

THE ONCE AND FUTURE NERD
Book 1 - PRINCES OF IORDEN

Chapter 6
"The Singing Sister"

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PROLOGUE

1 EXT. BLACKHOLD - DARK OF THE NIGHT

1

NARRATOR

Blackhold was under siege. The very foundations shook as Orc warriors ferociously assaulted the main gates with a battering ram the size of a wood serpent.

SOUND: BATTERING RAM CRASHES UNTIL THE SPLINTERING

General Kerr, the Esteemed Commander of Blackhold, stood atop the highest parapet, alone but for his longbow, a bucket of arrows, and a noose, hanging from a high-above bell tower. Kerr loosed arrow after arrow into the Orc hordes. Most hit their marks, but it made no matter, the Orc numbers were too great.

The next crash was accompanied by a splintering noise; the Orcs were through the gates. Kerr continued to loose arrow after arrow as his men fought valiantly in the corridors of Blackhold.

One distinctive figure cut a path of destruction through the defenders. General Traft, the half-Orc rebel General, swung his double-bladed scythe with a deadly grace. Guardsman after guardsman fell to Traft's brutal dance.

Kerr continued to loose his arrows, until it was clear all hope was lost. Calmly, Kerr launched two final arrows before laying down his bow. He climbed up to the noose. Traft, seeing this, broke into a sprint through the chaos of battle. Kerr maneuvered his head into the noose, while Traft was still two dozen paces away. As General Kerr kicked away his bucket, Traft flung his scythe.

The gleaming blade spun through the air, flecks of blood spraying off of it as it flew. Kerr fell, the noose tightened -- until the scythe blade sliced cleanly through the rope above the general's head. The old man fell to the ground, his ankles breaking loudly at the impact.

Kerr opened his eyes to see the Rebel Traft grinning. And then horde was upon him. They tore him limb from limb.

PART ONE:

2 EXT. FOOT OF A STEEP HILL IN ARMSTRUNGARD - MAGIC HOUR

2

NARRATOR

Outside of Armstrungard, a pair of garbage collectors were making their rounds early in the morning. As one approached the base of a cliff, far below the walls of a reclusive monastery, a putrid stench wafted towards her. She found the remains of a human, smashed from the long fall from the monastery above.

The body, as you may remember, belonged to Sir Jasper Frieshelm, and had been thrown off of this cliff by Brennen and Regan after the battle of the previous evening. With a sigh, the garbageman set to her task.

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 1

Hey, Janice! Get over here!

NARRATOR

A second garbage collector stumbled out from behind the hill, dragging behind her an overflowed bag of refuse in one hand. In the other, she awkwardly held the leads to two pack horses. The horses were yoked as if to pull a cart, but instead of a cart, they dragged more trash bags awkwardly along the ground behind them. The first trash collector stared at her colleague in confusion.

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 1

What are...where the fuck is the wagon?

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 2

I sold it.

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 1

YOU SOLD IT?!

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 2

Yeah. We're rich, Elsa.

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 1

You sold it in the last ten min-- rich? What do you mean rich? Who'd you sell it to?

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 2

To a *knight*. For 20 gold pieces. Still think I wouldn't know good business if it bit me in the arse?

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 1

Let me see!

NARRATOR

Janice's wide grin faded slightly.

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 2

Well he didn't pay me yet!

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 1

I'm sorry, could you say that again, please?

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 2

Yeah, his liege's seat was just usurped, so he needed the cart to go back to the castle, restore the rightful line, and then he's gonna send us our gold. With interest!

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 1

Oh, gods help us, Janice.

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 2

What?

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 1

You've been had, you fucking dunce! And this time you dragged me down with you. That wasn't no knight.

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 2

You didn't see the guy! He had the kind of face you can trust!

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 1

He "*had the kind of face you can trust*"? That's why you gave away our livelihood?

GARBAGE COLLECTOR 2

Real earnest-looking old bugger. Looked kinda sickly too.

3 EXT. NEARBY - SIMULTANEOUS

3

NARRATOR

Nearby, Brennen sat in the driver's seat of a slightly-malodorous cart, being pulled by the late Sir Frieshelm's horses. Sir Brennen did not look well; the sickness from the untreated arrow wound in his arm had finally caught up to him, and he was pale and sweaty. Billy, Jen, and Nelson rode in the back of the cart. Jen was covered up to her neck in loose hay. Billy was tending to her red and swollen neck, carefully dabbing the last of Nia's icy slush over the injuries.

The wagon approached a guardhouse blocking their path.

BILLY

You be OK for a few minutes?

NARRATOR

At a weak nod from Jen, Billy and Nelson covered the girl completely with hay. By the time the cart reached the guardhouse, Jen was all but invisible.

CITY GUARD 1

Where to, old timer?

BRENNEN

Never heard of sentries guarding the exits of a city.

CITY GUARD 1

Been a string of killings lately.

CITY GUARD 2

(Company line)

The City Guard seeks for questioning a young woman with gold hair who may be connected to the murder of Sergeant Jamie McShane. She was last seen traveling with an Elf and an acolyte. Any information which leads to the location of such persons will be generously rewarded.

BRENNEN

Sorry to say, we know little of the local gossip. These two are but simple troubadours, and I am their escort to the house of my lord for his harvest-end feast.

CITY GUARD 1

So I reckon it's important you arrive in a timely manner.

BRENNEN

Yes, very much so.

CITY GUARD 1

That'll be fine. Just pay the exit toll and you're free to go.

BRENNEN

Exit toll? I've never heard--

NARRATOR

It dawned on Brennen to whom this toll would truly be paid.

BRENNEN

(indignant)

I am a Knight of the realm.

CITY GUARD 1

Knight, eh? Well that's nice. The cock-sore of the thing is, though, the toll just tripled. Didn't it?

CITY GUARD 2

(Tittering)
Tripled.

CITY GUARD 1

Been a rough year for the city.

CITY GUARD 2

Hehe rough year.

BRENNEN

So you understand that what you are asking is counter to the law and punishable by forfeiture of property?

CITY GUARD 1

Do you wanna leave or do you wanna waste our time?

NARRATOR

As the guards dickered with Brennen over the fee, a figure in a dirty hooded robe stumbled out of a nearby alley behind the guards. This personage stumbled and tripped as if incredibly drunk, and clutched a small bottle. The guards paid no notice.

BRENNEN

So be it. I traveled without coin, but perhaps in its stead you would accept a free performance from this talented troupe.

CITY GUARD 1

No, not at all.

BRENNEN

Boys.

BILLY

(sotto voce)

Why do we have to sing? Why can't *I* learn to lightning the shit out of someone?

BRENNEN

(sotto voce)

Just do it.

NARRATOR

Reluctantly, Billy and Nelson climbed out of the wagon. They stood awkwardly in front of the guards, each looking to the other for guidance on how to begin.

CITY GUARD 1

This better fucking be good.

CITY GUARD 2

Better be good.

NARRATOR

With a deep breath, Billy dove into his performance.

BILLY

Yo, Nelson, drop 16 bars on their asses!

Billy BEAT BOXES...badly.

NELSON

...Seriously?

NARRATOR

Billy shrugged. The boys fidgeted in awkward silence.

NELSON

Uh...Know any Led Zeppelin?

BILLY

Some.

NELSON

Let's sing one of their songs about hobbits.

BILLY

Led Zeppelin doesn't have any songs about hobbits.

NELSON

Led Zeppelin has like 20 songs about hobbits.

BILLY

I don't know any of those. AC/DC?

NELSON

Okay, what song?

BILLY

The one they play on the classic rock station.

NELSON

I don't listen to the classic rock station.

CITY GUARD 1

What the fuck are--

NARRATOR

--Billy belted out a guttural sound which, I suppose, could be compared to singing.

NELSON

Oh that one, okay!

NARRATOR

Nelson joined in. As they "sang," Billy gestured vigorously with his hands. He held one hand up by his ear, and rapidly punched the other in front of his belly. I'm told, in Pennsylvania, this was called an "air guitar", although it more closely resembled an orangutan suffering from a stroke.

NARRATOR

The guards were transfixed by the boys strange performance.

They reached the "lyrical" portion of this "song," which had something to do with shaking all night long? Which sounds unhealthy now that I mention it. The bard responsible should probably seek medical attention.

In any case, as this "performance" continued, the drunkard stumbled into the first guard briefly before wandering away.

DRUNKARD

(Slurring)

Beg your pardon, constable.

NARRATOR

The guard did not even turn, engrossed as he was by the boy's so-called singing.

4 EXT. NEARBY ALLEY - SIMULTANEOUS

4

NARRATOR

As the boys continued their performance, Nia and Yllowynn paused at the intersection of one dark shady alley and another, darker and shadier alley, squinting to recall the route Regan had suggested.

NIA

Yes, I am certain this was the way she said.

YLLOWYNN

I just want this business behind us. My parents would die if they knew my life had come to this.

NARRATOR

Nia decisively led them into the darker alley, Yllowynn reluctantly following. As they hurried, they passed an old man sitting on the ground in the shadows, covered

(MORE)

NARRATOR (cont'd)
in dirt and with a grimy cloth wrapped around his head.
He called to them hoarsely.

