

## Interlude 1: Old Ghosts

The full moon reflected its pale aura down on Castle Gemini as Nira Hart stepped out of the War Ministry Offices and made her way down the corridors to the Imperial Throne Room.

She passed a looking glass mounted on the wall and backed up. Gideon was fastidious and expected the same from all his subjects. She was dressed in her “black-n-burg” War Ministry regalia for this meeting. A black suit with burgundy striping on the pants and the War Ministry seal, embroidered with gold and silver thread on the right breast. Satisfied with her appearance, she turned and continued to the throne room.

Marina Dazmonova, the Master-at-Arms was standing at the balcony on the far side of the room when Nira came in. A fire popped and crackled in the hearth on the eastern wall, and cast its fiery light on the back of the Knight’s breastplate.

“Good evening, Minister,” she said, turning at the sound of Nira’s boot heels. “Marina. How are you?” she asked.

“I’ve been better. Can you believe it?” Dazmonova asked, crossing her arms.

“So it is true?” she was still trying to make sense of the report that she had just received: Lazarus Kail was alive in the Empire.

“I just got a report back from Motropolis,” Dazmonova said. “They pressed a few folks, and it looks like he did roll through there. There will be consequences for us all in this.”

“Don’t be dramatic, Marina. Worry about your Knights, keep your predictions to yourself.”

“I was there, on that beach, Nira!” her steel voice reverberating off the antechamber walls in a grotesque echo.

“Do get ahold yourself, Paladin!” Nira snapped back. Technically, she outranked Dazmonova, but the two of them had shared ammunition and spilt blood on the battlefields together; helped shape the imperial law enforcement into what it was. But she was not about to allow subordination.

Dazmonova took a step towards Nira but stopped at the sound of footfalls entering the antechamber.

“Minister, Paladin, is he ready for us?” the tall, slender woman asked. Her long black hair was pulled back and pinned in a tight braid at the back of her head. Despite being an immortal, she looked grim and tired. Her pale blue eyes were cloudy, and almost puffy from a tireless night.

“Good evening, Ava,” Dazmonova said.

“How long have you known?” Nira asked.

“I informed you just as soon as I had received the word, Minister, I swear it! A messenger from Motropolis came with the information a few hours ago in the night,” Ava Cross said.

“Come now, Ava. You’re smarter than that,” Nira said.

“I’ve sent additional All Terrain Officers to the area to conduct sweeps. I also have recommendations, Marina, for Knight deployments,” she said removing a folder from the bundle under her arm and handing it to Dazmonova.

“And when did you start taking point on my chevies?” Dazmonova said, taking the folder.

“They’re suggestions, Marina, don’t get your spurs twisted,” Cross said.

“It appears that your ambition has gotten us into trouble, Ava. We’re just trying to make sure it doesn’t happen again,” Nira said.

“This is pretty in line with what I had set up,” Dazmonova said, looking over the requisition list. “I’ve already sent teams to Vineland and Polaris.”

Nira did not believe that Cross could look grimmer. When Dazmonova spoke, she saw Cross lose what little color she had left. She did not want to believe it herself.

Nira thought this part of her past was behind her for twelve cycles. Now the Chalets were dead, a headless H-Man had ridden into Windeburg just that morning, and there were rumors that Lazarus Kail was behind all of it. She had tried to hang on to the hope that they were mistaken, but a few cents had cured her notion of coincidence.

“Her Excellency will have something to say about the increase of constables,” Cross said.

“Very likely,” Dazmonova chimed in, trying to cut some of the tension.

“Ari can say whatever she wants, but until she is the Empress, it is no concern of ours,” Nira said. “Is that understood?”

“Yes, Minister,” Cross said, cowering.

The latch to the throne room made a resounding clink in the antechamber, and Diana Askari stepped in. She was clad in her Imperial Guard uniform, holding her short halberd in one hand and pushing the door open with the other. “The Emperor is ready to receive you, my Lords,” she said as she bowed and gestured for the three officers to enter.

“There was one other thing, Minister,” Cross said.

“And what is that?”

