

Chapter 3

But that was ridiculous. I had to survive. I had to survive so I could free Daren.

Right?

On a side antechamber coming from one of the lesser used great ballrooms was a doorway set into walls of marble and crystal. Its thick mahogany door frame set with silver patterns, designs of fractal complexity that convey a sense of movement from the base to the bottom implied rather than stated immense resources had gone into this negligent piece of furnishing. The patterns crossed over to the door via the hinges yet concealed the hinges in the folds of their designs. The door itself was also mahogany and the silver threads ran about the edges of it, leaving the center dark and undisturbed. The color seems deep and warm with age and many coats of stain.

It exploded as we came through.

Lightning surrounded us, cocooned me, and wafted across my face and hands whispering in my ears. All I could smell was ozone. Silver branches of fire fell from my finger tips to score deep grooves in the marble floor, burning the polish off in long black lines.

“Go,” I commanded the other two, trying to force my words out through the rolling thunder that was trapped within the four walls with me. I could see the runes that constituted lightning dancing in the air around me, but they had been corrupted and twisted. The fundamental nature of the power was tainted by the shoggoth, and now it stuck to me, draining me.

I flicked a great glob of it away, and it reduced heavy furniture to blasted splinters. Small bolts began to climb between my eyelids, looking for my eyes and trying to get into my brain. When I clenched my eyes shut to keep them out I should have lost all contact with the outside world, for thunder deafened me, but in the darkness of my head I could see the outlines of the conduits that were sucking energy through the doorway. The spell was sucking corruption through the cracks in the doorway and using my strength to do it. Soon shoggoth would come though.

I grabbed the power in my hands, using that gesture to allow myself to attack the magic directly with my will, and threw it at the stone and wood of the door frame. It made contact and then made contact with itself, and formed a loop. The power it was draining from both ends no longer had anywhere to go. Ignoring caution I began funneling my power into the spell, letting the energy spike. It could not escape and escalated exponentially. We had a race between the two of us, me and the corruption. It was attempting to come through, but the anchor it had in this world was shearing stone apart, destroying any resemblance to a doorway the portal had. In blindness I smiled again, pure and easy, glad no one could see me. Even if there were watchers, the intensity of the light would hide me.

“Is this what you wanted?” I asked beast rhetorically. “Is this what you had in mind? A pure contest of power with one of the true children of Baron? Have you no subtlety?”

Fire and wind are the two ingredients necessary for lightning. Fire inherently tries to burn away impurities, and as I shoveled energy I'd siphoned from Casaroc's storm into it, power for the spell was sucked out of the shoggoth a thousandfold what I inserted. I drew the stones from my pocket and poured everything I had left through them, and the lightning shrieked like fingernails on slate. It only took heartbeats for the walls to buckle. They exploded outwards from me, no longer in any recognizable form, and left me alone and breathless in the center of the destruction.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, my dear sister Helen. Doesn't she make an amazing entrance?"

I blinked until I could see and looked around.

Through the gaping holes in the walls, I could see a shocked crowd, shading their eyes with their hands and trying to take cover behind long tables groaning with the weight of food and wine. Debris littered everything. Silk dresses were dusted with rock shards. Half a dozen of the more demonstrative females had fainted. Duncton, tall and fit in immaculate green, was grinning like an idiot.

"Pleasure to see you again, Duncton," I told my brother as I stalked barefoot through the startled crowd. "You need a new door." My scotched clothing would never look presentable, so I ignored it. I palmed the stones back into their bag as I went forward.

"Witch!" shouted Mandrake in his voice of judgment. Standing proud by the host's side he was flanked by his twin, who was trying to say something but couldn't be heard. They were almost identical, differing only in expression and personal colors. Mandrake wore black and red, his heraldic colors. Van wore blue and white. "For breaking your banishment imposed by the edict of—"

"High Judge, I invoke the protection clause of Mars Impens."

Mandrake stopped mid-edict, forced to pause in the very act of pronouncing guilt and sentence.

"In accordance with such, I request the protection of the People's Champion until such time as a formal inquest can determine the merit of my claim."

The two brothers turned and looked at each other, instinctively confirming each had heard what the other had. They looked back at me. Mandrake, High Judge and Champion of the Law, stopped speaking with his mouth still hanging open. He shut it with a click. Van stared at me so hard I think he stopped breathing.

"I'm terribly sorry to interrupt these delightful festivities, Duncton, but since two of your guests are here in formal attire, I really must insist."

Around me, the whispers had hit an intensity reserved for political catastrophe and social triumph. Shocked faces were riveted to the spectacle of the four of us, siblings and power players in the royal game of politics and together at once for the first time since we tried Daren by Mandrake's authority. No one here but us had been born then, and stories about the occasion had begun to fade to myth.

I swept up the three low steps of the receiving pulpit and stared at the others from equal footing. The

dais wasn't large, perhaps six feet around. James had followed me here but left and returned to his lord, pulling the pale lilies out as he did so. They exchanged a brief, vestigial head bow that confirmed my opinion of the high regard Duncton had for him, and then James handed over the spoils of our little journey.

Duncton examined the blossoms carefully then met his lieutenant's eyes. James nodded very seriously. Duncton whistled, returned the flowers to James and his attention to me.

"You know, of course, that the old High Law has not been invoked in a very long time. It may no longer be valid," he broached the matter carefully, pulling the first major sticking point into the open.

