect him.”. That was not exactly reassuring coming from the high priestess, the way Paul saw it. When his grandfather had grown ill, Arielle had decreed that Adrian would overcome the fever and deliver his justice for several more years. *Not even a fortnight ago*. But it was not her fault that Adrian had died. No one could have stopped his illness. The king had a fit of pain about the chest and had been in bed for days. He was bled, and bathed, and blessed, but it did him no good, and all had known it to be so. Light poured through the high ceiling windows, bright but cool. Paul picked through some potatoes and boiled eggs and whatever little else that he could stomach to eat. None were very hungry, except for Marcus who lustily spooned more of the potatoes onto his

platter.

“Poor boy,” their Uncle Aden had once told him and Sam, “He’ll be great knight your brother, but god forgive if he’s ever to do battle on an empty stomach. He’d surely be brought low.” Sam had liked that joke so much, he had attempted to repeat it to every knight or household attendant who had the misfortune of running into him that day and the next. However, he had seemed to have trouble with the delivery of the joke, and it was never as funny as when Aden has said it himself. That might have been 3 summers passed by now, it had become difficult for Paul to remember.

Today Aden had not armed himself with any jokes when he came to fetch Paul. Sam protested as the strode from the minor hall. “I want to go with you.” Their mother caught his hand as he began to rise. “Your brother has the right to make his choice of a banner. You will have that right after him and Marcus. In the meantime, both of you shall need a shearing.” He gave a helpless glance at Paul, who nodded in return. Sam had begged him not to choose any of his favorite plants or animals as for his banner and made him swear upon his royal honor. That meant that he could not adopt the likeness of the Wild Bull who would descend from the titans with the snow to wait where the mountains meet the grass. Paul was also barred from choosing a toad. Marcus had taken to calling his favorite of the hounds toad, a shy brown mut in truth. But Sam had grown fond of toad as well and had thrice declared that he would take toad for his banner. Never once had he deigned to make this proclamation in front of their father though. And Paul was frankly confused whether he meant to take the hound or the frog. Either way Paul best steer clear to appease his brother in this difficult time. Sage was also off limits. Sam reckoned it was the king of the plants in the Harthland. It fed the elk and the deer, as

well as the birds and the rabbits. Paul wondered why being the most edible had qualified the grouse for Kingship but beckoning his brother for reasons proved tedious work.

“Most importantly of all,” Sam had told him, ”You cannot take the bear.”

On this occasion Paul had decided to provoke his little brother. “Sam you cannot mean to take all of these as totem, surely.”

“I plan to choose one of them, or perhaps two. But I want to make that decision for myself.

“You’ve never even seen a bear. You shouldn’t take the bear for your banner. It wouldn’t be right. Grandfather says men ought to make their banners of their own hand” Marcus had caught on, “The dusty old bear skin they’d have to dig up for you would be twice your size.”

“I wouldn’t bring him a stupid skin,” rebuked Sam, with all his young pride, “I could bring him a tooth or a claw.”

“Aye, and that would be very brave of you.” It had been a crueler sort of joke than Paul had intended but it would be better to discourage his brother from making a fool of himself at their father’s coronation.

Aden brought Paul to the southern gardens, and there they sat on a stone bench beneath a fruit tree. The sun had begun to traverse the sky timidly and Paul could still feel a chill creeping under the folds of his cloak. The sky, however, was brighter and dryer than it had any right to be by Paul’s estimation. In his mind, the day ought to be dark and sunless. The wind ought to howl and the rain lash against the stones. The Blue Titan had been collecting snow for several days and nights but today, the clouds had made way and the summit was visible with its ripples of deep blue ice. When Paul looked out over the

endless rows of pasqueflowers, and dianthus, and fireweeds, out toward the leagues and leagues lupine meadows stretching out to the west, he found not the faintest hint of a cloud. The mood of the day was about as fit for sunlight as Paul felt fit to be the heir to a king.

He smiled a crooked toothed smile at Paul, who could not help but return it. “Choose wisely Paul. You will be remembered everywhere you go by your banner. What would you have people think when they see your company on the march? What would you have all the people of the world see on the horizon? Hope? Fear, maybe? I always look back and wonder if maybe I should have made mine something outrageous. Like a dragon. Imagine ole Aden marching off to battle with a dragon overhead. Now that is a proper serpent.” His grin was wide then narrow when he saw Paul’s expression. “You wouldn’t like that? Suit yourself. Might regret it one day like me.”

They sat there for a while, quiet. The sun veered into a cloud and a shower of shadows was cast down onto the earth below.

“Perhaps a compass. You have always been good always at counting. You remind me of my younger brother,” his uncle paused and looked out toward the titans, Green and Red and Golden and Blue, all of them blue. ‘An abacus would be funny... Don’t you think?’ he said with another smile, this one sadder than the last, yet it gave way to a chuckle. “With a snake all tangled in the rungs.

Paul suddenly felt desperate to find his answer. His uncle continued to suggest symbols and not a single one of them was of any use to him. His father would surely have the priests preparing their grandfather by now. The march to the Titan’s mouth would be on the morrow or the next day perhaps. His brothers had thought of hundreds of great

beasts and heroes and swords to display upon the shields and banners, but Paul had scarcely thought about it at all. Now he felt unprepared for his father's coronation. He had not read the histories as extensively as his brother Marcus had done. He could not remember the banners of all the Harthean Kings and Princes of renown. He had not the slightest clue what kind of prince his father wanted him to be. He was not a sailor, not a soldier. He could ride but he hardly cared for it, that had been Marcus as well. Sam knew all the animals that lived between the Titans and Merlon's Belt. Every idea Paul could call forth had just been one he had heard his brothers say nights passed. He had the right of first choosing and not the faintest clue what made for a good totem.

Paul threw his head back, frustrated, and thought he might yell. Instead, he opened his eyes and saw, yellow and crimson and violet, that hung so low overhead he was surprised he hadn't seen it earlier. He plucked it.

"Your father has decided it is time that Elia marries." Paul did not know what to say to that. His cousin was their Uncle Aden's daughter and only child. Paul had not been very close to his cousin, but he knew it would be difficult for his uncle to see her go to be wed in some unfamiliar place, to be a wife and lady and mother the sort. When Paul was eleven, their uncle had moved west with his wife and daughter, at the behest of Paul's great grandfather. Elia's mother grew ill shortly after they arrived, and Paul heard that Elia would not shy expressing her distaste for the country. Sam had only been jealous of them, begging his uncle to take him as well so he might finally see a grizzly or a wolf down in the Stone Tooth Valley. However, Sam's pleas had been for naught.

"She might be happy to get away from the country. I know" he looked at Paul, "that's what your father says to me." Now he evaluated the palms of his hands. "I wish I

could have given her the comforts of home... this home, these past years. She will scarce get an opportunity to enjoy them again.”

Paul had been feeling a similar anxiety all day, he found. “Everything is going to be different now.” Paul had meant it to for it to come out as a question, but his uncle simply nodded at that, as if he had understood some thoughtful notion Paul had been trying to express. Paul wondered what that might have been.

The day tread on lethargically, as the sun meandered across the sky. Aden soon took his leave of the prince, and soon after, the prince took his leave of the bench, when it had lost the virtue casting shade. He wandered the halls aimless, floating through the brightly lit stone castle, pale and ghostly. It was best, Paul found, to evade his mother and the wrath which followed at her heels whenever traditions were afoot. Though Paul had wanted to bury his woes beneath his feather pillow, he knew he’d find no piece in his chambers with the queen’s attendants lurking about. So instead, Paul headed to the library, where he lit a candle and picked out a leather-bound volume of “Dark Noon”.

He flipped through parched pages looking for the page with gold-flecked illustration of Symeon riding his hideous mountain condor Temon over the Jade Canyon toward the Lands of across the Rubicon, but he saw only the feast in the deep, and some more of the Conjuror’s adventures in the north. He could not find it. Perhaps it he had grabbed the wrong one. He plucked another and passed the pages back with his thumb. Not this one either. On one page he saw Jereis fighting the Golden Bear and on another Dani giving blue and violet flowers to a serpent maid, and later still Symeon and Olivar stood attendant to the King. Paul put the book back in its place. Paul reckoned he’d drawn that book out a hundred only to read that single page, to run his fingers across the

ink figure and his monstrous steel-feathered bird. If his instincts had not betrayed him, it should have been in the second volume, when the brotherhood crossed out of the Kingdom of Urum through a hidden passage. beneath the Crystal Rain. But Paul had grabbed that one first and not seen it.

