

AN AUTUMN WAR

DANIEL ABRAHAM



An Audacious Plan

Balasar Gice had come to Acton with his best men, the books, the poet, the plans. The High Council of Galt had heard him out—the dangers of the andat, the need to end the supremacy of the Khaiem. That part had gone quite well. No one seriously disputed that the Khaiem were the single greatest threat to Galt. It was only when he began to reveal his plans and how far he had already gone that the audience began to turn sour on him.

Now the fate of all his work, the years of planning, of struggle, of battle, rested on what happened in the next moments.

The Lord Convocate spoke. “Fourteen cities in a single season. It can’t be done, Balasar. Uther Redcape couldn’t have done it.”

“Uther was fighting in Eddensea,” Balasar said. “They have walls around cities there. They have armies. The Khaiem haven’t got anything but the andat.”

“The andat suffice.”

“Only if they have them.”

“Ah. Yes. That’s the center of the question, isn’t it? Your grand plan to do away with all the andat at a single blow. I have to confess, I don’t think I quite follow how you expect this to work. You have one of these poets here, ready to work with us. Wouldn’t it be better to capture one of these andat for ourselves?”

“We will be. Freedom-From-Bondage should be one of the simplest andat to capture. It’s never been done, so there’s no worry about coming too near what’s been tried before. I’ve found books from the First Empire...”

“All explaining why it’s impossible.” The old man’s voice was almost gentle. It was a ploy. He wanted to see whether Balasar would lose his temper, so instead Balasar smiled.

“It all depends on what you mean by impossible....”

Turn the page to see what people are saying
about *An Autumn War*....

People Are Raving About *An Autumn War*....

“Thanks to the dignity with which Abraham invests his characters, and the exquisite sensibility with which he details their inner states of mind and emotion, their tragedy offers us the kind of catharsis that marks a superior work of art. I was deeply moved by Abraham’s grim yet far from hopeless tale, whose conclusion in the forthcoming *The Price of Spring* I await with impatience.”

—*Realms of Fantasy*

“*An Autumn War* is, in its closing stages, heart-stoppingly surprising and exciting. Rarely does the penultimate volume in a series carry such a charge of its own.”

—*Locus*

“Daniel Abraham delighted fantasy readers with his brilliantly original and engaging first novel, *A Shadow in Summer*, and in *A Betrayal in Winter* penned a tragedy as darkly personal and violent as Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Now in *An Autumn War*, the third volume in the Long Price Quartet, Daniel Abraham has written a spectacular epic fantasy of much wider scope and appeal that will thrill his fans and enthrall legions of new readers.”

—*Fantasy Book Critic*

“Daniel Abraham gets better with every book. *A Shadow in Summer* was among the strongest first novels of the last decade, and *A Betrayal in Winter* was a terrific second book, but in *An Autumn War*, Abraham puts both of them in the shade. This book really blows the top off, taking the world of the *andats* and the poets in new and unexpected directions. *An Autumn War* will keep you turning pages and break your heart in the bargain. If there’s any justice, this should be a contender for all the major awards.”

—George R. R. Martin,
New York Times #1 bestselling author

“This book will land Abraham in the ranks of our greatest working fantasists, shoulder to shoulder with Robin Hobb, George R. R. Martin, and their peers. I urge you to buy, borrow, or check out from the library the first two books so you’ll be ready for *An Autumn War*. As for Abraham, he’s outdone himself and the rest of us with this book. I await the fourth book in the Long Price Quartet with a certain amount of awe.”

—Jay Lake,
author of *Mainspring*

“New readers will find Abraham’s deft storytelling style accessible, but returning fans will most appreciate the growth of the world and the characters.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“There is much to love in the Long Price Quartet. It is epic in scope but character-

centered. The setting is unique yet utterly believable. The storytelling is smooth, careful, and—best of all—unpredictable. The first two books impressed me, but *An Autumn War* surpassed them, leaving me stunned and wondering where Abraham will take me in the fourth book.”

—Patrick Rothfuss, bestselling author
of *The Name of the Wind*

“I already knew Daniel Abraham was an excellent writer. *An Autumn War* is his best novel yet: his quiet compassion for humanity slams hard against his clear-eyed depiction of the ruthless progress of war and the bitter choices people must often make to protect their own. Highly recommended.”

