

Malaise

It was a small victory: his nose was blocked and therefore incapable of suffering the stench that pervaded the streets. The dead had recently been burned, now resting in the lungs of those who had outlived them. The same fear was etched on the face of every man, woman and child: that of death, and of undeath. Terenroe had always been sacrosanct. It was the jewel at the heart of the crown, the shrine of the Prophetess. But its people were ignorant iconodulists—they emptily revered their legacy and the hallowed safety it promised. They were all repugnant, deserving of the doom that slowly encroached upon them. And yet the city was not the same as he remembered. For once, the loathsome vanity that hung in the very air had begun to disperse. This kingdom was built upon fear. Now may it be undone by fear.

Zannerot went directly to the safehouse. It was in a ghetto that clung to the eastern boundary like mould upon the crust of a stale loaf. Wedged between two other rotted slum-dwellings, a lone stairway led up and reversed upon itself once before permitting entry to an apartment that boasted all of two rooms. Ferg looked up from his seat on the floor—there was no furniture apart from a single bed in the next room, so there he was. The boy's eyes widened in surprise, but it was his dog that hurried first to greet Zannerot. A lone candle was the only light, but it was a poor one.

‘Have we anything to eat?’

‘No, Master.’

‘I meant for me. Don’t lie to me Ferg. I’m tired, but I’ll scrape over every corner of this place if I smell food.’ The boy shook his head. He was an imbecile, but there was honesty in his eyes. ‘How’ve you managed to survive?’ Instead of answering, Ferg looked away, embarrassed. No doubt he had been reduced to the same plane of subsistence that the rest of the bottom-feeders had. Zannerot pushed the dog away. ‘I’m going to bed. See that your mutt doesn’t disturb me.’ Ferg nodded, but the wretched animal began to alternate between a piteous whine and feverish growl. The sheets were cold yet still wet with sweat, but he was too exhausted to care. The cry of the dog lasted the rest of the night, and Zannerot found himself too weak to rise and put an end to it.

This might be the spot to go into introspection and add some exposition. Show why Z has become sick - he’s been on the road, this is a chance to explain what else is happening in the kingdom as he rides through it. The necromancer is out battling other players in the game. we

also see here that he picked up the key to the king's jail and had that sent back to revaztralon via the shadowclade/his cronies.

Next morning, the pain in his throat had spread to his mouth, nose, and to the rest of his head in general. His thirst was terrible. It was midday by the time he was desperate enough to lift himself from the pillow. Daylight had infiltrated the safehouse somehow, though it was as weak as he was. Ferg entered and stared at him as though a sick person might have been a novelty. Zannerot attempted to say the word 'water', and continued to do so until the idiot understood. Normally, the origin of the water might have mattered. This time, he simply waited, and drank whatever it was that his new servant brought back. It tasted foul, and only time would tell as to whether it would aid his survival.

'Why is your dog so loud?'

'She's hungry.'

'I'm hungrier. You'll find me some food, and you'll do it today. Believe me, it's better that you go hungry, or that your dog goes hungry, than I do. I promise you that, Ferg. Now go.' He had expended the last of his patience. Hopefully that would motivate his only companion to greater obedience. The boy left fearfully; Zannerot tried to return to unconsciousness. He could not. **The cup had awakened his senses, but it only heightened the pain.** The afternoon was torturous, but it was not long before Ferg returned with several pieces of fruit. They were in reasonable condition, and while they were being eaten, Zannerot asked the boy where he had stolen them from.

'From the...' Ferg began, but trailed off and looked away. Then his eyes hardened and met those of his master again. 'You must take this.' The boy handed him a letter.

'What is it?'

'It's the epistle... It came...'

'Who?'

Ferg turned and ran away. Zannerot shivered and broke the seal. The message was written in the same ink: a red so dark it was almost black. There was a single page.

Servant,

I require you to act with urgency. Terenroe will not fall without the aid of my accessory in the mercantile district. You will approach him immediately upon receiving this instruction, and find his office in the Avenue of the Silvermagne. The door shall be marked. Know that he understands more than he feigns, and that his eyes and ears are mine, just as yours are. Every success and failure is transparent to me, and every result has its consequence. As always, the ends justify the means unquestionably. You must elevate yourself to a level of efficiency and discretion beyond that of your promises. No further

historical reminders are necessary. Our operations in the city will have completed by the wax of the moon.

With perspicacity,

~N

He rose from bed and fed that letter to the candle flame. Donning his boots and cloak, he lowered the hood over his face and groggily descended to the street outside. It was littered with beggars and would-be thieves, peddlers and urchins alike, thick with the wounds and grief of war and the upheaval of natural order. Every second conversation regarded the vengeful spirits of the returned dead. The air had still not cleared of the funerary pyre-smoke. After sixty paces of walking through it, Zannerot stumbled and fell to his knees before a gutter, then ejected the contents of his stomach. That was an improvement. After the shuddering had stopped, he picked himself up again and located the marketplace. His bleary eyes and hoarse voice made poor tools for haggling, but by the end of it he had secured himself an acceptable meal—at least more nutritious than the one Ferg’s mercy had granted him.

