24th December 2012.

Kontia.

Brigadier Enya of the Tanaoi.

There was no cheering, no throwing off of clothes or jumping in the air; the typical jubilation from victory in battle was muted as we returned to Kontia. I glanced over at Tanya, clad in dark wyvern-scale with steel taloned gauntlets gripping the wriggling Apostle slung over a shoulder tightly. Much like a raider would do for a particularly handsome boy. The avatar of Zufmuut upon the world was wrapped up in a large rug, only her head poking out, with her mouth filled with cloth and tightly bound.

It would be almost comical if it were not so impossible. Tanya did not have the protection of Emroy. The Apostle had said that, and Tanya did not claim she did... yet the domination of Diva, commanded by an Apostle, had done nothing to Tanya.

It was strange how easy it was to see Tanya as the overly serious little girl she had once been. Somehow she had never changed, she had always wanted more. Raiding Orcish villages was not enough for her, she had to prove herself against the warbands of other tribes. A handful of cattle being rustled was not enough for her; she had to take off with entire herds. Defeating a Wyvern Knight was not enough, she had to defeat the crown prince of Sadera, but not even that was enough. Even the Gods themselves... it was madness to challenge an Apostle: they were the instrument of the Gods, a sliver of divinity was imparted into them. To fight them was to fight the God they represented, and who would dare fight a God? Such delusions were where stories of folly came from.

But no. Tanya *won*.

I wanted to feel pride, to feel comfort in the strength of my Queen. The Tanaoi had never been well-respected, never particularly powerful, but now we were unrivaled. I should be elated, but all I could remember was the terrible weight of the Apostle's voice and how utterly impossible it was to resist.

I looked back to Tanya as she strode through the city, where people watched her from side streets or looked from windows or rooftops. News of what Tanya had done would not have reached the people yet, they would not know what the wiggling, rolled-up rug meant.

Honestly, *I* did not know what it meant.

We arrived in the Temple district, the many temples of the great pantheon arranged upon both sides of a wide plaza, with white marble with painted murals and waist high planters carrying flowers that bloomed even in the cold winter months. Snow would never find purchase here; the Gods would not allow it.

In the middle of the plaza was a Goblin, a tiny, ugly thing, wrapped in defiled silks browned by blood. Even when the creature was alive, it was truly ugly. Mottled, yellowish green skin, thick and hairy like that of a pig, rows of irregular sharp teeth constantly growing and falling

out, and black eyes with tiny yellow slits for an iris. The dead goblin's tongue hung from its slack jaw in a fittingly ungraceful end. Its kin stood around the body, looking at the corpse as I tried to make sense of what I was seeing. Why had Tanya made her way here? Why was a dead goblin clad in silk and left in the middle of the temple district?

With no fanfare, Tanya dropped the rug at her feet and planted a boot atop it to prevent the Apostle from rolling her way to freedom while she shared some quiet words with the Goblins. They looked at her with wide eyes, gesturing to the body a number of times. I looked around and saw many people of Kontia arriving at the district and looking on with confusion. When we had entered the city, Tanya had called for an end to the 'lockdown' and allowed free movement of the people. It seemed those same people had moved here in the hope of finding out what had happened.

"Let me tell you a story." I almost jumped as Tanya's voice echoed out across the district. It was a magic she liked to use often, a way to make her voice louder and project further. "There was once a slave, a porter and general labourer, called Zekkt. Zekkt's people, his tribe, was subjugated by my tribe, the Tanaoi, before he was born. Before I was born." She paused and looked about before she continued. "The Kapparn Tribe were quite the boon to the Tanaoi, as his people knew how to work iron and, in rare cases, even steel. The Tanaoi had the Kapparn make blades of bronze and iron, work buckles for belts and knives for processing animals. What were the Kapparn offered in return? They were permitted to live."

I frowned as Tanya looked at the crowd of thousands, many Goblins that had been brought to the city. It was true: we Tanaoi had subjugated a number of Goblin tribes on the Steppe and permitted the useful ones to live. As was the way of the Steppe.

