

Dark age of Camelot[®]

A Spaniard in Albion



Book I – The Hollow Name
by Losnoopy

He came to Albion to find his grave. He founded a Legend instead.

Lorenzo “Los” Ortiz de Sevilla has lost everything. Haunted by the death of his fiancée and self-exiled from his Spanish homeland, he arrives on the shores of Albion with a single purpose: to die with honor in a war that isn’t his.

But Albion has other plans.

Taken in by the Order of Paladins, Los is thrown together with two unlikely companions—a flamboyant Latin duelist and a stoic Briton of old Roman stock. Though he longs for death, his sorrow awakens in him something he does not yet understand. And when a corrupt noble marks him for death, sending him on missions meant to kill him, Los doesn’t fall.

He rises.

From haunted catacombs to giant-ridden forests and dragon-scarred ruins, his death wish is mistaken for fearlessness. Whispers of the Epic Paladin spread across Camelot.

Now Los must choose: chase the ghost of the woman he loves... or embrace the life he is cursed to live.

In the Dark Age of Camelot, the most dangerous man is the one with nothing left to lose.

Dark Age of Camelot: A Spaniard in Albion

Legal Disclaimer (Unofficial Work of Fiction)

This is an unofficial, fan-produced work of fiction inspired by *Dark Age of Camelot*.

It is not endorsed by, affiliated with, or sponsored by Mythic Entertainment, Electronic Arts, Broadsword Online Games, or any related rights holders.

All characters, places, monsters, factions, abilities, and lore originating from *Dark Age of Camelot* are the intellectual property of their respective owners.

This novel/saga is a transformative, nonprofit, creative work created for entertainment and storytelling purposes only.

Original characters, dialogue, storylines, world-building elements, and interpretations contained within this work are the intellectual property of the author.

All rights reserved by their respective owners.

No infringement is intended.

- No Dragons were harmed in the making of this book.
At least not intentionally. Unless they deserved it.
- As for the Paladins, Clerics, Scouts, Armsmen, Mercenaries, Wizards, Sorcerers, Cabalists, Theurgist, and unfortunate villagers involved. They knew what they signed up for.
- All Chants use were performed by trained professional Paladins and Clerics. Do not try them at home. Special thanks to Tom O'Bedlam for his work on the Paladin Chants. Your suggestion and enhancements are appreciated.
- This story contains scenes of light banter, poor life choices, emotionally compromised individuals, questionable diplomacy, and at least one Spaniard who should not be allowed near Dragons. Reader discretion is advised.
- Any resemblance to NPCs or Mobs you definitely remember from your adventuring days is purely coincidental. ...Probably.
- No names were changed to protect the Innocent. All characters are guilty by association. Care was taken to be respectful to players portrayed in this story.
- Lastly, thanks to the Guild of Shadows for performing all the stunt work in this novel. Without them, this work would not have been possible. And best wishes to Timmy on a speedy recovery.

Dark Age of Camelot: A Spaniard in Albion



Book I – The Hollow Name

Table of Contents

Prologue:	7
Chapter I – The Spaniard	8
Chapter II – Prydwen’s Keep.....	14
Chapter III – The Three Misfits.....	21
Chapter IV – The Sword and the Price.....	28
Chapter V – The Battle of the Bridge	40
Chapter VI – Faith and Venom	49
Chapter VII – Arrows and Whispers.....	55
Chapter VIII – A Ghost from the Past.....	63
Chapter IX – Shadows in the Barracks	66
Chapter X – Paladins	80
Chapter XI - The Sickness of Los.....	92
Chapter XII – The Abbey.....	110
Chapter XIII – The Edge and the Echo	121
Chapter XIV – Threads Drawn Taut.....	140
Chapter XV - Of Traditions and Remembrance.....	159
Chapter XVI – Of Boasts and Bruises.....	167
Chapter XVII – The Writ of Tepok’s Mine	177
Chapter XVIII – The Field Between.....	187

Chapter XIX – Consequences	197
Chapter XX – Questions and Answers	209
Chapter XXI – The Catacombs of Cordova.....	230
Chapter XXII – The Uneven Return	238
Chapter XXIII – Secrets	245
Chapter XXIV – Venomites.....	262
Chapter XXV – The Return from the Dead	278
Chapter XXVI – The Weight of Survival	286
Chapter XXVII – The Ashen Crown.....	303
Chapter XXVIII – The Dragon Slayer.....	326
Chapter XXIX – ¿A dónde pertenezco?.....	338
Epilogue – Toledo	342

Prologue:

Tale of the Woeful Knight Diego Ortiz

"And when Arthur should depart, he warned all his host that an they see any sword drawn, look ye come on fiercely and slay that traitor, Sir Mordred, for I in no wise trust him.

In likewise Sir Mordred warned his host that an they see any sword drawn, look ye come on fiercely and so slay all that ever before you standeth, for in no wise I will not trust for this treaty, for I know well my father will be avenged on me...

Right soon came an adder out of a little heath bush, and it stung a Knight of Spaine upon the foot. And when the Knight felt him stung, he looked down and saw the adder, and then he drew his sword to slay the adder, and thought of none other harm.

And when the host on both parties saw that sword drawn, then they blew beams, trumpets, and horns and shouted grimly. And so, both hosts dressed them together.

And King Arthur took his horse, and said, '*Alas, this unhappy day!*' And so rode to his party. And Sir Mordred in likewise.

And never was there seen a more dolefuller battle in no Christian land."

—Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*

So ended the age of Arthur, King of the Britons.

And so it was, in the years following the death of Arthur—the Once and Future King—that the land of Albion fell into shadow.

Bandits prowled the roads. Tomb raiders defiled ancient crypts. Spirits of the dead wandered the ruins of old kingdoms, and worse still, the cursed undead rose from forgotten graves. Giants stalked the wild places of the world, and goblins poured from the mountain clefts like vermin. From across the sea, the warlike peoples of Midgard and Hibernia assailed Albion's borders, hungry for conquest.

And so began the **Dark Age of Camelot**.

Chapter I – The Spaniard

The Hacienda, Toledo – The Farewell

The shield of House Ortiz hung proudly above the hearth: a yellow lion rearing on a field of deep blue, surrounded by a bold border of red and white stones. It was the old Mozarabic style — uncompromising, geometric, born of Toledo's crossroads of faiths. A symbol of guardianship and endurance. A reminder of everything Lorenzo had been raised to uphold... and everything he believed he had failed.

To Lorenzo it seemed to stare down in judgment.

He stood before it in silence, shoulders stiff, fists clenched at his sides. Behind him, an old man entered with quiet footsteps and an even quieter voice.

"It was not your fault."

Lorenzo didn't turn. His eyes dropped to the tiled floor.

"It was my fault," he said, his words flat with bitterness.

The old man stepped beside him, a strong hand finding his shoulder.

"There was nothing you could have done."

Lorenzo's jaw clenched. He wanted to pull away — he had never liked being touched — but it was his grandfather, so he endured it.

"I could have done a thousand things differently. And it would never have happened."

"Look at me, Lorenzo."

But he didn't. His shame held him, heavy as chains. He kept his eyes on the stone beneath him, as if doing so could keep the rest of the world from touching him.

"I know why you are going," the old man said after a moment. "That is why I am letting you leave. But you will take this—"

He held out a thick sealed letter. The wax bore the lion crest of their house.

"Take this to Master Graent at Prydwen Keep. It asks him to watch over jou. Until jou find jour way."

Lorenzo took the letter, though he did not look at it.

"I do not need—"

"Jou will do this. For me."

At last, Lorenzo met his eyes. To the world he was Don Flavio Ortiz—Lord Magistrate of Toledo, Custodian of the Chapel of San Lucas, Counselor to the Royal Court of Castile. The Alcalde. Once a firebrand, now silver-haired and weary.

To Lorenzo he was something else entirely: the man who had raised him from birth. The man he had failed. The man he could never forgive himself for failing.

But Don Flavio saw not failure. He saw the boy who had survived, endured—who had not run from responsibility, but carried it. A true Ortiz, even in an imagined disgrace no one else but Lorenzo saw or felt.

"I must go," Lorenzo said, slinging the worn pack over his shoulder. "It is a long way to Albión."

Don Flavio embraced him—firm, silent, full of feeling.

"*Vaya con Dios*," he whispered.

Lorenzo didn't return it. Only *her* touch had ever brought peace. But it was his grandfather, so he once more endured.

Then he left.

He gripped the front of his shirt over the ring he wore around his neck and did not look back as he passed through the gates of the hacienda. But the feeling settled deep in his chest:

He knew he would never be coming home again. And that feeling left him hollow.

Cornwall Docks – The Name

Two weeks later, far from Spain's sunlit tiles...

The voyage had been merciful. Favorable winds and gentle waves carried the Spanish vessel across the sea like a whispered blessing. Lorenzo did not sleep much. He practiced his English with the crew, watched their card games, and asked about Albion. But mostly, he listened.

He knew only a few things for certain: his father, Don Diego Ortiz, had died in service to King Arthur. Albion was the land of Arthur's legend. And it would be the land of his own reckoning.

He would not speak of what had happened in Hispania. Not here. Not ever.

He had come to Albion not to live—but to die with honor.

He could not end his life himself. The Church forbade it. But Albion was at war and men die in war. And that, he counted on.

So, when he stepped off the ship, it was not hope he carried, but purpose.

The sunlight turned the docks of Cornwall gold. Ships creaked gently in their berths; sails furled like sleeping birds. Ropes snapped taut. Laborers barked names. The air was full of life.

And then Lorenzo stepped down—and something in the air seemed to hold its breath.

He looked no older than seventeen. But he moved like someone forged, not grown. His pack was of a quality befitting a noble, but devoid of emblems or embellishment.

His frame was lean, but strong—broad-shouldered, agile, made for motion. He wore a traveler's garb, simple and weather-worn, but around his neck hung a gold chain with a single ring. Not for vanity. For memory. That he kept hidden under his shirt.

He closed his eyes, touching the front of his shirt over it as if it were a holy relic.

His face bore no scars, but his eyes were older than his years. Almond-shaped, sapphire blue, intense in their stillness. His skin carried the warmth of the Spanish sun, but his soul felt colder than the sea beneath him.

"Eh, what's this then?" muttered a dockhand, watching him descend.

"Never ye mind," the Dock Master grunted. But he, too, kept watching.

But after a breath curiosity got the better of him and he crossed the planks to intercept the boy.

"Hail there, lad," he said. "What brings ye to our fair Albion?"

His eyes drifted as he looked the lad up and down.

Lorenzo reached into his pack and drew out the letter. The wax still held firm. "I seek Master Graent. At Prydwen Keep."

The Dock Master studied him again—youth, accent, sadness folded into poise.

"Aye. Prydwen's up the river, not far from Camelot. One of the coast ships can drop ye near," he said.

Followed by a pause that lasted a little too long.

"Are ye stayin' long?"

Lorenzo didn't answer. His gaze drifted down the coastline, as if he already walked some road only he could see.

"I, eh... didn't get yer name, lad."

Lorenzo hesitated. He had stripped his belongings of name and mark, even turned his coin pouch inside out. What he had not done was choose a new name. His mind was too far distant, fixed on an end, not a beginning.

As he looked down, searching for a name, his thumb traced the pouch. The reversed leather caught the light, and along the seam he saw three small letters—the maker's proud mark, the sign of *Los Oficiales de Sevilla*.

L. O. S.

The answer slipped from his tongue before he'd even finished thinking.

"Los... Ortiz."

I could've chosen a better apellido than my own, he berated himself. But it was too late now, and it couldn't be changed.

"Well then—pleasure to meet ye, Los. I'll make arrangements for ye. Won't be but a moment."

There was something about the boy that unsettled him. Not danger. Just... depth.

The Dock Master made the arrangements. The next vessel north would carry him. That was all he could do.

As he saw him off, he murmured, "Safe travels."

But Lorenzo simply stared out toward the horizon, his mind already far away.

The Watcher in the Crowd

Not all eyes missed the boy's arrival.

Hidden among crates and crew, another set of eyes followed.

Cadens, a wiry young man who looked to be a little older than Lorenzo. The way he moved was like mist through the docks. Dressed in plain leather, face shadowed beneath a salt-stained hood, he looked like any errand boy or petty thief. But his eyes were sharp. Purposeful.

He had already secured a cargo manifest—a folded slip, passed silently from the Dock Master's hand. It would reach Lord Edward Baldrick before nightfall.

But as he turned to leave, something held him.

The Spaniard.

Young. Alone. Noble, perhaps — something in the way he carried himself. A quiet that wasn't timid, but charged. Like a blade in its scabbard.

Cadens stepped back toward the Dock Master.

"The boy. Who is he?"

The Dock Master didn't look up.

"Spaniard. Calls himself Los Ortiz. Says he's headed to Prydwen Keep. Letter for Master Graent."

Cadens nodded, then gave the young man one more look over. Something was off about him, and his pack seemed too plain, the flap appeared to be missing a badge, a shield that was removed though the holes use to affix it were still there.

He didn't know what it meant yet. But he'd learned a long time ago:

Not all trouble announces itself with a loud voice. Some arrive cloaked in silence, carrying a ring, a letter, and a name.

Chapter II – Prydwen's Keep

Arrival at the Gate

The path along the coast led to a river that wound like a silver thread through the wild green of Albion, carrying the Spanish youth deeper into a land both foreign and fabled. The day passed beneath a sky soft with mist, and at last, the barge moored beside a narrow wooden dock near Prydwen's Keep.

It was no grand castle.

A modest stone wall and low stone towers circled the outpost—sturdy, weathered, and unadorned. The keep itself stood simple and rectangular, aged by wind and rain, without the elegance of Spanish towers or the stained glass of Toledo's holy places. Yet it held a kind of quiet strength. Not beauty, but purpose.

Lorenzo Ortiz de Sevilla stood at its gate, studying the rough-cut walls. He adjusted the strap of his satchel. His fingers rose to the chain at his neck, where the ring hung close to his chest.

He bowed his head and whispered a silent prayer.

"State your business," came a voice from the gate.

A guardsman stepped forward, one hand resting lazily on the hilt of his sword.

"I am here to see Master Graent," Lorenzo answered, his tone respectful.

The guard gave him a look, then nodded toward the yard where a tall figure in weather-worn mail stood before the door.

"That's him. The one by the door."

Lorenzo approached slowly. The man's eyes, dark and shrewd, turned on the newcomer with quiet appraisal.

Lorenzo cleared his throat. "*Hola*... Master Graent?"

The man turned fully, arms folded across a chest that suggested decades of drilling recruits into shape. His eyes narrowed—not unkind, just measuring.

"I am. And you would be...?"

Lorenzo hesitated a beat, then offered a small nod. "*Mi nombre es* Los Ortiz."

Graent's brow lifted a fraction. "A Spaniard, then."

No scorn. No suspicion.

Just... curiosity. And a faint note of *Ah, I see*.

"What brings you to Albion, lad?"

Lorenzo didn't answer with words.

He reached into his coat and withdrew a sealed letter.

The wax bore the crest of House Ortiz.

Graent accepted the letter, thumb brushing the lion seal before he cracked the wax.

As he unfolded the parchment, a second, smaller envelope slipped free—sealed with the same crest.

He caught it before it touched the ground.

He turned it over, eyes narrowing as he read the name written across the front. His expression shifted—just slightly.

He did not open it.

Instead, he slid the envelope into the inner pocket of his coat, out of sight of anyone who might see, and returned to the outer letter.

He read slowly, carefully.

Halfway down the page, his brow tightened.

When he reached the end, he folded the letter with deliberate care and looked at the boy anew.

"You're the grandson of Don Flavio Ortiz?"

"Jes," Lorenzo murmured.

"And Don Diego's son?"

Lorenzo's breath thinned. "*Sí. Por favor...* I ask that no one here be told who I am. Or who my father was."

Graent held his gaze—steady, measuring—now carrying an understanding he had not possessed a moment before.

"I see," he said quietly. "I served with your father."

Lorenzo blinked, startled. "Jou... knew him?"

"Aye."

Graent's voice softened—not sentimental, simply true.

"We fought under Arthur's banner together. Diego was a good man. A better man than most. You've no cause for shame."

He tucked the outer letter into his belt.
The concealed one remained hidden in his coat.

"And because I knew him—and because your grandfather asks it—I'll see you settled."

Graent's mouth twitched into a small, crooked smile.

"You have my word."

Lorenzo didn't know why that small, crooked smile eased something tight in his chest—but it did.

He held Lorenzo's gaze for a moment longer.

"He doesn't say why you've come."

Lorenzo's fingers gripped slightly the front of his shirt, over the ring at his neck.

"I have come to aid *Albión* in your war. To learn to be a knight."

Graent studied the boy—his stillness, his earnestness.

"Well. You'll want to speak with Master Claistan. He trains the new fighters. If you prove yourself, you may earn a place among the Armsmen... or the Paladins."

"Ah... *así así*," Lorenzo said, allowing himself a rare smile... trying on that crooked one for himself.

Then Lorenzo frowned after a moment, genuinely puzzled. "A... what is a Paladin?"

Graent chuckled. "A Paladin is a holy knight—one who serves not just the crown, but the Light."

Lorenzo nodded slowly, tasting the idea.

"Where did you plan to stay?"

At that, Lorenzo hesitated. He had plenty of coin, but no plan.

"Ah... where might be a place to stay?"

Graent sighed. "You'll stay here at the Keep while you train. I see now why Don Flavio asked me to watch over you."

"*Gracias*," Lorenzo said, bowing his head. "When can we begin? Now, if you have the time?"

Graent smiled faintly. "Eager. Good."

He took the boy's satchel to the central hall and returned with a short sword and a plain wooden shield.

"Here. You'll need these."

Lorenzo examined them, eyebrows drawing down.

"Master Graent... are there no better weapons you could sell me?"

"These are what all fighters start with. When you've earned better, you may buy better."

"*Si*," Lorenzo muttered, accepting them.

The Refusal

Graent led him to Master Claistan, a hard-faced instructor with eyes like cold iron.

When Claistan learned the boy was a Spaniard, his tone hardened.

"I do not train Spaniards," he snapped. "I barely agreed to train those two."

He pointed to a pair of figures sparring below the keep.

Graent's voice sharpened. "He is not just a foreigner. He is under my protection."

"Then train him yourself," Claistan growled. "And take the Latin and the Roman with him. You can have all three misfits."

Graent said nothing. He simply nodded once.

And so it was that Lorenzo Ortiz de Sevilla—a stranger in a strange land, heir to a legacy he would not speak—was placed among those deemed unworthy.

But in that moment, he felt no shame.

Only purpose.

The Report

The wind over Camelot moaned low that night, tugging at banners above high stone towers and whispering through murder-holes like the ghosts of old.

Beneath that wind, in a chamber lit only by fire and torch, Lord Edward Baldric stood at the window of his study — a figure hewn from shadow and ambition.

The golden tusks of the black boar on his tunic caught the firelight as he turned, one hand resting lazily on the pommel of his gilded longsword. He needed no

throne to command. The chamber was his court. The thick stone walls, the iron-strapped desk, the armor on display — all bore the weight of his presence.

He did not speak when the shadow entered.
He didn't have to.

A figure emerged — silent as a thought, hood shadowing his face, steps light, eyes sharp as flint.
Cadens.

Baldric did not turn. The man in brown leathers stood just inside the threshold, dust still clinging to his cloak, gloved hands folded behind his back.

"Your report?" Baldric's voice was iron wrapped in velvet — bored and biting.

Cadens remained still. His tone was flat.
"The ship's manifest: wine, tools, armor, and weapons."

He paused — just long enough for Baldric's eyes to narrow.

"And?"

Cadens blinked once. Deliberate.
"One thing of note. Perhaps nothing. A Spaniard. Came ashore at Cornwall Docks. Young — looked about seventeen or eighteen years old. Alone. Delivering a sealed letter for Master Graent."

Baldric raised a brow. "Name?"

"Los Ortiz. That's what the dockmaster called him. He carried a satchel — of quality make, but missing a badge, an emblem cut away. His bearing was that of noble blood, like someone raised with privilege as a birthright."

The name hung in the air like incense.

"...Ortiz," Baldric echoed.

He stepped closer to the fire, the flames reflected in his eyes.

"It is most likely nothing," he said coolly. "But just in case — find out what you can. About the messenger... and the message."

"As you wish," Cadens replied. No shift in his tone.

"You need not be gentle. It is a Spaniard, after all."

Cadens did not flinch. He had long since stopped assigning weight to prejudice. So long as Lord Baldric paid, he obeyed.

Baldric's mouth did not curl. But something colder than a smile passed across his face.

"You may go."

Without a word, Cadens vanished into the dark as silently as he had come.

Baldric remained alone in the flickering firelight, arms behind his back, eyes on the window.

Brooding over a name long buried.
Now stirring again in the dark.
A coincidence, perhaps.
But he would be the right age.

Chapter III – The Three Misfits

The Yard Beneath the Rock

The training yard beside Prydwen's Keep was a ring of hard earth and dust, worn by long drills. Practice dummies leaned like old men against crooked stakes, and the sound of wood and steel echoed beneath the open sky.

No banners flew here. No horns announced valor. Only the rhythm of repetition and the silence of judgment.

Lorenzo stood at the edge of it all—unsteady, unfamiliar, hands stiff around the hilt of a foreign, dull training blade. Master Graent stood beside him, arms crossed, gaze scanning the field until it settled on two figures sparring beneath the noon sun.

One of them moved like poetry.

Tall and rangy, bronze-skinned from long hours beneath open skies, he carried himself with the easy confidence of someone who had never needed permission to be seen. Even at rest, there was performance in him.

Beside him stood another—less flashy, but no less striking.

Broader through the shoulders, fairer, steadier, he moved with the grounded calm of a man who wasted nothing. Not a glance. Not a step. Not a breath.

They paused their sparring as Graent approached. Romao tilted his head, curiosity lighting his grin.

"Ah! Who have we here? A new brother-in-arms?" His voice sang with a theatrical lilt. "So serious looking. Must be Castilian."

Prox stepped forward, expression warm but restrained. His voice was steadier.

"Name's Prox," he said. "That's Romao. Looks like we'll be training together. You're the third misfit now."

"Misfit?" Lorenzo echoed, a bit puzzled.

"That's what Master Claistan calls us," Prox said, with a faint shrug. "A Latin. A Roman. And now you."

Romao bowed with flourish, the tip of his blade tapping the earth behind him.

"Romao Auralius Casanova di Roma. At your service. And you, *Signore*?"

Lorenzo hesitated. Their tone wasn't cruel. Their eyes weren't mocking. That surprised him.

"Los Ortiz," he said at last. "de Sevilla."

Romao brightened.

"Hispania! I knew it! Then we are neighbors by sea and sun. Tell me—are you trained in the blade?"

Los half-smiled.

"Jes. I was taught swordplay as a child."

Graent let the conversation play itself out, then gestured toward the circle.

"Enough words. Train together. Spar together. Fail or succeed—together."

The three stepped into the yard.

Romao crossed himself with quick, practiced fingers, then kissed his thumb. Prox followed, slower, crossing himself, his hand steady, the way he bowed his head almost priestly.

Los hesitated. His gaze flicked once to the ring hidden beneath his shirt, then he raised three fingers to his forehead, circled his thumb once over his heart, then placed his hand over the center of his chest, over the ring.

Romao cocked his head, grin quirked. "*Cos'è questo?*"

Los shook his head and said nothing.

And with that, the drills began.

Baptism in Dust

The afternoon wore on.

Prox's form was immaculate—steps calculated, balance precise, movements carved from years of repetition. He fought like a tactician. His blade struck where it needed, no flourish, no waste.

Romao was something else entirely. His style was elegant, almost theatrical: slashing arcs, sudden reversals, a rhythm all his own. He fought like a knight who knew the battlefield was also a stage.

And then there was Lorenzo.

He moved like someone trained for duels, not battle. His grip was wrong for a heavy Albion longsword—too light, too precise, the fingers working the hilt instead of the full arm. His stance stood too high, weight poised forward like a man trained to strike at the first opening.

When Romao expected him to circle, he lunged. When he should have crashed his shield forward, he tried to slip aside like a man who had never held a heavy shield in his life.

But he listened.
He adjusted.
And he learned.

For every blow that knocked him down, he rose again.

For every mistake, he gritted his teeth and tried anew.

Prox tried to coach him, "Block with your shield, not your head."

"Jes jou say that now!" Lorenzo retorted still holding his shield all wrong.

But he adjusted and tried again.

"You've got fire," Prox said between drills. "That's something."

"Jes," Lorenzo replied, panting. "But fire is not skill."

"It will be," Romao assured, tossing him a waterskin. "If you feed it properly."

Twilight Brotherhood

By evening, they sat beneath the shadow of the keep's northern wall. The sun burned low on the horizon, casting the world in gold and rust.

Romao lay on his back, arms folded beneath his head, eyes skyward.

"My mother," he said suddenly, "makes the best pasta in all the Kingdoms. One bite, and you would swear loyalty to the Casanova name forever."

Prox smirked. "You say that about every food you miss."

Romao's grin tilted toward Lorenzo. "Do you miss your mother?"

Lorenzo's eyes dropped to the grass. The question landed harder than expected.

"I never knew her," he said quietly.

Romao said nothing at first. His smile softened—melancholy now, not mischief.

"I am sorry. I did not know."

Los never looked up, he just spoke softly.

"She died when I was a child."

Romao said no more. Prox glanced over but didn't press. The silence between them didn't feel empty. It felt shared.

"Well," Prox said after a time, "someday I'll let you try my mother's apple pie, Romao. She's famous for it. And you too, Los. You're one of us now."

One of us, Lorenzo thought. A misfit, a foreigner. He had not come for that, for brotherhood, but until he could get to the battlefield, it was a minor comfort to have.

"Thank jou."

In the Barracks

Later, in the still hush of the barracks, the three lay in their bunks—bodies sore, minds quiet.

Before settling, Romao crossed himself, then kissed his thumb as if sealing the day.

Prox followed, tracing the sign of the cross with a steadiness that felt almost serene.

Los lay back, gaze drifting to the rafters. His hand rose in the dark—three fingers pressed to his forehead, then his thumb traced a circle over his heart—before falling again to the ring hidden beneath his shirt.

Romao watched him, his face curious. "You keep doing that eh."

Los turned his face toward the ceiling beams, saying nothing.

Silence stretched, heavy but not unfriendly. Then Prox broke it: "You did well today," he said into the dark.

"Jou say that now," Los replied. "But I took more hits than I gave."

"Everyone does on day one," Prox said. "Day one is a scar. Day two a bruise. Day three... still hurts, but at least you know why."

"Or you've gone numb," came Romao's voice, chuckling.

A soft laugh passed between them. Then stillness returned—still heavy, but warmer.

Lorenzo lay on his back, still staring up at the ceiling beams, turning a thought over in his mind for a while before speaking.

"Why do you use such heavy blades?" he asked, voice low, curious. "The greatswords. In Hispania, only nobles—or men with patronage—carry steel like that, and even then, I have only seen them in duels and ceremony."

Romao stirred.

"Greatswords?" he said. "Because they don't lie."

Prox followed. "You commit to every strike. No half-measures."

"In *Hispania*, I trained with lighter blades—sabers, arming swords, sometimes falchions."

Romao chuckled. "Sounds beautiful. But speed doesn't break a shield wall."

"Or take down Trolls or Firbolgs," added Prox.

Lorenzo murmured, "They look... heavy."

"They are," Romao said. "But once you learn to move with one, it feels like part of you."

"There's a downside," Prox said. "Aside from parrying, you have no defense. Arrows, bolts—your life gets short real fast swinging a great sword."

"And they're not easy to master," Romao added. "They punish hesitation. But reward control. You move your whole body with every swing."

There was silence.

Then Lorenzo held her ring to his chest and exhaled—quiet, steady. A shorter life was what he had come for.

"Then I want to learn," he said. "Will you teach me?"

"You sure?" Romao asked. "The greatsword not a forgiving teacher. One mistake and your spine remembers."

Lorenzo turned his head toward the them.

"I already hurt," he said. "How much worse could it get?"

There was a pause.

Then Romao's voice, softer now: "Well said, *fratello*."

Prox added with confidence, "We'll help you."

Lorenzo closed his eyes, fingers brushing the ring beneath his shirt.

He had come to Albion to die in a war that wasn't his.

But for the first time since crossing the sea...

He felt certain he would succeed.

Chapter IV – The Sword and the Price

The Bargain

The morning light came thin and gold, spilling across the training yard in long, trembling shafts. Mist clung low to the stones, and the air still held the breath of dawn.

Los was already there—alone, silent, waiting.

The oversized greatsword in his hands dragged slightly at the tip, his grip shifting with each swing as he fought to find its center. One stroke landed wide. Another, too shallow. But he did not stop.

Near the yard's edge, Master Graent stood with arms crossed, carved from the same iron as the keep itself. His gaze held no warmth. Only weight.

"You talked him into it," Graent said, voice like gravel dragged across stone.

Romao, ever composed, raised both hands. "I swear on my mother's lasagna—I didn't. He came to it on his own."

Prox stood beside him, arms folded, tone plain. "We told him the risks. He chose it anyway."

Graent's brow furrowed. "Did you tell him what it means to carry that blade? That on the field, it makes you a target twice over? That it takes twice the strength, thrice the timing, and no room for hesitation?"

Romao pressed a hand to his chest in mock solemnity. "We told him. He was insistent on learning."

Graent frowned. His eyes remained fixed on the boy in the yard—on Los, who stood now, resetting his stance, sweat already darkening the collar of his tunic. Graent sighed. Not in anger. In resignation.

"So be it," he muttered. "He's yours now. Both of you."

Romao blinked. "Ours?"

"If he wants to wield that blade, then you will train him. And if you slow him down, you slow yourselves."

Prox straightened. Romao sobered.

"I meant to send you both to Camelot by the next moon," Graent continued. "Claistan never intended to write your letters. He's been stalling. Burying you in delay."

The words struck deeper than any blow.

"But," Graent added, voice firm now, "if the two of you can make a fighter of him—if in two weeks I see a man worthy of the steel he's chosen—I will write the letters myself. For all three of you. You'll ride to Camelot together."

Romao and Prox exchanged a glance. For once, no smile. No banter. Only a flicker of resolve.

"It's a deal," Prox said.

Romao rolled his shoulders once, grin sharp and quiet. "Then let's make knights of us all."

Steel and Sinew

The yard echoed with iron.

Romao and Prox moved with the rhythm of long practice—circling, correcting, demonstrating.

Los had no rhythm.

The greatsword was a stranger to him. He gripped it like a farmer's tool, and it punished every misstep. It pulled at his spine, dragged his stance apart. But he listened. He watched. And he kept going.

"Let the blade do the work," Prox said, nudging his shoulder back into form.

"Don't fight the weight," Romao added, moving like wind around them. "Become

it."

"Jes-jes, jou say that now!" Los protested.

The sword was not just steel. It was a language of movement, of balance. The cross guard could catch an enemy's blow. The pommel could break bone. The weight itself could end a fight before the blade ever cut.

Romao danced with his weapon. A duelist's flourish, a poet's timing. Even his critiques were delivered with charm.

Prox, by contrast, cut the air like it owed him something. Every motion was clean, economical, unforgiving.

Los was struck often. His knees bruised. His ribs burned. His hands ached. But he did not falter.

By mid-afternoon, he could swing without stumbling.

By dusk, he could recover without faltering.

By nightfall, he could parry—
not well, but still standing.

Inner Reflection

That night, beneath the beams of the barracks roof, Los lay awake in silence. His body ached. Muscles throbbed. His hands were raw.

But something deeper had taken root—something new.

Not pride.

Not hope.

Conviction.

Why the greatsword?

Because it offered no shelter.

A shield, he believed, was for a man defending something.

But a greatsword was for those who had nothing left to lose but life itself.

And that was all he had left to give.

His hand rose in the dark—three fingers to his forehead, then his thumb circling once over his heart—before settling flat against his chest, over the hidden ring. A silent prayer passed his lips.

Only then did his eyes close.

Letter from Lorenzo Ortiz de Sevilla to Don Flavio Ortiz

Most honored Grandfather,

I pray this letter finds you in good health and peace.

The journey to Albion was long but uneventful, and I have at last reached Prydwen's Keep. The land is colder than I imagined and the sky seldom clear, yet there is a quiet beauty in its rolling hills of soft green and mists that move like breath over the fields in the early morning.

Master Graent received me with kindness. He speaks little, but I see in him the discipline of a soldier and the patience of a teacher. He has agreed to oversee my training until I earn a proper posting. You will be glad to know my first days have been spent in honest labor—drills, sword work, and prayer.

I have made two companions: Romao Casanova of Roma, he is a man full of spirit, and Proximo Magnus, an Englishman descended from the men of Roma, he is a man of solemn heart. They are both fine swordsmen and better men than most I have met in foreign service.

They have placed us in a special class for foreigners, where I have already impressed them with my skills in the use of a shield and have begun training with the greatsword—such as the great men of Castila use.

I have little time for idleness, which suits me well. There is always another lesson to master. Though my arms ache, I feel the discipline shaping me, and I pray that one day you will look upon me and see someone worthy of the Ortiz name.

Here in Albi3n they have taken to calling me Los. If you will be so kind as to address your letters to me thus, it will be easier for them to find me.

Give my love to everyone at home. And Grandfather I thank you for allowing me to be here. I know your heart was heavy at my leaving, but it strengthens mine to know you understood my desire to go. I promise I will not bring shame to your house.

*Your devoted grandson,
Lorenzo "Los" Ortiz de Sevilla
Prydwen's Keep, Albion*

With that, he sealed the letter with the signet ring of the House of Ortiz, the one he kept hidden at the bottom of his pack — the last proof of who he was, and the only evidence he would not surrender.

The Rogue's Quarter

The Master Edric chamber sat in the corner of Camelot's Rogues' Quarter—windowless, silent, colder than the stone that cradled it. The walls were bare, save for a single banner of Albion: old, faded and dark—a reminder of what they served. A low-burning lantern cast its glow across the old oaken desk.

Cadens stood in the threshold, still and unreadable.

"Close the door," came the voice behind the desk.

He obeyed without a word. The iron hinges groaned. The click of the latch echoed like a verdict.

Master Edric—Albion's spymaster, commander of its infiltrators—sat tall and wiry, his age hidden behind a predator's stillness and a stare honed to flint.

"You've been in Lord Baldric's service," Edric said without preamble. "For how long, I wonder?"

Cadens did not answer. He didn't have to.

Edric tapped two fingers against the desk. "You serve the realm. So long as your work doesn't threaten Albion's security, I'll tolerate your little side contracts. But if I ever suspect you've placed coin above the realm, I'll have your tongue nailed to the gate."

Cadens remained unmoved.

Edric leaned forward, the lantern catching the edge of his stare. "You have a gift. You're one of the best I have. And I need you for something of importance."

Cadens inclined his head—silent, precise.

"The Filidh," Edric said.

The word alone dimmed the room.

"They sing too loudly of late," Edric continued. "Their leader, Aithne Con, is said to be weaving more than songs. I want to know what she's planning. Quietly. Discreetly."

Cadens turned. The lantern flickered once, and he was gone.

The Filidh Ritual

The groves south of Prydwen's Bridge, where the Filidh danced, lay wrapped in ancient music and bone-deep silence. Moss clung to the trees like memory, and the earth pulsed faintly with old, druidic power.

Cadens moved among them as only a shadow could—stealthed, unseen, and intangible but for the faint shimmer of disturbed breeze.

He crouched behind a great stone, where the Filidh gathered beneath moonlight. He watched. And he listened.

Aithne Con stood draped in green robes embroidered with thorns and spirals, her hair woven with leaves and blood-colored thread. Her voice was soft—haunting—as she addressed the circle around her.

"The dead walk," she said. "And they shall walk for us."

Gasps and whispers followed.

"Tomorrow, before the morning fog lifts, we strike Prydwen's Bridge. Spirits of the old war, bound by sorrow and bound to song, will rise and drown its stone in grief. Then they will see who controls the road."

Cadens narrowed his eyes.

It was real.

She was no bard. She was a conjurer of the fallen.

He left before they dispersed, already threading together his next move.

Cadens understood the rhythms of cause and consequence. If he delivered the message directly to Edric, the threat would be managed through protocol. But if the warning reached Master Graent—a soldier of the old code—it would provoke action. Fast. Human. Relentless.

And the Spaniard... he would be up first at the Keep. The eager one. The ideal messenger.

And if Cadens timed it right... he could place the boy exactly where he needed to be.

He smiled faintly beneath his hood.

The Cutpurse Deal

The camp of Cilydd Difwych squatted like a scab on the low hills east of Cotswold—a place of smoke, broken tents, and ambitionless rot. Cadens slipped in easily, nodding once to the brute at the camp's heart.

Cilydd sat beneath a sun-bleached tent, sharpening a gut-hooked blade across a whetstone the color of bone.

"What do ye want?"

"I've work," Cadens said without blinking.

The brigand grunted. "Then speak it."

"There's a boy. A Spaniard. He'll return from the bridge along the road sometime after dawn. I need him beaten and robbed. But left alive."

Cilydd's eyes gleamed. "How alive?"

"Breathing."

"The dead are easier to rob," he said with a yellow-toothed grin.

Cadens met his gaze, flat and cold.

"No."

Cilydd shrugged. "We keep what we take?"

"All of it," Cadens confirmed. "I need only see what's found."

The man leaned back and smirked.

"He's carrying something good, then?" he said as he rubbed his fingers.

Cadens tossed a small pouch of coin into the firelight. "Keep your blades dull. I want bruises, not a corpse."

"We'll leave him breathin'," Cilydd promised, "though not much more."

Back at Prydwen's Keep, Cadens handed a scroll to a sleepy guard.

"It's urgent. For Master Graent."

Scrawled in plain ink:

To: Master Graent

Filidh planning attack on Prydwen's Bridge.

Spirits move by conjuration.

*The attack will come before dawn.
Send messenger urgently to warn the bridge.*

It would suffice.

The boy would be tested. The bridge would be defended. Edric would have proof that Cadens served Albion.

And as for Lord Baldric...

Two birds. One stone.

The Messenger's Errand

Prydwen's Keep, Just Before Dawn

Master Graent's voice thundered down the hill side to the training yard below.

"Ortiz!"

Los turned, breath still sharp from morning drills. He had begun before dawn, as he often did now.

Across the yard, the old soldier was striding toward him—hard-eyed, jaw set, a rolled scroll clenched in his fist. The parchment was marked with a streak of ash, as though it had been pulled from a fire.

"There is going to be an attack. Filidh magic. They're coming for the bridge. I need a runner, now."

Los took the letter without hesitation. "Jes, sir."

Graent's gaze narrowed. "...and come right back."

"Understood," he said, strapping his sword across his back. "I'll run as if lives depend on it."

Graent gave him one final nod.

"Go."

The Fog Before Dawn

Prydwen's Bridge Outpost

By the time Los reached the bridge, his chest heaved and his legs threatened to fold. Mist covered the valley like a burial shroud. Through it, the stone bridge rose wide and silent over the dark river.

A voice barked from the gate. "Who goes there?"

"Message from the Keep!" Los shouted. "Urgent!"

Sergeant Alain met him, tall and weathered, with the eyes of a man who knew how battles began—and how they ended.

"Who are ye boy?"

"Los Ortiz. Master Graent sent me with a message."

Alain swore and waved him forward. "Sir Barcroft! Messenger from the Keep!"

Sir Barcroft, grizzled and grim, took the scroll and scanned it. Then his voice rang like an anvil. "To arms! Shields up! Wake the paladin!"

Lady Aelawen emerged in full plate, her sword strapped to her back, her eyes already burning.

"You're from the Keep?" she asked.

Los nodded. "Jes. I brought the warning."

She studied him. "Then you've done your duty. Stay with Brother Willem."

"But I came to fight, to serve."

"You will serve by surviving," she replied. "Do as you're told."

Brother Willem stepped from the shadows, staff in hand. "The veil is thin," he said. "I heard them in the wind last night. Stay close."

Corporal Dunleigh, barely a man, looked nervously toward the mist. "Who did you hear?"

Willem's eyes closed. His voice was soft as falling dust.

"The dead."

Then came the sound from the riverbank—dry and distant, like a horn carved from bone.

Chapter V – The Battle of the Bridge

The Battle

It began with silence.
Not stillness—but a hunger in the air.

And then they rose—spirits veiled in memory, armored in grief and crowned in shadow. Ghosts of the old war.

Madre de Dios...

Los touched three fingers to his forehead, circled his heart with his thumb—then his fist closed hard on the front of his shirt, over the hidden ring.

He stood between Sergeant Grum, who gripped a poleaxe like a righteous executioner, and Corporal Dunleigh, whose shield shook in his hand. Alain and Aelawen took the center. Barcroft stood beside them. Willem walked the line, anointing brows with whispered Latin.

"Strike without fear," the friar intoned. "Hold the line."

The first wave struck—soundless and cold.

Aelawen advanced, her blade moving in bright, disciplined arcs.
And she was speaking.

Latin.

Los knew the words as soon as they left her lips—

Aura Salutis. Da mihi, Domine, praesidium contra vulnera corporis.
(Grant me protection against wounds of the body.)

Refocillatio Archangelorum. Concede nobis, Domine, sanationem divinam et refocillationem virium.
(Grant us divine healing and renewal of strength.)

Carmen Perseverantiae. *Infunde nobis, Domine, fortitudinem indomitam in adversis.*

(Pour into us unbreakable strength in adversity.)

Aura of Salvation? Refreshment? Chant of Perseverance?

He had heard some of them in prayers, others in old texts.
But never like this.

Her voice didn't sound like a cleric at a lectern.
It sounded like iron being shaped.
Like breath being hammered into purpose.

And as she chanted, Los felt it.

A tightening in his arms.
A warmth beneath the skin.
His exhaustion slipping away, quiet as dust in wind.
A pressure settling over his shoulders, like invisible armor being fitted around him.

Each word he recognized.
Each effect he did not.

Grum thundered forward with a roar, cleaving through two revenants—but even his fury seemed to ride on the rhythm of Aelawen's voice.

Los's pulse quickened.

These were no prayers of Castilla.
This was Latin bent to something older—something alive.

He swallowed.

Whatever this was...

...he had no time to dwell on it now.

Los hesitated—but only for a second. A shade lunged toward Dunleigh, and instinct took him.

He swung.

His training blade struck the spirit—and it howled, unraveling like fog.

"They can be struck!" Los gasped. "They can be hit!"

"Then send 'em back to hell!" Grum roared, his axe finding another ghost.

Alain fought in silence, face grim, shield arm bleeding freely. Behind him, Barcroft's voice cut the mist: "Steady! Hold!"

Aelawen passed beside Los, silver light glinting off her pauldrons. "Stay with me, Ortiz!"

"I'm here!" he cried, slicing another phantom away from Dunleigh.

Then Dunleigh collapsed beneath a phantom's blow. Los dragged him to the rear, grimacing as a strike grazed him. Willem was already there, praying over the boy.

"Why are they doing this?" Dunleigh whispered.

Willem looked toward the battlefield, eyes hollow.
"Filidh magic."

Break of Dawn

The sun breached the hills, setting the fog aglow. The spirits faltered.

One by one, they dissolved—some screaming, others quiet. Their sorrow unraveled in the light.

Then silence.

Not victory. Just *absence*.

Grum sat on the bridge, chest heaving. Alain moved among the wounded. Sir Barcroft looked up to the hills, face unreadable.

"No losses," he muttered. "By the Light..."

Willem removed his hood, eyes distant. "They will return. Unless we strike down those who conjured them."

Los stood silent, blood seeping from a head wound, too weary to speak.

Lady Aelawen approached and placed a gauntlet on his shoulder.

"You held," she said.

"I didn't do anything," he whispered. "I just... reacted."

Her voice softened.

"Sometimes," she said, "that's the only thing that matters."

The Road to Trouble

Los left the bridge bloodied and breathless—the message delivered, the danger, he thought, behind him. The old road back to Prydwen cut through a wood, where trees and brush crowded the path and shadows pooled beneath thorn and root.

It was there he first sensed it.

Movement—just beyond the bend. Not beasts. Not spirits. Men.

He slowed; instincts sharpened from battle. He caught the flicker of steel, the whisper of voices muffled by greedy laughter.

Four of them. Maybe five. Poorly armed, but coordinated. Cutpurses.

Los reached for his blade—but then saw their spacing, their caution. They weren't acting alone.

And in the brush, unseen but watching—stealthed—a sixth man. Los could feel his presence but not see him. It was a distraction that cost him precious time when reacting.

It was Cadens.

He did not move. He simply observed.

The cutpurses fanned out across the road, their hands resting on hilts, their gazes fixed on the coin pouch at Los's side.

"Afternoon, traveler," the tallest of them said, grinning with yellow teeth. "There's a toll for passing through."

"Jou do not have to pay me a toll to pass through, jou may go on jour way." Los said with a broken grin.

Then with a firm grip on his sword, breath calm despite the tension, he prepared for what came next.

The shadows thickened. The wind shifted.
And the dance of blades loomed a heartbeat away.

The Weight of Copper

Cadens had watched the Spaniard for days.

The boy wore grief like a second skin, spoke softly even in defiance, and clutched too tightly at things most men learned to let go. From the shadows Cadens had seen it all: the training, the clumsy first swings with that oversized blade, and now... the messenger's errand. Pathetically predictable.

What mattered now was what the boy carried.
And how easily it could be taken.

Cadens had hired the cutpurses—greedy, foul-smelling, poorly armed, but hungry. That made them useful.

He watched the fight from the thickets.

The boy alone, on foot, as expected—lightly injured still from the skirmish at the bridge. His clothing was torn. His eyes carrying the weight of what he'd seen—spirits not of flesh, but of sorrow and fury.

The ambush came swift.

Five men spilled onto the road and circled him like wolves.

The boy reached for his blade, but it was slow—too heavy. A training sword: blunted, unbalanced. Fit for practice, not survival.

He fought anyway.

Cadens tilted his head, surprised.

The boy had heart. He swung with fury, twice driving them back. Blood stained the dirt. One cutpurse cried out, struck by the hilt. Another took a glancing blow from the blade. But it was not enough.

They brought him down.

He fell to his knees—then they clubbed him. Boots found ribs, spine, jaw. His hands clawed at the leather strap biting into his throat as they tried to strangle him—and still he refused to yield.

"Hold him," one hissed.

Two of them hauled him back by the hair while a third grabbed the chain and yanked. The clasp didn't give. The metal sawed into his neck as he thrashed.

Los choked, gagged, and clawed like an animal—not fighting for breath, fighting to prevent them from taking that which was more precious to him than life.

It took two men to rip it free. Something tore. His scream wasn't fear. It was grief given a voice.

They laughed, and left him in the dirt, broken and barely breathing.

The Bandit Camp

Cadens—unseen, imperceptible—followed them back to their camp.

The men huddled around, the spoils laid out like trophies: coin, chain, ring. A wineskin half-drained. They had taken everything but the practice sword, worthless to them anyway.

The leader stood first.

"He nearly died for it," he said, holding up the necklace. "Bloody near tore his own throat to keep it."

Cadens took it without a word.

