

5 Artun's Will

"There are rumors, my king, yes, but we know nothing for certain."

"Rumors are born of truths, Algar, even if they grow grotesque with time. There is something behind this, and we must find out what we can. Certainty is the hope of priests and fools... but ignorance is darker, for king's at least." Artun turned to his advisor and looked him in the eye. "We are not ready. To be ready in time requires that I know when that time is to be. If we rush too quickly, the end result will be weaker than it might be. If we wait too long, we are caught by surprise. We need every available hour, if there is any truth to the whispers, and for that we must know more."

"Yes, sire..." Algar paused, letting his king ask questions, rather than give unwelcome advice.

"But?"

"But those lands are wild. The savages roam them freely, though even they must take care, or the cold and beasts will take them. For a man to go in ignorance of the place? I fear no word will return though we send a hundred spies and scouts."

"What is the choice?" The king frowned as he spoke, knowing the truth of his advisor's words.

"There is one who could go."

"Who?"

"Do you remember King Gunthrin's man?"

"His black pet?"

Algar nodded.

"What of him?"

"When last they were here, the men of the entourage got to drinking... drinking and telling tales. There were many things to be learned that night, and among them was word of the man's past. Mirragel is his name, and he is something of a legend among them."

"He is skilled, I hear. Uncommonly so?"

"Yes. That. But there is more. He learned his skill from the savages themselves."

"Are they so skilled? I had thought their danger due more to numbers and fierceness born of life in the wilds. Hard places breed hard men, so they say."

"They are fierce, and they are hard men, but they are also born into bloodlust, tribal fighting, and hunting from childhood. Boys of five are bloodied and trained, the tales say."

"And they trained this man? This...?"

"Mirragel. Yes. That is, they took him when he was a boy, and he did not die. When he reemerged from the north, the men of Thorngraad say, he was a man. Deadly. Quiet. Haunted."

"And well versed in the ways of the northerners."

"Yes, my king."

"Send word to Thorngraad. Gunthrin must send his man... and he should know the expectations of his Lord and King. Preparations must be made. We will groom the Lord of Crogmoor, as well, but in the short term we may need quicker action. Let the Petty King make his own preparations. He is, after all, closer to the threat than are we. Go, make it so."

Algar bowed and left the room. He moved through the broad hallways, carved from the living rock of the inner promontory of Freynar, and made his way up the long, curving stairway that led to the pinnacle of the

palace, the Crown of Stars. This was the seat of arcane learning in the city, the place from which knowledge was pulled from the constellations, from the various contrivances and instruments of the sages and seekers, and the place at which, it was rumored, certain among the mages could pull open a tear in reality and look through into the many realms of dreams and death.

It was also where the Featherer kept his birds, the pigeons that were so useful in carrying messages from one palace to the next.

Algar greeted the Featherer with a nod and the man smiled back. Gherrin, was his name perhaps? Algar did not remember. The man was young, compared to most of the masters in the Crown, and had not even begun to grey at the temples. Thirty-some years, perhaps, had passed since his birth. There was no doubt, however, as to his mastery of his craft. He cared for the birds with skill, but his success was truly due to a particular gift for administration. The birds would always fly to their home roosts, wherever that may be, and once they did, they would be shipped in cages, back to where they started. Simple enough, perhaps, but to keep track of the many daily messages that flew between the capital and the dozens of cities and outposts across the realm, ensure enough birds to always have one on hand despite the slow return of the caged animals, and it all added up to a cascade of constantly moving parts, complicated further by the frequent loss of pigeons to hawks, foxes, illness, and arrows – and it took a certain kind of mind to ensure that there was always a bird on hand to fly home to whatever place the capital needed to contact. In addition to this, the returning bird needed to be tended and shipped out to whatever distant place might need to contact the capital, speedily or in time of need.

“You have need of a bird, my lord?” Gherrin stated the question, then added “To what destination? I will ready it.”

“Thorngraad. To Petty King Gunthrin. From the King.”

“Very well. I will prepare.”