“There have been a few incidents in Thunduria. Some small syndicate, they largely appear to be dying youths. They’re calling themselves the Sea Orchids. Just wanted to keep you informed. It’s nothing that can’t be contained.” Cross regained some of confidence as she delivered the report.

“Are we containing it, Ava?” Nira asked.

“Minister?” Cross asked, confused.

“You said ‘nothing that can’t be contained.’ Tells me that the problem is ongoing. So, I’ll ask you again: is it being contained?”

“Oh, yes, Minister. I’ve taken measures to ensure that this is the first and last you’ll hear of them,” Cross said quickly.

“Measures? Better make sure an EK team goes out there too. And don’t mention it to the Emperor. Stick to Lazarus.”

Cross nodded in agreement, and they walked into the throne room one at a time.

The three women crossed the threshold into a cloud of perfumed air, rich in vanilla and lavender: almost noxious. A large-framed chair cased in gold stood against the far end of the room on a dais. There were three panels below the seat, each depicting a different scene from history.

Cross’s gaze went to the last panel when they reached the dais.

The panel depicted the Battle of Glass Beach. A figure holding her sword in victory while standing over a body on beach. Her gaze dropped upon recognizing her likeness.

“I must say that when my Lord High Constable, War Minister, and the Master-at-Arms call for a meeting in the middle of the night that it disturbs my calm,” a voice said from Nira’s right. Gideon stood on the large balcony overlooking the palace courtyard, clad in a regal military suit, with long hair that glistened in the moonlight. He had stood in that very spot twelve cycles ago when he told the Empire that Kail was gone.

Gideon half-turned toward the women, nodding to each as they bowed before him. Cross went down to one knee. When she had risen, the Emperor asked, “Now, what is this all about?”

“Your Majesty, Lazarus has returned,” Nira said. Silence swallowed any echo and filled the room.

Gideon turned back towards the balcony and walked to the banister, looking past the courtyard and walls to his city, bathing in the moonlight. Nira, Dazmonova, and Cross all exchanged looks while his back was turned, unsure if they should follow.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised, and yet, I am,” he said finally to the night sky. He then turned back to the women and asked, “How did this happen?”

“Majesty?” Nira asked.

“The last time I heard that name uttered, was on a report, quite some time ago. On that report, it said that he had been killed fleeing Purgatory. In fact, was penned by you, Ava,” the Emperor said as he turned all his focus to Cross. “And you were credited with the kill, if I am not mistaken,” Gideon said, throwing a glance at his throne. “I even seem to remember the ceremony where I elevated you to your current rank. Am I remembering correctly, Ava?” the Emperor said, his eyes falling on the silver on Cross’ collar.

“Yes, your Majesty,” Cross said, trying to straighten herself and avoid eye contact as Gideon began pacing in a small circle in front of her. “I remember the day very clearly.”

“Spare me your entire recollection, Ava. It is irrelevant, and evidently, unreliable. As it stands, we have confirmed sightings from eyewitnesses on the ground, living and dying alike. Not to mention a score of dead H-men and constables, at least one of whom was made to suffer the indignity of being killed and lashed to his steed. One of *us*, made into a fool.”

Cross’ eyes grow wide and her body stiffened; a strong wind might have blown her right over.

“What? Did you think that this is the first I’ve heard of his return?” Gideon continued, seeing Cross’ frozen visage. “Lazarus Kail has in fact come back. And what does that mean, exactly?” he asked, stopping in front of Cross. “Hmm?”

"I'm not sure I understand, Your Majesty," Cross said, sweat beginning to trickle from her temples.

"The fact that Lazarus Kail has been seen in the country means what about your report from Purgatory?"

"It-it means that I was...I was wrong, your Majesty," Cross stammered.

"No, Ava. 'Wrong,' would imply that you were incorrect about something true. In fact, you just lied, Ava." Gideon reached out and placed his left hand on Cross' right shoulder, lightly squeezing the way a parent does to comfort a child. Cross closed her eyes and tears ran down her face. From inside his jacket, Gideon drew a short sword, and in one motion his hand moved from Cross' shoulder to her hair, took a firm grip of her bun, and with his right hand brought the sword across her neck, decapitating his Lord High Constable.

