

Dark age of Camelot

A Spaniard
in Albion
BOOK III



THE KNIGHT
AND THE BASTARD
By Losnoopy

Exiled to the northern frontier of Albion, captured by Valkyries, and tasked by the Norse gods with settling a debt older than kingdoms—how much trouble can one man find himself in the middle of?

When Angela sends Los north to shield him from the gathering storm in Camelot, she cannot imagine what awaits him beyond Albion's borders—or what it will take for him to return.

Valkyries, demons, dwarves, and gods are dangers enough.

But when Lord Baldric finally strikes, the blow threatens to undo Los entirely. Sometimes learning the truth is more damaging than the lie meant to protect you. Los discovers that not every battle is fought with steel—and not every wound can be healed by faith alone.

As Angela fights to hold their world together in the aftermath, forces at court prepare a reckoning meant to strip Los of name, honor, and standing—without ever drawing a blade.

And as Los stands before the court, unarmed and unarmored, he must face a question no battlefield ever posed:

Can a man survive judgment when the truth itself is the weapon?

Or will it take a miracle—and the love of a woman—to save him?

In the Dark Age of Camelot,
Gods may demand sacrifice,
Men demand submission.

Dark Age of Camelot: A Spaniard in Albion

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Book III — The Knight and the Bastard

Table of Contents

Prologue — The Dwarves' Bargain.....	7
Chapter LI — The Knight at the Gate	12
Chapter LII — A Knight in Valhalla.....	32
Chapter LIII — The Road North Begins	39
Chapter LIV — The Burning Village	66
Chapter LV — The Wagon	94
Chapter LVI — The Goblin Passage	112
Chapter LVII — The Hidden Ally	121
Chapter LVIII — The Goblin Gamble	136
Chapter LIX — The Lady's Summons.....	143
Chapter LX — The Quiet Between	165
Chapter LXI — Sighildr's Hearth.....	177
Chapter LXII — Avalon	188
Chapter LXIII — The Dance Before the Dawn	201
Chapter LXIV — The Ambitions of Younger Men	223
Chapter LXV — Bledmeer	231
Chapter LXVI — The Three Forts of Anniogel	242
Chapter LXVII — The Shape of the Board	265
Chapter LXVIII — Word from the North.....	278
Chapter LXIX — The Return	293
Chapter LXX — Darkness Falls.....	312
Chapter LXXI — In the Pale Light of Dawn	320
Chapter LXXII — Rumors and Red Sashes	327
Chapter LXXIII — The Promise Before Excalibur	336
Chapter LXXIV — Last Stand at Excalibur	340
Chapter LXXV — The Round Table and the Trap	360
Chapter LXXVI — Brothers at the Wall.....	370
Chapter LXXVII — The Lost.....	379

Chapter LXXVIII — Sisters & Shadows.....	383
Chapter LXXIX — The Cost of Silence.....	392
Chapter LXXX — The Chapel Steps.....	400
Chapter LXXXI — The Arrest.....	410
Chapter LXXXII — The Courage to Choose.....	412
Chapter LXXXIII — Arthuur’s Lament.....	422
Chapter LXXXIV — The Trial	430
Chapter LXXXV — Home	443
Chapter LXXXVI — The Road to Avalon.....	452
Chapter LXXXVII — Los and Lorenzo	456
Chapter LXXXVIII — The Boy from Toledo.....	462
Chapter LXXXIX — A Father’s Word	468
Chapter XC — The Bastard’s Claim.....	473
Epilogue — Toledo	477

Prologue — The Dwarves' Bargain

Long ago—before sword met shield on Albion's soil, before a Spaniard's name was spoken in the halls of Camelot—there came a reckoning beneath the roots of the World Tree.

It began, as such bitter reckonings often do, with Loki.

The Trickster had cut the golden hair of Sif, wife of Thunder, and Thor's wrath was terrible to behold. To save his skin, Loki ventured down into Svartálfheim to bargain with the sons of Ívaldi, who forged for Sif new hair of living gold. And with that labor they made also Gungnir, the spear that does not fail, and Skidbladnir, the ship that ever finds fair wind and may be folded and borne in the hand.

But Loki was never content with one bargain when two might amuse him more. So he staked his own head against the brothers Sindri and Brokk, boasting that they could not match such works.

They could.

And they did.

From their forge came Draupnir, the golden ring that multiplied itself; Gullinbursti, the boar whose mane blazed like dawn; and last, greatest of all, Mjölhnir—the hammer of thunder, short in the haft, yet unmatched in might.

The gods judged the treasures.

To Freyr were given Skidbladnir and Gullinbursti.

To Odin were given Gungnir and Draupnir.

To Thor was given Mjölhnir, which the gods prized above all treasures, for it was not only a ward against Jotnar, but also a hammer of blessing and return.

Thus Sindri and Brokk had won.

And their prize was Loki's head.

But the Trickster smiled his crooked smile and said, "You may have my head—but not my neck."

No blade could claim one without the other. So Brokkr, denied his due, took awl and thong and sewed Loki's lips shut instead, and no god stayed his hand. Vartari they called that cord. And for a time, the halls were quiet.

But only for a time.

Loki ripped the stitches free. He laughed. He spoke again, as silver-tongued as ever, and the gods welcomed him back to their tables as though little had happened.

The dwarves watched from below.

They had won a god's head. And what had they received? A few holes in a liar's lips, healed almost as soon as they were made.

Worse still, the very treasures they had forged passed into the glory of other names. No one in the Nine Realms spoke of Sindri's hammer. They spoke of Thor's hammer. No one praised the craft of Ívaldi's sons. They praised Odin's spear. The dwarves had given the Aesir much of their glory, and in return the Aesir had left them shadow and silence.

So the dwarves remembered.

They planned.

They waited.

Until one cold dawn, their moment came.

The Abduction at Dawn

Far above Svartálfheim, in a high lodge set among the peaks where cloud and mist clung to the stone, two Valkyries slept beneath a silver sky.

Not those of the elder songs, but two others who bore those names: Brynhildr and Sigrún, twin sisters born of one womb and one hour, identical in face and fire. Brynhildr, elder by moments only, carried the calmer heart. Sigrún was the swifter storm. Together they were fiercest among Odin's chosen, and dear to the Aesir. Where they rode, battle turned. Where they wept, songs were made for the dead.

But that night even the watchful stars did not see what passed.

Cloaked in soot-dark shadow, the dwarves entered the lodge unseen.

Wards failed before them.

Runes went dumb.

No sword sang.

And by the time the morning frost touched the windowpanes, Brynhildr was gone.

Sigrún woke to emptiness.

She searched the lodge.

She searched the heights.

She searched the streams and the sacred groves below.

She found no blood.

No torn cloth.

No sign save absence.

At last Huginn and Muninn returned to Valhalla, Odin's ravens, who miss little beneath the sky. Then the truth was known.

Brynhildr had been taken alive into Svartálfheim, beneath the roots of Yggdrasil, where the dwarves keep their halls in stone and furnace-fire.

The Gods' Rage and the Dwarves' Gambit

The fury of the gods was swift.

Thunder walked the sky. Fenrir howled in his prison bonds. Thor gripped Mjölhnir until the short haft creaked in his hand. Freyja wept.

"They dare take one of mine?" Odin thundered. "Then we shall burn their mountain hollow."

Many in that hall thought war would begin before the day was out.

But the dwarves had prepared well. Before the gods descended in wrath, messengers came up from the deep places.

They came unarmed.
They came under truce.
They bowed to no one.

Then Odin bade them speak.

And the dwarf who led them spoke thus:

"We remember what was forged.
We remember what was won.
We remember what was denied."

"Loki was yours, not ours. The wager was ours, and yet he kept his head. We were given stitches where we had won blood. We forged the things by which you are feared and respected, and yet our names were buried beneath yours."

Thor would have risen then and dashed the speaker dead upon the floor, but Odin lifted one hand, and Thor sat again, though anger still shook him like thunder in a cloud.

So Odin said, "Speak all. And speak plainly. If Brynhildr has been harmed, no depth of stone will hide you."

The envoy answered, "She lives."

At that, the darkness in the hall lessened, though none there trusted the speaker.

Then the dwarf continued:

"Strike us down if you will, and we shall unmake what you hold dear: the hammer, the spear, the fetter that binds the wolf.

"But if you would have another bargain, hear our terms."

"Not by gods shall Brynhildr be won back.

Not by dwarf.

Not by any man of the kingdom of Midgard."

"Let a mortal fetch her out of Svartálfheim. Let him come into our halls and free her by deed, not bargain. If he does so before three moons are spent, then we shall count the old debt ended and our vengeance satisfied.

"If he fails, then let the old wager be fulfilled, and give into our hands the head of Loki."

Then the high hall fell silent.

For all understood the weight beneath those words. The dwarves did not boast idly. If they turned their craft against the things they had once made, then the spear might fail in war, or the hammer lose the strength laid into it at the first forging, or the fetter of Fenrir grow weak at the worst of all hours.

Then Frigg asked, "What mortal shall do this thing, if not one born beneath Midgard's throne?"

Now silence held the high hall like a blade to the throat.

Not a man of Midgard? Then who?

Who would they find, if not among their own?

The riddle vexed the Gods.

So they turned to Mímir, the ancient head of wisdom, whose counsel is not lightly sought.

Odin bowed his head.

"Who shall we find to rescue the Valkyrie, to bring Brynhildr home?"

And Mímir answered without opening his eyes.

Look west. To the kingdom of Albion.

Seek a knight of Albion, a Paladin, for those who bear the Light and the sword are oath-bound to shield the defenseless.

Three days hence, at Caer Benowyc, shall a knight come clad in red and gold, with a great sword in hand.

It is he you seek.

Then all in the hall grew still, for Mímir's words had the sound of fate in them.

Then Odin gave judgment.

Sigrún would go.

Other Valkyries would ride with her.

Together they would seek the man who would rescue her twin, her sister, her living mirror.

Chapter LI — The Knight at the Gate

The Road North

By the second day of travel, Alfred had decided silence was wasted on Sir Los Ortiz. This was unfortunate for Los, who had hoped for at least one quiet stretch of road before reaching *Caer Benowyc*.

"So, young man," Alfred asked from the saddle beside him, as though inquiring about the weather, "you truly fought a dragon?"

Los did not look over. "I truly got eaten by one, *jes*."

Alfred blinked. "That is not the same thing."

"*Jes*. *Jou* say that now."

For a moment Alfred only stared. Then, despite himself, he laughed.

Los glanced sideways at him and allowed the corner of his mouth to twitch.

The cleric was older than he had expected—well into his middle years, perhaps past them—with weathered cheeks, a thickening waist, and the sort of face that looked made for smiling and a little mischief. His robes were travel-stained, his boots muddy, and there was something pleasantly shameless in the way he occupied the world, as though discomfort had long ago ceased to impress him.

An ornery old cleric, Los thought.

Alfred shifted in the saddle. "I was told you were very serious."

"I am serious."

"No, you are not, young man. You are terrifying in a cheerful way. That is different."

Los snorted.

Alfred's gaze drifted to the sword across Los's back—not grand or great, but a plain two-handed sword, the largest of four blades the Paladin wore. A short sword hung at his side, a dagger rode at his belt, and a hunting knife was strapped across his back.

"Is that the sword you used to slay the dragon?"

Los shook his head. "No. This one I had made for me. Smaller than my usual great swords, but I thought it might travel better while I escorted you to Caer Benowyc."

Alfred squinted at the rather plain-looking weapon. "I see."

Los smirked. "Besides, it is faster and easier to handle than my great swords. And it feels sturdier."

Alfred glanced at the blade once more and gave a slow nod. "Well, if it works for you."

"Jes well," Los said. "With my luck, we might jus find out."

At that Alfred laughed out loud again.

They rode a little farther in easy silence before Alfred spoke again.

"I suppose I should call you Sir Los."

Los sighed. "Must you?"

"It seems respectful."

"It seems old."

"You are a knight."

"Jus call me Los."

Alfred considered that for a moment before replying.

"Then just call me Alf."

That got a real smile.

"Alf?"

"Yes. It is shorter, and easier to yell in a fight."

"It is terrible." Los crinkled his nose.

"Well, it is my name, young man. And you are one to talk, like Los is any better."

Los shook his head. He had to admit, if only to himself, his own name was not much better, as back home it meant *The*.

"Fine. Alf it is."

The old cleric beamed as though some solemn pact had just been sealed.

After a while Alfred asked, "Do you always run towards danger?"

Los adjusted the strap on his shield. "Only when it looks especially inconvenient."

"That explains nothing."

"Jes. Jou say that now."

Alfred studied him another moment. "I was also told you are difficult to keep alive."

Now Los looked at him, a bit shocked. "By whom?"

"Everyone."

"That sounds unfair."

"It sounded unanimous."

Los laughed under his breath.

"It cannot be that hard. I am still alive."

Alf grinned. "So far."

Ahead, the road bent along a rise, and the wind shifted.

Then both men smelled smoke.

Alf straightened in the saddle.

Los's smile vanished.

They pressed their mounts onward, and when they reached the shore, Caer Benowyc lay before them under siege.

The keep stood blackened and battered against the morning sky. Smoke rose from within the outer wall. Men moved in frantic knots along the battlements. Below, Midgard warriors drove a ram again and again against the southern gate, and each blow shuddered through the wood like a death-knell not yet finished.

For one heartbeat neither man spoke.

Then Alf saw it happen.

Los went still—not with fear, but with that dangerous stillness a young horse gets before it bolts. A colt at the gate, all gathered muscle and impatient fire. Alfred had been warned about that too. The Spaniard did not wait for battles. He lunged towards them.

“Stay behind me,” Los said.

Alf frowned towards the southern approach. “If we go straight in there, we’ll die before we reach the wall.”

Los was already turning his mount westward. “Which is why we are not going straight in there. We are going to cross the river mouth to the west, circle the island, and make a run for the north postern door.”

“Why the north?”

“Because they will expect us at the south postern.”

Alf stared once, then laughed despite the battle going on across the river. “That is either very clever or very foolish.”

“Usually both,” Los said as he cocked his head.

Together they wheeled west, cutting down to the river mouth, crossing where the bank dipped into deep water, swimming their horses across, hoping they would not drown. Arrows hissed somewhere far off towards the main fight, but none were looking for two riders there. The enemy’s eyes were fixed on the damaged south wall and the ram hammering at the gate.

They reached the north postern unchallenged.

A sentry on the wall above cried out in relief when he recognized Los, and the door was flung open just wide enough to drag them inside before the bar dropped again.

Chaos met them at once.

Men ran with buckets. Others hauled wounded towards the inner keep. Smoke rolled through the yard in black gusts. Somewhere above, a woman was shouting for more arrows. Somewhere else, a horse screamed.

Lord Sigimund strode through it all with soot on his face and blood on one sleeve, giving orders with a calm that prevented panic among the men.

He stopped when he saw them.

"Sir Los." Relief flashed across his face. "How many did you bring with you?"

Los nodded to Alf.

"We were expecting a relief force," Sigimund said, disappointed.

"Well, you got me. How are you holding up?"

"The main gate is nearly gone. When it falls, they'll pour through and there is not much we can do about it. We are about to pull everyone back to the keep."

Los looked towards the thunder of the ram and drew one steadying breath.

"Good."

Sigimund stared at him. "Good?"

"Jes. Pull them back."

The lord's brow darkened. "We will need time."

"Jes," Los said, unstrapping his shield. "And I will buy it, by holding the gate."

Sigimund opened his mouth to argue, but Alf spoke first.

"It will be all right."

Both men looked at him.

The cleric pointed upward towards the gatehouse. "There's a murder hole over the main gate, yes?"

Sigimund blinked. "There is."

Alf nodded as though discussing church repairs. "Good. Put me there."

Los turned to him. "What?"

Alf pointed towards the gate. "You hold the ground directly beneath it. Not five paces left. Not five paces right. Hold that patch, and I can keep healing you from above."

Los stared at him as the ram thundered again against the gate.

Alf went on calmly. "If you wander out of range, then you will have to explain yourself to Saint Peter."

Sigimund looked between them as though both had gone mad.

Then Los asked the only question that mattered.

"Jou are sure?"

Alf snorted. "Young man, I have been keeping fools like you alive since before you were born. Hold the gate and let me do my work."

For half a breath Los just looked at him.

Then he grinned.

"Jes," he said. "Jou are right."

Alf frowned. "I know I am."

"Jou are one ornery old cleric."

Alf barked a laugh. "And yet here you are, delighted to have me."

Los drew his sword.

"That remains to be seen." He grinned.

The ram struck again.

Wood split.

Men shouted.

Sigimund turned and began giving new orders. "Fall back! All of you. Fall back to the inner keep! Leave the gate to Sir Los, everyone else, fall back to the keep!"

Alf caught Los once by the forearm before they split.

"It will be fine," he said. "I have you."

And strangely enough, Los believed him.

Then they ran—Los for the gate below, Alf for the gatehouse above.

The Gate

The ram hit once more.

The main gate burst inward in a shower of splintered wood and sparks. Midgard's front line gave a great cry and dug in to drag the ram back, clearing the gate so they could flood through the smoking breach behind it.

Then the men on the ram stopped in confusion.

For from inside the shattered gate, a knight in gold and red had seized the broken head of the ram and was shoving with them, helping them clear the wreckage from the entrance.

"¡Puja! ¡Puja! A little more!" Los barked, shoulder to the timber.

One of the Norsemen actually obeyed before realizing who he was pushing beside. Then he watched as if the knight had lost his mind.

The ram lurched back another pace then another.

The broken head of the ram and the wreckage around it had not been hauled entirely clear. It sat at an angle from the threshold, leaving one side more open than the other. To Los's left, splintered timber and broken gate choked the footing. To his right, the lane was cleaner, but narrow enough that only a few could come well at a time.

Good.

Let them come that way.

Los let it go, stepped into the smoking gap, and gave the ground one quick measuring glance—the churned earth, the broken timber, the narrowing throat of the breach. Then he looked once up towards the murder hole.

"Jes," he muttered. "Right there."

And there he planted his boots.

Above, in the gatehouse, Alf stared down in open disbelief.

The old cleric had spent two days deciding Sir Los Ortiz was cheerful, reckless, and entirely too comfortable with danger.

And now he had seen him arrange a battlefield like furniture.

"Well?" Los shouted into the stunned Norsemen. "Did jou jus come to break doors?"

For half a heartbeat, Midgard stared.

Then they came.

And Los met them.

His sword rose and fell in arcs of discipline and fury, each swing carving space for retreating defenders inside the castle. Men who rushed him too closely paid for it in blood. His blade worked in brutal, efficient turns, drawing attackers towards the gate where their numbers would choke them more than helped them as they tried to crowd around the abandoned ram. The angled wreck of it also blocked a clear view from behind, so their healers could not easily call down Eir's blessings upon their warriors.

Above him, unseen by the enemy, Alf took his place over the murder hole.

The first axe struck Los's shoulder.

He staggered.

From above came the old cleric's voice, strong as a chapel bell. Filtering down through the hole like the voice of an ancient god.

"Refocillatio Maior!"

The blessing poured down.

Los straightened and returned the axeman's blow, driving him back.

A spear grazed his side.

A hammer clipped his helm.

Again the healing came.

Again he stood.

Below, men cursed. Above, Alf laughed like a man who had found his proper place in the world, withdrawing an apple from his surcoat as he watched the battle beneath him.

Blow.

Fall.

Refocillatio Maior.

Recover.

The defenders of Benowyc fell back just as ordered, streaming towards the inner keep while one Castilian and one ornery old cleric turned the shattered gate into an impassable breach.

Come the Valkyries

They came on the third day, just as Mímir had foretold—winged helms glinting beneath a blood-colored dawn, their steeds running not across fields, but through the clouds themselves.

Sigrún, second of the twin daughters of war, led her sisters across the sea that divided Midgard from Albion. No horn was blown. No banner was raised. They came swift and silent, like judgment.

Below them, the battle roared.

Caer Benowyc, proud outpost of Albion's northern reach, stood bruised and breaking. Flames licked skyward from the broken gate. Midgard's warriors crowded the breach, yet something strange had checked their flood.

Then she saw him.

A lone knight, gold-plated and crimson-sleeved, stood fast in the ruined gate bearing a two-handed sword.

Not retreating.

Not cowering.

Seemingly fearless, as he stood before the breached gate.

His sword rose and fell, parrying and then opening space in an unusual style that drew men in and confounded their swings. His voice rang out above the din—not with commands, but with defiance and power—and with each word the Light seemed to burn more brightly upon him.

Sigrún narrowed her eyes.

A Paladin.

So that was why he stood so stubbornly.

He did not fight like a man expecting to live.

Yet still he would not yield.

Around him the Midgard warriors checked and hesitated, unsure whether they faced a man or some half-mad thing made of oath and iron.

She watched as he used the ruined ram to block the view of the Midgard healers, preventing them from calling down Eir's blessings unless their wounded retreated from the breach.

Sigrún's mouth hardened.

There was no mistaking the colors. No mistaking the sword. No mistaking the signs Mímir had given.

So she descended upon the shore.

Her horse struck the earth upon the beach, and men on both sides recoiled at once. Midgard's captains saw her and knew her at once. The Valkyries with her fanned wide, winged helms bright through smoke and ash.

Sigrún lifted her sword and pointed straight at the knight in the gate.

Then she raised her voice in fierce command.

"Leave that vone to us."

The Capture

The order moved through the line at once.

Men dragged the wounded clear. Others stumbled back towards their own, clutching slashed arms or bleeding shoulders while healers rushed forward to tend them. One Norseman Los had cut across the thigh fell to a knee before being hauled behind the

line by two companions. Another, his forearm laid open, backed away swearing, only to vanish into the hands of a healer.

And in the sudden space they left behind, Sir Los Ortiz stood alone, checking the damage to his armor. The armorer was earning his coin this day.

He spat blood to one side and adjusted his grip as he took in the newcomers.

Winged helms. Women.

Valkyries.

"Oh, hell," he muttered under his breath. "More of them. Great."

One he could fight.

Two? Three?

No. He knew what that meant.

Still he set his boots where he wanted them—just beneath the murder hole, with the shattered gate at his back and the ram still lying crooked before him.

That mattered.

Let them come the hard way.

Then he took a half a step too far forward.

Above him, crouched in the gatehouse, Alf peered down through the murder hole and muttered.

"Oh no," the old cleric said. "Young man, don't you go making this difficult. You stay right where I can see you."

The first Valkyrie came in fast—faster than any mortal woman had ever charged him.

Not through the open lane.

Through the wreckage.

Los met her with a short, brutal turn of the blade that knocked her strike wide and drove her back into the splintered timber of the ram. She lost her footing and crashed over backward. Before she had even hit the ground, a second came through the cleaner side, cutting for his shoulder.

He pivoted, caught the blow hard on his shoulder, before striking her off balance. Then, releasing one hand from the hilt, he seized her by the shoulder and slammed her face-first into the angled ram. The third tried to use the instant between them. Her spear rang the side of his helm hard enough to turn the world white at the edges.

Los stumbled then recovered, stepped in and drove the pommel of his sword into her chest, knocking the wind from her lungs and sending her reeling backward over the broken ram, clearing the ground for one precious heartbeat.

From above, Alf threw out a hand as Los stepped back into view.

"Refocillatio Maior!"

Light poured down through the hole and over Los's battered shoulder.

He straightened in the breach.

Sigrún's eyes narrowed. As her Valkyries were dragged back to be healed by Eir's blessing.

They were not facing some half-trained knight. This man understood the ground beneath him. He had planted himself not merely in the breach, but where the broken ram and wreckage forced every attacker into a narrowed choice. The cluttered side stole footing. The cleaner side stole numbers. He was making the landscape fight for him.

Los could feel himself sucking stale air through a slit that suddenly felt no wider than a needle's eye. Heat choking him. Sound came muffled and wrong. He could barely see them, barely hear them, barely judge the distance fast enough. Most fights this did not bother him, but most fights did not go this long.

Enough of this.

He could tell by the way they struck at his joints and helm that they were not trying to kill him.

With a jerk, he ripped the helmet free and dragged in a deep breath of cool sea air.

One Valkyrie lunged the instant she saw his face.

Los met her with the helmet itself.

The rim smashed across the side of her head with a hard crack, staggering her so badly she nearly went to the ground. Before the next could adjust, he reversed the motion and drove the battered helm into her head as well with the return swing.

She reeled and fell as well.

Then he hurled the helmet at the third.

To steal one heartbeat.

It worked.

They flinched.

Only for an instant.

But that was enough.

Los seized the sword in both hands again, rolled his shoulders once, and smiled with that crooked grin of his.

"Much better. Shall we, ladies?"

For the first time, uncertainty touched them.

Sigrún saw it and cursed inwardly.

Enough.

She stepped forward.

"Clear the ram!" she snapped.

Two troll warriors rushed in at once, hooks and hands on the splintered length. Others leapt to help them. Timber scraped stone. The broken ram shifted, dragged farther aside, opening the cleaner lane wider and clearing the space about the breach.

Los watched it happen.

Well, he thought, so much for that.

Sigrún's voice cut across the field.

"Together!" she snapped. "Stop feeding him vone by vone. Brynja, take the cleaner side. Freydis, through the timber. Yrsa, his sword arm. Runa, the cloak. Make him turn!"

They moved as one.

One drove hard through the open lane.

Another came over the broken wreckage to his left.

A third hovered just behind, waiting for him to commit.

Los saw it as it formed and understood at once what had changed.

At last, someone clever.

The Valkyrie through the cleaner lane cut high. He caught it and shoved her wide—
—and the one coming through the splintered side lunged not for flesh, but for cloth.
Her hand seized the back edge of his cloak and jerked hard.

The pull did not throw him down.

It did worse.

It misaligned him.

His boots slipped a fraction on churned timber and ash. The next cut, which he would have met squarely a heartbeat earlier, now glanced off his shoulder instead and jarred him half a pace towards the cleaner side of the breach.

Out from the center of the patch he had chosen.

Alf saw it immediately.

“Damn you, Spaniard,” he hissed. “Back under the hole!”

Below, Los fought to do exactly that.

He battered the woman on the clean side off-line with a hard turn of his blade, kicked splintered timber into the path of the one coming left, and thrust hard enough to drive a third back over the angled ram. But now they were no longer arriving uncoordinated. Now they were arriving in concert, over open ground, forcing him to turn, reset, and turn again.

He hacked the spear wide, shouldered the shield-maiden off-line, and almost tore free of the cloak—

—but one woman struck at his knee, taking what strength remained in the leg.

Another Valkyrie seized his sword arm.

Another his left.

They pulled together.

His knee hit stone.

Then both hands slammed down into the churned ruin of the threshold to keep from going face-first into it.

Even then he tried to rise, muscles bunching as though he meant to throw them all off and continue the fight.

Sigrún saw dark hair, a bloodied jaw, the set of his shoulders as he still tried to stand beneath the weight of them.

No, no ordinary Paladin.

She stepped in.

He looked up and saw her then—really saw her—through the tangle of bodies and steel and chain. The leader. The one he should have gone for first.

Too late.

Sigrún reversed her sword and brought the pommel down hard into the back of his head.

Light burst white across Los's vision.

His arms buckled.

For the first time, he did not rise.

All of them were on him at once.

One wrenched the sword free lest he should find strength to reclaim it. Another twisted his arms back and lashed his wrists. Someone caught his jaw as he came half-awake, and a gag was forced between his teeth before any curse or challenge or chant could emerge. The hood came down over his head, swallowing smoke, battle, and dawn alike.

Even then he strained against them.

Only when the cords bit deep and his strength sagged beneath the fresh stun of the blow did Sigrún rise, breathing hard.

Around her, her sisters were marked by him.

One bled from the nose.

One held her shoulder.

Another had blood running down from the temple where the helmet had struck her.

Sigrún looked down at the bound knight at their feet.

Then she said, "Take him."

No one struck him again.

No one mocked him.

They lifted him between them and carried him from the field like dangerous cargo while Midgard's line, seeing him finally taken, gave a roar that was half triumph and half relief.

Above, Alf stared through the murder hole helplessly as they bore the Spaniard away. He looked out over the parapet and watched in disbelief as the Valkyries carried him down towards a waiting longboat along the shore.

"Light keep you, Los," he muttered hoarsely.

By the time Sabbince's relief force crested the eastern rise—well mounted and charging, Sir Sabbince in gold and red armor, his great two-handed sword in hand—the Valkyries were already at the water.

And it was too late.

The defenders behind the gate rallied at last, but the Spaniard was gone, swept away like a candle's flame by an unseen wind.

They cast him into the hull of the longboat none too gently, though not carelessly either. They needed him alive.

Salt wind hit the back of his neck.

Water slapped wood.

Oars bit the sea.

Inside the hood, Los stirred.

Pain pulsed at the back of his head. His wrists burned. His mouth tasted of blood and cloth.

He heard women's voices above him, harsh and breathless with effort.

"Is he vaking?"

"He is."

Then Sigrún's voice, hard as drawn steel:

"Keep an eye on him."

The boat pushed off from shore, and Caer Benowyc began to fall away behind him.

As the longboat cut through the sea's black mirror, Sigrún looked down at the prisoner at her feet.

His chest rose and fell, slow and steady. Even bound, even gagged, he still seemed to strain faintly against the cords, as though some part of him refused to accept his fate.

She scowled.

To think I must turn to this, she thought. A mortal. An enemy. A man of Albion.

She did not know his name. Only the prophecy. The colors Mímir had spoken of. The sword, borne in both hands—

Though not the great sword of the telling. Smaller. Plainer.

She pushed the thought aside. The colors were right. The bearing was right. He had to be the one.

Had she known that beneath the hood was Sir Los Ortiz, the Spaniard—bane of demons, slayer of wyrms and giants—perhaps she would not have bound him so harshly.

Or perhaps she would have bound him tighter.

The Silent Knight

Below the hood, Los clenched his jaw.

Captured. Restrained. Carried away from the battlefield like a prize stag.

And yet... he was not afraid. Only confused.

No Midgardian warrior had laid him low. No blade had crippled him. And these captors—strange. Not brutes. Not beasts. Women... and not just any women.

Valkyries. What do Valkyries want with me? Revenge?

Had he only known...

And had they asked, he might have come willingly.

The Reckoning

Caer Benowyc — The Ramparts at Dusk

The wind whispered cold over the battlements as the sun bled into the western hills.

Lord Sigimund turned sharply, his voice heavy with rage.

"What do you mean you could not save him? Lord knows what evil things they're doing to him right now!"

Sir Sabbince stood his ground, jaw clenched.

"It was save the keep, or save the Spaniard. I chose the lives within these walls."

He stared outward at the dimming fields. "Besides, by the time I arrived, he was already being hauled onto a longboat. No one could have reached him. No one could have done more."

"Aye," came the somber voice of Lord Kalorian. "And yet... Sir Los would have tried.

Charged the longboats himself, scattered their lines, carved a swath through the Midgard host until they dragged him down."

His tone was half mocking—half resolute. "It's what he does."

Sir Romao let out a dry, half-laugh.

"I can hear him now, surrounded—crying out something like 'Now you cannot escape!' Or 'One at a time! Wait your turn!'"

A moment of silence fell over the group before soft laughter followed. Even Sabbince smirked.

Then Sigimund's voice cut through.

"Grateful as we are for your arrival, Sabbince... it was Sir Los who bought us the time to rally. He held the gate alone, while the rest of us fell back. This keep still stands partly because of him."

He stared out over the sea, eyes steel.

"We owe him our lives. The least we can do is mount a rescue—and try to save his."

"If he still lives," muttered Sir Alcarin darkly.

"He was alive when they hauled him off. I saw it myself," Alf said as he joined them.

"Why take him alive if they meant to kill him?" countered Sir Raltir.

"Maybe to sacrifice him to their heathen gods," Romao spat, his disgust audible as he turned to the parapet.

Sir Raltir frowned.

"I don't think the Norse still practice ritual sacrifice, Romao. But the question stands—why him?"

"To King Eirik, perhaps," offered Alcarin. "The ones who took him were well-dressed, well-armed. Palace guard, by the look."

"All women," Lord Sigimund added quietly.

The group went still.

"Valkyries," Raltir whispered, voice grim.

The word landed like a stone.

Valkyries did not serve mortal kings. They served the pagan gods of Midgard. If Los had been taken by them, this was no political maneuver.

"But what would Valkyries want with Los?" asked Sabbince, not expecting an answer—but needing one all the same.

"Come with me," said Sigimund at last. "We managed to capture a few prisoners of our own."

His voice darkened.

"Let's see what they know."

Chapter LII — A Knight in Valhalla

The doors of Valhalla groaned open with ancient weight, revealing a chamber not built by gods so much as claimed by them—hewn from the bones of creation, roofed with shields, and walled in tales of valor. There, upon a throne carved from stone older than memory, sat Odin Allfather, his one eye sharp as prophecy.

At his left stood his son Thor, god of thunder, silent and storm-browed. At his right, Tyr the Just. Arrayed around them, the gods of Asgard waited, their divine gaze fixed upon the bound figure Sigrún and her sisters had brought forth.

Odin lifted a hand.

"Unhood him."

The cloth was drawn back.

Gasps rippled through the hall—not of surprise, but recognition.

The Knight Revealed

There stood Sir Los Ortiz—red-sleeved, gold-armored, sword-callused and battle-worn. The Spánverji. The Paladin. Slayer of wyrms and giants. His was a name known in Albion and whispered across the heathen realms in hatred and respect, alongside those of Sir Rex, Sir Jamison, and Lord Prack.

And here he was...

...in the hall of the slain.

Among the honored dead, some sent there by his own hand.

Anger erupted.

Cries of outrage, oaths of vengeance, the clash of tankards and the thunder of fists upon the feasting tables.

"Vhat is he doing here!"

"He burned my village!"

"Send him to Helheim!"

The dead had long memories.

Especially those who had fallen to his sword.

Los remained silent. His eyes scanned. His muscles tensed. He did not bow. He did not tremble.

Was this to be an execution? A trial?

The Outrage of the Valkyrie

It was Loki who broke the silence first.

Leaning lazily against a carved pillar, the Trickster looked from Sigrún to the bound knight before her and laughed aloud.

"Oh, Sigrún," he said, amusement curling through every word. "You were told to fetch a knight of Albion—not a son of Spánn."

Her hand flew to her sword.

She had taken the wrong man—and worse, she had taken Sir Los.

She had heard the stories of him. The slayer of men, trolls, and kobolds. A scourge of Midgard. How many had he sent into the hallowed halls of Valhalla? How many of her own people had crossed swords with him and died?

"Then I will correct the mistake now!" she shouted.

Steel sang as her blade left its sheath.

Los moved on instinct.

He had been working the cords at his wrists for some time now, turning them and testing them, until one hand slipped free. Then he waited. When Sigrún attacked, he moved.

She came at him fast, all wrath and wounded pride, blade flashing for his neck.

Los stepped aside.

Her strike cut empty air.

In the same instant he seized her sword wrist, turned beneath it, and used all the force of her own attack against her. Sigrún's feet left the floor. She hit the stone hard enough to rattle cups on the nearest table.

Her sword tore free and landed in his hand.

"Thank jou!" he said as he freed his mouth from the gag.

Gasps broke through the hall.

Then the honored dead of Valhalla surged to their feet as one.

Benches scraped back.

Tankards crashed over.

Axes were snatched up. Spears lifted. Swords hissed from scabbards. Men who had once fallen in battle to him now saw the chance to settle old debts in the hall of the slain.

"Cut him down!" was the cry of the Einherjar.

Los turned with Sigrún's sword in his grip.

Hand closing on its hilt—

—and he knew at once it was wrong.

Not the blade.

The grip.

Too small, too cramped for his hand, and balanced for another.

His eyes flicked towards the nearest Valkyrie, the one burdened with his confiscated weapons. She stood frozen in shock, cradling them awkwardly in her arms—his longer sword cumbersome, his shorter sword more readily drawn.

She had one too many things in her hands to react.

Los took advantage of it.

He let Sigrún's sword turn in his palm, reached for the startled Valkyrie before she could even think to move, and plucked his short sword cleanly from the tangle in her arms.

Now there was a weapon in his hand that belonged there.

Not the sword he wanted.

But it would do.

He wheeled to face the advancing dead.

One man. Two blades. And a determined look on his face.

If he had to kill his way out of Valhalla, so be it.

There was someone he had to make it home to.

He set his feet.

The hall rushed towards violence.

Behind him, Sigrún pushed herself up from the floor, one hand braced against the stone. Her hair had loosened in the fall. Her face burned—not from pain, but from humiliation. She looked up just in time to see him armed.

Armed.

Because of her.

The dead closed in.

Then thunder split the hall.

The Judgment of the Gods

A bolt of lightning struck the floor between Los and the advancing dead. The ground shook. Men fell back.

Thor lowered Mjölir.

Tyr raised his voice.

"ENOUGH!"

The god of law and judgment stepped forward.

"This man is a guest," he said. "And he shall remain so. Break *grið* in Odin's hall, and I will cast you down to Helheim myself."

A hush fell.

Odin stroked his beard, thoughtful.

"So," he said at last, "this is the one called Los." He did not smile. He did not frown. He simply regarded him with the cold, measuring patience of a god who had expected one answer and found another.

"Spánverji," Odin said. "Even here, your name is known."

Los narrowed his eyes.

"Sir Los," he replied, before giving the barest formal bow.

He had been greeted by kings with more warmth.

The Unwritten Path

Then spoke Vör, goddess of wisdom.

"If this is not the man first sought," she said, "let us ask Mímir what fate lies before him should he take up this task."

Los did not believe in fate. A man made his own choices, suffered his own consequences, and did not hide behind destiny for either.

From the shadows came the ancient oracular head of Mímir, his lips stitched with moss and time.

The question was put.

Mímir was silent.

For a long while, only the creak of banners and the crackle of the hearth filled the hall.

At last, Mímir spoke.

"It shall take the heart of two men to complete this task," he said, "but one must fail for the other to succeed."

The gods stared at Los in confusion, but Mímir said no more.

Only Los grinned.

Then the grin faltered.

Two men? he thought. Who is the other?

From across the hall, Fulla, handmaiden to Frigg, whispered to her mistress, "He is handsome. Perhaps we might keep him here."

Frigg smiled wistfully.

"He is not meant for these halls."

The Oath of the Paladin

Los stepped forward, voice sharp and sure.

"I do not know what that means," he said.

He raised a blade and pointed it at the gods themselves.

"But a man writes his own destiny. Tell me the task, and I will do it. If death waits at the end, then so be it."

His audacity silenced the gods.

For in all their long ages, few had dared speak thus within their hallowed walls.

And yet Odin nodded.

"Then it is yours, Sir Los, son of Diego."

He stood.

"You will rescue Brynhildr Hrafnisdottir, sister of Sigrún," Odin declared, "taken by the dwarves Sindri and Brokk, who hold her in the mountains beneath the ice. Sigrún shall guide you."

Sigrún's eyes narrowed in anger and disgust at the assignment—at being saddled with him.

Los turned to the Valkyrie who had tried to slay him only moments before.

"After you, my lady," he said with a charming bow.

She did not answer.

Her pride still burned from being so easily thrown by a mere Paladin—and before the gods, no less.

With a curt nod to the hall, Sigrún turned sharply and strode from Valhalla, her silence louder than any oath.

Chapter LIII — The Road North Begins

Valhalla's Gate — The Morning After

Word of his release spread through the realm as swiftly as a raven on the wing.

Outside the gates of Valhalla, the selfsame Valkyries who had once seized him at Caer Benowyc now stood waiting once more—this time with horses, not chains. Their faces betrayed no expression. Silent sentinels of honor, or perhaps of warning.

Their eyes followed the unlikely pair as they mounted: Sigrún Hrafnisdottir, a Valkyrie of thunder and wrath, and Sir Los Ortiz de Seville, the Spaniard, Paladin of Light.

Not a word passed between them.

The wind off the high fjords bit at his cheeks. Frost clung to the straps of his saddle. The realm of gods had no warmth to spare for mortals—not even honored ones.

Sigrún took the lead at once—back straight, chin high, gaze fixed forward. She did not glance at him, not even once. In truth, she half-hoped that if she rode long and far enough without turning, the sound of his horse would vanish behind her. That this foolish mortal, this irritating knight, would simply cease to exist.

But the steady clop of hooves at her back was relentless.

Los followed at a polite distance, watching the rigid line of her shoulders. He smiled faintly.

An ill start, he thought to himself.

The Giant in the Woods

Northwest of Huginfel

The road through West Svealand had narrowed to little more than a game trail beneath the pines.

Dark trunks pressed close on either side, their roots twisting through stone and moss. The ground rose and dipped unevenly beneath the horses' hooves, and the air carried

the cold resin scent of deep forest. Somewhere above, wind murmured through the branches like a thing trying not to be overheard.

Then the woods went still.

No birdcall.

No creak of branch.

No breath of wind.

Only the sudden, unnatural silence.

A shadow moved between the trees ahead.

A large shadow.

"When I heard it, I could not believe it!" boomed a voice like cracking granite.

Sigrún's brow darkened. She pulled her horse to a halt.

Baugi stepped out from between the pines like a piece of the mountain that had decided to walk. He was a Jotun of Jotunheimr, broad as an ox-cart and twice as tall as any man, with muscles like boulders and a beard braided with bone and leather. One hand rested on a young pine he had bent half aside simply by brushing against it.

"That you would even suffer his presence for a moment!" the giant roared, eyes fixed on Sir Los.

Sigrún hissed between her teeth. "And what business is it of yours, Baugi?"

She had nearly forgotten the tale. Sir Los had slain Baugi's son, Brimbron, in the forests of Uppland.

"Cause enough, Sigrún!" Baugi bellowed.

"He is not yours to fight or kill!" she snapped.

"By whose word?"

Sigrún's knuckles tightened on her reins. "By Odin's word. He is called upon to be my champion. And until he rescues my sister, he shall not be harmed by the likes of you!"

The very audacity of him—to even think to defy Odin's will, to stand there among the trees like some chieftain of the deep woods and lay claim to priority over her quest—set her pride aflame.

Behind her, Los sat straighter in his saddle.

My champion, she had said.

The words rang like a choir in the knight's ears, and a gallant smile spread across his face.

He bowed in the saddle with practiced elegance. "My lady," he said warmly, "fear not. I am quite jused to such challenges."

Then he turned to Baugi and frowned.

"As for jou, Bongy? Bangy? Whatever jour name is—"

The giant growled.

"—I don't know what grievance jou and I have, but I am bound to my lady's service. Until her sister is safe, I may not—without her leave—attend to jour tantrum."

The deliberate mispronunciation, the dismissive wave of the hand—it was like throwing oil on flame.

Baugi roared and wrenched a fallen pine trunk from the forest floor, roots and dirt tearing free with it, and swung it up like a club.

"Los!" Sigrún shouted, half rising in the stirrups. "Don't—!"

Too late.

Sir Los drew his sword, spurred his borrowed horse, and charged. With chants already forming on his lips.

The horse took one look at what its rider meant to do, planted all four hooves, and refused, skidding to a halt.

"Jou stupid horse—!"

That was all the knight managed before Baugi's club swept through the air and took him clean out of the saddle.

Los crashed into the forest floor like a sack of armor thrown from a battlement, skidding through pine needles and moss.

Sigrún's heart leapt despite herself. She wheeled her mount between the Jotun and the broken knight.

"STOP!" she commanded. "Or you will face Odin himself next!"

Baugi lifted his club, but paused.

"He is dead anyway," the giant rumbled. "No man could survive such a blow."

Sigrún looked back at the crumpled heap.

Part of her wanted to believe it.

Part of her was relieved.

And part of her—just a little—almost smiled.

Then the pile of armor moved.

Los groaned.

He rolled to one elbow, then forced himself up in stages, half-stumbling as he found his feet. A gash split his brow. His cloak hung torn from one shoulder. His sword was still somehow in his hand.

His voice, when it came, carried its usual infuriating bravado.

"Is that the best jou can do?"

Sigrún blinked.

So did Baugi.

The knight swayed, steadied himself, and raised his sword.

"Well?" he shouted, blood trailing from his nose. "Are we done? Or do jou wish to continue?"

Sigrún backed her horse away a few paces. She needed him alive—but now, despite herself, she was curious.

How much more could he take?

Baugi looked at her.

She shrugged once.

The giant roared and came on.

This time Los did not meet him with bravado. He met him with movement.

Baugi's club came down in a blow meant to pulp him where he stood. Los threw himself aside, rolled across roots and damp needles, and came up low behind a pine trunk just as the club smashed bark and wood from the tree in an explosion of splinters.

Los was already moving.

He darted in close along the giant's side and slashed hard across the back of Baugi's leg.

The cut was not deep enough to cripple, but it drew a howl.

Baugi turned too slowly in the trees. That was the trouble with size in a forest—there was never quite enough room to be as large as you wanted.

He swung again, trying to crush Los against a boulder jutting from the slope. Los ducked under the sweep, planted one foot on the stone, and drove his sword up into the side of the giant's knee.

Baugi bellowed and lurched, one leg folding beneath him.

Los ripped the blade free and leapt clear before the giant's free hand could close around him.

Baugi tried to rise again, half crawling, half dragging the wounded leg beneath him. Los circled through the pines, then came in from the side and hacked once more at the back of the injured knee.

The leg gave.

Baugi toppled sideways through brush and saplings like a felled cedar and struck his head against a half-buried boulder with a thunderous crack.

Then stillness.

The pines shivered.

A few startled birds broke from the branches overhead.

Los stood over the fallen giant, chest heaving, blade still raised.

He looked to Sigrún.

Well? Shall I end him?

No nod. No smile. Only silence and contempt.

With one clean stroke, he took the giant's head.

Then, grinning through blood and sweat, he wiped the blade and turned towards Sigrún, his open hand pointing to the severed head like some courtly offering.

"I present jou—"

"And vhat would I vant it for?" she snapped. "Find your horse and stop delaying."

She turned away at once, scanning the trees for the knight's bolted mount as though the whole affair had been no more than an inconvenience.

Los stared at her for a moment in disbelief.

Was she not impressed?

The Knight, the Lady, and der Troll

The Forest's Edge — A Reunion

From the shadowed woods beyond the clearing, a large shape emerged—lumbering, broad, unmistakable.

Leading Los's borrowed horse by the reins.

A familiar voice rumbled:

"Ver are ve going, Master?"

Los's face lit up like the sun over Hispania.

"Tim!" he exclaimed.

It was Tim der Troll—once his unlikely squire, now somehow here, as casually as if no time had passed at all.

"To rescue a maiden, my old friend," Los said proudly, planting a hand on his hip like a knight from legend.

Tim raised a suspicious brow.

"A real vone this time?"

He had been on enough of Los's quests to know they often ended in fire... or extremely confused villagers. But Los meant well.

Los bristled.

"Jes! In point of fact, we are rescuing her sister," he said, gesturing towards Sigrún.

Sigrún, still recovering from the absurdity of the last few moments, narrowed her eyes.

"Tim, it is good to see you," she said coolly. "But this task is for vone man alone—and not vone of Midgard. Only he can rescue my sister."

Tim scratched his head, thoughtfully.

"Vell... you could not pick better knight than my Master. But I do not come to rescue her..."

He smiled.

"I come to rescue him."

Sigrún opened her mouth to argue—but the logic, however trollish, was oddly unassailable.

Tim ambled past the fallen giant, pausing just long enough to glance at the severed head.

"Vell, Master... it's not a vindmill."

He shrugged and kept walking.

Los groaned and followed, muttering under his breath.

"One time... jou get struck by a windmill..."

Then he glanced back over his shoulder.

"Jou coming?" he called to Sigrún.

She blinked, mouth half-open.

"But... but—"

There was no use.

The company was now three.

She scowled.

"Fine. Just make sure you rescue my sister—and not Tim!"

And so the road stretched out before them, winding towards the mountains of the north, where the dwarves kept their secrets and a Valkyrie slept in chains.

The Knight.

The Lady.

And der Troll.

The strangest of trios set off to rescue Brynhildr.

The Watcher in the Woods

A forest spirit watched as the three began to ride away.

A Skogsfru.

Beyond the clearing, where pine-shadow gathered thick between the trunks, she stood very still.

She had watched the giant come through her woods like a storm with legs, bending young trees aside, tearing deadfall from the moss, breaking bark and root and branch in the name of some old grievance that meant nothing to the forest.

When the giant finally fell, she felt satisfaction. The clumsy brute had shattered ancient trees and torn great wounds in the earth. Good riddance.

Giants were careless with roots.

Men were usually worse.

But this one...

The forest-woman's eyes followed the knight in red and gold as he muttered over his recovered horse, still bloodied, still bruised, still somehow alive.

He had been loud. Foolish. And nearly gotten himself killed.

And then he had let the forest work for him. He had let stone and root and pine do what strength could not. He had fought like something that understood, if only for a moment, that the forest was not empty space between enemies.

The Skogsfru took notice.

Tim noticed too.

The troll shaman, attuned to forest and root and watching things, felt the attention before he saw any sign of it. His ears twitched. His broad hand tightened on the reins of his pony, but he did not look directly at the thing that had drawn his notice.

That, more than anything, made Sigrún's hand drift towards her sword.

"Tim," she said quietly.

"Ja," he answered.

"You feel it?"

"Ja."

Los looked between them. "Feel what?"

Neither answered at once.

The pines stirred though no wind passed through them.

The Skogsfru slipped fully behind a tree.

There was a hunger in her for this stranger. Not flesh. Not blood. Something brighter and more dangerous. A soul so stubborn it had taken a giant's blow and risen laughing.

But not while a Valkyrie stood watch over him.

Los frowned towards the trees. "Is there something there?"

Tim reached out with surprising gentleness and turned the pony's head back towards the road.

"Best not stare at things dat do not vant to be seen, Master."

"That explains nothing."

"Ja," Tim said. "Is safer dat vay."

Sigrún's gaze remained fixed on the dark between the trunks. She saw no face. No body. Only the sense of attention, old and green and patient.

Not Aesir.

Not Jotun.

Something of the woods themselves.

At last she said, "Do not vander off."

Los blinked. "When do I wander off?"

Tim looked at him.

Sigrún looked at him too.

Los opened his mouth, closed it, then nodded once.

"Jes. Fair."

Behind them, unseen by the knight, the forest-woman watched a moment longer.

Then she stepped backward into the pines.

And silently followed.

The Missive

Orchid Fair Guildhall — War Room

The fire had burned low in the hearth, casting long shadows across the maps strewn over the war table. Angela stood alone, unarmed and weary, her fingers gripping the edge of the oak as though anchoring herself by force.

The door opened behind her.

Tamara entered, a look of concern on her face, a scroll in her hand. The wax bore the mark of Caer Benowyc.

Angela turned sharply. "Report?"

Tamara nodded and offered the scroll in silence.

Angela unrolled it, then scanned the jagged script.

"Taken."

She read it again.

"He was captured?" she whispered.

Tamara hesitated. "They say he held the gate alone. That he bought the defenders time until reinforcements arrived. But... he didn't make it back."

Angela said nothing. Her gaze remained fixed on the parchment, though her fingers had begun to tremble.

"They took him alive," Tamara added quietly. "That means something."

Angela turned towards the hearth, the flickering light catching the edges of her hands.

"Alive..." she said. "Alive is worse. Who knows what they'll do to him."

Tamara stepped closer. "Angela... he knew the risk."

Angela's voice was low, but sharp.

"He always knows the risk. And still... runs straight into it."

She fell silent, and when she spoke again her voice had gone softer, more bitter.

"But this time... I sent him."

She sank slowly into the war chair behind her, as though the thought alone had doubled her weight.

Baldric's Smile

Camelot — Lord Baldric's Study

The chamber was dim, the fire banked low.

Lord Baldric stood at the window, hands clasped behind his back, watching the fall in the courtyard below.

A knock came.

His aide entered quietly and spoke in a low voice:

"Sir Los Ortiz... has been taken. Reports say he was captured during the defense of Benowyc by a force of women."

Baldric turned slowly.

"Valkyries?"

The aide shrugged.

"It was just reported that he's gone. And that he was taken alive."

Baldric's lips curved into something not quite a smile.

"The Norse have plucked the Spaniard from the board."

He stepped away from the window and poured wine, the sound of it sharp in the quiet.

"Let us see how the Orchid fares when its champion is missing. The longer he is gone, the weaker his position—and theirs."

He drank, savoring the thought.

"Send word to our friend the Baron. With Ortiz gone, the game changes."

A Mother's Prayer

Camelot — Private Apartments of Lady Triss

The chamber was warm, but Lady Triss felt cold.

She sat before her writing desk, the parchment in front of her blurred by the firelight.

The knock was soft. A novice entered and curtsied.

"My lady... news. Sir Los... is missing. Taken north."

Triss's quill snapped between her fingers.

She kept her gaze on the parchment.

"Is he still alive?"

The girl hesitated.

"He was."

A long silence followed.

Finally, Triss set down the broken quill and folded her hands. Her voice was steady, but only just.

"Thank you."

The girl curtsied and left.

Triss stared at the flame, willing herself not to think of the boy she'd held as an infant — or the man he'd become, stubborn as his father.

Saint Alban, bring him home.

The Trade Proposal

Castle Sauvage — Commander's Quarters

Lord Sigimund stood at the window, watching rain tap gently against the stone sill.

Behind him, two scribes and a knight waited by the door for orders.

The door opened none too gently. Angela swept in, rain on her cloak and fury in her eyes.

"You heard?" she asked.

Sigimund nodded. "I was there at Caer Benowyc."

"And?"

"I'm gathering men to recover him," he said. "Quiet. Fast. A mix of scouts, veterans, and diplomats."

"Diplomats?" Angela stepped forward.

"If the Midgardians took him to parley, we need options. We've captured a few of theirs in recent weeks—sons of petty Jarls. We can offer an exchange."

Angela looked genuinely surprised. "You would trade prisoners for him?"

Sigimund turned slowly, meeting her gaze. "Wouldn't you?"

She did not answer at once.

"Send word to Lady Winchell," she said at last. "She can negotiate. She's good at it."

"It may not help," Sigimund said grimly. "The ones who took him weren't common Norse."

Angela's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

He stepped closer, voice dropping, and laid a hand gently on her shoulder.

"Angela, we believe they were Valkyries."

Angela went still.

"Then God help him," she said softly.

"With God's help, we will," Sigimund replied. "We'll bring him back."

The Silent Girl at the Embassy

Camelot — The Castilian Embassy

The rain had begun before dawn and had not stopped.

By the time Willow reached the Castilian Embassy, her cloak was dark with it, her boots were soaked and caked with mud, and her hair clung in damp strands about her face like fire dragged through water.

She had come straight from patrol.

Caer Sursbrooke lay far enough from Camelot that news reached it late and in pieces. A rider had brought the first rumor shortly after midday.

Benowyc.

Midgard.

A breached gate.

A knight taken alive.

Then someone had said his name.

Willow had not waited for permission. She had not even gone to the scout barracks to clean herself properly. She had hired a horse and ridden until the poor beast lathered beneath her, then left it at the nearest stable with enough coin to see it fed and rubbed down.

Now she stood before the embassy door, breathless, wet, and very small beneath the crimson-and-gold standard of Castile.

For a moment, she only stared at the iron-banded wood.

She had been here before, for lessons and lunch, but never when he was not there.

Then she lifted one hand and knocked.

The door opened after no more than three breaths.

Ramón stood there in his usual dark, immaculate clothing, as though rain, mud, fear, and the collapse of sensible order were things that happened only to other people. His hair was tied neatly back. His face held its customary calm.

That calm lasted until he saw her.

His eyes moved over her quickly—cloak, boots, bow, quiver, mud, rainwater, trembling hands.

Then his expression changed.

Not much.

But enough.

"Señorita Willow," he said.

Willow looked up at him.

She did not speak.

Of course she did not.

She only looked at him with those wide green eyes, and Ramón understood more from that one look than many men would have understood from a full page of words.

He stepped aside at once.

"Come in."

She entered quickly, almost too quickly, as though afraid the door might close before she crossed the threshold.

Ramón shut it behind her and drew the bolt.

The embassy was warm inside. Not grand in the way Camelot's halls were grand, but orderly, polished, and alive with quiet purpose. The scent of parchment, wax, clean wood, and something simmering in the kitchen hung in the air. A small fire burned in the sitting room hearth.

Willow stood just inside the door, dripping onto the floor.

Ramón looked at the water gathering beneath her boots.

Then at her face.

"You have heard," he said quietly.

Willow swallowed.

A nod.

"Not all of it, I think."

She looked up, waiting to hear more.

Ramón's gaze softened.

"Come."

He led her into the office on the first floor, the one where Los sometimes conducted business he pretended was less serious than it was. The desk was orderly, the ledgers stacked neatly, the ink capped, the seal of Castile resting beside a half-finished letter.

Willow's eyes went to the chair behind the desk.

Los's chair.

Empty.

Her hands tightened at her sides.

Ramón saw it.

"He is alive," he said.

Willow closed her eyes.

Only for a moment.

Only long enough for one breath to break in her chest and then be gathered back again.

Ramón let her have that moment.

Then he continued.

"He was taken at Caer Benowyc. The reports agree on that much. He held the gate while the defenders fell back. Reinforcements came too late to prevent his capture."

Willow's head lifted sharply.

Taken.

The word had shape. Weight.

He could see the questions forming. So he opened a drawer and removed a small wax tablet, its wooden leaves worn smooth at the edges, and a narrow bone stylus. Then he gently handed it to her.

She took it and began to write.

WHO?

Ramón hesitated.

That hesitation frightened her more than the answer would have.

"Valkyries, so I have been told," he said.

Willow stared at him.

For once, even silence seemed too small for what she wanted to ask.

Ramón folded his hands in front of him.

"They took him alive and carried him north. We do not yet know where."

Willow's face went pale beneath the rain and road-dust.

Her gaze moved towards the door.

Ramón moved before she did.

Not hurriedly. Not roughly.

He simply stepped between her and the way out.

Willow looked at him.

Her hand snapped back to the wax tablet.

I GO.

Ramón read it.

His mouth tightened.

She turned the wax tablet towards him, as though he might not have understood.

I GO.

Ramón reached down, took the tablet gently from her hands, and turned it back towards her.

"No, pequeña," he said. "Not this time."

Willow's eyes flashed.

She reached for the tablet again.

He did not move it away from her. He only laid one hand flat over the words.

"No."

She stared at him with a hurt so fierce it would have been anger in someone else.

Ramón held her gaze.

"I know you want to help," he said. "I have no doubts about that. And if Don Los were somewhere a road could reach, I suspect you would already be halfway there before anyone thought to bar the gate."

Willow did not blink.

"But he is not in a keep or a prison tower. He is not tied in some camp beyond Hadrian's Wall where a clever scout with a bow might slip through the dark and cut him free."

His voice gentled, though the words did not.

"If he was taken by servants of pagan gods, wherever they have brought him, it is beyond our ability to follow."

Willow's jaw tightened.

Her eyes shone.

Ramón saw the next thought before she wrote it.

He had been learning her for months now. The angle of her chin. The way her fingers moved when she was about to argue. The fierce little breath she took when frustrated.

He sighed softly.

"Yes," he said. "He would go after you."

That struck her still.

Ramón removed his hand from the tablet.

"But there is nowhere to go. Not yet. All we can do is wait. Patiently."

Willow's brows drew together.

He leaned forward, voice low and steady.

"You know he would never forgive himself if something happened to you because of him."

Her eyes dropped.

There it was.

Ramón did not press it harder. He did not need to.

Instead, he took the tablet and set it aside.

"There are people working to bring him home. Lord Sigimund is gathering men. Lady Angela is not idle. Sir Sabbince has gone north with terms for exchange. Others are searching for any road, any rumor, any bargain that might return him to us."

Willow looked up again at the name Angela.

Something complicated flickered across her face.

Ramón noticed that too.

Naturally.

He noticed everything.

"Yes," he said calmly. "Lady Angela is afraid for him as well."

Willow looked away.

For a moment, she seemed younger than her already tender years.

Ramón softened.

"Fear is not a competition."

She looked back at him, startled.

He gave the faintest shrug, then rose from the desk.

"Come," Ramón said at last. "I was about to have lunch, and you look as though you have not eaten in days."

Willow gave him a look.

It was not denial.

Not quite.

Ramón accepted it as confession and ushered her towards the kitchen before she could object. The kitchen was smaller than the grand kitchens of Camelot, but warmer by far, with copper pots hung neatly along the wall, herbs drying from the beams, and a little nook beneath the window where Don Los always sat when Ramón could make him sit at all.

He pointed to the bench.

"Sit."

Willow sat.

The command had become familiar enough by now that she no longer wasted much effort pretending she would not obey it.

Ramón ladled thick stew from the pot into a bowl.

"Olla podrida," he said. "Don Los's favorite on a cold day, though he pretends not to like it."

Willow looked towards the bowl as he set it before her.

The steam rose rich with meat, beans, onion, and something peppery beneath it. The smell made her stomach remember itself all at once.

Ramón crossed to the sideboard.

"And would you care for fresh bread?"

At that, Willow's eyes lit.

Only a little.

But enough.

Ramón's mouth twitched as he cut a generous piece from the warm loaf and placed it beside her bowl.

"Ah. So there is life in you still."

Willow ignored that and reached for the bread with both hands, the warmth of it sinking into her fingers. Only then did she realize how cold she had been.

Ramón busied himself with a second bowl, adding a little more salt, a little more broth, and a scattering of herbs with the solemn care of a man conducting official business.

"You need not worry," he said without looking at her. "You know Don Los. He always finds a way out of trouble."

He paused, then added dryly, "Though I wish he would stop finding ways into it."

Willow's shoulders eased.

Not fully.

But enough that the tension no longer looked as though it might snap her in two.

She nodded once, then took a careful spoonful of stew.

Ramón watched just long enough to be satisfied that she was truly eating, then turned back to the hearth and made a small adjustment to the pot.

Outside the window, rain blurred the stones of Camelot into gray shapes and silver lines.

Willow looked through the glass, bread warm in her hands, stew steaming before her.

Ramón had told her there was nowhere to go.

Not yet.

But somewhere beyond the rain, beyond Camelot, beyond every road she knew, Los was alive.

And as she watched the water run down the window, she wondered where he was—and how she could get there.

A Troll's Truth

The Road North — Twilight Falls

Silently, the trio rode together—Sigrún in the lead, Sir Los behind her, and Tim der Troll bringing up the other flank, perched atop a stout, long-haired pony that looked far too small for his lumbering frame. The shaggy beast plodded along dutifully, unfazed by the weight on its back.

Los had named it Bill. It had always seemed to take the name begrudgingly.

"Where have jou been, Tim?" Los asked, breaking the quiet as they passed beneath swaying pines. "I haven't heard from jou in... it's been ages."

