

Leaning upon his staff with his eyes closed, Hoarluk Doomshaper reached with his mind to the dire trolls along the length of the half-constructed wall. They did not wish to be here, their small minds churlishly pulling against his own, focusing instead on the rumbling hunger in their bellies. They wanted to rend and kill, to eat. He clamped down on their petulance and reached with their gigantic hands as if they were his own, seizing heavy stones and hauling them into place. Dozens of kin scrambled along the wall with hammers and chisels, setting the stones in place as battlements came into being.

A throat cleared behind him, but he already knew she was there. He had ignored two such attempts to draw his attention. His eyes still closed, he snapped, "What, Calandra? Are you that eager to see the stoneworkers of Clan Sokosh devoured by frenzied dire trolls?"

Calandra said, "I have no fear of that. Keeping them in line while having a conversation with a visitor is no difficulty for one such as you."

There was no obvious sarcasm in her tone, but Doomshaper knew she was taunting him. There was something in her manner that reminded him of his eldest daughter. With a heavy sigh he turned, opening his eyes to glare balefully at the two individuals standing before him. Calandra's frame entirely eclipsed the anemic figure next to her.

For the first time he focused on this "visitor," realizing with a frown that he had not even sensed the man's approach. He was scrawny, possibly human, with a stained robe hanging loosely from his sharp bones; he was most notable for an extremely long beard that nearly reached to the ground. The beard covered most of his face, the rest covered in a hood. There was something odd about him and not simply his appearance. No, not a human, Doomshaper decided. An elf. One more withered, aged, and generally harrowed than Doomshaper had ever seen before. He looked like someone who had been a prisoner for centuries and was just let out of his dungeon into the sun. Slung across his back by a leather strap was a sizable scroll case, similar in proportions to some of the largest ones Doomshaper possessed. The ancient elf was bowed by his burden, bending forward, his frame barely able to sustain the weight.

"Who is this?" Doomshaper asked. The eyes peering at him from under the hood seemed almost empty, devoid of the vital spark of life. And if the visitor were capable of mustering arcane power, Doomshaper could barely sense it. It was almost as though he were a walking absence.

"I have no name worthy of saying aloud," the elf said in perfect Molgur-Trul, as if he had been born to the tongue. "I'm a simple hermit."

Calandra interjected. "I've been having a number of disturbing divinations of late. In every form. Cards, throwing the bones, dice casting. All doom and gloom. It has been puzzling me, but this hermit came to me, and he has spoken of things he should not know. I think he has the gift of true foresight."

"Divination is always unreliable," Doomshaper said, though he gave the elf another appraising look. "Why have you come to me?"

"I had little choice in the matter," the hermit said morosely. "I come to speak of a maelstrom, a tide of unending darkness about to crack its way into the world. Locusts will descend on the greatest city of mankind, and in that hour, the very world will stand on the precipice of ruin. This first gate is the keystone, and its opening will unlock a dozen more. The Claiming is at hand."

"You try my patience," Doomshaper growled at him. "Why must every self-titled prophet babble in riddles? Speak plainly or not at all."

The Iosan looked back at him with a pained expression.

Calandra put her hands on her waist and said, "You've been known to be mysterious from time to time yourself. Visions aren't always easy to explain. You've had your share."

Meanwhile, the hermit was muttering under his breath. "The Claiming will seize two souls in three. The power the immortal parasites will reap from this is beyond measuring. Our reality will bend under the weight of their footsteps. They are knocking at the door, and it is about to open. We are all betrayed."

Doomshaper kept his attention focused on Calandra. "What is your interpretation? Of both his words and your own auguries. You think this isn't just nonsense?"

"He is likely a little bit crazy," Calandra admitted, "but I do think something is happening. Talk of gates and shadows could be a Cryxian plot, perhaps involving banes, but I think we are looking at something larger. He has spoken of souls being claimed. I do not know a great deal about infernals, as they've never much troubled our people, but that would be my guess. He suggests Caspia as the place of imminent threat. Some gateway opening there, bringing doom to its inhabitants."

"Caspia and its people doomed?" Doomshaper considered this and then uttered a dark chuckle under his breath. "Good! Good riddance to all of them."

Calandra frowned. "We've never had to deal with infernals. I cannot say I know much about them, but everything I have heard is bad. They are a threat to be taken seriously."

The Shaman of the Gnarl's glared at both Calandra and the hermit, feeling distinctly as though they were seeking to manipulate him, as though he would be frightened by vague prophecies. He said, "There is a reason we have not had to deal with them. They are a human problem. Not one that troubles the kin."

