

Material Differences

“Look! Look!” someone cried. “They are returned!”

Loreen was turning the handle of the well, bringing a full pail of water to the surface, when she saw the returning soldieras. They were on the crest of the Mountain of Conquest, over a thousand proud women on horseback, silhouetted by the brilliant crimson orb of Greater Sol as it descended in the evening sky. In the centre was a figure, with no-one three horse-lengths to the left or the right of her. It was Queen Saranis. And behind her, fluttered the pennant of the Queendom of Arbenstadt.

All around Loreen, the citizens looked to the Mountain of Conquest and babbled amongst themselves.

“Have they returned in victory?” someone asked.

“Of course they have,” another snapped, “If defeated, they would surely return in the forbidden hours of night.”

Their questions were answered by the sound of a horn. The first notes echoed over the city of Arbenstadt. The horn was joined by a dozen trumpets. And then by over a thousand female voices singing in unison. Across the brow of the Mountain, they held swords skywards in tribute to Goddess. Many in the Square gasped when they saw these weapons as they glinted, reflecting the evening light of Greater Sol.

Loreen saw Tomanos with a pail of water in his hand. She ran to him and seized him by the shoulders, causing him to drop the bucket.

“Look,” she said. “They have swords of metal! Metallic swords!”

They jumped in delight as did those around them. Their bitter enemy, Ferrumville, had been defeated. Copying others, Loreen linked arms with Tomanos and danced in circles, then unlinked, switched arms and danced in the opposite direction. After some minutes they collapsed to the ground, exhausted but delirious. Loreen saw her opportunity. She kissed Tomanos briefly on the lips. It was her first kiss, and she strongly suspected, his first also. Tomanos returned an embarrassed smile and she kissed him again, this time a lingering one.

By the time the soldieras reached the city gates, Lesser Sol was part consumed by the Eastern Chasm. As full night fell, the citizens, all bearing torches, created a fiery path for the Queen and her soldieras from the city entrance to the castle.

Trouped by her personal custodia, Queen Saranis greeted her subjects, pointing her sword left and right, bestowing her blessing on selected citizens among the crowd.

Loreen and Tomanos watched the procession go by. Following the soldieras, there were several wagons. Some bore unknown, exotic foods. Others held strange looking machines, technologies long known in the enemy Queendom, but unknown in Custoda. Whatever was carried in the final wagon was hidden, covered by a tarpaulin, causing Loreen’s curious mind to race.

When the procession reached the castle gates, the Queen halted and turned to address the crowd. A horn sounded and the music dissipated. Those few people talking were quickly shushed by those around them.

“Loyal citizens of Arbenstadt. We have achieved a great victory over the Queendom of Ferrumville! Tonight, I ask you, indeed I command you, to celebrate our great victory.”

A huge cheer emerged from the crowd, and each citizen waved their torches above their heads. The Queen, brought her heels to her horse’s chest and proceeded through the castle gates, followed by her army.

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Frost lingered on the ground in the Main Square, even as Greater Sol rose. Loreen was annoyed with Tomanos; he was nowhere to be seen, though they had agreed to meet at half-rise. She began walking to the castle, only to find Tomanos running towards her, wearing an apologetic smile.

“Come on you,” she said. “They allow but a thousand into the public gallery. We may already be too late.”

They walked briskly to the castle, the crowd becoming thicker as they got closer. At the gates, castle custodas were shouting that they were almost full, that most of the crowd would not be admitted.

Even the castle custodas bore newly seized swords. Before this, a mere handful had ever been captured. The long blade was of shiny silvery Ferrum. And along its centre from top to bottom ran a thin line of golden aurum. The handle was of a dull greyish metal Loreen did not know of.

“That’s it now. No more,” the custoda said just as they reached the front of the crowd. She was a middle-aged woman with flowing grey hair.