—Kate Elliott, bestselling author
of the Crossroads trilogy and the Crown of Stars series

Books by Daniel Abraham

>+<

THE LONG PRICE QUARTET

*A Shadow in Summer**

*A Betrayal in Winter**

*An Autumn War**

*The Price of Spring **

>+<

Hunter's Run

(with George R. R. Martin and Gardner Dozois)

George R. R. Martin's Wild Cards: The Hard Call

(graphic novel)

*Published by Tor Books

AN
AUTUMN
WAR

>+<
Book Three
of the
Long Price Quartet

>+<

Daniel Abraham



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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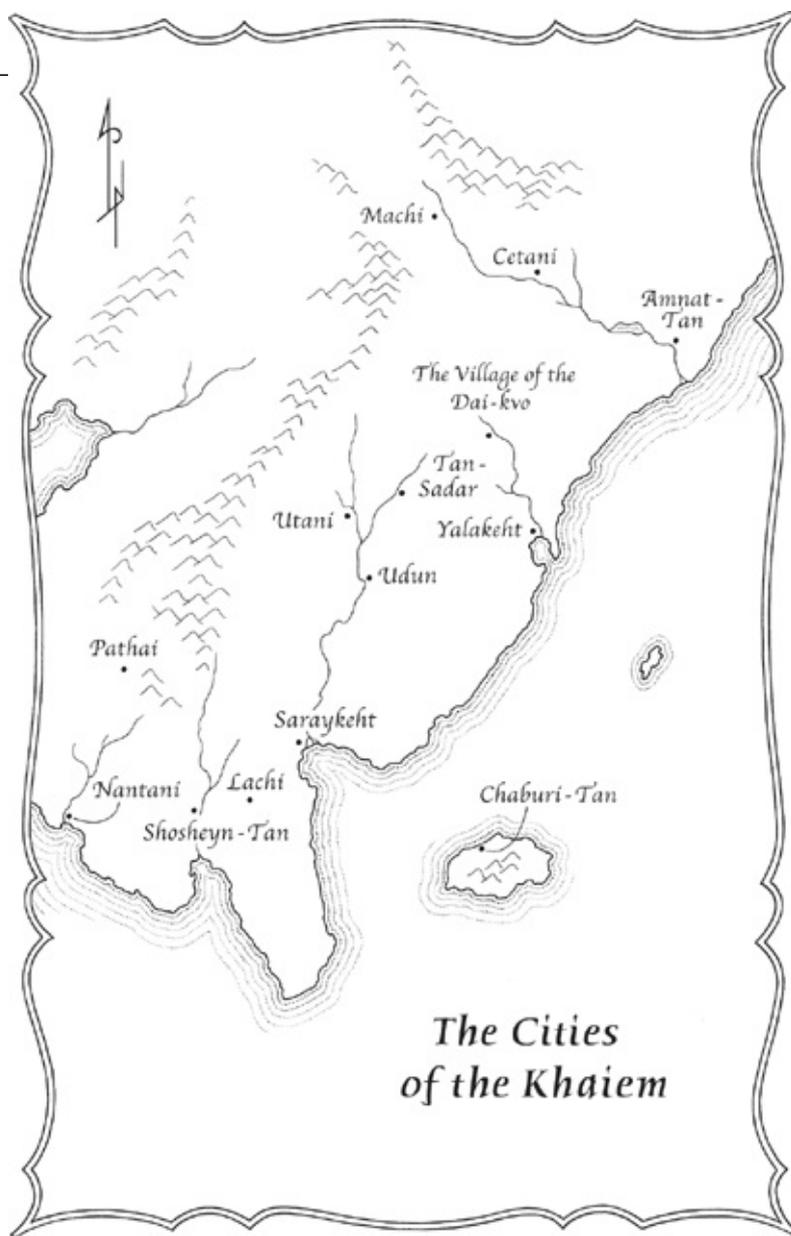
To Jim and Allison,
without whom none of this would have been possible

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Prolog

>+< Three men came out of the desert. Twenty had gone in.

The setting sun pushed their shadows out behind them, lit their faces a ruddy gold, blinded them. The weariness and pain in their bodies robbed them of speech. On the horizon, something glimmered that was no star, and they moved silently toward it. The farthest tower of Far Galt, the edge of the Empire, beckoned them home from the wastes, and without speaking, each man knew that they would not stop until they stood behind its gates.

The smallest of them shifted the satchel on his back. His gray commander's tunic hung from his flesh as if the cloth itself were exhausted. His mind turned inward, half-dreaming, and the leather straps of the satchel rubbed against his raw shoulder. The burden had killed seventeen of his men, and now it was his to carry as far as the tower that rose up slowly in the violet air of evening. He could not bring himself to think past that.

One of the others stumbled and fell to his knees on wind-paved stones. The commander paused. He would not lose another, not so near the end. And yet he feared bending down, lifting the man up. If he paused, he might never move again. Grunting, the other man recovered his feet. The commander nodded once and turned again to the west. A breeze stirred the low, brownish grasses, hissing and hushing. The punishing sun made its exit and left behind twilight and the wide swath of stars hanging overhead, cold candles beyond numbering. The night would bring chill as deadly as the midday heat.

