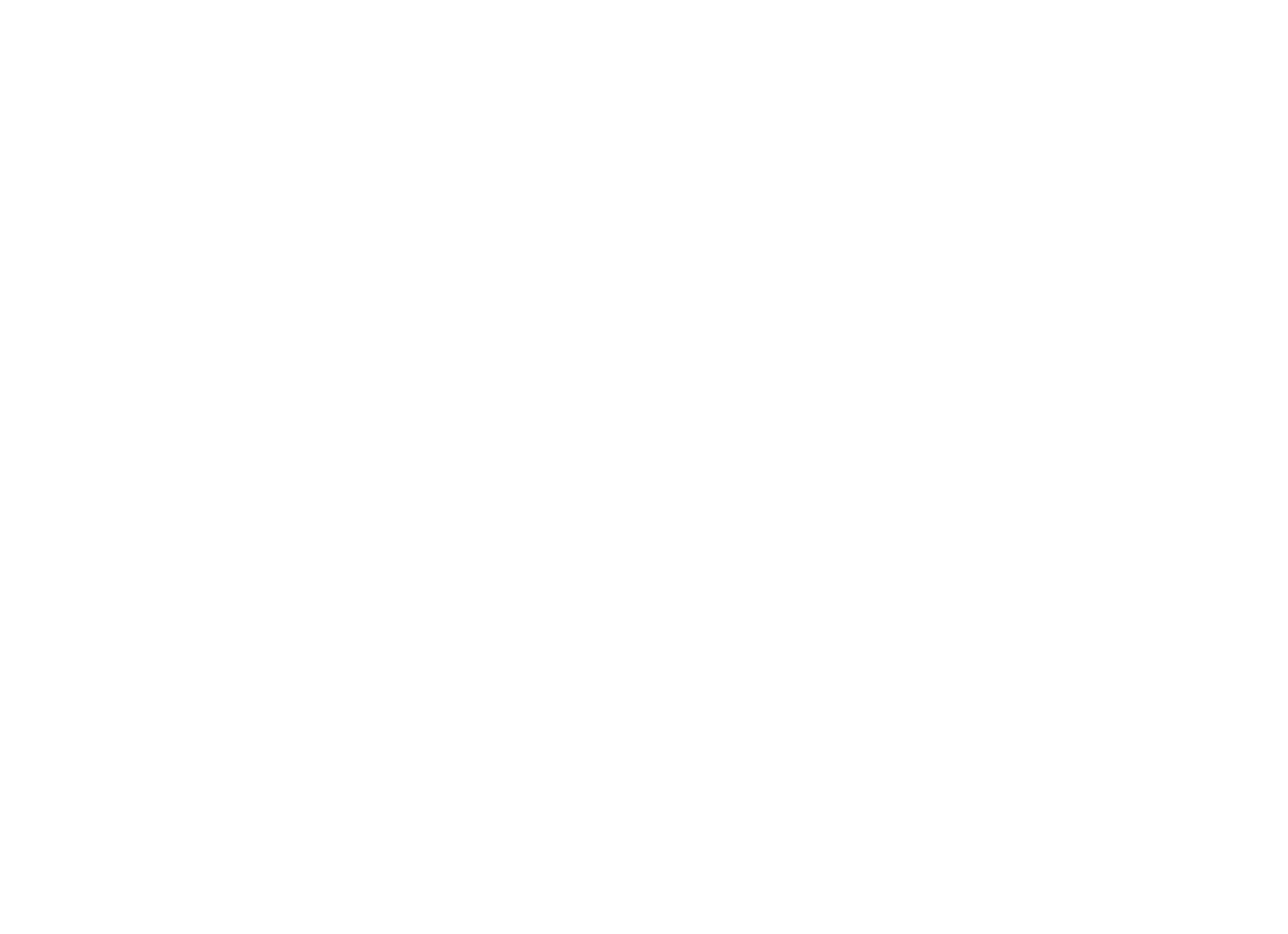




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Is there such a thing as doing bad things for other reasons, or is she just rationalizing her desire for control? Good and evil are complex concepts, and the more power you get the blur of the lines between them become. Note: A practical guide to evil contains some graphical violence and harsh language. Start reading now ... \(or move on to another listing\) Edit Share AboutEdit Practical Guide to Evil is a serialized fantasy novel about a young girl named Katherine Foundling making her way through a world that fundamentally works from narrative trails, and where good and evil are more than theoretical concepts. Introduced to evil by the powerful and mysterious Black Knight Amadeus, she fights bad things for good. Is she doing the right thing, or is she just rationalizing her desire for control? Good and evil are complex concepts, and the more power you get the blur of the lines between them become. 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The greatest danger lies in the west, where the first Prince Proser finally claimed her throne: her people sundered, she wonders if the crusade be a way to secure her reign. But all this does not matter, for in the heart of the conquered lands the most dangerous living man sat through an orphaned girl and offered her a knife. Her name is Katherine Foundry, and she has a plan. The practical guide to evil is YA's fantastic novel about a young girl named Katherine Foundling making her way through the world - albeit in a departure from the norm rather than on the side of the characters. Is there such a thing as doing bad things for other reasons, or is she just rationalizing her desire for control? Good and evil are complex concepts, and the more power you get the blur of the lines between them become. Updates every Tuesday and Friday as of Patreon's latest goals. The first update of each month will be accompanied by an additional chapter. The author can be contacted by erraticrrata@gmail.com under no circumstances epub, PDF files, audiobooks or translation guides will be allowed. Not quite what I think my father meant when he said I should find a talent that would set me apart from my brothers. - Basileus Ioannis Tracas of Nikae, Patriced Of the Rocks, Said Masego, puckering his nose. Gods. More stones. He turned to look at me, a gesture he rarely bothered these days. Why is it that you want to reclaim these lands again? At least Princess Heinaut wasn't there, as I suspected she'd be less fascinated by the harsh description of her principality. He's not wrong, I'm not going to make a mistake. I've visited a large valley - actually more like a dozen or so small valleys whose borders merge with each other - before, but it was closer to the capital, across the west and heart. There was a reason why the eastern parts of the great valley were more easily populated than the rest: they were a cursed dreary and inhospitable place. No doubt the Dead King worsened things by killing everything that crawled or grew in the region, but for some reason I doubted that there was anything to kill in the first place. Strategic reasons, I replied. Which we won't, since I didn't expect that there would be any people moving back to the highlands away from the soldiers and followers of the camp after we took back the grounds. It was basically the advantage of holding the shore against the dead rather than our defensive line in the lowlands, which was a landmark, one made even more appealing to Gigantes to install large chambers along the coastline to keep protected the undead. You'd think forcing people to live here would lower morale rather than improve it, Masego muttered. The Wasteland says, I snorted back. The Principality of Hainaut may not be a green luxury garden, but at least it was not with murderous monsters and suffering from weather that has changed on a whim. The hierophant turned to look at me in genuine surprise, as if he could not believe what he had just heard. There are all the best libraries in the Wasteland, he reminded me. People don't usually live in them, zez, I pointed out. I know, Hierophant replied sadly. I asked. He said a lot about him that I had no problem believing in it. I was just lucky that the Sorcerer must have persuaded him to ask the Saehalia. And it should have been because Masego would have asked himself, and I had no doubt that Tashya Saehlian would have given zeza access to the infamous Wolof spell of storage at the cheap, cheap price of marrying his only daughter. My blind friend shifted, his shining glass eyes turning into his sockets and learning something behind him before returning. Company? I asked. The Grey Pilgrim has it- There was a soft flash of light, gone into a heartbeat, and an air filled with the smell of burned flesh. Gul would probably like it if he could still smell like that. Skeletons had their own distinctive stench when burned. - handled, Masego finished. Interesting. I believe he's changing the properties he assigns to the Light almost by his will, Katherine. It's not unheard of, but that's just verisimilitude, of course. Having angels around for decades will allow you to pick up all kinds of tricks, I think I shrugged. Peregrine's protector was easy, but he didn't try to hide when he made his way up the rocky path to join us. This made it easy to pick on, for people with feelings like ours. Light is the divine facet of faith, Tariq Fleetfoot said softly, to side with us. This has several limitations to keep those mortal hands impose on it. Masego look very interesting. So if I had got fae's hands in enough numbers- you would still be missing faith, I interrupted, hoping to distract him before he gave the offense. When we were younger, stumbling over small details, it was usually enough to distract him. It wouldn't be hard to put a fae in it, Katherine, Masego boasted to me. This is fundamentally no different from any other kind of misconception. I could have made a small tactical mistake there, I mentally acknowledged. Tariq cleared his throat, but although he did not look surprised, he did not look so angry either. Masego glanced at him through a dark blindfold, utterly unabashed. Mathematically speaking, the chances of your particular interpretation of the Gods Above being correct all- cleared my throat. I made it twice as loud when he tried to kindly explain to Tariq that the basic application of mathematics showed that his whole life was probably a lie. How are the preparations going, Hierophant? I asked. He cocked his head to hand, burning eyes turn about exploring the distance. Indrani has almost finished installing the columns, he said. We'll be ready to start the respite ritual in about a quarter of an hour. I'll leave you to do that then, I said. He smiled joyfully at me, which even now was enough to make me feel a little guilty. I appreciate it, Said Masego, and then glanced at Pilgrim. He nodded at this man. Comparative numerics, Marcell the Elder, Hierophant suggested. It's all pretty simple, actually, when you consider - I think I see drani spinning a post about, I'm a little interrupted. Eyebrows widening in horror, a man who even without the magic to summon remained one of the best magicians in Kalernia trampled away to prevent his partner from disobeying constricting forces. His grumbling wailed before us in the wind, even as he disappeared behind the rocks below. Pretty invigorating young man, Tariq said evenly. I did. He didn't mean any harm, I said. I have no doubt entertaining doubts, Katherine. Indeed, in different circumstances I suspect an evening talk with hierophant would make for a fascinating conversation. He didn't say safe or religiously acceptable in any way, so I'd give it to him. But at this point, perhaps, a reminder that a certain moderation of words is fine won't go wrong, Tariq gently suggested. Other faiths may have more temperance and I believe he has been in three flashy matches with Blessed Artificer since he arrived. I'll talk to him, I sighed. Their names were clearly pushing them forward there, turning every slight annoyance into a slight and every dissent into an argument. The fundamental nature of the roles behind them was too opposed to any hope of cordiality there: Hierophant was the visivector of all the divine, while the Blessed Adversary forged what Peregrine himself called the divine aspect of faith. I know, Tariq said. I know the rituals as well, Catherine, and have not forgotten the taste of it - and have never made the feud between my Bestowal and the other run as deep as it happens between the two. I looked at him with interest. Anyone I'd hear about? I asked. They died, Peregrine said calmly, long before you were born. Yes, I bet they did. It was good at times to remind that the wrinkled old man in gray robes had the body count in the name, probably rivaling that of the disaster, haven't seen The Revenant manage more than gently inconvenience Gray Pilgrim, and he sure as hell not for lack of tries. My gaze drifted down, following the curve of the rocky slope. We left Twilight Ways in the dry part of this little mess swamp as a ritual would require solid grounding, but the swamps were spread in each direction with only a few hills rising from them on occasion in mounds of mud and rocks. Swamp water was smelly and dirty, but Concocter has already confirmed that it was not poisoned or cursed, so I was dealing with was a few bands of the undead. The whole region seemed to crawl with them, which foreshadowed bad for Prince Hannover's army. A decisive victory in Jewelun would not have left so many warbands out and about, so it was beginning to look like Keler was bleeding the Iron Prince Raw for that small town. Worse, he would have saved enough power that Prince Claus would have to handle it before trying it up with my incoming reinforcements. And worse than that was that we still had no idea where the master of the Iron Prince was, what strength it was facing and where exactly the missing army of Lucienri would be towards us, Papenheim or whoever hells it was he was scrapped with. Fortunately, Masego finally got back to the front on my side and he provided a solution for our ongoing troubles. He called it a respite ritual, though the name was catchy enough I realized that he probably wasn't the one to come up with it. It was the same ritual that we moved back to Creation to accept, with as easy a presence as we dared. Only the name has come, they all save the adjutant and our two young men. Most of our best killers were out and about, combing through the swamp to make sure nothing crept up on us and interrupted the ritual, but we'd clearly get the enemy's attention. The undead began to converge, which meant we had to hurry. Fortunately, we were almost ready. Roland had already sent word that the secondary arrays were ready - and Masego didn't even feel the need to check his work afterwards, which almost saw me gape - and now that Indrani had finished creating the seventh ring of pillars on our little hill there was not much left to do but witchcraft himself. The hierophant was laden with artifacts that were actually just vessels filled with magic that he could snatch for that purpose, but in case I hired the Conscript to stay on his side. We were fencing with rituals against Trismegistus himself, no matter how certain Masego was his formula I wanted him to have an additional source of magic at hand. I wouldn't put it that way, of course. He witnessed the work of the hierophant so he could give me his opinion on the matter later, although of course I asked that if something went into a rage he lends his magic to my mage court to solve the problem. It was known in the right circles I was the queen of winter once, he really should have known better than not to look twice at this formulation. Oriental winds when you will blow and return my love to me? His absence falls like winter snow, the brutal torment made decree. The predatory Troubadour really was a wonderful voice for an unrepentant monster, even when it was introduced to using the singing of horrible noble shit from home. Archer's inexplicable love for Lay of Lothian's Passing, a traditional ballad about the rise and fall of the love of Sir Lothian and his Lady Evelyn, remained a mystery to me even after years of knowing it. Keep in mind, this was a fairly common personality defect back in Callow as well. The only reason I ever sat in history but almost never court? I was thinking. This was unfair, because, in my experience, the most nobles were terrible, regardless of their relative position of their run in the social ladder. Baronial titles are at the bottom of the Callowan peerage, I believe Tariq said, while the dust aided ones are under only royalties. I expect both of these positions to tend to... excite ambition. Technically there were knights and lords under the barons, but I got his point of view. None of these kinds of smaller nobles are usually ever a problem for those who are away from the great nobles they swore. I expect that the Dukes of Liesse will not be a problem for my successors at least, I am grimly muttered. So here's the thing, Tariq, to my surprise, looked amused by the heartbeat before mastering himself. I know you care little about my opinion in this, and rightly so, Grey Pilgrim said, but your choice of successor should be welcomed, queen Catherine. Vivienne Dartwick will be the queen. I shot him with a curious look. Tariq's reluctance to be in close proximity to anything even remotely akin to the rule meant that he usually kept his part when it came to this kind of thing - for example, I suspected that he would very much prefer Rocal Malanza's reign over Procer rather than Cordelia Hasenbach - so I was surprised that he even recognized that opinion on the issue of Callowan's succession. She has the right qualities, I agreed with a gentler, pure from the weaknesses that many crowned heads accrue, Pilgrim Pilgrim Unlike many before her, I doubt that she will ever stop striving her best to do good: it would be a betrayal not only of herself, but of the trust that you extended her. My lips thinned, and I turned away. It wasn't that I didn't know that Vivien and I had a complicated relationship, or that it pulled on both of us in a way that tended to improve - if not necessarily by means of healthy means. To have the dark aspects of this connection pulled out in the light of day is a man who may be an ally but definitely wasn't a friend was not a pleasant experience. The eyes of the Grey Pilgrim have always seen too much for comfort. Lothian sought and mighty killed, the score of the evil enemies of the Seven Lords he cut into two and settled a great feud. Poor stupid Lothian. When intriguing baronesses try to get your lands offered to your debt family prowess on the battlefield, they don't really try to let you go - they were just baiting you into getting in over your head so they could save you and use you with a lifetime debt on top of the rest. I've sometimes wondered over the years if the enduring popularity of ballads - and play, was like ten different versions of the story, including one in the inexplicable Old Miazan - in Callow was due to the cultural resonance of the fighting noble covered in fame from the east lucked by a higher rank one moment he returned to the kingdom. Despite everything we deservedly complained about Praesi and Procerans, my people were always able to be horrible to each other without anyone's help. I'm afraid I'm offended. Gray Pilgrim finally said in silence. No, I said. And not unconfirmed, in the larger scheme of things. There was a pregnant pause. I sometimes forget that your grief is loved by each other. - Admitted Tariq. It's unusual in a group of villains. However, these are changing times. I meant my words as a compliment, but for it is enough that they may have fallen. You have found a protector for your home, and has put it on a path that promises differences. Then I'll try to remember your words as they meant, I said. The old man smiled with regret. It's a bad habit, Pilgrim admitted. Do you think it's worse than us? It was, and often tedious to deal with, but it was hardly the worst of its kind when it came to this particular sin. What he faced and struggled he had already made him one of their best numbers when it came to solving the problem, so I wouldn't whine. Besides, I had no illusions about the