"Here," Tim replied, beaming.

Los blinked. "Jes, of course. 'Here.' Naturally."

He opened his mouth to press further, then just shook his head and chuckled. The Troll's grin was too contagious to argue with.

They rode on in silence again until, at last, curiosity got the better of Sigrún. She had heard the tales—wild stories about the infamous Paladin behind her, about his unlikely companion riding a pony.

She glanced at the troll.

"Tim," she called, "come ride beside me."

Tim looked to Los, who nodded for him to ride ahead of him.

Los dropped back farther as Tim rode beside the Valkyrie.

"Tell me about Los," she said.

"He is Master. And he is Sir," Tim replied with firm pride.

"Yes, yes," she said, "but how did you meet?"

"Some time ago," Tim said. "I vas in de voods. And dere vas Master."

"And?"

"I cooked for him. Took care of him. Followed him."

"But vhy?" she asked.

Tim shrugged. "I like him."

"Vhy?"

Tim's face softened. "Master is kind."

That stopped her cold.

Kind? Los? The same man whose name made Midgardian children cry? She'd heard every awful tale—of fire, slaughter, cruelty. Kind?

She tried not to scoff. "He's burned villages."

"Maybe," Tim admitted. "He no saint. But he hates unfair fight."

He looked ahead, his tone growing wistful. "Vone time, by de river, dere vere three young vones. Fenrir had dem. Four of dem. Master rode into de beasts and saved de young vones. Den de young vones turned on him, because dey did not understand."

"Understood what?"

"That Master fights only ven he must. Not because he can."

Sigrún frowned. It didn't line up with anything she knew. And yet...

"Even now rides to save somevone," Tim added.

Sigrún turned and looked back.

Los caught her eye. He smiled.

She turned away again. Stubbornly.

He really was going to save her sister—he had made no grand speech, he had not asked for a reward. He seemed to come just because he was asked.

Tim shifted in the saddle. The pony beneath him snorted.

"There's vone more thing I'd like to know," Sigrún said.

"Ja," Tim said.

She narrowed her eyes. "Tell me about the var between Hrafn Varband... and Sir Los."

Tim snorted a laugh.

"Oh... dat all started 'cause Master kissed a girl."

"Of course it did," she muttered.

"Den Hrafn put a bounty on his head—vone beer, to any who could kill him."

"A beer?" she said, raising a brow.

"Ja. Anyone who helped kill Master got a beer. Master vas insulted," Tim said with a grave nod.

"That upset him?" Sigrún asked.

"Master does not mind enemies. He minds unfair rules."

"I see."

"So he started hunting dem. I tink... he also wanted a beer."

Sigrún frowned. "But Tim, you are Varband."

"Ja." Tim smiled. "But don't tell Master dat. He might want a beer."

The Silence Between

The light began to fade as the trio continued their slow ascent into the hills, the wind carrying the chill of the northern passes.

Sigrún said nothing.

Tim had fallen back beside his master, his long-haired pony trotting contentedly despite its rider's size. The troll hummed a low tune, happy in the simple joy of companionship. Los, ever the optimist, had resumed whistling some Andalusian ballad—as if he had not nearly been killed by a giant less than an hour before.

But Sigrún's thoughts did not move so lightly.

The things Tim had said—simple as they had been—echoed louder than any battlefield cry.

Kind.

She had never associated that word with Sir Los Ortiz.

She had heard other words.

Butcher.

Ravager.

Madman with a cross.

In Midgard, his name was carved into warnings, soaked in fire and ash. Mothers warned their children of the Spánverji. Warriors cursed him like a storm. Even Valkyries whispered of him—not as a man, but as a force of chaos made flesh.

And yet...

Tim had no reason to lie.

He hates an unfair fight, the troll had said.

Even now, he rides to save someone.

Sigrún glanced back at him.

Only for a moment.

He caught her looking and grinned.

She scowled at once and turned away, annoyed with him—and more annoyed with herself.

But one thing Tim had said lingered more than all the rest.

He is no saint.

Of that much, she was certain.

And yet...

She gripped her reins tighter.

This Spánverji.

This knight.

This fool.

He made her question too much.

And questions led to uncertainty.

Chapter LIV — The Burning Village

The Northern Reaches — A Village in Peril

The stars had not yet fully claimed the sky when the scent of smoke reached them.

It came on the wind—sharp, acrid, and wrong.

Then came the sound of steel against steel.

Sigrún reined her mare to a halt at once, eyes narrowing as orange light flickered above the dark line of trees ahead. Tim's pony shifted uneasily beneath him. Los tilted his head, listening.

"That," he said, "is not the good kind of fire."

Then came the cry of a woman, thin and terrible through the night.

Without another word, Sigrún drove in her heels and spurred her horse forward.

"Stay back!" she shouted over her shoulder. "Both of you!"

Los blinked.

"This is not your fight!" she snapped, already galloping ahead between the trees.

Tim looked to Los.

Los looked to Tim.

"She's going to get herself killed," Los muttered.

"I tink so too," Tim said, nodding solemnly.

Then both of them kicked their mounts forward after her.

The Village Center — Outnumbered

They arrived moments later—through the trees and into a village being torn apart by raiders.

Blodfelag surged through the thatch-and-timber homes like a plague. Swords flashed. Fire leapt from rooftop to rooftop. A few villagers fought to defend themselves—farmers with pitchforks, an old warrior with a rusted axe—but it was clear they were losing.

In the center of it all, Sigrún had already dismounted and thrown herself into the fray, her winged helm gleaming in the firelight, her sword flashing like the wrath of Asgard.

Her blade rose and fell like a piece of storm. She cut one raider down with a clean, savage blow, turned, and drove another back with shield and steel together. Then she shouted—not in fear, but in fury—to pull them towards her and away from a little girl cowering beneath a wagon.

But there were too many.

They came at her from front and side.

She faltered.

Just as she realized she was surrounded, a Blodfelag Dreng raised his blade behind her.

A flash of gold and red—

Sir Los was there, parrying the blow.

Sigrún did not hesitate. She pivoted and drove her sword clean through the Blodfelag oathbreaker as Los pressed forward, forcing the others back.

More came at them.

They stood together now, Sigrún and the knight she had sworn to hate.

Tim swung his great iron pan with reckless abandon, cracking skulls with cheerful brutality and scattering raiders wherever his pony carried him.

“Didn’t I tell you to stay back?” Sigrún growled as she blocked another strike.

“Jes,” Los replied, ducking beneath a blade. “But I am terrible at following instructions.”

Together they pressed the advantage—Los driving the raiders back, Sigrún guarding his flank and striking through every opening he made. Fire gave way to smoke. Screams turned to shouts of retreat.

The Blodfelag scattered.

And then, silence.

The Aftermath — Names in the Firelight

The villagers emerged cautiously from hiding—old men, children, a mother cradling her infant.

Many went to Sigrún first.

They bowed their heads to her. Some knelt. A few whispered prayers beneath their breath, thanking the Valkyrie who had come to them in their hour of need.

But others turned to Los.

Not with fear.

Not all of them.

"Is that...?" whispered one man.

"It is," murmured another. "That's the one they call Spánverji."

"Sir Ortiz of Albion," said an older woman, her hand over her heart. "The one who slew the vyrm."

Sigrún turned sharply to look at them.

Los gave them his best humble smile.

Then a boy approached with wide eyes and trembling hands.

"You... you saved my mother."

Los knelt before him, bringing himself down to the child's height, and tousled the boy's hair.

"Someday, it will be you who protects the village."

The boy stared at him as though a hero from a fireside tale had just placed a sword in his hands.

The villagers laughed, and some of the fear from only moments ago faded.

Sigrún watched in silence.

Beside the Well — A Quiet Reckoning

Later, as they sat near the village well, the firelight low and the wounds tended, Sigrún watched him in silence.

Los was not boasting. He was not gathering praise.

He was helping Tim mend a broken fence post. Smiling. Whistling.

"You came for me," she said quietly.

Los didn't look up.

"You looked like you could use a little help."

"I told you not to follow me."

"Yes," he said, fitting a splintered piece of wood back into place. "But I need you to help me find your sister. I could not simply let you die."

Then he smiled.

That same infuriatingly charming smile.

Sigrún studied him—truly studied him. And for the first time, the rage in her heart quieted, just a little.

He hadn't come for glory. He'd come for her.

And he had saved a village while doing it.

She looked away before he could catch her staring.

"Thank you," she said at last, the words tasting strange in her mouth.

Los glanced over, surprised. But he said nothing.

He just kept smiling.

Time passed in silence.

People went to sleep.

Tim, ever oblivious, snored softly nearby, curled beside his pony like a great hairy blanket.

The stars returned overhead, and with them came a fragile peace.

But Sigrún's thoughts were no longer as certain as they had been.

This Spánverji.

This knight.

This... man.

He was not what she had expected.

Not at all.

Beneath the Stars

The fire had burned down to glowing coals.

Tim snored softly, curled beside his pony like a great, oversized troll-baby. One meaty arm lay across the animal's flank, the other cradled a half-eaten turnip. The pony didn't seem to mind.

Los and Sigrún sat nearby, a little apart from the others, their helms set aside and their blades within reach. The ground beneath them was cool. The night sky stretched above, awash in silver.

For a long while, neither spoke.

Los sat with his knees drawn up, one arm draped over them, the other clutching the fabric of his shirt just above his heart. His fingers gripped the cloth as they often did, pressing it where Risa's ring rested on the cord beneath.

His eyes stayed fixed on the stars.

As if in prayer.

Sigrún glanced at him, something softer than suspicion in her gaze.

"Los," she asked quietly, "why are you fighting for Albion?"

He hesitated. His hand didn't move. His eyes didn't lower.

"I came to help," he said simply.

She tilted her head. "But why? You're not of their realm."

He gave a longer pause.

Then he said, "Because..." His voice dropped. "Because I believed it was the right thing to do."

And for the first time, Sigrún saw the sadness in his eyes.

Not the swaggering mask he wore in battle. Not the wit or bravado.

Something deeper, older.

His smile had vanished—not dramatically, but as if gently laid aside. His head bowed slightly. His hand still clutching his shirt.

Sigrún looked away, unsure why her throat had tightened.

They said nothing more. The stars wheeled overhead like silent witnesses. The coals dimmed. And night swallowed the last unspoken words.

Eventually, they both drifted to sleep by the fire.

A Dream of Light

In the stillness of the night, Los dreamed of Risa.

She stood at the edge of a wide plain of gold light, her hand outstretched towards him.

He ran to her. Called her name.

Her eyes never blinked. Her smile never changed.

He reached out—to grab her hand, to hold it, to never let go.

But just before their fingers touched, she vanished into smoke and wind.

Los gasped—but no sound escaped his lips as he dreamed.

Sigrún, too, dreamed

She was falling. Or perhaps she had always been falling.

There was a figure before her—a man whose face she could not see. But his hand reached for hers through the darkness.

She hesitated.

Then took it.

A warmth she did not recognize rose within her, and she did not fight it.

She did not know who he was.

Only that his hand was warm.

And that he had saved her from something she could not name.

The Watcher Beyond the Firelight

Norse Village — Night

The village had burned.

Blood had been spilled.

But it was not her forest that had burned. Not the blood of root or leaf. Not of the green.

So the Skogsfru watched from the edge of the trees with the cool satisfaction of a thing that measured the world only by what touched her domain.

What the Norse did to one another was not her concern.

Then he charged in—the knight in red and gold, running towards the fire, towards the screams, towards the Valkyrie. Towards the village.

A skilled warrior, yes.

She had seen skilled warriors before.

But there was something different in him.

The way he fought.

The way he tended the wounded afterward.

The way he helped mend what could still be mended.

The way his hand closed over the front of his shirt, as if holding some deep sorrow in place.

Then, when the village finally slept, their spirits reached across the gap. She watched as their hands, operating on some unspoken instinct of the dreaming mind, closed over one another in the dark.

The Skogsfru watched them for a long while.

If not for the Valkyrie, his soul would be one worth taking.

Taking a man from a woman was a simple thing.

But taking him from one of Odin's own?

No.

She would not meddle with a Valkyrie.

Dawn Light and Discovery

Los awoke to the soft warmth of morning and the sound of birdsong—and to the unexpected feeling of a hand in his.

Sigrún's.

She lay close, her face turned towards his, still asleep. Her hand nestled in his palm, light and sure.

Before he could pull away, her eyes fluttered open.

Sigrún didn't move. His hand was warm. Familiar.

She didn't understand it—but she didn't let go.

Not right away.

Then came the sound of stifled laughter.

A group of villagers, with baskets of bread and pots of porridge, were giggling as they watched the pair.

She snatched her hand back and drew her knees up, turning away so quickly that her hair fell across her face. Color had already risen to her cheeks.

Los sat up just as fast, brushing imaginary dust off his cloak, red creeping up his neck.

From across the fire, Tim raised a brow, grinning over a pot of breakfast stew.

"Breakfast, Master," he said, as though he had noticed nothing at all.

The Farewell

By late morning, the village had gathered to see them off. The sun had burned away the last of the mist, casting gold across the scorched rooftops and the broken fence lines now patched with fresh timber.

Children waved wooden swords. A mother held an infant on her hip. Old men stood straight-backed, wounded but proud.

At the center stood the village chief—an elderly man with a bandaged shoulder and a weathered face like cracked oak.

"You saved us," he said, voice thick with emotion. "All of you. If there's anything we can do in return—anything at all—you need only ask."

Los smiled gently, already astride his horse.

"The bread was warm. The stew was fresh. You fed us, and made us welcome. That is already more than enough."

He reached to his belt and unhooked his purse—a worn leather pouch, heavy with coin. He tossed it lightly to the chief, who caught it with both hands, surprised by the weight.

"Use it to rebuild," Los said. "Fix the roofs. Feed the children."

Sigrún looked towards him.

Los did not seem to notice.

The villagers fell silent. Then came murmurs. Then cheers.

The chief looked up, his eyes brighter now.

"You are a strange knight, Sir Ortiz."

Los gave a small, sardonic bow. "I get that a lot."

Sigrún mounted wordlessly beside him. Tim clambered up onto Bill with a grunt, still chewing the last of his breakfast carrot.

And with no fanfare, no trumpet or banner, the three turned their mounts towards the western trail.

Behind them, the village receded into a quiet blur of smoke, patched timber, and gratitude.

Two Silver

Camelot — The Castilian Embassy

The next time Willow came to the embassy, she was dry.

That was the first improvement.

She arrived just before noon, slipping through the back door after one careful knock, her scout cloak pulled close around her shoulders and her bow slung across her back.

Ramón looked up from his ledger.

He did not need to ask why she had come.

The question was already in her eyes.

"No," he said gently, shaking his head slowly.

Willow stopped just inside the office.

The word did not need to be spoken to wound.

Ramón closed the ledger and folded his hands atop it.

"No word yet from Lord Sigimund. None from Sir Sabbince. None from Bledmeer. If news had come, I would have sent for you."

Willow stood very still waiting, looking at the closed ledger, the inkpot, the seal of Castile, the stacked correspondence, the empty chair near the hearth.

Ramón waited.

Willow did not leave.

He waited a little longer.

Still she did not leave.

At last he sighed.

"If you are going to haunt my office, then you may as well haunt it productively."

Her eyes lifted.

He opened the ledger again and turned back several pages, one finger moving down a neat column of figures until it stopped on a small notation written in careful Castilian.

"Here."

Willow leaned slightly closer.

Ramón read aloud, "Master Graent. Two silver."

Willow blinked.

"It is a debt," Ramón explained. "A small one. Don Los owes him two silver for... something."

He frowned down at the notation.

"Unfortunately, Don Los wrote the note himself, and as usual assumed that being able to read his own mind would prove sufficient record-keeping."

Willow's mouth twitched.

Ramón noticed, but did not smile.

"Regardless, it is in the book. Therefore, it will be paid."

He opened a small coffer, counted out two silver coins, and placed them into a narrow leather pouch. Then he wrote a short note, folded it, and placed it with the silver.

"You will take this to Master Graent. He is at Prydwen's keep. You can ask for him there."

Willow nodded.

"You will place the pouch in his hand. You will wait while he counts it, and you will bring back any message he gives you."

Willow looked down at the pouch.

Two silver.

It was not much.

And yet Ramón handled it as though it was important.

She looked back at him.

He understood the question.

"Yes," he said. "It matters."

Willow's eyes moved to the ledger.

Ramón tapped the page once.

"A man who pays only great debts and forgets small ones is not honorable. He is merely afraid of consequences."

He closed the book.

"Don Los pays what he owes."

Willow took the pouch with both hands.

That pleased him.

"And do not run," Ramón added.

She gave him a flat look.

"I mean it. Walk like a civilized creature. You are on an errand for the embassy, not some common messenger."

She looked down at the pouch and then back up at him, understanding.

Ramón nodded.

"Now go."

Willow tucked the pouch safely inside her cloak and left.

Master Graent

Prydwen's Keep stood on a hill south of Camelot.

It was where Los had first trained when he arrived in Albion. It was where he had first met Romao and Prox. And it was where Master Graent had loaned him two silver after he had been robbed.

Los had never forgotten.

He had simply never gotten around to repaying the borrowed sum.

Willow made her way to the gate, past young men and women training as fighters, with sword, shields, and padding. Master Claistan was busy correcting stances, and shouting instructions.

The next generation of Albion's defenders.

Inside the keep men were going about their day, selling armor and weapons, giving out assignments, and preparing for patrols along the river.

The world had not stopped because Los was gone.

That seemed wrong to her.

Her Los was missing.

Didn't anyone care?

Willow approached the guard at the gate and presented him with the note.

"Eh? What is this? Who's it for?"

Willow stared at him.

"Come on now, spit it out girl."

She continued to look at him without blinking.

He looked at it a moment then called into the keep, "Gareth!"

An older man came from around the corner.

"What is it now?"

"Messenger," the guard growled. "Won't say who it is for."

"So read it."

"You know I can't read."

"Fine, hand it here."

He took the note and read it.

"It's for Master Graent. That one, over there."

Master Graent stood to the left of the main building. Testing the feel of a new crossbow.

Willow took back the note and went to him at once.

"Yes?" Graent asked.

Willow stepped forward and took the pouch from inside her cloak.

Then she held it out.

Master Graent looked at the pouch.

Then at her.

Then at the small folded note she handed him.

He took it carefully, opened the note, and read.

His eyebrows rose.

"Ah."

Willow waited.

He untied the pouch and counted the coins into his palm.

Then he stared at them for a moment.

Then he laughed softly.

"Two silver."

Willow watched him, uncertain.

Master Graent looked back at the note.

"Sir Los remembered. Or should I call him Ambassador Los now, eh?"

Willow's expression did not change.

But the old man's expression warmed.

"Well then."

He pocketed the coins and leaned one hand on the rail.

"Sir Los is a rare man. Most nobles forget two silver the moment they owe it."

His smile deepened, mild and fond.

"Tell him thank you for me."

She nodded, as though receiving a royal command.

Graent seemed to understand.

"I heard he had been captured."

Willow looked down.

Master Graent studied her for a moment, "I see, taken and still paying his debts. A rare young man indeed."

"Then I will pray for his safe return."

Willow nodded and then returned to the Embassy

When she arrived, Ramón was exactly where she had left him.

Or so it seemed.

The ledger was open. The quill was in his hand. The office looked unchanged.

But there was a cup of warm milk sprinkled with what looked like cinnamon waiting near the hearth and a plate with bread, cheese, and sliced apple set beside it.

Willow looked at the plate.

Then at Ramón.

He did not look up from the ledger.

"You were gone through lunch. What did Master Graent have to say?"

She crossed the room and picked up the wax tablet carefully from his desk.

THANK YOU. She wrote.

Ramón read it, then gave a satisfied nod.

"Good."

He opened the ledger, found the line, and struck through it with one neat mark.

Master Graent — two silver.

Paid.

Willow watched the ink dry.

Such a small thing.

A line in a book. Two coins. A debt erased.

And somehow, it felt as though she had helped Los in some small way.

Ramón closed the ledger.

"You did well."

Willow's eyes dropped at once.

He pretended not to notice.

"Drink your milk before it cools."

She looked back up.

He pointed towards the hearth with his quill.

"And eat."

Willow's expression made it very clear she had not come to the embassy to be fed like a child.

Ramón's expression made it very clear he had survived worse resistance from larger and more heavily armed fools.

After a long moment, Willow went to the hearth and sat.

Ramón returned to his work.

Outside, Camelot carried on.

Inside, the embassy settled into the quiet rhythm of scratching quill, crackling fire, and a silent girl eating because an old steward had told her to.

There was still no news.

But there had been something to do.

And for a day, it was enough.

The Request Declined

Orchid Fair Guildhall

The morning had already gone wrong before the scroll arrived.

Angela stood at the long table in the war room, one hand braced against its edge, staring down at a map of the north as if force of will alone might make it yield an answer. Benowyc. Bledmeer. The coast. The sea beyond. Too many roads, too many shadows, and not one certain place to lay a hand and say: There. They took him there.

The candles had burned low. Wax pooled beside the map. No one in the room had any answer worth speaking aloud.

The door opened.

Tamara entered with a sealed scroll in her hand.

"Avalon," she said simply.

That got everyone's attention.

Prox straightened where he leaned by the hearth. Romao turned from the window. Julia, who had been quietly reviewing a ledger at the side table, lifted her head at once.

Tamara crossed the room and offered the scroll to Angela.

"The Lady of the Lake."

Angela took it, broke the seal, and read in silence.

The room waited.

Her face gave away little, but those who knew her well saw the change in her eyes as she read—a sharpening, then weariness, then resolution hardening like steel cooling in water.

When she had finished, she lowered the parchment but did not speak at once.

"Well?" Prox asked.

Angela handed the scroll back to Tamara. "Read it."

Tamara's eyes moved over the page.

"A request for aid from the Lady of the Lake," she said. "Urgent. She asks that Orchid Fair answer the call."

Romao exhaled slowly through his nose. "Aid?"

Julia looked from Tamara to Angela. "Does she say what the matter is?"

"No," Tamara replied. "Only that it is pressing."

Angela took the scroll back.

"No."

The word fell cleanly into the room.

Prox frowned. "No?"

Angela looked up at him.

"We do not have the time," she said, "or the strength, to take on anything more right now."

Her tone was calm, but no one there mistook it for softness.

"We already have too many obligations as it is. Keeps needing manpower. Patrols to maintain." She set the scroll down beside the map. "No. Until we have Los back, every man and woman we can spare should be committed to that."

Silence followed.

That silence said enough. No one in the room had forgotten why the maps were still spread, why the candles had burned through the night, or why Angela looked as though she had spent the last several days holding herself together by sheer will alone.

Prox pushed off from the hearth.

"Then send me."

Angela's eyes shifted to him.

He spread his hands once. "If Avalon asks, someone ought to answer. If you need the guild for Los, fine. I can take a few men and go."

For a moment the offer hung there.

Then Angela shook her head.

"No."

Prox's brow furrowed. "Angela—"

"You already have an obligation," she said. "Caer Boldiam."

He made a face. "Boldiam can wait."

"No," Angela said, sharper now. "It cannot."

She turned fully towards him, guildmaster as much as friend.

"We gave our word. That still matters. Especially now."

That took some of the heat out of him. He did not like it, but he knew she was right.

Angela's gaze moved to Julia.

"You'll go with him."

Julia straightened at once. "Of course."

Prox glanced towards her, then back to Angela. "You're sending Julia?"

"Yes."

That was all Angela said at first.

Then, because she knew them both and because she was too tired for pretense, she added, "You'll need a cleric with you, and she is available. Pick six more for the patrol, draw what you need, and leave in the morning."

"Angela?" Julia hesitated.

"No," Angela said. "It's done."

Besides, Prox was less likely to argue further if Julia went with him, and they all knew it.

Romao's mouth twitched.

Tamara looked down to hide a smile.

Prox sighed, but there was no real protest in it now. He looked at Julia instead.

"Well," he said, "at least I'll have good company."

Julia gave him a small smile that warmed the room more than the hearth had managed all morning.

"I'll try not to let you get yourself killed."

"That would be appreciated."

For the faintest instant, something almost amused touched Angela's face before duty reclaimed it.

"Stay safe, both of you," she said. "That's an order."

Prox looked at Julia. "I suppose that means I should go pretend to be prepared."

Julia tucked the ledger beneath one arm. "I suppose that means I should make sure you actually are."

That got a quiet snort from Romao.

Tamara folded the Avalon scroll neatly in her hands. "What shall I tell the Lady of the Lake?"

Angela looked down at the seal for a long moment.

When she answered, her voice was controlled and formal.

"Tell her Orchid Fair regrets that we cannot answer her request at this time. Our strength is committed elsewhere."

Tamara nodded.

Angela's eyes returned to the map.

That was the truth of it. Not diplomacy. Not excuse. The truth.

Avalon had called.

And Angela Burns was turning it down because Los was still missing.

No one in the room challenged that. No one dared.

At last Angela said, without looking up, "Go. Both of you. See Boldiam done properly."

Julia inclined her head. "Yes, my lady."

Prox lingered half a second longer. He looked at Angela, and when he spoke again, the levity had gone from him.

"We'll get him back."

Angela did not answer right away.

Her fingers rested lightly on the map near the northern coast.

"I know," she said at last.

It was not confidence.

It was necessity.

Prox gave one short nod, then turned for the door. Julia fell into step beside him without needing to be asked.

Tamara remained with the scroll.

Romao went back to the window.

Where are you, fratello?

And Angela, left at the war table with the north spread out before her like a map to some forgotten treasure, fixed her eyes once more on the unknown places where Los

might be—and on the single task that outweighed Avalon, duty, and every other burden laid before Orchid Fair.

Bringing him home.

The Refusal Recorded

Mist drifted low across the waters of Avalon Marsh, pale as breath upon a mirror. The towers beyond the lake rose quiet and silver in the morning haze, their stones catching a light that seemed older than the sun itself. Nothing in that place ever felt entirely mortal—not the air, not the water, not even silence.

And within the hall, that silence had just been broken.

A messenger in the colors of Camelot stood at the foot of the chamber, head bowed, travel-stained and damp at the hem from the causeway. In his hands he held a sealed reply, now opened and read aloud before the gathered attendants.

At the far end of the chamber sat the Lady of the Lake.

Nimue was robed in white and pale blue, the folds of her dress spilling over the carved stone of her seat like moonlight over water. She did not look old. She did not look young. She simply looked as she always must have looked—beautiful in the way of deep waters and dangerous stillness.

Beside her stood Lord Adribard, hands folded behind his back, his weathered face unreadable as he listened to the last of the message.

"The guild Orchid Fair," the messenger finished, voice careful in that enchanted place, "regretfully declines the charge laid before them. Their strength is otherwise committed."

Nimue said nothing.

The messenger swallowed, uneasy at having to deliver words he himself clearly wished had been otherwise.

"Their attention remains fixed upon the recovery of their missing knight."

At that, something shifted very slightly in the room.

Not surprise. Everyone there had heard whispers enough. Caer Benowyc. Midgard. Valkyries. The disappearance of Sir Los Ortiz had traveled farther and faster than many armies ever did.

Still Nimue did not immediately answer. She rested one hand upon the arm of her chair and turned her gaze towards the waters beyond the open arch.

"So they refuse," she said at last.

The messenger bowed lower. "They do, my lady."

Lord Adribard stepped forward, measured and composed as ever.

"With respect, my lady," he said, "they do not refuse lightly."

Nimue's eyes moved to him.

"No," she said. "They do not."

And somehow that made it more troublesome rather than less.

The hall fell quiet again.

Outside, a swan drifted through the mist.

At length Nimue spoke.

"He is but one man. Orchid Fair should remember that. Their lady chooses love over command." She paused, weighing more than words. "But the need remains."

Adribard inclined his head. None had dared say it aloud, but all knew the shape of things between the Guildmaster and her chief Paladin.

"It does."

The messenger stood frozen, not daring to raise his eyes.

Nimue's fingers tapped once against carved stone. "Then who remains to answer the call?"

Adribard did not answer at once. He seemed, for the space of a breath, to consider how best to frame what was coming.

Then he said it, "The last son of Arthur."

The words settled in the chamber like a stone dropped into still water.

Nimue's gaze sharpened slightly.

"He is still a boy."

Adribard shook his head.

"Not so, my lady. He was knighted only recently by Sir Sagamore. Already men follow where he leads."

Lady Lynn, who had stood silent beside one of the pale columns, folded her hands into the sleeves of her cleric's robe.

"My lady," she said carefully, "he is a bastard."

The word did not crack through the hall.

It did not need to.

It settled instead, plain and cold, into the space between them.

Alant, the Paladin trainer, turned his head at once.

"He is also a knight."

"I did not say he was not," Lady Lynn replied.

"You implied it mattered more."

Brother Caun shifted near the hearth, his friar's staff resting against one shoulder.

"To some, it will."

"To law," Lady Lynn said. "To inheritance. To crowns. To men who remember such things when blood begins to matter."

Sister Endri's mouth tightened.

"Blood seems to matter a great deal already, or we would not be speaking of him."

Alant nodded once. "He was knighted by Sagamore. He leads men who follow him willingly. That speaks more clearly to me than the bed he was born from."

"And yet," Lady Lynn said, not unkindly, "the bed he was born from may be the first thing others see."

For a moment, no one answered.

Until Adribard did, voice measured.

"He is still Arthur's son."

The hall grew quiet.

A faint expression touched Nimue's face then—too small to be called a smile, too knowing to be dismissed as nothing.

"He follows in the steps of his father," she said. "I pray he fares better."

"Then perhaps," Adribard replied carefully, "it is fate that he be asked to save Avalon."

That drew a longer silence.

The Lady of the Lake looked past him, past the messenger, beyond the hall itself as though seeing some older current beneath the moment. The son of Arthur. Bastard or no, the weight of that name was never merely blood. It was inheritance, burden, expectation, and danger all tied into one mortal life.

At last she asked, "Does he know?"

"I believe," said Adribard, "that he believes it to be myth and legend."

Nimue's eyes returned to him. "I see."

"Shall I send for him?" Adribard asked.

The messenger shifted just once, perhaps only because the stillness of Avalon made every man feel clumsy in his own skin.

Nimue rose.

The hall seemed to alter when she did, as though everyone present suddenly recalled who and what stood before them. The silver light from the open arch touched her hair, and for an instant she looked less like a woman in a hall than the spirit of the place itself.

"He was knighted by Sagramore," she said, almost to herself. "Already a leader of men."

Then, quieter:

"Much as his father."

Adribard lowered his head.

There was no irony in her tone. No warmth either. Only the grave recognition that greatness and trouble so often rode together.

Nimue looked from one face to another: cleric, paladin, friar, sister, lord. Each had spoken from the shape of their own duty. None had spoken wholly falsely.

At last, the Lady of the Lake turned back towards the messenger.

"It is decided."

No voice rose against her.

"Seek him out."

The messenger looked up at last. "My lady?"

"Arthuur," she said. "You will bear my summons to the last son of King Arthur. Tell him Avalon has need of him."

"Yes, my lady."

"If he has sense," she added, "he will hesitate."

Adribard permitted himself the faintest trace of a smile.

"And if the blood of Pendragon flows strong in his veins, my lady?"

Nimue's gaze drifted once more towards the lake.

"Then he will come."

The messenger bowed so deeply his forehead nearly brushed the stone.

"As you wish, my lady."

He backed away, then turned and hurried from the chamber, eager to be out from under the weight of Avalon's gaze and into the ordinary world again.

When he had gone, the mist moved softly beyond the arches. Adribard remained where he was, hands folded, waiting.

Nimue did not look at him when she spoke next.

"You know it is not yet time."

"No, my lady."

"But you wish it."

Adribard considered.

"Yes," he said at last. "His son may only delay the return of the true King."

That, at last, brought the smallest flicker of approval to her face.

"Let us see," said the Lady of the Lake, "what sort of man his son has become."

Chapter LV — The Wagon

The Northern Road

Half a Day from the Village

They smelled it before they saw it.

Not smoke this time. Something older. Blood, mud, split grain, and the thick dead silence that follows sudden violence.

The wagon sat canted in the ditch where the road bent through a stand of birch. One wheel had shattered. The ox lay dead in the traces, mouth open, crows already gathering in the cold air. Goods were strewn across the frozen mud—bolts of cloth, a cracked barrel leaking grain, a wooden chest with its lid torn free.

Two bodies lay there. A man and a woman. The man had died reaching for a woodsman's axe he had never drawn. The woman had fallen half across the back of the wagon, an arrow buried deep between her shoulders.

Los dismounted without a word.

He went first to the woman and closed her eyes.

Sigrún scanned the tree line, one hand on her sword. "Blodfelag."

Los looked towardss the trees.

For a moment, he had the strange and certain feeling, someone, or... something was watching them.

Sigrún's voice tightened. "Ve should have finished them when ve had the chance."

Her anger burned for the dead. Unfortunate travelers, butchered because they had been in the wrong place when wolves passed through.

Tim said nothing. He only removed his hat.

Then something caught the Spaniard's ear.

Not a cry. Not yet. Something smaller than that. The sort of sound only a man already listening would hear.

He climbed into the wagon and gently shifted the woman aside.

Beneath a heap of furs and folded linen, tucked into a hollow behind the bench and wedged tight so she would not roll, lay a baby. Weeks old at most, red-faced and trembling, lips parted in a cry so thin it barely carried beyond the wagon's edge.

The mother had hidden her.

And died protecting her.

Los stopped.

For one long breath he only looked.

Then he reached down and lifted the child from the dark.

The baby's cry sharpened at the touch of the cold steel of his gauntlet. At once he set her gently back down, stripped off both gauntlets, and pulled open his cloak. With his knife he cut a broad strip from its hem, wrapped her in it, and tucked her against his chest.

"Los?"

Sigrún had heard the sound and came around the wagon. She stopped when she saw what he held.

He turned towards her, the child against his chest. The baby had quieted—not content, only too cold and too tired to scream properly.

"The mother hid her," he said.

Sigrún looked from the baby to the dead woman, then back again.

"Ve cannot take an infant into the Dwarven halls."

"She is coming with us," Los said.

It was not a request. Not an appeal. Merely a fact spoken in the tone he used when he had already made up his mind.

She had heard that sort of voice before in battle. Never over something so small.

Sigrún turned to Tim. But she could see she would get no help there.

"Tim," Los said.

The troll came at once and bent to look at the child. His broad face grim.

"Master," he said quietly. "She is too small."

"Jes. Can jou feed her? Goat's milk, warmed. And we will need a basket. One warmer than she was lying in. Make one from the furs. Por favor."

Tim nodded as though given a battlefield command. "I vill take care of her, Master."

Los looked down at the child again. Her tiny fingers had curled around one of his, fierce as hooks.

He did not know her name. He did not know if she had any family left, or a clan who could claim her.

But she was alive.

And now she was his responsibility.

At the edge of the trees, something shifted.

Los looked up.

Nothing moved.

Only branches. Snow. The pale trunks of the trees standing silent beyond the ruined wagon.

Still, the feeling remained.

Something was watching.

Waiting.

Sigrún followed his gaze, and her eyes narrowed.

"Vhat is it?"

"I don't know," Los said.

Tim did not look towards the trees.

That made Los more uneasy than if he had.

By the time Tim had lashed together a rough little basket from strips of leather, bent willow, and salvaged furs, Los was already mounted again, the child cradled close against his chest.

He turned west, towards the mountains.

Tim called down a blessing upon the child. Los felt it grow warm for a moment.

Then he began to move.

He felt, without knowing why, as if it was no longer safe to remain.

Sigrún watched him ride ahead. The dead lay behind them. The road stretched empty before them. And the Spaniard held the child as though she were the only thing in the world that mattered.

Something in her chest shifted.

She did not try to push it back.

The Road North — Night Camp

They made camp where the pines thickened and the wind dropped to a murmur.

Tim had worked a small miracle. From somewhere—Sigrún did not ask where—he had produced goat's milk, warmed it over the fire in a small copper pot, and soaked a strip of clean linen until it held enough for the baby to suckle. He sat cross-legged near the flames, the child cradled in the crook of one enormous arm, feeding her with the patience of someone who had done this before.

"Tim," Sigrún said at last, watching him. "How do you know how to do that?"

He looked up as if the answer were obvious.

"Trolls have babies too."

She had no answer to that.

The child fed, fussed, and at last slept in the basket Tim had made for her—a nest of furs set near the fire's warmth, close enough to feel it, far enough to be safe. Tim covered her with the strip Los had cut from his cloak.

Los sat a little apart in the dark, one hand pressed over his chest.

He had not spoken much since the wagon.

Something had settled over him—not grief exactly, but a quietness heavier than his usual silences. The kind that comes when a man is remembering something he would rather leave buried.

Sigrún watched him from across the fire.

He is thinking of someone, she realized.

Not the child.

Someone older.

Someone gone.

She did not ask.

She was beginning to understand that with Los, what he did not say often mattered more than what he did.

The baby woke twice that night.

The first time, Tim handled it, rocking her with a low rumbling hum that sounded like river stones rolling in deep water. She settled quickly.

The second time, it was Los.

Sigrún stirred at the sound of movement and barely opened her eyes. He was already up, lifting the child from her basket and pressing her against his shoulder. He walked the edge of the firelight slowly, pacing beneath the trees, his lips moving.

He was singing.

Not loudly. Barely more than breath. A melody in his own tongue, slow and aching, the sort of song that sounded old enough to have outlived the one it had first been sung to.

The child's cries softened.

Then ceased.

Los stood in the dark holding her, still swaying a little even after she had fallen asleep. His hand cupped the back of her head with a care so natural it looked almost practiced, though Sigrún doubted he had ever held a child before.

After a while he laid her down again, tucked the furs around her, and returned to his place by the fire.

He did not look towards Sigrún.

Perhaps he knew she was watching and chose to let it be.

But there was thinking to do now. Sigrún was right. They could not take the baby into the dwarven kingdom, and that meant a choice had to be made.

Sigrún lay still in the dark and thought of the stories she had heard of him.

Then she thought of this man she had just seen sing to an orphan beneath the pines — and wondered how both could live in one body.

The Watcher Beneath the Pines

The Skogsfru hid among the pines, listening.

She had followed them from the broken wagon, unseen beneath the forest canopy. She had watched the knight lift the child from the wagon. Watched him strip off cold steel so his hands would not frighten her. Watched him tear his own cloak to keep her warm.

Men took many things from the dead.

This one had taken a burden.

So she followed.

When the child cried in the night, the knight rose. He carried her along the edge of the firelight, swaying softly beneath the branches, and then he sang.

The words were foreign to her.

She had never heard the like.

But the melody was gentle.

So gentle the child quieted.

So gentle the pines seemed to lean closer.

So gentle that the forest-woman, who had not meant to close her eyes, did so.

She fell asleep beneath the stars, listening to the soft melody meant for the child, and woke at dawn beneath the trees—surprised.

The fire was ash. The camp was empty. The knight, the Valkyrie, the troll, and the child had already gone west along the road, towards the place where her forest thinned and the hard mountains of Raumarik began.

The Skogsfru followed swiftly.

She found them near the edge of her green, where pine gave way to stone and the road bent north.

The knight did not see her.

He rode with the child held close against his chest, one hand cupped behind her head as though the world might break if he held her poorly.

The Skogsfru watched him a moment longer.

Then she whispered words older than men.

A blessing.

A gift of luck for his quest.

A gentle breeze passed over Los, and for a moment, his burden felt lighter.

Sigrún sensed the change and looked sharply towards the trees.

Tim did not look at all.

The Skogsfru smiled.

When the road left her forest, she followed no farther.

The Road Ahead

They rode in silence for a while—only the sound of hooves, birdsong in the trees, and, now and then, the tiny sleepy fuss of the baby tucked close against Los's chest.

Finally, Los looked over to Sigrún, raising an eyebrow.

"So," he said. "What's the plan?"

Sigrún didn't answer immediately. She pulled a leather scroll from her saddlebag and unrolled it across her thigh, scanning the inked marks as they rode.

"We'll need to cross goblin territory," she said. "On the far side of the mountain lies the Dwarven kingdom. We'll have to get in without being seen."

Los leaned over in his saddle, mock-squinting at the map. "Goblins? They hold this side of the mountain and the Dwarves the other?"

"Yes," she replied flatly.

"I think I have a plan," he said after a moment, with his crooked grin. "We sneak into the goblin kingdom."

Tim beamed. "Good plan."

"Why is that a good plan? We are after the Dwarves, not Goblins." Sigrún looked at them, confused.

"Trust me." Los grinned.

The baby stirred. All three went quiet until she settled again.

Then they rode on.

The road ahead was long, and Los's mind was buzzing with thoughts.

He had a plan, and she would not like it.

The Brass Lantern

Camelot — The Castilian Embassy

Willow came again a day later.

She entered after one soft knock on the back door and looked towards the office before she had fully crossed the threshold.

Ramón was at his desk, as always. The ledger lay open before him, and beside it sat three sealed letters, a trimmed quill, and a small leather purse tied with red thread.

He looked up.

"No news," he said gently.

Willow stopped.

The words hurt less than before.

But they still hurt.

She nodded once.

Ramón watched her for a moment. Her face was composed. Too composed, perhaps. The stillness of someone waiting to be given something useful to do.

So he gave her something.

"Come here."

She crossed the room with the silent-footed walk of a scout. Her eyes went once to Los's empty chair, then away again.

Ramón pretended not to notice.

He set the leather purse before her.

"I have another errand."

Willow's gaze sharpened.

That was better.

"This is for Margaret at the Brass Lantern."

Willow blinked.

"The Brass Lantern is a tavern," Ramón said, "in the rogues' quarter."

Her expression did not change.

After a moment, he added with great dignity, "Not the sort of tavern to which I would ordinarily send a young lady."

Willow tilted her head.

Ramón looked at her.

She looked back.

The silence between them developed opinions.

At last he sighed.

"It is safe enough by daylight. Ask for Margaret. She is a large woman and difficult to miss. Give her this purse and the note. Wait while she records the money, then bring back whatever list she gives you."

Willow looked at the purse.

Then at him.

"The money is for the school," Ramón said.

That caught her.

Her brows drew together.

"Yes," he said, reading the question before she reached for the wax tablet. "A school. Margaret keeps it on the second floor of the Brass Lantern, away from the customers."

Willow stared at him.

"Don Los started it," Ramón said. "For poor children who need to learn letters, numbers, and how to write their names."

For a moment, the office seemed very quiet.

Ramón pushed the purse towards her.

"You will not stare. You will not accept drinks. You will not be drawn into games, wagers, songs, quarrels, or sudden friendships."

Willow's expression flattened.

Ramón raised one finger.

"If anyone gives you trouble, look at them as you are looking at me now."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Yes," he said. "Exactly that. Very terrifying."

She tucked the purse inside her cloak.

"And Señorita Willow?"

She stopped at the door.

"Do be careful."

Willow looked back at him.

Then nodded.

The Brass Lantern stood along a plaza in the middle of the rogues' quarter, where women did not linger and men glanced about before entering, even when everyone already knew where they were going.

Willow stood outside for several breaths.

A tavern.

Not so difficult.

She had seen taverns before. Soldiers drank in taverns. Scouts passed through them. Men shouted. Women carried cups. Someone usually played a poor fiddle too loudly, and someone else eventually fell over.

She could manage a tavern.

Then the door opened.

A laughing man stumbled out with one arm around a woman whose dress sat lower on her shoulders than Willow had thought dresses were meant to sit. The woman had dark curls, painted lips, and a smile sharp enough to cut purse strings.

She glanced at Willow.

Her smile changed.

Not cruelly.

Knowingly.

"Well now," the woman said. "You lost, little hawk?"

Willow froze.

The woman laughed, not unkindly, and patted the man beside her hard enough to make him stagger upright.

"Go on, Oswin. Before your wife remembers where you pretend not to be."

The man muttered something and hurried away.

The woman opened the door wider.

"In you go."

Willow stepped inside.

And immediately wished she had not.

The room was warm, close, and full of laughter. Men sat at tables with cups in hand. Women moved among them with practiced ease, some carrying trays, some sitting on laps, some draped over shoulders as though they belonged there.

Bright scarves.

Loose hair.

Painted mouths.

Bare arms.

Clinking cups.

Smoke, perfume, spilled ale, roasting meat, and laughter everywhere.

Willow stopped just inside the door.

Several people looked at her.

Then several more.

One woman gave her a wink.

Willow looked away too quickly, and her hand rose before she could stop it, half-covering the scar on her face.

A broad man with a beard leaned back and grinned.

"Bit young for this place, isn't she?"

The room went quieter.

Not silent.

But attentive.

Willow's other hand moved towards the knife at her belt.

Before she reached it, a woman's voice cut through the room.

"Look at that girl too long, Harding, and I'll charge you for the privilege."

The bearded man straightened.

"I didn't mean nothing, Margaret."

"No," the woman said. "You rarely do."

Willow turned.

Margaret came from behind the bar, wiping her hands on a cloth.

Ramón had said she would be difficult to miss.

He had been correct.

She was tall, broad, and handsome in a way that seemed built rather than painted. Her dark hair bore a streak of silver at one temple, and her sleeves were rolled to the elbow like a woman with work to do and no patience for anyone who made more of it.

A plain cross hung at her throat.

But her eyes were the thing Willow noticed most.

They seemed to see everything at once.

Margaret looked her over in a single sweep: scout cloak, bow, frightened eyes, hand half-raised to hide the scar, the other clenched inside her cloak.

Then her face softened.

"You're Willow."

Willow blinked.

Margaret smiled slightly.

"Thought so. Los's little friend."

Willow's eyes widened.

"What can I do for you?"

Willow handed her the note.

"Ramón, eh?"

Willow nodded.

Margaret opened it, read, and gave a small sound of understanding.

"Good. Come on, then. We can talk in the back."

Willow followed without protest.

Margaret led her past the bar, through a door, and into a small back room. The noise of the tavern dimmed when the door closed.

The room was plain, but clean. A ledger sat on one table. A few wax tablets, styluses, and scraps of parchment were stacked on a shelf. Beside them lay a small counting board and a bundle of practice letters.

Willow's eyes lingered there.

Margaret noticed.

"Supplies for the school," she said. "The children use the upstairs room when the tavern is not busy."

Willow looked back at her.

"Strange place for a school, I know."

Willow did not answer.

Margaret crossed to the table and opened the ledger.

"But strange places are often all the poor have."

Willow drew the purse from inside her cloak and offered it with both hands.

Margaret accepted it seriously.

Not as coin tossed to a tavern keeper.

As an account entrusted.

She counted the coins, nodded, then dipped her quill and wrote in a neat, practical hand. Willow leaned close enough to see.

Margaret paused, allowing it.

Then she sanded the ink and drew a folded list from between the pages.

"Here. For Ramón. More wax. More styluses. Firewood money. And bread, always bread. Children learn poorly with empty bellies."

Willow took the list.

Her eyes moved again to the wax tablets.

Margaret leaned one hip against the table.

"Churches do some good. Guilds teach their own. Nobles teach their sons. Some teach daughters, if they are sensible." Her mouth twitched. "But street children? Bastards and orphans?"

Her voice softened.

"Not many doors open to them."

Willow's fingers tightened around the list.

Margaret's gaze rested on her.

"Los opened one."

Willow looked up.

"He came here some time ago, asking if I would help set up a school. Quietly." A faint smile warmed Margaret's face. "I asked him why a knight cared whether orphans and bastards could read and write."

She gave a poor imitation of his accent.

"He said, 'Because not knowing makes the world smaller.'"

Willow swallowed.

That sounded like Los.

"He paid for the first tablets," Margaret continued. "Paid a clerk's widow to come teach letters three evenings a week. Gives me money for bread for the little ones."

She shook her head, smiling.

"A saint, that one."

Willow almost smiled.

Almost.

Margaret watched her for a moment.

Then she said quietly, "He is special to you."

Willow looked down at once.

There it was.

That awful, exposed feeling.

The kind that made her want to vanish into rafters or trees.

Margaret did not push.

"Aye," she said softly. "Thought so."

Willow stared at the floorboards.

"You are special to him too, you know. He talks about few people. You are one of them."

Willow blushed.

Margaret let her have the silence, then said, "He will be back. Mark my words."

Willow searched her eyes.

Margaret did not look like a woman who lied prettily.

"If there is any justice in this world," Margaret said, "he will be back. I pray for it daily."

Willow nodded once.

Margaret guided her back to the door.

The noise of the tavern rose again beyond it, and Willow stiffened.

"Stay close behind me," Margaret said. "Eyes forward. And off you go."

The common room seemed less terrible on the way out.

Not comfortable.

But less terrible.

At the threshold, Margaret stopped.

"Tell Ramón if he has questions, he can come ask me himself."

Willow nodded.

Margaret grinned.

"Off with you, then."

Willow stepped back into the street with the list in hand and the knowledge of the hidden school tucked somewhere deeper than her cloak.

When she returned to the embassy, Ramón was in the office.

Again.

Always.

Willow handed him Margaret's list.

Ramón read it carefully, then returned to the ledger, quill scratching as he entered the new expense.

Outside, Camelot moved loudly and blindly around them.

Inside the embassy, the silent girl sat near the fire and understood one more piece of the man she feared losing.

Los was not there.

But everywhere she went, she kept finding him.

Terms at Bledmeer Faste

Great Hall of Jarl Bledmeer, Midgard

The wind howled outside the stone hall, where the galleon from Albion had lowered its sails at the icy dock. Inside the keep, torches sputtered against the damp walls, casting long shadows across the floor of the great hall. Sir Sabbince stood tall beneath the banners of Midgard, his cloak still dripping seawater, flanked by two Orchid Fair armsmen and a cleric bearing the white seal of diplomacy in Lady Winchell's stead.

Jarl Bledmeer sat atop his carved oaken throne, draped in furs, his one good eye studying the men of Albion with open disdain—and curiosity.

"You've come far," he rumbled, "for vone knight."

Sabbince bowed, stiff but respectful. "We come in peace and goodwill and we bring noble hostages in good faith—for a trade."

At that, the armsmen stepped forward and presented the prisoners: two young men, their features unmistakably Norse.

Bledmeer raised an eyebrow. "Sons of Jarls. Hmph. That would buy you many things. But not him."

Murmurs spread among the Albions.

"Why not?" Sabbince asked, stunned.

Bledmeer shook his head. "The Valkyries took him."

The delegation from Albion stood silent as the Jarl let the word hang there. Though the rumor had reached Albion, this was the first confirmation. The hall fell silent.

"They serve the Gods, not the throne. I have no say in their doings," Bledmeer said.

"But... give me the hostages, and I vill send vord. I vill try to find vhere they took your man. If he yet lives."

"And if he doesn't?" Sabbince asked.

Bledmeer's voice lowered. "Then you have paid for vord of his death, and ve vill seek the return of his remains—if the Gods allow it."

Chapter LVI — The Goblin Passage

Through the Back Door

Edge of the Goblin Realm — Nightfall

The stars had vanished behind heavy cloud by the time they reached the ragged slope Sigrún called "the Goblin's Back Door."

Carved into the rock beneath an overhang, the narrow entrance was nearly invisible unless you knew exactly where to look. Sigrún did. She had traveled this path once before—long ago, during a raid. Back then, they had left it in flames.

Now they crept in silence.

Tim remained behind near the tree line, setting up a small camp far enough away to be seen, but close enough for the savory aroma of his famous troll stew to drift uphill. The baby lay bundled beside him in a basket of salvaged furs and rope, blinking up at the sky.

"Smells like meat," Tim had said proudly.

Los decided not to ask. Nor did Sigrún.

The smoke coiled upward—an invitation, or a trap, depending on who answered.

It didn't take long.

From the rocks above, Sigrún and Los watched the goblin sentries begin to stir. Five guards, all grumbling and armed, twitched their noses and muttered among themselves.

"I think it vorked," Sigrún whispered.

"Of course it vorked," Los whispered back, mimicking her accent. "Tim's cooking could lure wolves off a battlefield."

Sigrún gave him a look.

Los grinned.

Soon three of the goblins slunk off towards the scent, just as Los had hoped. That left only two at the door—dozing, distracted, and too far apart to help each other quickly.

Below, Tim welcomed the three goblins as though they were expected guests.

Without a word, he held out wooden bowls.

The goblins blinked at him.

Then one grabbed a bowl, sniffed it, and gulped it down with a noise halfway between a hiss and a slobber. The other two crowded closer at once.

Tim ladled more.

Then the baby made a small sound.

One goblin turned, yellow eyes narrowing with ugly curiosity, and reached a clawed hand towards her.

Tim caught the goblin's wrist before it touched her.

The smile vanished from the troll's face.

"No."

The goblin froze, eyes growing wide.

For a long moment Tim held him there, not squeezing, not snarling, just making it very plain what would happen if the hand moved another inch.

Then he released him.

The goblin wisely chose the stew instead.

Above, Los gave Sigrún a single nod.

They moved.

Los and Sigrún descended like shadows. No killing. Only swift, precise strikes—choking grips, reversed hilts, and the quiet thud of armor against stone. In seconds, the last two guards at the back door lay bound and gagged, breathing but unconscious.

Without a word, Los gestured for Sigrún to follow and slipped into the tunnel beyond.

Below, Tim kept serving stew until the three goblins had forgotten everything in the world except the pot.

Then, once Los and Sigrún were safely inside, the troll doused the fire, bundled up the baby, packed the pot, and hauled everything onto Bill.

He did not look back.

He simply turned back towards the village they had saved, as Los had instructed. The villagers had said if there was anything they could do. Los hoped that included taking care of a baby.

By the time the goblins finished licking the last of the grease from their claws and staggered back to their post, they found the guards just as Los had left them—bound, gagged, furious, and very much alive.

Beneath the Goblin Warrens

The darkness swallowed them.

The tunnel walls narrowed and widened without pattern, slick with damp moss and lit only by the occasional sickly fungal glow. Sigrún moved with one hand resting on her sword. Los moved with quiet purpose, every turn measured, every footfall deliberate.

"Do you think we are close?" she whispered.

"To what?" he asked, his tone neutral.

"You said there would be a passage. A link between the goblins and the dwarves."

"Oh. That." He kept walking. "Jes. Maybe."

He did not look at her.

Sigrún narrowed her eyes. There was something else he was not saying.

They slipped past a patrol—six goblins in crude iron and leather, muttering among themselves as they tramped through the dark. Los caught Sigrún gently by the arm and drew her back into a narrow side passage. They waited there in silence, breathing shallowly, until the goblins had passed.

Then they moved again.

Deeper.

Quieter.

And then—

Voices.

The clink of metal.

A low murmur drifting through stone.

Los raised a hand, stopping her where she stood. Then he quickly moved towardss a smaller, darker side tunnel.

Ahead, in the main tunnel, they saw him.

A goblin unlike the others.

Young. Slender. Seemingly important. Better dressed than any common sentry had a right to be. His chainmail was of fine make, almost elegant in the firelight. Around his thin green neck hung a golden chain far too rich for an ordinary goblin. Four broader goblins walked before and after him, all hard faces and heavy weapons.

Bodyguards.

Sigrún leaned closer. "Some form of nobility?"

"Maybe," Los murmured. "We'll see."

Before she could ask what he meant, Los was already moving.

The Capture

In a blur, Los slipped from the side tunnel like a wraith.

His arm snaked out, seized the smaller goblin from behind, and dragged him into the dark. A hunting knife pressed against the young goblin's throat before the bodyguards could do more than gasp.

"Not a sound," Los warned.

The goblin stiffened—but did not cry out. His guards lurched forward, blades half-raised, then froze in place, uncertain whether to rush him or watch their charge die.

Sigrún stepped out beside Los, her sword bared and cold.

"Stand back," Los ordered, "or I'll cut his throat."

The guards looked at one another, confused and hesitating.

Then Los eased his grip just a little.

"I don't want to hurt jou," he said in a lower voice. "I only want to talk."

The young goblin looked up at him, wide-eyed.

"You... you're Sir Ortiz," he rasped.

Los's grin widened.

"So jou've heard of me."

The goblin nodded quickly. "Yes, yes. Call me Gobby. Son of Gobbiru. He is king."

Los lowered the knife and gently turned him around.

"Can jou take us to him, Gobby?"

"To see king?" Gobby hesitated, glancing nervously at Sigrún. "With Valkyrie?"

"She is with me," Los said. "A friend."

"Why you wish to see king?"

Los reached to his belt and drew the ornate dagger he mostly carried for show.

"Take us to him, and I will give jou this."

Gobby's eyes lit at once as the torchlight caught the jeweled hilt.

"Gobby will take you! Take you both. And—Gobby keeps dagger?"

"Jes," Los said, placing it in his hands, sheath and all. "A gift. To a noble prince."

Sigrún raised an eyebrow.

Los shrugged. "What?"

"You're reckless," she muttered.

"Someone has to be."

She did not answer.

Gobby straightened at once, adjusted his armor, and turned towards his guards with all the gravity his narrow shoulders could muster.

"Follow!" he barked. "These two—come with us!"

The bodyguards still looked doubtful, but they obeyed. Goblin politics, Sigrún thought. Always strange.

And so, with their roles neatly reversed—Los and Sigrún now the ones being escorted—they followed young Gobby deeper into the winding halls of the goblin kingdom.

Towards the throne of the goblin king.

And whatever strange plan Los had in mind.

Sigrún frowned to herself.

Whatever it was, he had better be right.

Her sister's life depended on it.

The Goblin King's Hall

Deep within the Goblin Warrens — Throne Room of King Gobbiru

The air grew thick as they descended deeper, the glow of pale cave moss fading into torchlight and soot-streaked stone. The tunnels opened into a vast chamber cut roughly from the rock, high-ceilinged and echoing with the smell of smoke, iron, and old gold.

Gobby walked ahead with pride, his fine chainmail gleaming dully in the torchlight.

"Nice armor," Los said conversationally as they walked. "Where'd you get it?"

Gobby puffed out his thin chest. "Taken from dwarves! Many years ago. Small for them, perfect for me!"

Los raised an eyebrow, then glanced sidelong at Sigrún with a subtle, knowing nod. She returned it without a word.

At the end of the chamber loomed the throne—a broad, jagged seat made of scavenged bronze and black stone. Gems winked from the walls. Goblin banners hung lopsided from iron rods. And upon the throne slouched a large goblin with a heavy brow, golden rings in his ears, and a crown that looked like it had once been part of a dwarven chandelier.

King Gobbiru.

As they approached, the goblin king narrowed his eyes. "Gobby," he barked, his voice deep and graveled. "Why you brought outsiders to my hall?" His gaze sharpened. "A Valkyrie. A knight?"

Gobby bowed quickly. "This is Sir Ortiz. The one who slew a wyrm. He and Valkyrie here to see you."

Los stepped forward and bowed slightly—elegant, but unafraid.

"Jour Majesty," he said, his tone formal but smooth. "I am Sir Los Ortiz de Seville. This is Sigrún, sister to Brynhildr, who was taken by the dwarves."

The king's yellowed eyes studied them both. "Taken by the dwarves? And what is that to goblins?"

Before Los could answer, the heavy doors at the rear of the hall swung open. A goblin messenger ran in, panting.

"Back gate has been breached! Guards assaulted!"

The King sat up straighter. "How many dead?"

The messenger blinked. "None, Majesty."

All eyes turned to Los.

He raised his hand. "That was us. We... made sure they were still breathing when we left them."

The King grunted. "Strange behavior for knight. Not to kill goblins."

"I'm not here for goblins," Los replied calmly. "I'm here for the dwarves."

A murmur rippled through the goblin courtiers. The King scratched his chin.

"Why should I care dwarves took your woman?"

"She is not his woman," Sigrún snapped.

Los raised a hand, smiling. "Because while we rescue her, your enemies—the dwarves—will be distracted dealing with us. Their gates open. Their eyes turned elsewhere. A perfect time, I would think... for those who enjoy acquiring treasure."

He gestured slowly to the tapestries, weapons, and gold-lined shields decorating the chamber—each one clearly of dwarven make.

The King's eyes gleamed. Then he threw back his head and laughed, a gravelly sound like stones rolling in the deep.

"You have sharp eyes," Gobbiru said. "And sharper tongue. You think like goblin."

"I take that as a compliment," Los replied with a half-bow.

The King nodded. "You may use tunnels. One leads into the dwarf kingdom—through old stone vein. Forgotten by dwarves. But not by us."

Sigrún stiffened. "And in return?"

"No return," said the king with a grin full of crooked teeth. "Chaos enough. They chase you; we help ourselves."

He waved a hand. "Gobby, take them to passage."

Gobby beamed and motioned for them to follow.

As they turned, the King called after them. "Try not die, Sir Ortiz. You do, I want your sword."

Los grinned as he looked back. "If I die, you'll have to fight Tim for it."

The King blinked. "Who?"

The messenger whispered, "Big one. Makes stew."

The King's face darkened slightly. "Ah. Him."

Sigrún looked at Los for a moment. This was not the man she had fought at the gate. This was someone else entirely.

And so, guided by a goblin prince through tunnels carved in secrecy and stone, Los and Sigrún descended into the dark heart of the mountain... towards the dwarves who held Brynhildr captive—and the trap Los had quietly begun to set.

Chapter LVII — The Hidden Ally

The Dwarven Depths — Beyond the Goblin Passage

The goblin escort halted where the stone corridor narrowed into a jagged crevice. A dull wind whispered from within, cold and heavy from the depths of the mountain.

"This is where you wait," Los said to the goblin raiding party. "Give us time to make a proper mess."

The goblins grunted their approval and slunk into the shadows.

Sigrún leaned close. "What exactly are you doing?"

Los did not look at her.

"Trust me."

Then he slipped forward.

She hesitated, then followed.

They moved like ghosts through the dwarven depths, avoiding patrols in chainmail, smiths muttering beside carts of ore, and one priest blessing a small shrine cut into the stone. Hammer-song echoed somewhere far below them, steady as a second heartbeat beneath the mountain.

No alarm.

No shout.

No notice.

Then Los stopped.

Ahead lay a protected corridor flanked by steel doors and lit by a single rune-torch. One guard stood at the far end.

A lone figure stood there in ornate mail. An engraved shield. A finely worked sword.

And, exactly as Los had hoped, a winged helm.

His expression shifted.

"There," he whispered. "Exactly what I was looking for."

Sigrún frowned. "Los—"

"Wait here. I am going to say hello."

Before she could stop him, he stepped from the shadows.

Tall. Bold. Utterly exposed.

His sword remained slung across his back, and his arms folded across his chest as though he had wandered into the corridor by invitation.

The dwarven Valkyrie turned at once.

Her eyes narrowed.

She recognized the armor first. The shape of a human before her.

"Paladin," she hissed, drawing her sword.