"This is far more than a human problem," the hermit said with great clarity. "The locusts will come to the mountains and the forests when the farmlands of man are consumed. They seek the souls of all. You could act now to prevent this first opening of the way."

His tone, without any emphasis and devoid of energy, suggested he did not entirely believe it.

Doomshaper stepped closer to the frail elf, who stood placidly, as if unaware or uncaring that the trollkin elder could annihilate him in a single blow of his staff. "What would you have us do?"



March an army to Caspia to save the humans from themselves? How would they welcome us at their walled gates, even were we inclined to do this favor? They would answer us with rifles and cannons. Why did you come here instead of going to them, if your forewarnings are needed? What game are you playing, hermit?"

"It is no game. I go many places and speak to all who will listen. What you do is your choice. I have no choice for myself. I play the role set out for me, as do we all. I warn, you fail to listen, and darkness encompasses us all."

"I've had enough," Doomshaper snarled. To Calandra he said, "As he is your guest, I will leave it to you to see him off."

Were it not for ancient guest courtesies, he might have handed the hermit to one of his hungry dire trolls.

She looked abashed as she took hold of the hermit's elbow and led him away. Doomshaper knew she had brought him with the best of intentions. Though a talented augur, she put too much faith in her cards. The future was always in flux. And regardless of fell omens, Doomshaper did not intend to take credit or blame for any looming disaster facing Caspia. It was not his concern. He struggled enough to protect the kin of the Gnarlts, as well as the other regions, with Ironhide and his closest allies so far away.

The hermit did not appear bothered by this sendoff. He said, "I will return to you again, anon, when the locusts descend. You may welcome me then."

### *Months later, Caspia*

Arcane Administrator Orin Midwinter strode quickly through the halls of Castle Raelthorne, almost stumbling in his haste to return to his chambers and the warded inner sanctum where his true work was conducted. Just hours before, he had concluded a meeting with the warmaster general, the king, and several other high-ranking officers and officials regarding military matters. There, he had been forced to feign interest in their deliberations regarding the ongoing war in Llael. Nothing could be further from his mind or seem less significant now. All of the necessary events for that conflict had been staged, the ground laid for orchestrating precisely the sort of carnage in exactly the right places for his masters to benefit. He was tired of such subtleties and eager for the next phase, when he could cast aside all illusions and take his proper place, his deserved place, so long denied him.

It had not been simple or easy, his handling of these matters in the last few years, particularly given the relative unimportance of his position in the court. From an outside perspective, it might seem as though he had singular access to the king—and that was partially true. Yet this had not allowed him to accomplish his goals easily. Nothing had gone as hoped. His masters did not appreciate the tightrope he walked for them. Move too quickly, say the wrong word, and he could have been revealed and cast out, likely even incarcerated and executed. There had been a very close call not long ago, where he had been forced to sacrifice a man who had introduced him to his masters. A necessary loss but one that gave him the access he required. He had been forced to work indirectly, through subtler manipulations. His masters had grown impatient, and he had sensed their lack of satisfaction with his progress.

Only his proximity to and friendship with King Julius had prevented his replacement. Arranging a proxy in his place would not have been readily accomplished, not at this late juncture. Still, there were so many unexpected obstacles, not least among them the will and unyielding mind of Julius himself. Young though he was, he had shown himself to be no simple pawn of fate, no easily handled upstart who happened to have royal blood flowing through his veins. Whatever their flaws and peculiarities, members of the Raelthorne line—even their bastards—had proven to be a headstrong lot. They preferred to tug on the strands of fate rather than be pulled by them.

Midwinter sealed his outer door and took a moment to lay a heavily rune-inscribed narrow steel plate across the floor just inside, closing a conduit link with others set along the perimeter of the wall. There was a bright spark as it set in place; he felt a thrum beneath his feet. Thus protected, he used the key around his neck in conjunction with a hidden switch on the wall next to his bed to open a narrow alcove that led to a private chamber.

This was not his primary workshop and laboratory, which was located elsewhere in the castle. But it served for certain special projects when he could not trust even his most loyal and compromised subordinates. It was here he could make direct contact with his masters.

He pulled a cloth off the square table at the center of the room, revealing a surface inlaid with a complex pattern of geometrical shapes and inscribed glyphs. He opened a drawer beneath and withdrew a heavy object wrapped in cloth, unwinding it to extract a large and dark faceted crystal, which he set into a brass stand placed at the center of the table's geometrical configuration. He used a thin knife to cut his palm and let droplets fall upon its surface, igniting a pulsing red light from deep within. There was an immediate fluttering in his stomach, an uncomfortable nausea, followed by an intense acrid odor. But the most unpleasant part of the sensation, one he could never acclimate for, was the feeling of his soul yanked forward, as if trying to pry itself free of his body.