"The High Law does not rescind with time. This is of the edict of the Baron, from whom our power descends. Besides, my banishment is a product of the the same."

Duncton nodded and turned to consider Mandrake with his probing eyes. "Your Honor?"

"She is right. Mars Impens temporarily precludes the execution of the punishment for her actions and may eliminate them. There shall be an inquest," he said with clinical detachment. No trace of his irritation touched his voice, for this was a formal affair. His control transcended normality and had become freakish. Once he had announced the verdict, it was set in stone. He nodded to his brother.

Van stepped across the dais and stood beside me, exchanging personas. When he became the People's Champion, his shoulders sat a little straighter, and his eyes began to shine with a keen attention to my situation. It was as natural as wearing a well tailored shirt.

"Your Honor," I asked my oldest brother. "We must hold the inquest with great haste, but time must be made available for the nobles to compose themselves. When shall it begin?"

Mandrake considered me and then let his stoic gaze observe the intoxicated mass of nobility that surrounded us. Impassive, inhuman, he had resumed his role as well, and judged the fitness of the city to examine me coldly.

"It will be held tomorrow at sundown," Mandrake decided.

"Of course, Your Honor," I assented.

"Champion, I release the accused into your custody," he told his brother, who was now as alien to him as if they had just met for the first time.

"High Judge, I accept," the alien replied. Their roles fit about their shoulders as easily as breathing.

Formalities flowed like normal conversation. It was the most natural world to the two who stood before me, even if it never happened to the two who were my brothers.

"And as for her companion?" Van, my protector, asked.

“James Ryan is in my house, duly noted on the rolls,” Duncton interjected. “As a subject of the Low Justice, I claim the right to pass judgment on him for such crimes as I find him culpable in.”

“Granted. Know that his part maybe meaningful in the Inquest of Helen. His presence, and yours, will be required.”

“Of course,” Duncton acquiesced.

I turned to address Casaroc, but he was gone. When I surveyed the room there was no trace of him.

“Yes. He went with me to the Silent City. He can attest to what happened there.” I said, referring to James.

“Then he is a material witness in your case?” Mandrake asked.

“Absolutely,” I replied.

“He will be present tomorrow. Are there any others whose presence you require?”

“There may be. Commoners.” I did not want to reveal Casaroc's existence yet for several reasons. He would obviously want to retain his anonymity as long as possible, and if I helped him with that it might encourage any loyalty he might have towards me. Also, I wanted something in reserve that Mandrake would not be expecting. Finally, James was here, vouched for by Duncton, and his presence at my hearing was already ordained. Never show all your cards at the beginning of the game.

“Call them as you desire. Your Champion may call them at your behest by the power of House Royal.” Mandrake offered me the traditional protections of my station as a Daughter of the Baron. It was a step down from what I was used to.

“Unless they claim to be in the service of Helen,” Van interjected. He was standing at my side now, and he brought up the exemption for me. My heart grew light as I realized on an emotional level that Van really did intent to play his role and defend me to the end.

“Helen no longer has a house.” Mandrake replied.

“Immaterial. Her power speaks for itself.”

“And what power is that?”

“That.” Van jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the ruins of the wall, the blasted sitting room, and the hallway clearly visible on the other side. Van had the most marvelous habit of directness.

“Carcosa,” I answered. Magic was a bad foundation in a witchcraft trial. “I have the means to return there at a whim.”

Mandrake snorted. I smiled again, and turned to Duncton.

“Dear, I need a witness.”

Duncheon looked down back at James and then at me. He must have expected this outcome.

“James has lilies from Carcosa. I do not have the means to acquire them, but having sent him to Helen, now he has them,” he announced. He glanced at me and I could read, ‘that’s one you owe me,’ in his eyes.

“Do you attest that in my presence?” High Judge Mandrake asked.

“You want me to repeat myself?”

A battle of wills between those two was fascinating to watch. Duncheon was calm and assured, absolutely certain in his knowledge. He emanated confidence. But nothing touched Mandrake. His emotions were sealed off from his mind, and while he acted in his duties he may as well have been a computer. There was no flaw in his own certainty to allow Duncheon an approach. Still, Duncheon was the preeminent master of all things scientific here, and gainsaying him would be absurd.

“Then you too will need to be present at the inquest. All must hear what you have to say.”

“Naturally.” Duncheon smiled, almost a smirk. “I shall be there in my official standing.”

“Then be about your business. I must begin my preparations.”

“Thank you for gracing my house with your presence. I’m delighted you accepted my invitation.” Duncheon bowed slightly, enough to convey the required respect for our brother’s rank and no more. Mandrake acknowledged similarly and swept out.

“Why has the band stopped?” our host asked loudly. The band took that as their cue and immediately picked up their instruments. “Why is there no dancing?” The crowd rushed to the floor. “Why does my long lost sister have nothing to drink?” Glasses appeared in hands. We were alone on the dias.

“Van, how have you been?” I asked, eager to end that conversation. “You look well, and it’s been so long.”

“Thank you.” Then, much quieter, “What are you doing Helen?” Van had stepped forward and leaned over my shoulder to whisper in my ear.

“I’ll explain in private. Can you put me up for the night?” I hissed.

“Of course. A attendant of mine has a small house where you can stay. Unless you’d like to come back to House Royal with me.”

