

-GREATER THAN THE DEAD

1221. October

Wind hissed through nighttime air, brushing softly against stone walls. From high battlements a young man sprinted-

His run was laden with an angry, hurried vigor.

Around him, it was dark.

For a moment, the man stopped. He flung himself to the far right, pressing an onyx cloak against resolute embrasures.

Here, the wind was even more apparent as it barreled through this stolen keep.

The man peeled dark brown eyes across battlements, catching two dots of *flame* quickly approaching from faraway dark.

Good.

The man closed his eyes.

This means I can wait for a little while.

The man smiled.

I was worried I was late.

The man reclined his head against the wall, before sliding into a cross legged and seated position.

Voices entered the man's mind.

Are you listening, Olitissus?

Olitissus sighed.

You will depart tomorrow. Dominicus has high hopes for you.

Olitissus opened his eyes as the sound of footsteps met keen ears.

Despite this, his memories continued.

I think you'll die, Olitissus.

I hope you do. The Latins will try to capture you alive. They're angry. At us, our adopted allies too.

I'm confident they'll ensure you suffer.

Olitissus laughed, picturing the shine behind Lucaenus' head. Within Olitissus' thoughts, his half brother loudly settled into a chair that may as well be a throne. It was placed directly in front of two large windows- so when the sun was in the sky, it tanned Lucaenus' skin with an ethereal glow.

Olitissus shook his head.

They're close.

Frankish met Olitissus' ears like the hissing of insects, unintelligible with a brutal, hushed intensity.

The two Franks carried torches, though ironically it was that same very light that shielded Olitissus from their view- and gave the former perfect clarity within the dark beyond flame.

Gatemen will be on patrol until sunrise. The two will be drunk. Only one of them knows you are there.

You are to kill both.

Olitissus slowly rose from stone. Wind gusted heavily across the wall, causing torch flame to erratically *dance* within its wake.

Olitissus moved quickly while almost making no sound-

The Frank closest to him turned just as Olitissus *slid* his dagger across the man's neck. Blood instantly gushed from the man's wound, screams muffled by blood.

The surviving Frank spun around just as his comrade stumbled into a fall. He dropped his torch, reaching for a signal horn with one hand while struggling to unsheathe his sword with the other.

Olitissus simply sprinted into the man's center, sidestepping two wide and clumsy slashes meant for Olitissus' head.

Olitissus spun to the man's right, jabbing his dagger into the man's exposed armpit while muffling his screams with a cold palm.

Olitissus guided the man to stone, then looked into dying, teary eyes.

His victim was young- barely a man at all.

Olitissus pulled a blood -covered weapon free, then dug the blade *deep* into the Frank's chest.

Olitissus breathed heavily, looking down at hurried killings.

The killer shook free of feeling, continuing on a darkened stone.

This portion of the wall contained the portcullis chain- Olitissus could see the gate room only a few meters ahead.

Olitissus stuck to the shadows of the right side of the battlements, slowly making way to the gate room as an eerie quiet set in around him.

The gate room held no door- and Olitissus could see the latch mechanism that waited for him inside of it.

He slipped between stone entryways as if a wraith, and in the same moment pulled the portcullis chain towards him. In the very next second, *sound* exploded. The gate rattled with an animalistic roar, as if it was angry at being roused.

Faraway barks of *Latin* met Olitissus' ears then-

He exited the gate room, peering downwards at the fortress below. Soldiers were running about the ground level, while others climbed up to the wall itself.

Olitissus smiled.

He flung himself back into the gate room. He *stabbed* his dagger into the gate's locking mechanism, preventing anyone from closing the portcullis. Then-

A horn broke through nighttime panic. Olitissus stalked from a shadowy position, finding himself back outside in cold elements. In the distance, he could make out a great host of calvary descending from stony hills- The fortress seemed to *rumble* in response.

Now.. it's time for the Armenians to uphold their end of the bargain.

Olitissus turned from the wall, and covered his face with a half mask. Due to the age of the fortress, the walls were resolute- but crumbling. It was surprisingly easy for Olitissus to climb them initially, and it was easier now for him to descend.

Are you happy now, Lucaenus?

SAKIS KOURIDI held a diplomatic fury within calm demeanour.

