

## A Case for Agency

The Headmaster rubbed her head. She had chosen to sit in on the terran princess's entrance panel and it seemed that the decision was sound. Even here, the Crown Prince's influence reigned. Three of the five on the panel would have denied the poor girl due to various interests if she hadn't asked this year's chair to step out.

Fortunately, the princess wasn't the only terran with aspirations to attend. Utilizing her prerogative to chair the panel for terrans made sense. After all, it was the first time terrans had been considered for attendance. Not to mention that a decent number had applied.

*It was only right that I took part.*

Now, one of the church's paladins had come with a formal request for admission to the grounds to perform her duties.

A knock sounded and her secretary entered. "Headmaster, they are here to speak with you."

She raised a brow. "*They?*"

The telv woman nodded. "Yes, Headmaster. Two paladins of Alos."

Her eyes narrowed. This was getting out of hand.

*Now there are two of them?*

Two red armored paladins strode in with a level of confidence that screamed arrogance. She never really liked the paladins, but when they made demands, even nations listened.

Two sun elves, a man and a woman, stopped in front of her. Sun elves were the most common people in the holy order due to its location. That did not mean they were the only ones allowed within the order. So seeing them was not surprising. Based on their subtle markings, she knew they were lower ranked, but not the lowest. They were at a level where they would be sent on individual assignments.

It was not often that you saw two Evocatis together.

Curiosity filled her more than hesitance.

She smiled. "What can I do for the Holy Order, Evocati?"

If either of them were surprised that she knew how to read their ranking, they did not show it. She would have appreciated even grudging respect, but no.

The man glanced at the woman before speaking. "I am Evocati Khalan and this is Evocati Amari. We have each been assigned to protect one of the two Honored Ones that will attend the Royal Academy this year. We will be brief. Advise your Guard that we will be on-site to perform our duties," he stated with complete surety that he would be approved.

*Not that he is wrong.*

*But... Two Honored Ones?*

"Who is the second Honored One? I was aware of the terran girl."

The female paladin narrowed her eyes. "I suppose her status is not a secret at this point."

The Headmaster raised a brow. *Everyone* in the know had heard of the fire-magic-wielding princess who was also one of the Displaced. It was her duty to learn of those who wished to join the school. Never mind the fact that the church itself assisted in escorting the girl to the capital.

And the girl had spent ample enough time in the Capital for people to learn who she and, in some eyes more importantly, *her House* was.

"*Everyone* knows who the princess is, Evocati. She is not exactly subtle. *Blasting* her way onto the scene and scorching her way through the Polite War in a way that hasn't been seen in decades. That is if you discount her literally *scorching* her opposition. I hear even the Crown is curious," she stated.

*That is an understatement.*

*The Crown is actively trying to sabotage the girl.*

*All because of her connection to—*

Her eyes widened and she focused back on the man.

"Your charge is Lady Roslyn Tiloral. She is the other Honored One. *Interesting.*"

The man nodded. "She is, indeed. Both girls require protection. The Archpriestess was adamant on this fact."

"The Archpriestess does not—"

“Tut–tut, Headmistress,” the woman interrupted. “Do not finish that sentence. I will bring the entire Aviran contingent down on the Academy if I must. Those girls *will* have their safety ensured.”

She inhaled and exhaled. The Headmaster had already ensured the terran girl could attend. Two paladins would be better than more. However...

“You will not disrupt any academics. Their status with the Church is the reason you are authorized. I request that you not hinder the ability of the Academy’s guards to do *their* job. There is a reason we are able to maintain our neutrality through all of the brutality of the nation’s *politeness*. They are that shield.

“Please coordinate with them to ensure your needs are met. I will provide documentation that permits *your* authorization. No more. Please keep them on you. Despite your stance on the matter, it will prevent any future misunderstandings.”

She signed the pre-filled out authorization letter she had made, adding the names for both. The security office would make copies for them and maintain the original. She held it out for them and the woman grabbed it.

The man nodded. “Thank you, Headmistress.”

She rolled her eyes. “It is *Headmaster*.”

Evocati Amari smirked. “As you say, Headmistress. Thank you.”

When they left, the Headmaster rubbed at her temples. A short while later, the door sounded with a knock, and the Head of the Academy Guard entered. The middle-aged high elf looked... tired. He was in charge of the security for the entirety of the Academy, which included both the Lower and Higher campuses.

Not just the school that she administered.