"When I took command of my tribe, I ordered the many vassal tribes south as I had need of their many talents in my migration away from Saderan aggression. Without them, without the tribes my people had enslaved, my march on Kontia would have failed. Many of the great technological innovations I have brought to this city would be impossible. Zekkt was forced to march hundreds of miles by me, he worked tirelessly along with his brethren to secure our future. What did I offer in return? I promised Zekkt a better future, too. Just as I shall bring wealth and comfort to my people, so the Goblins, the many races of this world who live within my Dominion shall too know freedom, shall accumulate wealth, and shall enjoy the fruit of their labours. No longer would I tolerate the debasement of people who were not Lepus, no longer would I allow man or woman to work without compensation. It would not right the wrongs of the past, but it was a step towards a future wherein our peoples could be united in common cause!" There were quiet murmurings in the crowd, but Tanya did not pause for long.

"Zekkt accepted the contract I offered, he accepted my new deal. The deal was that he would work, his people would work, and my people would protect him." She looked at his body and shook her head. "It is doubtless you heard the explosion today. I am sure there have been many rumours. I shall tell you the truth of the matter: A stockpile of a dangerous weapon I control was targeted by assassins, these assassins killed the guards and set fire to the weapons, and that is what caused the loud explosion. Zekkt had volunteered for firewatch duty, and the moment he heard the explosion he and his peers collected their buckets, filled them with water, and rushed headlong into danger to put out the fire! I arrived

shortly afterwards... it was then that the assassins struck." The vast plaza was nearly silent as Tanya spoke, thousands of people hanging on her every word.

"I was attacked by men with crossbows and swords. Men who had a magic that rendered them impossible to see. I was wounded in this battle, and Zekkt watched as the assassins gained the upper hand. I shall remind you of the contract that many of you have agreed to. I, Tanya of the Tanaoi, High Queen of the Lepus, shall not compel a slave to fight for me. Zekkt had done his duty by putting out the fire, he had already done everything that could be asked of him, but for Zekkt, that was not enough. Zekkt watched the battle between the assassins and I, saw how when the assassins struck at me they became visible for but a moment, and with that knowledge in hand he rushed into battle. Fearless and resolved, with nothing but a bucket in his hands, there he threw water at the hidden blades, and when the water struck them, the spell they had used to hide themself was broken. I could see them and I ran forwards to slay the murderers, but I was too slow. In a final act of spite, an assassin struck Zekkt with a knife, taking his life, stealing from him the future that he had worked so hard for." She looked down at the body of the Goblin and seemed to have a moment of genuine pity for the creature.

"Zekkt did not owe me his life, he was under no obligation to do what he did. If he had run away when I was attacked, who could blame him!? Who could argue he should do otherwise? No one can! When I enter battle, I do so as a Lepus warrior, I do so with command of potent magic, with a sword at my hip and wyvern-scale armour on my body. When Zekkt entered battle, he had a *bucket*! Who is the braver between us!? Between him and I!?"

I stared wide-eyed at my Queen at such a scandalous question, to imply that a Lepus Queen was not as brave as a Goblin slave was- I looked out at the crowd, and even they looked uncomfortable. If anyone but the Queen herself had said such a thing, it would be expected that the speaker's tongue would be cut out.

"Zekkt will never enjoy the fruits of his labour, he will never know another sunrise or laugh with his people again. I will, thanks to him. There can be no doubt that Zekkt saved my life. From this moment, there is no more Zekkt the Porter. There is no more Zekkt the Slave. No, from this day onwards, he shall be known only as Zekkt the Brave! **Zekkt the Hero!"**

I stared dumbfounded as Tanya, the woman who would defy the very Gods, turned about and knelt before the body of a dead slave. The Goblins around her joined first, falling to their knees, then people of other races. I joined soon after, lest I be the last still standing.

Kontia's Palace.

Rory Mercury.

The palace was suffused in his odiously suffocating presence. An insidious, clawing sense of judgement and hate, she had willingly brought his tool inside the palace and likely did not know what that entailed.

I found her in the vault deep within the expansive wine cellar, the heavy iron door left open as Tanya hunched over the apostle of Zufmuut. The poor girl was in quite a state: her face was pale and her eyes unfocused. The Gods offered us a respite from death, but never from suffering.