Her body fell immediately, a great pool of blood flowing out both halves of her neck. Gideon held her head up by the hair and let the fluid run out of it before turning it to his own face. Her eyes were closed, and there was no grimace on it. He tossed the head aside, unsatisfied. "Make sure that Ingham is made aware of his promotion, and please, remind him of the responsibilities of the office?" he said to Nira as he walked over to a cabinet by the balcony.

"Yes, your Majesty," Nira said, stepping out of the path of the blood pool.

"Cross was a liability. She lied for over a decade about the biggest threat to the Empire," Gideon said. "Ambition is something to be stamped out. If not, then it runs rampant, burning everything in its path. There is no place for it in my Empire.

"Now, I've read the report, but what is the real situation? What is being whispered?" Gideon took a kerchief from the cabinet and cleaned the blood off his sword.

"There was the sighting of Lazarus and an old man in Motropolis. They met with a slave trader before heading to the ducal estate. Gwoltzer is in the air to Motropolis today. She'll be re-coronated as soon as she arrives," Nira said.

"Well, I'll never say that the man never did anything for me. I was growing all too weary of those living filth being on the payroll. Good thing we've ended that cat and mouse game. Slave traders and the Chalets? What are you up to old friend?" Gideon asked, more to himself.

"Interrogations are still being conducted. We should have a better idea in the next day or so," Nira said, relaxing only but a little.

"We've sent out advance orders to Vineland and Polaris already, and we've got drafts ready for the remaining cities," Dazmonova said.

"I had been led to believe that there were two sightings?" Gideon asked.

"Ingham is getting the details of the other incident, Your Majesty," Nira said.

"Wonderful. Who have you sent to Vineland and Polaris, Marina?" he asked.

"The Pale Horses have gone to Vineland, and the Honarim have been sent to Polaris, Majesty," the Knight responded.

Gideon took his chin in his hand when the door to the room swung open. Knox Ingham trotted in trying to brush off debris that had clung to him in his travel. "Your Majesty," he said after an initial surprise at seeing Nira and Dazmonova in addition to the Emperor.

“Knox, we were just talking about you,” Gideon said, a large smile coming across his face. “Congratulations on your promotion. I trust you’ll do a better job than your predecessor.”

Ingham followed the Emperor’s hand to the headless body on the ground, and stammered out, “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Your report, *Lord High Constable*?” Nira said.

“Yes, thank you, Minister,” Ingham said. “I have just come in from The Den. There has been a revolt. We have quelled it but we lost two constables.”

“I’m told there was a second sighting?” the Emperor asked.

“Yes, Majesty, I ran that down myself. A highwayman picked up an Outlander near The Frontier.”

Gideon kept his attention on Ingham and started twirling his index finger.

“He said that he ran into a pair of travelers as he was bound for Waypoint Junction. An old mortal, and an immortal, but he didn’t have any names, or which way they were going. He said maybe east,” the newly promoted constable said.

“Thank you, Knox. Well, that about makes it official; Lazarus Kail is alive in my backyard causing havoc. Just like old times. What was the extent of the revolt?”

“Uppity slowsies. Slow-healers, Majesty,” Ingham said trying not to look at Cross’ body in the middle of the room, or her head that had landed two meters away.

“And the Outlander?” Nira asked. “Where is he now?”

“I imagine he’s in Waypoint Junction,” Ingham said. “His LoPs checked out. He was immortal himself, near as I could see.”

“Paperless travelers will not last long in the Outlands,” Dazmonova said cutting filling the vacuum.

“Lasted long enough to get to Motropolis and slaughter the Duke and Duchess. No, I dare say that the old boy is fully capable of avoiding and dispatching the H-men.” Gideon continued his pacing. The others exchanged looks of perplexed anxiety as they waited for his word.

“This revolt at The Den, you said it was quelled. Delays?” he asked.

“Brixton said that delays to the rebuild should be minimal. The Alchemical Guild agent also reassured me that steps were being taken to moderate the stimulants they give the slowsies. Apparently, that’s what makes them lose what shred of intelligence they have,” Ingham said, cautioning a smile that quickly evaporated upon seeing the Emperor’s face.