BEGGAR
Spare some coin for an old man what's lost his sight?

YELLOWYYN
We've none to spare.

NIA
I'm sorry.

NARRATOR
The two continued quickly along the alley, until Nia
suddenly stopped...

NIA
--Wait!

NARRATOR
...and turned back towards the old beggar.

YELLOWYYN
Even if we did, there's no time.

NIA
(*To herself*)
The blind man has seen the face of god.
(*To Ylloyyyn*)
This may be a coincidence but I must know.

YELLOWYYN
We're in something of a hurry in case you've forgotten.

BEGGAR
Who's that?

NIA
My name is Nia. I'm an acolyte.

BEGGAR
You talk like a college girl.

NIA
Order of the quill.
(*Switches to Cockney*)
'Fore that I was a farm girl from Sea'old though. You
talk like someone from near there, innit?
(*Switches back*)
I can't quite place your particular dialect though.

BEGGAR

I try not to get hung up on what's past. Got a coin to spare for a poor country boy down on his luck?

NIA

I've no coin, but this incense will fetch a decent price at market.

BEGGAR

Oh, thank you dearie. And may Galadon smile on you.

NIA

It's not charity, brother. I'm buying information. Paying a toll on the path to the face of God.

BEGGAR

There's the college girl again.

NIA

Did you see anything last night?

BEGGAR

Ain't seen nothin' in quite some time.

NIA

So you've not been blind since birth then? May I ask what happened?

BEGGAR

Hunting accident.

YELLOWYYN

Whatever you're doing, we need to be at the rendezvous.

NIA

Pray forgive my bluntness, but I think that's a lie. I think you have seen something which most men do not see in their lives. I'm sure you've ample reason for not wanting to speak of it - but in Galadon's name I must know what you've seen.

NARRATOR

Suddenly, fear was plain on the beggar's face.

BEGGAR

...It wasn't me. It was the woman. I saw, but please believe that it weren't by my hand.

5 EXT. BY THE GATE - SIMULTANEOUS

5

NARRATOR

At the gatehouse, the boys continued their performance. The drunken figure stumbled up to the cart, and put an unsteady hand onto Brennen's shoulder.

DRUNKARD

Spare some good will so I can break my fast?
(*Whispers*)
Or maybe buy some gods damned earplugs?

NARRATOR

A small pile of coins quietly slid from the drunkard's robes into Brennen's lap.

BRENNEN

I can't help you. Please step off my property.

DRUNKARD

(*Muttering*)
Everybody's all "charity and good will" till it comes out of their purse. Don't know what I gotta do to get a drink around here.

CITY GUARD 1

All right, enough of this shit.

CITY GUARD 2

Yeah, enough.

NARRATOR

The boys stopped singing abruptly. Billy actually looked somewhat disappointed. The drunkard suddenly collapsed next to the cart and began snoring loudly.

CITY GUARD 1

Payment. Now.

BRENNEN

Very well.

6 EXT. NEARBY ALLEY - SIMULTANEOUS

6

NARRATOR

Meanwhile, in the alley...

YELLOWYIN

Nia, they're preparing to leave. If we don't--

NIA

(To the Beggar)
--What wasn't by your hand?

BEGGAR

The Prince.

NIA

What Prince?

BEGGAR

They was lying when they said a servant of Garedian done it. I seen who done it. Weren't no servant. Sure as I'm breathing, that was Garedian the very same, in that woman's body.

NIA

I think I believe you.

BEGGAR

I tried to stop it. I had my bow, but--

NIA

--Her face. I need to know what the woman looked like.

BEGGAR

I never saw her face.

NIA

No, you must have.

BEGGAR

Back was to me the whole time. Hand to Galadon. And you know I've the fear of the gods in me. But I'll never forget the way the Prince looked at her. Like he knew her almost.

NARRATOR

Nia stared at the old beggar, confusion evident on her face. Yllowyyn's patience ran out, however. He grabbed Nia's arm and pulled.

YLLOWYYN

Come on!

NIA

(Remembers her manners)
Thank you for your time, brother, and may Galadon smile on you.

NARRATOR

Yllowyyn dragged the acolyte away, and the two ran down the alley, away from the man formerly known as Peter of Brimshire.

7 EXT. NEARBY - SIMULTANEOUS

7

NARRATOR

At the guardhouse, the boys climbed back into the cart, as Brennen dropped a few coins into the guard's outstretched hand.

CITY GUARD 1

Still a little light.

NARRATOR

When the guard continued to offer his hand, the old knight made a show of grimacing, and passed along the rest of his coin.

With a smug grin, the guard dropped his bounty into a purse on his waist. One by one the coins vanished into the cloth pouch...only to fall out of a tiny hole in the bottom. The "sleeping" drunk caught each coin, quick as a cat, before they could fall to the ground or make a sound.

CITY GUARD 1

All right. On your way.

CITY GUARD 1

(To the drunkard)

You too ya lush. Find somewhere else to sleep.

NARRATOR

The snoring continued from the drunk.

CITY GUARD 1

Gods dammit, there used to be some respect for law and order in this city.

NARRATOR

The guard planted a kick in the drunkard's ribs. The drunkard, in return, reluctantly stood up and shambled along behind the cart, out of the city.

8 EXT. ROAD JUST OUTSIDE THE CITY - A FEW MINUTES LATER

8

NARRATOR

A few minutes later, Brennen reined in the horses at a small supply gate in the city wall, out of sight of the
(MORE)

NARRATOR (cont'd)

guardsmen. Perfectly timed, Nia and Yllowyyn emerged from the supply gate and climbed aboard the cart.

The drunkard, now appearing quite sober indeed, jumped gracefully into the cart as well. Regan -- of course -- dropped her hood and jingled her own now-full purse with pride.

REGAN

Well those two were about as useful as a suit of crotchless armor. I appreciate their contribution to the royal treasury though. How you doing back there, girly?

NARRATOR

Jen wiggled her head free of the hay and managed a slight wave towards Regan, but immediately winced at the movement.

NIA

Allow me.

NARRATOR

Nia tended to the girl's neck gently, conjuring some wisps of icy moisture out of the air to soothe the wounds. As she did so, Yllowyyn noticed Brennen's pale face as well.

YLLOWYYN

And Sir Brennen, why don't you let me take the reins for a little while?

BRENNEN

I'm fine.

YLLOWYYN

I'm sure you are, but I know all the best routes to the White Forest.

BRENNEN

Very well.

9 EXT. ROAD IN THE COUNTRY - NIGHT

9

NARRATOR

The party drove the wagon all day and into the evening. The White Forest first appeared as barely a speck on the horizon, but as the wagon grew closer, the forest loomed larger under a blood-red moon.

YELLOWYYN

Stay on this road for another four miles. Then look for a smaller road heading southwest.

NARRATOR

...said Yllowyyn, as he cleaned a fowl he'd felled for the group's supper.

REGAN

Nia. How they doing back there?

NARRATOR

Nia climbed to the front of the wagon.

NIA

How much longer to the entrance of the Forest?

YELLOWYYN

If we keep this pace and only stop to water the horses, I think we can be there before noon tomorrow.

NIA

I think I can keep the swelling in Jen's throat down that long. But we can't afford to lose much time.

YELLOWYYN

And Sir Brennen?

NIA

He's a hearty man, but...

REGAN

I don't want either of them sleeping tonight. Too easy for them to not wake up.

NARRATOR

With much effort, Brennen pulled himself to the front of the wagon as well.

BRENNEN

I'd rather be party to this dialogue than the family hound talked about in hushed tones.

JEN

(Croaks)
Same here.

NIA

Very well. We need you both to not sleep tonight. Just as a precaution.

REGAN

So if anyone has ideas for how to keep them awake for the next 18 hours or so, I'm all ears.

NIA

Just before I met you all, I was preparing to give a talk on the Concept of Divine Avatars in the Literature of Antiquity. I won't remember all the citations but I think I could--

REGAN

--Awake. The goal is to keep them awake, remember?

NELSON

I kinda wanna hear that one.

YELLOWYYN

A priest, an Orc, and a Human walk into a tavern.

BILLY

I know this one. The punch line is my fist walks into your face.

NELSON

We could tell stories! I'll start. In a hole in the ground, there lived a--

YELLOWYYN

--copy right!

REGAN

Huh?

YELLOWYYN

That cart up ahead just turned right. You should copy it.

BRENNEN

This isn't the first time I've looked the Jolly Farmer in the eyes under the blood moon.

SOUND: JUST THE WIND FOR A GRIM BEAT.

BRENNEN

Would you like to hear of the other times?

REGAN

...A little morbid there, but morbid's interesting.

BRENNEN

Very well. I first faced death on the the feast of my eleventh year.

15A.

END OF PART ONE.

PART TWO:

10 EXT. FOGGY FARM IN GREYFIELD - EARLY MORNING (41 YEARS AGO) 10

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

I was just a lad, not even 11 years, the first time I met King Gunther, and the first time Death tried to claim me. This is one of those times whose memory slices through the fog of age. My father had called my sister and me in from our chores, to give us the news.