She had seen his kind before.

Los tilted his head.

"A Valkyrie, are jou?"

She did not sound the alarm.

As he expected she would not.

She advanced with the confidence of one who had already measured him and found the answer simple. One Paladin, no matter how large, was no match for a Valkyrie.

Then a voice came from the dark behind him.

"Sister."

The dwarven Valkyrie stopped mid-stride.

From the shadows stepped Sigrún.

Her sword dipped.

"Sister Sigrún?" the dwarf breathed.

For one heartbeat, the corridor held still.

Then they crossed the distance between them. Armor jingled softly as they embraced, and the tension in the narrow passage loosened all at once.

"Vhat are you doing here?" the dwarf whispered fiercely. "If Brokkr or Sindri see you in these halls, they will take you prisoner as they took your sister."

Sigrún smiled faintly. "It is good to see you too, Mista."

Mista pulled back, then seemed to remember the towering knight beside them.

Her eyes went flat.

"And vhat," she asked, "is he doing here?"

Sigrún glanced at Los, then back to Mista.

"You know the challenge issued to Odin. Los is here to rescue my sister."

Mista's brow furrowed.

"Him? Inn Spánverji?"

Los offered a small bow.

Sigrún did not smile.

"I trust him."

That gave Mista pause.

She looked from Sigrún to Los, then back again. Whatever she saw in Sigrún's face seemed to trouble her more than the Paladin's presence.

At last, Mista stepped closer to Los and studied him with hard eyes.

"You are taller than I imagined."

"People say that a lot."

Mista rolled her eyes.

Then she turned back to Sigrún.

"Quickly, there is a storage room ahead. Hide there before someone sees you. I will return as soon as I can."

Sigrún nodded.

Los said nothing.

Together they slipped behind the heavy iron door and into the dark to wait.

Cloaks and Confessions

The room was dark and narrow, lined with barrels and crates stamped with dwarven runes. Dust hung in the air like forgotten prayers. They slipped inside as the iron door closed behind them with quiet finality.

They waited beneath the low stone ceiling, the torchlight flickering over the rings of Sigrún's mail and Los's plate. The air was still, save for the distant hammering of a forge somewhere deeper in the mountain.

Sigrún broke the silence first.

"All right," she said. "No more guessing. Tell me the plan. All of it."

Los leaned back against the wall and folded his arms. "What makes you think I have one?"

"You don't seem surprised by anything. Not the goblins. Not Mista. Not the tunnels." Her eyes narrowed. "You're not improvising."

I'm improvising everything, Los thought. *Completely making it up as we go.*

Though perhaps that was not entirely true.

Luck had been helping. More than he deserved. But some quieter part of him seemed to be helping too, catching each lucky turn and making a path from it before the louder part of him knew what to call it.

But as long as it was working...

Out loud, he said, "I thought a few things might go our way. Hoped for the rest."

"Like what?"

"Finding a high-ranking goblin before a patrol found us, for starters. And finding a dwarven Valkyrie. That part took longer than I had hoped."

Sigrún nodded. "There are not many Dwarven Valkyries. But Mista is a good one. Smart. Loyal."

"Good," Los said, just a little smug. "I am counting on that sisterhood of yours."

Sigrún's eyes narrowed slightly. "And then what?"

"We let the goblins do what goblins do best." He shrugged. "They cause trouble. We slip out with your sister."

"I thought we were the distraction for them."

Los grinned. "Sure. Let us go with that."

Before she could scowl again, the heavy door creaked open.

Mista stepped in, this time not alone. Behind her came three more Valkyries—Dwarven women in plain chainmail, sharp-eyed and silent. Each gave Sigrún a brief nod of recognition.

"I brought those we can trust," Mista said. "What is your plan?"

"Ask him." Sigrún nodded to Los.

"Can you take us to where Brynhildr is being held?" Los asked Mista.

"We can try," Mista said, eyeing him.

"Good. Take us to her and leave the rest to me."

They all looked to Sigrún.

She stood. "You all know what is at stake. Only he can rescue my sister."

Their eyes moved back to Los.

There was skepticism amongst them.

But no hesitation.

One by one, they nodded.

Mista pulled a bundle from her pack and handed out dark cloaks.

"Put these on," she said. "Hunch your shoulders. Bend your knees. Keep your heads down. In smoke and torchlight, from across a corridor, it may be enough."

Los looked down at himself, then at the cloak.

"May be?"

Mista gave him a flat look. "You are very tall."

"Jes. People say that a lot."

"Then try not to be."

Sigrún smiled and almost laughed.

Almost.

Mista turned serious again. "Ve vill valk beside you. If anyone looks too long, let us speak. Few here vill question a group of Valkyries."

She looked from Sigrún to Los.

"Brynhildr is held in the upper workshop—Sindri and Brokkr's forge. It is often locked though unguarded, but it is not impenetrable."

"We will keep watch while you get her out," one of the Valkyries said.

Before they moved, Los raised a hand.

"There is something else. A goblin raiding party is waiting a ways down from here. Once a commotion begins, they will begin a raid."

Mista blinked. "You are telling us this vhy?"

"So jou can juse it. If we are discovered, raise the alarm. Send the guards after the goblins. Blame them for the noise. Buy us time."

The Valkyries exchanged glances.

Then came grins.

"Clever," Mista said. "You vant chaos to cover your escape."

"I want my odds to be better than terrible," Los replied.

Sigrún looked at him then—really looked at him.

Not as the loud, arrogant Paladin she had expected. Not merely as the maddening fool with a crooked smile.

As a man who might actually pull this off.

A man who not only fought.

He thought.

She nodded once.

"This vill vork."

Los pulled his hood up and checked the fastening of the cloak.

"We go in quiet," he said. "We come out quieter."

And if all else failed...

Well.

He would improvise that too.

The Message Returned

Orchid Fair Guildhall — War Room, Evening

The rain had not stopped since morning.

Angela stood at the war table once again, arms crossed, her gaze distant as candlelight flickered against a dozen maps. The fire crackled low in the hearth. No armor today—only a long crimson coat over her tunic. She looked like someone waiting for a sentence, not a strategy.

The door creaked open.

Tamara entered, followed by a familiar figure—drenched, road-weary, but standing tall.

"Sir Sabbince," Angela said, straightening. "You've returned."

He bowed his head. "My lady. I came as quickly as the sea allowed."

Angela stepped forward. "Did you reach Bledmeer Faste?"

"I did."

Tamara moved to the hearth, stoking the flames. Sabbince unfastened his cloak and stepped closer, the weight of travel still heavy in his boots.

"He received us with suspicion, but not hostility," Sabbince began. "When we presented the Jarl's sons, his tone changed. He listened."

Angela's voice was calm, but sharp. "And?"

Sabbince met her eyes. "He confirmed what we feared. Los was taken by Valkyries. The throne of Midgard has no claim over him."

Angela's jaw clenched. "Then there is no ransom. No exchange."

"Not directly," Sabbince said. "But Jarl Bledmeer made a pledge. He will send word to those who *might* know where the Valkyries took him. If they are able, he says, they will bring Los to us."

Angela looked down at the table. Her hands settled on its edge, knuckles whitening against the wood.

"And if they're not able?" she asked softly.

Sabbince lowered his voice. "Then he promises to seek the return of Los's body... should their gods permit."

Silence stretched through the war room.

Tamara finally spoke. "That's more than I expected."

Angela did not answer immediately. When she did, her voice was tight, low. "That's not good enough."

Sabbince stepped closer. "My lady—"

"No," she said, cutting him off. "It's not your fault. You did what you could. But if the gods have him..."

She trailed off, exhaling slowly, as though trying to let go of something deep in her chest.

"We need a new plan," she said.

Sabbince raised a brow.

Angela turned towards the fire, eyes burning.

"If their gods have taken him," she said quietly, "then I will climb to their halls if I have to—"

She looked back at them.

"—and knock on their golden doors myself."

No one dared argue.

The Valkyrie Freed - The Rescue

The Upper Workshop of Sindri and Brokkr — Dwarven Halls, Deep Under Midgard

The stone corridor narrowed as they approached. The air was thick with the scent of burnt metal and old enchantments. At the far end stood a tall iron door—unlit, unguarded. Only the soft glow of cooling forges flickered beyond the workshop's arched windows.

Los eyed the lock. "No guards?" he murmured. "Too easy."

With practiced fingers, he slipped his hunting knife into the narrow gap between door and frame. A flick. A lift. The mechanism clicked.

The door creaked open.

"Los," Sigrún whispered, "something's wrong."

"Jes," he muttered. "But we are committed now."

They stepped inside—

A shrill chime rang out, sharp and unnatural. A warded alarm. It echoed through the halls like a war horn from the gods.

Los cursed under his breath. "Of course..."

The dwarven Valkyries behind them stiffened.

Los did not look back.

"Jou know what to do!" he hissed, already moving.

Mista and the others scattered at once, vanishing back into the corridor to turn the alarm towards the goblins.

Los and Sigrún moved deeper into the workshop.

The forge was vast—racks of enchanted weapons lined the walls, hammers rested on worn anvils, and suspended from the ceiling in a wrought-iron cage was—

"Brynhildr," Sigrún breathed.

Inside, a woman stirred. Her golden hair was tousled, her figure draped in a rumpled blanket, the same Serk she had worn the night she was taken. No armor. No dignity. Only a look of defiance.

She looked down, blinking.

"A Paladin?"

Then she caught sight of the figure behind him.

"Sigrún?!"

The sisters rushed to the bars, their hands meeting briefly through the iron lattice. Two reflections—alike in face and fire.

"Sister, how—?" Brynhildr began.

"No time!" Sigrún replied. "Ve are getting you out."

Los scanned the cage and found the lock.

"Here we go."

He grabbed a smith's hammer and swung.

Clang!

The cage shuddered and swung, but the lock remained.

Clang!

Still nothing.

Then—

The sound of heavy footsteps outside.

"Too late," he muttered. "Sigrún! Stand in the center of the room."

"Vhat? Vhy?"

"Trust me!"

Her eyes flashed.

Los grabbed the hoist-rope and cut it.

The cage dropped with a thunderous crash and rolled behind the smiths' workbench, partly obscured from the door.

"Sorry!" he called.

"You could have varned me!" Brynhildr shouted back, furious but breathing.

Sigrún scowled at him.

But she moved anyway.

Los pointed to the center of the room, and she stepped into place. From behind the workbench she could hear Brynhildr's breathing—soft, steady, alive.

It gave her strength.

The door burst open.

Sindri and Brokk entered, massive and grim. Their wide shoulders barely cleared the frame, their beards wired with steel, their eyes glowing like embers beneath heavy brows.

"Escaping?" Brokk barked, looking straight at Sigrún.

They had mistaken her for Brynhildr.

Good.

It had worked.

Sindri strode forward.

Los struck.

The pommel of his sword slammed against the back of Sindri's skull.

The dwarf stopped.

Then turned... slowly.

Unaffected.

"Oh... mierda."

Sindri grabbed him by the breastplate and hurled him across the forge like a sack of grain.

Los hit the wall hard; the stone seemed to crack beneath his armor. His sword was lost somewhere among the scattered tools and instruments.

Then the fight began.

Brokk moved to capture Sigrún, his hammer landing blows like boulders on her shield as she tried to hold him off. Step by step, she was forced back.

Los fought like a man underwater.

And worse, empty-handed as the dwarf continued his attack.

Sindri was stone. Each punch felt as though he were striking iron.

Los could do nothing.

Then came the bear hug.

Sindri crushed him in an iron embrace.

Bones creaked.

Los's vision blurred.

Then—a glint. Around Sindri's neck.

A key.

He reached. Yanked. Tore it free.

"Sigrún!" he gasped, and hurled the key.

She caught it, as she stumbled.

"Try it!"

"I can't!" she called back, parrying Brokk's hammer. "Only you can rescue her!"

Los groaned, then headbutted Sindri.

Nothing.

"Jesús..."

His head reeled from the pain, and his ribs felt ready to give in.

Desperate, he boxed Sindri's ears.

The dwarf roared and staggered.

Los dropped, rolled, then spotted it—a smithing hammer.

Long-handled. Heavy. Perfect.

He grabbed it with both hands, rose, and swung.

Boom.

The hammer crashed into Sindri's ribs, and for the first time the dwarf reeled.

Los swung again.

Boom.

Sindri stumbled into an anvil, scattering tools across the floor.

Brokk turned at the sound.

Too late.

Los drove the hammer into his gut with everything he had left.

The dwarf folded around the blow.

Sigrún struck the back of Brokk's knee with the rim of her shield, and he dropped hard to one side.

Los did not stop swinging until both smiths lay groaning heaps on the forge floor.

Then he staggered, clutching his ribs.

"Key," Sigrún said, already tossing it back.

Los caught it, stumbled to the cage, and jammed it into the lock.

No click.

He sighed.

"Of course."

Then he walked back to Brokkr.

Another hammer blow for good measure. Then he yanked a second key from beneath Brokkr's beard.

"Gracias..."

He staggered back to the cage, shoved the second key into the lock, and turned it.

Click.

The cage opened.

Brynhildr climbed out—tired, bruised, but unbroken.

Sigrún caught her in a brief embrace, and for half a heartbeat neither moved.

Los leaned against the bars of the cage, bloodied, breathing hard, and grinning despite himself.

"Well," he said, "that was the easy part."

Then his eyes caught on something resting atop one of the workbenches.

An ornate brooch lay among the scattered tools and bent scraps of metal, half-hidden beneath a strip of dark cloth. Gold, or something near enough to it. Set with small red stones and worked in a pattern of knots and leaves so fine it could only have been dwarven crafted.

Los looked at it for half a heartbeat.

Then he limped over, picked it up, and tucked it inside his breastplate.

Sigrún stared at him.

"Did you just steal that?"

Los winced as he adjusted the edge of his armor over it. "Borrowed."

Brynhildr raised an eyebrow.

"I am certain they will not mind," Los said.

Sigrún's eyes narrowed. "Vhy?"

"In case we need it later."

"For vhat?"

Los glanced towards the door, where distant alarms still echoed through the stone.

"I do not know yet," he said. "That is why it is for later."

Sigrún looked as though she wanted to argue, but Brynhildr only studied him for a moment longer.

Then she said, dryly, "You do this often?"

Los smiled.

"Only when planning ahead."

Chapter LVIII — The Goblin Gamble

The Raid Beneath the Mountain

The goblin raiding party crouched in the shadowed mouth of the eastern tunnel, pressed tight against the cold stone.

Thirty of them waited in the dark—mud-dyed leathers, rust-black daggers, empty sacks rolled beneath their arms. Their eyes gleamed towards the dwarven halls ahead.

Gobto, second-in-command and self-proclaimed expert in not dying first, shifted beside Prince Gobby.

"Any moment now," he whispered.

Gobby stood with his arms folded, trying very hard to look royal despite the low ceiling and the fact that his new dagger kept catching on his vest.

One of the younger goblins licked his teeth nervously.

"What if nothing happens?"

Gobby touched the jeweled dagger at his belt.

"Something happens. Sir Ortiz makes something happen."

Then the mountain rang.

Not a bell, exactly. A deep iron chime rolled through the stone, low and ancient, vibrating in their teeth.

The forge alarm.

Gobby's grin spread slowly.

"There."

Gobto hissed, "Move."

They moved. Not like soldiers.

Like rats that had learned tactics.

They skittered low through the eastern passage, keeping to the walls, slipping from shadow to shadow. Twice they flattened themselves as dwarven voices echoed nearby.

Once, a patrol thundered past the far intersection, axes drawn, running towards the upper workshop.

Gobby watched them go.

"Good," he whispered. "They chase Paladin."

"Poor Paladin," Gobto murmured.

Gobby looked at him.

Gobto shrugged. "What?"

Then the goblins poured into the side halls.

They did not go for the vaults.

Vaults had locks. Runes. Traps. Dwarves with very large axes and very little humor.

Workshops, however, had shelves.

Storerooms had crates.

Tool rooms had unattended tools.

And goblins loved unattended anything.

Within moments they were everywhere.

One goblin stuffed copper wire into a sack until it dragged behind him. Another took three polished gears, though he had no idea what they did. Two others argued over a half-finished helm. Someone found a box of silver rivets and began weeping with joy. Gobto discovered a tray of tiny engraved buckles and declared himself rich.

Gobby snatched up a beautifully balanced dwarven measuring chain, held it to the light, and nodded.

"Royal."

Then a door opened at the end of the hall.

A group of dwarven guards stood there, guided by four Valkyries.

By Odin's beard, Mista thought. Just as Los said.

They stared at the goblins.

The goblins stared back.

One of them, very slowly, tried to hide a stolen anvil chisel behind his back.

Mista took a deep breath.

"GOBLINS!"

Horns blew. The hall exploded.

Dwarven boots hammered towards them from all directions.

Gobto's ears flattened. "Dwarves not chasing Paladin?"

Gobby looked towards the distant forge-smoke.

Then he understood.

His face fell.

"I think," he said slowly, "we are the distraction."

There was a brief and terrible silence.

Then every goblin began whispering at once.

"Betrayed."

"Used."

"Never trust tall men."

A crossbow bolt snapped against the stone over Gobto's head.

"Run!"

The dwarves came on in hard, shields up, axes ready. They were not confused. They were not scattered. They were not chasing some distant noise while the goblins helped themselves.

They were chasing goblins.

This offended the goblins deeply.

"Escape!" Gobby barked.

"Split into threes!" Gobto shrieked.

For all their panic, the goblins obeyed quickly. They broke apart at once—three into a drainage cut, four under a workbench, six scrambling through a side fissure barely wide enough for their shoulders. One goblin threw a smoke pellet that burst against the floor and filled the corridor with choking gray.

A dwarf cursed.

A goblin cheered.

Another goblin ran directly into a shield and bounced off.

"Other way!" Gobto yelled.

Gobby grabbed the collar of the stunned goblin and dragged him backward.

"I swear on my mother's tail," he muttered, clutching the jeweled dagger at his belt, "I survive, I make Sir Ortiz pay."

Gobto shoved him towards a low crack in the wall.

"We trusted Paladin. That on us."

The goblins vanished in pieces.

Not cleanly.

Not nobly.

But like goblins.

They slipped into cracks, service cuts, old drainage runs, and ore passages too small for armored dwarves to follow quickly. Sacks were abandoned. Tools were dropped. One unfortunate goblin became wedged upside-down in a refuse chute and could be heard muttering prayers to whatever dark god invented tunnels.

But most escaped.

Behind them, the Dwarven guards chased smoke, shadows, and the last flickers of goblin chatter vanishing into stone.

And far above, in the now-emptier halls beyond the upper workshop, Los, Sigrún, and Brynhildr slipped away unseen.

The mountain had chosen its noise.

And for once, it was not them.

Walk Out Boldly

The Upper Workshop, Dwarven Halls — Moments Later

The forge had fallen silent. Only the occasional groan from the unconscious dwarves broke the hush.

Then—footsteps. Boots on stone.

Sigrún spun towards the sound, sword half-raised—then lowered it just as quickly.

Four Valkyries stepped into the workshop, clad in muted steel mail and ash-blue leathers. Their eyes swept the room: the shattered bench, the groaning smiths, the dented armor scattered like leaves.

They stopped dead.

One blinked. "Sindri and Brokkr?"

Another just stared at the wreckage.

Then, more quietly:

"Los?" Mista asked.

Sigrún nodded.

The Valkyries exchanged glances—impressed despite themselves.

Behind the broken workbench, Brynhildr stood straight-backed, arms crossed over a tattered blanket draped hastily around her shoulders. Her hair was tousled, her bearing unmistakable.

One of the Valkyries stepped forward and handed her a proper travel cloak. "For you, Frú Brynhildr."

Brynhildr nodded, letting the old blanket fall without ceremony.

"Back the way we came," Sigrún said, motioning towards Los, who was leaning on his sword like a cane and trying very hard not to collapse.

"I have a better idea," he muttered.

He was still having trouble breathing, but he lifted one hand and pointed up the tunnel.
Not down.

Up.

"Let's go out the front gate."

Six heads turned.

Los winced, then forced himself a little straighter.

"Just walk right out."

Brynhildr raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"Think about it," Los said. "They're still chasing Goblins. The smiths are down. We hide in a scrap cart. Valkyries wheeling scrap up from the workshops. Perfectly normal."

"That is mad," Sigrún said flatly.

"Is it?" Los replied. "So far, everything has worked out."

Brynhildr sighed, rubbing her temple. "And if it doesn't?"

"Then we die," Los shrugged. "Well—I die. You get taken prisoner again, this time with company."

He grinned that irrepressible grin—the one that always made things worse and somehow better.

One of the Valkyries shrugged. "It is so idiotic, it might work."

Moments Later — Upper Halls, Near the Outer Gate

A rickety wooden cart creaked along the corridor, wheels shrieking under the weight of ill-balanced cargo. Inside: one bruised Paladin, one battle-worn Valkyrie, and one

extremely irritable Brynhildr—all tucked beneath a mound of cloaks and rusted chainmail.

Two Valkyries pushed. Two walked ahead.

A dwarven sentry stepped into their path, brow furrowed. "What happened down there?"

"Goblin raid," said Mista.

"Again?" the guard muttered.

"It's been handled," she said without breaking stride.

The guards looked down the tunnel disappointed.

Then they stepped aside. No alarms. No shouting. No blades drawn.

Beneath a fur blanket, Los whispered, "See? Easy."

"You are sitting on my braid," Brynhildr hissed.

"Trust me," he grinned, "that may be the least uncomfortable part of this plan."

The outer gate creaked shut behind them.

Above them, the stars of Midgard glittered in cold, silent approval.

Chapter LIX — The Lady's Summons

The Last Son of Arthur

The guildhall was quieter than usual for that hour.

Not empty—never empty—but quieter. The common room still held the morning sounds of men and women moving by habit rather than leisure: armor being checked, boots thudding on worn timber, the scrape of whetstone on steel, low voices trading rumor and duty. But above it all hung the waiting calm of people not yet sent anywhere.

Arthuur sat at the central table—a large, round one, though not so grand as the one in Camelot. His mug had gone cold at his elbow and a half-unrolled map lay beneath one hand.

He was young enough that strangers still sometimes mistook him for less than he was—until they looked twice. There was something of his father in him whether he wished it or not: the broad shoulders, the solemnity when thinking, the way other men unconsciously measured themselves when he entered a room. But there was youth too, and not only in his face. In his restless energy. In the way his hand drummed upon the table before he stilled it.

Across from him sat Tungsten, broad as a gate and built like the sort of man doors learned to fear. Beside him sprawled Kilingu, all easy posture and sharp eyes, the sort of Paladin who seemed relaxed until steel was in hand. Near the hearth stood Faemz, arms crossed over a chest like a siege wall, while Wintyr sat at Arthuur's right with the composed patience of a cleric used to men circling decisions before finally walking into them.

"Arcanium is a fine metal," Sir Tungsten declared, "but I tell you Tungsten is the metal of the future."

"And of course," said Kilingu with a laugh, "you named it for yourself."

"Easier to trademark," Tungsten retorted.

That got a chuckle from the room.

"So when do I get to test it?" Faemz asked.

The hall door opened, cutting the conversation short.

A travel-stained messenger stepped inside bearing Avalon's seal.

The messenger's eyes moved across the room, found Arthuur, and held there.

"Sir Arthuur?"

Arthuur rose, curiosity already on his face.

"I am he."

The messenger came forward, bowed, and held out the scroll.

"A summons from the Lady of the Lake."

That brought a stir from the room. Not loud, but enough.

Arthuur took the sealed parchment and frowned slightly at the wax.

Avalon.

He broke the seal and read in silence.

Wintyr watched his face.

Tungsten did not pretend not to.

Kilingu leaned back in his chair, "Well?"

Arthuur read it through once, then again, slower.

At length he lowered it.

"The Lady of the Lake asks for aid," he said. "Urgent."

Faemz pushed off from the hearth. "For what?"

"It does not say plainly." Arthuur glanced down again. "Only that the matter is urgent, and that she asks for me by name—and the guild as well."

Kilingu snorted softly. "Perhaps we are finally being noticed. Such requests usually go to the Knights of Camelot, Knights Templar, or Orchid Fair."

"It is about time we were noticed for serving the realm," Wintyr said.

The messenger stood waiting, hands clasped before him.

Arthuur looked up. "Still. Why us?"

The messenger hesitated only a moment. "Orchid Fair was asked first. They declined the request. Their strength is committed elsewhere."

That shifted the room.

Tungsten let out a low breath through his nose. "Los."

No one needed the surname.

Kilingu sat up a little straighter. "They turned down Avalon over one missing knight?"

"They did," said the messenger.

Arthuur's eyes dropped to the scroll again.

He did not look offended. Not flattered either. Only thoughtful.

"So," said Faemz, "we're their second choice."

Wintyr shot him a look.

Faemz lifted one shoulder. "It's true."

"Not necessarily," said Arthuur quietly.

He set the scroll down on the table.

"The Lady asked for aid. Orchid Fair could not give it. That leaves the need unchanged."

Tungsten grunted once. Approval more than agreement.

Kilingu tilted his head. "And what do you think the Lady of the Lake wants us to do?"

No one answered immediately.

Then Faemz, because he was the sort of man who preferred to tread straight across subjects others circled, said, "Maybe it has to do with your father."

The room went still.

Even the messenger seemed suddenly interested in the grain of the floorboards.

Arthuur's gaze did not lift.

Faemz went on, less bluntly than he might have, but not by much. "You've heard the stories. That he's not dead. That the Lady keeps him."

"Myths and rumors," Kilingu muttered.

Faemz ignored him.

Tungsten said nothing, which in its way meant he was listening very closely.

Arthuur rested both hands on the table and looked at the scroll a long moment before answering.

"No."

The word was calm.

Measured.

He looked up then.

"If it were true," he said, and stopped there. If it were true, surely someone would have told him.

Wintyr's eyes softened, though she said nothing.

Arthuur went on, voice steady.

"She called on us. Us. And we will answer."

No one contradicted him.

It was a chance to prove themselves. They had been asked for by name. They could not, would not, refuse.

And yet—

Arthuur's eyes drifted for half a breath towards the misted windows of the guildhall.

If it was true...

If the Lady of the Lake was calling on him instead of his father...

Was it because the need was smaller?

Or because she believed he was enough?

Could he be enough?

Could any son stand where Arthur had stood and not vanish in his shadow?

He pushed the thought back down before it could settle too deeply.

Kilingu broke the silence first.

"Well," he said, "then we are with you."

That got the ghost of a smile from Wintyr.

Tungsten folded his heavy hands on the table. "So, we going?"

Faemz looked to Arthuur. "Is that even a question?"

The young Paladin looked down once more at the Lady's summons, then at the men and woman around him.

Tungsten, steady as a wall.

Kilingu, bright-eyed and impossible.

Faemz, blunt, dependable, and harder than old oak.

Wintyr, his wife, who knew him better than any of them and had not yet spoken one word for or against.

At last he turned to her.

"Well?"

She met his gaze without flinching.

"You want to go," she said.

It was not accusation. Merely truth.

Arthuur exhaled once, a little embarrassed to be so plainly read. "Yes."

"Then we go."

Tungsten grunted again.

Kilingu smiled. "There it is."

But Wintyr was not finished.

"But not because you are trying to prove anything to a dead king or a living legend."
She held his eyes. "Because we were asked."

That struck home more cleanly than Arthuur liked.

His face did not show it.

But Kilingu, who missed very little, became suddenly interested in the table again.

Arthuur gave Wintyr a small nod. "Fair."

Faemz crossed his arms. "Then we go."

Tungsten rose to his feet like a man standing up from a settled certainty. "Good."

Kilingu stood next, flashing the messenger an easy grin that probably did little to reassure him. "Tell Avalon the Knights of the Round Table will muster a force to answer the call."

The messenger looked to Arthuur for the true answer.

Arthuur took up the scroll again.

"Tell the Lady of the Lake," he said, "that we will answer her summons."

The messenger bowed deeply. "At once, sir."

By the time he turned for the door, the hall was already beginning to change. Benches scraped. Orders started. Men moved. Steel was checked. Saddlebags gathered. A summons from Avalon had become a road beneath their feet in less than a minute.

Faemz headed for the armory.

Tungsten for the yard.

Kilingu paused only long enough to clap Arthuur on the shoulder before following them.

Wintyr rose more slowly.

When the others had gone, she stepped closer and adjusted the fall of Arthuur's cloak with calm fingers, a wife's small correction before the world tried to take him away again.

"You do not have to be Arthur," she said quietly.

Arthuur looked down at her.

"No," he answered. "Only his son."

Wintyr's mouth curved faintly. "That seems like burden enough."

He almost smiled.

Almost.

Then he bent and pressed his forehead briefly to hers.

When he straightened, the doubt had not gone. It had only been given a shape he could carry.

If the stories were false, then this was merely duty.

If they were true...

Then the Lady of the Lake had called on him and not his father.

He did not yet know whether that was comfort or a test.

Outside, in the yard, someone shouted for horses.

Arthuur drew a slow breath, squared his shoulders, and went to answer the call.

The Frozen Ridge

Midgard's Northern Expanse

With the dwarven gate far behind them, the wind had teeth again.

Snow whipped across the mountainside in long, ragged gusts as the three trudged downward—Los in battered armor, Sigrún wrapped in her cloak, and Brynhildr walking strong despite the bruises from her captivity.

The cold did not faze her.

If anything, it made her more herself.

They moved in near silence until the ice began to crunch underfoot in a familiar way. The path was almost done.

"Are you ok?" Los asked, glancing over his shoulder. "Your feet will freeze if we don't find you something to cover them soon."

"If you have suggestions, I am open to hearing them," Brynhildr replied smoothly, her tone edged with disdain.

"I could carry you. Until we make it back to the horses."

Sigrún glanced at him, surprised—and a little jealous.

"That is quite all right," Brynhildr said, taken aback.

They reached a bluff where the mountain opened into a windswept overlook, revealing a vast stretch of Midgard below. Brynhildr paused and turned to her sister.

"Sigrún," she said, her tone softening. "Thank you. I don't know how you found me. But you did."

Sigrún took her sister's hand.

"You are thanking the wrong warrior," she said, tilting her head towards Los.

Brynhildr sighed—deep, but not begrudging. She turned to him, eyes narrowing slightly.

"Yes..." she said, "Thank you, Sir Ortiz. I am grateful for your assistance in my rescue."

Los gave a half-bow, adding with a familiar grin, "You are most welcome. All it took was a few concussions and finding the right key."

Sigrún rolled her eyes, hiding a smile. Somehow, this mad Paladin had pulled it all off—and made it look easy.

They resumed their descent. The ridge narrowed. Ice cracked beneath the weight of ancient winds. Brynhildr pulled her cloak tighter and glanced sideways at her sister.

"So," she said casually, "he is different."

"Different how?" Sigrún asked, though she already knew.

"He is not like other men," Brynhildr said after a moment.

Sigrún kept her eyes forward. "He is a Paladin. He follows the Light."

"And you trust him?"

"I do."

Brynhildr raised a brow. "You always were the careful one. Never trusted easily."

"I haven't changed."

"No?" Brynhildr gave her a faint grin. "You're valking beside a Paladin, through Midgard's mountains, with frost on your helm and warmth in your eyes. Feels like change to me."

Sigrún looked away. "He's from another world, Bryn. He doesn't belong here. And I—"

"Still bleed like the rest of us," Brynhildr said gently.

Behind them, Los began to hum a tune—his way of pretending not to eavesdrop.

"He bleeds—" Sigrún glanced back. "Just not like the rest of us."

Her words lingered.

A few minutes later, Brynhildr stumbled. Her bare feet had gone red and numb.

Without hesitation, Los stepped in and scooped her up.

She protested immediately. "Put me down at vonce—"

"Jes, I know," he said. "Jou wish to walk on jour own. But without shoes? Jour feet are already suffering."

He nodded to Sigrún. "Juse my cloak. Cut strips from it and wrap her feet. We can sort everything else out once we get to the horses."

Sigrún obeyed, her fingers working quickly against the rough fabric of what remained of his cloak. She watched the knight carry her sister with the same unthinking care he had shown the orphan baby, and felt a strange, unfamiliar ache stir beneath her ribs—not of anger, but of a vulnerability she was not entirely sure she could afford.

Cotswold

The road took Arthuur first to Cotswold. It was green with early sunlight and old memory.

Arthuur had ridden it often enough in younger years that his horse seemed almost to know the way without needing direction from him. The fields rolled soft and quiet beneath the sky, broken here and there by wooden fences, sheep, and the steady hum of rural life too practical to care much for legends. To the east, the land lifted gently; to the west, the old road ran towards Camelot and the concerns of men with banners and titles.

Cotswold itself sat where it always had—humble, weathered, and more important than its size suggested. A village that had seen generations of squires learn how little glory resembled a song once mud, bruises, and discipline had their say.

Arthuur rode to the tower on the eastern side of town just as a young squire was trying, with questionable success, to tighten a girth strap on a broad old warhorse who plainly considered the whole effort beneath his dignity.

The horse turned one dark eye towards Arthuur as he dismounted.

Arthuur smiled despite himself.

"Well, I see you are still alive, old beast."

The horse flicked an ear, as if conceding that yes, against all odds, he was.

The boy at the girth looked up sharply.

He was younger than Arthuur had been when he first came to Cotswold, but not by much. Lean, eager, trying very hard to look capable. When he recognized the visitor, his posture snapped straighter.

"Sir Arthuur."

"Arklen." Arthuur gave the girth strap a glance. "He'll bite you if you keep fumbling like that."

Arklen drew his hands back as though burned. "He never used to do that to you."

Arthuur laid a hand briefly against the horse's neck. "That's because he likes me better."

The horse snorted.

Inside the doorway of the inn, a deep voice carried out before the man himself appeared.

"That is because Clodder has better judgment than most people."

Sir Sagramore stepped into the light.

Age had bowed him only slightly. His hair was silver now, his face lined by time and weather and more campaigns than Arthuur could count, but there was nothing frail in him. He still moved like a man who had spent his life in armor and expected, if required, to put it on again before supper, though he was long past the days of quests and tournaments.

Arthuur straightened at once.

"Sir."

Sagramore's old eyes rested on him a moment, and something like satisfaction passed across the knight's face.

"You came quickly."

Arthuur frowned. "You knew I was coming?"

Sagramore grunted. "No. You rode into Cotswold like a man thinking too hard. Either you're in love, in trouble, or on a quest."

Arklen tried not to smile and failed.

Arthuur shook his head once. "You know I am married. I need a word."

"Then have one." Sagramore turned and motioned him inside. "Arklen, if that horse throws you, you'll spend the day walking."

"Yes, Sir!"

The Cotswold inn was plain compared to those in Camelot—sturdy tables, honest stone, few adornments beyond what use and memory had left in place. It smelled faintly of straw, leather, and woodsmoke. Arthuur had once thought it the center of the world. Now he knew better.

At least a little.

Sagamore led him to a table by a window, then sat with the ease of a man too old to perform unnecessary stiffness.

"Well?" he said.

Arthuur remained standing for a moment before deciding that was foolish and sitting opposite him.

"A summons came from the Lady of the Lake."

That got Sagamore's full attention.

Not surprise.

Something closer to pleased recognition.

"Did it now?"

Arthuur reached into his cloak and drew out the letter, already broken open and refolded. He set it on the table between them.

"She asks for aid. Urgent."

Sagamore did not touch the scroll. He only looked at Arthuur.

"And so you came to me."

"Yes."

"Wise for once."

Arthuur ignored that. "I wanted to ask what you know of her purpose."

Sagamore leaned back a fraction. "Nothing."

That was not the answer Arthuur had expected.

The old knight's mouth twitched.

"Nothing certain, anyway. The Lady of the Lake does not often trouble herself to explain her reasons to the likes of us. But the fact that she has called on you at all is worth noticing."

Arthuur studied him.

"She called on us," he corrected. "My guild."

Sagamore waved that away with a thick-fingered hand. "She called on you."

Arthuur let the point go. "Orchid Fair refused first."

"I know."

That gave him pause.

Sagamore saw it and shrugged. "Word travels."

Arthuur looked down once, then back up. "It doesn't matter. The point is the Lady asked. Orchid Fair turned her down. Now she turns to me."

There it was.

The thing beneath the thing.

Sagamore's old eyes sharpened.

"And you wonder why."

"Yes."

The old knight was quiet for a long moment.

Then, to Arthuur's surprise, he smiled.

"She has done well."

Arthuur blinked. "Done well?"

"Yes." Sagamore folded his hands over one knee. "I am glad she has come to you."

Again Arthuur was surprised, and his face must have shown it, because Sagamore's smile deepened by the smallest degree.

"What?"

"You look so much like your father. I would love to see Arthur again," Sagamore said simply. "God knows I would. But if she is calling on you, then so be it."

For one brief bewildered instant Arthuur only stared.

Then he thought:

He's gone senile.

Not wholly. Not helplessly. But enough, perhaps, that old grief had begun to untether itself from fact.

"My father is dead," Arthuur said carefully.

Sagamore snorted.

"Not so."

Arthuur stared at him now for a different reason.

The old knight met his gaze without a flicker of humor.

"Your father lives," he said. "He sleeps in Avalon until he is needed again."

The words landed in the air with absurd weight.

Outside, Arklen's voice could be heard faintly protesting to the horse.

A chicken made some foolish complaint in the yard.

The ordinary world went on as if nothing had just been said.

Arthuur leaned back a little in his chair and let out one breath through his nose.

"With respect, sir," he said, "that sounds like the sort of thing old men tell squires by winter fires."

Sagamore's face did not change.

"And with respect," he replied, "you are still young enough to believe that because something sounds like a story it cannot also be true."

Arthuur shook his head.

"My father died at Camlann before I could remember him."

"Your father sleeps," said Sagamore.

It was said so plainly that Arthuur had no answer ready.

Sagamore went on, voice quieter now.

"I buried friends. Not him. I stood beside him. I saw when she took him. And I tell you this, boy—if Nimue had need of Arthur, she would wake him."

Arthuur held his gaze.

Sagamore held it back.

At last Arthuur looked away first.

He rubbed a thumb once along the edge of the broken seal on the Lady's letter.

"Then it isn't him she wants," he said.

"No."

"It's me."

"Yes."

The old knight's answer held no grandeur. No song. Just fact.

And somehow that was worse.

For half a breath Arthuur let himself think it:

*If the tales were true—
if his father truly slept in Avalon—
and Nimue called on me instead of him—
am I enough?
Or does the need not merit...*

He crushed the thought down before it could root itself.

It did not matter.

Whether Arthur slept beneath the lake or rotted beneath a stone, the summons on the table was real.

Arthuur rose.

"Well," he said, because if he stayed seated he might start thinking too much again, "I am going to help the Lady."

Sagamore nodded once.

"That's a good lad."

Arthuur took up the scroll and tucked it back into his belt.

"I don't believe my father is sleeping in Avalon."

"No," said Sagramore. "Not yet."

Arthuur almost smiled despite himself. "You really mean it."

"I do."

"And if you're wrong?"

Sagramore's eyes went towards the open window and the slice of blue sky beyond.

"Then I have spent a great many years content to be wrong in hope rather than right in despair."

That sat with Arthuur a moment longer than he liked.

Then he bowed his head.

"Thank you, sir. For everything."

Sagramore rose more slowly, old bones acknowledging themselves without surrendering.

"Go, then," he said. "And do not make me regret having knighted you."

From outside came a sudden clatter, followed by Arklen's offended shout.

Arthuur glanced towards the sound.

"Still letting the horse teach lessons?"

"The horse has more patience than I do."

Arthuur laughed softly at that, then made for the door.

At the threshold Sagramore's voice stopped him.

"Arthuur."

He turned.

The old knight stood with one hand resting on the back of his chair, the years on his face plain and honorable.

"Succeed," Sagramore said. "And if you see your father... tell him I said hello."

Arthuur inclined his head.

Then he went back out into the Cotswold road, where Arklen was arguing with the horse, and the horse was winning, and the road to Avalon waited just beyond the bend.

The Goblins' Toll

By the time the mountain path narrowed again, Los's arms ached, Brynhildr's patience had worn thin from being carried like some damsel in distress, and Sigrún had begun to look at every shadow as if expecting it to grow teeth.

They had not gone much farther before the rocks ahead shifted.

Not snow.

Not wind.

Goblins.

They appeared from cracks in the stone, from behind black pines, from a narrow cut in the ridge Los would have sworn had not been there a heartbeat earlier. A dozen at least. Maybe more, though goblins had a way of seeming like twice their number when they were angry.

At their head stood Prince Gobby.

His fine chainmail was damaged, his royal sash was missing, and soot darkened one side of his face. His new jeweled dagger still hung at his belt.

He did not look grateful.

Sigrún's hand went at once to her sword.

Brynhildr stiffened in Los's arms.

Los stopped, then set Brynhildr carefully on her feet.

"Gobby," Los said brightly. "What brings jou out into the snow? I thought jou would be buried beneath Dwarven treasures by now."

Gobby flattened his ears and pointed one clawed finger at him.

"Sir Ortiz knows why."

Los blinked with impressive innocence.

"Do I?"

"Dwarves chased goblins!" Gobby snapped. "Many boots. Many axes. No distraction. Goblins were distraction!"

Behind him, several goblins hissed agreement.

"Betrayed!"

"Never trust tall men!"

Los frowned as though the news pained him deeply.

"The raid failed?"

Gobby's eyes narrowed.

Los sighed and shook his head in mock sympathy. "That is a terrible shame. I did manage to grab this myself."

He reached into his breastplate and drew out the brooch.

Gobby's eyes widened at once.

Sigrún stared at Los with new understanding.

Brynhildr slowly turned her head as well.

Los ignored both of them.

"But," Los said, "Gobby, I would rather you have it. I have what I came for, and I would feel terrible if you got nothing for all your efforts."

That slowed Gobby for half a breath.

Only for half a breath.

"You give to Gobby?" he asked, surprised.

The goblins went silent and looked to one another.

Los handed the brooch, worth a small fortune, to the goblin prince with both hands.

Gobby took it the same way, his eyes fixed on the jeweled treasure.

For a moment, he forgot to look angry.

Then he remembered.

"And my father?"

Los hesitated.

Only for a heartbeat.

But Sigrún saw it.

So did Brynhildr.

Then Los unslung his two-handed sword.

Sigrún's eyes flashed. "Los, don't."

He ignored her.

"For your father," he said, offering the blade hilt-first. "I know he admired it. I wish I had something better to offer, a blade more fit for a king, but take this. And thank him for me. For all of us."

Gobby took it carefully, almost reverently.

Behind him, the other goblins murmured among themselves.

Sigrún looked as though she wanted to shake Los by the shoulders.

But then Los set one hand lightly on the hilt of the shorter sword at his belt.

Not drawing it.

Only resting there.

A quiet reminder.

I am not unarmed.

Sigrún saw.

Her jaw tightened, but she said nothing.

Brynhildr saw too, and something like understanding passed across her face.

Gobby hugged the sword close, awkwardly, for it was much too large for him.

"Gobby accepts."

"I am glad."

"Sir Ortiz still owes."

Los raised an eyebrow.

"I jus gave jou my part of the treasure and my sword."

Gobby nodded solemnly. "Yes. That is why Gobby is only a little angry now."

Los stared at him.

"Jou act like it was my fault jour raid failed. It is not as if I sent the dwarves after jou."

Gobby's eyes narrowed.

For one dangerous heartbeat, the mountain held its breath.

Then Gobby tucked the brooch away and gestured sharply to his goblins. One by one, they vanished back into the rocks, into cracks and shadows and narrow places no man could follow.

Before he disappeared, Gobby looked back.

"Next time, Gobby makes plan."

Los inclined his head and smirked.

"Until then."

Gobby looked at him suspiciously.

Then the goblin prince was gone.

For a few breaths, only the wind remained.

Sigrún turned on Los at once. "You gave away your sword."

"I have another."

"You gave away your two hand sword," she repeated, as though perhaps he had not understood the first time.

Los looked down at the shorter blade at his hip, then back to her.

"Do you even know how to use that thing?"

Brynhildr gave a quiet snort.

Sigrún glared at both of them.

Los looked mildly insulted.

"Of course I do..."

Then he started walking again.

The Return

They reached the place where Tim had camped—just beyond the black pine grove, beside a patch of snow where the fire had been. There, they found their horses tied to a nearby tree.

Los looked around.

"Looks like Tim got away," Sigrún said.

Brynhildr scanned the trees. "No tracks. No signs of struggle. And you can put me down now."

Los obliged her at once, gently setting her feet on the ground.

"Tim should have made it back to the village by now," Los said with a bit of confidence.

"We should join him by midday."

"I hope you are right," Sigrún said.

Los smiled faintly. "I am sure of it."

They stood in silence for a moment, the wind settling around them like a waiting breath.

Sigrún adjusted her sword belt. "Come on then," she said.

They moved towards the horses. Brynhildr swung up first, and without a word, Sigrún mounted behind her.

Los climbed onto the second horse alone, wincing as his ribs protested.

Sigrún watched him wince, but he did not complain, and she said nothing.

But Brynhildr saw her concern anyway.

And so, with snow at their backs and the wind at their heels, they turned their horses south towards the village—ready to rejoin their giant companion, their tiny foundling, and whatever fate awaited them on the long road to Valhalla.

Chapter LX — The Quiet Between

Midgard Village — The Longhall, Nightfall

They crested the final ridge as the village came into view—a scatter of longhouses and fences nestled among the snow, smoke curling from chimneys into the pale evening sky.

A watchman spotted them first. Then came shouts, and villagers began to gather at the path's edge. Recognition sparked across more than one face.

"It's the shieldmaiden!" a child cried. "And the Paladin!"

They dismounted slowly. Los winced, hand to his ribs. Sigrún steadied Brynhildr as she slid down to the ground.

Tim was waiting in the village center.

The baby in his great arms, bundled deep in wool and fur, looking absurdly gentle for so large and rough a creature. At the sight of them, his broad face grinning.

Los was off his horse almost before it stopped.

"She is vell," Tim reported. "Village women helped. She eats much."

Los crossed the yard and made his way straight to Tim, weariness forgotten. He did not look at Tim. He did not look at the village or the gathering crowd. Only at the child.

She looked warm.

Clean.

He stripped off his gauntlets and let her tiny hand grasp his finger.

Only then did he breathe.

An elder watched him, then stepped forward—a man with a long grey beard and a fur-lined cloak. The village chief. He bowed his head.

"Velcome back. And you brought another. Come—our fire is yours. Our hearth is open."

He looked to Brynhildr and added, "Ve vill find you some proper clothing, more befitting a shieldmaiden."

Brynhildr inclined her head at being recognized. "I am honored by your welcome," she said, then followed.

First came hot broth and bread, then cloths and cloaks lined with wool. Brynhildr accepted the food graciously but paused at the clothing, turning to Sigrún.

"I look like I crawled out of a forge chimney," she muttered, then added with faint disgust, "and I smell worse."

Sigrún smirked. "A bath and new clothing, and you will be right as rain again, Sister."

Brynhildr almost smiled.

Almost.

A pair of village women came forward with folded garments and warm blankets, their faces full of respect and curiosity. Brynhildr allowed herself to be guided away, Sigrún following close beside her.

Los remained near Tim and the baby a moment longer.

The child still held his finger.

Tim looked down at him, then at the baby.

"She likes you."

Los's smile was faint, tired, and strangely soft.

"I'll take her, Tim," he said, and gathered the child carefully into his arms.

She settled against him with a small sound, warm and alive beneath the wool.

Los looked down at her as they started towards the longhouse.

"What shall we call you, princesita?" he murmured.

The Bathhouse

The bathhouse was little more than a heavy timber hut built low against the cold, its stones warmed from beneath by banked coals and steam. Yet after the dark of dwarven halls and the cruelty of the mountain, it might as well have been a palace.

Brynhildr sank onto the bench with a long exhale she had not meant anyone to hear.

Sigrún, seated beside her, wrung hot water through a cloth and handed it over without a word.

For a time there was only the sound of steam, splashing water, and the soft rasp of cloth over skin.

Then Brynhildr said, without looking at her, "So."

Sigrún frowned. "So vhat?"

Brynhildr dipped the cloth again. "Do not be tiresome. I have been caged by dwarves, carried down a mountain by an over-polite Paladin, and welcomed home to find a child in his arms and a look on your face that I know very vell."

Sigrún was silent.

Brynhildr turned then and studied her sister.

"He is not what I expected."

"No," Sigrún said quietly. "He is not."

"The stories said butcher. Killer. Scourge."

Sigrún's mouth hardened faintly. "The stories lied."

Brynhildr looked down into the steaming water. "He fought for me."

"He fought for us."

Brynhildr gave her a dry look. "Sigrún."

Sigrún did not answer.

Brynhildr went on, quieter now. "Who is this man? He fought the dwarves to reach me. Then, when all of it was done, when we were cold and suffering and trying only to get down the mountain, he saw that my feet were bare and that I could barely walk."

Sigrún's eyes flicked to her sister's face.

"He tore part of his cloak to wrap them and keep them warm," Brynhildr said. "And then he carried me. After all of that. I could tell his ribs were aching, and still he carried me."

Steam shifted between them.

At last Brynhildr added, "He is not a slayer of women and children."

"No," said Sigrún. "He is not."

That was the heart of it.

Brynhildr watched her sister through the rising steam. "You have begun to care for him."

Sigrún did not deny it.

Instead she looked towards the little shuttered slit of window, where only a thin blade of winter light came through.

"He is brave," she said at last. "And kind. And cunning when he chooses to be. And... he does not look at me the way other men do."

Brynhildr smiled faintly. "No. He does not."

Sigrún dipped her cloth again and stared at the water running from it.

Then Brynhildr said what had to be said.

"He is from another world."

Sigrún's hand stilled.

"His life is not here," Brynhildr went on. "It is in Albion. In the south. In lands that do not follow our ways. And you cannot change that."

Sigrún said nothing for a long while.

At last, she answered, low and honest, "I know."

Brynhildr studied her face, but said nothing more.

The Women's Ears

The bathhouse had thick walls, but a village built of timber carried sound the way winter carried smoke.

What Brynhildr and Sigrún meant for private speech did not wholly remain so.

An old woman named Yrsa, who had brought the fresh linens and taken no more than three steps from the door before pausing to adjust her bundle, heard enough.

Not every word.

Only enough.

That the foreign knight had fought for Brynhildr.

That he had wrapped her bare feet in part of his own cloak.

That he was not what the stories said.

And, most important of all, that Sigrún's voice changed when she spoke of him.

Yrsa carried their old linen back to the longhouse and said nothing at first.

Then, while Los sat by the hearth with the child and Tim argued cheerfully with one of the village women over the proper way to warm goat's milk, Yrsa leaned towards two other elder women and murmured, "The younger has given her heart away."

The other two did not look surprised.

One of them, Astrid, watched Los from across the hall as he shifted the baby higher against his chest with a care no butcher ever learned.

"To him?" she asked.

Yrsa nodded.

Astrid grunted softly. "Good."

The third woman, older than either of them and nearly blind in one eye, smiled into her cup.

"He is gentle with the child," she said.

"And brave enough to fetch a Valkyrie back from the midst of the dwarves," Yrsa replied.

"And foolish enough to take on both burdens," Astrid added.

That drew quiet laughter.

Across the hall, the chief, who had been pretending not to listen, heard every word.

So did the two elders beside him.

None of them interrupted.

But each man's gaze, in its own time, drifted towards the Spaniard with the sleeping child in his arms.

When They Returned

When the sisters returned to the longhouse, clean and wrapped in fresh wool, Los was exactly where they expected to find him—seated near the hearth with the child in his arms, still wearing his armor, as though he had forgotten the rest of the world existed.

He had not let the baby go since taking her back from Tim.

Brynhildr noticed first that he was still covered in road grime, his hair rough from sweat and smoke, armor straps hanging loose where some had already been unbuckled, and that the smell of battle still clung to him stubbornly.

Sigrún noticed too.

So, apparently, did the village women, who had already begun exchanging the look women have worn since the dawn of time whenever a man plainly needed washing and could not be trusted to seek it on his own.

Tim came to the same conclusion a breath later.

The troll folded his arms, sniffed once, then turned his nose up and looked away.

"Master need bath."

Los looked up. "What?"

"Bath," Tim repeated. "Clean. Vash."

Los frowned down at himself as though the accusation had come as a personal surprise.

"I am not that bad."

Tim sniffed again, louder this time.

Brynhildr turned her face away to hide her smile.

Sigrún held out her arms. "Give her to me."

Los hesitated.

Only for a moment—but long enough for everyone watching to see it.

Then, with visible reluctance, he placed the baby into Sigrún's care.

The child settled against her shoulder easily enough. Los, on the other hand, looked as though he had just surrendered something precious.

Tim clapped one heavy hand to his back and steered him towards the door.

"Come," he said cheerfully. "Before steam give up and die vaiting."

Los allowed himself to be herded a few paces, then looked back over his shoulder.

"At least pretend you are not enjoying this."

Tim grinned. "No."

The Sauna

They were given a room in which to change. There, Tim helped his master strip off his ruined armor before they went to the sauna. Los had also requested a towel. When they were ready, one of the village men showed them the way.

The heat of the sauna struck like a warm desert wind as Los stopped in the doorway.

Steam rolled heavy and clean over stone. The cedar walls sweated warmth. Water hissed where it struck hot rock, and the air itself seemed alive.

Tim went in without ceremony, stripped, and sat on the bench with the ease of a man returning to an old habit.

Los followed more slowly.

He had known steam baths before, in Castilla and farther south—warm tiled chambers where men sat half in prayer, and half in council, where heat loosened sore muscles, guarded tongues, and the sorts of truths men preferred not to speak in court.

But this was different.

Ruder. Wilder. Wood and stone and northern fire.

And yet beneath the difference lay something familiar enough to catch him off guard.

He sat.

And for the first time since leaving Castilla, warmth truly reached him.

Not battle-heat. Not fever. Not the brief comfort of a cloak by a roadside fire.

Warmth.

It sank into his shoulders, down into his chest, into the places where the northern road and the mountain cold had lived in him for too long. He let out a slow breath and then another, and his head fell back against the timber wall.

Tim, beside him, grunted in satisfaction.

"Better."

Los closed his eyes and nearly falling asleep.

"Jes," he murmured. "Much better."

For a while they simply sat.

Then Tim asked, "Master likes baby?"

Los opened his eyes a little. "I worry for her."

Tim considered this. "Needs family."

Los looked into the steam. "Jes."

Tim nodded as if this confirmed something important. "She likes Master."

That earned the smallest smile.

After that, words thinned again, lost in steam and water. When at last they came back to the longhouse in fresh wool and smelling like cedar and clean skin rather than blood and iron, Los reached, almost without thinking, for the child.

Sigrún let him take her.

Brynhildr watched the way the baby settled against him again, and said nothing. She did not need to.

Before the Elders

That evening the chief and the elders called for the longhouse benches to be filled.

Not for spectacle. Not quite. But because villages know when something has happened that ought to be witnessed.

The fire burned high. Shadows moved gold across the beams. The high seat belonged to the chief and the elders, but below it, in the place reserved for honored guests, sat Los, Sigrún, Brynhildr, and Tim.

The child slept in Los's arms.

That alone drew looks. Not mocking ones. Not even curious ones, after all the village had seen already.

Something else.

Recognition, perhaps.

The chief rose slowly.

His eyes fell first on the child.

"This child has no name," he said. "And no kin to claim her."

Sigrún stood.

The hall quieted.

Los, still holding the child, looked up at her but did not rise.

The chief inclined his head. "By vhat name shall she be known?"

Sigrún looked first at the child.

Then at Brynhildr.

A long moment passed between the sisters, small and silent and full of understanding.

Then Sigrún answered, "Sighildr."

A murmur went through the hall, soft and pleased.

Brynhildr gave the faintest nod.

It was a good name. Clever, perhaps. But good.

And then Sigrún added, clear as iron struck true:

"Sighildr Losdóttir."

This time, the hall stirred more deeply.

Not in outrage.

In recognition.

In understanding.

Brynhildr turned her head towards her sister, her eyes widening only slightly.

It is done, she thought.

The chief turned to Los.

"And do you, Spánverji, accept this naming?"

Los, not yet catching the full weight of what had just been declared, looked down at the child as she shifted in sleep and curled one hand around his finger.

A smile, small and helpless, touched his mouth.

"It is a lovely name."

The chief looked to the elders.

They nodded.

Then he lifted his voice and proclaimed, "From this day forth, let her be known among us as Sighildr Losdóttir."

The matter should have ended there.

But Los at last looked up—and saw in the faces around him that something more had happened than he had understood.

His gaze moved to Sigrún.

She held it steadily.

"Amongst our people," she said quietly, low enough now that only those nearest could hear, "a child must belong to someone."

He glanced down at the baby.

With a touch of longing in his voice—and something like an old grief stirring beneath it, and the sorrow of an ending he had already begun to fear—he said, "I hope whoever that is will take good care of her."

Sigrún's answer came gently.

"It is you."

He blinked.

"Me?"

She nodded once.

"She is now Sighildr Losdóttir."

And then, half a heartbeat later, the meaning struck him.

Losdóttir.

Los-dóttir.

Daughter of Los.

He looked down at the child in his arms as if she had somehow become heavier.

"No," he said at once, too softly for the hall and too honestly for anyone but those nearest to hear. "No, I can't... I..."

He stopped.

What was he going to say?

That he was leaving?

That he was no father?

That he did not know how?

The child made a small sound and tightened her hand around his finger.

Los froze.

For an instant, he looked more helpless than the baby.

His mouth opened once, then closed again.

He looked up at Sigrún, not angry, not betrayed—only lost, as though the ground beneath him had shifted and he had no idea where to place his feet.

She laid a hand gently on his arm.

The hall, seeing his face, understood that he had only just caught up to what had already been done.

Then the people of the village smiled softly and gave him a look kinder than pity.

Los stared back down at the child, trapped utterly by the tiny fist wrapped around his finger.

Brynhildr turned her face away to hide her smile.

Tim did not bother.

He grinned openly, like a troll who had seen many battles and considered this one among the more entertaining.

Chapter LXI — Sighildr's Hearth

The Longhouse at Night

The evening went on.

There was food. Ale. The recounting of deeds. Much praise was offered to Sigrún and Brynhildr, much curiosity directed towards Los, and more than one villager tried unsuccessfully to coax Tim into explaining what had been in the stew.

Through all of it, Los did not put the child down.

At last, the hall grew quieter. One by one the benches emptied. The elders withdrew. The fire sank lower, though not low enough to let the night in.

Los ended up seated with his back against one of the longhouse posts on the far side from the high seat, where he had been told he would sleep for the night. The child slept in the crook of his arm. His head leaned back against the timber. Weariness took him by degrees—first in the shoulders, then the eyes, then the slow surrender of a man who had gone too long on lack of sleep and borrowed strength.

At last, he fell asleep holding her.

Sigrún watched him for some time before she rose.

Carefully, very carefully, she knelt and eased the child from his arms.

He stirred.

Then, realizing the child was no longer in his arms, he woke. One hand moved towards his sword, leaning nearby.

His eyes opened.

He saw Sighildr safe in Sigrún's arms and went still again.

"You should sleep," she said softly.

Los blinked once, still caught between waking and dream.

Then he looked past her to the sleeping shelf beside the wall, where Brynhildr already lay beneath the blankets and furs.

"I thought," he said thickly, "that was where I was to sleep."

"It is," Sigrún said.

He frowned.

"But..."

Then he glanced around the longhouse for some other place to put himself and found none. On the shelf nearby, Tim was already asleep with the invincible peace of the completely shameless, taking up the whole thing like a boulder beneath a blanket.

Los looked back at Sigrún.

She said only, "It is fine, Los."

Which, of course, did not explain anything.

But he was too tired to fight the matter.

Los sat on the edge of the sleeping shelf and bent stiffly to remove his boots.

Sigrún watched him struggle with the first one, his ribs making the task harder than he wanted anyone to know.

"Are you not going to change?"

He glanced up. "What if I am needed in the night?"

Sigrún saw the awkward discomfort in his face.

The lie was so plain she almost smiled.

"As you vish."

He set the boots neatly beneath the shelf, close enough to find in the dark.

And so he climbed in beside Brynhildr with all the stiffness and care of a man trying not to offend the laws of gods, villages, or sleeping Valkyries. He left what he clearly thought was a respectable amount of distance between himself and the elder twin, folded one arm beneath his head, and closed his eyes.

After the Hall Grew Quiet

When the benches had emptied, the fire burned low, and only the old, the wakeful, and the burdened still remained, the chief sat with his elders near the high seat and spoke in a voice meant for men who already understood half of the matter.

"The child has been named," he said.

One elder nodded. "Losdóttir."

Another gave a short breath through his nose. "A bold naming."

"A true one," said the chief. "Look at him."

They sat with that for a while.

Across the hall, Los had at last fallen asleep against the post with the child in the crook of his arm. Sigrún had not yet moved to take her from him. Brynhildr watched both from beneath half-lowered eyes. Tim snored on the shelf next to them like a beast entirely at peace with itself.

The oldest of the elders rubbed his beard.

"If the Spánverji returns to Albion, the child goes with him?"

The chief shook his head once. "Not unless the world is stranger than I think."

"She stays here, then," another said.

"Vith Sigrún," said the first.

"And vith Brynhildr. Where one goes, so goes the other."

The chief looked towards the sleeping Paladin.

"And if he returns?"

At that, the oldest man smiled faintly.

"Then this village gains a Paladin and a Valkyrie."

"Two Valkyries," another corrected.

"Three shields, if you count the troll."

That drew a low chuckle.

Then the chief's face grew serious again.

"There is a house standing empty on the east side of the village. Gnalin's old house."

The others looked towards him.

"He had no sons," the chief went on. "No widow. No one to take it. It has stood closed since last autumn."

The oldest elder nodded slowly. He understood now.

"The child vill need a hearth."

"Ja."

"And if the twins mean to keep the child, and the Spánverji..."

The chief finished it for him.

"Then let them have a house that vas built for a varrior. Let it stand empty no longer."

The elders sat in silence for a moment.

Not resisting.

Thinking.

Then one by one, they nodded.

It was decided before any man spoke the words aloud.

By morning, the shutters would be opened, the dust swept out, and the blankets aired.

The old house would be made ready.

The child would need a hearth. The sisters would need a roof. And if the Spánverji was truly bound to them now, then the village would not be foolish enough to leave no place for him.

Because villages that survive are the ones wise enough to recognize when fate has walked through their door and sat by the fire.

Trapped Between

Morning came with warmth.

Too much warmth, in truth.

Los woke slowly, and then all at once.