Light brown hair poked from underneath black turban, while bright blue eyes stared at the light olive-skinned Lesser *Prince* seated before the sun itself.

Inexplicably, Allah's light was bright behind this young, haughty *Prinkipae ev Synorui*. As the Prince spoke, bright orange rays seemed to *boast* a kind voice that visibly bore veiled disdain.

“An urgent audience, Sakis?”

Border Prince Lucaenus smirked.

He leaned forward, elbows resting on his thighs.

“We just spoke six hours ago. I'm eager to hear exactly what happened to slip your mind back then.. for you to demand me here *now*.” Lucaenus' dark-but-bright eyes narrowed.

Sakis wanted to spit-

Lucaenus represented everything Sakis detested-

As a Cennetoi-born son of the Confessed Sultan, Lucaenus was given a province to govern upon his thirteenth birthday. This was done to secure power within the realm-

Should the Crown-Line extinguish, a court of Rumi electors termed Eci Mahkemes voted amongst Border Princes who would claim the Sultan's throne.

Sakis *shivered*. For such a perversion to be purported from Allah-

Sakis was no fool, however. The religious subtext was simply done for the masses-

The true reason was much less pious.

To ensure succession, each Confessed Sultan was allotted three wives, and further, a *cennetoi*, a physical manifestation of God's promised heavenly paradise. Here, the Sultan was allotted to indulge in certain dealings.. As here, the Sultan was no Sultan at all.

No.

Within this realm, hidden from sin, a Sultan becomes the Confessor-King.

And the Confessor-Kings have already earned *Jesus*' salvation.

Almost as if a twin to malformed customs of christianized, so-called *Holy* See Hordes, Lucaenus was a byproduct of inane Hellene treachery. A syncretic lie of culture despoiling that which Sakis' father drilled within him.

We are at peace with them. Those whose fathers chose to follow Fell Sultans. Those who mix and join with the Rümi. Though do not forget, Sakis. Our confederation is one of eternal war, not understanding.

The voice of Sakis' father faded to the sound of cawing gulls flying beyond the Prince's twin windows.

Now is not the time for such personal murmurs.

Sakis closed his eyes, swallowing heavily before delivering the reason for hurried audiences.

“I have just received word that Antioch on the Maeander is under siege. Assailed by *Frank* hosts, led by a Princess-Hospitaller of Rochambein. The Christian army, under her order, massacred all they found amongst our countryside.”

Sakis paused. Genuine disgust clawed across his countenance.

The Muslim continued.

“Majót-Aurie erected *crucifixes* upon those she caught. No woman nor child was spared from such cruelty.”

Sakis watched Lucaenus' close, keen stare catching twitches of surprise from a Prince attempting to keep dignity.

The Border Prince rapped fingers against a throne's armrest, sun bold behind quietly bellowing ruminations.

The Invader Christians, of course, were a consequence of the Horde's decision to adopt Christianity themselves. The tales of Sakis' people proclaim

that a Khan turned Sultan captured then Great Prince of the Romans- a Prince who was accompanied by the Christian mystic Aitheop-slave *Aoskeles*.

And it was this slave, this *Aoskeles* that cured the Sultan's twin sons of leprosy.

The slaves healing was binding- the boys were cured on the condition of turning to Christian doctrine-

To which, the Sultan tearfully obliged.

Seventy years later, this Sultan's thirteen year old grandson marched a holy horde underneath the grand walls of Constantinople, welcomed by fellow orthodox Christians buckling within misadministration of the Rumi.

Ninety-seven years past, scheming *Latins* launched a crusade, viewing the Holy See Horde as proof that *Western* Christianity was the only faith carrying God's grace. It was then the Sultanate lost Allah's great city.

Despite Sakis' distrust of the converted Hordes, he knew that the true and *unifying* enemy marched from *Agrie Rumi-*

Barbarian Rome.

And now..

Lucaenus drew in a short breath before speaking, his voice somewhat quieter than it had been.

Noontime bells *rang* from outside, drifting into royal chambers with a somber quake.

“The Rochambein have proven to be quite a bleeding ulcer.” Lucaenus’ brow furrowed.