truth of the villainous dignity on Kalernia. Although over time it could be disinfected, turned into something that was worth a hug, at the moment it was a party that considered cannibals and rapists among its ranks. I wouldn't moan about distrust when I hardly trusted any of them myself. As a woman of exquisite tastes, I preferred that my hypocrisy were at least somewhat deniable. There are worse to have, I said bluntly. Mistaken comparisons with others I knew were definitely one such habit, said the old man, but as it happens, I meant another. I was ready to make a request, you see. However, as the young Indrani once made it clear it was not for me to pull and push you: direct honesty will always get the best result. I thought, looking out of the corner of my eye. When exactly did these two have this alleged conversation? I didn't mind, but Archer never told me about it. I like to think so, I said, finally a little spl f. I listen, Pilgrim, even though I don't make any promises. As far as I was concerned, Razin and Akilyn were once again his problem. I only agreed to look after them as a temporary favor, not to be their devil-keeper forever. They had too much of a headache for me to be inclined to renew that promise anyway. I ask you to stay close to the White Knight when our armies join them, Tariq said. I frowned. Once again? I thought there was an old giggling rumor that Hanno and I were more than just friendly, dead and buried. Hell, we weren't even friendly anymore. I told you before. - And I believe you, Grey Pilgrim calmly interrupted. It's unrelated, Katherine. Before I left the army, I saw the Beginning of the Sword crisis in the Court of Meche. I fixed the old man with a steady look. This is not the time for the White Knight to stumble. I said bluntly. Even when he disagreed with me, even when we didn't get along, his participation in the truce and conditions in itself led him to the legitimacy we desperately needed. I wasn't going to pretend that one of the first things we scored in heroes, hesitating to sign up was sword of judgment is part of that. To which we must disagree, Pilgrim said frankly. It's just that time for the White Knight to stumble. I blinked. That's right, fucking, hero's logic. He had all the signs of madness, except for the part where he worked. You'll have to walk me through that one, I confessed. In my experience, when one of your doubts is they either die or lose their name. Sooner or later we're all tested, Tariq said. Often it starts with a loss of potency caused by doubt or fear, but if we rise to perform this test we don't just resume what we were: we will rise above it. My eyes narrowed. This came uncomfortably close to the iron-shedding iron in some ways, which made it even more sad coming from the older living hero on The Kalernia. Keep in mind as he described it would not necessarily be another man who in the central philosophy of Praesi highborn he always was. For the old Wasteland Guard, even the fight against the invasion was just the place for another duel against your rivals. I'm not too clear what it is that Hanno should doubt, I frankly said. He was basically getting his way, except when it would cost too much to others if he did. He's a smart man and reasonable enough for one of your money, so he shouldn't expect much more of us evil sinners. His thoughts are his own, not mine, to divulge, said Pilgrim, but I will speak to her myself. Hanno of Arvada is divided between the man he wants to be, and the man of fate demands that he be. It didn't sound like a particularly pleasant place to be. I was silent, waiting for Tariq to disappoint, and he did not disappoint. He is the Sword of judgment of his choice, Gray Pilgrim said, but he is a White Knight through the cause of fate. There should be no difference between the two, I pointed out. But there is, said the old man. The Sword of the Court is becoming increasingly unable to digest the deals the White Knight has been forced to make to ensure that we survive this war. And soon this inequality will come to mind. I studied him a little bit, disassembling his words. Under the Sword of Judgment I realized that he was actually referring to Hanno comfortably embracing his role as the axe-appointed Seraphim. It was usually what it defaulted to when in conflict, I noticed even now that the decision has become quiet. What was meant by the White Knight, however, was a little more hazy for my eyes. Hanno is a man who believes in the court, I tried, and Hanno is a man who is an officer of the Great Alliance. Pilgrim smiled tenderly at me. The last one is a death tie, Catherine, he said. It's not going to tie him up. It is rather Hanno a man who swore his faith in Seraphim and Hanno is the man who leads the heroes of our time. I will not distrust, she said, and never will I despair Tenderness will free me, for lovers the world is fair. I've been thinking about this for a while. Tariq, in fact, told me that while Hanno may have been well suited to the White Knight's name in certain circumstances, they were not present. It fits the name, but not the role, I'll try it. At least not the role of war forced him. He commanded obedience, through charisma and respect, but I saw how one could argue that Hanno didn't particularly want to be in charge of heroes, or really anything at all. He generally perceived leadership as a burden and perceived it only when he perceived it as his duty. Which, given that this war was a vague crusade in shape, and it was The White Knight must have been much more frequent than he was comfortable with. Throw in the Hierarch to silence the whole chorus of the court for what was, as far as I knew, for the first time in the recorded history of Calernia? I understand why Hanno had a problem with what he got into. Which is usually an expensive kind of doubt for named. Our time at Arsenal looks different seen by these eyes, I thought. It seemed too simplistic for me, but then I was in a pretty unique situation, didn't it? I was accumulating influence until I came to sit in every council, like queen Callow and representative of the villains. I really didn't see the difference because it really wasn't there for me. Honestly, I still thought he was](#)





of one hundred and fifty thousand in Lucientry disappeared into the air. The cunning old monster managed to keep the story of his hidden threat just even after revealing another hidden threat - he baked a second cake while eating first, so he literally got to eat his cake too. Gods, but I hated fighting the fucking Dead King. Tariq silently sipped his drink, letting me wrestle my thoughts into place, but when he saw my attention completely back to him, he put the cup down. And then? I just asked. I was able to make decent guesses about what the Iron Prince would have done so far, with the help of several sources of information and understanding, but now we were in the wilds. I never fought an old prince on the field, and the records of his campaign against the rats and the dead were almost non-existent - Lycanoese marked only by victories, defeats and tallies of the dead. Everything else was considered petty/bloafist. Although the iron prince's victories during the Great War were much more famous, they were won by waging a very different war. I wasn't sure what I'd do if I were him, much less what would have passed in Prince Hannover's head at this crossroads. A military council has been named, Tariq said. And after some debate, it was decided that the wise course would attack the enemy army in Juevelun break through. My forehead went up, and I made myself think. I could see the meaning in him, squinting a little, from his point of view. Assuming that my column broke through with quick victories in the Chigelin and Lozon sisters, the capture of Juevelun would allow us to tie our armies in the central Valley of Heinaut. The army of the undead from Malmedit could still go south on our defense, but at this point our combined forces could respond by leaving a strong garrison in Chigelin and then swinging this army of the dead across the Path. A neat trick, turning the destruction of the miner's path against those who did. Sure, he'd take the loss of taking Juevelun from pushing out the dead, an uncomfortable number of them, but this would save the strategic situation. The problem was that Klaus Papenheim did not know that the army in Lucientry had disappeared: I tried to send envoys, but I doubted very much that they had passed through the glove described by the Grey Pilgrim. Another army disappeared in the air, and the rubies piglets that he was going to reappear near the capital around the time when we finally took the sisters. You know right between the bloodied Papenheim and my own strength as even more the army marched on the back of the Iron Prince. It's going to turn into a bloody, ruinous mess. Were you there for the battle? I asked. I left early, Tariq said. Of all our Daral has been decided, I had the best chance of doing it for you unharmed and in due course, so the debt fell on me. The battle for Yuevelun will already take place, but the result is known to me or Ohanimu. I nodded slowly. You arrived on time, I confessed. We're going to have to hurry forward. What made the risks worse, I thought grimly. Already the Iron Prince has thrown the dice at the adoption of Juevelun, and now I have to hurry up with Cigelin or his efforts may be in vain. The illusion of control that he had when this campaign began, this cold armada of plans and schemes, was dead and buried. We won tactical victories, but we were on our way to a strategic catastrophe. The only way to save it now was to move forward and forward. If we don't, all that's left is measuring the scale of the losses we're going to suffer. I drained the rest of my cup, allowing the heat to pour over my throat, and set the silver down. Gods, silver. Who would have thought that I ended up drinking that one day when I first started sneaking sips of beer on - I froze. Oh, oh fuck me, I've had evidence all this time, haven't I? I knew the movements, I even knew how the enemy thought of us. I just didn't put it all together, I took the last step. It's a rat trap, I muttered. Limpid blue eyes narrowed on me, the exhausted old man turning back into Peregrine's heartbeat. Traces of bone fatigue were still there, but the flames caught fire again. Explain, Tariq demanded. Back when I was working in the tavern, I said, the owner would make these little rectangular boxes in front almost open and bread at the end. It would be a door at an angle like this - I formed a roof with one palm, and angled the other palm inside to represent the door. - so the rats will go for bread and press the door a little up. Only when they were inside the box- They found that the door could not be pushed to release them as the tree only bent to one side. The Grey Pilgrim quietly interrupted. I've seen them as before, they're used in the Levant as well. This bridge to the north is our bread, I said. If it is built, we will be in trouble, and we can lose this war in the usual way. But that's not why the Dead King built it. He wanted us to fall into a trap, Tariq said. He didn't get it, though, I heard it in Voice. The trap was a trap for him, and there was never any doubt that we fell in love with her. I laid it out more directly for him. You don't catch a rat trap to protect bread, Pilgrim, I said. The old man frowned. He wants to destroy our armies, Gray Pilgrim said slowly. Battles, grudge, even the capital - none of this means anything to him. Even if he loses all Hainaut, as long as our armies are destroyed he does not care. It's all expendable, I agreed. The army that disappeared from Lucientre can attack our lines of defense around now, with an even larger army headed down the mountain road to attack the eastern strongholds - with our own armies still, and kept in the dark for lack of scrying, it may have actually been a shot at breakthrough and in Brabant. But he didn't even try because he wanted to trap us in the central valley and destroy us. Not in one big battle where the odds are so perfectly stacked against him- which we're likely to win, given the number of heroes in our ranks - but in small commitments that would bleed us dry, whether winning or losing, Tariq muttered. He disagreed with my assessment, whirling his finger on the edge of his cup. But why the sudden obsession with armies in Hainaut? He asked at last. What has changed? I was interested in the same thing. The Giants got on our side, I tried. They are committed to helping, not the union. Maybe it's a thin foundation for development, Peregrine said. Perhaps the work of a hierophant at Arsenal? It can scare him into coming in after us so hard, I admitted. Masego knows much more about him than he can be comfortable with the likes of the Dead King. But the secrecy around the quarter seasons has been well preserved, Tariq. We were paranoid and there were violations, but I don't believe Mania got through and so he still has to be pretty much limp. Peregrine smiled sadly. You're fighting the bad, Katherine, he said. No walls, no locks, no oaths enough to keep her from exploring secrets if she wants to know them. I blinked. Do you think she sold us the Dead King? I was skeptical. If there was one person I would buy she wouldn't sell us, it would be him. Whatever it is even -- I froze a terrible thought that came too soon. Grey Pilgrim sighed. So he comes after us with all his hateful power, Tariq said. Therefore, we suffer from searing defeat at his hands and, like children in the dark, we pray for deliverance from our own guardian angel. I got up to pour myself a second damn drink, and when Pilgrim silently extended his empty cup, I filled it without remorse. I thought you trusted her, I finally I did, Tariq said wearily. And now I don't know. If you live long enough, Katherine, you'll find that the warp time even bonds you feel unshakable. And that we will never be as wise as we think, even when we think we are fools. I kept my mouth shut, although it would be pretty easy to stick a dagger or two in it now considering how bad we'd butted our heads over the advocate over the years. It was a difficult year for everyone, and the Allies didn't have to make it worse. I got shivering when you said that, I finally said, and it makes me sick to even consider. So I tend to think you're reading this right. But he's not coming at us with full might, Tariq. I've seen fights in the north he wages up against sleepers and they... I'm blowing my breath. At the back of my mind old words came to me like a harsh refrain. Where are the devils, Katherine? The intercessor once asked me. Where are the masters who darken the sky, and the demons he has kept on a leash for centuries? Where are the rituals that poison the earth and witchcraft never before seen? Well, he pulls out tricks there we haven't seen here, I said. The old man shook his head. He can't use it either, Tariq said. This would represent too steep an increase in strength on his side of the scales, Catherine. Providence would allow us to bridge this gap, and the last thing the Dead King wants is a war of equals in the game: it would put his troops at real risk of annihilation. Grey Pilgrim leaned back in his place. He was very careful to limit his efforts to grind us into the dust at his exhausted for a reason, Tariq continued. It is a winning method that involves very little risk to it and has proven difficult to handle. I frowned. A what... spent a few, I assumed. I honestly wasn't sure that Providence would be able to spit out even the odds, but maybe that was a point. I knew for a long time there was a risk to villains winning too big or obvious a margin - invincibility as a prelude to failure, my father was once a phrase - but I wouldn't have believed that the scale of Pilgrim was. It was the cross thinking I had to. It was not only the battle and the name of that story, but the crusade itself. It was what I knew about the Rise of the Dead King to power that I tended to believe Peregrine: caution was always his priority back then, even if it meant slowing his progress. He always preferred to let his enemies not open to quick victories. It changes things, I finally said. He wet his lips, sipping cognac. Don't you? Peregrine asked. Retreat There is no purpose. We are committed to war, even knowing that their intentions are different from what we expected. I went slicing