“That might be a bit embarrassing, seeing as it is that Mandrake lives there too. He might try to pass judgment on me in the bathroom.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“Why don't you stay here for the party and leave after? If your attendant is out somewhere, he'll need time to return home and make preparations anyway. I'll send someone with a message,” Duncton offered. He was close enough to be a part of our conversation, but a look had forced the crowd of excited nobles to keep their distance. He'd always impressed me with his discretion.

“I haven't ruined the mood?” I asked.

“Helen, you've just made my night. You kicked down my door, shattered my walls, stared down Mandrake, and brought up laws that are millenia old. I don't think anyone here even knew we had high and low justice. I couldn't pay money for better entertainment, and I checked. Believe me, I checked.”

I winked at him.

“Have I ever told you how wonderful you are?” I asked.

“Many times. Do it again.”

“You are amazing.”

“Actually, I kicked down the door,” James interjected.

“Fine then. I'll take it out of your salary.”

“I have a salary?” James asked curiously.

Duncton considered this. “Details,” he dismissed it.

“Would you like a bit of privacy?” Van asked. “Perhaps to get ready for the evening? Besides, virtually everyone here is going to want a few minutes to gossip and try to figure out who you are.”

“Van, you're amazing also.” I shared my flattery with him.

“As amazing as me?” Duncton asked, affecting a hurt expression.

“I could never choose between you.”

“Fine then. I'll prep the guests, you prep yourself. Whitler, take my dear sister to the Airy Suite.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

Van offered me his arm, and I took it. Whitler, a butlerly looking fellow, lead us out the great doors.

"Someone make sure that wall isn't going to collapse!" we could hear him yelling as we exited a small side door.

As soon as we were out of sight I staggered. Van looked at me astonished as I clung to him, trying to suck strength through his skin to keep myself upright. He swept one arm around me, draping his cloak over my shoulders.

"You might have to carry me," I warned him seriously.

"What happened to you?"

"Other than the obvious? I'll tell you in a moment."

He did have to carry me upstairs. Whitler left us at the door, and Van set me gently on a couch and fetched some water. The Airy Suite was gorgeous. Every chair seemed to float, the tables barely touched the ground, and wide expanses of open space made the room flow about. That might have been my head spinning.

Van and I had not seen each other much since our early youth. Once the children left the glass atrium, we'd scattered to the winds. As stories of his accomplishments had come to me, I'd been enamoured of him as a younger sibling often is. He was my ideal of the perfect warrior as well as the perfect man. Fighting dragons, waging the bandit wars, defeating the forces of evil and horror, being everything I'd been taught that a perfect human being should be, Van was more than human, but not like me. He had done it right. He had made all the correct decisions. Van was, after all, the perfect person.

"You need anything?" he asked.

"Strong drink," I admitted.

"Wine?"

"Van, do you think I've changed so much?" In the thousand years since my trial, I should have. I hadn't.

"Right." My oldest brother nodded and went to the sideboard. He returned with a black bottle. "Ever had Toxin?"

I took the bottle from him, pulled the cork with my teeth, and downed half of it. "Yes. Just now."

Van burst out laughing. "Sorry, I had forgotten that."

"Forgotten what?"

"Any number of things. The trip to the Lions."

"I'm surprised you ever remembered that at all."

"I don't. I remember the toilet pretty badly though." He returned to the sideboard and poured himself some wine. It was a white that matched his clothing. "This is a bit more my level. Want anything to eat?"

"What have you got?"

"Warehouses of stuff. Duncton has some bread and cheese here."

"I'd love it."

We made ourselves a snack. A couple more long pulls at the bottle took the edge off my nerves.

"So," he began.

"The King in Yellow lives."

Van very carefully put down his wine. A lesser man would have dropped it.

"I saw him in Carcosa. He looked at me. I think he recognized me."

"Faith," he whispered.

"That's the approaching chaos I'm going to talk about tomorrow. Do you think the city will be able to handle it?"

"Handle him? I doubt it. The news of him? Almost certainly. Only we know him. The family. How can the rest come to grips with the boogie man?"

"They'll have too."

"I don't think they can." Mandrake twirled a spoon in his fingers, spinning it about until it became a flat disk of light. "You don't understand. They've all heard of him. We make sure some of the old stories are still told. But they don't know him. Children dress up in yellow costumes when they're trying to be frightening, and it's a joke. At a fancy dress ball a while back one of the guests of honor came in saffron robes."

I stared at Van, wondering if perhaps I was already drunk and hallucinating. "You let someone in saffron robes into your house?"

"Helen, it's been eons."

"He's the King in Yellow! Raw distilled evil! Why?" I shrieked.

"This isn't Carcosa!" Van was almost pleading with me, trying to make me understand. "These people don't know."

“And now they're going to find out. He's still alive, Van.”

“But they don't know that, and they don't know him.”

I could not comprehend what he was saying. The words made no sense. Everything he said was a nonsequitor, a babble.

We stared at each other. I was shocked, disgusted, appalled, and worse. I couldn't even shut my mouth and had to let it hang open while I tried to make words come out. There was no way. We weren't even speaking the same language.

Van was better at these things than I. He moved forward and embraced me, holding me like a big brother was supposed to in normal families. When my nerve had returned I pulled away.

“Is there another bottle over there?”

My brother glanced down and looked at the one in my hand. “There is still a little in there,” he protested.

I just looked at him.

“And no, not of that there isn't.”