Sakis almost felt a pang of *sorrow* for the Prince- the boy, already beyond his years, seemed to age ten in a matter of seconds.

Sakis, as if a *mystic* himself, knew what caught the Border Prince’s thoughts.

They were hanged amongst cut bodies, purposely left swaying within farmland and confused, wandering swine.

Sakis hadn’t been there of course- when the province was lost.

Stories of Majót-Aurie’s perverse cruelty became a whispered legacy themselves- including what she had done to the Sultan’s blood...

During the Fall of *Side*.

According to scattered reports, the Rochambein was joined by her clansman, a *Kingborn* knight, no less.

Gaubéll.

Lucaenus offered nothing to the Muslim but a slight smile.

The Border Prince spared a moment to pray.

Sakis narrowed blue eyes. He wondered if the Prince perhaps prayed to the useless bravado of a name like *Lucaenus*.

Nobles of the Holy Hordes *and* Rūmi adopted the custom of giving their children overly *Hellene* names- to distinguish their bloodline from the growing mixed class amongst Holy See and Muslim tribes alike.

It was Sakis' turn to *smile* then.

Despite all of these foolish customs, the shared piety of both moslem and Christian-

Latins were steadily conquering holy lands.

Finally, Lucaenus spoke.

“Send word to Domnicus. I will once again need his Armenians. I also request two regiments of Martolos. In addition, I want the *241st*.” Lucaenus uttered steely.

Sakis held surprise.

While Muslims controlled the military within the Sultanate, theme legions were typically made up of Christians. Only twelve regiments out of the *Kapulis* were mostly Muslim..

The 241st were among those twelve.

“Each and every Mahkemes will vote against such a request. To choose a legio-kapuli directly behind Arsad’s rebellion..” Sakis scoffed.

Arsad was a foregone brother in faith- an Arab from Syria.

However, the Arab’s actions were too soon, too unorganized. They resulted in a ten year Muslim revolt-
quelled with genocidal pogroms across Anatolia and Syria.

Many of the crown sponsored killings were assisted by Muslims-

Muslims who decided to remain loyal to the now Christian regime.

Arsad was executed upon capture, ending a bloody civil conflict. The Sultan spared one third of Arsad’s legion, the 241st, and appointed a *Greek* moslem called *Siphaelles Mahmuy* to take Arsad’s place.

Lucaenus graced Sakis with a bitter chuckle.

“You present me with such tidings.. to ask of the Mehkemes?” Lucaenus hissed, using the *True Roman* tongue.

Lucaenus sighed heavily.

Sakis understood readily enough.

No matter the Prince’s decision-
He would incite wrath from the central powers.

Despite that, even the Mahkemes would understand losing Meander meant losing Caria.

And if Caria was lost, Lucaenus’ own province was vulnerable to conquest.

The insolence of demand could be appraised by the Sultan later.

“Send word directly to High *Prince* Sevkutmais. He will circumvent and *deal* with the Mahkemes. He will *understand*. He is one of the few who has.”

Lucaenus’ grim eyes met Sakis’ quiet regard.

“The vindication of *both* our faiths is at stake. I know you will not fail me, Sakis Kouridi.”

Sakis’ anger flared for but a moment-

It was tempered by fate- the understanding that if he did indeed fail to secure the support Lucaenus needed-

The Sultanate, and Allah's will with it-

Would be in danger.

In time, the opportunity to reclaim Allah's throne would come.

Now, however, Sakis knew that above all, he needed to preserve the realm.

Sakis bowed in the Muslim custom, offering obeisance and loyalty to a silent Christian Prince, *harem-cennetoi* born of a Fell Sultan.

*NEXT TIME: AINTEMUR-
WARRIOR OF MARTOLOS!*

CHAPTER ONE: WARRIOR OF MARTOLOS

“AINTEMUR!”

Aintemur’s dark brown eyes narrowed at the sound of his name. The autumn sun, while bright, did nothing to stop the light patter of rain that wet Aintemur’s hair. He sighed, opening his ears once more to the sound of shouts, swears, and coarse laughter around him.

Martolos.

