

The patrol comes to a stop to let everyone catch their breath. Closing your eyes you roll your shoulders to loosen them, listening to your chainmail clink and rattle; the noise grows loud in your ears eclipsing all other sounds. You open your eyes to see the altar ahead of you, identifying the sound as the nearest guard's chainmail settling into place as he stands to attention as you approach. You smile approvingly as the ripple of attention spreads in front of you, an honour guard of fifty Defenders to guard this wedding between two of the Barony's finest. Both a mark of honour and recognition of the sorts of problems these celebrations can attract.

As you walk up the aisle nodding and smiling at the assembled guests your mind turns inevitably back to the train of events that brought you here. It began when the two of you were sent on a deep range mission to investigate a newly formed outpost of the Nykrull empire. Months with nothing but each others' company, short violent conflicts with Nykrull patrols, and a uncivilised waste land had brought you closer together than you'd dreamed possible. Of course it began with arguments, silences, and recriminations; so much anger and hatred held back under layers of discipline taking the place of actual respect. How disciplined curt exchanges had turned to conversations, how respect, then friendship, was nurtured in the heat of battle - until that fateful night.

Food running low, waiting out a storm to pass before launching a daring raid on a stockade, shivering in your bed roll beneath the patched and re-patched tent. Feeling the cold wet air as she entered your tent, her warmth as she climbed in next to you, her bare skin light and soft against your own like silk. A night of passionate, desperate love making, your exhaltations masked from the nearby ears of your foes by the raging storm above. The raid became more thrilling after that night than you had ever imagined from the joy of sharing trials and success with a new love, a love that grew only deeper with each passing day.

You laugh to yourself, catching one of the honour guard's eyes as you reach the altar; how easy it can be to mistake hatred and loathing for attraction and the beginnings of love. How much you wished to bring her low to catch her at fault where all could see, and now all you desired was to see her happy and successful. You look out back down the temple, smiling at your parents, turning to the Marshal to exchange pleasantries, waving at Barel and Smithy, all the while waiting for your lady love to enter through the main doors of the temple.

You hear the commotion and the shouts long before the doors open; the honour guard ready themselves for action, hands on hilts, weapons soon drawn. The door bursts open and you see her twirling under an enormous cleaver, her signature twin green swords slicing for the orc's neck, the spurt of blood dark and thick and red splashing across the fine green and white lace of her dress. In moments she's across the threshold, arrows and bolts of fire hammering on the frame around her, her movements like a dancer always one step ahead of the danger. She barks an order to the honour guard, who slam their bodies against the door heaving them shut.

She hurries up to the altar smiling in that way that's only for you, handing the short swords to her bridesmaid Katrin, before kissing you. "Marshal make it quick, those doors won't hold."

The Marshall turns to you concern, replaced with the order of duty, "Do you Captain Gerrard Knight, take Captain Helyanwe to be your lawfully wedded wife under the eyes of Valkyrie and your assembled guests?"

"I..." Your words are interrupted by the clattering of metal from the entrance to the temple, a huge troll smashing the door asunder and knocking the honour guard to the floor. The sound of metal against stone ringing and echoing loudly, so loudly through the temple, you turn to face the threat and see the rest of the patrol, the wood of the forest, with the words still hanging half said on your lips.

The ground is uneven and treacherous; as the patrol walks along, a loose stone rolls under your feet just enough to make you stumble, although the jangling sent up by your chainmail makes it sound so much worse. A worse sound still is the woosh of the heavy club inches from your head as once again you duck just in time...the villagers had warned you about Brutus, the troll with whom until recently they had had an amicable 'you avoid us, we avoid you' relationship, and with the best will in the world you're not going to try taking him on alone, especially with your shield already in splinters.

The next swing comes in low when you were expecting it high, and it's enough to send you sprawling. The troll's madness is making him move far faster than you'd think possible for something that huge and with a mounting sense of horror you realise you're probably not going to be able to roll out of the way in time to avoid the next massive blow. You barely register the sound of running feet behind you as the club comes dow-

*Thunk.*

The club stops dead against the staff braced over Mistral's head; she's on her knees, having slid in to get under the club in time to keep the blow from connecting with you. Despite this, and despite clearly having pushed herself far past the bounds of her 'normal' strength, you'd swear she still sank a good half inch into the soil.

"Apologies for being late - there were more orcs below than we thought." There's another loud thunk as Brutus has a second abortive go at hammering Mistral into the ground, giving you time to get to your feet behind her. "If you are well enough to continue, might I suggest that we hurry? I fear I have limited time left to tackle this particular problem."

Words are largely unnecessary these days, especially for a fight as relatively straightforward as this; your answer is simply to deflect the next of Brutus's incoming blows to give Mistral time to regain her feet, sharing a smile recognising that you're both insane to be doing this with no immediate back-up. With your mace empowered with Fire and no shield to fall back on you take on the attack and let Mistral be your shield; every one of the troll's blows are caught and deflected away, giving you ample openings to bring your mace to bear on unprotected arms and chest, and her strength blocks his attempts to shove one or both of you over.

