18th March 2013.

Outside Fort Tolis, 310 miles North of Kontia.

Tanya, High Queen of the Lepus.

I lay on my back on a bed of furs and pillows scattered atop dozens of rugs which made up the floor of my personal tent. I had grown so used to waking at the same time across so many lives, it was trivial to wake with the dawn. Turning my head, my ears flicking this way and that, I channeled an eavesdropping spell on my already impressive hearing. A sentry calling out a challenge and receiving the correct answer, the clatter of a cook-wagon's tailgate being dropped, the first lazy curses of women who had been told to fetch water... Somewhere close by, someone was snoring loudly enough to be heard through two layers of canvas. I suspected a Goblin with some form of nasal malady.

The noise was comforting; it was the prerogative of all commanders to eavesdrop on the soldiers under their command as it was often the only means to gauge the mood of the soldiers before problems could metastasise. Over ten thousand women would soon wake, eat, wash, and be ready for battle. The last few days the women under my command had impressed me, even if they did so in a rather safe and controlled environment.

As far as I could tell, the forces under my command were in good spirits, and they very much should be! We had a secure supply line to Kontia, were marching slowly as I took the time to perform drills and ensure camp was set up, fortified, and broken every night, and they were returning to their homelands.

Even so, there had been problems; squads and companies finding themselves at odds with each other, equipment being damaged or lost due to carelessness, wounds and illness cropping up... Only two people had died during the march north: two officers of the 34th and 65th companies, respectively, both Lieutenants who had chosen to duel each other without my permission. They had fought naked with smallswords after a dispute. The Lieutenant of the 34th Company ended up slain in a single riposte by the Lieutenant of the 65th. An impressive feat, of course, but the Lieutenant of the 65th was sentenced to death the next day in front of the army for unauthorised dueling. I was pleased I had managed a clean strike; there was nothing worse for morale than a botched execution.

When we had arrived in the planes of Tolis, I had been struck by the quality of the fortification and its placement. Here in the vast planes, the Saderans had found a truly remarkable place to situate the castle. It was, quite frankly, the perfect location.

Fort Tolis stood tall upon a steep mound that overlooked a vast rolling plain. From its towers the fortress had a commanding view of the lands around it. Its tallest could be seen from almost fourteen miles away and sat at the end of a nearly pristine Saderan road. All around it was a nearly flat plane, with gentle slopes and isolated trees and bushes here and there. A neat and fast-flowing river, which came up to my chest at its deepest point, was a fine source of fresh water. I was reasonably sure the fortress had an aquifer under it to support wells within the fortress itself.

The wooden structure itself was built in the style of a Saderan encampment, however its dimensions had been stretched to totally fill out the hilltop with a vast and ordered grid supplemented by a host of storehouses, bunkhouses, and the like. Around the edge of the hilltop ran a palisade of sharpened trunks and ditches, and behind it, higher up, ran another. And behind that, a third. Each layer had its own walkway and towers and its own gate, and none of the gates lined up with the others. Anyone who broke through the first wall would find herself in a narrow walkway, looking up at the second, with men above her on three sides.

At first such defences were praiseworthy in a purely academic sense as I had expected a few hundred men, perhaps a cohort, as Zorzal had left the fort stripped bare to feed the Legion he marched south. Such a small force could not hold such a large encampment, thus taking it was merely a case of surrounding the fortress and walking in where it was undefended.

Over the past week I had the Avi I had taken with me pass high over the fort to produce detailed drawings and estimations of the Saderan presence. I had the men on the walls counted at every watch change from the dozens of positions around the fort I had established. At least two thousand, possibly more. It was more than I had expected.

Far more.

I had attempted to draw the Saderans into negotiations, but they had just ignored anyone I sent. I did not know whether the garrison had simply never left, or whether Sadera had reinforced the fort at some point in the last six months. It was entirely possible that some remnant had been left behind, forgotten by its Prince and then by its Empire, and had simply dug in and waited. It was also possible Molt had sent men north on a long and expensive road to hold a fort he must have known I wanted. It could also have been that some portion of the defeated Legion had escaped to this fort and settled in over the winter months.

Regardless, the number of Saderans in that fortress meant a quick assault would be rather wasteful. I would lose hundreds of women taking it, perhaps more. Each of those women represented years of food, training, and equipment, as well as the daughters she had not yet had. A dead Lepus was not just a tragedy; she was a write-off of an investment that would take a generation to replace.