She was wrapped up in a rug that had once been a vibrant shade of blue and white, but now bore the dull, dark brown of dried and congealed blood. I watched as Tanya pushed the wrapped-up Apostle between two sacks of heavy silver coins before dumping a third on top of her. Next came the bags of wyvernscales until Mabel was practically buried in coins and treasure.

I approached as Tanya looked at her handiwork, her armoured hands resting on the scales that flowed over her wide hips.

"*Sushi* roll." The High Queen of the Lepus, Sadera's sole rival, snickered to herself as Mabel glared at her from her carpet prison.

"It won't hold her forever. She will chip away at her restraints bit by bit, day by day," I offered as I settled into Tanya's side. The intense warmth in my core from the battle less than a dozen miles away made me feel almost giddy as Tanya absentmindedly placed a hand on my arm. I could taste the excitement still in her blood, her external serenity at war with that most delightful characteristic of her race.

Then she looked at me, eyes like frozen lakes.

"...What crime did Emroy commit?" Tanya's voice was level, and I struggled not to rub my legs together at the sheer *threat*. Steel talons built into her gauntlets pressed into the soft flesh of my arm, muscles tensed. Tanya was ready, willing, and more than able, to rip me limb from limb if I gave the wrong answer.

Fuck~.

"Some of the other Gods believe that the Lepus are to be put in their place, believe that there is a right ordering of the world and to step outside of it is worthy of punishment." I lied, my heart thundering in my chest, but like all the best lies it had some measure of truth. It was Tanya's magical capabilities that were objected to; few Gods would care if the Lepus came to dominate the entire world, no, it was the fact that Tanya was an unprecedented genius in magical theory and spellcraft that was objected to.

"Emroy does not believe the Lepus should be punished?"

"If the Lepus win, they deserve to win." I grinned, looking into the dangerous depths of Tanya's sky-blue eyes. Her grip on my arms relaxed for a moment, giving me a chance to strike.

I threw myself forwards, delighting in the sudden panic in Tanya's eyes followed by sheer confusion as I stole a kiss, my legs wrapping around her midsection as she staggered

backwards. I pulled away breathless as she blinked owlishly at me, her hands holding my hips as I pressed myself against her.

"I need you!" I begged.

"You're homosexual?" Tanya asked as I stared at her mouth agape.

"I have been grinding my butt on you for months!" I snapped, causing her cheeks to glow red as her eyes snapped around the room. "Furea said I had to be more direct, but this has been absurd. Take me!" I demanded, grinding myself against the dark warrior.

"I-I can't," Tanya protested.

"Why noooooot?!" I whined.

"I'm in almost three hundred pounds of armour," she stuttered.

I grinned at her.

"We can change that~!" I giggled and began to remove that inconvenient barrier. I delighted in how the woman that could crush me without a thought became pliant in my hands as I tugged at silken ties, exposing her bit by bit.

I moved her so that the best part of this moment I had waited for was within sight. The furious gaze of Mabel as she could do nothing but watch in silent rage.

26th December 2012.

Kontia.

Lucious Kati, Ex-Slave to House Graci, Kontia Slave Council Peer.

The council chambers of the Kontia forum had seen little use since Queen Tanya had taken command of the city. There was little need for it as the 'barbarian' woman was quite content to rule via paper missives and personal meetings. I looked at the assembled persons, a handful of merchants who had remained in Kontia when it was taken, some of the Lepus 'Officers', the Apostle of Emroy, and one of the Queen's husbands concealed behind thick white clothes covering him from head to toe and only showing his sharp eyes and forehead. There was also a representative of each race, a number of Goblins from the various tribes... It was a motley assembly of peers, the beginnings of what the Queen termed her 'Meritocratic Central Council.'

There was no real precedent to follow, while attempting to behave in a manner that would be proper for a Saderan council seemed rather foolish and fraught with peril. So, as I shuffled into place seated before the Queen, I took great pains to offer smiles and quiet compliments to the men and women (and what a novelty that was) around me.