SOUND: AXE SLAMMING INTO A STUMP AND GETTING STUCK

WILLEM

Dammit, Brennen! I told you, go easy. I just sharpened it.

YOUNG BRENNEN

Sorry, Da.

WILLEM

Come inside a minute, lad. I need to talk to you.

Brennen waits a beat for his father to go inside.

YOUNG BRENNEN

Agh!

SOUND: AXE SLAMMING AGAIN.

11 INT. WILLEM'S COTTAGE - A FEW MINUTES LATER 11 *

WILLEM

The High Prince, young Gunther of House Guernatal, has chosen to honor our farmstead with a visit. It's a great honor, some go their whole lives never laying eyes on a member of the royal family. *

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

My father, you see, held the royal family in as high regard as the faithful should. I'm ashamed to say, I did not feel the same at the time.

WILLEM

But we must work hard to prepare for the royal visit. All the summer's honey, and last winter's ale, must be devoted to the feast. We'll eat dry bread and drink grog until then. Also, Fiona, I'll need you baking every day, spare none of our reserves. Only the best *

(MORE)

WILLEM (cont'd)

for His Highness. You understand, Brennen, that she won't be able to make you one of your ma's maple tarts this year.

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*

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

My sister was born without speech, but we learned to understand each other as brother and sister must. I knew by the signs she made that truly was sorry.

*
*
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*
*

YOUNG BRENNEN

It's not your fault, Fiona.

*
*

WILLEM

And you can wipe that sour look right off your face, lad.

*
*
*

YOUNG BRENNEN

The Prince needs a bunch of farmers to cook for him? Ain't he got enough gods-damned--

SOUND: VIOLENT SLAP

WILLEM

For the last time, you'll not blaspheme in my house, nor will you speak ill of Royalty. He and his men keep us safe. Food's the least we can give them in return. Now, will you weep over some sweets like a little girl, or will you accept your debts like a man?

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

The argument was not a new one. I was young, and strong-willed, and stupid. Our arguments often ended with me earning a beating. This one, though, was stopped by a knock on our door. I opened it to find one of our neighbor.

YOUNG BRENNEN

Mister MacAndrews.

ALISTAIR

Brennen.

ALISTAIR

May I come in?

SOUND: A RICKETY WOODEN DOOR SQUEAKS CLOSED

ALISTAIR

Good morning, Willem. Miss Fiona.

WILLEM

What brings you to my home, Alistair?

ALISTAIR

The missus wanted me to ask if you had any honey you could spare.

WILLEM

Afraid I can't part with any. Prince's feast and that.

ALISTAIR

Prince's feast?

WILLEM

Haven't you heard?

ALISTAIR

I hadn't, but it figures. We had a good harvest this year. Could've maybe turned a profit.

WILLEM

Such is the way of things. You'd have nothing if the Crown didn't keep all the bandits at bay.

ALISTAIR

If the princes of Iorden baked half as much bread for their subjects as they did for their feasts, maybe there wouldn't be so many bandits.

WILLEM

You know what your problem is, Alistair? You think that just because your carcas takes up space on Iorden that you're owed something. That somehow the rest of us, who work for our place in the world, should pay you for the air you breathe. Now get out of my house before you infect my children with your indolence.

ALISTAIR

I look forward to His Highness' speech about the generosity of the common farmer.

BILLY

(Pre-lap)

That's harsh, man.

12 EXT. WAGON ON COUNTRY ROAD - LATE, LATE NIGHT (PRESENT)

12

BILLY

I think our dads would get along. Similar parenting styles.

BRENNEN

He was a hard man, but he knew a diseased soul when he saw one.

NELSON

I don't know if the dude sounds "diseased"...

NIA

Hush boys, no more commentary. Best to let Sir Brennen return to his tale..

13 EXT. WILLEM'S FARM - EARLY MORNING (6 DAYS AFTER PREVIOUS FLASHBACK) 13

OMIT.

14 EXT. OUTSIDE WILLEM'S COTTAGE - A FEW MINUTES LATER 14

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

Aye. The next week passed rapidly. I did as I was told, even if I sulked the whole while. And then came the day I first laid eyes on Gunther. My father had us dress in our finest, and await the High Prince along the road. It took many oaths and even more bruises, but I was there with my family to greet Gunther.

WILLEM

HAIL! ALL HAIL HIS HIGHNESS PRINCE GUNTHER!

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

We all knelt in the dust by the road, until the Prince's Herald addressed us, as protocol demanded.

MESSENGER

Rise, please.

MESSENGER

Who is responsible for this plot?

WILLEM

I, Willem son of Brandon, work this plot gratefully and in faithful service to Lord Aaron Greyhart, may it please you.

MESSENGER

Very good, Willem. His Majesty requests some well water that he may wash before supper.

WILLEM

Gladly. Brennen.

15 EXT. NEARBY ROCKY ALCOVE - A LITTLE WHILE LATER

15

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

I went to fetch the water while the Prince's retinue dismounted. The Prince traveled with many men; I filled our largest water kegs. Even at 11 years, I was taller and stronger than many men twice my age. Still, it took me some time to fill and carry the kegs.

By the time I returned, Gunther was practicing with sword and shield in a clearing. It seemed my child's willfulness fled me in...the presence of royalty. It was unseasonably warm out, and he trained with his shirt off. I could not interrupt him in...a moment of concentration, you understand. Would be rude! When he finally noticed me, I was suddenly shy. Belatedly, I threw myself to my knees, my eyes locked on the dirt at Gunther's feet.

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*
*

YOUNG BRENNEN

Your Highness. The water you requested.

GUNTHER

Thank you. You may rise. What do they call you, boy?

YOUNG BRENNEN

Brennen, may it please Your Highness.

GUNTHER

How many years do you have, Brennen?

YOUNG BRENNEN

Nearly eleven, your Highness.

GUNTHER

Eleven?! Big for your age! Strong too, I'll bet. You should think about the army. When do you turn eleven?

YOUNG BRENNEN

On the morrow, Your Highness.

GUNTHER

Tomorrow?! Well that won't do at all. I'm having a feast tomorrow, and you know what they say about the peacock loathing the sparrow which stands next to it.

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

I was horrified. I could not believe how quickly I had offended my Prince. How would we be punished for my insolence? My fear must have been evident on my face, as the Prince gave a short laugh and put a hand on my shoulder.

GUNTHER

Sorry, it was just a joke.

YOUNG BRENNEN

Oh...of course...Very good, Your Highness.

GUNTHER

A somewhat cruel one, I'll admit. But I meant you no personal insult. I'm not very good at...*this*. Yet.

YOUNG BRENNEN

I hadn't noticed, Your Highness.

GUNTHER

Gods, is that as exhausting for you lot as it is for me?

YOUNG BRENNEN

The water, Your Highness? Not at all, it was my honor and pleasure.

GUNTHER

Never you mind, Brennen. Run along, now. I'm sure your father and sister could use your help.

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

I later learned that was not at all what the Prince meant. Gunther cared for his people more than he did for formalities, especially then. As he aged, he learned the import of bowing and the titles. But he never enjoyed it.

15A EXT. WAGON ON COUNTRY ROAD - LATE, LATE NIGHT

15A

NARRATOR

Sir Brennen paused in his tale, lost in his own memories. His eyes began to droop closed.

REGAN

HEY! This shit was just starting to get interesting. You want the import of bowing and titles? I'm ordering you as Queen to finish this story.

BRENNEN

Very well, Your Grace.

16 INT. VILLAGE MEAD HALL - NIGHT AFTER PREVIOUS FLASHBACK

16

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

The Royal Feast was the next evening. We filled the village Mead Hall. There was food and music and dancing. The Prince gave the speech that MacAlistair predicted.

GUNTHER

His Majesty my Father had told me since my youth about the generosity and work ethic of the common farmer. But I didn't understand until I saw for myself, and now I can say truly that I am honored, and humbled.

SOUND: POLITE APPLAUSE.

GUNTHER

I can think of no better example of this than Brennen, son of Willem, whom I met yesterday.

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

I could hardly believe what I was hearing.

GUNTHER

He has 11 years today. Every boy deserves to celebrate his birth feast. Even if a Prince is around. Brennen, will you and your family sup with me?

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

I was overcome with pride. My father was happier than he had ever been since my ma died. We ate, we drank, all was well, until MacAndrews arrived

SOUND: HEAVY DOORS FLY OPEN

ALISTAIR

Everyone come quick! The granary's on fire!

SOUND: PANIC AND BUSTLE AS EVERYONE FREAKS OUT.

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

The merriment ended in a flash. For poor farmers like us, the granary was life itself. If we lost its stores of food, half our town would die of starvation in the coming winter.

GUNTHER

I'll send some of my guard to help.

WILLEM

Please, Your Highness, that won't be necessary.

GUNTHER

I insist.

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

The Prince did one better. He himself rose to direct the efforts of his men. I tried to join the Prince, but my father held me back.

WILLEM

I mistrust this. Take your sister and go home.

YOUNG BRENNEN

I'm coming to help with the fire.