The gold chain gleamed faintly. It bore no crest, no sigil—only a plain silver ring. A woman's, small and unadorned. Smooth edge. Worn band. Nothing of great value.

He turned it in his fingers, unimpressed.

"Sentimental fool," he muttered.

Next came the coin pouch—bulging and worn, the leather turned inside out. Cadens spilled its contents onto a cloth: silver, copper, a few Spanish gold pieces. Enough to draw notice in any tavern.

But it was the pouch itself that caught his eye.

On the leather was stamped LOS. Odd. It appeared like a craftsmen's mark and not like a proper name.

It was what he found on the inverse—hidden when the pouch was turned inside out—that caught his eye:

The symbol of a Lion on a shield, a border made of alternating squares.

Cadens smiled faintly.

So the boy had tried to hide it. A noble's son indeed.

He went to pocket it—
—but a hand shot out.

"Oi," the leader said. "We were told we keep what we take."

Cadens's stare fell on him. Flat, cold, pressing like a blade at the throat.

Wordless, he tossed a copper coin into the dirt.

The leader didn't flinch. "Two," he said. "For the pouch."

Cadens waited, then slowly flipped him a second copper.

The man caught it, shrugged. "Not like we could sell it anyway. A name stamped into it like that—bleeds trouble."

Cadens said nothing.

He pocketed the pouch, left the ring and the chain, and vanished as he had come.

Return to the Shadows

He would report to Lord Baldric tonight.

He would tell him that the boy was of noble birth and tried to hide it. That he carried a chain. A woman's ring. And that he bled to protect them.

Lord Baldric knew—or suspected—something about this boy. Now his suspicions would be confirmed.

And if Lord Baldric wished to bury the past...

...he would have to bury the boy too.

Chapter VI – Faith and Venom

The Road Side – Camelot Hills

Pain greeted him first.

A slow, dragging kind of agony—dull in some places, sharp in others—anchoring him to the earth like broken stone. Dirt filled his mouth. Blood caked one eye shut. The scent of sweat and coppery ruin clung to his skin like a burial shroud.

He tried to move.
Couldn't.

Then he remembered.
The fight. The ambush. The men. The blows. The ring.

"Risa..." he rasped.

His fingers, bruised and trembling, searched the hollow of his chest.
The chain was gone. Her ring—simple, silver, sacred—gone.
A cry tore from his throat, hoarse and wordless.

The world blurred.

When next he woke, it was beneath a canvas awning.
The air was thick with incense and the low hiss of an unseen serpent.

His shirt had been stripped.
Bandages lay tight across his ribs and shoulder. The wound on his temple was cleaned. The swelling, reduced. A damp cloth rested upon his brow, and in its chill, there was clarity.

"You live," came a voice.

It was calm, graveled by age and wind, with the kind of cadence that suggested both sermons and solitude.

A man in friars robes sat cross-legged beside him—weathered, thin, sun-darkened.

A cord of snakeskin girded his waist.

"I am Tycho," the man said, hands resting lightly on his knees. "Friar of the Venomites. I found you beside the road, half-dead."

Los tried to speak, but his voice cracked.

"Easy now," Tycho said. He placed a hand—warm, steady—upon the boy's chest. A faint pulse of light followed.

Emendatio Maior

(Greater Refocillation)

The ache lessened.

"Jou've... healed me?" Los whispered, disbelieving.

"I have faith," Tycho replied simply. "And with faith, some of us may heal. Friars, Clerics, Paladins... though Paladins only in part."

Los stared at him.

At how he sat there so calmly.
At the peace on the man's face.

"Is this magic?" he asked.

"No," Tycho said. "It is faith. And sometimes, faith moves the divine to act."

It was late. Dark had already settled in.
Los rose slowly.

He had to get the ring.
He had to find the ones who had taken it.

Tycho steadied him.
He offered water, bread, and an escort to wherever he was going.

Los took them all in silence.

"I am staying at the keep," he said lowly. "I need to find the people who robbed me."

"You need rest first. And to recover your strength."

His strength returned slowly with every step.
But not his spirit.
That had been wounded in ways even healing hands could not mend.

They walked the road to Prydwen's Keep in near silence.
Tycho hummed low and strange tunes under his breath.

But when they neared the outskirts of the keep, the friar stopped.

"I will go no further," he said. "They do not welcome my kind here."

Los turned to him. "Why?"

"Because we believe in faith," Tycho replied. "And true faith... is often feared."

He looked the boy over, his gaze lingering at the hollow beneath his collarbone.

"What was taken from you was not just gold."

"No," Los said, jaw tight.

"Then you must take it back."

Los said nothing, but his silence spoke.

Tycho smiled faintly.
"We may meet again, Spaniard."

Then he turned and vanished into the forest, leaving silence in his wake.

Prydwen's Gate

Master Graent stood in the keep's yard, arms folded, his expression etched with thunderclouds.

"You've been gone all day," he growled. "And you look like you were dragged through a battlefield."

Los stopped before him, breath measured.

"I was robbed," he said plainly. "Everything—gone. My coin. My... necklace."

His hand rose unconsciously to his chest, where the chain had once hung. Where the ring should have rested.

It pained him, deeply, to have lost it.
It was like losing her all over again.
Failing her, all over again.

He fought back the tears.
But some pain, a man cannot hide.

Graent's eyes narrowed. "You fought them?"

Los nodded once.

His mind was lost in sorrow.
He had forgotten all about the fight at the bridge. The spirits.

"With a training sword."

Another nod.

"They were many. I fought," Los said again, quieter now. "I lost..."

Graent studied him, his gaze not unkind, but sharp.
"You didn't drag yourself back in that condition. Who found you?"

"A friar. Tycho. He healed me."

At the name, Graent's mouth tightened.

"You'll stay away from him. From all of them."

"Why?"

"They're heretics," Graent said. "Outcasts. Snake-handlers. They wrap venom in scripture and call it holy. No good will come from their ways."

Los bowed his head, saying nothing.
But inside him, a fire burned—cold and bitter.

"Sir Barcroft said you acquitted yourself well."

Los looked up.

"At the bridge," Graent continued. "He said you arrived just in time, and handled yourself well in its defense."

He had forgotten.
Forgotten the spirits.
The cries.
The moment he had stood.

"I can see you need rest. Sleep. We'll talk more tomorrow. Prox and Romao should be back soon. They went to Cotswold to visit a tavern. I felt they'd earned the rest."

Barracks, That Night

He returned to his bunk in silence.

Romao and Prox were not yet back from their trip into town.
The fire was low.
The shadows, long.

He lay upon the cot, staring at the beams above, feeling the weight of nothing where the chain had once rested.

A ring. A memory.
The last touch of the woman he loved.

Stolen. Dirtied. Handled by thieves.

His hand rose, pressing hard against his chest where the ring should have been.
There, in the silence, he made his vow.

He would find them.
He would take it back.
And when he did, he would kill them all.

There were things a man could lose and rebuild.
But some things... some things were not meant to be taken.
And for those who stole it, there could be no forgiveness.

Chapter VII – Arrows and Whispers

Camelot

The streets of Camelot were quieter than usual as dusk bled through the sky, staining the stone towers in shades of gold and bruised indigo. Cadens walked with the silence of one born to the shadow, the sounds of the city slipping past him like wind through leaves. He had a report to deliver—one that would ripple through the courts of influence, through corridors of steel and secrets.

But first, a voice called out from behind him.

"Well, look what the wolf dragged in. Or was it the crow this time?"

Cadens turned, slow, instinctive. Only one voice lilted like that—sharp with amusement, soft with affection.

It was Endrond Addams.

The Scout stood with a tilted smirk. One hand resting against the curve of his bow, the other atop the hilt of a sheathed short sword. Tousled blonde hair peeked from beneath a blue woodsman's cap, and his cloak—matching blue—shifted with his stride like rippling water. His eyes, bright as the edge of a blade, studied Cadens with open curiosity.

"You've been out," Endrond said. "And judging by the new set of shadows under your eyes, not somewhere restful."

Cadens gave a brief nod. "I was watching the Filidh."

"The singing druids?" Endrond's brow rose. "And here I thought you didn't like music."

"I don't," Cadens said dryly.

Endrond laughed. "Then I suppose they were up to something worth the headache?"

Cadens gave no answer.

Endrond leaned in a little, conspiratorial. "Master Edric was asking about you, you know. I stopped in earlier. Said you were working too much. That he was starting to miss your grim silences."

"I'll be reporting to him now," Cadens said. "You should go rest."

"Rest?" Endrond scoffed, grinning. "After being on the road for two days? Absolutely. But not before we have a drink. Meet me at the Black Dragon after you're done playing master spy."

Cadens offered no smile, but gave the faintest tilt of his chin. For him, that was agreement.

Then he turned and disappeared into the inner quarters of the rogue's guild, leaving Endrond to shake his head and mutter, "One day that one's going to die of seriousness."

The Cotswold Tavern

Romao reclined against the edge of a battered table, a half-empty tankard in hand, while Prox worked through a bowl of lamb and bread, savoring each bite.

The tavern was loud, but around them it felt oddly still. Romao's eyes kept drifting to the fire, watching the wood hiss and split.

"You ever think there's something... not right about that boy?" Romao asked quietly.

"Los?" Prox looked up. "Sure. He's a bloody Spaniard swinging a greatsword like its penance."

"I don't mean foreign," Romao said, voice lower. "I mean... something inside him. The way he took to the blade. How quick he is to embrace pain. It's like he's chasing something. Or maybe running from it."

Prox frowned, chewing slower now. "You think he's dangerous?"

Romao shook his head. "No. I think he's sad. The kind of sad that'll get him killed if we don't keep an eye on him."

"Then let's keep an eye on him."

Prydwen's Keep – Master Graent's chamber

Night had thickened around the keep, wrapping the stone walls in silence. Graent sat at his desk, a candle burning low beside the letter he had already read a dozen times.

Don Flavio's hand had been careful, deliberate—words weighted with love and sorrow both. The letter asked only that Lorenzo be watched, guided... and that he be delivered to the one who could tell him the truth, the one who should tell him the truth.

Beneath it, Graent kept the second letter—sealed, unopened, addressed to Lady Triss, second only to Lord Prydwen in the Order of Paladins.

Graent leaned back, eyes heavy. Something was stirring. The ambush on the road had been too convenient. Cutpurses did not lurk between Prydwen's Bridge and the keep, and they certainly didn't rob people in broad daylight. And an Infiltrator—pale, wiry, familiar—had been lingering near since Los's arrival.

Graent trusted his gut.

He could not protect Los here, not if eyes were already watching. Not if Lord Baldric ever learned who Los was.

He pulled fresh parchment and began to write.

To Lady Triss,

The bearer of this letter is your son. I have not told him. I leave that to you, in your own way and your own time. You will know what to do with the letter enclosed, and I pray you'll know what to say when the time comes.

Sincerely

Master Graent

He folded the page, concealed the second letter within, sealed it with wax, and set it aside for morning.

Los, Romao, and Prox would leave at first light. Each with a letter of recommendation to the Paladin Order. And Los would be given the letter to Lady Triss.

On the morrow they would go to Camelot.

To the Order.

And to truths long buried.

Burns Residence - Camelot

The private chamber in the Burns residence held none of Camelot's grandeur, yet under Lady Triss's careful presence, it became a place of quiet sanctity. The tall windows admitted soft golden light, caught in the motes of dust that danced upon the breeze. A table stood between them, draped in white linen, upon which rested the leather-bound Scriptures, a dagger of ceremonial make, and two cups of lavender tea—one untouched, the other half-drained by her pupil.

Lady Angela Burns knelt beside the hearth, armor set aside, her practice blade lying parallel to her knees in ritual stillness. The embers flickered before her, as if stirred by her breath, her golden blond hair neatly framing her face.

She was the youngest of three daughters of a Lord who had no sons.

Lady Triss regarded her with pride.

"You are steady today," Lady Triss said at last, her voice smooth as candlewax, strong as tempered iron. "Your strikes were clean, your footwork measured. But it is your stillness I am most pleased by."

Angela smiled faintly, blue eyes bright. "You once told me stillness is where we meet the divine."

"I did. And I mean it still."

Lady Triss stepped closer, placing a hand lightly upon the girl's crown. Not in benediction. In belonging.

"You've come far, Angela," she said. "More than I ever expected from a girl so young, and so delicate when first I met her. Tomorrow, I will speak to Lord Prydwen."

Angela blinked, uncertain. "About...?"

"About you," Lady Triss said, a soft smile rising. "I will personally sponsor your entry into the Order."

The silence that followed was not hesitation—it was awe.

Angela's hands trembled slightly as they rested over her thighs. "Truly? But... I am only seventeen."

"Seventeen, yes," Lady Triss said, "but wiser than many at twenty. Your blade is already tested, your prayers already practiced. And with my word, Lord Prydwen will grant it. You will be the youngest Paladin in living memory."

Angela bowed her head, overcome.

"I will not disappoint you," she whispered.

"I know," said Lady Triss gently.

She turned and walked to the window, drawing aside the curtain. Outside, the rooftops of Camelot basked in soft amber, the streets drowsy with peace. But peace was ever temporary. The world moved, whether they were ready or not.

"There is one more matter," Lady Triss said, still watching the horizon. "Tomorrow I will also speak with Lady Winchell. You will need a cleric assigned to you. Not simply for field work, but for balance."

Angela's brows lifted. "Already?"

"Paladins do not walk alone, Angela. And you will be in the Order before the week is out. I would see you paired with one you can trust, one who will temper your heart if ever zeal clouds your sight."

"I understand," Angela said softly. "Do you... already know who it might be?"

Triss turned back, considering.

"Not yet," she admitted. "But I trust in providence. As I trust in you."

Angela rose from her kneeling posture and stood before her mentor—taller now than she had been even a season ago, but still looking to Lady Triss the way the moon looks to the sun.

"You've been like a mother to me," Angela said suddenly, the words surprising even her.

Triss's expression shifted—not surprise, but something more delicate, sorrowful and proud.

"And you have been the daughter I never bore," she said.

Then Angela, more hesitant now, spoke: "May I ask you something personal?"

Triss's gaze did not shift from her pupil. "You may."

"Do you... ever regret never having a child?"

The room stilled.

Lady Triss closed her eyes a moment. In the silence, memory stirred—of banners and blood, of younger days filled with duty, and a brief moment of softness. Of long rides, of oaths sworn. Of a love once touched, but never fully held. Of the price paid for a title earned in steel and solitude. And of a child, a son she had never known save for the all too few and brief days after his birth.

Her throat tightened before she spoke.

"No," she said finally, softly. "But sometimes, I wonder who might've come from me... had I chosen differently."

Angela lowered her gaze. "I'm sorry—"

"Do not be," Triss interrupted, turning at last. "I chose the sword. I chose the path. And I have never walked it in vain."

Then her expression softened.

"And besides... I have you."

Angela smiled, eyes damp but proud.

"I'll make you proud, Lady Triss."

"You already have," Triss said.

Then, as always, duty returned to the surface.

"Tomorrow begins a new chapter," Lady Triss said. "Rest tonight. Reflect. The days ahead will not be easy. But you are ready."

Angela bowed deeply, reverently. "Yes, Lady Triss."

As she left the chamber, her steps were lighter than air, her heart kindled like a lantern lit in the dusk

Church of Camelot

Night settled over Camelot with hush and weight.

Lady Triss sat alone in her quarters. No fire. One candle burned on the desk, its flame low and wavering. Her armor stood untouched on its stand—polished, but still. She had not worn it in weeks. Her battles were no longer waged with steel.

She traced the edge of an old prayerbook with her fingertip, but her mind wasn't on scripture.

Angela's question lingered.
Not the words exactly, but the shape of them.
The wondering. The imagined life.

She reached for the drawer. Opened it slowly.

Inside was a small wooden box, worn smooth with age. She opened it.
Folded linen. A child's ribbon—sun-faded blue, tied in a careful loop.

She hadn't spoken the name aloud in nearly twenty years.

"Lorenzo," she whispered.

She had only held him for days. A boy born of a fleeting love, wrapped in secrecy,
entrusted to others before her enemies could ever learn the truth.

He had been sent south, far beyond Camelot. To Toledo. To safety.

Not for shame. Not for convenience.
For protection.

She had chosen the sword. And with it came cost.

She did not know if the boy had lived.
If he remembered her.
If he hated her.
If he knew *anything* of the woman who bore him.

But some nights, in silence like this, she felt it.
Some tether still existed. However frayed.

Tomorrow Angela would become a Paladin. She would rise. She would shine.

But in a corner of Lady Triss's soul, the prayer remained:

Let him be safe.
Let him find peace.
And let the sword I gave my life to...
somehow be worth the sacrifice.

She closed the box. Blew out the candle.

And sat alone in the dark.

Not mourning.

Not hoping.

Just remembering.

Chapter VIII – A Ghost from the Past

Camelot – Lord Baldric's Private Residence

The manor house stood on the edge of Camelot's inner circle, a place of quiet power shrouded in the calm afforded to those whose influence need not shout. Lanterns glowed behind mullioned windows, spilling amber light onto the trimmed hedgerows. The guards at the gate did not notice when Cadens approached—he simply slipped past them.

He moved without hurry. Without hesitation.

The servants remained unaware of him as he passed through a long hall of oak and iron, where silence hung like tapestry. At the far end sat Lord Baldric, reclined near the fire, fingers steeped beneath his chin. Age had not softened him. His dark beard, now streaked with silver, framed a mouth too often set to scorn. His eyes were knives dulled by nothing.

"You're late," he said, not looking up.

"I was thorough," Cadens replied.

He reached into the folds of his cloak and tossed something onto the table beside Lord Baldric.

A leather pouch.

It hit with a quiet weight. Leather against wood. The shield, stamped into the pouch's exterior, was barely visible beneath dried blood: The mark of a house Baldric had not seen in over seventeen years.

Baldric's gaze flicked down. His hand moved—slow as a serpent—to touch the edge of the leather. He turned it over once, and froze.

There it was. Proof.

The family line he thought never to see again. A rival long dead. A child cast across the sea.

He did not lift the pouch again. He merely stared at it.

"How did you come by this?" he asked feigning ignorance.

Cadens answered carefully. "From those who took it from him."

Then there was a pause that for a moment filled the room.

"I don't want to know the details," Lord Baldric said, waving a hand. "I can see there was blood involved."

Cadens nodded once, hands behind his back. His eyes did not shift. "He carried little else. A training sword. This pouch—once heavy. And a gold chain around his neck bearing a woman's silver ring. Unadorned. Plain. But he bled to protect it."

Lord Baldric leaned back, fingers curling beneath his chin.

"A ring—?" Lord Baldric's voice chilled.

Cadens nodded. "They had to pry it from him. Took three of them. He nearly choked himself trying to keep it."

Baldric's jaw flexed. "And the ring?"

He nodded to the desk, signaling Cadens to produce it.

Cadens shook his head. "Still with the men who robbed him. I was interested only in what marked him."

A long silence followed.

Then Baldric's voice came low, hard.

"Does he still live?"

Cadens met his eyes. Unflinching. "Yes."

Another silence—this one heavier. Weighted not with shock, but something older. Something coiled.

Cadens gave a slight bow, then turned. He did not wait for dismissal. Those who worked in shadow knew when their part was done.

Baldrics Reflection

When the door clicked shut behind him, Baldric stood, slowly. The pouch still lay upon the table.

He stared at it.

Then his fingers closed around it like a vice.

He murmured, "After all this time..."

So... your son walks the realm, Rebecca.

Did you think I would not see him? Did you think the truth would stay buried forever?

He walked to the window, drawing aside the heavy curtain with one hand. Outside, Camelot slept. But the world never truly rests.

He had no doubt Master Graent would send him to her. The old war hound was loyal to the father—and to Lady Triss. But why was the boy here? Did she send for him?

He would be about 17 now, but a youth. Still... a boy could become a man.

Baldric stared into the night.

"Does the boy even know?" he muttered.

He returned to his chair and poured himself a dark wine. The goblet trembled faintly in his hand.

"I loved you once, Rebecca. Protected you from your own folly. Kept my silence even though you rejected me..."

His voice tightened.

"But your son—I will hate him as I hated his father. Not for what he's done... but for what he is. A living echo of the choice you made."

Chapter IX – Shadows in the Barracks

The Barracks – Prydwen's Keep

The door to the barracks creaked open, letting in the cool breath of night. Prox stumbled in first, still chuckling from some half-remembered jest. Romao followed close behind, a hand braced on the frame for balance.

"By the Light," Prox muttered, dropping his coin pouch on the nearest bench. "That barkeep knew how to pour."

"Too much," Romao replied, slurring just slightly. He pulled off his gloves and tossed them toward the hearth. "We should've come back sooner."

Their laughter faded as their eyes adjusted to the dim interior. Across the room, Los lay motionless on his cot, a single blanket pulled to his chest. His face, turned to the side, was swollen near the brow. One lip split. Bruising along his jaw told a quiet, grim story.

Romao stepped closer, squinting. "Saints... he looks like he tangled with a troll."

Prox's mirth died entirely. He leaned forward, gaze sharpening despite the wine still in his veins. "His chain," he said. "The ring. It's gone."

"I always meant to ask him about that ring," Romao muttered, trying to steady himself.

Neither said more for a moment.

The fire crackled gently, casting soft orange light across the room. Shadows danced across Los's still form—too still.

Then, without warning, he shifted. A low murmur escaped his lips, too faint to understand. His brow furrowed. One arm reached out into the empty air beside him, fingers curled as if searching for something—or someone.

Romao moved to kneel beside the cot. "He's dreaming," he whispered. "Should we wake him?"

Prox shook his head, voice low and rough. "Let him sleep. Whatever happened... it's carved deep."

Romao glanced again at the bruises. "Someone hurt him."

"They'll pay," Prox said. "But not tonight. Let him rest. We've got work to do in the morning."

Romao stood slowly. "We lost a day. If we're to get him ready for Camelot, we'll have to double the hours."

"Aye," Prox agreed. "No more taverns. No more delays."

They settled into their own cots without another word. But long after the room fell quiet, Romao lay awake, eyes fixed on the slow rise and fall of Los's chest.

He'd seen that kind of hurt before. The kind that didn't bleed from wounds alone.

Outside, the wind stirred, whistling soft across the keep walls.

Tomorrow, they would train. Somehow, they would make it to Camelot.

Together.

The wounded dream

But it wasn't a dream. It was memory, dressed in nightmare's skin.
The same nightmare that came every night.
Losing her.
Holding her in his arms, helpless as she slipped away.

Only now it was worse.
He had failed her again.

The ring.
He had to find it.
He had to take it back.

The Road to Camelot

Los woke before the sun, slipping from his cot while his companions slept off the wine and noise of the night before. He stepped outside into the hush of morning, where the mists still clung to the grass and the eastern sky burned gold with dawn.

He wasn't alone.

Master Graent stood by the Keeps gate, arms folded, the bags beneath his eyes betraying a sleepless night.

"How are you feeling?" the old man asked.

"I'll live," Los replied, his gaze distant—scanning the tree line, searching shadows for familiar shapes. The kind shaped like regret. Or vengeance.

Graent followed the boy's eyes. He saw the fire there. The wound beneath the wounds.

"You acquitted yourself well at the bridge," he said. "And I believe your time here is at its end."

Los turned to him, confused.

"I'm sending you to Camelot," Graent continued. "With Romao and Prox. Letters of recommendation await you. If the Paladin Order will have you... then so be it."

"Really?" Los blinked, unsure if he had heard him right.

"Really," Graent nodded. "But I ask one favor in return."

He reached into the folds of his tunic and produced a small sealed letter, the wax bearing no crest.

"I want you to deliver this, by hand, to Lady Triss. She is second only to Lord Prydwen in the Paladin Order. She'll be at the Church of St. George."

Los nodded, tucking it carefully into his pocket. "I'll see it done."

He hesitated. "Master Graent... I have no coin. Nothing."

Graent frowned, then reached for his purse. He handed Los two silver pieces.

"You can repay me later. Once you're with the Order. You'll manage till then."

Los's eyes lowered, voice barely above a whisper. "Please don't tell my grandfather. Or Romao. Or Prox. I don't want them to see me as a failure."

Graent regarded him quietly, then nodded once.

"You should know. At the Church—every morning—they hand out assignments. Quests. Missions. Some pay in coin, others in items, armor, or weapons."

Los listened intently.

"You'll be alright."

They stood in silence as the sun finally crested the hills, light spilling across Albion like a promise half-whispered.

Behind them, the barracks door creaked. Romao and Prox emerged, bleary-eyed, hair tousled, still reeking of last night's tavern.

"Where'd you go, *Fratello*?" Romao called.

Los turned, trying not to smile. "I have news."

"Let me guess," Prox said, squinting. "We're on latrine duty."

"No," Los grinned. "We're going to Camelot." He said with the exuberance of youth.

Master Graent nodded. "To present yourselves at the Church of St. George."

Romao whooped, pulling Prox into a clumsy shoulder bump. "We're going to be Paladins!"

"Clean yourselves up first," Graent barked. "You represent more than yourselves now."

Los turned to him, solemn. "Thank you. For everything. I'll repay you somehow."

Graent said nothing. He didn't need to.

But as he watched them go, to make themselves presentable he placed a hand briefly over the folded letter in his pocket.

And may she forgive me, he thought, for what I send her.

At the Wash Basin

Romao dunked his head in the cold water of the wash basin, sputtering as he pulled back. "So what did happen to you? You look like you fought a war."

Los dried his face slowly. "There was a battle. At the bridge."

Prox raised a brow. "We heard."

"*Fantasma*," Los said. "Ghosts. They attacked. We drove them off. I... I was injured."

It was a half-truth. But it was all he would give.

Prox met Romao's eyes but said nothing. He'd heard the truth hidden in the silence. That was enough.

They saw the bruises. The missing ring. The hollow at his chest where it used to hang. His money pouch gone.

Ghosts, after all, had no use for gold.

Romao shook his head. "You people fight ghosts here?"

"And worse," Prox muttered.

Romao frowned. "What's worse than a *Babau*?"

"A what?" Prox blinked.

Romao shrugged. "Like a ghost. But uglier. And it steals your breath."

"Ah," Prox said, catching on. "We have worse. Zombies. Liches. Banshees. Paladins fight them. Clerics banish them."

Romao puffed out his chest. "Well, I'm not afraid of any *Babau*. My holy sword will—ha! ha!—cut them down."

"When you get a holy sword," Prox reminded him.

"We do get holy swords, right?" Romao asked, suddenly less confident.

"We'll find out," Prox said grimly.

Los stayed quiet. But his eyes burned with something deeper.
Not fear. Not even hope.
Resolve.

By mid-morning, they stood before Master Graent once more, clothed and ready.

Graent handed each of them a sealed envelope.

"For the Order," he said. "Take these to the Church. And Los—"

Los nodded before Graent could finish. "I'll deliver your letter to Lady Triss. I promise."

And so the three misfits of Prydwen's Keep gathered their things, and with sun overhead and fate at their heels, they set out.

To Camelot.

To truth.

To become Paladins.

To begin the life that waited.

The Ring

The three companions walked the long road to Camelot, their boots stirring the dust of an ancient path worn by knights, pilgrims, and legends. Los had insisted they walk—it was, after all, a beautiful day, sky clear, wind at their backs.

But beauty wasn't the reason.

He claimed the day was too fine to waste on horseback, but truth burned beneath his smile. He had no coin to rent a horse, and he had another purpose. Eyes sharp, he scanned the trees and every turn in the road. Watching. Hoping.

Let them try, he thought. Let them come again. Let them see what happens when I'm not alone.

But the road remained quiet. Safe. And soon, the walls of Camelot rose before them—stone and story intertwined, crowned in banners, guarded by time.

Camelot rose like a song from the stone. Grand towers and walls.

To Prox, it was familiar—he had been here before.

To Romao, it was smaller than Rome.

But to Los—it was legend. Every stone seemed to breathe memory. His father had walked these streets. Now he did too.

As they crossed into the city proper, the three passed through the merchant district, where smiths hammered iron and weavers stretched bolts beneath striped awnings. The smell of baked bread, oiled leather, and forge smoke filled the air.

Curiosity pulled them apart—Romao toward the armorers, Prox toward the weapons racks. But Los hung back.

He had only two borrowed silvers to his name.

Quietly he browsed, without intent to buy—until he saw it.

There. Hanging from a crooked bit of wire. Silver. Simple. Unadorned.

Her ring.

Los froze. Then reached forward, lifting it with trembling fingers.

"Where did you get this?" he asked the merchant behind the cart, voice low but sharp.

The man blinked. "Picked it up last night. You interested?"

Los's jaw tightened. "It was stolen from me. Yesterday."

The merchant shrugged, nonchalant. "Can't speak to that. You want it, you can buy it."

"I want to know who sold it to you."

"Some fellas. Didn't get names."

Los's voice rose. "It's mine."

"For two silver," the merchant said with a smile. "It's yours again. Otherwise, I call the guards."

"You're charging me for something that is already mine?" Los demanded, heat rising in his chest. "What about the chain it was on?"

"No chain came with it," the man replied. "You buying or not?"

Their voices drew attention. A guard approached—a Sergeant by the crest on his cloak. Older, square-jawed, already frowning.

"Problem here?" he asked.

"This fellow's trying to take a ring without paying, Sergeant Bradford," the merchant said quickly.

"It's mine," Los snapped. "It was stolen off me jesterday."

Bradford's eyes narrowed at the accent. "You accusing this merchant of theft?"

"No," Los replied through clenched teeth. "But he knows who sold it to him."

"Got proof it's yours?" Bradford folded his arms.

Los hesitated. The chain was gone. The bruises were still tender. And who could prove love lived in a piece of silver?

Before he could answer, Romao and Prox appeared at his side.

"It's his," Romao said firmly. "He wore it every day."

Bradford sneered. "Not taking the word of a Latin. Or a Spaniard, for that matter."

"He's telling the truth," Prox added, voice steady.

Bradford turned back to Los. "You going to pay—or spend the day in the stocks as a thief?"

Los looked at the merchant again. The man smiled. He knew. He was selling stolen goods and getting away with it.

"Two silver," the merchant said. "Now. Or not at all."

Prox muttered, "That's highway robbery."

But Los said nothing. He pulled the borrowed silver from his pouch and handed it over. The merchant pocketed the coins with a grin. Bradford nodded and turned to leave, satisfied that the foreigner had been humbled.

As Los turned to go, he paused at the edge of the cart. There, tucked among trinkets, was a strip of worn leather cord.

He took it.

"Hey!" the man barked. "You have to pay for that too!"

"I already did," he said, as he slipped the ring onto it, tying a knot, and placed it around his neck.

Then he walked away.

Not triumphant. Not proud.

But whole again.

And he would never let it go.

The Messenger in the Market

The ring was returned. But Los was penniless.

Though his fingers curled around the leather cord now strung at his neck—its silver weight a balm and a burden—he felt no victory. It was relief mingled with fury. Robbed once more, humiliated in the eyes of the city guard, left with nothing but the bitter taste of injustice.

Romao, sharp-eyed despite his easy grin, was reminded by the absence of Los's coin pouch. His hip, once weighted with the jangling assurance of money, now bare.

"Come," Romao said lightly, though his voice was careful. "Let's find something to eat. Put some color back in our cheeks before we meet the Paladins, eh?"

Los didn't look up. His thumb brushed the ring where it rested over the center of his chest.

"I still need to deliver this letter," he murmured. "To Lady Triss. For Master Graent."

Romao glanced to Prox. They had guessed the truth—Los had no coin left, and likely didn't want them to know.

"Prox," Romao said casually, turning as if struck by sudden thought, "there are messengers here in the city, sí?"

Prox nodded. "Dozens. And one headed our way now."

Indeed, a boy was weaving through the crowd toward them, no more than fourteen, swift, sure footed and wide-eyed.

"*Ragazzo!*" Romao called, beckoning him with a smile. The lad slowed, cautious but curious.

Los opened his mouth to protest. "Graent said I should give it to her personally."

Romao ignored him for the moment. "You know the Church of St. George?"

The boy nodded quickly. "'Course. It's just up the road."

"And Lady Triss?" Romao pressed.

"She's one of the Paladins," the boy said proudly. "Everyone knows her."

"*Bene,*"

Romao grinned. With a smooth motion, he plucked the letter from Los's reluctant hand and passed it to the boy. "Take this straight to her. Tell her it's from Master Graent of Prydwen's Keep. Put it in her hand. You understand?"

The boy nodded solemnly. "Yes, sir."

Prox sighed, reaching into his pouch. He handed the lad a copper.

"For your trouble," he muttered.

"*Grazie*," Romao said cheerfully. "Now off you go."

Los watched the boy dart away through the crowd, heart twisting. He hadn't wanted this. But he didn't stop it either.

"Now, lunch is on me eh?"

Moments later, Los was swept along, half-dragged by his friends into a tavern tucked beside the market square.

Meanwhile, at the Church of St. George

Lady Triss stood near the altar in St. George cathedral, reviewing the litany for the day's rites when the messenger entered, hesitant but respectful. He paused just inside the nave, clutching the letter.

She turned, brow raised.

"Milady," the boy said, stepping forward. "This is for you. From Master Graent."

He placed the folded letter in her gloved hand.

"Thank you," she said gently.

The boy lingered for a moment longer, uncertain if more would be required.

Triss broke the seal—

—and froze, as if someone had pressed a blade against the spine of her soul.

"Triss?" Lady Winchell was at her side in an instant, hand on her arm. "What is it?"

The letter trembled in Triss's hand.

Triss said nothing. She simply handed over the letter. The concealed letter within had already fallen to the floor.

Winchell scanned it quickly, her eyes widening.

"This can't be..." she breathed.

Triss swallowed hard, her voice breaking.
"He's here. In Camelot. Graent sent him to me."

Winchell's eyes flicked toward the boy lingering in the nave. "Child, who gave you this letter?"

The boy shifted, suddenly nervous under their stares. "A tall man gave it to me, milady. Dark hair. Spoke kinda funny—like he wasn't from around here."

"Was he Spanish?" Winchell asked.

The boy shook his head. "No, ma'am. Latin, I think. He was smiling a lot."

Triss exhaled slowly. Her voice trembled. "That would not be him."

"But it came from him," Winchell asked.

The boy nodded. "Yes, ma'am. He was with two others," he offered.

Lord Prydwen entered just then, drawn by the noise. "Is everything all right?"

Winchell turned quickly as she swept up the second letter from the stone floor of the church. "A moment, my lord. Lady Triss simply needs air."

Prydwen studied them both, then nodded. "Very well."

He then nodded to the boy dismissing him.

Together, Triss and Winchell slipped from the church through the side door, emerging into the cloister garden where peace still lived among the ivy and stone.

Triss clutched the second letter now—still sealed, still unopened.

"My son," she whispered. "Here. In this city. After all these years..."

"Do you think he knows who you are?" Winchell asked.

"I don't know," Triss said. "Maybe. Maybe not. Why else would he come?"

She opened the second letter with care. The handwriting—Don Flavio's—was instantly familiar. It was faded now, but still graceful, marked by the weight of years and sorrow. The message was sparse, but poignant. Something tragic had happened in Hispania—he did not say what—and Lorenzo had chosen to leave, perhaps forever. The rest was left to her: whether to reveal herself to him, or keep the truth locked away.

Winchell sighed. "We have only the messenger's word."

Triss nodded slowly. "We must find them. Quietly."

She gazed toward the city beyond the cloister wall, heart aching.

"I have waited seventeen years to see him again. I can wait a little longer."

Chapter X – Paladins

Camelot, Church of St. George – Early Afternoon

Los, Romao, and Prox stood before Lord Prydwen in the cool hush of the church's nave. Their letters—three unsealed recommendations from Master Graent—lay atop a polished oak table.

Prydwen regarded them with measured scrutiny, his voice bearing both authority and mild curiosity.

"You come recommended by Master Graent, not by Master Claistan, as is customary. Quite unusual."

Romao cleared his throat. "Master Claistan withheld our letters. Master Graent intervened," he said, offering a slight bow.

Prydwen's eyes flicked to Los. Though the Spaniard's face was bruised and pale, there was steel in his gaze.

"How old are you three?"

"I am eighteen, Milord," said Romao with another bow.

"I am eighteen as well, Milord," added Prox bowing as well.

"Seventeen, Milord," said Los, giving a practiced and polite bow.

Seventeen. Young for a Paladin, Prydwen thought—but he trusted Graent's judgment. And something in the boy's gaze, and how he carried himself lingered in his mind. It had been a long time since one so young was made a Paladin.

"Very well. You are accepted into the Order of Paladins."

A hush of triumph swept across the three. Relief—at last.

"I trust you understand the expectations that follow."

They nodded, flushed with hope.

"You will lodge tonight in the abbey. At dawn, you will be consecrated. Then—your training begins."

Grateful, Romao and Prox exited the church, falling into eager talk about lodging and how to spend the rest of the day. While Los remained behind to explore the church.

Meanwhile, Outside the Church

Lady Triss hurried through the cloister, apologizing as she approached.

"I'm sorry, dear. I was summoned away—urgent business. Lord Prydwen awaits us already."

Angela's expression didn't falter. "I understand."

They found Lord Prydwen waiting on the steps to the church. Triss exchanged a glance with the stoic head of the Order.

"There are new arrivals," he said. "Three, recommended by Master Graent."

Triss braced herself. "Yes?"

"Two are exploring the city. The third never left the church. They'll lodge in the abbey tonight, no doubt in prayer. Tomorrow, they will be consecrated."

A quiet realization struck her.

One of them.

One of them must be him.

She quickly collected herself.

"I'm also here to sponsor Lady Angela's admittance to the Order," she said gently.

Prydwen nodded. "Lady Angela is seventeen—an exception. But so is one of Graent's boys... Very well."

Triss bowed her thanks. The weight of both their duties hung between them.

Seventeen. Lorenzo would be seventeen now. Hope rose in her chest like morning light.

The Catacombs beneath St. Georges's

Below the church, Los crept through the silent stone corridors of the catacombs, where cobbled floors and empty niches stretched into shadow.

He found a dusty ledge tucked within a recess and settled there, the only sound his own breath.

The ring at his neck lay cold against his chest. He closed his fingers around it—one slender thread connecting him to all that remained.

No coin. No roof.

Just a name and the memory of hands once warm.

What place was there for him here, in this grand city of stone and legends?

He lay silent as the grave. The ring's weight was small, but it anchored everything: memory, sorrow, love.

Perhaps these catacombs could be home, for now.

A footstep echoed above. A candle guttered somewhere far off.

He closed his eyes.

Tomorrow would come.

And with it, a new life.

Later – The Abbey Courtyard

Lady Triss and Lord Prydwen paused beside the abbey gates. Pale moonlight played across the carved stonework.

Angela's fate, Los's secret, the promise of new brotherhood—all hovered in the sacred air.

"Let them rest tonight," Prydwen said quietly. "Tomorrow, they will be Paladins."

Triss hesitated at the threshold.

"Lord Prydwen—thank you," she said softly.

He offered a mild smile. "The realm needs them—and you."

She longed to go in. To find him. To hold her son at last.

But not yet.

Patience is a virtue, even for mothers longing for their child.

Tomorrow, he would be there. Tomorrow, she would stand and watch as he was made a Paladin.

And maybe then—she would learn why he had come.

But for now, all that mattered was this:

He was here.

The Cold Before Dawn

The nave of St. George's was dark and breathless, save for the thin, shimmering light of the sconces and the moon's blue hush filtering through stained glass. Stone columns rose like frozen sentinels around her. No braziers burned. No warmth wrapped the space. But she stayed.

Angela knelt before the altar, her cloak wrapped tight around her shoulders. Her knees ached from hours on cold stone. The silence was deep, the kind that made your breath sound loud in your own ears.

She had not left since dusk.

Each whispered hymn she murmured wasn't for others. Not for approval. Not to impress Lady Triss or the watching Order. *It was for her.*

A rhythm of breath and spirit. A shield for the war in her chest.

She had been so sure.

She was supposed to be the youngest Paladin in a generation. The stars had aligned—the trial, the vision, the sword she lifted in Triss's presence. All had pointed to the coming morning. To her moment. Her name, first on the scroll. Her vows, spoken while the sun rose over Camelot's towers.

But the honor would not come.

Not for her.

Someone else had been accepted first.

First.

A boy. A stranger. Someone Master Graent had recommended.

Angela bit her lip.

The youngest Paladin. That was supposed to be her. Not some nameless boy.

She was supposed to make Lady Triss proud.

She bowed her head lower and let the shame mix with her anger. She let the prayer hide it all.

"Neque secundum iram tuam me arguas...."

(And do not rebuke me according to your anger.)

Her Latin faltered on dry lips. The wind howled through the cloisters outside, a long cold breath that made the candles flicker.

She stayed anyway.

Letting the cold soak into her bones. Letting the ache sharpen her focus. If this was a trial, she would endure it.

Not with pride. Not with glory.

But with obedience.

With faith.

When the morning finally came, she didn't remember falling. Her body had slumped near the altar, her brow slick with sweat, skin burning with fever. She couldn't lift her head, couldn't rise to greet the dawn she had prayed for.

Lady Triss found her.

For a moment, she didn't move.

She looked down at the girl's slumped form, so small beneath the great altar, fever burning through the pale of her cheeks. Angela's lips still moved, barely, mouthing fragments of prayer long after her strength had fled.

Triss's breath caught in her throat.

Her hand went to her chest before she realized it as she rushed to her young protégé's side.

Quickly she knelt. Not as a knight, not as a noble, but as a woman — and gathered the girl into her arms.

"Hush now," she whispered, brushing back Angela's damp hair. "You've done enough."

She lifted Angela from the stone floor and ordered her taken home.

She would be consecrated later. Privately.

Still a Paladin.

But not this morning.

Not the youngest.

Not the first.

Elsewhere, in the Abbey

Los, Romao, and Prox kept vigil in the small sanctuary chamber set aside for initiates. They had not spoken much since returning from the city. A quiet unity had taken root between them.

Each knelt and prayed in his own way.

Romao crossed himself briskly, then kissed his thumb with quick reverence. His posture stayed rigid, lips moving in sharp bursts of Latin.

Prox followed slower, more deliberate, his cross broad, his bow reverent as he prayed in a steady undertone.

Los lifted three fingers to his forehead, circled his heart with his thumb, and let his hand settle over the ring hidden at his chest. Then he began to chant softly in old Latin, his voice low and rhythmic, the cadences strange to their ears.

Romao glanced over once, curious, but said nothing.

Prox listened too, catching fragments of words he half-recognized, though the form felt unfamiliar. It was prayer, yes—but of a kind neither had ever heard.

They knew someone else had stayed the night in the church. They'd heard faint singing echo from the nave. They hoped whoever it was had made it through the night.

When the news reached them of Angela's illness, Prox crossed himself.

Romao shook his head.

"An ill start," he muttered. "And a bad omen."

Los bowed his head, and said nothing.

Later, at the Burns Residence

Angela lay in her bed, pale but peaceful. At her side knelt Lady Triss, clad in formal whites, her expression both stern and maternal.

"She pushed herself," Triss said aloud.

"She always does," came a voice from behind. Tamara Burns, Angela's oldest sister, leaned against the doorway. Her Friar's robes were wrinkled and her hair tousled, but her concern was plain. She had cured her sister's fever, but the body still needed to recover.

"She insisted on going last night," added her other sister, Amaranthia, composed and poised even now in her Theurgist's gown. "She wouldn't listen."

Triss lowered herself slightly, brushing a stray strand of golden hair from Angela's damp cheek. For all her years of steel and oaths, the gesture was tender—like a mother tending her child.

"She has the heart of a Paladin," Triss murmured. "But her body is still young."

Amaranthia's gaze softened despite herself. "She wants so badly to prove herself."

"I'll consecrate her here," Triss said quietly. "It will still count."

"And what of the others?" Tamara asked.

"I'll see to them soon. They begin today."

Later That Day

Church of St. George

Los, Romao, and Prox stood again before Lord Prydwen in Church of St. George, this time clad in plain tabards marked with the symbol of the Order. In their hands, the fine alloy of newly forged swords—simple, yet true.

"Your path begins," Lord Prydwen intoned. "Not with quests, nor battle, but with training."

Los bowed his head, trying not to betray the twist in his gut. He had hoped for a mission—something with coin.

Something to survive on.

Outside the Church

Romao and Prox soon found a place to stay—a room above a noisy tavern near the market. Cheap but warm, and near enough to the Church.

Los didn't smile when they offered to help him find lodging.

"I've got a place," he said softly.

They didn't press.

That night, when they returned to their beds, Los returned to the Abbey. He had learned that they offered pauper's meals—bread, broth, and a bit of root vegetable—set aside for the poor. No questions were asked. Some took it as a sign of piety.

Afterward, he knelt in the nave until silence settled over the Church. His hand rose—three fingers to his forehead, a circle traced with his thumb across his heart, before resting over the hidden ring at his chest. He began to pray, to chant, low and steady, words shaped in a cadence no one here would know.

*Domine sancte Pater,
lux ante omnem lucem,
qui eras ante saecula
et venisti in carne ad nos—*

*(Holy Lord Father,
light before all light,
who was before the ages
and came to us in the flesh—)*

*Ne sinas me deficere
eis quos mihi tradidisti.
Noli permittere ut cadant
per meam infirmitatem.*

*(do not let me fail
those whom You have entrusted to me.
Do not permit them to fall
through my weakness.)*

*Fac me ductorem,
non propter honorem,
sed ut ducam per tenebras
et feram lumen.*

*(Make me a leader,
not for honor,
but that I may lead through darkness
and bear the light.)*

*Et si vocas me ad mortem,
sit vita mea holocaustum
in obsequio tui Nominis.*

*(And if You call me to death,
let my life be a burnt offering
in the service of Your Name.
Your will be done.)*

*Fiat voluntas tua.
Amen. Fiat, fiat.*

(Amen. So be it, so be it.)

Lord Prydwen passed through the nave on his way to his quarters. He slowed, watching the boy. It was prayer, yes—but not like any he had ever heard. The gesture was strange. The words, unfamiliar. For a moment he lingered, brows knit in thought. Then he nodded once, quietly, as if chalking it up to foreign custom, and moved on.

In reality, beneath the church, the stone recess of the catacombs held his blanket now. A bed before its time. His breath misted as he lay down, the ring warm against his chest. His hands folded over it.

And as he faded off to sleep, a faint light watched over him.

He was a Paladin now.

And tomorrow, training would begin.

And somehow, he would endure.

The Consecration of Angela

Angela Burns slept quietly now, her fever broken. Lady Triss sat at her bedside, eyes fixed on the girl's pale face, her lips faintly colored again.

The consecration had been solemn, sacred—but swift. Angela had not the strength to kneel through the full rite. Triss had laid hands on her brow, whispered the vows, and felt the Light answer.

Triss had stayed two days at the Burns household, tending the girl. Yet, even as she kept watch, her thoughts strayed—drifting like smoke toward the abbey and the three boys she had yet to meet.

Her mind returning again and again to the church. To the letter.

*To Lady Triss,
The bearer of this letter is your son.*

One of the three had to be Lorenzo. But which? What if he was gone now, lost in the sprawl of Camelot? Sent to train at a distant keep? What if he had never been among them at all?