Tendrils of darkness moving like smoke gathered above the crystal and took on a vaguely humanoid form, one that stared back at him with inhuman eyes.

Midwinter cleared his throat. "I greet you with all humility and tremble before you, my master Agathon, who is also Ashoth, Ariphon, and Kylophelion. In speaking your names, know that I voice a prayer and vow that renews my commitment. I stand ready to serve at your whim."

The voice that answered back was felt directly in his mind, arriving with a clarity that was piercing and painful. "How transpire your labors? Is all as it must be?"

"The most vital aspects of the work are complete. The defiled keystone is in place, the palace wards are entirely compromised, and the gate framing is built. A few small aspects of the final surface glyphs are unfinished, held back, as they could be noticed by perceptive witnesses. That will be done last, just before the tenebrous alignment. Also, the Caspian garrison has not been repositioned. That will almost certainly draw attention, though I have prepared contingencies. I await your word on these final matters."



"You have it," Agathon said. "We come to you. Do what must be done."

A shiver that was both pleasure and terror traveled up Midwinter's spine. His mind felt almost torn in disbelief that the waiting was over.

"I will put the last pieces in motion," he said, his mouth dry. "It will take two weeks at most."

"Let your words be true, else in falsity I promise punishments beyond comprehension." With those ominous words, the dark smoke scattered and dispersed. The red pulsing light within the crystal faded.

Some nearly extinguished part of his soul quailed within Midwinter, that shriveled piece of himself still able to feel horror at what he had wrought, at this result of choices made years ago in desperation, motivated at the time by what he viewed as loyalty to his true king. A man now long dead.

How his life had changed since then. He knew his self of those days would not recognize him now. Then again, he had been mad. It had been comforting, that madness. Midwinter had often cursed the inquisitor, Wilkes Quinn, who had repaired his mind, restoring unwanted and unsought clarity. Even as Quinn had rebuilt Midwinter's fragmented mind, he had layered compulsions and obligations, ones that had forced Midwinter along a certain path, creating loyalties as strong as steel binding him to Julius. Bonds that could only be shorn and torn away later by Midwinter's infernal masters.

Because of this, he had nearly failed them, having conspired in the death of Vinter Raelthorne, the exiled king the Nonokrion Order had hoped to restore to the throne, knowing his bloodthirsty nature would suit their needs. In the aftermath, Midwinter had persuaded them that their goals could still be accomplished, that King Julius could also serve, if they adopted a different approach. The necessary wars could still happen.

Midwinter had been instrumental in urging for a more aggressive Cygnar, one that would push boldly into Llael to rectify old wrongs. This gambit had worked—in some respects, even better than expected. The Khadorans had played their part as well, particularly in the annihilation of Elsinberg. Many other strands had required pulling, including those tugged by Midwinter's counterparts in rival nations. Even now, Midwinter did not breathe easily, knowing failure could cost him more than his life.

He closed the inner chamber and left to visit the castle's royal telegraph station. The hour was quite late, and the stormsmith specialist assigned to this desk looked bored. He was startled by the arcane administrator's sudden appearance. The only telegraphs sent or received at this hour were emergency transmissions.

Midwinter handed him a slip of paper and said, "Send this to Eastwall at once, to the attention of General Alain Runewood, Archduke of the Eastern Midlunds."

Blinking sleepily, the operator sat up straight in his chair. "Of course, sir."

He squinted at the header on the paper and then said hesitantly, "This is designated 'Umbral'? I'm not familiar with that."

"There's no reason you would be. He'll understand. This is a top-secret exchange. I need you to omit adding this transmission to your log, on my authority."

The operator swallowed. "I'm not supposed to send messages with unfamiliar designations. And I believe omitting an entry into the log requires written approval by a CRS officer?"

Midwinter gave him a cold look, considering his luck of running into perhaps the only stormsmith operator fresh out of training who paid attention to the fine print of his regulations. "Do you really want me to wake your superior officer at this hour to explain why a junior specialist is defying a member of the king's inner council? This is an urgent matter. Feel free to check in the morning, but this message must be sent now."

The operator's will quailed. After a slight hesitation, he nodded and turned back to his station. He clicked on the controls with trembling fingers as large sparks leapt between metal nodes above him.

### *Eastwall*

In the highest tower of Cygnar's greatest eastern fortress, its lord and master sat at his desk with a piece of parchment crumpled in his hand while he contemplated the utter ruin of his life. He thought of past glories now reduced to bitter dust. Of stalwart companions left behind in blood and mud but having perished knowing they had served well and would be honored in death. Now it had come, at last, the action he had been dreading and avoiding contemplating. The moment he would perform treason.