“Headmaster, these paladins... Should the Guard expect trouble?” he asked.

She chuckled ruefully.

“Yes. There is no doubt in my mind that those two are going to be full of trouble. I’m sure most of it will be through no fault of their own.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Opening her eyes, she said, “Watch the terran girl. Have the fire brigade at the ready.”

He blinked.

“We will be prepared.”

*I sure hope so.*

*I hope we all are.*



Swanbrook.

A city where money ruled all. One of the few cities headed by the Merchant Guild, and one that for the right price, anything could be bought. It also boasted a large presence of the Blade's Guild. The laws were loose, a side effect of an overly corrupt City Guard.

*An overly corrupt everything.*

*This city would be well served under imperial rule.*

Ressa walked out of the Guard House and slipped her coin bag back into her inner pocket. She made sure to place it into the correct pocket, the one that would ensure a decoy pouch would be found first by thieves.

Swanbrook also hosted the Thieves Guild.

And one of their favorite past times was to rob the riskiest foreigner.

The rest of her team waited for her at a nearby market. The streets were lively; for all that the city was on a newly established front line in the war. However, unlike Marketbol which had been actively sieged, Swanbrook's army was present and fighting against a slightly larger imperial army at the river forty kilometers to the west. They had managed to hold the three bridges that crossed the natural barrier and were holding out hope that they would be relieved. Mana and magic were starting to cause issues in the war were people like her weren't present for the empire.

*They will soon be sorely disappointed.*

If they were fighting there, it meant that the city of Weltonsdan, set on the northern mouth of the bay, had fallen to her people. Who would be setting up to blockade the inlet bay where Swanbrook sat. The imperial navy just had to contend with the navy from the city of Cartaek seventy-five kilometers to the south at the mouth of the bay. The three cities represented the Gearldine Triangle.

They each had fashioned their entire economies to not compete with each other. It had made the bay one of the wealthiest port regions of the Sovereign Cities. The region was second only to the single city of Parholm along the southern coast. That city was also much better positioned than the Triangle.

She walked through the market, seeing people selling wares and services for just about anything. One woman even had set up a booth to sell massage services.

You just had to ignore what happened behind the curtain.

Her men were sitting on two benches near a fountain in the plaza. Alexi was eating some sort of grilled meat on a stick. The team medic was drinking water, but she saw crumpled wax paper from where he too had eaten.

Alexi stood when he caught sight of her, quickly shoving the remainder of his meal into his mouth and chewing quickly.

“Is that good?” she asked.

He nodded. “Delicious.”

“What was it?”

He shrugged. “Knowing Swanbrook? Probably rat.”

She huffed a laugh. “The *report* we had for the City Guard is handled. When our friends arrive they will find more difficulty than I believe they were expecting.”

Alexi nodded. “Good. So, different plan this time?”

Ressa shook her head ruefully. “Yes... We will be more—” she sighed. “...restrained. Our job here won’t be to confront the woman personally. It will be to disrupt her ability to assist the city. If we have to hire the Blades, we will.”

“Good. The last city... did not go well. It was not a good performance on our part.”

She agreed.

Marketbol had been an entire series of failures.

Swanbrook would be different. They were more prepared. No action would be taken until the Knights of Haven’s Hope departed. Ressa *really* hoped they would indeed leave the terran. Her group was severely outnumbered at this point.

As much as she wanted to *kill* that terran, she had to maintain her professionalism.

Going in unhinged would just get more people killed.

They would take it slow. Not attempting to force confrontations.

Ressa would use that time to learn more about her magic.

To learn more about *mana*.

She had a lot of work to do.



Amanda Levings groaned as she rolled over on her small bed. It was her recovery day.

Everything hurt. She had been subjected to more and more training by Ser Weylind over the past few weeks. He had been teaching her everything from hand-to-hand fighting to different ways of killing someone with a dagger. Not to mention the more academic topics that had been hammered into her brain.

She hated it.

Yet, every time she even considered saying no, it was like a sudden desire to learn *to kill* filled her.

She said yes and continued every time.

Amanda had thought the training before leaving for Avira was tough. Since arriving it had been worse. Lady Racine had told her that she would help her grandson. She never told her what else she would be required to do.

Every time she felt pressure in her head, she knew more pain would come. How long had she been at it?

Weeks?

Months?

Amanda wasn't even sure anymore. All she knew was what she was told. Every day except recovery day was the same. Wake up. Eat. Classroom instruction.