Silvermaigne was the city’s commercial hub, and the recent attack had done little to reduce the ferocity of business perpetuated by the hordes of merchants and their thralls. He threaded his way through the traffic of wagons and labourers who bore mostly timber, metals, and fabrics. The central avenue was curved like the blade of a scimitar, and lined with the gates of many great houses and storerooms. He began to inspect the entrances of each, one by one, and it became tedious quickly. Eventually Zannerot came to a door that was numbered in a fashion that conformed to the others on its row, but within the characters themselves the form of an astrolabe was carved—cleverly, so as to have been mistakable to an indifferent eye. He knocked. There was a panel at eye level that shifted aside, though it was the size of a fist and barred by an iron grate. Behind it, half of a man’s face appeared, and looked him over like he was a fresh net of fish.

The gatekeeper enunciated every word as though he was instructing a child: ‘when the elders promised a cornucopia, six Kings withheld their judgement. Then the occultation came, and the people turned to the first hope of truth that they could find.’

‘The Prophetess,’ Zannerot replied, his voice level with that of the speaker.

‘A Queen’s dalliance with the Dark Monarch, a paladin’s pretence of piety, and a magistrate’s move to magnificence.’

‘The Sycophant.’

‘Autumn, winter, spring and summer. These are a cycle, but which of them is first, and which of them is last?’

Zannerot paused before answering, and looked around the street to ensure that those passing by were not too close, then lowered his voice, directing it carefully at the grate. 'All observations are obfuscations. Therefore all agency is of the shadows.'

After a short delay the door opened, but the guardian had covered his face with the hood of a grey cloak, and simply led Zannerot into the depths of the building. It had the look of an office, though one could easily have called it home and lived there comfortably. As they moved through its rooms, conversation drifted faintly from other corners of the premises but remained as inaudible as the speakers were invisible. His guide stopped him outside the door of a room with walls stacked to the ceiling with books, and did not continue inside with him. Zannerot heard the door close behind him when he entered.

There was a man with a long grey beard seated at a desk in the centre, and though he was old and severely overweight, he was finely dressed and wore golden rings inset with precious stones on most of his fingers. Zannerot exchanged greetings with him before seating himself upon one of the cushioned chairs nearby.

'You look unwell. Is there anything we can get for you?'

He shook his head. Although he would desperately have liked to ask for a hot bath, a cut of slow-roasted beef, and a fine glass of wine to wash it down, it was not the time to be accepting charity. 'Crossbows,' he replied. 'Small ones – light and quick to load. Make any sacrifice to range that you need to, but they'll still need to be lethal at a dozen paces.'

'Is that so? And how many of these do you require?'

'Five-and-twenty. No, thirty. And... at least thirty bolts per unit. I want them ready within three days from now.'

The merchant stroked his beard and looked over a few items of paperwork that were at hand. Questioningly, his eye then met Zannerot's and he said, 'this order is of your own intuition, then. You weren't instructed to acquire these things.'

Nothing further was said for a few moments, but Zannerot did not look away from the man's gaze. This was not a game. It was not a negotiation. There was only the task at hand, and if he was meant to complete it some other way, then he was probably not the best choice for it. Whether his patron would see it that way would be another matter.

'Will you provide them, or not?'

The stare came apart as his opponent looked away and said, 'weapons like that aren't much use against the undead. There will be questions.'

'Then tell them that you're having them made for assassins.'

The old merchant gaped at him for a moment, then began to laugh. Zannerot's own face cracked into a smile and then they were both laughing, harder and harder until his laugh turned into a cough, which became increasingly more violent before he finally regained control

of himself. His face was red and his eyes were brimming with water, but he managed to choke out, ‘send a wagon along artisan’s lane at midnight, three nights from now.’ He rose to leave, but then remembered to add, ‘oh, and the main assault upon the city will hit after one week—but not later than two weeks—from now. Urlocke’s Grand Marshall will arrive to lead the resistance, but it would bode ill for him if the city’s militia were to find cause for inaction. Just a thought.’

The doorman took him from the merchant’s chamber to the street without so much as a goodbye. Relieved, he found a place to sit down and spent the better part of an hour staring at the traffic and trying to rest his nerves. The food had helped, but his condition was still wretched. He had to wonder whether the so called ‘accessory’ of the Silvermaigne had been able to take him seriously given his blocked nose and hazy eyes. No matter: it was done. Zannerot spent the remainder of the afternoon walking the streets until he located the fountain at the heart of the city, where he drank until his body could hold no more. Night had fallen by the time he had made his way back to the safehouse. Ferg was not at home, so he put all affairs in order and then put himself to bed. Sleep came more easily; he had missed much the previous night, and the day’s exercise had proved to be taxing.