The door opened and one of his senior adjutants entered. Major Layne Fairway asked, "How can I assist you, General?"

"We will shortly be receiving a large number of soldiers from Caspia. It's going to get rather crowded here. A sizable portion of the city garrison will be our guests. We'll need to find a way to make room for them and make the appropriate preparations for food and resupply. Until we work out the details, it'll be hard tack for many. It'll be important the officers participate as well, to avoid added resentment."

"I do like my bacon in the morning," Major Fairway said with an exaggerated frown. "This is sudden. What's this all about?"

"Combined military exercises and maneuvers with elements of the Second Army. To foster mutual cooperation and inter-reliance." The general waved a hand dismissively. "I expect primarily it is to make the Protectorate's border patrols jumpy and particularly to cause unease at Tower Judgment."

Fairway smiled. "That's never hard to do. Very well, I'll see it handled. If you could give me more precise numbers, I'd appreciate it. I'll start clearing space for our guests."



She turned to go, but he stopped her by speaking again. "Oh, and I'll be heading to Caspia myself shortly, to discuss these matters with General Halstead and the warmaster. If you could send someone to prepare my horse and the smallest possible escort, that would be appreciated. Fast horses for us all."

"You don't want me with you?"

"No, no. I need you to oversee preparations here. I'll take Upton. Once I'm there, I should be able to wire back the numbers you need. I'll get a list of officer names as well."

When she was gone, his morose thoughts returned at once. Even this was not yet treason. No, what would come next would cross the line. Ordering the men and women sworn to defend their nation to leave a city just before its hour of need. In doing so, countless innocent lives would be lost, their souls ravaged and stolen. He was about to be party to the potential ruination of his country. Selfishly, he could not ignore how this also meant ending a career of uncompromising service with shame.

He paced. As he crossed in front of his desk, he saw his swords in their stand, near his armor. He picked up the smaller one, the ceremonial blade that was not drawn in combat but worn to be buried with a sword knight after death. The legend had it that this would allow the knight to continue to fight in Urcaen. It was a symbol, one tightly linked to a knight's honor and the desire for a worthy death.

He drew the small blade from its sheath and tested its edge with his thumb. Though not made for battle, it was sharp. He eyed the flickering light of his fire along the weapon's mirror-bright length.

Despite his earlier thoughts, he knew he had already taken the first steps down this road. His first betrayal had come when he had been mortally wounded after the Battle of Fharin, when he had refused to accept his own death. He should have died in the hospital tents afterward. He had languished, suffering for weeks. That would have been a good death. It had seemed a small thing at the time to answer that whispered voice amid his fevered dreams, to beg for the chance to live and continue to serve. His miraculous recovery followed. Later, when it was too late, and they had their talons in his soul, he had bargained further. Trying to limit harm, he had squirmed and wriggled, only becoming locked tighter in their grasp.

Alain Runewood, the Archduke of the Eastern Midlunds, pressed the point of his ceremonial sword against his chest, just below his sternum. He grasped the blade closer to its hilt in his gloved hands, considering the angle required to pierce his heart. A coward's end, he felt, and he hesitated a moment, but then weighed that against the greater toll. There would be many questions, soon eclipsed by the coming darkness, but perhaps some lives would be spared that otherwise might not have been.

With sudden decisiveness, his right hand tightened on the blade, and he clasped it with his left and slammed it into himself. Expecting to feel an explosion of intense pain, instead he felt nothing but cold. His numbed fingers released, and the blade clattered to the floor. Looking down, he saw no blood on its edge or on his chest, though his tunic was torn.



He stepped back and saw he was no longer alone in the chamber. His shadow, which had been cast back away from him by the fire, had darkened and taken on form, become a tangible female that stood adjacent to him, her skin ashen grey and wearing peculiar armor. Her lower half, where her legs should be, manifested as swirling smoke. Cold gleaming eyes behind slits in her helmet stared back at him.

A voice spoke into his mind, calmly and almost politely. "Let us not be hasty, Alain. There is much for you to do. Your life has value, and I cannot allow you to end it prematurely. Consider those we have agreed to safeguard and protect so long as you do as you must. It would be tragic if that protection were removed, particularly in the days to come. Consider your family. Your former king. They are safe because of your contract. Focus on that. Nothing else that happens is your fault. The choices have been made. You are but an actor in it, not the author of this play."

After having demonstrated so vividly the futility of resistance, the umbral reaver attached to his shadow, where it merged and faded away. Alain Runewood could feel some part of his soul dying as he accepted that they owned him, body and soul.

When he left the room, he left his ceremonial blade where it had fallen, naked and discarded.