

Sarkaiym

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Creative Writing

Of

Rhodes University

By

Mike Sutherns

November 2013

Candidate: Michael Sutherns 09S0263

Topic: *Novella*

The kingdom of Sansland situated on the Azanian Peninsula has been ruled by Sorricians, the sky people, ever since they landed on terra firma centuries ago. The indigenous population are forced to engage directly in the social and economic perpetuation of their own domination beneath the Sorrician heel. Until revolution flares in the antipodes, and soon, even the gods themselves seem to take an interest in the inevitable course of events. But all is not what it seems. The revolution appears to proceed too rapidly. The kingdom's trade infrastructure collapses too easily. The Sorrician rulers are inexplicably and unrealistically confident in their ability to repel an attack on the capital. It will take a man of conscience, a regular soldier and a boy priest to restore appearances back to reality.

Supervisor: Mr R Berold

Co-supervisor: Mr P Wessels

Prologue

Before the Taming, eons ago

“Death is the first step toward Godhood,” Henrith said.

The girl at his side remained silent. They stood on the edge of a cliff.

“Shoren’s expansion across Gai’in was fast enough to contain her growing hunger. She is caged by his domain. But she bristles and probes, and soon even he will not be enough.”

“So what do I do?” she asked.

“You pick a name,” he replied.

“Sarkaiym,” she said with her eyes closed. Then she opened them and blinked up at the tall man beside her.

“Ah,” he said, “Peacebringer, in the tongue of the First. But I wonder child; do you have any concept of its meaning down here, in the tongue of the earth?”

She cocked her head, smiled, and said,

“Doomweaver.”

And then he grabbed the front of her leather jerkin, and in one swinging movement, threw the girl from the cliff.

*1631 on the Sky Calendar
Temple village of Amient*

Manadal fell to his knees slowly. The altar before him glistened with sweat, its very own expulsion of sorcery. He studied the altar, carved from the bedrock of the cliff itself, way out here on the promontory. A philosopher in the large village behind him proclaimed that the cliff edge had been chewed away for years, and would continue to dwindle for all the years to come, until all the land was swallowed by Shoren’s misery.

Groups of children gathered in groups behind him, each holding a candle and singing softly. Hymns were the simplest way of keeping the youths occupied, while the adults went about their evening affairs.

He withdrew a dagger from his belt, the hilt worn and smooth, and stretched out his left arm in the usual manner. Long, thin scars adorned the green-skinned forearm. He bowed his head and began to mumble words in a guttural tongue. He raked the blade across his flesh. Blood spattered onto the sweating stone.

A presence filled his mind, so abruptly as to stagger his courage. In all of his life bent before the altar, his prayers had never once been answered. He felt the presence flicker through his head, comprehending his entirety in a moment. Then it was gone. *She* was gone.

He vomited onto the black basalt rock, managing to turn his head to avoid any landing on the altar. Her touch had not been felt in generations, not since the last great Cabal of high zangoms had followed their goddess across half the world to join battle.

Manadal rose to his feet awkwardly, conscious of the cool breeze sweeping off the edge of the cliff beyond. He could hear the wind below droning loudly against the rock walls. He tried to steady his fierce pulse, beating wildly in his ears. He had never felt so close to her, had never felt so at one with his god.

The wind's roar grew louder, and Manadal walked to look over the edge, seeking a glimpse of the distant sea. A massive cloudbank hovered below, ruining any possibility of seeing the black water beneath the light of the moon. Instead, the tops of the clouds shone brilliant silver which began to roil violently, churning and writhing, before breaking apart with an almighty sound. A massive shape rose from the maelstrom. It looked like a sword slicing through the air. He could see even from here that it would dwarf the single road running through Amient. There were three large poles shooting straight upward from its deck, strung with billowing canvas.

He was unable to move, unable to speak.

The flying sword had soon climbed above him, and was slowly banking to move inland. He tried calling to the goddess again, hoping for guidance, whispering, entreating. He looked away from the vision, back to the clouds below and the words of prayer died in his throat.

Scores more of the wooden sword-like monstrosities were climbing to the heavens from the womb of the abyss. Manadal backed away from the edge, feeling drowsy and out of breath. He could make out figures crawling along the sides of the wooden sword, but he couldn't see their features at all. He was wheezing, finding his chest unwilling to respond to his efforts. He tried in vain to reach for her, but her name swam away from memory, and the incantations on his lips fell away. Something landed on the cliff behind him with a thunderous sound, and he turned around slowly.

From a distance came the sounds of screaming, and Manadal felt himself falling backward, eyes rolling into the back of his head. He crashed onto the edge of the altar, and heard his skull crack, leaking the insides of his head onto the black rock. He tried to place the source of the anguished cries. It was only when his strength faded, when his body began to surrender its spark of life and his soul looked to escape through his lips that he realised how hoarse his voice was.

1992 on the Sky Calendar

Kalk

Sansland Kingdom

Azanian Peninsula

The main gate out of the city was packed with wagons, caravans and carriages. All were headed for various destinations across the kingdom, delivering their precious cargo of harvested oxygen. Rannal had been employed as a driver for the plantations for most of his fifty-three years. He turned his one-horse cart around, heading for one of the smaller gates dotted along the walls of Kalk. He knew of a few that were closed for construction, but could still admit the small vehicle.

His old mare picked her way slowly through the bustling city, eventually coming to an area devoid of noise. The houses sprawled along this side of the wall were abandoned. He nudged his horse around the side of a small dwelling, and caught the flicker of a light through a dirty window. He craned his neck.

He jerked the reins in surprise when the horse stopped abruptly; they had nearly trundled into a carriage blocking the gate. Another six were lined up ahead of it.

A man stepped out from the shadow of the gate where the bigger wagon had blocked the way. Rannal masked his surprise and bowed his head in apology.

“I didn’t realise someone else had the same idea,” Rannal called out. He noticed the man was wearing a long blue cloak which hung to his ankles. His head was shaved. The pate gleamed softly. His gaze found the driver’s, boring into his eyes.

“And what idea was that?” he asked from a distance.

Rannal felt something akin to fear, as if a threat had just been delivered to him. His vision warbled and he felt momentarily out of sorts. He shook his head, blinked his eyes. The carriages had disappeared. The man in the blue cloak was gone.



1994 on the Sky Calendar
Paarl Amient, capital
Sansland Kingdom
Azanian Peninsula

Wilt was hunched over a small wooden table, straining his eyes to read by the light of a single candle. The book he read from was more like a slab of granite, with pages as thick as bark. He pinched the skin above his nose for the hundredth time, trying to squeeze out the headache forming between his ears. Two days in the crypts beneath the city hall had worn his mental state down, especially with the abundance of success he had had.

At his feet lay a sack, brimming with contents from the archives that he had meticulously stolen over the last few weeks to research down here in the depths. What he had uncovered had horrified him. Countless centuries of inexcusable atrocities committed against and upon the native peoples.

Though the language was far more primitive, he could understand the basic characters and phrases of the natives from years of study and practice, and the collection was not long in deciphering. One of the journals had belonged to a philosopher, a woman who had recorded her last few days amongst the living. How she had watched her children taken first by the plague, and then her husband. First a mild drowsiness, shortly followed by the inability to move, culminating in a fatal lethargy of willpower and strength. But then it corrupted the mind, sending delirium and fever. And before long, they were all gone.

This alone had done little to stir Wilt's emotions. Plague was unfortunate, but it had been a reality back then. Since the inception of the kalk plantations and their harvest, some time after that account, the plague had been driven from Sansland. It was what she wrote next which made him feel ashamed.

Why are they doing this to us? Why are the white-skins killing us?

Wilt had no doubt that this particular recollection was from the first of the wars, when the natives were quelled and given over to slavery. That he was reading it was enough to see him executed for treason.

The Sorricians had been less than kind in their takeover of the Azanian Peninsula, of that much Wilt was now sure. That the Sorricians had themselves been responsible for the terrible plague which once afflicted the people was new. A part of him wanted to laugh, another just wanted to cry.

All the stories that children are told, the ones before they rest to dream of a safe future, they all tell of the heroic Sorricians, throwing back the native hordes. Conquering like gods against a ruthless and tireless nation of savages. Boys and girls would fall asleep dreaming of ways to kill a native, with a smile on their little fat faces. And it was all a lie.

He caught the sound of faint footsteps, running. They grew louder and Wilt's heartbeat quickened. There were few reasons he would be disturbed down here beneath the castle, fewer still because he had only informed his wife of his whereabouts. An emergency then. He would probably need to act quickly, and he

wasn't sure who would have been sent. An Africkan servant would be fine, but if Kroc had sent one of his own messengers then word would reach the High Marshal of Wilt's unsanctioned research.

He acted quickly, closing the book and stuffing it into a large burlap sack at his feet, alongside a number of other texts of all shapes and sizes. He began chucking his instruments in at random with one hand while pocketing other items with his left. The light in the room suddenly burgeoned and he turned to see the glow of a torch descending the small spiralling staircase. *Shit*, he thought. He closed the sack quickly, and turned to face the messenger.

A young boy entered the tiny room, eyes cast downward in a sign of respect. He placed the torch in a bracket on the wall, and approached Wilt slowly with the fingers of his right hand grasping the wrist of his left. His skin was the faint cast of green, but his hair and eyes were black as night.

"Yes boy?"

"Baas," the boy said with a small bow of his head.

Wilt waited, but the boy remained silent.

"Well, what is it?"

"Baas, Lady D'kal sends for you. She said that another baas is looking for you."

"Which baas? Did she say?" Wilt replied as he prepared to set from the room.

"Baas B'ota, baas"

Wilt's spine flooded with cold fear. If the High Marshal of the Sorrician Legion had need of him, his fears had come to pass. *Well. It's about time then, natives*, he thought.

He grabbed the torch from the wall and, ignoring the boy, strode up the staircase and into the gloom. The winding staircase receded before him slowly, and he realised how quickly he had forgotten his ire at traversing this path the first time. He had gone deeper into the catacombs than most knew existed, choosing one of the many branching staircases familiar to only him and his wife. This particular stairwell entered into one of the smallest of the major tunnels leading back up into the city hall. They all emerged at different points, and Wilt would find this specific exit to the north of the building.

When he finally ascended onto level ground and out from the staircase, his arms and shoulders burned with exhaustion. He stood gathering his breath, barely taking notice of the native boy when he emerged from behind and trotted off to who knows where. Wilt thought to make for his home just outside the back door of city hall, to quickly drop off his research, but something was telling him that the situation with Kroc at the walls was of immediate concern. He whistled loudly, hearing the faint echo bounce around the massive arched ceilings of the corridor. Within seconds a small man appeared. His skin was a deep shade of green, and his bald head was layered with old and wrinkled skin.

"Yub, thank Sorric," Wilt said, relieved that his personal houseman was first to the summons. He had asked the elderly man to wait for him here when he had first gone down. Another two natives came from either end of the corridor, but all turned away quickly when they saw Yub attending his master.

"Of course baas," Yub said with an easy smile, slinging the heavy burlap sack over one shoulder. Wilt shrugged his shoulders a few times to ease the tension, and then strode off while calling to Yub over his shoulder,

"Straight to the house, Yub. Tell Melily that I have gone to my meeting, and will be back as soon as I can, okay?"

Yub nodded and bowed but his master was already turning the far corner in his haste. Wilt's loping walk to the front of the building helped ease his aching calves and he couldn't wait to breathe fresh air outside the thick stone walls. When he reached the entrance hall, he was surprised to see half a dozen servants milling about by the large stained-glass windows which flooded the room with light. Their heads were all close together, as though some vast conspiracy were underway. One of them, a woman with mossy skin and heavy brows, noticed Wilt and made a quick gesture to the others. At once their whispers ceased and they turned to incline their heads toward the Sorrician.

"Baas," they mumbled in chorus.

"Get back to work," Wilt said politely.

A year or two ago and he would have given them a few kind words, and set them on their way nicely. But things had changed drastically in recent times, and Wilt's nerves burned whenever he was around one of the native servants, fearful that they might lash out. *Damn rebellion*, he thought with a shake of his head, and then continued toward the entrance.

The double doors were massive, built from the sturdy wood of Kalk trees – the only doors in the kingdom with that claim. Kalk was only valuable as a living tree, for the rich veins of oxygen twisting through its trunk, oxygen which sold at two thousand sars a gram in the previous economy. But since the rebellion had swept through six of Sansland's seven major trade cities, and with the abandonment of plantations and other vital posts, the current trade was at zero percent. There was no longer any money going in and out of the Paarl Amient, the once-proud capital of the kingdom of Sansland.

Now food was the real currency, food and safe lodgings. The Merchant's quarter, sprawled along the wall and the first ring of the city was long since abandoned by the usual traders and shop-owners. Instead, it housed the remnants of the Sorrician Legion, which had been beaten back again and again by the natives.

People remained indoors at almost all times, whispering to each other of the native army coming to exterminate them once and for all. Wilt could laugh at their stupidity, they were the same people sneaking their clothes to native launderers in the night and making bargains with the green-skins for food.

The mentality of it confused him, how the Sorricians were so afraid of every native outside their walls but had the utmost trust for those within. He had expected civil outrage when the first rebels began their journey. But the citizens of Paarl Amient seemed to realise at some instinctive level that without their servants and farmers, and domestics and cleaners, and builders and miners, they couldn't quite sit as comfortably as before. And so, in some bizarre twist of fate, Paarl Amient still housed its overwhelming population of natives, trading from dusk until dawn in the Native Centrale, the district against the eastern wall that was theirs to call home.

Stranger still, the natives seemed perfectly happy to continue doing their work. Very few vanished beyond the gate; fewer still openly took up the cause of their kin. Paarl Amient looked after all of its children; even the most poverty stricken managed two decent meals a day. Of course, they had never worked the plantations, harvesting kalk from the deadly tree where a fellow plantationer would die every other day.

He stepped through a doorway built to the left of the main entrance and into early morning sunlight. The crisp air of the plateau had always been Wilt's favourite thing about Paarl Amient. The city was situated close to the northern tip of the Azanian Peninsula, higher even than the clouds. Surrounded by the monstrous Jengor Forest there was only one road leading to and from the city. Wilt stepped onto it now,

the very edge of Sorric's Walk, the hundred-league cobblestone monument to the High Council. Built in 1731 to mark the establishment of the kingdom of Sansland and the might of the Council's rule, it was also regarded as one of the finest structures built on the Azanian Peninsula.

For a moment Wilt pondered how many pairs of feet treaded the ancient colonnade, between here and its end at Menrit, the small town at the top of Saahni Pass. Thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands. An entire army could march along the road, thirty men abreast. An entire army *did* march the road. And he was off to see it.

He swung toward the stables, ignoring the respective nods of fellow Sorricians or the furtive bows of natives. He heard somebody cry "Chancellor!" but he dropped his head and hurried into the stalls. Mounting his destrier, Hulir, he made his way back onto the cobbled road. He was forced to take things at a quick trot because of the traffic, but once everyone recognised the markings on his horse, they scurried out of the way.

It was a short time before he reached the R'inik Gate and he wasn't surprised to see troops of soldiers hurrying like ants around the wood, iron and stone defences. Blockades had been arranged around the city entranceway, positioned to force enemy troops into avenues and lanes. He dismounted by a group of soldiers taking orders from a Captain. At the back stood a woman, and it was she who noticed him. She scurried over and he recognised the insignia of sergeant blazoned across her arm. She bowed her head fractionally.

"Good morning Chancellor. May I take your horse?" she said, keeping her eyes away from his. Wilt saw the lines creasing her face, giving her the appearance of an older woman, when she was more likely in her thirties. Wilt allowed himself an inward sigh; a few years of war could change everything.

"Thank you sergeant," he replied, handing her the reins.

Wilt looked up at the stairs cut into the wall adjacent to R'inik Gate. Above the iron bars was a long-house with a sloping roof. Wilt could see the ghastly crenelments from his position, snarling heads with one orb-like eye gaping outward. No-one knew their origin, only that the High Council had a hand in getting them there. Wilt shook off the uncomfortable feeling of the apparitions watching him, and began to ascend.

When his eyes grew level with the top, he looked up. His cousin stood with his back to him, just outside of the watch house, hands clasped formally behind his back. He was clad in full armour, complete with his cape of dirty green. Wilt moved to stand alongside him, ready to hear what the emergency was. The words fell away as his eyes lighted upon Sorric's Walk below, extending into the far murk of the forest. And there, just within eye sight, a throng of figures moved, enveloping the white cobblestones. There were thousands, hundreds of thousands of them, all moving in a silent procession toward Paarl like the ghastly head of a snake slithering from the forest. The native rebel army.

Somewhere in that throng walked their leader, an unknown commander who had bested them at every turn. The thought gave Wilt a cold shiver.

"Kroc, what's the plan here? We can't beat that," he dropped his voice to a whisper. "*We will all die. Look at that!*"

"It's the same argument with you every time, Wilt. And my answer hasn't changed."