Sigrún had joined them sometime in the night and now lay along his side, her hand resting lightly against his chest as though it had found that place in sleep and decided to stay. Brynhildr, for her part, had rolled towards him as well and now rested against his other side beneath the blanket with the careless intimacy of someone too exhausted to know where she was.

Los stared up at the roof beams.

Across the hall, Tim was awake.

He sat near the hearth with Sighildr in his lap, feeding her from a soaked cloth and looking entirely too pleased with himself.

Los turned his head just enough to catch Tim's eye.

Then, with all the dignity available to a man pinned between two sleeping Valkyries, he mouthed:

Help me.

Tim looked at him.

Looked at the twins.

Looked back at him.

Then he very deliberately looked down at the baby.

The traitor.

The Morning Offer

Morning came pale and silver over the village.

Smoke rose straight from the smoke holes in the still air. Frost crusted the eaves and fence posts, and every sound seemed sharper in the cold—the scrape of a shovel, the snort of a horse, the distant crack of wood being split somewhere beyond the longhouse.

Inside, the hall was quieter than it had been the night before.

The fire had burned down to a deep red bed of coals. Tim was already awake, seated near the hearth with the child in his lap and a strip of cloth in one hand, feeding her with the solemn concentration of a priest at altar work. Across the room, Los had only just freed himself from the trap of sleep and sisters. He now sat on the edge of the sleeping shelf, boots in hand, still looking faintly betrayed by the morning.

Brynhildr had recovered her composure and was behaving as though she had not woken half draped over a visibly terrified Los.

Sigrún was not inclined to assist her in this effort.

When the chief entered with three of the elders behind him, those in the longhouse rose as a mark of respect.

Los stood as well, though his first instinct, even now, was to glance towards the child.

The chief noticed.

So did the elders.

That, more than anything, seemed to satisfy them.

The chief came no farther than the hearth. He wore the same heavy fur cloak as the night before, though frost still dusted his beard from outside.

“Ve have spoken,” he said.

No one interrupted.

The old man’s gaze moved first to the child in Tim’s lap, then to Sigrún and Brynhildr, and at last to Los.

"There is a house on the eastern side of the village," he said. "It belonged to Gnalin, who died in autumn. No wife. No sons. No kin to claim it. It has stood empty since."

One of the elders, bent with age but still broad as an ox through the shoulders, gave a single nod. "We opened it this morning. The dust is gone. Fresh blankets have been laid within."

Los said nothing.

The chief went on.

"The child will need a hearth. We would be honored to see her raised here, among her people."

That landed exactly where it was meant to.

Brynhildr's brows rose just slightly.

Sigrún said nothing at all.

Tim looked as though this seemed perfectly sensible.

Los stood still, one hand resting lightly against the back of the bench near him, his eyes no longer on the chief or the elders, but on the baby.

She had gone drowsy with feeding and now clutched at the cloth in Tim's great hand with sleepy determination.

The chief saw where Los was looking and softened his tone by half a measure.

"The house stands ready."

At last Los looked up.

His mouth opened.

Closed.

He glanced, almost helplessly, to Sigrún, then to Brynhildr, and then back to the child.

No one pressed him.

No one in the room was foolish enough to mistake silence for refusal.

He took one slow step towards Tim and the baby, and Tim, with the calm wisdom of a troll who knew exactly when to move and when not to, rose and placed the child carefully into Los's arms.

Los began to protest. "Tim, I—"

Then the baby settled against him as though she had been waiting for that exact shape of safety.

Los stopped.

He looked down at her for a long moment.

The longhouse held its breath.

Then Sigrún spoke, her voice respectful and calm.

"It is a generous gift."

The chief inclined his head.

Sigrún laid one hand over her own wrist and inclined her head, the closest thing to a bow she was likely to offer.

"We would be honored to have a place within the village to raise the child."

Brynhildr looked towards her sister. She had expected no other answer. Still, hearing it spoken aloud made something final settle in the room.

The chief nodded once, satisfied. "Then it is settled."

An elder woman near the door, who had clearly been waiting for exactly that, said, "I put bread there already."

Another voice from outside called in, "And vood."

A third, somewhere beyond the shutters, added, "And a cradle, if the Spánverji does not object to one properly made."

That brought open laughter this time.

Los looked up at last, startled by how much had already been decided without him.

He had known this feeling before, in Castilla: standing still while other people, wiser and older and utterly certain, spoke his future around him.

He wanted to bolt, to run, to not be that boy again, but the child in his arms anchored him to the ground beneath his feet.

And the world continued to move without his say.

The chief's eyes crinkled.

"Welcome to our village, Spánverji," he said.

Los let out a breath that sounded like surrender.

Then Sigrún spoke again.

"First we must return to Valhalla," she said. "We must report to Odin."

At that, Los went very still.

Sigrún touched his arm at once, gently, understanding enough to feel the tension go through him without speaking to it.

The chief looked towards Tim.

The troll answered before he could ask.

"I stay," he said. "I vatch."

The chief grunted. "Good. Then she will be better guarded than most kings."

That won another small ripple of laughter.

Los did not join it.

He was still looking down at the baby, still quiet, still reading some future in her face that no one else could see.

For now, she yawned, tightened her fist around his finger, and decided the matter.

Los let out one slow breath.

Then, at last, he nodded.

The chief took that nod for what it was.

Los looked to Tim and, with obvious reluctance, eased the baby back into the troll's arms.

"Keep her safe," he said.

"Ja, Master."

No one in the longhouse missed the way Sigrún looked at him then.

Nor the way Brynhildr looked quietly pleased, and yet somehow uneasy.

Nor the way Tim, impossible creature that he was, looked as though he had expected this from the first moment Los had taken the orphan into his arms.

The Road to the Gods

Northern Reaches — From the Mortal World to Asgard

It was mid-morning when they finally departed. Frost-laced roofs gleamed as the village stirred behind them. The three rode in silence, their cloaks pulled tight against the morning chill.

No crowd gathered to see them off. Just a few nods. A loaf of bread handed up. A whispered thank you from a child who peeked through her mother's skirt.

Tim stood near the longhouse with Sighildr bundled in his arms.

Los offered a tired smile.

Sigrún nodded once.

Brynhildr said nothing, but her eyes held something new.

Tim lifted one great hand.

They left without fanfare, with only the sound of hooves through snow and the creak of leather and steel.

The road north climbed steadily, passing glacier feed rivers and sunless pines. The wind grew colder. sharper. The sky bluer, then stranger.

Eventually, the trees thinned. The mountains parted.

And there—cut into the ridge like a scar of light—stood the bridge, where it had first delivered them to the mortal realm.

Not of wood.

Not of stone.

But of song: woven threads of golden melody, suspended across a chasm no mortal could cross alone.

Brynhildr dismounted first. She took a deep breath and stepped forward. The bridge answered with a soft chord.

Sigrún followed.

Los hesitated, his hand brushing the ring beneath his shirt.

Then he stepped forward.

The bridge held.

And so they crossed—leaving the mortal world behind once more.

Chapter LXII — Avalon

Avalon Marsh

The marsh lay beneath a pale sky of mist and silver light, where water and earth seemed forever undecided which ought to yield to the other. Reeds bent in the windless hush. Pools of still, black water reflected cloud and ruin alike. In the distance, the worn silhouettes of ancient stone rose through the mist like half-remembered prayers.

Arthuur and his company rode in pairs along the causeway, horses picking their way over wet ground and old stones slick with recent rain. Tungsten rode nearest him, silent and massive in the saddle. Kilingu looked about with bright suspicion, as though expecting something magical to leap from the reeds and insult him personally. Faemz kept one hand near his weapon and the other lightly on the reins, while Wintyr's gaze moved between the marsh and the old stones with the composed alertness of a cleric entering holy ground she did not yet trust. The rest of the guild remained behind them, resting near the watchtower.

Ahead, two figures waited where the causeway crossed the water.

One was Lord Adribard, straight-backed despite his years, wrapped in a dark mantle against the damp.

The other stood a little apart, pale as moonlight against the gray marsh.

Nimue.

The Lady of the Lake did not seem to belong to weather, mud, or mortal roads. She stood where she pleased, and the place shaped itself around her. Her white and blue robes stirred in a breeze no one else felt. The water at her feet lay still as glass.

Arthuur drew rein first and dismounted.

The others followed his lead.

He came forward and bowed his head. "My lady."

Nimue regarded him for a long moment.

"So," she said, "the son comes where the father once rode."

There was no mockery in the words. No warmth, either. Only recognition.

Arthuur straightened.

"You sent for aid. We answer your call."

At that, Adribard's mouth twitched very slightly, as though pleased by the plainness of the answer.

Nimue inclined her head. "And I am glad for it."

Her gaze passed over the others in turn.

Arthuur introduced his companions. "Tungsten. Kilingu. Faemz. Wintyr. The rest wait by the tower."

Each gave the appropriate bow or nod, though Kilingu's carried just enough irreverence to prove he was still himself in a place like this.

Then Nimue looked back to Arthuur.

"The Drakoran press deeper into Avalon."

The words settled over the marsh like frost.

Adribard stepped forward to give them mortal shape.

"What began as raiding has turned to invasion," he said. "They no longer merely test the edges of the land now. They hold ground. Burn what they cannot hold. Poison what they cannot burn."

Faemz's face darkened. "How far?"

"Far enough," said Adribard, "that the roads to the west are broken, and the villages nearest the harbor are now in danger."

Nimue's eyes drifted towards the mist-shrouded distance.

"They now threaten the last stronghold of the Shrouded Isles."

At that, even Kilingu ceased looking amused.

Arthuur took one slow breath.

"The last stronghold," he repeated. "Caer Gothwaite."

Adribard inclined his head.

Nimue said nothing, but the silence confirmed it.

For a moment the marsh seemed quieter than before. An old kind of quiet. The kind that belonged to places where men had once swore oaths, and later died proving them.

Arthuur looked from Nimue to Adribard and back again.

"You want us to fight them."

"No," said Nimue. "I want you to defeat them and drive them from our isle."

No flourish. No plea.

Only certainty.

Arthuur glanced once at his companions.

Tungsten was already settled into the shape of coming battle.

Kilingu's eyes had sharpened into something dangerous.

Faemz looked as though someone had finally handed him a problem worth disliking.

Wintyr met Arthuur's gaze and gave the smallest nod.

He turned back to the Lady of the Lake.

"Then we will go," he said. "And we will cleanse the Isle of Avalon till it is yours once more."

Nimue studied him a moment longer.

Then, for the first time, something like approval touched her face.

"Spoken as a knight should."

Arthuur did not answer that. He only stood straighter.

"Come," said Nimue. "I will show you the way."

With that, she led them a little way from the keep, to a stone bridge that seemed to lead nowhere.

Adribard stepped back as Nimue lifted one pale hand.

The mist changed.

At first, it only curled more thickly about the stones. Then it began to turn, winding inward upon itself over the dark water. Light gathered in it—not bright, not blinding, but silver and strange, like moonlight trapped beneath ice. The marsh seemed to fall away from its center of it as the air itself opened.

Kilingu muttered under his breath, "Well. That's useful."

A tall portal of pale radiance rose above the water, its edges rippling like the skin of a disturbed lake. Beyond it, there was no marsh, no reed, no ruin.

Beyond it lay another shore. The mythic isle.

The Isle of Glass.

Gothwaite Harbor spread beneath a pale and distant light, its waters steel-blue and haunted by mist. Stone quays and narrow piers clung to the edge of the island below the high rise of Caer Gothwaite, whose walls crowned the slope above like something wounded but unbroken.

Wintyr drew a breath. Tungsten simply stared. Even Faemz looked impressed despite himself.

Nimue lowered her hand.

"The way is open."

Arthuur looked once through the portal to the harbor beyond.

Then back to the Lady.

"If we hold it," he said, "what then?"

Nimue's gaze did not waver. "Then Avalon breathes another day."

That was answer enough.

Arthuur nodded once, then turned to his companions.

"Tungsten."

The great Paladin stepped forward at once.

"Kilingu."

"Still here."

"Faemz."

The Armsman rolled one shoulder beneath his harness. "Aye."

"Wintyr."

She came to his side without hesitation.

Arthuur looked once at the others before putting his hand to the pommel of his sword and facing the silver threshold.

"Together, then."

Kilingu grinned. "Together."

"Always," said Faemz.

Arthuur stepped through first.

Cold light swallowed him.

For one strange instant there was no up or down, no road, no breath—only water, silver, and the sensation of old power passing around him like a current. Then stone met his boots.

He emerged into Gothwaite Harbor beneath the shadow of Caer Gothwaite.

One by one, the others came through after him, their horses following under Nimue's magic as though the world had forgotten to object.

Behind them, the portal shimmered in the mist above the quay.

Around them lay the harbor, the climb to the keep, and beyond that, the ravaged land that had called them here.

Arthuur looked up at the walls of Caer Gothwaite.

Then he said, quietly but firmly, "Let's report to the keep, and go from there."

And together the Knights of the Round Table guild went up towards the last stronghold of Avalon.

Caer Gothwaite — The Briefing

Gothwaite Harbor lay beneath a cold wash of silver light, its piers half-choked with broken nets, abandoned crates, and the scars of hurried retreat. Above it, Caer Gothwaite stood grim against the sky, its old stone walls damp with mist and its banners hanging heavy in the salt air.

Arthuur and his company rode through the gate at a measured pace, their horses steaming in the cold. The men on the walls watched them with the hard-eyed look of defenders too long under pressure to waste hope on every new arrival.

They had not yet cleared the courtyard before a voice called down from the steps of the keep.

"Sir Arthuur!"

A broad-shouldered officer in weather-darkened mail strode towards them, helm tucked beneath one arm, a look of plain relief on his face.

Captain Philips.

He did not bow deeply. There was no room left in him for ceremony. But his respect was obvious.

"Thank God you've come," he said. "We'd begun to think Avalon had been forgotten."

Arthuur dismounted at once.

"We came as quickly as we could."

Philips looked over the company—Tungsten, Kilingu, Faemz, Wintyr—and some of the strain in his face eased.

"Good," he said. "Because we're in poor enough shape that even a small company of proper knights looks like an answered prayer."

Kilingu glanced up at the walls. "Always nice to be appreciated."

Philips almost smiled at that, though it did not quite reach his eyes.

"Come," he said. "General Wystan is waiting. So are the others."

He led them through the keep and into a long stone chamber where a campaign table had been laid out beneath maps, markers, and guttering lamps.

Waiting there was General Wystan, stern and broad as an old oak, his left hand resting on the table as though he might steady the whole of Avalon by pressure alone.

Beside him stood Lady Eve, a Paladin in weathered armor whose face had the sharp calm of someone too tired to waste emotion.

Father Kenelm and Brother Obster were dusty with work, both grown too thin from long service under siege.

Two women in plain but well-kept gowns—Mistress Etheldreda and Mistress Eveleen—stood near the ledgers, bandage lists, and ration notes; the sort of people without whom walls fell faster than stone alone ever should.

General Wystan looked up as they entered.

"So," he said, "the Lady sends us Arthur's son."

Arthuur stepped forward. "She sent those willing to answer. If that is enough, then we are yours to command."

Wystan studied him for a long moment.

Then he gave a slow nod.

"It will have to be."

He gestured to the map.

"The Drakoran have pressed deeper than we first feared. Avalon City is lost. They hold it outright."

His finger moved south and east across the parchment.

"Most of the Dales of Devwy have gone the same way. The countryside burns where they are strong enough to burn it, and where they are not, it rots beneath them."

Mistress Eveleen spoke quietly from the side of the table. "Villages nearest the lower roads are empty now. Those who escaped came here or died on the way."

Mistress Etheldreda added, "And the food stores brought in with them will not last forever."

Father Kenelm folded his hands within his sleeves. "We are short on bread and shorter on hope, I'm afraid."

Brother Obster snorted softly. "You always say that."

"Because it is always true," Kenelm replied.

Wystan ignored them both and tapped the northeastern edge of the map.

"We cannot take Avalon City back yet. Not with what we have. Not while the Drakoran hold the Dales and move freely between their positions."

He touched three marked points in turn.

"So we begin here. The three forts to the northeast. Retake them, secure the line, and clear the surrounding country. If those positions stand, Caer Gothwaite breathes easier. If they remain in enemy hands, we are only waiting to be strangled."

Tungsten leaned over the table. "And how bad are these forts?"

Philips answered that one. "Bad enough. One's held properly. One is damaged and likely garrisoned lightly. The third changes hands often enough I'm surprised anyone still remembers whose banner belongs there."

Kilingu grinned. "That almost sounds encouraging."

Lady Eve turned to Arthuur then, her gaze measuring.

"You understand what is being asked of you?"

He met her eyes. "To secure what can be secured before reaching for what cannot yet be taken."

That earned the faintest shift in her expression.

General Wystan, however, only nodded once.

"Good. Then we understand each other."

Wintyr stepped closer to the table. "When should we be ready to move?"

Wystan gave her a hard look that softened just slightly when he answered.

"At dawn tomorrow."

Mistress Etheldreda glanced up from her ledger. "You'll want fresh horses, winter cloaks, lamp oil, dry rations, and twice as much bandage cloth as you think sensible."

Brother Obster muttered, "And prayers."

Father Kenelm said, "Those too."

Philips gave Arthuur a tired but real look of welcome.

"You'll have quarters tonight," he said. "Bread, broth, and whatever rest you can find in a keep with too many ghosts in it."

Arthuur looked once around the room—to the general, the Paladin, the priests, the women holding the place together, the captain who had greeted them as though he had nearly despaired of seeing help at all.

Avalon was not asking for a legend.

It was asking for labor.

For endurance.

For men and women willing to bleed until something held.

And that, at least, he understood.

"We'll take the forts," he said.

General Wystan rested both hands on the map and looked at him with the stern relief of a man too long in command to trust hope easily.

"See that you do."

Camelot — Lord Baldric's Study

The fire burned low in Baldric's chamber, more red than gold, casting long shadows across the bookshelves and dark-paneled walls. Rain tapped softly against the leaded windows. On the table between the two men stood two cups of untouched wine.

Baron Eddington did not sit.

He prowled.

That alone told Baldric how deeply the man was troubled.

"You underestimate the boy," Eddington said.

Lord Baldric remained seated, elbows resting on the arms of his chair, fingers steepled before his mouth. He watched the baron move as one might watch a hunting dog scenting danger where perhaps none yet stood.

"I underestimate very few people," Baldric replied. "Least of all those who begin gathering names and loyal men before they have finished gathering years."

Eddington stopped at that.

"Then you see it."

"I see a young knight with a famous father and a name that stirs memories in old men." Baldric's voice remained measured. "That is not the same thing as rebellion."

Eddington gave a sharp, humorless laugh.

"Not yet."

He came to the table then and planted both hands upon it, leaning in.

"Arthuur is a greater threat than Los ever was."

That earned Baldric's full attention.

"Is he?"

"Yes." Eddington straightened and turned away again. "The Spaniard is dangerous. Yes. Beloved, in his way. Capable. Useful. But he is foreign. He is rootless. He stumbles into greatness by accident and walks away from it just as easily."

Baldric's mouth almost moved at that.

"And Arthuur?" he asked.

Eddington looked back over one shoulder.

"Arthuur belongs here."

There it was.

The real fear.

Not fear of merit.

Fear of belonging.

"The boy seeks no crown," Baldric said.

He said it plainly, because it was true.

Arthuur did not maneuver. Did not flatter. Did not circle influence like a hawk circles prey. He rode where he was sent, served whom he must, and let old stories of his father gather around him without seeming to know how to stop them.

That, in its way, made him more dangerous.

Eddington snorted. "He does not need to seek it."

Baldric was quiet.

The Baron stepped nearer the window, looking out into the wet gray of Camelot's courtyard.

"Men need only believe he should have it."

The sentence settled into the room like a blade laid on a table.

Baldric let the silence stretch before answering.

"He is Arthur's bastard son," he said at last. "Not Arthur reborn. And bastards have no claim to thrones."

"No," said Eddington. "But tell that to soldiers. To old knights. To priests who mutter over the state of the realm. Tell that to villagers who love a legend better than a living king."

Baldric's eyes lowered briefly to the wine cup at his side.

He did not say what he thought, which was that Arthuur's greatest danger lay precisely in the fact that he did not seek power. Ambitious men could be trapped. Bought. Turned. Refused. The unambitious man, if beloved enough, became a banner others might raise whether he wished it or not.

Still, Baldric would not feed Eddington too easily.

"You speak as though he had declared himself."

"He has named his guild the Knights of the Round Table."

That was not nothing.

Baldric knew it. Eddington knew that he knew it.

"A sentimental choice," Baldric said.

"A provocative one."

Baldric leaned back.

"Or the choice of a young man trying to honor the father he never knew."

For the first time Eddington's eyes narrowed in true irritation.

"You always do this."

"Do what?"

"Dismiss danger and call it prudence."

Baldric almost smiled then.

"And you," he said, "see every shadow as a knife already raised."

Eddington did not return the near-smile.

"One day," he said quietly, "you will wake to find I was right too soon rather than wrong too often."

Baldric held his gaze.

He could not openly say that he bore Arthuur no ill will. He remembered Arthur too well for that. That a son should not be hunted merely for resembling a memory.

So instead, he said, "Take care what you place in the King's ear."

Eddington's expression changed very slightly.

Not guilt.

Intent.

"He must be warned."

"Warned," Baldric repeated softly.

The Baron moved to the door.

"Yes."

He paused there, hand on the latch, and looked back once.

"You have dealt with one threat already," he said. "Or thought you had. Do not pretend the second does not concern you."

Then he was gone.

The chamber fell quiet again, but for the rain.

Baldric sat alone by the failing fire and said nothing.

Inwardly, though, he thought:

Los is a storm.

But Arthuur...

Arthuur is the kind of danger that wears a good face, does not know itself, and gathers hearts simply by standing where men can see him.

And for that very reason, Baldric feared what would be done to him more than what he might ever do himself.

Chapter LXIII — The Dance Before the Dawn

Valhalla — The Great Hall of Shields

The doors of Valhalla opened to the sound of an ocean of voices.

Brynhildr entered first.

Sigrún walked at her side, head high, her cloak trailing behind her like a dark blue banner. Behind them came Los, bruised, weary, and dressed now not in armor but in borrowed Norse clothes, the remnants of his travel-stained cloak over his shoulders, his two-handed sword gone, his body aching, and his grin still somehow intact.

For half a heartbeat, the hall went silent.

Then Valhalla erupted.

Fists pounded upon tables. Boots struck the floor. Horns rose. Warriors shouted until the rafters shook, and the names of Sigrún and Brynhildr rolled through the great hall like thunder crossing the mountains.

The lost Valkyrie had come home.

Sigrún stood beside her, fierce and unbowed, and accepted the roar with the stillness of one who had earned it. Brynhildr's face did not soften, not before so many watching eyes, but her chin lifted, and something in her seemed to settle back into its rightful shape.

Los stood a few steps behind them.

That was where he had placed himself.

That was where he meant to remain.

He had done as he had promised. Brynhildr was returned. Now all he wanted was to go home. If that was still possible now, with Sighildr as his... ward? No. They had called her his daughter.

But he had to get back.

To... Albion.

Somehow.

But the hall had eyes.

Whispers began at the edges of the cheering. First among the Valkyries, then among the Einherjar, then farther down the long tables where men who had once cursed his name now leaned towards one another in surprise.

Inn Spánverji.

The Paladin.

The man who had brought Brynhildr home.

Odin rose from his high seat.

The hall quieted.

Not all at once. Valhalla did nothing all at once save battle and laughter. But the roar lessened, fists upon tables fading into scattered taps, horns lowering, voices dimming until only the fire spoke.

The Allfather's gaze fell first upon Brynhildr, then Sigrún, and finally Los.

"You return victorious," Odin said.

His voice was low and yet powerful.

Brynhildr bowed her head.

Sigrún did the same.

Los followed a breath later, with the formal courtesy of a man trying his best to play at humility and respect.

Freyja stood beside Odin, golden and grave, her eyes softer than the hall deserved. She looked at Brynhildr with joy, at Sigrún with understanding, and at Los with something that made him straighten before he knew why.

Odin descended one step from the dais.

"Sir Los," he said.

The title carried across the hall.

Los looked faintly surprised that Odin had used his title properly this time.

That pleased Odin, though his face did not show it.

"You entered Midgard as captive, crossed into the halls beneath the mountain, faced the dwarven smiths, and returned one of mine to Valhalla."

Los opened his mouth.

Sigrún gave him a look.

He closed it.

Odin's one eye gleamed.

"Name your reward. Fortune, favor, or fame. Choose, and if it is within my power, it shall be given."

A murmur moved through the hall.

Fortune.

Favor.

Fame.

Any one of them could make a man more than he was.

Los stepped forward only far enough to be properly seen. He bowed again, deeper this time.

"I thank you, Allfather," he said. "But I have no need of gold, nor song, nor glory. I have enough of each to last me a lifetime."

The hall listened.

Los looked towards Brynhildr.

Then to Sigrún.

"My reward was seeing Brynhildr returned safely," he said, "and having the honor of walking beside Sigrún. That was reward enough."

There was silence.

Not empty silence.

Full silence.

The kind that followed an arrow striking true.

Sigrún's face did not change, but something moved in her eyes.

Brynhildr looked at him for a long moment, as if revising some private judgment once again.

Freyja's lips curved faintly.

Odin studied the Paladin.

Then he inclined his head.

"So be it."

The hall exhaled.

"Yet your deeds shall be celebrated all the same."

Los looked to Sigrún at once.

Not in anger.

Not even fear.

Only with the weary, silent plea of a man who had done what was asked and wanted no more made of him.

Sigrún saw it.

For one heartbeat, her face softened.

Then Odin's gaze turned to her, and duty claimed her back.

She stepped forward to report all that had been done and seen.

Another choice had been made.

Los felt it land more heavily than it should have.

He had refused reward, and even that choice had been taken from him.

As with the child.

As with the hearth.

Choices were being made for him.

Again.

Then the drums began.

Not solemn drums, but feast-drums. War-drums beaten into joy. Harps and lyres joined them, then horns, then voices. Mead flowed so quickly that half the floor seemed in danger of becoming a river. Warriors crowded around Brynhildr to welcome her. Valkyries embraced her. Old tales were demanded and told badly before better versions replaced them.

At first, Los was left alone.

He stood in the middle of the hall, surrounded by celebration, and felt lost as ever.

He should have smiled. Bowed. Played the part he knew so well, as he had when Albion celebrated the slaying of the dragon and every eye turned towards him.

But he could not rise to meet the moment.

Brynhildr had been returned. He had saved a village. Rescued a child. He had a hearth waiting for him now. And Sigrún—Sigrún had become something he had no safe word for, a longing that wore another face.

Somewhere beneath the noise, beneath the cheers and songs and praise, Los felt it: he was becoming small again. He was that boy from Castilla again, standing silent, waiting for someone older, wiser, and utterly certain to tell him what to do.

Mímir had said one must fail.

In that moment, Los knew which one it was.

Lorenzo was what remained.

His hand moved before thought could stop it.

He grasped the cloth at his chest and felt the ring beneath it.

Then one warrior came.

A short dwarven Einherjar with a scar down his brow stood before him, horn in hand, and looked as though he had swallowed a nail.

"I vonce lived in the village you defended," the warrior said.

Los blinked.

"Ah."

The warrior lifted his horn. "You have my thanks, Paladin."

Los bowed his head.

"Jou are most welcome."

The man did not leave.

Instead, his gaze moved over Los—the borrowed clothes, the torn cloak, the weariness he tried to hide.

Los studied him in return.

"Are jou... Gnalín?"

The warrior's brow rose.

"I was. I am."

Los went still for half a breath.

Gnalín's eyes narrowed, not in anger, but curiosity.

Los glanced down, suddenly unsure whether he was about to offend a dead man.

"The village gave me jour house."

For a moment, Gnalín said nothing.

Then his face split into a laugh so loud several warriors nearby turned to look.

"My house?"

"Jes."

Gnalín clapped him on the shoulder and pulled him close, hard enough to make Los's bruised ribs protest.

"I am glad they found a worthy warrior to keep the hearth warm," the warrior said cheerfully.

Los let out a deep breath.

Gnalin laughed again.

Then, still gripping Los's shoulder, he leaned closer and lowered his voice.

"There is a loose stone beneath the high seat. Under it, if no fool has found it yet, is a small cask of mead. Well-aged."

Gnalin grinned.

Los stared at him.

"For nights when the cold bites too deep."

"I will remember. Thank jou."

Gnalin studied him then, and the laughter faded into something steadier.

"The village is full of good people. Keep them safe, Spánverji."

Los's fingers loosened slightly around the ring.

"I will."

Gnalin lifted his horn.

"To inn Spánverji!"

He drank deeply, then wiped his beard with the back of his hand and nodded, as though it had been settled.

Another came after him.

Then another.

Some spoke of the village. Some of Brynhildr. Some merely raised a horn and said nothing, which among men who had spent centuries killing and drinking and killing again was nearly eloquence.

Old hatred did not vanish in a night.

But in Valhalla, deeds had weight.

And Los had brought a Valkyrie home.

By the time the third horn had been raised to him, his hand had fallen from his shirt.

The first true gift came from Thor.

The god shouldered his way through the press of warriors as though the hall itself had been built too narrow to accommodate him. His red beard was braided with gold, his grin wide enough to frighten sensible men, and in one great hand he carried a silver flask chased with knotwork and runes.

"Paladin!" Thor boomed.

Los turned.

Thor planted himself before him, wide as a storm and twice as loud.

"Sigrún tells me you fought Sindri barehanded."

Several nearby warriors turned at that.

Los glanced towards Sigrún.

She looked entirely unrepentant.

"I began with a sword," Los said carefully, "and ended with a smithing hammer."

Thor's grin widened.

"And between?"

Los sighed.

"Between, I learned that fists do very little to a dwarf."

A few dwarves seated farther down the hall lifted their horns at that.

Los looked towards them, then touched his brow with great seriousness.

"And headbutts..."

He shook his head.

The dwarves erupted, pounding fists and raising horns in fierce approval.

Thor barked a laugh loud enough to rattle the cups.

Then he thrust the flask against Los's chest.

"For the road," Thor said. "Mead from my own stores. Drink it when you celebrate your next victory!"

The hall cheered loudly.

Los accepted it with both hands, because only a fool took gifts from gods with one hand.

"I thank you," he said carefully.

Thor clapped him on the shoulder hard enough to make his bruised ribs sing.

"You fought dwarves barehanded and lived. You earned no less."

"I am not certain that is comforting."

Thor laughed again and shoved a drinking horn into his hand.

"Then drink!"

The hall roared approval.

Thor lifted his horn.

"To Brynhildr returned!"

"To Brynhildr!" the hall thundered.

Horns rose. Mead spilled. Warriors drank deep.

Los raised his horn with the rest.

But he did not drink.

Not then.

Not when the second toast came.

Nor the third.

Each time he lifted the horn. Each time he smiled, bowed his head, or answered some shouted praise with enough courtesy to satisfy the room. But the mead remained where it was.

Most did not notice.

Valhalla was not a place where men watched closely to see whether another man drank. They were too busy drinking themselves.

Sigrún noticed.

Brynhildr noticed as well.

"A careful man," Brynhildr murmured.

Sigrún's eyes stayed on Los as he laughed at something Thor said and raised his untouched horn again.

"No," she said softly. "Not careful."

Brynhildr glanced at her.

Sigrún's mouth curved, faint and unwilling.

"Afraid."

The music grew faster.

Tables were shoved back. Boots struck stone. Men laughed. Valkyries joined the open floor, their cloaks spinning, their braids flashing in firelight.

It was not like the court dances Los had known in Castilla, where every step had a grammar and every turn was precise and controlled.

This was a storm with rhythm.

Los stood safely near the edge of it.

Or thought he did.

Sigrún appeared before him, eyes bright.

"No," Los said at once.

She held out her hand.

"Jes," she said with a smile.

Los stared at her.

Then his grin came slowly.

"Are jou making fun of my accent?"

"Jes."

He laughed despite himself.

"Dance with me."

Los looked at her hand, then at her face.

"Jes," he said, softer now.

Then she seized his hand and dragged him into the dance.

The hall cheered.

Los found himself among stomping boots, spinning cloaks, clapping hands, and warriors who moved with the dangerous certainty of men who considered broken furniture a sign of good music.

He missed the first step.

Recovered on the second.

Nearly collided with a man broad enough to be a wall on the third.

Sigrún laughed at him.

The sound struck him harder than the cold ever had.

"Keep up, Paladin!"

"I am keeping up!"

"You are surviving."

"That is my specialty!"

A roar of approval went up from the nearest table.

Then the warriors joined in.

Not as spectators.

As teachers.

A red-bearded Einherjar stamped twice, slapped his own chest, spun, and pointed at Los as if this explained everything.

Los stared at him.

The warrior did it again, louder.

"That is not clearer!" Los shouted over the music.

The table behind him erupted in laughter.

Others shouted advice over the drums. Men stamped patterns for him. Women corrected his hands. Someone shouted that his feet were too polite.

Los tried to follow them all.

This was a mistake.

The result was not grace.

But it had courage.

And in Valhalla, courage counted for more.

A third man clapped him hard on the back and shouted, "Good! Again!"

"I am not certain that was good!"

"It was alive!"

"Jes, that is my standard also!"

The hall began to clap in rhythm, harder and faster, driving him on. Los found something like the beat at last—not the courtly measure of Castilla, not the polished grammar of noble halls, but the brutal, joyful arithmetic of boots, breath, and laughter.

He turned.

He stamped.

He nearly fell.

But did not fall.

The cheer that followed shook dust from the rafters.

Then Sigrún came for him again.

She slipped through the circle, caught his hand, and pulled him out from between two enormous warriors arguing over which of them had improved him more.

"He is mine now," she said with a smile.

That drew a louder cheer than all the rest.

Los looked at her, breathless and laughing.

"Am I rescued?"

"For the moment."

"From them or from the dance?"

"Yes."

Then she drew him back into the open floor.

This time, there was no lesson.

Only her hand in his.

The music quickened.

Faster.

Faster still.

The dancers circled, broke, crossed, returned. The hall spun around him in gold and red and shadow. Sigrún moved like battle given grace, every step strong, every turn daring the floor to deny her.

Los followed.

Not perfectly.

But willingly.

Her eyes flashed.

Then she shoved him backward, hard and brisk.

He felt himself falling.

And yet not.

He watched his body fall away.

Then Brynhildr moved from the edge of the floor, swift as a blade drawn in moonlight. She caught him beneath the shoulders before his head could strike stone.

His body lay slack in her arms.

Los stared down at himself in open horror.

"Sigrún—"

Her hand closed around his.

"Do not worry," she said, far too calmly for what had just happened. "It is only temporary."

"Only temporary?"

"Yes."

Below them, Brynhildr adjusted her grip on his body with the expression of a woman who had not expected this to become her responsibility.

Then the Einherjar descended.

"Up with him!" one shouted.

Before Brynhildr could protest, three warriors hauled Los's body upright to a roar of approval. They propped him against a post, set a horn of mead in one limp hand and a sword in the other, and one bold Einheri snatched the winged helmet from a passing Valkyrie then jammed it lopsided onto Los's head.

She turned sharply, ready to scold him—then saw Los sitting there, slack and solemn, horn in one hand, sword in the other, his spirit nowhere to be seen.

The corner of her mouth betrayed her first.

Then she laughed.

The hall exploded once more.

Thor's laugh boomed loudest of all.

"Inn Spánverji!" he roared, raising his horn again.

The Einherjar howled.

Someone tried to tip the horn in Los's limp hand towards his mouth until Brynhildr slapped the man's wrist away.

"Do not drown him," she said.

Thor laughed harder.

Above them, Los stared in disbelief.

"What are they doing to me?"

Sigrún looked down, and to his astonishment, laughed.

Even Freyja smiled openly from the dais. Odin's single eye gleamed, and though the Allfather's face remained stern, a low rumble of laughter escaped him.

That was enough for the hall.

The cheering grew louder still.

Brynhildr looked up then, watching her sister wheel through the hall with Los's spirit in her hands. Sigrún was laughing. Truly laughing.

Brynhildr looked back to the body propped beside her, helmet crooked, horn in one hand, sword in the other, looking like the strangest warrior in all of Valhalla.

"You are trouble," she murmured.

Her gaze lifted once more to her sister.

"No man has ever made her smile like that."

She hesitated.

Then, just for a moment, she rested her head lightly against his shoulder.

"And yes," she said quietly, so softly the hall swallowed it, "perhaps I am a little jealous."

Then she straightened at once, adjusted the lopsided helmet on his head, and added under her breath, "Do not get any ideas."

Above, Sigrún's wings opened wide.

"Come," she said. "Let them have their fun with your body for a little while."

"That sentence does not comfort me."

"Jes," she said again, having fun with his accent. "Look at me."

He did, truly looked at her.

Then she lifted him higher.

His feet moved with nothing beneath them.

The drums thundered below, but something higher wove through them—golden, bright, impossible. Los moved because Sigrún moved, and she moved as though the air itself belonged to her.

He laughed once, startled and breathless.

She turned him beneath one wing.

He should have fallen.

He did not.

The hall became light and fire and song. Warriors lifted their horns. Valkyries watched with sharp eyes and softer mouths. Freyja stood on the dais, one hand pressed lightly over her heart. Odin watched, a low rumble of laughter still in him.

Los looked down only once more.

At his body.

At the helmet still crooked on its head.

At Brynhildr sitting beside it with her arms folded as if guarding a very troublesome piece of luggage.

At the impossibility of what he was doing.

Sigrún touched his cheek.

“Do not look down.”

He looked back to her.

And then he danced.

The evening passed strangely after that.

Perhaps it was an hour.

Perhaps it was a lifetime.

He danced while his body rested. He drank no mead, and yet the hall blurred with joy. He felt no weight in his ribs, no bruises, no cold in his bones. He was laughter and light and motion, held in the hands of a Valkyrie beneath the roof of a hall meant for gods and the dead.

And slowly, as all feasts must, the storm began to quiet.

The drums softened.

The wild songs gave way to something slower. Men sank back onto benches, drunk and red-faced. Some slept with their heads on the tables. Others murmured old stories into their cups. Fists no longer beat upon tables. The fires burned lower.

Sigrún's wings folded halfway, though they did not vanish.

Los stood with her in the open space.

No one had told him he could lead.

Still, he took her hand.

This time, she let him.

The music slowed into something tender enough to ache. Not courtly, not exactly. Not Norse either. Or perhaps it was both, because no one interrupted and no one laughed.

Los drew her close.

Sigrún came willingly.

Their hands fit together as though the world had been practicing the shape without telling them.

For a while, they moved almost without steps.

Only turning.

Only breathing.

Only holding to the last thread of the impossible.

"I am not supposed to feel this," Sigrún said, her eyes searching his.

Her voice was barely more than the music.

"Nor I," Los said.

"I am Valkyrie," she said. "You are Paladin. Your life is not here."

"I know."

"It was not written for us."

Los's mouth curved, but there was pain in it.

"Then what if we rewrite the stars?"

Sigrún looked at him, and for one breath the whole hall seemed to vanish.

No warriors.

No gods.

No one else.

Only her.

Only him.

"What if we could make the world ours," he said softly. "The way we wanted it to be. No Albion. No Midgard."

Her smile broke softly, beautifully, and with such sorrow that it nearly undid him.

"That is not how fate works."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"No."

That made her laugh, but the laugh caught before it became sound. It remained only a smile, lovely enough to hurt.

He held her closer.

For a while, they did not speak.

Around them, Valhalla surrendered to its own feast. Men slept with their heads upon tables. A Valkyrie spoke softly somewhere near the dying fire. Mead pooled in the hollow of a shield. The music had thinned to a low, tender thread played by some half-dreaming skald who seemed to know better than to stop.

Los led.

Not boldly now.

Gently.

This dance he knew.

Not from Valhalla. Not from Midgard.

From candlelit halls in Castilla, from polished floors, from music that taught men to be careful with the women in their arms.

Sigrún let him lead.

For a little while.

From the dais, Freyja watched them, eyes bright yet knowing.

She took Odin's hand.

Odin stood beside her, silent as winter.

For they knew what this was.

A love that could not be.

A truth fate would not allow.

A mercy too brief to save anyone and too beautiful to refuse.

The final note did not end so much as fade into the bones of the hall.

Los still held Sigrún's hand.

For a while, neither moved.

Then, so softly he did not notice at first, she took the dance from him.

One step.

Then another.

She moved him beneath the low gold of the hall, guiding him backward as though following some path only she could see.

"Sigrún?" he asked.

Her hand tightened in his.

"Look at me."

He did.

Her wings were still there, half-folded and bright as snow beneath moonlight.

"I don't want this to end," he said.

"I know."

"Then don't let it."

Her smile was tender enough to wound.

"I cannot keep you here."

"I did not ask what you can do."

"No," she whispered. "You asked what I wish."

He had no answer for that.

She drew him one step farther back.

Then she sat him back down.

The air changed.

The music grew distant.

Weight returned first.

Then pain.

His ribs.

His shoulder.

The ache of a body that had been patient and was patient no longer.

Brynhildr's hands held his mortal body steady.

The winged helmet had slipped lower over one eye.

Understanding struck.

"No..."

Sigrún's eyes shone.

Then she stepped backward one final time as he became whole again.

He woke to firelight.

Not the golden light of Valhalla.

A smaller fire.

A mortal one.

For a moment, he did not know where he was.

The bed beneath him was not his. The furs over him smelled of smoke, wool, and pine.
His ribs ached. His arm had gone numb.

Then he felt her.

Sigrún lay in his arms, warm against his side, her head tucked beneath his chin as though she had found where she belonged.

Los stared up at the roof beams of a house he did not know.

Across the room, Tim sat near the hearth with Sighildr in his lap, feeding her from a soaked cloth with solemn concentration. The baby made small, impatient sounds whenever he moved too slow.

Brynhildr knelt by the hearth, stirring the coals back to life.

She glanced over her shoulder.

Saw that he was awake.

And said nothing.

But her eyes held the memory of a golden hall.

Los looked down at Sigrún.

He should move.

He should rise.

He should remember duty and roads and Albion and all the names waiting for him beyond the snow.

Instead, he did not move.

For one breath, he let himself remain where he was.

Warm.

Held.

Wanted.

The house around them was still half-strange, only just given to them, still smelling faintly of old smoke and fresh blankets. Yet it had a hearth. It had a child. It had Tim muttering softly to the baby. It had Brynhildr at the fire and Sigrún asleep in his arms.

It looked too much like a life already made.

Chapter LXIV — The Ambitions of Younger Men

Camelot — The King's Privy Council Chamber

The King's privy chamber was warmer than most rooms in Camelot and colder than any place where real affection lived.

A fire burned high in the hearth. Tapestries softened the stone. Lamps glowed in beaten silver brackets along the walls. A table of dark oak dominated the room, and about it stood those men who imagined themselves guardians of the realm, or masters of it, or both.

King Constantine sat at the head of the table, still broad-shouldered, the first touches of age beginning to show more in his eyes than his face. He wore no crown in private council, but there was never any mistaking who ruled there.

At his right stood Chancellor Wacian, thin and grave, hands folded within his sleeves.

Near the far end lounged Cynan, the King's nephew, handsome in the easy, polished way of men who had never yet had to pay for much of anything. He sat with studied casualness, but his attention missed nothing.

Sir Norcross was present as well, upright as a drawn spear, his armor left outside, but somehow not absent from him.

Baron Eddington had the floor.

"The matter is simple, Your Majesty," he said. "So long as Arthuur lives and gathers men, the possibility remains."

Constantine's face darkened slightly.

"Possibility of what?"

Eddington did not blink.

"Challenge."

The word lay between them, ugly and plain.

Norcross shifted his weight almost imperceptibly.

Wacian lowered his chin, thoughtful.

Cynan said nothing, but his eyes sharpened.

The King's gaze hardened. "The boy has raised no banner against me."

"No," said Eddington. "He need not."

He began to pace slowly beside the table, though not as much as in Baldric's chamber. This was the King's room, and he knew the difference.

"He is Arthur's son. A bastard, yes—but blood enough for men who prefer memory over law. He is recently knighted, already followed, already admired. Even the name of his guild is an insult to the present order."

Constantine frowned. "The Knights of the Round Table."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Cynan spoke then, mild as cream.

"It is a bold name."

Every eye turned to him.

He spread one hand slightly. "And perhaps innocent. But the Baron is not wrong that it gathers attention. Men hear such a name and begin to think of the past. Of his father."

Norcross's gaze flicked to Cynan and stayed there for half a breath.

The King turned to his nephew. "You think him dangerous?"

Cynan lowered his eyes just enough to seem reluctant.

"I think," he said, "that men are already gathering to him. And they do so gladly. They expect him to be as his father. Bastard or no."

It was artfully put.

Not accusation.

Observation.

Wacian nodded faintly. "Perception matters, sire. Even when innocence is genuine."

Norcross finally spoke.

"Arthuur does not seek the crown. He is a Paladin in service to God and King, Your Majesty."

Eddington looked to him sharply. "You cannot know that."

"I know ambition when I see it," Norcross said coolly, looking directly at the Baron. "The boy has hunger in him, yes. But not for thrones or crown."

He turned to Constantine.

"He has the love of the people, I do not deny it. The right face for it, too. Arthur's shadow walks before him whether he wills it or no. But he has shown no disloyalty, pretends no claim and stirs of sedition. He serves when called. He has lately been away in Avalon, answering a summons no traitor would have answered if he meant to build a faction here."

That was sensible.

Annoyingly so, from Eddington's point of view.

Wacian folded his hands tighter.

"And yet service can be its own danger," the Chancellor said. "A man praised too often for obedience may one day find others eager to crown him for it."

Constantine sat very still at that.

The crown had never rested lightly on him. Men who wore such burdens long enough learned to hear threat even in innocent applause.

Eddington seized the silence.

"Your Majesty, have you not learned that you must deal with ambitious young men before they become a problem, not after?" He let that sit just long enough to invoke a certain Castilian Paladin without naming him. "Must you wait until he comes for what is yours?"

Norcross's expression turned to stone.

"Arthuur will not come for the crown," he said.

"Then perhaps the crown will be brought to him," Eddington shot back.

That one landed.

Even Constantine did not dismiss it.

For a moment no one spoke.

Then Norcross said, more carefully now, "There is another way."

The King looked at him.

Norcross continued.

"If the concern is influence, then use it. Give him service. Give him burdens. Give him roads to ride and monsters to slay and causes to spend himself upon. A loyal man kept busy has little leisure to become a rebellion"

Eddington's mouth tightened. He did not like how reasonable that sounded.

Cynan, however, smiled faintly.

A useful solution.

Very useful.

Let the King look to Arthuur and fear him just enough to keep that attention fixed elsewhere.

So long as Constantine watched Arthur's bastard, he would not be watching his own brother's son.

"Service," Constantine repeated.

Norcross bowed his head. "Yes, sire. Keep him in Avalon, or farther."

"Use him," said Wacian quietly, "and watch him."

That pleased the Chancellor because it was both order and suspicion at once.

Eddington was not wholly satisfied.

But he saw the King thinking, and that was enough for now.

Constantine's fingers drummed once against the arm of his chair.

"At the least," he said, "I will not have another man gather legend around himself unchecked."

No one answered that directly.

The room knew what it meant.

Now that the Spaniard was gone.

Arthuur would inherit the King's ire and fear.

Cynan lowered his eyes to hide the satisfaction in them.

Norcross held his face like carved stone.

Wacian inclined his head.

And Baron Eddington bowed, just enough.

The thought had been planted.

That was all the Baron had truly wanted.

Lord Baldric Alone

Camelot — Baldric's Chamber, Evening

The chamber was quiet.

Quiet, but not still. His spy had informed him of all that had been said in council. Now it was left for him to digest.

Rain pressed softly against the windowpanes. The fire had burned down low, leaving more ember than flame. Shadows climbed the walls in long red shapes, and Baldric stood with one hand resting on the carved stone of the hearth, gazing not into the room but into the coals as though the answer to men's ambitions might be found in what they consumed.

Arthuur.

They feared the wrong young man.

Baldric knew it.

He had known it even before Eddington opened his mouth in council and Cynan, smooth and smiling, lent his weight where it would do the quietest harm.

Arthuur was dangerous only in the way all beloved men were dangerous: he did not seek power, and so others might someday thrust it upon him whether he wished it or no. But he was not hungry for it. Baldric had seen hunger in men all his life. Had built a career on feeding it, denying it, or turning it into useful shape.

Arthuur had none of it. He was a boy living in the shadow of his father.

Duty, yes. Pride, certainly. Youth and the need to prove himself, of course.

But not hunger.

If the boy had been legitimate...

Baldric exhaled once through his nose.

If the boy had been legitimate, he thought, there would be no question at all.

Arthur's blood. Arthur's name. And, more importantly, Arthur's instinct to serve others before himself. The realm could do far worse than such a man.

But bastardy poisoned even the best inheritance. Law made certain of that, and Baldric was too old a statesman to pretend law did not matter simply because sentiment made prettier music.

Still.

Not Arthuur.

No, the real threat stood closer to the throne and smiled more easily.

Cynan.

Baldric turned from the fire and moved to the window.

Below, Camelot lay wet beneath the evening rain. Torchlight glimmered in the courtyards. Men crossed from one hall to another under cloaks and shields, small and purposeful in the dark.

Somewhere among them moved Baron Eddington, full of talk of tradition, glory, old virtue, and the restoration of all things as they ought to be.

Baldric's mouth flattened.

Traditional.

The phrase had begun to sour in him.

At first Eddington had seemed only what many great men became in uneasy times—stern, impatient, yearning for a stronger realm and a cleaner order. There was nothing unusual in that. Half the nobility of Albion clothed their appetites in the language of duty and inheritance.

But Eddington...

Eddington increasingly sounded like a man who loved order only so long as he might be the one arranging it.

And that was a different matter.

He had pressed too hard against Los without the Baron's support. Now Eddington pressed too eagerly against Arthuur. Always in the name of stability. Always in the name of crown and realm. Yet more and more Baldric heard something beneath it—not caution, not piety, but appetite.

For the crown itself, perhaps.

Or for the right to decide who stood near it.

And Cynan—ah, Cynan—stood far too near already.

Smooth-tongued. Patient. Willing to let other men supply the danger while he supplied the agreement. Cynan was clever enough never to sound ambitious when ambition would alarm. He merely seemed useful. Reasonable. Concerned for the same things everyone else claimed to value.

That was what made him dangerous.

A young man openly grasping for power could be dealt with.

A young man content to let fear move others on his behalf was subtler poison.

Even his guild pretended at loyalty: *Sect of the True King*. A clever name.

Baldric rested a hand against the cold stone of the window arch.

If Constantine was made to look always towards Arthuur, always towards Los, always towards some inconvenient bastard or popular knight—

then he would fail to see the nephew standing at his own shoulder.

And that, Baldric thought grimly, was no accident.

The old lord closed his eyes for one long moment.

He had served too long to be romantic. Too long to trust blood. Too long to mistake charm for harmlessness.

The realm was entering one of those dangerous seasons when the wrong men began speaking too often of virtue.

When he opened his eyes again, the rain had strengthened.

"Not Arthuur," Baldric murmured to the dark glass.

Then, after a pause:

"Nor the Spaniard."

His gaze hardened.

"No," he said softly to the empty chamber. "The danger is closer than that."

Behind him the fire shifted and settled, the coals folding in upon themselves with a low red sigh.

Baldric turned back towards the room, already thinking several moves ahead, though for the first time in many years he felt less like a player of the game than a man watching the pieces begin to move of their own accord.

And he did not like the direction of them.

Chapter LXV — Bledmeer

The Messenger

Midgard Village

Midmorning came too quickly.

The first pale quiet of waking had passed. The village had begun to stir in earnest outside the longhouse—axes biting wood, doors opening, voices carrying through the frost.

Los stood in the doorway, watching the village wake.

Behind him, the hearth burned low but steady. Tim sat near it with Sighildr in his lap, feeding her with the grave care of a troll entrusted with royal treasure. Brynhildr knelt nearby, folding fresh cloths with the severe concentration of a woman determined not to look domestic while doing domestic work.

Sigrún stood by the table, fastening her belt.

For one quiet moment, it almost looked like an ordinary life.

That was when the rider came.

Los heard the horse before he saw it: hooves striking hard ground, too fast for a villager, too direct for a traveler merely passing through. He stepped farther into the doorway and looked towards the village road.

A rider in leathers entered the village, his cloak marked with the colors of Bledmeer Faste.

Across the yard, Yrsa saw Los.

Her eyes widened.

Then she made one sharp motion with her hand.

Back.

Los stilled.

The rider drew nearer to the center of the village.

Yrsa's hand moved again, sharper this time.

Back, fool.

Los withdrew into the house and pulled the door nearly closed, leaving only a narrow crack.

Sigrún looked up at once.

"Vhat is it?"

Los raised one hand slightly.

Wait.

Outside, the rider dismounted. Leather creaked. The horse snorted hard enough to steam in the cold.

The village chief came to meet him with two elders at his side.

"I come from Jarl Bledmeer," the rider said.

The chief's answer was calm. "Then speak."

"He seeks vord of the Spánverji. The vone called Los. Taken from Albion and brought north."

Inside the house, no one moved.

Sigrún went still.

Brynhildr's hands paused over the folded cloths.

Tim's heavy brow lowered, and Sighildr made an impatient sound at being forgotten.

Los listened through the crack in the door.

The rider continued, "Jarl Bledmeer has given his vord to the men of Albion. They returned two sons of jarls taken in the southern fighting. In exchange, Bledmeer promised he would seek the return of their missing man."

Los felt the words settle into him.

Not loudly.

Not like a blow.

Worse.

A reminder of where he was supposed to be.

And that people were waiting for him to return.

The chief said nothing for a long moment.

Then, with the solemn certainty of a man who had never needed to lie often enough to become skilled at it, he said, "Ve have not seen him."

Los closed his eyes.

The village was lying for him.

The rider shifted his weight. "He vas last seen in the area, in the company of a Valkyrie, and a Troll."

"Many strange things pass through the north," said one of the elders.

"Especially trolls," another added. "But a Valkyrie? No. Ve would be glad to see vone, if vone should pass by."

Tim's mouth twitched.

Los did not smile.

The rider glanced around the village: towards the village hall, towards the houses, towards the very door behind which Los stood hidden.

"Jarl Bledmeer's vord has been given," the rider said. "If the Spánverji is found, he is to be brought to Bledmeer Faste. Alive, if the gods allow it."

"If he passes this vay," the chief said, "ve vill remember your vords."

There was nothing more to say.

The rider mounted again. Hooves struck hard against the ground. Slowly at first, then quicker as he left the village road and turned back towards the west.

Only when the sound had faded did Los step away from the door.

No one spoke.

Sigrún looked at him.

He looked back at her, then past her to the hearth, to Tim, to Brynhildr, to the child in the troll's arms.

For one impossible breath, he wanted to let the chief's lie stand.

He wanted to stay hidden.

He wanted to be only a man in a warm house while the world searched elsewhere.

Then he thought of Albion.

Of prisoners traded for his return.

Of promises made.

Of Willow, perhaps waiting in silence.

Of Ramón, who would have by now reported his disappearance to Castile.

Of Angela.

Angela waiting.

Angela worried about him.

Los let out one slow breath.

His hand went to his chest, closing once more over the ring beneath his shirt.

"I have to go."

Sigrún did not flinch.

Perhaps she had known from the moment the rider spoke.

"I know."

"I will return when I can."

Her eyes held his.

"Yes."

Then she moved.

She took her cloak from the peg on the wall. It was dark, heavy, lined with fur, and fastened with a Valkyrie's pin. She crossed to him and settled it around his shoulders before he could object.

"What are you doing?"

"Keeping you alive."

The cloak was warmer than his had been. It was soft, warm, and smelled.... of her.

"This will keep you safe on the road home."

Los looked down at himself. At the borrowed Norse clothes. At the cloak now hanging from his shoulders. At the place where armor should have been.

"I will feel safer in my armor."

Sigrún's mouth curved faintly.

"Your armor is ruined."

"I have worn ruined armor before."

"Have you."

From the hearth, Brynhildr said dryly, "It looked as though the dwarves had tried to make a kettle out of you."

Los turned his head towards her.

"It was good armor."

"It died bravely," Sigrún said, gently touching his arms.

That almost brought the smile out of him.

She fastened the cloak at his shoulder with her brooch. Her hands lingered there a moment longer than they needed to.

"Return to me," she said.

Then her gaze moved to the remnants of his old cloak, folded near the hearth.

Half of it was gone, torn into strips for Brynhildr's bare feet. For a baby's swaddling cloth. What remained was scorched, ragged, stained with road, forge, snow, and blood.

Still fixed to the cloth was the brooch he had worn when he was taken: not Albion's mark, not Orchid Fair's cross, but his own.

The symbol of House Ortiz.

She lightly touched it before turning back to him.

Los glanced at the ruined cloth.

"Well. this will keep me warmer than what is left of mine."

"Return to me," she said again.

He nodded, already half elsewhere, his mind turning towards roads, Bledmeer Faste, ships, Albion, duty.

"I will."

Tim rose then, careful not to jostle Sighildr.

"I go with Master."

Los looked from Sigrún to Tim. "Tim, jou should stay with—"

"I go," Tim said.

There was no argument in it.

Only fact.

Sigrún took Sighildr from him and crossed back to Los.

The child was warm in her wrappings, blinking drowsily at a world that had already begun moving too quickly around her.

Sigrún placed her in Los's arms.

That was the cruelest mercy.

Los took her.

Sighildr made a small sound, then settled against him as if he were a place she knew.

His hand supported her back. His thumb brushed the edge of her blanket. For a moment, every road in Midgard could have frozen shut and he would not have cared.

No one hurried him.

Not Sigrún.

Not Brynhildr.

Not Tim.

Not even the village outside, though by now faces had gathered near windows and doorways, quiet and watchful.

Los lowered his head and pressed the smallest kiss to Sighildr's brow.

"Be good, princesita," he whispered.

The child slept through the command, unimpressed.

His grip tightened once.

Then he made himself let go.

He placed her back into Sigrún's arms.

Sigrún received her as though she were their daughter in blood as well as claim.

Not awkwardly.

Not as a warrior holding someone else's burden.

As a mother holds a child.

Los saw it.

That was the point.

Sigrún's gaze held his over the baby's head.

She did not need to say it.

She is safe.

She has a home.

Los swallowed.

"I will come back," he said.

Sigrún nodded once.

"I will be here."

Simple.

Certain.

Crueler than any vow shouted beneath banners.

Los stepped forward and embraced her carefully, mindful of the child between them. Sigrún leaned into him for one breath, only one, and then let him go before either of them could make it harder.

Brynhildr stood by the hearth, arms folded.

Los looked to her.

"Take care of them."

She raised one eyebrow. "You say that as though I need you to tell me."

"No," he said. "I say it because I need to say something, and that is all I have."

Her expression softened before she could stop it.

"I vill."

She crossed over and gave him a quick hug.

"You just make sure you come back."

Outside, the village had gathered.

The chief stood near the road. Yrsa beside him. Astrid too. A child who had whispered thanks the day before clung to her mother's skirt and watched with wide eyes.

Los stepped out wearing Sigrún's cloak.

That drew murmurs.

Soft ones.

Understanding ones.

The chief saw the cloak, then looked past Los to Sigrún standing in the doorway with Sighildr in her arms.

He said nothing.

He did not need to.

Los inclined his head.

"Thank jou."

The chief returned the gesture.

"You vill always have a home amongst us."

Los nodded.

Tim stepped to his side, large and steady and already looking down the road as if daring it to misbehave.

Together, they moved towards the waiting horses.

At the edge of the village, Los looked back once.

Sigrún stood in the doorway of their house, Sighildr in her arms, Brynhildr at her shoulder.

Smoke rose from the roof vent.

Midmorning light touched the frost along the eaves.

For one breath, the house looked like something that had always been waiting for him.

Then Tim said quietly, "Master?"

Los turned away.

The road to Bledmeer Faste waited.

Albion waited.

Angela waited.

He adjusted the cloak once.

Then walked to their horses.

The Cloak

The road towards Bledmeer was quiet as Tim and his master rode side by side. Tim seemed more alert than usual, as if he expected something to come out of the forest and attack them. *Blodfelag*, Los thought. And as much as he wanted to tell himself he would kill them all for what they had done to the village, to the infant Sighildr's family. His mind was too deeply fixed on home. Toledo. Camelot. The village. *¿A dónde pertenezco?* Where is home? Where do I belong?

Tim's alertness was for something far more pressing.

She was watching. The Skogsfru.

She was watching from the woods again.

The knight was without the Valkyrie.

Though the Troll was still with him, now was her chance at a virtuous soul.

She need only separate them.

Then she noticed the cloak.

The Valkyrie's cloak.

On him.

She had claimed him, openly. Declared him hers.

Her eyes narrowed.

Los, lost in thought, did not notice her.

But Tim saw her, and this time he looked directly at her.

Surprised the Skogsfru stared back for a moment, before realizing. Shaman. And a powerful one, to notice her, and look upon her without fear.

As Los turned to see where Tim was looking, she hid behind a tree.

"What are you looking at?" he asked as his hand went to his sword.

"Nothing, Master."

"You keep saying that!"

"We go," Tim said. Los had never heard him give a command before.

Tim urged Bill to move on, and quicker than before: more than a trot, less than a gallop.

"Tim?"

"We go."

Los spurred his mount to catch up.

His eyes still scanning the woods, but found nothing but trees and forest green.

The Skogsfru leaned against the tree behind which she had hidden.

For a long moment, she stared after the knight and the troll.

The cloak moved on his shoulders as he rode, dark against the snow, the Valkyrie's pin catching what little light slipped through the trees.

Not merely warmth.

Not merely kindness.

A warning.

Sigrún had known.

The Skogsfru's mouth tightened.

The Valkyrie had sent him through the forest wearing her claim, and the troll-shaman at his side made certain the warning was understood.

Frustrated.

Defeated.

The Skogsfru stepped back into the trees.

Sigrún had won.

Los was safe.

Chapter LXVI — The Three Forts of Anniogel

By the time Arthuur reached Anniogel, the town had already begun to look more like a fortress than a village.

Wagons had been dragged across the western road facing the northern fort. Windows were shuttered. Doors were barred. Avalonian militia stood at every corner with weapons in nervous hands, watching the road to the northern fort, expecting an attack at any time.

Despite this, the town still lived.

But it lived behind a held breath.

At the eastern side of the town, a woman in scarred mail waited beneath a red cloak bearing a deep blue triangle, point downward, fastened with a silver clasp. She was tall, brunette, and stern in the manner of a woman who had traded sleep for duty and did not regret the bargain.