She would learn about etiquette, politics, medicine, alchemy, *poison*. Then they would move on to whatever plethora of subjects they deigned she must know.

Eat.

Then the worst would come.

Combat training.

No matter how much she wanted... how much she *needed* to stop, she couldn't. It was almost as if her body was no longer her own. As if she was losing who she was.

She just wanted to go home.

After combat training came bathing followed by attending to Lord Racine. The young man treated her like trash. However, he treated all of the servants like trash. She was required to act upon any request the young man may have.

*When did I become just a servant? When did I stop being a guest?*

Many of those requests... had become increasingly dark. There was something deeply wrong with the boy. He would soon be attending the Royal Academy and she would return to training.

*When did the desire to learn more ways to kill someone become so... enjoyable?*

Her sense of self was blurring. It was like she no longer even recognized herself.

A bang at the door caused her to shoot up. Her sore muscles groaned as she stood. A man entered. An elf.

His green eyes seemed to pierce through her. Ser Weylind was a strict taskmaster. However, the only pain he inflicted upon her was through training and spars. Any injury was quickly attended to by physicians.

*A gilded cage is still a cage.*

Pressure filled her and nearly caused her to buckle. Amanda knew that would only cause her training to last longer. Weakness would not be tolerated. The knight stared at her before turning and hesitating at the door.

She followed obediently.

This was supposed to be her day of remaining in her room. To give her sore muscles a chance to soothe. They never did.

The knight quietly led her throughout the manor until they reached the young lord's suite. When they entered, the old Amanda would have wanted to gasp. To cry out.

To flee.

The new Amanda would not. Such weakness had left her long ago. She was being forged into a new person.

A weapon.

Two guards were picking up the unmoving body of the boy's tutor. The high elf man's eyes were open and staring unfocused at the ceiling. Blood trailed down the man's face like tears. The young lord stood off to the side. Staring hatefully at the body.

Lord Racine glanced at her. "*Amanda*. Ser Weylind, you had to get *her*? What is she going to teach me? Terrans do not know *anything*."

*We know more than this shit world—*

Pressure filled her head.

The knight turned toward her and narrowed his eyes. "She will be adequate, My Lord. I have ensured her training is sufficient."

The boy groaned exaggeratedly. "Fine."

The knight gave her a nod and she walked to the table. She quickly scanned the books they lay on the table. *Easy enough. Basic subjects for a first-year student at the Royal Academy.*

She grabbed the book that was opened already, hopefully choosing the one they had already begun.

Ignoring the guards that removed the body, she sat down and glanced between the knight and the young lord. As the boy grumbled and took the seat next to her, she wished she could be back training. It was much more preferable to this.

Increased pressure caused her to wince. It was lucky that the young lord did not witness it.

Amanda Levings settled into her new role within House Racine.

And House Racine had invested much in her. Amanda was safe, for all that she had to accomplish tasks that she did not always enjoy. But such was life.



The burden of leadership was something that not all men could weather. It was something that must be bred for. Something that must be trained from birth. The other options were simply inefficient. *Bureaucracy*. Avira had it, of course, you could not manage the largest



kingdom on the continent without it. However, once it reached the point where it made *all* of the decisions, then your nation trudged to a stop.

Nevermind, the experiments in *collective* rule or even *representative* leadership. When the masses took control, a nation spiraled. A firm grip on the reins of society is what maintained stability. The masses needed that stability. That *order*. There was a reason that every nation of worth was either a kingdom or empire.

It was why the nobles with their ever-increasing desire to *steal* authority and power from the Throne needed to be *crushed*.

For Kerrell, the Crown Prince of Avira, it was his birthright.

His *duty*, to keep the nobles in line.

As the king aged, it was expected that the Crown Prince would start the long transition of power and authority. While Kerrell would not hold the *final* authority until that crown was settled upon his head, his father had been increasingly passing on day-to-day governance of the kingdom to his son.

His retainers and courtiers had immediately moved to expand his influence. Many deals had been made over the last two years. Many had borne fruit.

Some were lacking.

But where the vine withered, one must cut away the weakness to ensure the rest blossomed and grew.

Now the world had been turned upside-down by the arrival of the terrans, or *Displaced*, as the nation's scholars were calling them. Then they learned of magic.

He only had to learn of what occurred far to the west to the dwarves to know that magic was dangerous.