Kroc turned his long thin face toward Wilt, lined by the stress of command. The chancellor felt pity for the man, his time as High Marshal had seen him defeated

by the rebels at every turn. He would have been replaced a long time ago. *If there was anyone left*, he thought, *but there isn't. There's just me and him and the Council standing between the last few thousand Sorricians and a horde of green-skins.*

"Kroc, there has to be an alternative plan. We have to prepare! If we don't..."

"Jislaaike Wilt! Give it a rest. I'm sick and tired of hearing your pessimistic attitude. Look around you. They're going to hit these walls like a bull, and they're gonna reel back hurting. I plan on making them drown in so much of their dirty mud-stained blood that they forget why they marched here in the first place. We have prepared for every contingent Chancellor, trust me. It will take weeks before they can even hope to breach the city, even if they *did* purchase Moru incendiaries. But there are no siege towers, no ladders. Look, Wilt. These are a people used to taking unguarded cities. Most of them have spent their lives twisting oxygen from Kalk, they're weak of lung."

It was dawning on Wilt that Kroc was under the impression they were going to survive this. The man was convinced of his immortality. *Idiot*, he thought.

"Kroc, they've sacked six major cities. Weakened by years at a Kalk screw? Some, maybe. But most of these men and women have been living free for long enough to have recovered. Denying the truth of what's coming will only make you look more foolish, Marshal," Wilt said curtly, "you need to believe every rumour. You need to prepare for every rumour."

He dropped his voice low enough for just the two of them,

"Don't make the same mistake that every damn Provincial Regent has. Seek out a parlay. You and I can ride out and meet with them. We can convey the wishes of the Council for a unified government. An end to civil war."

"Is that truly what they want then? After all of this, they will accept *unity*? Fuck unity. Fuck the natives. This is my fucking land."



Sergeant Tanril Kilas dropped her gaze to her lap when she saw the High Chancellor descend the ramparts. She had tied his horse up against a wooden pike palisade in clear sight and she wouldn't need to take it back to him. She still felt slightly embarrassed at how she had handled the first situation, but truth was she didn't know what to say to Chancellor D'Kal. The man was good looking enough, but something had bloomed in her gut when she spoke to him, something warning her off. She knew enough to trust that feeling.

She watched the Chancellor trot his destrier back up the Walk towards city hall. When he was out of sight she rolled her shoulders, already uncomfortable with the morning heat. She felt restless. *I need a walk.*

The city never ceased to fill her with wonder. It was three times the size of the next largest city in the kingdom, Kalk. When she had arrived, trade was in evidence throughout the streets. But now it had dried up, and the people of the city were beginning to panic. Most had bolted themselves behind doors and boarded windows, while others refused to come out at all. And worse than all of that were the reports coming in from the Temples and the healing district.

Scores of Sorricians swore they were battling to breathe, and more still claimed to be afflicted by some sorcerer's lethargy. She didn't believe any of it. The citizens of Paarl were used to magnificence and glory, trade and wealth. They didn't suffer from the same corruption as the rest of the kingdom, and so hadn't experienced a lifestyle of hardship. When the gates closed and the native army turned their eye to the final stronghold of Sorrician power the people simply lost their wits.

She happened upon two soldiers, also conscripts, too young to have seen any real combat except city watch work, who were playing with knucklebone dice. As she approached they both turned to look at her in one movement, and she was startled to see that they were twins. They both hopped to their feet, each putting a foot on their upside down cups containing the dice, eyeing each other beadily. Their symmetry was amusing. They offered her a salute, and then without so much as a word, they returned to their game, snickering and whispering.

"Excuse me, soldiers, what are you doing?" she asked.

"Just a game of liar's dice sir," one said, not looking up.

"Do you want in sir?" said the other.

"You understand we're preparing for a siege, don't you? Do you know what that flag above the gate means?"

"Enemy sighted," piped one.

"And we're fully aware," said the other.

"Sir," they said in unison.

She frowned at them, but they ignored her.

"And your fortifications?"

"We've already seen to them," one said over his shoulder, shaking his cup.

The rattling echoed in Tanril's ears.

"By all means," said the other.

"Sir," they said together again, an affectation which was fast annoying the sergeant.

She began to examine their section, noting the meticulous placing of wooden perms, pikes and stop-routes. It was an impressive set-up, she begrudgingly admitted to herself. She noticed a sticky black mess on one of the pikes, and she moved in for a more careful look. It was covered in thick tar, all of them were.

“What the hell is this?” she asked.

This time they both looked up, and immediately abandoned their game, tucking their cups into their cloaks and snatching up the knucklebones – which they pocketed.

“Well, now, sergeant, you have our attention,” said one as they moved over.

The other said,

“This is tar, sir, placed as a last-gasp measure, in case we’re overrun.”

“We’re gonna set the bastards alight,” the first said, admiring the pike lovingly.

“And then we’ll watch them burn, right?” said the second, reaching out to dip his finger in the pitch.

They turned to Tanril and in unison said,

“Don’t worry sergeant; we’ll keep it in check.”

“Not my problem if you don’t,” she replied, and a shiver ran through her.

Eyeing the twins carefully, she backed away, and then turned to carry on along the inside of the wall.

Urtha caught her unawares, clapping her on the shoulder some way away.

“Meet those twins?” she asked, nodding in sympathy. The older woman made a warding gesture with her other hand. Tanril smiled wryly in agreement. Urtha was the only woman who had been friendly to Tanril since she had arrived, despite her status as a veteran of Ult’s early campaigns, and her rank of captain.

“It’s not like the old days you know Kilas. No cavalry, limited ammunition. Boxed in by the city walls and buildings. The Legion was trained to be vicious in its offence. We were trained to circle and break enemy squads, always supported, always with a second plan. This?” Urtha gestured around herself. “This is suicidal.”

“Then why are all the soldiers still here?” Tanril asked quietly.

The captain looked at her in an odd way, as though re-calculating her estimation of Tanril.

“Because their commander ordered it. The High Marshal may not be much, but his uncle was the best that ever commanded the legion, and so we do what he orders.”

“You’re all willing to die for the nephew of your late commander?”

“We, Kilas, *we’re* ready to die. And not for his nephew, no. For his *successor*.”

“Yes sir,” Tanril responded, straightening.

Urtha eyed her sceptically and then gestured for her to join as she walked the same way Tanril had been going.

“You were a Greencloak right?” Urtha asked.

Tanril cleared her throat,

“Yes, I was. Once.”

“Before all of this?”

“Before all of this, yes, sir.”

Urtha stopped dead, and grabbed Tanril by the arm. She squeezed gently and looked Tanril right in the eyes.

“I am truly sorry then. You must be one the few left. Well, one of the few Sorricians.”

Tanril looked away sadly.

“One of the few, yes sir. Me and the Marshal.”

Urtha gave a low chuckle.

“Yes, the Marshal too. Though his cloak is so dirty we’ve come to think of him as the solitary brown cloak in the kingdom.”

Tanril smiled at that.

“Did you...?”

“No, I had never seen him before I arrived in Paarl. I did hear of him though. The great captain Kroc of the B’ota plantation Greencloaks. I heard it was all his idea. And his cousin Alric. They were responsible for the first of them. I only signed on a few years later, when the other plantations took up the idea. They were looking for officers and I was looking for something to do. Something told me it was the right idea, call it a gut feel.”

Urtha narrowed her eyes slightly.

“A gut feel is it? You know, you’re not as unknown as you might think Kilas. And it’s not that the other soldiers don’t like you. They’re *afraid* of you.”

“But why, sir?”

Urtha glanced about, and then said in a low voice,

“Look, in this legion Kilas, everyone knows everyone else’s business. Believe it or not, the more you reveal, the more they’ll trust you. Why are they scared? Well, they say you can sniff out anything... That you *always know*.”

The captain raised her brows questioningly.

Tanril shifted uncomfortably.

“I got lucky a few times on the plantation. Caught plantationers escaping a few times, caught a few more stealing. I delivered the appropriate justice.”

Urtha laughed without humour.

“Appropriate justice? Hmm. Don’t be modest. You caught them *every time* Kilas. Moreover, you caught some of your own officers doing the same.”

“Only one or two,” Tanril tried to object.

“Four thieves, all Sorrician boys from the local town, two floggers, both Sorrician sergeants in the Greencloak hierarchy, and three rapists, all Sorricians, one the son of the farmer whose plantation you protected. And what happened to them all?”

Tanril drew in her breath slowly.

“They were convicted at trial and their sentence was carried out by the High Council itself.”

“Which explains why all of your men were docked a month’s wages and the farmer’s son was set free on all counts. And why the natives were...?”

Tanril blanched, unable to speak.

“They were?” Urtha asked again, adamant.

“Executed, sir.”

Tanril saluted smartly, and marched off.



The howling of the wind did not stop. It had been carrying on for as long as he could remember. So too the pain. Biting into his wrists, his ankle, his neck. Chains stretched from the aching points into the ground, sunk deep into the sand. Around him, the desert shrieked its fury. He was stuck in a twisted memory, an overlapping realm of agony and grief, held suspended in time, between two worlds. The original act from which the memory remained had been entirely different, in a village, people fleeing. But the stain left behind was a thing corrupted, a desert of shackles, a recollection only of the death of innocents.

If he looked to his left, he would find countless brothers and sisters of his in the exact same position. Many were children. They did not live. They could not die.

He was not sure why it was only them. It could be blind coincidence that kept their souls alive. Perhaps they alone were touched. Either way, an end to the misery did not seem likely.

To his right, the desert stretched away into a colourless sky, gusting winds spraying sand. He was the farthest on this side. He had forgotten many things, where he was from, how long he had been there, even what his name was. What he remembered was brutal, memories of fear cut short. And then awakening to this. Death would have been kinder.



Wilt made his way back home in a hurry, cantering back up the Walk amidst the waking bustle. Paarl Amient was a three-walled city, with its back to the cliff edge. City hall sat on a naturally elevated rise at the top, and the city poured out below it like rock pools in a mountain stream. Surrounding the building were the houses and servant's quarters of the wealthier citizens, known as the royal estates. All Sorricians were nobles in the eyes of their kin, but only those of traditional privileged heritage could call the royal estate their own. The nine great families all had their residence there. Wilt had long since sold the mansion he inherited, instead buying a small servant's house right outside city hall and renovating it with his wife.

Wilt hurried toward his home, leaving Hulir in the hands of the stable boy at the top of the Walk. He barely noticed the faces swimming passed him, the greetings and acknowledgements by the city coming to life around him.

They're here, and he thinks we can beat them off with a stick.

Again Wilt wondered at Kroc's audacity. By numbers alone the native army outnumbered them at least ten to one. That was excluding the exodus of civilians on foot behind them.

He was on the street leading from the top of the Walk and around the government building, which was on his left. His house lay behind city hall. He glanced up at it as he passed, marvelling at the high stained glass windows punched into the long wall. They reflected the early morning light in a myriad of colours. At the far end the street reached a T-junction, with the D'kal servant's quarters directly ahead. To the left of that low longhouse was Wilt and Melily's abode; a modest quarters.

His eyes fell to the figure of Yub, reclining against the wall of his house, the burlap sack held loose in one hand. His back was to the chancellor. Wilt moved up alongside the old servant, fearing for a moment that the man was dead. His second thought was who he would find to replace him.

"Yub, are you okay?" he asked, putting an arm beneath him to support his weight. His eyes were closed.

His voice came out as a croak,

"Baas, I'm just tired baas. Sorry baas."

"No, no, come Yub. That was a long way for you to walk," Wilt said as though speaking to a toddler. He helped the man up, noticing how light the elder was. He helped him stagger along to the entrance of the servant's quarters.

"Thank you baas, I will be okay from here," Yub wheezed.

Wilt nodded politely, and then turned back to fetch the burlap sack. He shook his head as he walked. When he reached the sack he opened it to double check that everything was still there. His own front door opened, and he heard his wife's voice for the first time in two days,

"Oh hello!" Melily said.

Wilt straightened slowly and then turned to offer his wife a large goofy smile,

"Hello dear, look, look! I found it," he said.

"Excuse me, High Chancellor," came a voice behind him. Wilt looked around to see a Bluecloak officer making his way over, two of his guards alongside. Wilt handed Melily the sack, and ushered her inside. Then he closed the door after her, and turned to the Bluecloaks.

"Yes officer, what can I do for you?" he asked.

The Bluecloak gave chilling smile.

“We have a report, sir,” he said in a voice like velvet.

“Go on.”

“The oxygen supply is waning to dangerously low levels. We have exhausted every known avenue toward restocking the central core, but with the army now camped outside I fear we have run our last expedition. We had eighteen caravans on that route. They’re most likely dead.”

He did not sound remorseful about that fact at all.

“And why should that matter to me?” Wilt asked.

“Because without fresh oxygen the council will likely suffer,” the Bluecloak replied.

“My concerns are for the safety of the people,” Wilt said stiffly, “not the Council. They are under your protection, not mine.”

“The Chancellor and the Marshal are the hands of the Council. They are the rightful kings and queens of Sansland.”

“Sansland may be a kingdom, officer, but it has been hundreds of years since we used such archaic titles. We are a government run by able bodied staff and citizens, not nine immortals who reside in a tower at the end of the world. They have not survived this long on the harvest alone, they will survive a while yet without it.” The Bluecloak stepped in close, putting his mouth to Wilt’s ear.

“That’s getting awfully close to treason, *sir*,” he whispered.

Wilt felt his knees turn to jelly.

“So what exactly is it you want me to do?” he asked.

“I want you to find a way to get those green-skinned bastards to piss off, so I can re-establish a proper trade route, Chancellor.” He stepped away again, dusting off Wilt’s robes. The Chancellor nodded furiously,

“Is that all?”

“That’s all. Find us a viable option, or we’ll come back,” the Bluecloak eyed Wilt’s door, “maybe even when you’re not home.”

With that he turned and set off, his two guards trailing. Wilt took a few moments to regain the strength in his legs. He shook his head, wondering at his sudden willingness to give in. When they had disappeared from sight Wilt stood upright, turning to go inside.

“What was that all about, Wilt?” Melily asked, concerned.

Wilt shut the door behind him.

“Nothing, just politics,” he said. “Have you found the books?”

He followed her gaze to her desk, where the burlap sack was still closed. He walked over and opened the top, rummaging for a small leather-bound book he had been reading earlier that morning.

“It’s in here, I’m sure of it,” he said, holding it up.

Melily grabbed the book from his hands and sat down in a plump chair. Pulling out her glasses from one of her many pockets in her robe, she unfolded them onto her nose. And then she began to read.

The home was sparsely furnished, with a small dining table in the centre and a desk at either end of the room. A small staircase was situated at the far end, leading up to the bedroom and bathroom above. The kitchen was through a doorway to the left, spotless, as they never cooked.

Wilt moved to the oxygen pump set into the wall. It was a small wooden handle stretching from a glass tube. When turned to the left, the vents in the ceiling would open wider. When turned to the right, they would close. The oxygen was a gift from the High Council, perched upon the Spire, where three massive pipes brought

them all they needed. At four hundred years of age, the immortal keepers of justice in Sansland commissioned the supply from six full plantations. Given that their Bluecloak officers were the overseers of trade, Wilt wasn't surprised. The Council were greedy and self-centred, and he knew that the 'gift' of the oxygen was a result of the need to expel pressure from the core – a monstrous machine in the depths of the catacombs which pumped the bottles of oxygen harvested on the plantations. The 'gift' was just another of the lies the Sorricians were told, but with power came privilege, and as chancellor Wilt had come to find there were far less magnanimous people in the world than he had once believed.

He was growing more concerned about the rumours of the returning plague, and they could not be coming at a worse time. The oxygen supply would run out at some stage, and when that happened the plague could very well return. It was common knowledge to every Sorrician child that without fresh oxygen to supply the country, disease would return. They were running out of time. Wilt refused to trust in Kroc's plan blindly. He needed to find a way to coerce the natives back to their posts.

"Willet, quickly, come here!" Melily called.

He hustled to her, peering over one of her bony shoulders. She was reading from where he had left off that morning, on a page with a single inscription.

*"Herald of order,
Seamstress of chaos,
Mother of earth,
Where the fields beckon, we reap
When the sword aims, we strike
To give thanks we draw blood,
To forge balance we bring Death,"*

"What is that all about?" Melily asked, rummaging through her drawers in a flurry. "Seems to be at least two hundred, maybe three hundred years old? The author must have been..."

"A zangom," Wilt interjected softly, "It's in the first few chapters. A high priest of the old goddess, the one they prayed to before our arrival." Melily gaped at him, one hand buried in her second drawer. She elected to leave whatever it was she was looking for.

"You don't think Sorric was here the whole time do you?" Wilt asked his wife, shaking his head.