Her faith faltered—and that frightened her more than any battle ever had.

"You should rest," said Tamara as she approached with a bowl of broth.

"I cannot," Triss murmured, brushing back a strand of Angela's damp hair. "I have other business to attend to."

Tamara, standing in the doorway, gave a firm nod. "Go. We've got her."

Amaranthia, elegant even in worry, said nothing—only bowed her head in assent.

Lady Triss rose at last. Still worried for her protégé, she returned to the Church—her heart torn between the daughter she had chosen, and the son she longed to see.

Chapter XI - The Sickness of Los

After the Consecration

Training had begun.

Los, Romao, and Prox stood before Lord Prydwen in the dusty yard behind the abbey, where straw dummies leaned like forgotten soldiers and chipped stones marked the boundary of their proving ground.

"You've chosen the path of the two-handed sword," Prydwen said. "Then you'll learn from the best in the realm. Lady Triss herself. Once she returns."

The boys nodded. In the meantime, they were left to train alone.

Romao was the loudest—shouting with each strike, mimicking heroic poses. Prox, efficient and quiet, drilled forms from memory. Los, though no stranger to bladework, practiced without flourish. Each stroke purposeful. Each breath a strain.

The day passed, and then another.
And Lady Triss did not come.

In their shared solitude, the three grew close—training together, laughing together, helping one another with stances, swings, and style.

But Los was fading.

The catacombs were cold. His meals—pauper's portions of bread and broth—left little strength in his limbs. He said nothing of it, but Romao noticed the way he coughed when he thought no one listened. Prox saw how his sword drooped near the end of practice, how his hands trembled when he reached for the cord at his neck.

Still, Los endured.
He had no choice.

The Next Morning – Return of the Blade Mistress

Lady Triss arrived early, her boots damp with morning dew. She met Lord Prydwen by the fountain.

"Angela?" he asked.

"Recovering. She will train with Lady Eve when she is ready. Castle Sauvage was in need of a Paladin—Eve agreed to take her while she serves there."

"And the boys?"

Triss hesitated. "I will see them now."

They were waiting in the yard—Romao practicing footwork, Prox cleaning his blade, and Los seated alone, pale and silent.

Triss stepped forward. She looked at each in turn.

Romao, with his bold Latin confidence.

Prox, quiet, thoughtful, rooted like the trees of his homeland.

And Los.

He looked up at her. His eyes were weary, his body still recovering from injuries. His lips cracked. But in his pale and sickly face she still saw it—

His father's face.

Her eyes.

This was him. It had to be.

He did not smile. Nor did she. But something passed between them.

"Get up," she said softly—hesitant, not the commanding voice they'd expected.

"Form a line."

They obeyed.

"Now, introduce yourselves."

Romao spoke first.

"Romao Aurelius Casanova di Roma. At your service."

Prox followed.

"Proximo Decimus Magnus. At your service."

Los spoke last.

"Los Ortiz de Sevilla. At your service."

She blinked at the name—puzzled.

Not Lorenzo? But it must be him. She had sent him to Toledo, not Seville. Still... it had to be her son.

She desperately wanted to hold him, but held back.

Instead, she began their lessons.

"Very well then—Romao, Prox, and... Los. Let us begin."

She demonstrated grips, stances, proper arcs of motion.

Romao grunted as she corrected his shoulder. Prox kept pace.

But Los... he staggered on his third form, the blade slipping from his fingers.

"Enough," she said suddenly. "Los. Sit."

"I'm fine," he muttered.

"You're sick," Prox said beside him.

"No worse than yesterday," Romao added.

Triss studied him. His face was pale. His breath shallow. She knelt and touched his wrist.

He flinched.

"You look as if you've not eaten in days," she murmured.

"I eat," he said. "Every morning."

Her lips tightened. "And where do you sleep?"

He said nothing.

Romao and Prox had assumed he slept somewhere in the church. They couldn't have imagined the truth.

That he was sleeping in the catacombs.

That Night – Beneath the Church

The catacombs welcomed him with cold silence. Dust clung to the air like fog, and each step echoed too loudly. Los laid down on the narrow stone shelf, his only covering a threadbare blanket he'd been given in the abbey.

He held the ring at his chest and said a prayer.

The bread and broth from the abbey filled only part of his hunger. But if he did not eat real food soon, he would not last.

Above, the bells tolled the midnight hour.

He coughed into his sleeve, weakly muffling it as it echoed.

The next morning, before Lady Triss arrived, Romao and Prox brought food for him. He tried to refuse them, but they insisted.

"You need to get your strength up," Romao said.

Prox spoke bluntly. "We know you were robbed."

Los said nothing.

"Let us help you," Prox insisted.

A warm bowl of soup and bread steadied him a little, though the chill remained in his bones.

"How long have you known?" Los finally asked softly, shame tinging his voice.

"Since before we left for Camelot," Romao said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Fratello... we fight together, we die together, and if need be, we suffer together. You are not alone."

When Lady Triss arrived, she found a still-pale Los and the others already in the yard. The empty bowl beside him told her he had at least eaten, though his pallor concerned her deeply.

"Today we will put aside the swords," she said. "Today, I will teach you your chants."

She thought this would give him a chance to regain strength.

"Chants are essential to a Paladin," she began, her tone dipping into something almost priestly. "They give you strength, endurance, and protection."

Her hand hovered over her chest, fingers tracing the sign of the cross.

"Repeat after me."

She spoke each one clearly, the syllables ringing through the quiet yard like taps on steel:

Aura of Protection — *Aura Protectionis*

Aura Protectionis. Da mihi, Domine, praesidium contra ictus inimici.
(Grant me, O Lord, protection against enemy blows.)

Minor Refreshment — *Refocillatio Minor*

Refocillatio Minor. Concede nobis, Domine, levamen et sanationem.
(Grant us relief and healing.)

Chant of Endurance — *Carmen Patientiae*

Carmen Patientiae. Infunde nobis, Domine, patientiam in labore.
(Pour into us patience in hardship.)

Battle Fervor — *Ardor Belli*

Ardor Belli. Accende in nobis, Domine, ardorem in proelio.
(Kindle in us fervor in battle.)

Righteous Strength — *Fortitudo Iusta*

Fortitudo Iusta. Da mihi, Domine, fortitudinem iustam ad sustinendum.
(Grant me righteous strength to endure.)

Crusader's Ward — *Praesidium Cruciferi*

Praesidium Cruciferi. Protege nos, Domine, signo Crucis tuae.
(Protect us by the sign of Your Cross.)

The three repeated her words, voices rising and falling in uneven cadence.

"Aura Protectionis. Da mihi, Domine, praesidium contra ictus inimici... Refocillatio Minor... Carmen Patientiae..."

Los repeated them last—quiet, his chest tight—but he never looked away from her.

He would endure.

Triss watched him out of the corner of her eye—quiet, pale, but unbroken.

And so they began their first true lesson as Paladins.

Camelot, Just After Dawn

The morning light touched the chapel spires as Lady Angela Burns mounted her palfrey beside Lady Eve. Though still pale, her strength had returned. The fever was gone. The consecration complete. And now she would serve.

Lady Eve, ever austere in her polished plate, sat firm on her charger, Her armor, the blue and gold of their Order neat and gleaming. She was bound for Castle Sauvage—to serve there until the return of Sir Emery who normally garrisoned there. And Angela would train beside her.

"You ride well," Eve said, eyes forward, posture perfect.

Angela offered a faint smile. "I trained before the Order. My sister Tamara made sure of that."

"We begin chants today. You already know how to use a shield—now you must learn to strengthen others with your voice and will."

Angela nodded. "Yes, milady."

The two rode on, hoofbeats echoing on the old stone road, eastward into the green arms of Forest Sauvage.

As they rode, Lady Eve began her lesson.

"Repeat after me: *Aura Protectionis... Refocillatio Minor... Carmen Patientiae...*"

The Chancellor's Decree

Lord Baldric was not a man to show his anger. He wore his displeasure like armor: cold, polished, and unyielding. But the news that had reached him that morning nearly cracked it.

Los—that boy—and his companions had been consecrated into the Order of Paladins by Lord Prydwen himself. The thought was galling. A foreigner with no standing made a Paladin before Albion's own sons. Worse: Prydwen had done it personally.

Baldric sat long in silence in his chamber, a thin silver blade in one hand, rolling between his fingers. His steward waited at the far wall, eyes averted.

"Leave me," Baldric muttered at last.

When the door shut, he turned to the hearth and let his mind do what it did best: plan. He would not stain his hands directly. No—he would nudge the boy toward his ruin and let pride do the rest.

The Next Morning — Chancellor Wacian's Chamber

By the next morning, he stood before Chancellor Wacian, the blue-robed minister of law and royal policy, ever eager to appear decisive.

"There have been reports," Baldric said smoothly, "of bandits growing bolder along the road to Castle Sauvage. They waylay pilgrims, traders—even the King's messengers. The people whisper that the Crown cannot keep its roads safe. Something must be done, Wacian. Swiftly, publicly."

Wacian's brow furrowed. "I've heard murmurs, but there are no knights to spare at present. What forces we have are south dealing with the Filidh"

"Not knights," Baldric replied. "We do have new Paladins."

Wacian blinked. "You mean the new initiates? There are four, yes?"

Baldric nodded slowly, concealing the shadow of a smile. "Precisely. Freshly sworn. Zealous. Eager to prove themselves. Let them ride. A simple mission: find the camp, rout the scoundrels, bring back any survivors for trial. Offer them a purse. Modest, of course. A gesture of appreciation."

The Chancellor sat back, fingers steepled. "I suppose it would be symbolic. The new generation of Paladins defending the realm. I shall draw up the writ and seal it at once."

Baldric inclined his head, all deference. "For the safety of the kingdom, Chancellor."

The Writ Delivered

The writ was delivered to the Church of St. George's the following morning.

What Wacian did not know—and what Baldric was sure of—was that one of the four initiates, Lady Angela, Lord Burn's daughter, had already departed for training in Forest Sauvage with Lady Eve. That left three.

Three boys.

Two foreign. And one of old Roman stock.

And one of them—the Spaniard—deeply ill.

Baldric had heard about it from one of his spies within the church. The pallor, the stiffness in his gait, the faint sheen of sweat, and that the boy was eating at the pauper's breakfast each day.

Sick and weak. He knew pride would not let him decline the mission. Baldric knew that kind of boy: too proud to rest, too proud to admit weakness, and in desperate need of the coin.

He would ride into the woods, weakened and weary, thinking himself a knight of legend.

And if the bandits did not kill him, perhaps the cold would.

Either way, Lord Baldric would not be mourning.

He sat by his window that evening, swirling dark wine in a bronze cup as the city settled into twilight.

"They made you a Paladin," he whispered into his wine, "but I will see you broken before you can rise."

The wine touched his lips.

The fire crackled.

And somewhere in Camelot, unaware of the storm being shaped around him, the boy he hated so deeply—slept beneath stone.

The Assignment

The following morning, a message arrived from the Chancellor. Bandits on the road to Castle Sauvage. The new Paladins were being asked to find them, and if possible, arrest them. A modest reward was being offered.

"Romao, Prox, and Los," Prydwen announced. "You're to go. Clear the road. Bring back prisoners. The reward money you can keep."

Then Lord Prydwen handed the orders to Triss.

Triss's brow furrowed. "Los is still recovering."

Lord Prydwen looked at Los and nodded. "Then he stays. The other two must go."

"I'm going," Los said, voice hoarse. "I can ride."

Triss stared at him. "You should be in bed."

"I am a Paladin. I will go where my brothers go," he insisted, then coughed.

The defiance was real—but the cough that followed was worse.

Prydwen watched him for a long moment, gauging pride against practicality. Triss looked ready to argue again.

But Los didn't budge.

At last, Prydwen exhaled through his nose.

"Very well. All three of you go."

Triss opened her mouth—ready to argue, ready to forbid it outright—but Prydwen lifted a hand, already turning away.

"They go," he said, firm as stone. "The matter is settled."

And then she looked to Romao.

As they gathered their equipment, Lady Triss caught Romao's arm and pulled him close.

"Bring him back alive. Don't leave him out there," she said in a low voice.

"You didn't need to ask."

The Sauvage Road

Southwest Road Out of Camelot

The Chancellor's writ bore the seal of the King: clear the road to Castle Sauvage of bandits.

It was early morning still when Romao, Prox, and Los set out. Lady Eve and Angela had already gone, unaware of the mission the three young men were about to undertake.

Los swayed in his saddle.

"You sure you can ride?" Romao asked.

"I'm fine," Los rasped.

"He's not fine," Prox muttered. "He looks ready to fall off."

Still, Los pressed on, jaw tight. His face was pale, damp with sweat despite the morning chill. The food Prox and Romao had given him had helped—but not enough. It had only slowed his decline.

Across the lane, Cadens and Endrond leaned against a tavern wall. Cadens squinted at the three riding out.

"They're leaving for something," Cadens murmured, eyes narrowing.

Endrond shrugged. "Looks like a job."

The tavern keeper, wiping a mug, called out: "Bandits on the Sauvage road. They'er sending the new Paladins after 'em."

Cadens turned to Endrond. "We're going after them."

"What? Why?"

Cadens didn't answer. He was already moving.

The Abbey Courtyard

Lady Winchell stood tall in the morning light, her vestments catching the sun. Beside her waited Julia Ashwell of Caer Ulfwych—young, bright-eyed, hands clasped tight, a modest satchel at her feet.

"She's ready," Winchell said, her voice edged with pride. "Top of her class in healing rites. And brave—though she doesn't boast it."

Julia curtsied to Lady Triss, deep and respectful.

Lady Triss studied the girl for a moment. "And she's to be assigned to Angela Burns?"

"Yes," Winchell replied. "Julia will temper her. Quiet her fire. I believe they will work well together."

Triss nodded slowly, her gaze turning distant for a breath.

Then she turned briskly. "Get your things. You're coming with me."

Julia blinked. "Now? But—"

"We ride for Castle Sauvage. Your Paladin awaits."

She paused—just slightly. "And I have... another matter to attend."

Winchell raised a brow. "What matter?"

But Triss was already walking.

Julia snatched up her bag and hurried after her, glancing once back toward Lady Winchell with quiet nerves quickening in her chest.

The Bandit Camp — Later, on the Road

The forest thickened as Romao and Prox rode ahead, scouting. Los had dismounted, too ill to continue.

"Stay here," Romao told him. "We'll check the woods."

Los nodded, resting against a moss-covered stone. When they were gone, something shifted at the edge of his vision—flicker, a figure—then a memory.

But was it a ghost? A fever dream?

He couldn't tell.

But followed it anyway.

Sword in hand, breath ragged, he staggered after the phantom through the underbrush.

The Bandit Camp

Cadens and Endrond crept behind, unseen.

"What's he doing?" Endrond whispered.

"Walking into a trap," Cadens muttered, unslinging his crossbow.

Through a grove, a camp came into view: tattered tents, ash-choked fire pits, men sharpening blades.

Los stumbled into the clearing.

"Well, well," sneered one of the bandits. It was Cilydd—their leader. "The little Spaniard."

"Jou stole from me," Los said, voice thin but steady.

The bandits laughed. One drew a blade. "How about we take what's left of you?"

Los lifted his sword. He swayed.

Then—from the trees—*thwip*. An arrow. Another. A bandit fell.

Cadens burst from the brush, blade flashing, while Endrond loosed shaft after shaft.

Los thrust once—killing the bandit before him—then staggered toward their leader before collapsing.

Even through the mask, Cilydd knew him.

"Why?" he gasped.

Cadens approached. "Because I told you, you were not allowed to kill him."

With one swift thrust, Cadens silenced him.

They moved quickly, efficient as shadows at work.

"Help me," Cadens barked to Endrond. "Make it look like he did it."

"Why?" Endrond asked.

Cadens' voice was flat. "Let's just say I owe him."

Together they dragged bodies, pulling arrows free.

They pressed blades into hands, smeared blood in deliberate arcs, kicked dirt over bootprints.

The smell of iron and pine pitch hung heavy around them.

When they finished, the clearing looked like a massacre wrought by one desperate, dying boy.

Cadens wiped his blade clean.

"Good," he murmured.

Then they vanished into the trees

Camelot Hills — The Rescue

Lady Triss rode swiftly, Julia—a young cleric meant to be assigned to Angela—close behind.

"You said you were taking me to Castle Sauvage to be assigned to a Paladin," Julia said, confused.

"I am. Now stay close."

Ahead, two cloaked figures slipped between the trees—too quiet to be bandits, too fast to be farmers. Triss spurred her horse after them, but they melted into the forest like men trained to disappear.

Then she saw the camp.

Dead men. Scattered gear.

And at the center—Los.

Face down in the dirt.

His sword lay at his side. In his hand, a gold chain lay loose, slipping between curled fingers.

Julia dismounted at once and raced to him. "He's alive," she said—then her voice tightened as she saw him struggle to breath. "Barely."

"Treat him," Triss ordered.

Julia dropped to her knees beside him and turned him onto his back. His skin was burning hot, slick with fever, yet his lips had gone pale. She ran her hands quickly over him—shoulders, ribs, abdomen—expecting to find the wet warmth of blood.

Nothing.

No split mail. No puncture. No gash.

Los's breaths came wrong—too shallow, too far apart.

Julia pressed two fingers to his neck and went still.

"His pulse—" she began, then swallowed. "It's... very weak."

Triss crouched beside her, impatience cutting through the usual composure. "Heal him."

Julia's hands hovered helplessly over his chest. "Milady, I—I can find no injury." Her voice dropped, ashamed. "It's not a wound. It's... sickness." She shook her head once, as if refusing the truth. "Forgive me. I have yet to learn to cure disease."

Triss was already down on her knees. No longer composed—urgent. She leaned close to Los's face, listening for breath, praying as if she could will air back into him.

"No, Los," she whispered, low enough that only the Light might hear. "Don't die. You have to live."

And for one terrible heartbeat, his chest did not rise.

Hooves thundered behind them.

Romao and Prox burst into the clearing seconds later, breathless. They'd come back down the road, found Los gone, and seen Lady Triss riding into the trees at full speed. They followed—confused and already imagining the worst.

"Los!" Romao dropped to his knees, hands hovering over him as if afraid to touch. "What happened? Los—look at me."

Prox crouched and lifted the gold chain from Los's lax fingers. His jaw tightened as he looked at it—then at the bodies.

"It's them," Prox said quietly. "The ones who robbed him."

Romao's voice cracked. "No. No, no—"

Then Los drew a thin, ragged breath, more a shudder than a breath at all.

Julia let out a sound she hadn't meant to make. "We have to move him," she said, suddenly shaking. "Now."

Lady Triss's face was unreadable when she finally raised her gaze. "Help me get him into the saddle."

Together, Prox and Romao lifted Los onto her horse. His head lolled once, and Triss steadied him with one arm, holding him upright.

Romao noticed the way she steadied him in the saddle—like a mother cradling her child.

"I will take care of him," Triss said, voice clipped, controlled. "You two escort Julia to Castle Sauvage."

"Yes, milady," they said.

Julia made to protest, but Triss was already spurring her horse into a gallop, Los slumped against her. Behind them, smoke lay low on the hills, and the road swallowed the clearing—as if it had never happened at all.

Twilight, Camelot

The gates of Camelot opened as the sun sank behind its walls.

Los stirred in the saddle—fevered, but alive. Triss rode steadily, keeping him upright.

Straight to the abbey she took him, straight to a bed where Acolytes hurried to tend him.

As they stripped him of his armor, one tried to remove his necklace—but he grasped the ring with a weary hand.

Stripped of armor, soaked in sweat, he drifted as if in a dream.

Lady Triss held his hand, fighting back tears. He muttered something she could not hear.

One acolyte hurried for water and cloth. Another ran to fetch Lady Winchell.

She was alone with him for a moment.

"Lorenzo," she whispered.

"Jes," came the faint reply.

Her heart leapt.

"Lorenzo Ortiz."

"Jes," he breathed weakly.

It was her son.

She kissed his hand. It was so very cold. She pressed her cheek to it, trying to warm it—and there she stayed.

Her son had returned to her.

And now she prayed with all her heart.

Let him live.

Chapter XII – The Abbey

Los's dream

Everything was heavy.

The world pressed in like water over drowning lungs. His chest burned, not with fire—but with absence. Of breath. Of strength. A weight pinned him to the earth, though he could not remember falling.

Then, somewhere between silence and shadow, came the warmth of a hand.

Her hand.

"Risa...?" he whispered, though no sound came. His lips were cracked. His tongue dry. But he knew that touch.

He opened his eyes—or thought he did. The light around him was soft, blue, like moonlight through water. She was there. Risa. Kneeling beside him, her fingers laced through his, just like she used to.

She smiled gently, her dark curls spilling over one shoulder, her brown eyes filled with unshed tears. Not grief. Something deeper. The sorrow of having waited for him.

"I missed you," he said, but the words never left his throat. They were in his mind, in his soul, and somehow—*she heard them*.

"I know," she whispered, brushing her thumb across his cheek. Her skin was as warm as it ever was. "But it's not time yet."

His heart ached. "Why not? I'm so tired, Risa. I want to stay."

She leaned closer, pressing her forehead to his. "You're not done. There's still more light in you. More to fight for."

"I failed," he thought, the shame rising like heat. "I faltered. I fell. I gave up."

"No," she breathed. "You must stand again, *mi valiente*."

Tears welled in his eyes, though he could not feel them. Her voice was like wind in the trees, like music far away. "I'm here," she said. "But I cannot keep you."

Then came a presence—a disturbance in the dream. A voice, not hers. A warmth, not hers. It brushed over his chest like light on still water.

"Morbum Sanare."

(Cure Disease)

He gasped.

A jolt passed through him. The world cracked like ice. The warmth of her hand faded. Risa's figure shimmered, her eyes filling with light and distance. She was slipping away.

"No—wait—*please*—"

She kissed his forehead, and her voice echoed into the dark.

"You must live... And I must wait."

And then she was gone.

In the silence that followed, the pain returned. The weight of his body. The breath in his lungs. He could not move, but he could feel again—the straw beneath his back, the cotton sheet, the cool cloth on his brow.

And another hand—strong, yet tender, holding his with fierce, unyielding care.

Not Risa.

Lady Triss.

She was praying, her voice tight with hope and defiance.

He could not answer her. Not yet. But somewhere in the drifting haze, he heard the soft scrape of boots, and another voice—calm, distant.

“When he wakes... tell him I came.”

The candles flickered.

And Los, clinging now to life and memory, dreamed no more.

The Mother

She could not remember when she last slept.

Not truly.

There had been moments—kneeling, praying, begging God: let it be him, let it be real. Let it not be a dream. But now, her son clinging to life, was slipping away.

She had sent for Lady Winchell, but time was running out and she knew it.

Los lay still, too still. Pale as parchment, skin slick with fever. His chest rose and fell like a struggling bird caught in a net, each breath thinner than the last. His lips were cracked, his face gaunt. *He had not eaten enough, had not slept well enough, and the cold of the Catacombs had taken its toll and would soon extract its price.*

She should have seen it sooner. The quiet stubbornness. How truly ill he had become.

Her son.

She held his hand now— this boy, this young man, who had survived the bandit camp, who had walked through death alone.

She pressed his fingers to her lips. "Please," she whispered. "Just one more miracle."

She did not cry. She would not. Not in front of the others.

Her knees ached from the cold stone, but she did not shift, she would not leave his side. Every whispered *Ave*, every trembled *Sancte Albane*, was a plea.

Let him live.

The Friar

The heavy oak doors of the abbey creaked open as dusk cast long shadows across the marble floor. The scent of candle wax and old stone hung thick in the air. At the far end of the abbey, where the light of the stained-glass saints trembled on the cold ground, a quiet gathering had formed.

They had escorted the young cleric to within sight of Castle Sauvage, then rushed back, pressing their horses hard. Now Romao stood at the abbey door, arms folded and jaw tight, while Prox paced in short, anxious strides. Neither spoke, but their eyes tracked the robed figure who had just entered.

Tycho's steps were soft but deliberate. His robes bore the sigil of the Church, and his face—lined with years and secrets. He moved past the boys without a word, the hem of his cloak brushing the floor like whispering wind.

At the center of the sanctuary, a cot with a mattress of linen and straw had been laid. Los lay upon it—pale, sweating, unconscious. His lips were cracked, and every rise of his chest was a struggle.

Lady Triss knelt beside him, silver hair pinned back. One hand clutched a rosary; the other held Los's limp, fevered hand. Her voice trembled with quiet Latin—words of mercy and light, whispered over and over like a rhythm to keep the boy breathing. Her gaze never left his face.

Tycho stopped a few paces away. "I heard the lad was sick."

Triss looked up sharply. Her glare could have sliced steel. "Stay away from him," she snapped, her voice like iron drawn from flame. "You'll not touch him with your poisons."

Tycho's brows lifted—not in offense, but in understanding. "I have only come to help," he said gently. His tone was neither pleading nor proud—just calm. Honest.

He knelt beside her. Slowly. Deliberately.

Triss tensed, shielding Los's body with her own. "Your kind have no place here, snake-charmer."

"This is exactly where I belong," he assured her. Then, gently, he placed a hand on her shoulder—not forcing, only resting. "Lady Triss... tending the sick is what we friars do."

She continued to glare, but her fingers loosened slightly on the boy's hand.

Tycho turned his other hand toward Los's chest. He could feel the burn beneath the skin—the fever that clung like phantom fire, eating him from the inside out.

He whispered, "*Morbum Sanare.*"

A pale blue light pulsed beneath his palm. Faint at first—then steadier. The glow washed over Los's ribs and throat, soft and shimmering like moonlight on water.

Los's chest hitched. His breath caught. A long, rattling exhale escaped him, and then—

Stillness.

Then a breath. Easier. Then another. His brow, once damp with sweat, relaxed. The flush in his cheeks faded. The fire... was gone.

Lady Triss's eyes widened. "The fever..."

Tycho withdrew his hand and leaned back on his heels. "Broken," he confirmed. "But he's still starved. Still weak. For that, I can do nothing."

Triss reached up and brushed a curl from Los's brow, her own face cracking into something raw. "He hasn't been eating well, I did not realize..."

"Will he be okay?" Romao asked, barely above a whisper.

"Food and a day's rest," Tycho replied. "He should recover."

"Can he wake?" Triss asked, her voice thin with hope.

Tycho shook his head. "Not tonight. Let his body rest. But tomorrow... perhaps."

He rose slowly, brushing the dust from his knees. Then paused. "When he wakes... tell him I came."

Lady Triss watched him go, her hand still curled protectively over Los's. Her voice, barely a whisper, rose to the saints above.

"Let him live."

The Walk and the Whisper

The morning rose soft and golden over Camelot, but inside the abbey's cloistered infirmary, the light reached more gently than usual, filtered through old stained glass and weary prayer. Los stirred beneath a linen blanket once damp with sweat. His fever had broken—thanks to Friar Tycho. His skin, though pale, no longer bore the waxen sheen of death.

Lady Triss sat beside him still, her back straight despite the long vigil. Her white vestments were wrinkled but still somehow proper. In her hand, she held a cloth freshly dipped in rosewater. She had not left him since they had arrived at the Abbey.

Others had come and gone through the night—Lady Winchell most of all, checking in with gentile hands and a healer's steadiness—but Triss had never once moved from his side.

Lord Prydwen stood at the door, arms crossed.

"You care for him as if he were blood," he remarked quietly.

Triss did not look up. "Perhaps I care because he was nearly bled dry."

Prydwen's nod was slow. "Is it guilt?"

Triss kept her eyes on the boy. "He was sent on your order."

"On your protest," he countered.

Her silence was answer enough.

Just then, Los stirred. His fingers twitched. His lips parted in a hoarse whisper.

Triss leaned forward instantly. "Los?"

His eyes opened slowly, unfocused at first, then sharpened.

"Lady... Triss?"

"You're safe," she said softly. "Back in Camelot."

He blinked slowly. "Camelot," he echoed.

She smiled faintly and brushed the dark hair from his brow.

Moments later, Romao and Prox entered. They paused in the doorway, their relief immediate and unspoken.

"He's awake?" Romao said, already striding in.

"Just now," Triss answered.

Romao knelt beside the bedside, grinning. "You stubborn fool. Thought we lost you."

Prox stepped beside him. "Do you remember anything?"

Los furrowed his brow. "I followed someone... into the woods. Then—a camp. Bandits." His voice thinned. "After that... nothing."

Romao placed something in his palm. Cold. Familiar.

The gold chain.

"We found this in your hand," he said.

Prox added, "The camp was full of bodies. Seven. All dead. Looked like you took them all yourself."

"People are calling you the Lone Paladin," Romao said.

Los stared at the chain in silence. His fingers closed around it as if recognizing an old friend.

"I don't remember killing them," he said quietly.

"Doesn't mean you didn't," Romao replied.

Lady Triss interjected gently, "He needs rest."

"I've rested enough," Los murmured. "I need air. To walk. Food."
He swallowed painfully. "And water... please."

She made to protest, but the look in his eyes gave her pause. With a weary sigh, she helped him sit up.

"Food and drink first. Walking can come after."

The Streets of Camelot

The city was bustling, the noise of life pressing against the edges of his fogged senses. Each step was slow, uncertain—but real. Romao and Prox flanked him, their easy stride adjusted to match his halting pace.

At one point his knee buckled slightly on the uneven stone. Romao caught his arm without a word and steadied him. Los gave a soft exhale, but did not stop.

The crowds thinned near the square, but not enough to keep the whispers away. A washerwoman froze mid-step. A young squire nudged his master and pointed. Somewhere behind them a voice murmured:

"That's him—the one who slew the bandits."

Los pretended not to hear. Prox scowled. Romao only chuckled.

"We collected the bounty," he said. "The full reward."

"It's yours," Prox added. "You earned it."

Los took the coin pouch. Heavy. Real.

"Gracias," he said softly. "This time I will buy lunch."

Then he stopped walking.

Across the plaza was the merchant—the one who had bought his stolen ring and sold it back to him.

Los signaled the others to wait while he walked forward, chain in hand.

The merchant looked up and blinked. "You..."

Los placed the chain on the counter. "How much?"

The man licked his lips. "A silver for it."

"Jou'll give me two silvers," Los said, his accent thickening with cold precision.

The merchant leaned forward. "One and a half, maybe—"

He reached to grab the chain.

Los withdrew it.

The merchant's face soured.

"Jour men," Los said quietly, leaning close, "are all dead. Everyone. I killed them."

The merchant's eyes widened. He had heard the rumors.

Los turned and walked away without another word.

Lord Prydwens Chambers

Church of St. George

Lord Baldric stormed into Lord Prydwen's chamber at the Church.

"He was to bring back prisoners," he snarled.

"They were already dead when Lady Triss arrived," Prydwen replied calmly.

"And the boy? No trial. Just bodies?"

Prydwen raised a brow. "You're suggesting he killed them in cold blood?"

"I requested action," Baldric snapped. "Not a massacre."

The old boar had given up the game, and Prydwen was quick to see it.

He stood up slowly. "They received justice. If he could have taken them alive, he would have."

Baldric's eyes narrowed. "This isn't over."

"No," Prydwen agreed. "But the realm has a new Paladin. And his name is spreading quickly."

His words twisted like a knife, whatever game Baldric was playing at, he wanted to make sure the point struck home: He had failed.

Baldric turned and left without another word.

The boy, he realized, was no longer just a pawn.

But this was not over. Not until the boy was ashes... and the Order turned against itself for defending him.

Chapter XIII – The Edge and the Echo

St. George's

The days that followed Los's recovery brought no fanfare, no parades through Camelot's cobbled streets—only the quiet return to the forge of discipline. Each morning began with the clang of steel, the sun rising to catch sparks from blades drawn in earnest.

He had been cleared to train again—barely—but Los refused to be idle. Though his body still mended, his spirit surged like a dammed river forced back into motion. Beside him, Romao and Prox matched his pace without question. They had watched over him when he fell. Now they stood with him as he rose.

The Courtyard of St. George

Lady Triss stood at the edge of the training circle watching, arms crossed, the wind tugging at her cloak. The three young Paladins moved with fevered energy: Romao's graceful strikes flowed like a dancer's form; Prox's precision was clean and measured, every blow textbook perfect. And Los—he came on like a storm. His blade sang through the air, each swing a declaration of purpose. There was no rhythm, no caution, only fire.

Triss narrowed her eyes.

"Los!" she barked.

He froze mid-swing, breathing heavy, sword poised over his shoulder.

She stepped forward. "You put everything into every strike. That may fall a tree, but it will not win a duel. Power without measure is a blade without a hilt."

He lowered the sword slowly. "Jes, Lady Triss."

"Again. But this time, you will think." She took a practice blade from the rack and strode forward. "Come."

Romao and Prox backed off as Triss raised her weapon.

Los came at her hard—one, two, three wild slashes—and Triss parried with ease, stepping into the last swing and catching him off-balance with a sharp tap.

"Too wide," she said.

Again.

This time, he checked his swing halfway through, feinted left, then a downward slash. She caught it on her cross guard and twisted, knocking his blade free. Los grunted, stumbling.

"Better," she said. "But don't chase the blow. Let your opponent commit."

She turned. "Romao. With me."

Romao stepped in, his greatsword already up in guard. Their sparring was faster, more flowing. Romao's form was elegant, almost flamboyant—until Triss exploited his flourish with a sharp sidestep and a strike that would have cut his shoulder.

"You leave openings when you perform," she said calmly. "Real opponents will not care how beautiful you are."

"Tragic," Romao muttered, brushing his tunic.

"Prox. Now you."

Prox moved with clean, economic strikes—angles tight, footwork crisp. Triss nodded with faint approval, then pressured him suddenly. He parried but retreated.

"You retreat too easily. Your form is strong, but fear still lingers in your elbows."

They finished with breathless silence. Then, with all three before her, she spoke.

"You are no longer apprentices. And so, your training must evolve. The next chants you learn will not simply steel your muscles or call light to your blade. These are chants of will—they demand control over yourselves and one another. Your minds must not waver."

The three stood straighter.

Triss raised her hand and began to chant—not loudly, but clearly. The cadence rippled through the courtyard, and the very air shimmered faintly around her.

"These chants," she said softly, "binds the hearts of allies. Use them as you fight as one."

"These chants," she said softly, "binds the hearts of allies. Use them as you fight as one:

Aura of Safety

Aura Securitatis. *Da mihi, Domine, securitatem sub tutela tua.*
(Grant me safety under Your guardianship.)

Major Refreshment

Refocillatio Maior. *Concede nobis, Domine, sanationem divinam et robur.*
(Grant us divine healing and strength.)

Chant of Stamina

Carmen Firmitatis. *Infunde nobis, Domine, firmitatem in itinere.*
(Pour into us steadiness on the march.)

Greater Battle Vigor - Vigor Belli Maior...

Righteous Power - Potestas Iusta...

Crusader's Guard - Custodia Cruciferi...

Aggravate - *Aggravare...*"

They knelt, reverent, and repeated her words:

Aura Securitatis... Refocillatio Maior... Carmen Firmitatis...

Castle Sauvage Drill Yard

The forest hummed with early summer heat, but the drill yard inside Castle Sauvage rang with steel and sweat. Lady Eve stood beside Angela and Julia, her arms behind her back. Four guards faced them in mock formation.

"You're no longer novices," Eve said. "Angela, your sword and your shield must defend. Julia, your prayers are her armor as well as your own."

Angela exhaled and took position. Julia stood behind, shield ready, lips already forming the opening lines of a blessing.

The guards moved. Angela parried one, side-stepped another, but she failed to protect Julia from a flanking strike. The Cleric stumbled.

"Again," said Eve.

And again.

The third time, Angela caught the flank, pivoted with surprising grace, and created a barrier between the oncoming blade and Julia's unspoken prayer.

Eve nodded.

"Better. But not enough. You wish to lead a guild? A guild is not just banners and names. It is trust. You do not carry your sisters—you lift them."

Later, as stars pierced the green-black canopy, Angela stood alone on the battlements. The wind tousled her blonde hair as she looked out across the vast forest.

"One day," she whispered, "I will lead a guild. And we will protect each other." Her gaze drifted back to the barracks where Julia slept. "But first, I have to become stronger."

Camelot Barracks

Endrond strode back into the scout barracks, dusty and tired. It had been a long ride back from the Wilds.

He spotted Chloe leaning against the post, laughing with another scout. Her red scarf was tied loose around her neck.

"Chloe," he called.

She turned, eyes bright. "Well, well. Endrond Addams returns. Run out of ghosts in the forest?"

"Never," he smirked. "Just hunting new orders."

"You picked a bad time. Sergeant Bradford's still a thorn in everyone's side."

Endrond's smile faded. "Still picking on Willow?"

Chloe nodded. "And the lieutenant keeps assigning her to menial posts. She doesn't complain, but..."

"She shouldn't have to." Endrond scowled. "Bradford's a bully with a badge. Someone needs to tell him to piss off."

Chloe grinned. "Maybe you should."

"Maybe I will."

The Catacombs Beneath St. Georges

That night, Los returned to the only place he truly felt at home—the catacombs. Not from need anymore; he had money from the reward for clearing the road of bandits. But from instinct.

It was quiet. Still. Here, there were no eyes on him, no expectations. Just stone, candlelight, and space to breathe.

He unslung his blade and began to move—not with brute force this time, but tight, controlled arcs. The catacombs gave no room for wide swings. He practiced steps that turned into counters, pivots into ripostes. His muscles had to learn a new way to fight: tight and clean.

His sword scraped the wall once, twice. He flinched. Then corrected. Measured. Adjusted.

In the silence, he whispered to the shadows,

"I have to do my best, mi amor. If I die... I die—and we can be once more. But if I let myself die..."

Above him, the city slept. Below, a boy with a Spanish name danced with ghosts.

And a light, faint, but there, watched over him as he slept.

Letter from Los Ortiz de Sevilla to Don Flavio Ortiz:

Most honored Grandfather,

I pray this letter finds you in good health and peace. Much has changed since last I wrote. I have been accepted into the Order of Paladins here in Albión, by the good recommendation of Master Graent himself.

My new instructor is Lady Triss—one of the most respected Paladins in the realm. She is stern yet fair, and has taught me that a sword is nothing without a soul to guide it. Under her tutelage, I am learning not only the forms of battle, but prayers that strengthen not only myself, but those around me.

You will be pleased to know I have found lodging near the cathedral, close to the Order's training grounds. Its halls have a solemn silence and reverence to them.

My first duty was a humble one: to see the road between Camelot and a castle called Sauvage cleared of bandits. It was no great feat, though it tried my strength and resolve. The roads are now safe once more, and travelers may pass in peace. For that, I am grateful. The Order saw fit to grant me a small purse for my service, though I have had no great need for money. Everything I need the church provides.

Know that I am well, that I am serving with honor, and that your grandson strives each day to bring credit to your house and to the faith you placed in him. And I remember always the motto of our house: honor, duty, faith.

*With devotion and respect,
Lorenzo "Los" Ortiz de Sevilla
The Order of Paladins, Camelot*

The Fire Within

The Church of St. George still smelled of the night's candles—tallow, smoke, and the faint breath of rain seeping through stone. Los knelt before the altar, the hall empty but for the slow creak of the great doors settling in their hinges.

He touched three fingers to his brow and began to chant, low and steady, the syllables rising and falling like breath caught in song.

*"En el nombre del Dios Altísimo,
que fue antes de los siglos,
que vino en carne,
y que arde aún en nuestro pecho."*

("In the name of the most high God,
who was before the ages,
who came in the flesh,
and who still burns in our breast.")

The words rolled through the nave in that old Mozarabic cadence—half prayer, half melody—the sound of Hispania echoing beneath Albion's vaults. He drew a circle over his heart with his thumb, then rested his open hand against the center of his chest as he chanted on. The hush of the church seemed to listen.

Then a voice broke the stillness.
"Los is it."

He turned. Lady Fridwulf stood in the aisle, pale as the stone itself, her cloak edged in the white cross of her order. Her tone was even, but the air around her tightened.

"You will tell me," She said, "what spirit you invoke before the altar. I do not recognize the invocations you spoke, and the signs you traced are unknown to the Church of St. George."

"It is the prayer of my fathers, Lady Fridwulf," Los said quietly. "From Toledo. I was taught to pray so in the Church of San Lucas."

"That form is not sanctioned by Rome," she replied, each word clipped like a verdict. "The Light is served through order, not invention."

"No," he said, "but it is the form given me by my grandfather."

Her jaw set. "Then until the Bishop pronounces upon it, you will abstain from these utterances and gestures."

She turned, her cloak whispering across the flagstones, and went to find Lady Triss.

The Courtyard of St. George's

They met in the courtyard while the morning bells still rang, Fridwulf recounting what she had witnessed.

"It is the way of his homeland," Triss said evenly. "In Hispania they keep a different liturgy. He means no disrespect."

"Another liturgy?" Fridwulf's voice carried the cadence of a sermon. "He crossed himself as though sketching a sigil, and called upon God as fire within the flesh. That is not how the Light is called in Albion."

"That," Triss said, "is precisely the point."

Fridwulf folded her arms. "Then let the bishop judge whether the boy may keep his foreign customs within our holy house."

The Bishops Chamber

Bishop Kustan was an old man of paper skin and bright eyes. He sat by a high window, sunlight spilling across the folds of his vestments. When Los was brought before him, he gestured kindly for him to come forward.

"Ortiz," he said, "Lady Fridwulf tells me you pray in a manner unknown to our clergy. Show me, please."

Los hesitated, then knelt. The Bishop watched without judgment—only curiosity.

He began again, voice low, the old chant spilling from him like breath remembered:

"En el nombre del Dios Altísimo..."

(In the name of the most high God.)

As he prayed, he lifted his hand.

"Three fingers," he said softly, "for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

He traced the circle again. "This, for eternity, which has no end."

Then his hand came to rest over his chest. "And this—because the flame of God burns not in heaven alone, but here."

The Bishop nodded, eyes glimmering. "Beautiful. But tell me—why here," he tapped the center of his own chest, "and not the heart?"

Los's mouth opened, then closed. His gaze fell to the floor. A muscle in his jaw flickered. He said nothing, fingers closing over the front of his shirt where the ring lay hidden.

Kustan studied him a long moment, then leaned back. "Then let it be so. You may keep the ways of your fathers. Pray as you were taught. The Light knows all tongues."

Fridwulf's lips parted to protest, but the Bishop lifted a hand. "With God's blessing," he finished.

The Church Steps

Los lingered outside the church doors. The sun had cleared the clouds, catching the gold cross at the spire's tip. He drew a slow breath, his hand resting over the hidden ring beneath his tunic.

"With God's blessing," he murmured. "I already had God's blessing."

The bells began to toll for midday mass, their song echoing down the streets of Camelot.

Echoes in the Trees

The Courtyard of St. George

Morning in Camelot carried the scent of damp stone and rising bread, but in the courtyard of St. George's the air was heavy with steel and expectation.

Lady Triss stood before her three students. Her cloak rippled in the breeze, hands clasped neatly behind her back, her expression calm—yet immovable as stone.

"Today, your training turns outward. You will go alone—not to prove yourselves, but to serve," she began.

First she turned to Romao.

"A Spriggarn camp has been seen west of Prydwen's Keep. You will deal with them. Your finesse will serve you well."

Romao's grin was quick and sharp. "Then I'll dispatch them at once."

"Proximo," she said next, "goblins are gathering east of Prydwen. Your technique is clean. Surgical. You'll end them quickly."

Prox gave a modest nod. "Understood."

Then her eyes settled on Los.

"You will travel to Forest Sauvage, northeast of Castle Sauvage, in the frontier.

Fellwood have corrupted the groves—trees twisted by shadow, roots that move when men pass too near. Travelers are afraid.” She paused. “Your... brute style will serve you well.”

Romao snorted behind a gloved hand. Los frowned.
“I was hoping to spar,” he muttered.

Triss raised an eyebrow. “Then spar with the forest. Just don’t lose.”

She turned without another word. The assignments were given. The true tests had begun.

Castle Sauvage — Later

Angela adjusted the strap on her shield as Lady Eve outlined the task ahead.

“You’ll accompany a party north. Six young adventurers—a wizard, a sorceress, a minstrel, a mercenary, and two armsmen. They aim to clear out a pocket of Ettin. Watch them, learn from them.”

Angela frowned. “But they’re green?”

Eve nodded. “Green, but determined. Use your training. Stay alert.”

Julia stood beside her, already checking her shield and mace, nervous but steady.

Angela exhaled. “We’ll keep them safe.”

“They’ll be counting on you both,” said Lady Eve. “Especially if things go wrong.”

Camelot Barracks

Endrond cornered Sergeant Bradford near the posting board, fists clenched at his sides.

"Why is Willow always on the worst assignments?"

Bradford didn't look up. "Talk to Lieutenant Kaherdin. He writes the lists. I just post 'em."

"She's sixteen. Mute. You send her to graveyards and watch posts—alone."

Bradford grunted. "She shows up, doesn't she?"

"She never complains. Doesn't mean she's not being punished."

The sergeant sneered. "Then take it up the chain, Addams."

"I will."

Behind a beam, Willow stood silent. She was thin, malnourished, five feet tall, fiery orange hair short but wild, her green eyes sharp. She met Endrond's gaze and gave the faintest nod.

Castle Sauvage

Los arrived just after the adventuring party had departed. His armor gleamed with polish, his greatsword strapped to his back. The guards barely looked up—until Lady Eve stepped forward.

"You're the one they call the Lone Paladin," she said.

Los sighed. "So I've heard."

Her eyes sparkled. "They say you killed seven in one blow. Quite a feat for someone so young. What brings you here today, young hero?"

"Lady Triss has assigned me to clear out the Fellwood northeast of here."

"I see. It does need to be done. But I have a task for you first."

She waved over a tall, silent figure in dark robes. "This is Alucard, a Friar assigned to Caer Boldiam. He is returning there now. You are to escort him."

Alucard gave a curt nod. His presence was calm, austere.

Los offered a hand. "Los Ortiz."

"So I heard," Alucard replied, his tone clipped and cold.

North of Caer Renaris — Dusk

The screams for help echoed through the woods.

Angela half-carried Julia through the undergrowth, the cleric's armor soaked in blood, an arrow buried in her ribs. Angela's own shield quivered under the weight of another.

Behind them lay silence. And six corpses.

A single Lurikeen Ranger had cut them all down. One by one.

Two figures appeared on the trail ahead as she made her way forward, a Friar and a Paladin.

Alucard rushed forward, catching Julia as she collapsed. "Ranger?" he asked, looking at the arrow.

Angela nodded, panting. "Still hunting us."

Alucard pressed his hand to Julia's side—then flinched as another arrow slammed into Angela's shield. She had seen the glint just in time.

Los had already donned his helmet. His head dipped slightly as he stepped forward, scanning the trees for their attacker.

Angela blinked at him.

But he was already moving.

Alucard turned to her. "Cover our retreat with your shield. We're heading to Caer Renaris. I can't heal her here with that Ranger stalking us."

The Ranger

Los drew his greatsword in a single, fluid motion. Three fingers rose to his forehead; his thumb began to trace a circle over his heart—

Thunk.