Oh, magic itself *could* be dangerous. In fact, most of it would likely have a positive influence upon the kingdom. The problem lay in that it could be learned by almost *anyone*. One did not arm commoners as they did a knight. That path lay a peasant's rebellion.

No. Kerrell would ensure that the kingdom would regulate and have a handle on this new resource. These... magicians—magi—would be utilized. They would be taught and be leashed to the throne.

And if he had to create another class of peoples to control them, he would.

The Crown had done it many times before.

But then there was this... *princess*. A terran.

Barely old enough to attend the Academy, which she had been permitted attendance. The girl was a threat. For she had sided with House Tiloral.

And now, emboldened by their new ally, his family's eternal rivals were maneuvering to stymie the Crown's authority and influence.

Count Angwin, one of his minor sycophants from the Duchy of Tiloral, had moved too soon. He tried to take revenge on this House... Reinhart for the death of his pathetic son.

An army was scoured by both a *child* and her paladin protectors. Who brought a level of force that hadn't been seen outside of an inquisition. It was... irritating. The Church was involving itself in Aviran politics. Such an act was unthinkable. It would take time and *many* resources to come up with a suitable response.

The Church taking an active position on both the terran girl and the heir to House Tiloral was another troubling development. One that he had to tread carefully. Any action he took could not come back upon him.

It seemed that everywhere he looked he was beset by imbeciles and incompetents.

It was no matter. The twins—his son and daughter—would also start the Academy soon. He would ensure that they understood what was expected of them. After all, the title of the heir was in the balance.

He walked into the council chambers, the men already within stood up from their seats until he sat at the head of the table. Prince Kerrell looked around those gathered.

All he saw were more sycophants.

When he took the throne, a purge may be in order.

“Your Highness. There has been news from our operatives in the north,” the general of the northern armies said. The high elf glanced at the kingdom's spymaster, who nodded.

“Yes, Your Highness. We have made headway into Turest. Something is happening on their northern border with the Norsval Forest. Our spies have yet to ascertain what, however, it has drawn their focus away from our own borders. We believe now is the time to enact our plans,” the spymaster said, a greying man who had served his father for decades. A man whose immediate subordinate ensured the organization did not fail completely.

*That man was likely the one who coordinated this.*

Kerrell nodded. “Good. Proceed. What of our plans regarding the war between the Sovereigns and the Vlaredians?”

The noble who represented the Duchy of Lis cleared his throat. “The Duchy of Lis stands ready to take advantage. As planned, we will move to ‘liberate’ the city of Rallan. As you are aware, they have been under siege by the Vlaredians for some time now. They are completely cut off from the rest of the Sovereigns.”

“Has Armanval reacted to the use of the pass?” Kerrell asked.

The Armanval Forest was one of the more... reactive of the great forests. The Valeni within were typically content to stay within the cities hidden within the forest. Or at least that was what they wished to think. Avira had long known that in order to maintain its safety, it needed to learn all it could about the Val Forests. After all, the kingdom had five such Valeni enclaves within its borders, and two more just outside of them. The knowledge they had gained on what lay within was a Crown secret gained through blood and one that would be kept.

The telv noble shook his head. “No, Your Highness. The forest is quiet.”

“Good. Proceed then. Lis will soon gain a valuable addition. Please pass along the Crown’s regards to the Duchess,” he told the representative from Lis.

The man bowed. “Her Grace looks forward to a closer relationship with the Crown and of course all of the benefits one brings.”

Kerrell had to consciously stop his eyes from rolling.

He ended the council and strode from the chamber. His mind was already moving to the next step. A meeting with his father, to discuss the terrans and whether to treat them all as a single people. Kerrell was of the mind that they should not. Why give a reason for people to join together in a common cause, it simply created situations like one noble had learned recently.

A large group of terrans had banded together and used their knowledge to take control of a castle. The one-hundred-odd men and women then fought off a larger force of the local count’s army. After Kerrell had learned of the act, it was something he had to see for himself. Under parlay, the terran leader had told him that might makes right. That terrans would have their own nation.

It was something that stuck with him.

Such a quaint phrase.

His status gave him much agency to dictate not only his life but those of others. It was a burden, but in it, he thrived. The great game was one that he was destined to control. As was his birthright.

And after he ordered his army to set the castle ablaze and cut down any who tried to escape, Kerrell realized that such a thought was one that his people, the Loreni, had embodied for millennia.

It created *legends* and sustained dynasties, but only for those who would take it.

All others deserved to be crushed under the boot of inevitability.