"No," he continued, "the Sanctuaries were the first Sorrician establishments, preaching alongside whichever deity the natives held to. The first settlers were traders and missionaries. But when the Sorricians came in full numbers, the larger Sanctuaries, now teeming with our people turned into towns. From towns, into cities. Paarl was the first, Kalk following soon after. The Council declared Paarl their home, and so the first great structure of our history was carved from the basalt of the cliff and built upon the promontory."

"The Spire," she whispered, nodding, "but what of the other Sanctuaries, the seven we have now?"

"Built to replace and honour the originals, much later, by Sorrician priests. I think it also had something to do with religion and politics not quite getting along."

"So that's why the High Priest and his septons are always complaining about them? I've heard whispers of a break-away, a splitting of factions. The High Priest assures us all that it is only rumours though."

“There was a splitting of factions, if I understand it, but only in so far as the Sanctuaries keep their own counsel on their actions and research. They don’t recognise Paarl’s High Priest as their own. They elect their own members and decide on who may or may not attend tutelage there. Its all very hushed up.”

“How do you know all of that?”

“Well, we have people watching the Temple closely; the High Priest’s every move. After some time, we realised we were not the only ones. The Sanctuaries are truly an unknown force. The Temple and city hall have always moved in a square dance around one another, each seeking a step forward while the other continues to drive them back. Rather futile affair really. The temple will never have full control of the people while the Council exist.”

“And the Council just so happens to be immortal,” Melily added.

Wilt nodded.

“Now about that verse,” he said, “I thought at first it was some incantation or voodoo, you know these old zangoms and their ways. But if you look at the final two lines, it could be a way to communicate. We could try offering her a prayer of sorts?”

“So spill some blood, maybe kill someone and everything... balances out, what does that mean? I’m not so sure, Wilt.”

“In any case, it’s rather pointless without the name of whoever this heathen goddess was.”

“Why is that?”

“Well according to the native lore, magic was first brought into the world with sound. And what is the first thing each person learns to say? Their own name. According to them anyway, I seem to recall it being ‘mama’. Still, names are the derivative of power, and one cannot access another’s power without his or her name.”

“Well, tell you what,” she said.

“I’ll see if I can’t find the name, and then maybe we can ask her for some help.”

Wilt looked over thoughtfully, and gave her a wan smile.

“And I’ll have a child brought up from the cellar quickly; we can spill his guts all over your new table.”



Tanril leaned against the wall just inside the gate, basking in the coolness of the shadow. Sweat oozed from the gaps in her armour, she was unused to the weight of the local garrison make, with its studs and iron bars. The gate itself was wrought from large steel ingots, forged into thick bars. There was a door on either side of the tunnel with a small adjoining room. Inside of each was a crank; both needed to be turned to raise the gate. Tanril was calculating how long the structure would last against a native battering ram.

The sound of hobnailed boots on cobbles drew close. It was Captain Markus, a beefy Sorrician officer with a few years experience. His long blonde moustache hung droopily to either side of his mouth.

“Sergeant, we have a troop emerging from the forest, no banners, making straight for the gate. We thought we’d send you to take a look, they’re Greencloaks.” Tanril shot up, whisking her non-regulation hat off her head, and handing it to Captain Markus.

“Hold this.”

She bounded up the steps, reaching the battlements on the wall in time to see the last members of a large band emerge from the forest, just outside of bow range. They had drawn up to full compliment in Sorrician formation, and two men were stepping forward. Even from this distance, Tanril recognised them both. Sergeants Mlamuli and Thina, Greencloak Brigade.

Before the rebellion began, each plantation was policed by a garrison of twelve Sorrician officers, and fifty to one hundred Greencloaks, one and all natives. Chosen for their leadership and aptitude, they were trained to be a force of rangers and huntsmen as well as being able to track down and return escaped prisoners. They were expected to enforce the law of the farm. The original idea had been to turn them into able leaders of men.

When the revolution began, somewhere deep in the delta swamps, forced by the natives’ unknown leader, the Greencloaks had shimmied to the cause faster than any other, leaving the plantations wholly undefended, barring the twelve officers. Anarchy ensued.

She reversed her steps quickly, exiting the city wall through a small side postern. She shivered remembering the last time she had laid eyes on these two men. They alone had refused to leave Tanril, them and their band of fifteen a piece. When her plantation had finally fallen, they had given her thanks and disappeared.

They both drew up, tall, green-skinned men with long green cloaks reaching their calves. They were armoured in supple leather, with a longbow slung across each of their backs. They began to salute, but Tanril made vicious motions with her hand in front of her body, telling them off. They each dropped their hands unceremoniously and looked at each other nervously.

“Captain Kilas,” Mlamuli began, but Tanril cut in.

“Its sergeant now gentlemen, same rank as you, no salutes. You’re a long way from the farmlands.”

She let the question ask itself.

They both inclined their heads graciously, and Tanril glanced to the ranks behind them, a vast scheme of green faces, with large green cloaks covering their armour and gear. Their silence was absolute, their formation impeccable. She wondered if they

had been training, they looked fresh and eager, and to her eye, better than they had been in the early days of the revolution.

“Sergeant,” their heads still inclined, “a long time ago we made a pledge to you. You were, and always will be, our captain. Our men feel the same. It gives us hope.”

“You know we’re going to lose?”

They raised their heads and each looked at her with intensity, two faces unflinching, and Thina said,

“That is why we are here.”

With that, he motioned, and the entire troop began to move as one. Tanril turned and motioned for the gates to open. She looked back at the two men and said,

“Not a word about the old days, understood?” They nodded, again.

She led them through the gates, noticing with an increasing nervousness that the men on the walls had not lowered their bows. She called out,

“Yield, I’m bringing in friendlies!”

The men ignored her. Then she saw the Marshal peer out from the longhouse, a stern look across his face. The native army behind them had no doubt seen all of this. In fact, their entire camp had gone silent. She risked a look back and immediately paled. The entire horde of green-skinned natives stared at them from their distant tents.

When she got through the postern door she found Ikalt and his squad surrounding her, swords and crossbows at the ready. Before long, all thirty-three of the Greencloaks were through and surrounded.

“Lower your weapons to the ground,” Ikalt called out.

“They’ve come to help sir,” Tanril said through clenched teeth.

Ikalt glanced at her nervously, sword held out defiantly.

“We don’t know that sergeant. They could be here to slit our throats while we sleep,” he growled.

“Trust me captain, these men were once under my command, they want to fight for us,” Tanril replied.

“It’s not my order sergeant, it’s the Marshal’s. Ask him yourself,” Ikalt said, stepping aside for her alone.

She found Marshal B’ota in the gatehouse above, wearing his own green cloak, now stained a dirty brown. He was studying the Africkan soldiers in the courtyard, with a manic smile on his face. For a moment she saw the same look that she had seen on the Chancellor’s face: malice. But when he turned to look at her, it was gone.

“High Marshal, two companies of Greencloaks, sir, under sergeants Mlamuli and Thina, sir.”

“Get out,” he barked to the soldiers around them, who abruptly filed out the two exits.

He faced her when they were alone and said,

“Two of your own then sergeant?”

She was taken aback, she didn’t know that the Marshal knew of her history.

“It’s my job to know these things,” he said as if reading her thoughts, “I know those men are loyal to you, I will accept their sacrifice.”

She forced a rigid salute and managed a ‘Thank-you-sir.’ He saluted back lazily.

Tanril turned around slowly, marching as casually as she could. *Son of a bitch*, she thought. All the men in the courtyard below were silent, some giving her deathly stares she met, and held.

“Stand down men!” the Marshal suddenly barked from the window. Ikalt and the others immediately filed their weapons away.

“Kilas, you will personally see to the housing and effective placement of these Greencloaks. Have them fresh and well-fed. The rest of you, get back to your duties.” A moment of silence, and then, mayhem. Soldiers scrabbled and moved, most just trying to look busy. Tanril caught the eye of her two sergeants and waved them to follow her. She had the perfect place for them.



Wilt left his wife at her desk, perusing over the books he had collected. He needed to see the Council, to propose his alternate plan to Kroc's madness. He had to wend his way through the City hall servants' quarters to find the path toward the Spire. It was given away by the three massive pipes half buried in the earth, extending from the base of the City hall's northern wall and traversing all the way up the side of the Spire and into the dome at its apex. The structure stood garishly ahead of him, above the rooftops, a jagged tooth silhouette in the late morning light.

The walk through the servant's quarters was thankfully short, as a low wall prevented any further building. Reaching it, Wilt looked out onto the cliff edge ahead.

Bare earth stretched between the chancellor and the beginnings of the rock which formed the promontory, as large as a training field for cavalry. Beyond it the rock formed a lip a few metres wide, ending in the open sky. The promontory defied all logic, reaching out from the cliff, a single spar ignoring the will of erosion. The Spire was built upon its edge, the circular base extending to encompass the back end of the promontory. Men had been saying for years that one day they would wake to find the Spire and its jutting spar gone, sheared away by time. Wilt shook his head against the thought. *The spiteful ones live the longest.* He made for the building.

A squad of Bluecloaks guarded the entrance, standing to arms with heavy pikes. Wilt nodded nervously as he approached them, but without even looking at him, the two in his way stepped to one side, pikes rigid against their shoulders. He looked up at the tower, seemingly unbalanced by the chunky piping tangling up one side. A stairway led to the main entrance, a floor above the ground level. The base was supposedly carved from the rock itself, with the rest of the stone coming from mines deep in the catacombs. Wilt had seen them for himself, nightmarish pockets of darkness deep beneath the world. Fortunately, they had only ever been used once, when the Spire was built to accommodate the Council centuries ago. Wilt couldn't imagine how someone might have managed that. It was minutes before the door swung open slowly.

Wilt crept inside, slightly nervous at what he might find. A single torch lit the interior, throwing the circular entrance hall into shadow. When his eyes adjusted, he froze at the sight of twenty glistening barbed arrowheads aimed at his head. He thought to perhaps turn around, but realised that he had every right to seek an audience with the council. He said in the loudest voice he could muster,

"Put those weapons down."

He was faintly surprised when the tips of the bolts pointed to the floor.

"What is it we can do for you?" said one of the Bluecloaks, stepping forward. Wilt recognised him.

"I have come to see the council, is Lord Erenis present?"

"The speaker will be down shortly," the Bluecloak said quietly and then signalled to the others. As one they returned their weapons to their slings and returned to whatever it was that was occupying them before the intrusion. The man who had spoken with him remained.

"I see you took my advice to heart then, Chancellor. I hope it's good news." Wilt just stood nervously, wondering where the council recruited these Bluecloaks. He had never met one socially or on any other occasion except when on council or oxygen related business. They never gave him a name either, and the opportunity of enquiring after a name seemingly never arose.

There were four rooms attached to the entrance hall, with a wide spiralling staircase cut sideways into the far wall. From the stairs a short fat man appeared. He held a cloth in one hand, and was dabbing the sweat from his eyes.

“Chancellor! The enemy are at the gates, the world as we know it is about to end, however may I help you?”

“Erenis. Can we move somewhere slightly more private?” Wilt asked in a strained voice, already wanting to roll his eyes at the man’s dramatic flair.

“Of course, Chancellor, of course. As the Council’s bodyguard, they are just doing their job,” Erenis said. He pulled Wilt into one of the rooms adjoining the entrance, slamming the door behind them.

“Well D’kal, it seems we are again forced to work together to pull this kingdom out of the shit.”

“Again Erenis? I don’t recall there ever being a first time.” Wilt narrowed his eyes, but Erenis held his gaze stoically.

“Believe me, Chancellor; the Council has given me license to... assist you... from time to time during your office.”

“And what assistance would that be Erenis? Spying? Assassination? Who in Sorric’s name *are* you?” Wilt asked, feeling the slow pulse of anger form in his chest.

“I’m just a humble servant of the Council, Chancellor,” Erenis said in his silkiest voice.

“I merely do as they order, you know that.”

“I know that you’ve been in Paarl less than a year, and have somehow managed to acquire a lordship and a personal voice in the Council’s ears. Tell me, does that jurisdiction extend to the Bluecloaks as well?”

Erenis only grinned wider, but the joy in his teeth failed to reach his eyes.

“They have no love for me, it’s true. But the Speaker and the Bluecloaks are two separate entities. I exist to assist with counsel. They exist to enforce the successful trade of oxygen.”

“So tell me, is there a particular reason you’re *assisting* me now Erenis? Or is this just a formality?”

Erenis fluttered his hands.

“Come now, Chancellor! Is there really a need for this hostility? What if I told you that the safety of Sorrician lives were in my best interest? That you and I strive toward a common goal?”

“I would say that I only believe what I see, Erenis,” Wilt replied bluntly, “and what I see is another Sorrician social climber.”

Erenis’ smile vanished and he said in a stony voice,

“Chancellor, trust me, I have thought of a way...”

“I don’t have time for your thoughts Erenis, I’m here to see the Council,” Wilt said, pushing passed the shorter man.

He opened the door and strode out of the room, heading up the spiralling staircase, ignoring the protesting man behind him. He reached a landing about a quarter of the way up, with a large polished door set into the wall. Higher up were the Bluecloak chambers, and further, Erenis’ rooms as Speaker for the Council. At the top, Wilt knew, the staircase ended. The dome above was inaccessible to any but the Council.

Wilt whisked the door open and strode in, Erenis at his heels. The court room extended way above him, reaching to the floor of the dome, at least three stories up. Balconies adorned the higher areas of the walls. It was one third of the tower’s size. Nine large pillars were arrayed in a semi-circle at the far end. Upon each pillar sat a

massive throne, its upper half covered by a small, opaque glass bubble. Inside each of these, Wilt knew, a Council member resided. He had never seen their faces, only their dark robes and long billowing sleeves which leaned on the arms of each chair. Attached to the pinnacle of each dome was a pipe, carrying fresh kalk-harvested oxygen to the immortal keepers of justice in Sansland.

Wilt bowed his head, and waited. Erenis, who had moved to the base of the foremost chair, announced,

“Chancellor D’kal, here to treat with the grand council.”

With that he marched out. Moments later, he appeared on one of the balconies.

Wilt remained bowed, waiting for the spokesperson to begin. The platform to the furthest left dropped fractionally, bringing the chair and dome that much closer to him. A voice spoke in his mind, distinctively male but otherwise indistinguishable.

“High Chancellor, are we incorrect in believing the natives march on Paarl? Shouldn’t you be preparing for a siege? The Council is unmoved by this late call for a meet.”

“Councillor,” Wilt said politely, “I have come to seek a hasty approval for my plans to save the city.”

“The plans for that were set in motion long ago. Marshal B’ota is to hold the gates until we command otherwise. Did we not give you another task, just this morning? To find a way to re-establish trade?”

“I don’t think that’s possible at this stage, Councillor, we’re besieged. They won’t let a single wagon in or out. Perhaps worse than that is the High Marshal believes we can win this fight. He believes we can quell the revolution. He will see Paarl burn to the ground before he gives up his hold. I am begging you to let me treat with the natives. Let me parlay and come to a suitable, peaceful agreement.”

There was silence in response to his words. Eventually the spokesperson replied,

“This is unacceptable. The native people of this land are weak. They do not know how to manage a kingdom. They do not understand *exigencies*. Let them break upon our walls like the waves of Shoren’s sea below us. Let them starve out there. What do you think is happening around the countryside as we speak? Anarchy, dissolution. If they do not return to the harvest, the plague will drive them all to death.”

Wilt blanched, unsure if he heard correctly. It had been centuries since they had last been threatened by actual disease.

“The plague? The plague will return?” he asked, his mouth dry.

“It already has Chancellor. No news reaches these walls anymore, but our eyes see further than you think. The outer lying edges of our kingdom are already falling to pieces. Why do you think there is such urgency in our request? We are not asking you to single-handedly end the civil war Chancellor. Just find a way to get the Bluecloaks on the road again.”

A whisper of fear licked Wilt’s spine, and he suppressed a shudder.

“But, the plague, the harvest...”

“The harvest has been dry for close on two years now Chancellor. We are down to the reserves, and if trade is not re-established soon, the entire kingdom will fall. We were relying on the last of our wagons to clear the natives, but they didn’t. We are out of the time we thought we had.”

Wilt couldn’t believe what he was hearing. For a moment he wondered if he was the only sane person in the city, the only Sorrician who could see the future clearly. The Council were still pre-occupied with the harvest, with trade. They were

failing to see the very present threat of extinction at the hands of the natives. He tried again.

“Please, councillors, listen to me. If a single Sorrician takes up arms, they will slaughter us all. *They don't care*. Equality is all they want. If we strike a deal, if we promise them...”

“Enough!” roared another councillor, his voice a deep baritone. Wilt was stunned into silence. He had only ever heard the spokesman, who now spoke again,

“Chancellor, while we admire your loyalty to your people, you must understand. We have ruled this land for four-hundred years. We have watched you mortals rise and fall, each believing in his or her own ability to change the world. And Chancellor, we have *endured*. The natives will sit outside the walls until one by one they will all succumb to the plague. *Then* you can treat with them, *then* you can send them back to work to save their country. Don't you realise, Chancellor, that without the harvest *there will be no life*. We keep this kingdom alive with the very oppression you seek to oppose.”