“Oh, that’s disappointing,” Loreen said and feigned to turn and go. Instead, she ducked and sprinted through the gap between the custoda and her compatriot. Tomanos, whose hand she was holding like a vice, was past the custodas too before he realised what was happening.

They heard a furious cry of “Hey, you two, get back here,” as they ran through the corridor and emerged into the courtyard. They merged with the citizens who were funnelling into the main entrance of the castle building. Looking behind, they saw one of the castle custodas scanning the crowd for them, her face red and sweaty. After some seconds, she turned and walked back towards the entrance.

Soon they were standing in the crowded public gallery of the throne room, looking down on the crowd of assembled courtiers. On the dais, the thrones of the Queen and Prince were covered with velvet sheets. The monarchs were not yet in attendance. They were scheduled to make their appearance at fullrise.

As time passed, the growing light of the suns caused the vast stain glass windows to cast long beams of multi-coloured light across the throne room.

A trumpet from the hall below played a short burst of notes. The crowd murmured in anticipation. Then the crier announced, “All stand for their Majesties, Queen Saranis and Prince Davius. In the Great Hall, the assembled courtiers and dignitaries took to their feet, as did everyone in the public gallery.

A great oak door opened to the left and the Queen entered to rapturous applause and cheering. She was followed some seconds later by her husband, the Prince. Following him, two

male courtiers entered and moved to the shadows by the back wall. Queen Saranis signalled all to taking their seats, causing a degree of confusion and discomfort among those in attendance as, by convention, no-one was permitted to take their seats before the royal couple. But, in accordance with their monarch's command, everyone sat.

"My Ladies, Lords, and citizens," began the queen. "By now you will be aware that we have won a great victory over the Queendom of Ferrumville. For centuries now, this Queendom has jealously guarded that most precious of commodities: metal, making for itself machines and weapons, which they have used to raid our lands. When they have attacked, we could defend ourselves only with oaken spears and shields, bows and arrows.

"And so, we launched a surprise attack on the city of Ferrumville, with the full might of our army, some two thousand. When they saw our numbers, many of their soldieras, took flight in a cowardly retreat, and we were met by fewer than three score Ferran soldieras. We salute these honourable warriors who fought to their ends, while their comrades ran like rats through secret tunnels.

"In that brief battle, we lost a score and three heroines. May Goddess welcome them to the Plains of the Infinite.

"May Goddess welcome them to the Plains of the Infinite," Loreen and Tomanos intoned with the crowd.

"The Queen and Prince of Ferrumville were found dead in their throne room, bearing in their hands the scalpels of their own destruction. Their daughter, Princess Helenus, took flight with their cowardly military, bringing shame upon herself.

"You will have noticed that our soldieras have returned bearing swords of metal, such as this one." She unsheathed her sword and raised it high. It reflected a violet ray from the stain glass window. "The Ferran army left behind them an armoury stocked with these weapons. We have returned with these and other implements and machines."

"And finally," she declared, a double clap of her hands causing the two courtiers to run across the dais to stand behind the covered thrones. "We secured these for the court of Arbenstadt."

When the courtiers pulled the velvet covering, a communal gasp arose from the crowd which morphed into a collective "Oooh". For, instead of the oaken thrones which had, for centuries stood there, stood two thrones of metal. They were similar in design, but one was larger and taller than the other.

Loreen scrutinised the larger one. It was composed mainly of brilliantly shiny Ferrum. It must be two horse's weight, she thought. On the seatback were pictures of both Sols, represented by a large and a smaller disc of pure precious aurum. The rays from both Sols were portrayed by bars, also of aurum, interspersed with the greyish metal which formed the handles of the swords. The queen assumed her throne, followed by the prince.

Queen Saranis spoke briefly to say that there would be a celebration in the main square at maximum light. There, some of the culinary spoils of Ferrumville would be dispensed for all to sample. She nodded to the crier who demanded that all should rise. The Royal couple arose and left. No-one stirred until the door was closed behind them. Slowly the crowd began to file out.