Algar turned to the table beside him, just inside the rookery house door. Quills, ink, and small pre-cut sheets of paper lay there, along with a bowl of tiny leather tubes that could be tied to the legs of the birds. He penned his note, marked it with the sign of the High King, and rolled it into one of the tiny tubes. As he finished, Gherrin returned with a bird held gently in his hands.

“How long will it take to arrive in Thorngraad?”

“A few days, likely. The birds are swift, but there are many obstacles. Wind. Avoiding danger. But Artumus here is swift and brave. He will get there faster than any of the others would.”

Algar nodded. He handed the tube over. “Thorngraad will no-doubt send a reply,” he said, “I am to see it the moment it arrives. Straight to me, and none other.”

Gherrin bowed to the command. Algar was satisfied, and returned to the stairs. He was only two flights down when he heard his name being called from above. He paused. A moment later, Gherrin appeared, heading down the stairs toward him, already out of breath.

“Lord Algar, good. A bird has returned.”

Algar’s eyebrows rose.

“Not that one, my Lord, but another from one who was sent out. I do not know from where this bird came in, but it has the seal of the king’s man on it.”

Gherrin placed the note in Algar’s hand and bowed again as he took his leave and returned to the heights.

Algar looked at the object in his hand. A message tube, like the others, but this one stamped with a double cross, a heart stamped between the straight lines in the center of it.

Leopeld.

As much as Algar yearned to open it, he dared not. The king would not be pleased with such an act, when he, himself was on hand and able to open it. Algar descended the steps and retraced his way to the great balcony,

where the king then sat at table, eating a bird not unlike the ones that were flying his messages to and fro as he chewed.

He swallowed.

"What is it?"

"Word, sire, from Leopeld the bard."

"Ah, good. That was quick indeed. I did not expect word until he had a good read of the place. Open it. Read it to me."

Algar broke the seal and popped the little lid from the top. The paper was filled with tiny, neat letters. Algar's eyes widened a little, as he read.

"It is in the Winter Code. It reads thus: 'Arrived. Crogmoor is alive. Healing. Common maid with child. His Birth by harvest. Gueninna protects. Gunthrin doting. Crogmoor likely heir. Queen cold.' It is signed with his mark."

The eating had stopped. It was the king's mind that now chewed. "The orphan has a child coming..."

Algar let his lord's mind work, knowing better than to interrupt.

"Yes, that could work for us. Gueninna has her nose in it as well. Good. She can be moved to our needs when the time is right. For now we must show her support. Not too much – she would grow wary – but we must let her know that we protect the boy, Eric, and his unborn child. If he is clearly the boy's, and no better claim comes, then perhaps we have both the heir and the heir's heir... so close to us. The young shoots must be tended, Algar. We must be ready. When word leaks out, we proclaim our support for both Dirridain and his child. Accept it, even if the young lord does not... but we must press him to do so. If he has another later, a more legitimate child, then we can move our blessings. There may not be time, now, for that."

Algar bowed his agreement.

"Go now. I will finish my meal and then bathe. Think on these things, and I will do the same. Let us meet when the fires are lit, and you can share your mind with me then. I shall decide the right course."

Algar said no more, and slid from the room on silent feet.

Artun was troubled. As a king, his duty was to play his subjects and enemies the way a master chessman plays the pieces on the board, but his fevered mind could not concentrate on the game. He knew tales of the savages of the north, the men and women who painted themselves in bright colors, draped in feathers and colored bones, and rush into battle as if their goal was death, but their duty was to take as many others with them as they could. Some, he had heard tales, had skin thick as ox hides, able to turn blades from all but the most perfect strikes from their enemies.

Foolishness, likely. Probably even. But still, when he turned his thoughts to matters of politics, subtle sounds of battle rose up in the back of his mind. He saw dim images of charging hordes of killers swarming his beautiful city like flies over a dead bird.

Knowledge. That's what he needed. Gunthrin would send his man, Artun was sure of that much loyalty from the lesser king, but even then it would be weeks until he knew anything useful.

No. Greater measures must be taken. He did not like them, as a rule, but there were times when such risks were the least dangerous of the options.

He sighed.

Rose from his seat.

Turned toward the stairs.