Wilt felt numbness in his arms. Not only did Kroc think they could repel the attack, the Council was under the impression they could outlast it. It was as if every lesson the natives had taught them remained unheeded.

“And what of the Sorricians? What of your own people dying of the plague?” There was a long silence.

“We will accept the losses.”

Erenis stood up abruptly and left the balcony above. Wilt was trembling.

In the calmest voice he could manage he said,

“Of course, Councillors,” and bowed deeply.



Tanril, Mlamuli and Thina peered from the window out onto the courtyard. She had brought the Greencloak squads into a five-storied furniture shop, which had long thin windows facing the gate and the forest beyond. From this vantage point, their exceptionally tall longbows would wreak havoc on advancing native soldiers below.

Since their arrival, both native sergeants had been acting suspicious around Tanril, as though in awe. She couldn't take it anymore.

"What is going on with you two?" she snapped, folding her arms.

They both grinned apologetically.

"Forgive us captain, its just. We did not expect..." Thina mumbled awkwardly.

"To see me alive?" she finished for him. "Well me neither."

"No captain, you misunderstand. We did not expect to find our faith rewarded, we..."

Thina tried again but shrugged it off into silence.

Tanril looked between the two men, feeling uncomfortable.

Mlamuli spoke up.

"Captain, there is one who would speak better than us, one who we would like you to meet."

Tanril nodded slowly, straightening,

"Who is it?"

Thina just nodded and turned to call down the stairs in the native tongue. Moments later a youth ascended. He had his head bowed as he approached.

"Captain Kilas," he said, in a surprisingly deep voice, "it is an honour to meet you again. I doubt you would remember me. Jayk, my mother was Mbali."

A flood of memory nearly swallowed her, as she was thrown into a vivid recollection of a beautiful native woman, always singing and laughing, carrying a small child on her back.

"I... I remember your mother. And you, but as a child. Welcome to the cause soldier," she replied, regaining her composure quickly. He could be no more than sixteen.

He offered her a gentle look and then said,

"I am not a soldier."

She raised her eyes to Thina and Mlamuli, who were both staring hard at her, but they offered no additions.

"So what is it you're here for?" she asked bluntly.

"Do you believe in the gods Tanril Kilas?" the boy asked, and she wondered if he was somehow older than he looked.

"I suppose. I mean, I was born to Sorric and all of that. I did the prayers and ceremonies as a child."

"But do you believe in them? That somewhere above us Sorric sits upon a floating throne of cloud, and that far below the black waters of the sea, Shoren lurks in restless sleep? That Torc and Terrick wield the fire of the sun across the land, and stare out from all flames at all times? How far does your faith reach captain?"

She looked around the room uncomfortably, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

He's just a boy, dammit.

“You know what, I’ve seen a lot in my years, but nothing remotely close to a suggestion of proof that they do, in fact, exist. Sorric has never answered the prayers of anyone I’ve ever known.”

That seemed to be what Jayk was looking for, because the corners of his mouth turned up and he said,

“Ah. But he is not the only god, is he?”

“Of course not, but he is the patron of the Azanian Peninsula.”

“Technically, he is only the patron of the kingdom. Rodea has no patron, their people are free to choose any temple. Moru is mostly a coastal province, they permit blood-rituals to Shoren. And if you search the most ancient ruins in Sansland, you will find other deities.”

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked softly.

“Because,” he whispered back, “you need to understand that Sorric cannot bring about balance. He *is not here*. He *will not come*.”

“What balance? What are you talking about?”

“The plague,” Thina whispered.

“It’s spreading once again,” Mlamuli said with his teeth bared, deathly-white against his green skin.

Tanril took a deep breath, hearing again the concerns of the people of Paarl, but this time as a reality. *Without the fresh harvest, Sansland is dying.*

“So what the hell can I do about it?” she asked defiantly. “I’m right here with you, trying to hold a city against an army six times our size. We need those people out there to get back to the plantations and start working again.”

Jayk scowled, the first time his face had broken its kind visage, and replied,

“That is not the answer. Do you think this land was only ever tamed by the harvest? That is a solution to counter the cancer, but the rot itself remains buried deep amongst us. The terranathema must be purged.”

“Terr-what? I don’t understand at all. What rot?” she asked.

Jayk shook his head. Thina and Mlamuli were whispering to each other hurriedly.

Mlamuli looked excited, but Thina was shaking his head. Before she could react, Jayk saluted and then turned on his heel and marched to the staircase. He stopped at the top and said,

“When the time comes Captain, you will.”

And then he was gone.



Wilt found himself descending into the catacombs again, a small torch in hand. He was annoyed to have to repeat his journey from that morning, tired and sleepless as he was. He was hurrying down a different spiral from his earlier path, heading to a section known to very few in the kingdom. He held a torch before him, following the memory in his feet rather than moving by sight. Wilt had first found this place as a young boy, exploring with his just-as-curious friend Melily, daughter of the kingdom's treasurer, Lord Porsol.

Wilt descended the familiar steps, ducking his head through a low doorway onto level ground. A bare stone room opened up before him, lit by a single torch, the edges swallowed in shadow.

Two men sat in the centre of the glow at a table. Both were old, injured bachelor's; veterans from before Ult's time, given a simple guard post and a steady pension for the remainder of their lives. One prisoner. Twenty-seven years of his sentence carried out. A zangom of dubious power, a man sworn to the earth, a priest of the old ways. Sobuntu.

Wilt nodded to the two men who were playing cards, and they inclined their heads slightly. They continued their game without a word.

The Chancellor moved passed them, out of their torchlight and further down the room. At the far end was a circular pillar, and manacled with long chains to it was the zangom. He was hunched into a ball, naked. Wilt dropped the bag of provisions he had been carrying next to the man, averting his eyes from the filth. He bracketed the small torch on the pillar above him.

"Here, I brought you some food, sit up," Wilt said.

The figure hacked and coughed, struggling to draw itself up. The skin looked mottled and sickly in the torchlight, and Wilt noticed the cracked nails and greying hair.

Sobuntu reached into the bag and slowly withdrew a pear. He ate.

"The last time I saw one of you was..." he croaked, waving a trembling hand.

"Yes, well. Here I am," was all Wilt could think to say to that. He pressed on.

"I need your help."

The Africkan priest tried a laugh, but screwed up his eyes in pain instead, clutching his chest. He wheezed, waving his hand for Wilt to continue.

"I need you to interpret something for me, a verse, can you do that?"

He nodded slowly, suspicious.

Wilt cleared his throat and then recited the verse from memory.

The zangom was giving him a fierce look in the shadows, eyes blazing.

"Where did you hear that?" he asked, scrabbling closer to Wilt, who backed out of range.

"I read it, in a diary. A diary of a zangom. Now, before you were... relocated... you proclaimed yourself the last of the high zangoms?"

The man nodded slowly.

"So, if I promise you a bath, some clean robes, and a healthy meal, will you tell me all that you know?"

"Why?"

"Because you might like to be clean and well fed-"

"No, why do you need to know so badly? What is happening?"

Wilt decided to keep the entire revolution under the covers for now, and simply said,

“The plague is threatening to return, and I seek the best means of averting the crisis.”

The man cackled wickedly,

“There is only one way the plague could return. If the plantations were abandoned. Are you in the middle of a civil war with the *native’s* skyman?” He sneered.

“Actually, we’re close to the end of one,” Wilt said, “but that is not the concern. The plague will wipe us all out anyway.”

“And what makes you think I can help? That this verse can help?”

“Because it speaks of balance. Because whoever she was, she managed to keep you all alive before all of this,” Wilt said.

“Before all of what?” the zangom asked.

Wilt sighed, and put his hands through his hair.

“Before all of us. The Sorricians,” he admitted.

Sobuntu was eyeing him strangely, his head cocked to one side.

“I have never heard a sky man admit something to one of us. Ever,” he said, clearly shocked.

“Yes, well, at this stage I have enough guilt on my hands to admit to anything,” Wilt replied distractedly.

“Can you help me or not Sobuntu? Either way I will have what I offered given to you.”

“What you read is known as the ‘first prayer’ to mother earth.”

“The first prayer?”

“It was the original guide to communication, the oldest of rituals. It is simple, sky man; spill your blood to approach her. A few drops are all that is needed.”

“So we can summon her? Now?” Wilt asked excited.

But Sobuntu shook his head sadly, and replied,

“If it were as simple as that sky man, we would never have lost our way. The altar is needed.”

Altar? Where had he read about an altar, it was in one of those books,

“I know of an altar,” he whispered.

“Where? Which altar?”

“I’m going to need to refer to the books again, but I can find it. So spilling blood on the altar will open some sort of communication?”

“Correct. Or so the old ways proclaim. The truth is the Altar of earth has been lost for generations.”

“I will find it,” Wilt said seriously. “I need to find it. I don’t suppose you know her name do you?” he added as an afterthought.

For a long time Sobuntu remained silent, still as anything. Then softly he said,

“We walk like blind children, forever searching with our souls. Does every lost child yearn for its mother? Her name was taken from us long ago, and we have no way of finding it again. That is the truth.”

Wilt shifted on his feet, suddenly uncomfortable. He hadn’t considered that.

“And what if somebody could give you that parent back? What if somebody found your guardian?” He leaned forward to catch the look on Sobuntu’s face. The prisoner buried his head in his chest and remained silent.

“Sky man, do you realise what you are saying?”

“What?” Wilt asked, confused.

“There is nothing I wouldn’t do for that moment to come. *Nothing.*”

“Would finding your god bring peace?” he asked.

For a long time the Africkan was quiet, and Wilt began to wonder if he would reply at all. Eventually the Sorrician opened his eyes and leant forward toward Sobuntu again.

“Would she bring peace?” he repeated.

Sobuntu’s eyes were hooded.

“It all depends, sky man,” he muttered.

“On what?”

“On whether or not she *wants* peace.”

Wilt felt sweat trickle down his neck uncomfortably, and he decided it was time to leave.

“Before you go, sky man, I have a simple question to ask you in turn?”

Wilt nodded distractedly.

“What did we do, *to deserve this?*”



Of all the things he had contemplated while chained to the sand, the notion of insanity was not amongst them. He knew that the things he had forgotten lacked importance, and that which he remembered was worth everything. More so, he believed in a reason for this madness, this continuation of their souls and bodies, even in a place such as this.

Centuries of rising sands had snapped the chains taut, even the tall pillar he had once sat beneath was now swallowed whole. Soon, even he would be beneath the sand, as would the others, doomed to burial for eternity without death.

He heard a boot crunch on sand above the roaring of the desert. It had to be close. He began to dig around the chain holding his neck. He pulled and twisted, eventually scraping enough loose links to inch his neck to the side.

An exceptionally tall man stood watching him, dressed in winter clothing, fur as black as night. His skin a deathly grey, with the faintest blue tint. His fingers thrummed on the pommel of a longsword at his waist.

He drew the weapon.



Tanril stood in the doorway of the furniture store, ignoring the cacophony behind her. Thina and Mlamuli were arguing ferociously in their native tongue about something at a table they had dragged to the centre of the room, while Jayk sat cross-legged on the floor in front of them, head bowed. It had been going on for minutes now, but neither of the sergeants seemed close to stopping their individual tirades. Tanril looked up ahead, through the doorway, where the walls of Paarl loomed in the midday sun.

Any assault on Paarl could only come from one direction, along the Walk. The thickly populated Jengor Forest had encroached upon the wall everywhere else, except for Benshir Gate, which led to the hunting grounds in the forest on the other side of the city. But Kroc had seen to it's barring himself.

The walls of Paarl were built from enormous slabs of pale granite; which fitted so smoothly it seemed as though the walls were carved of a single block of ivory. They had been mined further south in Menrit, from the walls of the plateau itself. She wondered for a moment who could have carved them, and how. She was sure someone around here must know.

Tanril thought it best to leave the Greencloaks to their squabbling. She pushed herself upright from the post of the door, and walked out into the courtyard. Groups of soldiers milled about, attending to all manner of tasks. Most, she could see, were sharpening weapons.

She made for the closest squad of legionnaires, unsurprised to find Ikalt and his men.

"Got yourself a squad finally Kilas," Ikalt said loudly. She decided to move on.

"Hope your boys are ready," Ikalt called after her, eliciting laughter from his men.

She hoped so too. Her legs weaved through the crowd of Sorricians taking her where they wished while she lost herself in thought. The sun was halfway through its descent behind her, as though falling onto the tip of the Spire.

The way Jayk had bowed, almost in prayer. "I'm not a soldier," were his earlier words. So what then? A lost boy? His cryptic words had left her rattled, but not for their mysterious nature. No, she was rattled with herself, with the sense of anticipation she felt in her mouth, as though something large was coming and she would get the chance to drink her fill of it. It was the energetic quiver in her gut which gave her cause for concern. She didn't even know what she was excited about.

"Sergeant!" came a familiar voice, breaking her reverie.

"Good to see you again, sir," it said again, though differently.

She looked down to see the twins smiling up at her, brown freckles reddening in the sun.

"Corporals," she said tiredly.

They got to their feet and saluted smartly.

"You boys ever seen any real battle?" she asked, stopping.

"No sir," said one, while the other shook his head.

"Where'd you learn to do all of this then?" she asked, indicating the defences they had organised.

"Runs in the family, sir."

"We're the youngest, sir."

“And your siblings?” she asked, instantly wishing she could take the question back.

“Dead sir,” said one,

“All three to the battle at the Delta swamps, sir,” said the other.

“At ease,” Tanril said, sighing. *Who hasn't lost someone to this rebellion?*

She walked for another bell, aimlessly wandering the Merchant's District, letting her feet make the decisions. *What are we all doing?* The plan was madness. No. It was suicidal at best. There wasn't a wall in the land that could keep that many natives out. How far did retribution go as an excuse for vengeance? The Sorricians carried fresh wounds, stung so recently as to still weep blood. But the natives carried old scars, and countless more at that. For every Sorrician who had fallen to a native blade, a thousand natives had perished to the conditions of slavery. Plantations threw out a score of bodies every week; men and women too affected by years at the kalk screw to get out of bed in the morning. Life on the farms was a grisly endeavour.

Mbali had been one such casualty, stricken by blood fever. Tanril had watched as more died to poor conditions. When she questioned the farmer and lord of the plantation, his reply had been, “There are always natives to choose from.”

She shook her head to clear it, looking up to find that her feet had carried her to the doorway of the Greencloak housing, the furniture store. Thina sat at the table inside, but Mlamuli was gone, as was Jayk.

“They would not listen,” Thina said, looking at the wall.

“I told them to stay, but the boy...”

“What about the boy? Who is he Thina?” Tanril asked seriously.

The native looked straight at her, right into her eyes, and said, “The herald.”

Again her gut roiled with excitement and anticipation, but her head filled with fear.

“The herald of what? The plague?”

Thina shook his head sadly.

“No. Of balance. He is the path-maker, the builder of doors, the light in the darkness for others to follow.”

“Then why did you try and stop him from leaving?” she asked.

Without answering Thina stood up and ascended the staircase.

Tanril turned to lean against the post again, staring out at the walls. They hadn't changed much since she left.



The entire arena floor of the city hall, the debating room for the chancellors and regents, was teeming with Sorricians. One and all from the royal estates, these were the wealthiest exploiters of the economy. And here they were expecting Wilt to house them, feed them and provide for them.

“In what capacity do they expect me to do this?” he asked in shock.

“I think in your capacity as chairman of the board of finances. If I’m not mistaken, these were all once business partners of ours,” Melily replied. Wilt’s mouth dropped fractionally lower,

“If I were responsible for all of my business partners there would likely be a few thousand here, not just a few hundred.”

“Well then, we best chalk this up as a victory,” she said.

Wilt scowled.

“EVERYBODY! LISTEN UP!” he roared, though only the first few rows even heard him. The rest were shushed to silence. After some moments the room was deathly quiet.

“Why have you sought refuge in the City hall?” he asked simply.

“Safety!” shouted one.

“We need food,” shouted another. Cheers accompanied them.

“I understand that, but we are under siege by an army of natives. The official order given out nearly two months ago was to stockpile food and fortify your houses. What happened?”

Three men appeared at the fore, all dressed lavishly. With the taste of bile in his throat Wilt recognised Ungrim G’int, Maradouth Jengor and Nars Hibalt, the spokespeople for the royal estates. They each belonged to one of the nine great houses, akin to the D’kal and B’ota names in status, and commanding all the wealth that went with it. Together they could likely afford to buy the kingdom out of its misery.

“My lord high chancellor, while we all did our utmost to see to your official order, we mostly found ourselves unable to fulfil the obligations you set upon our meek shoulders,” Maradouth said silkily. He was the minister of finance. Wilt had seen the man turn two sars into a thousand in hours. He scowled.