It seemed to the commander that the tower did not so much come closer as grow, plantlike. He endured his weariness and pain, and the structure that had been no larger than his thumb was now the size of his hand. The beacon that had seemed steady flickered now, and tongues of flame leapt and vanished. Slowly, the details of the stonework came clear; the huge carved relief of the Great Tree of Galt. He smiled, the skin of his lip splitting, wetting his mouth with blood.

"We're not going to die," one of the others said. He sounded amazed. The commander didn't respond, and some measureless time later, another voice called for them to stop, to offer their names and the reason that they'd come to this twice-forsaken ass end of the world.

When the commander spoke, his voice was rough, rusting with disuse.

“Go to your High Watchman,” he said. “Tell him that Balasar Gice has returned.”

BALASAR GICE had been in his eleventh year when he first heard the word *andat*. The river that passed through his father’s estates had turned green one day, and then red. And then it rose fifteen feet. Balasar had watched in horror as the fields vanished, the cottages, the streets and yards he knew. The whole world, it seemed, had become a sea of foul water with only the tops of trees and the corpses of pigs and cattle and men to the horizon.

His father had moved the family and as many of his best men as would fit to the upper stories of the house. Balasar had begged to take the horse his father had given him up as well. When the gravity of the situation had been explained, he changed his pleas to include the son of the village notary, who had been Balasar’s closest friend. He had been refused in that as well. His horses and his playmates were going to drown. His father’s concern was for Balasar, for the family; the wider world would have to look after itself.

Even now, decades later, the memory of those six days was fresh as a wound. The bloated bodies of pigs and cattle and people like pale logs floating past the house. The rich, low scent of fouled water. The struggle to sleep when the rushing at the bottom of the stairs seemed like the whisper of something vast and terrible for which he had no name. He could still hear men’s voices questioning whether the food would last, whether the water was safe to drink, and whether the flood was natural, a catastrophe of distant rains, or an attack by the Khaiem and their *andat*.

He had not known then what the word meant, but the syllables had taken on the stench of the dead bodies, the devastation where the village had been, the emptiness and the destruction. It was only much later—after the water had receded, the dead had been mourned, the village rebuilt—that he learned how correct he had been.

Nine generations of fathers had greeted their new children into the world since the God Kings of the East had turned upon each other, his history tutor told him. When the glory that had been the center of all creation fell, its throes had changed the nature of space. The lands that had been great gardens and fields were deserts now, permanently altered by the war. Even as far as Galt and Eddensea, the histories told of weeks of darkness, of failed crops and famine, a sky dancing with flames of green, a sound as if the earth were tearing itself apart. Some people said the stars themselves had changed positions.

But the disasters of the past grew in the telling or faded from memory. No one knew exactly how things had been those many years ago. Perhaps the Emperor had gone mad and loosed his personal god-ghost—what they called *andat*—against his own people, or against himself. Or there might have been a woman, the wife of a great lord, who had been taken by the Emperor against her will. Or perhaps she’d willed it. Or the thousand factions and minor insults and treacheries that accrue around power had simply followed their usual course.

As a boy, Balasar had listened to the story, drinking in the tales of mystery and glory and dread. And, when his tutor had told him, somber of tone and gray, that there were only two legacies left by the fall of the God Kings—the wastelands that bordered Far Galt and Obar State, and the cities of the Khaiem where men still held the andat like Cooling, Seedless, S tone-Made-Soft—Balasar had understood the implication as clearly as if it had been spoken.

What had happened before could happen again at any time and without warning.

“And that’s what brought you?” the High Watchman said. “It’s a long walk from a little boy at his lessons to this place.”

Balasar smiled again and leaned forward to sip bitter kafe from a rough tin mug. His room was baked brick and close as a cell. A cruel wind hissed outside the thick walls, as it had for the three long, feverish days since he had returned to the world. The small windows had been scrubbed milky by sandstorms. His little wounds were scabbing over, none of them reddened or hot to the touch, though the stripe on his shoulder where the satchel strap had been would doubtless leave a scar.

“It wasn’t as romantic as I’d imagined,” he said. The High Watchman laughed, and then, remembering the dead, sobered. Balasar shifted the subject. “How long have you been here? And who did you offend to get yourself sent to this...lovely place?”

“Eight years. I’ve been eight years at this post. I didn’t much care for the way things got run in Acton. I suppose this was my way of saying so.”

“I’m sure Acton felt the loss.”

“I’m sure it didn’t. But then, I didn’t do it for them.”

Balasar chuckled.

“That *sounds* like wisdom,” Balasar said, “but eight years here seems an odd place for wisdom to lead you.”

The High Watchman smacked his lips and shrugged.

“It wasn’t me going inland,” he said. Then, a moment later, “They say there’s still andat out there. Haunting the places they used to control.”