through the pockets for my pipe, a long shaft of dragonfly that Masego gave me years ago comforting to the touch. The wakeleaf pack, still from the white knight's gift, was carefully stuffed and I lit the sheet by tapping the finger against the rim and letting the black flame slither in. If it's our armies that are in its sights, it means it's got sloppy elsewhere, I said. The advocate would not want him to win cleanly, that's true, Pilgrim mused. The more expensive the victory for him, the better in her eyes, and that means warning as late as she could really give it. I grunted in agreement, pulling the tube and blowing out a ring of smoke. We thought we would guard this bridge north as it was his own child, I said, but I would bet it was stripped clean. Of course we still can't explain Lucientry's army, but he can't teleport - there's no way he could go all the way there so quickly. You're proposing a raid, Tariq said, genuinely astonished. Yes, I replied. We won't get that opportunity twice. You offer to send five Bestowed, and they should be among our most powerful to have a real chance of success, before a series of battles that promise to be the decisive clash of this war, Pilgrim slowly said. That is... Bold. It meant he wanted to say stupid, I lowered my mind, but my favorite track record against him earned more diplomatic formulations. We can argue later, I rejected, but I would be a mistake to find out at this late hour we lack the stomach to take advantage of the opportunities when they are given to us. Despite this, we must now move forward as fast as we can and link to the Prince Claus's column. If you rest for the rest of the day, will you fight fit tomorrow? In a few hours, I'm going to get back on my feet, Tariq said hesitantly. I never need to sleep much, and to a lesser extent after I was blessed with the friendship of Ofany. He kept wobbling, so I coked my eyebrows at him. It finally moved him to speak. You seem to be... stepped up to... said Gray Pilgrim, and raised his hand, as if to ward off the protest. I mean not bad from it, just that conversation that would put others in despair seems instead of lit fire in you. If it were? I pulled on my pipe, examining it, and then eventually shrugged. This is the most confident I have felt about this campaign since it started, I confessed. The old man began with astonishment. I think you don't do the sport me, Tariq said. I nodded and, to my own surprise, he snorted. Aschen gods, why? He asked. I don't believe this will end in tears, although many will shed along the way, but the little news I've brought you to hit me as a source of trust. The enemy fooled us and put us in great danger. It's always going to get ugly, I frankly said. But now we keep the forces in motion, Pilgrim. We know - or have a good guess, at least - why the Dead King is acting now, what it is after and where all these things still in a larger tapestry of war. For the first time since our armies went north, we are no longer blind. We can finally find a way to win, and I mean to win properly. Don't just survive on the skin of our teeth or settle for a bloody draw. My fingers are already itching ink and paper, and a quiet place to think. Oh, we were definitely in the pit. I was sure that the Iron Prince was about to get stuck between two large armies while I caught up, and if any of us made a mistake, it could turn into the worst military defeat that the Great Alliance has suffered since the beginning of the war. Heck, this could turn into the kind of defeat it was just impossible to recover from the pure dirt lives and resources lost. But this pit, it was an old friend. I've been here before, through my own mistakes and the shenanigans of others, and the feeling of the bottom of the barrel under my feet doesn't frighten me. I smiled at the Grey Pilgrim, baring my teeth ferally. It's the eleventh hour, Peregrine, I said. Not yet. Do you have a plan, then? Tariq Fleetfoot asked. The blue eyes of the tanned face greeted my look and there I found a light that was not light - no one was entirely his own, and patient and merciful in a way that even some of my kind would be envious, on a quality that the life of the Relier's chair service is sharper than the edge of the razor. There was as much man like Grey Pilgrim as there was a god. I looked into those eyes, I wondered if there was really anything at all that we care bones of one. I said. There are still enemies ahead, Tariq said. The remnants of the army that held Lawson Hollow, as well as the army heading to the Chigelin sisters. And that force must be destroyed, I agreed, but I don't need our entire army to do that. Not our reserve under the leadership of General Pallas will join the battle as well. You will divide the mass into two parts. Pilgrim said. And then take half to lighten the Iron Prince? We'll do better, Tariq, I said, rising to my feet. I went looking across my desk, opening the drawers until I found what I wanted: a small scroll, linked by Scribe's own hand. It was a neat, beautiful map of the Principality of Hainaut, the accuracy of which meant that it was probably worth as much as a herd of horses. I unwrapped it across the table, gestaculating for Pilgrim to approach as I took the bottle on one corner to hold it down and empty the inkwell on the other. If Prince Claus won the battle for Juevelun, I said, tapping his finger on the city, then right now he's marching into the central Valley of Hainaut that locals call the Highlands. And you believe that the enemy army that was once in Lucientry will travel unnoticed to take it by surprise there, Pilgrim said. I know, I said. So, from his point of view, even if he hero likes it, you will be able to convey to yourself what happened to the column of Prince Klaus, I still get stuck here, clearing the dead in the direction of the Sisters. It actually shed light on why Lozon Hollow's defense army was so willing to back off, even given the bloody nose I gave him. At this point holding Hollow is no longer a strategic priority for him, it was much more important to tie my army up for a few more days until he finished stripping Klaus Papenheim's column. And the worst part was that the Dead King made no mistake in my need to cleanse the dead ahead of us. It was not a force I could afford to leave behind me, taking the path of strengthening the Iron Prince. If I did, I would then be stuck with a massive army behind enemy lines and no supply lines. Heck, at this point he hardly even needed to fight: he could just keep chasing us and let hunger do the work for him. Fortunately, General Pallas was still in the wind and was about to make her bite felt. I'll leave behind the third army and half the firstborn along with some of the Proceran fantasies, but most of my army will be headed... I trailed off, leaning forward and squinting at the map, before finally laying my finger on the high ground halfway up the stretch of Julianne's highway connecting the sisters to the capital, but a little eastward. There, I finished. And what is that what are you going to do in the middle of nowhere? Grey Pilgrim finally asked. I breathed deep into the wayciff, enjoying the burn and taking my time before spewing a stream of gray smoke. I smiled coldly at Peregrine. Why, Tariq, but we're going to ambush a force that's going to ambush the Iron Prince. In war and politics, we are all like men sharing the same dark cave and stumbling blindly. The key to winning in any issue is patience and seeing only a little further forward than your opponents. - Luke MONSELIER, the thirty-second first Prince of Proser, is largely remembered by the Great War that followed his murder brawl. The last blows of the battle did not last an hour, and now they fought. Sometimes I sympathized with Cordelia Hasenbach because although I fought her tooth and nail to keep the truce and the conditions out of reach of the temporary laws I didn't quite agree with her when it came to them. I've always bent the rules of the name, haven't I? I made them out of the powers of all but two of their kind, allowed them to wield power over others and invested them with a weighty responsibility. But sometimes, the gods sometimes, they just went and did something that made him feel like I was biting down on a sip of coal. I knew names, I could tell the source of this stupidity, but there was no excuse. If they were soldiers under my command, it would end at times and demotion. If they were Allied officers, even nobles, I would have suspended them from command and sent them away. But names were less common than noble blood, the power they gave is more highly valued than the titles these days when late times were howled at our door, so instead I should be soft. To reproach and discipline, as if dealing with children, and not with hardened killers, authorized by Creation. What hope was there for the Lisse Accords when even the Dead King at our gates was not enough to make minds on us? I struggled with my growing rage down as I limped through the dusty grounds of our camp, knowing calmness would serve me better. It was exhaustion and anger to speak, I told myself. There will be good and bad days in the heck, and no treaty can change that. It was never their goal to fix the world, because it was too ambitious a charge for everything that was made by my hand. The agreements will do what they should have, and Calernia will be confused along with a few less atrocities splashed on the pages of their history. That in itself would already be a better legacy than I had the right to claim, some would say. In the distance, as I turned the corner, I heard a round of applause. The night was boiling in my veins, responding to the furious streak of anger that gripped me, and the nearby legionnaires trembled. I sent for the full company of armed soldiers, phalanxes and everything to accompany me. They had to serve either an escort or a mail fist, depending on my orders, and my mood was feeling more and more like squeezing my fingers. The applause itself wasn't bad, it was what it meant: that the named decided a fight in public in front of any soldier who cared to watch. On the same day as the bruising battle with the Kingdom of the Dead, our corpses are not even all burned. My fingers are clenched. Well, at least one of them was supposed to be one of mine, so maybe the flogging wasn't off the table yet. It is with this hard to stomp particular soldier the sense of business that my company has entered the picture. A large crowd of soldiers - a few hundred, a thousand? - gathered in a big ring. By their looks and armor they were from half a dozen different armies and oaths, a clean piece of our coalition shouted hoarsely as the five named fight and the coin changed from hand to hand. Silent fell in the vicinity of the phalanx, soldiers paling and hastily get out of the way of power, singing to call. There was just enough quiet I finally made one particular stream out of the cacophony. The old duty I learned as a child in Laura, beautifully sung a cold-blooded monster. The Virgin Mary, your just and cheerful tears make the poets sing, but for a smile given sweetly high banners will kiss the sky. The predatory Troubadour had an unpleasant sense of humor, it seemed. Maiden Mary was a children's song, but it dates back to the Cousins War, a civil war that brought to the throne the same branch of The Fairfax House that my father later played, and Mary in question was Mary the Applicant. The queen Mary the Third, most scholars have called her, since her Oriental Bells conquered the southern bells long enough for her baby son to die crowned king, and another cousin replaced him. I'd be impressed about Troubadour knowing the song at all if it wasn't the same shit ending a song about the Civil War while named fighting in front of a crowd of noisy soldiers. There was blood on the floor, I saw, but at least no one died yet. Archer and Silver Hunts were both bleeding and I knew that look in Indrani's eyes - she'd take a murder stroke without hesitation if she got the chance. The Silent Keeper and Headhunter were both in better shape, with the Keeper having nothing but marks on her plate while headhunter suffered only a slight cut on her cheek. The only voice of sanity there was Roland, even now trying to get everyone apart and pretty much failing. - nothing decides, I caught the Rogue sorcerer talking. You're only making it worse for - Do it with them, Lady Archer, someone with a heavy Liessen accent screaming. Callow! Sword and crown! Hunting, the accent of Alamamans shouted in response. For Grace and Heaven, Silver The crowd roared, the crowd cheered, and the predatory Troubadour was still playing that damn song. Virgin Mary, bright and beautiful! What kind of groom did you embrace? Hand in hand, courting about your trot grace of the kingdom. Enough was enough. The mood may be even more joyful than bloody at the moment, but the crowds were mercurial beasts - I can turn sour very, very quickly. I was still cursed windward from the gates of Akua and I opened, but not so spent I could not gather loud thunder when I hit the ground but off my staff. Cotton rolled through the ring, drowning out even cheers, and I limped forward as the phalanx rudely shoved aside a few spectators and played back on my way. Break up, I said, my voice as cold as steel. Now, and I won't bother with the arrests. The tremors passed through the crowd, though my eye was on the fighting - which stopped actively trying to hit each other but were still close and holding arms - and the mood was doused quite comprehensively. I would half expect someone to protest and have to make an example, but instead already the edges of the crowd were worn out as people made quiet shoots. As the stone collapses, the whole ring will fall apart soon. There was a flicker of memory, just like the edge of my mind, as I recalled when I was a slip girl in Laura, and I watched the Black Empty Hall worth the Lords with, but a few words. That night I swore that one day I would have that power too. It took years, but I got there. However, I wondered what this way wild girl from the orphanage would think of the woman I grew up in. I smiled subtly, knowing that she might well have added me to the list of monsters in need of murder. The queen Catherine, Roland started, it's-utter nonsense, I gently said. But your role in it was insignificant and well meant. Go back to your tent, Rogue Sorcerer. He caught my eye for a moment, and whatever he saw there, he told him not to argue. My mind lingered long enough to recognize his bow and then moved to the four remaining names. I couldn't see the Silent Guardian face under her helmet, but her position was shy. As for headhunter, they - no, he, if I understood the face paint correctly - looked pretty unapologetic and utterly unembarrassed. Then he had to reason to go, I decided. Which left two that would be a spark for the whole mess. Archer and the Silver Huntress. Who hit first? I asked. She did, said the Huntressman, her high voice shrill with anger. I scored the first blood, Indrani said. You swung at me first, Alexis. It's true, Hedhunter scoffed. On both counts. And the Guardian couldn't resist supporting his girlfriend, could he? Hardly Tu on one. My look went back to Silent Guardian, who took off the steering wheel and showed a tanned and dark-haired head. Although she looked like she rather wanted to smash the bounty hunter's skull, for me she bowed out in an apology. Did you just intervene after the blood was drawn? I'm clarifying. She nodded. I was humming, looking at the Bounty Hunter. And you intervened out of your abiding love for justice, I take it? I was thinking. You tied me up, Hedhunter chuckled. You tried to stab me in the back, you- The Word The Hunter used was in tradetalk, but by tone it's not a compliment. You're both fired, I said, ignoring Hunt. For participating in the brawl, you are both docked to pay for five months and you will be assigned a menial job under the officer of my choice. Hedhunter looked at me, opening his mouth, but his staring dipped in my direction - where my fingers, without my notice, took to squeezing and impure. His mouth closed. Sacked, I said coldly. Hedhunter went not so politely, elbowing some of the last remaining soldiers in his path as he went. Of the predatory Troubadour there was no sign. I noted. Clever little shit did well on his escape before I could rap his knuckles. Indrani and the