

The Ascension

Kaleidoscope of Destiny

I pledge to no ruler, to no country, to no deity;

In the Touch of Death, in thee I place my eternal faith.

– an excerpt from the vow of the Order of Wraiths as willed by the Caider Sybil Barbesier

Amareinth wiped the blood off her face, the lace handkerchief soaking the crimson liquid. A sigh escaped her as she leaned backwards, and the plush carpet gave way under her sharp heels. She observed the babbling man before her, red and white blisters prominent on his translucent skin. The nobleman had tried to wiggle against the ropes encircling his wrists and ankles, but to no avail.

Her nose crinkled. She once again chastised her pride for not delegating this arduous task. Alas, she couldn't refuse a challenge. Not when Sybil had mentioned her waning infamy in this miserable city – a masterful ploy to ensure her participation and maintain an illusion of giving her a choice.

She should have relegated the assignment to one of the Shades, but her schemes had coaxed her coming, and her boredom had sealed the deal.

During the past few months, the continent of Arcanda was uncharacteristically content with its rulers and nobles, hailing no exigency for the Order's services. A pity, and a reason why Amareinth had decided to indulge her mentor by tracking down the wretch of the lord, who, rumours claimed, possessed a rare book. She doubted he possessed the entirety of it: a few pages at best.

His greed was challenged solely by his boastfulness. A true feat. And if he indeed owned such a treasure, she didn't doubt that not just the city, but the whole kingdom would be enlightened of this occurrence. Not that it mattered. She had to proceed with her assignment, if only to steal a handful of pages; forced to suffer the duplicitousness of the nobility while smiling at their traitorous faces.

And that's how she ended up here – in one of the dimly lit rooms adjoining the exquisite ballroom. The guests in gem-encrusted masks milled outside, their frocks and gowns glimmering with the riches carved out of the others' suffering. The laughter and clinking of glasses penetrated the lavish mansion, echoing down the hallways, chasing her fury. Their merriment would drown any screams soon to echo from the lord's throat. Unfortunately, it also meant that she would find no reprieve from his incessant prattling.

Emerald Reckoning – a draught developed by the Order – untied one's tongue, made one more susceptible to the stranger's influence.

In this case, it had a regrettable flaw.

“She seduced me. The little doe-eyed bitch. Oh, how she whimpered.” The lord spat to the side, baring his rotting teeth. “She wanted it.” He smiled, his mouth twisting to one side. “Should have strangled her then and spared the coins.”

Amareinth’s lips curled. His confessions had begun with the crimes of his sheepish youth that sang to her amusement, yet, as the tale progressed, so reared its head her revulsion at his despicable deeds.

“I will make you rich, bathing in stells, if you untie me—”

She drew her blade across his skin, eliciting a howl of pain. The lord cursed, and raged, and confessed, and trembled, while she delivered cut after cut after cut.

The story unspooled in dark threads. The lord had the blood of innocents on his hands, and he basked in it. Even her kind frowned upon cruelty without a reason. So she revelled in the sharpness of her ornate dagger. The gurgling of the blood flowing down the bastard’s neck was a melody to her ears. His life was forfeited after he had revealed the location of the pages.

Amareinth was no pious priestess, but she delivered the suffering with purpose and not for her amusement. She wiped the dagger on the lord’s velvet sleeve, uncaring of his dying convulsions. She slipped out of the room, trailing death’s verve in her wake.

Her eyes glided over the red-haired servant panting near the wall, another triviality, who would never recall her appearance, not while the mirages bowed perception to her will.

Amareinth flipped a rogue strand of hair over her shoulder, hunching her back. Her needle-crafted facade shifted into the visage of utter unimportance: her eyes downcast and her demeanour that of a wounded deer surrounded by a pack of wolves. Quiet and unremarkable. Not worthy of a second glance, relegated to the periphery, to the shadows where she thrived.

The sun-plated stairs bore her weight without a creak as she strode towards the lord’s study. The gallery of solemn portraits accompanied her ascension; the light of svetalia revealed the pompousness of Mellerand’s forebears, their beady eyes glaring down upon her.

A flash of light stole her attention, luring her to the window.

Her hand swept over the antiquated curtains that hid the world of poverty from the tender sensibilities of the aristocracy. A kaleidoscope of colours shattered the calm, the light skittered up the walls and reflected in the tributaries outside. Fireworks rattled the city, blooming with vibrant vengeance. The garlands of pure gold flowers, silk olive ribbons and lantern-shaped svetalia embellished the paned windows of the nearby mansions.

If one moved a bit further away from the city centre, away from wealth, and decadence and rotting corruption, one would find the gold replaced by fading yellow papers. The papers were scattered on the decrepit wooden frames, hiding the terror under the pretence of loyalty.

Her fist bunched the burgundy velvet. Amareinth turned her gaze in repugnance. The festivities dug their sticky claws into her memories, reigniting the voracious fires that scorched her soul, just like guards torched everything blue or, Nine forbid, red; burning away the remembrance of better times.