Eventually the troll falls, a few final blows making certain that he won't be getting up again, and it appears to have been just in time; Mistral sags as whatever internal fire it is that fuels a Champion's feats clearly runs out all at once. You've seen it happen to her enough times before not to be concerned but you still offer her a shoulder to lean on while she gets her breath back; it earns you a wry smile, but she takes you up on it anyway.

There's a flicker of movement from the bushes; before you can warn Mistral, another huge shape charges at you. The villagers apparently failed to warn you that Brutus had a mate, and she's clearly Not Happy.

Neither you nor Mistral have the chance to brace before the small tree-trunk hits; you tumble into each other, your chainmail clattering and jangling as you go sprawling. You grope for your mace, ready for the next blow - only to see the rest of the Mad Ox patrol looking down at you in bewilderment.

A rest stop is called by mutual consensus; even though everyone in the patrol is keen to put an end to the current temporal troubles, the lack of healing and the emotional toil are making everyone cautious and a little on edge. Even you, it seems - you give yourself a shake to try and loosen up muscles tense with worry, setting your chainmail to jangling like many tiny bells. You reflect to yourself that in some ways it's funny - the battered hero of a hundred campaigns, about to receive one of the highest honours of the Kingdom, and yet you still have a bad case of nerves just from where you are and the formality of the occasion. If it wasn't for the ceremonial guards standing either side of the doorway being willing to joke around you'd be more nervous still, but they've both been as relaxed as their office allows (mostly complaining about the belled drapes above the doorway that chime in the slightest breeze) and it helps.

The fanfare starts next door, muffled by the thick wood; Orin and Brian straighten up, give you one last wink of encouragement, and at the pre-rehearsed moment swing open the double doors to the Great Hall. It's just long enough for you to muster a tenuous calmness and you step into the aisle with at least a good impression of confidence, Master Sergeant Caledfwlch falling in behind you bearing the Prince's ceremonial sword. While you do your best to keep your attention on the seated figure waiting for you at the other end of the hall you can't help but see the sea of nobles and notables around you, the aisle itself only kept clear by the honour guard stationed at regular intervals along its length. It's gratifying to note that no few of those guards - some doing their best to keep a serious face in keeping with the occasion, others giving up and beaming - are those who have served with or under you over the years. Orchid gives you a covert thumbs up as you pass him, Katrin just grins and winks.

Equally gratifying are the other familiar faces among the crowd. Paladin Smithy, looking even more awed by the occasion than you feel, Archibald and Seth, fingers entwined as always, Rose smiling encouragingly with her daughter - your god daughter - at her side. You even spot Chunfeng doing her best impression of Sun Ju's shadow, and as you catch her eye you think you see the hint of a smile and a slight nod of approval.

As you reach the final approach you can't help but glance to one side to where you know your personal guests are - you note with fond amusement that your parents have refused their provided seats despite their age, and that at a guess Liliun only made it here in time because she asked someone to drag her out of her workroom in case she got distracted by her latest research, but you wouldn't have any of them any other way. The seats that had been supplied have been taken over by the boys as perches to give them enough height to see over the crowd properly - your eldest, having just hit that age where being adult seems so very important, rips off a pretty good salute as you pass, while your youngest just bounces and waves with mum steadying him from behind.

You reach the step before the throne and bow; silence descends. Prince Lazar rises, asks you to stand and his commanding voice asks you to swear by each of the traditional oaths in turn; to protect both Crown and people, to obey the laws of chivalry, to do your duty towards the innocent and those in need. You confidently reply to each question through many hours of practice; when you finally manage to look the Prince in the eye you see a kindness there and remember that he knows how this feels, for all that it's been many years since he was standing in your place.

"Kneel, Gerrard Knight." You kneel, head bowed, nerves warring with pride, and you hear rather than see the Prince take the sword from Caled. "In many ways you represent an ideal of what this Kingdom strives to be; you have given your all to her in the name of Justice, almost to the point of no return. Your service to Crown and country has been exemplary in the face of great troubles, and had you not been present to give leadership at the battle of Tarn's Ridge we feel it is safe to say that there would not be a Kingdom now. It is therefore our great honour to confer upon you the title of Knight of the Kingdom" You feel the cold touch of the blade on each of your shoulders in turn. "Arise, Knight Lieutenant-Commander Knight."

The assembly roars its approval, even the honour guard - somehow the clanging of them rapping knuckles on armour in the time-honoured alternative to clapping rises above and almost overwhelms the cheers. As you

rise to receive the honour the noise and the hall fade away and you find yourself standing with the patrol once more.