Her gaze moved over the riders as they approached.

Then her brow tightened.

"I was expecting Orchid Fair."

Arthuur drew rein, then dismounted and bowed.

"Forgive me, my lady. We are not of Orchid Fair."

The woman's expression did not soften.

"That much I see."

Behind Arthuur, Tungsten made a quiet sound that might have been a cough. Kilingu, less helpfully, looked amused. Faemz scowled.

Arthuur ignored all three.

"I am Arthuur," he said. "Of the Knights of the Round Table."

The woman went still.

Not greatly. Not enough for any common soldier to notice.

But Arthuur saw it.

"Arthuur," she repeated.

"Yes, my lady."

"The son of King Arthur."

The words moved through those gathered at the gate like wind through dry leaves.

Arthuur felt the old weight settle across his shoulders. Familiar. Heavy. Not cruel exactly, but never gentle.

He inclined his head.

"Yes."

For a moment, Lady Treva Evasca only studied him.

Then she looked past him to the others: Tungsten, broad as a door and twice as cheerful; Kilingu, watchful and loose-limbed; Faemz, stern-faced and sharp-eyed; Wintyr, hood drawn against the cold, healer's satchel at her side.

"I was told Orchid Fair would be sent to aid me," Lady Evasca said.

"They have not the strength to spare aid, my lady," Arthuur said. "Their strength is spent elsewhere, in the effort to retrieve one of their own."

That made her eyes return to him.

He met them steadily.

"Their lady might at least have spared me the Spaniard."

A small silence followed as the Round Table knights looked at one another.

"It is he who is missing," Arthuur said.

Lady Evasca's expression changed.

Only slightly.

But enough.

"I see."

Then she gave the faintest nod.

"Come, then, Arthuur of the Round Table guild. We have little time, and I have less patience for further delay."

Arthuur bowed once more.

"Then I shall endeavor not to dawdle."

That earned him the first almost-smile.

"Good."

She turned and led them through the village.

Inside the town hall, a rough map had been weighted to a table by daggers, stones, and one cracked silver cup. Three forts had been marked upon it in charcoal: one northwest of Anniogel, one farther south, and one between them, sitting like a thorn in the road.

Lady Treva placed one finger on the northern mark.

"The northern fort is closest. Lieutenant Yal'ris holds it. His raiders have tested our defenses daily."

Beside her stood a sharp-eyed Avalonian woman with her brown hair bound in a soldier's knot.

"Lieutenant Arella," Treva said.

Arella nodded once. "Yal'ris is bold and not patient. He comes mostly at dusk. Tests our defenses. Then withdraws before we can draw him into a proper fight."

A tall and broad-shouldered Avalonian man leaned over the map next.

"Lieutenant Meurig," Treva said.

Meurig tapped the center fort. "The central fort is the greater danger. Commander Slor'vid holds it with his lieutenant, Grrar. Slor'vid is no raider. He knows what he is about. The other two forts answer to him."

"Then why not strike him first?" Tungsten asked.

Lady Treva looked to Arthuur, waiting to see how he would answer.

Arthuur studied the map.

"No," he said at last. "If we strike the center first, the northern and southern forts close on us. Slor'vid only has to hold long enough for his lieutenants to come down on our flanks."

Meurig's expression shifted.

Not in surprise exactly.

Reassessment.

Arthuur touched the northern fort. "We take Yal'ris first. Quickly."

Then he moved his finger not to the center, but down to the southern mark.

Lieutenant Arella's eyes followed his hand. "The southern fort?"

"Yes."

"That leaves Slor'vid behind us."

"It leaves Slor'vid alone," Arthuur said. "If we take the north, he will expect us to move on him next. Instead, we go south. We cut away his other force before he understands we have changed the shape of the board."

Another woman near the hearth gave a hard little laugh. She was tall and slender as the others, but had the posture of a soldier at attention even when at rest.

"Sergeant Denysea," Lady Treva said. "She has been saying much the same thing."

Denysea nodded but held her tongue.

At the far side of the room stood a young woman in the armor of a soldier, her hands resting on the pommel of her sword. She seemed barely as old as some of the militia outside, but there was no fear in her posture.

"This is Emily," Lady Treva said.

Emily straightened slightly.

"She knows the area better than any here," Lady Treva said. "And she has twice brought wounded back from beneath Yal'ris's walls."

"Then I would have her with us," Arthuur said.

Emily blinked.

Lady Treva looked at him carefully. "She is young, and lacks combat experience."

"But she knows the area," Arthuur said. "That is more than any of my people can claim."

Lady Treva considered it for a moment. "True." She nodded. "Then she will join your people and guide you, once we have a plan."

Then from the corner came a softer voice.

"Reporting as ordered, my lady."

Every head turned.

An Inconnu woman stood half in shadow near the door, gray-skinned and slight, with pale eyes that caught the firelight strangely. She had entered so quietly that even Kilingu's brows rose a little.

"Kaere," Lady Treva said. "Scout and guide. When she wishes to be found."

Arthuur looked her over curiously. "I have never seen a scout in scale before."

Kaere inclined her head. "Around here, you do not live long without one. Even as a scout."

"Is it that bad?" Arthuur asked Lady Treva.

"We would not have sent for aid if it were not."

Lady Treva nodded to Kaere.

Kaere stepped closer to the map. "The Drakoran forces watch the road. They have a clear field of view in all directions. They do not watch the northwest as closely. A force large enough to take the fort would be seen long before reaching that side."

"And a small force?" Arthuur asked.

"A small force could reach it," Kaere said, "if they were careful."

Lady Treva frowned. "A small force cannot take the fort."

"No," Arthuur said. "But they can cause chaos once the fight begins."

Tungsten looked from the northern mark on the map to Arthuur.

"And the rest of us?"

Arthuur touched the southern approach.

"We take the ramp. A frontal assault."

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then Denysea gave a low, approving sound. "Simple."

"Dangerous," Arella said.

Arthuur looked to Lady Treva. "How many can you spare?"

"Eight," Lady Treva said. "Sixteen if we leave the town undefended."

"I will not ask you to empty the town."

Lady Treva studied the map a moment longer. "Twelve. Perhaps sixteen, if I trust the western barricade to frightened boys and old men."

"Eight," Arthuur said at once.

That made her look up.

"You do not want more?"

"I want Anniogel defended."

Something in Lady Treva's expression shifted. Not warmth. Not yet. But respect, perhaps, or the beginning of it.

"Eight, then," she said. "Arella will command them."

Arella straightened. "My lady."

"Sergeant Denysea will go as well."

Denysea smiled thinly. "Good."

Arthuur nodded. "I have sixteen of my own. Three Paladins, including myself. Two Armsmen. Three scouts. Two clerics. A friar. Two wizards. A theurgist. A sorcerer. And a cabalist."

Denysea lifted a brow. "That is not an army."

"It will be enough," Arthuur said. "If Kaere leads the scouts to the north and strikes the moment the gates open. Not a moment sooner."

Kilingu glanced towards the northwestern side of the map, then towards Kaere.

"I can get them there," she said with quiet confidence.

Arthuur allowed himself a smile before turning back to the map.

"This will work."

Wintyr looked at him then, her expression softening in a way he pretended not to notice.

Lady Treva held his gaze a moment longer before nodding.

"When do you propose to begin?"

Arthuur looked in the direction of the fort.

"At once."

Kaere inclined her head, then motioned for the other scouts to gather on her.

"Give us time to reach the north."

Arthuur nodded.

"Tungsten and Kilingu will take the front of the ramp with me. Form a shield wall."

Tungsten grinned. "Finally, a sensible part of the plan."

"Faemz, once we reach the gate, I want you and the other armsmen to break through it. Until then, stay behind us Paladins."

Faemz nodded once.

"Wintyr, take charge of the clerics."

Her mouth tightened, but she nodded as well.

He looked to Arella. "Have your people fall in with mine. We form one shield line, with spears and polearms behind. Casters in support."

Arella considered him a moment, then nodded. "Agreed."

"Denysea, you keep a reserve along the left. If the Drakoran forces try to reinforce from the center, hold them. Do not give chase. Let them make the mistakes."

Denysea's smile sharpened. "Now that is clear."

A few of the Anniogel soldiers laughed softly.

It did not last long, but it was enough to loosen something in the room.

Arthuur placed both hands on the edge of the table and looked over the map once more.

"The plan is simple. We make Yal'ris believe the fort is being taken from the south. He commits his men to holding the gate. When his attention is fixed, Kaere's scouts take the north wall and begin sending arrows into his rear. Once he turns to answer her, we take the fort."

Meurig tapped the central fort with one finger. "And Slor'vid?"

"With any luck, it will be over before he can do anything about us," Arthuur said. "And when the northern fort falls, he will expect us to come for him next."

"Then let us hope luck is on our side," Arella said.

"Let us hope." Arthuur moved his hand to the southern fort. "We take Zudd before Slor'vid understands he has lost the shape of the board."

Lady Treva was silent for a long moment.

"Then command of the attack is yours, Sir Arthuur."

He did not accept it at once.

"This is your town, my lady."

"The Lady chose you to cleanse this land," she replied.

Arthuur accepted command and placed a finger on the northern fort.

"We start there."

A Bed for the Night

Bledmeer Faste — The Northern Coast

By the time the towers of Bledmeer Faste rose out of the gray, Los could feel every mile in his bones.

The road had been long, and Tim had ridden beside him for most of it in companionable silence, a great shadow against the snow. Now and then he pointed out a safer turn in the path, or warned Los where ice hid beneath loose powder, or grunted at the wind as if personally offended by it.

At the last ridge before the Bledmeer Faste, Tim stopped.

Below them, Bledmeer stood hard against the northern coast, its timber and stone walls dark with frost, its watchfires burning red through the pale evening haze. Beyond it, the sea moved cold and iron-gray beneath a sky full of low clouds.

Tim looked at the keep.

Then at Los.

"Master goes home now."

Los nodded.

"Jes."

Tim's heavy face folded into something very near sadness.

"Tim returns to little vone."

Los looked north, though the village had long since disappeared behind snow and distance.

"Take care of them."

Tim nodded once.

"Tim vill."

For a moment, neither of them moved.

Then Tim reached out and, with surprising care, placed one great hand against Los's shoulder.

"Master comes back."

It was not a question.

Los looked at him with quiet sincerity.

"I will. I promise."

Tim held his gaze a moment longer, as though measuring the promise for weight.

Then, his duty done, the troll turned and rode back into the white.

Los watched until snow swallowed him.

Only then did he turn towards Bledmeer Faste.

The guards saw him coming long before he reached the gate.

At first they only stared. A lone figure in Norse clothes, with no armor and only a short sword, wearing a Valkyrie's cloak fastened at the shoulder with a Valkyrie's brooch. His face bore the bruised weariness of a man who had walked through more than weather. It was his lack of beard that truly gave away that he was not one of them.

One guard began to raise his spear.

Then his eyes caught the brooch.

The spear stopped halfway.

The other guards saw it too. Their hands tightened on their weapons, but no spear lowered towards Los. No man wished to be the first to put iron before what a Valkyrie had marked.

"Who goes there?" the guard called.

Los stopped before the gate.

"I am Sir Los Ortiz," he said, "and I am going home."

The guards looked at one another.

The Spánverji.

One of them turned and ran inside.

Jarl Bledmeer came to the gate himself, wrapped in fur and iron. His eyes narrowed as they moved over Los's clothes, the cloak, the brooch.

He stopped just beyond reach.

"Your people came looking for you," Bledmeer said. "I gave my vord I would look for you. My riders vent south after vord came that you had been seen in Vest Svealand and Raumarik. They reported that they could not find you. Yet here you are."

Los nodded.

"Ve heard you vere taken by Valkyries."

"Jes."

Los held the Jarl's gaze and said nothing more. He was too tired to make the answer easier.

The wind moved between them.

Bledmeer waited.

When Los offered him nothing more, the Jarl's gaze returned to the cloak.

"Clothed as a Norseman," he said, "and wearing the cloak of a Valkyrie. Vhat happened to you? Vhere have you been?"

Los turned before answering, looking back over the frostbitten land, across the cold, misted mountains, towards the road that had brought him from the village, the bridge, and all that lay beyond mortal sight.

"Valhalla," Los said. "Beneath the mountains of the dwarves. And a little village where I..." He stopped, his hand closing faintly over the center of his shirt, over the ring beneath. "Where I have... a child."

He looked weary. And a bit lost.

"A child?"

"Jes."

"You have not been gone long enough to have a child."

Los looked down at the ground, a bit defeated.

"I've been busy."

For a long moment, Bledmeer looked at him.

Then the Norse lord drew a slow breath, and a grin broke through his astonishment.

"That sounds like a tale that vill take more than mead to tell," he said with a laugh.

Los sighed.

"Come," Bledmeer said. "I vill have a feast prepared. Food, drink, and afterward, a bed for the night. Tomorrow, a ship vill take you to Albion."

A bed for the night was all Los truly needed.

But he could tell it would cost him a story.

And though they asked, he said little of his adventure. The Valkyries had taken him before Odin in Valhalla. Odin had charged him to rescue Brynhildr from the dwarves. He had slain a giant, saved a village, and Lady Brynhildr had been returned to Valhalla.

He said no more of the child.

Nothing of the dance in the hallowed hall of their ancestors.

But all of Bledmeer's hall sat and listened all the same, with wonder at his tale, however brief it was.

He had been to Valhalla and returned alive.

That was more than almost any living man could say.

Some asked about the hall of the honored dead. Others asked if he had seen their fathers. Others asked of the halls beneath the mountains and the dwarves who lived there.

Los did his best to answer.

Jarl Bledmeer listened and watched until he saw his guest had grown weary of speaking.

"Enough," he said solemnly.

The hall quieted.

It was not a rebuke, but a mercy.

One for which Los was grateful.

By the time the feast ended, Bledmeer had already sent word ahead.

A messenger had gone south by ship.

The Spánverji lived.

He had reached Bledmeer Faste.

Tonight, he would sleep.

Tomorrow, he would be returned to Albion.

The Northern Fort

Kaere left first.

With a simple salute to Lady Treva, she turned and motioned for the scouts to follow.

Three scouts from Arthuur's company went with her, along with two of Anniogel's archers, their faces pale but steady. They slipped into stealth before leaving the village, moving north first, then bending west around the fort until they could approach the northwestern wall unseen.

Emily did not go with them.

She would take the hill north of the village, where she could see the fort's north wall, the village, and the ramp along the southeastern side. The trees at the crown gave just enough cover to conceal her until it was time to signal, and the height let her see directly into the fort.

From there, Emily could see both halves of Arthuur's plan.

Which meant both halves depended on her.

At the edge of town, Arthuur paused beside her.

"You remember the signal?"

Emily nodded. "Kaere shows white cloth from the north wall. I answer with the banner of Avalon from the hill. Then you begin."

She looked towards the fort, then back at him.

"I wanted to go with you."

"I know."

"I can fight."

"I do not doubt."

That surprised her.

Arthuur softened his voice, but not the order beneath it.

"This is not a lesser task, Emily. We move on your signal."

Emily stood a little straighter.

"Yes, Sir Arthuur."

"Now go."

She nodded, then slipped out behind the village and climbed towards the hill.

The western barricade opened just wide enough to let Arthuur's force through.

Beyond Anniogel, the land opened to a great ditch between the village and the northern fort.

The forts themselves were little more than rings of wooden palisade raised on earthen hills, with a few rough buildings inside. Not the kind of fortress minstrels made songs about, but hill forts built to watch the road and deny passage to raiders. Drakoran banners hung from the wall. Shapes moved behind the timber. The earthen ramp rose from the southeastern approach, broad enough for a formation but steep enough to punish anyone climbing under fire.

It made good ground for defenders.

Bad ground for anyone foolish enough to attack it directly.

Arthuur halted his line across the ditch, within bow shot of the fort.

Then he looked towards the hill to his right.

Nothing.

So they waited.

The men shifted quietly. Shields rested low. Spears angled towards the grass. The wizards and theurgist stood with hands ready, while Wintyr and the other healers waited behind the line.

Above, the fort remained still.

On the hill, Emily lay low among the trees, one hand gripping the folded banner of Avalon.

Her eyes searched the northern wall.

For a long moment, she saw only timber, shadow, and Drakoran banners.

Then, far across the fort, a flicker of white appeared against the palisade.

Kaere.

Emily's breath caught.

She rose just enough for the village and Arthuur's line to see her, and lifted the Banner of Avalon into the gray light.

Arella exhaled.

"They are in place."

Arthuur raised his shield.

"Then we begin."

The line formed.

Arthuur stood at the center, Tungsten on his right, Kilingu on his left. Arella's soldiers took their places among Arthuur's, not ahead of them, but with them. Faemz and the other armsman waited behind the Paladins with swords and polearms. Spears settled into place. Casters spread just enough to work without crowding the road.

Arthuur lifted his sword.

"Forward."

They advanced in full view of the fort.

No stealth now. No subtlety. Shields high, boots striking the road in steady rhythm, the attack as clear and blunt as a hammer blow. Chants rose from the Paladins, bolstering the line.

From the wall, Lieutenant Yal'ris had been watching them, waiting.

Fools.

Then a horn cried from the wall.

Arrows came next, rattling against shields and skipping from mail. Stones followed, crashing down the ramp and bouncing into the ditch. One Anniogel soldier stumbled when a shaft punched through the edge of his shield, but Kilingu shifted sideways and closed the gap until the man found his footing again.

"Steady," Kilingu said.

Not loudly.

Just enough.

The line held.

At the top of the ramp, Lieutenant Yal'ris opened the gate.

Bold, Arella had called him.

And not patient.

He did exactly what Arthuur needed him to do.

The Drakoran forces came down the ramp in a scaled rush, each of them taller than the men they struck, shoulders broad, their short tails twitching behind them as they hit the shield line with the weight of living battering rams.

For several breaths, the whole fight became iron, strain, and the scrape of boots against stone.

Arthuur did not try to win quickly.

He only held Yal'ris's attention.

"Forward!" he called.

The shield line pressed.

The Drakoran answered.

More of them came through the gate.

Too many.

Lieutenant Yal'ris came behind them, larger than the warriors around him, nearly half again as tall as most men and moving with the ugly confidence of something used to being obeyed. Unlike the soldiers who followed him, his tail was full and heavy, sweeping behind him as he advanced, thick enough that men gave ground before it struck them.

And then the north wall came alive.

Kaere's scouts had climbed over the palisade like shadows, and now loosed their arrows. Arrows struck the Drakoran surging through the gate. Some staggered in confusion. Some fell. Others turned towards the north wall, suddenly uncertain where the true attack had come from.

That was enough to turn the tide.

"Now!" Arthuur shouted.

Faemz and the other armsmen came forward. Tungsten and Kilingu held the line while the armsmen drove their weapons into scaled flesh.

Together, Arthuur and his men broke through.

The northern fort fell quickly after that.

Not easily. But Kaere's scouts held the north wall. Arella's soldiers exploited the breakthrough. Denysea's reserve stood ready to check the Drakoran should they attempt to reinforce from the center fort. Wintyr and the healers tended the wounded.

Yal'ris saw his force collapsing and entered the fray himself.

He knocked men aside, clawed into armor, and launched himself at Arthuur.

Tungsten caught him by the tail and hauled him backward with both hands.

Yal'ris twisted with a roar.

Tungsten let go.

The Drakoran turned too quickly, overbalanced for half a breath, and arrows struck his shoulder and flank. He staggered, furious, then crashed into Sir Tungsten's shield hard enough to drive the Paladin back.

The shield held.

Tungsten dropped beneath the next clawing strike.

Scale met steel.

His blade found the soft underside of Yal'ris's throat.

The lieutenant fell.

After that, the remaining Drakoran broke.

Some tried to flee towards the center road and found Denysea's reserve waiting. Some turned towards the north wall, only for Kaere's scouts to cut them down.

The victory was complete. Total.

The Drakoran banner came down with a long, ugly rip of cloth.

Denysea raised Anniogel's colors in its place.

For a moment, no one cheered.

Then cheers rose from the village.

Anniogel had seen.

In the fort, the celebration was more muted. Wounds were tended. Men took deep breaths.

Arthuur stood in the yard and looked first not to the fallen enemy, nor to the captured banner, but to his own people.

"Count the wounded. who can be healed here, who needs to be sent back to the village." he said.

Arella turned to him.

Something in her expression shifted.

Then she nodded. "Denysea. Count our wounded."

Denysea was already moving. "Aye."

Wintyr knelt beside one of Anniogel's soldiers, light gathered in her hands. The man was pale but breathing. Nearby, the friar bound a spear-cut while one of the clerics murmured a prayer over a broken arm. Tungsten sat on a crate because Wintyr had pointed at it and apparently even he knew better than to test that tone.

Emily came down from the hill a few moments later, breathless from the run and trying very hard not to look as though her hands were shaking.

Arthuur saw.

He did not mention it.

"One fort taken, two more to go."

Emily blinked, as if she had expected more. Perhaps she had expected a speech.

Arthuur simply looked south towards the remaining forts, as everyone gathered around.

"Rest. We move at dark. With any luck, we take the southern fort at dawn."

Slor'vid Watches

From the central fort, Commander Slor'vid watched Anniogel's colors rise where Yal'ris's banner had been.

At first, he said nothing.

Beside him, Lieutenant Grrar gripped the wooden palisade hard enough to splinter it.

"You said not to send troops."

Slor'vid did not look at him.

"That fool Yal'ris should have been able to hold against such a small force."

"We could have reached him."

"No," Slor'vid said. "We would have arrived after he had already lost."

Grrar bared his teeth. "We should have tried."

"No. He got what he deserved for opening the gate."

Slor'vid had seen the first assault and judged it for what it appeared to be: a frontal attack up a defended ramp by a force too small to take the fort. Brave. Loud. Obvious. The sort of attack Yal'ris should have enjoy breaking.

What he had not seen was the trap inside the fort. He had not seen the north wall bloom with arrows after the gate had opened.

He had not seen Yal'ris struck from both sides.

The young Albion knight had shown Yal'ris one hand and struck with the other.

Now the northern fort flew Anniogel's colors. Men moved along its wall. Fires were being lit. Figures crossed before the open gate.

A reclaimed fort.

A new foothold.

And now his advance had been checked.

"Prepare for an attack," Slor'vid said.

Grrar turned towards him.

"Now?"

"Now. Double the gate watch. Clear the inner yard. I want eyes on the village, the northern fort, and the road between them. They will come here next, they will approach from the northeast."

Grrar looked towards the captured fort. "You believe they come here next?"

"Of course."

Slor'vid's jaw tightened.

"They have taken the northern fort. If they remain there, they invite us to take it back. So they will strike us next. They will believe momentum favors them."

Grrar grunted. "Then we break them here."

"Send to Zudd," Slor'vid said. "I want all of his spare warriors here before dawn."

Grrar's head turned sharply. "You would weaken the southern fort?"

"We will need them here. Once we crush this new army, we will take back the northern fort. Then we take the Anniogel."

"Victory will be ours."

Slor'vid looked again towards the northern banner, now flying where Yal'ris had stood.

The commander who had led the attack from the village had been brave. Foolish, perhaps. But brave.

Yal'ris had been more foolish still.

Surely they had paid dearly for it.

"They will come here," Slor'vid said again.

Then, after a moment, he added, "And send west. I want reinforcements from Avalon Isle before the next moonrise."

Grrar smiled slowly. "Then we crush them between stone and scale."

Slor'vid's eyes remained on the northern fort.

"If they are foolish enough to come here."

Chapter LXVII — The Shape of the Board

The Night March

They left the northern fort looking alive.

Fires burned in the yard. Shadows crossed the wall at regular intervals. Spears had been propped where the silhouettes would catch the light. From the central fort, it would look like the captured fort had been garrisoned in strength.

In truth, only a handful remained.

The rest went over the northern wall in darkness.

No horns. No banners. No bright Paladin nonsense, Tungsten complained until Wintyr threatened to make him carry the medical packs as well as his shield.

After that, he complained more quietly.

They dropped into the ditch beyond the wall and climbed the far bank into the broken country northwest of the fort line, where no road ran and no sensible army would march willingly.

Where even the watchtowers west of the forts stood empty.

They had been built to watch the causeway, but Slor'vid had seen no need to man them. The Drakoran held the forts. They held the causeway. They held the island beyond.

Which was why Arthuur had chosen this route.

Kaere went ahead, guiding them through the broken ground. Emily followed farther back, making certain no one became separated or lost. They moved south between the forts and the causeway, through scrub, mud, and low ground that swallowed sound almost as greedily as boots.

Men stumbled. Armor whispered. Once, a wizard slipped knee-deep into black mud and had to be hauled free by Faemz.

The central fort was the dangerous part.

Arthuur halted the column while they were still north of it and sent them past in smaller groups. Not together. Not in a line long enough to catch the eye. A few at a time, low and quiet, through the broken dark where the hill rose above them and the palisade cut off all sight of the yard within.

Far to his left, the central fort stood black against the night, timber walls crowned above a stone base. A few torches burned within, but no watch could be seen along the palisade.

The western towers remained dark.

No ladder creaked.

No voice called down.

No shape leaned out to look below.

Arthuur crouched in the scrub until the last of his people had passed. Then he crossed with the final group, keeping low beneath the bulk of the hill.

For one moment, Arthuur looked towards the central fort.

Behind those walls, Slor'vid would be ready for a fist.

Arthuur would give him silence instead.

Arella came up beside him, breathing quietly. Her eyes moved from the dark towers to the path where their column had vanished.

"He is not prepared for this."

"No," Arthuur said, his voice low.

Somewhere beyond the central fort, the southern fort waited thin, damaged, and undermanned.

Arthuur turned south.

"Let us not keep Zudd waiting."

The Southern Fort

By first light, they had reached the southern fort.

It stood lower than the northern one, half-sunk into wet ground and surrounded by ditches full of dark water. It had been poorly repaired compared to the northern fort. The gate was still badly damaged and unable to close properly, and part of the palisade remained broken. The Drakoran had taken it and moved on to the central fort with little thought that it might ever be taken back.

There were fewer sentries as well.

Fewer voices.

Fewer shapes moving behind the wall.

Slor'vid had taken the bait.

Arella saw it too.

"He pulled men from Zudd."

"To strengthen the center," Arthuur said.

Denysea smiled. "That was kind of him."

"Thoughtful," Kilingu agreed.

Tungsten rolled his shoulders. "Do we get to attack now, or is there another clever delay?"

Arthuur looked towards the fort.

"We attack now," he said. "We can delay later."

He grinned.

The southern fort did not fall by subtlety.

It fell by speed.

Arthuur gave Zudd no time to understand his commander's mistake. The casters struck first, fire and wind snapping across the wall to drive the sentries into the fort. Then the shield line crossed the ditch. Faemz and the armsmen hit the gate before the defenders could form properly behind it.

The Drakoran fought hard.

But they fought with fewer men than they should have had.

By the time Zudd reached the yard, shouting orders in a voice like stones breaking, Arthuur's line had already pushed through the gate.

Zudd was slightly larger than Yal'ris had been, broader through the shoulders, his scaled hide marked by old pale scars.

Two Anniogel soldiers went down before him. A third would have followed, but Kilingu stepped into the path of the blow.

His shield cracked.

Zudd laughed.

Kilingu did not.

The Drakoran struck again, forcing him back a step. Then another hard enough to split the rim of Kilingu's shield and drive him nearly to one knee.

Zudd leaned forward, teeth bared.

"Little knight."

Kilingu looked up at him.

"Big lizard."

He dropped the ruined shield.

Zudd attempted to finish him.

Kilingu stepped inside the return blow, close enough that it struck his shoulder. Pain flashed across his face, but his sword was already moving. He drove it upward beneath Zudd's ribs, where the scales thinned along the side.

The Drakoran's laugh died in his throat.

Kilingu held him there for a moment, close enough to see understanding enter his eyes.

Then he tore the sword free.

Lieutenant Zudd fell dead in the mud of his own fort yard.

The southern fort broke soon after.

Not because the Drakoran lacked courage. They had plenty of that.

They lacked numbers.

By midmorning, Anniogel's colors flew over the southern wall as well.

Arthuur stood beneath them, looking north towards the central fort.

There would be no hiding this one.

No illusion to maintain.

No quiet march.

Slor'vid would know now.

He would see them coming.

This would be the real fight.

The Central Fort

Commander Slor'vid did not rage when the southern fort's signal failed.

That angered Grrar.

Slor'vid stood in the central fort's gatehouse, looking first north, then south, then west towards the causeway, where his messengers had gone in the dark.

The northern fort was lost.

The southern fort was lost.

The Albion commander had not come where Slor'vid had prepared.

He had gone around him instead.

Grrar waited.

At last, Slor'vid spoke.

"Pull them back from the ditch."

Grrar's jaw flexed. "From the gate?"

"No. From the ground before it."

"Commander?"

"Let them spend themselves reaching the gate. Let them break it if they can."

Grrar's mouth slowly widened.

Slor'vid looked towards the yard below.

"Then we kill them inside."

Grrar smiled at that.

"And the reinforcements?"

"They will come from Avalon City."

"When?"

Slor'vid looked west.

"Soon."

But soon was a dangerous word in war.

By afternoon, Arthuur stood before the central fort.

He had left only banners, watchfires, and silence behind him at the southern fort. Lady Treva had come as well, with everyone she could muster from Anniogel. This fight would decide the fate of the village.

The central fort was little more than a harder version of the other two: an earthen hill crowned by timber palisades, a stone base, a broad gatehouse, an open yard, and three wooden buildings facing the center. Its walls were no higher. Its gate, though, was reinforced and in better shape. Its approaches had been cleared. Slor'vid had stripped away everything that might hide an attacker.

No blind side.

No easy wall.

No trick to repeat.

Arthuur studied it for a long moment.

Tungsten stood beside him.

"I hate when enemies learn."

"It is inconvenient," Arthuur said.

Kilingu looked towards the gate. "He is waiting for us to attack."

"Yes."

"Then?"

Arthuur took one slow breath as Lady Treva arrived.

"Thoughts?" he asked her.

"Your plans have worked so far," she said, looking over the ground before them.

"Then we advance carefully." Arthuur turned to the line. "Form up. It is time we finish this."

The central fort did not fall quickly.

It had to be taken step by step: the ditch had to be crossed first, then the gate taken, then the open yard where Slor'vid surely waited. The casters drove the archers from the gatehouse. The scouts kept the defenders busy. Faemz and the armsmen drove forward, hacking at the gate timbers and weakening them. Wintyr and the clerics held the wounded together with prayer, light, and clenched teeth.

It was slow work.

Every step forward was contested.

But the line held.

Arthuur did not chase glory. When the breach was made, he kept the force together and waited until it could be widened. When men grew impatient, he called them back. When the Drakoran tried to draw the Paladins through the gate alone, he gave them spears and arrows instead.

Men looked to him.

Orders moved outward from him like ripples through water.

Together they moved through the gate.

The line bent where he told it to bend and held where he told it to hold.

From the far side of the inner yard, Slor'vid saw.

He did not know the commander's name.

He did not need to.

There.

That one.

Slor'vid moved.

At first, Arthuur saw only a broad shape forcing its way through the crush, larger than the lieutenants who had served him, scaled hide pale as stone beneath the smoke.

Then the wings opened.

They spread behind Slor'vid like torn sails, vast enough to make the yard seem smaller. One beat drove smoke and ash outward. Another wing struck an Anniogel soldier across the chest and hurled him back into the men behind him.

One of his own stumbled in front of him, and Slor'vid struck him aside without looking. An Avalonian spear caught him in the ribs and scraped along his scales without slowing him. He seized the shaft, tore it free, and dragged the soldier forward hard enough to throw him into two others.

He was not merely forcing his way through the yard.

He was force itself.

He was not trying to hold the yard.

He was trying to reach the man taking it from him.

"Arthuur!" Faemz shouted.

Tungsten turned, but too late. Three Drakoran warriors crashed into him at once. Kilingu tried to cut across the yard and was forced back by a knot of warriors who threw themselves into his path.

Slor'vid had not come alone.

He had brought enough warriors to make a road.

Arthuur lifted his shield.

Slor'vid hit him like a falling gate.

The impact drove Arthuur back three steps. The wings made it worse. One snapped around from the side, not edged enough to cut, but heavy enough to batter his shield out of line and turn his shoulder before the next blow came.

The next blow numbed his left arm from wrist to shoulder. Another cracked the rim of his shield. The third came low, vicious and fast, and Arthuur barely turned it aside before Slor'vid's claws tore sparks from the stone beside his boot.

There was no elegance in him.

No wasted motion, either.

Slor'vid fought like a thing bred to break walls.

Arthuur answered as best he could. But he was outmatched. His sword scraped over scaled hide, bit shallowly, and skidded away.

Slor'vid smiled.

Then he struck Arthuur in the chest hard.

Air fled Arthuur's lungs. His back struck the stone base of one of the buildings. He tried to bring his shield up, but Slor'vid hammered it aside and stepped in close, one clawed hand closing over the shield's rim and wrenching it down.

Pain tore through Arthuur's shoulder.

He dropped to one knee.

Across the yard, Wintyr shouted his name.

Arthuur heard it as if from underwater.

Slor'vid leaned over him, scaled face close, breath hot with blood and smoke.

"You," the commander growled.

Arthuur drove his sword upward.

Slor'vid caught his wrist.

Not easily.

Not without effort.

But enough.

The Drakoran twisted, and Arthuur's blade stopped short of the softer scales beneath his arm.

Slor'vid's other hand closed around Arthuur's neck.

Around them, the battle narrowed to that single moment.

"Who are you?"

Arthuur looked up at him.

His fingers tightened around the hilt.

"Arthuur," he said.

Slor'vid's eyes narrowed.

"Pendragon."

The name struck harder than any blow.

For one heartbeat, Slor'vid's expression changed.

To recognition.

Of the old name that still haunted Avalon's stones.

"Arthur is dead," Slor'vid growled.

Arthuur's breath came hard.

"Arthur..."

His fingers tightened around the hilt.

"...was my father."

Light crashed down over Slor'vid's head and shoulders.

The smite struck with a white crack of light that snapped the commander's head aside and burned across the scaled ridge of his brow. He staggered, blinded for the span of a breath, his grip loosening as he staggered.

In the space of that moment, Arthuur moved.

His wrist freed, he rose from one knee and stepped into the opening Wintyr had made.

His sword drove up beneath Slor'vid's scales and into his heart.

The blade went deep.

Slor'vid's body locked.

His eyes found Arthuur again, furious and disbelieving.

Behind him, Wintyr stood beyond the shields and spears, one hand still raised, light fading from her fingers.

Arthuur leaned close, breath ragged.

Then he tore the blade free.

Commander Slor'vid fell dead at Arthuur's feet.

His wings folded around him as he fell, useless at the end.

For a heartbeat, the central fort seemed to pause around him.

Then Grrar roared.

The Drakoran surged one last time, but their commander lay dead. Tungsten broke free with a shout and met Lieutenant Grrar near the center of the yard.

Grrar came at him with both hands, fury making him careless.

Tungsten gave ground once, twice, then drove his shield into Grrar's chest and turned the larger Drakoran onto Lady Treva's waiting sword.

Grrar looked down at the point buried in his side.

Tungsten shoved him off the blade.

Grrar fell.

Faemz drove the armsmen forward. Kilingu rallied the left. Arella and Denysea pushed through with Anniogel's soldiers at their backs.

The last Drakoran resistance collapsed.

Anniogel's colors rose over the central fort.

The battle was over.

Arthuur sat on the steps of the main building within the fort, his shield arm bound tight. Wintyr sat beside him, one hand near his wounded shoulder as if daring him to pretend it did not hurt.

Tungsten leaned against the parapet, breathing hard. "What next?"

Arthuur looked across the yard.

Three forts taken at great cost.

The Drakoran commander and his lieutenants dead.

The road to the Isle of Glass no longer open to the Drakoran.

"First, the wounded," Arthuur said. "Then we send for reinforcements."

Lady Treva scanned the fort before nodding.

"I will send a messenger to Gothwaite Harbor at once. And let them know the forts are ours once more."

Tungsten groaned. "This calls for a celebration, at the very least."

Kilingu smiled faintly.

Wintyr said nothing. Her hand remained near Arthuur's shoulder.

Below them, Anniogel's horns sounded again.

This time, the cheer that answered was not quiet.

The three forts had fallen.

Chapter LXVIII — Word from the North

Camelot — The War Chamber of Orchid Fair

The room smelled of parchment, steel polish, and tension.

Sir Sabbince stood by the hearth, scroll in hand, his cloak still dusted with rain. Across the table, Lord Sigimund leaned forward, his gauntlet tapping an uneven rhythm on the edge of a campaign map. Beside him, Lady Angela stood still, her hands clenched behind her back, trying not to hope too hard.

"Well?" Sigimund demanded. "Speak, man."

Sabbince unrolled the scroll with a worn breath.

"It's from Jarl Bledmeer of Midgard. And... well. It's good news."

Angela's eyes flicked towards him. "Los?"

He nodded. "Alive. And apparently very much himself."

He paused. Then, added dryly:

"He's been on an adventure."

Angela looked at him with curiosity. "What kind of adventure?"

Sabbince cleared his throat.

"According to the Jarl, he has been traveling with a Valkyrie named Sigrún and someone he refers to as Tim der Troll. He claims to have been to Valhalla, slain a giant, saved a Midgard village, and rescued someone named Frú Brynhildr."

Sigimund raised an eyebrow. "A damsel in distress?"

Angela closed her eyes for just a second. "Of course."

"There's more," Sabbince added, setting down the scroll. "Bledmeer says Los will be returned to Albion soon. And that the Valkyries have released him."

Angela took a half-step back from the table, one hand drifting unconsciously to the hilt of her sword. The firelight caught the relief in her face before she masked it.

"We were about to send a rescue party," she said.

Sigimund turned to her. "You still could. Meet him at the border. Escort him home with honor."

Angela was quiet for a moment.

Then: "No."

Her voice held no anger—only restraint, and a hint of pain.

Both men looked at her.

"After all that, he can find his own way home."

She had spent weeks worrying, sleepless with guilt and fear. She was the one who had sent him to Benowyc, to keep him safe from court intrigue. From Camelot.

And now she learned he had been traveling with a Valkyrie, slaying giants, and rescuing maidens.

He had made her worry.

He had made her jealous.

"Lady Angela—" Sabbince started.

"If he's crossed fire, ice, and faced gods to get back to us, he won't need us to escort him the rest of the way home."

Sigimund said nothing at first. Then, after a moment, he nodded once.

"As you wish."

A Prayer Answered

Camelot — Private Apartment of Lady Triss

The same chamber. The same desk.

But this time, the knock was brisk.

The acolyte entered with a scroll.

"From Orchid Fair, my lady. Sir Los lives. He is... returning."

Triss closed her eyes for a single heartbeat. When she opened them, she crossed herself, the weight in her chest eased — but not entirely.

"Is he well?" she asked.

The girl hesitated.

"They do not say, only that he is traveling from Midgard. That he fought a giant, rescued a maiden, and saved a village."

A faint, almost imperceptible smile touched Triss's lips. Pride, or fear, or both. She glanced at the fire before turning back to her desk.

"Thank you. I am sure he will have stories to tell when he returns."

Saint Alban, thank you for your grace, for bringing him home again.

The Spaniard returns

Camelot — Lord Baldric's Study

Baldric's aide was pale when he delivered the news.

"He's alive, my lord — and returning." Then relayed what was being said of Los's adventures.

Baldric set his goblet down slowly.

"Of course he did."

He moved to the map on the wall, tracing a finger along the northern coast.

"I am sure he will return with songs to his name, and the sympathy of fools."

The aide bowed.

Baldric turned back to the window, the rain still falling beyond the glass.

"Let him come home a hero. Heroes are easier to ruin."

The Embassy

Camelot — The Castilian Embassy

Willow came again in the rain.

Not a hard rain this time. Only a fine gray mist, clinging to her cloak and jewelring her hair with tiny drops of water. She stepped inside quietly, her scout cloak drawn close, bow at her shoulder, boots leaving faint dark prints across the threshold.

Ramón was already in the office.

He had not opened the ledger.

It was the first thing she noticed.

The second was the letter in his hand.

Willow stopped in the doorway.

Ramón looked up.

He did not make her ask.

"He lives."

For a moment, Willow did not move at all.

"He lives," he said again, softer now. "Word came from the north. Jarl Bledmeer has confirmed it. He has been found and is returning to Albion."

Willow closed her eyes.

Her shoulders folded inward, just once, as though something inside her had finally been allowed to loosen.

Ramón looked away, giving her the dignity of being not watched too closely.

Rain tapped softly against the window.

Ramón returned the letter to the desk, straightened it carefully, and opened the ledger at last.

"And since you are here," he said, taking up his quill, "you may help me with some accounts. Don Los will return to chaos if I permit emotion to interfere with bookkeeping."

Willow looked at him.

The look said many things.

Most of them were unkind.

Ramón dipped the quill.

"Yes," he said calmly. "I am also relieved. Sit."

For the first time in days, Willow obeyed without protest.

She took a place near the hearth and watched Ramón begin his neat columns and careful figures.

Outside, Camelot went on beneath the rain.

Inside the embassy, the fire burned warm, the accounts waited, and Willow could breathe again.

A Cold Welcome

Camelot — The Orchid Fair Guildhall

The guildhall roared with voices when Los stepped through the doors, taking a heroic pose, though dressed as a Norseman. Tankards slammed, hands clapped, and questions flew from every corner.

For one heartbeat, Angela forgot to breathe.

He was alive.

Bruised. Weary. Thinner around the eyes. But alive.

Then she saw the cloak.

Dark northern wool, heavy with fur, fastened at his shoulder by a brooch that was not Orchid Fair's, not Albion's, not even his own.

The raven brooch.

The cloak did not belong to him.

Worse, Angela knew at once whose it must be.

The Valkyrie's.

The woman who had stolen him away.

Los stepped inside, unfastened the brooch at his shoulder, and hung the cloak on a peg near the door, as if it were any common traveler's garment.

It was not.

When the door shut behind him a draft moved through the hall, stirring the cloak slightly.

Romao was the first to reach him, grinning ear to ear. "Fratello! Look at you. Dressed like a Norseman."

Prox leaned around him, eyes catching on the cloak. "And wearing a Valkyrie's cloak, unless I have lost all sense."

Los glanced back towards the peg where he had hung it.

"My cloak was ruined," he said.

"Ruined how?" Tamara asked.

Los thought of dwarven tunnels, a giant's blood, and cloth torn past mending.

"It died bravely."

The room laughed.

Romao clapped him on the shoulder. "Tell me the giant was at least twice as tall as a man."

"At least," Los said without blinking, which earned him a cheer from the corner table.

Prox elbowed his way through the crowd, a smug tilt to his head. "If you don't tell me you knocked it flat with one swing, I'm going to be disappointed."

Tamara, usually the picture of composure, threw her arms around him in a quick hug before punching him in the arm. "You took so long. We were starting to think you'd run off with the Valkyrie."

"I almost did," He said with his crooked grin.

The room laughed.

Angela did not.

The words struck before she could remind herself it was only Los being Los. A careless jest tossed into a room already drunk on his return.

But the cloak remained.

The room was warm and loud, full of ale, clinking mugs, and half-shouted questions. Los gave them pieces of the tale: giants and goblin princes, dwarves beneath the mountain, rescues, escapes, and Valhalla itself.

But not the child.

Not the home.

Not the dance.

Not the woman whose cloak still hung by the door.

Through it all, Los kept glancing towards the far end of the hall.

Towards Angela.

Angela felt each glance and hated herself for not answering them.

She should have crossed the room. She should have thrown her arms around him as Tamara had. She should have said his name and thanked the Light, and every saint she knew, that he had come back alive.

Instead, she stood by the table with her head bent over a map, her quill scratching quick strokes that meant nothing.

When she finally looked up, his eyes were already on her.

Hopeful.

Careful.

That made it worse.

"When you are ready to work," she said.

His face changed, almost imperceptibly.

"I still have to check in at the embassy."

"When you have," she said, looking down at the map again because if she looked at the cloak one more time, she might say something unforgivable. "We have fallen behind on patrol rotations."

No smile.

No welcome.

No Los, I am glad you are alive.

The others noticed the chill, though none spoke of it.

He gave a small nod, as if it had not mattered.

Inside, it did.

More than he wanted to admit.

Slipping Away

The night wore on, the ale flowed, and the laughter in the hall rose and fell like a tide.

Los told a few stories, shortened and polished, just enough to satisfy those who asked, never the whole truth.

When no one seemed to be looking, he set his cup down and crossed to the pegs by the door.

The Valkyrie's cloak still hung there, dark and heavy, the raven brooch catching the firelight.

Los looked at it for a moment.

He nearly reached for it.

Then his hand moved past it and took down a plain traveling cloak from another peg. One of his own, left behind when he had gone north to Benowyc. Someone in the guild must have left it there, untouched, in the hope he would return to claim it.

He pulled it around his shoulders and slipped out into the night.

The cold air outside was a relief after the heat of the hall. His boots on the rain soaked cobbles as he walked away from Camelot's glow, towards someplace quieter.

The Cotswold Inn

Cotswold Village — Cotswold Inn, Late Night

The place was near empty. The hearth burned low, throwing long shadows across the tables. The innkeeper stood behind the bar, polishing a cup that had been cleaned several times already.

Two patrons sat apart in opposite booths.

A friar in travel-worn robes, cowl half-drawn over his face.

It was Alucard.

And Los, his cloak still draped loosely around his shoulders, staring into a cup he had not touched.

Rain fell gently outside. The smell of damp wool and old ale hung in the air.

Neither man spoke.

Los's mind was not here. It was in Camelot, standing in front of that table, hearing Angela's voice as if she were reading from a duty roster instead of greeting a man who had crossed fire and ice to come home to her.

Lilith

The door creaked open.

A woman stepped in, wrapped in a dark cloak that shimmered faintly when the light caught it. She moved with the slow confidence of someone who belonged anywhere she chose to be.

Alucard looked up immediately.

He didn't know her face, but the air changed with her presence — colder, heavier. Shadows seemed to pull towards her. The light seemed to want to escape her.

A faint smile curved her lips. She crossed the floor in haste, the sound of her shoes soft against the wood.

"May I join you?" she asked, voice low and melodic.

Los looked at her for a moment. He saw warmth, beauty, softness — all the things he wasn't feeling tonight.

She spoke in soft, quiet tones — the kind that pull people closer to listen.

"It is so cold tonight... and lonely."

Los listened, but said nothing back.

She reached out, fingertips brushing the back of his hand. He didn't pull away.

From across the room, Alucard's stare sharpened.
Something was wrong. Too wrong.

"Why not come with me?" she murmured. "The night is long. The fire grows cold."

Then she offered her hand.

Los looked at it.

For one brief moment, he thought of Angela's face when she had looked down at the map instead of at him.

Then he took it.

Alucard rose, intercepting them as they passed. His hand closed on Los's arm.
"Los," he said, quietly but urgently.

Los met his gaze — and saw something like fear in the friar's eyes.

But tonight, fear didn't matter.
He let her lead him towards the stairs.

As they passed the bar, Alucard's eyes followed — and that was when he saw it.

In the mirror behind the counter, where her reflection should have been, there was nothing human at all.

Only the shadowed, shifting form of Lilith, Queen of all Demons.

The Ring

The Cotswold Inn — Upstairs Chambers

The rain fell against the glass, blurring the world beyond.

Los sat on the edge of the bed, bare-chested, watching rainwater run down the glass and turn in the dim light. The fire behind him crackled, casting a low amber glow across the room.

The ring against his chest felt heavy.

A broken promise.

He felt unworthy to touch it.

His hand found it anyway.

"Come back to bed," Lilith whispered, her voice soft as silk as she slid behind him. Her hand traced the line of his chest, her body warm against his back.

He did not look at her.

Then her hand touched the ring.

The one thing still sacred.

Her fingers brushed the small circle of metal resting against his bare chest.

Los went still.

All night, he had kept it out of his mind.

But now her hand was on it.

His hand closed over the ring at once, shielding it beneath his palm.

"Do you not desire more?" she asked, tilting her head until her lips brushed his ear.

"I have to go," he said.

The words came out rough.

Barely more than breath.

Her hand stilled.

"You cannot leave me," she breathed, softer now, but edged with command. "You belong to me."

Los said nothing.

He rose, pulled on his trousers, slid his shirt over his head, and fastened his belt with slow, deliberate movements.

As soon as the shirt settled into place, his hand returned to the ring beneath the cloth.

Something shifted in the air. Her warmth pulled back as he dressed, replaced by something colder.

"I could give you the world," she said, her tone sharpening. "I could give you anything you desire."

His fingers tightened around the ring.

Still, he did not turn.

His gaze stayed fixed on the rain-streaked street outside the window.

Her words meant nothing.

He desired only one thing.

And it was not her.

The rejection hit her like a blade.

Her beauty twisted as the illusion broke. Flesh turned to shadow, her eyes to pits of flame, talons curling from her fingers.

"No man rejects me!"

The strike came fast.

Her talons tore through cloth and flesh alike. Los staggered forward from the blow, hot blood running down his back beneath his shirt.

He caught the edge of the bed, steadied himself, then walked to the door without looking back.

Running would have required fear.

Fear required caring what happened next.

He had very little of that left.

Behind him, Lilith howled. The walls quaked with her fury, the fire guttering as if afraid. She screamed curses and promises, the room trembling with her rage.

But he stepped into the hall, then out into the night.

Into the rain.

Into the cold.

Into the dark.

His fingers still clutched the ring through his shirt.

He did not stop.

The Warning

Camelot — Outside Angela's Home, Dawn

The first light of morning crept over Camelot's rooftops, pale and cold.

Alucard stood in the street, hood drawn, his breath misting in the cold. He had been there all night, murmuring prayers between glances at her closed door.

When at last it opened, Angela stepped out, pulling her cloak tight against the cold. She froze at the sight of him.

"Alucard?" she asked. "What is wrong?"

"We need to talk, my lady," he said, his voice low and urgent.

Her brow furrowed at his tone, and at the strange, troubled weight in his eyes. "All right..."

"Not here."

He took her arm, more roughly than he intended, and steered her away from the street. She did not resist, but confusion shadowed her face as they hurried through the quiet lanes towards the cathedral.

The heavy doors closed behind them, shutting out the street. In the dim hush of the nave, beneath the watchful eyes of saints in stained glass, Alucard finally stopped.

"This is the only place I trust to speak of it," he said.

Angela's voice softened, but it carried an edge. "Speak of what?"

"Sir Los," Alucard said, the name heavy on his tongue. "He is in danger—worse than danger. I saw her."

"Her?"

"A woman. Cloaked. Beautiful. Too beautiful. I felt it the moment she entered. The air changed. Shadows drew to her. She drew him after her. He followed her upstairs. I... I tried to stop him."

Angela's eyes narrowed, a flash of disbelief breaking across her face. "You are saying—"

"She was not a woman." His voice dropped to a near-whisper. "In the bar mirror... I saw her true form. Lilith. Queen of Demons."

Angela shook her head, trying to reconcile the words. "Lilith? That is—"

"I swear it," he cut in, stepping closer. "I fear she has him now. Her charm is poison. I believe he is under her influence."

Angela stared at him, searching his face for any trace of doubt.

There was none.

"Who else have you told?" she asked finally.

"No one. Only you," Alucard said. "Because I know you care for him... and because if he is to be freed, her hold must be broken."

Angela looked away, jaw tight, the thought gnawing at her.

Then, quietly: "Thank you, Alucard. I will do what I can."

Chapter LXIX — The Return

Camelot — The Albion Embassy, Pre-Dawn

The streets were empty but for the echo of his boots.

Snow clung to the edges of his cloak, melting into dark patches where the wool hid the shallow but angry cuts across his back. He kept to the shadows, not for stealth, but because he did not wish to be seen.

The back door of the Castilian Embassy groaned when he pushed it open. Inside, the lamps burned low. Ramón was awake—he always was—seated at the table with a ledger and a glass of wine that had long gone untouched.

"Ambassador?" Ramón's voice carried both surprise and worry. "You look unwell."

Los said nothing at first, just shrugged the cloak from his shoulders. The shirt beneath was torn, three long rents where Lilith's nails had found him. The flesh beneath was red, raw, and still oozing in places.

Ramón was on his feet at once. "Sit. I will fetch a cleric—"

"No." The word was sharp. Final.

Ramón froze, then narrowed his eyes. "Then you will explain why, por favor."

Los didn't answer. He just sat.

Ramón left and returned with towels, clean water, rolls of linen, and a small glass bottle filled with clear liquid.

He cleaned the wound first with water, saying nothing. Then he uncorked the bottle.

"What's that?" Los asked, glancing over his shoulder.

"Medicine," Ramón said flatly.

The liquid touched the wound and Los hissed through his teeth. Heat bloomed across his back—not the warmth of healing, but a searing burn that went straight to the bone. A thin curl of steam rose from the cut.

He gripped the table, jaw tight. "That's not medicine."

Ramón wrapped the bandages with practiced hands. "Then do not ask questions you already know the answers to."

When it was done, Los sat for a long moment, his hands resting on his knees, head bowed. Ramón didn't press him.

He gathered the bloodied towels, set them aside, and washed his hands in the basin.

"Willow has been here almost every day."

Los's shoulders tightened.

"Has she?"

"Sometimes twice a day." Ramón dried his hands slowly.

Los looked down at his hands.

"I went to the guildhall."

"You should have come here first," Ramón said. "You did not."

"I was on the way here. Then I got... distracted."

Ramón looked at the torn shirt. The bloodied towels. The bandages across Los's back.

"So I see."

Los said nothing.

Ramón's voice softened by a degree. "She will want to know you are alive."

Los nodded once.

"In the morning."

Ramón studied him.

"It is morning."

Los had no answer for that.

Ramón did not immediately move.

Then, quietly, he said, "She is asleep in your office."

Los looked up.

"Willow?"

"Sí. She came as soon as she heard you had returned. She waited as long as she could. I covered her with a blanket."

Los turned his head towards his office.

The door stood half open.

He rose slowly, careful of the bandages, and crossed the kitchen without taking his cloak from the chair. Ramón did not stop him.

The fire in the office hearth was still burning low, orange light breathing softly over the walls. Willow lay curled in the chair beside it, small beneath Ramón's blanket, one hand tucked beneath her cheek, the other resting near the wax tablet that had nearly fallen from her lap.

Small as she was, curled beneath the blanket, she looked almost like a child in sleep. She was not. She was near his own age. But sleep, and her slight frame, stripped the years from her.

Los stood in the doorway and felt something inside him twist.

She had waited here for him.

Not for the man who had gone into that room in the Cotswold inn. Not for the man whose back burned where Lilith's claws had torn him. Not for the man who could still feel shame crawling beneath his skin like a fever.

She had waited for the man she believed would come home.

Los could not cross the threshold.

He wanted to.

God help him, he wanted to kneel beside the chair, touch her hair, tell her he had returned, tell her he was sorry for every hour she had been afraid.

But his hands did not feel clean enough for that.

The fire shifted. A small log broke apart in the hearth, sending up a brief shower of sparks.

Willow stirred, but did not wake.

Los stepped back.

"Let her sleep," he said softly to himself.

Ramón, standing behind him, answered.

"She is asleep."

Los did not look at him.

"I meant me."

Then he returned to the kitchen table and sat carefully, as if the bandages were the only reason his back would not bend.

Ramón studied him for a long moment.

"What happened to you in the north?"

Los did not answer at once.

He simply clenched his fist over the center of his shirt, over the ring, eyes fixed on the floor, as though the right words might be written somewhere in the grain of the wood.

Then, very quietly, he said, "There is a child."

Ramón went still.

Los continued without looking up. "A foundling. Her mother was dead when we found her. Sigrún named her Sighildr."

"Sigrún."

"The Valkyrie."

Ramón absorbed that with the expression of a man deciding which of several questions would do the least damage.

"And the child?"

Los's mouth tightened faintly.

"The village calls her Sighildr Losdóttir."

Ramón said nothing.

"Daughter of Los," Los said, because the silence required it.

Ramón drew one slow breath through his nose.

"I see."

"I did not ask for it."

"No," Ramón said. "I cannot imagine you did."

"She is safe. With Sigrún. And Brynhildr."

"You trust them?"

"With my life."

He paused, considering his words.

"With hers."

Ramón looked at him then, more carefully.

"That is not the same answer."

"No."

Los swallowed.

"The child has a house. Mine, apparently."

"Apparently?"

"It was given before I understood the matter."

"Of course it was."

"I don't know what to do."

Los finally looked up, lost as he had been the moment the child was given his name.

Ramón did not answer quickly.

That, more than anything, frightened him.

At last Ramón asked, "Sigrún gave her the name?"

Los nodded faintly. "Jes."

"And the *apellido*?"

Los looked directly at him.

Ramón waited.

After a moment, Los said, "Jes. Sigrún gave her the name Losdóttir as well."

"I see," Ramón said again.

This time the words carried more weight.

Los's shoulders tightened. "I mean... I did rescue the child and sent her back with Tim to the village."

"And the village took this as you taking responsibility for the child."

Los nodded again.

Ramón's expression remained mild.

"And when they offered you the house?"

"The elders said the child would need a hearth."

"And you accepted?"

Los opened his mouth, then closed it again.

"Well," he said at last, "Sigrún accepted. I... I did not know what to say."

"Of course you did not."

"It happened very quickly."

"These things often do when someone else is certain before you can be yourself."

Los looked down at his hands again.

Ramón set the basin aside and took the chair opposite him.

"So. There is a child in Midgard bearing your name. A house given for her hearth. A Valkyrie who named her. And this Brynhildr?"

"Her sister, the one I rescued."

"I see, who guards her as well. And you, who are here bleeding in my kitchen before dawn, telling me you do not know what to do."

"That is the shape of it, jes."

"A complicated thing."

"I know."

"No," Ramón said gently. "I do not think you do."

Los looked up.

Ramón held his gaze.

"You cannot bring the child here."

The words struck him harder than expected.

"I know."

"Do you?"

Los's jaw tightened.

"I cannot bring an infant across war torn roads and a sea crossings into Camelot, into court politics, into a life where I am never certain what blade will be at my back."

"No," Ramón said. "You cannot."

"But I could not jus leave her on the side of the road."

"No," Ramón said again, softer now. "That, too, you could not do."

Los closed his eyes.

"She was so tiny," he said. "And when she grabbed my finger..."

The words failed him.

Ramón's face changed, but only slightly. Enough to show the old servant had understood more than the young noble had meant to reveal.

"She has a hearth," Ramón said. "She has women who will protect her. She has a village. That is no small thing."

"It does not feel enough."

"Because you think responsibility means holding everything in your own hands."

Los said nothing.

"It does not," Ramón continued. "Sometimes responsibility is knowing whose hands are better than your own."

Los let out a humorless breath.

"I am her father, apparently."

"Apparently?" Ramón said dryly.

That almost drew a smile.

Then Los's gaze shifted towards the door, to what he had left behind.

"I need to get her cloak from the guildhall."

Ramón's brow lifted.

"Her cloak."

"Sigrún's. I left it there."

"With the guild."

"Jes."

Ramón looked at him for a long, quiet moment.

"And your cloak?"

Los's face shifted.

"Back in Midgard."

"Back in Midgard," Ramón repeated.

"It was damaged beyond use. Torn. Burned. The armor I wore to Benowyc was ruined as well. I left what remained behind."

"With Sigrún."

Los hesitated.

"With Sigrún."

Ramón leaned back very slowly.

"She gave you hers and kept yours."

"She said it would keep me safe."

"I am sure she did."

Los frowned. "Why do you say it like that?"

"Because a woman does not keep a ruined cloak for warmth, Don Los."

Ramón's eyes held his.

"She kept the brooch too, did she not?"

Los went still.

He had not thought of the brooch.

Not once.

The torn cloak, yes. The ruined cloth. Surely she had not meant to keep it.

But the brooch was not nothing.

The brooch was House Ortiz...

"Jes," Los said quietly. "She did."

Ramón drew one slow breath through his nose.

"I see."

"Stop saying that."

"I will when you begin to see for yourself."

Los looked offended, but only faintly. He was too exhausted for more.

Ramón's voice softened by a degree.

"Don Los, she did not merely give you a cloak. She sent you home wrapped in hers and kept yours."

"To keep me safe," Los said again, weaker this time.

"Yes," Ramón said. "And perhaps she meant it. But meaning one thing does not prevent a woman from meaning another."

Los looked away.

"I do not know what you mean."

"There seems to be a great many things you do not know, Don Los."

Ramón's voice softened.

"Do you love this Sigrún?"

"What?"

The word came too quickly.

Too loudly.

Ramón said nothing.

"No," Los said. "I... no. I mean, I..." He stopped, jaw working once. "I don't know."

Ramón nodded as if that answer told him more than a confident denial ever could.

"I see."

"Stop saying that."

Los looked away for a moment.

For a while, the only sound was the faint hiss of the lamp and the distant murmur of Camelot waking beyond the shutters.

At last Ramón said, "Then we will do what can be done."

Los looked back at him.

"The child needs support," Ramón said. "Quietly. Properly. Food, cloth, coin if the village will accept it, useful things if they will not. Nothing that draws eyes. Nothing that endangers her."

Los's face changed.

"I think that is a very wise plan."

"Then I will begin making arrangements."

"And what should I do?"

Ramón gave him a flat look.

"Pray."

"Right."

"And you," Ramón continued, "will not make decisions while wounded, sleepless, and bleeding on my floor."

"I am not bleeding on the floor."

"Do not test me."

That almost brought the smile out of him again.

Ramón rose and gathered the last of the bandages.

"While you sleep, I will tell Willow that you are home. I will also retrieve the Valkyrie's cloak before it becomes the most discussed garment in Camelot."

Los winced.

Ramón noticed.

Then Los bowed his head again.

"I have made a mess of everything, haven't I, Ramón."

"No," Ramón said. "You have survived several messes. Some not of your making."

Los looked up at that.

Ramón's expression remained unreadable.

"But you have also made some of your own. We will begin there."

Los sat very still.

Then, quietly, he said, "I do want to do right by her."

"The child?"

"Jes."

Ramón nodded once.

"Then you will."

"You will figure it out once you have slept."

Los let out a slow breath.

Ramón stepped closer and rested one hand briefly on his shoulder, careful to avoid the bandaged wounds.

"The child is safe tonight," he said. "That is the first duty."

Los closed his eyes.

For once, he let the words stand.

"Jes," he whispered.

Ramón squeezed his shoulder once, then let go.

"Good. Now sleep before you fall out of that chair or give me another problem to solve."

Los sighed.

"Thank jou, Ramón."