“There aren’t,” Balasar said. “There are other things. Things they made or unmade. There’s places where the air goes bad on you—one breath’s fine, and the next it’s like something’s crawling into you. There’s places where the ground’s thin as eggshell and a thousand-foot drop under it. And there are living things too—things they made with the andat, or what happened when the things they made bred. But the ghosts don’t stay once their handlers are gone. That isn’t what they are.”

Balasar took an olive from his plate, sucked away the flesh, and spat back the stone. For a moment, he could hear voices in the wind. The words of men who’d trusted and followed him, even knowing where he would take them. The voices of the dead whose lives he had spent. Coal and Eustin had survived. The others—Little Ott, Bes, Mayarsin, Laran, Kellem, and a dozen more—were bones and memory now. Because of him. He shook his head, clearing it, and the wind was only wind again.

“No offense, General,” the High Watchman said, “but there’s not enough gold in the world for me to try what you did.”

“It was necessary,” Balasar said, and his tone ended the conversation.

THE JOURNEY to the coast was easier than it should have been. Three men, traveling light. The others were an absence measured in the ten days it took to reach Lawton. It had taken sixteen coming from. The arid, empty lands of the East gave way to softly rolling hills. The tough yellow grasses yielded to blue-green almost the color of a cold sea, wavelets dancing on its surface. Farmsteads appeared off the road, windmills with broad blades shifting in the breezes; men and women and children shared the path that led toward the sea.

Balasar forced himself to be civil, even gracious. If the world moved the way he hoped, he would never come to this place again, but the world had a habit of surprising him.

When he’d come back from the campaign in the Westlands, he’d thought his career was coming to its victorious end. He might take a place in the Council or at one of the military colleges. He even dared to dream of a quiet estate someplace away from the yellow coal smoke of the great cities. When the news had come—a historian and engineer in Far Galt had divined a map that might lead to the old libraries—he’d known that rest had been a chimera, a thing for other men but never himself. He’d taken the best of his men, the strongest, smartest, most loyal, and come here. He had lost them here. The ones who had died, and perhaps also the ones who had lived.

Coal and Eustin were both quiet as they traveled, both respectful when they stopped to camp for the night. Without conversation, they had all agreed that the cold night air and hard ground was better than the company of men at an inn or wayhouse. Once in a while, one or the other would attempt to talk or joke or sing, but it always failed. There was a distance in their eyes, a stunned expression that Balasar recognized from boys stumbling over the wreckage of their first battlefield. They were seasoned fighters, Coal and Eustin. He had seen both of them kill men and boys, knew each of them had raped women in the towns they’d sacked, and still, they had left some scrap of innocence in the desert and were moving away from it with every step. Balasar could not say what that loss would do to them, nor would he insult their manhood by bringing it up. He knew, and that alone would have to suffice. They reached the ports of Parrinshall on the first day of autumn.

Half a hundred ships awaited them: great merchant ships built to haul cargo across the vast emptiness of the southern seas, shallow fishing boats that darted out of port and back again, the ornate three-sailed roundboats of Bakta, the antiquated and changeless ships of the east islands. It was nothing to the ports at Kirinton or Lanniston or Saraykeht, but it was enough. Three berths on any of half a dozen of these ships would take them off Far Galt and start them toward home.

“Winter’ll be near over afore we see Acton,” Coal said, and spat off the dock.

"I imagine it will," Balasar agreed, shifting the satchel against his hip. "If we sail straight through. We could also stay here until spring if we liked. Or stop in Bakta."

"Whatever you like, General," Eustin said.

"Then we'll sail straight through. Find what's setting out and when. I'll be at the harbor master's house."

"Anything the matter, sir?"

"No," Balasar said.

The harbor master's house was a wide building of red brick settled on the edge of the water. Banners of the Great Tree hung from the archway above its wide bronze doors. Balasar announced himself to the secretary and was shown to a private room. He accepted the offer of cool wine and dried figs, asked for and received the tools for writing the report now required of him, and gave orders that he not be disturbed until his men arrived. Then, alone, he opened his satchel and drew forth the books he had recovered, laying them side by side on the desk that looked out over the port. There were four, two bound in thick, peeling leather, another whose covers had been ripped from it, and one encased in metal that appeared to be neither steel nor silver, but something of each. Balasar ran his fingers over the mute volumes, then sat, considering them and the moral paradox they represented.

For these, he had spent the lives of his men. While the path back to Galt was nothing like the risk he had faced in the ruins of the fallen Empire, still it was sea travel. There were storms and pirates and plagues. If he wished to be certain that these volumes survived, the right thing would be to transcribe them here in Parrinshall. If he were to die on the journey home, the books, at least, would not be drowned. The knowledge within them would not be lost.