As the patrol moves onwards an anomaly catches your eye; you find yourself watching as little bits of your equipment seem to alter - the leather handle of your mace changes colour then returns to normal, your shield gains new nicks and scratches along its edge that have always been there. You focus on tuning it out and keeping your attention on the job at hand - and nearly stumble when your leathers change to plate, your chainmail suddenly rattling loudly against it. The two guards haul you up roughly; the chains on your wrists and ankles, thick and heavy to counter your own physical strength, clatter with an air of finality.

The jeers and boos can still be heard from the crowds amassed outside. The hazy light through the windows is heavy and grey with the smoke from the fires of the riots - fires that have already consumed your family's home, and not through accident. Walking is difficult with the weight of your chains, and the guards half drag you along as if eager to discharge you from their care. Their disdain is obvious.

You are led through two wooden doors, marched in through the rows of assembled nobles and guild officials, and roughly dumped on a chair. On the desk in front of you is laid out a copy of your last mission report; the four senior officers and adjudicating Judge who make up the court-martial tribunal appear to be reading through their own copies. It is the Lieutenant-Commander who speaks first.

"Guard Gerrard Knight. You have been summoned before this tribunal so that we can ascertain the depth of your culpability in the failure of your recent patrol, resulting in the deaths of everyone but yourself and one other, and the resulting corruption of the 2nd and 4th Light Pathfinder companies, the 7th Warden Company and the 4th Heavy Guard Company to the Gamesmaster's forces. Do you understand the gravity of this situation?"

The memory of Barel's lifeless eyes as she tore out Archibald's throat with her teeth comes unbidden to your mind. You nod silently.

He continues, "Personally I don't think we have the time to go through this, and if it was up to me I'd just have you thrown in a deep dark hole somewhere and be done with it." The Judge next to him wrinkles her nose at the comment. "However, given the Baron plans to announce the drafting of all able bodied citizens of fighting age in an effort to slow the Gamemaster's advance, it is important that we have this trial properly to help undo some of the damage you've done to the Defenders' reputation."

*The two halves of Caled's body flying through the air, the thump as they hit the trees. The groan as the torso started to move again.*

"Bring in the surviving witness."

*Shouts of frustration as Smithy was pulled off his feet - turning to screams of terror and pain as he was torn apart.*

A side door opens; in steps Liliium, haggard and barely recognisable. She quails slightly as she locks eyes with you then takes her seat, turning to face the Judge. Turning away from you. The Judge in a soft gentle voice says, "Seeker Liliium, if you can tell us in your own words what went wrong?"

*Lying there helpless. Too weak to stand, as your friends and comrades died around you and rose again.*

She starts slowly, trembling at first, but grows more confident as she speaks - and you can't help but notice that she only ever refers to you as "Lieutenant Knight". She describes how things started normally at first, although you had seemed on edge and unhappy about the number of non-military on the mission, especially those who had not served with you previously; the patrol encountered and dealt with a few advance scouts of the Gamemaster's forces with no particular difficulty. However, after the third such engagement the Pathfinder Sergeant acting as your second-in-command raised a complaint; you kept overriding her orders to the rest of the patrol, stopping her getting on with her job. According to Liliium you reacted badly; after a short and vicious

argument you ordered Caled to take over as your second. From then on you charged headlong at every foe encountered, utterly determined to let nothing further slow the mission down.

*The bodies breaking beneath your blows, each one pointlessly throwing their life away to keep you from reaching the Gamesmaster.*

One of the Majors interjects, "You say in your report that he seemed to be obsessed with stopping the Gamesmaster personally. Would you say he'd lost control?"

"Yes."

"Carry on."

"It all came to a head when we reached a circular depression in the forest. The Pathfinder came back to warn Lieutenant Knight that something seemed wrong and that we needed to stop so she could check things carefully, but he wouldn't listen. When Aniseed tried to interject, tried to calm things down, he... he... he..." She finally looks at you, tears in her eyes.

*The feel of your fist as it hits flesh, the gasp from the patrol, the soft thump as Aniseed fell, the way she looked up to you - one eye covered with a healing hand, the other shocked, apologetic... scared.*

*Your own shock at your reaction, an old instinct from your youth that you'd thought was long buried. Shock that left you stunned for precious seconds.*

"He punched her. Caled moved in to intervene - and that was when the Gamemaster attacked. The first and only warning was Lieutenant Knight collapsing to the floor as a Shadow rose practically through him from its hiding place. It was a rout. Barel went down next, Aniseed got paralysed as she ran to help - when the lich appeared, Caled ordered me to run, to go and try and get help. That was the last I saw of any of them."

You bury your face in your hands as she starts to sob. All you can see is the Gamemaster standing above you, one foot on your chest, gloating that he's leaving you alive as a warning, offering you the chance to gamble your Barony against the lives of your dead patrol. Smirking as he ordered their now undead forms to deliver you to your Superiors.

The chains on your wrists clink loudly as you struggle to look the tribunal in the eye and at least take the punishment you deserve with what remains of your dignity. You feel the weight of your manacles lift unexpectedly - and as you raise your head you find yourself back in the woods among the Mad Ox patrol, looking at you in concern.