WILLEM

No, listen to me. I'll help with the fire. You and Fiona wait in the hunting blind and watch the house. If anyone comes, run and fetch me right away. Don't dare do anything yourself, understand?

17 INT./EXT. - HUNTING BLIND NEAR WILLEM'S HOUSE - LATER

17

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

My sister and I did as we were told, and hid to watch our house. I loved Fiona, more than anything in Iorden or Selbirin. And even without speech, she was sharper than a Moonsilver arrowhead. As we waited in the hunting blind, we spoke, in our own way.

YOUNG BRENNEN

I don't know what it is we're looking for. Probably nothing. Probably Da won't let me do anything, like always.

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

She gestured to me, as if chopping wood, and smirked.

YOUNG BRENNEN

Agh. Any idiot can do that.

BRENNEN

That's all it took, for her to know I was troubled. I denied it, of course, but she knew me too well. She

(MORE)

BRENNEN (cont'd)

asked me if I was worrying after some lass. She was always teasing me, embarrassing me in front of her friends. I told her it was not about a lass, and of course she didn't believe me. She started to prattle on about the Prince's good looks. I wanted to hear none of that. Suddenly though, she had a thought. Sharp that one, as I said. She pointed towards the MacAndrews farm and raised an eyebrow.

*

YOUNG BRENNEN

Don't be silly. He depends upon the granary too.

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

She pointed out that he must have been the only person in town not at the feast, and there was no reason for him to be at the granary in the middle of the night instead.

YOUNG BRENNEN

I don't know. Maybe he really dislikes the Prince that much--Good god. Fiona, stay here. If someone comes, get Da. Do you understand? I'm going to leave you the horse but I need to go now. Give me your word you won't do anything stupid.

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

The stupidity of children. I should have stayed with Fiona. She should have listened.

18 EXT. SMALL PATH - A FEW MINUTES LATER

18

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

Instead I ran back to the mead hall. Through the red light of the blood moon, I could see smoke.

SOUND: RUNNING AND PANTING

19 EXT. MEAD HALL - A FEW MINUTES LATER

19

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

I arrived to find the whole building ablaze. Men and women were dead everywhere, including many of the Royal guard. Gunther himself was in the middle of the fight. He moved through his same pattern of strikes and parries as I watched him practice the day before. Only this time he parried dark-cloaked Templars.

Pre-lap: Nia GASPS.

20 EXT. WAGON ON COUNTRY ROAD - LATE, LATE NIGHT (PRESENT) 20

NIA

No one should have to face that as a child. Or ever, for that matter.

BILLY

Wait, face what?

NIA

The Templars of Discord.

NELSON

Dude. Dibs on the band name.

NIA

The Templars of Discord are a militant cult of Garedian. Twisted, irredeemable souls, every one.

BRENNEN

Aye, to be sure. But as mages, they're all the more formidable for it.

21 EXT. MEAD HALL - NIGHT (CONTINUE FLASHBACK) 21

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

They fought Gunther's sword with wisps of blackness, darker than night itself. The Prince was surrounded, his back to a wall, three hooded figures gesturing at him. With a flick of one Templar's wrist, Gunther's sword went flying. With another, his arms were pinned above his head with bonds of night.

I didn't think, there was no time to think. I had grabbed my axe, my woodcutting axe, on my way to the hall. I swung it, and the first templar's head was rolling across the ground.

That was the first man I ever killed. I swung at the next Templar's chest, and my axe lodged there. As I tried to dislodge it, the man's hood fell. It was Alistar MacAndrews. He was the second man I ever killed.

21A FLASH-CUT TO WAGON 21A

BILLY

Holy shit!

BRENNEN

The thing about the wicked is that they are often also petty. My sister - gods dammit, she gave me her word - she thought she could stop the fire while it was still small. She got confused in the smoke. My father returned in time to save her, but the house collapsed before he got out. She never came to see me while I recovered. I think she was scared I'd blame her. I think part of me did. But not as much as I blamed Alice MacAndrews. In any case, when Gunther invited me to join his army, I didn't have to think too hard.

NELSON

The army when you were eleven?

BRENNEN

The captain of Gunther's reinforcements asked the same thing. The Prince himself invited me, and commanded his captain to accept me. I was still bed-ridden, recovering from the fight.

24 EXT. GUNTHER'S CAMP - AFTERNOON (TWO DAYS AFTER PREVIOUS FLASHBACK)

24

GUNTHER

I wasn't that brave at his age. Some men are never that brave in their whole lives.

CAPTAIN

No doubt, Your Highness, and with all due respect, but I can only do so much with a boy.

GUNTHER

Well, do it.

CAPTAIN

By your will, my Prince. So, what do we do with her?

BRENNEN

Alice MacAndrews survived the fire, gods damn her. The prince's men had arrested her, and had bound her with arms high above her head - the pain would distract her too much for her to focus on a spell - but knew not what to do with her.

*

GUNTHER

Has she told us anything about the plans of the Templars?

CAPTAIN

Hasn't said a gods-damned word for the last two days.

GUNTHER

I suppose we must take her back with us.

CAPTAIN

My men won't like it. Waste of rations they'll say.

GUNTHER

I won't like it. But my father was very clear on the subject of summary execution. And this village is clearly in no state to hold a trial.

SOUND: FOOTSTEPS

GUNTHER

Brennen my boy! Up and about I see. Have you thought about my offer?

SOUND: FOOTSTEPS CONTINUE

GUNTHER

Did my physician clear you to walk?

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

I was not cleared to walk. I could barely even stand. But Alice MacAndrews lived, and my father did not. There was an axe near the Captain's tent. A real battle axe. I had never held one before. But in some ways, all axes the same. You swing them, they cut things. I swung the axe, and swung it again, and again. And then she was dead. I walked back to the Prince, dropped the bloody axe, and fell to my knees at Gunther's feet.

*
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*

25 EXT. WAGON ON COUNTRY ROAD - PRE-DAWN (PRESENT)

25

*

BRENNEN

"My life for yours, Your Highness," I said.

Another beat of grave pause.

*

NARRATOR

Silence stretched as the weight of Sir Brennen's words sunk in. In the darkness, the old general's eyes began to close. Regan broke the stillness.

*
*
*

REGAN

So that all you got? The elf says we got at least another six hours to the gates of the White Forest.

*

BRENNEN

Very well. The next time I faced death was one dawn
after I first met the half-Orc who calls himself Traft.

NIA

Let's hear that one, then.

*

END OF PART TWO.

*

PART THREE:

26 INT. ARLENE'S BEDCHAMBERS - VERY EARLY MORNING

26

NARRATOR

Arlene lay in her bed, staring at the ceiling. The first rays of the new morning revealed bags of sleeplessness under her eyes. There was a knock on her door.

ARLENE

Who's there?

RICKARD

(Through door)
Arlene? It's Rickard.

NARRATOR

She went white.

RICKARD

I mean you no harm. I just wish to speak with you.

ARLENE

I don't wish to speak with you.

NARRATOR

She climbed out of bed and clung to the wall farthest from her door.

*

RICKARD

(Through door)
I'll stay near to the door, you may stand as far away as you like.

NARRATOR

Shaking, she picked up a brooch from her night table and hid it behind her back.

*

*

RICKARD

(Through door)
I'm going to open the door now.

SOUND: DOOR CREAKS OPEN

RICKARD

How are you feeling?

NARRATOR

Arlene stared at him, incredulous at the question.

RICKARD

I mean after the accident the other night.

ARLENE

Get out before I scream.

RICKARD

I request only a moment of audience.

ARLENE

(Voice rising)

I swear on MY LIFE--

RICKARD

-No, shh please! Lest your brother hear.

ARLENE

That accident freed me from the stain of your crime.
I'll die before I'm sullied again by the likes of you.

RICKARD

I come in peace and contrition, please hear--

ARLENE

--I. Will. Die.

NARRATOR

She lifted the brooch and held the pin against her
throat.

RICKARD

Come now, my lady, don't be ridiculous.

NARRATOR

Some chivalrous instinct drove him a few steps towards
her. In desperation she pushed the pin up.

Arlene gasps in surprised pain.

NARRATOR

Reflexes stayed Arlene's hand as Rickard rushed towards
her. But as he neared she turned the pin on him.

RICKARD

(ad lib.)

Agh! Ack! My lady, please!

NARRATOR

He got his hands up just in time to save his own sight.

ARLENE

(ad lib.)

Get out get out get out...

NARRATOR

At last he managed to grab her hand and wrench the brooch free, but she used her free hand to besiege his face.

ARLENE

(crying)
Leave me alone you monster!!

NARRATOR

Amid the flurry of blows, Rickard got on his knees, took out his dagger, and placed it against his own throat with the hilt facing his cousin.

RICKARD

Take it! Kill me if you wish!

NARRATOR

Her offensive slowed. Trembling, she tentatively took hold of the knife.

RICKARD

I am vulnerable and at your mercy, my lady. Please hear me out.

NARRATOR

Tears mixing with blood in the cleft of Arlene's shoulder, she narrowed her eyes, and grazed the blade against Rickard's throat. He flinched but did not run, as a small trickle of blood ran down his own neck.

ARLENE

Speak, then, if you must.