“That's too bad. It's decent stuff.” I drank a little more, deciding I would ration out the rest of it.

“Would you like to head down?”

“Not yet. I want to be sure James has finished giving Duncton his briefing.”

“What do you mean?”

“James is currently telling Duncton everything we've done in the last few days. Its the price I'm paying for Duncton to back me as I try to remove my exile.”

Van sipped his wine slowly, looking at me carefully. His expression hinted at respect and a healthy caution. He was no doubt wondering what he had gotten himself into. He would be a powerful ally, so I decided to tell him as much as possible. “Are you familiar with the story?”

“No,” Van admitted.

“It began with James having problems with his love life. He seems to be less than wise in his choice of paramours. He's currently after Varya.”

Van snorted.

"Exactly. Though he claims to be having some success. Regardless, he needed help with her so Duncton sent Azhi to tell me to see what I could do. The real purpose was Duncton wanted to make overtures to me after all this time. I think Duncton gets nervous when he doesn't know what I'm capable of or what I'm doing. I knew Duncton had been seeking a return to Carcosa since we left there, and I also know he has been unsuccessful."

"You have been in contact with him prior to this?"

"Not consistently."

"Then how did you know he was trying to return to Carcosa and had failed?"

"I know he was trying because I know Duncton. No one knows what happened there after we left, and no one's been back since except me. He's been trying to find a way."

"That sounds like him."

Van's agreement was unnecessary but gave us a common ground. This would make it easier for me to get him up to speed.

"How did you know he failed?" he asked.

"Because no one but me can go there. I've sealed the way."

"How?"

"I am a witch," I reminded him. "That was the reason I was exiled in the first place."

"You were exiled because you and Ducarte incited a revolution, brought an army to Carcosa, laid siege to the palace, and sent assassins after Satre," Van corrected me.

"That wasn't what I was charged with, unless you did it behind my back. By the time my trial came up I had already left, and the only thing I could be tried for in absentia was witchcraft."

"Helen, you were exiled because none of the rest of us wanted you killed, even after everything."

"I can think of a few people who would disagree."

Van sighed and rubbed his head in a tired gesture. He changed the subject, "So did you help James with Varya?"

"Yes. I took him to Carcosa, where he collected some lilies. Alyssa wants them very badly so Varya does as well. Female politics being what they are," I snorted. "-that should all but melt Varya's heart. If James has the brains of a toaster he'll drag Varya through coals at the bargaining table, beat her at something, and force that bitch to give him a little respect, which should be all he needs to get inside that stainless steel trap she calls her heart."

"Helen, be nice."

"I am being nice! I'm helping James get the girl."

"That's not what I meant."

"She is a bitch. It's a point of pride with her."

"I'm not going to listen to this. Ever be civil, or I'll leave now to warn Duke Prescott that you're going to be his guest for the evening and the foreseeable future."

"Very well. I'm sorry."

Van accepted that at face value. "Would you like to talk about Satre?"

"Van, why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Everything. Being so polite. Helping me. Sitting up here now, talking to me. I want your help, and I need it, but we have nothing in common."

"You're my sister. Satre isn't."

"He's your brother-in-law."

"Because I'm trying to get through to you. I remember what you did at the end of Carcosa. I remember the look in your eyes, the ruthlessness, the way you were so willing to die for whatever it was you wanted that it bordered on eagerness. Even now, everything you've done, everything you're doing is leading you somewhere, and I don't know what it is, but I don't think its going to help you, or us, or anyone, and it's certainly not going to make your life easier. I remember hearing you laugh when you weren't bitter. I can't remember when you stopped."

How do you tell the only truly good person left in the world that you're the villain in the play? I had so much practice hiding my emotions that I don't think any of the hopelessness that I felt so suddenly showed through. It all stayed close to me, very tight, and was something that I could keep to me alone. It was a small kindness, a way to let Van believe in goodness and hope a little longer. I missed those feelings, and I was happy I could give someone else them for a little while. But the voices in the back of my head kept whispering, and my thoughts kept revolving, and like a machina I began to plot again.

"Thank you, dear." I kissed him very softly on the cheek. It felt like poison, so I swallowed to clear the taste from my mouth. "But I'm fine now." I stood up, took the last of the bottle in a mouthful, and swirled the caustic beverage around my tongue until the alcohol burned everything away. When I swallowed it flushed the last bit of regret into my stomach, and I felt ready to go on. "Would you mind

if I took a moment in the other room?"

"Of course not."

I smiled and stepped around a corner, softly shutting the door. The bathroom was expansive with wide windows covered in green lace that fluttered in the evening breeze. Duncton had imported the idea of running water, something I firmly supported, and I filled the sink as I looked into the mirror. As usual, my reflection was a thin, twisted dead man with bloodshot eyes.

"We've come to Wilno, Daren," I told him as I washed my face. "Our path was always destined to lead here, and we've walked to the end of this part of it. Do you feel any better?"

"Feel?" He didn't understand the question. "I should remain sane for a while, though the pendulum is swinging back. Are you prepared for what you must do here?"

"Yes. I will not fail our master."

"This place is not the end of our path. This is merely the antipode of the swing. Between here and Carcosa is the whole of our route, merely bouncing back and forth in the same mad, unavoidable way that my mind comes and goes. If you're feeling drained, do not falter. The pendulum stops for an instant at each extreme, but it obtains its greatest energy there."