“With civil war comes a shortage of personnel and employees, and with the oxygen trade as dead as a corpse we have all found ourselves somewhat... incapacitated,” Ungrim, chancellor of the royal district, added.

“You mean you’re all broke and don’t know how to chop up firewood,” Wilt said angrily.

Maradouth just smiled, his hands covered by long billowing sleeves.

“Actually,” Ungrim said, “my lord chancellor, according to legislation set out by your father, we have the right to invoke public proceedings in the debate arena in a time of war. During said proceedings, any members of the public wishing to remain inside the City hall will be adequately housed and fed. You have admitted that we are under siege. We claim our right.”

Wilt was staring at them incredulously.

“You want to have a debate now? About what?” he asked, perplexed.

“About how we get the natives back to work,” Nars Hibalt said seriously.

“We need to crawl before we walk gentlemen. Let’s first see that the army outside doesn’t kill us, then we can worry about getting them back to work.”

“They can’t win,” Maradouth said bluntly.

“Why not?” Wilt asked.

“Paarl’s walls will drive them back,” he said, looking around. Cheers of enthusiasm went up.

“I said the walls will drive them back!” he shouted, and the crowd behind him gave a roar of approval.

Wilt looked at his wife, who gave a short sharp shake of her head, *it’s hopeless*.

“Very well,” Wilt said, hushing the people with his hands.

“I will agree to debate, but only tomorrow! This afternoon, you can feast courtesy of the government.”

More cheers went up. Wilt made his way to the servant’s rooms attached to this side of city hall. He opened the door and said inside,

“Please, could you all make your way into the debating arena as soon as possible. Attend everyone in there, use as many servants as you need, and please, get them drunk and asleep as soon as possible. Thank you!” and then rushed off again, Melily at his side.

They hurried down a corridor leading to the back door, finding their path unimpeded. The servants had yet to light the sconces against the afternoon, and the northern end of city hall was draped in murky colours from the waning sunlight through the stained glass. In between each window hung a portrait of a previous High Chancellor of Sansland. In the corridor running parallel to them on the other side of the building, hung identical portraits of the previous High Marshals.

Wilt was not particularly fond of the oil paintings, he saw too many of his forefathers. And at the end, just before his own frame, his father scowled down at him with his usual disapproval.

They hurried through the back door and onto the street behind.



“Wilt, get up,” Melily, said frantically, shaking him awake. He raised his head groggily, guessing it was early evening by the gloom in the windows. He could hear a din occurring outside, and Melily was looking at him frightened. He had been asleep for about a bell.

“What’s going on?” he asked her, but she merely pointed to the door. Wilt stumbled upright, still dressed in three-day-old robes. He made his way to the door and heaved it open, craning his neck outside.

There was total anarchy in the street behind city hall. Sorrician’s swarmed in bands of drunken lechery. Leaning against the wall of the government building in front of Wilt were four men, singing a shanty. Each had an ornate silver chalice in hand, sloshing from side to side. To his right another two men were brawling, while a group of Sorricians cheered them on. The sun had set behind the buildings and the Spire in the north, but the streetlights had thankfully been lit. Green-skinned servants darted around the press, bringing food and more alcohol from inside city hall. Wilt was struck speechless. *Why can’t they do this inside?*

To his left he saw a group of Sorrician men milling at the entrance to his servant’s quarters, and he saw furniture being thrown out the open door and onto the road. He ran over, just in time to catch Yub as he flew into the doorway. His nose was bleeding and he clutched his chest. His breath was coming in gasps.

“Get out!” Wilt roared at the group of white men in the room, but they barely took notice of him. They were busy kicking the rest of the servants out. One man was saying,

“Come on, get out, these beds are for Sorricians now! Result of the siege. Go tell your greenback friends to fuck off, and then we’ll give these back.” Wilt couldn’t believe his ears, what were these men thinking?

“Are you mad? Have you gone mad?” he shouted, but the men just looked at him cradling Yub, and then carried on shooing the other natives out. They were drunk, and it was clear not a single one of them realised who he was, or cared.

The native servants, all Wilt’s own, were grabbing the few items they could and were heading out the door. Wilt wanted to shout, to scream at them to fight, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t muster the will to do what was right. The Sorrician men here would probably beat him half to death in their state. He lowered Yub gently to the floor, listening to the man’s hacking breathing.

“Its okay Yub, I’ll get you help,” he said. Before he could do anything though, hands were pulling him away softly. He turned to see Melily, anger blazing in her eyes.

“They’ll look after him,” she said, indicating Neli and Hutti, two native girls who had cleaned their quarters. They picked Yub up gingerly between them and made their way slowly out the door. Wilt turned to Melily,

“What in Sorric’s name?” he asked, “Where are they going to go?”

“I’m not sure,” Melily said.

Wilt looked around the street to see if he could find a single Sorrician able to speak properly. He gripped one fellow weaving down the road and asked,

“Why are you not still in the public arena?”

“S’fullup,” he replied, belching, and then said, “Ma’adouth says if we too drunk to make it home, we can just use the servants’ quarters for the night.”

Wilt snarled and pushed the man aside. He would have a word with Maradouth Jengor about this.

“Melily, I need you to find anything and everything you can about altars, okay? In the books.”

She nodded and returned to the house. Wilt set off to find Jengor. There were so many Sorricians crowding the back door that he had to walk around the whole building to reach the main entrance.

When he turned the corner he found himself facing a horde of greenskins. The native servants who had been expelled from their homes, standing at the back door entrance to city hall. With a start, he recognised the boy had been sent as a messenger to him earlier, standing with an older girl, a sister. The entire group of natives were at a loss as to what to do.

Wilt wondered what it was that made him feel instantly superior, what it was exactly that gave him the power to look down at these people, to know in his heart that he was better than them, that he deserved a happier, more fulfilling life than them. He felt it, but he couldn't understand why. Was it the mere virtue of being Sorrician that made him better?

There was a thought which stuck with him. How would Sansland work if equality had risen in place of subservience? What if those first settlers had strived to develop Sansland as a community of equal peoples, instead of separating the classes? Wilt and Melily had discussed such things before, but never in too much depth and usually over too much wine. They mostly came to the conclusion that such a kingdom would never work; they justified their actions to themselves with excuses of necessity and expediency. But Wilt was beginning to think that that is all they were. Excuses. There was no reason to his mind that the country could not have been just as strong had the natives and Sorricians worked together as a unit, instead of the latter collaring the former into servitude.

No matter how pathetic, no matter how passive the servants may be, they did not deserve *this*. But more so because they were still here. The hundreds of green-skinned servants, workers, builders, and more had remained inside the walls of Paarl, throughout the revolution. They did their chores, they accepted punishment, and they lived normal lives. *And how do we repay their loyalty? We kick them out of their homes the first night of the siege, and we expect what? Their loyalty is gone now. Too late to salvage that.*

Wilt looked for a sign of military presence, spotting two awkward looking Legionnaires standing with their pikes raised just beyond the throng. He made his way over to them, nodding politely at their crisp salutes.

“High Chancellor,” they said in unison.

“I need a favour please, a quick one,” Wilt said, patting one of them on the shoulder,

“I need you to fetch the prisoner known as Sobuntu; you can find the details in the prison office inside.”

To the other he said,

“Come with me,” and he turned around.

The first soldier set off, making his way around the natives and into the City hall behind them.

Most of the natives were now staring at him expectantly. One came to the fore, and said loudly,

“Why have they taken our homes from us?”

Wilt looked around nervously, realising just how precarious his situation had suddenly become.

“They had no right to do that,” he replied evenly, “but I am preparing alternative locations for you temporarily. Everything will return to normal tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow is too late,” the speaker growled, eliciting murmurs of agreement.

“We have done everything you asked, where is the justice?” he added, gathering more cheers from the crowd. Soon they would be baying for blood. Wilt needed to distract them, immediately.

“Tell me,” he cried, “where is your faith?”

That seemed to silence them, and the speaker looked confused.

“Faith? In you Chancellor? Or in this kingdom?” he asked, uncertain.

“In yourselves,” Wilt replied. He opened his hands up to the crowd,

“Where is your faith, I ask you? Who is it you pray to when the nights grow dark and the cold creeps in?”

The natives began whispering amongst themselves, and the speaker was suddenly under intense scrutiny.

“We do not know her name,” came a frail voice from the back of the throng.

The natives began to open up, and before long the legionnaire and his charge were in a bubble of space, moving slowly to the Chancellor’s position. Wilt nodded at Sobuntu, now dressed in pale robes and carrying a staff which doubled as a walking aid. He was clean and his head was a bald pale green.

“Unfortunately, neither do you,” the zangom said with a sad smile as he reached the Sorrician.

The zangom turned and said in a soft voice, which carried nonetheless,

“Some of you may remember me, others will not. My name is Sobuntu. And I have come to tell you that she is closer than you think.”

The natives erupted into conversation with each other.

Wilt started at that, unsure of what to make of it.

“What does *that* mean?” he whispered to the native.

“You will see,” Sobuntu replied. To the milling natives he said,

“Follow me. I will guide you to a place of safety.”

A voice sounded from the centre,

“They will kill us where we stand. It’s a Sorrician trick!”

But Sobuntu only shook his head, and said,

“Follow me if you still have faith. Follow me, if you want freedom.”

Some of them looked uneasy, while others simply picked up their pitiful belongings and prepared to move.

“What are you going to do?” Wilt asked, confused, “I had you brought here so you could take these people to the Temple.”

Sobuntu cocked his head and said,

“Forgive me sky man, but I intend to take these people to their comrades beyond the walls. And any others who wish to join us. They will not die defending your city.”

Wilt looked at him fiercely, but he knew he couldn’t argue, not with everything that had happened. The wealthiest men in the city had effectively sealed their fate. If the native population within the city decided to leave, nothing would stop their army from razing it to the ground and walking away. He nodded.

Sobuntu announced to the crowd,

“Come, I feel the whisper of change in my blood,” and with that he turned and began hobbling down the road. The entire group of natives made to follow him. When

the last of them had cleared the City hall, Wilt made a quick decision. Bidding the two gaping soldiers farewell, he hurried down the Walk.



She was leaning against the door again. Thina sat glumly at the table, silent. Tanril was not in the mood for his sour attitude. She felt the urge to walk again. Without a word to the native man behind her, she set out from the furniture store, electing to turn right onto the Walk, rather than forward to the courtyard. She wasn't in the mood for Ikalt and his cronies.

Eyes on the floor, she made her way up the Walk slowly. Night was descending quickly now, since the sun had dipped behind the distant cube that was city hall, and the thin crooked finger that was Spire. She heard the shuffle of a crowd moving ahead, and raised her eyes.

Tanril's mouth opened. Coming down Sorric's Walk was a host of natives. *Going the wrong way.* An elderly green man led the procession, dressed in ragged pale robes and carrying a long branch as a staff. She was frightened too, not for her life or safety, but because they were utterly silent. The only sound was of their feet as they shuffled in a mob down the cobbled road, a few with torches to ward off the coming darkness.

She was wrong, actually, they weren't silent. A hum had risen from deep within their ranks; she couldn't be sure who had started it. But they were all picking it up now, humming a tune she didn't recognise. The music was surreal; it seemed to warp the world around her, rooting her feet to the ground.

Something within her responded, deep in her belly, reaching out to the music. She closed her eyes, lifting her head to the sound, feeling her soul swell in her body. She raised her arms and, eyes still closed, she let the music take over. Minutes passed, and she still did not feel the throng around her, though the humming remained loud in her ears. She opened her eyes, and with a start, fell to the cobbles a foot below her.

As she hit the ground her body switched to auto, and she rolled across the ground to the closest building. Righting herself to a crouch in a doorway, she launched into a sprint to the closest alley. Hugging the corner of the wall as she turned stopped, straightened.

She peered back, looking at the well-lit gate through which the natives were casually marching. She was so distracted by the music she hadn't noticed them swarm around her. She looked to the defences, to see why nobody was stopping this crazy sight. And then she noticed the odd positions, the sickly silence coming from the soldiers. The Sorricians were rooted to the spot, unable to move or make a sound. She saw Kroc, halfway down the stairs, locked mid-step, face visibly red from here. She saw that he shook, as if seconds from breaking the spell, but to no avail.

The gate was raised, and Tanril saw that natives had taken to the wheelhouses on either side of the tunnel.

She watched as the tail of the band disappeared through the gates, the natives from the wheelhouses running to catch up. Tanril moved back into the alleyway and sat back on her haunches in disbelief. It had to have been sorcery of some kind, some wayward, powerful magick that could render a hundred soldiers completely useless. If they used that again in warfare, well, *we're already dead*, she thought. That's probably why they didn't kill me. *They did not need to.*

"Good evening soldier, that..." came a voice from behind her. She stopped it short by gripping the throat with two powerful hands. It took a moment for her to recognise Lord Erenis, speaker for the Council. She let go immediately.

“Sorry, sir. Instinct. That was some Jacelin-spawned sorcery or something, sir,” Tanril said apologetically.

“A little more than that, I should think,” he said, rubbing his neck whilst peering at the now-closing gate and the pinprick torch lights of the fading Africkan multitude.

“What do you mean?” she asked, fearful that he had seen all that had happened to her.

His gaze did not revert to her, and he seemed to be talking to himself when he said,

“A gift.”

Then his eyes met hers again, and he smiled wickedly.

“And here I thought chivalry was dead.”

Tanril stared at the man, and then asked,

“What did you see?”

“You are quite something sergeant Kilas,” was all he said.

He bowed deeply at the hips.

Tanril wasn't sure what to say to that, so she waved him off with a casual

“Sir.”

She didn't notice him leave, but when she next looked up he was gone. She needed to figure out what just happened. She got to her feet and made for the gate, exiting the alleyway onto the Walk.

When Tanril reached the courtyard, she spotted the High Marshal, descending the stairs in fury and bellowing at the men around him, who one and all looked terrified to their bones. She ran over to him, about to ask what happened, when Kroc yelled out to her.

“Kilas, there you are! Dammit, get me your Greencloaks, I need their longbows.”

She opened her mouth, about to ask a question when she realised where she was. This was one of the most powerful men in the kingdom. Instead she saluted, and turned back to the first line of shops, wondering what possible reason the Marshal could have. And then one struck her.

She entered the furniture store, finding Thina and four of his squad at the table. They all looked up at her.

“The High Marshal has need of you,” was all she could say.

Thina nodded and snapped an order to his men. In seconds, all of the Greencloaks were filing out the door, fully armed. Jayk and Mlamuli were still nowhere to be seen. Tanril followed them into the courtyard where they were pointed to the wall. When they had ascended the steps, the Marshal, standing outside the longhouse, called out,

“Array positions along the wall. Notch arrows. Fire at my command.”

The Greencloaks spread out across the wall, each stringing and equipping his long bow. Thina moved over to stand by Tanril and whispered,

“Remember, find Jayk. He is the herald. Go to the city hall.”

He turned to the Marshal and said,

“What is our target Marshal?”

“The fleeing rebels, sergeant,” he replied, pointing at the band of servants led by the man with the walking stick. They were still well within bow range. The other captains and legionnaires had ascended the walls to watch the show. Many were joking and laughing. She couldn't believe it.

Thina, however, shook his head.

“No.”

The Marshal, who had been looking at the refugees with a sardonic grin, turned to Thina.

“Excuse me soldier? I just gave you an order.”

“And I refused it,” Thina said, snapping his longbow into two pieces over his thigh with a loud crack. His soldiers followed suit. The High Marshal simply smiled at them, and said,

“Legionnaires, we have the first traitors of the cause. Arrest them.”

The Greencloaks were instantly surrounded, all of them disarmed and held at weapon point. The High Marshal continued to watch the native band led by the staff bearer as it dwindled beyond the glow of the city.

“Cage them. At the entrance to the Native Centrale as a warning to the others,” he said casually. The natives were hauled off by squads of legionnaires.

The Marshal walked over to her, and she realised that she too was now surrounded.

“Are you one of them or one of us, Kilas?” he asked bluntly.

“You planned that,” she said, “you knew they would refuse.”

He shrugged,

“This is war sergeant. Here, at the end of civilisation, where we come to meet our final end, *there are no good people left*. Only those with the power to do what needs to be done. They chose their own fate.”

He waved at the men around her,

“Leave her.”



He went stone cold as her eyes locked onto his. In a moment, she looked away again, as if nothing had happened. Then she had Erenis by the throat, and Wilt found himself marching back to city hall as if his destiny itself were at the helm.

He needed to speak to Melily right away, to find out what he could about altars. That was the most important thing right now. After that, he would have to have a word with this sergeant Tanril Kilas.

When city hall loomed into sight ahead, he spotted the two Sorrician guards still at their posts. He beckoned the same guard who had gone to fetch Sobuntu.

“Another errand, I need you to retrieve sergeant Tanril Kilas from the courtyard defences please. Someone down there will direct you, I’m sure. Have her brought straight to my home, okay? Not my office or this building, but to my front door.”