He resolved to look again. When Paul grabbed it, the weight felt familiar, like one of his old toys. He could feel the page as if it were calling to him, telling its brothers and sister to make way. But when opened the book it wasn't any more there than it had been moments earlier. He could feel the space it left behind but the pages he saw spoke of the events immediately before and after Simeon's flight. *It's been taken out.* That confused Paul, then angered him. He looked up, attempting to give his silent God a contemptuous look but all he saw were wooden beams and old grey stones.

For the rest of the day Paul attended his mother, who, with the governor of Stone Harbor, Lord Helmont, was making arrangements for the coronation. She had exchanged her silver silken robes for a satin gown of black and gold. She had adorned her neck with a chain of golden amulets, each one encrusted with a different colored gem. The amulet that sat on the center of her chest below her neck depicted a serpent, open mouthed with a ruby tongue. Paul's mother had never been fond of extravagance in any form, but it seems that was all beginning to change. She had transformed from a noble wife and mother into a queen, all since he had seen her at breakfast. Paul saw his mother sign bills for the employment of cooks and land workers and civil servants and tens and hundreds of men at arms. There would be a procession for his grandfather's entombment, and with it, food and drink and ale and wine, and feed for the horses and livestock, wagons and wains for the tents and the gifts of the clergy, and palanquins for Lords and Ladies who

might be too fat or simply too highborn to walk to the. Between the Coronation, the Banner Parade, and the King's feast, it seemed that the morning bells had heralded the coming of debt rather than the coming of death. However, Paul knew he and his family had no choice in it.

"The family lives in the castle, but the castle is mortared in faith and tradition. If these were left unattended, the castle crumbles," his grandfather had said, before they baptized Marc. Paul was remembering how Marc's hair had been golden in his infancy, and yielded only partially to brown, when after he had been baptized.

Then the room grew tense, and Paul's father walked in.

The King's own name was Geralt Pierre and he was of the royal bloodline Urum. The King was broad shouldered and broad chested and tall. Tall as a king should be. His hair was black and grey and white, and his tunic was bloody red. His footsteps had been hammers, yet he'd appeared suddenly at Paul's back. It was the kind of entrance Paul would expect of an assassin or a frightened servant. His grandfather's comings and goings had often been broadcast by his herald, but his father's whereabouts had been the subject of inquiry for the better part of the afternoon. Now he was before them and he and the Queen and the Lord Governor were silent. It was dark outside now, and the candles were burning hot. Paul knelt. Helmont followed.

The King offered them their feet and they accepted graciously and silent still.

"Erric if you'll excuse us..." the King began.

"Of course, sire! I hate to intrude your majesty," he was sputtering as he hurriedly gathered his rolls and clumps of papers.

"You can leave those there; I'll be brief and then you and my wife may continue,"

said the King.

“I’m at your service sire.” And with that he was gone, and it was silent as the void beyond the stars and heaven.

Looking Paul up and down it was easy to see his father’s fatigue. In an instant he lost a father and gained all the weight of the world on his shoulders. Yet the very next moment, he found still the strength to smile. “Are you doing alright, Paul?”

Startled as if it were his first time speaking to the king, he let out a whimpering “mmhmm.”

His father nodded, so as to prod him to continue speaking.

Not fully wanting to Paul finally said “I’m... I’m going to miss him so much.” His father reached out a large solid hand, pulled him close with his gentle strength, and together, they cried.

## II

### 190 AU

The yard bellow the Southern Gate trembled as the sun lifted the siege of darkness that had been set upon the sky. Torches that had just then burnt brightly, went to smolder; the light they had cast overshadowed by the sun. And as the armies of Sun and Moon collided, Marcus could almost ignore the unrelenting of nasal assault horse shit in the air. The gold-flecked prince had been the first of his brothers to wake today, and the first and only one to saddle his own horse. All of the princes had their own horses, *or ponies is Sam's case*, but Paul had never truly taken to riding and Sam had been fonder of running around chasing his garron through the lupines than he had ever been of saddling her. Marc was different. He was a good rider, as his uncle and Ser Daron often praised. He had grown taller, more accustomed to plate and mail. As his sixteenth year drew near, Marc rode more like a knight with each passing day and each passing night.

This morning, however, Marc's snow-white mount shifted uncomfortably beneath him, here and there trying to peddle backwards unnoticed. "Elephant" he had named here, after his beloved cousin, though his mother had been told the name was a suggestion of Sam's. Next to him, Paul sat his horse, silent and ponderous in a woolen crimson cloak that matched his own. She had been cladded in black from head to hooves when his grandfather King Adrian had given her to him as gift. It had been on the eve Marc's 8th birthday. That was long ago now. The mare had shed her coat of black, and Adrian had set his own coat of green velvet, for a shroud of sealed black stone. Marc felt a queer sense of duty when he spared a glance at the sarcophagus in the covered wain.

Next to him, Paul sat his horse, silent and ponderous in a woolen crimson cloak that matched his own. Paul, who was of a height with Marc, though two years his elder, had always been the brother most fond of long brooding bouts of silence. But in the few days Paul had met a ghost and donned its complexion. He was afraid, Marc could see plainly enough. *But if what?* This would hardly be the first time they went to visit Titan in his seat. It was, in fact, the first time either of the two would be taking a step inside the catacombs to see the Kings of old. But that was hardly a cause for concern.

They would have guards and men at arms, and at their side, Uncle Aden. There would scarcely be any cause for concern. And if all else failed, they each had their swords, freshly forged smokey steel, and each fitted with a hilt and pommel carved in the likeness of a snake bearing fangs. The hilt of Paul's sword was wrought in gold, Marcus's own in chrome. They may not yet be knights but they had been trained to use the blades more than competently.

At Marc's back, Royal guards began to trickle out from the beneath the stone archways of the castle proper. The King had chosen red for his royal banner, and it had made Marc's childhood home, with its green banner's and its golden sweets, into a bleak black beastly fortress. As the stream of plated fire-ant knights sputtered.

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They slowed when they reached the Grint Lake. To the west, the Sun kissed the top of the Avens and set the clouds afire.

"We just over there on the ridge above the south bank." Aden told the three of them. "It'll be night when we reach the mouth, but I'm not of a mind to keep the King waiting." Marc

wondered which King his uncle had been referring too. He did not ask, for it made little matter. They'd be exalting Adrian this night, that much was clear.

The party swung around to the left to reach south side. They mounted the ridge and Marc looked back North. They had climbed quite a bit higher than he had expected, he saw at once. The slope which led down toward the water had been cleared of pines and he could see out beyond the treetops of the opposite banks. The Ur was there, slithering through the meadow as hungry snakes do. Its back was hidden behind Hartstone Hill. It seemed, in the pale blue of evening, closer at hand than it ought to be in the wake of a full day's ride.

They dismounted and gave their leads to Debor Din. Prince Aden gave Nate Buckthorn charge of setting the camp in order while they descended. Ben Sweets had the honor of transporting the stone. He seemed he seemed to pale at the prospect.

They trudged on. The way up toward the foot of the mountain was steep and, as it turned out, they were not as close to the Mouth as Marc had assumed. Though summer had seemed in full swing this very same day, a chill set into the nighttime air. Not near soon enough the pines gave way and the ground beneath their feet was rock, old, wind and water worn. They took a single switchback to the west, turned a corner, and they were there.

No, it was there. The night blackened mountainside was spewing water from a thousand different holes into the open air. The power of the torrent was palpable and gave Marc a queer feeling in his stomach. The rock here was not worn, it was gashed. Some were leaks, trickling down like snowmelt. Others were great cascades, spitting mist at the very sight, and ever. The moon was a bright crescent bone, and it too was spitting. The light

beamed off it.

"All of you be careful. The way is slick."

"As you say, uncle," Paul nodded and followed behind. They continued along the wet mountain wall then came under a towering stone. Mist hung loose in the air. It sunk beneath his crimson overcoat and cold nipped at his skin. To Marc's amazement, when they came out from under the stone, that they had passed behind the waterfalls.

They went on, until the sounds of the water tranquilized. The archways were high, and somewhere above Marc's head the moon's silver blue light was creeping down into the cavern cathedral. Torches mounted pegs and Aden stopped at the edge of a wide dark pit behind a stone altar. The rock was cracked but the cracks had been mended and lined with gold. Int shone bright and unmistakable in at his side.

"How deep is that?" Paul asked

"I don't know"

"I don't think you'll be wanting to find out," Marc smiled.