With my head down so my hair tumbled about me I could only see him like through curtains. I glanced up at this most peculiar statement from someone who viewed the world in mechanical precision. "You think our travels are the swinging of a pendulum in some clock of fate?"

"Perhaps." He shrugged. "And perhaps I am already mad and retreating to my youth. I was a clockmaker before I became a murderer."

"I never knew that."

Daren ignored that, and I finished my toilet. He asked, "What do you intend to do now?"

"I'm going to go find Casaroc. I might need him at the inquest, and I certainly want to be able to put my hands on him when he becomes useful. Besides, I need to get away from that party downstairs."

"Why? The rich and powerful are down there. They'll be scheming; you'll be scheming. It should be a perfect evening for you."

I glanced at him in the mirror, then down at myself. "Because I haven't a thing to wear."

That baffled him. I smiled and left.

"Van, I need to get out into the city tonight."

He considered this, then nodded. "And you want to go alone?"

“No, but you are very noticeable.”

Van nodded again. He had risen in my absence to stand before a large painting of himself. In the image he was standing alone before a horde of shadowy men with sword in hand and a determined visage. The scene implied a courageous last stand against unbeatable odds. Realistically, the odds must not have been unbeatable after all, for he seemed to find the image of his epic demise amusing.

He was over six feet tall, and weighed perhaps two hundred twenty pounds. Words like heroic, valiant, and noble spring to mind when you see him. He has a high brow, long firm jaw lines, and a regal nose. His hair is dark. There's usually a hint of smile behind his eyes, unless he's being serious, and every emotion seen in him seems genuine and warm. Mandrake is his identical twin but lacks his charisma. Being identical without the charisma is like being blue, only orange.

“I understand. I will go ahead of you to your host, and prepare him for your stay,” my brother offered.

“Thank you. How is the city?”

“Very tense.” Van was picking his words carefully. “I'm not sure if you noticed the brittle edge to the festivity below. The army has been mobilized, and more than half of it is now deployed. Most of that is the infantry.”

That was surprising. “The home guard?”

“Yes. The outer guard is already in the field. There's an enemy out of Kazor, riders on black horses that come and go in the night. Everyone is worried this is a feint to draw our forces away. Do you know Varana?”

“No.”

“He's the Lord of the Army. He's taken command of the troops in the field personally. Very competent man. Still, the people are worried. Be careful out there tonight. Mistakes can be made.”

“I see. How is the family?”

“Alyssa remains healthy and in the palace. Satre is with her, and that does much to relieve the anxiety of the people. Varya has departed. That worries me. It also worries others, and rumors have begun circulating about her behind my back. I squash that firmly if it comes to my attention. Duncton is well. He has been suppling the military with most of what we need. What he does not have he acquires. Mandrake is unchanged, and I am happy to busy.”

He didn't mention anything about Seth. Up until recently I had never remembered Seth was a sibling of ours at all, but I had been worried I was somehow less aware of our past than the others. It impressed me with Seth's ability to keep a secret. Unless he didn't know either, of course.

“Let's begin moving outside. We both have a great deal to do this evening. We can walk and talk.”

“Certainly.”

Van rose and began replacing the wine and bottles on the sideboard. I asked him why he was doing that, for Duncton had a thousand servants to do it for him.

“Yes, but who will do the work for the servants?” he replied. I tried to figure out if he was joking.

When we were growing up in that glass enclosure, we had at all times been in the public view of both the guards and any noble who happened to look in. Under constant scrutiny Van's development had split from his twin's.

Mandrake had defied the watchers and ceased to care about them. He completely ignored everyone who watched him, and this belligerent apathy grew cancerously until he truly did not give a damn about anyone but himself, and the peculiar moral standard he found. He had chosen the law. Thus he was the perfect High Judge. Nothing else mattered to him. He was immune to bribery, threats, and all efforts at persuasion, because he honestly did not care. The law itself, the High and Low Justice, were godlike to him. I think that is what gave him the strength to go on each day. Completely separated from the rest of humanity, he fed on those inked mandates of the court and government as his bread and butter. If his soul could be dissected it would come apart in paragraphs, articles, and precedent.

Van had turned the other way and become perfect. He cared about everyone, noble and common, good and foul. Van was absolutely bound by his word. Any issue of honor could be brought to him, barring only constraints of time. From an amalgam of every moral compass he'd formed some inner guide that managed to point unerringly towards the greatest good. The strain must have been incredible, but it had forged him in a fire hotter than the core of the Earth, a place where I'd spent a great deal of time. Now, as I watched him carefully replace the decanter, wipe up the rings of condensation left by the wineglasses, and leave his dirty glass in a conspicuous place so it could easily be found and cleaned, I realized that his perfection wasn't a joke, and he wasn't being kind to gain my trust. He really was that man.

We paid our respects downstairs and bundled into the carriage. I was still watching him, the immensity of what he had become staring me in the face. There was nothing left to do. I surrendered.

“Van, this war.” I stumbled for words. It was hard to talk to a living ethical monument. “Is it so bad?”

He looked at me curiously. My mask was slipping dangerously, and that scared me.

“Yes, it is.”

“How can I help?”

“Helen, I don't know. I don't know you.”

I smiled. “I'm not terribly complicated,” I lied.

He caught that and smiled at me. It was a polite fiction, one he would never have uttered, but he would never have had too.