Aintemur laughed cynically to himself, making sure to hide the smile he wore as he turned about. The title used to mean something to him- they were warriors- protectors. His father and his *father’s* father had served. He remembered seeing the ranks of Martolos as they marched through his village, shining armor emblazoned with the cross.

That image was now contrasted quite efficiently with the dressings of his commander. The tall man wore a leather tunic crudely dyed dark blue. A scimitar, unsheathed, hung from a ragged belt. The only armor the man possessed was a crusader helm, stolen from a latin captain he had killed.

“Aintemur,” The man started again. The crusader helm seemed to stare at Aintemur as it was held against his commander’s waist, the sound of rain ringing off of it.

“Your will, commander Hajeoglou.” Aintemur said, bowing.

Hajeoglou gave Aintemur a tight, appraising smile. Aintemur glanced past the man's shoulders for a moment-

Something is happening.

The camp was abuzz with activity that usually accompanied hastily delivered deployment orders. Things were calm in this region of Rumelia, and while Aintemur had ostensibly "seen" combat, he had never actually fought in a real battle. Their role was more of a policing force, and if necessary they provided logistics support to the legions-

Was this a last minute order to follow around one of the larger legions again? Aintemur thought back on his first year amongst the Martolos two summers ago, when instead of finding glory on the field of battle, he spent his time clearing legio latrines. His father had told him how the Martolos were the ones who carried the legacy of Rome-

Aintemur smiled bitterly again, and this time, he was unable to hide the expression from Hajeoglou.

The man scoffed, sound of it causing Aintemur's outburst of emotion to vanish instantly.

"You're off duty today, and instead of drinking or whoring, you're here."
Hajeoglou glowered.

Aintemur nodded.

“Yes, *Kapteoni*.” Aintemur bowed again.

“I was praying.” The young Martolos finished.

His commander scoffed once more, before spreading his free arm to the scene around them.

“Amongst all of this? Had you no question of what was occurring?”

Aintemur shook his head.

“As you said, I am off duty today, *Kapteoni*.” Aintemur answered respectfully.

Hajeoglou offered a genuine laugh, yellow teeth visible underneath the mustache that hugged his upper lip.

Hajeoglou was an easy going man, though you wouldn't know that as a new recruit. All he requested was that you perform your tasks, patrols, and other duties as dolled out and requested; otherwise, he encouraged his men to partake in the vices he himself did- whoring; drinking. Like *some* of the Martolos here, Hajeoglou was mostly greek, having been raised on the coastal regions of the Anatolian mainland. Due to this, he was often treated the same as people like Aintemur- those with mixed seljuk-greek heritage.

Melezioi.

Aintemur dismissed the slur from his mind- and the first day he had heard it applied to him-

As Hajeoglou's expression sobered.

“We have new orders. You're amongst the last I wanted to inform. I wanted you to enjoy your day.”

The rain seemed to harden, droplets upon Hajeoglou's helm now reminiscent of beating drums. It seemed to grow darker too; Aintemur mused that he had been praying here longer than he first assumed.

Hajeoglou continued.

“We are to join the 241st on campaign. *True* campaign.”

Aintemur shivered.

Of course, he knew what was happening. How the latins were gaining more and more land, killing whoever they crossed; wherever they went. The foremost of them- the Princessling of Rochambein-

“ Majót-Aurie.” Aintemur said softly.

Hajeoglou nodded.

“She brutalized all she found- christian and moslem alike. She is a mad dog, a beast without reason mixed with cunning belonging only to the most tempestuous of devils.”

Hajeoglou lowered his head as he spoke.

“Border Prince Lucaenus has requested us. We are to relieve Meander.”

Aintemur’s body felt as if he had just dipped into a freezing lake.

The latins under Majót-Aurie...

They were not like the others. Their violence exceeded the graphic norm Aintemur had heard from the interior regions. Theirs was a devil’s rage, their false christianity ringing in such a tone that both moslem and true christian quaked within earshot of their marching steps.

And now... he was to face them, along with the 241st.

Aintemur swallowed.

“When do we join the main force?” He asked quietly, though he already knew the answer.

Hajeoglou paused, placing the helmet he carried upon his head carefully.

Despite this, Aintemur could see the corners of a yellow smile form behind the exposed contours of his commander's expression. To the sound of swears and the braying of a stubborn donkey, Aintemur's eyes locked with that of Hajeoglou as the man answered.