Huntress still collided with each other with weapons in their hands, long knives for Archer and a spear for her old friend. I'm cocked eyebrow. Is there any specific reason you two are still holding hands? I asked a little bit. I saw Indrani suppressing the how. She knew better than the Hunted Woman that the special tone of her voice did not bode well for me. If she withers the blades, the Silver Hunter began, I'll be - If I have to make this order, Alexis Argent, I interrupted slightly. I could just lose my temper and fucking drum you two of this army in front of the gods and men. With a quiet sliding sound, Indrani's long knives returned to the shell. I turned a dark eye on her: she was doable, I knew, just that the Huntsman looked like a recalcitrant recalcitrant, and she was an obedient subordinate. Unlucky for her, I didn't buy it. The silver hunter blinked with discomfort and then reluctantly hit the ground with a spear. She folded her arms over her chest, looking rather defensive. I'm going to ask you two questions, I said. No, Indrani is almost playful, as if she were set in stone she would get out of it without losing her feathers. My irritation spiked. Hunter, why did you attack an ally? I asked directly. She'd be grimacing, though I'd be a couple more off the wording than the memory of the kick thrown. Lady Of the Lake did not raise these shame is easy. She got Lysander killed, Alexis Argent abruptly said. Same old story: Indrani has a larf, and one of us bleeds for it. Only this time he didn't stop bleeding. The anger in her voice was a hard, cold thing. I found the hate thread in it disturbing as it was too strong to be fresh - it was an old poison, just brought out at first sight with a fresh wound. I appointed her to the Third Army myself, I said evenly. As for the death of Beastmaster, I realize that she fought and had a broken arm trying to prevent it. The eyes of the Silver Hunt hardened, turning to Archer. The ranger, the black queen, it doesn't matter, Alexis said bitterly. You always find skirts to hide behind, don't you? Say it again, indrani sn blured, his hand behind the knife. Look at the tongue, Huntress, I said sharply. Don't make me repeat myself again. She looked like a mule, but she didn't argue. She was more interested in protecting her pride than my honor there, I thought, so my empathy was limited. I felt a faint breeze around my neck, left in a moment, but did not let it distract me. Archer, I said. Why did you respond with a knife? Indrani's lips are thinned. I was offended beyond reasonable expectations of restraint, she said. You're lying. My anger, never far away, burned cold and sharp, as once again the order I gave under my rights was disobeyed. This, I did it tolerantly. The wind came back, but it was never a breeze at all: it was breath. Warm, through the open mouth. Silence, I said. But as the beast leaned over his shoulder, breaking out of laughter, even as she struggled her mouth snapped shut. I felt a vicious fit of satisfaction that I didn't engage but didn't ignore. Archer's face was sluggish with surprise. You two are damned shames, I said. Shame on you both. Indrani rose backwards as if I had hit her. With the zest of will, I exfoliated the order I spoke to the Huntsman. Her lips parted, and she exhaled in her pants. Hunter, you are no longer the commander of the heroes of this army, I said. The White Knight will handle the rest of your discipline. I offer it to him as a courtesy, but if you break the truce again I will have no choice but to stop being polite. My eyes went to another criminal. Your salary docked for this whole campaign, I Archer. You don't have to talk to any hero off-duty without the explicit permission of the Rogue or me. If you draw a blade on an ally again, I will send you south as a child whom you insist on acting as - Her hands were clenched, but she was silent. You also lost the right to give up assignments within six months, I finally said. You'll be accompanying your firstborn on the raid tonight, so go back to your tent and get ready. Both of them looked at me sullenly, in that heartbeat eerily similar to each other for all their completely different performances. Grief was a bitter herb, I knew it better than most and they were both fresh from the death of someone they cared for in a very complicated way. I figured out why it came before it came, I really did. But I was also a high-ranking officer of the Great Alliance, sworn to observe the truce and conditions that they had just violated in a spectacularly public and untimely manner. My duty was clear, and my anger did not fake in the slightest. I looked at them both until they left without bothering to properly dismiss. The moment they left the beast brushed against my shoulder, almost affectionately, and without one lingering beam it disappeared. I could talk again, I knew. It wasn't an accident. I felt like my will once again struck against creation as a decree of the queen. One step closer, I thought, and exhaled. To what I did not yet know, but the shape I began to distinguish was not unpleasant for my eye. Blood them, I ordered the firstborn. Under this moon, your only mandate is to reap death. After dark, our ability to feroc the forces of the Dead King was bad enough that tomorrow's battles would be the final blow of destruction. Twilight Ways will allow drowsiness to chase the enemy camp on the other side of the pass from all sides, all the while staying away from the jaw traps that had sprung upon us the night before: there would be no chambers here to keep us written, this time. Only skirmishes in a way that has been the lifeblood of Everdark for millennia is perhaps the only way of war in which the firstborn could be said to be the most accomplished of all peoples of Calernia. And of the sigils went, under the command of Yves and his subordinate sigil-holders. We went with them, a group named under my own leadership. Archer, naturally, because I wanted to keep her under out of trouble and camp for a while. Some place in such a raid was considered a prize, and so I awarded it accordingly: the Tramp Spear came with us and the Bounty Hunter. Roland I dragged along mainly because of his experience in breaking magic, knowing that it was never wise to bet on Keter without having that one last trick up his sleeve. The choice was also a balance, which naturally some I'm sure it's just a coincidence, Archer sardonically muttered that your choices are even on both sides of the fence. Ever a diplomat, right? It wasn't a disapproving tone. Even the group was good, well-adapted, I suspected that in her eyes the politician having the floor in making it tarnished him irrevocably. Are you complaining that I'm soothing the waters you helped upset? I answered. I didn't choose that fight, Indrani told me flatly. You were still struggling with it, I said. Her face tightened with genuine anger. I don't owe you that, she said. I don't owe anyone that. Then spare me the comments, I briefly replied. I'll take the shit for you, Indrani, but I won't take it away from you as well. If you want to talk about things owed, it's best to remember that. Not the most pleasant exchanges to precede going into battle, although only Roland seemed to notice the tension between us as we sidled through Twilight Ways. He did not ask, but my very Alamance instinct of recognition, when the question would not be well received sparing me the irritation of having to offer even a cursory explanation. Soon we returned to Creation, anyway, and the raid didn't even have the time to be a problem, knowing that my Silent Guardian was perfectly capable of waging ships to war without breathing in the neck, so I had the freedom to those where I wanted to go. I've had some thoughts before. It's pretty icky to get rid of the Pale Knight if it can be done without paying a ruinous price. The enemy went down the path of dusk, as soon as we got out of the Path and found that the army was still in the hands of the enemy, and if anything the northern side of the passage was more heavily protected than before, but we would have left north of the enemy camp - in plains between Lawsons' Hollow and Cigelin sisters - so it was impossible to miss that there were departing columns. I shared my thoughts at night, looking for numbers. Maybe ten twenty thousand masses hold the passage in case we hit overnight, but the rest were mobilizing to leave. Hell, there were scouting units north of us in the distance. Leaving? The bounty hunter scoffed. Fools. We're catching up. She - was her, tonight - it would be right if our soldiers were things made of stone, not flesh and blood, but it wasn't. I'm not sure we can, Rogue Sorcerer replied. Not after today's battle. One day I had to ask Roland what kind of upbringing a man like him had forged. It has been remarkably well studied in various subjects, including quite a few that magicians in the form of Praesi would have considered under their He's right, I said. Practically speaking parts of the army will be - the Second Army and Proceran squads have recently returned, as well as a healthy piece of Dominion warriors - but it would be risky to participate in the chase with a low number and this will leave the forces behind as very vulnerable. Unlike us, however, the Dead King didn't have to give shit about the wounded or the exhaustion or supplies. He could have just ordered a march. It was three days between the Sisters and Lozon, so if we took a day to recover and marked immediately, maybe we would have arrived at the Sisters before he did. Can. But that would be risky. If the Chigelin sisters were reinforced, we could end up in positional catastrophes. Then what should be our goal this night, the black queen? The tramp spear asked. I chewed my lip. I wasn't comfortable risking a night fight with Keter, even if I could put together enough of my army to lead one with my firstborn. This left only one logical move. We won't hunt the Revenants, after all, I said. We're going to dilute their number as much as we can - get attached to Bones, build on something else. We avoid Retribution if they are not alone and stay close as a group. I got it? Archer, even after our terse exchange, remained completely reliable. I get it, Indrani said, edginganing his bow. We're hunting, the tramp agreed. Roland sighed, nodding, and Hedhunter rolled his eyes. I'll kill it if offered," she insisted. By all means, I replied softly. The Levantine villain met my eyes, and I smiled subtly. I've killed more difficult women than her, and no problem. A minute later she nodded. OK, I said. It would be a stretch to say that what followed was boring - the danger may be limited, but it still existed - but it got... Duplicate. And it was boring from the start. Moving on foot, we hit the enemy's columns hard, aiming at Bindl and random structures or supplies, before retreating back to Twilight and popping out elsewhere. We were fast enough, no Revenants came even close to us, although part of it must have been from the firstborn being a bigger and much more destructive threat. We saw maybe two hours that things were actually turning sharply in favor of sleep. The mighty burned whole parts of the enemy with impunity, and among the dead there were growing victims, which could have been a minuscule cost for the firstborn. Some of the sigils got too bold though, it cost them. The Revenants, first, but the stricken sigil doubled down and summoned the Allies - only for the Grey Legion to make an appearance. It was a significant enough event that I parted ways to form my group temporarily and called a sigil-holder for me to report. Lord Soln bowed deeply, but spoke briskly. He wanted to get back into the fight. The irons unmake The Night, Losara the queen, as well as the carved pillars made during our previous raid, said Lord Sun. It looks like they have also been invested in a parish that prevents access to Twilight Ways. This surprise was... Costly. Between them and the Revenants, we were forced to retreat. Let me see it, I said, stretching out my hand. The scope of the Night was promptly proposed, and my damned suspicions were confirmed. I've seen the Grey Legion before, those clumsy dead, imprisoned in armor, so thick that it's bigger than a shaft. These armors were very different and very distinctive, so it was easy to say that the Grey Legion had only recently been refitted. So that's what you got from this, Neshama, I thought. It doesn't really matter where we could pester their ranks and avoid them, but there will come a time in this campaign when drowsiness will have to stand and fight. And when they did, Prince Bones and his legion given the murder of the firstborn would wait for them. Go, I told Solno. Go back to the fight. Pass my order to the Grey Legion to avoid us, so that we will not allow the enemy to further improve the ways to kill us. It was worse than these troops just a hard sleepy contour, I knew. It also meant that two of the three assets we had on hand that could deal with the Grey Legion without the terrible victims - namely Akua and I - were just equally out of date. Some tricks would work to a limited extent, like flooding the gates, but I wasn't sure of smashing them myself anymore. And our last response to their species, the Blessed Iskuznik, worked exclusively in the Light. I wasn't so sure that the Dead King didn't have something to counteract that as well, given how much he invested in building this army. Fuck. Unpleasant as the revelation was, there was nothing but to continue our forays. I went back to my group and we resumed our attacks, continuing to apply bloody noses wherever we went until around the early bell. We all started to slow down, close calls were coming and the wins were becoming more loppiness, so I called it at the end. The firstborn remained until a full hour until dawn, only then retreating to the Twilight Path. I slept for as long as I dared, which was not much, and woke up too early to be presented with corpses. Named and Revenants, this time. I took two aspects from Beastmaster before he grew up to do more but but I had no right to the body of a sage. The way the Headhunter took their heads off the enemies they deftly fucked with my ability to steal aspects, I found with displeasure after a very disappointing hour of pawing at the Revenants fruitlessly, but I still got two of the kill tramp spear done. Depressingly weak, these two, but I've never been one to mock having another artifact up my sleeve. When the military council met afterwards, once again with full complement, there was no real disagreement about the decisions that should be taken. Morning Scouting parties and found Lozon Empty, so we would have sent the Name to smell the traps, no doubt left behind, and after them the advanced force to hold the end of the passage. The full army will only start moving tomorrow at dawn when we have stepped out on Twilight Ways in an attempt to catch up with the enemy. If we were lucky, our unexpected strike would have captured the Chigelin sisters before the enemy arrived, and we could pin the Dead King between the fortress and our field army. If not, then we would have to get... Inventive. There were still too many unknowns for a proper battle plan to be done, unfortunately. There was a bit of excitement until Bell's noon when the Gigantes delegation finally caught up with us, but the Giants were polite and he did wonders for morale. I was sent a polite but firm reminder that Gigantes would not fight if attacked, and could not be used as military actors on our orders, but I had no doubt about it. Just like wardens they would cost tens of times their weight in gold, which would be no small amount. Gigantes, however, was largely expected. I knew they came from messages from Unostali. When there was once again excitement at the sudden appearance, though, it came as a genuine surprise to me. I thought it might have been an early supply convoy at first, but Hakram was quick to send a phalanx to let me know otherwise. It was the Scribe herself who accompanied the unexpected arrival in my tent, helping him with amazing softness to enter the chair. I fired her eagerly afterwards - Hakam I would trust with such a conversation, but she was not Hakram. Catherine, the Grey Pilgrim greeted me wearily. Tariq looked a month past exhausted and all too fragile even for a man his age who did not bode well. He was also supposed to be in Prince Claus' army, which