Morning

The Embassy

Willow woke to warmth, firelight, and the smell of ink.

For one breath, she did not remember where she was. Then her fingers brushed the wax tablet in her lap, and the night returned to her in pieces.

The embassy.

Ramón.

Waiting.

Los.

She sat up so quickly the blanket slid from her shoulders.

The office was empty.

For one terrible moment, the old fear opened beneath her ribs again.

Then Ramón appeared in the doorway carrying a tray.

"Good morning, señorita."

Willow stared at him.

He set the tray on the desk as if this were an ordinary morning and not the edge of the world. Bread, cheese, sliced apple, a cup of watered wine. He adjusted the cup by half an inch before looking at her.

"He is here."

The breath left her all at once.

She reached for the tablet with clumsy fingers.

WHERE

"In the training yard."

She was on her feet before he finished.

"Breakfast first," Ramón said.

Willow was already at the door.

"Señorita."

She stopped only because Ramón's voice had become very soft.

"He is hurt."

Willow turned.

The tablet hung forgotten in one hand.

Ramón's face was composed, but not cold.

"Not dying," he said, because he knew exactly what her eyes were asking. "But hurt."

Her fingers tightened around the tablet.

"He has been in the training yard since before dawn."

Willow looked towards the hall.

The tray might as well have been stones and ashes. Bread had no meaning. Cheese had no meaning. Hunger belonged to some other person, in some other room, in some other life where her Los was not somewhere nearby and wounded.

Ramón sighed.

"Yes," he said, with the resignation of a man surrendering to the inevitable. "Go."

Willow ran.

Penance

Camelot — Morning

By first light, Los was alone in the training yard.

The bandages itched under his shirt, but the sword in his hands felt honest—simple in a way nothing else was.

He swung again and again, each cut and parry a silent prayer of penance. Sweat cooled on his brow in the morning chill.

He thought of her—of Lilith's voice in the dark, of the moment he had surrendered to his own weakness. And of the only woman whose opinion truly mattered... one who he feared would never forgive him if she knew.

Unworthy.

Unworthy of the Light.

Unworthy of Risa.

The sword slowed. His hand went to his chest, fingers closing over the ring through his shirt. The ring felt cold even through the cloth.

He whispered into the empty yard.

"God... forgive me."

Behind him, the gate creaked.

Los turned at once, sword still in hand.

Willow stood at the edge of the yard.

She wore the same clothes she had slept in, her hair mussed from the chair in his office, Ramón's blanket clutched around her shoulders as if she had forgotten she still carried it. Her eyes found his face first.

Then the sword.

Then the sweat darkening his shirt.

Then the faint red stain where the bandages beneath his shirt had begun to bleed through.

For a moment, neither of them moved.

Los lowered the sword.

"Willow."

That was all he managed.

She crossed the yard before the sound of her name had faded.

Los had time to set the sword aside.

Barely.

She struck him hard in the chest with her fist.

Not hard enough to hurt.

Not soft enough to be mistaken for anything but anger.

The little punch she gave him when fear had nowhere else to go.

Los looked down at the place she had struck.

Normally, he would have smiled.

Normally, he might have said something foolish. Something gentle. Something very Los.

This time he only swallowed.

"I know," he said.

Willow's anger faltered.

She searched his face.

There was something wrong.

Not the blood. Not the wound. Not even the exhaustion carved beneath his eyes.

Something deeper.

Then she threw her arms around him.

The force of it drove the breath from his chest. Pain flashed across his face as her arms brushed the claw marks beneath his shirt.

Willow felt him flinch and pulled back at once, horror widening her eyes.

Los caught her wrist before she could retreat.

"No," he said.

His voice was rough. Worn thin.

"Stay."

She froze.

Then, more carefully this time, she put her arms around him again.

Los closed his eyes.

One hand rose and rested lightly against her back, as if even comfort required permission from God and he was not certain he had it.

Willow held him.

He smelled of cold air, sweat, blood, and the sharp bitterness of whatever Ramón had poured over his wound. He was alive. He was here. He was wrong somehow, wounded somewhere she could not see, but he was here.

She pressed her forehead against his chest.

Los stood very still.

Then his hand returned to her back.

Weakly, at first.

Then, after a moment, as if he remembered how, he held her.

The training yard remained quiet around them. Frost clung to the posts. Morning light crept pale along the stone.

Willow did not move.

Los bowed his head over her.

"I am sorry," he whispered.

She tightened her arms around him.

He did not know which part she forgave.

He did not know if she knew there was anything to forgive.

But she stayed.

And for one breath, one small, undeserved breath, he let her.

The Bishop's Counsel

Camelot — Chapel of Saint Alban

Candles guttered in their sconces as Angela stood before Bishop Kustan.

The silver-haired bishop was small, but his voice was still strong when he spoke.

"You wish to free someone from... an unholy influence?" he asked, folding his hands over the head of his cane.

"Yes," Angela said. She did not speak Los's name. "If a soul's will is not entirely its own... if their thoughts and heart are bent by some darker power—how is it broken?"

The bishop's eyes narrowed. "You must find and destroy the source. Cut it away at the root, lest the corruption return."

Angela's jaw tightened. "The source?"

"A demon, a cursed relic, a place of corruption... whatever it is, it must be ended utterly."

She bowed her head as though in prayer, though her mind was already moving elsewhere.

The Weight of Grace

Los's bedroom, Castilian Embassy.

Los knelt in the silence, the stone cold beneath his knees, the candle guttering low in its pool of wax. His hands were clasped too tightly, knuckles white, as if prayer could be forced by strength alone.

His voice was raw, barely sound.

"Light forgive me... for what I've done."

The stillness pressed back—until the air shifted, warm, steady, like dawn breaking behind closed eyes.

She was there. Santa Lucía. Radiance soft as a flame, eyes clear as water drawn from the well of heaven.

Los bowed his head lower, unable to meet her gaze. The weight of his guilt pressed on him, heavier than mail. He thought she had come to rebuke him, to name aloud what he had done in weakness and shame.

But Lucía said nothing of it.

Instead, her voice came soft as candlelight.

"No, Lorenzo. I have not come to count your sins. I see what you have carried. I see the souls you lifted from the dark. The wounded you bore home when no one else dared. The children you fed when they had nothing. These things, too, are what I see."

Los's breath shuddered. He swallowed hard.

"...I merely followed the light where it led."

Lucía shook her head gently.

"You did more. You gave strength. You gave hope. That is not a small thing."

At last, he dared to lift his eyes.

The guilt had not vanished, but her light made it bearable. A grief he could carry without being crushed.

And for the first time since the night with Lilith, Los's shoulders eased. Not because he believed himself forgiven—but because she had come and had not made his failure the whole of him.

The Name of the Enemy

Camelot — The Royal Archives

Angela moved quickly through the aisles of parchment and vellum, the librarians' protests fading behind her as she went. Dust billowed when she dragged a heavy tome from its shelf.

She turned past pages of exorcisms and sigils until her gaze caught on a name written in black ink that had not faded with time.

Lilith.

Queen of Demons. Dweller in shadow and flame. Her throne is said to lie in the deepest reaches of the underworld: Darkness Falls.

Angela's hand tightened on the page as though she might crush the name itself.

If Lilith was the source, then Lilith had to be destroyed.

Chapter LXX — Darkness Falls

Orchid Fair Guildhall — Angela's War Table

By nightfall, Angela was drafting orders.

She would gather the best blades and the most faithful hearts.

And yes, Los would come.

If the demon had touched him, then they would face her together.

She looked at the map spread before her, her hand resting on the mark where one entrance to Darkness Falls lay in Camelot Hills.

"This ends at the source," she murmured.

The Refusal

Castilian Embassy — Camelot

The knock came heavy, like a summons.

Los opened the door to find Angela standing there, armored and resolute, a small company of Paladins and two Clerics waiting in the street behind her. The moonlight gleamed off their shields and plate.

"With you, we'll be eight," she said without preamble. "We're going to slay a demon in Darkness Falls."

His hand moved towards his chest before he stopped it.

"I'm busy," Los replied flatly.

Her brow furrowed. "The realm is in danger. It needs you."

His shoulders sank as he looked away. "The realm is always in danger."

She took a step closer. "The realm needs you—"

The ring burned against his chest. Lilith's fingers. The dark.

"No."

"—I need you."

The words collided in the doorway.

Los went still.

The word came out sharp, too fast, before she'd even finished. He had meant it for the realm, but the way it landed... it cut her directly.

Her eyes widened—hurt flashing before it hardened into anger.

"Then I don't need you either!" she screamed, voice rising in the quiet street. She turned on her heel.

"Angela—wait, I—"

But she was already striding back to the others, snapping orders. In moments, the company was marching away, cloaks swaying in the night wind.

From the doorway, Los stood silent, throat tight with words that had come too late.

He wanted to call after her.

He wanted to explain.

Instead, his hand closed around the ring beneath his shirt.

Angela did not look back.

She would save him—she'd sworn it to herself—even if she had to do it without him.

The Counsel

The door shut behind him, leaving only the quiet creak of the timbers and the weight of what had just happened.

Los stood there for a long moment, staring at nothing, until a voice came from the side room.

"You are not going after her?"

Ramón stepped into the light, carrying a long-wrapped bundle. His eyes searched Los's face.

"I can't," Los said. It came out flat, but the truth was heavier than the words.

Ramón didn't argue. Not at first. He simply set the bundle on the table and unwrapped it. A sword lay within, its crossguard shaped like outstretched wings, the steel bright even in the dim lamplight.

"You love her, do you not?"

Los didn't answer with words. His hand went to his chest, closing around the ring beneath his shirt.

Ramón's voice softened.

"Don Lorenzo... do not let the dead make every choice for the living."

He stepped forward, placing the sword in Los's hands.

"This was delivered while you were in Midgard. From the Church. A holy blade, consecrated to cut through the filth of Darkness Falls. It has waited long enough for you to claim it."

The weight was solid.

Righteous.

Ramón began fastening Los's armor without asking permission, buckling each plate with the ease of long habit.

When the last strap was pulled tight, Los slung the holy sword across his back.

He looked at Ramón.

His trusted valet.

"Gracias. For everything."

Ramón gave a short nod, stepping back.

"Bring her home."

Los had avoided Darkness Falls until now.

But tonight, he was going in.

Not for the realm.

For her.

The Rescue in Darkness Falls

Camelot Hills — The Ruins of Darkness Falls

The wind bit at Los's face as he rode hard through the cold night, his horse's breath steaming in the dark. His cloak snapped behind him, the holy sword Ramón had pressed into his hands lying across his back like a promise... or a sentence.

He crested the ridge upon which stood the old ruins and drew rein. The skeletal remains of a long-forgotten fortress loomed before him, its stones blackened and cracked by fire and time. No banners. No sounds of life. Only the sickly pale glow spilling from the yawning arch at its heart.

Los dismounted without a word. His boots touching the cursed earth. The air at the threshold was warmer. Foul. Thick with the copper sting of old blood.

He stepped inside.

The light swallowed him.

The world shifted.

Stone became obsidian. Torches burned with unnatural fire. The stench of sulfur crawled into his lungs. Before him, vast stairs plunged into the abyss. Shadows moved in the deep, hulking and inhuman. Somewhere far off came the clash of steel.

He descended, blade in hand.

He found their trail soon enough: a broken spear still slick with blood, a collapsed winged fiend with its throat cut, a smear of ichor leading deeper.

The sounds of battle grew sharper.

Voices.

Steel striking steel.

He passed a side passage, charred-smelling and half-hidden, with a glowing portal like the one he had entered—a back way. He marked it, then moved towards the noise.

Los burst into the large chamber just as the fight tilted towards disaster.

Angela's shield arm sagged under the weight of blows. One cleric lay unmoving. Another was pinned against the wall by a snarling beast. A Paladin's sword arm streamed blood.

And towering above them was Lilith.

Her true form stood revealed, cloven hooved, claws like scythes, beauty stretched like a cruel mask over nightmare.

Los's voice rang out, the first notes of his chant rolling like thunder through the cavern. Light clung to battered warriors. Strength returned to failing limbs, and the clerics' prayers burned hotter.

Lilith's head turned.

Her eyes locked on him.

"Out!" Los shouted. "Back the way you came—move!"

Angela's head snapped towards him, shock and relief in her eyes.

He met her gaze.

Go.

For one heartbeat, she looked as though she might refuse.

Then she hauled a cleric to his feet, rallying the survivors towards the exit.

Los held the chamber.

He chanted and struck anything that came too close. Light flared from his blade. A fiend recoiled. A Paladin stumbled through the passage. Then the clerics.

Then Angela, last of all, looked back.

"I am right behind you." Los assured her.

Then they were gone.

Only Los remained with Lilith.

Lilith spoke then, her voice for him alone, low and cutting beneath the clash of battle.

"Is this the one you rejected me for?"

Los said nothing.

"Is she your little whore, then? Will you tell her about me? About us?"

Her smile sharpened.

"About the child I carry?"

Los's grip faltered for one brief instant.

"Or is that why she is here?"

The ground shuddered, and her smile broke.

From the darkness beyond the chamber, something vast emerged: a writhing mass of stolen flesh, faces screaming silently from its shifting bulk. Arms and claws flailed within it.

Legion, the Devourer of Souls.

Los turned to run, but the floor cracked beneath him.

He hit the stone hard.

His sword skittered across the floor.

Two Hearts

Angela stumbled out of the portal with the survivors, armor scorched, breath ragged. They waited — one breath. Two. Three.

Los hadn't followed.

She looked at the others, then turned without a word and plunged back into the hellish light.

The chamber was chaos.

Stone split and smoked. Legion's bulk coiled like a living mountain. In its grasp, Los hung limp, armor buckling inward.

Angela's gaze fell to the sword lying between them.

A Church-forged holy blade, unmistakable in its consecrated design.

She had not yet earned one of her own.

But in this moment, it did not matter.

She seized it.

The consecrated steel flared white-hot in her grip. Legion recoiled, its bulk spasming under the blade's purity.

Angela charged, a cry tearing from her throat.

Every ounce of fear, fury, and love drove the blade into the heart of the mass.

Light exploded through the chamber.

When it faded, Legion was ash drifting through the dark.

Angela rushed to Los, sliding her arm under him and hauling him upright. He staggered, one hand gripping her shoulder, the other pressing to his ribs where Legion's grip had crushed him.

"Can you run?" she asked.

He met her eyes.

"For jou... always."

They fled into the portal together without looking back.

Chapter LXXI — In the Pale Light of Dawn

Camelot Hills — The Ruins at Dawn

The portal cast them out into the cold air of Camelot Hills.

Los nearly collapsed the moment his boots hit the grass, and Angela caught him with both arms, bracing her weight against his. His armor was battered, blackened in places, the edges of the plates warped from Legion's crushing grip. Each step was a struggle, and his breath came ragged, as if every breath had to fight past pain and exhaustion to reach daylight.

They had escaped.

They were alive.

But the world felt unnaturally still. The other Paladins and clerics stood in a silent half-circle, their faces pale from what they had seen below. None spoke.

It was one of the clerics who broke the silence at last, his voice thin with what he had witnessed.

"The demon queen. Did she fall?"

Angela looked to Los.

He was staring back at the ruins, at the pale glow dying in the arch, and for one moment his face belonged to a stranger.

"No," he said. "Only her creature."

Angela's jaw tightened. The Bishop's words moved through her like cold water. *Cut it away at the root, lest the corruption return.*

"Then this is not finished," she said quietly.

Los said nothing.

He did not trust himself to.

Angela kept her arm firmly around him, unwilling to let go. She could feel the tremor in his body as she reached up and began working at the buckles of his ruined armor. The

plates came free one by one, clinking against the hard ground, revealing the sweat-damp linen beneath and the hard, uneven thud of his heartbeat beneath her hand.

His head turned towards her, his eyes, shadowed by fatigue, fixed on hers with a clarity that stole her breath.

"I love jou," he said, soft and sincere.

The words were not shouted over battle.

They were not mumbled in passing.

They were raw. Unguarded. Spoken as if nothing mattered except that she heard them.

Angela froze. Her fingers stopped on the next buckle. Warmth rose in her cheeks, the ruins around them fading into a blur. For once, she had no command to give, no order to make, only the pounding in her chest.

Then he said it.

The thing she had never expected to hear from him.

Not like this.

"Marry me."

Her breath caught. "Los, I—"

The words failed her. Her hand found the side of his face, fingers brushing into his hair before she pulled him down and kissed him.

The cold, the blood, the smoke—all of it fell away.

When their lips parted, his arms closed around her, holding her as if letting go might undo the moment. She pressed her head against his chest, listening to the uneven rhythm of his heart, her tears dampening the edge of his tunic.

"I love you too," she whispered, her voice breaking as she said it.

Around them, the others stared, wide-eyed and silent, their armor still bearing the black soot of Darkness Falls. These were warriors who had just faced demons in the deepest pit of Albion, yet this seemed somehow greater.

More impossible.

But neither of them noticed the onlookers.

For that single heartbeat, there was no Darkness Falls.

No realm.

No war.

Only a man and the woman who had brought him back from the dark, standing together in the pale light of morning.

The Road

Camelot Hills — Dawn

Angela stepped back first, her eyes still searching his face as if to make certain he was truly there. In her hand, she held the holy sword, its glow gone now, but the steel still warm from battle.

"You dropped this," she said, offering it to him.

Los took it carefully, his fingers brushing hers on the hilt. The weight settled into his grip, familiar and true.

A faint smile tugged at his lips.

"Funny," he said softly. "The first time we met, it was your sword I was returning."

Her brows lifted at the memory.

Ellan Vannin.

The mud underfoot, the smoke and blood in the air. A troll had crashed through their line and lifted her clean off the ground by the neck. She had lost her blade... and then he had been there. His own sword had been driven deep into the creature, and he had grabbed hers from the dirt and fought with it, ordering her to fall back while he tried to help hold the Midgard line at bay.

"You saved me from that troll," she said quietly.

His smile deepened.

"And when I came to your home to return your sword, you challenged me to a spar."

"That was when I gave you a blow on the chin with my shield," she added, the ghost of a smile breaking through.

He chuckled, low and tired. "Jes... I remember."

The moment lingered as they walked to where the horses waited, dew silvering the grass, the sky paling towards morning.

The others were already mounting up. A weary cleric gave Los what blessing she could spare to mend his broken ribs before turning her horse towards Camelot, the other Paladins falling in beside her.

Angela watched them go, then looked back to Los.

"Camelot?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Humberton."

She did not question it.

They mounted side by side. Without another word, they set their course across the hills. The ruins of Darkness Falls sank back into shadow behind them, pale dawn stretching over the land ahead.

The road curved into the shelter of the woods, a road that led away from the court, the politics, and the eyes of the realm. For now, it would carry them towards quiet miles, and towards each other.

The Ring Between Them

Humberton

They had taken a room in Humberton Keep for the night. The chamber, meant for a lord, was quiet save for the low flicker of candlelights. Its glow fell over the bed, the wine-stained table, and a simple white cloak he had folded carefully set aside, as though it were holy.

Angela lay with her head against his chest, her fingers tracing slow, unthinking circles along his skin. The sheets lay tangled around them, warmth still clinging from the closeness they had only just shared. His arm was around her, steady and protective, as though even now he feared someone might come to take her away.

Her fingers slowed.

There were wounds she understood: the dark bruising where Legion had nearly crushed him, the raw places where armor had bitten deep.

But there were others.

Fresh lines crossed his back. Half-healed cuts. Scars that she suspected had not been there before Midgard. A thin pale mark near his shoulder. A rougher one lower down, still tender beneath her touch.

She wondered what had happened to him beyond the sea.

What he had survived, and hidden, behind that familiar foolish smile.

She shifted slightly, her lips brushing his collarbone. Her hand drifted upward until it found it.

The ring.

She stilled.

Her fingertips brushed it once, then closed gently around it. Not to take it—just to touch it. To hold it for a moment.

Los froze. His breath caught. His chest tightened. Every part of him tensed beneath her hand. She was touching it—the one thing he kept sacred. For a heartbeat he wanted to seize her wrist, to pull her hand away, to guard the last thing he had left.

"You always wear it," she said softly.

He didn't answer.

Her cheek rested against his chest, her voice low and steady when she spoke again.

"Even now—it's still here. Between us."

He remained silent. Not out of indifference, but as though words themselves might shatter something too deep to repair.

Angela didn't press. Her hand stayed over the cord. Her eyes closed briefly. She drew a slow breath before speaking again.

"I never asked. I did not want to pry. But I've always known."

She swallowed once, then—softly:

"Is it hers?"

He swallowed hard, and she felt the movement beneath her cheek.

His mouth opened, then closed again. The words stuck—brittle, fragile.

Then—barely audible:

"Jes."

There was a long pause.

"She died in my arms."

His voice wasn't rough. It was small. As though just saying it caused a deep unyielding pain. But as he said it, he held her closer.

Angela nodded softly against his chest. She didn't move her hand. Didn't pull away.

"I am not asking you to let her go," she whispered. "I only need to know... that there is still room in your heart for me as well."

Los finally turned towards her. His hand lifted—slow, careful—and rested over hers where she held the ring.

His eyes were not wet, but his jaw was tight and his breath uneven.

"I do not know how to take it off," he said. "I am afraid if I do... I will lose her again. I will lose all I have left of her."

Angela leaned up slightly. Their foreheads touched.

"Then do not take it off."

He did not answer. He only pulled her closer and buried his face in her shoulder.

And for once, he did not reach for the ring.

He reached for her.

His voice came quiet and frayed.

"I love jou."

Angela inhaled softly—slow and steady. Not surprised. Just full.

Her hand moved from the cord. Slowly. Gently. Letting go. She slipped her arms around him instead, drawing him into her.

"I love you too."

And then it happened.

A tremble passed through him. Then another. His breath hitched. The tears came—not loud, not dramatic, but raw. Silent. Steady.

At last, a grief long-bound finally unspooled.

Angela said nothing. She just held him. One hand on his back, the other cradling the back of his head, fingers in his hair. Her thumb gently rubbing the back of his neck.

She didn't pull him from the ring. She simply held him, quietly reminding him that he did not have to choose.

That he could carry both love and loss.

That he was still loved.

Chapter LXXII — Rumors and Red Sashes

Orchid Fair Guildhall — Evening

The fire in the war room burned low, casting long shadows across the map table as the door swung open.

Boots on stone. The smell of travel and cold air.

Prox looked up first, his brows rising.

"Well, look who finally decided to grace us with his presence."

Romao leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers over his stomach.

"We were about to send out a search party. A very expensive one."

From her place near the hearth, Tamara glanced up from her ledger, one brow arched.

"A whole day, and not a word from either of you. We expect that from Los—but not from you, Angela."

Amaranthia set down her tea with exaggerated slowness, the corner of her mouth twitching upward. Julia, perched on the arm of a chair, stared between the two newcomers like she'd caught them sneaking in past curfew.

"Where have you two been?" Romao asked, his smirk edging towards trouble.

Los shot Angela a sidelong glance. She stood beside him in the doorway, her cheeks already warming under the collective stare.

"Nowhere special," Los said lightly.

Julia's brow arched.

"We heard the rumors."

Angela's eyes narrowed.

"What rumors?"

"That he proposed," Tamara said flatly.

The room went still. Prox's eyes widened. Romao's smirk sharpened like a drawn blade.

Angela's blush deepened.

"I... think I will go check on the supplies in the next room."

"I'll help," Julia said instantly, springing up.

"So will I," Amaranthia added, rising with a grin far too knowing.

Tamara closed her ledger with a decisive snap.

"This I have to hear."

The four women swept into the adjoining chamber, their voices dropping into a hushed, but suspiciously gleeful murmur.

That left Los alone with his oldest friends.

Romao leaned forward, forearms on the table.

"So...?"

Los dropped into the nearest chair with a groan, stretching his legs out like he'd been riding for a week.

"So what?"

Prox leaned an elbow on the table, swirling his wine.

"Don't play dumb. What happened?"

"Nothing happened," Los said—though his tone suggested otherwise.

Romao gave him a look.

"Los..."

He sighed, glancing at the closed door, then back to them.

"I have not asked her father yet. And I do not want the whole of Camelot knowing before that happens."

Romao's smirk softened into something almost sincere.

"So it is true."

"I did not say that."

"You didn't have to," Prox said, grinning. "Your face said it for you."

In the adjoining chamber

Angela stood with her arms crossed, trying and failing to keep her expression neutral.

Julia leaned in like a conspirator.

"Was it romantic?"

"Where were you when he asked?" Amaranthia pressed.

"Did he go down on one knee?" Tamara asked, deadpan, but watching closely.

Angela shook her head.

"It's... private."

"That's not a no," Amaranthia murmured, hiding her smirk behind her hand.

"It's not public," Angela corrected firmly—but the blush betrayed her.

"And until he speaks with father, it stays between us."

The sisters exchanged glances—half amusement, half approval—and for once, they didn't press.

Back in the war room

Prox poured three cups of wine and slid one towards Los.

"To secrecy," he said.

Los took it with a faint smile.

"Jes. To secrecy."

The fire popped. Laughter murmured behind the door.

And for now, the truth stayed exactly where they wanted it—between friends who were like family, and two very suspicious sisters. But the rumor was already spreading throughout Camelot.

The Promise

Outside the Brass Lantern — Late Afternoon

Los went to the school tucked away on the second floor of the notorious Brass Lantern tavern, because he told himself it was routine.

He told himself he was simply checking the roofline, the condition of the back door—things a man should do when he'd promised Margaret supplies and safety.

He told himself many things.

What he found was a boy standing near the wall, maybe twelve, maybe thirteen, thin as a reed, listening too hard to a man Los didn't know.

The man wore a plain hooded cloak.

But there was a strip of red cloth wrapped around his waist.

Los slowed.

The man wasn't shouting. He wasn't preaching. His voice was soft. Friendly. Like a secret shared.

"...you want to be a Paladin," the man was saying, as if he'd known it before the boy admitted it aloud.

The boy's shoulders tightened. "Yes."

The man gave a little laugh, kind, not mocking. "Of course you do. Who wouldn't? Shining armor. The Light. All the songs. You want to matter."

The boy swallowed, eyes fixed on him as he nodded.

"And you think they'll let you," the man continued, gentle as a knife. "You think they'll look at you—at your hands, at your boots, at the school you come from—and say, yes, this one belongs in our hallowed halls."

The boy's mouth opened. Then closed again.

"They won't," the man said, still soft. "Not for you. Not for people like us. They'll smile. They'll praise you for dreaming. And then they'll keep the doors closed."

Los could not make out what the man was saying past the bustle of the city so he approached to hear.

The man's eyes flicked up. He saw the sword at Los's hip, the posture, the presence, and his smile stayed in place a fraction too long.

Like a man realizing he'd wandered into the wrong alley.

But he didn't run.

He only tilted his head as if to say, see? I told you. Even he's watching.

The red-sashed man turned back to the boy. "Tell me something. How many from your school have been sent on to be Paladins?"

The boy hesitated.

The man waited, patient.

"...None," the boy admitted.

"And clerics?" the man asked, voice still mild.

The boy's cheeks flushed. "None."

The man nodded as if confirming a simple arithmetic. "There you are."

Then his voice softened again.

"...and you're strong," the man continued saying. "You can feel it, can't you? Stronger than the work they give you. Stronger than the life they planned for you."

The boy swallowed, eyes fixed on him.

"You want to matter," the man continued. "We can make you matter."

Los only got to hear the last part of the conversation, by the time he stopped beside the boy and looked down at him.

"Go inside, Thomas," Los said gently.

The boy didn't move.

Los's voice didn't soften, but it carried weight now. "Now."

The boy's eyes flicked between Los and the red sash. Then he turned and hurried towards the school door at the back of the Tavern.

The man straightened.

"No harm meant," he said. "Just talk."

"Jes," Los replied. "That is how it starts."

The man's smile sharpened. "I'm only telling the truth."

Los tilted his head. "And what truth would that be?"

The man spread his hands. "That he can be more than you offer him. That he does not need to beg. He does not need to bow. And to stop believing false promises." His eyes narrowed. "We offer a chance."

Los's gaze was steady. "Jou offer anger."

The man's smile returned, thin and pleased. "Anger is honest."

Los's own smile was thin. Not friendly. Not cruel.

Honest.

"Anger is easy," he said quietly. "It is also juseful—for men who want children to bleed for them."

The man scoffed. "You don't know anything about it, foreigner."

Los took one step forward.

Not threatening.

Just certain.

"I know enough to tell jou to stay away from the children."

The man's gaze slid past Los towards the school windows, towards the silhouettes watching from inside, and for the first time his mask slipped. A flash of annoyance. Calculation.

"And if I don't?"

"Jou will stay away from the children."

Then the man gave an exaggerated formal bow as the school children watched from the window, a performance, a reminder before he turned to leave.

As he walked away, he called back over his shoulder, still casual.

"You can't stop it. They'll come to us. Everyone will, in the end."

Los watched him go until he disappeared around the corner.

Only then did Margaret appear in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron, face tight with worry.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Los nodded once. "They've been here before?"

Margaret's mouth pressed into a line.

"A few times," she admitted. "Always polite. Always smiling. Always talking about 'change' like it's a lullaby."

Los's eyes stayed on the street.

"They ask the children what they want," Margaret added, quieter. "Then they tell them why they can't have it."

Los's jaw tightened.

He didn't look angry.

He looked awake.

"I will speak to the boy," he said. "And then to the guards."

Margaret studied him. "And tell them what?"

Los exhaled through his nose.

"I'll think of something," he said.

He turned towards the door.

"But this ends today."

The Lies We Tell

Schoolroom — Moments Later

Los stepped into the doorway and the school room went quiet in the way it always did whenever he entered.

He didn't smile.

He did not lecture.

He only looked at them: ink-stained fingers, too-big tunics, eyes that had already learned too much fear.

Then he pointed, not at any child in particular, but towards the street beyond the window.

"If anyone with a red sash speaks to jou," he said calmly, "jou do not listen."

A few brows knit. One boy, the same boy from the yard, stood too straight, as if he meant to be brave.

Los's gaze settled on him.

The boy's voice came out fast. "I want to be a Paladin."

The room held its breath.

Los did too.

Just for a heartbeat.

Because the boy's want wasn't foolish. It wasn't childish. It was the kind of want that could keep someone alive... or get them killed.

Los's eyes flicked briefly to Margaret at the back of the room.

She didn't move. But she was watching him like a verdict.

Los returned his gaze to the boy.

"Study," he said, steady. "Study hard. Get stronger."

The boy frowned. "And then I can be a Paladin?"

Los lifted a hand, gentle and final. "First. Study. And get stronger."

The boy's mouth worked, trying to fight for the dream.

Los didn't let him.

"When you have done that," Los continued, voice low enough that it felt like a promise without becoming one, "I will start jou training with the armsmen."

A ripple went through the room.

The boy's eyes widened. Hope—hot and immediate—flared in him.

"But... Paladins—" he began again.

Los's gaze held him. Kind, but unyielding.

"The rest will come in time," Los said.

The boy nodded, because he had to. Because Sir Los had spoken.

Los let the silence sit a moment, like a weight settling where it belonged.

"So what will we do when those men come around?" he asked the room.

A small chorus of nervous voices answered. "Go to Lady Margaret."

Los nodded once.

"Good, or come to me. Now back to jour lessons Ninos, and I will see to it Margaret has some treats for jou after lessons today." he said—and left as quietly as he'd come.

Margaret watched him go.

She didn't look relieved.

She looked like a woman who had just heard a truth spoken out loud for the first time—

And realizing how long it had been true.

If the right children were ever going to reach those halls she knew, someone would have to open those doors for them.

Whether Los meant to or not.

Chapter LXXIII — The Promise Before Excalibur

Late Autumn

Weeks passed.

Los still had not asked Angela's father. There was always something in the way: a patrol to lead, a keep to reinforce, a council summons that could not be ignored. The war did not pause for matters of the heart.

The guild stayed busy. Patrol requests piled up like snow against the door. Keep captains sent for extra men. The map table in the war room was never bare, the candles never burned all the way down before someone lit a new one.

And yet... things had changed.

Angela was warmer now, the steel in her voice softened by smiles that came more easily. She laughed more, lingered longer in the hall after the day's work was done. She wanted, desperately, for everyone to know.

But the time wasn't right.

Not yet.

Her father, Lord Burns, would not be quick to approve. She was his daughter, a lady by birth. Los was a knight, true, and an ambassador besides — titles that might raise his station enough to stand at her side. But Lord Burns was a man of the old ways. Even if he agreed, the match would still need the crown's blessing.

Royal permission.

So they waited.

Sometimes, in the quiet moments between duties, Los thought of another hearth far across the sea. Of Sigrún's cloak folded away hidden. Of Sighildr's small hand closing around his finger. Of the life that had happened in Midgard like a fever dream and yet had been real.

He did not speak of it.

Not to Angela.

Not yet.

Whatever he owed Sigrún, whatever he owed the child who bore his name in a language not his own, he did not know how to carry any of it into this life without breaking something.

So he carried it silently.

And beneath that weight lay another, darker one, which he did not carry so much as bury.

The Cotswold inn. The rain against the glass. The night his despair had opened a door that should have stayed shut, and the thing that had walked through it wearing a woman's face.

Angela had touched the scars in the dark at Humberton and had not asked about them. That mercy was the heaviest thing he owned. A dozen times since, the truth had risen in his throat — only to be buried in the quiet after her laughter, the softness of her smile — a dozen times he had swallowed it, telling himself the same lie every man tells at such a threshold.

After. I will tell her after.

After her father. After the crown. After there was enough built between them that the truth could not carve it all away.

So he carried that in silence too.

Then Angela would appear in the shadows, warm and alive, and for a little while the silence became easier to bear.

They held hands only when they thought no one was looking. They slipped away from the guildhall for walks that always seemed to have no particular destination. Once, Prox caught them returning together from the river path at sunset. He didn't say a word — but his smirk lasted all evening.

It was Ramón who finally broke the silence around the rumors.

Los found him in the embassy's study, seated behind a desk littered with sealed scrolls and reports from across Albion. The valet didn't look up right away, just finished signing a dispatch before setting the quill aside.

"Close the door, Don Lorenzo," Ramón said.

Los did so, crossing the room with the ease of long familiarity. "If this is about the patrol to Berkstead, I—"

"It is not." Ramón leaned back, studying him with those sharp, measuring eyes. "It is about the lady."

Los's brows rose, but he said nothing.

"You know," Ramón went on, "as ambassador, you would need permission from both crowns to marry her. Albion and Castilla."

"I am aware."

"And as her father is a lord, there will be... expectations. Traditions. She is a high noble, and you..." He gestured vaguely, as if the titles Knight and Ambassador were pieces on a game board he could slide into place, but not quite crown. "You are close. Perhaps close enough."

Los gave a short smile. "Jou do not approve?"

"I think it's a smart match," Ramón said without hesitation. "And I think there is love between you." He leaned forward, voice quieter now. "Which is why I tell you this: tread lightly. The wrong step here could cost more than you think."

Los inclined his head, the weight of the warning settling over him like armor. "Jes. I understand."

But when he left the embassy that night, Angela was waiting for him at the end of the lane, half-hidden in the shadows.

His hand found hers.

And just like that, Ramón's caution seemed very far away.

The summons came at dawn.

A royal courier rode up the lane, his cloak still damp with rain. The scroll he carried bore the wax seal of Castle Excalibur's garrison, its message simple: urgent, but polite.

Castle Excalibur needed a knight to take a week of watch. Orchid Fair was on the rotation, but every sword in the guild was tied up: patrols, escort duties, keep assignments. No one could be spared.

No one but Los.

He read the scroll once, then again, and set it on the war table.

"I will go," he said.

Angela looked up from the supply ledger she had been working over. "You?"

He nodded. "Jou have no one else to send. And guarding Excalibur is an honor. I can manage a week on the hill."

She set the quill down, studying him. "When you return..."

"When I return," he finished for her, "I will speak to jour father."

Her eyes softened, but there was urgency beneath them. "Soon, Los. Time is running out—for both of us."

"I promise," he said.

And he meant it.

By midmorning, he was on the road. The late autumn wind cut along the ridges as he rode northeast, the weight of his vow pressing heavier than the armor on his shoulders.

Castle Excalibur came into view late in the afternoon: a proud, compact fortress rising from the crown of a high green hill. Its pale walls caught the last light of day, and its banners snapped in the wind. Legends said the blade's resting place had once lain here, and that the hill remembered every battle fought in its shadow.

As Los rode through the gate, he glanced back towards the road south—the road that, in seven days, would take him back to Angela and the promise he could not afford to break.

Chapter LXXIV — Last Stand at Excalibur

Sixth Day on the Hill

Castle Excalibur — Dusk, the Sixth Day of the Watch

Six days on the hill, and Sir Los Ortiz had learned the garrison of Castle Excalibur the way he learned every place he was posted: by its food, its complaints, and its dice games.

There were twenty five of them. Career men, mostly, of the sort the great campaigns never wanted and every quiet fortress could not do without. Sergeant Hewe had held this wall for twenty years and spoke of the stones the way other men spoke of old dogs — with insult and absolute devotion. Brother Cadoc, the garrison cleric, cooked for all of them, prayed for all of them, and cheated all of them at dice with a serenity that Los found frankly inspiring. And there was Dannet.

Dannet was sixteen, this was his first posting, and he had spent six days working up the courage to ask the question that had been living behind his teeth since the Spaniard rode through the gate.

On the sixth evening, on the wall at dusk, he finally asked it.

"Is it true? About the dragon?"

Los did not look over. "Which part?"

"All of it."

"Then jes," Los said. "Except the parts that are exaggerated."

Dannet nodded seriously.

"Those are also true," Los added.

Down the wall, Sergeant Hewe made a sound that in a lesser man might have been a laugh.

The last light was going out of the west. Below them the hill fell away in long green shoulders toward the treeline, and behind them the keep rose pale against the darkening sky, and in its chapel, under lock and prayer and twenty years of Hewe's suspicion, rested the relic they were all here to guard.

Excalibur's Sheath.

"They say," Dannet offered, "that the man who bears it cannot bleed. Not from any wound."

"That is the legend," Brother Cadoc agreed, coming up the stair with bread that was still warm. "The sword won the battles. The sheath brought the King home from them."

Hewe took his bread without ceremony. "Shame it does not work for the rest of us."

Los smiled and said nothing.

One more night. Tomorrow his relief would arrive, and he would ride south, and by the second evening he would stand in front of Lord Burns and keep the promise that had been pressing on him heavier than his armor since the morning he left.

Soon, he thought, and for once the word had nothing to do with the ring against his chest.

That was when the birds went quiet.

Hewe noticed it first — the man had twenty years of standing watch on this hill, he knew every tree and sound. He stopped chewing and set down the bread. He looked at the treeline the way a shepherd looks at a still hedge.

Then, from the darkness under the trees, faint and sweet and utterly wrong, came music.

A harp. A voice beneath it, rising and falling in a tongue none of them spoke and all of them knew.

A war-song of Hibernia.

"Bard," Hewe said, and the word came out like a curse.

The treeline began to glow. Not torches — torches flickered. These lights were steady and green-white and cold, and they came on in ranks, and they did not end. They filled the dark under the trees the way stars fill a clear night, one at a time and then all at once, until the whole southern wood burned with them.

Dannet's voice came out very small.

"How many is that?"

Nobody answered him.

An army.

The Riders South

Captain Smith read the hill in one long look from the gatehouse and did not waste breath pretending.

"We cannot hold this," he said. "Not against that. We hold long enough for word to reach the nearby Caers and Castle Sauvage, and we make them pay for every stone they take. That is the whole of the plan, gentlemen."

"The roads will be watched," Hewe said.

"They will," Smith agreed. "So we will not trust everything to one road."

Los looked towards the stable yard.

"Four riders," he said. "One for each stronghold."

Smith followed his gaze, then nodded.

"One for Boldiam. One for Renaris. One for Benowyc. One for Castle Sauvage."

He looked around at the gathered men.

"One warning may be stopped. Four are harder to silence."

Orders moved quickly.

Smith chose three experienced riders for the nearby Caers, giving each a sealed dispatch and a separate road down the hill. They would leave minutes apart, forcing the Hibernians to divide their attention—or gamble on which rider carried the warning that mattered most.

Then Smith looked towards Dannet.

"You ride for Castle Sauvage."

The boy's face changed at once.

"No, Captain. My place is here."

"Your place is where I order it," Smith said. "You are the fastest rider in this garrison, and Sauvage is the longest road."

Dannet looked towards Los, as though hoping the Spaniard might argue for him.

Los did not.

Instead, he stepped closer and placed the dispatch into the boy's hands.

"Listen to me," Los said quietly. "Every man on this wall can swing a sword. What we need is someone who can ride like the wind."

Dannet's jaw tightened.

"They will say I ran away."

"They will say you went for help," Los replied. "Assuming you stop arguing and go."

Smith pointed towards the stable yard.

"You heard him. Mount up."

The first three riders left through separate posterns as darkness settled over the hill.

One rode east for *Caer Benowyc*.

Another cut north-east towards *Caer Renaris*.

The third drove south-east for *Caer Boldiam*.

Shouts rose from the Hibernian pickets below. Arrows climbed into the dark. Green-white fire flashed across the slopes as the enemy tried to decide which rider mattered most.

Then Dannet went.

They opened the southern postern for him at full dark.

Los watched from the wall as horse and boy raced down the hill like something spilled. He heard the shouts rise from the trees and saw the first arrows reach after him. Then an orange bloom of eldritch fire lit the whole slope for one terrible heartbeat.

When the light died, the hoofbeats were still going.

Los let out the breath he had been holding.

There had been twenty-four men in the garrison.

And one Spaniard.

Four now rode through the dark with Excalibur's fate divided among them.

Twenty-one remained upon the hill.

The Arithmetic of the Hill

The first assault came at midnight, and it was almost polite.

Rangers seeded the battlements with arrows to keep heads down while catapults began throwing stones against the southern wall. The first shots landed short. One struck the hillside below the keep. Eventually, they found their range and began battering the walls.

Then the ram appeared.

It came slowly up the southern road beneath a roof of timber and wet hides, pushed by men who kept their heads low and trusted the Rangers above them to keep the walls clear.

The walls were not the question.

The gate was.

Every man on the hill knew the only way into Castle Excalibur was through those doors, and the Hibernians had brought a ram to knock upon them.

Captain Smith let them come.

"Hold," he ordered.

Crossbowmen waited behind the battlements. Casters prepared their spells.

"Hold."

The ram crept closer.

The harp played beneath it all, sweet and steady in the darkness.

Smith lowered his hand.

"Now."

The hill answered.

Crossbows snapped. Spells burst among the men beside the ram, throwing bodies aside and driving others away from its handles. Rangers replied at once. Arrows struck stone, wood, armor, and flesh. Eldritch fire climbed the battlements in green-white bursts.

Los moved wherever Smith sent him — from the wall-walk to the gatehouse, from the gatehouse to the southern parapet, carrying orders, pulling wounded men out of the open, and lending his chants wherever the line threatened to bend.

Then the ram reached the doors.

Its iron head struck with a sound that shook dust from the gatehouse ceiling.

Once.

Then the men pushing it broke beneath the fire from above.

The survivors abandoned the machine and fled down the road, leaving it crooked before the gate.

It cost Hibernia a handful of men to learn the hill's temper.

It cost the hill three.

Los knew all three names.

That was the trouble with six days and a small garrison. He knew Aldwin had a girl waiting in Snowdonia. He knew Peytr owed Cadoc four silver from Tuesday's dice. He knew the third man had complained every morning that Cadoc burned the porridge.

The rain of arrows and spells was too fierce to reach them. By the time the assault broke and Los could cross the wall, all three were dead.

Now he knew what they looked like by lantern light with their faces covered.

There was no time to know anything more.

The harp had started again.

Twenty-one had become eighteen.

The wounded came down to the chapel, where Brother Cadoc worked through his prayers the way a miser worked through coin — counting, always counting.

A cleric's power was not a well.

It was a purse.

And it emptied.

"How many blessings do you have left?" Los asked him near the second hour.

Cadoc did not look up from the man whose shoulder he was closing.

"Fewer than you are planning to need," he said. "So plan better—and give me time to recover."

The second assault came before dawn, and there was nothing polite about it.

The Hibernians had found their range.

Trebuchet stones came down against the gatehouse with the slow certainty of judgment. Catapults threw fire onto the battlements. Rangers filled every opening with arrows, and the eldritch sent void-fire hammering into stone already weakened by the siege.

Under that storm came another ram.

Larger than the first.

Heavier.

Its roof was plated in timber and iron, its hides dripping water, its wheels groaning beneath the weight.

Captain Smith moved men away from each impact before the next stone fell. Hewe kept the southern wall firing. Los went wherever the shouting was worst.

The ram struck the gate.

Boom.

The doors held.

Again.

Boom.

Iron fittings screamed against oak.

Again.

Boom.

The gate held.

The tower above it did not.

A trebuchet stone struck high against the southern face. At the same moment, void-fire burst through the cracked masonry below it.

The gatehouse folded inward.

Stone, timber, and men came down together.

Sergeant Hewe was inside.

The surviving defenders drove the second ram away before sunrise, killing its crew beneath arrows and falling stone. The Hibernians withdrew just far enough to reform, leaving the machine abandoned beneath the gatehouse ruins.

In the brief silence that followed, they found Hewe at the foot of the stair he had guarded for twenty years.

Five others had died beneath the gatehouse with him.

Los stood over Hewe for as long as he could afford.

Four seconds.

Long enough to memorize what loyalty looked like when it was finished.

Eighteen had become twelve.

Dawn came up gray and indecent over a hillside black with Hibernia.

The harp played on, patient as the tide, and Los understood that the music was not for the attackers at all.

It was for the garrison.

It was to teach them the size of the sea.

He climbed what remained of the gatehouse and looked out over the ranks below.

Trebuchets stood among them now. Catapults. Another ram being assembled beneath the trees. Rangers gathered in companies. Eldritch light waited behind them with green-white light collecting around their hands.

Los did the arithmetic of the hill one final time.

The arithmetic said: today.

He had come to Albion to die.

He had never said it aloud — not to Ramón, not to Angela, not even in the confessional, where God presumably knew anyway and had been too courteous to raise it.

He had crossed the sea to find an end worth the name. An honest death in an honest fight—and, in death, to be with Risa once more.

And here it was.

On a green hill, guarding a king's legend, against odds so pure they were almost a mercy.

He waited for the old peace to come.

The quiet that had settled over him at Benowyc's gate, in the dragon's shadow, in every hopeless place where the arithmetic said today.

It did not come.

What came instead—and it startled him so badly that he laughed, alone and out loud on a broken tower at dawn—was outrage.

He had a promise to keep in the south.

He had a father to face, a question to ask, and a woman who was going to yell at him for taking so long.

Death had picked, of all the days in his life, the single most inconvenient one on which to finally hold out its hand.

"No," Los told the hillside, to nobody, in the voice of a man declining a second helping. "I am too busy to die today."

Then the drums began.

Beneath the trees, the new ram started forwards.

And the whole green sea stood up and came.

The Call to Excalibur

Castle Sauvage

The rider came at a gallop, slumped low in the saddle, clinging to consciousness by will alone. An arrow jutted from his shoulder; the edge of his cloak smoldered where fire had caught it. His horse thundered toward the gate of Castle Sauvage, hooves striking the stone like hammer blows.

"Rider inbound!" a watchman shouted from the battlements. "He looks injured!"

Sir Yvain was already striding toward the gate.

"To arms!" he bellowed. "Open the gate!"

The portcullis groaned upward in time. The horse cleared the threshold. Then the rider tumbled from the saddle, striking the cobblestones with a sickening thud. Blood smeared the ground as a guard rushed to him.

"Hibernians... Excalibur..." he rasped.

Sir Yvain dropped to a knee.

"Water! Healer! Quickly!"

Then, softer, he said, "Breathe, lad. Tell me."

"Hibernians... attacking... Castle Excalibur. Large force... cannot hold..."

Sir Yvain's jaw clenched.

"How many?"

The boy's eyelids fluttered.

"An army..."

"And defenders?"

"Twenty..." His lips trembled. "plus one."

"And one?" an armsman echoed, confused.

But Sir Yvain understood.

"He means the Spaniard."

Lady Angela Burns had been at Castle Sauvage since morning, arguing patrol rotations and supply figures with men twice her age and half her patience.

At the news of the attack, she crossed to Sir Yvain and the fallen rider.

"What of Los?" she demanded.

"Unknown," Sir Yvain said grimly.

Angela turned to the boy.

"Wake him."

Too late.

He had slipped into unconsciousness.

Angela's breath caught.

"Sound the alarm," she ordered, her voice like ice. "Get word to Camelot."

Bells tolled. Men scattered. But every soldier in Castle Sauvage already knew the truth.

By the time an army could march, Excalibur would be ash and memory.

She turned for the chamber where the mages waited.

"Prepare it," she snapped to the young mage on duty.

"My lady, that location is unstable—"

"Brave men are dying while you speak."

Within moments, five mages formed a circle on the portal pad in the courtyard, glyphs burning beneath their feet. The air thrummed with power.

"Clear your mind," the lead mage warned. "One stray thought and you may—"

But Angela had already fixed on one thought.

One man.

She poured every ounce of love, fury, and fear she had into that image.

His face.

His voice.

That infuriating smile she could not bear to lose.

She needed him.

"Now!"

The portal erupted in light and wind. Her cloak snapped like a banner as she stepped forward, into fire and magic—

And was gone.

The Last Stand

The outer gates of Castle Excalibur fell.

Splinters and fire sprayed into the smoke-dark morning. Inside, arrows hissed through the black air. The twelve remaining defenders fought their way back through the outer ward, every blow buying seconds.

Twelve became nine on the stair.

Nine became eight before the inner gate.

Captain Smith staggered through it last, a wave of spells breaking around him. He crossed three steps into the courtyard before his knees struck the stones.

"The relic..." he gasped. "Protect..."

Los caught him before he fell.

But the captain was already dead.

Eight became seven.

For one heartbeat, Los remained there with Smith's weight in his arms.

Then command fell to him.

"Bar the gate!" he shouted. "Get the wounded to the keep! Move!"

The surviving defenders dragged the inner doors shut and dropped the heavy bar into place.

For a moment, there was something almost like quiet.

The enemy reforming beyond the gate.

The wounded being carried across the courtyard towards the central keep.

Brother Cadoc moving among them with his empty purse of prayers, giving out the only things he had left: his hands and the sound of his voice.

Beyond them, the great keep rose above the courtyard, ancient and grim. Within its walls rested Excalibur's Sheath—a symbol of Albion's pride and strength, and a prize worth kingdoms.

The thing that kept a king from bleeding, Los thought, in a castle full of bleeding men.

He placed every soldier who could still use a crossbow along the courtyard wall and at the arrow slits of the keep. Those too badly wounded to stand were carried inside.

Five soldiers remained with him.

And Brother Cadoc, whose miracles were nearly spent.

Boom.

The battering ram struck the inner gate.

Boom.

Wood cracked.

Boom.

Metal screamed.

Los stepped into the center of the courtyard and unclasped his crimson-and-white cloak, letting it fall upon the stones.

Torchlight caught the edge of his blade.

"I will draw them towards me," he told the men above. "While they are looking at me, kill them."

Brother Cadoc came to him then, moving badly, one arm dark with someone else's blood or his own.

"I have one prayer left," the cleric said. "I have been saving it."

"Then save it still."

"I was saving it," Cadoc said, with the patience of a man correcting a slow student, "for you. It will hasten your swing."

He laid his hand on the Spaniard's brow, and spoke the old words, and the warmth went through Los like the memory of every hearth he had ever sat beside — Sevilla, the guildhall, a longhouse in the north he could not afford to think of now. When it faded, the weariness of the whole night had faded with it.

"Go with God, Sir Los," Cadoc said.

"And jou, Brother Cadoc."

He kissed the ring at his neck, then tucked it back beneath his armor.

Soon, he thought.

Death was but moments away.

I am sorry, Angela.

And there — with the ram thundering and the gate dying — the thought finished itself in a way it never had before. Not *I am sorry to go*.

I am sorry I could not stay.

The inner gates shattered.

Green-cloaked Hibernians poured into the courtyard.

"LOOSE!" Los roared.

Crossbows snapped from the walls and arrow slits. Spells burst among the attackers. Holy light rained from the keep behind him.

Los met them in the open courtyard.

His chants rolled across the stones, and the Light burned upon him so fiercely that men in green squinted against it. At first, he fought to draw them away from the central keep.

Then he fought to kill.

They came at him in numbers, spreading into the courtyard, trying to surround him. He gave ground only when he chose, turning each retreat into another angle for the crossbowmen above.

A champion's blade turned against his pauldron.

A spear found the seam at his hip, and he paid the spearman back with interest.

Somewhere beyond the broken gates, the harp was still playing.

"Jou, Bard!" Los shouted into the smoke, parrying high and killing low. "Do jou know anything else? Jou have been playing the same song all night!"

One of the wounded crossbowmen laughed from above—a cracked, unwilling sound.

That laugh was worth more than the bolt he loosed with it.

For a time—a long time, longer than any arithmetic allowed—the courtyard belonged to one man.

But the tide grew.

Eight had become six on the wall. He heard it happen and could not look.

His breath became ragged, his arms slowing, blood seeping into his armor as the onslaught took its toll. The spells came for him now — the eldritch had found him at last, and the void-fire licked at the stones around his boots, herding him, boxing him, and every man he put down was replaced by two who had watched how he did it.

Behind him, a spear took down an Armsmen. Brother Cadoc brought a heal down on Los instead, because that was the last thing he had left to give and he gave it the way he had given everything all night — counting the cost, and paying it anyway.

Six became four.

Los saw him fall.

Then he brought the cleric back, a quick restoration before returning to the fight.

Something in him went very quiet, and it was not the peace he had waited for on the tower at dawn. It was the other thing. The old thing. The thing that had held a gate at Benowyc and stood in a dragon's shadow, and it took him by the hand now and said: a little longer.

Not for Risa.

Not for the dying.

There was a promise in the south, and he intended to be alive to keep it, and the whole green army of Hibernia had made the mistake of standing between him and a conversation with Lord Burns.

Then the Firbolg came.

A mountain of muscle and steel, roaring as it charged.

Los raised his blade.

Too slow.

A crack of white light split the smoke behind the Firbolg.

For one impossible heartbeat, the battlefield seemed to hold its breath.

And in that heartbeat, Los — falling, spent, his guard broken at last — thought with quiet resignation: *The gates of Heaven. I am coming, Risa.*

Then Angela came through.

Red and white blurred past Los.

Not Risa.

Angela.

She had torn a hole in the world rather than wait for an army.

She hit like thunder, her sword driving into the Firbolg's ribs and burying to the hilt. She wrenched it free as the creature collapsed, then wheeled, striking again and again, driving the enemy back.

Los's sword dipped to the stones.

His legs nearly gave way.

Angela was there in an instant, shielding him with her body and shield.

"I'm here," she whispered, pulling him against her.

Horns sounded from the east.

Clear.

Bold.

Albion's call.

Reinforcements from the Caers surged up the hill. The Hibernians broke, retreating into the dark.

Of twenty-one defenders, only five still breathed — four on the hill, and a boy in a bed at Castle Sauvage with an arrow-wound in his shoulder and all their lives to his name.

But the Sheath remained.

By sunrise, every road to Camelot would carry the story.

Not the bravery of all those who stood and died.

Only that Sir Los Ortiz had held the gate.

Angela at His Side

The world returned in pieces.

Pain first.

Then the weight of his body.

And lavender.

"Jes..." he murmured.

"You're awake."

Angela sat beside the bed, armor still marked by soot, hair clinging to her cheek. A cut traced her temple. She looked like she had fought the war by herself.

"Angela..."

"Don't speak. The friar says cracked ribs. Maybe worse. Bunk will be here to mend you in a moment."

He smiled faintly.

"Jou came..."

She adjusted the bandage, not meeting his eyes.

"I promised," he said softly.

She looked at him then, her own eyes red-rimmed.

"You're not getting out of speaking with father that easily."

He tried to laugh, but pain stole it away.

"Jes... I know."

Her hand stayed on his.

Then she kissed his forehead.

"Rest, Los. I'll yell at you later."

Lord Baldric Learns the News

He heard before the court did.

Cadens had already told him Los lived.

Baldric crushed the goblet in his hand.

"He survives," he said softly. "Again."

Wine dripped from his hand like blood.

He looked toward Camelot's towers.

"Then let's see if he survives what comes next."

The Ripples

The church bells tolled twice marking the hour.

Lady Triss stood alone in her study when the message came. It bore Angela's seal and was written in her hand.

Castle Excalibur attacked.

Defended by twenty-one.

Five survived.

Sir Los held the gate.

I arrived in time.

The Sheath is safe.

Triss closed her eyes.

"Never meant for quiet service," she said to herself. "Like your father."

A knock came at her door.

"Lord Baldric requests a meeting of the Orders."

Of course he does.

Chapter LXXV — The Round Table and the Trap

The Citadel of the Round Table

The round table in Camelot was rarely used—usually only when all the Orders were summoned, or times of war. Each of the great stone chairs bore the crest of a class: sword for the Paladins, sunburst for Clerics, the bow, the staff, the blade, the hammer. Fourteen in total. Fourteen orders. Fourteen powers of Albion.

On one side sat Lord Baldric, black-clad, his golden boar crest polished to a mirror shine. He opened the meeting with forced courtesy, thanking each order for sending their representatives in response to the “grave emergency.”

Around the table sat: Lady Triss of the Paladin Order sitting opposite Lord Baldric, Lady Winchell of the Clerics, Captain Rion of the Armsmen, Master Grundelth of the Wizards, Master Edric of the Infiltrators, Lieutenant Rydderac of the Scouts, and so on.

Each had brought an attendant.

Lady Triss’s attendant was Sir Los, recently returned from the siege at Castle Excalibur. Though his eyes still looked tired from battle, he stood tall and silent behind her right shoulder, formal blue and gold of his personal colors catching the light. His body mended by the miraculous work of his cleric Bunk.

Julia stood behind Lady Winchell, her cleric’s tabard freshly pressed for the council—nervous as ever in a room full of officers. When she caught sight of Los, the tension in her shoulders eased. A small, wry nod—the same one she’d given him a hundred times before across the aisle of the church. It was habit now, half reassurance, half prayer.

He returned the nod, never sensing that the ground beneath his feet was about to shift.

The Meeting Begins

Baldric spoke of the Hibernian assault, the siege, the narrow escape, the sacred duty to protect the sheath of Excalibur—the relic of Albion.

"We must not allow such a disgrace again," he proclaimed. "I propose that each of the seven major keeps—Caer Benowyc, Caer Erasleigh, Caer Berkstead, Caer Hurbury, Caer Sursbrooke, Caer Renaris, and Caer Boldiam—send a standing detachment to guard Castle Excalibur at all times."

Murmurs of agreement followed.

Even Lady Triss nodded.

"It is sound," she said. "And fair. Let every region bear the burden, equally and honorably."

Baldric smiled.

And then he struck.

"And no foreigners," he added, the words dropping like poisoned arrows. "This is our relic. The soul of our kingdom. It must be protected by our own blood."

Silence fell.

All eyes turned to Lady Triss, for everyone knew whom he meant.

Her jaw tightened.

"I will remind you," she said, each word like iron, "that it was Sir Los who stood alone at the gates of Castle Excalibur. It was he who held them until aid arrived. It was he who preserved our sacred treasure."

Baldric had counted on that defense.

He stood slowly, his voice smooth with venom.

"And I would remind all," he said, "that it was Lady Angela Burns who ultimately saved the sheath. Not your bastard son."

Gasps tore across the room.

Los blinked.

He hadn't been paying attention—half-lost in thought of how he was going to approach Lord Burns—but now the word son rang like thunder.

He stepped forward instinctively.

"My Lady?" he said softly, confusion coloring the honorific.

Lady Triss's eyes flicked to him. Pain. Guilt. Panic. She raised her hand slightly.

"Stay behind me my son," she said.

She realized too late what she had just said.

Los furrowed his brow, searching her face for something—anything—that made sense.

"Jou mean that... spiritually?" he asked, voice thin. "Like a Cleric would say?"

Baldric didn't give her the chance to answer.

"No," he said flatly. "She does not."

He stepped forward—just once—and set his black gauntlet down on the round table with a deliberate tap.

"Look at him," he said, addressing the nobles now. "Look how he stares. She never told him."

He turned back to her, eyes gleaming.

"Tell him, Lady Triss!"

Lady Winchell stood, voice raised, "Lord Baldric, this is not the time—"

"Tell me what?" Los asked, his voice small. Fragile.

"Tell him," Baldric growled, "that you are his mother."

The words struck the chamber like a hammer—sharp, final, inescapable.

Julia gasped as she covered her mouth.

Lady Winchell's face drained of color.

Los didn't move. His voice came out soft—staggered.

"No... that can't be. My mother died when I was a child. In Seville."

Lady Triss rose then stepped towardss him.

"Lorenzo..." It slipped from her lips before she could stop it.

But Baldric cut in again, his voice sharpening like a knife.

"Your mother stands before you. The woman who abandoned you as a babe and sent you to live with your grandfather. She sent you away—so her career, her honor, her station would not suffer."

Silence followed, the kind that swallows a room.

Los turned slowly to Lady Triss, as if the motion alone might break something inside of him.

"How did you— know my name?"

She said it without thinking.

Lorenzo.

Not Los.

Not the name he gave to the realm, to his friends, to the court.

The name she should never have known.

Her face trembled.

She reached for him, but he stepped back, a half step, as if the world had tilted beneath him.

"Is this true?" he asked, eyes locked on hers.

Lady Triss opened her mouth, but nothing came.

He looked down. The stone beneath his boots swam in and out of focus.

"Why?" he whispered.

Lady Triss finally found the words.

"Because I was afraid."

The Revelation's Aftermath

The chamber was still as death.

She had planned speeches. What she would say, how she would tell him. But now—the deed was done.

Los stood motionless, staring at Lady Triss as though trying to see the truth of what had been said deep within her soul.

Her voice, once so steady in command, had crumbled.

"Because I was afraid," she had said.

Afraid.

Afraid of what? Of him? Of the world knowing?

His eyes burned, not with tears, but with the deep, dry ache of something torn loose inside and not yet understood. He gave no shout, no accusation. Just a silence more punishing than any blow.

Then,

"Jes... I understand."

His voice was quiet. Controlled. Spanish-accented and brittle.

"I understand many things now."

He turned to walk away, the echo of his boots on the stone was thunderous.

"Los—" Julia called out as she took a step towardss him, her hand half raised, reaching for him.

He didn't stop.

Lady Triss made to follow, but Lady Winchell caught her wrist.