“We've already joined them- they came to us.”

Next time: Olitissus' game!

Olitissus walked through the streets of Helikarnas. It was nighttime now, and his bones seemed to rattle with each passing step on cobbled stone. The air was cold yet comforting in a way; and upon the air, sounds of the city warbled into ears used to much crueler tones.

Caria.

According to his mother, this place used to be called *Halikarnāssós*. The Greek-speakers of this region, the Carians and the Ionians, were quick to join Persian lords in their wars against Greece itself long, long ago.

That fact was often thrown into the face of nobles of this place- yes, it was here, in Caria- that Christianity was forgotten as easily as it was adopted. Far before the first Christian Sultan, this place followed the teachings of the prophet instead.

As Olitissus walked, he could see that this was still very much true. Mosques outnumbered churches here, they had not been converted to follow the light of Christ himself. Art and architecture, more easily seen during the day, followed this trend. Many buildings favored more persian designs as opposed to roman, and the language of the nobles here was found to be either persian or turkish, not *greek* or even the usual turkic-greek pidgin that had formed in some of the interior realms.

Olitissus continued on.

The man maneuvered between two drunks who passed on the street. One of them clasped Olitissus firmly on the shoulder, laughing.

“Merhaba!” the one clasping him slurred happily.

Olitissus smiled.

While moslem, it seems the people of Caria are as reliant on the decadence of Rüm as any other.

Olitissus’ grin grew a shade deeper.

“Rahat,” Olitissus replied. He continued, glancing at the drunken man’s companion, who had stopped as well.

“Rahat ol dosstum.” Olitissus finished, kind tones painting his voice.

The two men laughed rather loudly, before passing Olitissus and fading into the night.

As their banter fled from Olitissus' ears, his eyes narrowed darkly.

Olitissus was used to traveling far along the coastal roads.

He loved entering the cities of places like these. The smell, the quickness of it..

It reminded him of home.

Of Mother.

The man paused in his step- picturing the woman.

For a moment, Olitissus then spared a brief thought to Lucaenus, his mind focusing on the parting words Lucaenus had given him.

I think you'll die, Olitissus.

I hope you do.

Olitissus felt a certain chill.

It was different from the nighttime air brushing against his skin. He shook it away along with errant thought, continuing through. The light of the moon did little to alleviate the darkness, though that was no matter; Olitissus knew the way well. He continued, ignoring the few passerbys that ambled past him.

Soon, he came to a small structure between two stone buildings. The structure had a wooden door, upon which Olitissus opened and walked through without issue. It was instantly brighter within the building; a fire roared in the middle of the room Olitissus found himself in.

Tables and chairs rounded about the perimeter of the fire, most of them empty, some of them occupied by one or two guests. Olitissus' eye instantly fell upon Dominicus, and then on the man's guardian.

Behind Dominicus a dark skinned youth stood, perhaps four or five years younger than Olitissus himself. The Nubian bore long corded hair, colored black and blonde, though on his head numerous bald spots blotched his skull. The youth bore thin, slanted eyes and a thin nose, of which full lips waited underneath. High cheekbones were highlighted by the illumination of a fire Dominicus sat beside, and Olitissus noticed that the youth was openly armed with a bow and knife, both brandished proudly.

Olitissus laughed aloud, as he always did when he saw the Nubian. Most places where he and Dominicus met forbade weapons, but Dominicus managed to evade this rule each time. Of course Olitissus was not naive

enough to go defenseless, but he also went through the effort to hide his armament.

“Isidoros,” Olitissus said, nodding at the Nubian.

“Dominicus,” Olitissus whispered, taking a seat opposite from the aforementioned older man.

Dominicus smiled, leaning forwards into his chair. The wood protested somewhat at his shift in position, while keen eyes appraised Olitissus for a moment.

Around them, the low hum of murmured conversation buzzed. The nearby fire began to warm Olitissus’ arms as he crossed them. He put more of his weight onto the table, spying two mugs that waited by Dominicus’ large hands. The old man caught Olitissus’ gaze, and gave a rueful smile in response.