foreshadowed much worse. Tariq, I replied softly. I didn't bother to ask if something went wrong because it wouldn't have been here otherwise. To my surprise, he accepted my offer. Something tough, Tariq Fleetfoot asked. This will keep me awake long enough to get through this conversation, at least. I haven't slept in weeks. I silently revised my assessment of the problem from being rather bad on, as I poured poured full glass of cognac and pressed it in his hand. He drank deeply and offered thank you. We finally found out why the army in Juevelun didn't chase us when we passed him to Malmedit, Grey Pilgrim told me. You, I said, grimacing. We also found that missing an army of two hundred thousand, Peregrine thoughtlessly smiled. It was, after all, waiting for us in the last city. Victory in the war takes place in three parts: struggle, diplomacy and strategy. Not a third is enough to bring victory alone, and each of them is neglected at great peril. - Excerpt from Ars Tactica, the famous military treatise Horrible Emperor Terribilis First It was a good day if you discounted all die. As the opening blows of the second Battle of Lozon in Hollow fought under my command began to reflect, I sat on a high chair and watched as I absent-mindedly ripped at the end of the afternoon meal. The meat pie is still warm with juices splashing on my armor when I'm a little deep. The prelude was, to my mixed pleasure and strain, unfolded pretty much as I had planned. A group of five men under the Silver Hunt blew a hole on top of the western hills, allowing both gates to open to Arcadia to hit armies hidden under hollow hills. Pickler betrayed the hills in advance, of course, since I wasn't in the market just to create cave lakes: the whole point was to wash the enemy army. How much do you think it is inside? Akua said. At least twenty thousand by my count. The shadow stood upright on my side, in a intricate gold accented dark dress and veil, whose casual flicker betrayed the gate took far more out of her than she liked to admit. It took even more out of me, of course, since Akua drew the Night through my own connection to it. She could manipulate the outside of it just fine, as she was at the Princes Cemetery when she called the eclipse, but otherwise it was also limited to the fact that my body could stomach. Which was, at this point, essentially nothing. Two large gates, exactly aligned in parts of Arcadia and for a while? And in broad daylight, to download. No, I was actually out fighting before sunset, and that meant so was it. Between that and the twenty-five, I replied. I wonder what the general is that stands before us today, Akua mused. Not Trismegistus myself, of course. He rarely takes the lead in such a direct manner. Not that the consciousness of Hidden Horror will not flash around the battlefield all day, anyway, along with its own will. But Akua was right, Neshama usually did not serve as his general - not without reason, as he was not particularly outstanding. The Undeaf Don't learn, after all, and he was not a military man while alive. His tactic was all imitation, something he knew, and meant that he usually used Binds or Revenants as generals as a general as well. It was typical of his brutal streak of pragmatism that the Dead King would raise the new commanders who were most troublesome for him and link them to his service. I had no doubt that he was the general strategist of the Kingdom of the Dead campaign, notice. On a large scale, outside of tactics, there really was nothing that could think the way the king of death could. Prince Hannover mentioned the princes of the bones usually commanded by all the local undead as well as his own Grey Legion, I noted. It may be the Pale Knight, although admittedly he seemed more of a champion than a general to me. Or it could be a hundred other invisible trembling souls, none of which we even sniff out slightly. We had not yet dug so deep in Keter's reserves that the Dead King had to stingy with the generals, to my enduring displeasure. I continued to tear into the meat pie as the battle began in earnest, the Third Army under General Abigail sounding horns and starting to advance. By now, the tide of water flowing from the caves and hollows began to die out, swallowed by the thirsty earth and turning it into mud. Maybe ten thousand have been recycled with water, I said, sharpening my eyes at night, studying the field. I was hoping for more. The rest are buried in mud, in disarray and often without weapons, Akua said. Your hunting hound in the Third will make a good sport out of them. It's designed for a lot more than that, I muttered. The third army only made up the center of the formation of my master, with the Procerans under Beatrice Volgnac make up the left wing and the Levantines under their blood make up right. I expected her to bite off the hard piece while advancing, falling on it until it recovered, but she would have to spread a third to get them all, and that was the last thing either she or I wanted. After all, the Third Army was the bait. I wasn't given a full battle plan, shadow idly said, but it seems to me that you are taking a big risk with an array of your strength. The third pluck strongly forward, and your left wing... undermined. She wasn't wrong. Black would turn pale at this kind of battle array, which was a sharp departure from the traditional doctrine of the Legion. My center was a steady ten thousand Legionnaires and my right wing wildly overstrength seventeen thousand Levantines, while my left wing was only six thousand Procerans. Mainly warriors volnjak, the principality of the troops, with some fantasists. The rest Proceran troops were sent to clear the lowlands with drowsiness under Ivah, after all, and have yet to return to the field. But then the three minds behind the modern Legions, Black and Gham Singlecomb and Ranker, built this model to break up mortal armies. Fighting the Kingdom of the Dead was a different kind of war. One where the enemy was not tired, where the number at every turn was almost certainty and the enemy's arsenal carried a few more unpleasant surprises given to undermine your strength with each passing battle. But I've adapted to this war. I learned how to lead it. We came to Lozon's Hollow to achieve two things, I said. We couldn't just make one unfortunately. Even we pushed out the army and took the Hollow, we had to destroy the enemy's fighting force here: even if retreated weakened, we could not afford to have it behind us while we were moving through the capital. It would be a children's game to cut our supply lines if even a few thousand raiders were left free around Hollow, and we were already in the minority from the enemy, so I'm reluctant to shake the free forces of the garrison to leave behind. The only worst way to achieve those goals is to attack Lawson in Hollow, I said. I've seen lights turn this way before. The dead king and his generals have just begun to throw corpses at us, knowing full well that even if the battle itself is lost, they will still win the war, effectively destroying our army in compromise. No, the fighting in the pass was something I wanted to absolutely avoid - which is why our original campaign plan called on the forces under General Pallas to strike the Chigelin sisters further north tomorrow and then swing south to pin the enemy here as soon as they would have secured the fortress. Since then, the plan has apparently gone out of the window, but the main reasons for its adoption remain. However, you are, in fact, attacking Lozon Hollow, Acua dryly pointed out. No, no, I grunted. These are the right reasons for the classic Legion war, they just ended up in front of the aisle. Which one the opposite general will notice, said the golden hue. Why not allow you to retreat deeper, where the pass narrows and your benefits evaporate? The bait, I smiled grimly, went in two. I finished the last of the meat pie, scarf it down and lick the warm juices off my fingers. I pretended not to see the disapproving look thrown my way under the tasteless veil. In the distance, as the Army began to plow through the dead, washed with water, from the pass began to pour reinforcements. Skeletons, yes, but also designs. It would be a tough fight. And when the dead, thrown on the flanks of the Third, broke out of the mud, still disorganized hordes, the enemy general did exactly what I wanted them to do: they sent the horde in waves, trying to flank and even envelop the third army before the strengthening wings could arrive. The enemy did. The siege engine of the enemy on top of the hills began to unleash some deadly surprises, pillars of black stone, but Archer was with the third, and I left the heroes floating: one of them would nip it in the bud before it turned out too bad. Providence well as secured it. You seem content, which means that this dawn rout is exactly what you set out to do, noted Akua. What fits better into my assessment of Abigail Summerholme than that of the over-general who struck out too far ahead, I'm currently looking at. I shrugged. It keeps, you know, for those who have looked into our armies, I said. I called them Dauntless personally, they served as my vanguard in half a dozen wars, and they command a rising star among my commanders - but a young one who never went to military college. Malacia will have a record of this, which means that the Dead King has them as well. If it were Hune rushing it would be suspicious, but is it? I smiled. Why, Akua, it's not a trap, I said, is an opportunity. One Keter grabbed quick willingly. So the dead came out swinging from the pass in the distance, pouring reinforcements and trying to absorb the third before seemingly leg-dragging procerans and Levantines caught up and handled the flanks. From the outside eye that tortured formations - one wing too strong, the other also wing - would have forced on me politics and fear of trouble in the overall command structure rather than more tactical considerations. I have split my wings across the nation of birth and now pays the prince for it, neither the Levantians nor the Procerans too eager to follow the example of the reckless General Callowan. But the Third held on, because the Third always held on, and so the jaws of the trap closed. So now you've hurt them, Akua said. As if to bet the hand of the gate, the ballistas of Callow's army began to sing. I saw the understanding of dawn in Akua's eyes, because although she was not exactly a veteran commander she was intelligent and well-researched in matters of warfare. The enemy had to strengthen through the pass, its entrance is now devoid of all fortifications of the careful work of Mr. Solna, which means that my deminers knew exactly where the battlefields of the murder should be created. The copper stone ballists poured into the enemy in the dead, again and again, as the tanks caught up and the fire through the still-prepared defenses had already begun to erode. And now the enemy general has realized that he was fired into a box - once a cave, the mouth of the pass - there are thousands were made at an advantage. The fighting force was only one platoon, and the only one left was the first row of the dead and the living. The fire of my army was still burning hot, but the swaths of ash, and with it the King

talking. I positioned them closer to the left flank, expecting the blow to come there, so my fingers were raking my hands off my seat while two silhouettes on the wyvernback rose from too far as the first rows of the Dominion were covered and shredded. It got handled in the end, but not fast enough. The dead pushed hard into the Malaga section of the shield wall at the same time swarm attack, and it would have turned into a rout without what I suspected to be the name of the intervention. Couldn't be sure at this distance, not with armies so large and constant streaks of light and witchcraft. The next helping hand that came to inform Hakram was Scribe, who told me there was grim news yet. The sage stabilized the gap in the levantine line, Scribe told us. And? Adjutant gravel. The moment the wall of the shield closed, he was shot by the Revenant archer, Scribe told us. I believe he may have used his three aspects in the afternoon of fighting, and become vulnerable as a result. Tell me they found the corpse, I said. I'm blowing my breath. It could have been worse. There were no nets outside of history, I reminded myself, and stuck the course. When the proceran flank began to falter despite the best efforts of Beatrice Volignac and the desperate fighting named there - Headhunter killed two Revenants and claimed their heads, according to reports Hakram received - I did not panic or send orders to my cavalry. Instead I smiled and sent for the elder Mag Jendayi, Hun's senior charmer. Send Lady Catalina's word to prepare for the crossing, I ordered. In the end, in the afternoon the squads we sent were supposed to come back. Instead of letting them openly come across the plains, I would instead ask Willow and the fantasists under Lady Catalina to take the Twilight Ways - I could thus unleash them as a surprise when the time came. Keter would have reported for our own magicians, they were not hidden, but not for those who left with our squads. I could, because of this, bet surprisingly with good chances. This would help with the morale of Proceran, and be pulled out of the fire not by foreigners but by their own kind. After beating them would today, it would make them some good. When the first fantasist company on the left flank broke down, I immediately gave the order for the reinforcements to begin to move to Creation. I was shaking with surprise though when the Shields Third Army winked and they began to form offensive magic instead. Wait, if General Abigail had figured it out. Plan? I carefully studied the movements of the Third, preparing to massage brave companies around the standard, and decided that it did not. The gates are only now starting to open, after all, to the applause of the Procerans behind them. Most likely, she worried about the left flank collapsing on her and acted to cut off the threat from the source. I chuckled. Whatever her intentions, the timing for this charge was actually perfect: I got what I could from my soldiers for the day, it was time to wrap it up. Send the word Summoner to retreat from the right flank and help with the charge, not, I said Hakram. Cut the free pupil as well, he suggested. She'll thank you for that. I pondered over this moment, then nodded. He was by my side and deep behind our lines, and while there may not be such a thing as safe when fighting Keter he wasn't such a big risk, he couldn't spare his bodyguard and assistant for a while. I settled back in my seat, watching the last few exchanges of the day unfold. It went better than I dared to hope, to tell you the truth. The enemy center, although steadily strengthened in the afternoon, was also steadily selected as a result of hours of copper stone bombardment. I didn't expect that to mean that it was thin on the Binds - they need more light to be destroyed if anything - but that was the only explanation that came to mind as to why the undead center is ruined like a rotten egg when a third is charged into it. I watched the enemy ranks disintegrate under the weight of heavy companies and almost asked Gendai to send a signal to General Abigail to retreat because she had gone too far ahead, but she still stopped alone. Ok, I thought, was a retreat. General Hoon, feeling like I had that the battle was coming to an end, came my way. She made her courtiers herself and Hakram, and then got into why she came here. Congratulations in order. Your Majesty, said Ogre. Another victory to your name. I didn't mind, although there were still fights on the field. With the third, pretending to be a head narrowing in the pass, enemy reinforcements were cut off, so that the left and right wings simply pushed the pockets of the undead to the walls of the caves and systematically destroyed them. It will take some time and the third will have to keep until they have been made, but with the amount of named we have on the field we should be able to cope with any nasty surprise the enemy has left to unleash. All left for someone to sabotage the enemy's siege engine in the hills before we could retreat, which I was already mulling sending the word to the Silver Huntsman group do. A moment later there was a big explosion