An arrow slammed into his pauldron, skidding off the joint with a screech of steel.

"¡Maldito sea," he hissed, forcing his voice low, *"Aura Securitatis. Da mihi, Domine, praesidium contra ictus inimici. Refocillatio Maior. Concede nobis, Domine, sanationem divinam et robur. Carmen Firmitatis... Vigor Belli Maior... Potestas Iusta... Custodia Cruciferi... Celeritas..."*

Each word settled over him like a shield, threading strength into his limbs. He moved through the trees, breath sharp, steps quickened by the chant. The wind trembled through the leaves. He could feel eyes on him.

Thunk.

Another arrow hissed past, grazing his helmet. He ducked, turned—then only silence. Shadows.

And then the Ranger was there.

A Lurikeen in reinforced leather armor, dual blades drawn. Esis lunged, silent as death.

Steel screamed as Los raised his greatsword, catching the first strike—but the second cut deep across his thigh. He grunted, twisted, and slammed the pommel into Esis's shoulder.

The Ranger staggered—just a step—but enough.

Los pressed the attack. One heavy blow. Blocked. Another—dodged. Esis danced around him, striking at the gaps in his armor.

He thought he saw an opening, but Los struck first—his blade crashing against Esis's ribs. The Ranger reeled, clutching his side, blood darkening his reinforced leather.

"You're good, lad," Esis spat, then turned and bolted. "But too slow."
And before Los could take another step—he vanished.
Like a flame snuffed out by the wind.

Los stared into the silence of the trees for a long moment—
then roared into the dark,
"Come back here, *jou hijo de perra!*"

But for Los, the truth was, the fight had ended none too soon.

He shook his head.

When he had asked for a sparring match, this was not what he had intended.

The Trees Stir

Los pressed his back to the tree, eyes closed, breath quiet as he listened—really listened—for the Ranger.
A bowstring's hum. A shift of boots. Anything.

Nothing.

Only the groaning creak of the forest...

He opened his eyes.

Twisted trunks. Bark warped like scars. Roots curled across the ground like claws.

Fellwood.

"Jes... of course" he muttered. "Por el amor de Dios."

They had gotten between him and Caer Renaris.

He rolled his aching shoulder and thought sourly:

If that Ranger puts an arrow in my backside while I'm fighting these cursed trees, I swear—I will kill him.

Slowly.

At least the others should've reached Renaris by now—the cleric, the paladin, the friar. He'd given them the time. He had to believe it was enough.

Los gripped his greatsword tighter. His leg burned, his ribs throbbed, but the healing chant still eased the worst of it.

Duty waited, and duty didn't care how tired he was.

He lifted his hand in the old Mozarabic gesture—three fingers to his forehead, his thumb circling his heart... then chanted again:

"Aura Securitatis... Refocillatio Maior... Carmen Firmitatis..."

The strength seeped back into him.

He stepped forward, breath slow but steady. If the others had reached Renaris, they were safe.

As for him, he lifted his sword once more, jaw set.

Time to fall some trees.

The Weight of the Living

Darkness had blanketed Caer Renaris in a cold hush. The keep's stone halls were quiet—but not still. The wounded cleric still breathed. The fires still burned low. And Angela, though alive, carried more than bruises.

In the keep's small chapel chamber, Julia lay pale and unconscious beneath heavy blankets. Her discarded armor still bore the dark stain where the arrow had torn through, but her chest rose and fell in a steady, shallow rhythm.

Angela sat beside her, unmoving. Her gauntlets lay cast aside on the floor, bare fingers laced tightly in silent prayer. Her shield leaned against the wall, its face split by two deep gouges. Her armor, scuffed and smeared, bore the scars of a battle neither fair nor victorious.

"She'll live," Alucard said quietly. The tall Friar knelt beside Julia, his hands now still after calling upon the Light to close her wound. "She needs rest. And now that I have done all I can for her... I do too."

Angela didn't look up. "Six dead. Six young warriors who trusted us."

"You weren't leading them," Alucard answered, his voice calm but firm. "And you didn't abandon them either. You shielded Julia. You saved her. That alone is more than most could have done."

Angela's voice was low, raw. "I didn't save the others."

Silence lingered, heavy as the stone walls around them.

At last, Alucard spoke again. "You were sent to learn—and now you have. I was there when Lady Eve gave you your orders. Lesson one: sometimes, people die."

Angela looked at him—tears sharp in her eyes, but unfallen. "I should have died with them."

"No, milady," Alucard said simply. "You should live. Learn. And grow."

Later that night, they moved Julia to a private chamber in the upper keep. Angela declined a cot in the garrison, instead taking a hard bench beside her comrade. Her eyes, half-lidded, remained fixed on Julia's breath. The wound had closed. She would survive. And for now, they were safe.

Angela turned to the narrow window. "I never even saw his face," she whispered, thinking of the armored knight who had come to them in their darkest hour. "I wonder if he made it..."

Alucard, seated nearby, replied without opening his eyes. "There's nothing we can do for him now. Rest."

Caer Renaris — Before Dawn

A hammering fist shook the gates of Caer Renaris. The guards pulled them open, and there stood a lone figure, streaked with dirt and sap. His armor bore the scars of battle—jagged grooves where bark had raked the steel, a greasy sheen of corrupted resin clinging to the plates. His helm dangled from his hand.

Los looked as though he had fought the forest itself—and somehow won.

"Paladin!" one of the guards called. "You made it!"

He stepped past the threshold with a weary sigh, shaking leaves from his torn cloak. "Where are the others?"

"In the keep," the guard replied quickly. "Alive. The cleric was wounded, but healing. They reached us at dusk."

Relief washed through Los, warm and heavy, like sunlight breaking after a storm. He exhaled, the sound almost a prayer.

"Lord Renaris will want to speak with you," the guard added.

Los closed his eyes. His body ached from the Fellwood's crushing blows, his armor battered nearly beyond use. Every step threatened to fold him where he stood. For a heartbeat, he considered surrendering to the exhaustion.

But when he opened his eyes again, he straightened, steadied his breath, and gave a single nod.

Council Chamber

Lord Renaris stood alone over a spread of maps, shoulders slightly bowed, silver beard bright in the lamplight and narrow eyes intent. He did not look surprised when the door opened and Los was shown in.

"They're already calling you the Lone Paladin," he said, voice low. "Quite a name."

"I don't choose what people call me, my lord."

"Names are given. Reputations are earned." Renaris gestured to a chair, but Los did not sit.

"I hear you met the ghost in the trees," the lord went on. "Esis—a Lurikeen ranger of some infamy. The scouts say he's death made flesh."

"I didn't defeat him," Los said. "He bested me. I only slowed him—long enough for the others to reach the keep."

"You survived. That's rare enough—especially for one of his targets."

Los said nothing. He had not been afraid—not when he saw Esis, not when he charged, not even when he failed. He had thought only of the others.

"I imagine you'd like to see them," Renaris said. "They're in the inner keep."

Los stayed silent for a moment, his thoughts turned deeply inward.

"I'll send a detachment at first light to escort the Friar to Boldiam, in case Esis returns," Renaris added. "You've done more than could be asked of anyone."

"I should head back then, my lord," Los replied.

"They owe you their lives."

Los inclined his head and turned for the door.

"One last thing," Renaris called after him. When Los looked back, the lord's voice had softened. "Thank you."

Los answered with a faint nod, then slipped into the corridor's cool stone hush.

Just Before Sunrise

Los stood in the courtyard, tightening the straps beneath what remained of his cloak. Each pull of the leather tugged against bruises hidden beneath his armor. The battle with the fellwood had drained him, and every breath reminded him that he was overdue for rest.

A young messenger lingered nearby, eyes wide. "Sir? You're leaving already?"

"I've done what I came to do," Los replied, his voice rough with weariness.

The gates groaned open to the pale grey light of dawn. Los stepped forward, then paused. His gaze drifted upward, to the high window above the keep where the survivors rested.

"They made it," he whispered. The words hung like prayer in the chill morning air.

Then he turned east, toward Castle Sauvage. His task was done.

Now he had to return to Lady Triss and deliver his report.

Chapter XIV – Threads Drawn Taut

Caer Renaris – Dawn's Quiet

The early morning mist curled like faded smoke around the battlements of Caer Renaris. The forest beyond stirred softly, no longer haunted by screams or blood. The terror that had been Esis—the silent killer of the Wilds—had passed, and only stillness remained.

Angela and Julia had left just after dawn, horses fresh, spirits steadied, and a modest breakfast to get them on their way. Julia rode strong again, her wounds fully mended—Alucard's healing had worked. Angela had hugged him quietly before leaving, simply whispering, "Thank you."

Now Alucard stood near the stables, his travel bag slung over one shoulder, preparing to return north to Caer Boldiam, a small detachment of guards to accompany him. The keep's doors opened behind him.

"Heading out so soon?" came the calm voice of Lord Renaris.

Alucard turned. "Unless I'm to be reassigned, my duty calls me elsewhere."

Renaris walked alongside him, hands clasped behind his back. His armor gleamed despite the early hour—ever the formal man, even when the world was still shaking off sleep.

"I thought you might want to know," he said casually. "Your friend stopped by the keep last night."

Alucard paused. "My friend?"

Renaris gave a slight smile. "The Spaniard. The one with the big sword and poor judgment."

Alucard's jaw tensed. "He is not my friend."

Renaris glanced sideways. "Of course not."

Alucard looked down for a moment. "But he lived?"

"Somehow." The Lord of Renaris's tone grew more thoughtful. "Walked out of the trees half-dead looking like he had fought the whole forest. Carrying himself like the world was burning behind his eyes, but yes—he lived."

Alucard exhaled through his nose. "Good."

Renaris chuckled faintly. "You know, for someone who isn't your friend, you're awfully relieved."

"I didn't say I wanted him dead," Alucard muttered.

"You also didn't thank him for saving your life."

Alucard slung his bag higher on his shoulder. "He didn't do it for me."

"No," said Renaris softly. "But he did it anyway. That counts for something."

Alucard said nothing more. With a final nod, he turned and walked down the trail, guards in tow, disappearing into the morning fog.

Campacorentin Forest – The First Lesson

Mist clung to the moss-covered trees of Campacorentin like faded silk, and the air held the quiet, sacred weight of old places. Beneath the boughs, two figures knelt before a third.

Jestec and Hollia—newly consecrated Paladins, their tabards still crisp, their blades still polished from ceremony—faced Lady Calla, the stern but fair veteran instructor who had once trained under Lady Triss herself.

Calla paced slowly before them, one hand resting lightly on the hilt of her sword, the other gesturing toward the woods behind her.

"You are no longer initiates," she said. "You carry the Light now. It is not a badge. It is a burden. And out here, you'll learn quickly how heavy it becomes."

Jestec, tall and broad-shouldered, nodded solemnly. Hollia, smaller but with eyes like burning iron, clenched her fists in silent resolve.

"Today," Calla continued, "you will learn silence. Follow me. Do not speak. And should you hear something in the woods... pray it isn't watching you."

She turned and strode into the trees. They followed.

Camelot – The Tradesmen's Tavern

Romao leaned back against the booth, arms stretched wide across the backrest, tankard in hand. Prox sat across from him, posture more contained, but the lack of a smile on his face gave away his mood.

"She's harder on him than she is on us," Prox said, swirling his drink.

Romao raised an eyebrow. "Triss?"

Prox nodded. "You've seen it. She watches him like a hawk. Corrects him more, trains him longer."

Romao shrugged. "Maybe it's because he needs it."

"Maybe," Prox said. "But it's more than that. There's something in how she looks at him. Like she's trying not to feel something."

Romao smirked. "You're becoming a poet."

Prox snorted. "You're becoming blind."

Then they both laughed, but Romao's face sobered. "He's changing, Prox. That mission—where he slew all those bandits. It scarred him. I can see it in how quiet he's become. And somehow sharper."

"I noticed that too," Prox said.

Romao frowned. "He didn't say anything, but... I don't know, maybe I am just imagining things."

They drank quietly and let the moment settle.

Castle Sauvage – Angela's Grief

Angela stood in the chapel alcove, fists clenched, jaw trembling. The room smelled of incense and iron—like sorrow wrapped in ritual.

"I should have protected them," she whispered. "I was the Paladin. I was supposed to—"

"You were not alone, Angela."

Lady Eve stepped forward, her voice even and steady, like stone warmed by sun.

"You fought to the end and you protected Julia. That is what matters."

Angela shook her head. "But they died. And I don't even know who saved us."

Eve placed a hand on her shoulder. "Does it matter?"

Angela looked up, eyes rimmed red. "It does to me."

Eve's gaze softened. "Then let that mystery give you strength, not doubt. Someone gave their blade for your life. Honor that with how you wield your own."

Angela turned back to the altar. "Then I swear—on all those who died—that I will never fail again."

Eve watched her quietly, then whispered, "Good. But the world has a cruel way of testing vows."

Camelot – The Courtyard

Los arrived that evening, travel-worn, armor battered, gait stiff from wounds he'd rather not discuss. The fading sun painted the courtyard in amber light; Lady Triss waited there with Romao and Prox, a parchment roll in one hand, steel in her posture.

There were no pleasantries. No warm greetings.

"Rest tonight," she said, voice clipped. "Draw fresh armor from the armory. But tomorrow—"

She handed them sealed assignments.

"—you ride."

Romao accepted his first, grinning before he'd even broken the wax.

"Romao," Triss said, "you'll go to the northeastern edge of Campacorentin Forest. Ebony Fellwood roam there. They are dense, heavy, and stubborn. Strength—not flourish—will cut them down."

Romao nodded.

"You swing like you expect the enemy to applaud. These will not. Your blade must commit."

Romao nodded again, "I understand."

Then she turned to Prox.

"Proximo. Southeastern Campacorentin. Giant Spiders have nested there. Quick. Unpredictable. They punish hesitation and reward precision. Do not try to overpower them. Out maneuver them."

Prox grimaced softly. "So... finesse."

"Yes," Triss said flatly. "You have form. Now you must have instinct and the whole sword must become an extension of yourself."

Then her attention fell on Los.

He stood straighter without meaning to — though exhaustion tugged at him like a weight.

"Los," she said. "Your assignment is in the Salisbury Plains, along the southwestern glades. Spriggarns have formed packs."

Los frowned.

"Jes," he said quietly. "I understand."

"Do you?" Triss asked, stepping closer. "Spriggarns require *skill*, not strength. They punish overreach. They punish reckless power."

Her gaze held him until the meaning sank in.

Romao shifted beside Prox. Both felt the weight of what she wasn't saying.

Triss continued, voice measured but firm:

"Control, Los. Balance. Restraint. Your strength is not the problem."

She tapped the parchment with one gloved finger.

"How you use it is."

Los accepted the assignment silently, jaw set—not defiant, but determined.

After a moment, he added,

"Those Fellwood jou sent me to kill before were north of Renaris, not northeast of Castle Sauvage."

Triss paused. "And what were you doing north of Renaris?"

"Lady Eve asked me to escort a friar," he said plainly. "Along the way we ran into a wounded cleric and a paladin. He took them back to the keep. I stayed behind—fought a ranger and several fellwood."

Romao and Prox exchanged looks.

Triss stared at him with a flicker of disbelief.

"Los," she said, "those were Hornbeam Fellwood. They should have been above your ability to take alone. The ones I intended were Ebony Fellwood — not nearly as dangerous."

Los shrugged, a bit annoyed by the correction.

"Jou said chop down Fellwood," he murmured. "I chopped down Fellwood."

Romao snickered. Even Prox's lips twitched.

Triss pinched the bridge of her nose and muttered something in exasperated prayer.

Then her voice steadied.

"Dismissed," she said, turning away.

Los moved to leave — battered armor rattling faintly with each step — but Triss spoke again without looking back.

"...And Los."

He paused.

"This time... be careful."

He gave a faint, weary nod.

"I will, milady."

And then he limped toward the armory, parchment in hand, ready to face whatever new lesson the world intended to carve into him next.

Defenders of Albion – Scout Command

Endrond slammed the door behind him.

"Lieutenant Kaherdin."

The older man looked up from his ledger with a slow, irritated stare.

"What now, Addams?"

Endrond stepped forward, jaw tight.

"You're letting Bradford run wild."

Kaherdin's quill paused. His eyes narrowed, clearly annoyed.

"Speak plainly."

Endrond didn't hesitate.

"Willow. He's picking on her. He treats her like a failed recruit. And *you* are overworking her."

Kaherdin stood, pushing his chair back with a scrape.

"Watch your tone."

Endrond didn't flinch.

"Then maybe start watching your men."

The silence between them was cold and brittle.

Then the lieutenant exhaled sharply.

"Fine."

His voice dipping with disdain.

Kaherdin exhaled. "Fine. You like speaking up, Addams? Good. You're going to Ellan Vannin. Mile gate watch. Let's see how that tone holds up there."

Endrond's mouth twitched with anger, but still he saluted.

"As you wish, sir."

Kaherdin returned to his ledger, voice flat.

"And Willow..."

He added without bothering to look up.

"She can go sit in a tree at Caer Sursbrooke. That's where she'll do the least damage."

Albion's Edge – Parting Ways

The next dawn saw the gates of Camelot open for five young souls.

Romao, Prox, and Los rode together as far as West Downs, their cloaks flagging in the pale morning wind. At the crossroads, their paths split. Los turned east alone, toward the wide Salisbury Plains—into the whispering glades where Spriggarns hummed lullabies made of thorns and bone.

Romao and Prox pressed on toward Caer Ulfwych, riding side by side until the fork in the forest divided them as well. Romao veered northeast, toward the blackened Fellwood where charred bark and shadow waited. Prox turned southeast, into the spider-haunted groves, where webs clung like ghosts between the ancient oaks.

Far to the west, Endrond boarded the ship to Ellan Vannin, his cloak snapping behind him like a banner of defiance—punished for speaking truth, but unbent.

And Willow, silent but steady, vanished into the coastal mists of Caer Sursbrooke—just another whisper in the trees.

In Campacorentin Forest, Jestec and Hollia. Their path had only begun—steel still untested, light still bright, untouched by the weight the world would one day demand of them.

Echoes of Light

Lady Calla had never been a subtle teacher.

On their first morning beneath the green vault of Campacorentin, she made Jestec and Hollia raise their shields before they had even finished breaking their fast. Barking orders, she circled them like a wolf sizing prey, striking the rims with the edge of her training blade—sudden, sharp, without warning.

“Paladins do not wait for the Light,” she growled. “They bear it. Show me you can hold.”

Jestec, broad-shouldered and stone-faced, absorbed the blows with steady grace. Hollia, lithe but fierce, shifted her stance after each strike, quick to learn, quick to adjust.

At last Calla stepped back with a nod of approval and nodded toward a rune-marked altar stone nearby.

"Good. Now you'll chant."

Like Triss before her, she began with formality. Like Eve, her cadence was crisp. But Calla's words carried the rough edge of the field, not the polish of the abbey or the quiet of a chapel.

She spoke slowly, deliberately:

Aura Securitatis. Da mihi, Domine, securitatem sub tutela tua.

Refocillatio Maior. Concede nobis, Domine, sanationem et refocillationem virium.

Carmen Firmitatis. Infunde nobis, Domine, firmitudinem contra lassitudinem.

Vigor Belli Maior... Potestas Iusta... Custodia Cruciferi... Aggravare...

The forest seemed to hush. Power rippled through the air like heat over sun-warmed steel. Guided by her voice, Jestec and Hollia gave breath to their first invocations—faith, holy resolve, unity. Their voices trembled at first, but by midmorning the old stones echoed with something stronger. Not yet the sure chant of a master, but a sound that carried weight.

On the second day, Calla gave them their first task.

"Salisbury Plains," she said. "Boars. Massive, tearing through farmsteads near the wood. Should be simple for two shield-trained Paladins—unless you forget your training."

She handed them a parchment.

"Don't."

Salisbury Plains – Boars and Giants

The wind cut across the plains, carrying dust and wild-root on its breath. Jestec and Hollia moved in unison, shields high, first invocations low on their lips.

They found their quarry quickly—a boar the size of a cart, bristling with rage, tusks scythe-curved and yellowed. They dropped it together in a clean, disciplined kill. The second fell the same way.

The third was no boar.

A giant crested the hill—hide green, frame towering. Jestec caught the first thunderous blow on his shield and dropped to a knee. Hollia slipped in and struck the ankle; the thing barely noticed.

They were outmatched.

A blur crossed the plain—dark hair, white cloak, steel singing.

Los.

He hit the giant from the flank with a roar and drove his blade deep into its knee. The brute bellowed and staggered. Jestec lunged. Hollia followed. Three strokes in concert, and the giant crashed to earth, groaning once before falling still beneath Los's greatsword.

Los wiped the blade, then glanced up. "Jou two all right?"

"Jestec," the tall one said, catching his breath. He tipped his head to his partner. "This is Hollia. We're Paladins. New—but trained."

"Los," he offered.

Hollia's eyes narrowed, a hint of a smile. "Are you the one they've been talking about? The Lone Paladin?"

"Jes. So they tell me."

Jestec grinned. "We owe you one."

"There's another giant ahead," Los said, pointing down-slope. "Do you need help with it too?"

They exchanged a look and nodded. They'd come to hunt boars; you can't do that while fighting giants.

"We'd appreciate it," Hollia said.

The three moved as one.

By afternoon they had brought down two more giants, each fight swifter, more precise. Los led—intoning higher invocations and striking without pause. Jestec fixed foes with shield and grit. Hollia flowed between them, her blade finding the moments the others made. They felt like a unit by day's end.

Then Los turned toward a dark grove at the foot of the hill.

"I'm actually here for spriggans."

"We'll come," Hollia said simply. "The least we can do."

Together they advanced: Jestec and Hollia blocking with their shields while Los hewed through flesh and bone, driving with his greatsword again and again through the foe. With their help, he didn't falter.

Caer Ulfwych – Reunion

The wind howled through the high windows of the keep, carrying the smell of pine and stone. Inside the hall, torches burned low, their smoke curling above long tables worn smooth by years of garrison meals. Romao nursed a mug of ale while Prox leaned back with arms crossed, that faint, knowing smile tugging at his mouth. Their armor was scuffed and dented, but both were very much alive.

"To the end of toil," Romao declared, lifting his mug. "Conquerors of Fellwood and slayers of spiders!"

Prox shook his head. "One mission of many yet to come."

"Bah." Romao waved him off. "For now, this one is done. Those Ebony Fellwood hit like siege towers. Every swing rattled my bones. By the end, my arms felt ready to fall off."

"You still shout every time you swing, don't you?" Prox said with a bit of a laugh. "Swinging like a brute."

Romao grinned. "And yet the trees fell, did they not?"

Prox chuckled and took a slow drink before speaking. "Spiders. Dozens. They don't fight like trees. They wait—patient. Strike from shadows. I had to learn to wait too. To be still." He set his mug down carefully. "I've never seen spiders so huge."

Romao groaned theatrically. "Like *cani*?"

"Bigger," Prox said. His calm voice carried a weight Romao didn't miss.

The door creaked open. Lord Ulfwych entered—a tall figure in a cloak the color of storm clouds, silver-threaded hair marking long years of battle. His eyes found them at once.

"Lady Triss asked me to check on you," he said. "I see you're not dead. That's something."

"Barely," Romao muttered, rolling a sore shoulder.

"Tired," Prox admitted, though the faint smirk remained.

"Good," Lord Ulfwych said. "Then you're ready for harder things. But first—food and drink. You've earned it. Rest while you can."

Camelot – The Burns Manor

Angela and Julia returned to Camelot with Lady Eve, having left Castle Sauvage just after Sir Emery—a Saracen Paladin trainer clad in burnished armor—had returned from patrolling the frontier. They parted company upon reaching the capital.

"Go with peace, Lady Angela," Eve said, resting a gauntleted hand on her shoulder. "And go with purpose."

Angela nodded. "I won't forget."

That evening, the Burns Estate was quiet, lit with the glow of late evening lanterns. Angela stayed with her sisters, and Julia gladly accepted her offer to remain as a guest for the time being.

Amaranthia and Tamara listened intently as Angela told them everything—the failed mission, the fallen adventurers, the vow she had sworn in grief.

"I don't think I want to lead a guild anymore," Angela admitted at last.

Tamara folded her arms, voice steady and practical. "Because you failed once?"

Amaranthia chuckled, flicking a playful glance her sister's way. "Since when has that ever stopped a Burns?"

Angela hesitated. "I don't want to lead alone."

"You won't," Tamara said firmly. "You'll have us."

Angela looked between them. "We need eight to found a guild."

Tamara smirked with a look of determination. "Then we find five more."

Julia leaned forward with a smile, her voice bright. "Four more. I'll join you."

Camelot – The Cloisters

Lady Triss sat with Lady Winchell beneath the rose windows of the abbey, parchment spread across their bench like discarded prayers.

"He'll need a Cleric soon," Triss murmured. "I won't always be there to watch over him."

Winchell nodded. "There's a name I've been saving. Bunk McHeal."

Triss blinked. "That's a name?"

Winchell's lips curved slightly. "He comes from a long line of Healers. Strange fellow, but brilliant. Precise. Efficient. And he doesn't talk much."

For the first time that day, Triss allowed herself a small smile. "He sounds perfect."

"I'll send for him," Winchell promised.

Camelot – The Citadel

The courtyard echoed with the clop of hooves and the rustle of cloth as Los dismounted outside the citadel of Camelot. His cloak, once white, was now darkened with dirt. Mud laced his boots. Yet his sword gleamed, freshly cleaned—he had taken the time to honor it.

He passed beneath the arch of the inner keep and into the council hall, where Lord Prydwen stood beside Lady Triss at the round table. Both looked up as Los approached.

"I have returned," he said, giving a small bow. "The Spriggarns have been slain." He placed a rolled parchment on the table.

"And... three Salisbury Giants."

Prydwen raised an eyebrow. "Three?"

"They were causing trouble near the groves. I had help—two novice Paladins. We worked well together."

Lady Triss folded her arms. "You were sent to slay Spriggarns. Alone. And not slay giants."

"Jes my Lady...."

Prydwen studied Los for a moment, then nodded once. "Noted. Good work."

Triss's eyes lingered on Los's face. He looked tired—but composed. "You didn't have to fight giants," she murmured.

"No," Los said quietly. "But we did..."

Campacorentin – The Return

Jestec and Hollia dismounted and knelt before Lady Calla and made their report. She did not smile.

"You were told to hunt boars, not giants."

Jestec opened his mouth. "They were attacking—"

"Slaying one that attacked is different from chasing two more." Her voice was sharp. "And this Paladin Los—he is no one you should follow blindly. Legend is not leadership."

Hollia frowned. "He saved our lives."

"And you endangered them by not following orders."

There was silence. Then Calla said, "You will report back to me tomorrow. At dawn. And you will go out again and slay boars."

They bowed. Chastened. But ready to serve—ready to learn.

Camelot – Church of St. George

Beneath the stained glass of St. Georges's, the air was cool with incense and old stone. Lady Triss stood in her class armor, holding a folded letter sealed with red wax.

"From Lord Ulfwych of Campacorentin Forest," she said, the parchment in her gloved hands. "Commending two Paladins for skill, discipline, and valor in Campacorentin Forest."

Proximo and Romao stood tall before her, their armor still dusted from the road.

She looked at them both—her expression unreadable. Then slowly nodded.

"According to Lord Ulfwych you are ready to advance."

"Thank you, Lady Triss," Romao said, as he and Prox bowed low.

She turned her gaze to Los, who stood quietly behind them. "You as well, Los."

Los gave her a quiet nod.

The lesson began.

First: Refocillatio Angelorum. Concede nobis, Domine, sanationem divinam et refocillationem virium.

(Grant us divine healing and renewal of strength.)

Celeritas Amplificata. Da nobis, Domine, celeritatem amplificatam ad servitium tuum.

(Grant us amplified speed for Your service.)

Carmen Firmitudinis. Infunde nobis, Domine, firmitudinem contra lassitudinem.
(Pour into us endurance against weariness.)

Potentia Virtutis...

Her cadence was natural, practiced—each chant layered with weight, each name echoing softly beneath the vaulted ceiling.

"Now," she said, turning back to them, "you will learn to call the Light with more power."

She drew a slow breath.

Obice Fidei: a barrier to keep you safe.

Exasperar: Causes your enemy to become enraged. This makes them focus on you and not your companions.

Reviviscere: To bring back to life.

As she said it, explained it, Los's jaw dropped. Was such a thing possible? Could he bring her back? Resurrect her? Without thinking his hand moved over the ring beneath his shirt.

But then Lady Triss continued.

"This can only be done in the moments after death. If they have been dead too long you cannot restore life to them."

His fleeting hope dashed, his soul rent and torn once more.

He looked down, closing his fingers tightly over the hidden ring. His throat burned. The ache was sudden, sharp, familiar.

Triss watched him — just for a heartbeat.

The slight tremor in his jaw.
The way his shoulders folded inward.
The desperate press of his hand to his chest.

Now she understood.

Vestula Abbey – New Orders

The side chapel of Vetusta Abbey was quiet but for the scratch of quill on parchment. Sunlight filtered in soft through the high, clouded windows, catching the polished silver trim of Bunk McHeal's vestments. His mace hung at his hip — immaculate, oiled, and clearly well cared for. His posture carried the rigid confidence of a cleric trained to excellence, a boy determined to rise higher than his forebears.

A scribe approached, offering a sealed scroll.

"Assignment from Camelot," he said.

Bunk accepted it with a small, dignified nod. He broke the wax, unrolled the parchment—

—and blinked.

Then blinked again.

"Assigned to... the Paladin Los?" he said, as though the name itself tasted strange.

"*That* reckless Spaniard who slew the entire bandit camp?"

"Orders from Lady Winchell," the scribe replied mildly.

"I should be assigned to someone like Sir Rex or Sir Jamison, not... this Spaniard," Bunk snapped. "I was being considered for a post at Castle Snowdonia."

"I'm sure you were. Still — these are your orders."

Bunk muttered under his breath as he turned to leave. "Disaster waiting to happen..."

And with that, Bunk McHeal marched out of the chapel —
vestments pristine, pride firmly intact,
destined for a Paladin he was absolutely certain would ruin his career.

Chapter XV - Of Traditions and Remembrance

Camelot – The Forgotten Birthday

The tavern was cool compared to the summer heat outside. Inside, the mood was light—a hum of laughter and quiet conversation filled the air. Mugs clinked, dice scattered across tables, and the bard in the corner strummed a bright tune that no one listened to closely. In a quieter alcove, near the back, Los, Romao, and Prox sat at a round table, relaxing and enjoying a bowl of stew, so fresh steam still rose from wooden bowls.

Romao leaned back, one arm slung over the back of his chair. His eyes gleamed with pride.

"On my birthday," he said, "my mother makes *penne al forno*. Not just any penne—hers is baked with thick cream, roasted garlic, *and* four cheeses. My brothers would fight over the browned crust on top. Me? She gave me the corner piece, always." He beamed. "And if she was feeling generous—one glass of red wine."

"Only one?" Prox said, grinning.

Romao shrugged theatrically. "She's a mother. She worries. But the food—ah, *madonna mia*—I could ride through a troll camp if I knew that dish waited for me."

Prox chuckled. "My folks aren't so flashy. We have a big breakfast—roasted apples, fried bread, bacon if we can trade for it. My little sister makes me a lopsided pie, and we play that ridiculous game where everyone tries to guess your favorite animal."

Los smirked faintly. "Still a lion, Prox?"

"It's always a lion," Prox said, mock-offended. "But every year they guess 'badger.' I'll never understand it."

The laughter faded for a beat as both turned to Los.

Romao leaned in. "And you, *Fratello*? What did *your* family do?"

Los looked into his mug, then his voice came quietly.

"My grandfather... would take me to the hill above the vineyards, before sunrise. We'd drink Horchata and watch the light rise over the fields. He said... birthdays are to remember who you are, and where you come from. That was his way."

The table fell into a gentle hush. Even Romao, always the first to speak, remained quiet.

Los turned his face, but his hand moved instinctively to the cord around his neck. He had never taken the ring off—not even to put it back on the chain that once held it—for fear it might slip away.

Risa.

He remembered her hands, the way she pressed flowers between pages of books, how she smiled when she handed him the loaf she'd baked with figs—*"for the occasion,"* she had said, eyes shining.

Her voice echoed through memory: *"Seventeen, Lorenzo. I'll make it perfect, you'll see."*

And she had. That birthday had felt full, perfect. That was the last one...

Romao elbowed him gently. "So... when is your birthday?"

Los blinked, caught between past and present. "...July seventh."

Romao squinted. "July—? Wait."

His eyes went wide, then he leaned forward.

"That's today, you idiot!"

Prox straightened. *"What?! No way!"*

Los stared at them, speechless.

Romao slapped his shoulder hard enough to jostle the mug. "You absolute mule! Sitting here like it's just another day?"

Prox stood up, grinning. "Three more mugs! And a *slice of something sweet*, for the birthday fool!"

Los opened his mouth, closed it again, and laughed—*really laughed*—for the first time in weeks. "Jes, alright. But jou both are paying."

Romao raised his mug. "To the youngest lunatic ever to slay a giant—and forget his own birthday."

Prox joined, "To Los Ortiz!"

And Los, flushed from embarrassment and the weight of memory, lifted his drink in silence.

The Birthday Never Celebrated

Lady Triss sat alone, the weight of the day draped across her shoulders like an old cloak—even though it was only early afternoon.

Her eyes drifted to the drawer in the corner of the desk.

She did not open it.

She seldom did.

Inside were the letters she had written over the years—one for each of his birthdays. Folded, sealed, never sent. The first few on fine parchment. The later ones, hastier.

She stared at it now, her hand motionless on the desktop.

She knew.

Today was his eighteenth.

He wouldn't know that she remembered. He couldn't. If he guessed—if he questioned—it might all come undone.

So, she did nothing.

Except think of the child she'd given up. The boy she had never sung to sleep. The teenager she was coming to know, and now a man. Seventeen birthdays lost... but not this one.

Not this one.

This one, I gave you something, she thought.

A cleric.

Not just a battle partner, but a lifeline. Someone trained to guard his soul and body both. Someone who could walk beside him through darkness and bring him home.

She whispered aloud, soft as dust.

"Happy birthday, my son."

And in the stillness of her chamber, she let the silence answer her back.

The Burns Estate

On the Garden Terrace, the scent of honeysuckle drifted lazily through the warm afternoon air. Bees hummed over the late-summer blooms, and sunlight filtered through gauzy curtains drawn open to the garden. The terrace outside the Burns estate overlooked green hills and distant forest. The stonework was warm beneath their feet, the chairs padded with cushions stitched by Amaranthia herself.

Lady Angela sat with her sisters under the shade of the ivy-covered archway, her arms crossed and mood stormy despite the idyllic setting.

"I don't care what anyone says," she huffed. "He stole it from me."

Julia blinked. "Who did?"

"*Los Ortiz*," Angela said, the name like a stone in her mouth. "That boy who killed all the bandits. The one who became the youngest Paladin in a generation. I was meant to be the youngest Paladin in a generation. That was *my* day."

Julia exchanged glances with Amaranthia. "But... wasn't he accepted the same day as you?"

"Exactly!" Angela snapped, "but earlier in the day which means He was accepted first. Lord Prydwen even said he accepted me because he had already accepted him. Probably born in October or December or something, the reckless child. And now *he* gets the title. He'll be the one history remembers. Not me. I bet he doesn't even *know* what a Paladin is supposed to stand for. Just stumbles into it—blinking—and *poof*, glory handed to him."

Amaranthia lifted a brow. "You're only saying that because you don't know his birthday. And no matter what you were going to be accepted, he would not have turned down Lady Triss's endorsement, that is something that boy did not have."

Angela crossed her arms tighter. "Well, whatever it is—it's not August eighth."

Julia tilted her head. "Wait... that's next month!"

"Yes." Angela sighed. "Not that it matters."

Julia smiled softly. "That's not so far off. Is there anything you want?"

Angela shook her head. "No. What I *wanted* was stolen."

A breeze carried the scent of lavender across the terrace. Amaranthia sipped her drink, her tone smooth. "You'll outshine him in time, little lion. That I don't doubt. But maybe, just maybe, let this one birthday pass without sharpening your claws."

Angela looked away and didn't answer. Not at first.

Julia, ever the soft voice of comfort, tucked her legs beneath her. "My family always did the same thing every year. We'd go into the woods behind the cottage and have honeycakes and stream-cooled cider. My brothers would race, my sisters would pick flowers and braid my hair."

She smiled as she stared into the garden. "I never got anything fancy. But it always felt like the whole day belonged to me. It never mattered what we had. Just that we were together. I guess... that's what made it special."

Angela's expression softened slightly, despite herself.

Amaranthia leaned back in her chair. "Mother used to make cinnamon bread shaped like animals. One for each of us. Angela always got a lion, Tamera always got a badger."

Tamera grinned as she reclined enjoying the sun, only half paying attention. "A very dignified badger."

"And you a dove," Angela murmured.

"Too gentle for my own good I guess," Amaranthia smirked.

"And Julia?" Angela asked, a little quieter.

"She'd be a lamb," Amaranthia said, still smiling.

Julia blushed. "I think I'd rather be a squirrel."

They all laughed.

The bitterness in Angela's chest didn't leave entirely—but it *settled*. Becoming less sharp.

The mood eased as the conversation drifted, as it often did, to the guild.

"Still want to do it?" Amaranthia asked, running her fingers along the edge of her cup. "Found a guild of our own?"

"Yes," Angela said firmly. "But it has to mean something. It can't just be another noble girls' social circle with matching cloaks and rules about how many curls you're allowed to have."

"Big, or exclusive?" Amaranthia pressed. "Private or open to all?"

Angela hesitated. Then looked at Julia.

Julia tilted her head. "Why not open to everyone? There's good people everywhere. Even peasants. Even strange boys from Spain."

Angela snorted. "Don't push it."

But the words left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Amaranthia leaned forward. "All classes, all backgrounds. Peasant and noble. Cleric or rogue."

Angela sat up straighter. "A Guild of all sisters—blood or not. No walls. But we will still need 4 more members."

Amaranthia raised her cup. "To the future, then."

Angela paused—then lifted hers.

"To *our* future."

Chapter XVI – Of Boasts and Bruises

The Tavern

The mercenaries came in loud, half-drunk, swaggering like men who thought coin made them kings. They shoved through the crowd, their boots heavy on the boards, and claimed the space like wolves sniffing out easy prey.

In the corner, a man who had been nursing watered ale all evening went still. A red sash lay knotted loose at his waist—too bright to be accident, too deliberate to be fashion. He watched the mercenaries a moment longer, then slid from his bench and slipped out the door as if avoiding trouble.

One of the mercenaries caught sight of Los at the back table. His grin sharpened.

"Look here, lads! It's the Lone Paladin! Seven men with one swing, they say. Shall we line up and let him try for eight?"

Laughter rolled through the room. Tankards banged the tables.

Los stared at his drink.

Romao leaned close, voice low but firm. "Let it pass, Fratello. Not worth it."

The mercenary sneered. "What's the matter, boy? Run out of prayers? Or saving yourself for another fairy tale?"

Still, Los kept silent, jaw set.

The man leaned closer, voice dripping. "Look at you, noble Paladin. I'd wager your mother was some tavern wench, wasn't she, boy."

Los's tankard hit the table with a crack. His eyes rose, cold as drawn steel. "My mother was a pure and noble woman."

The mercenary barked a laugh. "Pure? Noble? She was likely—"

Los exploded before the mercenary finished his words. "Jou son of a—"

He didn't rise. He launched—taking the man backward over the table. Ale and splinters flew. Fists hammered, boots scuffed. The mercenary clawed at Los's chest, seized him by the shirt—and his grip caught the leather cord around Los's neck as well.

He yanked.

The silver ring flashed in the light.

For a fraction of a heartbeat, something in Los's face changed—not rage. Panic.

Romao, still seated, sighed. "I wouldn't..."

The mercenary tugged harder.

Los's fists came down like stone, fury unchecked.

Other mercenaries surged from their benches, shouting. Two of them grabbed Los, hauling him off their beleaguered comrade, trying to set him up for a beating.

Prox was already half out of his chair, fists curling, the grin of a boy spoiling for a scrap flashing across his face.

Romao caught the look, exhaled like a man giving in to the inevitable. "Oh, diavolo."

The two stood together and waded in, as the tavern dissolved into chaos—shouts, crashes, flying ale, bodies rolling across the floor. A blur of limbs and curses until the whole place drowned in the brawl Los had tried—briefly—to avoid.

The Aftermath - St. George's

The morning chill bit through their bruises. Los, Romao, and Prox stood in a row, stiff and sore after a night in the cells. What had begun as a birthday celebration had ended in injuries, spilled ale, and the cold stink of the city cells. Sergeant

Bradford smirked as he marched them up to the church, all too pleased to deliver Paladins like criminals.

"The tavern keeper demands compensation for damages," Bradford announced, lingering in the nave.

Lady Triss's gaze flicked to him, sharp as a blade. "You've done your duty, Sergeant. You may go."

Bradford hesitated, smirk twitching, but she cut him off again: "Now." He bowed shallowly and slunk away.

Only then did she turn, cloak snapping as she faced her Paladins. "Conduct unbecoming of the Order. If you wish to brawl in taverns like common armsmen, I will gladly see you serve as common armsmen. Do you understand me? Do You!"

"Yes..." came three slow replies.

"What has gotten into you three?" She continued as she stopped in front of Romao, eyes sharp as drawn steel. She had recognized early on that he was the leader of the three.

"Well? Explain yourselves."

Romao shifted his weight, gaze flicking down. "It was Los's birthday," he said at last. "We were celebrating. Then these mercenaries started in."

Triss's expression didn't soften. "You are Paladins. Not common street soldiers to be baited into a fight by mercenaries. You will not disgrace the Order again in such a manner."

She turned next to Prox. "And you, Proximo?"

Prox stood straight, but his jaw tightened. "Milady, they were laying into Los. What were we to do?"

Her gaze fell heavily on her son. "Los?"

He stood a half step behind the others, eyes lowered. One hand gripped the front of his shirt, fingers tight around the cord beneath. When he spoke, his voice was quiet, raw.

"They insulted my mother."

Silence struck the room like a hammer.

Triss's breath caught—but she maintained her composure. Her tone stayed cold, measured. She saw the hand at his chest, heard the strain in his voice—they'd struck something sacred. But he was a Paladin now, and she was his commander.

"And so, you disgrace her memory by brawling like a dockhand? Your mother needs no defense from tavern trash. You dishonor her when you stoop to their level."

No one moved.

Los's jaw flexed, as he looked at the ground.

Then he muttered under his breath, sharp and fast:

"Sus madres eran putas de taberna. La mía no."

"Los!" Triss's voice cracked sharper than she intended.

Romao winced, half-smiling in disbelief.

Prox leaned sideways toward him. "What did he say?"

Romao exhaled through his nose, trying not to laugh. "You don't want to know."

Triss glared at them both disapprovingly. She wanted to scold Los further—to remind him of rank, of decorum.

But she couldn't.

Because, for all his insolence, in the end—
he had fought for her honor.

She straightened. Then returned to the matter at hand. "The tavern keeper will be repaid—out of your own coin."

Romao groaned. Prox muttered darkly.

Lastly, she fixed her eyes on Los. "And you—especially you—will give me your word. No more tavern brawls. Not while you serve the Light."

Los raised his head. His jaw set—but his hand never left the cord. "I promise."

Later That Morning

she found Romao by the stables still rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He straightened as she approached.

"Romao," she said, quieter now. "Tell me what truly happened."

He shifted his weight, boots scuffing the straw. "Same as always. Too much ale, too many egos. Los got baited, and we followed."

Her eyes narrowed. "And the insult?"

Romao hesitated — a rare thing for him.

"The man said something about Los's mother. Los told him his mother was a noble woman." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I told him not to say such things. Not in a tavern. Words like that don't earn you respect—it'll only get him hit harder."

"I see."

Triss dismissed him with a nod, but her gaze lingered after he turned away. She had asked as if it were merely an afterthought, but the words struck like stones. Even his closest brothers thought it was just a boast, a boy's puffed-up tale.

But she knew better. And the truth weighed heavier on her than on anyone.

Camelot – The Burns Manor

Word of the tavern brawl reached Angela before evening prayers. Amaranthia had returned from the market with the tale already embroidered by gossip—the Lone Paladin throwing mercenaries through tables, all to defend his mother’s honor.

Angela stood in the sunlit sitting room, arms crossed, expression carved from stone as her sister recounted it.

“So he breaks the Peace of Camelot,” Angela said, voice sharp with disdain, “and people *cheer* him for it?”

Amaranthia lifted a brow. “They cheer the story—a boy fighting for his mother, even if his claim was... generous.”

Angela’s jaw tightened. *Generous*.
A polite word for a lie.

Nobility was blood, lineage, birthright, not a costume. To boast and then to brawl over it, was not honor but arrogance. He was a commoner, a foreigner—yet already the city whispered his name as if it were carved in stone.

“He will brag and boast until Camelot grows tired of him,” Angela muttered. “And when he falls, the Order will share in his shame.”

And yet—even as she scorned the lie—something in the story nettled her. The way he had defended it. Why cling to a story of nobility he did not possess — and risk bruises and punishment for it?

The Church of St. George, that evening

The chapel was nearly empty, its candles guttering low. Stone saints kept their silent watch while the last of the brothers drifted away to their cots. Only one figure remained kneeling near the altar.

Los.

His cloak pooled around him, sheltering him from the cool night air. From the shadows of the aisle, he looked every bit the devout young Paladin — patient, reverent, steadfast in prayer. A boy of faith, humbling himself before the Light.

But his stillness was not only devotion. It was waiting. Waiting for silence to fall, for footsteps to fade, for the last doors to close so no one would notice when he slipped below into the catacombs where he slept.

His hand rose slowly to his brow. Three fingers brushed his forehead, his thumb circled over his heart, then his palm settled over the small silver ring strung on the cord beneath his shirt. He held it there as if it were the only anchor keeping him upright.

His voice was little more than a whisper.
"Madre... I never knew jou."

The words trembled as he clutched his shirt over the ring. "I have jour blood... I bear the name jou gave me... but I cannot remember jour face. And I don't know why jou left me."

He swallowed hard, eyes fixed on the symbol of the Grail above the altar. "I don't know if jou think of me in Heaven. But I am here... and I am all alone."

He bowed his head lower, clutching the ring tighter still.

In the shadows of the nave, another figure stood frozen. Lady Triss had come to the church quietly, her silver hair unbound, her steps meant to be unseen. She had expected to find him at prayer, but not to hear this.

His word struck like a blade to her chest.

Every word pierced her — the ache in his voice, the wound of abandonment she had left upon him. Her knees buckled, her hand flew to her lips, stifling the cry that rose as she gripped a pillar.

She wanted to run to him, to take him into her arms, to tell him he was not alone.

Even taking a half-step forward before freezing, her breath catching. No. Not yet.

Not without destroying everything he understood about himself... and everything she had sworn to protect.

So she stood in the dark, her body trembling as she watched him kneeling, whispering into a silence that would never answer.

When the last of his prayer faded, Los bowed his head, and the hush of the church closed over him.

Triss turned away, unable to bear it.