I was also not exactly running out of time; the campaign season was young, my supply line back to Kontia was secure, and every morning the men on those walls woke up and ate a little more of whatever they had stored in that fortress. I could afford to wait, and waiting also provided me with the perfect opportunity to practice siegeworks.

The first parallel, the first major trench, was dug well outside of non-existent cannon range and completely encircled the fortress. This was followed by approaching trenches and a second and third parallel, each closer to the fortress than the last. Artillery companies had the responsibility to establish battery positions for their guns, even if they were not permitted to fire them. There was no sense wasting ammunition at this point.

Were I under any pressure I would have created a dozen breaches already and would be well on the way to destroying the defenses at range with my guns. The Saderans must be quite confused as to why this siege had been bloodless so far.

The preservation of my advance force was vital, as Sadera could deploy truly massive Legions; once I would begin to travel west, I would be far more likely to encounter one. I had intended to bring ten thousand Lepus north: a full Brigade with the best equipment the foundries of Kontia could provide, to secure Fort Tolis, then the Pomi hillfort, then push west towards Fort Alba and the Goblin settlements at the frontier.

I ended up with almost twenty thousand, because many Lepus, who had not met my standards, had taken the opportunity to march north with my army on their way home. Something I was hardly going to prevent. I also had almost a thousand Goblins and three hundred Avi follow me north, the very first volunteers of the formation I had commissioned before the Central Council, the National Voluntary Guard.

It was, I would admit, a slight stretch of my own law. The NVG had been founded as a defensive formation, loyal to the Regional Governors (once I establish them) instead of the Crown, and I had promised its volunteers before the Council they would only ever be used for defensive actions. The garrisoning of defensive emplacements and the maintenance of logistical networks had been on that list, however, and a captured fort required a garrison just as a long supply line required maintenance. I was confident any competent lawyer would agree with me. So long as I did not order the NVG to partake in this siege, I was technically not violating my own laws.

In battle, neither the Goblins nor the Avi were of much use. Both were physically weak by the standards of my people, with even Human women being stronger than a Goblin man. But the Goblins were loyal. That was not a small thing. That was, in fact, invaluable at any price. I had knelt before the body of Zekkt in the temple district and given him a garden and a statue, had given his people contracts, wages, and the protection of my soldiers, and the Goblins had not forgotten any of it. They moved with a zeal that drove them to exceed my expectations. I was confident in leaving the fortress in their hands when I moved my army onwards. They had volunteered by the hundreds, and when they had been told the Queen was going north, they had begged to come along.

The Avi were a different matter entirely, invaluable for a totally different reason: they could fly. An Avi could leave the camp at dawn and circle the fort from a height no crossbow could reach, could carry a letter to Kontia in a fraction of the time a rider could, and did not need a road, a remount, or a bridge. They were perfect scouts and perfect messengers, but rather unenthusiastic, seeming more resigned to whatever fate had in store for them than having any strong position on my rule. Many of the Kontian people respected me for my victory alone or for the mercy I had shown them after they were defeated. The Avi, however, seemed to hold no particular opinion of me at all, or at least none I could glean from spies, rumours, or eavesdropping.

There was something else I had noticed about them on the march north, which had amused me far more than it should have. A Goblin and an Avi could carry an almost identical combat load. An Avi was much bigger than a Goblin, a good head or two taller and with wings that

could span the width of a wagon when they stretched. Yet almost all of that size was wing and feather and hollow bone, built to be light, and an Avi loaded like a mule would never leave the ground. A Goblin, meanwhile, was small and dense and stubborn, and could carry a respectable weight for his size so long as nobody asked him to run with it. The result was the quartermasters could issue the same standard kit list to both, with the same rations, the same water, and the same short crossbow, bolts, and a knife.

My musings were cut short as the furs beside me shifted.

Rory Mercury had been snoozing for the better part of an hour, curled against my side with the boneless contentment of a cat, her silky black hair spilled across my pillows and somehow smelling faintly of roses and blood. She did not wake slowly. She simply stopped being asleep and, before I could say anything, she had rolled over and climbed on top of me, settling her weight on my hips as if I were a piece of furniture she owned.

"Good morning, my Queen," she purred, and kissed me.