The following day had him feeling markedly better. Just as he sat up from bed with a yawn, Ferg came up the stairs with a look of exasperation on his face. ‘Have you seen Shiva? I can’t find her anywhere!’

‘The animal? I cut its throat, just as I’d cut yours if you took as much sleep from me as it did. The corpse burned with the rest of them in the night.’

The boy’s face twisted in anger, but when Zannerot stood and crossed the room, Ferg dropped the letter he had been carrying and fled for the last time. It would probably be prudent to add a lock to the only door however. At least his temporary home ought to be more peaceful now. He stooped, picked up the envelope, and broke the seal.

Servant,

The Brotherhood of Light is shattered, but at least one of its few remaining cells lies hidden in Terenroe. I know this because one of them is an agent of my own. Yet another of them is close to discovering him. You shall find the last cell. You shall determine which of them is still loyal to the Brotherhood, and then eliminate those who intend to restore the order. If the city is traded before you have done the needful, our operations will become immeasurably difficult. The Shadowclade irregulars are converging on the Nine Seasons Inn tomorrow, and they shall be waiting upon you for leadership.

With perspicacity,

~N

Zannerot read the letter a second and then third time before burning it. There were many places within Terenroe where a traveller might purchase accommodation, but at the present time these establishments were in dire short supply. With legions of undead soldiers marching across the ruin of the kingdom, there was no stronghold safer than the home of the shrine. And the Prefect, in all his pious wisdom, had not elected to close the gates to pilgrims, though it was well known to all that the daily flood of refugees that continued to pour in were more concerned with their own hides than any act of remembrance or worship (though they were probably fighting even now for a pew in the cathedral). There had been reports of disease spreading. What could anyone do? The wiser residents, those citizens who owned their own homes, stayed inside of them. The rest were a colony of rats. Mercenaries would be harder to spot than usual.

He spent the rest of the morning sharpening his dagger. It was short, but cruel and well balanced. Light enough that when sheathed in one of the many pockets sewn beneath his cloak, one might forget it was there, though Zannerot's thoughts visited it often. Would that he had used it on himself, long ago, before any of this had begun. But he had not brought himself to do that then, and knew that he would not now. Instead he walked the streets, rubbing his hands together for warmth. His nose had begun to clear, and every intake of breath was vile. Children wailed in the arms of their mothers, and their begging fathers bleated for alms.

The Nine Seasons was as crowded as he had expected. He ordered their cheapest wine, and joined the only spot remaining at a table that seated twelve. The others wore the usual fear on their faces, and were arguing about how long their rations and funds were going to last them. Zannerot sipped and sat silently as his ears strained to distinguish individual conversations around the room and follow them. It was impossible. When his patience was exhausted he stood, lowered the hood of his cloak, and looked around at every other table. If he had caught anyone's eye, they had done well not to show it. He left then.

No letter awaited him the next day. A small victory. This time, he found a spot on the street opposite the Nine Seasons entrance and simply waited there, pretending to be a beggar. It afforded him the opportunity to watch carefully as its patrons came and went, and he began to sharpen his awareness of which class of traveller each belonged to. Some boisterous aristocrat even dropped a copper chip into his collections jar and told him not to get scurvy. As the sun began to finally sink under the silhouette of the cathedral, Zannerot saw a man walk into the inn and knew with certainty that he had seen a member of the Shadowclade. Somehow, the smell was not as bad around this part of town (either that or he had become accustomed to it), and nearby, a group of urchins had constructed a fire-pit out of bricks they had pulled from a

loose wall. He sat with them and offered a copper chip in exchange for their assistance in waking him at sunrise. Then he slumped into a street corner and slept.

In the morning, the city continued to digest its meal of wayfarers with renewed intensity. He had become comfortable with his perch on the street corner, and pissed against the wall that had granted him shade for over a day now. The door of the inn saw customers in pairs, trios and more, but only occasionally singles. The man was probably holed up in a bedchamber. Zannerot lowered his hood and entered the building. His eyes scoured the main hall as the crowd chewed on carefully portioned food and old news. He walked casually to the side of the room where his quarry inconspicuously sat. Suddenly, a roar of laughter burst from a table nearby. A detachment of militia were drinking and trying to explain their humour to some of the others. Zannerot froze, but amid the noise his counterpart spotted him. He turned and left swiftly.

