

- POLOS -

I slit it open with the knife I keep tucked into my sleeve, habit, not paranoia. If it were paranoia, my hand would tremble. A habit means you've made peace with the motion, that your hand knows what to do before your mind bothers to think...The blade kisses clean through wax and parchment, leaving a curl of red wax clinging to the edge of the letter. Another one.

Same seal, a crimson dragon dusted in a golden powder. Same heavy scrawl. Same rot beneath the ink, spreading like infection across each line. His letters come daily now: once, twice, sometimes thrice before the sun has finished bleeding over the hills. Each one more fevered than the last, as though madness itself were urging his quill. I don't rush to read it. I already know the rhythm.

*TO THE GREAT PRETENDER,*

*DO YOU STILL WEAR THE CROWN, OR HAS IT BEGUN TO DEVOUR YOU FROM  
WITHIN? DOES IT FEEL HEAVIER EACH PASSING MORNING? DO YOU STILL DRAPE  
YOURSELF IN SILKS AND LIES, PRETENDING YOUR COURT OF SOFT-MOUTHED  
FLATTERERS MAKES YOU SOVEREIGN?*

*YOU ALWAYS CONFUSED LOVE WITH POWER THEN, AND YOU CONFUSE MERCY  
WITH WEAKNESS NOW. I REMEMBER THE WAY YOUR HANDS SHOOK WHEN YOU  
SIGNED YOUR FIRST EDICT WHEN WE RULED TOGETHER. YOU LOOKED TO ME FOR  
APPROVAL, LIKE A CHILD SEEKING HIS FATHER'S NOD. I PITIED YOU. YOU WANTED  
MY BLESSING. THE GODS LAUGH AT SUCH TENDER-HEARTEDNESS. DON'T YOU  
KNOW THEY DO NOT HEAR COWARDS?*

*YOU CLING TO TREATIES AND PARLAYS, HOPING WORDS WILL SAVE YOU WHEN THE FIRE COMES. THEY WON'T. I'VE BURNED BRAVER KINGS THAN YOU. WATCHED THEM KNEEL IN THE ASHES OF THEIR OWN MAKING, BEGGING FOR MERCY AS I RETURNED THEIR KINGDOMS TO DUST. I'VE ISSUED WARNINGS LONG ENOUGH. THERE IS NO PLACE FOR YOU IN THE NEW WORLD. YOU THINK GATES AND PRAYERS WILL KEEP THE SKY FROM FALLING? LIKE ALL ROTTEN ROOTS, YOU MUST BE TORN FROM THE SOIL AND BURNED.*

*YOUR FIELDS WILL BLACKEN. YOUR CITIES WILL CRUMBLE. YOUR SONS WILL CURSE YOUR NAME FOR CHOOSING PRIDE OVER MERCY. I GAVE YOU TIME, I GAVE YOU WARNINGS TO BEND THE KNEE. YOU DID NOT ANSWER. COME FIRST LIGHT, I WILL BRING DRAGONFIRE. REILLA WILL BURN. LET THE SOULS OF YOUR KINGDOM LEARN WHAT YOUR PRIDE HAS COST. DECLARE ME YOUR ONE TRUE KING, OR WE WILL TASTE THE BLOOD OF OUR DRAGONS.*

I let the letter rest on my lap.

The fire snaps behind me, spitting embers that crawl across the stone like tiny, dying stars. The walls feel narrower than they did a moment ago, as if the words themselves are crowding me in. I smooth the parchment flat once more, though the words remain the same, no matter how carefully I press them. My thumb finds my temple. The ache isn't new. It's lived there for months now, a dull throb behind the eyes that no tincture soothes.

REILLA WILL BURN

Gods... What is he proving? That he can bleed the world dry in the name of his own delusion? That I'll do nothing while he razes what's left?

I fold the letter once. Then again.

Tighter this time. Neater than it deserves.

I stare down at the letter a moment longer, the parchment softening where my fingers press. I am already thinking of what must be said in return, though words, at this point, feel like pebbles thrown at a storm. Still, there's a pattern to his madness, and somewhere within that pattern there must be a fracture I can reach through. I will find it. I must.

The thought doesn't last.

A voice, soft, precise, unhurried draws me back to the room.