of light in the distance on top of the hills and then pillars of flame, and I once again recalled that the heavens had a sharp sense of humor. It's only half the battle, I finally answered. We still don't keep Hollow themselves. Given Kether's sacrifice today and the fact that the raid on the FirstBorn will undoubtedly take place tonight, there is no question that the dead are still holding the pass tomorrow afternoon, General Hong said. The last blow of the sword was not given, but it is a victory anyway. We would be out of the raid in force overnight, and in full force sleepiness: nearly twenty thousand, including a few unsuive Mighty. I fully intended to savaging the enemy army as brutally as I could before dawn came and fighting resumed tomorrow. We'll see this if the pans that neatly, I replied, but I take congratulations in the spirit they meant regardless. Thank you, General Hoon. She didn't linger after that, leaving us with our thoughts. I watched the last signs of battle far away without really looking at them. Hakram cleared his throat. You look agitated, he said. Yes, I confessed. It was an uphill battle, even if it went well for us, the aide said. It's not always a trap, Katherine. Then there was the Grey Legion? I asked quietly. The mud held them, but halfway into the fight Kether had to spit out a ritual that steadied the ground so they could fight. Mighty Sudone killed an lot of Kether's magelia, but not so much that they would not have been able to deliver this particular surprise. I had an answer waiting for him, admittedly, but without the certainty that it would work. They never came out at all though, which was my fingers squeezing and uncles. Has anyone seen the prince of bones? I suddenly asked. We saw the Grey Legion yes, but the prince himself? Hakram paused for a moment. I'll see it, he promised. Do it, I muttered. I'm missing something, I feel it. Roland reported seeing the crab some time ago, I suddenly remembered. Something to do with it, maybe? I couldn't see any obvious connections, though. It's not that I don't think it's a win, I said. We're not dealing with an amateur, a niche in planning both outcomes. He got something even from the defeat. He didn't have an answer to that question, so I left him for work. By sunset I appreciated the losses for both sides of the battle, rough as they were. My there were about eighty thousand dead and perhaps another thousand mutilated beyond the current capacity of our priests and magicians for repair. It took us into the army of fifty-nine thousand strong, maybe even a little lower. The enemy, isn't it? Kether began to hold the Lawson Valley with an army of one hundred thousand, and now it has barely half: fifty-eighty-five thousand left, we believed, although the Grey Legion was considered among them. My soldiers, even without being our full army on the field, fought like lions and won the day. Heroic victory, some would call it. Now just have to win another hundred and never lose. Welcome to the war with Keter. Surprise is not a fixed quality. Yesterday's coup is the mistake of tomorrow. - Theodosius Thecaling unconquered, Tyrann Helike Princess Beatrice Volignac Heinaut believed in honesty with herself, even when it was painful to do so. Especially when it hurt. Even when she was only the sister of the ruler of Hainaut, she knew that in refusing to look the reality of Creation in the eye would be great dangers. That's why she didn't bother to pretend she had anything but fat, even when her high birth meant that flatterers offered sweet lies insisting otherwise a basket. She was fat and she didn't lose weight. It was a way of things, something she didn't like but would have to live. Allowing myself to indulge in a fantastic world at the expense of reality was simply childish, and the childishness of a woman of her rank was the road to an early grave. And now she was no longer just the sister of the princess, she was Volijnak. Julianne led and pursued death worthy of his son, leaving Beatrice with two grieving nephews, as well as a crown she never expected to wear. It was Procer and here the blood matted - especially when she was as old as the house of Volignac - so Beatrice was still regarded as royalty, but she had no illusions about what she really was: the leader of a large armed gang, dependent on the charity of the high throne and foreign powers for her survival. She was the royal family only until no one cared to challenge him, and if the army she had saved from ruin it would have ended Hainaut as a kingdom. There can be no return when its extends only to ashes and refugees. And so Beatrice considered herself smarter than those whores of Langevin in Cleaves, at least, whose smidgen security erred in thinking they could afford to plot when at the very end times were on their doorstep. Gaspar Langevin's staggering maneuvering folly still surprised her - if the man really forgot that more than half of the forces protecting his land were foreign, that some of the same firstborns he wanted a little had bred for Cleven? It was cradling that knowledge. And yet now that Beatrice Volignac's fingers tightened around her spear, she was forced to admit that in some ways she was a fool as well. Catherine Lyuling, from Callow, was a light woman. This temper was a legend, true, but it was not easy to provoke, and when in good spirits the young queen was both kind and impulsively generous. She was free with honors others in her position would have grabbed tightly. The apparent absence of queen Callow in learning to demolish one of the high births was a casual figure of fun in proceran circles, because she was cunning in the way a peasant or a merchant was cunning - without Polish, without elegance. Beatrice wasn't a fool enough to think of the Black Queen Callow as just a savage, but between the cordiality and the habit of low eyebrows she forgot who she was dealing with. Then the hills were broken, the sky opened, and the army was smashed by the celestial deluge all within an hour. Beatrice recalled the stories of the Battle of the Camps. From Doom of Liesse, what Callowo's veterans affectionately called the Arcadian Campaign - as if it wasn't a complete howl of madness to invade the realm of the fae - and finally the cemetery of princes, where the sport was made of its kind, as no one has dared since the days of Theodosius the ReCalculator. The black queen did not bother with proper weights, recalled Princess Beatrice, because after the cemetery there was no living ruler who could demand from her. Princess Hainaut led that sink of truth sink into her bones, breathed deep into it. It won't be forgotten again, she swore. Princess Beatrice let go of her fear, reminding herself that once horror was on her side, and turned her eyes to the enemy. Already the Third Army under its canny general fox was advancing at a brisk pace, the red-painted shields locked tightly into the shield wall. The waters are not finished flowing yet, but they have slowed down and will soon wash out. Behind them would be dirty lands and a stormy mass of undead, unprotected and difficult formation, which Callow's army had already punished with sustained artillery fire. There were rumours that the copper stones released by the balast deminer-general were lit by the bright light, where they beat, burning bones and driving away necromance. The battle plan, in its current form, dictated that the flanks of the coalition army would wait for the overflight before advancing as well. Beatrice understood the purpose because she had done some exploration of the war: there was hope that enemy reinforcements, already pouring out of the depths of the pass, could be drawn back into the water-empty caves by the hasty advance of the Third Army, in Keter's attempt to push that force when she outpaced the rest of the coalition army. It was a risk on but in fact it was an attempt by the Black queen to limit the losses on their side as much as possible. She wanted, according to Beatrice, to bring the dead to fight her at the mouth of the pass. Where Kether's number cannot be brought to bear as they will in a wide field, queen Callow wanted to eat an army of one hundred thousand one bite at a time. The front lines would have stabilized as soon as the flanks had caught up with the Third Army, and when they were, artillery could be drawn to the mass undead facing the coalition. In the real sense, the soldiers of the Grand Alliance would not be an axe executioner, but a cutting blockade: their goal would be to pull out the enemy and keep them in the field of killing artillery, not necessarily to cause great damage to themselves. The art of war on the young queen was not famous for no reason, although Princess Heino did not believe it would be so easy. It never happened to Keter, however, blind concerns were not the reason for being paralyzed, so when Princess Beatrice Volignac received the word from her commander-in-chief, she gave the order to her captains. The trumpets sounded, a bright loud call, and drumming evenings began as Hainaut's last army began its promotion mixed with fantasy companies. In the east, the Levantines repelled its offensive, and just as the Third Army reached the edge where the water touched - where the dead were swept away - the march of the flanks finally began. The plans of the queen callow are going well so far, Beatrice has seen. A stream of reinforcements hurried out of the deeper passages to prevent the Third from simply sweeping through, and when finally the shield wall of the Third Army's north forces slowed into the swamp of mud and steel that the water did. The undead did not have sharp enough teeth to break the wall of Kallowan's shield, so the stream split. Caves torn open to look into them began to fill the undead, trying to bypass the enemy's shield wall. Instead of just fighting ahead, the dead tried to bring their numbers bear by attacking on the flanks as well - at the moment only splashes harmless on the sides of that thick eastern formation area, but the undead were gathering numbers to mount more serious attacks. The enemy was moving too fast, Beatrice thought, as she looked with her eyes narrowed. Light skeletons, unarmed and barely armed, were sent first and on in masse because they were not so inclined to get stuck in the swamp. Princess Heinaut sent for one of her captains and ordered that the drum roll accelerate, setting a faster march. If she waited too long, she feared that the Third Army might be completely encircled before the reinforcements arrived. That would be a disaster, especially if Kallowan's heavily armed soldiers rise up to serve the keter. Unsurprisingly, Callow was devoid of all the beauty she sometimes thought of looking at the Pristine Arms of Callow's Army. All the wealth there went to war. Will that Julianne and their father before her practiced that same stupidity, which in these dark times was not stupid at all. Volignac House has had more use for the plate than palaces these days. The princess's eyes drifted to the hills in the distance, beyond the fighting, where she was told that a large siege engine was still waiting. He hasn't tried a single shot yet, but as far as she knew, the Chosen One didn't destroy it. What was Keter waiting for then? We've been through the lighter part now, ducklings, Sergeant Hadda has bitten. Shields is steady and mind your right. Not smart, it doesn't pay off against skullies. Edgar exhaled, feeling the usual tremor of fear descending his spine. He would have been fine when the shield wall came into contact with the enemy, but until then he knew from experience the nerves would stay with him. From above came orders for the fourth cohort, from which Captain Pickering's company was the second company to move from the back to the left flank to prevent the enemy from hitting the army. It was strange to turn your back to the dead in front of them, to get out of the Hollow, but then Edgar just turned to look the undead in the face, didn't he? Liked better when we were just smashing down the broken bones. Edith muttered on his side. As a dangerous job, but still better than a fucking wall shield. Edgar snorted. Dangerous work was a good word for him. The black queen called the ebb and flow to break up the hidden enemy army, and when she washed up in a sea of mud and grows underneath the front rows of the Third Army sent ahead the priests of the rebel house. Stripes of dazzling Light struck struggling skeletons and ghouls, carving smoking furores into the mud, but it was the task of the legionnaires following them to destroy any bones they saw sprouting. Not harmless work, it is because sometimes the skeletons played dead than they were and the unpleasant surprises of the mud and bent to come at you below. But as Edith - remarkably sensible, for the Girl LIessen - said, the still damned spectacle is better than the shield wall. There, sometimes luck just meant that you didn't get back into enemy service when you died. The company moved into place as smoothly as was possible on the muddy ground, a line of twenty moving to the front. Edgar's own line was second rank, which meant they would see the fight soon. Over the shoulder of a shorter soldier, he saw pale naked skeletons with only spears in his hand deftly running through the mud. Companies filled in Edgar's own side, expanding shield the wall before the enemy could sweep around him, and he exhaled softly. If he had been in the first rank, he would not have dared to bend his eyes from the enemy, even when he caught the movement above. In the second, however, he risked his gaze. It was not the Conscript and another named bringing vultures into the sky as now that the flood gates were closed they fled. Too low, anyway, and too fast. It was with surprise that Edgar realized that he was looking at the artillery fire. Some huge spear was released, or perhaps a pole? Whatever the truth, a long length of dark stone fell into the back rows of the Third Army, killing a dozen by a blow. Edgars' fingers tightened with fear on the stiff, for the black stone glowed run. The heartbeat later, there was a crackling sound and an explosion of witchcraft followed by screams, half the company dying in a lightning mess. Another pulse, and the dead rose. The company at the back of the Third turned to face the fresh menace - and while another pillar was fired at them, it burst into the air as if artillery fire of their own somehow caught it - but the impulses kept coming. Always the same two, lightning and necromancy, but it was a powerful combination and stripes of light and witchcraft thrown at the post did nothing. Edgar Lore exhaled and turned away. Fear ran into his veins as the distant sound of the big drums began to thrum, but he could no longer afford to look anywhere but forward. The first wave of skeletons is charged forward in complete silence. Without the lead, Sergeant Hidda shouted. Mad, they howled back, and for a moment nothing. Driven by gloom - Gods, Indrani thought grimly. It's something new. What the hell was that pole? She learned the stone from their trip to the crown of the dead a few years ago - she had never seen that exact black tone anywhere but in the deepest reaches of the Fortress of the Dead King - but it was the first time she had ever seen this particular breed of nastiness. It was a fairly simple setup, but alternating impulses were already chewing through two companies, and all attempts to cope with the situation eventually turned into oil tossed on the flames. Not that she could afford to spend a lot of time searching. The enemy siege engine was still shooting at the cursed pillars, and there were only so many heavy arrows in her quiver - three, in fact, and she was already on her last. That would have meant three pillars swatted out of their trajectory, at least, but for some reason she doubted Keter would run out of ammunition at the same time she did. Nocking the last heavy arrow, Archer suppressed the grimace as she saw another Blackstone post release. She exhaled, resisted, and then drew and let go. Indrani didn't even bother to see if she had struck, already knowing Wood. Normally she would have had some more heavy arrows, but today the cat sent her to cope with the designs, so it was the untangling with which she booted. Useful things, those, but hardly a dent pillar. Pickler's brass ballista was still chewing the undead coming out of the aisle so a third wasn't in danger of