“Helen, you've been gone for a thousand years. You returned wearing a mask made of Damascus steel, without eyes, nose, or mouth. I have no idea how you can help, because I have no idea what you're capable of. Since the beginning you've kept your own counsel, but that means no one knows the truth of your affairs. I won't pry, but you built the wall that keeps me out.”

Which was of course true. He was also very bright.

“I'm adept at doing things to people. I cannot do much to myself.”

He nodded sagely.

The carriage bounced up and down the steep streets of Wilno, rounded a high crest, and set off up a steep incline. My position left me looking up at him.

“I'm something of a magus,” I offered. “The lightning you saw when I arrived was mine. But I can't help people with that. I can't cure the sick or water crops. My magic is purely offensive.”

“Well, we are at war,” he replied amused. “This is the time for offensive capacities.”

“What would you like me to do? Set the sky afire, or burn the stars out? Raise the earth in fists of rock to attack the enemy?”

“All that is within your power?”

“Would you like to see a demonstration?”

“No. I trust you.”

The carriage leveled.

“Is there anything I can do to help you? Magic is a peculiar beast, and not much given to explanations. If you tell me about your work, perhaps I can tell you what I'm capable of in that capacity.”

Van nodded. “I've taken over command of the regiments that remain. Mostly we train, test and improve the fortifications of the city, and manage the logistics for the men in the field. A great deal of my job is managing the morale of the citizens. Whenever the army leaves home, those who remain worry for those who have gone. It saps the minds and spirits. I support that as I can.”

“There isn't much I can do there. Are there enemies within?”

“No,” he replied. “There are enough of those without.”

“Then I should leave. I'm no good at those problems.” Besides, if what James had told me was

accurate, my presence would be a poison to morale.

“You just arrived.”

“I know.”

A long uncomfortable silence reigned. We stared out the windows into the dark, watching dark buildings pass in the night like ghosts. Eventually he reached behind him and rapped his knuckles sharply on the window to the driver, and we slowed to a halt.

“This is a good place for you to slip out unobserved. When you are done, go to the estate of Lord Prescott. If I'm not there, I will have made all the preparations before I left.”

“Thank you.”

He rose, opened the door, and climbed out. He helped me descend and stayed a moment with me on the dark streets.

“Helen, the house of Lord Prescott is on the western hill in the border between Duncton's quarter of the city and mine. The gate will be lit by three lanterns. The porter will be expecting you.” He paused, then finished, “Keep what we've spoken about in your mind.”

I nodded.

The tall buildings loomed above us. In the dark the tops were lost to the night, for there is no moon in Wilno, and the mad light of the stars casts more shadows than it dispels.

“And be careful.”

“Am I in danger?”

“Helen,” he started seriously. He changed gears suddenly, and tried to make light of the issue. “You're least popular person here since ever. I would feel better if I was with you, but I understand your motivations. Don't take any foolish risks. Are you armed?”

“No.”

“Would you like a weapon?”

It would probably set his mind at ease. “A small knife if you have one.”

Van drew and handed me his belt knife. The blade was longer than my forearm, and looked like it would be perfect were I suddenly consumed by a desire to bisect a wildebeast. I handed it back to him.

“You'll be the first person I see if I need a broadsword. But I was thinking about a small knife.”

He laughed. Set into the scabbard of his sword was a small, utilitarian knife perhaps seven inches long, including handle. He offered it to me.

Now most men I have seen test a knife blade do so on their thumb. This never struck me as wise. The best outcome they would get is a cut thumb, and I had no intention helping my enemies make me bleed. I took a small scrap of my destroyed clothing and laid it across the blade, releasing it so I could pinch the ends below and draw it across the edge to test it. Before I could grab it again, it fell in half, severed by its own weight.

“Oh, my,” I observed.

“Will that do?” He gave me a sheath for it also.

“Van, you're amazing.”

“Thank you. Good luck.”

He was about to offer me more help, perhaps a cloak or something. My determination was already weakened by speaking with him, and I needed to harden myself as soon as possible. When he started asking how else he could aid me, I took some money, but stopped him there. Then I leaned forward, patted his hand affectionately, and disappeared into the dark. When I glanced over my shoulder he was staring after me with a torn expression. Finally he turned and reentered the carriage. It vanished in the night.

I like the night. I like being alone in the pitch black. For some reason the fears most people have for the nameless things that hunt the dark never troubled me. The streets are also less crowded, and it's easier to move unseen.

East and west of the city center the mountains spike and fall with treacherous irregularity. Networks of bridges and airborne walkways connected the spires and great manses, providing convenience at the price of the district appearing to be covered in spiderwebs. On street level live the poor and the wretched. I went among them, looking for certain signs, until I came to a small shop under a half moon. The dark half was outlined in silver and the shadowy border between the two sides was fuzzy and indistinct. It was small, had very little storefront, and more than half of it was almost buried by the slope of the road. Inside were flowing robes and tapestries, braziers of bronze and silver, and small altars for household shrines. The air smelled of incense mixed with stale sweat when I took a breath after shutting and locking the door behind me. There were no windows, so once inside I was comfortably isolated from the outside world. I found a cloak in black and midnight blue, and a sheer dress of gray silk to go underneath. Combined with dark leather boots and gloves, they would do. I met the shopkeeper as he came down stairs from his living quarters above. There were flecks of food on his beard.

I smiled when he saw me. “Good evening, Moristan. How are you?”

He turned bone white. “You're dead!”