Which was also the argument *against* making copies. He took the larger of the leather-bound volumes and opened it. The writing was in the flowing script of the dead Empire, not the simpler chop the Khaiem used for business and trade with foreigners like himself. Balasar frowned as he picked out the symbols his tutor had taught him as a boy.

There are two types of impossibility in the andat: those which cannot be understood, and those whose natures make binding impossible. His translation was rough, but sufficient for his needs. These were the books he'd sought. And so the question remained whether the risk of their loss was greater than the risk posed by their existence. Balasar closed the book and let his head rest in his hands. He knew, of course, what he would do. He had known before he'd sent Eustin and Coal to find a boat for them. Before he'd reached Far Galt in the first place.

It was his awareness of his own pride that made him hesitate. History was full of men who thought themselves to be the one great soul whom power would not corrupt. He did not wish to be among that number, and yet here he sat, holding in his hands the secrets that might remake the shape of the human world. A humble man would have sought counsel from those wiser than himself, or at least feared to wield the power. He did not like what it said of him that giving the books to anyone

besides himself seemed as foolish as gambling with their destruction. He would not even have trusted them to Eustin or Coal or any of the men who had died helping him.

He took the paper he'd been given, raised the pen, and began his report and, in a sense, his confession.

THREE WEEKS out, Eustin broke.

The sea surrounded them, empty and immense as the sky. So far south, the water was clear and the air warm even with the slowly failing days. The birds that had followed them from Parrinshall had vanished. The only animal was a three-legged dog the ship's crew had taken on as a mascot. Nor were there women on board. Only the rank, common smell of men and the sea.

The rigging creaked and groaned, unnerving no one but Balasar. He had never loved traveling by water. Campaigning on land was no more comfortable, but at least when the day ended he was able to see that this village was not the one he'd been in the night before, the tree under which he slept looked out over some different hillside. Here, in the vast nothingness of water, they might almost have been standing still. Only the long white plume of their wake gave him a sense of movement, the visible promise that one day the journey would end. He would often sit at the stern, watch that constant trail, and take what solace he could from it. Sometimes he carved blocks of wax with a small, thin knife while his mind wandered and softened in the boredom of inaction.

It should not have surprised him that the isolation had proved corrosive for Eustin and Coal. And yet when one of the sailors rushed up to him that night, pale eyes bulging from his head, Balasar had not guessed the trouble. His man, the one called Eustin, was belowdecks with a knife, the sailor said. He was threatening to kill himself or else the crippled mascot dog, no one was sure which. Normally, they'd all have clubbed him senseless and thrown him over the side, but as he was a paying passage, the general might perhaps want to take a hand. Balasar put down the wax block half-carved into the shape of a fish, tucked his knife in his belt, and nodded as if the request were perfectly common.

The scene in the belly of the ship was calmer than he'd expected. Eustin sat on a bench. He had the dog by a rope looped around the thing's chest and a field dagger in his other hand. Ten sailors were standing in silence either in the room or just outside it, armed with blades and cudgels. Balasar ignored them, taking a low stool and setting it squarely in front of Eustin before he sat.

"General," Eustin said. His voice was low and flat, like a man half-dead from a wound.

"I hear there's some issue with the animal."

"He ate my soup."

One of the sailors coughed meaningfully, and Eustin's eyes narrowed and flickered

toward the sound. Balasar spoke again quickly.

“I’ve seen Coal sneak half a bottle of wine away from you. It hardly seems a killing offense.”

“He didn’t steal my soup, General. I gave it to him.”

“You gave it to him?”

“Yessir.”

The room seemed close as a coffin, and hot. If only there weren’t so many men around, if the bodies were not so thick, the air not so heavy with their breath, Balasar thought he might have been able to think clearly. He sucked his teeth, struggling to find something wise or useful to say, some way to disarm the situation and bring Eustin back from his madness. In the end, his silence was enough.

“He deserves better, General,” Eustin said. “He’s broken. He’s a sick, broken thing. He shouldn’t have to live like that. There ought to be some dignity at least. If there’s nothing else, there should at least be some dignity.”

The dog whined and craned its neck toward Eustin. Balasar could see distress in the animal’s eyes, but not fear. The dog could hear the pain in Eustin’s voice, even if the sailors couldn’t. The bodies around him were wound tight, ready for violence, all of them except for Eustin. He held the knife weakly. The tension in his body wasn’t the hot, loose energy of battle; he was knotted, like a boy tensed against a blow; like a man facing the gallows.

“Leave us alone. All of you,” Balasar said.

“Not without Tripod!” one of the sailors said.

Balasar met Eustin’s eyes. With a small shock he realized it was the first time he’d truly looked at the man since they’d emerged from the desert. Perhaps he’d been ashamed of what he might see reflected there. And perhaps his shame had some part in this. Eustin was *his* man, and so the pain he bore was Balasar’s responsibility. He’d been weak and stupid to shy away from that. And weakness and stupidity always carried a price.