Her own whisper lost in the shadows.

"Forgive me, Lorenzo."

Baldric

The candles in Lord Edward Baldric's study burned low, not from neglect but from intention. He preferred dim rooms—rooms that kept men honest. In bright light, people performed. In shadow, they confessed.

A knock came at the door—soft, cautious, the kind given by someone who already knew the answer might be pain.

Baldric did not look up from the ledger he was annotating.

"Enter."

The man who slipped inside wore no crest and carried no weapon he meant to be seen with. His cloak was plain. His boots were scuffed as if he'd walked the last mile on purpose. His face had the forgettable quality of a servant who wanted to live a long life.

He bowed once. Low.

"My lord."

Baldric turned a page with a gloved finger. "Report."

The messenger swallowed. "Word from the countryside. Taverns, inns, crossings. The kind of places where men drink their courage first, then spend it."

Baldric's pen paused. "Go on."

"Men with red sashes," the messenger said. "Not soldiers. Not guilded. Some are armsmen without a banner. Some are farmhands who've never held a sword properly. A mercenary or two. They don't gather in crowds—just... one here, another there. They sit. They listen. They speak little."

Baldric's pen resumed. "And yet you're here."

"Yes, my lord." The messenger licked his lips. "Because it was thought to be nothing at first. A man making noise in a rural inn. A drunk with a cloth tied to his arm, pretending it makes him important."

Baldric's eyes did not rise. "And now?"

"And now one was seen in Camelot."

That earned Baldric's attention. The pen stopped. The silence that followed was not dramatic—it was clinical, the way a surgeon goes still before a cut.

"A sash," Baldric said softly. "A color. A symbol. And what do symbols do?"

The messenger hesitated. "They... make small men feel larger."

Baldric's mouth twitched. Not a smile. Something colder.

"Who benefits?"

"We don't know." The messenger's shoulders tightened, bracing. "They speak as if they have a cause. 'Set Albion right,' they say. 'A reckoning for the high and proud.' But they're few, my lord. Rural. Scattered. I would have dismissed it if not for the capital."

Baldric leaned back. The chair creaked once, like a warning that furniture, too, had learned to be cautious around him.

"A rebellion," he said—not as a question, but as a label.

"It is believed so, my lord. Or the beginning of one."

Baldric regarded the messenger the way one regarded a candle nearing its end: patient, interested, certain of the outcome.

"Do they have a name?"

"Some have started calling it the Red Rebellion." The messenger shook his head quickly. "They appear to be poorly organized as yet."

Baldric's gaze drifted past the man, to the curtained window, as if he could see the kingdom beyond it and all the little fires people thought were hidden.

"Then find the hand that guides them," he said. "Not the men wearing the cloth. The man who told them to wear it."

The messenger nodded, relief flickering in his eyes—relief that the command was clear, that his lord had not demanded a miracle.

"I will, my lord."

Baldric's fingers tapped once on the desk. "I want you to listen. To follow. To learn where they meet when they stop pretending it's coincidence."

The messenger swallowed again. "Should I... should we employ Cadens for this? He has contacts. He—"

"No." The word came down like a gate slamming shut.

Baldric's eyes were sharp now, fully awake. "Cadens is too close to the Crown these days. I need to know what the Crown knows, then to control what it learns."

He leaned forward, just slightly. Enough to make the messenger feel the weight of attention like a blade laid gently on the throat.

"For this," Baldric said, "send someone the world does not look at twice."

The messenger bowed lower. "Yes, my lord."

Baldric picked up his pen again, calm restored, as if they'd been discussing a shipment of wool.

"Go," he said. "Bring me names. Faces. Quietly."

The messenger backed toward the door, eager to become invisible again, and vanished like the night. The door closed softly.

Baldric paused for a moment then, almost as an afterthought, said to himself once the room was empty and still, "If they truly are rabble—peasants, troublemakers, nothing more—they may prove useful."

His pen scratched once more across the page.

"And if it isn't," Baldric murmured, more to himself, "then I would know the name of the fool who is teaching them to stand together."

The candles continued to gutter—slowly, obediently—while Lord Baldric wrote as if the kingdom were really his.

Chapter XVII – The Writ of Tepok's Mine

The Church of St. George

The King had issued a Writ.

Goblins had overrun the old Asterite mine in the Black Mountains South. Once the pride of Albion's metallurgists, its veins held a treasure rarer than gold—Asterite, the featherlight alloy strong enough for sword and armor and yet delicate enough for enchantment. Stocks were dwindling. Reopening the mine was now a royal priority.

The Venomites, the guild of shadows and poison, had accepted the mission.

Tycho entered the nave of the Church of St. George with the Writ in hand, his cloak still damp from travel. His boots left faint marks on the polished stone, a trail of shadow and resolve.

Lady Triss and Lady Winchell stood near the nave, discussing requests with Los and Bunk. Both women turned at the Friar's approach, eyes narrowing in unison. Suspicion flickered between them like drawn blades.

"Ladies," Tycho said, offering a measured bow.

Triss moved a half-step, placing herself between him and Los without a word.

"What can we do for you this day?"

Her tone civil; her stance was not.

There was no curtsy. No nod. Only the restraint owed to a man she once called heretic—and who had saved her son's life.

Tycho held up the parchment. "I come bearing a Royal Writ. The Asterite mine has been claimed by goblins—a chieftain called Tepok now holds it. His ilk foul the tunnels and spill into the valley. The King requires it reclaimed."

Lady Triss did not blink. "And?"

"I require a Paladin to lead the way,"

"We have few to spare," she replied. "Romao and Proximo are afield. The rest are dispersed across the realm."

"I'll go," Los said.

Triss's head snapped toward him. "Los—"

Her tone a clear warning that he had spoken out of turn.

"He saved my life," Los continued, steady, nearly timidly. "Twice. I owe him"

Tycho said nothing. But the corners of his mouth lifted.

Triss's jaw tightened. Her son had more than spoken out of turn, he was trapping her into letting him go, and worse, the Heretic had welcomed it.

"Yes, well," she said flatly, "Los is just beginning his pairing with Bunk. They will be training together now."

Tycho gave a soft smile. "Then let them bond in the mine."

Triss stared daggers at him. *Stay away from my son*, her silence screamed.

"May we?" Los asked again, quieter. "I owe him."

Bunk exhaled, eyes closing for a beat. He wanted no part of Venomite entanglements; neither did Lady Winchell. Her hand settled on his shoulder, firm and reassuring.

Tycho glanced to the cleric. "For the record—I will not be joining the expedition. A Friar from our order will see to the healing."

At that, Lady Winchell relented. "Where one goes, the other goes," she said, voice iron in its resolve. Her cleric would not be shown up by a mere Friar.

Triss raised an eyebrow. "And where will you be, if not leading them?"

"I am, required elsewhere," Tycho said. "The party is assembled: a Friar, an Armsman, a Mercenary, a Wizard, a Cabalist, and a Sorceress. With your two, they're eight."

Lady Triss's eyes narrowed. She hated this. Every piece of it. But the King's seal gave her no room to refuse.

"So be it."

The Church of St. George – Later That Day

The party assembled in the chapel courtyard—six figures cloaked in the shadows of different faiths and callings. Tycho made no introductions. He simply gestured, and they stepped forward one by one.

First came Gwendolyn, a young Friar in russet and grey, her hair bound in a bun, a polished oak staff in hand. She bowed deeply to Bunk, then to Los.

"I am Gwendolyn, I heal, and I pray," she said. "And I have faith we shall all safely return." She finished with a smile.

Beside her stood Rhic, a towering Armsman a little older than Los, with a polearm nearly as long as he was tall. His armor bore the marks of previous battle, but his grin was fresh and boyish.

"Rhic of Lynn Barfog," he said, nodding to Los. "I'm told you're the famous one."

Lygar, by contrast, was lean, dark-haired, and sharp-eyed—a Mercenary with two short blades crossed at his back, he seemed to be Rhic's age, a little older than Los.

"Lygar," he said with a wink. "I don't do honor. But I do kill goblins."

Behind them stood three robed figures.

Malthan the Wizard gave a curt nod, his eyes distant, icy. "Malthan, wizard, ice and earth magic. I hope you two have dressed warmly."

Lirien the Cabalist tilted her head, pale and quiet. She spoke just once, voice low and unhurried:

"Lirien, Cabalist. Body and matter magic. Stay clear of my spells and we will be just fine."

Valora the Sorceress paused before speaking, though her veiled eyes scanned the party with surgical coldness. When she finally spoke, her voice was smooth as glass.

"Valora, Sorceress, body and mind magic. Break my mez again Lirien and I will blind you."

Bunk leaned toward Los. "This is a suicide party."

Los adjusted the strap on his sword. "Have faith."

Tycho watched them with a stillness that made the air feel thinner. Then he stepped forward and offered Los the sealed Writ.

"Show this if challenged. You have royal right."

"And you?" Los asked.

"I have business elsewhere," Tycho replied.

He looked to Gwendolyn, and something passed between them—quiet, unspoken.

"I'll see you again," she murmured, "Lord willing."

Then Tycho turned and vanished into the cloister archway.

"Mount up," Rhic said, tapping his polearm against the ground like a command.

"The mine won't clear itself."

Bunk sighed like a man being marched to his own execution.

Los glanced once toward the church door, toward where Lady Triss surely still lingered beyond sight.

He didn't look long. Just long enough to steady himself—
long enough to feel the regret twist in his chest at having disappointed her by speaking out of turn.

Then he turned and followed the others into the street outside.

And so they departed—six adventurers, a Paladin, a Cleric, and a Writ. Ric and Lygar, laughing and chatting with Gwendolyn all the way.

Black Mountains South

They reached the outer ridgeline near the mine before dusk.

Smoke curled from crude goblin fires at the mine's entrance. Dozens of squat figures gathered around makeshift barricades, their horrid speech echoing across the granite slopes.

Los signaled silently. Rhic and Lygar took the flanks. The casters readied spells behind cover.

Gwendolyn whispered, voice barely more than breath:

Aura Custodiae — custodi nos, Domine, aura tutelae tuae.

The air tightened around them like unseen mail. She did not stop—*Fortitudo Sacra; Benedictio Fortitudinis; Dexteritas Sacra*—each name a quick stitch in the fabric of their defense.

Then Bunk began, deeper, steadier, as if laying stone beneath their feet:

Scutum Sanctum — erige super nos, Domine, scutum sanctum.

Light gathered, thin at first—then firm. *Concordia Angelica... Potentia Archangeli.*

A rush of holy force swept through Los's limbs. His fingers tightened on his sword hilt in disbelief.

"How did jou—?" he began.

Bunk cut him off with a look. "Have you truly never been blessed by a Cleric or Friar?"

Los shook his head. "No. Only Paladin chants."

He touched three fingers to his brow and circled his thumb over his heart.

Then he began to chant.

The layered strength settled into him—strange, exhilarating, almost too much to contain.

He lifted his sword, feeling the weight of the world suddenly lighter.

Then he charged.

The first goblin guard was asleep at its post. It never woke; Los dropped it before it could scream.

Chaos erupted. Goblins shrieked and scrambled from their fires.

Lygar's blades flashed like lightning in a storm.

Rhic's polearm swept bodies aside in brutal arcs.

Malthan's ice shattered armor; Lirien's spells warped flesh; Valora's enchantments turned goblins against their own.

Bunk and Gwendolyn moved like a single creature—one shielding, one healing—never breaking rhythm.

By nightfall, the camp lay still. Blood soaked the dirt.
The mine mouth yawned before them, black as a swallowed sun.

"What now?" the Lirien asked as she stared into the abyss.

Los wiped his blade, breathing hard.

"We go in—together."

The Church of St. George

Lady Triss sat behind her desk, scrolls and reports stacked like quiet fortresses around her. She looked up as Los entered. His cloak was torn. His armor bore scratches and dents. And though he stood straight, the tiredness clung to him like dust.

He set the Writ before her.

"Tepok is dead," he said. "His goblins slain or scattered. The mine is clear. Asterite can flow again."

Triss's eyes moving over the ink with precise care. "And your companions?"

"Injured," Los replied, "but alive. The Sorceress will recover. McHeal... did a magnificent job."

A small, approving nod. "Good. And you?"

Los hesitated. Not long. But long enough for her trained eyes to see it.

"Alive," he said.

And nothing more.

Triss studied him—his stance, the breath he didn't quite take, the hand he kept over the cord beneath his shirt. A dozen questions rose in her chest, none she could voice.

At last she set the Writ aside.

"Then you've done well," she said.

Her tone was even.

Her heart was not.

The Merchant's Tavern

The fire cracked and tankards clinked as laughter spilled from the corner booth. The mine-crew had claimed it entirely—loud, triumphant, and rowdy enough to shake dust from the rafters.

"Did you see the look on that goblin's face?" Rhic boomed, sweeping his polearm through the air with enough enthusiasm to endanger bystanders. "Like he'd seen death coming on two legs!"

Lygar snorted into his ale. "I was doing just fine until those damn smites kept flashing in my eyes. Bunk, do you ever *pray* without setting something on fire?"

Bunk didn't look up from his mug. "They kept targeting me," he muttered. "I was angry."

Across the table, the casters were at war—again.

"The mez was *stable* until you broke it," Valora said, voice thin as ice, eyes narrowing at the Cabalist.

Lirien sipped her wine with serene indifference. "It was that, or let Rhic die screaming. Either option had merit."

Rhic barked a laugh. "Next time, decide faster! I was fighting three of the little beasts while his highness"—he jabbed his mug toward Los—"was dancing with Tepok!"

Los cracked a faint, crooked smile. "Jes... dance is one word for it."

The table erupted again.

Tepok the Overseer had been a monster of iron and muscle—big as a troll, mean as any nightmare. Every swing of that cleaver had been like a falling gate. Three times Los had felt the world blur at the edges. In the end, he'd taken Tepok's head to end the fight for good.

Gwendolyn lifted her mug, her smile warm and resolute. "To survival."

Los raised his tankard in return. "To a job well done."

They drank.

And for a few hours, tucked into a warm corner of Camelot, there was peace.

There was laughter.

And there was the rare grace of living long enough to enjoy both.

Quiet Despair

After the tavern's warmth had guttered out, after the laughter faded into distant echoes swallowed by Camelot's stone, Los slipped away from the city's sleeping heart and made his way to the church.

St. George's was dark at this hour, lit only by the faint glow of a few stubborn candles that had burned too low to be worth extinguishing. Their light pooled weakly across the nave as Los crossed it, silent as a penitent ghost. He dipped his head, out of habit rather than thought, and pushed open the heavy iron gate to the crypt stair.

Cold air met him—cooler than the night above, smelling of limestone, wax, and the faintest trace of old incense. The catacombs breathed around him, a hollow whisper that wrapped the silence close.

He descended.

Past empty arches.

Past old tombs with names he could not pronounce.

Past the carved effigies of knights who had earned the rest he believed he never would.

He reached the narrow alcove that had become his bed—a stone shelf meant for the dead, not the living. Now Los claimed the space because it hurt no one, burdened no one, and asked nothing in return.

He eased himself down, the stone cold against his back as he let his body fold at last. His tunic was still dusted from the mines; his muscles throbbed from the long fight; the bruises under his ribs pulsed with every breath.

His hand rose to his chest.

His fingers closing around the cord. Around the ring. Around the only solid thing he had left in this world.

His eyes squeezed shut—too tight, trying to hold everything in. Trying to dam the ache that broke through every time the world grew quiet.

He had failed.
Again.

Failed her.
Failed to join her.
Failed to die when his life should have ended.

And Bunk—Bunk and his miracles—had shown him how easily a man could be dragged back from the brink. How easily survival could be forced upon him.

Even in battle, God denied him release.

His chest tightened. His breath hitched.

He trembled.

This time he couldn't stop it—the shiver that ran through him, the ache in his throat, the silent sob he swallowed because he would not allow himself tears where anyone might hear.

His fingers dug into the fabric of his shirt, gripping the ring so hard it bit into his palm.

"Perdóname..."
His voice cracked.
"Perdóname, mi amor..."

A breath.
A broken sound.
A confession to the dead.

"Porque estoy atrapado aquí..."
His forehead pressed against his clenched hand.
"...condenado a vivir."

The catacombs offered no comfort.
Only stone.
Only silence.
Only the weight of a life he did not want, and could not shed.

Los lay there in the dark, trembling, fighting tears he could no longer hold back.

Alone with the ring.
Alone with the memory of her.
Alone with the life he had not chosen—and the death he could not reach.

And eventually, exhaustion pulled at him, heavy as chains.

He closed his eyes, breath unsteady, fingers locked around her ring as he drifted into a restless sleep.

And in the darkness, something unseen settled beside him—
a presence soft as a breath, watching over him as he slept.

Chapter XVIII – The Field Between

The Village of Humberton – Hearths and Letters

The thatch-roofed homes of Humberton curled like old fingers in the Black Mountains South, smoke rising in lazy columns. Inside one of them, warm bread cooled on a sill and laughter spilled from the hearth.

"Eat, Bunk. You're thinner than a horse that's lost a wager," his mother chided, ladling stew into a wooden bowl.

Bunk sat—stoic, quiet, freshly returned from the battle at the mine—and nodded, eyes softening at the sound of his younger siblings squabbling over who got the last roll. For a moment, the warmth of home overwhelmed the grim echoes of battle still ringing in his mind.

"Paladins again?" asked his father, seated across the table, brow lifted.

Bunk gave a short nod. "Yes, Father. And a Friar. Even a Sorceress, though she preferred to keep to herself."

His father smirked gently. "And the Spaniard?"

At that, Bunk's stoicism faltered just for a heartbeat. "Still breathing," he said. Then, quieter, as if the hearth might carry the words out the chimney, "Somehow."

His father didn't laugh. He only watched Bunk a moment, the way a man watched weather. "Somehow."

Bunk's spoon hovered above the stew. He set it down instead.

"He doesn't fear death," Bunk said, voice low. "That isn't courage. It's... a problem."

Across the table, his mother paused mid-step, as if she'd heard a word she didn't like. The younger ones kept squabbling, blissfully unaware.

His father didn't answer at once. He tore a piece of bread, slow, thoughtful—then glanced past Bunk's shoulder toward the dark window, where the road lay invisible beyond the glass like a memory.

"Or it's a man who's seen enough death to stop bargaining with it," he said at last.

Bunk's jaw tightened. "He walks into it, Father. Like he's trying to prove something. Like he's... waiting for it."

His father's eyes stayed on the window. "Maybe he is."

That landed harder than Bunk expected.

Then his father looked back to him, steady as oak. "Either way—watch him close. Not to judge him. To guard the men around him."

Bunk let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. "I do."

"I know you do." His father reached for his cup, then added, almost casually, "Just don't confuse recklessness with malice. Sometimes the Light puts broken weapons in good hands."

Bunk's gaze dropped to his bowl. The stew had cooled a little in the time it took his thoughts to catch up.

His mother set the ladle down with a soft clink and kissed the top of his head as she passed behind him—quick, like she didn't want the boys to see. "Eat," she murmured again, gentler this time. "You can't guard anyone on an empty stomach."

Bunk lifted the spoon.

But even as he ate, his mind was back in the mine—back in the dust and the shouting and the way Los had moved like a man who did not care whether he lived, only whether others did.

And that frightened him.

Outside the Church – The Three Brothers Reunited

They found each other in the courtyard as bells rang softly in the spires above, sunlight catching on the tall stained windows of St. George's. The cobbles beneath their boots were warm with late afternoon light, and for a moment, the world stood still.

"You look older," said Proximo, his brow raised as he took in Los's leaner face and eyes sharpened by burdens.

"I missed Jou too," Los replied, flashing a weary grin. There was no defensiveness—only the simple joy of familiar faces and shared trials.

Romao approached with a clank of half-loosened armor, hair longer and eyes deeper-set than Los remembered. He clapped Los firmly on the shoulder. "We missed you. We thought—well, Bunk would be here with you."

Los chuckled, the sound rough but genuine. "He's with his family. Deservedly so. He needed a rest."

The three stood quietly, reverently, sensing the fleeting peace around them.

The silence was too sacred to break, but someone had to.

Then Los broke the stillness. "Let's hit the tavern. My throat's dry, and I'm sure we all have stories to tell."

The Merchants' Tavern – Tales of the Road

The tavern was low-lit and lively, beams thick with age and blackened from centuries of smoke. The fire crackled in the hearth with orange promise, air thick with roasted game, stale mead, and worn leather boots.

They claimed a corner table beneath a faded banner bearing the Sigil of Albion, its threadbare gold barely catching the candlelight.

A serving girl brought drinks without being asked—clearly having seen the weight of their travels and scars from battles. She smiled politely at Romao, and he returned it with enough charm to coax a laugh.

"To returning," Prox said, raising his mug.

"To not dying," Romao added, clinking his own to Prox's.

Los lifted his cup last. "And to good friends."

They drank.

Later, as the first chill of evening settled into stone walls, the stories flowed.

"Did I tell you," said Prox, leaning forward, "about the goblin who tried to duel me?"

Los raised a brow. "A goblin? Singular?"

Prox nodded solemnly. "Chain armor, bucket for a helmet, a rusty sword he scavenged. Charged me like Arthur reborn. Little bastard swung like he meant it, nearly took my leg off."

Romao snorted ale from his nose. "Lies."

"No! I respected his spirit. Gave him a warrior's burial after."

"And the sword?" asked Los.

"Made it a grave marker. Little bugger earned it. Placed the bucket on top as a shrine."

Laughter rang honest and clear.

Romao spoke next. "A robber in the Avalon Marsh, made shadows dance like wolves—beautiful trick, until one bit me. Then I realized—ah, real wolves."

"Shadow wolves don't bite," Prox agreed sagely.

Romao smirked. "Exactly. Real wolves. Then swamp rats. Then a giant frog. After fighting half the marsh I realized I hadn't even reached the fellow I was supposed to kill."

More laughter. More emptied mugs.

Then silence settled softly. Los traced his cup's rim, eyes distant. "I took a green group into Tepok's Mine. Adventurers, fresh and stumbling. But we won."

"Not everyone can match us," Prox said simply.

"No," Los agreed quietly. "But sometimes, I forget patience."

The silence lingered, comfortable yet heavy.

Romao leaned back and sighed. "We'll ride again soon. Letters are coming—more requests, more dangers."

Los nodded, eyes half-lidded with weariness. "Let's hope they send us together next time."

They drank again. Beneath faded banners, their brotherhood stood strong.

The Assignment Board

Bootsteps. Orders. A line formed at the northern end of the square—adventurers needing Clerics, Friars, Paladins.

Romao picked a request from Caer Witrin: investigating a haunted church in Cornwall. Proximo was assigned to Lynn Barfog, near the high crags.

Both hesitated, exchanging quiet glances with Los.

"You'll be alright?" Romao finally asked, voice tender and brotherly.

Los smiled softly, sincerely. "Go. Someone needs to carry the Light to the edge of the world."

The Frontier – The Plan

Not long after, the call came. Knight-Captain Rex was raising a host at the frontier's edge. It was Los's turn to answer the call as iron, distant rain, and tension filled the air.

Rhic and Lygar sharpened blades beneath war banners.

"You ready?" Lygar elbowed Rhic playfully.

"Born ready," said Rhic. "We hold the middle of the line, let's take the glory of the first blows upon the enemy!"

Los was silent, gaze now set upon the line of shields across the field before them, fingers finding the ring beneath his armor. He barely heard Rex bark orders.

"Hold formation. Let them come. Their shield wall will lose cohesion as they cross the field. When it does—*we strike.*"

Los said nothing. This is what he had come to Albion for.

This moment.

He placed his hand upon his chest over the ring.

Soon, he thought. *Just a little longer.*

The Field Between – March Without Thought

Damp ground. Breath misting in air thick with sweat and fear. Los moved before realizing—steps carrying him forward, sword drawn, heart racing.

Behind, Rhic laughed, then stopped abruptly. "Wait. Where's Los?"

Lygar pointed grimly. "There."

Los walked alone, sword drawn, breath steady, moving toward the sea of Midgard shields.

"Fool," Rhic spat. "What's he doing?!"

Battlements and Trees – Watching the Madman

From the battlements, Knight-Captain Rex cursed. "Who is that breaking rank—the reckless fool!"

Beside him, his Lieutenant Rhett frowned. "Looks like suicide...or madness."

In trees nearby, Chloe crouched beside Endrond. "You seeing this?"

Endrond nodded then signaled quietly. "Volley on my mark."

The Charge

Halfway across, Los's clarity returned in a rush—too late did he realize what he had done.

I've gone too far.

He hesitated, pulse thundering. He touched the spot on his chest over the ring. His resolve hardened.

Soon, mi amor.

The army of Midgard laughed. Trolls pounded shields, dwarves jeered.

"Come, little lamb!" one shouted.

Los gripped his sword and charged, roaring fiercely.

The Avalanche

Rhic raised his polearm and looked to Lygar. "We follow!"

Lygar unsheathed blades. "Damned right!"

Then others followed.

A moment before Los crashed like a hammer into Midgard lines the first volley fell. The enemies shields were unprepared as they mocking the lone paladin, the army felt the sting of their mistake, their laughter silenced.

Their line raked by arrows allowed Los to drive into their ranks.

Then the second volley fell—and Albion's army slammed home.

Aftermath

The field was a graveyard.

Beneath a pile of bodies—Trolls, Norsemen, shieldmaidens—Rhic and Lygar found Los.

His armor was dented, he was bloody, his left arm hung limp, but his eyes were open though glazed with pain.

"You bloody idiot, charging in alone" Rhic muttered, pulling Los up, "and yet somehow you lived."

Los groaned in pain. "Unfortunately."

Lygar grinned, helping him. "I have never seen anything like it, you were fearless."

Los didn't answer, his hand pressing the armor over the ring.

The Keep – That Night

By firelight, songs were sung.

Los sat apart, back against a stone wall, wine untouched.

A cleric had already attended to him.

All around the camp others called him *hero. The Lone Paladin. The hammer of Albion.*

But when Rhic and Lygar finally sat beside him, they questioned.

"You doing that again?" Lygar asked solemnly.

"No," Los whispered.

"What were you thinking?" Rhic questioned, full of concern.

Los stared quietly into the darkness, then mumbled finally, "Not thinking. Just..."

His hand rested over the ring hidden beneath his shirt, as he looked beyond the walls to distant stars and mourned her once more.

He had failed again.

Soon, mi amor. Just a little longer...

Chapter XIX – Consequences

The King's Council – Camelot

The long chamber of stone and gold flickered with torchlight, banners quartered blue and red with a golden grail hanging above the marble dais. King Constantine sat upon the throne of Albion, his crown catching the light in thin glints of flame. Around him stood his trusted council—Chancellor Wacian in a gilded grey robe, Champion Norcross in warplate polished bright, and Master Edric robed in sable and shadow.

The great doors opened. Boots rang on stone.

Two men approached: one with a Paladin's mantle draped over arcanium armor, the other an Armsman cloaked in the purple and white of his guild—Rex and Rhett, leaders of the Arthurian Knights and the Knights Templar, commanders of the northern defense.

They bowed.

"Come forward," Constantine said, his voice full of authority. "And report."

Rex stepped forward, tall and immovable as a tower shield. "Your Majesty. We held the frontier. The army of Midgard was driven back beyond our border. But..." His brow tightened, jaw clenched. "A Paladin training under Lady Triss—Los Ortiz—broke ranks. He charged alone into the center of the enemy line. It was not strategy. It was not bravery. It was recklessness, and it nearly cost us the entire battle."

Rhett exhaled through his nose, stepping up beside him. "Your Majesty, Sir Rex speaks true. The boy disobeyed orders. But... his lone charge broke their center and stunned them. Others followed. And we won."

"That does not absolve him," Rex said sharply. "Outcome does not excuse the danger. I request a formal reprimand."

Norcross nodded, arms folded across his breastplate. "Make him a hero, and you'll birth a dozen undisciplined fools."

"And yet," Edric said calmly, "in every tavern, from Camelot to Castle Sauvage... they're already praising him. Calling him a knight, even if we do not. 'The Lone Paladin,' they whisper. The realm is weary of war, of the constant dangers that plague the realm. Perhaps it needs a hero. A name the common folk can cheer for. This Ortiz has become one—whether we bless it or not."

The King leaned back, his fingers stroking his beard. "Then perhaps we should give them one... a knight."

Rex stepped forward, voice rising. "No, Your Majesty. With all due respect. Glory without discipline is no virtue—it is folly."

Norcross added, "The boy's actions, if left unchecked, will only lead to his death. His—and those who follow his example."

Wacian tilted his head, fingers steepled. "I agree with Edric. The people crave heroes, and they've chosen this Paladin. Why not give the realm what it already believes it has?"

"I agree with Sir Rex," Rhett said finally, jaw set. "Battles are won by discipline, not heroics. He's brave. But it was reckless."

A long silence fell.

Constantine exhaled and rose from the throne. "No."

The room held its breath.

"I will not knight him. Not yet. The crown cannot afford to reward undisciplined acts—no matter the outcome."

He turned to Edric. "Let the people praise him. But we will not. Let the boy earn his knighthood as all others have—through discipline, through service, and through time."

Rhett bowed his head. Rex gave a satisfied nod.

Edric said nothing, but his eyes dimmed like a candle behind glass.

Wacian only nodded.

The Church of St. George – Lady Winchell's Chambers.

The sanctuary was hushed, its air heavy with candle smoke and faint echoes of chant. Lady Winchell stood in the glow of the altar, her hands folded in quiet reflection, when a hesitant knock broke the stillness.

The door creaked open.

Bunk McHeal stepped inside, helmet under his arm, shoulders stiff as if dragged by duty rather than will. His eyes wouldn't quite meet hers.

"I heard about the northern defense," he began, voice low. "But... that's not why I came." He swallowed, shifting the helmet in his grip. "It's... the mine."

Winchell turned fully, brows drawn. "Go on."

Bunk hesitated, the words sticking in his throat. "The fight in the Black Mountains. Not much has been said. But Los—Paladin Ortiz—he fought like..." He trailed off, jaw tightening. "Like a man who didn't care if he lived or died."

He glanced down, as if ashamed to give voice to it.

"It was more than recklessness. He threw himself in front of every blow—always first in, never stepping back, no matter the odds." His voice faltered again. "I saw it in his face. He wasn't fighting to win. He was fighting so no one else would be lost. And he succeeded. We lived. All of us. But..."

The last word hung heavy. He couldn't finish.

Winchell studied him in the silence that followed—the way he shifted under the weight of what he'd said, the way his fingers tightened around his helm like a confession made to a judge.

Finally she spoke, voice even but grave. "Thank you, Bunk. I'll make sure Lady Triss is made aware."

Bunk gave the faintest nod, relief and guilt mingling in his eyes. He bowed quickly, then left the cloister as though the shadows themselves might accuse him of speaking up.

The Church of St. George – The Upper Walk

The bells had not rung yet, but the sky beyond the clerestory windows was already pale with morning. The light played along the elevated stone passage, softly glowing against the stone columns, and the hush of the sanctuary below rose faintly through the arches.

Lady Triss stood at the balcony, her hands folded behind her back, watching as the dawn crept across Camelot.

Soft footsteps approached. She didn't turn.

"Triss," came the quiet voice.

"Winchell," Triss answered, her voice low but warm.

They stood in silence for a moment, the kind shared only by those who had long stopped needing permission to speak.

Then Winchell stepped beside her, eyes on the city. "Bunk came to me."

Triss shifted her gaze, just slightly.

Winchell nodded. "He said in the mine, that Los fought like a man who embraced death." her voice was solemn.

There was no immediate reply as Triss gazed out across the city, taking in what Winchell had just said.

"He said he stepped in front of every blow. Never protected himself. Like he wasn't trying to survive. Like he was just trying to keep everyone else alive."

Triss inhaled through her nose, then exhaled slowly.

Winchell didn't push. She simply added, with gentleness, "Your son's heart is broken, Triss. And no one but us knows why."

Triss finally turned her head, meeting her friend's eyes. "He's so young."

Winchell nodded. "If something doesn't change, Rebecca... he won't grow old."

There was nothing more to say.

Winchell reached out, rested her hand briefly on Triss's arm—a quiet gesture of support, and of sorrow—and then left, her steps fading softly down the stone.

Camelot – The Black Dragon Tavern

The smell of ale, old stone, and charred meat clung to the rafters. Endrond sat at a corner table beside Chloe and Cadens. The tavern buzzed with retellings of the battle. Of Los's heroism and fearlessness. Coins clinked. Dice tumbled. Songs were sung.

"He charged the center of their line alone," Chloe said, still in disbelief of what she had witnessed. "Have you ever seen anything like that before?"

Endrond shook his head slowly. "No. And I don't know if I want to see it again."

Cadens sipped his drink, eyes unreadable. For once, he held his tongue.

"He could've died," she said. "Would've, if they hadn't followed our volley."

Endrond frowned. "But they did follow. That's the strange part. No one questioned it."

Chloe stared into her cup. "That's what frightens me most. That they followed him."

Lady Triss's Quarters

Lady Triss stood in silence, one hand resting on the cold stone sill as she gazed over the waking city.

He fought like a man who wished to die.

The thought echoed inside her, tightening her grip on the stone.

"Who is she?" she whispered. "Who do you mourn so deeply, my son, that you hurl yourself at death to follow her?"

Her fingers curled harder against the sill. *"And what must I do to stop you?"*

The city stirred below, but within the chamber all was still—save for the weight of love unspoken, and a mother's prayer trapped behind armor and silence.

At last, she turned to the drawer, hands trembling, and drew out Don Flavio's letter.

Perhaps it was time to tell him.

The Burns Manor

Angela heard the news from a messenger boy that morning—Los Ortiz had nearly been knighted for his actions in the frontier.

Her fingers curled around the training sword at her hip.

"Of course he was," she muttered.

Across the yard, Julia looked up from her drills. "He did win the battle."

Angela exhaled sharply. "He nearly died doing so. That's not heroism—that's recklessness."

But her words rang hollow. Because part of her envied him. And part of her feared for him—feared what was broken inside him that made him fight like that.

She turned on her heel and marched toward the Church of St. George.

The Church of St. George – The Nave

She found Lady Triss alone in the nave, gazing at the high stained glass with quiet reverence.

"My lady," she said, voice hesitant, "is it true?"

Triss raised her eyes, slow and calm. "Is what true?"

Angela stepped forward. "That the King nearly knighted him. That Los—was being considered for elevation. After the battle."

Triss's eyes did not narrow, but they seemed to freeze.

"And where did you hear this?"

"From a messenger boy this morning."

Triss had not heard this rumor, it both shocked and pleased her all at once, but she maintained her composure.

"Do not believe every rumor you hear." She admonished her pupil with a tender smile.

"I want to resume my training," Angela said.

Triss didn't look away. "You never stopped."

"I, want more." She said insistently.

At that, Triss slowly studied her. "Very well. It is time you learned your next chants."

Angela hesitated, then glanced down. Her voice was softer now. "And a mission. A quest. Something."

Lady Triss laid a hand gently on her shoulder.

"A chance to prove yourself?"

Angela looked up and nodded. It was selfish. It was unbecoming of a Paladin to seek glory. But right now, she didn't want to be patient. She wanted to *matter*. Not to be overlooked. Not to be overshadowed.

If I succeed, she thought, they'll speak my name too.

Triss nodded once. "I have a mission for you and your sisters. Julia will go with you, as will two from Lady Calla's company—Jestec and Hollia. You'll lead them. Together, you will clear Keltio Fogou in Campacorentin Forest."

Angela blinked. "Just us?"

"Yes," Triss said. "With Light. With discipline. With each other." Then she stepped back, voice quiet but firm. "Now—chant."

And so, beneath the stained-glass shadows of St. Georges's nave, Angela began again.

Refocillatio Angelorum... Celeritas Amplificata... Carmen Firmitudinis ... Potentia Virtutis... Obice Fidei...

The Church of St. George's – The Garden

Her hands trembled as she walked the garden after Angela had departed.

So close, she thought. They nearly knighted him, could it be true?

A mother's pride welling up inside of her. For a moment she let herself forget what he had done.

Softly she whispered to herself:

"Lorenzo... do you even know how close you came to becoming what I once dreamed for you?"

In the silence, she held her hand to her chest and prayed.

Lord Baldric's Manor

Lord Baldric had only just returned to the capital.

For a week he had ridden the countryside—visiting lesser lords, whispering alliances into wine cups, assuring wavering nobles that his aims were humble, loyal, purely to strengthen Albion.

Even Lord Adribard, with his irritating independence, served a purpose. Baldric could speak of harvest yields and border raids over supper, and if anyone in Camelot inquired after the meeting, it would seem nothing more than the realm's business as usual.

Now, back within the velvet-draped walls of his study, the fire had burned low. Shadows clung to the corners, stretching long behind polished furniture and half-drawn curtains.

He sat at his desk, fingers faintly stained with ash and ink, the latest field report finally in hand.

He read it slowly.

The mine was cleared. Asterite extraction has begun.

He allowed himself a smile.

At last. The veins are open, and the crown did the work for me. Let them celebrate—every coin drawn from that mountain flows through my hand first.

But his gaze turned cold as he reached the final line:

Mission led by Paladin Los Ortiz. Group included Venomites. Casualties: none.

The smile vanished.

So... the boy leads heretics now.

But it was the second report that enraged him:

The battle in the northern frontier.

Los Ortiz being praised as a fearless hero.

The King considered knighting him.

He tossed the parchment aside, as if it were poisonous. Then, without rising, he drew out a fresh scroll and dipped his quill.

The Chancellor had assisted him in clearing the mine.

Now he had another task.

His eyes drifted to the map pinned beside the hearth. Then settled on the Catacombs of Cordova.

He had heard the stories. Tomb raiders entered, drawn by whispers of relics and forgotten gold.

None ever came out.

His handwriting flowed—smooth, deliberate.

To the Chancellor

Subject: Deployment Request – Catacombs of Cordova

Disturbances reported in the Catacombs of Cordova.

Confirmed undead activity.

The situation demands a swift and thorough purge.

Deploy those who cleared the Asterite mine as most suited.

Modest reward offered.

He paused. The quill hovered above the parchment.

Then, softly, he murmured to no one:

“Nearly knighted—before more worthy men of the realm. No.

For that, I will see you dead before they have the chance to consider it again. And those heretics along with you.

If the people wish to crown a fool, I will make a martyr instead."

With a flourish, he signed the page and pressed his signet ring into the dark wax.

It cooled with a hiss.

The seal held.

The trap was set.

The Writ

The chamber was still. Only the whisper of parchment and the steady scratch of a quill disturbed the quiet.

Chancellor Wacian sat at his desk, sunlight slanting through the arched window behind him, casting golden bars across a spread of reports and requisitions. His gilded grey robes shimmered faintly with the movement of his arms as he reached for the next document in the stack—another field request, this one from Lord Baldric.

He read it with half-lidded eyes.

"Catacombs of Cordova," he murmured, brows barely twitching. "Same group as the mine..."

Wacian sighed, dipping his quill once more. If Lord Baldric found the group effective, so be it. The matter of why the Catacombs needed clearing—if they needed clearing—was no concern of the Crown so long as the cost wasn't tallied to the royal ledger. There was no threat reported. No living enemy. No urgency. Just... curiosity, perhaps. Or mischief.

With a flick of his wrist, Wacian signed the new Writ and pressed the Crown's seal into hot wax.

"Deliver this to Tycho, leader of the Venomites," he instructed the waiting scribe.

"He handled the last one."

And with that, the matter vanished from Wacian's desk and from his mind like dust swept from marble.

Chapter XX – Questions and Answers

The Venomite's Instinct

Tycho held the missive in his hands, the red wax broken, the parchment still crisp.

A direct request. The Crown wanted the very same group. Not just another Venomite group. The same *group*.

He read it again.

The same group — though no names were listed.

His eyes narrowed, the corners creasing with unease.

Something felt wrong.

He tucked the writ into his cloak and made his way toward the Church of St. George. The towering stone facade loomed before him like a monolith to tradition. He'd always found its presence stifling. Better, in his mind, the cathedral of the woods, where sunlight filtered through branches and the wind carried prayers to the sky.

Inside the nave, he spotted Lady Triss to the right of the altar, her students—Romao, Proximo, and Los—arrayed before her as she guided them through Paladin chants. To the left, Lady Winchell stood with Julia and Bunk, the clerics hunched over Latin texts, murmuring blessings as they studied.

Tycho stepped forward, his boots echoing against stone.

Lady Triss turned before he spoke. She *felt* him coming. The air shifted around her shoulders like rising hackles. She stepped between Tycho and her students, voice like a drawn blade.

"How may we help you?" she asked coldly, her eyes narrowing as if to burn a hole through his veil of composure.

Unperturbed, Tycho gave a shallow bow and produced the unsealed writ.

"I am in need of your Paladin once more," he said.

Her body tensed—just slightly, but it was enough. A lioness shielding her cub.

"I have three here today. Romao and Proximo are eager and well-prepared."

Tycho nodded politely to them. Then met her eyes again.

"If it's not too much trouble... I require Los." Then a deliberate pause. "And McHeal."

A sharp glance flashed from Lady Winchell to Triss, wordless and biting. *Deny this! He dares request them by name? The Church chose who to send—not the petitioner.*

Bunk stiffened. He had warned her—warned them all—that Los was reckless, perhaps unstable. Being assigned with him again made his gut knot.

Lady Triss inhaled slowly. She wanted to deny it. *Desperately.* But there was no excuse she could offer that wouldn't ring hollow under scrutiny.

"And the purpose of this Writ?" she asked carefully.

Tycho held her gaze.

"To clear the Catacombs of Cordova."

Triss's expression didn't change—but something behind her eyes tightened.

"Will you be joining them this time?" she asked.

Tycho shook his head. "I have... other matters to look into."

Like where this order truly originated.

Of course you do, she thought, her eyes narrowing.

But the seal was official. The writ bore the authority of the King. There was no way to refuse.

"I will release them to you once their lesson concludes," Triss said stiffly.

Tycho gave another respectful bow. "The others await them at the inn in Cotswold. They are already acquainted."

And with that, he turned and walked away, the cord of his robe brushed the floor like a tether dragging secrets behind him.

Between the Pillars

Lady Triss and Lady Winchell stepped behind the altar, the sunlit nave separating them from their students like a curtain of gold and silence. The moment they were out of earshot, Winchell turned on her peer with a whisper edged like steel.

"You should have refused him," she hissed. "We owe Tycho nothing."

"I know," Triss murmured. "But the seal was clean. Official."
Her fingers were clenched at her sides, as if resisting the urge to strike something.

Winchell folded her arms. "There's no reason to disturb the dead. No incursion. No plague. No bandit threat. Why would the Crown send them into the Catacombs?"

"I don't know," Triss admitted, though the question burned inside of her.

They fell into silence for a moment, two pillars of resolve, bracing beneath a storm they could not name.

"We should at least advance their training," Winchell said. "If we cannot stop this, we can give them stronger armor to weather it."

Triss nodded in agreement. The die was cast; there was little more to do now.

Meanwhile – Quiet Questions and Sudden Smiles

Across the nave, Los turned to Bunk with a measured glance.

"Jou don't want to go, do jou?" Los asked quietly, not accusing—just tired.

Bunk looked at him with flat honesty. "Yes, I do not like them, they are undisciplined, and you... are reckless."

Los looked down. "Jou heard then."

Bunk breathed heavily, "Everyone heard."

Silence settled between them—quiet, uncomfortable, but true.

A moment later a gentle voice floated across the aisle.

"Proximo?" Julia's voice was soft, melodic.

The Paladin turned, surprised. Her approach was quiet, her presence almost glowing in the morning light. The sun framed her in golden radiance, and Prox suddenly forgot how to breathe.

"Yes?" he asked, clearing his throat.

She smiled—sweet and curious.

"May I ask you something?"

He glanced once at Romao, who raised an eyebrow and offered a silent *go on*. Then Prox turned back to Julia and gave a small nod.

"When is Los's birthday?" she asked, tilting her head.

The question caught him off guard. For a second, he had expected... well, something else. Something more.

"July 7th," he said slowly. "Why?"

Julia's smile widened, and she looked secretly pleased. "Just asking for a friend."

She turned as if to return to her studies—then paused.

"And Proximo..." she said over her shoulder, flashing him a special smile. "When's your birthday?"

He blinked. "Um... September 19th."

With a graceful little curtsy, Julia returned to her texts.

Prox stared after her, stunned, like a man who had just heard an angel hum his name.

Romao chuckled and slapped a hand against Prox's chest.

"She likes you, my friend."

Prox's ears went red. "What? No—she was just asking about birthdays."

Romao arched a brow. "She didn't ask *mine*."

Prox risked another glance. Julia looked back and offered a second smile, soft as a summer breeze.

Romao grinned wider. "Definitely likes you."

The Chant Lessons

Lady Triss stood before her students once more, her mantle catching the stained-glass light in shades of crimson and gold. There was a weight behind her calm—something unsaid but known to all.

She looked at each of them—Romao, Proximo, and Los—as if seeing them not as boys in training, but as knights preparing to walk into the light.

"This morning," she said, her voice low and steady, "you will not train for today's trials. You will train for what tomorrow may demand of you."

She raised her hand, and the air itself seemed to hush.

"These are not chants for novices. They are for Paladins of tested will, who fight not for glory, but for those who will never know their names."

Her gaze lingered on Los, then softened as she continued.

"I will teach you the higher chants—those that bind you to one another when fear would pry you apart."

Triss raised her hand and began—not loudly, but with a clarity that made the courtyard feel suddenly still.

Aura of Invincibility — *Aura Invincibilitatis*.
Custodi me, Domine, virtute quae non vincitur.
(Guard me, O Lord, with power that cannot be overcome.)

Angels' Refreshment — *Refocillatio Angelorum*.
Angelorum ministerio, Domine, refice nos.
(By the ministry of angels, restore us.)

Chant of Resilience — *Carmen Firmitudinis*.
Infunde nobis, Domine, firmitudinem contra lassitudinem.
(Pour into us endurance against weariness.)

Then her voice tightened, the names coming quicker—commands now, not comforts, meant to be caught and held:

Battle Zeal — *Zelus Belli*...
Virtuous Power — *Potentia Virtuosa*...
Crusader's Protection — *Praesidium Cruciferi*...
Infuriate — *Incitatio Furoris*...
Amplified Celerity — *Celeritas Amplificata*...

The three nodded solemnly. Even Romao, usually quick with a smirk, stood reverent, as if before an altar.

They knelt and repeated her words—names first, like keys set into memory:
"Aura Invincibilitatis... Refocillatio Angelorum... Carmen Firmitudinis... Zelus Belli...
Potentia Virtuosa... Praesidium Cruciferi... Incitatio Furoris... Celeritas
Amplificata..."

"These," Triss said softly, "are not simply chants. They are legacies. Use them wisely—and return to me whole."

And so they learned—not spells, but vows bound in syllables of light.

Across the aisle, Lady Winchell had come to a similar conclusion. Though her tone was sharper, more academic, her intention was no less urgent.

She stood between her two students—Julia and Bunk—like a commander with her elite.

"You are both being sent into danger. I will not send you unprepared."

She gestured to their open texts.