collapsing anytime soon, but the loss was already mounting and that slippery eel general Abigail led Archer behind at some point. Looking ahead, Indrani found that the batters were scaffolding on the pass. A house-sized abomination resembling bears, damned hard to put down and surprisingly flexible for their size. They also carried the bellies of undead soldiers, which made them a bloody plague for regulars: it was like a live battering ram spewing soldiers. Archer bit her on the lip. She couldn't do anything else about the pillars, it must have been one of the unforeseen circumstances of Katherine who handled it. She could start banging away at the design though, so even as another pillar was shot in the distance Indrani reached out to untangle and knocked it. In this, at least, she could tip the scales. You don't have a job, the black queen told him. Follow Providence where it leads you. Balzer, whom people now knew as a sage, did so without remorse. Even Peregrine was burned by that cunning, and he wouldn't gainay them when they stood on the same side. So the sage retreated into himself, closing all the shutters, so that nothing could hide the feeling of a slight nudge of Destiny. And Destiny forced him not to stand with the Dominion warriors with whom he shared blood, or the Procerans, whom he swore to protect from the attention of the Enemy. It was with this strange Third Army that his steps took him. Not even to fight at the front, though Balzer knew many secrets of destruction, except for fists, and stood behind. He understood why it was only when a black stone fell from the sky as a pillar and death blossomed around him. Balzer learned many secrets for which some called him wise, while others called him a sage - even a sage, over time. But enlightenment was not a common way, it was a struggle within: lonely, infinite, eternally unattainable perfection. So he was not surprised when the priests of the House of Rebels cast their faith brightly and threw it into the black stone to no avail. No candle could light the black sea inkwell. And what can witchcraft do, whether it's flames or thunder? Only a fool sought to defeat the devil on the ploys of the devils. In this, however, he could help. The sage made his way through the fresh undead, smashing skulls through helmets as he glided through their rows, and soon saw a pillar from the near end. How evil you are, muttered the sage, narrowing his eyes. Kill, the black stone sang. Take. Kill. Take. His perseverance was washed its like a morning mist, even a touch of lightning - the light inside it was more than what the work of the enemy could bring. Balzer pressed his hand against the stone, not sparing his feverish heat, but not lingering on such ephemeral things. Like a river, it must flow and never stop. It was the opposite with this thing of stone and fear, because it was a shell hosting pulsating hatred and greed, and nothing more. The shells were always weak, and the sage found it soon. The undead clutched his back, but he was quick, and his oneness with the Light blinded their eyes. Gouna, Balzer said, and struck. In his right hand he held the power to destroy, learned from years of studying the lingering shades of divine anger left on this world, and this is what he unleashed against the work of Trismegistus. The black stone crashed under his fist, showing the howling witch's heart, and it was he who snatched and put out. For a moment, when he died, he thought he had heard the word. Not enough to divine anything from him, but perhaps with meditation ... The sky above spewed another pillar of black stone, falling among the soldiers to deliver the rattlesnakes of death. Possibility. The sage smiled. Today was a good day, he decided, and was looking for the next pillar of black stone. - Lord Razin Yana of Binder's Blood dropped his shield because the spear may not have struck, but it made it as useless as it was useless anyway. It was the third shield he had survived since the beginning of the battle, and he already had two horses killed under him: Kether was in fine shape today. His sworn swords, which served as avant-garde, held on to him. Malaga was defending its honour today, although it was Akilyn who added a case to Rolls for her blood - she took a few slayers and lanterns to kill Tusk, who would have walked past Archer's punitive barricades, giving the murder a blow herself. This should put her in a better mood, wiping out the shame that was injured on the first real day of the fight campaign. The dead were held under the assault of the Dominion, which Lord Malaga found when he carefully studied the front lines. The Levant warriors did not make enough dents to push back the enemy, although they themselves were not in danger of losing ground. Much as Razin would have preferred a more glorious bent on battle, he couldn't deny that the Plan of the Black queen was working: the copper stone ballists of Callow's army tore through entire enemy companies as they poured out of the aisle to reinforce, focusing on the center in front of the Third Army. It was not a great honor for his warriors and Akilin to be used as simple hooks keeping the metaphorical fish from wriggling out of the reach of the ballists, Razin Yana thought, but if it led to victory would have his peace with him. The Procerans were tasked with doing the same thing on their wing, anyway, so it was hardly a surfeit of honor to walk - only Abigail Fox, that ruthless and cunning general, who would blood his binders so dramatically in the cemetery, claimed anyone, given the key role of the fight. However, there was no reason for Dominion not to try to capture a better position. Razin sent for his captains and ordered to press on the very edge of the right flank, led by lanterns and axes. One of his sworn swords brought him his fourth shield of the day, and Lord Malaga wondered whether he should return to the ranks. Men fought better when he fought them. The decision was stolen from him when Kether acted first. From the broken ceiling of the caves came a great acophony, when the diabolical excuses were suddenly unleashed: surviving flocks from the first day, birds, bats and insects, flowed like a tide with ear screams. Lord Malaga swallowed the curse. Of all the armies of the people, the Dominion struggled with these horrors the most. BINDERS, shouted Razin Yana. BINDERS, ON THE SWARMS. - The conscript snorted mockingly when he saw these Dominion savages fumbling around with their so-called witchcraft. Semi-baked diabolism was what it was, it's the use of showes as anchors for bodies made from their surroundings - in this case, mostly mud and stone. Not all binders could forge flying creatures, or another proof of their fundamental incompetence. Cedric reminded himself that not everyone could equal his own skill, but it was half though and almost more bragging than empathy. Are you sure your being is capable? Concocter asked. Beneath them, it caused a wyvern dough to her wings as she sped toward the undead flock. The conscript cast his colleague with a contemptuous glance. It's a little late to ask, isn't it? Cedric chuckled. She rolled her eyes, brazen wretched. Gods, but the Black queen simply did not recognize its value - always she used him as a horse-handler for some lower-named, when he could do it all on his own. My concoctions will work as promised, Concocter flatly said. The only possible point of failure here is your work. The conscript was being bullied. My work is always flawless, he said. That's why I was too valuable to send to Arsenal, unlike some others. She would probably argue with this self-evident truth, so Cedric ordered him to call the bank hard up and leaned closer to his neck. The containers with which Smoner loaded his belly made the design less manoeuvrable, but he learned to compensate for it. It doesn't matter anyway, he thought. Unlike what his colleague thought, the containers didn't just spit out. Cedric manipulated his call to narrow him down when they approached the edge of the pack, smashing the container, even when it opened its mouth. Like the old dragons of legend, his appeal exhaled got of something - though it was gas, not fire, but diminishing effect. Gas did his job, Summoner was forced to admit, even when he began to lead wyvern in making a long passage through a mass of undead creatures spewing clouds all the time. Beer attacked necromantic structures almost like holy water, feeding on them and breaking the spell by holding them together - it was particularly deadly on insects, but even the birds collapsed after a heartbeat impact. Another victory to be laid at his feet, the Conscript thought with smug satisfaction. - General Abigail realized that it must be a bit like how a chicken would feel if it was still alive when you put it on a scythe to roast. Just enough movement to give you the illusion that you could do it when in fact you were just spinning around so that you could be roasted more evenly. Unfortunately still on horseback, the general hid another howling as she watched another pack of ghouls jump over the shield wall at the front and land on top of the magician's shield panels of bondage and then wiggle through the weakness in them. The third army was made to stand and take the bloody hits of the deminers General Callow could pound the enemy into the dust with her ballistas, a strategy that Abigail would admit to herself she would have loved if she wasn't connected to her standing so close to the killing field. Boots, this damn horse seemed to realize they were in it together at least until the end of the battle - she cooperated, and didn't try to bite her for at least an hour. From this unfortunately dangerous point of view, General Abigail was watching the field. It took several hours since the beginning of the battle, long enough that some of the mud began to dry out, but with all the efforts on both sides it remained at an impasse. The Revenants tried to break the front line several times, but The Name met their head and got the best of them. Most of the time, anyway. Some devil in a pale plate killed the villain and retreated only when a group under the Silver Hunt appeared to make him return. It would have been some time before sunset. Abigail realized, but there would be no clear winner today. The trouble was that even with the rotations it people were getting damn tired, and the Procerans probably had worse on their flank: half of them were mercenaries, and unlike the Dominion on the right they had no room to be able to keep the reserve. Things could have turned out to be unpleasant if they hadn't been careful, and even with the Second Army still being held in reserve a lot of damage could happen very quickly if the left flank went sour. The trouble is that when it came to what she could actually do help to support the left flank, General Abigail saw only one option, and she was not quite eager to take it. Maybe not as bad as what would happen if we wait though, she muttered on a horse. She looked at the risks. The gods, as much as she hated to admit that doing nothing can be the more dangerous of the two. Volinak's soldiers were hardy, but the mercenaries didn't have the same stomach on the right. If some started working ... Abigail was still holding on to something until she saw the first fantasist company break down, cursing and giving orders to his general staff, even if the mercenary managed to rally and return to position. She was just going to get worse the longer she waited, and with Abigail's luck, everyone here was going to get a runner out except her own damn army. After dismantling, she gathered as many companies of heavyweights as dared to pull up to her and made a wedge. She sent for the standard of the Third Army, chose the poor bastard to carry him into battle, and waited for the order she gave to step into the House of Rebels and Coydola magicians. The changes were noticeable when it happened: from defense to offensive. The priests struck out with massive volleys as the shields winked and were replaced by a large spear of flame either. Gods, Abigail muttered faintly. How bad could it really be as a Tanner? Too late to back off now, she knew. After she pulled all these heavy companies for her, if she gave the command to the commander, she'd be at her for cowardice - she understood from the beginning, but was a way to avoid the fight. She found the post bag, she had given the army standard, and sent her back to the ranks with a smile, taking it herself. You see, with this thing in her hand, she can't use a sword so no one can expect her to. Abigail realized she can't use the sword anyway. And Kether can go after the standard to damage morale. She made herself a target again. Are you ready, General? The tall looked at her, Abigail saw, waiting for her order. Swallowed the whimper that came out in response, she said a gift. Some of the officers looked impressed. General Abigail ordered. In violation. Dauntless. This time she was lucky: the answering roar of approval drowned out any piercingly frightened her voice was in fact. I fear my tyrant in the end, but afraid that I reserve alone for what being on my knees will make of us. The queen Eleanor Fairfax, founder of the Fairfax dynasty, General Abigail again looked into the Baalite eye, wishing that the generals were lucky: the answering roar of approval drowned out any piercingly frightened her voice was in fact. I fear my tyrant in the end, but afraid that I reserve alone for what being on my knees will make of us. All right all this was the sixth time since the Third Army began to mobilize that it had to look at enemy positions, but repetition did not improve its prospects either. Sleep did a good job of smashing enemy walls and destroying their ditches, but the corpses worked tirelessly through the night. The walls were rebuilt into little more than stacked stones, more like a cattle-fence than a fortification, but the good thing about cattle was that it doesn't usually try to hit you. Somehow she doubted that the undead would be so favorable. At least they're low on bows, General Abigail muttered. Javelins isn't that bad when he gets up to it. They made a room even on a plate and they could give up the shield of course, but the range was smaller and you couldn't carry anywhere like many of them. I don't understand why Kether Fields has so little staff Tribune Krolam gravel on her side. With their number, massive volleys would be almost impossible to deal with. Their dead are too stupid, Abigail absent-mindedly told him. Bindi, the one with the souls still nailed to the corpse, they're smart as people. But Bones? They can't maintain a crap outfit, certainly not something as fastidious as a good bow. Javelins are easier, and easier to do too. She glanced at her right hand, a tall, high-court, like he was spooling for a fight. It's not his fault, Abigail reminded herself. Orcs have just been born this way, with lots of teeth to compensate for the lack of the part where common sense went. She would also probably want to fire more if she got to eat the losers afterwards, she realized. Tavern stakes these days were basically a rip-off, so the greenskins were definitely coming forward there. We will wait for the Sapper General to finish his bombardment to move forward, she told Krolam. And send our greyhounds, don't they? I want this field to be cleared before our shield wall starts moving forward. On it, Tribune staff cheered. He's a good man. Some would call Abigail paranoid as a precaution, but they couldn't. Largely because they were all dead while she was not. A good empty field en route to Lozon Hollow, after Keter was allowed time to work his wickedness? Yes, she didn't fall in love with it. Her bloodhounds were the suggestion she made to the Black queen last year that received approval, to her surprise: mixed crews of regulars, priests and lesser magical talents who could sniff out the kind of hidden diabolical Dead King liked to leave wallowing before her men walked to them. Leaving them to do their job properly will slow the progress forward, but Abigail isn't quite a sight. She looked into Baalite's eye again, silently Fate. While it was a relief to learn that the Battle Plan of the Black queen would not require a third charge at the lozen Hollow Estuary under enemy fire, it was still stuck leading the avant-garde. Its inexplicably enthusiastic soldiers might think it's an honor to serve as cutting-edge meat shields - Dauntless, they all cheered as the word meant they were no longer the people closest to swords trying to kill them - but General Abigail was not deceived. When you contacted Keeter, the front was the last damn place you wanted to be. Far from being her own preferred locale, but she didn't have much success getting there. Grimly, the general leaned back on the horse as the wings of the attack gathered east and west. The second army, under the command of General Hoon, will remain behind it and serve as both a reserve and an escort for the siege engines, while the left of the Procerans gathered under the command of Princess Beatrice, and on the right the two leading members of the Blood were given general command. This made the west an underdog flank, not so steady or numerous, but the Black queen sent most of the horse alliance there to support them. It would have been some time yet before they had to advance. General Abigail knew, and when they did she would at least call with her. She still realized with despair that they had somehow got her again. She had a plan, solid. It was too late to back away from all this general business now as the pragmatic soul she was forced to admit as much. In addition, Abigail, from Summerholm, did not stick out this bloody nightmare of war in order not to retire with a full general's pension: when she returned home, she fully intended never to lift a finger again for the rest of her life and perhaps to drink herself in an early grave. It was her year-old right of the gods to do so. Thus, the plan was adjusted. Abigail was going to make herself sufficiently embarrassed that they'd reassign her home, where she couldn't make the Black queen look bad in front of all the fancy nobles by being a lot. It would have been a delicate line to walk, being embarrassing enough to be sent off, but not enough to be demoted, but as the daughter of a long and legendary line of boorish drunkards Abigail believed in her blood to get her through it. It's, um, not quite as she expected. People kept laughing when she said horrible things like sure the dead king is terrible, but in his defense he's stuck living next to Procer for centuries and makes sense of Lake Dominion from a hole in the ground, it's pretty much the rest of the country too and instead of out of the outlandish number of invitations to parties three times. She dug deeper into rudeness, trying things like you people say and repeating stories could be heard living in Summerholm as the brewer's daughter, but it turned out these procer folk fantasies were shockingly hard, well, shock. The only advantage was that these days Abigail may have to worry about loops and the Black queen eats her soul, but at least she doesn't often have to worry about having a knife! The best thing about being a general is that when you get to a good safe place away from the front line, you have to call it a strategy. I loved developing strategies, Abigail was. She did as much as she could humanly. But now that the Third Army had spread across the plains in front of the Hollow Valley, the dark-haired woman finally realized the ultimate betrayal of her rank: even if she stood at the back of her army, this army could still be caught in front of the coalition. She was again. The general looked into the Baalite eye again and sighed. It really was a shame about the horse, she thought. They may not have noticed her slipping away otherwise. - Although the Robber was told that his appointment was to serve as Pickler's bodyguard, he suspected that what he had actually been sent here to do was to make sure that Sapper-General Callow did not end up killing her designated spotter: the honorary young Lord Gaetan Rocroy of Cantale, also known as Page. The robber admired the young man in a deep and sincere manner, which he did not hide in the slightest. He needed many years of work to get under the skin of everyone he met, while the boy was pushing through on natural talent alone. It was a miracle to contemplate, really. Praesi measurements are very inadequate, Page blithely said. Outdated, even. It's Sallian paume to be used, not Sergeant Snoyer, who has been a deminer for over a decade, twitched so hard he snapped the thin copper wire he was adjusting. Crows, but the boy was an artist. Talent couldn't be suppressed, the Robber wouldn't let me. It should have been encouraged, no, cultivated! Otherwise it would be a loss for Creation. Fire, Pickler coldly ordered. The page didn't quite go out of the way, so when the counterweight trebuchet came down he had to hurriedly jump to the side. Eyes on the stone, lord, the robber shouted. The hero looked at him for a presumption before doing what he had to and serving as a good little spotter for callow's army deminers. The boy's eyes narrowed after the stone hit the side of a steep hillside to the left of the entrance to the hollow. It was shocking, Paige said. The stone crashed on the surface. No big crack though, you need to get closer. Here was a common sigh of all who studied ballistics. Eight hundred feet was well in the range of the imperial trebuchet, which was a model Callow is used. If the stones weren't To crack the hills on this range, the ballistics - who shot further but with significantly smaller projectiles - would do next to nothing if deployed. The choice on the left was to either keep hammering away with trebuchets for hours or start pulling out more interesting ammo. The boss made it clear that she wanted those hills torn apart by her plan, and she didn't look like she was in the mood for an argument about the practical involved. Iron frames inside, do you think? The robber asked Pickler. She licked her chops thoughtfully, chewing at the thought. If your assessment of how hollow hills are even remotely correct, Pickler said, then this is the most sensible theory. It could be chambers, I suppose. The boss mentioned when one of the siege engines they had torn, the top of the hill came to clear with him, the robber noted. She thought the platform was made of stone, but maybe... It was just anchored by the metal beams that cross the top of these caves, Pickler approvingly said. It would be a metal amplified by spells to have this particular effect, so it is more likely to become than iron. Long, spiky fingers - she had the hands of a deminer, Pickler, delicate and deadly - drummed the side of the nearest trebuchet thoughtfully. We'll keep pounding away at the eastern hills. The Sapper-General has decided. Nothing we won't crack western right now. I don't like relying on sabotage, but it seems necessary once. Even without having to order, the deminers around them paid attention to her words: nine trebuchets were prepared for a concentrated fire, a turn on their platforms. Like a swarm of ants, goblins to work. The page looked rather uncomfortable looking at them uneasily, so the Robber decided to help. Sitting up to the boy, he offered a wide and fantasing smile. Tell me about these pauses, good sir, the Robber asked. Unlike my ignorant and concealing colleagues, I am always open to the teaching of Superior Proceran Training. The boy's face lit up with enthusiasm, and from the corner of his eye the Special Robber tribute saw the lieutenant kicking a trebuchet stone in a rage. Will Catherine be open to the boy's permanent appointment to him, he asks? Roland de Beaumara suspected that many would have envied the surface of his current situation - namely, slowly going forward as four beautiful women were pinned against him. The whole part of it also involving a complex spell of illusion and surrounded by the undead wanting to kill them all might have been considered something to drag, note, and unfortunately he would not even be able to remember the experience fondly. Not when Sidonia continued to eld him as the Levantine heroine had just had the most gruesome bony elbows, or when the Silent Keeper was not on your feet for eight times. The gods that plates of armor were heavy, apart from the fact that the Keeper herself was nothing small woman. My leg, the outgod whispered. Please be careful. To Silent Guardian's credit, she looked somewhat apologetic and tapped shoulder in apology. This had already put her ahead of Sidonia, who was just giggling when she said she kept elbowing him. Stop whining, said The Blessed Artist. You'll give us up. What Adanna of Smyrna said was not so much as a hint of irony her voice was, in her own way, impressive. Roland made himself count up to five so he didn't engage in retors, and then they resumed their slow advance. The paths found by Catherine's anxious goblin lieutenant eventually proved to be true, with a third attempt allowing them to slip into the crevice that led to the large caves beneath the hills. There have been difficulties on the way, of course, but between Roland's skill for ward craft and Silver Huntress' acute feelings they managed to avoid giving themselves away. It was inside, they were forced to remain under the illusion, as the place crawls from the undead. Even in the rare corridors Binds always patrolled, and Roland clung close to the wall as the other Chosen did the same to once again avoid the edge of his illusion touched by a patrol of thirty undead soldiers in pristine armor. The caves trembled with the clatter of the engines of Callow's army giving surface, but while sometimes the stones were weakened the place did not seem in danger of collapse. He could understand why Catherine would risk sending them here now. Only a group of Chosen will be able to see it halfway quietly, or without everyone involved dying in the process. We are close, muttered the Silver Hunter. Only one level on the left. Aanna, are you sure you can't make it from here? The device, which was prepared by the Blessed Artist, should be able to bring down the ceiling of the cave, but she insisted that it should be launched as close as possible to it. There were corvair rings, other sides, fortunately, and four nerve levels up to five of them were now standing close to the highest they could stand. There was a level five, but it seemed narrower than the others. I should have done it from below, Artificer peevishly replied, but it would have been rolling the bone. I can only guarantee results from a level above us. Then let's go, sighed the hunter. Steady and cautious, everything. The illusion Roland now uses indoor sound, as long as it was low enough pitch. That's why he chose something otherwise so unstable and fastidious among his repertoire. That is why, when the great axe plunged into the wall just above his head, the tall Revenant in the pale smiling mirthlessly as the spell shattered, he was quite surprised. Halfway quietly there was no, the Rogue Sorcerer mused. Time to see if without all the participants dying can still be saved - There was a moment of silence as a massive spear of Light ripped through the hilltops on the left side of Lozon Hollow, spinning in the sky as some hippo spit until it thinned and disappeared into the shower notes. Traces of smoke followed behind, warmed from the priestly authority, telling small bonfires and scorched rock. You know, said the Robber, looking at the rising smoke, when the Boss told me that Archer would be sabotage, I thought it would be something else... Why? Pickler suggested. Yes, he replied weakly. It works. Is it from a woman who looked like the Wasteland? Goble knew it couldn't be a tramp spear or a Silver Hunter - the former would have Archer bragging before the storm, while the latter had probably tried to kill Archer by now. The rogue sorcerer was adept at interfering but not using light, and the Silent Keeper had a reputation as a solid warrior, but not particularly powerful. This left only a woman with an Ashuran accent and those golden high-born eyes that were rogue feeling cautious every time they saw them. People with them, as a rule, were quite dangerous when they lived to the age of Halfway Artificial. He would do his job regardless, Pickler shrugged. Shame that they didn't get the enemy engine, but I assumed it would have to do. In front of them, trebuchets snapped into motion. One by one they pounded on a hillside until finally the thunderous crack the sappers worked on the whole bell, finally sounded. The page excitedly informed them that there was a big crack now. Seven more stones and finally the side of the hill collapsed. The iron bones that held it could still be seen in ruins, twisted and curved, but rarely broken. The spectacle corresponded to the fact that the eastern slopes, which were broken more than half the bell back. Hold the fire, Saper ordered. The requirements are made. Start promoting copper ballists as soon as the Third advances. Ignoring the Page, which asked if he could finally leave, the Robber chose one of the trebuchets and began to climb up the beams. Unlike his comrades, he was hinting at what was coming and he wanted as fine a place to witness as he could. As he climbed on one of his legs, supporting the support, he watched as the great vavren rose into the sky from behind the front line. Not a real beast that one, he did not move quite correctly, but his sharp eyes saw two silhouettes on his back. The conscript would be the one he knew, but he wasn't sure on the second. Archer should be with the Third, it will serve as avant-garde, but you never knew with the boss. Not as it was low to name these days, anyway. Speculation served to entertain him as the wyvern flew forward, swarms and wvrm rising to meet him from a distance. The death sentence the two named came out if it was anything other than a distraction. It wasn't, though, and with a pleasant shiver the Robber felt the air begin to thicken. He swallowed his breaths as if fighting against the reluctant Creation, the self-powerbeing gathered always surprising him. It was good for his army to recall exactly what the Black queen was at times, the Special Tribune felt. The cat played better these days, so sometimes Westerners forget who exactly won the Tenth Crusade. A large round gate winked in the sky over Lozon Hollow, and to the robber's surprise the heartbeat later the second did. Sahaelian is finally earning her keep, then. The hollowed-out hills on either side of the pass were torn at the top and smashed in front, so now all that was left was using this extended field of interaction and giving a pitched fight - or conventionally would suggest. This was not the boss's way, however, not at all. She rarely agreed to one knife in her kidneys, it was one of the most charming things about her. So it was with utter glee that the robber began cackling when he realized that the gates in the sky were not related to the Twilight Ways at all. The way the water began to pour out of them was something of a hint. - Roland pulled deep on one of his strongest offensive magics, forming a fire and turning it dense and fluid before throwing a hundred drops of it at a mass of skeletons and coming after them. The tramp spear, pulling the unconscious Adanna closer to her, turned long enough to send a burst of light to the armored Revenant still haunting them, cursing angrily at Ceseo when the dead hero shrugged his shoulders as he had everything else they threw at him. Nothing made a dent: no steel, no witchcraft, not even light. Silent Guardian managed to throw it off the ledge before, the most success they had, but it came back soon. With more Revenants, of course, for the gods despised Roland deeply and wanted him to die screaming. Alexis put the seventh arrow in the shield titan of the woman, following them with a hailstorm, that disturbing laughter of the constant echo through an entire army of mobilization to kill them. The arrows were banging against the wall as they passed the pillar, just seconds too slow to catch any of them, but at least they were charged with armor. The skeletons in front of the pillar, that's disturbing laughter of the constant echo through an entire army of mobilization to kill them. The arrows were banging against the wall as they passed the pillar, just seconds too slow to catch any of them, but at least they were charged with armor. The skeletons in front of the pillar, that's disturbing laughter of the constant echo through an entire army of mobilization to kill them. The arrows were banging against the wall as they passed the pillar, just seconds too slow to catch any of them, but at least they were charged with armor. 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