Settling down, I noted that there were a fair number of young Lepus in black gambesons with swords at their hips next to each of the doors. It was interesting that Her Majesty was relying upon the more serious and competent younger generations for security. After the assassination attempt, new standards were in place across the city, and there were also a series of security proposals that had not been implemented yet that would doubtlessly chafe in places.

They were all necessary precautions, however.

"We are all here. Very good," the Queen began. She was seated upon a wicker throne that I understood was somewhat traditional for her people, but she had also moved a writing desk of all things into the chamber and sat behind it. Neat stacks of papers were separating her from the people that made up her new 'central council.' "The purpose of this assembly is an end of year review, as well as the establishment of objectives and projections for the next year. However, I shall allot time now for any of the persons present to petition the crown before we begin. I would also ask the people here to be aware I have no interest in sycophants. There shall be no legal penalties for anything said in this room, nor shall there be any punishments for disagreeing with me or questioning my proclamations. This is in fact the place where, if you have concerns about my governance, you bring them to my attention. However, I understand that there might be some who fear for safety regardless of my assurances, hence there shall be a system put in place to allow for anonymous communication with myself. That is one of the objectives for the next year. Now we shall begin with open petitions to the crown. Please raise your hand if you would like to bring a petition to my attention."

Instantly, half a dozen green hands were raised.

"The Central Council observes the honourable Tentorak, Chief of the Kapparn," a young Lepus girl with faintly dark violet hair and piercing red eyes, standing by the Queen's side, spoke out, and the Goblin in question stalked forwards to stand before the Queen and the Council.

I kept my expression neutral as the Goblin began a long-winded and meandering speech, extolling the virtues of Goblins of all things. Ever since the Queen had knelt before the body of Zekkt, the greenskins had been in the process of celebration and had become almost unbearable. They would march through the streets, banging drums and singing in their debased language. Truly the Queen had made a misstep honouring them quite so; that was not to say that Zekkt did not deserve veneration for his sacrifice, it was merely unbecoming that his race consider themselves too highly merely for the actions of one of their number.

"A fine suggestion, Chief Tentorak. The remains of the storehouse will be demolished and, in its place, a memorial garden will be constructed with a statue of Zekkt erected in the centre," Her Majesty replied to the Goblin after he had rambled on for a while. I blinked as the greenskins in the room jumped to their feet and cheered. I held back a sigh... another boon to the goblinoid servants of the Queen. However, it seemed Her Majesty was in a good mood and was more likely than not to agree to minor concessions. Her Majesty called for another petition, and this time I raised my own hand.

"The Central Council observes the honourable Lucious Kati of the Slave Council," the young Lepus called out. I made my way forwards before addressing the Queen.

"Your Majesty, I stand here before you as a representative of the many slaves of all races who faithfully serve you. While we are content to labour with the many privileges you have offered us, it has become clear in our treatment and in our contract that we hold a distinct place compared to that of the slaves oppressed by Saderan despots. In light of this very real distinction between our role and theirs, I would ask that the crown change the name of the 'Slaves under Contract' to 'Labourers under Contract', and change the name of the 'Slave Council' to the 'Labour Council'." I heard a flurry of whispers from the crowd around me; the foolish would consider this a distinction without a difference, but I knew better.

"A fine suggestion! I have long considered the institution of slavery to be a blight, and I firmly believe that anyone who works for the maintenance of our common civilisation should deserve to enjoy the fruits of their labours." I was surprised at how enthusiastic Her Majesty was for the change. "Your suggestion is accepted; let it be known there will be no slaves under my Dominion, only men and women who willingly enter into a labour contract and for which they are fairly compensated!"

There was no cheering as I made my way back to my seat. After several more petitions were brought to the Queen the young Lepus at the Queen's side called for order.