"For you, Julia:
Major Restoration - *Refectio Maior*"

Julia bowed her head in understanding.

"And for you, Bunk:
Major Refocillation - *Refocillatio Maior*"

"Master them today. You may need them tomorrow."

Bunk nodded without complaint. His eyes were calm, but his grip on the edge of the pew was white-knuckled.

Elsewhere in the city, the same quiet urgency stirred.

The Burns Manor

In the warm-lit drawing room of the Burns residence, the hush of silk and parchment accompanied a private lesson far from the stone echo of churches.

Lady Eve, wrapped in cream and gold, stood before Angela with a grace more akin to a dove than a war maiden. Her hands folded gently over one another as she offered the lesson.

"You are a light in the darkness, Angela. And Keltio is a very dark place, with the light cleanse it."

Angela, seated with one hand resting on the hilt of her consecrated sword, met her mentor's gaze without flinching.

"I won't fail again," she said softly.

"I don't ask for perfection," Eve replied. "Simply that you do your best."

She handed her a scroll inked in deep red.

"Remember these chants and carry them in your marrow:

Aura Invincibilitatis... Refocillatio Angelorum... Carmen Firmitudinis... "

Angela exhaled slowly. The weight of those words settled on her like a mantle of iron and silk.

"I will lead them safely there," she said. "And I will return safely home with them all."

"I know," Eve said, placing her hand gently over Angela's. "Always remember the light does not abandon those who believe."

Farewells and Departures

The great doors of the Church of St. George creaked open as Lady Triss and Lady Winchell emerged into the morning light, the pale sun gleaming off the steps like burnished gold. The bell had not yet tolled the hour, but the square was already stirring with quiet movement—novices sweeping stone paths, pigeons flitting through high arches, a distant rider's hooves ticking across cobbles like a clock counting down.

Los and Bunk stood just inside the threshold. Their packs were ready. Weapons cleaned. Armor worn without ceremony.

Lady Triss faced them first. The wind caught her hair as she stepped forward, but her voice held firm.

"Los," she said, her tone both command and concern, "be careful."

He nodded once, solemn and steady.

"And bring them all back alive." Her eyes lingered on him with something unspoken. Not just duty. Something more fragile. More human.

"I will," he promised. "Or I won't come back at all."

Triss flinched—barely.

Lady Winchell gave Bunk a sharp nod,

He returned a determined nod back; he has promised her to bring him back alive. Nothing more needed to be said.

Lady Triss looked between them both one final time—her Paladin and Winchell's Cleric—then stepped back.

The door closed behind them with a thud like judgment rendered.

Cotswold Inn: The Reunion

Cotswold was quiet beneath the shadow of Camelot. Birds chirped unseen in the branches overhead, and the dirt path well worn by the many travelers headed to the great city. Yet it somehow felt green, and peaceful all around it.

Bunk rode a pace behind Los, sitting straight and tall as usual, but his eyes were wary and expression flat as stone.

"You don't look thrilled to be here," Los said without turning.

"I'm not," Bunk replied evenly. "We're heading to cursed ruins with undisciplined mercenaries, led by a Friar who won't even be joining us. What's there to be thrilled about?"

Los managed a faint smile. "I suppose the company."

"That's part of the problem."

The village of Cotswold sat at the entrance to Camelot surrounded by trees like a memory of peace—low stone cottages, smoke curling from hearths, and the familiar weather-worn sign of the inn creaking gently above its door.

Inside, it was as if nothing had changed.

Rhic and Lygar were already at the bar, mid-argument and halfway through tankards of ale.

"I'm telling you," Lygar said, slapping the wood, "Westwind Red is the superior brew. It has body."

"It has bark," Rhic retorted, "and no finish. Unlike Dragon's Roar—"

"Which tastes like boiled armor!"

Gwendolyn sat nearby, laughing easily. Her staff leaned against the wall beside her, and a glass of something golden in her hand. She glanced over as the door opened.

"Ah," she said warmly. "The Lone Paladin arrives."

Rhic turned with a grin. "Los!"

"And Bunk, of course," Gwendolyn added with a respectful curtsy.

Bunk gave a bow in return. Of all of them, he respected Gwendolyn the most. She was efficient, calm, and precise—laughing often, yes, but never when lives were on the line. During the mine mission, her healing had been clean and timely, her presence unwavering. She was disciplined and knew her job.

At a corner table sat Malthan, Lirien, and Valora, deep in arcane debate. Lirien gestured irritably with a small flame dancing on her fingertip.

"You can't cast two spells simultaneously the spells would become unstable!"

"They would be stable if you used quick cast!" Malthan argued, pointing at his open tome.

Valora sighed, sipping her wine. "If either of you could win a duel without burning your own robes, I'd listen."

Los stepped fully into the room.

"Shall we?" he asked, voice calm and clear.

Rhic raised his tankard

"A Toast before we go!"

All paused to hear.

"To the Lone Paladin!" he declared.

Lygar grinned and raised his mug. "And to Bunk, everyone's favorite scowling miracle-maker."

Bunk frowned. Of all the people he could be paired with, it had to be these two again, and he was not fond of either of them.

Lygar stood and stretched. "Tycho said you'd be leading again. Not planning to charge off alone this time, are you?"

Los glanced down. "No. Not this time." He said a bit softly

Lygar clapped a firm hand on his back. "Just teasing, lad."

"To adventure, then?" Rhic grinned, eyes bright.

Gwendolyn raised her glass. "To adventure."

They poured out onto the road like laughter breaking from a stone wall. Rhic and Lygar resumed their ale debate. Gwendolyn joined in with amused corrections.

The mages brought up the rear, still arguing about spell casting. They all mounted up and prepared for the long ride.

Los rode in silence, hand brushing the hidden weight beneath his tunic.

Bunk kept pace beside him without a word.

Behind them, the light of Cotswold faded into memory, and ahead lay adventure, or something darker.

Keltio Beckons

The cobbled square outside the Church of St. George glowed with morning light, still warm from the rising sun. Lady Triss and Lady Winchell stood on the steps like carved guardians, their mantles catching the breeze, their expressions unreadable.

From the lane leading southward came the soft clatter of hooves.

Angela Burns rode at the front, white cloak flowing over her armor like a banner of purpose. Julia followed beside her, reins in one hand, mace resting at her side. Behind them came Tamara and Amaranthia, each in robes of their callings and ready, their faces solemn but unbowed.

The girls dismounted in unison, their boots striking the stones like a promise.

Lady Winchell greeted them first with a nod. "You're late."

Angela smiled faintly. "We didn't want to leave Camelot without saying goodbye."

"You are not leaving. You are *going forth*," Lady Triss corrected softly with a warm smile, stepping down toward her.

She reached into her satchel and drew out a scroll sealed in silver wax.

"I've sent word ahead to Lady Calla. She will meet you at Caer Ulfwych. Jestec and Hollia will await you there."

Angela nodded, then hesitantly asked. "Are they trained as well as, I am?"

"No," Triss said. "But they are loyal. And they will follow your lead."

A beat passed between them—teacher and student, woman and girl, mother and daughter in all but name.

"You've grown, Angela," Triss said, touching her shoulder. "I know what happened north of Renaris. It would have broken others. But here you are. Steady. Smiling."

"I'm ready," Angela replied. Her voice trembled, but only slightly. "And I won't let them down."

"I believe you."

Behind them, Julia adjusted her pack and quietly slipped a hand into her belt pouch. Inside it, a folded scrap of paper—Proximo's birthday, scrawled in her own hand. She smiled to herself.

Tamara tightened her gloves. Amaranthia checked her staff. They were ready.

Lady Winchell stepped back and gave a nod of approval.

"Let the Light lead you. Let faith shield you. And come home safely"

Angela turned once more to Lady Triss, then mounted her steed. Triss placed a final hand over the horse's mane.

"Return with victory," she said softly. "And with each other."

Angela saluted. "We will."

She tucked the scroll into her satchel. A daughter of Camelot, ready to lead.

And with that, the four young women rode south, toward Keltio Fogou. Toward a test not of strength alone, but of trust, will, and what it meant to lead without fear.

Behind them, the bells of Camelot tolled once, deep and resonant.

A benediction. A warning.

Tycho in the Hall of Records

The ink had faded on most of the tomes.

Dust hung in shafts of amber light, motes drifting like the ghosts of forgotten scribes. Tycho moved silently through the archive vault beneath Camelot—a labyrinth of narrow aisles and brittle parchment. His fingers brushed spines marked in Latin, Old Cymric, and cruder tongues. He wasn't looking for spells. He was hunting intent.

The Asterite mine... Lost to the goblins years ago, and yet recently reclaimed. Its former deed-holder? *Lord Baldric*.

Tycho narrowed his eyes.

As for the Catacombs of Cordoba—only a single reference. A resting place. Roman origin. No records of unrest. A few reports of tomb robbers entering.

And yet, a writ.

He exhaled slowly, then turned toward the palace halls.

Outside the Chancellor's Chamber

Chancellor Wacian's door gleamed with fresh polish, but Tycho didn't knock. He sat outside of it, still, leaning against the stone with quiet patience upon a bench. When the Chancellor finally exited—robes rustling like parchment—Tycho's tall form shifted into motion.

"Chancellor," he said, bowing with formality.

Wacian blinked up at him. *"I'm sorry, have we met?"*

"I am Tycho. Of the Venomites." His tone was measured. "May I have a moment of your time?"

"I have a meeting; I do not wish to be late for."

Tycho stepped beside him, matching pace without aggression. "This will only take a moment."

Wacian sighed. "Make it quick. I've no time to waste."

Then he paused for a moment remembering.

"Venomites, you are the guild that cleared the mine... yes good work on the mine. You must have impressed Lord Baldric to be requested for another task." Wacian added.

Tycho stopped walking.

Wacian turned, noting the sudden stillness in the hall.

"Is there a problem?"

Tycho's voice was low. "No, Chancellor. Thank you for your time." He bowed deeper this time, with a shadowed grace.

Lord Baldric... what interest did he have in the catacombs? Or was it something else entirely?

Strange fellow Wacian thought to himself as he hurried away lest Tycho found his tongue.

Church of St. George – Romao and Proximo

Sunlight filtered through stained glass, casting colored patterns across the stone floor. Romao and Prox stood near the colonnade, armored but idle, watching the clergy bustle about.

"Feels like we've been benched," Romao muttered, arms crossed.

"Better to be bored than dead," Prox replied, though his tone betrayed impatience.

Lady Triss approached them with uncharacteristic distraction in her step. Her brow was furrowed. Something weighed on her.

"Milady," Romao said gently, "can we help?"

"No, Romao. All is well." A lie—smooth, practiced, and unconvincing.

"If we're not needed here..." he tried again, "might we ride to join Los in Cordova?"

Prox stood beside him.

Triss's response was swift. "No. I already sent one Paladin with that party. I won't send two more."

"Then... perhaps Angela's group?" Prox asked, his voice softer, eyes drifting toward the spot where he'd last seen Julia.

Triss paused—then shook her head.

"No, Angela will already have two Paladins with her once she arrives at Caer Ulfwych. If I send two seasoned Paladins with her, she will never learn to lead. She must have room to grow."

Romao raised a brow, but said nothing.

"You both need rest," Triss continued, her mind clearly elsewhere. "When was the last time you saw your family, Proximo?"

He blinked, caught off guard. "Some months, Milady."

"Then go and take Romao with you. And give your mother my love. She always made the most lovely apple pies"

They exchanged glances—conflicted, but obedient.

"As you wish," Prox said with a bow.

Triss watched them go, then turned. There were questions that needed answers—and only one place to find them.

Campacorentin – Two Arrivals

Los and his company rode through the forest before dusk. The moss-covered stones whispered of older wars. When they reached Caer Ulfwych, he was surprised to see two familiar faces—Jestec and Hollia—training beneath the watchful eye of Lady Calla.

He smiled. "Didn't expect to see you two here."

Jestec brightened. "Los!"

But Lady Calla remained silent, standing stiffly in the training yard of the Caer. Her eyes narrowed at the sight of him—stern, unmoved. Rumors had reached her long before the man himself. Reckless. Unorthodox. Dangerous.

Los sensed it immediately. He offered a small, respectful nod instead of a greeting she wouldn't accept.

"Where are you headed?" Hollia asked, before being given the eye by Lady Calla that said I did not give you permission to stop practicing.

Los noticed that too.

"We are on our way to Cornwall. We'll catch up on the way back—with stories to share, I'm sure."

Calla did not speak. Only watching in silent judgment as they rode off out of sight.

Angela's Arrival

Later that evening, Angela's group arrived.

The reception, this time, was... different.

Lady Calla approached with formality, giving Angela a shallow curtsy. "Lady Burns. Lady Triss speaks highly of you."

Angela bowed her head. "She's a remarkable mentor. Recently, I've trained under Lady Eve as well."

Calla's smile strained. "Yes... Eve. A softer touch... but no less dedicated. My students are tempered otherwise. This is Jestec, and this is Hollia." She said as she motioned to her pupils.

Angela acknowledged them with a polite nod. "I look forward to working with them."

Then she gestured behind her. "Tamara, Amaranthia—my sisters. And Julia, who is like a sister to me."

Julia smiled and brightened up at being called a sister.

Calla gave each a measured greeting, then turned to her pupils. "Jestec will guide you to Keltio. He knows the way."

Angela's reply was solemn. "Thank you, Lady Calla."

Lady Calla gave another short curtsy.

"May the Light guide you."

Calla watched them with a solemn certainty:

This group would be worthy of the challenge ahead.

Road to Keltio Fogou

The group moved at a steady pace.

"You just missed Los," Jestec said, trying for light conversation. "He passed through earlier."

Angela blinked. "I've never met him."

"Oh." Jestec sounded surprised. "He helped us slay giants once. Just him, Hollia, and myself."

From the rear, Hollia spoke up. "Lady Calla says he's reckless. But... I've never seen anyone fight like that. Fearless."

Angela's tone cooled. "From what I've heard, he charges ahead recklessly—without thinking, without planning ahead. That's not someone we're meant to follow."

Jestec hesitated. "You sound like Lady Calla."

Hollia nodded. "Lady Calla says 'Failure to plan is planning to fail.'"

"Well, there wasn't time for a plan when Los saved us from that first giant," countered Jestec.

Hollia gave him a sharp stare.

Angela nodded. "Well, we have time and a plan." She assured them.

She outlined it calmly: pair off, protect each other, move in wedge formation. Julia with her, Jestec with Amaranthia, Hollia with Tamara. Slow, deliberate clearing.

As they arrived at the entrance, a hush fell.

Jestec whispered, "We're here."

Angela raised her shield. "Everyone knows their role. Let the Light guide us."

Julia and Tamara whispered blessings. Chants rose around them—measured, sacred.

"Aura Indestructibilitatis..."

"Refocillatio Sanctorum..."

"Carmen Constantiae..."

Then Angela's voice joined—firmer, clear.

"Aura Invincibilitatis..."

"Refocillatio Angelorum..."

"Carmen Firmitudinis..."

The others felt it—her bearing, her confidence, the gravity of her leadership. They lifted their shields. Together, they stepped into shadow.

The Garden Meeting – Triss and Wacian

The garden behind St. George's was quiet but not empty. Wind brushed the hedges. Birds chirped in distant harmony.

Lady Triss waited beneath a marble arch, hands folded.

Wacian arrived, robe a bit dusty despite the short distance from the Palace to the church. "Lady Triss. A rare pleasure."

He nodded in respect.

She curtsied—graceful, precise. "I appreciate your time, Chancellor."

"Of course. What can I do for the Paladin Order?"

She kept her tone light. "You issued a writ recently, to clear out the Catacombs of Cordova."

"There have been... rumors. Minor disturbances. Nothing concrete. Best to act before it festers."

"So the Crown requested it." Lady Triss inquired.

"Not directly. The request came from Lord Baldric."

"I see." She let the silence hang. "He requested a specific group?"

"He did. Said the ones from the mine were best suited."

"Did he name them?"

"No. Just 'the same group.'" Wacian tilted his head. "Is something wrong?"

Triss placed a gentle hand on his sleeve. "Not at all. Only... I'll have to let one of my Paladins know he's made an impression."

Wacian smiled. "A commendation, then." He paused to see if there was anything more, but Triss remained silent. "If there is nothing else, I do need to return to the Palace, again it is always a pleasure visiting with you Lady Triss."

As he left, Triss stood beneath the ivy. Her eyes lingered on the garden's old stones.

Did Baldric know Los was part of that group?

Worse... does he know he is my son?

And what interest did he have in an old Roman catacomb?

She stood very still and closed her eyes, listening to the wind and wondered whether her fears were shadows of her own making—or something real.

Chapter XXI – The Catacombs of Cordova

Cornwall – The Warning

They had been traveling for more than a day with little rest when Los pressed the group onward past Avalon Marsh and Adribard's Retreat, ignoring dusk settling in. Bunk grew more irritable with every mile, and when they passed Caer Witrin in darkness, his patience snapped.

"This is reckless," Bunk grumbled from his saddle. "We'd be better off resting. Spirits stir more boldly after sunset."

"Afraid of the dark, priest?" Lygar grinned beside him.

Bunk's hand went to the haft of his mace. "I'm afraid of ignorance."

"If we clear it tonight, we sleep at the inn in Cornwall. Ale tastes better after a job's done," Gwendolyn offered with a half-smile.

Los said little. His hand strayed to the ring beneath his shirt. It felt warm—not from skin or motion, but as if another hand pressed it gently to his chest. As if she were there.

He closed his eyes briefly. Then pressed forward.

The Cornwall Inn

The inn at Cornwall was alive with evening chatter, firelight dancing on worn stone and oak beams. Los stepped inside and scanned the room—eyes lingering on the barkeep: a sharp-eyed woman in her mid-thirties, sleeves rolled, hair streaked with silver before it's time.

"Evening," he said, approaching. "I'm looking for information."

"You're buying a round, I hope?" she replied without turning, already pouring.

He smiled faintly and dropped coin on the counter. "A drink for everyone."

That drew eyes. A few muttered thanks. One man scoffed.

"Awfully generous, stranger."

"I like generous men," the barkeep said, handing him a tankard. "You could learn something, Sawyer."

"It's been a long day, Sally."

She turned to Los. "So—what is it you're looking for?"

"The Catacombs," Los said evenly. "Cordova. What do you know?"

The chatter died. A single log popped in the hearth.

Sawyer looked up. "You could ask the man in the back—if he lives."

Rhic tensed. Los raised a hand to quiet him.

Another man added, "He and his party went in. He's the only one who came out. And not well."

"I found him," Sawyer muttered. "He was crawling."

Los nodded to Bunk and Gwendolyn. "See what can be done."

As they left, Sally leaned in. "You're not planning to go in there."

"We've been tasked to clear it," Los replied. "By royal writ."

"Then you've been sent to die," she said, voice quiet and firm. "No one returns. Not whole."

"You mean like the man in the next room?" Rhic asked.

Bunk reentered then, shaking his head grimly. "He's already passed."

"He was a tomb raider," Sawyer muttered. "He got what he deserved."

"We're not thieves," Los said, pulling parchment from his cloak. "This is official."

Sally studied the seal. Her brow furrowed.

"Iohannes," she called. "Take them."

A lean man in the shadows looked up, scowling.

"I'll show you where it is," he said, rising. "No further."

They followed Iohannes south. The night deepened. The trees thinned.

Eventually, they crested a ridge. There, on the hill, glowed a faint green light—sickly, unnatural.

"That's it," Iohannes said. "They say a Roman Contubernium guards the tomb at night. Eight soldiers, dead and buried long ago. Beyond them? No one lives to speak."

He turned without waiting for thanks. "You were warned."

The Dueling Ring

In Cotswold, Proximo and Romao sat near the tavern hearth, half-finished stew before them.

"I don't know how you can eat this stuff; it has no flavor." Romao complained.

Prox looked up from his bowl. "This is good food, and hardy too."

"Good? It needs basil, garlic, olive oil, a pinch of seasoning, something. You only think it is good because you do not know what good is, someday, you come to my home, My Mother will show you what good food tastes like."

Prox smirked, "You always say that. What is really bothering you?"

Romao sighed then leaned back. "We're learning new chants, and for what? I want a real fight."

"We could spar."

"I'm tired of sparring. I want to test myself for real—find a worthy opponent. Perhaps sneak out into the frontier and find a real fight"

"More likely to be ambushed than find a duel."

A nearby mercenary turned his head. Lean, scarred, and watchful, he approached with quiet confidence.

"I know a place," he said in a low voice.

Romao raised an eyebrow. "You do?"

"Mathias," the man introduced himself. "And yes. A dueling ground. Out in Ellan Vannin. Albs, Mids, Hibs. One-on-one. Real fights."

"Illegal," Prox said, already frowning. "Triss would have your hide."

"Then she won't find out," Romao smirked. "Tell me more."

"No potions. No outside aid. Just you and your opponent. The duel begins with a bow. Ends with surrender—or unconsciousness."

"Any healers?"

"There's usually ones nearby. Just in case."

Romao leaned forward, intrigued. Prox sighed, already seeing the future.

"Two days," Mathias said. "I know the way. You in?"

Prox narrowed his eyes. "Five days. Meet back here. If you're not back, I'm telling Triss."

"Five days," Romao agreed with a grin. "This will be good."

The Catacombs of Cordoba

The tomb's entrance glowed faint green—ghost light flickering along the cracked roof. And there, just as Iohannes had said, stood eight Roman legionaries. Or what remained of them.

Los walked ahead without waiting. No chants, no blessings.

"Stop!" Bunk called out. "We need time to prepare—"

"We'll handle these first," Los said. "Then you can cast your blessings."

Gwendolyn hesitated, hand raised. "Los, we should—"

But he was already moving.

Behind him, Rhic and Lygar advanced. Then his voice rang out as he began to chant.

The Roman spirits broke formation. One charged blindly caught by Los's infuriate chant. The fight began.

Bunk cursed, but joined the battle. Sword and spell met cold, ancient steel. The Romans fell, dust scattering like ash in wind.

Los stood amid their remains, chest heaving. For a moment, he felt so alive.

They stood before the open tomb.

"From here," Los said, voice hardening, "we proceed with care. In formation. Bunk, Gwendolyn—bless them all."

Bunk nodded, though his face was grim. He glanced at Gwendolyn. "You sure about this?"

She gripped his arm. "I've got your back."

Blessing where given, torches lit, and then they descended.

The first hall was easy. Boogeys, slow and dull, fell quickly.

Then came the spirits—Roman dead, rising from alcoves. Still manageable. Still too easy.

Gwendolyn walked beside Los, eyes scanning every cross hall.

"The side halls are dark," she warned. "We should clear them."

"They're empty," Los muttered, distracted. "We press on."

She frowned, but said nothing.

They turned south and entered a longer hall, the air growing colder.

At the third crossroads, stronger spirits emerged—Centurions, perhaps. More dangerous.

Los coordinated attacks. Rhic, Lygar, Los—all struck with precision. Spells followed. The spirits gave way. The party pressed forward.

The great hall appeared at the end of the corridor—ornate, wide, lined with carved pillars. At its center: a sarcophagus, imperial in design.

"Ready yourselves," Los ordered. "We draw them out. Rhic, Lygar on flanks. Bunk, doorway. The rest of you—support spells."

He stepped forward.

The emperor stirred.

Then everything went wrong.

Screams erupted behind them.

From the uncleared side halls of the third crossroads of the long corridor, Roman spirits surged—resting dead, now loosed.

The mages were cut down in seconds. Gwendolyn turned to defend them with her staff, calling upon heal after heal, giving blow after blow—then she fell.

Bunk turned to help—but shadows poured from the fourth crossroads as well.

He had no choice. He ran forward, into the hall, into Los's formation.

"We're surrounded!" he shouted.

Los tried to break through—to reach the fallen.

Bunk grabbed him, shoving him back. "You can't help them! They're gone!"

"No!" Los cried, heart breaking. "I can save them!"

Then the torches went out.

The cold was absolute.

Four remained—Los, Rhic, Lygar, Bunk—alone in darkness, the only light a pale green fire from the dead.

Los felt it—his failure, his guilt.

Then came another light.

Soft. Silver. Gentle.

It entered the chamber like morning mist, and with it came stillness.

The Romans recoiled, unable to hold against its purity.

Bunk's voice rang out: "LOS! A Passage!"

Los staggered, watching the light push back death itself.

"I have to save them!" he cried.

You have to go, Lorenzo.

The voice was soft. Still. Only he heard it.

The voice did not enter through his ears—it struck the heart.

"Who... are you?"

I am Lucia of Syracuse. Teresa sent me to look after you.

Tears burned his eyes. Rhic and Lygar grabbed him.

"We have to go!" Rhic shouted.

The light led them.

Out of the tomb. Down a back corridor. Through a cracked tower into cold morning air.

Los collapsed in the grass.

"Santa Lucía," he whispered, voice breaking. "Déjame morir... déjame volver a quien amo..."

I cannot.

The sun broke over the hills.

And with it, the Roman dead returned to their tomb.

Chapter XXII – The Uneven Return

Caer Ulfwych – Angela's Return

The mountain sun cut bright and gold across the yard of Caer Ulfwych. Angela swung down from her palfrey, tugging at stiff buckles, her fingers raw inside their gauntlets. Behind her, Julia dismounted with a soft wince, while Tamara, Amaranthia, Jestec, and Hollia handed off reins, dust-streaked and weary but smiling.

Applause rose from the archway. Guards thumped spear-hafts on the flagstones, a rough drum of approval that echoed under the walls. A stable hand hurried past with tack slung over his shoulder and called to her, eyes bright with admiration.

Lady Calla stepped from the shade, her gaze sweeping over the returned party. She brushed grit from her greaves, voice even.
"Well done. I heard Keltio was crawling."

"It was," Angela answered. "But we cleared it."

"And you brought everyone back," Calla said. "That's the only thing that matters to me."

Angela nodded, but her eyes drifted away—to the sky, to the tower top, to anywhere that wasn't this moment of praise.

By evening the yard had emptied. Angela sat under a wind-stunted elm, her back against its rough bark, when Julia came with a wooden tray: bread torn into fists, a bowl of broth still steaming at the edges.

Angela glanced up, her voice low. "Did I do well?"

Julia didn't answer right away. She sat, brushing dust from her clerical garb.

"We all lived," she said at last with a gentile smile. "And we completed our task."

Angela smiled. But it did not reach her eyes.

It was a day before word arrived of what happened to Los and company, whispers traveled faster than the survivors could return: the Catacombs gone wrong, the mission had ended in disaster, Los's name was now bound to loss.

Camelot – The Reports Arrive

The air in the chamber was still, only the faint rustle of parchment and the slow shifting of light from the tall arched windows betraying time's passage. Lady Triss stood beside Lady Winchell at the table in her chamber, both reviewing the latest mission reports.

Angela's report arrived first, a wax-sealed scroll delivered by courier.

Triss read the report, then held it briefly to her chest. They had succeeded. Everyone had returned alive.

"Good news?" asked Winchell.

"They made it," Lady Triss said as she handed the scroll to Lady Winchell. "Angela led them to success."

Lady Winchell accepted it, then skimmed over the words. "Minimal injuries. Even Lady Calla's two did well."

"Yes." Triss said softly, though she did smile. Her eyes flicked briefly toward the door—waiting.

Waiting for word from the Catacombs. From Los.

When word finally arrived a day later, the messenger bore no joy on his face. He simply handed over the scroll and departed, quickly but solemnly.

Lady Triss opened it. She read it in silence. Her fingers tensed once—barely. Then relaxed.

"He survived."

Lady Winchell reached for the report, but Triss passed it wordlessly aside and walked toward the stained-glass window, her face unreadable.

The Abbey in Camelot – Los's Recovery

The abbey infirmary breathed with candlelight and low chanting, shadows stretching long across the vaulted stone. Los lay on a cot nearest the wall, armor stripped away, his sword propped untouched in the corner. He had not spoken since returning. He had not eaten. His eyes were half-lidded, his body still, one hand pressed over his shirt where the ring hung on its cord—like it was the only anchor keeping him in this world.

Rhic sat on the bench beside him, silent, hands slack on his knees. Lygar leaned against the window arch, jaw set, staring out into the city but seeing nothing.

Bunk paced the length of the chamber, muttering half-sentences under his breath.

"If I'd made him stop... if we'd cleared the side halls... if Gwen hadn't—"

He stopped. His fists clenched. His eyes snapped to Los.

"No." His voice cracked sharp in the quiet. "It wasn't Gwen. It wasn't the halls. It was him."

Rhic's head lifted slowly. "Careful."

But Bunk pressed on, voice rising. "He put himself in front of every blow. Dragged us into that cursed place like he wanted to die—and the rest of us paid for it. Gwen is dead. Malthan, Lirien, Valora—all dead. Because he—" he pointed at the cot, trembling, "—he doesn't care if he lives or dies!"

Lygar's jaw tightened. He pushed off the wall, stepping toward him. "Watch your mouth, Cleric. He's lying there exhausted and you spit on him?"

"I'm telling the truth!" Bunk barked back. "He wants death. Can't you see it? He's dragging us all with him!"

Rhic rose, his voice a low rumble. "Enough. He carried us out when none of us thought we'd live. You owe him your life."

Bunk's face twisted—guilt, fury, grief warring across it. He turned away, slamming his fist against the stone. "And he owes us his. We carried him out; he was trying to go back in!"

On the cot, Los's fingers curled hard around the ring beneath his shirt. His eyes shut tight, as if he could close out the room, the voices, the weight of their words. But the guilt clung, heavily to him. This was his doing.

The air hung brittle, the silence pressing heavily after Bunk's outburst.

Then the door opened.

Not with hesitation, nor command, but deliberate purpose. Lady Triss entered, her cloak brushing the stone, her composure iron. Her gaze swept the room—Rhic, Lygar, Bunk—then settled on her son.

She crossed to his side and knelt, her hand resting lightly on his forearm. "You came back," she whispered.

Los did not answer. His fingers only tightened faintly over the hidden ring.

Triss bowed her head. She did not look at the others. She did not ask what had been said. She stayed beside him—commander, mother, torn—and the silence saying more than judgment ever could.

The Crossing — Angela Sees Los

The sun bled low behind Camelot's roofs as Angela crossed the north cloister of St. George. Ahead, four figures moved beneath the arcade: Bunk. Rhic. Lygar. And between them—Los.

He wore only a travel-stained tunic, the sleeve dark where bandages pressed through. His shoulders sagged, his hair unkempt, his clothes rumpled. Every step

dragged, as though the Catacombs themselves still clung to him. His right hand never left his chest, fingers clenched tight around something hidden beneath the cloth.

Angela took a step, her breath catching.

Julia's hand found her sleeve. "Is that—?"

"It is," Julia said softly. "But... not now."

Angela stopped. She watched as they passed, Los's gaze fixed on the stones at his feet, never lifting.

Once, she had wanted to outshine him.
Now she wasn't sure he would survive this failure.

Angela looked down at her hands. She wondered if they would have returned so easily as they had from Keltio, had they gone to the Catacombs instead.

The Catacombs – Santa Lucia's Light

That night, beneath Camelot, in the deep stone hollow where few dared to go, Los walked the narrow hall of the catacombs. Not for penance.

For solace.

For silence.

He still slept here. Not by necessity. By choice.

He stopped before a forgotten shrine — a small recess in the wall, its carving half-lost to age.

A figure in worn relief: a knight with sword raised over a fallen dragon, a palm frond faintly etched beside his feet.

Los set a candle at the base and lit it. The flame trembled against the stone, gilding the edges of Saint George's face.

The flame flickered, uncertain. Then the light stirred, and the candle died, as if extinguished by an *unknown* wind in the stillness of the catacombs.

He bowed his head in the darkness.

Then—

A second flame ignited.

Pale. Silver. Soft.

It did not burn like fire. It shimmered.

The light grew, taking the shape of a woman robed in radiant white. Her eyes were clear and kind. Her face not young, but timeless.

He stared, breathless.

"She sent you," he whispered.

The woman nodded.

"You have seen me before," she said, her voice soft as starlight.

"In sleep," he murmured. "I thought... it was her. I hoped."

"I am not Teresa," said Lucia of Syracuse. "She asked me to watch over you."

His knees gave way. He knelt fully, breath shaking.

"I failed them."

"You led them," Lucia answered gently. "And you lived."

Los looked down, fingers closing hard around the ring beneath his shirt.

"Why?" he whispered. "Why did I survive?"

Lucia stepped closer, her hand brushing his temple.

"Because you are not done."

His voice cracked.

"¿Por qué me maldices con la vida? ¿Cuando lo único que deseo es estar con ella otra vez?"

For a heartbeat, the light brightened—warm, sorrowful.

Then slowly faded.

He was alone.

But not abandoned.

In the hush that followed, the ring warmed against his chest. His hand stayed there, pressing it against it.

Chapter XXIII – Secrets

Lady Triss's Chamber

The candle had nearly burned down to the wick.

Lady Triss sat at her desk, papers spread before her in ordered rows, though she had long since stopped reading. The reports from Keltio Fogou were clean—Angela had succeeded. All lives accounted for.

But her mind was elsewhere. Her eyes drifted to the door for the third time in ten minutes.

When it finally creaked open, she didn't look up right away. But the silence that entered with him was different. Thicker. Heavier.

Tycho stepped inside.

His robe hung loose, the edges damp with mist. His boots were quiet on the stone. But it was his face that told her what words had not: gaunt, pale, hollow-eyed. He looked like a man carved from ash.

"I'm sorry about Gwendolyn," Triss said softly, rising from her chair.

His answer came like a thrown knife.

"Why does Lord Baldric want the boy dead?"

The words struck her motionless.

For a moment, she simply stared—no breath, no blink. Then slowly, she sat back down, her hand tightening on the edge of the desk.

"I don't understand," she said cautiously. "Want who dead?"

Tycho said nothing. He turned and pushed the door shut with quiet care. The latch clicked in the silence. Then he faced her again.

"I'll ask you one more time," he said, his voice steady. "Why does Baldric want your son dead?"

Triss's mouth parted, but no words came. Her throat caught. When she finally spoke, her voice was thin.

"What makes you say that?"

Tycho's gaze didn't waver. "So it's true."

She looked away.

"How did you—?" she began.

"I saw it the day I came to heal him. You hovered over him like a mother. You said nothing aloud, but I recognized the fear." He stepped closer. "And now, after what happened in the Catacombs... I need to hear it from your own lips."

He paused. "Did you know the writ came from him?"

She hesitated to answer.

Then his voice came stronger, more forcefully. "Did you know?"

"I didn't know the writ came from Baldric," she said. "Not until after they were already gone."

Tycho's tone darkened.

"He requested the exact group that cleared the Mine—a mine he personally had an interest in. Then he sent them to the Catacombs of Cordova. A place with no strategic value. No royal interest. And from which no one returns." His hands flexed at his sides. "If it were *my* guild he wanted rid of, he could have assigned it to us directly. But he didn't. He asked for your son."

Triss lowered her eyes to the desk, then back up—meeting the storm behind his calm.

"Do you think he knows?"

Tycho began to pace, slow and deliberate, like a man trying not to break something in his hands.

"I don't know what Baldric knows. But I do know he wanted him dead badly enough to sacrifice four of my people."

He stopped. Swallowed.

"Including my..." His voice faltered, just once. "Including Gwendolyn."

Triss stood. Her voice gentler now. "She was your protégé. I know what she meant to you."

Tycho turned sharply, his composure cracking. "Do you?"

The words echoed. Then silence.

When he finally spoke again, his voice was quieter. "I don't know why Baldric wants the boy dead. But that he *does*—and that cost the lives of four people to try—is reason enough for me to keep him alive."

Triss exhaled slowly, studying the man before her. The stoic Friar was gone. In his place stood something harder. Older. A man carved from conviction.

"So what do we do?" she asked.

Tycho stepped forward, his hands open.

"Give him to me. Let him join my guild. We'll protect him as one of our own."

"I can't," Triss said, almost reflexively. "He's a Paladin."

"I'm not asking you to change that," he said. "We won't teach him our ways. We won't press our beliefs. What he does or does not follow—that's yours to guide. But we can shield him in ways you cannot."

She turned away, toward the stained-glass window that looked over Camelot's western wall. The stars outside flickered above the rooftops.

Her son had nearly died. Again. This time, not to a battlefield, or fate—but to a writ signed by the Crown.

If Baldric truly tried to kill him...

She closed her eyes. Then opened them.

"I agree."

Tycho nodded, saying nothing more. There was nothing else to say.

The Truth of the Light

The sun had long since dipped behind the towers of Camelot. A hush lingered in the stone halls of the inner sanctum, broken only by the scratch of quill on parchment.

Lady Winchell sat at her desk, posture upright, a reading stone in her hand, a ledger of assignments spread open before her. The room smelled of ink, vellum, and old lavender oil—a place of order and discipline.

A knock.

Then the door creaked open.

"Lady Winchell," came a steady voice, burdened.

She looked up to see Bunk McHeal standing in the doorway, helmet cradled under one arm again. His face was pale beneath the scratches, his eyes dark with something unresolved.

"There's something I need to tell you," he said, stepping inside. "That wasn't in my report."

She set the quill down immediately. His tone had the weight of confession.

"Speak, my child," she said gently, gesturing him forward.

He shut the door with quiet care, then approached and stood at attention.

"It's about the Catacombs,"

Her brow tightened. Of course it was. Four dead—including a Friar. All of them Venomites, yes, but not undeserving of life. And one of her own nearly lost—the young man standing before her. The Spaniard had led them to ruin.

"You already submitted your account," she said. "You wrote that Los acted recklessly, that a back entrance was found, and you escaped through it."

Bunk nodded once. "Yes, my Lady. But... it's how we found it. And how we got to it." He pause. "It wasn't luck."

Her gaze sharpened. "Go on."

"There was a light," Bunk said, voice lower now. "A pure light. Not torch fire. Not mage-flame."

She straightened slightly. "In faith, the Light will always find those in need," she offered, with a small, approving smile.

"This light pushed the Roman spirits back," he said. "They shrank from it—like shadows from the sun. It held them at bay... while we carried Los out."

Lady Winchell blinked. "I see."

"I... didn't hear anything. I saw nothing but the light." His throat moved with a dry swallow. "But someone else did."

She tilted her head, listening now with more than curiosity.

"Los was speaking," Bunk continued. "Not to me. Not to Rhic or Lygar. Down there in the dark... he was answering someone. Someone only he could see and hear."

Lady Winchell's lips parted slightly. "Did he tell you who it was?"

"No," Bunk replied, shaking his head. "But once outside, he started speaking Spanish. Fast. Urgent. I only caught part of it, a name."

She waited, breath caught.

"Saint Lucy."

The name struck the silence like a bell.

Lady Winchell froze. Her hands folded slowly, almost absently, as if the motion anchored her. But her eyes betrayed a flicker—of uncertainty.

"I—" Bunk hesitated. "I'm sorry I left it out. I didn't know how to write it down. What to say."

She nodded once, her voice now composed. "Thank you, Bunk. You were right to come to me."

Her tone shifted—cooler, more formal—but the tremor beneath it had not gone unnoticed.

"I will see to it this is relayed to Lady Fridwulf... and to Bishop Kustan. What you witnessed was truly divine..." Her voice drifted off, her gaze flicking briefly to the window.

A saint. A miracle. And *him*—that reckless boy. Triss's son.

Lady Winchell pursed her lips tightly.

"I beg forgiveness," Bunk added, his voice softer. "It's been weighing on me since Cornwall. I didn't know how to report it."

"Your burden is lifted, my child," she said at last, offering a faint, practiced smile.

Bunk nodded. "Thank you, Milady."

He turned, the weight on his chest lighter now—though a deeper humility lingered. He had been there, and yet he had not seen what Los had seen. Like an apostle in the shadow of a prophet.

The door closed softly behind him.

Lady Winchell sat motionless for a long time.

Then, at last, she whispered into the stillness:

"Saints do not waste their miracles."

St. George's Church – Later That Night

The hallway was quiet now. Tycho had gone, and the door closed behind him with the soft click of finality.

Lady Triss remained at the desk for a long while. Her hands rested on the wood, still and pale, as if anchoring her there. Around her, the candlelight flickered in gentle waves across the stained glass, casting holy lights in shifting hues of gold and crimson.

*He kept my secret.
And now he'll keep my son.*

She had misjudged him. For years, she'd kept Tycho at a distance—respectful, wary, perhaps even quietly dismissive. A heretic in name. A shadowed man walking the borders of faith.

But it had been *Tycho*, not Wacian, not Prydwen, not Winchell, who had stepped forward to shield the boy she could not openly claim.

And now—*Los*. The boy was unraveling. Bit by bit, guilt and silence wearing at the edges of him like water against stone.

She stood and crossed the quiet hall, her steps measured, robes whispering across cold stone. She passed the novice dormitories and descended into the chapel where she knew he would be.

He was there, kneeling at the side altar.
Alone.

The stained glass above cast a deep blue light across his features, etching shadows under his eyes. He hadn't heard her approach.

"Los," she said softly.

His head lifted slightly. He looked worn—not from battle, but from surviving it. This was the weight of memory, of survival that didn't feel like salvation.

"I'm fine," he murmured, voice frayed.

"You're not," she said gently, kneeling beside him.

For a moment, silence wrapped around them. Only the toll of the Cathedral bell gave any sense of time.

He exhaled. "Four people died. I tried to protect them. I tried to hold the line."

"You did what no one else could've done," she said. "Because of you, some made it out."

"I didn't protect Gwendolyn." His gaze dropped to his hands. "She died right in front of me."

She covered his hand with hers, steady and warm. "Then don't let her name become a wound. Let it become a vow."

He blinked. Not in protest—just stunned stillness.

"She followed you into darkness because she believed in you," she said. "And you brought three people back from a place no one returns from. A miracle, if you ask me."

His eyes flicked toward hers. His mouth opened, then shut. He didn't speak.

It had been a miracle. He had not told anyone, but she could see it in his eyes—the shape of something divine that had come for him. Protected him. He had not brought anyone out, it was Santa Lucia.

She gave his hand a gentle squeeze, then stood.

At the threshold, she paused.

"You're not alone, Los," she said. "And you never will be."

Then she turned and left him to his mourning and prayer, the shadows of saints watching from stained glass as the candlelight slowly burned down to its last breath.

The Cloister Garden – Just Before Dawn

The garden at the heart of St. George's lay hushed in pre-dawn stillness. Dew clung to hedges and the lip of the stone basin, where the fountain whispered quietly to itself. The air was cool, edged with the sharpness of morning about to begin.

Los sat beneath the cloister arch, one knee drawn up, his sword laid beside him.

Tycho approached from the corridor beyond—unarmed, unarmored, his presence as still and certain as gravity.

"I heard you were up early," he said.

Los didn't look up. "Couldn't sleep."

Tycho nodded and sat across from him on the opposite bench. The stone was cold. He didn't seem to notice.

"I want to ask something of you."

Los's eyes narrowed. "If it's about the Catacombs—"

"It's not," Tycho said. "It's about what comes next."

Los turned his head. Said nothing.

"I want you to join the Venomites."

The words hung in the garden, caught between the leaves and the light.

Los stared at him. "You want me to replace the ones who died?"

"No." Tycho's voice was calm, unwavering. "I'm not asking you to replace anyone. I'm asking you to honor them. Their deaths weren't your fault. But what you do with the life they bought—that is in your hands."

Los dropped his gaze to the flagstones.

He had heard this talk before, when Risa died, no one blamed him, they said it was not his fault.

But that did not mean he was not guilty of their deaths. As he held himself responsible for her death.

"Lady Triss would never allow it."

"She already has."

Los looked up, startled.

"I spoke with her last night," Tycho said. "She agreed. If it's your wish."

The silence stretched. A bird called softly in the hedges. The first breath of morning stirred the air.

Los looked down at his sword. Then toward the sky, where pale light began to wash the edges of the world.

"And you'll teach me what you believe?" he asked.

"I won't," Tycho said. "I gave Lady Triss my word. Your faith is yours. What you believe, or don't—that's your path. I leave it to her to guide you. I only offer a shield as you find your way."

Los didn't reply immediately. He sat still as the dawn began to bloom across the stones. Choking back silent tears.

Then, with a quiet breath:

"Okay."

Tycho gave a single nod and rose, leaving him there.

The Cotswold Inn – Morning

The hearth fire crackled low, warming the inn's stone walls as the early sun filtered through lead-glass windows. A few locals sat scattered at tables, spoons scraping bowls, mugs clinking gently, the morning stillness broken only by the occasional murmur of conversation and the tread of boots on timber.

Prox sat alone near the window, staring out into nothing as he waited for Romao.

The door creaked open.

Romao stepped in, brushing road dust from his sleeves, his dark curls tousled from the wind. His eyes scanned the room, and when he spotted Prox, they lit with the spark of shared promise.

He crossed the floor with a confident stride.

"You're late," Prox muttered, lifting an eyebrow.

Romao grinned. "Five days exactly. As promised."

Prox leaned forward. "So? Tell me about it."

Romao glanced around the tavern. A few farmers. An old man asleep by the fire. A barmaid rinsing mugs. No one close enough to overhear. Still, he lowered his voice as he slid into the bench.

"It was amazing," he said, voice hushed but electric. "Truly. I sparred with a Celtic Champion who fought like the sea itself—relentless and cold. Then a Firbolg Hero—built like a siege tower—and fast too. After that? A Troll Berserker. Absolute madness. I barely dodged a skull-crusher. And finally, a Blademaster named Naailo. He fought like a dancer with blades for hands."

He leaned back with a far-off look, eyes alive with memory.

Prox gave a slow whistle. "And did you find what you were seeking?"

"Yes, and more. I *learned*." Romao waved down the innkeeper. "Two bowls of whatever's warm, please—and two ciders. It's a tale worth toasting."

"And your new Mercenary friend?" Prox asked, arching an eyebrow.

Romao chuckled. "Mathias? Wild fellow. Good fighter. He's the one who introduced me. Said new faces come through from time to time—Midgard, Hibernia, even Albion. No grudges. Just skill. They'd never fought a Paladin before." His eyes gleamed. "Of course, I'd never fought a Champion or a Hero before either. We plan to go next time the group meets."

"You're seriously going back?" Prox said, disbelieving.

"Of course," Romao said without hesitation. "I learned more in two days there than I have in a month of drills. No politics. No rank. Just blades, sweat, and skill."

He paused as the bowls and mugs were brought to the table, then frowned slightly.

"Speaking of people here—or *not* here... where's Los?"

The air in the tavern changed, subtly. Prox looked down, stirring the porridge without eating.

"You haven't heard, then."

Romao's smile faded. He lifted his spoon halfway, then froze. "What happened?"

Prox set the spoon down, slowly. "The mission didn't go well."

Romao leaned in. "Is he—?"

"He's alive. So is Bunk. Two others made it back." Prox's voice lowered. "Four didn't."

Romao sat in stunned silence.

"She should've let us go with him," he said at last, his voice tight. "We *should* have been there."

He pushed the bowl away, appetite gone, and stared out the window as the breeze rustled the inn's ivy-draped sill.

"I know," Prox replied quietly. He blew gently on his spoon, steam curling into the morning air. "But it wasn't our call to make."