RICKARD

Where do you think he got the idea to orchestrate that "accident"?

NARRATOR

She tightened her grip and took several sharp, furious breaths. But then withdrew the knife and reeled back her hand.

SOUND: ONE MORE HARD SLAP

ARLENE

You had no right to tell him!

RICKARD

You said yourself, it freed you from the stains of... the past.

ARLENE

And how exactly did you know Lord Mooncrest would respond as he did?

RICKARD

Knowing what I did about the man, I thought it a safe assumption--

ARLENE

--Safe?! Yes it was very safe for you, gambling with my honor.

RICKARD

If you knew Antonin Mooncrest, you'd know he was more likely to have me beheaded or castrated on the spot than he was to besmirch you.

ARLENE

Maybe so. But I still had a right to know before you did that.

RICKARD

Yes you did. But I couldn't risk being seen consorting with you beforehand. So I wronged you once again, in order to make things right.

ARLENE

Right? Have you any idea what I had to suffer at my brother's hand lest he tell anyone what you did to me? How many insults and injustices which can never be undone? And now you come here, a week before my wedding, tell my betrothed to throw me off a horse, and you have the gall to say you've made things right?

RICKARD

That was the wrong way to say it. I only meant that my actions should be interpreted as my deepest and most abject apology, knowing as I do that mere words of contrition would be trivial in the face of your suffering.

ARLENE

I didn't ask for your apology, and I sure as Selbirin will not feign forgiveness to ease your conscience.

RICKARD

I don't ask for your forgiveness, nor do I deserve it. I only ask that you not think of me as a monster.

ARLENE

What I think is mine to decide. It's the only thing that is. And if you wanted me to think kindly of you, perhaps you could have kept your gods-damned breeches laced and not used me like some army page boy uses a pillow with a split seam!

RICKARD

I was hardly more than a boy myself!

ARLENE

And what was I?!

RICKARD

You know how Ardel is. How he can make you feel. I was dumb with drink myself, but I'll never forget the way he said "you want to be a man, don't you?" You don't know what it's like for a boy. A boy who never becomes a man is worthless. He might as well be a--

ARLENE

--a girl? Worse, a girl without her virginity. There's nothing worth less.

RICKARD

No man can change the past. Only make the best of the future.

ARLENE

Very well. I don't think you a monster. I think you a sad, broken boy who broke me as well. If you want to make the best of the future, get out of my life this instant, and never return.

A beat as Rickard composes himself.

RICKARD

My lady.

NARRATOR

He nodded, and was gone. Arlene dropped the candle holder and sobbed.

*

27 EXT. WAGON ON COUNTRY ROAD - DAWN

27

BRENNEN

Some days which come to be important start like any other. Others, you can feel the minute you wake.

27A INT. COMMAND ROOM OF BLACKHOLD - EVENING (16 YEARS AGO)

27A

BRENNEN (V.O.)

I was invited to Blackhold for the promotion ceremony of then Colonel Traft. But before they presented him, I had time to fraternize with the Esteemed Commanders of the four Civic Guard Strongholds: Lord Robert Greenhorn, Esteemed Commander of Summerhold, Ivan, son of Morris, of Seahold, Bryce Riverfell of Freehold, and of course Dillon Kerr of Blackhold. This was sixteen years ago. I remember because it was only a few weeks after Prince Uther was killed. Peaceful be his rest.

IVAN

We were all very sorry to hear about His Highness, Brennen.

BRENNEN (V.O.)

The loss of The Prince still cut deep with all those faithful to the Crown, and Ivan was already a few cups deep.

*
*
*

KERR

Here's to Prince Uther.

BRENNEN (V.O.)

Offered General Kerr. Everyone drank to that. The loss of The Prince still cut deep with all those faithful to the Crown.

SOUND: 5 WOODEN CUPS HIT THE TABLE

IVAN

If it would help, I can dispatch a few men to Brimshire to help with the investigation.

BRENNEN

Thank you, General, but that won't be--

NIA

(Pre-lap)
--Wait.

28 EXT. WAGON ON COUNTRY ROAD - EARLY MORNING (PRESENT)

28

NIA

Prince Uther was slain near Brimshire? General, have your dreams continued?

NARRATOR

In the wagon, Brennen shook his head as if hoping to clear the fog of fever.

BRENNEN

No, but I haven't slept since we parted ways in that cave.

NELSON

Dreams? There's been more dreams? Like, prophecy dreams?

NIA

My father used to say, "Anyone who says they're certain they've heard the voice of god is either a prophet or a madman. Either way, watch them well." Which is to say, I hesitate to use the word 'prophecy,' but the details have become too uncanny to ignore entirely. I have dreamt the last two nights. And seen the same young girl you described, Brennen.

REGAN

But you only saw her after he described her.

BRENNEN

And what does this have to do with Brimshire?

NIA

The night we spent in the monastery, the girl in my dream said "the blind man has seen the face of god." Kalth'yr, that's why I talked with that poor man.

YELLOWYYN

You encountered a blind beggar on the streets of Armstrungard. Hardly a miracle.

NIA

He was from Brimshire. He says he saw the Prince murdered. And believes Garedien did it.

BRENNEN

To start, no one saw the Prince's murder except the murderers. My men and I interviewed damn near half the Kingdom in our investigation.

NIA

Above all else, the man seemed terrified he would be accused. You can understand that, can't you? Perhaps he went into hiding.

YELLOWYYN

More importantly, that Garedian killed the Prince is obviously a madman's raving.

NIA

Not if one believes in avatars.

YELLOWYYN

You've now crossed from foolish speculation into blasphemy.

NIA

I'm not saying I believe it. *

NELSON

I used to believe in Avatar. Until Shyamalan ruined the movie and the sequel sucked. *

NIA

Sometimes a scholar puts forward a proposition - maybe even a distasteful one - without judgment, just to see how it holds up to new information received. *

JEN

(croaks)
Hypothesis.

BILLY

God bless you.

NIA

We call this a provisional assertion. And the process of following a road of thought to its end, even if it ends in falsehoods or absurdities, often sets us on the path of truth.

REGAN

HEY!

NARRATOR

Regan struck Brennen on the forehead, jolting him awake.

REGAN

You didn't finish your story, asshole. Nia, no offense, but we can get back on the path of truth later. I hear Elven wine is a good shortcut.

BRENNEN

Where did I leave off?

NELSON

The other Generals, they were all sorry about the Prince.

BRENNEN

Ah, yes. Anyway, after the proper condolences were expressed, it was time to meet Traft. They were grooming him then, to take over as Esteemed Commander of Blackhold.

NELSON

Who was grooming him?

YELLOWYYN

(Awed reverence)

Th'ayyd Ry'y lo-Th'yyt, Lord Commander of the Th'ar lo-Hyyl.

BRENNEN

The Knights of the Wood wanted to prove that, with the right training and discipline, even a half-Orc could become a loyal servant of the realm.

NIA

An unfortunate miscalculation.

YELLOWYYN

It was benevolent of them to try.

BRENNEN

A dangerous bit of hubris, if you had asked me. But no one did, and even rash as I was then, I knew enough not to speak to Th'ayyd Ry'y lo-Th'yyt unless spoken to.

BILLY

Hehe. "Real teat."

NIA

Shh.

BILLY

So this Real titty guy, what is he, like, the ultimate hard-ass?

YELLOWYYN

The first day of her command, she rode 15 knights into an Orc hive of around 300. Now, this hive had recently raided a nearby human village, and she had been ordered to carry out justice. So when she arrived, she announced that all the warriors should surrender and report for execution.

BILLY

Twenty-to-one? Ballsy.

YELLOWYYN

Admittedly, only around 75 of that 300 were warriors of warring age, but Orclings as young as 7 or 8 years have been known to take up arms.

NELSON

Still five-to-one. How'd she win the battle?

BRENNEN

There was no battle. All 75 came quietly. They'd heard stories of the High Commander's prowess, and decided it was easier that way.

YELLOWYYN

The Th'ar lo-Hyyl are the single greatest fighting force in Iorden, bar none.

BRENNEN

Aye. And Th'ayyd Ry'y lo-Th'yyt may be the most formidable warrior alive. And I would never say that lightly. So, you can understand my shock when she returned to Blackhold that next morning, bloodied and without horse.

29 INT. MOONCREST ENCAMPMENT, OUTSIDE CASTLE GUERNATAL -
MORNING

29

NARRATOR

As Brennen continued to regale the party, Antonin Mooncrest was working on a story of his own. It was this he discussed, in his army's command tent outside the walls of Castle Guernatal, with the troupe of stage players hired for the pre-nuptial festivities.

ANTONIN

So you're to perform this evening?

LEAD ACTOR

Yes, my Lord. The comedy of The Orc Wife and the tragedy of Princess Rhiannon.

NARRATOR

Antonin nodded to one of his men, who handed out scrolls to the players.

ANTONIN

You will perform this instead.

LEAD ACTOR

My Lord?

ANTONIN

Instead of the plays you had prepared, you will perform this one for the court.