"Let him go Rebecca," she whispered. "Let him breathe."

Even Lord Baldric said nothing. His work was done.

As the great doors of the chamber closed behind him, Sir Los Ortiz, Paladin of the Church, left without looking back.

The Fallout Among the Orders

As the heavy doors shut behind him, voices erupted across the chamber.

"How long have you known?" demanded Master Edric of the Infiltrators, his eyes sharp as knives, directed at Lady Triss.

"This changes everything—" said Captain Rion.

"It changes nothing," said Lady Winchell. "He has earned every honor he bears."

"But his bloodline—" began Master Grundelth.

"Is irrelevant!" Winchell snapped. "Unless blood matters more than sacrifice?"

"So he is the son of Diego." Lieutenant Rydderac demanded to know.

Some nodded. Some scowled. Some looked away.

Lord Baldric only folded his hands and sat down, content to let the storm rage.

He had done what he came to do: divide.

Not the Orders.

But her, from her son.

Lady Triss stood amid the chaos, her expression blank.

Inside, she was shattered.

The Confrontation: Angela & Lady Triss

A quiet chamber above the Orchid Fair guild hall in Camelot.

Lady Triss stood by the arched window, staring out over the skyline of Camelot. She didn't turn as Angela entered—her boots hard against the wooden floor.

The door slammed shut behind her.

"You lied to me."

Triss said nothing.

"All this time, we have been fighting beside him, bleeding beside him, burying people beside him—and you knew."

Triss finally spoke, quietly.

"I did not lie. I withheld."

Angela took a sharp step forward.

"You made me lead him. Me. You watched him run into fire, break against Midgardian steel. You saw how he suffered. And you still said nothing."

"I did what I thought best," Triss answered, trying to maintain her composure. "For Albion. For him."

"Don't you dare say that," Angela snapped, eyes ablaze. "Don't you dare use the realm as your shield."

Triss turned to face her. Her eyes, usually so calm, were heavy with regret.

"He was a child. If they had known who he was—whose blood he carried. I had to protect him."

Angela stared at her, fists clenched.

"He doesn't need protecting. He needs the truth. He's a man. A man who just found out his mother is alive. You should have told him."

Silence.

Then Triss, quietly:

"Would you have told him?"

Angela blinked, caught off guard.

"What?"

"If you had been me... Would you have told him—knowing what it could cost him? The enemies it would awaken?"

Angela hesitated. Her heart thundered.

"Yes," she whispered. "Because I love him."

That broke something in Triss. Her hand found the edge of the window for support.

"Then be patient with him," she said, voice trembling. "Because he does not know how to love a mother he never had."

"And you?" Angela asked, biting back emotion. "Do you know how to love a son?"

Triss didn't answer.

Angela stepped back, her breath shaky.

"You better learn. Before he's gone."

Then she left. The door shutting softly this time.

And Lady Triss remained alone in the silence, the cold wind of Camelot brushing her silver-gray hair.

Angela Finds Los

It was in the garden at the church that Angela found him.

She had not been invited to the round table meeting. But word spreads quickly—too quickly—especially when one of your Clerics comes running out of the hall in tears.

Now she stood beneath the arch of ivy, fists clenched, breath shallow. Across the stone path, Los Ortiz stood alone at the fountain, the wind tugging at the blue and gold of his cloak, the lion crest rippling like a wounded standard.

She didn't call his name.

She didn't need to.

"Did you know?" His voice cracked across the distance like a whip—sharp, sudden.

Angela froze.

"Did you know?" he said again, turning. His face was tight with fury, and worse—betrayal. "Was it funny to you? A great joke for the noble Lady Burns? The Castilian fool pretending to be Albion's hero?"

"No," she said, stepping closer. "No, Los—"

"Was I just some fool to pity?" he barked. "You all knew. Everyone knew but me!"

"I didn't know!" she snapped, her voice breaking under the strain. "I swear to you—I didn't know."

Los faltered. But only for a heartbeat.

"Lady Triss. Lady Triss—all this time..." he laughed bitterly. "She trained me. Lied to me. Watched me suffer."

"She thought it was the only way to keep you safe—"

"Don't," he cut her off. "Don't you dare defend her. Don't excuse it. My whole life—everything I thought I was—" he took a breath, staggered, "—was built on a lie."

Angela stepped forward again, now within arm's reach. Her voice softened.

"Los... you are still you. You're still the knight who saved my life—twice. Still the fool who makes me furious, and the man who stood alone at Castle Excalibur when all hope was lost."

"I'm not Castilian," he whispered suddenly. "Not even that was true."

Angela's breath caught.

"I was born in Albion," he said, looking down at his hands like they were foreign. "Not Seville. Not Hispania. Albion. I thought I was an outsider... but I was born here all along."

The weight of it hit him like a stone wall. He sat on the fountain's edge, hands trembling, gaze unfocused.

"Then who am I?" he asked. "A lie? A secret? Some half-blood shame hidden in plain sight?"

Angela sat beside him, her voice quiet but certain.

"You're Los Ortiz," she said. "And I didn't know—not until today."

She reached for his hand, gently. "But if I had—I would've told you. Because you're not just some knight to me."

She hesitated. Swallowed.

"You're my whole world."

He looked at her. Really looked. Eyes wide, then glassy.

"I don't know how to be him anymore."

"Then we'll figure it out," she whispered. "Together."

And in the hush of Camelot's northern garden, with the wind brushing gently through the ivy and the fountain trickling behind them, a knight shattered by truth found something unbreakable beside him. Her.

Chapter LXXVI — Brothers at the Wall

Prox and Romao Learn the Truth

The sun was at its zenith when Romao found Prox atop the western battlements, sharpening his sword in long, slow strokes.

The Paladin glanced up as his friend approached, already sensing his concern.

"You hear it yet?" Romao asked grimly, folding his arms.

Prox's jaw tensed.

"About Lady Triss?" he said. "Yes."

"About Los?" Romao pressed.

Prox paused—his whetstone stilled mid-draw.

"...He's her son."

"So it's true then." Romao let out a long sigh and leaned back against the stone. "Santa Maria..."

They stood there in silence, two young men who had bled beside their friend, shared bread, firelight, and war.

"I always wondered why she watched him like that," Prox muttered. "Didn't act like the others. She was... protective. But never soft."

Romao nodded, brushing his hand through his dark curls.

"She trained him like a soldier. Loved him like a stranger. That's what gets me."

"He doesn't know how to take it," Prox said. "Saw him earlier—he looked like someone had carved out his soul."

Romao didn't speak right away.

"He told me once," he said at last, "that he used to dream of his mother's face. Said he remembered nothing, just a voice. A warm voice." Romao shook his head. "Now he finds out she was right in front of him all along—and lied."

Prox stood, setting the whetstone aside.

"It wasn't her call alone. Others knew and kept the secret."

"Yes," Romao agreed. "But she is his mother. She should've told him."

Prox looked out over the fields beyond the wall.

"He needs us now," he said.

Romao tilted his head.

"What do we say? Sorry your whole life was a riddle wrapped in a mystery?"

Prox cracked a grin.

"Nah. We tell him he's still our brother."

Romao finally smiled too, but it was touched with melancholy.

"Even if he is the son of the most powerful woman in Albion?"

"Especially because of that," Prox said. "Means he's going to need us more than ever."

Romao pushed off the wall and patted his friend's shoulder.

"Let's go find him. Before someone else fills his head with more ghosts."

Embassy Shadows and Quiet Loyalties

The Embassy of Castile, Camelot — Late Afternoon, shortly after the Council Chamber fallout.

The embassy sat quiet beneath a darkening sky, its crimson and gold standard fluttering in the breeze above the gate—an island of foreign soil in the heart of Albion.

Romao knocked twice on the iron-banded door while Proximo stood beside him, arms folded.

"What if he doesn't want to be found?" Prox muttered.

Romao didn't answer. He knocked again—harder.

A moment later, the door opened. Ramón—Los's valet and personal secretary—stood in the doorway, expression composed, dark eyes scanning them both like a commander assessing a battlefield. He wore not livery, but the understated grey and silver of a court attaché. His sleeves were immaculate.

Ramón guided them into the main room. He was more than a servant. Los had warned them once: Use the front door. Ramón is... capable.

He studied their faces. A faint crease formed between his brows.

"You are looking for Ambassador Ortiz," he said, voice low and precise. "He is not here."

Romao's jaw tensed. "He's not at the guildhall. He's not at the Abbey either."

Prox added, "The council meeting—he left it devastated. Everyone heard what Lord Baldric said."

Ramón's gaze sharpened. "And what did Lord Baldric say?"

Romao hesitated. "That Lady Triss is... his mother."

Ramón said nothing.

Not shock. Not disbelief.

Just silence—and then the faintest sigh.

"I see," he said at last. "So. It is finally out."

Prox's eyes narrowed. "You knew?"

"If you will follow me, gentlemen," Ramón said, leading them into the study where he sat behind Los's desk and folded his hands.

"I've known since before I arrived in Camelot," he said calmly. "So has Castile. Don Flavio—his grandfather—insisted it be kept secret. Not out of shame, but out of wisdom. He understood how the world treats men born outside the law. The secret was kept... even from Lorenzo himself."

Prox blinked. "Lorenzo?"

"Lorenzo Ortiz," Ramón said evenly.

Romao exhaled, half a curse. "And no one thought to tell him."

Ramón met his gaze without flinching. "I am his steward. His secretary. His valet. And when needed, his shield. Don Lorenzo is not merely some foreign knight who rose by chance. He was of minor nobility even before Camelot. He carries the will of Castile. He represents our Kingdom in all dealings with Albion."

"But now?" Prox asked.

Ramón nodded solemnly. "Now he cannot. He is a bastard. And bastards, officially, cannot speak for the crown."

Romao frowned. "Then who represents Castile?"

"No one," Ramón replied. "Not while he lives. The court will have to send a replacement. Until they do... he is still the ambassador. But I will have to report this to the crown."

Romao stepped closer. "He's out there, Ramón. Alone. And this time... I think he might actually believe the worst. That he's nothing."

Ramón's face darkened slightly. "He is not nothing. He built something here."

He rose and opened a drawer in the sideboard behind him, pulling out a worn red leather ledger.

"He started a school after he discovered your friend Willow could not read. He gave me coin from his stipend and told me to find children in the lower quarter—those with no family names. He saw to it they were taught to read. And when they could read, he sent them to train. To become Scouts. Armsmen. Mages."

Romao stared.

"You mean to tell me—"

"He created a place for bastards and orphans," Ramón said quietly. "A small place. But one with books. With warmth. With dignity. He wanted them to have a chance in this world."

He closed the ledger with a soft thud.

"A bastard who helped other bastards," he murmured. "The irony, of course— now he is no longer able to even help himself."

Prox's voice softened. "Is there anything you can do?"

Ramón was silent for a moment.

"No," he said at first.

Then his eyes flicked to a bundle of sealed letters on the desk.

"...Let me see what can be done."

He stood.

"And gentlemen, remember this: Until I am ordered otherwise—by the King of Castile, or by the King of Albion—Don Lorenzo Ortiz remains ambassador. He may be a bastard by birth. But he is not without loyalty. Or power."

Romao nodded grimly.

"We'll find him," Prox said.

Ramón walked them to the door and paused before opening it.

"When you do," he said quietly, "remind him: even a man without a name can still carry a kingdom's honor."

Behind him, the banner of Castile stirred once more in the wind—red, gold, and unbroken.

Brothers and Blood

The Armory Below Camelot — Brothers Reunited

The air inside the stone-vaulted armory was cool and still. Lanternlight danced across rows of polished weapons and shields, but only one figure stood among them—alone.

Sir Los Ortiz sat at the edge of the wooden bench, his crimson cloak folded beside him, his sword propped against the wall. He had been staring at the leather straps on his gauntlet for what felt like hours, as if the answer to his shattered world might lie there in the threading.

Footsteps echoed.

Two sets.

He didn't look up.

"Jou here to tell me I should have known?" he asked, voice low. "That it was obvious? That I was blind?"

Romao answered first.

"We came to tell you you're not alone, Fratello."

Prox walked over and took a seat beside him, saying nothing at first.

Los finally looked at them. His eyes were red but dry. Empty.

"She lied to me my whole life," he said. "My name, my past—everything. I thought I was of Castile. I thought I came from Seville. Turns out I was born right here... in Albion."

"Yes," Prox said quietly. "But you're still you."

Romao crouched in front of him, resting his elbows on his knees, his voice softer than usual.

"Your blood might be from Camelot, but your soul? That came from battle. From honor. From pain. All the things that made you you."

Los said nothing.

"You're not just her son," Prox added. "You're our brother. That never changed. It never will."

Los looked down at his hands. The same hands that had wielded a sword across the forests of Sauvage. The same hands that had carried the dying and buried the fallen. The same hands that had once reached for a future that now felt impossible to reach.

"It changes everything."

"It changes nothing that matters," Prox said firmly.

"We followed you into hell once," Romao said. "And we'll do it again. But not until you get your head out of your own sorrow and remember who the hell you are."

A long silence passed.

Then Los spoke.

"I don't know who I am anymore."

Romao stood up, placing a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Then we'll help you remember. Together."

Prox nudged his shoulder against Los's.

"One step at a time."

At last, Los let out a quiet breath.

And then, slowly, nodded.

"Jes," he whispered. "Together."

The High Tower — Lady Triss's Private Chambers

The halls of Camelot were quiet at this hour. Only the guards that patrolled the streets at night nodded as Sir Los Ortiz passed, his boots echoing lightly on the stone steps as he ascended to the top floor of the north tower.

He didn't knock.

The heavy oak door stood slightly ajar. Beyond it, a single candle lit the room.

Lady Triss stood at the window, her silvery hair catching the moonlight, her gilded armor shed for a deep blue robe clasped at the collar with the sigil of a golden eagle.

She didn't turn as he entered.

"You knew I would come."

"Of course," she said, voice even. "You are my son."

That word — son — hit him like a sword to the ribs. He closed the door behind him.

"So it's true."

"It is."

Los paced a slow circle through the chamber, eyes roaming the books, the armor stand, the banner above the hearth — all symbols of duty and honor.

"How long?" he asked.

"Since the day I received your grandfather's letter."

He faced her now. Pain in his voice.

"And why? Why would you abandon me? Let me grow up thinking I had no mother. Why would you let me mourn a woman who wasn't even dead?"

She turned at last. Her sapphire eyes matched his.

"Because I love you."

"Love me?" he said, nearly scoffing.

"Yes," she said, stepping forward. "Enough to protect you from the world that would have crushed you before you could rise."

"You let me grow up without a Mother. You... you let me wonder if I was cursed. You watched me kneel in the Church and pray for a mother I thought I'd never know!"

"And I was there," she said. "I saw you. I wept in silence. And I stayed silent because I had to."

"Why?"

Her voice dropped, quiet but unwavering.

"Because my enemies would have used you against me. Because the name Ortiz could not be tied to Camelot while I led its armies. Because your father was a Spaniard, a knight I loved, but one the court would never accept. And because Lord Baldric—" she swallowed, "—was already waiting for a way to destroy me."

Silence followed.

Los turned away, running a hand through his hair.

"So you chose duty over me."

"No," she said, stepping behind him. "I chose you. I chose to give you a life. One where you could become something more than a pawn in the games of noblemen."

He turned, slowly, his voice breaking.

"I needed a mother."

Triss's eyes shimmered.

"And I wanted to be that Mother. Every day. Every time I trained you. Every time I corrected you or gave you counsel. Every time I held back and wished I could just hold you."

Los clenched his fists, staring at the floor.

"And now?"

"Now you know the truth," she whispered. "And I stand before you not as your commander, not as mentor... but as the woman who bore you."

"And what am I supposed to do now?" he asked.

"Whatever you need to. Rage. Grieve. Hate me. Or... forgive me."

He looked up at her.

Their eyes locked—mirror images, past and present colliding.

She stepped forward without hesitation—and embraced him.

Like she had wanted to since the moment he arrived in Camelot, since the moment she knew, truly knew it was him.

It was the embrace of a mother finding her long-lost child.

And Los was truly lost; he didn't know what to do.

This was something new.

Something uncertain.

But something real.

She held him, as tears silently fell at last.

Chapter LXXVII — The Lost

The Embassy at Dawn

The streets were still damp from the night's mist when Los stopped before the crimson-and-gold gates of the Spanish Embassy. The standard of Castile hung motionless above, its colors dulled in the pale light.

He stood there longer than he should have, his boots planted on the worn stone, eyes fixed on the heavy iron-banded door.

It felt like a threshold he no longer had the right to cross.

The latch turned.

The door opened, and Ramón filled the frame—impeccable as always in grey and silver, dark hair tied neatly back, expression unreadable.

"Don Lorenzo," he said evenly, "you need not stand outside your own door like that, Ambassador."

Los's voice was quiet, bitter.

"Am I though?"

Ramón stepped aside, ushering him in without hesitation.

"You are—until someone tells me otherwise. Either our King... or theirs."

The scent of polished wood and parchment greeted them as Ramón led him through the hall to the Ambassador's study. He closed the door behind them before speaking again.

"I was aware of your parentage before I accepted this post," Ramón said. "As is the King of Castile. It was kept secret as a favor—and out of respect—for your grandfather, Don Flavio."

Los's gaze dropped to the floor.

"So everyone knew. But me."

"It was for the best," Ramón replied, his voice firm but without cruelty. "But now that it is out... there is little that can be done. I have already sent a dispatch to Castile explaining the situation. I await instructions."

Los gave a hollow laugh. "Instructions for what? I am a bastard. I have no standing, no home... no hope."

Ramón's chair scraped softly as he rose. He crossed to Los and placed both hands on his shoulders—steady, unyielding.

"Who is this?" Ramón demanded quietly. "I do not know this man. The Lorenzo I know would never lie down and quit. Where is the man who stood against the King's Champion and kept getting up?"

Los's answer was almost a whisper.

"I do not know."

"Then we must find him," Ramón said, his voice hardening. "There is a fight ahead, Don Lorenzo. And we will need that man."

The two men stood in silence, the weight of the moment pressing between them. Somewhere beyond the embassy walls, Camelot stirred to life—but here, in the study, the air felt charged.

Not with defeat.

With preparation.

Lord Baldric's Next Move

In a dim chamber beneath Swanton Keep. Torches flicker. The council table bears no royal crest—only a black boar, crudely carved.

Lord Baldric sat at the head, shadowed, his fingers steepled. Around him, a half-dozen figures in varying cloaks and uniforms. A few wore no insignia at all.

"It worked," said a cloaked woman. "He left shaken. Lady Triss was humiliated."

"That wasn't the goal," Baldric muttered.

"It wasn't?"

"No," he said coldly. "The goal was to isolate him. Remove his foundation. Ruin them while we position ourselves."

He rose and walked slowly to the center of the chamber, where a tattered map of Albion lay on the table.

"The relic was only the beginning. That sheath—Excalibur's sheath—is a symbol. But symbols can be replaced."

He pointed to Prydwen Keep, Castle Sauvage, and Caer Berkstead.

"I want garrisons disrupted. Trade slowed. Rumors spread. Make Orchid Fair look weak. Question Lady Burns's leadership. Whisper that Triss is a disgrace. And most of all..."

He tapped Camelot.

"...make him doubt himself."

A man stepped forward.

"Los Ortiz? He's still just a Paladin."

Baldric's voice dropped to a dangerous whisper:

"He's her son. And now that the people know, he is more dangerous than ever."

He straightened.

"He must be broken completely."

The torches flickered as if the darkness itself agreed.

Spies in the Wind — The Undermining Begins

A dim corner of a busy Camelot tavern, laughter and music inside the tavern masked the low, deliberate voices in the shadows. A young scout, barely past twenty, leaned forward with a grin.

"You hear the latest about Lady Burns?"

The older man across from him raised an eyebrow. "Go on."

"Word is she teleported alone into a battle like a reckless child. Nearly got herself killed. Heard she's obsessed with that foreign knight of hers—some say she'd burn a keep just to save his skin."

The older man nodded slowly. "And her guild?"

"They follow her, but not all agree. Some say she's got too much heart and not enough sense."

Coins changed hands. The scout stood and slipped into the crowd.

Outside, he met a hooded man who waited in the alley.

"It's done. The seed's planted."

The hooded man nodded once. "Keep it up. The goal isn't to cut the orchid... but to make it wilt."

And in the shadows of Camelot, quiet whispers took root.

Chapter LXXVIII — Sisters & Shadows

The Burns Estate, Private Solar

The hearth glowed low, casting soft amber light across the thick stone walls of the Burns estate's upper solar. Outside, the wind rattled the shutters, but inside, the fire whispered in uneasy quiet.

Angela sat forward in her chair, still in her training tunic from earlier, golden hair loose about her shoulders. She stared into the fire, jaw tight, as if the flames might burn away the heaviness pressing on her chest.

Tamara paced behind her, boots whispering over the rug, hands clenched at her belt. "I knew Triss was hiding something," she said, low and sharp. "But this? To lie to her own son—and to keep it from us?"

Across from Angela, Amaranthia sat poised in a soft blue robe, her teacup cooling in her hands.

"It changes everything," she murmured.

Angela's voice was rough. "And yet... does it?"

"It changes him," Amaranthia replied.

Tamara stopped pacing, turned towards Angela, and said with deliberate weight, "It changes you, too."

Angela's brow furrowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means," Tamara said, each word cutting, "you can't marry him now. Father would never allow it. Not if he's a bastard."

The words hit like a spear to the chest. Angela's breath caught audibly, her shoulders stiffening. For a heartbeat she couldn't speak — not because she didn't understand, but because she did.

Her voice came low, almost shaking. "That's not your decision. And it's not his fault that his parents were never married."

Tamara's tone was flat, unyielding.

"It does matter. In this world, bloodlines are not sentiment. They are law, inheritance, alliance, and power. You know that as well as we do."

Angela rose from her chair slowly, her eyes catching the firelight—gold, but burning.

"Then maybe the law is wrong."

Amaranthia set her cup down gently, her voice quieter but no less steady.

"You care for him. That's plain. But caring won't be enough — not against politics, not against Father."

Angela's hands curled into fists at her sides.

"I've fought beside Los. I've bled beside him. And I don't care if he was born in a palace or a pigsty — he's still the man who saved my life. That's the only measure that matters to me."

Tamara crossed her arms, unconvinced, but said nothing more.

Amaranthia allowed herself the faintest, knowing smile.

"Then perhaps this isn't the end of his story. Perhaps it's only the beginning."

Angela nodded once.

"Then we stand with him. Burns women do not abandon their own. Not now. Not ever."

And the three sisters, though shaken, sat together in the deepening dark — bound not only by blood, but by a quiet, rising resolve that truth may wound, but it would not break them.

Camelot Garden - later that night

The moon hung low over Camelot, caught in the latticework of bare branches above. The garden had emptied at dark. Only the soft rustle of ivy and the slow trickle of the fountain remained.

Angela walked slowly down the path of crushed stone, her boots nearly silent. She found him where she expected—beneath the white tree near the northern wall, sitting on the edge of the fountain, cloaked in silence.

Los didn't look up as she approached.

"Jou came," he said softly, eyes fixed on the rippling water.

Angela stopped a few feet away. "I said I would be here for you, for better or for worse, in sickness or in health."

Los looked down bitterly, there was no humor in him. "Even now, after everything... I am just a fool in crimson armor."

"You're no fool," Angela said gently. "You're grieving."

He didn't answer.

She took a few steps closer, then sat beside him—leaving just enough distance not to crowd him.

"I spoke with my sisters," she said after a while.

Los arched an eyebrow faintly. "Let me guess... Tamara wanted to throttle Lady Triss?... Mother."

Angela allowed herself a small smile. "She still might."

Los stared at the water again. "And jou?"

Angela hesitated. Her voice softened.

"I wanted to scream. At Triss. At the world. At you, for pushing everyone away when you need them most."

He finally looked at her. His sapphire eyes were hollow—but he was listening.

"Then Amaranthia reminded me of something," she continued. "No matter what they call you... Los Ortiz. Lorenzo Ortiz de Seville. Son of Triss... you are still the man who saved me in the forest. Who stood beside me at Ellan Vannin. Who turned the tide of a duel with nothing but honor and stubbornness."

He looked away again, jaw clenched.

"I don't know who I am anymore," he murmured. "Castile isn't home. Albion... it feels like a lie. My name, my legacy—it was all built on sand. And that sand has shifted"

Angela leaned closer, her voice steady now.

"Then build it again."

He met her gaze again—truly met it this time. And for a long moment, neither spoke.

Then softly, Angela added:

"And if you stumble... I'll still be here."

Los blinked. A breath caught in his throat. Something unspoken passed between them—old wounds, new truths, fragile hopes.

He looked down at his hands for a moment.

"Stay a while?" he asked.

Angela nodded. "As long as you need."

And beneath the moonlight, they sat together—quiet, steady, and no longer alone.

The Shadow and the Comforter

The barracks were loud that night. Torches burned low, ale flowed too freely, and tongues loosened under the guise of celebration. Somewhere in the back, Sergeant Bradford laughed.

"Did you hear?" he sneered. "The golden eagle of Albion had a little chick—left it in the mud and pretended it never hatched!"

A few of his men chuckled, uncomfortable but too afraid to silence him.

"And now look," Bradford went on, nursing his drink, "Los Ortiz—no, wait, Lorenzo de Nobody—couldn't even tell who his own mother was! Half the court's calling him the 'Forgotten Prince.' Poor bastard."

More laughter. Cruel. Petty.

In the shadows near the corner pillar, Willow stood—small, unnoticed. Her emerald eyes glistened in the dim light. She said nothing, as always, but her fingers clenched the hem of her cloak. Her breath came faster. Shallow. Quiet.

When Bradford said, "What sort of Paladin gets abandoned by his own mother?", something inside Willow snapped.

She turned and fled the hall, nearly silent on her feet.

Near the outer wall, Faemz of the Knights of the Round Table guild stood with a handful of young Armsmen, Friars, and Scouts, reviewing writs of transfer by torchlight. He had come to collect fresh recruits for the Avalon campaign, nothing more.

And yet he had heard every despicable word.

The Church Garden

The garden was quiet again.

Angela sat with Los beneath the white tree. She didn't speak much—just listened. Just remained near him. Her hand rested lightly on his for a time. She offered him a final, quiet word of comfort, and then rose.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said gently. "We still need you."

Los didn't answer. He watched her walk away.

But he was not alone.

From the hedge, Willow had been watching. She had been there since she arrived, knees hugged to her chest, hidden in the dark, waiting for a moment that felt right.

She wouldn't, couldn't approach while Angela was there.

Now, she rose—timidly, hesitantly. And then she ran.

Her soft boots whispered through the grass until suddenly she was in front of him.

And then—she threw her arms around him.

Not shyly. Not hesitantly.

With all the love and sorrow and devotion she had never spoken aloud.

Los stiffened in surprise, arms still at his sides.

"Willow—?" he began.

But then he heard her breath—shaking.

Felt her cheek against his chest.

And something inside him shattered.

His arms came up around her. Slow. Desperate. Grateful.

And there in the moonlit garden, the knight who had bled for both king and relic... wept.

Not in pain.

Not in defeat.

But for love long denied, and wounds deeper than any cleric could mend.

Willow said nothing.

She didn't need to.

She simply held him, small and strong, while his tears fell into her fiery orange hair. For the first time in his life, it was ok to cry and not feel ashamed.

She made it ok to cry.

The King's Council

"—paraded himself before this court as a son of Castile," Lord Baldric said, his voice calm enough to pass for reason. "A foreign knight. A useful knight. A charming knight, if one listens to the commons. Yet now we learn he was born within Your Majesty's own realm. A bastard of Albion blood, hidden beneath a Spanish name."

The council chamber was colder than the hour required.

King Constantine sat at the high end of the table, one hand curled around the arm of his chair. Around him stood the men who shaped the realm when swords were still

sheathed: Lord Chancellor Wacian, Baron Eddington, Master Edric, Sir Norcross, Cynan his nephew, and others who had learned the art of silence.

Baldric continued.

"He accepted favor. Residence. Office. He stood before noble houses as Los Ortiz of Castile while concealing his true name, Lorenzo Ortiz, bastard son of Lady Triss. If such a thing is permitted, then any man may pretend whatever blood best suits him."

Sir Norcross's jaw tightened.

"He has bled for Albion."

Baldric turned his head slightly.

"Many men bleed, Sir Norcross. Blood spilled in battle does not wash clean deceit before the Crown."

Wacian folded his hands.

"There is cause for inquiry, Majesty. Not into bastardy. Bastardy is no crime. But false name, false standing, office accepted under concealment — these are matters that endanger the King's peace. And our alliance with Castile"

Master Edric had said nothing.

That made Constantine look at him.

"Well?" the King asked.

Edric's eyes remained dark and still.

"I have seen no proof that Sir Los came to Albion as an enemy agent."

"No one said agent," Baldric replied smoothly. "Deceiver will suffice."

The words settled unpleasantly.

Baron Eddington leaned forward at last, his voice mild.

"The question is not only what he intended, Majesty, but what men will say of it. The realm has little patience for uncertainty in those raised near the Crown. If handled swiftly, the matter may be contained."

Cynan, standing near his uncle's chair, lowered his gaze as though reluctant to speak.

Constantine saw it.

"You have something to say. Speak."

Cynan looked up.

"Dear Uncle... Lord Baldric is correct."

Baldric did not smile.

Cynan continued, gentle as poison poured into wine.

"If this is allowed to linger, men will not say Sir Los deceived the court. They will say the King was deceived. They will say Your Majesty elevated him. That Your Majesty requested him as ambassador. That Your Majesty gave honor to a man who had no lawful claim to it."

The King's hand tightened on the chair.

Cynan softened his voice.

"He stains your honor so long as he remains an ambassador and a knight."

Silence followed.

Sir Norcross looked as though he wanted to speak again, but held his tongue. Edric's face gave away nothing. Wacian watched the King, waiting for the moment law would be asked to save face.

Constantine's eyes moved from Baldric to Wacian.

"How swiftly can this be handled?"

Wacian bowed his head.

"By morning, Majesty. And a trial the day after."

Edric's eyes flicked to him.

"Morning gives no time for Castile to answer."

"No," Baldric said. "It does not."

That was the point, though no one in the room was foolish enough to say it.

Constantine rose.

"Then by morning. Have the warrant issued and executed."

Wacian bowed.

Baldric bowed.

Cynan lowered his eyes.

And somewhere beyond the council chamber, the bells of Camelot began to toll the hour.

Chapter LXXIX — The Cost of Silence

Throne Room of Albion, later that morning

The morning sun filtered through the stained glass of Camelot's high throne room, casting shards of crimson, gold, and blue onto the cold marble floor.

At the foot of the dais, Chancellor Wacian stood like a statue, arms clasped, lips pressed into a fine line. Before the king Lord Prydwen bowed deeply.

The King of Albion, robed in deep velvet and crowned with quiet authority, sat forward on his throne. His voice was calm, but grave.

"So it is true. Lady Triss bore a son in secret, outside lawful marriage, concealed him from the Order, and misled this realm by omission."

Prydwen bowed his head.

"Yes, Your Majesty. The child is Sir Los Ortiz. Now known to be Lorenzo... her blood."

The King exhaled.

"And this was known to none?"

Prydwen hesitated.

"There are whispers that Lady Winchell knew. That she may have been there when he was born, acting as midwife. But there is no confirmation. And if she knew by confession..."

The King paused for a moment.

He would not run afoul of the Church.

"The sanctity of confession will be respected."

Wacian inclined his head. "Then Lady Winchell remains beyond the reach of this matter."

"For now," the King said.

The words settled coldly.

Prydwen's hand tightened.

Constantine looked down at him. "But Lady Triss?"

Prydwen did not answer.

He did not need to.

The King's voice softened, almost sorrowful.

"The Order of the Paladin must be beyond reproach."

"My King," Prydwen said quietly.

Wacian's eyes moved to him.

The King's did as well.

Prydwen raised his head. "If she is to be judged, let the judgment be true. She concealed a child. She concealed blood. She allowed that child to train beneath her hand and rise within the Order without revealing the truth. Trust has been broken. I cannot deny it."

His voice lowered.

"But the Light still answers her call."

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then the King leaned back upon the throne.

"So be it. I cannot command you to cast Lady Triss from the Order. Nor can I, as King, strip her of her vows. But it is in the best interests of the Order that she be relieved of station, command, and all authority of instruction. The stain she has placed upon the Order must be removed."

Prydwen closed his eyes once.

Then opened them.

"Yes, Sire."

For a moment, it seemed the matter had ended.

Then Lord Prydwen asked the question that remained.

"And the boy?"

The King took a deep breath.

He did not answer.

Instead, his eyes moved to Wacian.

The Chancellor deflected the question with all the practiced subtlety of his office.

"You will need to name another in her place."

Prydwen's answer came with visible effort.

"Lady Calla, who is currently assigned to Campacorentin Forest."

Wacian nodded faintly. "A stern choice, but a sound one."

Prydwen looked as though the words had cost him more than he wished anyone to see.

The King's fingers rested upon the arm of his throne.

"This must be done publicly. The realm must see that trust broken carries consequence."

Prydwen bowed his head again.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The King's gaze did not soften.

"Then see it done."

Prydwen held his fist against his breast.

His voice was hollow.

"Yes, Sire."

Lady Triss's Chambers

The soft knock at the door was not unexpected. Triss stood ready. She wore robes, not armor. Her armor stood polished and plain upon its stand, stripped of insignia, a silent sentinel beside the wall. Her sword remained hanging where it had always hung. She would not carry it today.

The door opened. Lord Prydwen entered alone.

His voice, when it came, was as old as the stones beneath them.

"Lady Rebecca Triss. By the authority of the Church and the Holy Order of the Paladin, I am bound to relieve you of your station."

Triss met his eyes.

"I understand."

"You are hereby removed as trainer," he said. "As commander. As second in command of the Order."

She nodded once.

For a moment, he said nothing. Then, barely audible:

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She looked away.

"Because I knew what it would cost."

He stepped further in, jaw rigid.

"And yet you taught him. Trained him. Let me knight him."

"I did," she said. "And I would again."

Prydwen's voice cracked—not in fury, but in sorrow.

"You were my sword-arm. My conscience."

Triss gave a faint smile.

"And I still am. Even if you must turn your blade on me now."

The silence between them said everything.

At last, she named what he could not.

"You are not stripping me of the Light."

"No."

"Nor of my vows to the Lord of Light."

"No."

"Only of the trust I violated."

He did not answer.

That was answer enough.

At last, Prydwen stepped aside.

"It must be the church. Where all may witness."

She nodded.

"Then let it be so."

Church of St. George — Midday

The great stone nave of St. George was packed.

Paladins lined the pews, some standing in armor, others seated in stunned silence. Whispered prayers and hushed outrage flowed beneath the vaulted ceiling like an underground stream.

This was no common gathering.

Lord Prack stood among the senior knights, grim as carved stone. Sir Raltir, Sir Rhildor, Lord Sigimund, and Sir Sabbince watched from the nave. Near the altar stood the trainers and wardens of the Order: Lady Alma of Camelot Hills, Lady Eve of the Isle of Glass, Sir Caewel of the Black Mountains, Lord Ulfwych of Caer Ulfwych, and Lady Calla of Campacorentin Forest.

Farther back stood Angela, Romao, Prox, Jestec, and Hollia, with a dozen others who had begun their training beneath Lady Triss's hand.

At the altar stood Lord Prydwen.

Lady Triss walked slowly down the aisle.

Her head was high. Her shoulders straight. She carried no weapon, no shield. Only silence.

Los stood at the rear of the church, still cloaked in white, watching her come.

Prydwen raised his voice.

"Lady Rebecca Triss. By the judgment of the Holy Order of Paladins, you are hereby relieved of station, command, and all authority of instruction within this Order."

A gasp rippled through the chamber.

Triss did not flinch.

A murmur moved through the pews.

Prydwen's hand tightened at his side.

"You have broken trust within the Order. And trust is the steel from which our Order is forged."

Triss bowed her head once.

Not in shame.

In acceptance.

Prydwen looked towards Lady Calla.

"Lady Calla of Campacorentin Forest, step forward."

She did so without hesitation.

"You shall assume interim charge of instruction and discipline, and serve as second-in-command of the Order."

Her face was pale. Her jaw set.

She brought her fist to her breastplate and bowed to Lord Prydwen.

"As you command, my lord."

Her eyes flicked once towards Lady Triss.

Only once.

Then away.

She offered no salute. No word. Only the cold glance of one who felt betrayed.

Triss saw it.

Accepted it as well.

That silence, too, was earned.

Prydwen turned back to Lady Triss.

"Lady Triss will be escorted from the grounds."

Two senior Paladins stepped forward, flanking her.

The church doors groaned open.

Triss turned and began the long walk down the nave.

The hall was silent.

A wounded silence that swallowed all but the sound of her footsteps.

As she passed, Lord Prack set his fist against his breastplate.

Sir Raltir followed.

Then Romao.

Then Prox.

After a moment, Hollia did the same, her face tight with tears she refused to shed. Jestec followed, stiff and pale beside her.

Others bowed their heads.

Others stared forward and did not look at Lady Triss at all.

A dozen Paladins remained still, their faces hard with betrayal. To them, she had not merely hidden a son. She had hidden a scandal inside the Order itself, trained him beneath her own hand, and let him rise among them while truth slept buried.

Some looked at Los.

Some with pity.

Some with anger.

Some with the cold certainty that the bastard had even less right to stand beneath St. George's roof than the woman who had concealed him.

Los felt every glance.

He did not move until Lady Triss had nearly reached him.

Then he stepped into the aisle.

No sword left his sheath.

No challenge passed his lips.

He simply followed his mother out of the church.

Angela moved after him at once. Romao and Prox fell in behind her.

Jestec took one step, then stopped when Lady Calla's eyes found him across the nave.

Hollia's hand touched his arm.

She slowly shook her head.

Not here.

Not now.

Lady Triss did not look back.

Lord Prydwen stood at the altar, his heart heavy in his chest.

Lady Calla remained beside him, rigid and pale, already wearing the burden she had accepted.

The doors closed behind Lady Triss.

And the sound of them shutting was louder than any condemnation Lord Prydwen could have spoken.

Chapter LXXX — The Chapel Steps

The doors of St. George closed behind them with only the heavy sound of wood meeting stone, and the long silence after. She had not been banished from the church. Not stripped of her vows as a Paladin. This was merely ceremonial.

Lady Triss sat on the steps of the chapel; her hands folded in her lap.

Her son stood beside her.

Angela leaned against a pillar. Romao and Prox stood nearby, their faces calm but unreadable.

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then Los said what had been eating at him since the doors had closed.

"This is because of me."

Lady Triss looked up at him.

"No."

The word was quiet.

It struck harder than anger would have.

Los swallowed, he had felt the stares, the blame. "If I had not come to Albion—"

"If you had not come to Albion, I would still have borne a son in secret," she said. "I would still have hidden you."

His jaw tightened.

She looked at him more gently then.

"My son, I do not regret having you here. I do not regret seeing the kind of man you have become."

His fist clenched despite her kindness.

"I will make this right," he said. "Somehow."

He drew a heavy breath.

"I should have said something inside. When they..."

"You did exactly what you should have done."

He looked up. "I did nothing."

"Yes." Triss held his eyes. "And for once, Lorenzo, that was wisdom."

He flinched at the name, but did not retreat from it.

"They looked at you like—"

"Like I had betrayed them," she finished. "Understandably so."

Los had no answer for that.

Then he looked at her with all the sincerity and seriousness he could muster.

"Jou will come stay with me at the Embassy until I can find a home. One worthy of jou. And jou will not have to worry about money. I will take care of jou. Jou will never have want."

Lady Triss blinked.

For one impossible instant, she looked as though she might laugh.

"Would you?"

His looked down at the ground for a moment, then nodded. "Jes."

"Lorenzo," she said, and now there was the faintest warmth in her voice, "I am the Lady of Rilan."

He stared at her.

She lifted one brow.

"Did you think I lived on prayer and borrowed candles?"

"I... had not thought about it."

"That much is clear."

Romao turned his face away, but not quickly enough to hide the corner of a smile.

Angela covered her face with her hand.

"Los, your mother is the second richest noble in Albion, next to my father, and maybe Baron Eddington."

Los looked down, having been made to look foolish by his own ignorance, then back to his mother.

"So.... Nearly as rich as I am..." Los said half-jokingly.

"Something like that."

"Still," he said quietly. "I would have."

The humor faded from her face.

"I know."

Triss looked at him for a long moment.

Then she stood up and touched his cheek.

Only once.

Only briefly.

He forced himself not to recoil.

He had never liked being touched.

But this was his mother.

"Come, Lorenzo," she said, reaching for his hand.

"Could you not do that?" he asked.

She paused. "Do what?"

"Call me Lorenzo."

"But it is your name."

"Jes," he said. "But I have gotten jused to being called Los."

For a moment, she only looked at him.

Her expression softened.

"Well," she said, "I named you Lorenzo."

Then she held out her hand again.

"Come, then."

He took it.

Awkwardly.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To breakfast," she said. "I have not eaten since this all started, and I am famished."

She looked to the sky.

And somewhere above the clouds, the bell tower tolled—not a dirge, but something slower.

It was not a condemnation.

But not an ending either.

The Citadel — A King in Shadow

That evening, in the solar above the throne room, the King of Albion stood before the high windows, watching dusk settle over Camelot's rooftops.

Chancellor Wacian stood behind him, unmoving.

"It is done," Wacian said.

The King did not turn. "And the Order?"

"It obeyed."

"That is not what I asked."

Wacian lowered his head slightly.

"Some paid their respects. Others refused to look at her. Lady Calla has been named in her place."

Constantine's hands clasped behind his back.

"I see. And the boy?"

Wacian's mouth tightened. "He followed her out."

The King closed his eyes.

"Then he has more honor than I gave him credit for."

"He was not alone," Wacian added. "Lady Angela Burns followed. His friends Romao and Proximo as well."

For a long while, the King said nothing.

Below, Camelot's lamps began to kindle one by one, small flames against the coming dark.

"Lady Triss has stood for Church and Crown longer than many men have served either," Constantine said at last. "The noble lady of Rilan. A defender of Albion. And now she has been made a pariah."

Wacian said nothing.

The King continued to look over the city.

His face was tired.

But no less kingly for it.

"What price are we about to pay," he murmured, "for what you have done, Baldric?"

Enough

Elsewhere — Lord Baldric's Study

A decanter clicked gently against a glass.

Lord Baldric sat in his candlelit study, the report unfolded beneath one hand. His son stood near the hearth, dressed in dark wool, silent as his father read.

At last, Lord Baldric smiled.

"Lady Triss removed. Lady Calla named in her place. Some refused even to look upon her."

He set the parchment down.

"Good."

Sir Baldric's brow tightened. "Good?"

"She is disgraced," Lord Baldric said. "And the Order divided."

His son said nothing.

Lord Baldric lifted his glass, eyes fixed on a candle flame.

"Now it is the boy's turn. The trial will finish him, and remove the stain he has placed upon the kingdom."

Sir Baldric stared at him.

"Father... have you not done enough?"

The elder Baldric's hand stopped halfway to his mouth.

Then he slammed the glass down upon his desk.

"Enough?"

The word came out low.

A growl more than a question.

Sir Baldric held his ground. "Lady Triss is disgraced. The Order is divided. Must you press further?"

Lord Baldric rose so sharply the chair scraped behind him.

"No," he said. "It is not enough."

His voice hardened.

"So long as that boy lives, so long as he breathes, so long as men call him knight, hero, ambassador, or son of any house worth naming, it will never be enough."

Sir Baldric went pale.

Lord Baldric leaned over the desk.

"He is her blood. Her mistake. Her shame walking freely about the realm."

For a moment, only the fire spoke.

Then Baldric's voice lowered.

"Tomorrow morning, he will be arrested. The writ has already been prepared. His assets will be seized before he has spent a single night in the cells."

Sir Baldric sat in stunned silence.

"And the day after," Lord Baldric said, watching his son, "the realm will see him tried, convicted, and condemned."

He picked up the report again.

"Lady Triss received consequence."

His mouth curved faintly.

"The boy will receive judgment. And if there is any justice left in Albion, exile."

He paused but a moment.

"Permanent exile."

The Streets and Taverns of Camelot — That Night

The city did not sleep.

Not properly.

In the torchlit lanes, whispers moved faster than the watch patrols. From the gatehouse to the market square, from the stables to the river docks, the same words passed from mouth to mouth.

"They say the choirboys are divided over it."

"Over Lady Triss—aye, the same Lady Triss who trained Sir Norcross, the King's own Paladin."

"They say she's the boy's mother. The Spaniard. The one who fought Amren."

"A bastard, then?"

"So they claim."

In Merchants Tavern, the rumor was wine-soaked and brash.

"They shamed her before the whole Order," a mercenary said, slamming down his tankard. "And Los—no, Lorenzo, or whatever name the bastard wears now—followed her out."

"Like a fool," someone said.

"Like a son," another answered.

The table quieted at that.

Only for a moment.

Then the arguing began again.

In The Black Dragon, the tone was hushed, furtive.

"If it's true," a merchant whispered, "then more than the Order is split. The King's court is split. And when the court splits..."

He made a cutting motion across his throat.

At the barracks, soldiers traded versions like playing cards. In one, Triss had been marched out in chains. In another, she had spat at Prydwen's feet. In yet another, she had called the King a coward and walked free.

Truth was already lost beneath the telling.

By midnight, the story had traveled beyond Camelot's walls—carried by waggoners to the outlying villages, murmured by sailors in the river taverns, and woven into rough ballads by street bards eager for a coin.

Some said it was a tragedy.

Some, a scandal.

Some said it was justice.

Some said it was only the beginning, because if the noble Lady of Rilan could be brought so low for hiding a bastard son, then God help the bastard son when the court turned fully towards him.

And in the quiet places between, where no one was listening but the stones, the city seemed to hold its breath.

Something had shifted.

Something that would not shift back.

The Empty Nave — Lord Prydwen's Solitude

The Church of St. George had emptied.

No voices lingered beneath the vaulted ceiling.

Only wax, stone, and the silence left behind after judgment.

Lord Prydwen stood alone where Lady Triss had stood.

His cloak was removed. His armor unlatched at the collar. Above him, the banner of the Paladin Order hung motionless in the candlelight.

The Order had had lost its matriarch.

It would not be the same without her.

He looked down the aisle where she had walked, straight-backed and silent. Where some had honored her. Where others had refused to look. Where Los had stepped forward without a word.

Only following her out the doors of the great church.

Prydwen closed his eyes.

"You are mothering one and neglecting the other."

His words returned to him like a blade turned in the hand.

He had said them to Triss once, thinking himself wise.

He had been closer to the truth than he knew.

Or perhaps he had been afraid of looking closer at what was right in front of him.

"You should have told me," he said softly.

The nave gave no answer.

Of course it did not.

Triss was gone.

And the Crown would not stop with her.

Prydwen opened his eyes.

"No," he said to the empty church. "I will not let them destroy you both."

He turned from the altar and walked not towards the doors, but towards the small vestry where ink, parchment, and seal waited.

If the court meant to question Sir Los Ortiz, then it would hear more than whispers of birth and blood.

It would hear of the dragon.

It would hear from men who had seen him stand.

Prydwen sat, took up his quill, and began to write.

To Lord Adribard.

Then to Lord Solice.

By the time the last bell of evening rang over Camelot, the letters were sealed and on their way.

Lord Prydwen, who had been forced to take command from the mother, had begun the work of saving her son.

Chapter LXXXI — The Arrest

Embassy of Castile, Camelot — Late Afternoon

The red-and-gold banner over the embassy gate moved like a slow breath in the wind. Inside, Los stood at his desk with Ramón—dispatches arrayed in neat stacks, a candle guttering low.

The knock wasn't a request. It was a verdict.

Ramón opened the door to a lieutenant of the Royal Guard flanked by two men in steel. Behind them loitered Sergeant Bradford, helmless, mouth set in the sort of smirk that thinks it's private.

"By order of the King," the lieutenant said, voice like scraped stone, "Sir Los Ortiz, now known to be Lorenzo Ortiz, is to be taken into custody and presented for trial."

Ramón didn't blink. "No. This is sovereign Castilian soil. The Ambassador enjoys immunity."

"Not for fraud upon the court," the lieutenant replied. "The charge: misrepresentation before the Crown."

Ramón's jaw tightened. "You are wrong."

Los touched his arm. "Ramón." He gave the smallest nod. "Do what you can. I will go with them."

Bradford's smirk deepened half a shade. The manacles clicked shut.

As they turned him in the doorway, Los glanced back. Ramón was already crossing to the desk, drawing a fresh sheet, the quill carving a black line.

Dispatch: To His Majesty, the King of Castile — URGENT.

Subject: Unlawful arrest of Ambassador on sovereign soil...

The door closed. The embassy's banner kept breathing.

The Treasure Incident

The Embassy, Later That Evening, Back Entrance

The second knock tried to sound bureaucratic and landed brutish instead. Bradford, five guards, a corporal, and the same lieutenant—this time with a scroll in hand—stood at the back door of the embassy. An attempt to be more discreet this time.

Ramón received them with the same measured calm. "You've returned to make a worse mistake?"

"Writ of seizure," the lieutenant announced. "All assets awarded to the accused from the dragon's hoard are to be surrendered to the court pending judgment."

"That hoard," Ramón said, "is secured within this embassy. The embassy is Castile. The hoard is the King of Castile's. I remind you; you have no jurisdiction here."

Silence. Then: a fractional nod. The guards tried to storm the embassy.

A heartbeat. Then—thuds. Pained swearing. The sound of a man hitting a door with his face. The corporal's eyes went owl-round.

He scurried backwards, pale.

Ramón said nothing, he simply smoothed his cuff.

The Corporal ran as fast as he could back to the citadel.

"Captain, The Ambassador's aid!"

A new knock came at the front door this time. Captain Ryder, helm under his arm, expression taut with embarrassment. "Señor Ramón. Apologies. My men, acted impertinently. Permission to collect them? They are not..."

Ramón stepped aside. "Of course, Captain. They are no more injured than a competent cleric can mend." He guided Ryder through the hall to the back courtyard, where five guards stared up at the clouds in various meditative postures of regret.

Ryder offered a crisp nod on the way out. "It won't happen again."

"I am certain," Ramón said, and closed the door with the gentlest click in Camelot.

Chapter LXXXII — The Courage to Choose

That evening

The cell was not deep enough to be called a dungeon, nor clean enough to be called a chamber.

It sat somewhere in between, as though Camelot itself could not decide whether it meant to shame him or merely contain him.

A narrow slit of window admitted a blade of winter light high on the wall. Straw lay scattered over the stones, half-fresh and half-fouled by older occupants. A wooden stool sat in one corner beside a bucket and an untouched cup of water. Beyond the iron-barred door, footsteps passed now and then in the corridor, muffled and indifferent.

Los sat on the bench fixed to the wall, elbows on his knees, hands loosely clasped.

He had not asked for food. Had barely touched the water. He wore only a plain shirt and trousers he had been arrested in, and somehow felt more exposed than he ever had in battle.

Outside, the realm was deciding what to do with him.

Inside, he had had too much time to think.

One man had already decided and had come, despite the guards' protests that there was to be no visitors.

The scrape of a key turned in the lock.

Los looked up.

The guard at the door opened it without ceremony and stepped aside.

The man who entered filled the threshold not by size, but by presence.

Lord Prack.

Even stripped of armor, there was no mistaking him. His bearing was that of a knight so long accustomed to battle and command that stillness itself seemed a chosen discipline. He was older than Los, though not bent by it, his face weathered, his eyes hard in the way of men who had spent years looking at danger and declining to blink.

Los rose at once.

For half a heartbeat neither man spoke.

Then Los inclined his head.

"My lord."

Prack gave the barest nod in return.

"Sir Los."

No warmth in it. No coldness either. Only respect.

That, somehow, meant more.

Los had heard of him long before they stood face to face. Every Paladin had. Lord Prack was one of those rare men who crossed from reputation into measure. The sort of knight other knights quietly judged themselves against, whether they admitted it or not. Defender of the realm. Keeper of walls. Breaker of charges. A man whose name was spoken not with wonder, but with certainty.

And Prack, clearly, had heard enough of Los as well.

For a long moment he studied the Spaniard in silence, taking in the state of him, the cell, the barred door, the indignity of it.

Then he said, "You looked taller on the battlefield."

The corner of Los's mouth twitched.

"Jes," he said. "So I am told."

Prack stepped further into the cell. The guard closed the door behind him, though he did not lock it, and withdrew to a respectful distance down the corridor.

Prack's gaze moved once around the stone walls.

"A poor place to keep a dragon-slayer."

Los let out the faintest breath that might have become a laugh if it had found enough life to fully form.

"Jes, jou would have thought they would put me up some place nice."

Prack's expression did not change, but something in it eased by a fraction.

"I know what you did," he said. "Not just the dragon. Benowyc. The gate. The things you did in the north. The things men say in taverns are half lies, of course, but some lies are lies because they claim too little, not too much."

Los lowered his eyes a moment, not in shame but in acknowledgment.

"I've heard things of you as well, my lord."

Prack folded his hands behind his back.

"Oh?"

Los nodded once.

"That you once took a relic from Hibernia and brought it back alone." He looked up again. "That you once took Dun Bolg and left its gates open daring the enemy to enter." He looked up at the much taller man. "That you once took back Caer Berkstead from Midgard while Hibernia attacked your army from behind."

At that, Prack's mouth almost moved into a smile, though it never quite arrived.

"They exaggerate."

"I was there my Lord that day at Dun Bolg. I had never seen such courage before."

Lord Prack nodded.

Silence settled between them then, but it was not an uncomfortable one.

It was the silence of two men who understood something of what it cost to wear the same vows.

At length Prack said, "Do you know why I came?"

Los leaned one shoulder lightly against the wall beside the bench.

"To tell me how badly I've disappointed everyone?"

"No."

"Then I hope it is to break me out. The smell is starting to get to me."

Prack ignored that.

"I came because there are too few real Paladins left in the world for me to let one sit in a cell and think himself abandoned."

That landed harder than Los expected.

He looked away before the older knight could see too much in his face.

Prack stepped closer, not unkindly, merely enough that the words that followed no longer belonged to the corridor or the guard or Camelot's gossiping halls.

"Sir Los, there are no scars on my back," he continued.

Los looked up.

Prack's expression remained level. Not prideful. Not boastful. Simply true.

"There never will be. Because I have never run from a fight." His eyes held Los's without wavering. "That is why I do not lose."

The words sat in the cold air between them.

Not a boast.

A statement of how he lived his life.

Los swallowed once.

He understood the meaning at once.

But he could not help but think for a moment about the scars across his own back, the wages of a moment of weakness with a Demoness.

Prack was not speaking of battle.

He was speaking of courage. Of facing those who would destroy you. And of not surrendering to them.

Los's voice, when it came, was quieter than before.

"This is not a fight I can win."

Prack tilted his head slightly.

"That depends what you think winning means."

Los looked towards the barred slit of a window, where pale light striped the opposite wall.

"They know what I am. I know..."

Prack answered at once.

"And what are you?"

"A bastard."

Prack shook his head, "If that is all you are, I have wasted my time coming here."

"What more is there. My life was a lie."

"So you did not slay seven bandits? Giants? A dragon? Face the King's Champion?"

"I did but..."

"Good then remember that tomorrow."

That struck home.

The older knight let the silence do its work for a few breaths before going on.

"I will not be attending the trial."

Los blinked. That, of all things, had not been what he expected.

"No?"

Prack shook his head again once.

"The trial is a farce."

The word echoed strangely in the little cell.

A farce.

Not proceeding. Not tribunal. Not law.

Farce.

Los let out a slow breath through his nose and lowered his gaze to his own hands.

"I have no choice," he said.

Prack was silent for just long enough to make Los look up again.

Then he said, very quietly:

"Don't you?"

Then he knocked once against the iron with the back of his knuckles.

The guard came at once, opened the door, and stood aside.

Prack left without another word.

The door closed.

The key turned.

Los stood in the middle of the cell, motionless.

Outside, the castle went on breathing. Footsteps passed. Somewhere distant, a bell rang the hour. The world moved towards the trial as though nothing had changed.

But something had.

Slowly, Los sat back down on the bench.

He looked at the cup of water. The straw. The wall. The slit of winter light.

Then leaned back against the stone and closed his eyes for a moment.

I am Sir Los Ortiz de Sevilla, he thought.

I am a Paladin. I have fought for this realm, bled for its soil. I owe no one an apology for the things I had no say in. Nor for how I have lived my life.

Then he paused his thoughts for a moment reflecting on what Prack had said.

Prack, who was an example to all Paladins.

He would not participate in a farce.

And Prack was right. He still had a choice.

The Forbidden Visit

Camelot Prison — Later That Night

The cell was a cold box of stone and a slit of moonlight. Los sat on the bench, shoulders forward, hands clasped like a prayer without a god.

Then soft steps, light as a moth-wings.

When he looked up, Willow stood at the bars—cloak swallowed by shadow, eyes bright as foxfire. She held out half a small loaf of bread.

He took it with both hands, as if receiving a sacrament. "Thank jou, Willow."

He tried a smile. It died on his lips. "I am sorry... for not being the man jou thought I was."

She frowned, hurt flickering across her face—not at him. At the world that could make him say such a thing. She reached through the bars and pulled him to her—small arms, fierce as a vow.

His breath hitched. Then his hands came up and held on. For a long moment he said nothing, because the words would have broken him.

"Thank you," he managed at last, raw. "For standing by me. When no one else will."

She shook her head once, as if to say no—when everyone else will or won't, I will anyway. Then she slipped back into shadow, and was gone.

He was grateful for her visit, even if only for a minute of warmth.

He didn't know she'd slipped past two posted guards under orders from the Chancellor himself to allow no visitors. Had he known what she'd risked...

All he knew was that the cold room now felt less like a tomb.

Last Light

The door to the cells closed behind Lord Prack with a sound of finality.

Outside, three figures waited in the corridor.

Proto was leaning against the opposite wall as if prison passages were built for his comfort. Livvy stood beside him, arms folded, trying and failing to look solemn. Eduparms said nothing. He stood a little apart from them, eyes fixed on the door Prack had just closed.

Proto looked up. "Did you tell him?"

Prack did not slow. "Tell him what?"

"That he is short, ugly, and his mother dresses him funny."

Livvy made a small sound and turned it badly into a cough.

Prack stopped.

Only his head turned.

"Proto."

The word cracked down the corridor, short and curt enough to straighten lesser men.

Proto straightened only slightly. "So no."

Livvy snickered.

Prack's eyes moved to her.

She immediately looked at the floor.

Eduparms did not laugh.

His gaze remained on the cell door, heavy and thoughtful, as if he could see through the wood, through the iron, through the stone itself to the young Paladin sitting alone beyond it.

He had seen Sir Los fight.

For an Armsman, that meant something. Words could be polished. Titles could be borrowed. Blood could be praised or spat upon depending who held the cup.

But steel told the truth.

And Eduparms had seen enough steel to know quality when it stood before him.

Prack noticed.

Of course he did.

Proto's voice softened half a shade, humor still there but less careless now. "What did you tell him?"

Prack looked once towards the door.

Then he resumed walking.

"I told him all he needed to hear."

Proto pushed off the wall and followed. Livvy went with him, still wearing the ghost of a smile. Eduparms remained a moment longer, eyes on the cell.

Then he bowed his head, once, not quite to the door and not quite to the man beyond it.

Only then did he follow.

A Father's Edict

The Burns Estate — Late Night

"Absolutely not," Lord Burns said, each syllable a slammed door. "You will not go near him. You will distance yourself—and your guild—from this scandal. Best to forget the boy."

Angela didn't move. "I will not abandon him like his mother did. I will stand beside him—trial or no."

They held each other's gaze, the war between them palpable in the air.

"I forbid it," Lord Burns said, his tone commanding and definitive.

Her voice went quiet and dangerous. "You may command my time, my duties, even my food, and on occasion, my silence. But you do not command my heart."

She turned and left. The latch clicked. And Lord Burns was left with his own echo.

Chapter LXXXIII — Arthuur's Lament

News Arrives in Anniogel

Anniogel — Command Hall

By the time Faemz returned to Anniogel a day later, the rumor he carried was already old in Camelot.

He did not know Sir Los Ortiz had been arrested.

He did not know that men in high rooms had begun plotting to use the language of law against him.

He knew only what he had heard in the Defenders' barracks.

And what he had heard had not been kind.

The command hall of Anniogel still smelled of wet wool, old smoke, and fresh ink. Maps of the three forts lay spread across the long table, weighed down with cups, knives, and bits of broken stone. Lady Treva Evasca stood at the head of the table with two of her captains, discussing the need for fresh troops from Caer Gothwaite.

Arthuur stood opposite her, arms folded, eyes on the narrow line of road leading west.

The Causeway to Avalon.

That was where the Drakorans had gone.

That was where the next blow would fall.

Kilingu had returned before dusk with four new recruits for the Knights of the Round Table: a Cleric, a Minstrel, a Sorcerer, and a Wizard. They stood now near the far wall, tired from the road and trying not to look overwhelmed by the war table.

When the door opened again, Faemz came in with four more.

Two young Armsmen.

A Scout.

And a Friar with mud to his knees and the expression of a man already regretting his vows.

"I brought four new recruits," Faemz said.

Arthuur looked up.

For a moment, the weariness in the room eased.

Lady Treva gave the recruits a measuring look. "Welcome to Anniogel."

The four bowed with the courtesy of the tired, but still respectful.

Kilingu grinned faintly to see their numbers increase.

Arthuur only nodded.

"I thank you all for coming. We will need every sword, prayer, and spell we can gather for the fight ahead."

Faemz stepped closer to the table, but did not remove his gloves. That alone drew Wintyr's eyes. Faemz was usually all ease and motion after a return, quick to shed road-dust and quicker to make some remark about the poor quality of horses, inns, or mankind in general.

Tonight he was careful.

Too careful.

"There is something else," he said.

The room shifted.

Arthuur's gaze remained on the map. "From Camelot?"

"Yes."

Lady Treva looked between them.

Faemz hesitated, and that made the thing worse before he ever spoke it.

"I heard talk in the Defenders' barracks," he said. "About Sir Los Ortiz."

Arthuur's eyes lifted.

Wintyr went still.

Faemz continued, quieter now.

"They say he is Lady Triss's son."

A faint stir moved through Lady Treva's captains.

"And," Faemz said, "they say he is a bastard."

The room went very quiet.

Arthuur's eyes moved from the map to the floor in front of him.

Not at the Causeway now.

As though the old wood of the table had become a road leading somewhere he had no wish to go.