“Let the dog go. There’s no call to involve him, or these men,” Balasar said. “Sit with me awhile, and if you still need killing, I’ll be the one to do it.”

Eustin’s gaze flickered over his face, searching for something. To see whether it was a ruse, to see whether Balasar would actually kill his own man. When he saw the answer, Eustin’s wide shoulders eased. He dropped the rope, freeing the animal. It hopped in a circle, uncertain and confused.

“You have the dog,” Balasar said to the sailors without looking at them. “Now go.”

They filed out, none of them taking their eyes from Eustin and the knife still in his hand. Balasar waited until they had all left, the low door pulled shut behind them. Distant voices shouted over the creaking timbers, the oil lamp swung gently on its chain. This time, Balasar used the silence intentionally, waiting. At first, Eustin looked at him, anticipation in his eyes. And then his gaze passed into the distance, seeing something beyond the room, beyond them both. And then silently, Eustin

wept. Balasar shifted his stool nearer and put his hand on the man's shoulder.

"I keep seeing them, sir."

"I know."

"I've seen a thousand men die one way or the other. But...but that was on a field. That was in a fight."

"It isn't the same," Balasar said. "Is that why you wanted those men to throw you in the sea?"

Eustin turned the blade slowly, catching the light. He was still weeping, his face now slack and empty. Balasar wondered which of them he was seeing now, which of their number haunted him in that moment, and he felt the eyes of the dead upon him. They were in the room, invisibly crowding it as the sailors had.

"Can you tell me they died with honor?" Eustin breathed.

"I'm not sure what honor is," Balasar said. "We did what we did because it was needed, and we were the men to do it.

The price was too high for us to bear, you and I and Coal. But we aren't finished, so we have to carry it a bit farther. That's all."

"It wasn't needed, General. I'm sorry, but it *wasn't*. We take a few more cities, we gain a few more slaves. Yes, they're the richest cities in the world. I know it. Sacking even one of the cities of the Khaiem would put more gold in the High Council's coffers than a season in the Westlands. But how much do they need to buy Little Ott back from hell?" Eustin asked. "And why shouldn't I go there and get him myself, sir?"

"It's not about gold. I have enough gold of my own to live well and die old. Gold's a tool we use—a tool *I* use—to make men do what must be done."

"And honor?"

"And glory. Tools, all of them. We're men, Eustin. We've no reason to lie to each other."

He had the man's attention now. Eustin was looking only at him, and there was confusion in his eyes—confusion and pain—but the ghosts weren't inside him now.

"Why then, sir? Why are we doing this?"

Balasar sat back. He hadn't said these words before, he had never explained himself to anyone. Pride again. He was haunted by his pride. The pride that had made him take this on as his task, the work he owed to the world because no one else had the stomach for it.

"The ruins of the Empire were made," he said. "God didn't write it that the world should have something like that in it. Men *created* it. Men with little gods in their sleeves. And men like that still live. The cities of the Khaiem each have one, and they look on them like plow horses. Tools to feed their power and their arrogance. If it suited them, they could turn their *andat* loose on us. Hold our crops in permanent winter or sink our lands into the sea or whatever else they could devise.

They could turn the world itself against us the way you or I might hold a knife. And do you know why they haven't?"

Eustin blinked, unnerved, Balasar thought, by the anger in his voice.

"No, sir."

"Because they haven't yet chosen to. That's all. They might. Or they might turn against each other. They could make everything into wastelands just like those. Acton, Kirinton, Marsh. Every city, every town. It hasn't happened yet because we've been lucky. But someday, one of them *will* grow ambitious or mad. And then all the rest of us are ants on a battlefield, trampled into the mud. That's what I mean when I say this is needed. You and I are seeing that it never happens," he said, and his words made his own blood hot. He was no longer uncertain or touched by shame. Balasar grinned wide and wolfish. If it was pride, then let him be proud. No man could do what he intended without it. "When I've finished, the god-ghosts of the Khaiem will be a story women tell their babes to scare them at night, and nothing more than that. *That's* what Little Ott died for. Not for money or conquest or glory.

"I'm saving the world," Balasar said. "So, now. Say you'd rather drown than help me."

>+< It had rained for a week, the cold gray clouds seeming to drape themselves between the mountain ranges to the east and west of the city like a wet canopy. The mornings were foggy, the afternoons chill. With the snowdrifts of winter almost all melted, the land around Machi became a soupy mud whose only virtue was the spring crop of wheat and snow peas would bring forth. Travel was harder now even than in the deadly cold of deep winter.

And still, the travelers came.

