

“Citizens of the blood, welcome to the stable. I see a great many war horses today.”

Laughter echoes around the pavilion. She’s right, they are nearly all old war horses. Proud and glorious in their day, but past their prime by decades.

“I’ll not drown you in words. I’d love to, but the duel is nearly done, and our Emperor will soon leave, and I dare not speak over his forty-five titles.” More laughter. It comes easily. These nobles, at least, have no real love for Emperor Louis. “So I’ll simply do something foolish, and explain myself.”

Sullivan takes off the ring on her hand. It’s not part of the show, but a nervous tick. She’s no great orator, after all.

“As you all know, I’m making a play at election. At being the Mortal Queen. If you don’t know this, then I would think it wise to stop drinking so much so early in the day.”

Those alcoholics she’s speaking of seem to take that as a cue to drink even more. They raise their glasses, and drink to the noise of laughter.

“I don’t expect to win. I don’t really hope to, either. Ceremonies and silks and sitting on a velvet throne all day while gentry talk my ear off about land disputes is not my idea of how my twilight years ought to go.” She turns to Philippe, old man he is, and they share a knowing smile. “Though if you have any desire to be as foolish as me, don’t fear to cast that vote, would you?”

A few people produce their tokens that they will cast for Sullivan. Not nearly enough to sway the election, but enough to cause applause.

Sullivan doesn’t smile.

“I run for this.” She gestures around the table. “For all of you, here today. Old friends and new ones both, I come to talk to you frankly. Truthfully. To hide no longer from what we all know, but what we’re too kind and too fearful to say.”

She slides the ring back on her hand, and leans over the table. Her muscles bulge. Strong as ever, even ancient as she is.

“Varathia is dying, and if we do not act - it *will* die.”

That causes nothing less than uproar. Much of it in protest, much of it in shock, and much of the rest in support. None even think to insult or attack Sullivan for what she’s said, but the words themselves they call lies or foolish. They boast about armies and gold and conquests. The old especially seem outraged. Those who have fought besides Sullivan in war after war, bleeding and killing for Varathia.

Orys grumbles to Katya, Ilya nods in silence, and Saint-Juste just smiles like a lunatic. Ulthwi agrees, as does Menodra and the other southern lords. Philippe protests, as does Archbishop Blaise and most of Sullivan's war horses.

She weathers their storm, looking unaffected, eyes cast out toward the sky.

Their wrath is like high tide. It comes, it stays, it goes, and before long the ocean recedes, and Sullivan stays where she is.

"My lords!" Sullivan calls, to those who still talk. "Are you of the blood or not? This is beneath you."

That silences them totally, leaving the pavilion itself quiet as a Marlan evening.

"Is there a one of you here who would accuse me of lying? Of treason, or cowardice, or stupidity?"

No one answers, and Sullivan nods.

"I was born a peasant, as I'm certain my enemies have made no secret of. And though my blood is common, and I'm ashamed of my low birth-" She's not. She says it only to satisfy the old lords. "It taught me two things. That I must always be true, and that I can't waver. Not once, not ever. In seventy-three years of living, I have not. Never."

And then she points at a scar on her body. First a rope scar on her wrists. "I did not waver before Mattea of Lyeil, when she tried to hang me. No, I lived, and I killed her and all her bandits on the Sharkshore."

Sullivan's hand moves down to her chest, where a stab scar no doubt hides beneath her clothes. "I did not waver when Giovanna Cariana had sixfold my number at Kaithe's Pass. No, I stood, and stood still when dawn came and her armies broke down the mountainside."

Now she points at a burn that drapes over her left shoulder, looking angry even now. "I did not waver when Andre Sullivan and all his traitor sons hid behind the walls of Orlais with cannon and fire. No, I conquered, and I put them all to the Vylinius' justice."

Lastly, she points to a poorly-healed fracture on her shin, which must haunt every step she takes. "To use the words of our great hero, I didn't *bloody* waver at Komme, when Vladimir V's twenty-thousand cavalry rode to meet me on the field. No, I rallied, and I crushed his line from behind."

Sullivan pulls back from the table, letting the weight of her words and the glory they bring turn the pavilion to her side. To silence dissenters, and to rouse allies into remembering why they love her so. It works. It works on all of them. They remember the victories they've won at her side, or the stories told by loved ones and mentors. Even the Exploratores, the gentry, the slaves, they remember songs and legends about these battles. About Sullivan the Ironwood, invulnerable and unbeatable for sixty long years of crisis.

They don't cheer, they don't toast. They sit and awe and wait for her next words, and she makes them wait, looking severe and with no limit to her pride.

"We stand on the brink." Sullivan says. She lowers her voice, removing the mawkish pride and replacing it with all the severity her words must bring. "Even now, we're ravaged. Civil war burns everything from Black Harbor to the banks of the Schoehn, wasting soldiers and treasure and unity. The Helborn look ready to spawn yet another Graven King, and spread their seed into Varathia with the Cult of the Locus. In Kossovy, Vladimir's last son was not found in Carrogersk, proud as our final victory was. He retreats into the depths of that frozen hell, and he will return."

Sullivan begins to pace.

"And what of the others? The revolution of *slaves* in Syracuse? This new crisis on the Silver Sea, pirates uncounting. What of Madras, or the ever-hungry Darkmen? We are surrounded by enemies."

Before anyone can say anything, Sullivan moves on.

"But we have always been surrounded by enemies. So what? We are Varathia, after all. Built on a foundation of iron. We will rise and we will conquer as we always have. So long as our foundation remains."

Now her true purpose comes. And she believes what she's saying as truly as she believes anything.

"Our crisis now is not our enemies. Not truly. It's not what lays outside our borders, but what gnaws away at our foundations within. It is the rot inside of us, the decay of all that makes us strong and proud. That is what brings us to the brink."

Sullivan takes a deep breath, and prepares to enter the climax of her speech.

"You know who I speak of. Highborn traitors—" House Karol in all but name. "-the bourgeoisie, the Locus, the Reformers, the constitutionalists, *republicans*." She takes a breath, but still seems breathless. "Whatever you think of these people, they wear at our foundations. In attacking a piece of it, they attack all of it."

Sullivan wipes off her brow. And while everyone at the table favors at least one group she'd named, they all seem to agree on her point.

"The Sweet Plague, the famines, the ruins of war. The destruction of our currency, the decadence of our nobility, and in turn their turn to corruption and soft lives. They turn their back on their duties. They think they must only reign, not rule."

Sullivan gestures around.

"You know better. We are not gods, we are not divine. We are leaders. If Varathia must bleed, we bleed. If Varathia must sacrifice, we sacrifice. We serve before all others, and by that right alone they must serve us. Each noble of the blood who forsakes this is nothing more and nothing less than a traitor to our people, because they too gnaw at our foundations."

Her words are extreme, divisive, and persuasive. Everyone is roused in their own way, some to anger but far more now to understanding. Sullivan has given them a new cause. A new war - perhaps one day fought in blood. She validates them and she chastizes them. In the same breath she has denounced them all, and given them hope.

"This is why I have called you all today. No matter who wins this election, no matter what comes, remember this. Remember my words. Remember what I have said. The Mortal Empire is dying, but we can be its salvation. We are iron, and iron still. Remember that when you return to your castles, to your families. The world is at stake, and our answer must be unity. We will not involve ourselves in civil war, in conspiracy, in treason, in moneygrubbing, in decadence. We will stand together against the storm, or it will sweep us into history as it has for so many before us. We will have unity - and from it we will have salvation."