“Quite possibly, but that only makes your clientèle especially diverse.”

“I’ll call Mandrake!” he threatened.

“We just met at dinner,” I replied. He wilted when I told him this, for he knew I despised untruths. It wasn’t out of any ethical high-ground. Very rarely, if ever, were they they worth the trouble. “So that avenue’s closed. Duncton’s affair was attended by all the best people, Mandrake’s twin included, so there’s nothing to gain by threatening me with them either. But there is a great deal to lose by my patronage of your establishment being known, not the least of which is someone might discover our long and loving correspondence. Perhaps someone of the High Judge position, who has a tendency to hand down harsh sentences for such things as consorting with the powers of evil?” I smiled again, as sweetly as I could. It evoked such a delightful reaction.

Moristan’s brow fell, and he hunched his shoulders like a beaten man. Crestfallen, his one defeated glance up at me was devoid even of spite. “God, I hate you,” he prayed.

“Very nice. Fervent. Good to see you’ve taken religion.”

“Our correspondence was never loving, you know,” he muttered in vain complaint.

“Of course I do. You do too. But it’s the opinion of everyone else that makes the difference. Though I do distinctly recall giving you enough money to buy this shop. And encouraging the merchant princes of Cenice to sell you everything you needed to get started at a very low price. So don’t act like I’m the bane of your existence.” I was still smiling, but my tone went cold. “I put you here, Moristan. I have kept you alive and solvent, and you have done very little for me in exchange. I put your children through expensive schools, I keep your wife in silk, and you’ve never gone hungry. Now I don’t give a damn if you’re grateful or not. I require no thanks. But I do require these,” and I dropped the clothing on his counter. “And information. Satre. What is he up to?”

“They’re yours,” he replied, handing me back the semi-formal attire.

“That was never in question. Now turn around and don’t stare at anything reflective while I change.”

He did, staring with dull eyes at the floor. There was an ornate steel tub I stepped into, leaving the ruined shoes. There I also discarded the burned tatters I’d been wearing, and tossed them atop the boot leather. The pile I kicked against Moristan’s feet. Then I traced the rune for Water on my forehead and sent a trickle of power into it. Water began pouring down my body, and I set to work scrubbing my tiredness away.

“You still haven’t said anything about Satre,” I observed.

“Lord Satre hasn’t left the palace in over a week. He sits there with the ministers and councilors, politicking away. Rumor has it that he’s trying to force the lesser houses into uniting behind his military strategy. While none of the other great houses oppose him, they aren’t forcing their minions to hasten to provide manpower. Nothing much is happening there.” Moristan bent down and picked

up my pile of clothes. He carefully kept his eyes averted from me, but on standing peered into a silver mirror. I'd expected that. Was it comforting to know I was attractive enough to make him try to look? Maybe. But my reflection was far less desirable a vision than my naked form. He saw Daren reaching for him and it seemed that the lunatic's emaciated fingers would find the shopkeeper's throat. Instead the madman clawed at the mirror, striving to get out.

I laughed and stepped out of the tub. The new garments felt comfortable and when Moristan tore his eyes away from the horror that was reaching for him, I was leaning against the counter with a bottle of one of his imported liquors in my hand.

"I warned you, you know. Now make sure you burn those clothes. We wouldn't want them to be found, correct?"

Wavering a little, he nodded. He wouldn't even turn to look at me now. Daren certainly made intimidating people easier. But then, Moristan never should have tried to peek.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied.

"Good. Now then, what are Satre's plans for the military?"

"How should I know?" he replied. He didn't sound like he was trying to be misleading, so I accepted that.

"You should find out. The sooner I know that, the less likely I am to come back and talk."

"I'll see what I can do," he replied.

"Excellent. I'll be leaving now."

He didn't complain about that. On my way out I took a pair of polished, silver earrings and got away as quickly as possible.

I don't like using myself like that. It was certainly effective, which is why I did it. Moristan had needed to be reminded of how bad the effects of crossing me could be. I tempted him with a simple disobedience, and when he took it he found that the reward was gone, replaced by a new threat. He would think twice about it again. I had done quite a bit for him, so both the carrot and the stick would encourage him to see things my way. Still, I recoiled a bit at my own methods. To use my body as such a simple tool made me feel cheap.

"Does that make sense?" I asked Daren. "Should I be ashamed of that?"

Daren snarled and grumbled, hissing madness and violence into my ears. I gently removed the earrings and put them in the pouch with Nilo's stones.

It didn't matter, really. Why was I quibbling over showing some skin, when Daren couldn't even stay sane? By now he was consumed by hate and would endlessly attack anything because the very idea of

peace was impossible to him.

“Whatever it takes, Daren,” I whispered into the bag as I sealed it. “Come hell and damnation, I will set you free. It may be at the behest of our master, but it's all for you.”

Brassy trumpet calls echoed through the night, reverberating off the hills. As others heard them the call was picked up and repeated until the strident cry filled the city. It sounded like it came from the walls originally, perhaps the main gate. Night had long since deepened to midnight, so the gates should have been long closed and sealed. But that horn call was the summons, and it was followed by the cry to unbar the portals. Voices echoed the demand. I hastened through the city towards the source.