"You," he pointed, "know I don't like heights."

"You don't have to go if you don't want to"

"Yes, he does." Aden was not smiling.

"If Paul isn't going down, I don't want to go either." Sam's full head of hair had been reduced to a thin layer of fuzz atop his head. The head beneath that layer was also shining unmistakably. That way he looked a good deal like Paul, but starved and bare faced. He was rather tall for someone who's face so closely resembled a baby.

"All of us are going, be glad you're not carrying that damn coffin." He pointed toward Ser Benny once more.

"The 'coffin' is currently being blessed." Her holiness broke in.

Aden had to sigh that. He waved torch men into the pit. "After you, my princes," Aden gave ever the slightest bow.

Marc took Sam's hand and did what was asked. He could do that much for his grandfather. The old King had been so good and so wise. Marc would miss him dearly indeed.

Down they went and down and down and still there was no bottom. The sound of water had vanished. Strange stoned sparkled in the torchlight, still embedded in the smooth stone. Down and down and down. The dark here was stalking and hungry. It ate greedily at the torches, all but putting them out. The way down wound round and round and the sound of water subsided far off above their head.

Marc's under tunic had grown damp. The air was moist, but the chill slowly receded. The humidity in the pit was uncouth. The abyss was growing wider in diameter as the descended.

The first tomb stone did not appear until they were deep in the belly of the beast, where the abyss has no bottom and no too as far as any of the party could see. The stone slab looked nothing like what he had expected. It was not shapely like his grandfather's, and if had ever truly been engraved with runes or encrusted with gems, that had been long ago, for they were all gone now. The surface had begun to discolor and crack. That much was visible even by torchlight.

On the cavern wall above the hollow where the ancient tomb was seated, there was evidence of an inscription. It was unintelligible, the glyphs eroding and slick with moisture. But Marcus had learned the meaning of the inscription when he was a young

boy.

### *Titian Spawn*

The first King's name was Camurum Aurturs. He led the Mountain people north, out of the crystal mountains, to settle beneath the titans. That was also the name of his eldest son, the Golden Titan, and grandson, the Golden Smile, whose stone beds were deeper still.

Down and down, and tombstones they passed by the score. It was not till long after, that they came upon the Tomb of the first Serpent.

Marc had always loved learning about the History of his family. Since the death of the Titan Spawn, the Kings of the Mountain had ruled the lands of the upper Ur and the Valley of Stone. But in that time, there were a hundred Kings, and a Hundred kingdoms. The last of the mountain Kings, Triston, had no sons, but four daughters. So, when the time came the King ordered each of his daughters to go and find a worthy king to inherit his kingdom. The eldest was Sirella, and she married King Juden of Avelora, the Horse King. The Second was Honrua and she married Kevis of Hamur Chjo, the eldest son of the Highland King. Some say, he was a fearless warrior with a sword as tall as most men. His third daughter, Fraeris, married the Merchant King of the Stone Harbour, Boris the bountiful.

When the eldest three daughters returned with their would-be King's in tow, the King asked why his youngest daughter was not present. Vaela she was named, and she was the fairest of the four, that everyone knew. When Triston's youngest daughter arrived without a husband, claiming that she herself would be the next King, her was furious and

banished her from his Kingdom forever and always.

In the end Triston had split his Kingdom in three, each to be inherited by one of his remaining daughters and ruled by their husband. They were the Kingdom of the Ur, the Highland Kingdom, and the Kingdom of the Valley and beyond.

This was known as Triston's Tragedy, and it plunged the Kingdoms into war for a hundred and fifty years. This was the Age of the Suitor Kings, and by decree of Julian I, none of them were buried here.

Triston's tombstone was the last of the ancient stones. The engraving above it was still written in glyphs, very much worn away, and Marc couldn't quite remember what it was purported to have said.

The next tombstone looked entirely different from the last. It had intricate engravings all over and wherever the rock had cracked, that crack was lined with gold. On top, there were no glyphs and no characters either. No name. No date. Only a snake, Gold on black.

The tomb was a dreadful sight, for all of its finery. It was no less haunting than the last though there was no danger of confusing one for the other. The monstrous thing was a different color, like coal in a windowless room, and taller than he was. It was still slick with damp as the others had been. It didn't even look like stone, it looked like marble. It was not simply a sarcophagus on a stone stage, it was built into the rock, like some black cyst carving up the Titan's heart.

They were only bigger and more terrible as the party continued their descent. *1...2...3...4....* Marc knew how exactly many there were. The first had been

Julian. Every child in the world might've known it. But only six people in the entire world still had his blood in their veins. The seventh had died 5 nights and 4 days ago. 13...14...15...

He saw snakes on everyone. Black on Gold, Violet on White, Red on gold, coiled and tangled, biting and suffocating prey in their grips. Some were bush vipers, some pythons and other snakes that lived in places so far away that Marc would surely never see them. *Although Sam might try and see them all. 19...20...21.*

It took so awfully long for the the men of the clergy to to lay their grandfather inside his tomb, that Marc worried the sun might come up outside before they came down the Titan's tongue again. Somehow it was a lighter color than the others, there among the torchlit darkness. It had been fitted with its own snake gold on green, for Urum had been Adrian's Garden, and he had watered it well. They christened it with smoking sage, and her Holiness said a prayer so long, would have lulled the old king into a deep sleep long before his hair and beard had gone grey. Marc wondered if his grandfather was really at rest, right about now.

The four of them, the uncle and all three brothers, knelt before the that grave. Marc said farewell as best he could, but he doubted his grandfather could hear it from within his stone chamber. Their uncle put a hand on the lowest of those smokey grey stones.

"I'll be keeping that promise", he looked up, staring intently. Adrian might have been standing right there in front of him, the way Aden looked at the carvings in the rock. A tear welled in his eye but never fell.

"A King of Gold, A King of Stone," Holy Arielle intoned.

"*A King of Flesh and blood and bone*" they all gave back at once. Not only the princes but

the guards as well, and the clergy. It was one brooding blighten voice

"Serpents in the sagebrush, tear drops in the rain"

*"Bury them beneath the blue, from whence the serpent came."*

"Amen," as the echo of her soft holy voice faded away, Marcus realized it was done.

A panel was placed over the space in the tomb where the burial stone had been placed, and it was sealed with golden mortar.

Sam craned his neck around and said "This is the last tomb. Where will they bury father?"

"It will fall to Paul build it one day soon," their uncle looked at the eldest brother.

"You'll be helping Paul build it," his own notion finally brought a familiar smile to his uncle's face. "We're going to put a pick in your hands and some muscle on those long bones." Sam shrank at the thought.

Marc and his elder brother exchanged a grin as well.

"Let's get you dry, son, before you catch a chill. The new King would have my neck if you got sick now."

When they emerged from the mouth once again, the Sun had not yet begun to do its dance across the sky. Nor would it for several hours, star speckled sky revealed. The moon parade was in full swing, and neither the chill in the air, nor the dampness under Marc's cloak had receded. When Marc settled in their pavilion last night, the fatigue seemed to be keeping him from sleep. The exhaustion turned the night into early morning in with a blink of his eyelids.

Aden woke them at first light. That did not help Marc's mood. He had woken very hungry, and that made him irritable.

"Come along lads. All three of you.", he gave sam a light nudge with his boot. "Up boys, let's go."

"Is there food?"

Aden turned to Marc's brothers, "Do you see what I mean?"

The two of them erupted in a stupid bout of laughter and none of it made any sense at all as far as Marc could see. They ate warm bread and black cherries and ham. It was a meager fair and filled marc little, but he figured he was more like to get to eat as soon as he was back home.

Then they were back on their horses. Marc was deadly sore and squirming to lessen the ache in his ass. Elephant's coat was a beacon of white light under an oppressive grey sky.

"We'll not wait for the rest of them to come along. There is a king to crown."

Their uncle set a staggering pace, that made Marc question whether Sam or his horse could keep up. But they did. They left the clergy and the greater part of the royal guards in the dust to trudge along in their wains.

Four of his father's most acclaimed knights rode in front and back, every one of them in a mail and woolen crimson cloak. In front rode Ser Flynn Hornfels, the ranking officer among these Fire Ants. He was shorter than you would expect a man of his 'effect' would be, but he held his chest out and oft spoke with it. He rode a raucous red stallion that elevated him, seating him among the tallest of the party.