"We shall now outline the objectives of the Crown over the next year. The first objective is the establishment of four townships upon the bank of the river Kontia upstream; each of these townships shall be fifty miles from each other and the first is to be fifty miles from Kontia. They are all to possess port infrastructure which can service an *Ulaid*-class vessel, as well as at least one boatyard each that can produce this class of vessel. These townships shall become administrative centers which will govern the lands around them. A road shall be constructed, at a distance of four hundred feet from the river bank, connecting Kontia to each of these townships. The road shall be forty feet wide, shall be made of gravel, shall not have an elevation rise of more than one foot per one hundred foot of length, nor shall this road have a curve radius tighter than a three-hundred-foot radius anywhere upon its length. The towns will be serviced by roads of similar dimensions that connect to this main road."

I quickly considered the magnitude of the project, as this would doubtlessly be near-totally handled by the Labour Council. It would require over fifteen thousand Labourers at least. Why did she want the road so absurdly wide? Was it to quickly move her army along the river? I suppose that made sense from a defensive standpoint; I was grateful she was being reasonable in ordering the road be made of gravel rather than building a true Saderan stone road. With the construction of the towns as well, building ports and port infrastructure, it was ambitious but not unreasonable. It would also allow more lumber to be brought to Kontia. Demand for wood had become overwhelming, and nearly a tenth of the Labourers in Kontia spent their days dragging logs to the city.

"The second objective is the securing of the various forts and settlements north of Kontia, as well as the subsequent garrisoning of said forts and settlements. To that end I shall be establishing two new branches of the military: in addition to the Royal Army of the High

Queen, I shall be commissioning the Royal Navy of the High Queen. Such a force shall concern itself with securing rivers, lakes, and sea power for our people. I shall also be commissioning the National Voluntary Guard: the *'NVG'* will be a military formation distinct from the Royal Army for its focus on territorial defence. The NVG will also be loyal to the Governors of the regions they are raised in and not report directly to the Crown. People of any race may volunteer to join the Guard with the assurance that they shall only be used for defensive actions, such as responding to enemy incursions into our territory, maintaining logistical networks, or the garrisoning of defensive emplacements. Membership of the NVG shall be a requirement for the ownership of weapons or armour, such as crossbows, swords, firearms, and metal armour. Bows, slings, and spears without performance-enhancing enchantments shall be exempt from this law in observance of the requirements for hunters, herders, and personal defence against wildlife." The Queen paused as one of the Merchants raised a hand. The young Lepus next to the Queen looked at her and received a nod before she spoke.

"The Central Council observes the honourable Nicola Luci, Warden of the Mercantile Guilds."

"I apologise, Your Majesty, what exactly is a *'firearm'*?" Nicola asked. The question was a fair one, but I suspected that a 'firearm' was somehow related to the cannons the Queen had created; they spat fire, after all. The 'arm' must be short for armament.

"'Firearm' is a classification of weapon that uses explosions to propel a projectile at high speed. The cannons I have created are an example of them, but the same principle can surely be used for other, smaller, designs."

"If we join the Guard, we can own cannons?!" Nicola asked dumbstruck. There was a flurry of quiet conversation around the room as the Queen nodded.

"Of course, all citizens of good character can own cannons and other firearms. Since there are no currently licensed producers of firearms that are not state-owned, you would need to place an order for the weapon system with the Crown, of course, and it could take some time for delivery of the product, but you can purchase the weapon. You can also buy an *Ulaid*-class ship if you would like," the Queen answered.

A Lepus jumped to her feet.

"Can we buy one of the ships, too?!" The redhead Lepus exclaimed with shock as the Queen frowned at the shocked expressions of the assembly.

"Of course? The Mora Tribe can order an *Ulaid* and it will be built for your Tribe. Since you are a Queen, you would not need to join the NVG. But for a payment of two hundred thousand silver Denarii, an *Ulaid*-class vessel will be produced and delivered to the Mora Tribe to do with as you see fit."

"What about the cannons?" Nicola prompted. "How much would they cost?"

"A newly-cast Yannit Mark Seven four pounder cannon would cost two thousand five hundred silver Denarii for a civilian to purchase from the Crown. A used model might be cheaper, depending on its condition. Of course, if you are interested in purchasing a licence and have investment capital, you can open your own cannon foundry to produce and sell them yourself," the Queen said, her tone as serious as ever.

Silence filled the room for a moment before everyone began to shout at once.

Do you have a Licence for that +1 spear?