In the great courtyard, Tomanos was beyond excited.

“We have metal, Loreen, metal! Not just a few pieces, but lots of it. Swords to defend ourselves with. Machines to make things for us. And if we hold Ferrumville then we control the mines as well. This changes everything.”

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The camp was in the Forest of Souls, one day’s ride East of Ferrumville. Princess Helenus was alone in her yurt. A shaft of light stabbed the air as General Tatianus, her most trusted confidant stepped inside.

“Your highness,” she said, standing rigidly to attention.

“So, Tati, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit. And, for the love of the goddesses, call me ‘Ma’am’”.

“Yes ma’am, two things. Firstly, I wish to convey my condolences, and those of your army, and of the people of Ferrumville, on the death of your Mother and Father, the queen and prince.”

“Thank you, Tati, and convey my gratitude to the rank and file. Regarding the citizens I will express my thanks to them in my first public speech after we retake Ferrumville.

“Regarding my mother, as tradition states she was to pass the Queendom to me at the next Equinox, when she reached three score and seven. When she heard of your plan, she was happy to sacrifice herself in the rite of Regum Destructum, as our foremothers once did. So too my father. They have both been welcomed by the goddesses to the Forest of Paradise. I have marked their passing for two nights and one day. Now is time we must move on.”

“Indeed Ma’am. That brings me to the second matter.”

The general, walked to the entrance, pulled back the curtain and beckoned to someone. A woman entered the yurt, the Supreme Adjudicator. She bore on a cushion, the necklace of State.

“And now Ma’am,” the General said, “before the goddesses and before mortal woman, it is time for your coronation.

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Within days of their triumphant return, the courtiers of Arbenstadt began to notice that the Royal Couple were not well. At first it seemed only that the colour had drained from the queen’s cheeks. These concerns were dismissed as fancy until the day Prince Davius arrived alone to the daily pleadings. The Queen had never before missed the pleadings, but the prince explained that she had come down with a heavy cold. Indeed, the Prince Davius himself displayed cheeks which were pale and, worse, sunken, as if he had ceased the taking of food.

Two days later, the prince failed to appear at the court session, the high adjudicator attending instead, explaining that he had caught the same affliction as the queen, which was named as an influenza. Three days later, under intense pressure for an end to her obfuscation, the high adjudicator admitted that the Queen was ‘quite ill’, as was the Prince. The true seriousness of the situation became clear when the royal’s daughter, Princess Ilsa attended the daily pleadings. At just fifteen years, she was too young to issue rulings, but the ominous significance

of the young princess, sitting on the Queen's throne was not lost on the citizens of Arbenstadt, though she, at least, appeared to be in good health.

Every soldier of the Ferran campaign also became ill, to a greater or lesser degree. Their symptoms were similar. Initially they took to their beds, feeling weak and devoid of energy. Then they became nauseous, rising frequently from their beds to vomit, so that this unknown disease became known as "The Nausea". Soon, they could take no food, and the vomiting became more frequent. It also emerged that those few soldieras who had remained behind to guard Arbenstadt were also being affected, though the course of their illness ran a few days behind their compatriots.

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"We shouldn't be here," Tomanos hissed.

"I know," Loreen whispered back. "That's what makes it fun."

The storeroom was almost completely dark, illuminated only by a skylight, high above them, and this allowed only the dim rays of Luna in the night sky. They had gained access to the storehouse through this window, being just slim enough to squeeze through.

Now, her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Loreen fancied she could see what she had come for: the swords. Yes, when she blinked again, she could see their faint outline, many of them, stacked on top of each other, on shelves just in front of her.

"Look Tomanos," she whispered. "I told you they'd be here. Dozens of them, scores even."

"Yes, I see them," he hissed in reply. He was terrified that a custoda would walk in on them at any moment.

"And these are those left over," Loreen continued, "after each of our soldieras has been issued with one!"