By the time I got to the gates, the windlasses were straining against the weight of the vast steel portcullis. As it rose the interior granite doors retracted into recesses in the walls, pulled by teams of men and horses. Inside the gate tunnel I heard other portals opening, including the two great iron wrought doors named Remorseless and Relentless. Each of those was nearly a foot thick, as tall as the murder corridor, and suspended from pivots in the ceiling. A hand on the right lever could send them crashing shut with the force to pulp any beast or monstrosity in their way. Over choruses of groans and strains and the urgings of winch team leaders the crowd cried for answers.

It did not take long for the cause of the excitement to appear. First I heard the steady rhythm of a thousand feet stepping in cadence. Then the glorious armor and arms of the infantry stepped into the courtyard. No officer ever rode before the front rank. It was a matter of tradition that the vanguard was enlisted men who'd seen combat. As the ranks of soldiers trudged into sight, I tried to figure out why they might have risked the wildlife to get back into the walls. There was no good explanation.

The problem with bureaucracies is that there's no one to answer questions. I tried for a while, interrogating this and that minion, but go no answers. I suppose I could have slammed someone with the will, dragged the information out of them, and then blasted their mind to pieces, but with as many witnesses as a gateyard full of scared civilians had, I declined. Best for a girl to keep a few surprises. Subtlety would be nigh impossible until I could get someone alone.

Ultimately I took refuge in a dive bar populated by the drunk, the stupid, and the insomniacs for some serious thinking. Once the wait staff provided me with enough bottles of paint thinner strength liquor, I unsubtly implied I wanted privacy, and they left me alone.

The army's return in the dead of night must have been a retreat. It must have been a semi-panicked one at that to undertake the risks in a nocturnal return to Wilno. That being said, they had returned in formation so it couldn't have been a rout. That meant Varana, who I recalled as being a preeminently logical man, would have recognized an unbeatable foe. But instead of selling his men to the last to buy time, he'd returned. Thus he'd anticipated the powers which had remained behind would be able to turn the tables. They would be better able to wield the fighting power of the city than he could. Varana was chosen due to his incredible competence, so it wasn't just a strategic problem. No, the royal family presented a need for inutterable power on a personal scale.

Well, I considered while pounding glass after glass of grain alcohol, I was certainly inutterable power.

Satre was a cosmic power on level of gravity, but cautious. He wouldn't be as good. I'd never let restraint or common sense slow me down, so maybe I could eclipse him. If I could get the people on my side, that would sway the parliament. The parliament had the power over law. My banishment was an affair of the High Law, exceeding the power of parliament, but only when a Baron sat on the throne. If the rule of law had been muddled, I might be able to waffle enough that Mandrake's iron wrought allegiance to legal matters would block his spiteful enforcement of my sentence. That would weaken Satre's grasp of the reigns of power. That would serve my purposes.

But my purposes began with the liberation of Daren. Our master required it. How could I bend politics to free a dead murderer from a mirrored prison, wrought by the will of Baron? I had not the power.

Satre did. The thought came to me suddenly, halfway through a shot of liquid fire. Satre had more power than anyone. Satre breathed power with every exhalation. Sure, he hated my guts, but that was a simple thing. He might manipulated into doing my will by his own spite for me. I just needed to put a choice before him that left freeing Daren as the best way to be rid of me.

There were two ways to go about that. The nice way was promise to leave if he did me a favor. That was nearly unthinkable. He despised me so much it blinded him to be willing to help me even if it did get rid of me. All that remained was the nasty way. If I could set up a situation where freeing Daren brought forth insurmountable evidence of my evil, if liberating Daren would cause with absolute certainty my exile, the lord of House Royal might do it to overcome any doubt as to the conclusion of Mandrake's inquest.

Then Mandrake's inquest could not be left to chance. The High Judge must be prepared to lift my sentence, and everyone must know it. It must be certain, so the only option of my dear brother-in-law would be manipulate circumstance himself, freeing Daren that I would be found guilty. Mandrake would sentence me to death, I would escape, and then, lost in the infinite world, Daren and I would be together. Daren would be sane.

I finished the bottle. It wasn't as strong as Toxin, so I flicked it. It spun across the table, tipped over the edge, and shattered on the hardwood floor. Flecks of clear liquor splattered the ground, discoloring oak planks and sizzling where they met wood. That was impressive.

"Another!" I ordered. Anything that vicious had a special place in my heart.

I could defeat the inquest through Mars Impens. I came bearing warnings of the King in Yellow. Mandrake was aware of the danger posed by him, even if the common fool wasn't, so if I could make that danger real, I could be freed. Thus the King in Yellow must come to Wilno for he was the only terror great enough to overshadow my act of service in warning the city of that same terror. In a sudden flash of genius I figured out how to make it work. Daren must bring the Saffron King to Wilno. If Satre freed Daren to prove his crimes, I would be found guilty of accessory to crimes against reality. It would be bait too delicious for Satre to forsake.

A tired woman who had been beautiful once brought me my next bottle. I smiled charmingly and took a long drink in victory. My throat burned so good I savored the taste reminiscent of battery acid and lava. The barmaid stared at me frightened. When I released a delicate burp of fire and sulphur from

the drink, she blanched and fled. Clearly, no one in this city knew how to drink.

“Excuse me,” I murmured to her retreating back. One must always be polite, after all.

Thus my two first steps were determined. Casaroc must testify that the King in Yellow lived. Second, I must find out what had happened to the military. No other threat, more immediate than the one I intended to use against the city, could be allowed to menace it. It would draw attention away from my own scheme.