

The tide of war was rising. It had made the abysmal conditions in Union even more so. It was starting to breed desperation. Desperation could breed all sorts of erratic responses, even betrayal. She could hear the booted feet of the men that were searching the Inn for her. Lady Eustacia pulled the children close, as they huddle in the dirt cellar of the Hoary Goat. There was a small grate at street level. Through this, they glimpsed the enormous wheels of what must be siege engines roll through the snow and mud of Union's main thoroughfare. She could not make out who was whom? Did these deadly devices belong to Marakeen? Garramond? Karafey? Skaldia? Did it matter at this juncture? So many people outside. Through the slats of dusty light, she could see all around her the dirty grim faces of her flock as they peered up at her, waiting...expectant. What now?

After the devastation of the Brightwater Estate fire, the Goddess had given her twisted and tortured soul peace and purpose but not a roadmap. She knew she had to find the source of suffering...this new Dark Power. And, she knew she had to find The Chosen... Her Blessed One... Her Silent Saint...Mara. For now, though, she had to get these children through the next few moments.

The thwack of wood slapping wood made them all jump. These little ones knew survival, they were her newest initiates but they understood silence meant life. They held their breath. They all wordlessly called out to their Saint.

"Eh, Don't know what yer going on about...I'm just trying to keep yer soldiers happy. But yer welcome ta look around the place!" Corben was bellowing to someone up in the common room as he descended the ladder into the dirt cellar where the Lady and her lot hid. He was carrying an empty cask, as big around and he was, on his shoulder. The position cleverly blocked any onlookers from seeing into the hatchway. He dropped it and hefted a large crate of root vegetables, quickly into the same position. He glanced over at Eustacia and winked. "And while yer at it, do you think you can spare a few men ta help me pull some casks up from this here cellar." He continued to holler to those above as he slowly mounted the ladder pushing the crate in front of him. He left the hatchway wide open but stood at the top. A flash of panic rinsed through Eustacia. She could hear someone barking back at Corden, but she couldn't make out the words. No, not betrayal, but he was pushing this game of nonchalance too far. She held her breath. "No?! But Ser, surely ya could spare... Well, ser, no need ta be rude! Yeh, I will be sure ta' letcha know if I see anyone fitting that description!" She could hear the booted feet retreating. *Clever man, Corden. The Work surely has a spot for you*, she thought.

Long moments went by. They dared not moved until they saw the innkeeper's beefy face peering back down through the hatch. "All clear, my Lady." He thrust a hand down to her to help her ascend. She brushed the dust off and let the burly man scoop her up. She checked at the shutters and the door to make sure they were, indeed, free of the Cultists who sought her and her network. Assured of their safety, she helped the motley crew up into the warmth of the kitchen.

"Corden, you are truly a friend to those in need. Your aid will not be forgotten," she said kissing his cheek. They would wait a bit longer and then head up to the roof, to disperse into the town.

"I've seen the good yer doin here first-hand m'lady. And I've seen the nonsense these 'white robes' are up ta. Yer always welcome here and so are yer kids." he scrubbed the mop top hair of an urchin called Tork. "You just let me know what'cha need."

"Thank you again, my friend, but the Hoary Goat is compromised now, and the War will make things....unpredictable. Don't worry, we will find a new safe house. But if, in the coming days, you need me throw a coin to any one of these lot and they'll find me." Tork and the others knew the drill and began disappearing. Separately they were safe. It was only when they met together, and with her, that her urchins were in danger. She knew they would take a moment to offer a prayer to Mara before finding the lost corners of Union. She had trained them well.

She squeezed several gold coins into the innkeeper's hand. "A reward for the faithful. Be well Corben. Keep our secret... or don't, the Sister either moves in you or she doesn't. Only you can know." She left him pondering her words and slipped out the back door of the Hoary Goat.