“Would you care for a drink? The brewers here make some of the best.” Dominicus nodded towards Olitissus, raising a hand slightly above the other.

“They pair it with ayran. Filling, while also helping to clear the mind.”

Olitissus raised thin eyebrows, brushing a finger underneath his nose.

“I thought you had stopped drinking.”

A laugh rose from the old man.

“As did I.”

Silence passed between them for a moment.

Dominicus took a sip of his ale, then immediately followed with a deep drink of that ayran concoction.

“I highly suggest you have some of the ayran, Olitissus. They can sweeten it, if you’d prefer. Heat it with cinnamon. It’s typically-”

“You’ve told me this before, said this exact thing. Each time we’ve met, in fact. Is this one of your games? Or have you finally gone senile?”

Dominicus didn’t react to Olitissus’ obvious yet controlled anger, and instead relished in maintaining the younger man’s steel gaze.

Dominicus chuckled, taking another sip of his ale.

“You know how these things are.” The old man rasped, humored.

Olitissus rolled both of his shoulders, then exhaled deeply.

“Yeah. They’re winning. *Barbarian Rome*, as the electors would call them-”

Dominicus nodded so readily it made Olitissus pause. The younger man looked about the inn, bowing his head.

“They were winning then. They’re winning now.” Olitissus finished.

Dominicus sighed. He took up the cup of ayran, circling his refreshment errantly, elbow rested on their shared table. Finally, he took a long gulp, finishing drink.

He placed the cup onto the table, then leaned back, smoothing his beard with two fingers.

“The Sultan revels in hedonism. Less than *half* a man. His sons- the ones leading armies-” Dominicus turned to his left, gazing at the fire for a moment, before raising his hand to a nearby servant.

Olitissus watched Dominicus speak in the local tongue. The man asked for more ayran.

Dominicus continued, catching Olitissus' eyes on resumption.

“They’re fools. They have forgotten what has begotten them, Olitissus. So far removed from greatness.. And after the Arab revolts...After the loss of Egypt to Barbarian Rome..”

Olitissus frowned, but continued listening.

“You have no reason to explain whatever it is you are about to task me with.”
Olitissus said carefully as Dominicus’ new drink was placed upon the table with a clink.

“Are you afraid that I will work against you? I have seen how that ends. Often, I was the one who dealt with the *end* of such ideations against you, Dominicus.”

The old man favored Olitissus with a genuine grin then.

“No, No.”

Dominicus sipped at his ayran.

“I suppose I am enraptured by the theatrics- the history. And it is that itself-history, that is, that informs my choices.”

Olitissus grinned.

“I think I’ll try that drink, ayran.”

Dominicus returned Olitissus’ expression, hailing a servant.

“It’s something I’ve felt I cannot go without.” Dominicus said with a wide smile.

The old man then thinned his lips.

“The grain begotten by the franks and latins- capturing Egypt from the Fatimides, they ensured their place within our furthest realms.”

“And now, they knock upon our doors within Anatolia.” Olitissus replied. He looked over his shoulder, sensing movement and seeing a servant woman approaching. She came with a drink, Olitissus smelling the sweetness of cinnamon as the ayran wafted nearer.

“Our purpose is not to ensure the survival of a regime, Olitissus. The comings and goings of government, of state. These things change often, it is the progression of fate.”

Dominicus laughed softly as he spoke.

“I possess my faiths, yes. But it is with the understanding fate is separate from such faith. Action doesn't represent faith, it represents the immediate, the actions of those who do not respect faith. But they are under its influence, if not in a vulgar sense.”

Olitissus shook his head, looking away.

Dominicus favored himself as some sort of poet, a man of enlightenment.

Dominicus was Greek- at least, more *Greek* than Olitissus.

As such, Dominicus saw his position as something higher than even he would haughtily presume-

The elder had spoken such before. He viewed place and authority as the mark of something greater. It caused the man to have legitimate insight on the comings and goings of this world, but also gave him a certain air of naive superiority, speaking without actually understanding what he himself said.

“Something changed. You’re not fighting for the Sultan anymore, are you?”
Olitissus ventured.

He wondered if even his mission to Armenia was legitimate, then.