The Reinstatement was accompanied by unquenchable flames and prolonged executions of those who dared to raise the traitorous colours. That's how Amarillia was forced to celebrate the decimation of the Castelnoe dynasty. Stephan's way of revelling in the consequences of his avarice. The avarice that brought so many lives to ruin.

A deep breath, and she continued down the hallway, dealing with a lock on the study's door. It took her a few minutes and several attempts to discover all the hidden compartments. The sycophant lords of Stephan's court trusted too much in fear as a deterrent, not bothering to protect their treasures.

She strolled between the whispering secrets, unravelling them with a trained touch: along the shelves, behind the clocks, inside the books. Her nimble fingers and polished picklocks cheated the concealment mechanisms until one compartment remained.

The pages awaited her.

She paused, deducing the shift in the air. Too quiet. Her honed senses tunnelled with a single-minded focus; she held her breath and listened.

A shriek punctured the silence. More joined a second later, until screams echoed throughout the mansion. The sounds of celebration unwound into chaos and terror.

Amareinth cursed under her breath, relying on her preternatural senses to appraise the creeping danger. The rare gift – inherited from the Dinati-rich bloodline and polished by years of training – served her faithfully for many moons.

She hurried through her ministrations.

The cries of dread reigned, followed by the yelling of the lord's guards and–

The authoritative shouts cut through the floors, followed by the ear-bleeding sound of the whitescreamers. Amareinth counted herself lucky to be outside their reach; nothing was more tedious than fighting through the disorientation.

She ignored the approaching ruckus of footsteps, focusing on cheating the lock. She didn't doubt her ability to eliminate any obstacles, but her preference would be to disappear without a confrontation. Even a well-earned one.

As an elite military group, the Metal Regiment was tasked with protecting the people of Amarillia and preserving the stability of the kingdom. In truth, they were nothing but a bunch of heartless murderers ravaging the country, paving their ambitions in blood and suffering. Not that the commoners perceived the Order any differently. Perhaps, in some parts of the kingdom, but not here. In Orandi, the corruption ran deep, but so did the blood spilt by the Order's assassins.

Picklocks danced between her callous fingers; her ears attuned to the rhythmic turn of the mechanism. A smile touched her lips once the tumblers locked into place, releasing their secrets.

A short-lived peace. The whirl of silver and green uniforms burst into the study, just as she grabbed the pages.

One. Three. Five.

Eight of them crowded the room: each with a cruel curve to their lips and a silver whitescreamer. So much for slipping away like one of Endymmon's nightcrawlers.

She raised her hands behind her head, feigning confusion mixed with terror. They were so reliant on their toys; they never saw the danger of her pretend subservience. A gentle tug upon her earrings, and it was already too late. The flower-shaped earrings unwound, encircling her ears – a sound-muffling brilliance of an invention with a ridiculous name she hadn't bothered to commit to memory.

She gave the men a coy smile of a noblewoman before drawing her wicked daggers.

Amareinth sheathed her blades and rose from a crouch. She surveyed her work; the crimson smiles on the soldiers' throats stood out against the stark brightness of their collars. The blood seeped into the threads of the carpet, the emerald green rusting into the iron brown. She scrunched her nose, taking a step back; she had enough blood clinging to her as it was.

To her surprise, they weren't as pathetic as usual. Quite an occurrence, with even a few strands of her hair falling prey to their swords. Unfortunately for the Metal Regiment, she didn't need a trim, and they had paid for the transgression with their lives.

A hair tie would be a prudent choice for the next outing: she couldn't quite stomach the idea of shortening her hair. Not when she could still remember her mother's gentle touch, her caring hands weaving an elaborate braid. Amareinth caressed the sapphire pendant with her fingertips. Her retina burned with memories of gardens and books and warmth. She shook her head, eviscerating the errant recollections.

Amareinth shed the dress, the ruffles and skirts falling in a tumble of bruised petals. Nimble as a cat, she left through the window, her pointed shoes lodging deep into the brick wall. She climbed down, keeping to the shadows – her constant and faithful companions. A few twists, and she reached her destination – the servant's yard.

The carriage drivers wandered with hungry eyes and treacherous desperation. The chaos had not yet reached this wing of the mansion. Several coins and a stern look, and one of them fled the lord's mansion as if the very demons from the depths of Endymmon pursued his carriage. Amareinth escorted the accelerating carriage with her gaze before using the distraction to sneak into another one. For a moment, she considered staying put and enjoying the inevitable parade of the now-late Lord's guards and royal watchdogs. Their endless bickering would be highly entertaining.

The Metal Regiment's arrogance and presumed superiority had not endeared them to the city's guards. It might have provided her with a spectacular show, alas, she could not tolerate such a potent dose of stupidity. Not after the time spent listening to the lord's ramblings.

Her ruminations were drawn short by two silhouettes sprinting towards her hiding place.