Gideon’s visage had contorted from its calm, near understanding gaze to an evil grimace focused on Ingham. “Tell me Knox, what amuses you about Lazarus Kail putting our people under his knives?”

The newly-appointed Lord High Constable stood as frozen as his former boss, who lay not two meters from him. “I meant no credit to the man, Your Majesty,” Ingham managed to utter beneath the bristles of his mustache. “Only that through his actions, our plans have not been hampered.”

"I'm afraid that's where you are wrong, old friend," Gideon said, seeming to recede back into his previous persona. "We were on the cusp of something new. A world without Lazarus Kail. He was beginning to fade. The fact that he was dead had helped a great deal.

"This will cause noise, louder than we have seen in an age. We would do well to remember what got us here," he said.

"The Prophecy has already failed," Ingham said.

Gideon lowered his brow and stopped pacing. "Then what is the old boy up to?"

"He was smuggling mortals out of the country last time. Maybe he thought he laid low long enough to start up again?" Ingham asked.

Gideon considered and resumed pacing. "Perhaps. What are the specifics of the incidents in Motropolis? I am struggling to understand how he passed through so many fingers."

"The initial report was filed by Justin Gaffe, mayor of Green Water," Nira said.

"Dying, no doubt," Dazmonova scoffed.

"This is doing nothing for my confidence in the mortals to be anything more than laborers."

"Does this Gaffe have a history anti-imperial sentiment?" Ingham asked.

"Nothing reported," Nira said, scanning the contents of the folder.

"No ties to the Lazarene then," Gideon said. "It matters not. This dying mayor has failed in his duties. Knox, have him arrested and killed for treason. Imperial order. If he had been doing his job, we would have Kail in custody."

"Of course, Majesty," Ingham said.

"One more thing, Knox," Gideon said. "Have word sent to Ledyard."

"Ledyard? You think we need the Jackal?" a visible chill ran through Ingham.

"It does seem that way," Gideon said indicating Cross' body with his gold tipped boot.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Ingham replied. He did not wait for further suggestion, clicked his heels and excused himself from the throne room through the large wooden door.

"Nira," Gideon said, as she was about to turn to follow Knox out of the throne room. Dazmonova continued to the door, and when she was not bidden, went through it. "Do stay a while. How is my cousin?" Gideon asked.

"He seemed well the last we spoke. He wrote last lunar that plans were being drawn up for a second seaward expedition. And he wants to go to the Homestead on Unification Day next year," Nira responded.

"Does he? Still a home-body after all these years?"

"Still," Nira said. She had not physically seen her husband in six lunars, but she could no longer remember the last time that she actually missed him. When they had first wed nearly four cents ago, it was all passion and lust. It was a different time; the Empire was still gestating in Gideon's mind then. The air almost always smelled of hot metal and blood in those times.

“And how are you taking this development?” Gideon asked.

“Majesty?” Nira asked.

“Twelve years is nothing to us. But this last twelve, thinking that he was really gone. It was blissful,” he said, looking out onto his moonlit city.

“We should have—”

“Tut,” Gideon said, whipping around and bringing his forefinger to his lips. “There is no use thinking about what *should have* been done, because it wasn’t. So, what do we *do*?”

“We’re doing it, Majesty. We are sending all available forces to locate and capture them,” Nira said.

“Each attempt to upset the Crown weakens us. It turns people against us, and threatens to open us to attack,” Gideon said.

“Cross lied to us. We will catch him and put him down.”

“If it comes down to the two of you, will you?” Gideon asked, standing squarely across from his War Minister.

“Without hesitation,” Nira said, standing at attention. Gideon revealed nothing in his expression and dropped his gaze in thought. “My loyalty has only ever been to you and the Empire, Your Majesty,” she added.

“We shall see. You are part of this family, Nira, and I have had no greater faith than your sword on the field. But, you know that if I am crossed, nothing will stop my retribution,” Gideon said. Nira nodded, and then bowed to turn and leave. “One more thing. On your way, please find someone to pick that up?” he said as she passed Cross’ body.