

Prologue:

The Queen of Psalms

Chapter I

Stentore was awoken by the sun's rays entering through the stained glass windows of his small manor, his scullery maid entering shortly afterwards. As a member of the lower nobility with barely enough land to sustain himself and close to no retinue, the maid doubled as his personal valet and aided him in his duties. She was a fair woman with brown hair, worn long and wavy and big brown eyes, features shared by most Kallistians. Though she did not know her own age, Stentore guessed she would be about five years his younger or about six-and-ten.

"Good morrow, my lord." Her voice was chirpy and sing-songy, she always seemed happy to be with her master. Perhaps it was the growing repute of the young knight as a fearsome man or mayhaps she hoped for something more. "Big day ahead, Sir. I prayed for you last night, I know the Lord will guide you!"

Stentore let out a soft sigh as he raised his hands to hold his head. He had forgotten all about it for a moment but his bruises quickly reminded him; today was *The Day of Psalms* and the beginning of the Festival in *Alasia*, followed by the Viceroy's Tourney. The day would be long and dreadful, filled with idle chatter and nonsensical ramblings about peasants and taxes. All the discussions he did not know how to avoid, his mother serving as an interim Seneschal and overseeing the small lands and his only knightly retainer, an aging man from Albas, held both functions of Marshall, Shire Reeve and Justiciar. There was little to do in the outskirts of the small *Velasco*, a religious village that overlooked the lands of the gentry.

Stentore's manor was a square tower, five stories tall that served as the keep and living area, surrounded by a wooden palisade to protect his animals, a bailey with enclosures for cattle and sheep, a stable where he kept his four horses and little more than four wooden watchtowers overlooking the defenses. A chapel once stood next to the keep, though it has fallen into

disrepair and was too costly to fix. With his inheritance and station had come some money and most would have used it to better their living quarters, but not Stentore Grimaldi. He had invested in two sets of armours and arms, a warhorse and training with his Marshall, Sir Nepert. He wanted fame, glory and everything that came with it. And yet, at twenty one years of age, he had accomplished nought but win some melees and jousts against peasants and ill equipped men-at-arms. *This time will be different*, he thought. *I will unhorse every man that dares raise a lance at me, be it a Knight or a King.*

Finally springing to his feet, he groaned in pain as his ribs seemed to ache from the training and hard falls he had taken. This prompted his maid, Magdalena, to rush over to his aid and place her cold hand upon his side. It felt good, too good. Stentore recoiled at her touch and turned to face her.

"It is fine, simple bruises. Would you be so kind as to bring me my riding attire, we shall depart when all is ready." He offered a gentle smile so she would not feel spurred by his sudden gesture to get away from her. In truthfulness, the young knight felt lust for many a woman and could have taken most of them for the night, yet he had never laid with one. It was a sin and knights should aspire to higher standards, *true* knights at least.

After washing his face and hands in a wooden bucket brought up to his bedchamber, he coiffed his hair and trimmed his beard to look more presentable. He had no coins to spare for new fancy outfits for the feast, therefore his personal effects fit easily within the small cart. A couple of tents, his suits of armour, bow and arrow and weapons. For only furniture, a chest to lock his valuables and two wooden planks covered with wolf fur that would serve as beds. For attire, his riding outfit consisting of leather breeches, boots and a plain gambeson covered by a cloak that displayed his arms-- a severed pirate's head on a blue field, and a more *presentable* change of clothes that was nothing more than a coloured tunic, matching hose and slippers that appeared well-worn. The fact of the matter was simple, he was one of the poorest wealthy man of the island.

Exiting the keep to go check on Sir Nepert and the groom, he noticed his mother standing by the well. She seemed upset, her dignified appearance lessened by the redness of her nose and watery eyes. *Nothing new under the sun*, he mused as he walked towards the widowed lady.

Placing his hand on her shoulder, he squeezed her ever-so-softly. "Mother, I'll be fine," he spoke in a reassuring tone. "You cannot cry every time I leave the keep or else the only sight I'll ever lay my eyes upon is the local Chapel."