Ser Joseph Rainwater was the knight they called "Angel Hair". Upon the black and red of his mail and branding, the long curling locks seemed snowy white, where only days ago they had looked like shimmering molten gold across their grandfather's green field. This

second son of the Lord of the Rainwater was remarkably handsome according to all, there is no doubt. And calloused cold according to those who knew him well. His jokes were cruel, and his horse *was* snow white, not like Marc's elephant. The horse's eyes were bloodshot red and the skin beneath its coat was bleached.

Ser Norlan Renefer's steed was black like the clouds in the sky and very slender. His bushy brown mustache fluttered about restlessly in the wind. MORE

The Last of them was Ser Henry Peninjer, brother of Lord Tomas, a one of the capitol lords. His destrier was pale grey like Adrian's MORE.

At midday they reached the foot of Hartstone Hill. The green and yellow pock-marked face of the Ursh Valley stretched out toward the west. A fog had settles over the valley,

The temperature had wavered, and the sky threatened rain all throughout the morning.

But the storm the never came. Halfway up the hill the saw vast tracts of farmland reaching off into the west. They hugged the banks of the river. Farther north on the western bank, St. John's Borough lay sprawling half gleaming in the waning rays of the evening sun, half basking in the shadow of the Urum's Southwestern Wall. When they spied the southern gate of the Castle did not quite look like the home he had remembered. Garbed in reds and blacks, the smooth stone blocks which had been so pale of face before to on an overcast complexion.

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There were godbrothers and godsisters a plenty in the bathhall, all of them wearing expectant faces. The three boys had entered robed but now they were all but naked.

Covered only by white undercloths, the princes looked positively meager. Marc was the biggest, a bull by comparison to his brothers though that is to say very little.

Paul's arms were wiry, twigs on a long pale trunk of torso that radiated in the shadow of his obsidian scalp. His shoulders slumped downward. His skin clung to his ribs and his shoulder blades like a thin silk mask. His gut was small yet protruded nonetheless when compared with his chest which was sunken. His legs were short in comparison to his body, and this made him look as ineffective as he acted.

The youngest prince looked much the same, only his limbs were longer and all the slenderer, if such a thing could be imagined. His skin carried darker tones than those older princes', closer to the copper of his own hair than the snow white of Paul's complexion.

In days gone by, that hair had grown into long curling locks, but now it was no more than a buzz about his ears and crown.

The baths had been drawn steamy warm, but somehow the onslaught of God-fearing eyes had turned the air in the bath hall frigid. The boys de-clothed all at once and stepped into the pool.

The Godfather was a tall gaunt figure, clad in gold embroidered white satin. On his head a tall cap christened his brow, the elaborate red-gold cross of the Clergy of the Holy Covenant ornamenting its front face.

"In the name of God and the King, I charge you to take these holy vows, and swear your life to Urum and to the one Lord"

The princes consented.

His eyes were hazel brown, reflecting specks of gold in the candlelight. "Bow your

heads"

The princes obeyed.

"Do you three princes swear your faith to the one, God, who created Heaven and Earth and Mountain and Man, all things seen and unseen, for now and ever lest your soul be cursed by sin?"

"We do" Paul and Marc were synchronous, as Arielle had taught them, but Sam lagged as always.

"And to the King of Kings, God's son and your forbearer, who was sent by God's loving hand, to vanquish the false gods and pretenders of the Ancient Heartland," the skin on his cheeks was weathered, and a flock of salt and pepper hairs was sprouting from his hard jaw. "Who reaped sowed the land with blood, spilling gold upon valley and river to water the saplings of his father's Kingdom?"

"We do," that was better from Sam, but he was still stammering, as if the two words were troubling to memorize.

Marc had difficulty picking out how old the Godfather might be. Seldom had this holy priest deigned to venture from his temple across the river and up toward the Castle on Hart-stone hill. In the past whenever, the need had arisen, Lady Arielle would deliver the blessings. But the Holy Lady Arielle was most likely still halfway between the Titans and the City. "And to your mother the Queen and your Father the King, who are the begotten by of King's Blood, whose lives are forfeit to god and Kingdom?"

"We do" that one sounded almost right.

They poured that golden oil over top of all three heads. It dribbled down the side of marc's nose and along his spine as well.

### III

#### 190 AU

Two nights shy of a full moon's turn, Paul's journey brought him, his cousin Elaine, and all his father's men to the county line, where the red grasslands of Jester gave way to sparsely wooded meadows. The pathetic dirt track they called a road had narrowed to the width of a man's shoulders and the carts and wains rattled tremulously as they worked their way over the dry bumpy terrain. The rhythmic beat of boots upon the earth accompanied the pounding of a hundred sets of hooves. To the Northeast, the crystal surface of the serpent's tongue carved a glistening path down toward the city of Basilia in the heart of Basil. The air had begun to thicken, and Paul's tunic and undershirt were sticky with sweat by the time the sun had reached the crest of the sky. His back ached incessantly, and he could barely feel his legs with the constant pounding hoofbeats of the Mare between his legs.

Paul's cousin Elaine was hidden within the pillows upon cushions of her covered wagon, which had been furnished to carry her the rest of the way after she had refused to mount her horse on the third day of riding. In previous contents, mostly food supplies, had to be left there on the side of the road. Instead of mounting her gelding she had sat upon the dirt of the road, and announced she could no longer ride, out of pain. How many days ago she had thrown that tantrum Paul could no longer remember, but he remembered the pathetic look on her face. In her heart she truly believed that if she cried and screams long and loud enough, that the whole journey, the wedding, the alliance with the Basils, and the entire bloody war might be called off. But it wouldn't be. It couldn't be called off, or even postponed. It had been a stupid waste of time in the end.

The journey seemed to go on forever and there was little comfort in it. Some mornings in the most initial and disoriented moments of his waking, Paul would also experience that dreadful fleeting hope that the cruel dream had ended, and he was back home at King's Castle. But only for that instant. For the better part of the spring, Paul had woken up in occasional inns or the rare holdfast, but most nights it was in his tent. Paul, unlike his brothers, had seldom spent more than an afternoon outside the bounds of the city, or the castle for that matter. Ser Simun had assured in the beginning that travel would become easier by the day, but this had proved yet untrue. Each day of riding the blisters swelled and ripped and oozed and swelled again. Each hour the sun would climb across the sky making the air hotter and more suffocating than the last, until finally night fell, and a chill would conquer the air, giving Paul the shivers in his damp musty clothes. In the evenings Paul would lay in his tent listening to the whispers of the wind against the flaps and the sounds of nature out on a hunt. The stinging of his saddle sores and the unnatural cacophony of the wilderness kept him sleepless most of the night, most nights. It was miserable.

Accompanied by his younger brother Marcus, the second of the King's three sons, and his cousin Elaine, the only daughter of the King's brother, Paul was duty bound to traverse the width of the country twice over before journeys end. They were near 500 in the party, most of those being men at arms sworn to shield the Princess and the young Duchess from any possible harm.

At a fork in the river road 50 leagues south, Marcus, on a mission of his own, had split off from the rest at the stone bridge of Marrowton, taking 10 men with him to cross the serpent's back. Marc was off to squire for the Count of UvBael 100 leagues to the east.

Paul could still see him there on the bridge, the way the streaks of gold in his brown curls had seemed ablaze in the golden light of the afternoon. They'd never really been apart before, those two. Elaine and her mother and father had left the city when Paul was a small boy, Elaine and Marc, near tots. They had traveled west, to the valley, and been overtaken by an early summer snow. Elaine's mother, who had thrown a notorious fit at the prospect of going to live "with the bears and the wild bull!"

The night previous, Paul and Elaine had been hosted and feasted modestly yet generously by the Baron of Jester, a boy of 8 years with a lazy eye and a lisp, at his humble keep. The young Baron was constantly twitching, looking about anxiously as if under threat of attack, or fumbling around with his toys in his hand and muttering incoherent childish thoughts. The baron's holdfast was a low square stone fortress, with a timber roof and four short towers keeping watch over the small village at the foot of its walls. As uncomfortable as Paul had been on the road, he was twice so in the presence of this most noble and courteous child. And so, at his insistence the wedding party set out once again early this very same morning.

There was a slight yet undeniable pain emanating from the base of Paul's groin, and the nagging sensation grew only more discomforting with each mile of dirt road. The unendingness of this journey North was taking its toll. At night, when he shed his riding greens, his thighs would be chafed raw and bleeding. In the night, beneath the folds of his sleeping pelts, that roughened tortured skin would begin to blister and swell. The cruelty came to a head each new day when, in the first light of morning, he would mount his horse once more, and all those blisters would at once pop and begin to bleed again, rubbing up against his under clothes. He wondered if the skin there would ever heal.