I allowed it, and then, because I had no real reason to deny the heat in my blood, I deepened the kiss, making her fight to maintain her position. When she finally pulled back, she was smiling, her chest shifting as she gasped for air. Her red eyes were half-lidded and pleased.

"You were thinking about wagons and boxes again." She gave a huff and crossed her arms.

"Is contemplating logistics truly a crime?" I gave her a smile as she blushed.

Her gaze drifted from my eyes to my cheek, and her smile softened into something I did not see on her face very often. She reached out and ran her fingertips across the tattoo there, tracing the line of it from beneath my eye to my jaw, and then across to the other side to trace its mirror.

"Still not fond of it?" she asked, delighting in the fine art inked into my face. I did not answer straight away.

I had absolutely no intention of ending up looking like some Yakuza reject. I had meant every word of it. Yet, days later, I had let Art ply his trade with me after he had asked but a single time. A unified motif, mirrored on both sides of my face, one for Elric and one for Shinji. He had made it far more subtle than any Lepus tattoo normally was without needing me to utter a word.

For a moment, lying there with Rory's fingers on my cheek, I felt the old reticence rise up in me. A woman from my first life would have looked at her reflection and seen a criminal or a sailor or a delinquent. A woman from my first life would have been ashamed.

But I remembered Art's face when he had shown me the sketches. How his ears had been pinned back in nervousness, how his hands had been shaking slightly, how he had started explaining the meaning of every line before I had even looked at them.

How he had looked when I had said yes.

"...No," I said quietly, "I am fond of it."

"Good." Rory leaned down to kiss the tattoo on one side of my face, then the other, with the solemnity of a priestess at an altar. "It suits you." There was a faint rattle of a chain, and my gaze drifted past Rory's shoulder to the foot of the bed.

Mabel Forn lay curled on a pile of furs placed there for her, snoozing in her chains. The white restraint garments were a little greyer than they had been when we left Kontia, and I would have to see to that. The long sleeves were still tied behind her back, the straps and buckles still in place, the chain running from her clothes to the bedpost still slack. Here and there on the cloth, the symbols of Zufmuut Rory had burned into it still glowed a faint, cold blue. Her breathing was slow and even. She looked very small.

"You know she would kill you in your sleep if she could," Rory said in a whisper just loud enough for the gagged apostle to hear. I saw the restrained girl flinch.

"Which is why she is in chains." I dismissed the thought.

"Mm," Rory hummed and opened her mouth to say something else. Then she stopped, her head tilted slightly as if listening to a sound I could not hear. Her eyes lost their focus. For a few moments she did not seem to be in the tent at all.

"Rory?" I prompted.

"A servant of Emroy is approaching," she said, her voice flat, almost bored, "coming from the east. On foot."

I sat up, which required Rory to slide off of me, which she did with an exaggerated sigh.

"One of yours?"

"One of *His*," she corrected, already reaching for her dress. "A priest... a sacred priest!" She sniffed the air, which should not have told her anything through canvas and miles of Steppe. "Old blood. Old death on him. He has been fighting something that should not be."

I turned to don my armour.

By the time I stepped out of the tent, the sky had begun to grey along the eastern horizon and the camp was fully awake. Lepus stretched and yawned outside their tents, the more diligent among them already in armour and the less diligent being shouted at until they were. The Goblins were at the cook-wagons, chattering in their own tongue as they ladled porridge into bowls. A pair of them saw me and bowed so low they nearly dropped their pot. I gave them a salute without stopping and told them to carry on as a shape dropped out of the sky.

The Avi landed heavily, wings flaring to kill her speed, and stumbled two steps before she found her footing and straightened to attention. She was one of the dawn patrol, brown-feathered and young, with frost still clinging to the tips of her primaries.

"Your Majesty," she began, standing to her full height, leaving her not too much shorter than me. With a single flick of her wings she was cast in glittering ice for a moment and had a remarkably regal presence. "A Lizardman is approaching the camp. Alone. He has a halberd of Emroy." She glanced at Rory, who had followed me out.

"How far away?" I asked.

"Two miles, perhaps less. He's slow." She shrugged.

"Have your patrol shadow him, he is to be escorted to my tent."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" The Avi saluted, then crouched and launched herself back into the sky with a gust of air that sent ash from the nearest cookfire scattering over a pair of very unhappy Goblins.