She stifled a moan, trying to hold back her tears. "I worry for you, son," she turned to face him and rested her head on his chest. "I worry every time you pick up a sword, a lance or ride a horse. I worry that you will not live to know the joys of fatherhood, I worry that you will battle a dishonourable man with dishonourable means and end up like your brother. Worrying is all I do, my son. I would not be much of a mother, if I did not."

Touched by his mother's words and her eloquence, Stentore took a short moment to give her one last look, noticing her covered dark hair, hidden for modesty, and her stern look of disapproval. But he knew that deep inside, she felt pride for her only surviving child, she loved that he was a brave and noble man. After all, she had loved a brave and noble man once upon a time, Petrus Grimaldi. Born in Serenitam, sixth son to a small robber baron and smuggler, Petrus had earned the keep for services rendered on the battlefield. He had amassed a considerable wealth by marrying his *Queen of Psalms* after winning the tourney, *Lady Angela Belmontina*. She was born from the second son of the *Count Laurio Belmontina*, a well-to-do noble from Kallista and respected courtier. With the reputation he garnered as a knight, earning the moniker 'Hotspur' due to his skills on horseback, and his marriage to a noblewoman, the late *Viceroy*, Gentile Imperialis of *Alasia* had granted him land and income henceforth till the end of times.

Of course, that did not mean much for a castle requires money to build, peasants to work the land and armed forces to keep the peace. With his wealth dilapidated and the *castle* being more of a gated manorial tower, there was not much left to spare to repair either the centuries old *Rionan chapel* or hire woodcutters to expand the farming area. Worse, the land granted by the monarch-in-acting was ripe with bandits led by a disgruntled baronet that claimed the land as his. The win came at grave costs and left Lady Angela a widow and saw her bury her oldest son, a knight-in-training and Stentore's role-model, Giovanni. Memories of this period were not plentiful, as he was barely a boy of four, though the image of his weeping mother clenching at her

son's cold arm would be engraved in his mind for the rest of his life. *However long it may be.*

Snapping back to reality, he gently dipped his head before his mother. "Mother, you are in charge," he walked towards his white mare, a warhorse called *Duke* and tugged on his saddle to see if it was properly secured. "Do not hold court in my absence, grievances can wait for my return. I fear that letting in disgruntled folks with most of our forces gone would not end well. As such I expect the gates to remain closed."

Pulling his arming sword from the oiled cloth that his groom handed him, he proceeded to sheathe it within a scabbard that hung from his saddle, ready to draw in case they ran into oppugners of any kind. The riding party was very small, disturbingly so, but it was all he could afford. Three horses, two ridden by the knights in tow, and one pulling a wooden cart that held his belongings, driven by his groom that would serve as a squire and his scullery-maid that would serve as a cook and valet. It was pitiful but most had it worse.

With the clink of the chains that held the portcullis being raised, the party exited the courtyard and trotted into the muddy path that led south to the old city of *Alasia*, where the centuries old *Rionan* palace was now seat of the court. The chariot's wheels creaked every bump on the road, the deep ponds of rainwater doing nothing to help smoothen the ride. Some peasants stopped working and stopped to stare at the parade, an unusual sight in this area. Most of them were cheering as they spotted the *severed head banner*, all wishing for their lordling to win. The same way they wished for good harvests and decent shits. To be born a peasant was a cruel jest played by some *god of mischief* to mock the frail nature of mankind, it seemed. In spite of this curse, Stentore could not help but feel admiration for his vassals and peasants, finding ways to live and creating the resources he lived off of-- in a way, they thwarted the trickster-god's plan, showing resilience in the face of adversity.