At an hour beyond mid-day, Ser Joseph, the knight they called “Angel hair”, reigned up beside Paul, on his dazzling silver Maioran stallion. He was wearing studded leather over his clothes, and all of it under cover of his deep blue cloak. His hair was somewhere between silver and gold, his eyes were hazel in the shadow of his brow but turned a murky green when struck by the light of the sun. Paul needn’t even look at him to know. All the singers, all the poets and jongleurs from Stone Harbor to the Port of Empala sang songs about Angel Hair. Young boys’ and girls’ leagues and oceans away, who would never come close to the man, had likely heard about the Knight of Rainwater, with the hair like threaded silk, whose eyes were a gateway to the depths of the Rubicon Sea. Every year it was a tale more ridiculous than the one told previous.

He smiled at Paul, with not a crease in his face, “I’ll wager we’ve crossed into Basil, by now my boy.” Never had it bothered Paul to be called a boy but hearing it from the relentlessly smug man of no more than 24 did not sit well today.

“I’m your prince, and we might as well be of an age.”

The Knight’s smile did not waver, “A prince you are, my mistake. However, you are not as much a man as you think, and you certainly are not a man as I. If you were, your age would be of no concern, no matter what I called you. The man was so handsome, at times it made Paul feel ill.

To that Paul said nothing. He wished he could come up with something clever, or better yet something wise and kingly to say in response. But there was no Kingliness in him, nor wit. Instead, he chose silence. In the corner of Paul’s eye, he thought saw Elaine stirring from within the covered wagon, but she did not appear from within. Even with all those cushions, the rattle of the road must have been wickedly uncomfortable.

“To the west there,” he pointed across Paul’s chest to his left, “is Wraithsfield, beneath the red tooth.” There is a road there, at the base of the labyrinth canyon. When we’re done here, in Basil, we’ll be taking that road down to the coast, then follow along the sea toward Fischer’s town. Some say that thousands of outlaws and bandits live in the fissures. They even have their own little bandit lord, to rule over the sea of thieves. I asked your grandfather to allow me 50 men to go and purge those trenches. But the old King called them rumors. Now we’ll see if there is truly a fox beyond the brush, or just the shade of a prairie dog.”

Paul did his best to conceal his fear at the prospect of an ambush on the road west, but the mere thought saw his stomach drop below his ankles. Paul continued, wordless, eyes ahead, hoping to see the tops of tower, even though he knew he would arrive no sooner than tomorrow.

“Don’t worry, sweet prince. That golden sword on your hip isn’t just pretty. It’s sharp too, and so are all the rest of them,” he said gesturing toward the rest of the party behind them. “No harm will come your way.” There was something dark in the way Joseph Rainwater spoke to people. Beneath that haunting smile, beneath the angel hair, there was a cruel contempt for any and everything outside of himself. To the onlooker, the man was beautiful, almost perfect. But on the inside, something was rotten. “I grow tired of your company ser,” Paul told him, without once looking again upon his face. The knight widened his smile another step, bowed his head and slowed to let Paul continue alone.

The next day it wasn’t until the late hours of the afternoon that the procession

reached the city crossing. This close to the ocean, there were flies in the air, and sweat came down heavily upon Paul's brow. The sky had gone from dull grey to the smoldering blue and amber of a sunset to the west. The rain had missed them, but mud clotted the way up toward the bridge. The damnable thing was so long and poorly built, that two different wains snapped axles on the journey to the other side of the river, that evening alone. Paul, who had crossed the first and the fastest, watched with mild disinterest as barrels of apples and radishes down toward the sea. Some hapless peasants might stumble upon one of those barrels, washed up on the bank or lost in a cluster of reeds and have their dinners taken care of for the better part of the rest of summer.

By the time all the wagons and wains had crossed, night had fallen, the air had grown thick with bloodsuckers, and Paul had to surrender hope of reaching the sea spire before morning. However, even with the aching of his legs from the ride, Paul found sound sleep.

In his dream, he was back on his horse, looking out over vast desert, with his sword in hand. Slowly, he noticed the men at his side. They were nameless and faceless, but they were his army. They were his men. Slowly, the ground began to tremble as if a mountain might spout right out of the ground in front of them. The horizon was spotted with the silhouettes of a thousand Infernal ants, directly coming his way. The shells of their exoskeletons gleamed in the blinding presence of a red-hot sun. As they grew ever closer, one by one the insects became Men, in helm and plate, with spears of razor steel, on the backs of mounts from hell. At their frontmost rode a massive his enamel plated warrior, his full helm crafted in the likeness of four golden faces going around. The face on the giant's left ear was spread into a wide haunting grin. On the right, the face was

solemn, almost blank. The face in front was grief stricken, weeping tears of blood down shimmering cheeks. Paul could not see the face that sat at the back of the helm, but he knew it was there all the same. It was always there, watching.

In his left hand whirled a terrible spiked morning star on the end of a chain and peg, in his right a great shield, which was like to weigh as much as Paul did. As he wheeled his horse around to flee, his men bore their spears and shields, barring his way to safety. He struggled feebly to get by them, but they were determined to keep him there, on the front lines. With his enemies at his back and his friends in front there was only one thing to do.

The sword was a yard and a half of dark steel, almost black against the blaze of red dawn. The hilt was wrought with Ursh Gold. As he removed it from its sheath, the slither of steel on leather spiced the kiss of the wind. He raised the thing in one arm, blade rising feathery light over his head. There was smell of excrement, that of horse and man alike, thick upon the ground and on occasion the breaches of a young soldier. Behind the lines of Paul's army, trumpets roared countering the pang of the enemy the drum corps. Soundless, breathless, he bid them charge.

The air inside the tent was viscous and warm. Paul had sweat through his garments in the night. Sitting there between the woven panels he tried to imagine the was back home, but the climate brought the charade to a close rather quickly. After that useful mental exercise, Paul finally gained the courage to face the day before him.

When he took his first step out from the tent the sky was grey and bright, the wind drove south from the distant seashore. The grass was tough and tall and itched his ankles at the touch. There were no mountains in the distance, only low trees and rolling plains.

In this part of the country, the river was brown and smelly. Back in Urum the water was always sapphire blue. The river was likely half a mile wide, and it looked all that much bigger in the light of day. He wondered, only for a fleeting moment, how one might endeavor to build a bridge across it.

Sitting atop the surface of the water, like a fly sitting atop a pane of painted glass, was a small caravel with its anchor planted. On the bank small raft had come ashore. With it had come three men, two with sword in their belts, and eels on their chests, an done in a green doublet, curls atop his head with a wispy hair about his lip. Ser Simun and Ser Joseph

“We were so sorry to hear of your dear grandfather’s death, sweet prince. He was after all such a well-tempered king.”

“Eh, thank you, my lord. I do not think I’ve had the pleasure of your name.”

“My name is Percival, Prince. I am the earl’s household steward. We’ve come to fetch you the rest of the way into the city. We had been waiting downstream last evening, but we sailed upriver when we did not spot you on the banks.”

“We all felt the need to spend one more night in the country to be true. We knew you wouldn’t mind the wait.”

Paul had never been called charming, yet this man smiled at that, as if he knew exactly how Paul felt. “If I might ask, where is the Duchess Elaine.” Paul had been wondering the same, but he assured them she would be ready soon.

Inside her tent, Elaine was face down in her bed furs acting as if she had not even noticed him. She had complained the whole way of a want for food since the endless strips of salted meat were not apparently to her liking. And still, standing over her there,

Paul noticed she had grown stout since the journey began. He imagined what it would be like if she grew properly fat, she who had always been praised for her appearance.

“Elaine, you can’t sleep any longer. We must go. These people are waiting for us. They brought a ship and everything.”

She turned to him, “I feel so ill, Paul. I can’t go on a ship! Tell them I can’t.”

He frowned at her. Her whole life she, with her endless black curls, had been told she was beauty itself. But he here with that pleading look on her face, she looked petulant. All she was going to do was make a bad impression on these people, who were her new family.

“It’s not me telling you to get up, Elaine. It’s my father, and he’s the king. You may not think you have to do what I say, but you better remember to do what the king tells you.”

Turning her nose up at him, her mouth threatened a rebuke. But all she had in the end were a few tears and some more hopeless pleas. “Paul, I don’t want to stay here. I want to go back home.”