Loreen walked to a shelf and picked up a sword slowly and carefully, so as not to alert the elderly custoda they had seen dozing outside the door. She held it out, as if confronting an enemy Ferran. The strip of aurum which ran the length of the blade, glinted, even in this faintest of light.

"It's magnificent, isn't it?" she said, speaking to herself as much as Tomanos.

"Yes, it's magnificent Loreen, just like you. Now can we get out of here, before we get caught and get clapped in the stocks in the square?"

Loreen raised one eyebrow as she considered her new boyfriend. She couldn't decide if his timidity made him more attractive or less. "Yes, let's get out of here."

They were halfway up the stairs when Tomanos saw that Loreen was carrying the sword.

"What are you doing with that?" he hissed. "Put it back."

"Put it back? I didn't come all this way to leave without a souvenir. This is coming with us."

Tomanos debated the matter briefly until he realised she was not for relenting. He conceded with a sigh.

On Tomanos' shoulders, Loreen squeezed through the skylight. Stretching her arm towards Tomanos she took the sword from him and laid it carefully on the roof tiles. Tomanos took one last look down at the storage area and noticed something. It seemed he saw a faint blue light emanating from the shelves below. Or did he? Were his eyes playing games with him. He

blinked and looked again. It was still there, so faint as to be almost imperceptible, a bluish radiance emanating from the shelves bearing the Ferran swords.

“Tomanos! What are you doing?! Let’s go!”

Loreen’s arm was thrust through the window, demanding his attention. He grabbed her hand and clambered through the skylight.

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The first soldiera died eight days after her return. The following day, the horrifying news was released that both the Queen and Prince had succumbed to the mystery disease. Indeed, many courtiers suspected that they had been dead some days, but that the inner coterie had suppressed this fact. The Royal couple were cremated at night on the Mountain of Conquest but without the customary period of celebration.

Princess Ilsa was installed as Queen and undisputed ruler in a private ceremony, again breaking a tradition dating from the time of the Garden. Those few in the inner circle noted that even she looked to be in wretched health but rationalised this as the grief of a child in such torrid circumstances.

A rider arrived from Ferrumville with the news that the garrison there was, to a woman, stricken with the Nausea. The rider herself succumbed the night of her arrival, her mission accomplished. If the soldieras’ condition continued to worsen, it was feared that the garrison would soon be overcome, even by the compliant Ferran citizens. But no relief could be offered as those soldieras in Arbenstadt were universally stricken.

Theories ran riot. The most popular was that the army had contracted a disease in Ferrumville, to which the natives were immune. Perhaps, the despicable Ferrans had somehow created some virus, it was suggested. But then why had the soldieras, for the most part, not passed it on to their families? To be sure, some army husbands and children had caught the nausea, but to a lesser degree.

And then of course there was Princess Ilsa, who had not been on the Ferran campaign. Why had she so quickly succumbed to the Nausea. She had not been seen in court for several days and was generally believed also to be dead.

And then there was Goddess. Perhaps, it was argued by the Supreme Priestess, that Goddess had been angered by this surprise attack on Ferrumville, renegeing as it did on the time-honoured tradition of declaration of war. The people who attended the service of *Lunarset* jeered when the Supreme Priestess made this charge from the alter. The Messenger of Goddess had to retreat from her alter when prayer scrolls first were hurled at her, followed by pieces of temple furniture.

Within a Lunar cycle, the organs of Arbenstadt society: the government, the judiciary and the church had largely broken down.

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The Ferran army approached their home city on the night after Moonset. Four soldieras approached the city gates, and one made the call of the wolf. Within a minute, the vast doors of Ferrumville began to rumble open. Two women citizens stepped out and beckoned to them. The soldieras rushed forward to meet them. Two Arben soldieras lay on the ground, blood covering their necks.