He would walk much the same path Algar had, just a few minutes before, but when Artun reached the highest reaches of his home, he would not seek the bird keeper. No, there were others on the heights that he would seek.

"My king," the man in the yellow robe stated, bowing so low that his draping white beard brushed the stones at his feet, "We have been expecting you."

Artun doubted it, a little, but there was a table set, a fresh jug of wine beside warm food, and a plush chair drawn up to it as if for one to dine.

"If you are hungry?" the man gestured to the meal. "Our words may be long."

"It is not pleasantries I seek."

"Few do so, here."

"I want... knowledge."

"It is our stock and trade, Your Highness, as you know."

Artun felt his frustrations flash up, and his glance at the old man must have shown it.

"I am at your service. As are we all. What is it you wish us to seek out?"

"The west. The north."

"The savages, or your own people?"

"Both, if you can. But... I want to see the enemy. I want to see if the rumors are true."

"To see friends is easy, if they are willing. To see enemies is more difficult. They can be elusive. To know where to look we risk much exposure, and the wise among their own are not powerless."

"Show me."

"The gods exact a price. The Lady fades and the Cloak of Gilmesh falls over the land even now. Such a time is deceptive. The Dark One's price is often high... and seldom what it seems."

"Will it be true?"

"It will not be a lie, but it may also not be the whole of the truth."

"And the price?"

"I will not know until after the bargain has been struck and the Sight given. If you will me to do it, and will pay the price, I can begin immediately."

Artun nodded.

"It must be done in a place of power. I will ascend. I can see to it that an acolyte is here to serve your needs."

"This will do," the king waved a hand at the set table. "I will wait alone. My mind is not for company, even the silent tongue of a servant."

The old man reached the top of the stair and paused to take in some air and rest his old bones. He would keep the king waiting, just a little longer than the monarch could endure with patience, and then he would return with whatever news he had.

It would not be difficult.

Such things as scrying out the movements of enemies was a relatively easy task, from a place made to empower it. What demanded more of his thoughts was the price to ask. He did not lie to the king, the god would need to be honored, but horned Gilmesh hungered not for gold or silver. The wise would take that. Patrayin himself would claim his rightful share... perhaps a bit more for his troubles, and then he would arrange for something that would please the brooding god of shadows and darkness.

His breath caught, he forced his legs forward into the center of the tower. And rolled up his sleeves. He had scried many times – looked through into the Spatial Plane and out through another rift, to some point far away. It took a physical toll, yes, but not so much to harm him, and the spell was easy with years of use.

He stepped into the intricate design, marked out on the floor with inlaid blue stones, and his yellow robes hang still.

He closed his eyes.

A breath in.

A hand lifted.

Slowly, surely, the stones began to emit a soft light, blue at first – the same hue as the stones themselves – and then their light intensified, rising to a cool white radiance that rose up from the lines of the design like partitions of shimmering glass.

He raised both hands above him. The tattoos that whorled around his arms shuddered and shimmered as if with a light of their own... and then he opened his eyes and slowly reached out before him. As he extended his arms, the air in front of him warbled and faded, then opened to his touch and expanded until a narrow slit in the air itself waved there in the midst of the design with him.

He stepped forward, and was gone.

The rift remained in the room, gently humming with power and waving at the edges a little, as if pondering whether or not to stay.

Patrayin stepped over the flat, hard ground, counting his steps forward in the direction of the western lands. The space around him was thick with darkness, almost as if a thick smoke or dark fog filled the room, but it was not so. The darkness there was merely space. Open space. Nothing, it seemed – though the wise knew that great energy dwelt there, stewing and abiding its time until another great turning, when the gods would meet in negotiations of battle and the world around would be ready to receive another great influx of raw power, to fuel it for another era of light... or of darkness.

He knew that a step of a certain length would cover a mile of the distance between Freynar and the west. He would aim for Felkey, take a look, and then turn north.

The look was uneventful. The city looked well enough. Peaceful enough. He walked then, for a little while, north, and opened the rift again, feeling the blast of cold air and wind on his face.

He let his face relax, take it in, acclimatize itself to the frigid weather of the northern plains until he could open his eyes. He opened them.

And his mouth fell open at what he saw.