The silence between them stretched like a wound.

"Where is he now?" he asked.

Prox didn't hesitate. "Knowing Los? At the church. Praying."

Romao gave a single nod, and the two young men sat there quietly, surrounded by the warmth of the fire and the noise of a waking world.

They would have to report in soon—Lady Triss would want to know they were back. But neither of them moved. And at that moment they did not know what to say.

House Burns – Morning of August 8th

Angela woke to the scent of cinnamon, roasted apples, and fresh bread. The morning sun spilled golden light across her quilt, and for a moment she lay still, smiling into the warmth.

Her birthday.

She rose quickly, brushed her hair, and padded downstairs barefoot.

In the dining room, the table was nearly set. Julia was arranging the last of the silver, Tamara folded napkins with precise flair, and Amaranthia was pouring tea near the hearth. The smells of the kitchen lingered—syrup, spice, and warmth.

Their father entered from the garden, wiping his hands with a cloth.

"Happy birthday," Lord Burns said, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "To my favorite daughter."

Angela grinned. "Thank you, Father."

Julia appeared behind her with a plate in hand and presented it with a flourish. On it sat a honey cake shaped like a lion—its mane dusted with golden sugar.

Angela laughed with delight. "You remembered!"

"I made it myself," Julia said proudly. "But that's not your *only* surprise."

Angela sat, intrigued. "Oh?"

Julia slid into the seat across from her, smiling like someone hiding a secret just behind her teeth.

"Do you remember what you said you wanted more than anything this year?"

Angela squinted. "To be the youngest Paladin in a generation."

"Exactly," Julia said. She leaned in and whispered, "July seventh."

Angela blinked. "What? What's July 7th?" she asked confused.

"Los's birthday," Julia said, suppressing a grin. "He turned eighteen on July seventh. And you..." She gave a dramatic pause. "August eighth."

Angela's jaw dropped.

"I'm younger by a whole month and a day?" she asked, stunned.

Julia nodded. "You are."

Angela sat up straighter, a grin blooming across her face. "I *am* the youngest Paladin in a generation!"

"I knew you'd want to know," Julia said, pleased.

Tamara raised an eyebrow. "Wait—how did *you* find out his birthday?"

Julia blushed just a little. "Proximo told me."

"Ohhh," Tamara drawled, immediately catching on. "So *that's* why Julia's been asking about *him*."

Amaranthia joined in, grinning. "Look at her—she's gone pink."

Julia waved her hands, laughing nervously. "Stop! It's not like that—I just overheard him say something. That's all."

Angela chuckled, shaking her head as she cut into her lion-shaped cake. "I don't care how you found out. Best gift of the day."

Then Julia added more quietly, "There's also talk about Los joining the Venomites."

Angela looked up, startled. "The *Heretics*?"

Julia shrugged. "Rumor says it's his way of honoring the four who died in the Catacombs."

Angela frowned. "Lady Triss would never allow that. Not one of *hers*."

"I heard she already knows," Tamara said. "And approved it."

Angela shook her head, dazed. "I can't believe it, he's joining the most controversial guild in Albion?"

"Yes, but I heard..." Amaranthia began before her father cut in.

Lord Burns cleared his throat at the head of the table, folding his napkin with deliberate care.

"Ladies," he said. "We do not gossip at the breakfast table."

"Yes, Father," they all replied—half in unison, half through laughter.

Angela took another bite of her cake, chewing thoughtfully.

She was the youngest and while it should not have mattered, she smiled all the same.

Her story, she decided, was just beginning.

Camelot – Lord Baldric's Study

The windows were shuttered though it was midday. He preferred the cold solitude of his study to the noise and bustle outside.

Candles burned in tall wrought-iron holders, their flames motionless in the heavy stillness. Stacks of parchment cluttered the long desk—writs, troop tallies, requisitions, all ignored.

Lord Baldric stood before the hearth, its cold ashes matching his mood. Behind him, a single scroll lay open, its wax seal broken cleanly.

Report – Catacombs of Cordova

Submitted by Cleric Bunk McHeal, corroborated by surviving party members

Survivors: Paladin Ortiz Cleric McHeal, Armsman Rhic, Mercenary Lygar

Casualties: Malthan Wizard, Lirien Cabalist, Valora Sorceress, Gwendolyn Friar

Remarks: Slain by undead Roman spirits.

Baldric's eyes burned holes into the mantel.

"He survived," he said, his fist hammering the wood above the fire place.

Baldric's voice cut again, harsh, angry. "The boy survived *again*. That's the third time."

His spy cleared his throat. "And... he's now sworn to the Venomites. Officially. Lady Triss's blessing, if the whispers are true."

A silence settled in the room—thick, rising like a tide. Then Baldric turned.

"So the heretics claim him now. Four dead and they replace their numbers with the Boy."

The spy said nothing.

Baldric moved to the desk hovering over it. Glancing at maps and scrolls.

"Go." He ordered.

He had thinking to do.

Chapter XXIV – Venomites

St. George's Courtyard – The Cloak of Heresy

Los waited outside the church, his pack slung over his shoulder, heart heavy. The church had been his home since arriving in Camelot, and though it had not been that long, it felt like leaving home all the same. He would return, he knew it. But still, the hollow feeling lingered

Tycho met him on the steps, a guild cloak folded neatly in his hands. White with a grey Chevron, and above it a skull in $\frac{3}{4}$ profile.

He handed him the cloak reverently. Los was now a Venomite. There was no ceremony, no fanfare, just the silent acknowledgement that he was now one of them.

Even the city felt still, silent, as though Camelot itself was withholding judgment.

Twelve met them near the fountain at the center of the crafters' quarter. They stood in rough formation. No matching armor. No polished symbols. Only worn leather, scratched steel, and the quiet gravity of people used to surviving. The Venomites.

Tycho introduced Los to them, their newest member, a brother in arms.

Los stepped forward.

Their greetings towards him were solemn, not warm. They had suffered the loss of four and were still grieving inside.

"We stand together, we help one another, we serve together, and in serving others we serve the Light." Tycho reminded them.

Rhic approached the Spaniard, taking the cloak from his hands and helping him put it on.

"Yer a Venomite now," he said solemnly. "Welcome to the guild, to our way of life."

Lygar clasped his forearm in brotherhood, but too, stayed solemn.

Tycho studied him for a moment. Then, without further ceremony, turned to the group.

"Today we join the Army of Albion, we are headed north to push the Hibernians back beyond their mile gate, and to restore the balance between the realms." His voice was calm and even toned as usual, his composure unbreakable as ever.

Los nodded.

At the church's balcony, Lady Triss watched her son leave with Tycho.

Beside her, Lady Winchell exhaled sharply. She had not told Lady Triss or anyone else what Bunk had reported to her.

"This is madness, are you sure there was no other way?" she hissed.

"I am not sure, of anything, but I know for the moment he will be safe, and that's all that matters."

Ellan Vannin – Milegate of the Dead

The wind drifted across the heathered hills like a breath held too long. Albion's army, its banners some with a grail, some with guild emblems fluttered across the breadth of the force arrayed, gathered before the Hibernian Mile gate. Rex, sword drawn and brow furrowed, gave the signal with a single word.

"Advance."

The steel tide surged.

The gate fell within minutes—its defenders overwhelmed by the momentum of Albion's push. Rex led the charge with brutal elegance, his blade singing through flesh and steel alike. No speech. Just purpose.

On the left flank, the Venomites scaled the wall, their tattered cloaks catching the wind.

Tycho ascended first, staff held not in prayer but in defiance. His prayers were low, vibrating through the stone beneath their feet. Each word was a ward; each swing a benediction of violence.

Los followed, voice echoing across the ramparts as he unleashed the chants of the Paladins: *Obice Fidei. Exasperar. Zelus Belli*. His blade struck down two before the first blood even reached the stone.

Below them, Rhic was a hurricane. His halberd arced in wide, devastating sweeps, shields splintering like kindling, bodies thrown back with every strike. Lygar fought like a ghost—fast, fluid, his twin blades leaving ribbons of crimson in their wake.

Victory—brief, bitter—seemed at hand.

Until the horn blew.

It came from the hills to the right.

A second Hibernian wave—strong and many—poured from the narrow valley, fresh and unbloodied.

"Fall back!" Rex's voice rang. "To the gate!"

The Albion host obeyed, retreating in a staggered line—but those on the wall had no escape.

The Last Stand

"We hold," Tycho commanded. "This is where we stand."

The Venomites fell into formation atop the battlements. Some kissed amulets. Others tightened their grips. No one asked for further orders.

Rhic and Lygar dashed to the top of the stairwell.

"I'll hold the top," Rhic barked. "You bleed the rest on the way up."

Lygar grinned as he drew back his short bow and went to work. "I'll save a few for you."

They held the top of the stairwell, and the sounds of steel soon followed.

Tycho turned to Los and grabbed his cloak, pulling him bodily toward the wall's far corner—where stone met a near-vertical hillside. The slope below was steep but grass covered, one could not climb up it, but could perhaps fall down it and survive.

"Stand here," Tycho said. "Chant, Los. Chant like the world depends on it."

Los gritted his teeth and began. The old words. The ancient tones. The Light stirred as he chanted.

Rhic screamed as he was cut down at the top of the stairs. Then Lygar gave a war cry, drew his swords and leapt into the fray.

Venomites were falling all around, and all he was doing was chanting.

Los moved to rush forward, his blade ready—but Tycho shoved him again.

"CHANT!" He ordered him again.

As Los resumed his chants Tycho grabbed him and with strength unknown tossed him onto the hillside to safety on the other side of the gate.

The Fall and the Shadow

Los hit the hill shoulder-first and rolled, sliding and thrashing until he came to rest. His cloak tangled around him as he came down the steep slope. When he finally stopped, he lay broken at the base of the wall, breath shallow.

The power of his chants the only thing that saved him from dying.

He looked up.

Tycho stood above, framed by mist and dying light.

Then—from the haze behind him—movement.

A ripple in air. A distortion. And then: a figure came into view, as if out of thin air. Cloaked. Hooded. Blade gleaming black.

Tycho's back arched as the assassin stabbed him.

He staggered. Turned. Met Los's eyes.

Then fell forward and disappeared over the battlement's far side.

His killer peered down for a moment, unblinking.

And vanished into the ether, from whence he came.

Los screamed—not in rage, not in grief, but in raw refusal to accept what had just happened.

His body buckled when he tried to rise. One arm wouldn't move. His ribs ached with every breath.

Then—bootsteps.

Jamus

A tall figure emerged from the gate. Armored in plain platemail. A sword hung low at his hip. A broken halberd in his hand. His eyes were sharp, searching.

"I've got you Lad." he said.

Los tried to speak. But couldn't.

Jamus approached, crouched beside him.

"You're not dead, so let's get you out of here."

Then half lifted him up, dragging him along with the army as it retreated.

Albion War Camp – After the Battle

When Los woke, he was on a cot beneath rough canvas. Fire crackled outside.

Jamus sat nearby, arms crossed.

"You made it," Jamus said.

"The others?"

Jamus shook his head. "Those on the wall? They're all gone. Only you came off it breathing."

"I watched Tycho fall," Los said, voice breaking. "Rhic... Lygar... I should have stayed."

"You would've died," Jamus said. "And you wouldn't have saved a single one of them."

Los looked away.

"He abandoned us," he muttered. "Rex. He withdrew the army and left us to die."

Jamus exhaled. "If he hadn't, more would've died. You can hate him. But don't forget—you made it out because of him."

Los sat up, finding his bearings.

"I'm Jamus, by the way."

"Los."

"I've heard of you. You should sleep Los. We've got a long road to Sursbrooke."

"I can't."

"Well... try." Jamus said.

Then he lay down and quickly fell asleep like a man used sleeping on hard ground, as Los stared into the fire.

War Council – Ellan Vannin, Night of the Battle

Rex stared down at the war map as if it held the answer to the survival of Albion's army. All he could see was retreat—down the coast, back to friendly ground. Save what remained of the force he had brought.

"How many?" he asked.

A lieutenant stepped forward. "You saved a good portion of the host, sir. But the losses were heavy. Everyone on the wall is presumed dead. A whole guild wiped out."

"You mean the Venomites," a captain corrected. "One survived. I saw him dragged from the field by one of my armsmen."

"I heard it was their Paladin that survived," the lieutenant added, "but no one's seen him since. It's possible he died somewhere in the camp."

Rex looked up from the map.

"List him as missing," he said. "We'll make a better accounting in the morning. For now, send the fastest runner with a battlefield report to Camelot. They need to know what happened—and prepare, in case Hibernia presses the advantage."

The Fog Outside the Camp

Los couldn't sleep.

He was restless and eventually got up and walked through the camp. The wounded were everywhere—whimpering, coughing, groaning in their sleep.

Too few, he told himself. Far too few.

As he reached the camp's edge the fog hung thick and heavy.

The sentries strained their eyes into the dark, hands tight on weapons, every breath drawn with caution.

Then—distant cries. From the battlefield.

They heard them.

So did he.

The sentries stepped forward. "You can't go out there. It's not safe."

Los didn't answer. He only stared into the mist.

There—through the veils of fog—a pale glow shimmered. Not fire. Not steel. Something softer, steady, beckoning.

Without a word, he stepped past the sentries. Their protest died on their lips as he vanished into the fog, swallowed whole, as he followed the light.

The Battlefield – That Night

The mercenary was dying, forgotten near the tree line. Even the Hibernians hadn't bothered to finish him.

Then—a figure knelt beside him. A hand on his shoulder.

"I've got you."

He was dragged toward the lights of the Albion camp.

A scout cried for help near the ridge. Water. Anything.

Then: "I have you," said a voice, soft and foreign.

Arms lifted him from the ground.

A cleric near the wall, left behind, prayed for the Light.

And then—

"I will get you home."

And she was carried, gently, into the fog.

By dawn, the clerics noticed something strange. There were more wounded than they'd counted.

"Where did you come from?"

"I don't know," one replied. "Someone brought me. I didn't see who."

Another echoed, "They weren't wearing armor. Just carried me back and left."

By morning's light, twelve had been brought in—none of them could name their rescuer.

But the story was already spreading.

Camp, Just After Dawn

Jamus woke and found Los returning, filthy, bruised, and bone-weary.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

Los dropped to sit by the dying fire.

"I went for a walk."

Camelot – The Round Table

The war room smelled of ink, steel, and worry.

They had received Rex's report of the previous day's battle that morning.

Lady Triss stood beside Lord Prydwen at the long oak table; her eyes locked on the freshly arrived scrolls. Proximo and Romao stood behind her, silent and tense. They had checked in with her the day before and she had assigned them immediately to be aids at the war council to her and Lord Prydwen.

When the first casualty lists came in, she immediately took possession of them, opening them and reading over the lists of names.

Her eyes scanned quickly.

Guild: Venomites

Status: Wiped out

Deceased:

Tycho of West Downs

Rhic of Lynn barfog

Lygar Thornblade

Kallen. Benedict. Vanae. Hallen...

She reached the end. Los Ortiz: listed as missing.

Her breath caught.

He's not listed among the dead, just amongst the missing.

She turned to leave.

"I'm going to the front."

"No, you are not," Prydwen said, the authority in his voice was unmistakable.

"Your place is here."

Her voice was ice but her hands shook. "One of our Paladins is missing."

He knew at once who she meant. "What makes him so special?"

"He's one of mine. I trained him. He's, my responsibility."

She didn't wait for permission. She turned to Prox and Romao.

Her voice held no doubt—only fire.
“Go to the front. Find him.”

They saluted and immediately rushed out the door of the citadel before Prydwen could counter her order.

Lord Prydwen scowled at Lady Triss, her actions seemed irrational, desperate.

“We need one of them here as our aid,” he reminded her.

Lady Triss then turned to Julia who was acting as the aid to Lady Winchell.

“Go find Angela, bring her here. Now!”

Julia hesitated for a moment as she looked to Lady Winchell, who nodded for her to go.

Then Lady Winchell looked to Lady Triss as she watched her fall apart. She had to save her, from herself, and from her son, the boy would only bring her ruin.

“My Lord,” she beckoned Lord Prydwen, “May I have a moment with Lady Triss, I fear she needs air.”

Prydwen looked at Lady Triss, then back to Lady Winchell.

“Then do so, but return at once.”

Lady Winchell grabbed Lady Triss by the arm and escorted her out, Triss’s composure had broken, she needed to get ahold of herself and Lady Winchell was going to see to it.

Camelot – The Garden Cloisters

The stone corridor echoed with their footsteps until the heavy oak doors of the citadel shut behind them. A cool summer breeze met them as they stepped away from prying eyes and ears—away from the war room, from duty, from those who might hear what they should not.

Winchell didn't let go. She pulled Triss toward the church, through its quiet nave and out into the sanctity of the cloister garden. The air smelled faintly of lavender and old incense. Only the toll of a distant bell and the rustle of leaves disturbed the hush.

She didn't speak. She simply led Triss to a stone bench and sat with her. Her grip had softened, but her gaze remained steady. Watching. Waiting.

Triss's hands trembled, ever so slightly.

"You can't lose yourself over this," Winchell said sternly.

Triss didn't answer.

Winchell continued, voice calm but unyielding. "There are soldiers missing every week. Good ones. Brave ones. We grieve them all—but we cannot fall apart over one name on a scroll."

Triss's eyes narrowed, blue as frost. "He's not just one name."

"I know," Winchell said sternly. "I was there when he was born, remember?"

Triss exhaled shakily and closed her eyes, trying to find her center, trying to breathe like a Paladin again and not a mother.

Winchell hesitated—then continued.

"There's something I need to tell you. Something not in the official report about the Catacombs."

A silence stretched between them like a drawn bowstring.

Triss lowered her gaze. "I know what happened. I read the list. I saw the names. And now this. If he dies out there and I'm waiting here... What was all of it for? The hiding, the years, the silence? What did the silence protect him from—if he's to die out there alone?"

"Rebecca, listen to me." Winchell took her hands gently but firmly. "Bunk came to me. He told me what really happened down there—how they got out of the Catacombs."

Triss turned, trembling still, eyes fixed on her closest friend.

"When all hope was gone," Winchell said, "a light appeared. A holy light. It drove back the Roman spirits. It cleared their path. It guided them out through a rear entrance none of them had known existed."

Triss blinked. "What? Bunk told you this?"

"He did. Los didn't speak of it?"

"Not a word."

"There's more." Winchell's voice lowered. "As they were dragging him out—Bunk said Los was speaking. Not to them. To someone else. It was in Spanish. He couldn't understand most of it. But he heard one name: *Saint Lucy*."

Triss froze.

Winchell watched her. "I haven't reported this. Not to Lady Fridwulf. Not to the Bishop. Not yet."

"What... what did *She* say?" Triss asked at last, voice thin with awe.

"I don't know. Bunk said he saw only the light. He heard nothing."

Triss sat still, stunned, her mind racing.

"Why didn't he tell me?" she whispered. "Why leave that out of the report?"

"I don't know. Maybe he's afraid no one will believe him. Maybe... maybe he can't find the words. But saints don't waste miracles."

Triss looked down at her clasped hands, voice barely audible. "*She heard him,*" Triss whispered. "*And she came.*"

Winchell said nothing—just held her hands a moment longer.

Then, gently, she nodded and let go.

Albion War Camp – Morning After the Fog

The camp was quieter now—less groaning, more breathing. Fires crackled low, and the smell of ash clung to the misty morning air.

Jamus returned with a bowl of stew and a heel of bread. He found Los sitting on a flat stone just beyond the tents, legs drawn in, hunched slightly like he hadn't truly slept. A few cuts still crusted red on his knuckles.

"Brought you something," Jamus said, setting the bowl beside him.

Los nodded. "Thanks."

Jamus didn't leave.

He stood there a moment, studying him—dirt-smeared, silent, his hand resting over his chest, clutching his shirt where the ring hung beneath it.

"I've been hearing things," Jamus said finally. "From the clerics. From the wounded. They say someone pulled them off the battlefield last night. Dragged them in through the fog."

He paused.

"They didn't see who it was. Just... a voice. A hand. And no armor."

He sat down beside him.

"It's true, isn't it?"

Los didn't answer right away. He stared at the ground—at nothing. His gaze didn't lift.

"You brought them back."

Still silence.

"You weren't trying to be a hero, were you?" Jamus asked again, gentler this time. Less curiosity. More understanding.

Los finally looked up.

"No," he said. His voice was low, but steady.

"I was just trying to make the losses less."

Jamus exhaled. He didn't press further.

He stayed beside him as the sun climbed slowly above the mist and the fog began to lift.

Camelot – Lord Baldric's Chambers

Baldric read the report by candlelight, lips pursed in thought.

The Venomites—gone. Tycho, dead. Los Ortiz listed as missing.

He leaned back in his chair, savoring the wine he poured into a silver goblet.

"How efficient," he whispered. "And I never had to lift a finger."

Chapter XXV – The Return from the Dead

Camelot – To the Rescue

Romao and Prox rushed from the citadel toward the stables, hearts pounding, boots clanging against wet stone.

"Get three horses!" Romao shouted.

"Three?" Prox called back.

"Yes! And meet me at the Black Dragon!"

Without waiting, Romao disappeared around the western gate, cloak flaring behind him. Prox paused, frowning. *Three horses? Who's the third?*

Romao knew exactly where to find him.

The Black Dragon Tavern stank of sweat, stale ale, and pipe smoke when Romao shoved through the doors. A few heads turned, but he scanned the room with singular purpose.

There—in the corner booth, slouched low like the world was spinning too fast—sat Bunk McHeal. His eyes were red-rimmed, his cleric's tabard half-unlaced, and he cradled his tankard like a newborn.

Their eyes met.

"There you are, you *figlio di puttana*," Romao growled. "You're coming with me."

"I am not," Bunk slurred, clutching the tankard tighter like Romao might steal it.

"Oh yes you are. Los needs you—and where do I find you? Drunk in a tavern."

Bunk looked away. "He doesn't need me. He has Lucy. Surely she'll protect him. Again..."

Romao's jaw clenched. "What are you talking about?"

He grabbed the cleric by the collar and hauled him up. Bunk resisted with all the strength of overcooked noodles, swinging his tankard and missing by a mile. Ale splashed across the floor. He stared at the puddle, stunned—like the drink had left him on purpose.

Romao dragged him toward the door. "Come on."

Outside, Prox rode up with two extra horses in tow.

"He's drunk," Prox said flatly.

"I know he's drunk, but he's coming with us. He can sober up on the road."

"I'm not drunk," Bunk mumbled, staring at his open hand. "I'm... drunk."

"We can see that, McHeal," Prox muttered. "Why do we need him?"

"In case Los needs him," Romao said, forcing Bunk awkwardly into the saddle.

Bunk slumped sideways. "He's fine. Doesn't need me. He has a Saint"

"What's he going on about?" Prox asked confused.

Romao mounted his horse, adjusting his gauntlet. "I don't know. But we ride for Castle Sauvage and go from there."

He turned his horse east.

"We're coming, *Fratello*."

The Burns Manor

Angela was lacing her boots when the knock came—short, insistent.

She opened the door to find Julia, breathless in the doorway, her tabard slightly askew from haste.

"Julia?"

"You're needed at the citadel," Julia said. "Now."

Angela straightened. "What's happened?"

Julia hesitated—just long enough to stir alarm. "Lady Triss requested you. She sent Proximo and Romao to the front. Los is missing. She wanted to go herself, but Lord Prydwen stopped her."

Angela's brow furrowed. "Los?"

Julia nodded. "He was at the battle for the Hibernian mile gate."

Angela threw on her cloak and followed her out, heart already tightening with a mix of urgency and confusion. She only knew what others whispered about him—but if Lady Triss had tried to leave her post, something more was unfolding than Julia had said.

The Round Table Chamber

The war room air was thick—sealed behind stone, laden with ink, sweat, and quiet tension. Lord Prydwen stood at the round table, flanked by officers, with maps spread beneath his braced hands. He glanced up as the doors opened.

Angela stepped in beside Julia. She expected to see Lady Triss.

But her place was empty.

"Milord," Julia said quickly. "I've brought Lady Burns, as instructed by Lady Triss."

Lord Prydwen gave a curt nod. "Lady Triss has stepped away. You'll stand over there until needed."

Angela took a step forward, hesitated. "Should I take her place at the table?"

Lord Prydwen's gaze cooled. "You are not a councilor Lady Angela. Not yet. You'll stand there." He gestured to Julia's side. "Aide to my right. Say nothing unless addressed."

Angela lowered her gaze. "Understood."

She stepped back and stood beside Julia, spine straight, hands clasped behind her. She whispered, "Where is Lady Triss?"

"I don't know," Julia murmured. "Lady Winchell's gone too. Triss was... shaking when I last saw her."

Angela's eyes flicked to the vacant space at the table. She had never seen Lady Triss falter. Not once.

Lord Prydwen turned—just enough to catch their whisper—and fixed them both with a look.

They fell silent.

The chamber resumed its rhythm: scratching quills, low voices, rustling parchment. But beneath it all, Angela felt it—the weight of absence. She didn't yet know why it unsettled her so deeply.

The Chapel Garden – A Name in the Night

Later that evening, when the halls had fallen into silence and the council had retired, Lady Triss walked alone into the chapel garden behind St. George's. The moon cast a pale silver veil over the cobbled path, and the hush of midnight hung like a benediction.

She stood before the statue of the martyr—Saint Alban—his carved eyes lifted skyward, one hand outstretched in quiet mercy. A lantern flickered gently at the base of the plinth, its flame steady, but small.

Triss knelt. It was not Saint Lucy, but it was all there was in the garden.

She lowered her hood, placed her hand over her heart, and bowed her head.

Her voice was low and reverent, carried only on the wind

"Saint Lucy, bearer of holy light,
I thank you—for watching over the boy I could not protect.

You saw him in the dark and brought him to the light.
You guided him through fire, shadow, and death.

I ask you now, blessed martyr—do not turn from him.
Keep watch over his soul as he walks the path all Paladins must.
Light his way when the way is dim,
And if he must fall again... let it be into grace.

I entrust him to you blessed Lucy —light of the forsaken.”

She opened her eyes. The lantern flame swelled—not with wind, nor with wick,
but with something still and sacred. A warm pulse of light, gentle and knowing.

Triss smiled through the mist in her eyes.

And whispered, “Amen.”

The Chapel of St. George Evening time

After the council had retired Angela walked to the quiet chapel alone. The silence suited her better than the hum of strategy and noble voices. Candles flickered low near the altar, casting long shadows across the stone floor.

She didn’t know why she hadn’t gone home yet. Maybe she wanted to be seen still standing, in case anyone looked. Maybe she was waiting.

Footsteps echoed softly against the marble.

She turned.

Lady Triss entered through the side corridor, her cloak pulled around her shoulders, the faint scent of lavender still clinging to her from the cloister garden. Her expression was composed—barely touched by the storm that had taken her earlier.

Angela stood as the older woman approached.

"Lady Angela," Triss said, her voice quiet but steady. "Thank you. For standing in today."

"I only did what was needed," Angela replied.

"Perhaps. But you did it well." Triss offered the faintest nod. "You carried yourself with discipline. Lord Prydwen was pleased. So was I."

Angela bowed her head. "I was glad to help."

And she meant it.

But part of her—small, sharp—still twisted at the memory of Triss's absence. Of seeing the chair empty. Of knowing it had been empty not for the war, not for Albion, but for him.

Would she have left the war room if it had been me?

The thought rose unbidden and unwanted. Angela pushed it down.

Triss looked at her a moment longer, then added, "It matters, Angela. That you were there. Even if I could not be."

Angela nodded again, though the question still smoldered behind her eyes. Triss had shaken. Triss had defied orders. For her—for *that boy*.

Angela had never seen her falter for anyone else.

He was entrusted to her not even a full year ago, she reminded herself. Just another Paladin under her charge.

But that wasn't how it had looked.

Triss took a breath. "I hope you'll continue to lend your steadiness in the days ahead. The others will need it. So will I."

"I'll serve however I'm needed."

A small smile touched Triss's lips, fleeting but sincere. "I know."

She rested a hand briefly on Angela's shoulder—not ceremonially, but warmly—and then moved past, into the deeper chapel.

Angela stayed where she was, watching the candles burn.

She told herself it didn't matter. That Triss trusted her. That Triss had noticed her. Praised her.

But would she have come for me?

The thought returned, quiet as a whisper in the stone chapel.

Angela clenched her hands behind her back; gaze fixed on the flame.

She would not ask. She would never ask.

But the fire inside her still smoldered—jealousy, quiet and unwanted.

She had been pushed aside for him.

Why?

Where the Wounded Walk

The towers of Caer Sursbrooke loomed grey in the early light, their stones streaked with ash and rain. Beneath its walls, the road twisted with life—if it could be called that. Soldiers trudged in long lines, bandaged and weary, leaning on one another. Some rode, slumped in saddles. Others were pulled in carts, pale as ghosts from the shore where they had been ferried in from Ellan Vannin.

Willow stood high in a tree watching, eyes scanning the horizon, her hand gripping her bow tightly. The enemy had not pursued the army yet, but she would be ready if they did.

Romao and Prox reined in just outside the outer wall. The army was filing past in ragged formation.

"He's not here," Prox muttered. "Damn it all."

Romao squinted down the line, jaw clenched. "He has to be."

A few scattered stragglers passed by, bloodied and torn. No Los.

Bunk dismounted with a wince, no longer nursing a hangover, and adjusted his belt. "No one at Castle Sauvage reported seeing him die."

"No one reported seeing him alive either," Prox snapped. "That's not confirmation that he lived."

"Semantics," Bunk said.

And then—"Did *jou* come all this way out here jus to see me?"

They turned.

Leaning against a cart, half-shrouded by a battered cloak, stood a familiar figure. Armor dented and buckled. His face gaunt and tired, but the voice was the same. The same crooked smile. And the sapphire eyes—those were unmistakable.

Los lowered his hood.

Romao didn't move at first. Then he strode forward and pulled him into a crushing embrace, laughing with a sound halfway between relief and madness.

Prox punched him hard in the shoulder. "You idiot."

Los winced. "Good to see jou too."

Bunk looked over at them. "I *told* you."

Chapter XXVI – The Weight of Survival

Camelot – The Second Morning

The gates of Camelot stood open as survivors limped through in small groups—dusty, bandaged, stunned. The battle for the Hibernian milegate had passed two days ago, but its shadows still clung to every face.

Lady Winchell stood on the chapel steps, watching the wounded file past. Helping those in need. She nodded to the guards, but her focus was elsewhere—on the girl.

A young cleric, barely more than eighteen, she was one of Lady Serenity's students, along with her walked a scout who looked the worse for wear but alive. They were quiet until she gently questioned them.

"You were among the wounded at the Hibernian milegate?" Winchell asked.

"Yes, milady," the girl said softly. "I... I was left near the wall. I'd been praying for help when someone found me. I didn't see them. I was half-conscious. But I remember... they said, 'I will get you home.'"

The scout nodded. "The one who rescued me said I have you. But they didn't speak like one of ours. And they had no armor."

"Funny accent," the girl whispered. "He said 'jou' instead of 'you.'"

The scout nodded in agreement. "Same."

Lady Winchell recognized the manner of speaking at once; it could only be him.

She placed a hand on the girl's shoulder. "You are safe now."

Then she turned at once and crossed the courtyard toward the church.

St. George's – The Garden Cloister

Lady Triss knelt in prayer before the chapel's altar when Winchell entered. She didn't speak at first, she simply grabbed her by her arm and half dragged her out to the garden.

Lady Triss came along, confused, "What has gotten into you?"

Then, "He's alive." Lady Winchell said

Triss grabbed her by her arms. "They returned?"

"No. But the wounded speak of a rescuer who said 'Jou' instead of 'You.' A voice in the fog. No armor. Just a voice and hands bringing them to safety."

Triss swallowed hard. Her hand clasped her chest.

"He's alive," Winchell repeated. "You have been praying for a miracle."

"Saints be praised." She said as she looked up to the sky.

Caer Sursbrooke – The Southern Road

They rode south at noon, the rolling forested landscape to their left, the hills to the right. The wind tugged at their cloaks, and the morning fog still clung to the earth in pockets.

Los, now on a borrowed horse, kept quiet, one hand resting on the pommel of his sword. Romao and Prox rode ahead, alert and tense. Bunk, mumbled low prayers as he rode.

"Something doesn't feel right," Prox muttered, glancing toward the tree line.

"Agreed," Romao said. "No birds. No sound."

Los raised a hand and brought the group to a halt.

Then—movement.

A faint tremor beneath the earth.

Followed by three Raven Clan giants emerging from beyond the hill before them, they were twice the height of a man, and dressed like Pitcish warriors. Their eyes were like that of a man, their bodies in form and function like a man. One of them raised an axe larger than any of them and pointed it toward the riders.

Romao dismounted. "We doing this the old way?"

Los dropped from his saddle and drew steel.

"I'll draw them. Romao—cut their knees. Prox—finish them. Bunk—keep us on our feet."

Prox grinned. "Finally. A proper fight."

Bunk sighed as he climbed down, readying his blessings. "We never just *ride* somewhere, do we?"

Los was already moving; his great sword raised above his head.

"Zelus Belli!"

His voice echoed across the trees.

"Obice Virtutis!"

Other chants followed from three voices.

Holy light ignited all about him as he clashed with the lead giant. The creature's axe swung low—Los ducked under and slammed his sword into its gut, wounding it deeply.

Romao darted in, slicing across the back of the giant's leg. It howled and dropped to one knee. Prox lept onto the giant's back, driving a great sword deep into it.

The second giant came charging in, swinging its giant sword. Los raised his sword to parry, but the impact knocked him onto his back with a crushing blow.

"Refocillatio Maior!" Bunk shouted from behind. A golden ripple of healing magic surged into Los, bolstering his limbs just enough to get back to his feet.

The third giant charged Romao. He rolled aside, leaving a gash in its calf as he passed. Prox landed beside him just in time, both of them driving blades into its midsection.

Los parried another blow from the second that sent him flying, then *Iudicium Supremum*

And the giant fell.

Bunk had called down a smite from the heavens with great fury.

A moment later, silence.

The bodies of the Raven Clan giants lay sprawled in the grass and torn earth.

Romao wiped his blade. "We're still a damn good team."

Bunk grumbled. "We're lucky there were not more."

As they caught their breath, Los stepped over one of the giants—something glinted beneath its massive hand.

He pried it loose.

A dagger. Or at least, it would have been, to the giant. To Los, it was the size of a great sword—dark steel veined with faint silver runes. As soon as he gripped it, the runes shimmered softly, the blade came alive with a crimson flame.

Romao's brow furrowed. "That thing's magic."

Prox leaned in. "Very old magic."

Los turned it over in his hands, he could feel a surge of power.

"I'll hold onto it then. It might make an interesting great sword."

And with that, they remounted, riding on toward Camelot.

Dartmoor – Ominous Winds

Lord Prydwen stood at the edge of the war room; a map of Albion spread before him. Miniatures representing units and forces marked recent reports.

"Another dead caravan," he said quietly.

Endrond stood beside him and nodded. "Burned. Crushed. Survivors say they saw a shadow with wings."

"Could be a trick of the light and shadow."

"Could be a dragon." The scout added.

Prydwen's eyes narrowed.

"And the giants?"

"Everywhere. They're stirring."

Prydwen folded his hands. "Then we will need someone to investigate."

St. George's Church, Late Afternoon

The gates of Camelot swung open as the four riders passed beneath them, cloaks heavy with dust and sweat. The city was quieter than usual, the mood somber, the echoes of the recent battle still present in every whispered prayer and clink of hammer in the square.

Los reined in just before the steps of St. George's. He swung down stiffly, his armor scratched, dented, and partially split across the side where a giant's sword had found him. Bunk dismounted behind him with a groan, muttering curses about saddles and bruised thighs. Romao and Prox followed, silent and weary from battle and travel alike.

The church doors opened before them.

Lady Triss stood in the entry, flanked by the golden glow of stained glass behind her. She didn't speak at first. Her face was composed, her posture faultless—but her eyes lingered on Los. The briefest flicker of relief crossed her features before she mastered it.

"Welcome home," she said, voice even. "All of you."

Los gave a quiet nod. "Thank you, milady."

She stepped forward, her gaze narrowing as it settled on him more directly. Her tone sharpened, controlled but cutting.

"Is it true," she asked, "that you went into the fog after the battle at the Milegate? Alone. At night. Unarmored. Unarmed?"

She had heard the reports as they came in from survivors.

Los hesitated.

"Los?"

He met her gaze without flinching, but didn't answer.

Her jaw tensed. "Do you understand what that was? It was reckless. Unnecessary. Foolish. Saints above, *you could have died.*"

"I know." His answer short, a touch curt.

"Then why?" her tone softened.

His reply came quiet, but sure. "Because others would have died if I had not."

She stepped closer, voice tightening with the heat she tried to hide. "And how many did you save, exactly? I've heard twenty five. Some say thirty."

"I don't know," he admitted. "Less than that. Maybe a dozen. Maybe less."

She studied him—truly studied him—for the first time since he'd ridden in. Her eyes drifted down over his armor, taking in the battered state of it, the rough stitching in the sleeve, the cracks along the pauldron.

Her voice dropped.

"Your armor looks like you were rolled over by a giant."

"Three, actually," Los said without a trace of humor.

"What?"

Romao stepped forward, unslinging his blade from his back. "South of Sursbrooke. Raven Clan giants. Ambushed us on the road. We fought them off."

Prox crossed his arms. "We killed them."

Lady Triss's mouth parted slightly. "You *what*?"

"Los led the charge," Romao said. "Drew their attention, gave us the openings. We brought them down. All three."

She turned slowly to Los again, eyes scanning him anew—less with scorn now, more with stunned appraisal. Before she could speak further, another stepped out of the chapel door.

Lord Prydwen.

"Lady Triss, I came to speak with you about—" He stopped, taking in the battered figures standing before her. His gaze moved to Los. "You've returned."

He looked at the four of them, then stepped closer when he saw the state of Los's armor.

"Did I hear you right, you encountered giants?"

"Yes, my lord," Los answered.

"Three of them," Prox added.

Prydwen turned back to Lady Triss, brow furrowed—but not in confusion. In resolution.

"Come with me."

Lord Prydwens Chamber

Lady Triss and Lord Prydwen walked to his chamber.

"Were sending Los and Bunk to Dartmoor," Prydwen said. "Reports of a dragon. Burned caravans. Displaced giants. I want confirmation—and if possible, I want to know where it sleeps."

Lady Triss's eyes narrowed. "You're sending him alone?"

"He's not alone. He has a Cleric."

"Bunk McHeal is a perfectionist. Los is..." she struggled, "Los is not."

Prydwen leaned forward. "Rebecca. He is a Paladin. That title must mean something. We have no one else with his experience fighting giants, he goes, and I will not waste time. Besides—he just slew three more. Who else would be better?"

There was silence.

She clenched her fists. "He's barely returned."

"You treat him differently than any other Paladin, why?"

A breath caught in her throat—quick, barely there, but enough.

"He's one of mine."

"And yet you treat him differently than Prox or Romao." Prydwen's voice dropped. "You've made it plain he is somehow special. But I have to ask: why him? And why not Angela? You have abandoned her for him. Why?"

Triss's jaw tightened.

"I thought she was your protégé."

"I..." Triss faltered. "she is."

"You're not training two Paladins. You're mothering one, and neglecting the other."

The words struck hard. Truth often did.

Lord Prydwen took in a long breath.

"I am sending him, and McHeal with him, unless you can give me one good reason why not to."

He had given her an out, a chance to stop him from sending the boy, but she could not take it, she could not betray the truth of why she treated him like no other Paladin she had trained before.

"You are right, I have been neglecting Angela." She deflected. "Give me tonight to complete Los's training, Prox and Romao as well."

"You have until dawn, then they are going."

Camelot – St. George's Church, Shortly After

The church had grown quiet again, save for the dull hum of shifting armor and the muted flicker of torchlight. Los sat on the edge of a stone bench beneath the rose-glass window, his cuirass unbuckled, arms resting on his knees. Across from him, Bunk nursed a steaming cup of something sharp and bitter, occasionally blowing into it like it had wronged him.

The door creaked.

Lady Triss entered, followed closely by Lord Prydwen.

Both stopped before the two men.

Prydwen stepped forward. "You're both being sent to Dartmoor."

Los straightened, his brows knitting slightly. "Dartmoor?"

"Scouts report burned caravans. Some say they've seen a dragon." He met Los's gaze directly. "I need confirmation. I need to know if it's real, and where its lair is."

Los blinked once. "And if it is?"

"You *do not* engage it," Prydwen said firmly. "Observe. Track. And Return. Is that clear? If there is a Dragon, we will assemble a force to slay it."

Los nodded once. "Yes, my lord."

"Good," Prydwen said. "you leave at first light."

He turned to go, but Lady Triss lingered a moment longer. Her gaze held Los, unreadable in the dim light.

"Go get something to eat," she said quietly. "I'll see you in the nave after."

She turned, her cloak trailing after her, and was gone.

Bunk let out a dry exhale. "Ah. Brilliant. Send the paladin who attracts trouble like a moth to a flame. And me, a humble cleric, into dragon country."

"less worried about the Dragon than I am about Lady Triss."

Bunk squinted towards the door way she had disappeared through. "She's going to beat you half to death, isn't she?"

Los cracked a faint smile, and a bit of a laugh. "Probably."

The Nave – The Final Chants

That evening, Los knelt within the dim firelight of the Nave.

Lady Triss stood before him.

"These are no minor chant," she said. "They will not make you immune to harm—but it may give you the time you need."

She recited the sacred Latin slowly.

Aura Salutis. Da mihi, Domine, praesidium contra vulnera corporis.

(Grant me protection against wounds of the body.)

Refocillatio Archangelorum. Concede nobis, Domine, sanationem divinam et refocillationem virium.

(Grant us divine healing and renewal of strength.)

Carmen Perseverantiae. Infunde nobis, Domine, fortitudinem indomitam in adversis.

(Pour into us unbreakable strength in adversity.)

Zelus Belli Maior. Accende in nobis, Domine, zelum invictum in proelio.

(Kindle in us unconquered zeal in battle.)

Potentia Virtuosa. Concede mihi, Domine, vim magnam ad servitium tuum.

(Grant me great force for Your service.)

Mantellum Cruciferi. Indue nos, Domine, velamine protectionis Crucis tuae.

(Clothe us with the veil of Your Cross's protection.)

Celeritas Purissima. Da nobis, Domine, velocitatem caelestem et agilitatem immaculatam.

(Grant us heavenly swiftness and immaculate agility.)

Scutum Animae. Protege, Domine, animas nostras contra omne malum.

(Protect our souls against all evil.)

Scutum Magicum. Defende nos, Domine, clipeo arcano contra incantamenta.
(Defend us with an arcane buckler against enchantments.)

Scutum Elemental. Defende nos, Domine, scuto contra vires elementorum.
(Defend us with a shield against the forces of the elements.)

Obex Temperantiae. Circumda nos, Domine, vallo moderationis et patientiae invictae.
(Surround us with the rampart of moderation and unconquered patience.)

Incitatio Furoris. Da mihi, Domine, ut in me ruant et alii vivant.
(Grant that they rush upon me, and others may live.)

Los repeated each word. The air shimmered faintly around him. The warmth on his skin wasn't from the torches. He could feel the difference between these and the chants he had already learned, they were more powerful, more protective.

"Work with McHeal," Triss said. "Protect him. He will heal you."

"I will," he replied. "With my life if need be."

And he meant it.

Triss laid her hand on his shoulder, "Do not face the beast alone should you find it. Return to me, and we will face it together."

"Jes my lady." Los promised her, he could feel her deep sincerity, she would fight it beside him. If only he gave her a chance to.

Night – Church of Camelot

Los was exhausted—bones sore, eyelids heavy.
And yet, he had to rise again at first light.

He didn't pause to look around him as he moved through the church's quiet nave and descended the stone steps into the Catacombs. His steps were measured, but weary.

From the far side of the sanctuary, unseen in the shadow of a tall column, Lord Prydwen stood watching. He had come to check on him—to see if he was prepared for what came next.

Instead, he watched Los disappear beneath the church.

What was he doing down there?

Prydwen waited in silence. He lingered long after Los had gone, but the young man never came back up.

In the Catacombs Los bowed his head, his voice scarcely more than breath.
"So it was you. Once more, you watched over me."

Lucia's radiance wavered like a candle in still air. She shook her head gently, her words soft as flame.

"I watch over many. That night, it was not you I watched, but the souls you bore out of the dark. I gave them light. You gave them strength."

His shoulders bent, as though carrying the weight anew.
"...Then I was only your hands."

Her gaze did not falter.
"And was that not enough?"

When morning came, and Los and McHeal departed on their mission, Prydwen returned to the chapel. This time, he followed the stairs himself—into the silence below.

It didn't take long to find it.

A shelf meant to house the dead. A single wool blanket folded with military precision. A tiny oil lamp. A few worn possessions. On the wall, shallow scoring—slashes where a greatsword had struck in midnight drills.

He stood there a long time, staring at the place where Los had slept—beneath the altar, beneath the prayers, beneath all of Camelot.

Alone.

Prydwen sighed, the weight of it settling into his chest.

All this time...

The boy had been living beneath our feet.

Camelot – Stables

Just after sunrise, Los mounted his horse—a chestnut mare. Bunk stood beside his own mount, stiff-backed, eyes narrowed, his steed grey and lean with muscle. He had fully recovered from their last adventure.

"I will accompany you," the Cleric said. "But I will not clean up your reckless swordplay."

Los nodded once. "Jes. Just keep me alive long enough to juse it."

"You just remember we're there to investigate, not to charge headlong into a fight with a dragon."

"Jes I know."

"I mean it Los." Bunks look was stern. Uncompromising.

"Jes I promised already, no fighting any dragons until a force can be assembled. I get it."

They rode out without fanfare, bound for Dartmoor.

The Burns Manor

As Los and Bunk departed, Triss walked to the Burn's manor in Camelot where Lady Angela was staying these days.

The servants met her at the door and guided her to the training area where Angela was working on her sword skills.

"Lady Triss," she said with a curtsy. "To what do I owe the honor?" Her words were cordial, though tinged with confusion. It had been a while since Lady Triss had come to see her, she had been spending all her time with that boy.

"I thought we could do some training."

Angela blinked. "With you?"

"With me," Triss said. "And no one else."

Sword met shield. Chant met chant. And in the training yard where roses climbed old stone, Angela felt the fire again.

The fire that made her a Paladin.

The fire that made her feel alive.

Triss corrected her form. Praised her stance.

She had grown since being left in Lady Eve's care.

Lady Triss struck harder, more precise. But Angela met her moves with skill and determination.

Then

Angela smiled—not because it was easy.

But because she felt she mattered to Lady Triss again.

"Angela, repeat after me." Triss said as she lowered her sword.

It was the final lesson, the one she had given to Los before he departed.

Angela repeated the words, felt the change.

Then her mentor raised her sword again.

They chanted, attacked, defended, until their arms grew weary, it had been the best day of training in some time, for both of them. Mentor and Student. At last they sat on a bench at the edge of the training area, smiling, enjoying the cool breeze.