“With all respect, this exercise, as you call it, is ill-advised,” the envoy said. His hands still held a pose of deference though the conversation had long since parted from civility. “I assure your intentions are entirely honorable, however it is the place of the Dai-kvo—”

“If the Dai-kvo wants to rule Machi, tell him to come north,” the Khai Machi snapped. “I can pull my puppet strings from the next room. I’ll make a bed for him.”

The envoy’s eyes went wide. He was a young man, and hadn’t mastered the art of keeping his mind from showing on his face. Otah, the Khai Machi, waved away his own words and sighed. He had gone too far, and he knew it. Another few steps and they’d be pointing at each other and yelling about which of them wanted to create the Third Empire. The truth was that he had ruled Machi these last fourteen years only by necessity. The prospect of uniting the cities of the Khaiem under his rule was about as enticing as scraping his skin off with a rock.

The audience was a private one, in a small room lined with richly carved blackwood, lit by candles that smelled like rich earth and vanilla, and set well away from the corridors and open gardens where servants and members of the utkhaiem might unintentionally overhear them. This wasn’t business he cared to have shared over the dances and dinners of the court. Otah rose from his chair and walked to the window, forcing his temper back down. He opened the shutters, and the city stretched out before him, grand towers of stone stretching up toward the sky, and beyond them the wide plain to the south, green with the first crops of the spring. He pressed his frustration back into yoke.

“I didn’t mean that,” he said. “I know that the Dai-kvo doesn’t intend to dictate to me. Or any of the Khaiem. I appreciate your concern, but the creation of the guard isn’t a threat. It’s hardly an army, you know. A few hundred men trained up to maybe half the level of the Westlands garrison could hardly topple the world.”

“We are concerned for the stability of all the cities,” the envoy said. “When one of the Khaiem begins to study war, it puts all the others on edge.”

“It’s hardly studying war to hand a few men knives and remind them which end’s the

handle.”

“It’s more than any of the Khaiem have done in the past hundred years. And you must see that you haven’t made it your policy to ally yourself with...well, with anyone.”

Well, this is going just as poorly as I expected, Otah thought.

“I have a wife, thank you,” Otah said, his manner cool. But the envoy had clearly reached the end of his patience. Hearing him stand, Otah turned. The young man’s face was flushed and his hands folded into the sleeves of his brown poet’s robes.

“And if you were a shopkeeper, having a single woman would be admirable,” the envoy said. “But as the Khai Machi, turning away every woman who’s offered to you is a pattern of insult. I can’t be the first one to point this out. From the time you took the chair, you’ve isolated yourself from the rest of the Khaiem, the great houses of the utkhaiem, the merchant houses. Everyone.”

Otah ran through the thousand arguments and responses—the treaties and trade agreements, the acceptance of servants and slaves, all of the ways in which he’d tried to bind himself and Machi to the other cities. They wouldn’t convince the envoy or his master, the Dai-kvo. They wanted blood—his blood flowing in the veins of some boy child whose mother had come from south or east or west. They wanted to know that the Khai Yalakeht or Path or Tan-Sadar might be able to hope for a grandson on the black chair in Machi once Otah had died. His wife Kiyan was past the age to bear another child, but men could get children of younger women. For one of the Khaiem to have only two children, and both by the same woman—and her a wayhouse keeper from Udun...They wanted sons from him, fathered of women who embodied wise political alliances. They wanted to preserve tradition, and they had two empires and nine generations of the Khaiate court life to back them. Despair settled on him like a thick winter cloak.

There was nothing to be gained. He knew all the reasons for all the choices he had made and he could as easily explain them to a mine dog as to this proud young man who’d traveled weeks for the privilege of taking him to task. Otah sighed, turned, and took a deeply formal pose of apology.

“I have distracted you from your task, Athai-cha. That was not my intention. What was again the Dai-kvo wished of me?”

The envoy pressed his lips bloodless. They both knew the answer to the question, but Otah’s feigned ignorance would force him to restate it. And the simple fact that Otah’s behavior habits were not mentioned would make his point for him. Etiquette was a terrible game.

“The militia you have formed,” the envoy said. “The Dai-kvo would know your intention in creating it.”

“I intend to send it to the Westlands. I intend it to take contracts with whatever forces there are acting in the best interests of *all* the cities of the Khaiem. I will be pleased to draft a letter saying so.”

Otah smiled. The young poet’s eyes flickered. As insults went, this was mild enough. Eventually, the poet’s hands rose in a pose of gratitude.

“There is one other thing, Most High,” the envoy said. “If you take any aggressive a

against the interests of another of the Khaiem, the Dai-kvo will recall Cehmai and Ston Made-Soft. If you take arms against them, he will allow the Khaiem to use their poets against you and your city.”