LEAD ACTOR

With respect, my Lord, I'm not sure you understand what it is we players of the theatre do. It isn't rote recitation; a play takes time and thought to prepare. You can't just hand us a manuscript we've never seen before and expect us to perform it the same evening.

ANTONIN

Well it needn't be perfect.

LEAD ACTOR

Beg your pardon, my lord, but aside from the pride we take in our work, we've our reputation as a company to consider. That's all we have to trade on. I know this isn't your trade, my lord, but no playwright would think your request reasonable.

ANTONIN

I'll pay you tenfold what Redmoor is paying.

LEAD ACTOR

Well, let's see what we have here.

Beat as he reads.

LEAD ACTOR

Have you read this?

ANTONIN

Of course. I conceived of it and dictated it to my scribes.

LEAD ACTOR

This...implies The Lord Regent had his sister raped and the High King murdered.

ANTONIN

And if your performance is decent, I'll catch the conscience of The Lord Regent.

LEAD ACTOR

Oof. That line is bloody terrible. You're not inspiring much faith in your skills as a playwright.

ANTONIN

I needn't be praised for my verse, only to rouse Lord Redmoor to rash action, so that I may see if my suspicions are founded.

LEAD ACTOR

Yes I think it will rouse him. I think his rash action will be to behead the players who just called him a murdering, usurping, rape conspirator. How is exactly is this plan supposed to end well for me?

ANTONIN

What if, at the end of your performance, you simply recited a sonnet--

ACTOR 2

--No sonnets!

ANTONIN

What if someone else wrote the sonnet?

ACTOR 2

Fuck everything about sonnets!

LEAD ACTOR

Shut up, Edward, and mind your tongue around nobility. Forgive my man's manners, my Lord. But if you want to call out Ardel Redmoor, you'll have to do it yourself.

30 INT. CASTLE GUERNATAL ROYAL SOLAR - LATE MORNING

30

NARRATOR

All the while, Ardel Redmoor broke his fast alone in the Great Hall of Castle Guernatal. He was picking through far too much food for any one man to eat, when his sister strode in, walking with purpose. He sneered at her.

ARDEL

This is a pleasant surprise. To what do I owe it?

ARLENE

Where is my handmaiden?

ARDEL

I'm sorry, I don't know to whom you're referring.

ARLENE

My handmaiden, Gwen. The one I've had for the last ten years.

ARDEL

Oh you mean the base-born twat who used to follow you around like a sick dog? I'd forgotten all about her.

ARLENE

Where is she and when can I see her?

ARDEL

Shouldn't you be in bed, recovering from your accident?

ARLENE

I'll go nowhere until you tell me where she is.

ARDEL

Our investigation of her is ongoing. Now run along.

ARLENE

Damn you, Ardel--

ARDEL

Oh hush now, you--

ARLENE

(ROARS)
--I WILL NOT BE SILENT!

NARRATOR

Ardel had to recover from his shock before he could turn to anger.

ARDEL

How about I return her to you one piece at a time for the next year?

ARLENE

I swear, if you harm one hair on her head...

ARDEL

What? What will happen if I harm her?

ARLENE

I will blame myself, as you've trained me to do and loathe myself more wholly than I ever have before. You will finally succeed in breaking my spirit completely. And then...then you shall need to fear me. Can you even fathom what a woman with nothing to lose is capable of? See if I don't burn down the tabernacle and dance, laughing in the ashes. See if I don't fuck every man in the army until Mooncrest leaves in shame. See if I don't open my wrists at my own wedding feast. Try keeping this counterfeit peace with Antonin Mooncrest as you wash his betrothed's blood off of his finest clothes. So tell me brother, do you really wish to reap all that you've sown?

NARRATOR

Ardel searched his sister's face for any sign of weakness. He found none.

ARDEL

Who told him?

ARLENE

Pardon?

ARDEL

I thought we were past coyness. I know your little accident was nothing of the sort, but I also know it wasn't your idea. So tell me who gave Mooncrest the idea, and you can have your pet back, in no more wretched a state than you last saw her.

NARRATOR

Arlene deliberated, as one often does when given a "choice" that isn't.

31 INT. ARDEL REDMOOR'S BEDCHAMBERS - A FEW HOURS LATER

31

NARRATOR

Thus did Ardel come to pay an unexpected visit to his cousin Rickard, as Rickard wrote alone in the small room of Castle Guernatal in which he'd been staying.

RICKARD

Cousin. How do you fare?

ARDEL

Poorly.

NARRATOR

Several of Ardel's men charged in and seized Rickard.

ARDEL

It broke my heart to hear.

RICKARD

Whatever you mean, I'm sure there's an explanation.

ARDEL

You've been speaking obscene and repugnant slanders against my sister.

RICKARD

I assure you, I've done nothing of the sort.

ARDEL

Antonin Mooncrest says you've been bragging of how my sister gave her maidenhood to you ten years ago.

NARRATOR

Rickard's eyes widened with terror as he realized that yes, his cousin would stoop that low.

RICKARD

You were there you son of a whore! You know exactly what happened.

ARDEL

I've had enough of your lies. You've gone far out of line and must be punished. Like an unruly hound. Guards.

NARRATOR

Rickard remembered the man-at-arms coming forward with tongs and a red-hot knife, and then nothing. The next thing he could recall was screaming formlessly into a pillow, and missing his tongue.

END OF PART THREE.

PART FOUR:

32 INT. COMMAND ROOM OF BLACKHOLD - EVENING (16 YEARS AGO)

32

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

As I supped with the four Esteemed Commanders of the Civic Guard, on that night sixteen years ago, General Robert Greenhorn - the only nobleman of that party - inquired after his sister, the Lady Dagmar, who would one day be Queen, you recall. Peaceful be her rest.

ROBERT

So, Brennen, how fares my sister at court?

BRENNEN

Well, I think. The late Prince--

IVAN

--Honored be Uther's name!

GROUP

(*ad. lib.*)

Hear hear!

SOUND: 5 WOODEN CUPS SLAM DOWN ON TABLE.

BRENNEN

Uther was not overfond of her, but I think he only hoped to honor the memory of his Lady Mother.

ROBERT

I understand. But I imagine he would feel that way about any Lady of whom His Majesty was fond.

BRENNEN

Aye. Pray you, let this stay at this table, but His Majesty has spoken favorably to me about your Lady Sister on several occasions.

ROBERT

Ah! Splendid! Any counsel you would give her were you in my place?

BRENNEN

Well...no, nothing. Just do as she's been doing.

A pregnant silence.

ROBERT

I'd rather know, Brennen.

BRENNEN

It's...you know how women can gossip.

ROBERT

Gods, don't I know it.

IVAN

Especially if they get some wine in them.

Ivan HICCUPS.

BRYCE

There's this courtesan swings by us now and then. Sweet girl, treats the boys good. But they call her the Horn of the Elders. Tell her something, the whole realm's gonna hear it.

All LAUGH.

ROBERT

But really, Brennen. What are they saying?

BRENNEN

Nothing too terrible. Just that she may be attracting the attention of some below her station. Not intentionally of course.

ROBERT

Like whom?

RY'Y

Generals.

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

We all rose in her presence, and immediately bent our knees. The Lord Commander of the Knights of the Wood, with her golden armor and spiked sabre. Th'ayyd Ry'y lo-Th'yyt.

BILLY

(V.O.)

Hah. Oh, sorry.

RY'Y

As you were.

SOUND: ARMORED MEN SITTING DOWN

RY'Y

Allow me to introduce Colonel Traft.

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

He had barely 25 years then, could hardly grow a damn beard. But he wore clothes and hair like a man's - could almost pass for one. But I never liked the look of the bastard.

RY'Y

Shall we sit?

33 INT. SAME - A LITTLE LATER

33

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

In any case, Ry'y lo-Th'yyt asked each of us to impart the wisdom of our years on the whelp before he left for his first campaign. Being asked was an honor you didn't refuse.

BRYCE

When I's a little younger than you, I's in a riding accident. My leg's all messed up and I said to my Dad, I said "gods damn. I gotta get another horse, this one's crazy." And my dad said "I could get you another horse. But one day you'll have something you only get one of. And you'll have to make the best of it. So you better learn how to do that now." This is your only duty to the realm, son. There's a lot of honest people counting on you doing it just to go on with their lives. So you'd better make the best of it.

TRAFY

I will. Thank you, sir.

ROBERT

When a man does as much as you'll be doing for the realm, he may start to think he's entitled to certain allowances. It can be very easy to lose one's self in, camp followers, for instance. You'll never be more than a man though. Everything in moderation.

TRAFY

Yes, sir. Thank you.

IVAN

Brandy before ale, smooth shall ye sail. Ale before brandy...you'll shit yourself.

BRENNEN

Is no one else going to say it?

Embarrassed silence.

BRENNEN

You've got that Orc blood in you, lad. Half of you comes from savage, treacherous, rapine stock. Surround yourself with good men and see that it doesn't get the better of you.

RY'Y

We all know his background, General Brennen. But, we wouldn't be having this conversation had the Colonel not already shown much loyalty and valor. General Kerr, have you anything to add?

BRENNEN

(V.O.)

There was something sad about how long he took to answer.