Lady Triss leaned her head back against the wall. She had needed this, to spend time with Angela, to reaffirm their relationship. And to take her mind off Los.

But a burning question had been gnawing at Angela.

"Would you have come for me?" she asked softly

Triss turned her head gently.

"What?"

Angela didn't look up.

"If it had been me—lost on the battlefield. Wounded. Alone. Like Los."

There was no pause, no calculation. Triss reached over and took Angela's hand, gripping it with hers, firm and warm.

"Yes. I would have come. With sword in hand, prayers on my lips, I would have found you."

Angela finally lifted her gaze. There was a glint in her eyes.

Triss's voice softened even further.

"Not because you are my student. Not even because you are a Paladin. But because you matter to me. You always have."

Angela smiled, quietly. Not with triumph, but with peace.

"Thank you, my Lady."

Triss gave her hand one last gentle squeeze before letting go.

"You are not second to anyone, Angela. You never were."

Camelot – Lord Baldric's Chambers

Lord Baldric held a goblet of wine, eyes fixed out the window, looking over Camelot.

"A dragon..." he muttered. "Well. That wasn't my doing."

He sipped.

"But if it devours the Spaniard, I'll not weep."

He drank deeper, then a smile crossed his face.

And if it doesn't... I'll find another fire to throw him into.

Chapter XXVII – The Ashen Crown

South of Camelot – On the Road to the Avalon Marsh

The sun crept slowly up the eastern sky as Los and Bunk passed through Camelot's western gate, the guards giving them a silent nod as the city faded behind them. Their mounts moved at a steady trot, hooves soft on the dew-drenched dirt road that wound through the low hills and into the Salisbury Plains. A chill clung to the early air, quiet but not still, as though the land itself was holding its breath.

Los sat upright in the saddle, one hand lightly on the reins, the other resting across his thigh, Risa's ring was tucked beneath his armor, hanging from the cord around his neck as always. His hand unconsciously drifted to it as his thoughts played out what would happen should they find a real live dragon.

Bunk rode beside him, as straight-backed as ever, chainmail neat, boots polished, and a perpetual look of judgment aimed at the horizon.

Neither spoke for a time. The hush between them wasn't awkward, just... unfilled.

Eventually, Los broke the silence.

"Do you have much family?" he asked, his voice low, barely louder than the wind.

Bunk didn't turn his head, but his brow twitched. "A sister. Older. She's a Friar, currently stationed in Snowdonia. And three younger brothers—all bound for the cloth. One already a novice, the other two soon behind."

"No Paladins?" Los asked with a smirk.

Bunk scoffed. "We're McHeal, not McSteel."

Los laughed heartily, a big grin crossing his face.

It took Bunk a moment to realize the pun "oh yes, I see." Then he laughed too.

They rode a few paces more before Bunk angled a glance toward him.

"What about you?"

Los looked forward. "What about me?"

"Family."

He was quiet. The kind of quiet that didn't invite follow-up.

Bunk waited anyway.

"My father died serving King Arthur," Los said eventually. "I never knew him. My mother... died when I was born."

"I'm sorry."

Los only gave a faint shrug. "It's just life." For Los it was just how it was.

More silence. Then Bunk's eyes dropped briefly—just briefly—to the cord around Los's neck.

"No offense," he said gently, "but what is with the ring."

Los didn't answer.

"I've seen you reach for it when you think no one's looking," Bunk continued. "So, what is with it."

Los looked down at his chest as if looking through his armor at the ring, but he never pulled it out.

Bunk waited.

"It was hers," Los said, after a beat. "Risa. My fiancée's. It's all I have of her now."

Bunk's expression turned somber.

"I'm sorry," he said again, and this time it carried weight. "I didn't mean—"

"No. It's fine." Los's voice didn't crack, but it was thinner now. "She died, before I left Hispania."

He looked down, remembering her dying in his arms, holding her.

They rode a while in silence again. But it felt different now.

Bunk finally said, "You could take it off. It might help you move on."

His hand rose to the edge of his cuirass, gripping hard where the steel met his throat. The ring was somewhere below, out of reach, but he could feel the ache in his chest.

"It's all I have."

"Fair enough," Bunk said quietly. Then, after a moment: "Just don't get killed chasing ghosts."

Los actually smiled at that. A weary smile—but real.

"Chasing ghosts is what we do," he said, laughing softly.

Then he exhaled, letting the tension bleed from his chest.

Bunk grinned, "And giants, and goblins..."

Los laughed again, "Jes those too."

As they rode on, Los looked up at the sky, it was the first time the ice had really been broken between them.

"If it works for jou, we will stop and stay the night in Lord Adribard's Retreat." Los offered.

Bunk nodded, "That works for me. Lord Adribard is famous for his hospitality."

"Then it's settled," Los said, reining his horse gently. "A warm fire. A safe roof. And no giants for one night."

Bunk chuckled. "Now that's plan I can work with."

For the first time, they rode on as something like companions.

Adribard's Retreat – A Stirring in the Marsh

The first thing Los noticed was the noise.

Not the clamor of weapons or the ring of steel, but the *hum*—dozens of armored men and women gathered outside the keep, voices low but charged. Some bore the insignia of Avalon, others the grail. Plate gleamed in the evening light. Scouts moved like shadows among them, relaying orders. Even the air felt tighter, like the silence before a storm.

As Los and Bunk approached the outer tower, a guard stepped forward, helm tucked beneath one arm.

"You're just in time," he said. "They've found it. The dragon. Tracked to the old ruins of Dartmoor castle."

His voice held a kind of awe. Or fear.

Bunk pulled up short in the saddle. "*Truly?*"

"Aye. Lord Solice is mustering a force. Says tomorrow he will ride for Dartmoor to slay the beast."

Los dismounted and strode forward without another word, weaving through the crowd until he reached the stone steps of the manor itself. Bunk followed close behind.

Two Avalonian Paladins stood at the top. One wore gilded armor and bore a sunburst upon his chestplate—Lord Solice, a leader among men and Avalonians. The other, older, watched with a hawk's stillness—Lord Adribard, the Retreat's namesake. Behind him stood his squire: a dark-haired young half-Avalonian, bearing Adribard's banner and holding his shield at the ready.

Los bowed low before the two lords.

"Los Ortiz," he said. "Paladin. I was sent by Lord Prydwen to verify the threat and locate the creature's lair."

Adribard nodded in acknowledgement. "Then you've arrived in time. The scouts confirmed the beast's location before sunrise. It nests in the ruins of Castle Dartmoor, three leagues into the mist."

Lord Solice gave a thin smile. "We ride in the morning. You are welcome to join us."

Before Los could reply, Bunk stepped beside him, armor jingling softly.

"With respect, my lords," he said, "our orders were reconnaissance. You've confirmed the dragon exists and learned where it sleeps. That's what Lord Prydwen asked of us. Nothing more."

Adribard's gaze moved from the cleric to Los.

"I didn't come to see it," Los said quietly. "I came to *face* it."

Bunk turned toward him sharply, incredulous. "That is *not* what we agreed."

Los didn't flinch. "No. It's what I intend to do. Lord Prydwen said to report back and he would send a force to face it, well here is a force headed to face it."

Bunk stared at him, angrily, he promised! Now he was going to drag them into a fight with a Dragon.

Then Adribard spoke, voice like old stone. "It is your choice."

Bunk looked from one to the other, then sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Of course."

Through the Marsh and into Cornwall

The march took a day, the landscape shifting from dense wetlands to rolling hills and stony outcrops.

By the time they reached the edge of Dartmoor, the army had swelled to over a hundred: Armsmen with tower shields, Paladins, Wizards and Sorcerers in embroidered robes, Mercenaries bearing swords and daggers, Scouts with their bows, Theurgists and Cabalists whispering to their elementals, Clerics chanting softly, Friars in worn leather robes, even a few Minstrels tightening the strings of their lutes.

Los rode near the front, silent, watchful.

"This is madness," Bunk whispered. "It's not an army—it's a parade."

But Los didn't respond. His gaze lingered on the horizon.

A dragon.

In the tapestries it was small enough to kill from horseback. And yet a hundred men were marching to face it.

Through the Valleys of Dartmoor

The road wound downward into the granite valleys of Dartmoor, cloaked in drifting mist and trees.

Massive silhouettes moved between the stones.

Granite Giants, nearly twice the height of a man, stone blue skin, and capable of crushing a man with their bare hands.

Their footfalls rolled like thunder across the valleys, each step shaking the earth beneath the company's boots.

Los rode ahead with his helmet at his side, watching one of the creatures wrench a boulder from the ground and hurl it across a ravine. It struck the far cliffside and burst apart in a shower of stone.

"Saints preserve us," Bunk muttered.

Los smirked. "A minor challenge."

They pressed on in wary silence. Archers loosed arrows when the giants strayed too near, and Wizards cast spells of fire and ice that flashed against the fog. The monsters were slow, but relentless—each valley a gauntlet of stone and wrath.

Still, the host moved on, undaunted—Paladins and Armsmen clearing the way ahead, their chants echoing between the cliffs.

By the time they cleared the final pass leading to the lair the host was already tired. But they pressed on. All eager to see their quarry with their own eyes.

Dartmoor Castle – The Dragon's Lair

By late afternoon the ruins of Dartmoor Castle stood like a broken crown on the valley floor, the ground and walls were blackened stone. Steam clung to its ruins, curling into shattered windows and hollow towers.

Lord Solice, Lord Adribard, Los and a reluctant Bunk sat at the head of the army, staring at the ruined ground before them.

"Thoughts?" Lord Solice asked.

Lord Adribard's eyes didn't move from the blackened stones. "I am open to suggestions."

Bunk glared at Los as if his glare alone might unhorse him.

Los only shifted his weight in the saddle, then reached back and settled his hand on the hilt of a spare blade strapped across his pack — the one taken from a Raven Clan giant. To the giants it had been a dagger; in his hands it was a two-handed sword, heavy and honest. When he slid it free of its sheath the edge burned with a crimson flame, like steel set alight. He felt the strength in his arms deepen and steadier under its weight, though beyond that he knew nothing of it.

"I have a suggestion," he offered as he touched the still sheathed blade.

"Of course you do," Bunk muttered.

Lord Solice and Adribard turned. "Go on."

"We need to cross the open ground from the edge of the castle ruins to the center where the dragon will be," Los said, pointing to the black scar at the courtyard's heart.

"Yes, and your idea?" Solice urged.

"Jes. I go first," Los said. "I draw its attention and hold it. While it is focused on me, the rest of jou cross and take the beast from behind."

Bunk put his head in his palm. "And how are you going to do that?"

"Jou remember the sword we pulled from the Raven Clan giant?" Los asked, tapping the flat of the sheathed blade.

Bunk's face flickered with the memory. "The one that glowed when you held it?"

"That one." Los smiled, as if the whole matter were academic. "I'll distract the beast the way we do with bulls back home—the crimson flame will make a fine target for it to chase and lunge at."

The cleric closed his eyes and shook his head. "It'll roast you before we get to you."

"Jou say that now." Los grinned. "Oh, jou of little faith."

He had seen plenty of reliefs and tapestries of St. George slaying the dragon, they looked to be not much bigger than a large dog, or a small bull. He would simply put on a display of skill, taunting the beast, then slay it. Just as he had trained to do with bulls back home, *Alanceamiento de toros* they called it.

"Do you really think you can manage it?" Lord Adribard asked.

"Easily," Los said — with all the confidence of a fool who had never faced a dragon before.

Lord Solice and Adribard shared a look. Then Solice nodded. "So be it. You'll have Bunk, of course, and a friar for added support."

Lord Adribard raised two fingers toward his squire. "Brother Onoloth. Now." The young Avalonian bowed once and vanished into the ranks.

"We're all going to die," Bunk muttered. "Saint Lucy, if you're listening..." He crossed himself. "Please save us from the fire."

But the die was cast. All Bunk could do now was take part in the madness and hope the Saints were listening.

The army moved as quietly as they could, taking positions behind the ruined walls of Dartmoor Castle, bracing for what was to come.

A few men clapped Los on the shoulder and wished him luck — farewells spoken to a man already marked for death.

Los only gave them that irrepressible grin that said, *I've got this*.

Then, without a word, he drew the ring from his chest and kissed it.

Bunk caught his arm as the army hunkered behind the walls. "This is foolish. You'll die before they've even drawn their blades."

"I'll manage," Los said.

"You kissed that ring around your neck," Bunk pressed. "Why? Because you want to die!"

Los met his eyes but said nothing.

He turned before Bunk could say more and entered the courtyard alone.

Bunk cast blessings upon him as quickly as he could from cover: Strength, Fortitude, Dexterity, Quickness. Brother Onoloth blinked at the sudden act but followed suit, pouring blessings of resistance to fire, blessings of greater health, blessings of greater speed in battle.

The dragon loomed in the center, large as a tavern, curled amid charred bones and broken stone. Its blue scales shimmered in the light, its eyes half-closed, its wings curled around it like a crown of shadow.

Madre de Dios.

This was no bull—this was something older, heavier, and terrible. There was no time to reconsider the plan. All he could do was press forward.

Los unslung his sword. Drawing the now burning blade, its crimson flame seeming to take in the moment. “Soon, *mi amor*.”

He stepped forward and began to chant:

Aura Salutis... Refocillatio Archangelorum... Carmen Perseverantiae...

He felt the power of his chants surging through him.

Then the dragon’s eyes fully opened.

Its wings unfurled.

A gust of wind and force lifted Los from his feet and hurled him backward as the beast took flight.

“Coward!” Los roared, staggering to his feet. “Jou come back here!”

The dragon gave him no heed. It climbed, circled once above the ruins—then dove. Toward the force hiding behind the ruins.

A wall of fire engulfed them.

Screams rose like a wave.

Solice’s formation shattered under the onslaught of a single pass—soldiers burning, walls collapsing, casters fleeing, men dying.

Then the dragon rose again and returned, landing within the ruined courtyard with a bone-rattling crash. Smoke curled from its nostrils.

And in a voice like smoke and iron, it spoke:

"You dare challenge me in my lair? I shall feast upon your bones!"

Los stood alone, stunned that such a creature could speak, and horrified by the devastation it had so easily wrought upon the force meant to slay it. He heard men still screaming—saw them burning and scattered, saw them dying—but he was powerless to help them.

He just gripped his greatsword, unable to breathe, unable to think.

Then the dragon came down on him—its massive jaws opening wide.

He did not flee. He couldn't. He was frozen with fear.

And when the shadow fell over him, he lifted his blade and drove it upward with all his might.

It was futility.

It was instinct.

Outside the Castle – Horror and Revelation

The survivors stared in stunned silence as the dragon lifted its head—massive jaws unhinging, smoke curling from its nostrils as it moved to swallow him whole.

Then—

Los was gone.

The dragon's enormous throat flexed.

It reared its head back...

Then the beast staggered.

A burst of blue-white light flared between its teeth.
Its eyes rolled back, and the life in them snuffed out.

It gave a sound that wasn't quite a roar—more a shuddering gasp—and fell.

Then the ground shook as it collapsed, stone splintering beneath its weight.

And then—nothing.

A silence so deep it swallowed the wind.

Bunk froze mid-incantation, hands glowing with half-spoken blessings. Around him, Clerics and Friars halted, still as statues, watching the fallen colossus.

Lord Solice himself having survived the dragon's fury stepped forward, sword in hand.

"Saints preserve us," he muttered.

"Look there!" cried Lord Adribard's squire.

All eyes turned.

The dragon's head lay twisted, its neck slack. A slow pool of dark blood spread beneath it—
and from the back of the skull jutted the unmistakable tip of a sword.

Gasps rippled through the ranks.

Frost glazed the edges of its jaws, the smoke from its nostrils gone to steam and then silence.

Then—muffled cries from the dragon's maw.

Several soldiers rushed forward to help pry at the jaws.

Inside—soaked in blood and a crust of frozen saliva, armor rimed with ice—was Los.

He was shivering, lips blue, eyes dazed.

His fingers twitched. His lips moved.
"Help," he croaked.

Several of them dragged him free—from the jaws of death.
Literally.

They laid him in the dirt beside the ruined gate.

Lord Solice knelt beside him. "What in God's name happened?"

Los's breath came in shudders. Frost clung to his hair, his lashes.

"I thought it was going to swallow me," he rasped. "I drove the blade up as it closed its jaws. The moment it impaled itself there was...a light—blue-white. It exploded from the sword. Then everything went cold."

He stared past them at the dead beast.

Bunk crossed himself, whispering, "The Light preserved him again."

Los trembled from the chill. "Maybe," he said softly still chattering. "Or maybe there's more magic in that blade than I realized."

Return to Camelot – The Epic Paladin

With great difficulty the dragon's head was cut off and mounted on a cart. The force, or what remained of it, returned to Adribard's Retreat with the wounded. The clerics and Friars had done what they could, but there was only so much they could do when faced with so many wounded, dead, and dying.

Still Lord Adribard held a feast, praising Los for his heroic and epic deed. The minstrels caught onto this and started calling him "The Epic Paladin" in tale and song.

The next day the procession continued onto Camelot with song and fanfare along the way.

Farmers came to the edges of their fields, men lined the road to see the head of the beast and the man who had slain it.

Los was hailed as a hero.

He was called the Dragon Slayer.

The Epic Paladin.

But Los said little.

He had not slain the dragon by skill. Only instinct, terror, luck, and the aid of a magic sword.

For his part, Lord Prydwen, with the blessing of Lord Solice, awarded him half the dragon's hoard and the creature's head.

"You did what no one else could," he said. "Whether planned or not—you did it."

Bunk said little as well. But his disapproval was written on his face.

"You're suicidal," he muttered once, as they rode through cheering crowds. "You kissed that ring and walked into death. She means that much to you?"

But Los didn't answer. He just kept looking straight ahead.

He had failed her again. This time by his own hand.

That Night – The Feast

There were celebrations in the capital—banners unfurled, bells rung, a feast blazing with laughter in the great hall. Trumpets had heralded the return of the Dartmoor party, and the people of Camelot poured into the streets to see the Paladin who had returned from dragon-haunted lands.

Los rode at the front, ash still on his cloak, his blade hung low on his back. Behind him rode Bunk McHeal, clean and rigid as ever, his expression unreadable. The crowd cheering Los's name.

Romao and Prox had arrived just in time to see the procession approach the church.

"You see that?" Prox said, still catching his breath. "They're calling him the Epic Paladin now."

Romao nodded, lips pressed together, eyes fixed on Los.

Just then, Los caught sight of them and saluted his brothers—and they, returned it in kind.

Inside the hall, banners gleamed, and goblets overflowed. Nobles toasted the tales of giants and bandits, and now—of a dragon. Servants moved with trays of roast lamb and honeyed bread, musicians played as though Albion had won a great war.

Romao and Prox sat side by side at a long table, armor freshly polished, though their spirits were restless.

"He should be here," Prox muttered. "He earned it more than anyone."

Romao tore a piece of bread and said, "He's never fought for feasts."

"You think he's alright?" Prox pressed, his concern sincere.

Romao didn't answer immediately. His gaze drifted toward the high windows, where the stars began to pierce the night. "He looked... hollow. Like a man who came back from something no one else saw."

Prox exhaled. "You think he saw death?"

Romao nodded slowly. "I think he saw more than he'll ever say."

They were quiet a moment.

"I don't like it," Prox said. "Everyone celebrates the myth. But they forget the man."

Romao's voice was low. "He won't let it break him. He's strong."

"He shouldn't be alone," Prox continued.

Then the trumpets flared.

A herald's voice cut through the hall:

"Los Ortiz de Seville—Dragon Slayer and Epic Paladin!"

The great doors opened, guards stepping smartly aside. Cheers erupted before Los even appeared.

Then he strode in—a fresh cloak upon his shoulders, that crooked grin on his face.

"Forgive my late arrival," he called out. "Dragons are easy to slay—their blood is harder to clean off!"

The hall roared.

Romao watched Los enter with flair, "You were saying?"

Someone shouted, "Tell us, Los, what happened? What did the beast say before it died?"

Los smiled, his eyes gleaming. Then as animated as only a Spaniard could be, he began:

"Well, I had everyone stay back and walked up to it, you see—challenged it to a fair fight."

He looked around the room, making sure he had every ear.

"Then it stared me dead in the eyes and growled, *'Jou dare challenge me in my lair?'*"

He paused, letting the crowd lean forward, grin widening, gesturing as if the thing were right before him, his arms in sweeping motions as he spoke.

"So I told it, 'The King forbids me to fight jou in Camelot, and Lady Triss forbids me from dueling inside the church—so jour lair will have to do!'"
Even Triss laughed despite herself, and the King raised his cup in salute, grinning at a jest well-played.

Laughter crashed like thunder; even the minstrels broke rhythm to laugh.

Los bowed, soaking in the cheer—if only for a heartbeat.

He laughed with them—loud enough to make them believe.

Then his hand drifted, just once, to his chest like it had a mind of its own—pressing the front of his shirt where the ring lay hidden beneath.
The laugh died in his throat. His eyes went somewhere far away.

"Jes—alright," he said a beat later, grin restored, as if nothing had happened.

The crowd cried out, "What did it say next?"

"It bared its teeth and roared, *'I will feast upon jour bones!'*" he said, moving about as he told the tale.

"So I told it, *'Then choke on them!'*"

The hall erupted again. Tankards banging on tables.

"And when it tried," he added with a wink, "it found me too hard to swallow—."

Cheers rolled through the hall.

Then he concluded. Motioning as if he were still in the moment of the deed.

"I thrust my sword up and slew it from the only side it was vulnerable—the inside!"

The room roared its approval.

And as they cheered, Los laughed with them—loud, bright, and—hollow beneath the sound.

The cheers swelled again, echoing off the stone. Los lifted a cup and drinking deeply.

Then raising his cup high in the air as he made his way to the only two people in the room that mattered to him, Romao and Prox, dropping down between them. At the long table.

"Well look who decided to join us," Romao said. "The hero himself."

"The fool himself," Los answered, grinning. "I wish you'd have come along. I'd have let you have the tail."

Prox frowned. "You're laughing, but your eyes don't hide the truth. Are you ok?"

Los clapped him on the shoulder, too hard.

"That's just exhaustion, *hermano*. Comes from not dying when the world expects you to."

Then he shrugged, "Or when you expect to..."

Romao met his gaze, steady. "You don't have to do this—the jokes, the legend."

Los's smile held.

"Somebody has to. They need the story more than I need rest."

He stood and lifted his goblet high.

"Eat, drink, and enjoy!" he admonished all, "For tomorrow we die—or wish we had, once the wine wears off!"

Laughter rippled through the hall again.

Romao only shook his head, smiling despite himself.

Prox grabbed Los's shoulder and brought him back down to his seat.

"Ok, ok, enough, we just want to know you are ok."

Los leaned close enough for them alone to hear.

"I'm fine," he said quietly. "Let them have their joy. It costs me nothing."

Then he straightened, raised his cup to the minstrels, and the noise of the room swallowed them.

St. George's – After the Feast

He tarried a while, then while the music still played and the wine still flowed, Los slipped from the hall unnoticed. The torches along the corridor hissed as he passed, their smoke clinging churning skyward. He had told Romao and Prox he simply needed some air.

Lady Triss saw him go and waited until the laughter behind her broke into another verse of song before rising from her place and following.

She knew where she would find him.

The church was dim, lit only by a few flickering sconces and a candle or two. The hush of distant celebration seeped through the walls. The stained glass glimmered faintly. The church itself seemed to hold its breath.

He sat in the front pew, head bowed, his crooked grin was gone.

She entered quietly. Her boots sounded soft against the worn stone. For a time she only watched him—the way his shoulders held tension not from pride, but from the effort of holding everything else in.

At last she walked forward and sat beside him.

"I saw you at the feast," she said gently. "You played the hero well."

His voice was low.

"Did I?"

He smiled that crooked grin of his— his mask sliding back into place.

As the candlelight carved hollows beneath his eyes.

"You did," she answered.

He gave a short laugh.

"They needed a story."

She studied him fully now. His face calm, his crooked smile, his eyes... tired. Not from lack of sleep, but from the weight he carried.

"You fear what the story is becoming," she said, not fooled.

"I fear what it demands I become," he answered, his mask slipping a little. "Each time they cheer, it pulls me further from who I am. Who I try to be."

He met her gaze—spent, yet still smiling.

"Do you hear what they call me now? It was bad enough when I was the Lone Paladin."

He shook his head, his grin never faltering.

"Now you're the Epic Paladin," she said softly.

"A myth. It wasn't bravery. I raised my sword, it impaled itself. Really—it killed itself. That shouldn't count."

He laughed again, quietly, his hands miming the motion that had ended it, then jokingly making a dying sound.

Triss rested a hand on his shoulder.

"Let me say this plainly: you are not alone. Let them call you what they will—just don't let it change who you are."

He looked at her, fatigue settling in.

For a heartbeat, the smile held—then the mask fell. His eyes glistened faintly.

"You think it hasn't already?" he asked, voice low, more confession than challenge. His gaze dropped to the floor.

Triss's hand lingered on his shoulder.

"Not yet," she said.

"Rest, Los. Take strength from silence if you must. Know that I am here, if ever you need me."

When she rose to go, he stayed seated. She didn't press him.

The church door closed behind her with a soft whisper of wood and brass.

When the city slept, Los slipped into the catacombs beneath the church and lay down on the stone shelf he had claimed in secret — the only place that still felt like home.

In the shadows above, unseen, Lord Prydwen watched him descend into the catacombs and he said nothing.

Caerwent – The Solar at the Burns Estate

Word reached Carewent by courier at dawn.

A dragon slain.

The Epic Paladin lives.

Camelot erupts in praise.

Angela sat by the window, a letter unfolded in her lap, her eyes wide with disbelief. Across from her, Tamara stirred a pot of morning porridge without looking up. Julia, half-dressed in her tabard, stood frozen with one boot on.

"Did you say dragon?" Tamara asked flatly.

Angela nodded. "A real one. In Dartmoor. Los led the charge. They say he killed it by himself."

"That's not possible," Julia said, blinking. "Even the most seasoned guilds can't kill a dragon without casualties."

"There were casualties," Angela replied. "A lot. But he survived."

Tamara set the spoon down and turned. "And they're calling him the *Epic Paladin* now?"

"Yes."

A silence stretched between them.

Then Julia shook her head. "I knew he was reckless, but this..."

"Reckless or not," Angela said quietly, "he lived. He keeps living. That's more than we can say for most men who chase glory."

Tamara folded her arms. "You're inspired again, aren't you?"

Angela didn't answer.

"I can see it in your eyes," Tamara said. "Every time he appears in a story, you get that fire. Like you have something to prove."

"Maybe I do," Angela whispered.

"To who? To him? To you?" Tamara asked.

Angela looked down at the parchment again. *The Epic Paladin*. She touched the edge of it, then said, "To everyone."

Julia smiled brightly. "Then let them call *us* reckless, too."

Angela stood, her eyes still distant. "He fought a dragon."

Tamara raised an eyebrow. "Then let's go become the kind of women who'd fight one as well."

Camelot – Lord Baldric's Study

The scroll trembled as Lord Baldric read it.

He had just finished breakfast when the report arrived: a dragon had attacked a force at old Castle Dartmoor. Many died. The beast fell—impaled from within.

And the name they cheered in Camelot...
The name etched in song...
Los Ortiz.

His goblet tipped sideways in his hand. Red wine bled onto the vellum.

"He lives?" he muttered. "He *lives*?"

He stood, pacing. "They call him *Epic*—*Epic*?" The word left his mouth like it tasted of rot. "He stumbles into the jaws of a dragon and comes out a legend?"

He laughed bitterly. "What *are* you, boy? What is it that guards your worthless hide?"

Baldric's fingers tightened around the edge of his desk. *That ring... the chants... the myths that follow you like a shadow.*

He stared out the window at the grey sky above Camelot.

"Camelot bows to you now. Even Prydwen praises you and Triss hovers like a ghost."

He paused, then said it aloud.

"But you don't know."

The smile that crept across his lips was slow, poisonous.

"You don't know who you are. Not really. Not yet."

He sat down and began to plot.

Caer Sursbrooke – The Silent Watcher

High above the coastline, Willow sat on a wide tree branch, her legs folded, eyes watching the misty sea. Below, waves crashed against black stone.

A squirrel climbed down the trunk beside her, nimble and curious. It paused on her shoulder and chirred softly.

Willow pulled a small nut from the pouch on her belt and handed it over.

The squirrel took it without fear.

They sat together in stillness—two quiet souls, content.
Watching. Listening.
Waiting.

Chapter XXVIII – The Dragon Slayer

Caerwent – The Burns Estate

The morning sun streamed in warm ribbons through the tall windows of the manor's solar, gilding the stone walls and painting the breakfast table in gold. Fresh bread steamed on a platter beside a wheel of goat cheese, but no one reached for it—not yet.

Lord Burns stood at the head of the table, a letter in hand. His eyes scanned the parchment again, though he had already read it twice. With a breath and a subtle lift of his chin, he lowered the letter and addressed his daughters.

"You'll need to dress formally," he said. "Angela, your armor will suffice. Tamara. Amaranthia. Gowns."

Angela sat upright, still in her gambeson from morning drills. Her fingers tightened slightly around the rim of her cup, though her expression remained calm.

Across the table, Tamara raised an eyebrow. "Formal? For what?"

Her father's lips curled slightly. "They're knighting the Spanish boy. Tonight. For slaying the dragon. And requesting he be made Ambassador from Hispania, from Castile."

There was silence.

Amaranthia blinked, wide-eyed. "He's being knighted?"

Angela said nothing. She looked out the window instead. The fields beyond Caerwent shimmered with dew, the treetops moving gently in the early breeze.

"Will you go?" Tamara asked her.

Angela's gaze remained on the horizon. "Of course I'll go."

Lord Burns looked over at her, quietly approving.

Tamara glanced toward their father, then back at her sister. "What do you think he is like?"

"He stood before a dragon and did not run," Angela said softly. "He must be fearless."

Amaranthia leaned forward, her tone conspiratorial. "You're not just going as a guest, are you?"

Angela allowed a small smile. "No. I'm going as a Paladin of Albion."

The others didn't speak after that.

Angela rose from the table without touching her meal and walked to the armoire in the adjoining room. She opened it slowly and ran a hand along the side of her breastplate, then polished until it caught the light like water.

Her eyes lingered on the etched emblem of the church at the center.

She didn't need to be a dragon slayer. Not yet. But she would stand among those who were.

And when her moment came, she would be ready.

Elsewhere – Invitations and Reactions

At Campacorentin, Lady Calla read her invitation aloud. She stared at it a long moment.

"They're making your friend Los a knight."

Jestec and Hollia exchanged excited glances.

"Don't get too excited," she said, snapping them back to attention. "It's too far for us to attend. And we have more work to do."

Her voice softened only slightly.

"Now repeat after me: *Aura Securitatis. Refocillatio. Carmen Constantiae...*"

Camelot – Lord Baldric's Chamber

Lord Baldric read the letter in silence.

A knighthood.

An ambassadorship.

Praise and pageantry.

He crushed the parchment in his hand.

"So be it."

He turned to the fire and fed the letter to the flames.

The Great Chapel of St. George

The bells of Camelot rang clear and solemn that evening, echoing from the high towers to the crowded streets below. Though the ceremony was arranged with barely a day's notice, word had traveled quickly: *The Epic Paladin* was to be knighted.

Inside the great chapel, the candlelight flickered against stone and stained glass. The high vaults glowed in hues of red, gold, and blue, casting halos of color across the heads of those assembled.

At the far end of the nave, near the steps of the chancel, Lord Prydwen stood in his formal white-and-gold armor, flanked by two senior knights. He watched the doors. Waiting.

The pews were not packed, but they were well-chosen. Lords and Ladies who could not come had sent their sigils in gilded envelopes to be read aloud. Their absence was not personal, but entirely due to the short notice. Their acknowledgment, however, was what mattered.

From behind a curtain, the ceremony's subject waited.

The Outer Hall – Before the Ceremony

Los sat in the small chamber just beyond the altar doors, dressed in his polished armor, the greatsword laid flat across his lap. His hands trembled, not from fear—but from the sheer absurdity of it all.

"Sir Los," he whispered under his breath. "Sir Epic." He laughed almost to himself.

The door opened, and in came Romao and Prox—both in armor, both grinning.

"Look at you," Romao said. "Like a statue in a cathedral."

"You clean up nice," Prox added, elbowing him.

Los looked up. "You think I deserve this?" sincerely questioning it.

Romao crouched in front of him. "You survived Dartmoor. You slew a dragon. If that doesn't deserve a knighthood, then nothing does."

"I didn't slay it with skill."

"But you slayed it," Prox said. "With instinct, heart, and a prayer. That's Albion enough for me."

Los stood slowly. "Then let's do this."

The Gallery – Angela and the Burns Sisters

Angela stood near the front row of the nave, her Paladin ceremonial armor shining, casting a faint halo about her. Tamara and Amaranthia sat on either side of her, dressed in crimson and gold gowns, their hair braided with ribbons.

"He really is going to be knighted," Amaranthia whispered.

Angela nodded slowly, eyes fixed forward. "He deserves it."

Tamara leaned in. "He looks like he still doesn't believe it himself."

"Good," Angela said softly. "That's why he's worthy."

Julia stood behind them in the gallery, dressed in her clerical garb, silent as always—but watching. Proud.

The Chancel – The King’s Arrival

The trumpets sounded. King Constantine, King of Albion, robed in white with gold embroidery, entered the chapel with his entourage. He ascended the dais to the alter, then turned to face the aisle.

Lord Prydwen stepped forward. “Bring him forth.”

The great doors opened.

The Procession

Los walked in, armor gleaming like starlight, his blade strapped to his back. He walked flanked by Romao and Prox as honor guard, his eyes straight ahead, his step steady but humble. Murmurs rippled through the gathered few as he passed.

There he is.

The dragon slayer.

The Epic Paladin.

But to Los, it was an isle he had walked a hundred times, and he walked it as he always had.

He stopped at the foot of the dais and knelt.

The Ceremony

“Los Ortiz de Seville,” the King’s voice rang out. “You have served Albion with valor, protected her people with strength and humility, and stood where others fell. You have faced adversity and did not flee. You have given our realm not only victory—but hope.”

Lord Prydwen stepped forward and drew a ceremonial blade.

"Do you swear to serve the light, to uphold justice, to defend the innocent, and to honor the code of chivalry as a knight?"

"I do," Los said bowing his head.

The blade touched each shoulder.

"Then rise, *Sir Los, Knight of the Paladin Order, Slayer of the Dragon.*"

Applause rose—not deafening, but solemn, reverent, heartfelt.

The King's Decree

"One more matter," the King said, lifting his hand. "By the counsel of Lord Prydwen and the will of the Crown, we have officially requested of the Kingdom of Castile that Sir Los... be assigned as our official *Ambassador from Hispania*. The embassy across from this very church, long empty, shall be his residence and charge. Let him be a bridge between our peoples—one born of fire and tempered by honor."

Gasps and whispers filled the room. Even Los looked stunned.

Lord Prydwen approached and pressed a silver key into his hand.

"Now move out of my catacombs," he whispered with a wink.

Los blinked, caught off guard.

And for once, he had no words.

After the Ceremony – Courtyard Reflections

The guests mingled under the twilight sky in the stone courtyard of the chapel. Candle lanterns floated in the fountains. Minstrels played soft melodies. Nobles conversed and toasted.

Romao clapped Los on the back. "Sir Los. Ambassador. Dragon Slayer. Anything other titles you want to collect?"

"Don't tempt him," Prox said, grinning. "He might go for Pope next."

Los shook his head. "Let's start with a quiet room and a warm meal."

The Witness

St. George's Cathedral, Camelot - That Evening

Angela stood near the back of the great chapel, her polished armor catching the light of a hundred candles. Around her, nobles and knights gathered in their finest—but she had come in her battle plate, the emblem of the Church gleaming at her chest.

She was not here as a guest.

She was here as a Paladin of Albion.

Beside her, Tamara and Amaranthia whispered softly, their gowns rustling against the stone floor. But Angela's eyes remained fixed forward, on the dais where Lord Prydwen stood beside the King.

The great doors opened.

Los walked in, flanked by Romao and Prox, his armor gleaming like starlight. He moved with that same easy grace she'd seen in reports—confident, humble, steady. The crowd murmured as he passed.

There he is.

The dragon slayer.

The Epic Paladin.

Angela's fingers tightened at her sides.

She had fought just as hard. Trained just as long. Proven herself just as worthy.

And yet.

Los knelt before the King.

"Los Ortiz de Sevilla," the King's voice rang out, filling the chapel. "You have served Albion with valor, protected her people with strength and humility, and stood where others fell."

The words washed over her—words she had wanted to hear spoken over her own bowed head.

Lord Prydwen drew the ceremonial blade.

"Do you swear to serve the light, to uphold justice, to defend the innocent, and to honor the code of chivalry as a knight?"

"I do."

The blade touched each shoulder.

"Then rise, *Sir Los, Knight of the Paladin Order, Slayer of the Dragon.*"

Applause rose—solemn, reverent, heartfelt.

Angela's breath caught.

She watched him stand, watched the King smile, watched the crowd lean forward as the announcement continued:

"By the counsel of Lord Prydwen and the will of the Crown, we have officially requested of the Kingdom of Castile that Sir Los be assigned as our official Ambassador from Hispania..."

Ambassador.

Knight.

Legend.

Her chest tightened, something sharp and bitter rising in her throat. Not hatred. Not even envy, exactly.

Just the ache of standing still while someone else moved forward.

Tamara's hand found her arm, gentle. "Angela?"

She didn't answer. Couldn't.

Around them, the chapel erupted in celebration—nobles congratulating one another, knights saluting, servants rushing forward with wine.

But Angela stood motionless, watching as Los—*Sir Los*—accepted the congratulations with that crooked grin, looking almost embarrassed by the attention.

He doesn't even want it, she thought, and somehow that made it worse.

She had worked her entire life for this. For recognition. For the moment when the King would speak her name and the world would know her worth.

And he had stumbled into it in less than a year.

"We should go congratulate him," Amaranthia suggested softly.

Angela shook her head. "No."

"Angela—"

"I need air."

She turned before her sisters could protest, slipping through the crowd toward the side entrance. The night air met her as she stepped into the cloister garden, cool and sharp against her flushed cheeks.

She walked until she reached the stone bench beneath the old oak, where the noise of the celebration faded to a distant hum.

There, in the quiet, she let herself feel it.

The jealousy. The frustration. The burning, desperate need to prove she was just as worthy.

But beneath all of it—deeper, quieter—something else stirred.

Determination.

She had watched him receive his moment. And instead of breaking her, it had forged something harder inside her chest.

Because if he could do it—a foreigner, an outsider, someone who arrived with nothing but grief and a sword—then so could she.

Her fingers curled into fists, nails biting into her palms.

"He earned it," she whispered to the empty garden. And meant it.

But so will I.

She stood slowly, straightening her shoulders, her breath steady.

The King had spoken Los's name tonight. The crowd had cheered for him. History would remember this moment.

Angela looked up at the stars breaking through the clouds above Camelot's towers.

And there, alone in the garden, she made her promise.

Not to the world.

Not to her family.

To herself.

"Someday," she whispered, "it will be my turn."

The words hung in the air like a vow.

And Angela Burns did not make vows lightly.

She turned back toward the chapel, where the celebration continued without her.

But she wasn't the same girl who had walked out.

She was the girl who would make them remember her name.

Just not yet.

Not tonight.

But someday.

Lady Triss Approaches

She crossed the courtyard with her white cloak trailing behind her. She didn't speak right away—just laid her hands gently on his arms.

"You are now 'Sir Los,'" she said, her voice soft with emotion. "You'll have to carry yourself differently. There will be higher expectations of you as a knight. You'll be an example to all around you."

Then she smiled. Not the smile of a commander. Not of a Paladin.
But of a mother.

"I am so proud," she said, her voice catching slightly. "So very proud of you."

Romao looked at Prox. Then nodded toward her.
They saw it clearly—but said nothing.

Chapter XXIX – ¿A dónde pertenezco?

The Embassy

The crowds had dispersed, the ceremony long over when Los made his way towards his new home. Though it was far from official, he would be allowed to stay there until it was.

He had passed this building a hundred times.
Boots striking the same stones, eyes fixed on the citadel's gate beyond.
Never once had he thought to look.

Now, standing across from the church, the ivy caught his eye. The late light made the leaves shimmer, and beneath them, something glinted. He reached up, brushed the vines aside, and froze.

A red field. A golden castle. Three towers, the center higher than the rest.

El escudo de Castilla.

The emblem of the Crown, the same that flew above the Alcázar of Toledo and the ships that crossed the western sea. It had been here all along—paint fading, stone weathered, the edges worn smooth by rain. A piece of Hispania, hidden in plain sight, just beyond the shadow of Camelot's own chapel.

He laughed once under his breath, quiet and tired.
"How many times," he murmured, "did I walk past home and never see it?"

The gate stood ajar, iron filigree dulled by years of neglect. When he pushed it, the hinges gave a soft groan, like something old remembering how to move.

Inside, the courtyard lay still. A patio of white stone waited silently to greet visitors to the back door, a fountain along the wall, long dry. The walls rose in gentle arcs of pale stucco, their corners trimmed in dark wood. Balconies looked out to the streets from the front, their wooden rails twisted slightly, and rough from years of weather and neglect. Here and there the sun found a bit of color—

red tile, gold paint, the faint outline of another castle emblem above the main entryway.

He stepped onto the flagstones and stopped again. Beneath his boots lay a mosaic of blue and white *azulejos*, familiar patterns from the cloisters of San Lucas. The scent of lime and olive oil hung faintly in the air.

He removed his gloves, ran a hand along the old stone. It felt like... home.

Within, the embassy opened in quiet dignity: high-beamed ceilings, a Castilian banner draped along the stair, the royal seal etched above the hearth. A portrait of a former King looked out from the far wall, his gaze steady, his crown bright even in the dust. Every detail declared the sovereignty of Castile—its faith, its order, its pride.

And yet no voices echoed. No servants moved. No lamps burned.

It felt less like a place awaiting its master than a shrine waiting for a pilgrim.

Los stood in the center of it all and breathed in the stillness. All this time he had prayed across the street, under foreign arches, never knowing that the soil of his own kingdom waited here—quiet, patient, forgotten

He wandered through the embassy until he found the ambassador's study at the back of the hall. The air there was cooler, touched with the smell of wax and dust. Shelves lined the walls, filled with ledgers whose ink had long gone brown. A desk waited beneath the window, buried under a film of neglect and disuse—its surface grey with years of silence.

He set down his gloves, laid his pack on a nearby chair, drew the cloth from a side table, and began to wipe. The motion was slow, deliberate, each pass clearing away a little more of the past. Candle stubs, a cracked inkwell, an old quill chewed by time. When the wood finally showed through, it gleamed faintly in the dim light—walnut dark as old wine.

Outside, the rain began. It fell soft at first, a whisper against the tiled roof. Then steadier, filling the courtyard with its hush. The rhythm of it reached through the open shutters, washing over him like a prayer he'd forgotten how to say.

He lit a single candle, set it near the center of the desk. The flame bent in the draft, then caught itself, and held. Shadows stretched across the walls, stirring the crests of Castile like a living thing.

He placed before him a sheet of parchment and fresh ink, the texture of the parchment rough beneath his fingers, and dipped the quill into the ink. It felt heavy, or maybe it was his mind as he searched for the words to write. Then he began.

To my honored grandfather, Don Flavio Ortiz,

The nib scratched softly, the only sound besides the rain.

I write from the long closed Embassy of our kingdom in Camelot. It stands across from the chapel of St. George, where I have prayed these many months without ever seeing the castle above its door. It seems I have been blind to our kingdom's banner, hidden by ivy and rain. Perhaps that was fitting.

He paused, watching the ink glisten in the candlelight. The flame wavered, and for a moment it looked like the gold upon the page.

He leaned back, listening to the rain as it deepened, the steady drumming against tile and stone.

I have fought for Albión and been given an honor I do not know how to carry. You trained me from birth to be an Ortiz, to carry honor in my heart, yet I still feel unworthy of the title the Church has given me. They call me "Sir Los" now, and they have sent a request for the embassy to be re-opened, and if God wills it, they wish me to be the Ambassador. Though I feel neither knight nor statesman. What I am, grandfather, is your grandson—one who still prays in the tongue of our people. I will be forever grateful for the education you gave me, for all those who blessed me with their patience teaching me all a young boy and man could learn.

He smiled faintly at that, the smallest crack in the mask. The candle flickered as he stared out the window.

If you should find me worthy to commend to the King for this high chamber which I have not sought, but would serve with all my heart if asked. Then I will do my all to be worthy of it, and of you.

Your devoted grandson

Lorenzo "Los" Ortiz de Sevilla

Knight of the Church

The ink dried slowly in the candlelight.
As he looked down at the parchment, the question rose again.

¿A dónde pertenezco? Albión? Castilla?

He had come seeking death, and it had eluded him—and in that failure, he had found something new. But what would be the shape of that thing?

He sealed the letter, pressed the Ortiz signet into the warm wax, and set it on the desk.

His hand drifted to his chest, resting over his shirt, over the ring. Not gripping it—only feeling the weight.

"This was never what I planned," he murmured. "I did not seek titles, nor honors. Yet now that I have them... what am I to do? Do I keep seeking you, Risa—chasing a death that will not take me? Or live the life I am cursed to endure? Live up to the honors others have laid upon me?"

He stared at the dying flame. "Risa... what do I do? Is this where I belong now?"

He paused as he looked out the window.

"Risa, I need you..."

The rain softened outside. He let the candle burn low, its light turning to ember, and sat there long after the words had vanished into shadow, watching the rain.

Tomorrow the rain would stop, and a new life would begin.

But the question remained: *¿A dónde pertenezco?*

Epilogue – Toledo

The bells of San Lucas had long since fallen silent, leaving only the rain—steady, tapping against the tall arched windows of Don Flavio’s study.

He stood there, hands clasped behind his back, watching the city blur through the water running down the glass. The rooftops gleamed like wet slate. The narrow streets below were empty save for the occasional lantern swaying in the wind.

On the desk behind him lay two letters.

One was the first, written more than a year ago, sealed with wax the color of blood and marked with the lion of Ortiz: *I am safe. I have arrived in Albion. Please, do not worry. Signed Lorenzo “Los” Ortiz*

The second: *I have become a Paladin and am serving the Church with honor. Again, Signed Lorenzo “Los” Ortiz.*

There had been nothing since.

He turned from the window and looked at the papers again. The candle beside them had nearly burned to the socket. Its flame threw long shadows across the room, touching the books, the map of Hispania, the old sword that had belonged to his son, Diego.

He sat slowly at his desk. His fingers brushed the letters but did not open them. The wax was already cracked from being handled too often.

“Where are you now, niño?” he whispered. “And what has become of you?”

Outside, the rain thickened, rolling across the tiles.

Don Flavio looked out into the darkness once more, searching the horizon as if the night itself might answer.

Then he asked quietly, "Did you find what you were looking for?"

The candle flickered once, guttered, then went out.

To be continued...

Dark Age of Camelot: A Spaniard in Albion. Book 2 – The Shadow and the Crown.