The right to bear magical arms shall... be infringed?

For context, if we were to convert the prices quoted by Tanya from Saderan silver denarii into 2016 United States Dollars, the cannon would be worth $10k and the Ulaid would cost $800k. Expensive, but not outlandishly so.

Edited by: Shirojacky

I want to thank my supporters:

Mikołaj Jóźwiak, funkopopcollectible, Boofer Dan, Rita, KAFFING, Jarrik32, an_ode_to_venus, Akseli, kaya, Antonio Dorey, Justin Juarez, Noire, Jose Hernandez, radiatafan, Jonathan Sanoguel, Ricardian, Perf, nathan holmes, Harvey Marks, kfrar, Hawkteer464, emerot, Mikkel ET, Caleb Bear, TUSF, Danny Surety, Ven, nicoxyz, Cambstansa, Kuro Nikou, G Sharp, Ivor the traitor, Luis Castro, Dominique Glénat, Aloe Hussein, Alex Huynh, Nicholas Giordano, Dorian Grizzle, Yggdrasil, Xeno426, Manaia, Khepri90, Shrimperium, Markus, Sutton Jones, Robert Chappuis, Mars, Groot, mijaco, Russian_Doggo, squish, joseph lizon, Dean, TransGothBunny, Luftritter, Nicholas Reilly, snips, BarrettSlayer, Moore605, Stx66, Alatoic, Sir Gideon Ofnir - the All-Knowing, Skyler Flores, Erick reyes, Maximillian, Know Map Game, chikenman01, Nil, Vex, Ultragamer_2017, Qweunn, Liaira, bnnuy, Oniix, Anna Parr, Daniel Kerber, 8thKnightofKeys, Napoleon III, Alejandro C Gutierrezybriggs, Paradox, Gavril, Chavonne lawson, Yotam Bonneh, Lord Sturm, Apple Man 2, meatybyte, Dmitry Gumin, Birhaledin, Kingslayer, Big Bo from Binary Domain, W C Purdy, Luis Ortiz, Lawngnome, Skulldragon7, Legion_13, chris kris, Gremlin Jack, Sgt. Rock, Aifer, Marcelo Antonio Barria barrera, MagicDownUnder (MDU), bakkysak, Comics, Mowtine, Gryfonides, Mango_tequila, ----, Greenie Boi, TheChaoticTaco, Hamers, Loket, Berik Bekenov, Drill to the Sky, Jared, ReleeseTheKrakan, Kornelius Idland, Hornet, Pinky95, PlagueSpreader64, Lurker, xerixo, Tyrant615, Karene, Sweetlaxer, CATATAU11MIL, Carvor, Christian E. Y., DonPacific Bobcat9er, Robolo42, Karl, Lino, Glitchrr36, Sean, Lapiver, Dave Steele, Kind, Rakkis157, Rykia, Inirlan, Michael Zalesny, Sarasana, INVRZ, Sir Baka, Aaron, Verified Mustelid, Daniel Ervin, Fabriz Gauthier,

Tobias, Jason Langford, Mrn00b, Rhotisserie, Boghog123, matthew Hungerford, TheBlueBananaPig, Lothspell, fiva, Vanguard_D, SavedMeerKat78, Mulchmeat, Vyushia, Master Brave, Silver W. King, Spade_Slick, Duncan Sproule, Mega Elite, Ty2bp, Mysterious89, Rimgaudas, Nicholas Hammond, Tony, Rouslan Fectchenko, Logan Petersen, Varisis, Weise, Mackenzie Buckle, BloodDraconius, Afforess, CommanderBrunch, Dr.D, D3ad0s, Unknown B, Arcman, Andres Franco, Nathan White, Va, Endymion2314, Issac Norman, bertucchi, Kyle Kawahara, Aceter, Mortaldude, Hex, SerenaBlackburn, StrikebackXIII, Tinfoilmecha 11719, bkmy, JustAUser, Emdee Kay, Reese Apperson, ZD Lawson, atreids5, wawabi, Guerinology, dark king, Old Hammer, Xodarap4,

You can read ahead of the publicly released chapters on my Patreon.

I also have a public discord.