She let out a long breath, relaxed her manner, and stepped into the flow of the streets. Her method of lurking through the streets was always to look as if she weren't. Without the children, she could take bigger risks. It wasn't long though before she realized the flow of foot traffic was getting thicker. It seemed all of Union was out of doors. It was easy to be lost in the growing throng. Looking around she noticed happy chatter and growing excitement as the crowd pressed Northward. She was swept along. *Are they all headed to the College? Why are you all not shuttering your windows and bolting your doors? There is a War going on!* The little daughter of the Butcher skipped merrily alongside her mother. A gaggle of young men jabbered and pointed towards something ahead. A panhandler crabbed at people who made to push past her. *What is happening?* It started to have the feel of a bad dream. She wanted to stop someone and ask, but she needed to stay inconspicuous. There were White Robed Cultists here but only on the edges. They seemed to be smiling and hurrying the crowd along.

And then the flow spilled into a larger milling crowd of onlookers. She was stuck in a sea of people. Lady Brightwater was never a commanding figure of a woman. She had a diminutive frame and she liked that she could blend in, but now she felt as if she were drowning. All she could see were backs and shoulders. She ducked and squeezed her way to the side, and up on to a low wall. She could see the shores of the lake ahead. She was in the large paved square that marked the entryway. Here began a series of stairs, bridges, and gatehouses that made up the long expanse over water to the College. She could see a figure on the stairway. *Miscavage!* He was shouting encouragement at the crowd. People were singing and chanting in response. As they came forward, his cultists were ladling out drinks from oak barrels for each. Eustacia's blood ran cold as she watched the white robes smile and nod as men, women, and children approached. Each in turn drank and then processed on toward the Mage College and its Dark Lord.

Monster! She knew no good could come from that dark mind. Usually, he was just out to poison minds with his twisted promises and false prophecies. Now, it seemed he was out to poison the people's bellies as well. *How did I miss this? How did I not know?* And then it occurred to her she had been holed up in the Goat's cellar. *Uh! Stupid!* She chided herself. That's why they were so actively and publically hunting us! Miscavage was trying to keep the *Network out of the mix, so he could spur this on unopposed.* It had worked. For a moment her pity for the people of Union was replaced by disgust. She scoffed. A few pretty words and few pretty promises and they all fall right in line. *The herd had been led to the trough! But what is in the water?* Fear for the people cleared her derision away and she felt desperation growing in her breast. She watched a father hold the cup so his son, a boy of eight, could take a deep drink of the proffered draught. Even if she screamed at the top of her lungs, her warning would be lost in the din. She could not stop it. *Please D'Dwydn, I beg of you... send me Mara. Save these innocents. Please, help them. Help me!*

And then the Silent Saint was there. Impossibly....beautifully...perfectly...there! She couldn't make sense of the scene, but Mara was there.

The sea of people had parted. Dressed in simple traveling clothes, her auburn hair floating on the breeze, Mara stood in the middle bathed in a golden radiance. She wondered at it. Does no one else see? She stood amongst her companions: the lithe blonde thief, the half-elf archer, the raven-haired witch, and... *a goblin?* Clearly, things had changed. There was also another new face. *What is this?*

Holding a knife to a small bound boy's throat was a badly scarred Knight of Justice. She could make no sense of it. Miscavage was saying something, but she couldn't make out the words, and then the Knight cut the boy's throat. Eustacia's hand flew to her mouth, and she gasped in horror, but she could do little else. Her feet felt locked in place. Her blood was ice. It was over in a heartbeat, and then they were gone. Miscavage let them pass. Once again, the Cultists were gathering all comers into their strange procession.

She felt in a fog and she slipped gracelessly from the wall and stumbled back through the throng. Lady Brightwater's normally nimble mind could not put the pieces together. Her hero appeared. A child was tortured. Miscavage welcomed them. And now the madness continued all around her. She shook her head in confusion.

Little did she know, she had naught to fear. Her Silent Saint was about to make the very waters of the lake do her bidding. Soon, the tide of war would truly rise and it would rinse all that was foul clean.