The guard nodded resolutely and hurried off the way Wilt had just come. He nodded to the other man and then carried on to his house. The street was still full of Sorricians; it seemed there was no end to the spill from city hall. The door was still crowded with people, but most were beginning to complain at the lack of service and absence of native servitude. Wilt nodded to himself, they would likely retire when they realised that no help would be forthcoming. He waited at the entrance to his house, watching the flock. Sure enough, in drips and drabs, people had begun to tire of the street and turned back to flood the doorway with two way traffic.

“Chancellor,” somebody called and Wilt shuddered. Coming through the dwindling throng was the Bluecloak officer, his two lackeys at his side.

“It seems your original plan was not quite what we had in mind,” he said when he reached the chancellor.

“You’re right, it was a bad idea,” he admitted, trying to avoid another incident like that morning.

“Have you come up with anything else?”

“As a matter of fact, I’m in the middle of tracking a path through the Jengor forest. I’m positive your men will find it uncontested.”

“There are no paths through the forest,” the Bluecloak replied tersely.

“Not that we know of, no,” Wilt replied, “but we were not the first to travel it. I have found more than enough evidence to find a suitable travel route for you. But I need some time,” he said, folding his arms.

The Bluecloak looked at him sceptically, screwing up his eyes.

“Very well. You have until morning.”

Groaning silently, he opened the door, he found Melily at her desk - which was now covered in the books and tomes Wilt had dredged up from the archives. She didn’t turn around. He shut the door behind him, leaving it unlocked. He walked to his wife and peered over her shoulder, finding her scribbling away on a map of the kingdom. She had circled the seven major cities, as well as the seven sanctuaries. There were arrows cascading up and down between circles. Paarl had the most by far.

“Have you found anything?” he asked.

“Sorric’s tears Wilt, it all makes sense. It’s unbelievable,” she replied, still scribbling away.

“It all started here, in Paarl, it’s where the first altar was carved. Okay, hang on, altars. You know how every body has a heart? Beating blood into our bodies to

keep us alive? It is the same with a god and their altar. The most powerful gods have hundreds of temples, hundreds of altars where they are worshipped.”

“Right, like the altar carved into the back of the Temple?”

“Exactly! Though Sorric’s demands are rather simple. Prayer and hymns, and all the rest. But, as we know, he never responds to us anyway. Begging the question-”

“Of whether we have our worshipping right.”

Melily bobbed her head in agreement,

“There are other ways, of course. More... *mundane* ways.”

“Such as spilling blood upon the altar?” Wilt asked.

“Just an offering, a few drops at most, but they must touch the stone,” Melily answered.

“And the map?”

“Ah, the map,” Melily said, “Seven major cities which were all once sanctuaries. The first sanctuaries were set up on top of the only altars to the native deity. Technically they the body away from the heart, leaving her to roam un-worshipped, ethereal and forgotten.”

Wilt shuddered, and then blinked in realisation,

“But that means there should be an altar here. In Paarl.”

“Right again. And you will never believe where.”

Wilt raised his eyebrows, thinking of city hall. He was about to give answer when Melily said quickly,

“Before you answer, yes. The Spire.”

Wilt blanched, face turning pale.

“I was going to say the City hall,” he murmured, “that would have been easy.”

“Much easier, sure,”

“But hang on, I was there today and I didn’t see any altar” he frowned.

“It was carved into the rock of the promontory. Didn’t you once wonder why the base of the Spire is so high?” she asked.

Wilt nodded, she was right. It all made sense now. The Sorricians had cut the natives from their god, banished her to a ghostly half-life. And then they had set about taking the peninsula for themselves, enslaving the native populace.

“That is not the worst of it Wilt.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it. If the plague arrived after this deity was cut loose, and was only repulsed again with the implementation of the harvest, then-”

“She was the original keeper of balance. So simple. But none of this is any use without her name,” he said.

Melily was shaking her head though.

“Wilt D’kal, where is your faith?”



“Sergeant Tanril Kilas?” came the question from the dark. She was sitting inside what had been the Greencloak housing, the furniture store, lost in her emotions. Thina and his men were now imprisoned in the Native Centrale, left in the street for all to see.

“Sergeant, I have orders from the High Chancellor to bring you to his chambers at once.”

She stood up slowly in the darkness. Then she made for the doorway, brushing past the figure before her, who turned and followed.

They moved slowly toward the city hall, and Tanril breathed a sigh of relief putting her back to the wall and its grim reminders.

Soldiers scurried about lighting the bulbs lining the Walk. The excess of oxygen pulsating from the pump in the city hall allowed for a large number of street lamps, one and all balls of controlled oxygen-fires. It made the cobbles beneath her feet shine like it was the middle of the day. No one seemed bothered to hinder her.

Some time later the large building rose up before them, its tall square frame hiding all that lay beyond but the jutting tower of the Council. She turned to the soldier behind her and said,

“That will be all, thank you private, return to your station, I can find my way from here.”

“Sir, with respect, the Chancellor asked that you be taken straight to his front door,” the man replied, looking uncomfortable.

Tanril knew how to play this game, and she was actually thankful that she had control over something again.

“Do you think your superior officer is incapable of finding a house, soldier?” she asked, keeping her voice low.

“No, sir,” he stammered.

“Am I blind and in need of a guiding hand?”

“No, sir, it’s-”

“Then I don’t understand what possible use I could have for you between here and the chancellor’s house, which is,” she raised a hand and pointed down the side street, “about thirty feet in that direction.”

The soldier nodded, the muscles in his jaw bunching. Tanril smiled inwardly, she hadn’t forgotten how to turn down a soldier.

He simply saluted and made off toward the entrance to the city hall, while Tanril set off down the side street. *Sorry soldier, you’re in for a roasting.* She had no intention of seeing the High Chancellor, not just yet.

She came around the corner of city hall, ready to sneak into the back door. Instead she found herself in what looked like a party venue. Broken clay jugs were scattered amongst the plants, while chalices, mugs and cups were strewn along the road. A few Sorrician’s hovered at the back door to city hall and Tanril felt a twinge of anxiety. But she relaxed when she saw their expensive clothing, and even more when she saw their features. Wealthy men, not the type to fraternise with the military or question an officer going about her business. And they were all drunk, which meant they weren’t likely to remember seeing her either.

She passed the High Chancellor’s home, hearing the murmur of conversation through the open window, but she didn’t stop to listen. If he so much as glimpsed outside he would spot her. She reached the crowded doorway, slipping into the

throng. She shoved hard with her shoulder, barrelling the drunks through. They fell into a heap on the other side, but Tanril maintained her balance, stepping briskly through and taking a right. She would take the corridor lined with portraits of the High Marshals all the way to the front of the building.

She hoped that was where Jayk and Mlamuli were waiting for her. She turned the corridor and walked into mayhem. There were Sorricians everywhere, scattered along the corridor, some passed out, others still very much awake. Naked bodies were draped along sleeping figures and Tanril was sure that the whorehouses had been stripped bare. She marched between writhing bodies and hooting men, covering her nose against the ripe smell of alcohol and sex.

She picked her way through the mess, silently wishing she could draw her sword. A naked woman lurched into her, thrusting a thickly made-up face to hers.

“Want a twirl darlin’?” she asked, belching.

Tanril pushed the woman away and kept moving, pinching her nose against her foul breath. It took some time, but eventually she found herself in the entrance hall, which was empty. It was a large rectangular room, with a staircase descending lower at either end. She didn’t know much else about the building.

A hand reached out and gripped her arm; smooth green skin. She turned to find Jayk’s face before her own.

“Come, quickly, I will show you what needs to be done.”

Behind him, Mlamuli smiled.

“Mlamuli, Jayk, I’m sorry. The others are...”

“Yes, but now is not the time. What they did made this all possible,” Jayk replied, pulling her toward the staircase to their right.

“Made what possible?” she asked.

“What needs to be done,” Mlamuli said quietly, following.

They descended the staircase in the eastern side of the room. It led down a single flight into a corridor which sloped downward. They made off for the far end. Other staircases sat in the walls of the corridor, descending into unknown places. Suddenly Jayk pulled her left, into one of the mysterious passages. It was a spiralled staircase, extremely small, making it rather difficult to breath. They wound lower and lower, eventually walking out into a large, well-lit corridor, which curved away to their right. Jayk set off, traversing downward. Eventually the corridor straightened out, and there at the far end sat a massive wooden door, chained closed with a huge iron lock. They stepped up to examine it. There was a chain bolted to the outside corners of each door, pulled taut into the middle and held with the iron lock.

“Any ideas for this one Jayk?” Tanril asked.

“A few actually,” he replied with a look of amusement. He placed his hand on the lock and closed his eyes. After a few moments, the iron seemed to warp and stretch, and suddenly came apart like dough. When Jayk removed his hand, the iron was as hard as ever to her touch, but the lock was open, like it had been thrown in a furnace and melted apart, and then frozen again in seconds.

She looked at him with bewilderment, waiting for some sort of answer. But none was forthcoming. Mlamuli jumped in instead and said,

“Jayk is a direct descendant of the zangoms of old. He was taught the old ways by his mother, but possesses a talent far greater than she ever did. In the old world, he would have been crowned a high zangom, a mage-priest tasked with the protection of the people. They would have taught him the secret ways of earth magic.”

“A priest? Of who, Sorric?”

The older man said,

“No. Of our own goddess, the one who was taken from us.”

“What? You have another god?” she asked, incredulous.

“Not another one,” Jayk said, shaking his head, “Just the one. The mother of earth.”

“What happened to her?” Tanril asked, pulling the chains apart, and slowly easing the doors open.

She forgot her question when she saw what lay in the room beyond.

A broad column rose from the centre of a very high-roofed circular chamber, made entirely of glass, and where it reached the top there branched off hundreds of pipes and cables, like some nightmarish spider web. Inside the glass column a pump rose and fell, slowly, methodically pushing oxygen to all corners of the city. It had the sound of a deep rumbling drum.

The monstrous machine only held her attention for a few moments. It was what lined the walls and floor of the room, the boxes stacked into piles as tall as the pump itself, which caught her real attention. Tanril had never seen this much kalk oxygen in one place. She made her way over to one of the boxes, wrenching open the top. Inside were nine empty pockets. She tried a second and then a third, but they were all empty. The insignia’s blazoned on the lid of each differed. Before long she had found marks from all thirty plantations. All were dated three years ago. The last full harvest. She looked around and started doing the calculations in her head. Her time as captain had given her plenty of experience with the oxygen trade, but this was staggering. The only way there could be this many boxes would be if the city hall had acquired the entire trade’s worth from that year.

She turned to Jayk, who merely shrugged.

“This makes no sense,” Tanril said, “There is no way they could have gotten all of these here.”

“What do you mean?” Mlamuli asked from where he was studying a panel of levers and buttons on one wall.

“I mean that this is impossible. The oxygen trade runs from Kalk to the other six cities and even into Moru and Rodea in the east. There are allocations, there are rules. Only certain deposits can go to certain cities, I’ve seen the ledgers. The Bluecloaks have a representative for each of the thirty plantations on the merchant’s assembly in Kalk. They are each given license to trade within a specific sector. Only six of them were permitted to sell to Paarl, but here is proof of all thirty. The only way that could have happened, would be if all thirty of them sold to the Council.”

“Perhaps they changed the rules to stock up?” Jayk suggested.

“No,” Tanril replied shaking her head, “that would be ludicrous. Without fresh oxygen the other cities would succumb to the plague.”

Jayk and Mlamuli simply stared at her. It slowly dawned on Tanril that she was probably exactly right.

“But... How? How could they do that?” she spluttered, bewildered.

“You are surprised at Sorrician treachery? After everything you’ve seen?” Mlamuli asked.

Slowly, biting down on the truth, Tanril nodded.

“Okay, so they swindled the final harvest from the others, potentially leaving them vulnerable to plague. Shit,” she said. She was remembering all the complaining Sorricians, moaning about a lethargy and shortness of breath. She wasn’t so sure she doubted them now. But that meant that Paarl was already weakening, that the balance brought about by the oxygen pump was waning. She looked at Jayk.

“Why are we here Jayk?” she asked.

“This is the first step,” he replied “We must shut off the pump once and for all.”

“Are you mad? Was this the plan all along? To kill every living thing in Sansland?”

But Jayk was shaking his head,

“Have you forgotten that we lived in peace and harmony for hundreds of years before the Sorrician’s arrived? There was no plague when the peninsula belonged to us. We lived freely upon this land.”

“You spoke of a cancer, of a rot within us? The terr- something?”

“Terranathema,” he said.

“The Sorricians?”

“No, the Sorricians are no longer our concern. No offence,” he said apologetically, “but we have already won this war. That army out there will make no move on these walls. They will sit and they will wait until you have all accepted the simple truth. There will be freedom. And there is nothing you can do to change that.”

“So what then? What is the source of the plague?” she asked.

“Your Council,” Mlamuli said from behind Jayk.

“The Eternal Council? How?”

“You will see,” Jayk replied. She wished he would stop saying that.

“So you propose we turn off the oxygen in the hope that the council dies and the plague disappears?”

Jayk gave a firm nod.

“If it was that easy, why have none of you ever tried it before?”

“There are a number of other factors to consider, none of which are particularly interesting, I promise. Let’s just say our people have been waiting for the right moment.”

“So how do we do it then?”

Mlamuli beckoned for her to move over to the panel with the levers and knobs.

“When I pull this one down,” he said indicating a long lever, “you press these buttons, in this order,” he showed her the buttons.

“Ready?”

She nodded.

Mlamuli pulled the long lever down. A choking sound emerged from behind them, and Tanril looked over her shoulder to see that the pump had stopped halfway up the cylinder and wasn’t moving. She turned to the buttons and pressed them in the order Mlamuli had described. With a sighing sound, the cylinder vibrated into stillness. Mlamuli released the lever, which slowly returned to its original place. The sudden silence pressed like cushions on Tanril’s ears.

“Well that was far less exciting than I expected,” Jayk said.

She nodded in agreement, for the first time noticing three tall, thin doors on the opposite end of the room, behind the cylinder. She felt a twinge in her gut, bidding her to explore the rooms. She couldn’t explain it, but she was drawn toward them. She walked across, coming around the glass column. The doors were identical and side by side. They were three man-lengths tall, but not very wide.

She pushed open the middle one, peering into the room beyond. It seemed that they all connected to the same room, a sunken amphitheatre which dwarfed the room she was currently in. It could probably house the entire native army outside the gates. Massive glowing sconces ringed the ceiling, illuminating the shocking sight below, which extended as far as she could see, dwindling into the far reaches of the room.

She let out a long whistle.

Jayk and Mlamuli came up behind her, each looking over a shoulder. They both gasped in shock.

“How is that possible captain? You said it was impossible,” Jayk whispered.

“I know what I said.”

“That’s not just some of it,” Mlamuli observed, before nudging Tanril with his elbow, “Captain, you said it wasn’t possible.”

“I know what I said!” Tanril snapped.

The room was brimming with dusty, web-covered boxes, some centuries old judging by the design.

And glaring at them in the light, more than could be counted, were the stamps of all thirty plantations.

I know what I said. It should be impossible. But that’s not some of it. That’s all of it.



“Where is she?” Wilt asked the soldier who was propped up against the city hall wall. “I sent you to find her over a bell ago.”

“M’lord,” he replied respectfully, looking nervous, “we parted ways just here. She said she would find her way straight to you.”

Shit.

“Very well, carry on,” the chancellor said, turning to return to his quarters. He trundled around the outside of the government building, eyes on his feet. He let them take him to his front door, his mind racing with what to do about the missing sergeant. Suddenly a commotion broke out somewhere amidst the houses ahead, Wilt could hear tense voices and angry words, but his view was blocked. He picked up his pace, ignoring his own door and carrying on to the back of the city hall. From there he turned to take the same path as earlier that afternoon, through the servant’s housing. It was easy once he found the raised pipes in the ground. The commotion had come from somewhere just inside the first row of small houses. Wilt figured it was another group of drunken Sorricians, probably arguing over a spilled drink or a spurned advance. Either way, it would be a mistake to walk directly into whatever was happening.

He stole up to the closest house and, back to the wall, shimmied along to glance around the corner. He couldn’t believe his fortune. Crouched beneath the eaves of the dwelling opposite were two native men, and the Sorrician sergeant Wilt had been looking for. His heartbeat fluttered and his mouth went dry. He pricked his ears to catch their conversation, which had died to whispers following the initial argument. With a start, he heard his own title come up.

“...speak with the High Chancellor first,” Kilas was saying to the other two, who were obviously disagreeing with her. Wilt couldn’t hear their reply, but he couldn’t risk moving forward either, they would spot him in an instant.

He simply waited, muscles straining with the effort to remain still and quiet. He heard a few more snatches of conversation, but not enough to put it together himself. Then they were off, Kilas in the lead, following the triple-pipe line toward the Spire.

Sorric’s teeth, they’re actually going for it.