KERR

No. There's naught I can say that will prepare you for what you'll see out there. Honor your charge as long as you can, and know when it's time to walk away.

34 EXT. WAGON ON COUNTRY ROAD - LATE MORNING (PRESENT)

34

NARRATOR

Brennen shivered in the back of the wagon as he tried to continue his tale, but his fever worsened.

BRENNEN

We finished our meals and retired to bed. At dawn, the High Commander and 50 Civic Guard set off for their campaign.

(getting a little delirious)

I remember my dream that night so vividly. There was a dragon who had somehow trained a hawk. The hawk flew into a field, sent all the mice and rabbits running. Then the dragon flew in, and burned and ate everything.

REGAN

Sir Brennen, what happened with Traft and the raid?

BILLY

And who was nailing that guy's sister?

BRENNEN

Commander came back in the morning. No horse, bleeding bad. Said Traft turned on them, more Orcs coming. They were on us ten minutes later. We held the fort, terrible toll. A spear nicked my throat. Stone-tipped, be dead if it were steel. Thank Galadon for elf medicine. Thought I was dead. Saw my own blood spray

(MORE)

BRENNEN (cont'd)
 onto the walls of Blackhold. That cold dizziness
 creeping over my eyes...

NARRATOR
 Brennen's eyes rolled back as his face went slack.

REGAN
 Brennen? SIR BRENNEN?

NARRATOR
 Regan urged the horses faster.

REGAN
 Somebody hit him!

NARRATOR
 Nelson shook his head in emphatic refusal of the
 Queen's command. Billy reached a hand towards Brennen,
 closed his eyes tightly, and then lightly tapped
 Brennen's cheek, before yanking his hand back and
 covering his head.

REGAN
 Gods dammit, I said HIT HIM!

NARRATOR
 Jen, still holding her raw, swollen throat, kicked
 Brennen in the gut with all the strength she could
 muster. He started awake, but just barely.

YELLOWYYN
 Should be less than an hour to the gates. Sooner if we
 keep this pace.

REGAN
 Nia, if you know any prayers for making god be less of
 a bastard than usual, now would be a great time.

NARRATOR
 They rushed onward.

35 EXT. BLACKHOLD - SIMULTANEOUS

35

SOUND: SPOOKY TEMPLAR PAD THROUGHOUT THIS SCENE AND THE NEXT

NARRATOR
 Meanwhile, far to the west, outside the walls of the
 newly captured Blackhold, several of the Templars of
 Discord conducted a horrid ritual.

 Three of them restrained a captured Guardsman, while a
 fourth opened his throat.

SOUND: BLOOD SPRAYS ONTO THE WALL

NARRATOR

As his body fluttered and then fell still, his lifeblood sprayed onto the walls of the fort, onto which had been carved runes of an all-but-forgotten script. These now glowed with an eldritch fire.

The Templars, tossing the lifeless body onto a pile of similarly butchered corpses, studied the pattern of illuminated carvings. As the unnatural light faded, they abruptly turned their backs to the wall, and entered the keep in search of Traft. *

One headed into the fort to inform Traft of their new knowledge. *

36 INT. COMMAND ROOM OF BLACKHOLD - NEARLY CONTINUOUS

36

NARRATOR

General Traft was taking breakfast at the time, in Blackhold's command room. He was surrounded by his Orc Cheiftans, and his new Protege, Smith the smith. *

The room grew quiet with dread as the cloaked figure seemed to float in. *

TEMPLAR

WE HAVE READ THE PORTENTS.

TRAFT

And?

NARRATOR

The Templar of course used an illusion enchantment to cloak his voice like he cloaked the rest of himself. His effortless proficiency in the arcane arts did nothing to calm those around him.

TEMPLAR

THE STORMBRINGER IS NIGH, AND ALL SHALL CRUMBLE. WE RIDE EAST.

TRAFT

Take your pick of the horses. We'll follow you in the morning.

NARRATOR

The Templar nodded, and left. The door seemed to close behind him without his pulling it. Smith and the Chieftains exhaled palpable relief.

TRAFT

I'd hoped we could wait a little longer to march on Freehold. Riverfell's the least evil of the four I think. Oh well. He dies next.

CHIEFTAIN 1

I still don't trust the Templars. And, respectfully, Brother General, I don't know why you do.

TRAFT

I don't trust them. They're not trustworthy. But they are predictable, which is good enough for wartime.

SMITH

Sorry, what was that about a stormbringer?

TRAFT

They're referring to a prophecy that's very important to their sect. They believe that when the time is right, a great agent of chaos will appear to solidify the rule of Garedian. The Templars follow me because they think I'm some kind of key to finding the Stormbringer.

SMITH

Do you believe that?

TRAFT

Stranger things have happened in my life. Did I ever tell you all why they believe what they do?

NARRATOR

No one seemed eager to respond in any way.

TRAFT

Suppose now's good a time as any.

37 EXT. WAGON ON COUNTRY ROAD - SIMULTANEOUS

37

NARRATOR

And as Traft began his story, Nia prayed over Brennen, who drifted in and out of lucidity in the back of the wagon.

NIA

Please grant your grace to our dear friend and your loyal servant. Return his body to a healthy state of order, and deliver him from illness, that most terrible agent of chaos.

NARRATOR

Suddenly, Nia's mind made a connection it perhaps should have some time ago. You know how mortal minds can be.

NIA

Brennen, "the King has loved my enemy," yes? That's what the girl said.

REGAN

Are you still fucking on that?

NIA

I'm loathe to say it, but Avatars, dreaming...it's the only thread that can tie the visions together.

YELLOWYIN

This line of thought is preposterous and we haven't the time for it.

*

NIA

Brennen, I think you and I may have seen auguries of Galadon.

BRENNEN

King...never loved the enemy.

NIA

No, His Majesty was an honorable man, he would never have knowingly loved chaos. But if Garedian took a mortal form and deceived him...

Brennen GROANS.

NIA

That beggar believed that Garedian took the form of a woman, and that this woman killed the Prince. I'm afraid there's no tactful way to ask this Brennen, but had His Majesty ever mentioned any...personal entanglements--

*

--Brennen GROANS LOUDER.

REGAN

No, you're right. That's good. Angry's better than unconscious. Sir Brennen, was Gunther fucking anyone on the side, other than my grandma?

NIA

No, I really am trying to deduce who it could have been. What friend of the Enemy could have been close to His Majesty?

38 INT. COMMAND ROOM OF BLACKHOLD - SIMULTANEOUS

38

NARRATOR

And at around the same time that Nia pondered this, General Traft reached a detail in his story which was shocking to Smith.

SMITH

Wait. Dagmar Guernatal? The High Queen of Iorden took you as a lover?

NARRATOR

Do you see what I tried to do there? The answer to Nia's questions was--oh, you understood? Good. Just making certain. Mortal minds, you know. In any case...

TRAFT

Her name was Greenhorn then. She wasn't queen yet. But yes.

DISSOLVE TO:

39 EXT. JUST OUTSIDE BLACKHOLD - MIDNIGHT (16 YEARS AGO)

39

TRAFT

(V.O.)
I couldn't sleep that night, so I just kind of walked to nowhere.

DAGMAR

General.

TRAFT

(V.O.)
Dagmar looked like a dream that night. Maybe she was.

TRAFT

Not yet. The promotion ceremony's in the morning before we leave.

DAGMAR

I needed to see you before then. And touch you.

TRAFT

(V.O.)
I couldn't match her gaze. Wasn't strong enough then.

DAGMAR

You needn't go.

TRAFT

I gave my word, my lady.

DAGMAR

And why do we keep our word?

TRAFT

When the Elves change their mind and take away what they gave me, my word'll be the only currency I've got.

DAGMAR

And why should it be thus?

TRAFT

It could be much worse.

DAGMAR

It could be tenfold better and then some.

TRAFT

Could be. But what do we give to get there?

DAGMAR

Everything.

TRAFT

(V.O.)
She kissed me then.

DAGMAR

I'm willing. Are you?

TRAFT

No.

DAGMAR

Ere this time tomorrow, I fear you will be.

TRAFT

Could be.

Dagmar gives him a beat to think.

DAGMAR

Very well, then. If I must lose you tomorrow, let me have you now.

TRAFT

(V.O.)
We made love under the--

SMITH

(Pre-lap)
--It didn't happen like that.

40 INT. COMMAND ROOM OF BLACKHOLD - LATE MORNING (PRESENT)

40

NARRATOR

The Chieftains all looked quite surprised by Smith's interruption.

TRAFT

I'm telling the story, Smith.

SMITH

That's not how people make love. That's how a boy of thirteen years tells his friends it happened, probably with "some wench from Armstrungard. You wouldn't know her."

*

SOUND: CHAIR BEING PUSHED OUT

TRAFT

Are you calling me a liar, Smith the smith?

NARRATOR

Smith cowered and flinched under Traft's towering presence and furious gaze.

*

*

SMITH

No, no, not at all, sir. I only meant--

--a Chieftain *GUFFAWS*. Everyone *CRACKS UP*.