“Yes,” Otah said. “I understood that when I heard you’d come. I am not acting against the Khaiem, but thank you for your time, Athai-cha. I will have a letter sewn and sealed for you by morning.”

After the envoy had left, Otah sank into a chair and pressed the heels of his hands to his temples. Around him, the palace was quiet. He counted fifty breaths, then rose again, closed and latched the door, and turned back to the apparently empty room.

“Well?” he asked, and one of the panels in the corner swung open, exposing a tiny hidden chamber brilliantly designed for eavesdropping.

The man who sat in the listener’s chair seemed both at ease and out of place. At ease because it was Sinja’s nature to take the world lightly, and out of place because his suntanned skin and rough, stained leathers made him seem like a gardener on a chair of deep red velvet and silver pins fit for the head of a merchant house or a member of the utkhaiem. He rose and closed the panel behind him.

“He seems a decent man,” Sinja said. “I wouldn’t want him on my side of a fight, though. Overconfident.”

“I’m hoping it won’t come to that,” Otah said.

“For a man who’s convinced the world he’s bent on war, you’re a bit squeamish about violence.”

Otah chuckled.

“I think sending the Dai-kvo his messenger’s head might not be the most convincing argument for my commitment to peace,” he said.

“Excellent point,” Sinja agreed as he poured himself a bowl of wine. “But then you are training men to fight. It’s a hard thing to preach peace and stability and also pay men to think what’s the best way to disembowel someone with a spear.”

“I know it,” Otah said, his voice dark as wet slate. “Gods. You’d think having total power over a city would give you more options, wouldn’t you?”

Otah sipped the wine. It was rich and astringent and fragrant of late summer, and it swirled in the bowl like a dark river. He felt old. Fourteen years he’d spent trying to be what Mac needed him to be—steward, manager, ruler, half-god, fuel for the gossip and backbiting of the court. Most of the time, he did well enough, but then something like this would happen and he would be sure again that the work was beyond him.

“You could disband it,” Sinja said. “It’s not as though you need the extra trade.”

“It’s not about getting more silver,” Otah said.

“Then what’s it about? You aren’t actually planning to invade Cetani, are you? Because I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Otah coughed out a laugh.

“It’s about being ready,” he said.

“Ready?”

“Every generation finds it harder to bind fresh andat. Every one that slips away becomes more difficult to capture. It can't go on forever. There will come a time that the poets fail and we have to rely on something else.”

“So,” Sinja said. “You're starting a militia so that someday, generations from now, when some Dai-kvo that hasn't been born yet doesn't manage to keep up to the standards of his forebears—”

“There will also be generations of soldiers ready to keep the cities safe.”

Sinja scratched his belly and nodded.

“You think I'm wrong?”

“Yes. I think you're wrong,” Sinja said. “I think you saw Seedless escape. I think you saw Saraykeht suffer the loss. You know that the Galts have ambitions, and that they've put their hands into the affairs of the Khaiem more than once.”

“That doesn't make me wrong,” Otah said, unable to keep the sudden anger from his voice. So many years had passed, and the memory of Saraykeht had not dimmed. “You weren't there, Sinja-cha. You don't know how bad it was. That's mine. And if it lets me see farther than the Dai-kvo or the Khaiem—”

“It's possible to look at the horizon so hard you trip over your feet,” Sinja said, unfazed by Otah's heat. “You aren't responsible for everything under the sky.”

But I am responsible for that, Otah thought. He had never confessed his role in the fall of Saraykeht to Sinja, never told the story of the time he had killed a helpless man, of sparing an enemy and saving a friend. The danger and complexity and sorrow of that time had never entirely left him, but he could not call it regret.

“You want to keep the future safe,” Sinja said, breaking the silence, “and I respect that. But you can't do it by sitting on the table right now. Alienating the Dai-kvo gains you nothing.”

“What would you do, Sinja? If you were in my place, what would you do?”

“Take as much gold as I could put on a fast cart, and live out my life in a beach hut on Bakta. But then I'm not particularly reliable.” He drained his bowl and put it down on the table, porcelain clicking softly on lacquered wood. “What you *should* do is send us west.”

“But the men aren't ready—”

“They're near enough. Without real experience, these poor bastards would protect you from a real army about as well as sending out all the dancing girls you could find. And now that I've said it, girls might even slow them down longer.”

Otah coughed a mirthless laugh. Sinja leaned forward, his eyes calm and steady.

“Put us in the Westlands as a mercenary company,” he said. “It gives real weight to it when you tell the Dai-kvo that you're just looking for another way to make money if we're already walking away from our neighboring cities. The men will get experience; I'll be able to make contacts with other mercenaries, maybe even strike up alliances with some of the Warden. You can even found your military tradition. But besides that, there are certain problems with training and arming men, and then not giving them any outlet.”

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