“Ah so now that you’re here, going your home out in the country doesn’t seem so bad, does it? That might teach you to not complain about what you’ve got. I want to go home too Elaine. you must see that. Everyone we’ve brought here with us does as well.” “So why don’t we take them?” she cut him off. “Why don’t we turn right back around and march everyone back home?”

“You can’t be so stupid as to think that would be alright. My father needs you to marry the Earl’s son. You’ve already been promised to him, and we sent riders out ahead to herald our journey moons ago. If we turn back now, at this moment, we will have

greatly offended an important ally. There is no turning back toward home for me either Elaine. I'm going to be married too, and my father says I'm going to have a seat of my own, though he had not yet told me were. You could do very well here if you focused on what's important."

He saw very little understanding in his cousin's eyes when he looked at her. Her cheeks were raised high upon her face with a rosy hue. Her nose was sharp and small. Her tight curling ringlets of ebon hair were matted and frizzled from trying to hide within her bedroll. Her eyes were begging desperate. When he looked at her, all he saw was a rotten child, with little appreciation for her own privileges.

"I hate your father, Paul. And I'll hate you too if you leave me in that city. You'll never see me again."

"You can hate the King. But you must obey him." With he left, knowing she would dress.

Elaine did not speak another word all the way down the serpent's tongue. The silver sky had only grown darker since day's break, and the water was spraying lightly as they hurtled downstream. The rest of the Party would continue the journey on foot and horse, until they arrived in Basilia. The smell of the river water only grew stronger as they came into the city. The walls of the city were squat and uneven. The houses and inns were all made mostly of timber not stone. As the large vessel sailed by, Paul could see the low folk stop their daily tedium to steal a glance at the ship. From this far out they looked as small as mites. It seemed the city could not be more nonplused by the prince and duchess's arrival.

At the mouth of the river, where the city meets the Sea, a huge stone drum forty

fifty feet high sat flanked on three sides by high towers. At the top of the largest tower, a great fire blazed golden in the gloom.

“That is the Sea Spire, my Prince.” Percival tittered in his ear. He smelled like lavender and mint. “The castle was built by men with your own blood running through their veins. How special it must be to have such a connection with this place.” Paul did his best to look honored, but Elaine did not so much as glance at the castle that would from now until forever be her home.

When finally, the ship approached the outer wall of the Castle called the Sea Spire, which was higher by double than the outer wall of the city itself, Paul spotted a giant iron portcullis plunged deep into the water on its northern most side. As the caravel with its auburn eel on a sail of dark blue came closer to the foot of the sea gate, the iron banded grate began to rise slowly, with the long wailing screech of rust brushing against stone.

Inside, a gaggle of servants and guardsmen stood around 2 youths in fine clothes. The largest of the three, and presumably eldest, was the groom to be, Ser William of Basil, the knight who would one day be the Earl of the County. He was flanked to his right side by his younger sister and his younger brother on the left, both of whose name he could not remember for the life of him.

When they had disembarked it was the girl who spoke first. She took herself onto one knee at their feet and took Paul’s hand in hers.

“It is an honor and pleasure to receive you as our honored guest, my prince.” Delicately as if she were whispering to a spider, she kissed the top of his hand, and lightly raked her fingers over the center of his palm. That was passing odd, he thought.

Never, even since he had been dubbed heir, had anyone greeted him in this way.

Next, she took the hand of his cousin, and gave it what looked like the same treatment all the while dulling out her courtesies. Her brother, the older one, with a short cropped dirty blonde head of hair, did Paul the favor of simply kneeling and bowing his head as a way of paying homage. When he laid eyes upon Elaine, Paul saw a strange look come into his eye, like the sun being covered up by dense dark clouds.

Was that disappointment?

Inside the castle, Paul and Elaine were taken before the Lord's high seat where he would receive them. But when they arrived in the large hall where The Earl of Basil held his court, he was nowhere to be found. The greathall of Earl's Castle seemed inhospitably dark, two torches on wall sconces lit the room from floor level, but on opposite sides of the great circular room. Through a vast oculus in the ceiling, the parting of a grey-blue cloud revealed the bright pale spotlight of the moon, which washed over Paul and Elaine. In moments like these, when things were not exactly as they should be when they should be, Paul's mother would grow more indignant the longer she was made to wait. Today, Paul counted himself grateful she was not there to give the Earl her reproach whenever he decided to greet them.

After a quarter of an hour, or perhaps a half, the door at the back of the room came open. Two men in mail and studded coats came through first, followed by a swollen man in with a large fur of some predatory animal over his fine shirt and skirt. Behind him trailed two more guards. The Earl, without so much as a look at his two guests, turned toward the seat and placed himself there. His left hand rested on the carved likeness of a burning sun on the end of an armrest. The fingers on that hand began to tap the carving

rhythmically as he finally looked up, and unto Paul's face. The fingers of his right hand... were missing.

## IV

### 190 AU

Where the turbid waters of the Rubicon Sea met the towering grey cliffs and wavering shores of the Basilic Coast, the amber light of the sun offered it's surrender to the jagged horizon. Fuchsia and violet rhododendrons stood shoulder to shoulder with spring columbines, rows and rows of them, a great and colorful army that seemed to march in the wind off the ocean. In the bride's mass of thick black curls were woven florets of fireweed and bunches of shooting stars. The skin of her face bore the bright dying light dusk as the bronze shield of Kemron bore the devastating blow of his own brother's axe in the ages past and stories old. There, against the brooding clouds and the spray of crashing waves, Elaine was as handsome a maid as Paul had ever seen. In her deep green dress and serpent ringlet round her neck, Paul could barely tell how stout she'd grown. If only he could forget.

The bride and groom and vicar stood beneath a white stone pavilion, with columns streaked with ivy. The gown she wore was layered wool, dyed green and interwoven with golden silk ribbons slithering up her skirts. Beneath those folds, she was indulging her habit of shifting her weight from one side to the other, which betrayed a restless discomfort. The Queen, Paul's mother, had made a point of grieving Elaine over this most discourteous impulse.

Her match was far less dashing. Head near shaven, Ser William dawned heavy navy fleece with an auburn sash. Round his waste was an ornate belt colored rosette and holly, made of the skin of some reptile no doubt. The buckle was encrusted with a polished dazzling orb of lapis lazuli. But his face was etched with a look of what might

be equal parts contempt and disinterest. Elaine had winged unceasingly about how the Earls eldest son had been more than mildly discourteous since their troop had arrived. At the time, Paul had told her that perhaps he had simply been nervous to approach her, or too pious to consort before the wedding, and had considered suggesting to her that he may have been disappointed with the size and shape in which she had been delivered. But he thought better of that notion.

Here and now, with his cousin shimmering on the waterfront, Paul was befuddled at why this mere lordling felt entitled to balk at a bride of royal blood. He should be grateful, and gracious today most of all, but instead the brute was standing there with his pig nose and his meaty head looking as if his meal had spoiled. Paul had never been proud, odd as that might be for the son of a King. His mother and father had always prattled at him about honor and courtesy and reputation most of all, but those words had fallen short of his limited youthful understanding. Now, he understood. That girl, that stubborn willful stupid girl was worth more than gold, and these people have no gold. She was Paul's own blood, a duchess, heir to lands and incomes, and her children would be men and women of great renown in years anew.

“Lord, our god,” recited the vicar, “master of the sea, lord of the sky, creator of the lands near and far, grant this lord and lady your holy blessing, shield their vows from all who seek to do them ill, and bind man to wife in the undying spirit of family. We ask all of this, lord, in honor of your glory.” The godly man was dressed in a dark robe of violet and crimson that made the man seem twice his true size as it billowed lightly in the wind. He turned to face young William.” You may now offer your bride a totem, ser.” The young knight looked out over the rows of witnesses and made a gesture with his

hand. No sooner did the slender, sweet-smelling steward, Percival, hurry forward only slightly struggling with the weight of a small wooden chest in his grasp. He gave the chest over to William, though it looked little more than a jewelry box in the in the clumsy grasp of his thick broad fingers. Kneeling, he opened the box so that Elaine and all the rest might see its contents. The inside was lined with red velvet and on the underside of the lid were painted a green snake and a lilac eel encircling one another. From the bottom of the box, William removed something small and delicate. As he removed it from within, the evening light sent rays of light bursting through the stone adorning the mantle of the ring he held in his hand. When lastly, he placed in on his bride's hand, the death throes of dusk sent shafts of light spraying across the seated crowd of witnesses.