It took nearly an hour for the priest to reach my tent. The sun had cleared the horizon by then, washing the plateau of Fort Tolis in pale gold. He was a tall Lizardman, pale blue of hide, wearing a silk mantle which had seen far better days and carrying a halberd he leaned on heavily. As he drew closer, I could see a number of his scales were new, pale and soft compared to the weathered hide around them, in long lines across his arms and chest that could only be healing wounds.

"Ah!" He stopped a few paces from me and threw his arms wide, nearly toppling over as his halberd swung free, before he caught it again. "The Tochtli War-Lady herself! And-" His eyes went to Rory, and the grin faltered for the briefest moment before it returned, wider than before. He dropped to one knee, which looked painful, and lowered his head. "Envoy of the Dark One. I am honoured beyond words." He spoke in accentless Lepus, and I had to restrain myself not to demand that spell from Rory.

"Rise," I said, causing him to frown before he glanced at Rory and followed my command. "You have come a long way."

"I have, I have." He got back to his feet with the help of the halberd, wincing. "My name is Tlaue'Lilok, Sacred Priest of Emroy, of the temple of Okuillin."

"I am Tanya, High Queen of the Lepus." I offered a hand, and the Lizardman seemed to wait for a moment as if expecting more before he took it with a toothy grin.

"I believe I spoke to one of your Queens once, a tall and beautiful woman with red hair. Vera of the Mora."

"I am glad she left a good impression," I offered. "Come. You can sit and tell me why you came."

Rory had already sprawled herself across the furs once more, head propped up on one hand, red eyes fixed upon him with lazy interest. Mabel was watching intently, I noticed, curled tighter at the foot of the bed, her eyes peering over the edge of her mask. The priest glanced at her, at the chains and the faintly glowing symbols, and chose not to ask. I had one of my guards bring water and dried meat. The priest ate as if he had not eaten in days.

"I went to Kontia first," he explained between mouthfuls. "I found your city very interesting, I'll admit, but I could not stay. A Tochtli woman at the gate told me where you had gone." He took a long drink of water. "Then more walking. I am not as young as I used to be."

"But why come to me at all?" I pressed.

"Not to you, High War-Lady. Forgive me." He nodded at Rory. "To her. I go where the Envoy is, and the Envoy is with you." He set down his cup, and some of the cheer left his face. Not all of it (I suspected that would take more than this), but enough to make me lean forward. "I fought a Tochtli. A walking dead one."

"An undead Lepus?" I asked. "Can you explain?"

And so he did. In great detail, in the precise, procedural, slightly over-explained way every Lizardman official I had ever met seemed to share, as if he were reporting to a Magistrate. A village in the Northern Coalition had been attacked over several weeks. Something would appear at night and take a single person each time it came, man or woman or child, and leave no remains. Identified by red eyes in the darkness.

"I fought her," he said. "A Tochtli woman, or what was left of one. Taller than me, even when hunched over. One ear hanging by a scrap of meat, horrible... sh-she had no jaw! But she did have a pair of steel knives, rusted. Not the product of your kind and she was strong, so very strong, the strength your people are cursed with did not leave her when she died." He raised one healing arm and turned it in the light, showing me the length of the scar. "She did this. And this." He touched his chest. "The villagers finished her in the end. I would be dead otherwise." He sighed before continuing.

"The dead walk sometimes. It is rare, but it happens. Bad deaths, bad places, foul magic. A corpse made to walk is a puppet. It moves, and fights or labours... it does what it was made to do and nothing more. It does not think. Or do anything particularly complicated." He tapped one talon against the bronze cup of wine in his hand. "But she feinted."

I frowned. "'Feinted'?"

"She struck at my weapon to draw it down, then struck again when my guard was open. She gave ground when she needed to. When an arrow struck her, she turned her head to see where it had come from." The priest shook his head slowly.

"A soul," Rory said from the furs.

"A soul," the priest agreed. "Soulslaved. Bound back into dead flesh and made to serve. That is not a thing which happens in a bad place by accident. Someone did that to her.

Someone with great skill." He looked between us. "I believe there is a Necromancer, at the place... the place of that great battle. Where the Saderan Prince broke your old High War-Lady. They say the land is still black with blood. Tochtli and Human both, more than anyone could ever count."