Camille's hand rests on the map I have laid out before me, her fingers splayed between two river valleys. She's speaking, something about troop rotations, the eastern garrison, supply routes from the Fens, but I only catch fragments. My mind is elsewhere admittedly, tangled in the echoes of that damn letter.

"Camille," I say quietly, interrupting her mid-sentence.

She looks up, not startled, she never startles, but expectant. Calm as the tide, as always. That's what steadies me about her, what's always steadied me. She doesn't ask why I said her name. She simply waits.

"I need to speak with him."

Her brows lift, just a fraction. "With who?"

But she already knows. I see it in the faint tightening of her jaw, the minute shift in her breath.

I hesitate. Saying his name feels like opening an old wound.

"Ares."

Her composure falters for the first time, just a flicker. Her hand drifts to her chest as if to guard the heart beneath. "You just read his threat, Polos."

“No,” I murmur, rising from my chair. “I’ve read his *madness*.”

“My darling he’s made himself clear, we’ve hours before his army is at out front gates, you need to rest”

“No,” I repeat, stepping around the table. The map crackles under my palm. “The fool’s made himself loud. There’s a difference.”

She doesn’t move, doesn’t shout, doesn’t even plead. She only watches me, eyes sharp, searching. “You’re not thinking clearly.”

“One last chance to reason with him, Camille,” I say, voice low but firm. “To stop a slaughter. If there’s any chance at all, I have to take it.”

“There is not.” Her tone is quiet, unyielding, like tempered steel.

“You think he’s beyond reason?”

Her eyes, Gods, those big brown beautiful eyes see through me, the way they always have. She doesn’t know the truth, not fully. The reason I can’t stop reading his letters, can’t stop believing that buried beneath the venom and delusion, some fragment of the man I once knew might still exist.

Camille steps closer, her voice softening to something almost mournful. “You’ve seen what he’s become. The man you *used to-*”

“Used to what?” I cut her off, “The man I trusted? Flew beside in battle? Even bled for?”

She doesn’t finish.

“If there’s any part of him left,” I say, “Any piece not yet consumed by whatever darkness festers inside him, then I have to try. Not as a king. As a man.”

She flinches, barely. Just enough for me to hate myself for it.

"You're risking everything," she says. "On *maybe*. What about us?"

I reach for her hand. She lets me take it. Her skin is warm, alive, and it steadies me even as it condemns me.

"To save hundreds of thousands of lives?" I ask quietly. "Yes."

"And what of your life? What of our sons? Our daughter?"

I hold her gaze. "You are the best part of this realm, Camille. And if I fall, then I leave what we built in the best hands until our son comes of age."

Her fingers tighten around mine. "Why?" she whispers. "Why does it matter so much?"

"Because I'm King," I tell her. "Because it's my duty."

She knows I'm lying. I see it in the way her eyes narrow, in the slight tremor of her lip before she steadies it. But she doesn't press.

"Your duty is here," she says. "To us. To the realm."

"If my duty is to the realm, then I must protect it, all of it."

She steps closer still, until her breath mingles with mine. Then she leans forward and presses her forehead against mine, as she used to when we were younger, before crowns and politics turned love into something measured and fragile between us.

"Go, if you must," she whispers. "But you come back to me. You understand?"

I nod.

She turns towards the terrace, the moonlight spilling through the lattice windows. There, gleaming on its stand, rests my armor, obsidian and silver-edged steel, newly polished. The scene of oil and leather hangs heavy in the air. Camille lifts the cuirass, her hands steady but silence thunderous. She pauses, tracing the silver inlay along the breastplate: our house sigil, a crowned raven in flight, wings spread wide. Her fingers linger there, and for a moment, neither of us speaks. The fire pops behind me.

“I won’t wear it,” I say.

Her hands still completely on the armor, knuckles whitening where they grip the cold steel. For a moment, the only sound is the low whisper of wind threading through the tower’s narrow windows, and the hearths fire’s muted crackle, a weak, petulant sound that’s never quite enough to warm this room, no matter how many logs we feed it.

Camille doesn’t look at me right away. Her voice, when it comes, carries that note of controlled desperation I’ve learned to recognize in her after all these years

“You’re riding straight into that beast’s fire”

“I’m not going to war.”

“You think he’ll see it that way?” The words strike sharp and sudden, like a whip cracking against stone. When she turns, her gaze catches mine, steady, not fear, exactly. It’s the look of a woman who’s watched too many good men ride out to die for causes that felt righteous, only to turn to ash in the retelling.