Faemz swallowed.

"There was a sergeant. Bradford, I think. He and some of his men were laughing over it. Mocking him. Calling him names."

Wintyr looked at Arthuur.

She knew that stillness. Not anger. A wound long buried.

Faemz looked at the floor for a moment before looking up and continuing. "I thought you would want to know."

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then Arthuur said, plainly, "It is not a matter for us to deal with."

Faemz looked up.

"I know. I only thought... perhaps there was something you could do."

"There is not."

Faemz opened his mouth, closed it, then forced the words out poorly.

"I thought because you are also—"

He stopped.

Too late.

The silence that followed was colder than anything outside the walls.

One of Lady Treva's captains looked away. The Friar lowered his eyes. Kilingu's expression hardened in warning, but even he said nothing.

Arthuur did not move.

He only looked at Faemz.

Not with anger.

That would have been easier.

At last, Arthuur said, "There is nothing I can do for him."

Faemz's face tightened.

Arthuur turned his eyes back to the map.

"We are not in Camelot. We are here. The three forts are ours, but barely. The Drakorans reinforcements have set up camp on our side of the causeway, and if we give them time, they will make us pay dearly for every stone between here and Avalon."

His voice settled back into command by force.

"Right now, we are planning the next step in this campaign. That is where our efforts must be."

No one argued.

No one dared.

Lady Treva studied him for a long breath, then gently rolled one of the map weights between her fingers.

"I think," she said, "we have done enough planning for tonight."

Arthuur looked at her.

Whatever passed between them was brief, but understood.

He nodded.

"Yes. Tomorrow, then."

Chairs scraped. Parchments were gathered. Lady Treva's captains bowed and withdrew. Kilingu motioned the new recruits towards the door, muttering something low about bunks, food, and a place to sleep.

Faemz lingered.

"I did not mean anything by it," he said quietly.

Arthuur's eyes softened by the smallest measure.

"I know."

That almost made it worse.

Faemz nodded once and left.

Wintyr remained near the table.

So did Tungsten, pretending badly to study the western road. Kilingu paused at the door as if he had forgotten something. Even Lady Treva looked back from the threshold.

Arthuur saw all of them.

"I would like the room," he said tired but not unkind.

Wintyr's hand tightened at her side.

"Arthuur—"

"I just want to go over the plan once more."

She did not believe him.

But she understood.

She bowed her head and left with the others.

The door closed.

The command hall settled into silence.

Arthuur stood alone over the map, surrounded by forts taken, roads not yet won, and a rumor from Camelot that had found him all the same.

Arthuur Alone

The fire had burned low in the hearth.

Only a few red coals remained beneath the blackened wood, pulsing softly in the dark like a heart that had forgotten why it still beat. Shadows gathered along the walls of the command hall, stretching over maps, cups, knives, and the little stones Lady Treva used to mark the forts they had taken.

Arthuur stood alone at the table.

The Causeway to Avalon lay before him, drawn in a narrow line of ink.

He should have been thinking of that.

Of Drakoran positions.

Of supply wagons.

Of how many men could cross abreast before arrows turned the road into slaughter.

Instead, he heard Faemz's voice.

They say he is a bastard.

Arthuur closed his eyes.

For a while, he said nothing.

Then, quietly, to the empty room:

"Father."

The word felt foolish the moment it left him.

There was no answer.

There never was.

Only the low crackle of the hearth and the wind worrying at the shutters.

Arthuur opened his eyes and looked down at the map.

"They expect me to be you," he said. "Every time they look at me. Every time they say my name. They do not mean me. They mean you."

His fingers rested on the edge of the table.

"And now worse. Now they look at me and think I must know what to do for him."

He gave a small, humorless breath.

"A man I have never met."

The fire shifted.

"What am I supposed to do?" Arthuur asked. "Ride to Camelot? Leave Avalon to the Drakorans? Stand in some hall and tell them not to laugh? Tell him it will be all right?"

His jaw tightened.

"It won't be."

The words hung there.

He had not meant to say them.

But there they were.

Arthuur looked towards the dark window, where his own reflection stared back faintly from the glass. Young. Tired. Crownless. Fatherless.

"They will laugh," he said. "They will mock. They will make his birth a wound, then mock and laugh more at him for bleeding."

His voice lowered.

"As if being born a bastard is a crime."

For a moment, his control thinned.

His hand closed around one of the stones on the map, not hard enough to crush it, but hard enough for the edges to bite into his palm.

"But he is a knight," he whispered. "Like me..."

He stopped.

The room seemed to wait.

Arthuur swallowed the rest.

Both bastards.

He would not say it.

Not even here.

Not even to the ghost of the man whose name he bore.

At last he set the stone back on the map.

"I do not know what you would do," he said. "That is the cruelest part. They all think I do. They think your blood comes with answers."

A faint, sad smile touched his mouth and vanished.

"But it did not."

He stood there until the coals dimmed further.

Then Arthuur reached for the marker representing his own small company and moved it towards the thin line of the Causeway.

"There is nothing I can do for him," he said softly.

The words cost him.

He made himself finish them anyway.

"But there is something I can do here."

He stared down at the map.

"At dawn, we take the road."

No voice answered.

No father's hand settled on his shoulder.

No king of old stepped from the shadows to tell his son he had chosen rightly.

There was only the fire.

The map.

The war.

And Arthuur, alone, teaching himself how to be the man everyone already believed him to be.

Chapter LXXXIV — The Trial

The King's Great Hall — Morning

The banners of Albion watched from the rafters. Nobles packed the gallery. At the long oak table: Lord Chancellor Wacian presiding from the dais; Lord Prydwen stone-faced; Lord Baldric unreadable; Baron Eddington eyes like a hawk; Lord Burns a brewing storm; all flanked by lesser lords.

Chains clinked as Los was led in.

By the doors, Prox and Romao stepped out of rank and met him midway.

"No visitors were allowed," Prox murmured.

Romao put a hand to Los's shoulder before the guards jerked it away. "But we're here. You're not alone, fratello."

Los gave the smallest nod.

Outside the great hall, dozens of orphans and their mothers stood silent with hand-painted signs: crude lions, small crossed swords, a lopsided sunburst. Not loud. Just there. A second jury, made of those with the least to spend and the most to lose.

The court noticed.

Wacian banged his staff. "Proceedings will begin."

The Trial — Unity

The great chamber of the King's Hall was cold and cavernous, the vaulted ceiling swallowing the murmurs of assembled lords and courtiers. Candlelight shimmered on steel and gold, casting long shadows across the stone floor.

Los stood alone at the center—hands in chains, back straight, eyes forward. They had left him in the plain shirt and trousers he had been arrested in, denying him the dignity of his knightly garb. And yet, he was the still point in a storm that had not yet broken.

The great doors opened again.

Angela stepped through.

Her red and white armor gleamed, the gold cross stark against her breastplate. She did not look left or right. She did not bow. She walked the length of the aisle as if she had been born to it, and without hesitation, came to stand beside Los.

She took his hand.

She'd seen him in storms before — but never like this.

Los stood as though it were someone else on trial, his chains resting slack, his back straight, eyes fixed on the foot of the dais.

Not on her. Not on the Chancellor. Not on anyone.

She remembered that morning in the yard with Amren, the way he fought without chanting — without calling on the Light — and how it made her heart pound with fear and fury in equal measure.

This was the same man, choosing silence like it was a weapon.

It infuriated her.

It terrified her.

Her fingers tightened around his, willing him to react, to look, to do something.

For a heartbeat, nothing changed — she was the only one holding on.

Then his grip shifted, warm and deliberate, closing over hers with quiet strength.

We are in this together, the gesture said.

And yet his gaze never left the dais.

The chamber rippled with voices — sharp whispers, muffled oaths, shifting boots.

Baldric leaned back in his chair, watching, his fingers laced.

So... she binds herself before the first word is spoken. Let her. She will drown beside him.

Burns felt heat rise behind his eyes as he leaned forward.

Daughter... what are you doing?

Wacian rapped his staff, voice sharp. "Lady Angela Burns. You have no standing here."

"I have every right to stand beside my husband," She said, her tone steady as steel.

The nave exploded with noise — gasps, curses, scraping benches.

Burns shot to his feet. "What have you done?!"

"More than a month ago," Angela answered, unflinching. "At the Abbey in Humberton."

"I did not consent," Lord Burns growled.

Burns felt heat coil in his gut, rising behind his eyes. *Married? Without my say? Without a word?*

He wanted to tear the words from her lips, to roll back the days until she had not yet walked into that abbey in Humberton. This was his daughter — his blood — tying herself to a man he had warned her to keep at arm's length. Only to find out he was too late.

What have you done, my daughter? What have you done to us both?

Baldric seized the gap. "Then the marriage must be annulled." He let his gaze flick to Baron Eddington — weighing the man's reaction.

Eddington's fingers tapped once on the arm of his chair.

Annul it and you destroy a man the people would follow. Keep it and we risk losing a potential ally in Lord Burns. Which way will the wind blow?

"Without royal sanction, it is voidable," Wacian agreed, sensing the chance to cut this clean.

Angela's hand shifted — resting flat against her stomach.

"I plead my womb," she said. "Annul this, and you place two bastards before you instead of one."

The chamber froze.

Los did not move.

But beneath the stillness, something opened like a wound. Another voice, from another darkness, low and cutting beneath the memory of battle. *About the child I carry?*

He did not know if the demon had spoken true. Demons lied the way other creatures breathed. But the words had waited in him ever since, patient as a debt, and they chose this moment to be remembered — here, before God and the court, with his wife's hand resting over the life they had made in light.

His fingers tightened around Angela's hand. Not comfort, this time. An anchor.

He locked the thought away, as he had locked away everything else, and kept his eyes fixed on the foot of the dais.

Burns's stomach turned to stone.

She had left him no choice. If they destroyed Sir Los, they destroyed her — his daughter, his family, his name.

The man had been a thorn in his side since the day she first invited him into her guild, into her life... yet now, to shield her, he would have to shield him. The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Eddington's eyes narrowed.

A child changes the board. The people will see not just a knight — but a bloodline. Dangerous... or invaluable.

Baldric felt the old wound twist — Triss's face, replaced by her son's.

Now the Ortiz blood breeds in Albion's heart.

From the balcony's shadow, the King leaned forward, his voice silent but his mind measuring.

A man of the people. A child born of scandal. The boy only digs his hole deeper. Perhaps it would have been better had Lord Baldric killed him before this scandal could erupt.

Wacian's knuckles whitened on his staff. This was meant to be swift. Now the air was thick with politics and blood. Still, procedure demanded the farce continue.

"So be it," the Chancellor said, anger clipped beneath formality. "Lady Angela you may remain. The matter of your marriage is for the King alone to decide."

His gaze locked on Sir Los. The hall quieted until only the banners stirred. He unrolled a parchment, the crack of wax splitting the silence.

"Lorenzo Ortiz, called Los," he read, his voice carrying the iron calm of a man pretending this was law and not spectacle, "you stand before this court and the King's council to answer charges brought in the name of His Majesty."

He lifted his eyes.

"First: that you did conceal your true birth, name, and condition, being bastard-born and native to Albion, and permitted this court, the Crown's officers, and the noble houses of this realm to receive you as a lawful son of Castile, bearing an honorable name and standing not rightly your own."

A stir moved through the hall.

"Second: that under such false name and standing you did accept honors, dignities, office, and trust within this realm — knighthood, service under the Crown's peace, and most notably the office, residence, and privilege of Ambassador of Castile — without making plain the defect and condition of your birth."

Baldric's mouth did not move.

But his eyes did.

Good.

Wacian continued.

"Third: that by these concealments you have brought scandal upon the alliance of Albion and Castile, set noble houses in dispute, drawn the Church and Crown into disrepute, and endangered the King's peace."

The parchment lowered. Wacian's gaze narrowed, the formality gone from his tone.

"These are not questions of valor, nor whether you have swung a sword well enough to please the commons. They are questions of right and blood. By what right did you stand among nobles? By what means did you obtain office? By what lawful claim did you bear the style and favor given to you in this realm?"

A faint stir moved through the hall—boots shifting, silks whispering, the sound of men unsure whether to breathe.

"Lorenzo Ortiz," Wacian continued, "tell this court—why did you conceal your true name? And for what purpose did you come to Albion?"

The question hung like a blade in the air.

Los's fingers tightened around Angela's hand. He did not lift his eyes from the base of the dais. In the stillness, the truth pressed heavy against his chest—why he had come to Albion, why he had taken up arms here. To die. To meet an honorable end, to be with Risa again. That had been his only purpose.

But now... Angela. His wife.

I cannot answer that, he thought. Not in front of her. Not to anyone. I would face a thousand condemnations before I'd let her believe anything other than I love her.

Beside him, Angela's eyes shifted towards him for the briefest instant. She felt the tension in his hand, a dangerous stillness in his posture. It was the kind of quiet that held a blade behind it. Her grip firmed—not in comfort, but in readiness.

The silence stretched until it felt like a weight pressing down upon him.

Then, the heavy doors opened. Another figure entered—Lady Rebecca Triss. No armor, only the weight of her name and the crest of her house. She had waited outside the hall, choosing her moment.

"I, Lady Triss," she said, walking unhurried to the center, "claim this man as my son."

Los did not turn. He kept his eyes forward, fixed on the foot of the dais, remaining silent.

Triss turned to Angela, taking both her hands. "And I consent to the marriage."

Lord Burns's jaw set hard. Of course she would consent to the marriage. It was her indiscretion that had brought them all to this moment. And now she wished to tie that same indiscretion directly to his House. Like mother, like son.

Triss smiled at her protégé, now her daughter by marriage.

Angela met her gaze — the woman who had once called her the daughter she never bore now accepted her as family, bound not by promise but by blood and vows.

Wacian's staff cracked against the stone. "Irrelevant. The question is his illegitimacy, and whether he used a false name to gain title and favor before this court — and by that favor obtained an office to which he was not lawfully entitled."

He turned back to Los.

"Do you deny that you concealed your true birth? That you bore the false name Los Ortiz of Castile, and not your true name — Lorenzo Ortiz, bastard son of Lady Triss? Do you deny taking honors and office while this court remained ignorant of your illegitimacy?"

It was at that moment, Ramón, Steward of the Embassy of Castile, entered. Wearing the Livery of Castile, he strode to Los's side placing a hand on his shoulder for but a moment, *I Promised you I would be your shield*, he seemed to say. Then he bowed low to the court.

"If it pleases the court." Ramón began.

Wacian's eyes narrowed as he stared at Los's valet, now arrayed in the royal livery of Castile.

"It does not please the court to be interrupted," he said. "But it appears interruption is the order of the morning. Speak."

"Señor Chancellor," Ramón said evenly, "matters of what Castile knew or did not know have not yet been made plain to me. I await formal reply to my dispatch, and would ask the court's patience until then. As for his legitimacy," He withdrew a paper from his livery with great care and reverence, "I hold here a letter from his grandfather—Don Flavio Ortiz, Alcalde de Toledo—stating that should Lady Rebecca Triss claim Lorenzo as her son, he will likewise claim him as blood."

Wacian eyed him. "Regardless of who claims him, it does not erase his illegitimacy, do you concede that a bastard cannot hold the post of Ambassador?"

Ramón bowed the barest fraction. "As a general rule of courts—yes. But as a subject of the Kingdom of Castile, he is afforded certain protections and rights—now doubly so, as he stands a noble bastard claimed by both his father's and his mother's blood."

"Enough!" Lord Burns barked.

They circled like vultures over a carcass — but it was his blood they were circling over: his daughter, his grandchild.

He rose before the thought had fully formed.

"Then I claim Sir Los under House Burns by marriage, and consent to the marriage."

The words struck the hall like a dropped helm.

Damn you, boy, Lord Burns thought, staring daggers at Los. *You've won a place in my house by accident... and I will spend the rest of my days regretting it.*

Angela's breath caught.

She had braced for her father's wrath — not his claim.

For all his bluster and fury, he had just stepped between Los and every blade in the room.

It was not forgiveness; it was protection, and it would cost him dearly.

She looked at him, eyes wide, and mouthed a single word: Father.

Yet Los still did not look up. His gaze stayed fixed on the foot of the dais, his expression unreadable.

Angela's hand slackened in his as the shock of her father's words settled in.

Only then did he squeeze her hand — firm, steady — a renewal of their silent vow: *We're in this together.*

Ramón's brow lifted, the faintest ghost of a smile playing at the corner of his mouth as he nodded to Lord Burns.

"Then perhaps the court must concede that this man does not stand here without house, blood, or crown to answer for him."

Baldric rose like a man stepping into the tilt yard.

"He was born in Albion," he said. "He is a subject of Albion, bound by Albion law. Castile's claim ends where our shores begin."

"Yet by right of blood," Ramón countered smoothly, "Castile holds him as surely as House Burns now does. Three claims, Chancellor Wacian... and none of them easy to dismiss."

The murmurs rose again — sharper now, tinged with the scent of courtly dispute turning into something far more dangerous.

From the balcony's shadow, the King leaned forward, his expression undeniably upset, angered by all of this.

Wacian's knuckles whitened on his staff.

This was meant to be swift.

Now the air was thick with blood and consequences.

"So be it," the Chancellor said at last. "The matter of foreign office will be separated from the matter of birth. In the King's name, this court requests that the Kingdom of Castile recall Lorenzo Ortiz from ambassadorial office, effective upon receipt and acknowledgment of royal dispatch."

Ramón rested a hand on Los's arm.

Los met his gaze, gave a single, quiet nod, then returned his eyes to the foot of the dais.

"As you wish," Ramón said, bowing with formal grace — though the steel in his tone made clear the concession was far from surrender.

Wacian continued, scenting blood.

"And second, the matter of his knighthood. Unless there are any objections, the accused shall be stripped of his title—"

A voice cut clean across him.

"I object."

Every head turned.

Sir Amren, the King's Champion, strode down the aisle.

Wacian's lips thinned. "Sir Amren—"

Sir Amren took his place at Los's side — a position already crowded.

"My Lords, you know me as the King's Champion, sworn to truth as I am to my sword. I have fought Sir Los with my own hands, in the yard, before witnesses. I tell you now—he is a man of valor."

Wacian's jaw tightened.

Amren did not flinch.

"On the day of our bout, I have since found out, he was forbidden to chant. Not by his own choice, nor mine, but by an order given from within this very court. I know not the tongue that spoke it, for it matters little—what matters is that such an order was given at all.

To strip a Paladin of his chants is to bind one arm behind his back before the fight began. It dishonors our match, it dishonors his Order, and it stains the honor of the court that allowed it. That day, injustice was done to this man."

"Sir Amren" Wacian tried to cut in.

But Amren pressed on. "And yet—Sir Los bore it in silence. He made no complaint, sought no mercy, and fought as he was. And despite that injustice against him, still he refused to yield. That is what I saw in Sir Los.

My Lords, if you would weigh him today, remember that you have already weighed him once—under unfair measure—and he did not falter. That is the mark of a knight who serves Albion, even when Albion does not serve him."

Los did not lift his head. His eyes stayed fixed on the carved base of the dais, his fingers still wrapped around Angela's hand. Only the smallest change betrayed that Amren's words had struck—his thumb shifted once against her palm, a slow, deliberate press.

Angela's own grip tightened in answer. She didn't look at him; her gaze stayed locked on Sir Amren. But behind her eyes, a storm moved—shock, then anger. She remembered that day at the lists, how he'd fought without chanting. She'd wondered at the time, but the match—and its aftermath—had moved too quickly to dwell on it. Now, hearing Sir Amren, she wondered if, as with that day, his silence today had been ordered.

Los's breathing stayed even, controlled. Whatever passed between him and Angela in that moment needed no words.

Before the Chancellor could shape the word decorum, Lord Prydwen rose.

"If it please the court, I have letters." He held aloft two pages, the wax seals catching the light. "From Lord Adribard and Lord Solice — on the matter of the Dragon. They attest to Sir Los's actions, how he stood alone, and that through his valor alone was it slain. They give Sir Los their continued support and stand by his knighthood, as do I. And I remind the court he is a Knight of the Church and not the realm."

Wacian's gaze flicked towards the shadowed balcony where the King sat. A single hand rose... and stilled.

The Chancellor set his jaw.

"So noted," he said, clipped.

Then Wacian drew a slow breath.

"Then let us move to the Order he has defrauded... we shall hear from the Bishop."

The nave doors opened. Bishop Kustan entered, his robes sweeping the stone. Lady Fridwulf and Lady Winchell followed close behind him, their faces composed and severe.

"May it please the court," Kustan began, his voice rich as a bell. "On the matter of his standing in the Paladin Order and the Church — it has come to us, by testimony and confession, that during the incident at the Catacombs of Cordova, the accused was preserved by divine intervention — the intercession of Saint Lucy of Syracuse."

A ripple of whispers hissed through the hall.

Kustan turned to Los. "Do you deny this?"

Los's eyes dropped. "I do not deny it."

"Then let the record show," Kustan said, "that the Church recognizes Sir Los Ortiz, however named, as a Paladin and Knight in good standing within the Order. And the church."

Silence cracked like ice.

A few lords nearly swallowed their tongues.

Each revelation shifted the power in the room.

Baldric seethed at the Bishop's words.

A sanctified bastard is still a bastard... but one draped in the Church's banner would be harder to gut.

Eddington watched the room turn,

Every defense they raise only forges him stronger in the eyes of the commons. This trial is turning him into a symbol of royal persecution; he could not have planned it better. If only he could bring the boy over to his side without alienating Lord Baldric.

Wacian saw the verdict slipping from his hands.

This should have been simple... Now the Crown must tread around a sanctified knight, married into a noble house, claimed by a foreign court, beloved by the commoners.

The King's shadow shifted once more on the balcony.

Wacian read the movement.

His mouth became a hard line.

"On the first matter," he announced, "the court finds sufficient uncertainty of birth, name, and standing to suspend the accused from exercise of ambassadorial office within Albion, pending formal answer from Castile."

Ramón bowed once.

Nothing more.

"On the second matter," Wacian continued, "the question of Crown honors and styling within the King's peace is reserved to His Majesty."

"On the third matter," Wacian said, each word forced through his teeth, "standing within the Paladin Order and his Knighthood is maintained by declaration of the Church."

Bishop Kustan inclined his head.

"Finally," Wacian said, "noble sureties having presented themselves; the accused is released from custody into the keeping of House Burns and House Triss, with the Embassy of Castile answerable for his presence when summoned."

Burns looked as if he had swallowed broken glass.

Triss's face did not change.

Ramón bowed again.

Angela's hand tightened around Los's.

"The accused is released," Wacian finished, "pending the King's further pleasure."

The staff fell.

It was done.

Outside, the poor knelt in silence on the steps — no cheers, no shouts. Just rows of bowed heads in brown cloaks and patched sleeves. The quietest victory Camelot had ever seen.

The Walk Out

The chains were removed, and Los — still Sir Los — stood very still, as if the world might tilt again if he moved too quickly. Angela's hand found his once more. Her fingers tightened. Prox and Romao stepped to his side. Sir Amren gave a nod like a promise. Triss breathed — perhaps for the first time since she had entered. Ramón inclined his head the faintest degree.

They walked together into the light.

On the steps, the children surged to their feet, then stopped themselves, forming a crooked lane down the street. A little boy with a too-big cap saluted with his whole body. A girl hugged a book like a shield.

Los looked at Angela, then at the sky.

"Well," he said, voice hoarse, "that was... something."

Angela's smile was relief cracked open by love.

He squeezed her hand. She squeezed back.

Behind them, in the high shadow of the balcony, the King stood without moving, the glass throwing a dozen broken colors across his face.

Chapter LXXXV — Home

The Sisters and Julia

Orchid Fair Guildhall — The Return from the Trial

The heavy oak doors of the Guildhall creaked open, spilling a narrow beam of daylight across the flagstone floor. The low hum of conversation faltered as Angela stepped inside.

Her crimson cloak, still carrying the faint scent of the Great Hall's incense, trailed behind her. Gold embroidery caught the light, and though her expression was composed, the whispers already swelled around the room.

She had walked out of the King's Great Hall a wife... and with a child on the way.

Near the central hearth, Tamara stood with her arms folded, habit slightly askew as if she'd just come from the training yard. Amaranthia sat with the poise of a court lady, hands folded on her lap, though her eyes betrayed curiosity. Julia lingered behind them, apron slightly rumpled from errands, her expression warm but searching.

Tamara broke first.

"Well," she said flatly. "You've gone and done it. Secret vows, a spectacle at court, and a child revealed before half the realm — all in one afternoon."

Angela took a measured step forward. "Tam—"

"I'm not done." Tamara's tone softened a fraction. "I just hope you're certain. This isn't the sort of knot you untie later."

Amaranthia's gaze flicked up. "I suppose congratulations are in order. But... how did Father take it?"

Angela hesitated. "He... took it better than I expected."

Julia stepped forward, her smile small but sincere. "Well congratulations from me. I'm happy for you both. But, Angela... you could have told us. We'd have stood with you."

"I know," Angela admitted quietly. "We wanted to tell everyone when the time was right."

"And the middle of a trial was the right moment?" Tamara asked, one brow raised.

Angela opened her mouth, then hesitated. "I'm sorry. I just... things moved faster than I had time to think."

Tamara huffed, then stepped forward and pulled her into one of those firm, half-hug, half-grips only an older sibling could manage. "You're a fool," she murmured. "But you're my fool. And if he so much as breathes wrong towards you or your child, I'll tan him myself."

Amaranthia rose gracefully and joined them, her poise melting into something warm and protective as her arms wrapped around them both.

Julia's smile deepened, and she stepped in without hesitation, encircling all three in a gentleness that carried as much love as words ever could.

For the first time since the trial, Angela let her shoulders ease, releasing a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. In the circle of her sisters' embrace, she felt the steady warmth of family—and the quiet certainty that somehow, everything would work out.

Blood and Blessings

Angela and Lady Triss

The Guildhall had begun to quiet, the echo of voices fading down the corridors. Angela stood alone near the long table, her fingers tracing the edge of a map she wasn't really seeing.

A soft footstep broke the stillness.

She turned. Lady Triss stood in the doorway, the pale afternoon light turning her greying hair to silver. For a long moment, she said nothing—simply studied the young woman before her.

When she spoke, her voice was even, but not cold.

"You kept it from me."

Angela drew herself up, meeting her gaze. "I did."

A pause lingered—not the silence of strangers, but the weighing of what could be lost or kept.

Lady Triss crossed the space between them until they stood an arm's length apart. "You were my student," she said, her tone shifting. "My responsibility. The daughter I never had." Her eyes softened, just slightly. "And now... you are family."

The breath caught in Angela's throat. She had wanted to hear those words for years—wanted Triss's pride in her as much as her guidance.

"I will take care of him," Angela said quietly. "And of our child."

Angela let out a slow metered breath. Then Triss closed the final step and wrapped her arms around her—not in the measured clasp of a commander, but in the warm, protective embrace of a mother holding her daughter.

"I have always been proud of you," Triss murmured against her hair. "But today... more than ever. The way you stood up in court. That took real courage."

Angela closed her eyes, letting the words sink in. Held in that rare, unguarded moment, she felt the surety that she had not only Triss's approval, but an unwavering place in her heart.

Mother and Son

Los and Lady Triss

Los leaned against the oak table in the guildhall's study, still dressed in the simple shirt he had worn at the trial. He had yet to even put on a sword.

Lady Triss closed the study door behind her.

"You could have told me," she said without preamble.

Los met her eyes. "I could have," he said evenly.

"And yet you didn't."

"No. And if I had... it would have been harder for you to pretend you didn't know."

A flicker of something—not anger, not quite—crossed her face. “You’ve changed, Lorenzo.”

“Maybe,” he said. “But not in the ways that matter.”

Her gaze softened, but her tone remained steel. “Then protect her. Protect your child. Because now you’ve given me something to lose twice over.”

He looked down for a moment. “Jes. I understand.”

Then he paused, his tone softening.

“Are you still proud of me?”

She was silent for a long moment—long enough for him to think she might turn and walk away. Then she stepped forward, closing the distance, and rested her hand on his shoulder.

“I was proud the day you stood your ground against Sir Amren,” she said quietly. “Prouder still when you returned alive from the relic keep. But today...” She let the words settle. “...today I am proud because you stood there while all the world wanted to tear you down, and never faltered.”

She let that hang in the air.

“Look at me, Lorenzo.”

For the first time since learning she was his mother, Los let himself hold her gaze without flinching.

A heartbeat passed.

“Thank you,” he said softly—quiet enough to be meant for no one but her.

Her hand lingered on his arm before she drew him into a long, steady embrace.

He did not weep. He did not break. But she felt it—the faintest trembling in him, like a bowstring drawn too long and finally allowed to ease.

Lady Triss closed her eyes and held him tighter, her words meant for him alone.

“You are not alone,” she whispered. “Not anymore.”

When they stepped back, his face was as it had been—composed, unreadable. No one else in the hall would have guessed.

But she knew. She had seen what the trial had cost him; in the only way he would ever allow.

And for Los too, something had shifted. In her eyes, he saw more than care, more than quiet strength.

He saw Family.

Brothers

Los, Prox, and Romao

Los stepped out of the study and into the warm haze of the guildhall's common room. The air smelled faintly of spiced woodsmoke and roasted meat, the fire snapping in the great hearth. Near it, Prox and Romao sat at a low table with a pitcher of ale between them, their armor set aside, boots stretched towards the flames.

Both men looked up at once.

"So it's true," Prox said, voice low but heavy.

Romao's grin spread slow and wide. "Married in secret, a child on the way... Fratello, if you were going to make trouble, the least you could have done was invite us along."

Los smirked, stepping towards the table. "Jes. I'll make it up to jou."

"How?" Romao asked, leaning back with theatrical suspicion. "By letting me plan the christening? I throw a better party than the King's court."

Prox snorted. "No, no—he'll 'make it up to us' the same way he always does: by getting us into something life-threatening. We've fought with you, bled with you, seen a hundred reckless stunts. But this..." He poured Los a cup and slid it across. "...this may be the most reckless yet."

Romao lifted his mug. "To Los—the only man who could survive a dragon, a duel, and matrimony in the same year... and it's not even over yet!"

Los clinked mugs with them, chuckling. "Jes. But of the three, marriage will test me the most."

They drank, the firelight catching the gold in their cups. For a moment, warmth and the pop of the hearth filled the space.

Romao broke it first. "So... what will you name it, if it's a boy?"

"Since I'll keep using the name Los," he said, "I was thinking Lorenzo."

Prox leaned forward. "And if it's a girl?"

"Angelina," Los replied without hesitation. "After her mother."

The words settled into the firelit air, soft and certain.

Romao raised his mug again, his grin fading into something almost reverent. "To family."

Prox echoed, "To family."

Los lifted his cup last, meeting their eyes. "To the future."

After the Storm

Late Evening

The Guild Hall was dark but for the low fire in the hearth. The din of Camelot—boots, bells, and rumor—was muffled by thick stone walls and the heavy door Los had shut himself.

Angela was already there, seated at the table in the study, her armor set aside, her tabard folded beside her. The candlelight caught in her hair, making the stray strands into a crown she didn't notice she was wearing.

He crossed the room slow, as if still moving through the long echo of the court.

They were finally alone.

Neither spoke at first. The only sound was the faint sigh of settling wood.

She broke it. Her tone nearly angry. Confused.

"You just stood there."

He paused and took a long breath.

"Jes."

"They tried to strip everything from you."

He took the seat opposite her. "And yet..." He let out a long sigh. "I walk out still breathing. With jou at my side."

Angela's jaw tightened. "You didn't fight back."

Los's mouth quirked—not quite a smile. "If I had... Wacian would have won. He wanted me angry. Loud. Easy to paint as unworthy. Instead..." His eyes found hers. "...I let them fight each other. Easier on my sword arm."

Angela shook her head, half exasperation, half awe. "You turned the King's court into a brawl and never even drew steel."

"Jes," he said again, softer. "But I had help."

Her gaze wavered. "Don't thank me. I only—"

"Angela," he said, her name an anchor in deep water. "When jou walked into that hall, jou were not my guildmistress, or a lord's daughter, or a piece in their games. Jou were my wife. Jou kept me standing, jou gave me strength."

Something in her eyes caught, held. She tried to hide it.

He leaned forward. "There was a moment, standing there, when I thought—if this ends with me in chains, it will not be the worst fate. I have already been claimed by someone who will not let go."

Her lips parted, but no words came. She reached across the table, and he met her halfway. Their hands clasped, warm and sure.

"Angela—" he began, but she shook her head, her breath unsteady.

She looked away, voice low. "I thought I was ready for them. I thought I could stand there and not care what they said. But when they called you 'nothing'—" her voice caught.

He stood and crossed to her. "Jou didn't let them win."

He took her hands again and helped her stand.

She let out a breath that was half a laugh, half a sob. "I didn't let them see. That's not the same thing."

He held her in his arms as the truth hung between them—how close it had come, how easily the court could have taken everything. Her shoulders trembled, the tension of hours breaking at last.

Los cupped her face gently. "They can strip titles. They can take land, gold, names... but they cannot take you from me."

Her eyes met his, glass-bright in the lamplight. "They tried," she whispered. "God help me, they tried."

And then her restraint fell away. She leaned into him fully, her forehead against his chest. She let it go, until nothing remained but her breath against the steady beat of his heart.

Angela's eyes closed.

She knew he would not break.

Not here.

Not ever.

He could bleed. He could stagger. He could carry grief so heavy it bent his shoulders when he thought no one was watching.

But break?

No.

Not her Los.

He held her, one hand cradling her head, the other anchoring her close, the world narrowing to the quiet between them.

For the first time all day, neither had to fight, neither had to keep their guard up.

For a long while, they stayed like that—two people who had been weighed, measured, and somehow, for tonight, not found wanting.

Outside, the city still whispered his name, for good or ill. Inside, in the glow of embers, Los let himself believe he was allowed this—this quiet, this moment, this heartbeat—before the next storm.

Chapter LXXXVI — The Road to Avalon

Word from Caer Gothwaite

Anniogel — Command Hall

In Camelot, the matter had already become history, become legend.

In Anniogel, it arrived as warning.

The messenger came just before dusk, with muddy boots and General Wystan's seal tucked safely inside his coat. He looked tired from the road, but the moment he entered the command hall, every eye turned towards him.

Lady Treva Evasca stood at the head of the table. Arthuur stood beside her, one hand resting on the map of the three forts.

Tungsten, Kilingu, and Faemz had been arguing for the better part of an hour about which brew tasted best. Kilingu was arguing Westwind Red was a refined drink and therefore superior. Faemz was arguing that Humberton's Dark Ale was what real men drank. But even the Friar agreed that Tungsten and his love of Dragon's Roar meant he had no taste and therefore no viable opinion.

Arthuur had listened to all of it with the grave patience of a commander surrounded by men having a less than worthwhile discussion. Though if he had been asked, Caerwent Ruby Red was his favorite.

Ale was fine in taverns.

But for meals?

He smiled faintly.

Sir Sagramore had taught him wine was best.

The messenger bowed.

"My lady," he said to Treva. "Sir Arthuur. Word from General Wystan."

Treva took the sealed letter and broke it quickly. Her eyes moved over the page.

Then, for the first time in days, relief softened her face.

"He is sending reinforcements," she said.

The room stirred.

"Enough?" one of her captains asked.

Treva looked up. "Enough to man the three forts."

Tungsten struck the table with one open hand. "Finally."

Kilingu grinned. "Then we stop babysitting the forts?"

Faemz folded his arms. "The sooner the better I say."

A few tired fists pounded the table in agreement.

Even Arthuur smiled.

Not widely. Not carelessly. But enough that Wintyr, standing near the wall, saw it and was glad.

"General Wystan congratulates Sir Arthuur on retaking the forts," Treva continued, with a nod towards him. "And says the relief column should arrive by tomorrow's second bell if the roads hold."

"The roads will hold," Tungsten said.

"They had better," Kilingu muttered. "I am tired of staring at the Causeway waiting for them to make a move."

"The small force we left in each fort has convinced them to wait," Arthuur said. "Either their numbers are smaller than we think, or they believe ours are larger than they are."

That quieted them, but not unpleasantly.

There was strength in the room again. Purpose. The kind that came when men could finally see the next step beneath their boots.

Treva turned back to the messenger who looked as if there was more to say. "Was there anything else?"

The messenger hesitated.

And with that hesitation, the warmth thinned.

"Yes, my lady," he said. "There is... news from Camelot."

Arthuur's smile faded.

The messenger looked from Treva to Arthuur, uncertain how much weight to give a rumor carried over too many miles.

"They say the Spaniard has been arrested."

No one spoke.

Then Lady Treva frowned. "You cannot arrest an ambassador."

The messenger shifted, uncomfortable. "They say he is no longer ambassador."

"Why? What was he arrested for?" Faemz asked, though his face had already gone still.

The messenger swallowed.

"They say he was arrested for being a bastard."

The word landed harder than it should have.

One of Treva's captains gave a sharp, disbelieving laugh. "Being a bastard is not a crime."

"No," Arthuur said.

His voice was quiet.

"It is not."

The room looked to him.

He did not look back.

"But a bastard cannot be an ambassador."

His eyes had lowered to the map, to the narrow road inked westward towards Avalon. But for one breath he was not seeing the road. He was seeing Camelot. A hall. A crowd. Men laughing because a word had given them permission.

The room went silent.

Wintyr stepped closer.

Her hand found his beneath the edge of the table and squeezed.

Arthuur looked at her.

He smiled.

It was almost convincing.

But she saw the worry in his eyes.

So did Lady Treva.

The messenger, not understanding the silence he had caused, hurried on. "That is all my lady. No news from the frontier or other fronts."

"Thank you," Treva said softly. "Take food and rest. When you have done so, you may return to General Wystan with my compliments."

She looked back to Arthuur.

"What are you planning to do?"

For a heartbeat, the question could have meant anything.

About Los.

About Camelot.

About bastards in courts where blood mattered more than deeds.

Arthuur let Wintyr's hand go.

He straightened.

"When the fresh troops arrive," he said, "they will take command of the forts."

Tungsten looked up.

Kilingu's grin returned slowly.

Faemz watched Arthuur with something like apology still lingering in his eyes.

Arthuur placed one finger on the narrow line between the Isle of Glass and Avalon Isle.

"Then we take their camp, then the Causeway."

The room settled around the words.

Then the room nodded in approval.

Arthuur looked towards the western road.

"And we carry the campaign forward."

Chapter LXXXVII — Los and Lorenzo

The Solar — Morning After the Trial

The morning light slanted through the high windows of the Burns estate solar, soft over carved oak panels and the silver dishes laid out between them. The smell of warm bread and honeyed tea lingered, though neither had eaten much. Angela sat at the small round table near the window, her gaze drawn out across the gardens where dew clung to roses and sparrows stirred the hedges.

Her mind was still in Camelot—the weight of voices, the ring of judgment, the sudden announcement she had not planned to give. She traced a fingertip along the rim of her cup, thoughts circling until something snapped into place.

Her head turned sharply towards her husband.

"You bastard!"

Los, already mid-sip of tea, set the cup down with practiced calm. "Jes," he said, his accent soft as ever. "This has been established."

Angela blinked, incredulous, her jaw tightening. "Don't you dare make light of this."

One brow arched. "What else would jou have me do with it?"

She leaned forward, voice rising. "Why didn't you tell me your grandfather was the Mayor of Toledo? That is not the role of a simple magistrate. That position holds real power."

His answer came smooth, untroubled. "Jou never asked. And jes, he is the most important man outside the Palace walls. Even my appointment as Ambassador had to go through him."

Angela rose, pacing towards the window. "So before you were outed—you weren't just some commoner from Castile. You were a—a noble by birth."

Los tilted his head. "Jes. Does that make a difference?"

She sputtered, frustration breaking through. "Of course it makes a difference! I thought you were a commoner who had earned everything—your rank, your knighthood, your honors—on your own merits."

Los was taken aback by her words.

"Jes. I did earn them. On my own merits."

"Yes, but..." Her hands clenched, then fell open, unable to find the next words.

He held her gaze, steady and unreadable. "Angela, I wanted you to love me for who I am, not for who my family is."

The silence stretched.

"I do love you for who you are," she confessed, still putting it all together. "Who I thought you were. Even a minor noble's son would receive some education, be knowledgeable in the ways of court. Why hide that from me?"

There was a silence between them for a moment.

Then.

A strange stillness came over him.

He stood slowly, and gently clasped his hands behind his back.

He took in a deep breath... deeper than usual.

Then slowly let it out.

His shoulders eased back—not tense, not defensive—just... right.

His bearing was noble, his demeanor princely. Whereas other men tense up when taking on a noble stance, Los eased into it, as if he had always been. Even his crooked smile was gone, replaced with a more even, normal, but small smile.

Angela watched the transformation and forgot to breathe.

When he spoke, it wasn't Los.

It was Lorenzo.

"Angela," he said, voice smooth, flawless, unaccented, "You are right. I have kept a part of me from you."

Her jaw dropped.

"My God," she whispered. "What happened to your accent?"

His expression softened—not regret, not guilt.
Just... truth.

"This is who I was raised to be," he said quietly. "And Los is who I chose to be."

Angela's breath came quick and unsteady. "Why hide this from me?"

His eyes met hers without flinching. "Because Lorenzo is who I was. And because people need Los."

"I need you" she said, raw. "The real you."

"Then you will have me, all of me. When it is just us. No one else."

Before she could say more the solar door opened.

Lord Burns stepped inside.

Angela flinched.

Lorenzo stepped back.

And in the blink of an eye—
His shoulders tensed.

He looked at the ground, then back to his wife.

And he was Los again.

Lord Burns took one look at his daughter's expression—her jaw tight, her posture sharp—and then at the distance between her and her husband. His face darkened.

"Is everything all right?" he asked, voice low with a father's concern as he moved past Los and took his daughters hands in his.

"Yes, Father," Angela said through clenched teeth, her eyes moving from her father to her husband.

"We were... just talking."

Los lowered his head respectfully. "My apologies if we disturbed you."

The accent hit her like a slap.

The lie.

The mask.

She felt her anger spike.

She opened her mouth, breath sharp—

—but Los lifted one hand slightly and shook his head, tiny, pleading.

Not now.

Lord Burns saw it.

Saw his daughter silenced.

And every protective instinct in him sharpened to a point.

He stared at Los with daggers in his eyes... then, with all the discipline of a seasoned noble, turned back to his daughter.

"Not at all," he said tightly. "I came only to check on you. Yesterday was... a long day."

Los nodded quickly. "Jes, my Lord. And I apologize for that as well."

Lord Burns squeezed Angela's arms and offered her a thin, fatherly smile.

"If there is anything you need."

His warning to Los was unmistakable.

"We're fine, Father," Angela answered—steady, but still sharp at the edges. Her gaze moving from her father to Los.

Lord Burns lingered a moment too long as he followed her gaze to her husband, then exhaled and stepped back.

"Very well. I'll give you two some privacy."

He closed the door behind him.

The instant the latch clicked—

Los vanished.

And Lorenzo stood there once more.

The noble posture.

The controlled breath.

"For you alone," he said softly. "No one else." as he shook his head slowly.

His true voice.

His true bearing.

His true self.

Angela's anger didn't disappear—it folded into something quieter, something that trembled in her throat. She had known him as Los, the knight, the rogue, the Spaniard with the crooked smile and stubborn courage.

But this man standing before her—

This was different.

This was the part of him he had buried.

The part he had never shown anyone since the day he left Castile.

The part Risa loved.

The part he gave to no one.

And he was giving it to her.

Not the world.

Not Albion.

Not even his friends.

Her.

Only her.

He stepped towardss her, reaching for her, tenderly, cautiously.

"Lorenzo..." she breathed. Even saying the name felt like it belonged someone else.

His eyes softened—not the bright, mischievous spark she knew, but a deep, steady stillness.

"Yes Angela?"

She looked at the ground, unsure of what to say.

"...Thank you."

A small, genuine smile touched his lips. Lorenzo's smile.

He drew her gently into his arms.

"I love you," he whispered—soft, honest, true.

A breath shivered out of her as she leaned into him.

And in that closeness—in that moment where his forehead almost touched hers—Angela understood fully:

He was giving her all of him.

All he had left.

All he had to give.

Chapter LXXXVIII — The Boy from Toledo

The Embassy of Castile — Later that morning.

The embassy was quiet when Angela stepped inside, its stone corridor echoing softly with her footsteps. Morning light filtered through the high windows, laying long bars of gold across the tiled floor.

Ramón, having heard her enter, emerged from the Ambassador's office, wiping ink from his fingers.

"Lady Angela?" he asked, startled. "Don Los is not here. He left for the cathedral—"

"I'm not here to see Los," she said.

Ramón straightened, his brows knitting. "Then... how may I be of service, señora?"

Angela hesitated.

She felt foolish for coming.

She felt desperate for answers.

She felt the weight of her husband's secrets pressing behind her ribs.

Finally, she said, quietly:

"Ramón... tell me what you know of my husband.

Not Los.

Lorenzo."

Ramón blinked. Slowly.

Then he exhaled and leaned back against the desk.

"What would you like to know?" he asked.

Angela's heart tightened.

"Tell me everything."

Ramón folded his arms, his voice gentle, careful.

"He was raised in Toledo, by his grandfather Don Flavio. He is educated. More than most nobles in Castile. Languages, mathematics, astronomy, law, diplomacy, scripture, philosophy, rhetoric. Don Flavio made sure he had the finest tutors."

Angela stared in disbelief. "My Los?"

She felt as though someone had shifted the ground beneath her feet.

Ramón nodded, then continued.

"And yet..."

He drew a slow breath.

"All that education," he said softly, "came with a price."

Angela's brows knitted. "A price?"

He nodded, eyes somber.

"My lady... has he ever spoken to you about his friends back in Castile?"

Angela frowned. "No. Never."

Ramón gave a slow, sad nod.

"That is because he had none."

The words landed like a stone dropped into deep water — and Angela felt the ripples move inside her.

Her throat tightened.

She thought of her own childhood:

Her sisters.

The other noble girls she trained with.

Shared meals, whispered secrets, nights giggling under quilts.

Even when the court was cruel, even when politics grew sharp — she had never once been alone.

And Los...

Her husband...

The man who smiled so easily, who joked, who charmed, who fought for everyone but himself...

He had grown up with no one.

A loneliness so total she could scarcely imagine surviving it.

Her breath stilled.

Ramón's voice returned softly:

"His life was tutors, books, instructors, strict schedules.

Scholarly pursuits, martial training, and being groomed for high office.

No play. No companions.

Only expectations."

Angela swallowed hard, the ache in her chest sharper now.

Ramón continued, apologetic but honest.

"He speaks perfect Castilian, perfect Latin, perfect Arabic. He can even read and write Greek and Hebrew. As for his English..." He shook his head.

"I do not know why he uses the accent. He does not need to."

He paused, studying her.

"He uses the accent even with me. With everyone. Always."

Angela swallowed. "Why, then? I... I heard him speak without it just yesterday."

"I do not know," Ramón said quietly. "But that he trusted you with his true voice... that is something special."

Angela lowered her gaze.

Her heart ached with a strange new tenderness—
an ache for what he must have borne alone.

"It seems I am still learning who he really is," she said softly.

Ramón leaned forward, his voice gentle.

"My lady... if he has shown you the boy he once was, that is no small thing."

His eyes softened with quiet understanding.

"He gives that to no one. Not even me."

Angela's breath caught.

She nodded, thanking him softly for his honesty.

Then she left the embassy in silence, her steps slow along the stone corridor, her thoughts racing far ahead of her.

Trying to understand the man she loved—
and the lonely boy she was only now beginning to meet.

And at last, she understood why the woman he once loved had meant so much to him.

The Godmother

The Garden Court — The Burns Estate

The stonework of the inner garden glowed warm in the late afternoon light. A breeze carried the scent of lavender and sun-warmed ivy over the fountain's steady murmur. Los and Angela sat together on a carved bench, Willow across from them in one of the high-backed wrought-iron chairs.

Angela's tone was warm but measured. "It's true. We are married. And..." she glanced briefly at Los before looking back to Willow, "I'm expecting."

Willow's eyes widened—not with surprise, but with the quiet sting of jealousy. Her gaze shifted away, focusing on the ripples in the fountain's basin.

Before the silence could harden, Los leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. "We've talked about it, Willow. And there's something we both want. We want you to be godmother to our child when the time comes."

Willow's head lifted, her expression a flicker of shock.

Angela smiled softly. "More than that—we want you here with us. There's a room ready for you upstairs. Your own room. You can come and go as you please, but..." her voice gentled even further, "we want you to be part of our family."

For a long moment, Willow didn't move. Then her hands tightened in her lap, as if she were holding something fragile together inside herself.

Los reached across the space between them, resting a calloused hand over hers. "Jou've stood by me through hard times, and I appreciate it. I want my son or daughter to grow up knowing who jou are, and what jou mean to us."

Her eyes glistened, and she gave a small, quick nod—once.

A knock sounded from the cloister archway. A steward stepped in, bowing slightly. "Sir Los—Lord Burns is in the solar. He requests a word."

Los's gaze shifted to Angela, a silent question. She gave a faint nod.

"I'll be right back," he said, squeezing Willow's hand once more before standing. "This shouldn't take long."

When he was gone, the garden seemed to lose some of its warmth. The sun still touched the stone and ivy, but the air felt quieter, heavier. Angela stayed where she was, her hands resting loosely in her lap. Beside her, Willow had drawn her knees up to her chest, arms wrapped around them, her gaze locked on the fountain.

"Willow," Angela said at last, her voice low.

Willow didn't move. She didn't look away from the rippling water, as if staring hard enough might make it all go away.

Angela looked at her. "You don't have to speak for me to know. You're jealous."

Willow's brows furrowed, but she didn't deny it.

"I can't change what he and I are," Angela continued. "But that does not mean he doesn't care about you."

Willow's eyes lifted, uncertain.

"You matter to him," Angela said. "Not as a shadow in the corner, or someone he owes. You're part of his life. We want you to be part of our lives."

Willow's gaze dropped to Angela's midsection, the faint swell beneath her gown. Slowly, almost hesitantly, she reached out and laid her palm there. Angela covered Willow's hand with her own. For a moment, they stayed like that— bound by love for the same man, and now by the life growing between them.

Something in Willow's guarded expression wavered. Then she leaned in, hugging Angela quickly but fiercely, as if afraid she might change her mind.

Angela squeezed her hand. "Good. Then you'll stay?"

Willow didn't nod again. But she didn't leave either. And for Angela, that was answer enough.

Chapter LXXXIX — A Father's Word

The Solar — Lord Burns' Word

Los stepped into the high-ceilinged solar, the air heavy with the scent of old oak and the faint bite of brandy. Lord Burns stood by the window, hands clasped behind his back, gazing out over the city.

"Jou wanted to see me?" Los said.

Lord Burns didn't turn immediately. "I did. Close the door."

The click of the latch sounded louder than it should have.

"This is long overdue," Lord Burns said, still facing the glass. "I have watched you—watched the chaos you bring, the loyalty you inspire, the way you've tangled my daughter's future in with your own. And now, you've made her your wife. Without my consent."

Los stayed silent, letting him speak.

Lord Burns finally turned, his eyes sharp as drawn steel. "If you had come to me—stood before me and made your case—perhaps I would have refused. Perhaps I would have consented. But you robbed me of that choice. For that, I should despise you."

The words hung in the air like a drawn bow. Then Burns' tone shifted, lower, heavier.

"But I have also seen you stand when no one else would. I have seen her look at you as if you were the only man in Albion worth following. And I have seen you face down lords and kings without once bowing to convenience."

He stepped closer, stopping only a pace away. "So tell me, Sir Los—what are you going to do with the life you've taken hold of? With my daughter's trust? With the child she carries?"

Los didn't flinch. He met the older man's gaze head-on.

"What am I going to do?" Los said quietly. "The same thing I've done since the day I met your daughter. Stand my ground, protect the people I care about, and give my life if I have to."

Burns' eyes narrowed. "That's the sort of answer you give a crowd, not a father."

"I'm not here to charm you," Los cut in, not harsh, but resolute. "And I'm not here to beg. I love Angela. I'll spend every breath I've got making sure she and our child never have to bow to anyone who means them harm. That's all I can promise you."

For a long, heavy moment, Burns simply studied him.

"You think love is enough to keep her safe?" Burns asked finally.

"No," Los said. "That's why I carry a sword."

It was blunt, almost reckless—and yet, for the first time since Los had entered the room, the corner of Lord Burns' mouth twitched. Not a smile, but the shadow of one.

He turned back towards the window. "You infuriate me," he said. "You break rules. You drag my daughter into storms she should never have to face. And somehow... you keep walking out of them."

Burns' voice dropped, almost too low to hear. "And she's happier for it."

When he faced Los again, his expression was still stern, but the steel had cooled.

"You've forced my hand. I can't undo this marriage without tearing her apart. So I won't." He stepped closer, meeting Los's eyes. "But understand me, Ortiz—if you fail her, there won't be a realm in this world or the next where you can hide from me."

Los inclined his head. "Understood."

For the first time, Lord Burns extended his hand. Slowly, deliberately.

Los took it. Their grip was firm—more an agreement between men than in-laws.

When Burns let go, he exhaled, his voice softening only slightly. "Then go on. She's waiting for you. And next time..." His gaze sharpened again. "...come to me first."

Los nodded once, then turned towards the door. As he stepped into the hall, the late sunlight caught his form. Lord Burns stood there watching him until he vanished.

Family Chosen

The Garden — After the Talk

Los came back down the flagstone path, his pace unhurried but heavy with the kind of thoughts a man doesn't shake off easily. The voices of servants working somewhere beyond the hedges drifted faintly in the air.

Angela was still on the bench where he had left her, Willow beside her, both with cups of cooled tea untouched at their sides.

When Angela saw him, she rose—searching his face. “Well?”

He gave a faint smile, almost rueful. “Jour father... had his say.” He let the pause stretch, then added, “And in the end, he chose to call me family.”

Angela's breath eased out, some of the steel in her posture softening. She took his hand, squeezing it once before stepping aside so Willow could see him fully.

Willow looked up at him, her eyes flicking between them—gauging, measuring.

Los crouched so he was level with her.

“Well, now that that's settled,” he said with a smile, “the offer still stands, Willow—your own room here. Your own place. If you want it.”

Willow didn't answer, but after a beat, her gaze softened just enough to tell him she'd heard.

“Come on,” he said, his voice warm. “Let's go inside.”

They walked together along the garden path, the scent of roses drifting on the breeze. Angela stayed close on one side, Willow on the other, his hand holding his wife's.

Willow still looked at her a bit jealously, but less so now.

By the time they reached the door, the three of them carried a stillness, a fragile peace.

For Los, something in him eased. For the first time since the trial, the knot in his chest loosened.

And for a moment, the long shadows of the court and all its sharp edges felt far away. Here, there was only the warmth of home, and the quiet certainty that—whatever came next—they would face it together.

Permission

Lord Burns's Study

The fire in the hearth had burned low, throwing long amber shadows across shelves of old ledgers and hunting trophies. Los stood just inside the doorway, hands behind his back, waiting until Lord Burns finally looked up from his desk.

"You wanted to speak with me, Lorenzo," Burns said, voice measured.

"Jes, but please, my mother calls me Lorenzo, if it is all the same to jou. I have grown accustomed to being called Los." Los took a step forward, his boots quiet on the rug. "I come to ask permission—jus as jou told me I should."

One of Burns's eyebrows lifted in mild surprise. "And what favor is it, exactly, that requires my consent?"

"It's about Willow," Los said. "She's... been more than a scout to me. More than a friend to both Angela and I. She risked herself when no one else would, stood by me when half the court wanted me gone. I'd like to give her something that shows she is part of our family."

Lord Burns leaned back in his chair, studying Los with a keen, almost predatory gaze. "Part of your family. That's no small statement. You're aware of what that means for her... and for me?"

"I am," Los said evenly. "Which is why I'm not doing it without jour blessing. I want to give her a cloak brooch—a gold rampant lion, my lord, of my house. A sign that she belongs to Angela and I... and that she is protected by both our Houses."

Burns's eyes narrowed slightly, not in anger, but in thought. "A brooch can be more dangerous than a sword if worn by the wrong person. It tells the world where you stand... and whose enemies you've inherited."

"Then it's perfect for Willow," Los said, a faint smile tugging at his mouth. "She's already earned our enemies. I'd rather she had our protection to go with them."

That drew the faintest chuckle from Burns, quickly gone. "You care for her."

"She's family," Los answered simply. "She is like blood to me. And I'd like to recognize that."

Lord Burns drummed his fingers once against the desk, then stopped. "Very well. You have my permission."

"Thank jou," Los said with a respectful bow.

Burns reached for his glass of brandy and took a slow sip. "Then see to it. And make sure that rampant lion is forged strong enough to last a lifetime."

The Gift

The house was quiet; the day's clamor long faded to hush. Los found Willow in her room, perched on her bed, mending a worn bracer by lantern glow. She didn't look up when he stepped in—she didn't have to.

He stopped in front of her and held out a small bundle wrapped in dark cloth. She glanced at it, then at him.

"For jou," he said simply.

Willow set aside the bracer and took the bundle, unwrapping it slowly. The lantern light caught on metal—a rampant lion, wrought in gold on blued steel and polished to a quiet shine. Strong. Solid. Meant to last.

Her fingers traced the shape once, then closed around it as if she might lose it otherwise. She looked up at him—not with her usual guarded stare, but something rawer, searching.

Los didn't explain. He didn't have to. He just sat next to her and gave a small nod and a kind smile.

After a long moment, she pinned it to her cloak. The lion rested just above her heart.

She didn't say thank you—Willow never did. But she leaned forward, pressing her forehead to his shoulder for the briefest heartbeat before pulling back and returning to her mending, the brooch glinting faintly in the light.

Los left her there, knowing she understood.

Chapter XC — The Bastard's Claim

The Defenders of Albion hall smelled of old wood, oiled leather, and damp wool from cloaks hung near the door. Quills scratched, boots clumped, voices murmured over the day's orders.

Willow stepped inside, her hood down, heading towards the assignment desk. She moved with her usual quiet efficiency, her small frame easy to overlook—until a voice behind her cut through the room.

"Well, look who decided to return," Sergeant Bradford drawled. "The little gutter rat."

Willow froze but didn't turn right away. When she finally did, her eyes were cool, unreadable.

Bradford's gaze dropped to the brooch above her heart. The gold rampant lion gleamed against her cloak, catching the light.

His expression hardened. "Where did you get that?" He closed the distance, his hand starting to rise.

Willow stepped back before he could touch it, shoulders tight, eyes locked on him with sharp, unblinking defiance.

Bradford lowered his hand slowly, studying it again. "I've seen that lion before. Only two houses in Albion use it. And if either one finds out a rat like you is wearing it..." His voice dropped into a dangerous growl. "...you'll be in deeper trouble than you've ever crawled out of."

Willow didn't answer. She simply lifted her hand, covering the brooch and holding it against her heart like a shield. Her glare didn't waver.

Then she turned and walked away, her steps quick, the brooch hidden under her palm.

Bradford stood watching her go. When the door shut behind her, he muttered under his breath, almost to himself—

"The bastard's claimed her."

The Tavern Rumor

Ye Old Mug Tavern

The hearth's heat fought with the late autumn chill that seeped through the tavern's shutters. Chloe sat with Endrond and Cadens at a corner table, their mugs half-drained, a small plate of bread between them.

"She's out of the barracks now," Chloe said, breaking the silence. "Moved into the Burns estate."

Endrond arched a brow. "With him?"

"With both of them," she replied, leaning in. "Lady Angela approved of it."

Endrond snorted into his ale. "Maker help her. What were they thinking?"

Cadens didn't look up. "We warned him before—don't give her false hopes. She's not built for life in a manor."

Chloe's jaw tightened. "Maybe she's not built for life in the gutter, either." She let that hang before adding, "You know he taught her to read?"

That made Endrond glance up. "I used to read her orders for her. Then one day she stopped needing me to. I figured someone had been teaching her... but Los?"

Cadens scoffed. "He's got a wife. Why tie himself to her like this? Now every enemy of House Burns or Ortiz will see her as fair game."

Chloe met his gaze. "Then maybe they'll have to go through him first."

The three sat in silence for a beat, the fire snapping in the hearth. Cadens finally shook his head. "I just hope she knows what she's getting into. That lion's not just a pin. It's a promise."

The Man She Loves

The Bedroom — That Night

Angela sat on the edge of the bed, brushing her hair back as Lorenzo spoke softly beside her — his voice clear, unaccented, refined.

Smooth as silk.

Measured.

Gentle.

It was beautiful.

It was intimate.

It was a part of him she never expected to hear.

And yet...

It wasn't the man who had stolen her breath the first time they danced.

It wasn't the man who fought beside her with fire in his eyes.

It wasn't the man who made her laugh when she wanted to scream.

Lorenzo was his past —

but Los was home.

When they finally slid beneath the covers, he wrapped his arms around her from behind, his breath warm against her neck.

Angela closed her eyes, steadied herself, and whispered:

"I want my Los back."

Lorenzo froze.

Not hurt.

Not offended.

Just still —

a stillness full of understanding.

Slowly, he tightened his arms around her, drawing her into the warmth of his chest.

And when he spoke, it wasn't Lorenzo.

It was Los.

Soft.

Familiar.

Hers.

"I love you," he whispered into her hair.

Angela's heart shuddered.

She turned in his arms, resting her forehead against his chest, letting the warmth of him fold around her.

Quietly, she breathed, "I love you too."

He exhaled — a long, low breath that released the last of Lorenzo within him.

He would be her Los.

Not because she demanded it.

But because he chose to.

And tonight, that was enough.

Epilogue — Toledo

The chambers of Don Flavio Ortiz were heavy with late heat. The wax on the seal had barely cooled when the courier bowed and departed with Don Flavio's response to Ramón's letter.

Flavio read the letter again in silence. The report from Camelot was dry, diplomatic, merciless: Our ambassador arrested, tried for concealment of birth, embassy grounds violated, a demand for Lorenzo's ambassadorship to be revoked, released without sentence.

He set the parchment down beside a glass of untasted wine. The candlelight turned the words "concealment of birth" to blood-red ink.

In the courtyard below, the bells of San Lucas tolled, indifferent to all of it.

"My grandson," he murmured, not to be heard. Then, after a long pause, he reached for new parchment and began a new letter he would never send. One from the heart.

Do not return yet. Hold fast to the Light. The shame is ours, not yours.

When the letter was finished, he sealed it with his crest, then slid it onto his desk already heavy with silence.

To be continued...

Dark Age of Camelot: A Spaniard in Albion. Book IV — The Dark Spire.