Wilt waited a few minutes before allowing himself a deep breath and unclenching his muscles. There was only one route to the Spire, he was in no rush.

He thought to tell Melily where he was off to, but decided against it in the interest of safety. She would undoubtedly force her way into attending, and Wilt couldn’t risk putting her in danger at this stage.

He set off after the trio. When he cleared the last of the servant’s houses he stopped, crouching at the low wall. Ahead the tower loomed out of the darkness like black broken tooth.

The three figures were already well on their way across the bare earth field, nearly at the lip of rock. Wilt suddenly straightened, *the Bluecloaks!* They would be feathered with bolts in moments. He was too far away to see what would happen.

Fuck it, he broke into run.

He made it about forty feet before he had to slow down and regain his breath. The Bluecloaks were nowhere to be seen though, and the sergeant and her two friends were nearing the staircase. *The second they step inside there,* he thought. He tried

calling out, but could barely get the breath into his lungs. Instead he stood hunched over, hands on knees, sucking in air. He cursed himself for being so unfit

He kept an eye on the trio as they ascended the staircase, a part of him hoping they would be attacked. He wanted to see what she could do.

But when they reached the doorway, they just went on through unhindered.

Another trick like the one at the wall?

. That shifted him back into movement, and he hurried toward the tower.

When he reached the staircase, he slowed, hoping that whatever had prevented the Bluecloaks from firing the first time would do so again. He cautiously approached the threshold, hands out before him in surrender. It was pitch dark inside, the only light coming from the staircase; a rich glow from further up.

When his eyes adjusted, Wilt could make out figures slumped on the floor. He picked his way carefully around them. A voice called out, startling him.

“Don’t mind them Chancellor, they won’t be disturbing anyone tonight.”

“Erenis, what did you do?” he asked in a tight voice,

“Are they all...?”

“Dead? Yes. A simple poison, applied to their lunchtime repast. They had become far too annoying with their endless talk of trade and the good of the Council. And they never listened to a single word I said. But all of that aside, I had to kill them. But then, you already understand why, don’t you?”

Wilt nodded slowly, looking about for the man. He couldn’t see him the gloom. He continued forward, toward the staircase. When he reached it, he placed a hand on the railing and turned. A large shadow detached itself from the wall to his right, and Erenis swelled into the light, ringed fingers glinting.

“How do you know?” Wilt asked, narrowing his eyes at the man.

“It is my job to know,” Erenis snapped. “Something you always seem to forget. You said you did your research, I’m sure you have made the simple connections as to why I am here.”

“One of Sorric’s very own high priests, yes, I know. But we already have one of those, in the cathedral. The Temple in Paarl is the grand arena of religion in Sansland, and I bet the High Priest didn’t take too kindly to your intrusion. So you found yourself a new job, Speaker to the Council. Fortunate that the previous owner of that title died days before your arrival.”

“Fortunate indeed,” Erenis said without a hint of emotion.

“Why did you come to Paarl? And how did you find out about all of this?”

Erenis sighed,

“While you may think that blasphemous cathedral is the pinnacle of religion, we amongst the order consider your High Priest, and his six counterparts in the other cities, as nothing more than loud speakers. The true power of the church remains with the Sanctuaries. Did you know that the original zangoms of the Azanian peninsula could wield the elements like weapons? They had the natural ability to command the earth-bound forces – flame, stone, metal. The Order of Sorric has a different heritage. Our forefathers – the rare few blessed with talent – could alter the mind. We were masters of espionage and deception. If you can make an enemy think whatever it is you want, they cannot stand in your way. Of course, there is barely a whisper of talent left in Southern Azania, so our methods have adapted. The true power of the church, Chancellor, lies in knowledge. We collect it, we supply it, and we hoard it like gold. Both ours and that of the natives. And with that knowledge-”

“Comes immense power,” Wilt finished, trying to swallow what he was being told.

“I understand, you’re spies and assassins and historians right?”

Wilt’s breath was still rather shallow, and while the pounding in his head had retracted, he feared its return at any moment.

“Something like that yes. But there are things you must know, before we get into that room up there Wilt.”

It was the first time Erenis had ever called him by his name. The fat man sat on the step and patted the space next to him. Wilt obliged, feeling awkward sitting on a step next to the man he had despised for so long.

“Are you ever going to answer my first questions?” Wilt asked.

“Right, I was getting there. The short version then, time is short.”

“Yes, speaking of time, where are the three?”

“Trying to get into the court room, but the door is barred from the inside. They will take a while longer. As I was saying, the short version. We uncovered something in our archives, long before you or I existed, which drove my order to abandon the city Temples and rebuild the Sanctuaries elsewhere. You know what I speak of, the plague brought down by the Sorricians. The brutal removal of a goddess from her people, leaving the land susceptible to disease.” Erenis suddenly raised his head to the roof,

“It’s all *their* fault,” he spat, “they are the heart of the sickness.”

“I see.”

He snapped his head to Wilt, pushing his face right up to the chancellor’s, his green eyes wide.

“Do you see? Do you really see what we are Wilt? We are the *seeds*. Wherever the Sorricians are, the plague follows. To stop the plague, we all have to die.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” came a voice from above them. Sergeant Kilas and the two natives were standing on the stairs.

“Did you think we wouldn’t hear you?” she asked, shaking her head.

“Anyway, that’s not true. The Sorricians aren’t the bearers. It’s only the Council.”

“How do you know that?” Wilt asked, standing. He was hit by a sudden head rush and had to steady himself on the railing.

“Because, not a single box of oxygen has gone anywhere but to the city hall for the last three hundred odd years.” A stunned silence followed that statement. Erenis was the first to speak,

“So that means we just have to remove the Council?”

Sergeant Kilas nodded,

“It seems that way. We’ve already shut off the oxygen supply, it’s been dead nearly half a bell. We’re hoping they’re starving up there.” Wilt didn’t miss the look the two natives gave each other behind her back.

He looked at Erenis, who was nodding thoughtfully. He now understood why he was feeling so affected, there was no fresh oxygen to keep the sickness from spreading through Paarl. The entire city could go up by morning.

A thought hit him from nowhere, flashing through his mind with one word, *balance*.

“Of course!” he said aloud, and everyone turned to look at him.

“It’s all about balance. Before, the goddess kept the balance, she was the fulcrum. The council changed the fulcrum to the supply of oxygen. The plantations, the slaves, all of it.” He realised what he was saying as he said it, and his hands found the top of his hair where he clutched, horrified.

“Exactly,” Erenis said angrily,

“It’s all to keep the nine of them alive. Sorric’s tears. Let’s go.”

The Sorrician high priest led the way, Wilt behind him, the sergeant and the two natives behind him. When they reached the door to the court room, Wilt was racked with another headache and nearly fell over. One of the natives caught his arm and steadied him, keeping him upright. Wilt looked at him surprised, noticing for the first time that he was a Greencloak. He nodded at the native, who slung Wilt’s arm around his neck and let Wilt lean on him. Erenis was fiddling at the door with a large key, which eventually gave way. The door swung open smoothly.

The five of them marched in, Erenis in the lead. The pillars ahead of them were raised into the roof, and there was silence other than their steps.

“Do you think they’re dead,” the Greencloak whispered to him.

Wilt stayed silent, not trusting himself to speak. *Who knows?*

Erenis and Sergeant Kilas marched to the closest pillar, while the other native, a boy, came to stand beside the Greencloak.

“When it is time Mlamuli,” he said quietly, taking Wilt’s weight from the man. When the Chancellor was safely supported by the boy, the Greencloak retreated quietly to the back of the room. Wilt craned his neck to see what he was doing, but he couldn’t quite twist all the way, and he couldn’t shrug off the boy, who was forcing him to face forward.

Suddenly, as one, the nine pillars began descending.

“Here we go,” the boy said.



Tanril stepped back as the pillar began to descend. She saw that the others were doing the same. *Right, time to do this then.*

She placed a hand on her sword, feeling the familiar grip between her fingers. She waited nervously as the nine stone columns descended smoothly. There were large thrones on each of them, carved from the same piece of rock.

A cacophony of voices suddenly blared in her mind and she gripped her ears in pain. She turned to see the others doing the same, clearly all able to hear what she heard.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“The outrage!”

“Traitors! Hang the traitors!”

“ENOUGH!”

There was silence. Tanril looked up. The pillars had stopped halfway down into the room, still a good few feet above her. She retreated a few step so that she could see them properly.

The central figure raised a long black sleeve. The domes of smoky glass covering their heads gave no indication of their features.

She turned to Jayk, to ask him why it hadn't worked, when the final speaker's voice bounced through her mind again.

“It seems we *do* have traitors in our midst. The High Chancellor, a legionnaire and our very own Speaker. Along with two natives. I hope you don't mean to use that weapon on one of us, slave.”

Tanril turned her head, peering behind Jayk and the Chancellor, where Mlamuli had drawn his longbow and notched an arrow. *What is he thinking?*

She turned back to the councillor and stood.

“We are not the traitors. You are. We've cut off the supply of oxygen to the Spire; you will be dead with the rest of soon.”

She didn't get the reaction she was looking for, as nine cackles erupted in her head.

“It seems your antics have done nothing more than wake my brothers and sisters from a restful sleep. Did you think the kalk harvest was intended to keep *us* alive?”

The awful laughter sounded again. Tanril wasn't sure what to say to that.

“No,” the speaker started again, “the oxygen was a protection for *you*. We are unaffected by the plague.”

“Don't be modest brother, these ones are dying already, tell them the truth, they have come this far, they deserve to know why before they die,” said another of the seated figures, a woman's voice.

“Very well, the truth then,” came the speaker, “the truth. We *are* the plague. The terranathema. We are people of the sky, not of the earth. The pure oxygen, harvested from a plant native to our ancient home K'alikkor – or Kalk as you know it – forces the corruption to remain within our bodies. Without it we do not die, we just *infect*. Shutting off the main supply has done nothing but speed the process. You have taken the last few days we could manage to give you, and turned them into hours.”

There was silence for a few moments as the room digested that.

“How did you manage to reroute every trade caravan to the city hall? How did nobody notice?” Tanril asked, ignoring the grim reality the councillor had proposed.

“Meticulous manipulation,” came the reply. “We fed our Bluecloaks trickles of our power, we gave them command over weaker minds.”

A baritone voice sounded: “Unlike your vanity-ridden sermon-givers and those historians in the Sanctuaries, we were true warlocks of the Order of Sorric.”

“The people received their bottles, but they were filled with air,” the speaker resumed.

“All of it came to us. Courtesy of our Bluecloaks. The simplicity of the lie has always fascinated me, since nobody ever questioned it.”

“Until now,” Tanril said.

“That is so. Until now. Did you find the rooms below then? Only our Bluecloaks have the keys to that area. We struggle to admit it, but we are slightly impressed. That they are all dead does not surprise us. Tell us Erenis, did you think your corruption had gone unnoticed?”

“On the contrary, I expected you to throw me out within days. That you didn’t leave but one conclusion,” the man said.

“We keep you around because we find your paltry games amusing, nothing more,” the speaker said calmly.

“Or is it because you find them dangerous and have needed to keep a close eye on me?” Erenis retorted boldly, though the sentence left him wheezing.

There was no reply.

“If you’re anathema to this land then why don’t you leave?” Tanril asked, “Why not return to the sky? If your very existence is death, why do you remain?”

A moment of silence, and then mutters broke out amongst them, echoing in her head. When the speaker replied, his tone was haughty,

“We were exiled.”

“For what?” Erenis asked out aloud.

“For creating you,” the speaker replied.

The woman’s voice sounded again,

“You were our greatest achievement. The Order of Sorric had never seen the like before. Nine perfect children.”

Images flashed through Tanril’s mind, nine bone-white babies, eyes closed, lying side by side in a crib. Perfect hands reaching for out to stroke their soft skin.

“But we were condemned for our brilliance, sentenced to death!” came a man’s voice, previously unheard. It was whiny and nasal.

“We had perfected the power of the Creator himself. We explored the highest levels of magic, we traversed planes unknown to any others; and what do we get for it?!”

“Exile!”

“Betrayal!”

“Mockery!”

The protests dwindled away. Eventually the woman spoke,

“Our practices required... alternative measures. The High Priests, the very men and women who had tasked the nine of us with exploring the hidden realms of Gai’in, condemned us. So we fled, with our households and guardians, we fled across the world.”

The speaker jumped in,

“And landed here. Where we thought we were safe. But the first of our scouts to touch the land were corrupted, their bodies and flesh twisted into something... demonic.”

The woman came back,

“We watched in terror as that bitch sucked the very life from their bodies. We managed to get a foothold once we found her altars, but the damage was already done.”

One by one the councillor’s raised their sleeved arms, letting the material fall away. Grotesque, malformed hands resided within, the flesh a sickly white. They were twice the size of a normal person’s, twisted into odd claw-like shapes. Tanril couldn’t stare at them for long. She turned away.

“Do you see the price we paid?” came the nasal voice,

“Do you see?!”

A shrill voice jumped in,

“This was our sacrifice for you.”

“What do you mean by *us*?” Tanril shouted.

Again, images flashed through her mind, a village from the view of a bird, getting closer, landing. The sight of massive ships sailing in the clouds, scores of them, while underneath green faces fled in terror, bowing and scraping, many simply keeling over and dying. White hands being held up, slowly transforming, as if melting.

The same village, some years later as it was slighter bigger and under construction. Strangely-coloured children were walking around everywhere. Most of them had pale skin which oozed a bright green glow, with blonde or black hair. It was the most unusual thing Tanril had ever seen. Adult natives walked around amongst them, treating them like their own. There were only two Sorricians, both men, both with perfect features and bone white skin. She knew that they were two of the babies she had seen earlier. Somehow, they both looked recognisable, the shape of their jaw, the way in which they held themselves. The same feeling she had at the wall that morning, when talking to the chancellor, raced through her stomach again. The scene shifted.

It was many years later, Paarl was much larger now, the children were all gone. Instead Sorricians roamed in bands while natives kept to a small area on the eastern edge of the forest. The walls were under construction, already a third of the way up. Natives swarmed amongst the sites. Along the small group of shops which would later become the heart of the merchant’s district, there were simple wooden boards hammered into the dirt. They were covered in flyers and wanted posters for ghouls and monsters. Tanril couldn’t count them all. The images stopped.

The Chancellor suddenly called out in a frail voice,

“Are you saying that we were bred? Like dogs or horses?”

The councillor with the nasal voice cried out,

“Not like dogs, weren’t you listening? You are the greatest achievement in the history of the Order. We bred you with the natives to survive.”

The shrill voice jumped in,

“You were more than an achievement, you were our children. Our first sons, Dekal and Bohtar.”

The face of the two bone-white men flashed in Tanril’s mind again, and she realised why they looked so familiar.

“The others. Rennik, Jengor, Hibalt, Gint, Kirla, Mallerick and Porsollo. The first Sorricians.”

Tanril shook her head to clear the visions, a fluttering of white faces, and then looked up at the speaker; the one she assumed was opposite her.

“What happened to the children? The strange ones with the glowing skin? The half-breeds?”

“They outlived their purpose,” the speaker replied. “Didn’t you see the notices? We convinced the people that they were monsters, demons that would attack in the dead of night. The Sorricians turned on them so easily; it was such a thing to watch. How quickly they forgot their own grandparents. A sufficient means of disposal, once they had mixed enough of their seed.”

Tanril stared at them in horror. And then something pinched the back of her head.



Sword in hand the tall man had freed them, one by one. He wasn't sure how long it had taken; time did not seem to be a vital element in this place. But when it was done, the tall man beckoned, and they followed.

The desert sands filled their eyes and mouths.

They walked forever. As they moved, shapes came into view around them.

Figures clawing their way from the sands. They were not dangerous.

One flitted close to him, and he felt the yearning in its soul. Unable to reach the other side, unable to meet Jacelin in death. Before long the group of children and the few adults who had been shackled were the heart of an exodus of shadow. He could feel them, their desire. They were the nameless same, lost to the far corners of the ethereal.

The tall man stopped and, holding out his hand as if in gesture for others to follow, sank into the sands as they swirled beneath his feet, sucking him out of view.



Wilt and Jayk had slumped to the floor when the councillors had first begun their rant, as the Sorrician had almost keeled over. So too had Erenis. Something gripped the white-skinned men but no one else. Jayk had slumped to the floor with him, holding Wilt up while he struggled to breathe. The descent of the council had driven his chest to near collapse. Erenis was clutching his neck, panting. While the councillor's spoke, Wilt focussed on his lungs, trying in vain to open them wider. For some reason the natives and Tanril remained unaffected.

Suddenly Jayk was shifting, turning away despite the speaker's continued monologue in their heads. Wilt saw the Greencloak behind, drawing his bow up to his cheek, and thought, *yes, put an end to his speech, I'm tired of this*. Jayk nodded to the native who in one swift movement fired.

Wilt turned as fast as he could, dragging his eyes upward. But the arrow did not pierce the glass dome of the speaker.