TRAFT

I'm fucking with you, Smith. There are two types of stories in this world. Lies people tell about evil done to them, and lies they tell about evil they've done. The second kind is to be picked apart until only the twisted, wicked skeleton remains and then smashed underfoot. The first is to be cherished for all its nonsense.

41 INT. ARLENE'S BEDCHAMBERS - SIMULTANEOUS

41

NARRATOR

Meanwhile, a very worried Arlene Redmoor heard a stern knock on the door of her chambers. She hid her candle holder behind her back and opened the door.

Gwen, though flanked by two Redmoor men, looked healthy. Arlene thought it nearly too good to be true, and so hesitated to move lest she awake from this reverie.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (cont'd)

But when the guards pushed Gwen forward and she fell into her lady's arms, Arlene knew she was warm flesh and pumping blood.

As they breathed in the realness of each other, Ardel lurked into view behind Gwen. Arlene hugged Gwen tighter and looked at Ardel with furious intensity.

ARDEL

Don't worry. She's quite unharmed. And thank you for your help.

NARRATOR

Ardel and his men walked away.

Arlene and Gwen talk to each other through tears.

ARLENE

Are you all right?

GWEN

Yes. Gods, I missed you.

ARLENE

Are you...did anyone...?

GWEN

I wasn't touched.

ARLENE

Praise be.

GWEN

I think they were short on men after that assassin made her way through the dungeon. No one could afford to leave his post.

They LAUGH together, relieved.

ARDEL

Oh, I nearly forgot.

NARRATOR

Ardel oozed back into the doorway.

ARDEL

You're going to have a new neighbor.

NARRATOR

Ardel's men dragged a barely-lucid Rickard past the door. They lingered just long enough to display the dried blood covering his shirt.

ARDEL

Well I couldn't abide him using my old chambers after he spoke such slanders against you. Don't worry though. He'll be under constant guard, lest he try anything rash when the sedatives wear off.

NARRATOR

Ardel slammed Arlene's door shut. She heard a key turn in her lock.

GWEN

Who was that man?

ARLENE

That was my cousin, Rickard.

GWEN

Not the one who...

ARLENE

The same.

Gwen GASPS.

GWEN

Why did Ardel cut his tongue out?

ARLENE

There's so much to tell since you've been gone, but not tonight.

GWEN

He deserves it and more.

From the next room, a PAINED MOAN begins quietly.

GWEN

I'm frightened, m'lady. Very frightened.

ARLENE

I'll never again let you out of my sight, I swear on my life.

The MOAN winds up into a CRY as Rickard comes to.

NARRATOR

As Rickard's cries worsened, Gwen had a thought which disturbed her greatly.

GWEN

What did Ardel mean when he thanked you?

ARLENE

He's only trying to play games with my mind.

The cry is now a HORRIFIC, FORMLESS SCREAM.

GWEN

(Cries)
We should leave.

ARLENE

Where would we go, Gwen?

GWEN

Anywhere else. For both our sakes.

Another SCREAM.

GWEN

(Beside herself)
Please, please leave with me.

ARLENE

(Crying too)
We can't. Not now.

GWEN

Then when?!

ARLENE

Just lay with me. Please.

The SCREAMING is constant now.

GWEN

It won't get better here.

ARLENE

It's all right, Gwen.

GWEN

It's not all right, it's never been all right!

ARLENE

Do you remember the lullaby you taught me when we were young?

Gwen borders on hysterical.

GWEN

(Ad Lib.)
Please, please, please, please let's go. Please.

ARLENE

There were two sisters by the sea./ Each was as fair as fair could be.

GWEN

There's nothing to gain staying here.

ARLENE

The younger's voice was pure'st but none./ The elder's bright as a candle in the sun.

Rickard SCREAMS again and Gwen SOBS.

ARLENE

Into town one day there rode a knight.\ Singing "here is where I'll find a wife."

NARRATOR

Gwen struggled and thrashed, but Arlene held her tight, as much a restraint as an embrace.

*
*

ARLENE

The elder said "this much I know.\ If he hears her sing I'll be yet alone."

NARRATOR

The lady sang softly, her lips brushing the serving girl's ear as she sang.

*
*

Gwen's sobs quiet and her breathing slows.

ARLENE

So she called out "sister, come with me! \ Let's go walking by the sea."

ALL SCREAMS BG NOISE FADES OUT AS ARLENE & GWEN MOVE INTO A DREAMIER SOUNDSCAPE - PLEASANT SOUNDING REVERB LIKE A WELL-RECORDED FOLK SONG.

*

ARLENE

And the waves did thrash and wind did churn.\ And only the elder did return.\ Returned alone, returned alone.\ Fa lalala la la doe doe.

*

42A EXT. BLACKHOLD - PRESENT

42A

(Torches and night sounds for all Blackhold Present sections)

NARRATOR

Traft stood high atop the ramparts of Blackhold, surveying the night.

*
*

ARLENE

(V.O.)

*When the younger's body washed ashore, \ The elder wept
like the rest and even more.*

NARRATOR

Smith stood with him.

*

ARLENE

(V.O.)

*She was consoled by the handsome knight. \ And ere long
she was his wife.*

SMITH

Which type of story is yours?

ARLENE

(V.O.)

*One day a dragon came to town. \ Stores were devour'd
and homes burnt down.*

TRAFT

I suppose it's a little of both.

ARLENE

(V.O.)

*The Knight hoped to the dragon slay, \ And thus was the
sister a widow made.*

TRAFT

How much of each you'll need to judge for yourself.

*

ARLENE

(V.O.)

*Knowing that her doom was near, \ She thought of the
sister once held dear.*

TRAFT

Would you like to hear the rest of it?

ARLENE

(V.O.)

*So she crawled to the mound where the dead did rest. \
And cried upon her family crest.*

SMITH

Only if it's good.

ARLENE

(V.O.)

*"A wicked, rotten wretch am I. \ Woe that I've but once
to die."*

42B EXT. WAGON ON COUNTRY ROAD 42B *

(Wagon and night sounds)

NARRATOR *

As Brennen shook with fever... *

ARLENE

(V.O.)

"Was not just you I drowned that day,\ The best part of
me too washed away."

42C INT. ARLENE'S BEDCHAMBERS 42C *

(BG Noise and Screams from Sc. 41, Reverb on Arlene &
Gwen changes to put us back in the room with them.)

NARRATOR *

...And Arlene Redmoor sang... *

ARLENE

Washed away, it washed away.\ Fa lalala la la day day.

42D EXT. BLACKHOLD - PAST 42D

(Just night sounds for Blackhold Past)

NARRATOR *

...Traft told his story to the night. *

ARLENE *

(V.O.) *

And then a voice came from the earth,\ Sweet and true
and full of mirth. *

TRAFT *

(V.O.) *

We made love under the moon, as I said... *

ARLENE *

(V.O.) *

"Sister it's true you've done me wrong.\ But flesh is
weak as love is strong." *

TRAFT *

(V.O.) *

As we lie under the stars... *

ARLENE

(V.O.)

"I've still love for you to give.\ So promise me that
you would live."

TRAFI

(V.O.)

Dagmar looked at me--no, through me, and spoke.

ARLENE

(V.O.)

"Now take that spade, unearth my bones.\ I'll make you
a flute so sweet of tone."

DAGMAR

You're coming to a crossroads, my love.

ARLENE

(V.O.)

So sweet of tone, so sweet of tone.\ Fa lalala la la
doe doe.

42E EXT. WAGON ON COUNTRY ROAD

42E

YELLOWYIN

I can see the guard towers of the White Forest!

ARLENE

(V.O.)

So she rode to town with flute bleached white.\ And
found the dragon in the night.

YELLOWYIN

Not much farther now. Hyah!

SOUND: HORSES SPEED UP

ARLENE

(V.O.)

Lest the dragon burn her into coal.\ She played her
flute with heart and soul.

42F EXT. BLACKHOLD - PAST

42F

DAGMAR

The world is coming to a crossroads.

ARLENE

(V.O.)

The fife it piped out clear and true.\ The voice of the
sister she once knew.

42H EXT. BLACKHOLD - PAST

42H *

DAGMAR

(whispers intimately)
And you shall choose our path.

ARLENE

(V.O.)
The dragon sighed, and then he wept.\ Then drifted off
and soundly slept.

DAGMAR

The stormbringer is nigh. And all shall crumble.

42I INT. ARLENE'S BEDCHAMBERS

42I

ARLENE

And thus the elder's life was saved.\ By the voice of
the sister she once slayed.\ In life we do each other
wrong.\ And all atone by love's sweet song.

NARRATOR

Gwen's crying calmed as she looked into Arlene's eyes.
Together they sang. A malodorous cart approached the
White Forest gatehouse.

*
*
*

ARLENE & GWEN

(harmony)
By love's sweet song, by love's sweet song.\ Fa lalala
la la da da.

43 EXT. UNSPECIFIED ROAD - DARKEST PART OF NIGHT

43

NARRATOR

And on the road from Blackhold, six Templars of Discord
drove their horses into a breakneck gallop.

*
*

TEMPLAR

THE STORMBRINGER IS NIGH. AND ALL SHALL CRUMBLE.
END OF CHAPTER.