The soldieras spoke to the citizens, quickly assessing the situation within. Yes, the entire Arben garrison had been afflicted. They had lost control of the city and had retreated en masse to the barracks, presumably hoping that the Nausea would pass. Yes, the garrison had a small number of sentries, those who were still in the middle phase, but they would easily be overcome.

In silence, the army funnelled into the city and surrounded the barracks from a height on all sides. At the signal of Queen Helenus, metal arrows were unleashed from a dozen crossbows. All six sentries were silently impaled, most twice or more. Four of them fell to the ground, while the remaining two staggered randomly, attempting to maintain their feet. Each Ferran marksman loaded a second arrow into the flight groove of her weapon and pulled the cocking stirrup back, ready for the next command.

“Loose!” the queen hissed again. The tottering figures were impaled multiple times and collapsed to the ground. Now the crossbow-women loaded arrows with cloth at their tips and again cocked their weapons. This time, they dipped the arrow tips into the fiery grates that stood behind them, before taking aim at the windows of the barracks building.

“Loose!” Helenus commanded, and a flurry of flaming arrows flew from all sides at the building. They smashed through the glass of the narrow windows, lighting up the interior within seconds. With each successive flurry of arrows, the interior grew brighter. Screams and shouts rose from inside. The door at the building’s base opened and a stream of soldieras ran out, most unarmed, some still in nightwear. Some of them appeared too sick even to run. All were mown down with crossbow fire within a few horse-lengths of the building. Those who tried to escape numbered no more than a score. It seemed that those not dead were too weak even to try to make good their escape. Indeed, Helenus mused, perhaps the fumes of the fire within brought some of them blessed relief.

As the fire within the building reached its apex, lighting her face, she turned to General Tatianus.

“When the fire subsides, we will enter the armoury and end the misery of those with life still within them. At first light, we will go through the city and root out any hidden snakes, not already dispatched by our good citizenry. In the evening, we will visit our families, partake in a fine dinner and spend the night in our beds with our men. The following morning, we begin our march on Arbenstadt.

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“How did they do this, the Ferrans?” Loreen asked. “How did they disable our brave soldieras? Most of them fled at the first sight of our army. It’s as if they cast a spell.”

“There are no spells Loreen,” Tomanos replied. “There is no magic outside of children’s stories.”

They were in her garden. In the cottage, her parents were praying to the Goddess, imploring her to somehow repel the Ferran invasion, which was surely coming. It was half-set and Lesser Sol was low in the sky.

Tomanos reflected on his own words: “no magic”, and yet it had seemed that the swords in the armoury had glowed by themselves. Was that not a magic of sorts?

“Loreen! Do you still have the sword?”

Loreen’s head shot around to the open door of the cottage.

“Tomanos! Be quiet,” she hissed.

“I’m sorry,” he said, whispering now. “Do you have it?”

She nodded.

“Where is it?”

“In the hay barn. Why?”

Two minutes later, they were in the loft of the haybarn. Loreen went to the back wall and carefully cleared away some straw that covered the floor. The sword emerged.

“Don’t touch it,” Tomanos said.

He approached it slowly, looking again for the faint blue light he had seen, but he could not see it. But Lesser Sol provided dim light even in the loft. The armoury had been in almost complete darkness.

“Looking for your magical light again?” Loreen offered.

“I tell you I saw-.”

Tomanos jumped as something moved under his foot and a screech filled the air. Composing himself he saw it was a rat. To his surprise, it did not scamper away; it just lay there. When he bent down, he saw that the creature was in bad health. Its stomach rose and fell rapidly, and its eyes were almost closed.

“Look! There’s another,” Loreen said, pointing.

By the wall, close to the sword, lay a second rat. This one was motionless. Nudging it with her foot, it flipped over, clearly dead.

“Poison,” Tomanos said. “They’ve been poisoned. The same as our brave soldieras.”

“You mean they have put poison on the swords. That’s not possible. The Ferrans know aught of poisons. And even if they did, they could never find enough to cover thousands of swords with it.”