It went straight through the back of Kilas' head, pitching her forward onto the floor. She landed with a sickening crunch. Wilt stared in horror.

Jayk was looking frantically between the Greencloak and Kilas' corpse, muttering loudly.

Wilt reached over and tried to grab the front of Jayk's cloak, but was too weak to do more than fumble at it,

“Why did you do that? Why did you-”

“It was supposed to work! With death comes balance! I did everything I was supposed to!”

Wilt shook his head,

“You didn't do it right, she needs her name. The blood needs to touch the altar.”

He pushed himself upright, holding his ears against the sudden roar of disapproval from the councillors. He crawled forward, as if in a dream. The sergeant's body lay ahead, twitching. Wilt hauled himself with what little strength he had left. He grabbed Kilas' foot, struggling to inch himself forward. The floor was slick with her blood.

The councillors were all shifting now, arms moving frantically, unable to do more than wail in the minds of those present.

The stone, Wilt thought frantically, trying his best to clear his head, it needs to touch the stone. The spire is carved from the same rock as the promontory; the altar was carved from the actual promontory. It's the same rock... It's the same rock! He whispered those four words to himself as if they were an incantation - he was praying for the first time in his life, but it was not Sorric he directed his prayers to.

He pulled himself alongside the woman, and then pushed his face to hers. The arrow jutted from the back of her head, forcing it to lie sideways. Wilt looked at her face, her eyes were open, tiny, racking breaths escaped from her lips.

He reached for the sergeant's knife and drew it, bringing it to bear directly along the lower side of her throat, where her artery pulsed slowly.

Above him, he heard the unmistakable sound of the domes rising; a churning metallic whir. Wilt turned anxiously to Jayk.

“Are you sure it's her? How did you know? How *do* you know?”

Jayk stared at the Sorrician.

“Chancellor, where is your faith?”

Wilt nodded and looked back down.

“Sergeant Kilas, I am so sorry. But we need to let her out.”

Closing his eyes, Wilt whispered into the dying woman’s ear, “Sarkaiym,” and opened her throat.



She dreamed of falling. Over and over again, she dreamed of falling. A man, his hand rough, throws her with incredible strength out into the abyss. Then the coldness. The plunge into Shoren's waters smashing the bones of the body she currently inhabited. Or so He told her when He picked up her soul from the floor of His ocean in her dream.

"Death is but the first step," He whispered, something she had heard before, elsewhere.

The dream was never ending.

A part of her existed outside, but it was a small part. It could achieve no more than a gentle nudge in the right direction, trying its utmost to guide them to their goal. If she could get to that part of her, that thing she couldn't quite find a name for, she knew she could find her way. Except she kept falling.

Suddenly it stopped. There was no rough tug, no calloused hand.

She was locked in a room, and needed to find the key. Outside she would find what she needed.

A man approached. Behind him walked a host of the silent. Children mostly. Their skin green. One of them, an old man she vaguely recognised, smiled warmly at her.

"I'm so close Henrith, I can almost feel it. Show me the way," she called.

But he shook his head, a finger to his lips. He pointed to the floor, where blood pooled around her naked feet. She realised it was her own. I'm dying, she thought.

Henrith reached out a hand, and spoke; though she had the feeling it was an old conversation.

"Peacebringer, in the tongue of the First. But I wonder child; do you have any concept of its meaning down here? In the tongue of the earth?"

And then his gaze hardened and Henrith whispered in another's voice:

"Sarkaiym."



Wilt pushed himself away from the corpse. The tightness in his chest dissipated, and in moments he resumed his breathing with ease. He felt revitalised. The voices of the council had gone silent. Wilt stood to see what sat in the thrones.

Perched upon each of the nine chairs was a misshapen creature. A lone orb-like, gelatinous eye stared outward above mouths devoid of teeth. *So that's what four hundred years of genetic corruption looks like*, he thought dully.

Erenis had gathered himself to his feet, as had the two native men. The Greencloak and Jayk walked over to the body of the Sorrician sergeant, both kneeling and whispering a prayer.

Jayk turned to Wilt after some time and said,

“We need to take the body to the altar. Her sacrifice deserves reward.”

Wilt simply nodded.

“How do you plan on that? It's buried beneath the foundations of this tower,” Erenis said.

“We will tear it down,” the Greencloak replied.

“We will tear it down together,” Jayk added.

The Greencloak hefted the lifeless body onto his shoulder. Erenis turned to Wilt and asked,

“What about everything we learned chancellor? The truth of the houses? The harvest?”

“We tell them what they need to hear. The harvest sustained the high council for long enough. We endeavoured, as a group, to return things to the natural order. Both sides are winning parties. As for our heritage, well, I'd say we have a chance now to rectify those wrongs.”

He looked at Jayk and said,

“I asked the last high zangom if she would bring peace. He said maybe. What do you think? Will she return for vengeance against us?”

“Peace is impossible without change. Do you know what Sarkaiym means in the old tongue? Doomweaver. But before that, the first walkers of the earth – those we now call gods – they called her Peacebringer. Which is she you ask? She is both.”

Jayk and the Greencloak walked past the two Sorricians and out the door.



Wilt exited the Spire with Erenis, leaving the natives and the corpse of a Sorrician woman inside. They found the two guards still at their post outside the city hall. Wilt beckoned to them. It would be midnight in just over a bell, judging by the stars.

“I need you to report to the High Marshal. Tell him to get to the Spire immediately, an emergency, on my behalf.”

The two guardsmen nodded and set off down the Walk. Erenis turned to Wilt,

“What exactly do you plan on telling the High Marshal? In case you had forgotten, he imprisoned thirty natives earlier this afternoon, and if he finds two more in there, well.”

“You’re right. We need some sort of leverage over him,” Wilt replied, tapping his nose.

“Let’s devise something on the way back.”

The two men walked casually to the Spire. Erenis seemed to sense what occupied the chancellor’s mind and thankfully remained silent. Wilt could still feel the knife in his hand, the pulse of her blood through the skin of her neck. The way her eyes stared out at nothing but the floor.

He had killed.

For some reason the thought did not leave him sour or sickened. He thought back to the room, how he had acted without rationalisation, but instinct.

“If you are thinking what I would imagine you are thinking,” Erenis spoke, “then I would like to say my part before you spend too long dwelling on it.”

Wilt nodded slowly.

“She was not always considered the kindest, but the mother of earth was regarded for one thing above all. She regarded loyalty as the highest honour, and she repaid her followers in kind. Perhaps one day you would care to hear a story about the ancient zangom who crossed the world. The simple crux of it is Sarkaiym started a war to bring him back. If you think that what you did back there was a crime, or that your hands are somehow stained, they aren’t. The Greencloak pinned her with a headshot for Sorricsake. Don’t blame yourself for anything. We did what needed to be done.”

Wilt doubted that conclusion would ease his mind at all. They were reaching the edge of the earth patch.

A shout sounded behind them. They turned to see the High Marshal and two of his lieutenants hurrying toward them. Kroc looked furious.

“What do you want Wilt? What’s the emergency? Three-quarters of my men are just recovering from some damned affliction which struck a while back, and now my captains are reporting that their will to fight is gone. If the natives send an assault now, we’re done for. I don’t know what to do Wilt. It’s over, we’re finished.”

“They won’t attack Kroc. Not tonight. Not any night. An alliance has been forged. By the blood of sergeant Kilas no less,” Wilt cut in.

“What do you mean? Kilas is dead? How?” Kroc asked.

“She sacrificed herself for the cause,” Wilt replied, biting down on the lie.

“What happened up there Wilt?”

The chancellor felt weary beyond belief, but he had a feeling the night was far from over.

“To put it simply, the council are gone, the plague has been driven out for good, the Bluecloaks are all dead, there will be no more kalk harvest, no more plantations and no more slavery, does that about cover it?”

“No,” Erenis jumped in, “we also returned a goddess to her throne.”

“Yes, that too.”

Kroc and his officers stared.

“So what does this mean for us Wilt? Do we open the gates and let the rabble in?”

The two officers suddenly put their hands to their swords, drawing their weapons. Kroc bared his teeth.

“It seems I missed two.”

Wilt turned to see the Greencloak and Jayk approaching from the Spire.

“That won’t be necessary Marshal,” Wilt said, “these are the native ambassadors. They helped secure an end to the plague.”

The officers did not sheathe their weapons.

“And how will they feel about what I did to their kin earlier? Are you saying we all get off free for everything that’s happened?”

“No,” Jayk called out, “retribution has already been taken. My people outside the gates have everything they could need. Land, resources, but mostly their freedom. That gift is payment enough. That this man,” Jayk indicated to Wilt, “did what was necessary to return Sarkaiym to her rightful place is more than we could have asked. The Cabal of zangoms will accept it. Besides, your economy is in ruins. Your government will have a hard time restoring the trade routes and finding a new resource to mint. We are all in the same nest sky man; we are all starting from the bottom.”

“And the other cities? The ones your army sacked? What of those people? Where is our justice for them?” Kroc asked angrily, “I cannot accept that this will all blow over and we can merrily walk away as friends.”

Jayk simply shrugged,

“For the answer to those questions, there is someone here better suited to answer.”

“Marshal,” Erenis said on cue, “Paarl has been effectively cut off from Sansland for months. All who lay down their weapons were left unharmed. The cities are empty because the Sorricians fled to the safest places they knew.”

“The Sanctuaries...” Kroc said, awareness sparking in his eyes.

“The simple truth is,” Wilt said to his cousin, “we actually *can* walk away as friends. The refugees will return to the cities, and we will establish a bilateral government to rebuild Sansland. From the ground up.”

“But first we must tear something down,” said the Greencloak, “let the Cabal in.”

Jayk was nodding,

“We will show you our power with the goddess restored.”

Kroc turned to his officers, nodding stiffly.

“Send word to stand down arms. Send an envoy to the natives; tell them we have agreed to peace with two of their own.” He looked at Jayk.

“Jayk and Mlamuli.”

“Jayk and Mlamuli,” Kroc repeated to the lieutenants.



They stood in a line at the end of the Walk, just in front of the courtyard, where the defences were being hastily dismantled. Beside the chancellor stood Kroc, his officers, Erenis, Jayk and Mlamuli. The gates were raised, and the whole Sorrician legion had disarmed and milled about in the courtyard, awaiting the natives. Something seemed to have taken hold of the Sorricians, who were chattering nervously and excitedly. It seemed that word in the army spread quicker than wildfire, and Wilt could hear veiled whispers of Tanril Kilas being the vessel of a goddess, touched to be a demigod on the other side. She had died to bring peace, and they would honour that sacrifice.

A procession was coming through the gates, about thirty men and women, all elderly. There were no guards or troops, no weapons. A single figure stepped forward and Wilt recognised Sobuntu. A man and woman joined him and the three made their way to Wilt.

“Sky man; allow me to introduce to you the leaders of the Cabal of zangoms. This is Beeko,” he gestured to the man, “and this is Sulu,” he pointed to the woman.

“Greetings, Chancellor. That we could prevent further bloodshed pleases us,” Sulu said. Wilt avoided glancing at Kroc and smiled, saying,

“Yes, as it has us. We should get to arranging...”

“There is a long and prosperous future awaiting us, sky man,” Sobuntu interjected, “but now is not the time.”

Hitching his staff up, the elderly native began to lead the others up the city toward the spire.

Wilt followed respectfully, Kroc and Erenis to either side of him. The Marshal whispered,

“These are the great leaders of the natives? These are the people that took a kingdom?”

“You would be surprised at the knowledge one gains from a religious lifestyle,” Erenis said from the other side of them.

“That the Cabal is so large and hasn’t torn itself apart yet is testament to their good nature. Our temples can barely manage a single High Priest and a few septons without a bloodbath.”

“I don’t see how a religious lifestyle can teach strategy or tactics, or how to storm a wall,” Kroc said.

“Zangoms were once warrior priests. Their histories contain vast amounts of knowledge on warfare and tactics, Marshal. In fact, you should be happy there are only thirty left. In the old days, talent was bountiful and there were hundreds of zangoms,” Erenis replied.

“And these ones? Do they have talent?” Kroc asked.

“Yes, some more than others,” Erenis replied.

“And how is it you know that?”

“Because I possess some talent myself. Of course, as the chancellor already knows, I deal in a different vein of magic to the natives.”

Kroc looked at Wilt, who kept his eyes on the floor.

They reached the promontory after a time, where the Cabal spread out in a crescent facing the tower. Mlamuli had moved Tanril’s body outside, and it lay beneath the man’s green cloak on the stone close to their feet. The sight of it should

have shocked Wilt, should have made him feel something, but no emotions welled forth.

Erenis spoke up,

“We might want to step back a bit. This will get hot. The rock has been soaking up oxygen for nearly four centuries. We of the Order have tested samples of it. It melts like wax.”

“Melts?” Wilt asked.

Each member of the Cabal raised their arms, palms facing the Spire. A rich warm glow began to emanate from their hands, increasing in size, until it looked as though each held a ball of light with their fingers.

Erenis pointed to the top of the Spire, where the dome began to droop. Thick smoke billowed into the night sky.

“Why hasn’t it caught flame?” Kroc asked.

“The fire is not like that of Torc and Terrick. This is Sarkaiym’s power, that of the earth. It burns hotter than flame, invisible to the eye.”

“Then why can’t we feel it?”

“Because it is controlled,” said Erenis, frowning. “Their power, *gods*, Jayk’s power.”

“And you said there were hundreds of them?” Kroc asked incredulously.

The Spire was collapsing upon itself, the pieces of rock slowly withering to nothing. The Cabal had taken up a chant, singing melodically while their hands glowed bright.

Wilt wasn’t sure how long they stood there, but when the first rays of dawn began to peek out from the city behind them, he felt the fatigue rock him like a blow. When only the base remained the chant shifted, changing its rhythm. The staircase began to melt into the rock, as did the base of the Spire. Wilt watched as it ran in black rivulets along the promontory, hardening into flat stone. Within seconds the entire surface was flat and smooth, except for a single carved altar jutting from the centre.

“That was all Jayk,” Erenis whispered. “The boy has extreme potential. She chose her herald well.”

Wilt watched as the Cabal grouped together, talking excitedly.

Sobuntu made his way to them.

“There is one more task awaiting us, but first, bring the woman.”

Mlamuli stood, hefting the corpse of Tanril Kilas and the cloak it was wrapped in.

He walked over to the altar, and lay the body down next to it. The cloak fell away from her head, revealing her face beneath. It was perfectly preserved. The zangom known as Beeko walked over, turning to the others.

“Today we mark the first day on a new calendar. The calendar of Azania. A united kingdom.”

He lifted his left arm, bringing a dagger to bear with his right. He struck down hard, opening a gash in his arm. He bowed his head and whispered, before tracing the blood over both the corpse and the altar. One by one the others followed suit, until at last, Sobuntu was left. The old green-skin sighed and said to Wilt,

“In the days and nights to come, you must not doubt yourself. You did what was necessary sky man. For that we thank you. *She* thanks you.”

With that the last high zangom stepped up to the body and altar and completed the ritual. When he moved away, the body sank into the stone like the sun swallowed by the horizon.

At that moment Wilt looked into Tanril Kilas’ face.

And he could have sworn he saw her smile.

Epilogue

2004 on the Sky Calendar
Pilgrim's End
Republic of Azania

She stood on the edge, peering out at the infinity beneath. Once, she had been too frightened. An ethereal figure sat cross-legged behind her, applying a whetstone to a ghostly sword. She too was insubstantial, more a coalition of will than a corporeal being.

Behind her the city laid still, unaware of its midnight visitors. Only pilgrims came to this site now, some to marvel at the altar, others to place a hand on the folded green cloak beside it.

A man walked up beside her, as if stepping out from an invisible curtain. His figure was solid, a tall body with rope-like muscle.

“Was this another lesson?” she asked, but he did not reply.

“Well if it was, consider the moral learned.”

“What moral would that be?” he said after some time.

“That no good deed goes unpunished.”

The corners of his mouth turned up for a brief moment.

“So what will you do now that you’ve learned this lesson?”

“Teach it to someone else,” she replied.

“You picked your name wisely.”

If she had a waist, she would have bowed to the compliment.

“Who is she?” he asked, clearly indicating the ethereal woman with the sword behind them.

“A soldier. My Soldier.”

He remained silent for some time.

Eventually he grated,

“Herald, Soldier, Priest.”

“I took my inspiration from the once-kingdom of Sansland. Tri-lateral.”

“And what use will they be? These are not like the heroes we once commanded.”

“This is not the world we once conquered, Henrith.”

He shook his head. The silence resumed.

“I thought you would understand, I thought you would stand at my side,” she said.

“I am at your side,” he replied, “I always was. But some experiences even a god must undertake alone.”

“You would abandon me again?” she asked, but it was without emotion, there was no accusation.

“Not this time, no,” he fingered the pommel of his sword, “What is it you plan to do?”

“It’s simple,” she replied, “I’m going to pick a fight.”