Totems were not always meant to be worn as this. When his father had been crowned, each of the King's three sons had been required to take a totem as their own and put it on a banner of their design. This was the custom. At the coronation Sam, the youngest of the three princes by far, had picked a batch of blue flowers, and lain them across an indigo field. That had seemed to please their father. Marcus, ever the pious unimaginative one, had taken a green leather-bound volume of "Dark Noon", a fable from the origins of Ursh Civilization, as his totem. He placed it upon a bright golden banner. Paul however, had not known what to choose, and instead had asked Sam, who had instincts for this tedious sort of thing, to choose a totem for him. The day of the Coronation, he asked Sam what he'd chosen and was met with the wide terrified gaze of a young boy who has just remembered he's forgotten to do what is asked of him. Sam had whirled and run. Their mother had raved when none could find Paul's younger brother anywhere in the Castle the very day their father was to be crowned. Moments

before they were to depart, Sam appeared in the yard on his horse, dressed in his finest shirt and cloak. He told Sam he had it, reached in a pouch on the saddle and pulled out a ripe purple and gold plum. Paul could still feel the pit that formed in his stomach when he presented the fruit as totem on a deep green flag; could still see his father's stony stare. He could feel the hundreds and thousands of eyes on his back even now, and the stark silence.

Paul slipped out of those dark memories and back into the present when the Earl's younger son, who had been seated on his right, stood, along with all the other boys below the age of manhood [13] seated behind them. Derek, he was called, a little thing for his age. If he ever chanced to stand beside the great oak that was his elder brother, he looked a twig very much. It hadn't taken very long however before Paul noticed how seldom that came to happen. One by one, the young boys in the hall approached the pavilion. This was not the marriage custom observed in the capital, but all the same Elaine knew what to do. Stepping down the stone stair, for a moment she blocked out the point on the horizon where the sun had chosen to make its nest. Her likeness turned to silhouette, and the golden red rays lit her hair alight with the illusion of flame. She took Derek's hand in her own, and to her other side the hand of another boy, perhaps lord Crabgrass's boy, or the castellan's. From there either boy took the hand of another who'd come forward, and each of them took the hand of another in turn, until they formed a long chain of tens of shy youths which ended with his cousin. The boys marched Elaine down the aisle past the rows of spectators toward the wedding feast. From there, every young girl in the crowd rose out of their seat and formed a similar, but admittedly shorter chain of girls began to form around the lordling. Out of the corner of his left eye Paul caught something out of place,

which did not immediately register with him. He took a moment and then turned his head. The next thing which turned was his stomach. Daella, the young daughter of Melba the cook who'd travelled across half of Urum to this place, was hurriedly rushing down the aisle to join the rest of the girls. She was no older than 6, but even still she should not have been anywhere near an event such as this one. How had she even gotten this far this guards posted on the sea stair? Where all the other young girls wore silk gowns with flowers in their hair styled after the duchess, Daella wore a rough wool tunic the color which was a murky green brown, with dark oily stains across the front. Her dress and the state of her hair, with its tangles and lice, gave her away immediately for a commoner.

“She should know better,” he told himself as he watched with horror and humiliation as she trotted conspicuously down toward the pavilion. The moment she made a grab for the nearest girl's soft pink hand. the girl turned, and with a look of terror and revulsion, she screamed and screamed and screamed. Loud and shrill, near deafening, she screamed ever more, until helpless Daella and a few other toddlers and babes began to weep. One man yelled, “don't touch her, you filthy girl!” and made a move from his seat at the back of the audience toward the helpless poor sobbing little girl. His face was ugly, with a crooked nose, this grimacing lips, and brown hairy birth mark on his right cheek. As the other girl continued to wail, William's displeasure turned to disbelief and then a bright flash of anger.

“What is this insect doing at my wedding?” he roared. “Dirty stupid little girl.” He began to practically froth at the moth with outrage. “Take her away! Put her in a dark wet cell!”

At that notion, Paul could take no more of this. He stood and for an instant he was ready

put himself between them and place this stocky Earl's boy on his noble ass. However, at that very same moment a cry came from behind the crown and Melba came scrambling into the aisle.

“Daella,” she was practically screaming, “get away from there, stupid girl!”

“What is the matter with you, woman,” said the man who had been so quick to rise from his seat that he could only be the screaming girl's father. From his stride and his pride, he must at least be a knight or minor noble. And from the hand resting on the hilt, he was the sort of man who would rather stain his blade with blood than have his honor stained with the insolence of a servant. “Have you no wits, to allow your ilk into this royal wedding. Is your head soft on top, woman? Explain yourself.” The young cook stood in the ugly man's shadow, eyes not moving from the mosaic that had been set in the stone hundreds of years ago. “Speak!” and he struck her hard with the back of his hand. Her legs gave beneath her for a moment, but she caught herself on one knee. No one stepped to defend her, not even the rows and rows of knights who had taken oaths to shield too poor and weak and helpless. No one said a word, but to encourage this disgusting display. William took a merciful step away from Daella, but closer to her mother. Finally, Paul found his words, right as the man made to hit her again. The pink faced little noble girl continued her screaming and Daella the poor thing, continued her sobs.

“Strike her again and the next blow will strike your hand from your wrist, I swear it.” It hadn't even really sounded like him. He didn't know why he'd said it like that, yet the air hung with all the authority of a King, he felt it. The ugly man turned back toward the front row incredulous. His shirt was a bright silky sky blue, a white shield with two

red stripes and small brown bird was sewn on the breast. His boots were trimmed leather, and a gold chain hung heavy round the red skin of his neck. His knife turned with him, before he could realize who had spoken. For a moment, white hot rage still burned in his hand, but the moment his eyes focused on Paul's green gold shirt, his hand came off the hilt of his knife. It was too late, even the threat of steel against one of royal blood was sure to rouse Ser Simun. He had approached the man from behind, while he turned. In the instant his hand came up, the knight took hold of the man's wrist and twisted it behind his back, while grabbing the gold chain with his other hand and throwing the man to the ground headfirst.

“No man, not even the son of my King, will order hands removed in my hall. Unhand this man.” Pointing the bare end of the flat stump which terminated his right arm, the Earl looked Paul directly in the eye. It must only have been a second, but it had been a second two long as Paul saw it. A knot had twisted

“No one bears steal against our King's heir.” Returned Ser Simun. He was bald, lean, and tall, with a hard face and a tortured nose. To call his company pleasant would be generous. His dress, and his armament was plain enough for a Royal Guard; the man beneath that garb and mail was plainer still. He had never been a reassuring presence, yet he had never once given offense or been discourteous, the way his fellows often had. The King's knights were not bad men, but they served a purpose, and beyond that purpose little was asked of them. Loyalty, Obedience, Secrecy, Protection. Perhaps he had never been fatherly, the way Benfred Marrow had always been, but in this moment, Paul was grateful for this most boring protector.

“I see no blades bare here, ser. I never saw one. Did you, ser? I will not repeat

myself. Unhand him.”

Ser Simun looked too Paul, who flushed. He'd not started been the one to start this mad scene, but now, in front of the groom and all the guests, he was expected to end it. He looked at briefly at William, who was insolent enough to look bored, then at his father, whose unwavering, unblinking eyes mad the voice catch in his throat. He saw no purpose in escalating this situation any further, that much was common sense. But below sense, below, reason, deep down in the place where he always hid the rage, he could only see Daella's poor face sobbing, and this vulture came down on her. Painfully, he let defeat wash over him. “Do as he say,” was all he could manage then, as he looked back to where ser Simun had done more than accost the supposed knight.

Grimacing, he stood, and released his grip on the ugly man's wrist, as well as on the chain around his neck.

“Ser Florence leave us, go back to your keep. Your father will hear of this, have no doubt.” The man with the blue shirt and the birthmark, who was getting uglier with every bulging vein, gave in finally and left, spitting on melba's feet and he walked by. Melba hurriedly grabber Daella and made for the exit. Ser Simun took by her other hand and rushed them both out on Ser Florence Kath's heels. The Earl turned to his son “Do not do anything to dishonor yourself this night, boy. The last we need is ill accursed luck from shedding blood on your wedding day. And you,” he pointed a thick left-handed finger at Paul in his seat across the aisle, “your household seems to be in disorder, my prince. What is it they've been teaching you about courtesy in the capital? Do common children share water and play with those high-born in the city of Urum? Do they table together in your father's hall as this? That sounds not at all like the kind of thing your

father could stomach in his court. Tell it truly, is this normal for you and yours. Because it is unacceptable hereabouts, I tell you, my prince. Un-ac-cept-able.”