“No Loreen. I’m not saying that. I’m saying they’ve discovered a poison of their own.”

He picked up the sword from the floor, making sure to take it by the blade. It’s this strange new metal of the handle, this metal we have never seen before. That’s why our soldieras are all dying. They’re all walking around carrying this poison with them.”

Loreen’s mind raced.

“But what about the Royal Prince? And Princess Ilsa? Neither went to Ferrumville. And neither of them ever carried swords.”

Tomanos went silent.

“The thrones!” he exclaimed. “The thrones! They also have the grey metal. And in greater quantities than just a sword handle. No wonder the Queen and Prince succumbed so quickly. And the princess so soon after.”

Loreen went silent, processing his words. Slowly, she came to realise that it all made sense.

“By Goddess, you’re right,” she said, “They knew our army was greater in number than even they, with their metal, could repel. They left two magnificent thrones, knowing the queen, in her vanity, would bring them here and use them as her own...”

“And they didn’t leave their weapons behind by accident,” Tomanos offered. “They left behind an arsenal of poisonous devices, knowing again, that we would surely take them.”

“We have to tell someone,” Loreen said. “We have to collect these swords and throw them into a pit. And we need to arm ourselves again with oaken spears and bows and arrows. We need to tell someone. Before they come.”

“Tell who?” Tomanos implored. “The royal family is dead. Our generals are all dead or dying. The priestesses are in hiding from the people. There’s no-one in charge, even if anyone will listen to us.

Loreen realised to her huge frustration, that Tomanos was right.

“It’s too late, Loreen. If they come... when they come, we have no means to resist them. The elders will throw open the gates to them in the hope of mercy.”

“You’re right. We can’t resist them.”

It was some minutes before either spoke. It was Loreen, her mind turning at top speed.

“We need to go to the forest,” she said. “And afterwards, we’ll need to get into the Palace.”

“What for? What’s in the forest?”

“Come on. Let’s go.”

* * *

A cry arose in Central Square. When all looked up, they saw that the Mountain of Conquest had, once again, a great army on its crest. But this time, the pennant behind the central figure was that of Ferrumville.

As Tomanos had predicted, the elders gave orders to leave the gates open. Two of the elders met with an emissary of the queen and word came back that no-one, whether civilian or soldier, would be harmed if they provided no resistance.

Within the hour, Queen Helenus was in the throne room.

“Please don’t go any closer than this your majesty,” Tatiana implored. “It is not necessary to touch Insidium to suffer its effects. Its invisible rays project we know not how far.

She nodded.

Four soldieras carrying slabs of dark plumbium entered the chamber. Under the general’s instruction, they covered the seatbacks of the thrones, with the slabs.

“It is neutralised now, Your Majesty,” Tatiana assured her. “But let us wait until they have been removed.”

A dozen more soldieras entered the chamber. Six women seized each throne, turned it onto its back and slowly made their way out of the chamber.

It was some minutes before the door opened again. The same twelve soldieras entered carrying the Arben thrones. They placed them side-by-side on the dais and, following her assent they left the chamber. Once again it was just Helenus and Tatiana.

“They are magnificent, aren’t they,” the queen said. She was admiring the intricate carvings that adorned each chair from the apex to the bottom of each leg. Entire stories were described, battles fought, famines endured, harvests and feasts.

“They’re so obsessed with acquiring metal and the technologies that go with it, that they’ve lost sight of the artistry they have in their carvings. Until they captured some of our knives and chisels, they used to use sharp stones, can you believe?”

She sat in the taller throne.

“Suits you Ma’am,” General Tatiana remarked with a smile.

“Hubris, Tati, that’s why Saranis lost her army, her queendom and her life. Hubris.”

She felt a faintly moist sensation on the underside of her hand. Looking at her palm, she saw it glisten slightly.

“Oh,” she remarked, “they must have varnished it recently.”

In fact, the substance was not varnish, but the sap of the rare, insidious Shadowlands tree.