Outside the Pomi hillfort. Zorzal had brought three hundred thousand Legionnaires and as many Auxiliaries against Tyuule, and Tyuule had given battle again and again, refusing to retreat until her armies were mostly dead. I had never seen the field. I had been leading my tribe south, away from it, while it was being fought.

'A near-limitless supply of dead Lepus and dead Humans, lying unburied on the Steppe for the better part of a year.' I felt something stir deep in my chest. That old, hot pressure, the bloodthirst within which I had contended with for a lifetime. Those were Pomi dead on that field, women who had died for their High Queen, and someone was digging them up and putting them to work. I was surprised at how offensive I found that thought.

"Thank you," I said, "this is valuable information."

The priest bowed his head. Rory said nothing at all. I looked at her then and found her staring at the priest, her face entirely blank...

This priest knew something Rory did not, that much was obvious from her face. Rory Mercury, First Servant of Emroy, a being who had walked this world for nearly a thousand years and who could smell death across a continent, had not known someone was tearing souls from her god and stuffing them back into rotting Lepus. And neither, apparently, had Emroy.

'How was that possible?'

Why had a single wounded priest needed to walk hundreds of miles, to tell Rory something in person? If Emroy were truly the God of War and Death, surely he would know when the dead of a battlefield were being taken from him. Surely he would know before a Lizardman in a village pond did. And yet it seemed that only now, with this information placed before his Apostle, could Emroy even begin to make a decision.

It was undeniable evidence the Gods were even less cognisant of the goings-on of the world than I had assumed. It was almost reassuring to find this world's gods had at least the decency to be ignorant in this manner when compared to the seemingly everpresent Being X.

Did the temples have something to do with it? Did the prayers and rituals and sacrifices of the faithful somehow carry information upwards, like reports passed up a chain of command? How did the Gods of Falmart gather information? Was that why Rory existed at all, a pair of eyes and a nose Emroy could send where his temples could not reach? A walking temple? If that were true...

Rory stiffened. It happened all at once. One moment she was lying across the furs, and the next her whole body had gone rigid, her back arched, her fingers curled into the furs so hard

I heard something tear. Her eyes went wide and unfocused, staring at nothing above the priest's head. At the foot of the bed, Mabel whimpered behind her gag and tried to push herself further away, her chains rattling. Even I could sense something different, something in the flickering shadows in the corner of the tent.

Something had turned its attention here.

The priest went to his knees again without a word. It lasted perhaps ten heartbeats. Then Rory blinked, and her eyes found mine, and they were very clear and faintly glowing with unconstrained power, mana radiating from her not unlike when Mable had met me in battle for the first time.

"I am going to the fortress," she said.

I stared at her. "...The Saderan fortress?"

"Yes." She sat up, smoothly, and swung her legs off the bed. "For you and your army, the war is over. For now. And I will be saying the same to the Saderans in that fortress."

"What exactly do you mean?" I asked, carefully.

"Emroy and Hardy have made a compact."

Rory stood and reached for her halberd where it leaned against the tent pole. She did not look at me as she spoke, but at the blade, inspecting it for something only she could see. "The souls of the dead do not belong to mortals. They belong to Hardy, to judge as she sees fit, and the souls of those who die in battle are Emroy's before they are hers. Whoever is doing this is stealing from both of them." Her lip curled. "Hardy is finally doing her job. Good for her. You," she turned to point at me, "and the Commander of that fortress, are commanded by the Gods to end this Necromancer." She smiled, and it was not her usual smile. "Together."

There was a long silence. The priest, still on his knees, looked delighted as one could be.

"*Commanded*?" I repeated. Rory bit her lip.

"You're not even *scared*~." She let out a husky gasp and sauntered forwards in delight. "That's what I find so intoxicating about you, my love." She inclined her head to the side. "Commanded, ordered, demanded, two of the most powerful Gods and many of their petty supporters are telling you to do this."

I looked at her, deep in her wide and beautiful eyes and felt a presence beyond us both regard me.

"Together," Rory said again, softer this time, without the contamination. A request. She slung her halberd over her shoulder, lifted onto the tips of her toes, and kissed me on the lips. "Please," she whispered.

"I am a reasonable woman," I said at last, and everyone in the tent seemed to find that very amusing. "We will see what the Saderan Commander has to say."

"What beautiful madness," the Lizardman uttered in awe as I looked out of the tent at the fortress upon the hill.