Olitissus had worked for, and seen, how Dominicus’ allegiances evolved, changed. Dominicus killed men he had spoken to for months, years even. Personalities he had found interesting, conversations he had enjoyed. Effort expended on preserving their goals-

Until Dominicus decided they were no longer of use. Or if their desires grew beyond what Dominicus deemed necessary, at the time.

“Majót-Aurie has sent me words, from my traders in conquered lands. Even from those in Constantinople. The city has forgotten us, and embraced their Frank conquerors. Yet, they would presume to send me words written in latin.”

“And whatever she said, you decided it was worth more than what Lucaenus has supplied.”

“Are you bothered by that?” Domincus asked.

Olitissus laughed genuinely at the question.

“You secure my next meal. What is anything else to me?”

Dominicus’ eyes widened, then the old man nodded.

“Yes. In that regard, we are the same.”

Dominicus’ face fell- slightly- almost indiscernible- however Olitissus saw it. The older man seemed to have recognized this, as he bore an almost childish grin, taking the time to reposition himself in a wooden chair that might as well be a throne.

“Action- do you know what that is?” Dominicus asked.

Olitissus scoffed, not intentionally, but towards the sincerity of the tone delivered.

“Action? You expect me not to know ‘Action?’ “ Olitissus asked. He spared a look towards Isidoros, and finding the man’s face devoid of emotion, turned his eyes to Dominicus.

“Surely you meant more by this and my understanding is ignorant. I am asking to be educated, not implying you have wavered in what you have told me.” Olitissus answered, careful and measured.

Dominicus held a grin- one that marched within the silence between the two men as if a blaring, *blaming* trumpet. Finally, he answered.

“Majót-Aurie let us capture the castle in Armenia. The nobles of conquered Crusader land, they are... eager to resume trade. True mercantile, from Egypt, from Jerusalem. Syria.”

“So they wish to continue the stalemate? Despite the blood being shed?” Olitissus asked, taking a drink of ayran.

Dominicus was right-

It was delicious- the cream of it cooled Olitissus, a sweetness that wasn’t too tart, but was somehow more refreshing than water.

“What difference is that answer to the days we experience? Does one or the other guarantee our safety? Will we be hidden from death if we follow one, or the other?” Dominicus waved a hand.

“You do not need to answer. I know-”

Olitissus interrupted.

“I know.”

“So, what is it. What am I to do? Or do you want to continue your theatrics?” Olitissus said.

“The forces Lucaneus organized- of those, the greco-turk *Martolos*. They are to have different orders. They are not to march to Meander.”

Olitissus smiled.

Is this Majót-Aurie’s plan, or is it yours, Dominicus? Is this an action taken to prove your new loyalties?

Olitissus nodded.

“It will be done.”

NEXT TIME: SONG OF THE MARTOLOS

SONG OF THE MARTOLOS

“Faith.. faith-“

Father cackled while saying this, Aintemur remembered *that* well.

“Faith is a cloak,”

“Despite how many times it fails... how many times it betrays, we wear it.”

Aintemur had felt the warmth of his father’s forehead pressing against his own then. And in times since past, the memory was ceremoniously adorned like armor. But he knew-

Aintemur- he knew-

Knew as screams filled the air, knew as ricocheting carcasses of ox *crashed* into his ranks-

The warmth he felt, the familiarity of it- it was an omen, not something that he could trust in. Not something that meant somehow, despite everything, he would survive.

Screams bloomed as if they were flowers in spring. Decaying beasts spread instant malaise throughout Martolos ranks. Men beside, behind, and in front of Aintemur retched as the stench of death settled upon them alongside spits of fire.

An electric echo crescendoed throughout the mountainous valley. Moments ago, it was quiet- serene. Now-

Aintemur's ears drummed. Smell, noise-

Wetness splashed against his lower forearm as he stepped forward. A mass of bodies, marching allies, crowded ahead of him as black smoke billowed above.

Trumpets sounded- commanding the Martolos to march not right, but left.

Aintemur tried to- some others near him did too.

But arrows rained upon them, silent daggers that zipped past ears and into throats as if whispers. With each volley, dozens of Martolos fell, dead or dying, blood adding to the stench of horse dung and the excrement of the freshly killed.