Nevertheless, now was due time for Stentore to draw inspiration from the bravery of his folks for he would be facing men from all around the country, some having fought in battlefields and slain men before, some having even won the tourney before. But he could not back down now, it would be a show of weakness. Weakness was not something to be tolerated by the Grimaldi family, their heraldic motto reading "*Upright in Valour and Suffering*",

a phrase that revealed the duality of a knight's life. Valorous, chivalrous, famous but always suffering.

Chapter II

The road was winding as they reached a crossroad, a small carved stone indicating the way to *Alasia* and the road to *Travistiere* the other way. Stentore had only been to the city once, back when he was a babe suckling at his mother's breast, during an occasion in his father had seen granted a small feast upon pledging allegiance. Sir Nepert had never set foot near the south of the island, having arrived from *Albas* by ship and docking in the northern town of *Terranova* before reaching the Grimaldi manor, and the other two members of the ragtag group had barely ever left the diet, let alone visited for leisure. As for the wagon, its contents hobbled freely and would have to be secured every other mile or so it seemed. Magdalena seemed to have earned her salt already, having prepared and packed food for the trip.

Raising his fist in the air, the group knew it was time for a halt, even the knight himself was beginning to feel sore. The groom, a man in his twenties with disheveled brown hair, promptly tied the horses to a wooden post whilst Magdalena did her best to set up a dining area. Our stocks were rather low, boasting only a couple of wide hares Stentore had perfectly shot down and a pre-salted slice of pazetta. Bread, of course, was more abundant, yet none of it was white beard. Whole wheat bread was both easier and cheaper to make, but that would do. A bite from the pork meat was one too many for the knight, the meat itself being too hard to bite, much less enjoy. But Magdalena would always do her best to feed her guests. It just so happened, every once in a while, that the stocks at the *Grimaldi* estate had nothing better to offer. After forcing some more lard down his throat and washing it all down with a half pitcher of honeyed ale, the young knight rose to his feet and adjusted his longsword to walk towards the cliff-side.

The view of the gorgeous, tumultuous sea offered a perfect viewing experience- one could even spot the smaller islands in the horizon, and the

emerald sky seemingly joining the ocean at the end of the world. Legends had long postulated that Kallista was indeed the nexus point of Paradise and Earth, a plane where it all stood still. The sun would reflect its magnificent orange hues in the distance and the rhythmic cadence at which the waves would clash upon the rocky elevation was a sight to behold. For a moment, all was quiet. For a moment, Stentore was content. But most like everything in Stentore's life, it did not last long. Soon enough, the reverberating clunk of another caravan's wheels would make itself known and disturb the peaceful, almost heavenly view, Stentore had found for himself.

Before he could give the order, Sir Nepert had drawn his own blade in precaution, the midday sun magnified on the polished steel forced Stentore to close an eye and tilt his head to look at the group approaching. Before long, it was obvious their wheel had cracked in two and their party was unable to fix it. Advancing with determination and focus, like a man with no time to waste, Stentore performed a small nod as he crouched to inspect the damage. *Nothing good.* He sighed and picked himself up, his eyes meeting those of the stranded man- an older fellow with a grey beard and a courtly attire both colourful and freshly washed. At his hip hung a sack of coins, either silvers or golds. *A wealthy man, indeed.* Mused Stentore

"Sir, I have at my disposal a groom used to such repairs," he began, licking his lips for a moment. "Though I would encourage you to put your stablemaster to the task as well."

The man scoffed. "You will fix this carriage for me, and that is final." He appeared to be a nobleman in a hurry, his grey hair was almost as neatly trimmed as the decorative gold-inlays within the hilt of his sword. He pushed past the groom aside and carefully avoided stepping on the mud. "I am due to the King's feast, would you want to be the reason why?" Gently resting a hand on my shoulder.

Pushing his hand aside with contempt, Stentore's eyebrows furrowed. "I stopped out of *charity*," he offered the man a sarcastic smirk. "If my humble assist is not enough for your Lordship, I suggest getting down on your knees and fixing it yourself. What's a faulty wheel to such a distinguished man." The Count did not laugh, yet someone inside the carriage did.