“I have to believe he will,” I say.

She sets the armor down with deliberate care, piece by piece, as though the steel might bruise if she’s not gentle with it. When she straightens, something flickers across her face, resignation, perhaps, or the brittle calm that comes when love and duty start to look the same.

"And you still think he'll listen to reason...." She says, not quite asking.

"I don't know," I admit. "But I can't strap on steel and expect him to believe I haven't come to kill him."

Camille nods once. Not in agreement, only acknowledgement. It's a quiet permission that wounds worse than protest. Without another word, she turns away and crosses to the travel chest at the foot of our bed. She kneels beside it, lifting the heavy lid with both hands. Her movements are fluid, deliberate, the practiced ritual of a woman who has spent her life turning dread into order. Linen. Simple cloth. No sigils, no embroidery, no colors that proclaim allegiance. Just the garments of a traveler, a merchant, perhaps, or a minor lord who's learned to move through the world unseen.

"You'll need water," she murmurs, tucking the folded cloth inside. "And something to eat. The wind is cruel tonight."

Her hands move with the same careful grace they always have, the grace of fifteen years spent ending to a husband who never learned to rest. A husband who found comfort only in the next crisis, the next decision that might keep a fragile peace from crumbling. I watch her fingers work: wrapping dried meat in linen, tucking a flask of honeyed wine beside it, the *good* wine, I notice. The one she saves when I'd return home alive from a battle. A small knife follows, its handle worn smooth from honest use. A cloak. Flint and tinder wrapped in oiled leather.

I remain where I am, standing useless in the middle of the chamber, my hands heavy at my sides. The air feels too close, the space between us thick with things I can't say.

"You should rest," I offer quietly, though even as I say it, the words taste absurd.

Camille closes the satchel with a firm buckle.

"Krin's harness has started to wear thin along the shoulder straps," She says, still not looking at me. "I'll send word to the saddler to have it mended" Her tone is practical, steady, and yet every word trembles on its edge. "You'll need gloves if you don't want your hands torn raw".

There's an accusation buried in her voice, soft, but unmistakable. That I've missed the small practical things. That my blindness to them is part of something larger, something selfish.

"I'll manage," I say.

She fastens the pack with precise, efficient movements. The leather groans as the straps slide through the brass rings. When she rises, she brushes imaginary dust from her dress, dark velvet and blue silk, the blue so deep it might as well be midnight. The firelight gilds her face in copper, and for a moment, she looks carved from marble: regal, untouchable, composed. But I know the truth, the slight tension around her eyes, the way her breathing has grown shallow and controlled. Every movement is too measured, too exact, the practiced composure of a woman who's holding herself in check.

"You always think that you will," she says softly.

"Manage. Survive. Find a way through." Her hands smooth down the front of her dress, a nervous gesture she's never quite broken.

I cross to her, taking the pack from her hands. Her fingers linger against mine, warm, trembling. Neither of us move to break the touch.

"You're not a fool, Polos," she says. "But you are not infallible either. Stupid accidents claim the lives of King's the same as beggars."

The words are meant to strike reason into me, but they land softer, sadder, like a benediction from someone who already knows she'll be ignored.

"I will come back to you," I swear. "I swear it".

Her breath catches, barely. “And if he draws a blade? If reason fails, and all your noble intentions crumble the moment you stand before the man he’s become?”

I show her the dagger from my belt, the blade catches in the firelight. “I’m never without one,” I say. “Just in case”

Her lips part, perhaps to argue, perhaps to beg. But she doesn’t. Queens do not beg. Instead, she lifts her chin, regal and defiant, the way she always does when the world tries to take something from her. Her hands rise, smoothing down the front of my tunic, memorizing the fabric and the shape of the man beneath it, as though committing me to memory in case memory is all she has left.

“I married a King,” she says. “Not a martyr.”

“I know,” I whisper. “You deserve better than me, Camille.”

The silence that follows between us feels heavy enough to split stone, pregnant with everything we’ve left unsaid, the buried truths, the quiet and desperate love that still survives between us. When I turn to go, her hand catches my wrist with surprising strength.

“When you see him” She says, her voice barely above a whisper, “Look at his eyes.”

I glance back over my shoulder. “Why?”

“Because that’s where the truth hides,” she says. “Even in monsters”