Outside he waited. If it took another day, he would be forced to abandon his post at least for a short time while taking care of business on artisan's lane. Whether or not other members had passed by or entered the Nine Seasons, he could not have said. It did not take another day, but it did take most of the current one. A lone figure emerged from the inn and stood outside, scanning the traffic. Zannerot stood also, and their eyes connected. He turned, walked, and did not stop until he was halfway down a narrow alleyway where he waited alone. The other man caught up to him slowly, and stopped when he was a few paces away. A thick black beard did little to hide his youth. The boy's eyes were set with determination, yet they betrayed fear. As they should have.

'The leaf feeds the deer, who in turn feeds the wolf,' said Zannerot.

'The servant.'

'Aye. And autumn, winter, spring and summer. These are a cycle, but which of them is first, and which of them is last?'

The eyes wavered but did not look away. 'All... a-all observations are obfuscations. Therefore all agency is of the shadows.'

'Where are the rest of your men?'

He soon heard that they were in pockets all over the city. Communication so far had apparently been poor. The report he received did not exactly paint the Shadowclade Irregulars in any respectable or competent light. If their members were any less alert than this one, the enormity of the task would be beyond them. He told the youth to find the rest of them immediately and then have them converge on his address at midnight. Zannerot took care to keep his back straight throughout the conversation, and his nose pointed above the boy's head as he stared along it, channelling his annoyance as a presentation of urgency.

Back at the safehouse, he gathered rubbish from both rooms and dumped it all onto the street. There was no sign of Ferg, and no further written correspondence. He renewed the edge of his dagger with a whetstone. Then he locked the door and crawled into bed. The sun was just starting to go down, and if he happened to sleep through until morning, then so be it. He had waited upon them, so too would they wait upon him. A loud bang on the door roused him at midnight, however. It was swiftly followed by more, louder banging. The specifics of the nightmare he had been in were immediately obscured by the clanging reality. Zannerot clattered down the stairs and turned his key in the lock.

‘Quiet!’ He hissed. The moon was bright outside, and shone the men on the street into sharp relief. He pulled the door ajar and motioned for them to go past him and up the stairs. The total count was seven-and-twenty. No doubt there had been a few stragglers or casualties, but he considered himself lucky even for that many. Once all were inside, he inspected their faces, crammed into the corners and sides of the apartment. Only several were older than he was. Some wore the scars of combat, but most did not. A few were sick. Blackbeard was among them, though he was trying to avoid eye contact. Zannerot ensured that the attempt did not succeed.

‘It’s a bad time to be a sellsword, friends. But if you happen to be that unfortunate, it’s at least a better time than any other in that there’s pay around the corner if you’re efficient at doing as you’re told.’ Nobody else spoke. He had to appreciate that the echo in the room was markedly different with so many bodies packed around to absorb it. Zannerot continued, ‘you all found your way here, so that tells me you’re not as stupid as I feared, and that you’re hungry for it. I’ll be honest with you, I’m hungry too. I don’t need to remind you that the number of ways a man can die has increased recently.’

He could see in their eyes that he had not only their attention, but their understanding also, no matter how limited it might have been. As he spoke, Zannerot looked them over and within a few sentences had decided which of them could fight, and which of them were likely to hold their tongues in future, and by overlap of category, which of them had both qualities. ‘You, you, you, and you,’ he pointed. ‘You four will stay here tonight, and assist me tomorrow. The rest of you will rejoin us one day after tomorrow, at the fifth gate from the north on the avenue of the Silvermagne. It’s as simple as that. Now, if anyone has a question, they had better ask it while they have the chance.’

‘When will we be paid?’ It was not one of the four he had chosen who had said it.

‘When I say so,’ he replied, and dismissed them. They left more noisily than he would have liked, and though his chosen four remained silent in the main room while he returned to bed, they slowly began to murmur to each other once they assumed he had fallen asleep. It

allowed him to learn enough about them before dawn: they were as desperate and inexperienced as he had suspected.

This could be the right point to end the chapter, because there's still a lot of material to come, and it would allow me to gloss over some of the slower events, like the interception of the crossbow delivery, and Zannerot getting to know the guys. None of that stuff is really relevant. The second chapter can start off closer to the action and the reader can get up to speed on what happened in between via the usual retrospective introspection. Here are the plot points I want to get through, though:

- Z and company head around town, trying to catch the trail of the hidden paladins.
- Z runs into Tileas, but during his conversation with him, one of the paladin loyalists appears and attempts to kill T. Zannerot makes the difference in the fight, putting his dagger to use.
- Somehow, the obfuscator is a step ahead of Z and it is actually T who delivers the next of her letters to Z. She warns him that the Prefect is planning to assist the brotherhood in their convene (which is why they have to have it in the forest later after the Prefect can't help)
- Z trains the shadowclade boys on how to use a crossbow. They use an abandoned warehouse in the Silvermagne district to rehearse. This turns out to be a lot of trouble.
- Z and the boys make their assassination run on the Prefect. There's a fair bit of action, and Z overcomes a variety of adverse situations to get the job done and then get out alive.