“It will not happen again, my lord, I promise you,” was all Paul could manage in return.

Mercifully, after that, the chain of young girls, minus the one Kath girl who was presumably the daughter of the Knight who’d been so unattractive to look upon, continued with the festivities. They led William away and up the sea stair back toward the stone drum of Earl’s castle.

Alive with the light of a thousand candles, the great hall of basil looked far more handsome now than it had in the gloomy dank dark of their arrival. Scented smooth bathed the guests along the benches of long tables which filled the room. Rows and rows of noble onlookers in silk and satin, wearing precious metals and stones of various colors numerous different sized. The size of the hall even the greatness of the hall at King’s Castle in question. The rim of the oculus must have been close to one hundred feet overhead. Not knowing how it had been done, Paul noticed a great iron chandelier had been hung from four large hooks near the bright moonlit eye in the center of the ceiling. How they had done it was beyond Paul’s comprehension. He sat directly to the right of the Earl, whose seat was raised a foot higher than that of every other attendee. The sprinkle of beer which was refuse from numerous heavy-handed toasts made at regular intervals sprayed Paul’s dinner lightly, along with his clothes.

It would have bothered him terribly for hours he sat there looking at his cousin in her wedding gown. She barely resembled the wreck who’d woken him up that morning. The morning had started with warm air drifting into the chamber carrying with it the

scent of the sea. The sounds of gulls in the chattering intermingled with the tolling of ships in the bay. When Paul roused from sleep, small beads of sweat had formed between his thighs.

Paul and Elaine had been given a shared apartment, which contrast with the furnishings of home was comparably sparse. With their wards and Elaine's flock of handmaids, the rooms were oft cramped, and the soft ocean breeze did little to ease the discomfort of so many bodies in the two-room suite.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Paul realized his cousin was sitting in a chair at the foot of his bed, looking out over the sea.

"You're up early," he told her trying to ignore the distant terrified way she was glaring out the window. But when her eyes turned on him, his stomach rolled over for a brief instant.

"I can't do it Paul. I can't. I need to go home, right now." She was slumping over in the uncomfortable wood and leather backed seat. Her spindly thin arms cradled her gut as though in pain, and her neck stooped down and forward, giving her a hunched heavy-set look. Her curls were her claim to beauty, yet they looked so untamed there and then, that she was barely recognizable to the princess she'd always been.

"You're slouching."

In times like these, he would always look to tease her. He couldn't stand to see her so downtrodden, even if she was an entitled little brat. She was always more fun when she was angry or excited.

But at that very instant she did something which shouldn't have surprised him, but it did.

She began to weep.

The soft sobs she gave were muffled and choked, but the crystalline trail her tears left on rosy cheeks.

"Can't you see what's going on! You are supposed to keep me safe Paul!" She stood up and out of the chair and came to the window. She looked straight down from the edge. Then their eyes met. "But you've acting like a little boy! What do you think they'll do when they find out."

"When they find out what?" Suddenly in the pit of his stomach telling him he didn't want to know.

"That I can't have his child!" she said with all the venom of a serpent.

Another handsome serving girl came before him at the table. Paul was unaccustomed to this style of dining. At King's castle it was customary for serving men and women to approach the dais from behind, so as not to obstruct those at the long tables from view of the King and Queen. Typically, their guests would balk at being shown instead the backside of a common cup bearer. She smiled a crooked smile at him. It was endearing despite the orientation of her bottom row of teeth. The wine she poured was a translucent red, smooth, and sweet.

After his third cup, the Earl clapped his hands, and a group of singers were ushered in and began to perform. After them a flutist, then a poet. Next came the band. A line of harpists, Vertiphones, three on either flank, and above it all was a sound from another world. The Verdaka was larger than any horn Paul had ever seen. The sound it made was not that of an instrument, but of a voice. Had he never seen one illuminated on parchment, he might have mistaken it for a voice. But what voice could sing such a song.

At the very sound, Paul could see castles that surely never existed, lurking behind the flaps of his eyelids. He'd had too much wine by now surely. The melancholic melody which oozed out of the long slender bell was at once wooing him to sleep and giving him a feeling of extasy so fleeting he had to grasp onto it desperately to feel anything at all. Sooner than he would have ever allowed, the song stopped, though no one had truly been singing.

At some point throughout the playing his eyes must have closed, because when he opened them, his vision was blurred and there were restful tears in his eyes. To his horror the entire hall had turned their attention from the band to Paul. With expectant looks upon their furrowed faces, one by one they came to the realization that the music, and perhaps even the wine one might assume, had led the prince to doze. In last attempt to retain some conciliatory bits of dignity, he clapped and gave all the musicians his compliments. All 13 of them stood in acceptance of his praise. He inspected their faces one by one and realized with silent astonishment that the Verdakist was a woman. Their faces were powdered, and their heads covered, but by a rough estimate she looked his mother's age. Paul had never seen a woman play an instrument at home. In the church, the clergymen would ring the bells and at the beginning and end of every service the elder would sound the Gonul. The great brass drums. But in the church, there were no strings or horns. Nor in the King's Castle. Singing was for the those who live and work in the street, said the old Kings. Strings for the tailor. Paul had never heard music like this before, and he knew somehow that this was real music. That what he had heard in the years prior was only the infancy of a more beautiful art.

The final percussionist of the evening was the Earl. With his fist he pounded on

the table and rounded up the eyes and ears of each onlooker. He stood and watched them for a moment. And then he said, "This has been a swell time, hasn't it? I mean, when's the last time one of the Royal Blood in our city, and now here we have two. And one of them will be staying with us, for the rest her days. Now that makes this a blessed day indeed. But a wedding is not complete in times like these, with just kisses and wine, is it, my friends. No these are times of peril and change. And in hard times, we must find solace in love and progeny. So let bind our newlyweds in the marriage bed. What do ya say eh?" he turned to look at paul.

On the other side of the table, Elaine was burying her face in her platter, hoping to avoid the attention that she was being so exclusively granted.

"Aye," Paul almost choked on the word. "In times like this, we must all do our duty. Let them have at it, I say," and with that a roar of delight went up and Paul searched desperately for the bottom of his wine cup.

William stood up out of his chair, well lubricated with wine and in a haste to do the deed. He pulled out Elaine's chair from the table and scooped her up in his arms like a child. Not a few months ago she was still a child. But much had changed.

The sea of dancers parted before them as he carried her to the back of the hall to exit through the large double door. A parade of spectators and silken skirts trailed hurriedly behind them as he carried her through the doors. Passing through he turned back to look at the hall. And for the first time Paul saw the young lordling smile. He never saw Elaine's face in that moment. He never looked. He didn't want to see it. For fear. For shame. He didn't want to know.

He'd worked it out earlier that morning, after Elaine left him. Once it was a

thought in his head it was a certainty. Elaine had been false. No matter how much they tried it would be impossible for William to make her pregnant. It was beyond him to guess when that secret might be revealed but it would be sooner than later, he had a feeling. It would be better, Paul, reckoned for him to be gone by the time that happened, cleansing himself of the responsibility. He's done himself the favor of being ignorant till very recently and would surely not be expected by his father to return and settle the matter from all the way out west. The King would have to resolve the matter himself. What resolution the king might find Paul could not imagine. All he knew is that before William could be given the heir he's so desperately sought out; Elaine would have to give birth to the Baby that's already in her belly.

“Now,” Paul said, turning to face the Earl, “I have beyond a doubt fulfilled my end of the bargain. You have your duchess.”

“You will have your shipyard, my prince. You will have your little export enterprise as we discussed.”

“That isn't all.” It came out harder than he intended but he meant to leave no doubt. “The delegates will arrive any day. You will guarantee them self-passage, and you will not lift your nose at them. You will give them every courtesy you've given my family these days. Their ships and will come and carry home the goods supplied by the Ursh Trading Company. And your will not interfere in their affairs. Should our exports end up at the bottom of the Rubicon at the hands of the Korons or Marons, we will not suspect but assume your involvement until you may prove otherwise. You are charged not only with allowing this operation but safeguarding it. In the name of the King.”

“I know damn well who is giving the orders here boy.”

“You’ve had your royal wedding. The one everyone knows you’ve wanted for so long.” At that notion the Earl’s look turned ice cold. The color drained from his complexion, and in his eyes, Paul saw a glimpse of the hate he’d heard so much about. “Now we will have ours, my Lord.”