

THE HERO'S LOT

Books by Patrick Carr

THE STAFF AND THE SWORD

A Cast of Stones

The Hero's Lot

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THE HERO'S
LOT

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This one goes to the men in my life:

To my father, Joe William Carr,
who awoke in me an appreciation of and love for a
well-told tale.

To Joe Si Carr,

who was and is my brother and friend
through all the craziness of being Air Force brats and
after.

And to my sons:
Patrick, Connor, Daniel, and Ethan.
Every father wants his sons to surpass him—you do.

1

ACCUSED

Sweat, hot and salty, flowed into Errol's eyes in the sticky heat of the early fall afternoon. He forced a quick blink to shed the distraction, not daring to risk the split second it would take to wipe his brow. A welt as long as his hand burned his left rib cage. Its twin worked to numb his right shoulder. The staff in his hands blurred and buzzed like an angry insect, nearly invisible, but as yet he had managed only a single strike against his opponent.

And he was tiring.

The man opposite him, stronger and fresher, darted like a snake, the blade of his sword disappeared as his arms corded and he struck. Errol parried at the last moment and flowed into a counterattack. The clack of staff against sword filled his ears like the sound of a drummer's rim beats.

For a moment he dared hope that he would penetrate his opponent's defense, but the attack exhausted itself, and he retreated to defend against those cursed whiplike strokes of the swordsman's counter.

Pain blossomed in his side as the sword found its mark. It was no use. Four weeks of food and rest had nearly restored him to complete health after Sarin's attack against the kingdom. But "almost" was insuffi-

cient against such an opponent.

He backed away and grounded his staff. “Enough, Liam, I am no match for you today—perhaps not ever again.” One of the watchmen, Lieutenant Goran, offered him a wad of cloth. He lifted his shirt. A trickle of blood tracked a crooked rivulet down his side. It could have been worse. Only his foolish pride—and Weir’s goading—had impelled him to spar with Liam so soon after his release from the infirmary. All in all, he’d been lucky.

The blond-haired man across from him relaxed from his stance and favored him with the same smile that made every girl, woman, and widow in the kingdom swoon. On Errol the effect failed to dazzle, but it reminded him his fellow villager walked a bit closer to perfection than other men.

Liam inclined his head. “You’re nearly as fast as you were before the attack.”

Captain Reynald nodded his agreement from his vantage point just to the side. “The lad speaks the simple truth. Had you sparred with any other man—” he paused to glance at Weir—“you would have won, easily. As it is, there are only two men I can think of that could best either of you. Merodach and—”

“Naaman Ru,” Errol finished.

The captain grunted. “Yes.”

Eagerness flared in Liam’s eyes. “How good is he, Errol?”

“I don’t know. I never saw him in an actual fight, and we never sparred. I’m just as happy about that, though. His best student, Gram Skorik, pushed me to my limit. Rokha, his daughter, told me Ru bested Skorik without breaking a sweat.”

Liam’s eyes shone. “Wouldn’t it be glorious to go

against him, the best swordsman in the world?”

A catarrhal laugh erupted from Errol's throat before he could stop it. “Glorious? No, I don't think so. The last time I saw Ru, he had naked steel in his hand and was furious with me.”

Errol panicked as he said this last and cursed himself for a fool. His admission might lead to questions about his escape from the caravan master he could not answer. Before Reynald or Liam could inquire after the means of his deliverance from the legendary swordsman, Adora, flanked by Weir and a dozen ladies of the court who gazed in longing toward Liam, joined the trio.

“Are you well?” the princess asked him.

His breath caught at the sight of her . . . as always. The green of her eyes unmade him, so he busied himself with his staff, twisting the knoblocks back onto each end. “A couple of welts. They're a small price to pay for letting Weir goad me into a match with Liam.”

At the mention of his name, Lord Weir elbowed Errol on his way to congratulate Liam on his victory. “It's too bad you called a halt, peasant. A couple of blows to the head might have taught you respect for your betters.”

Errol made a show of looking around Weir and over his head. “If I see any I'll let you know.”

Weir yanked his hand toward the pommel of his sword, as if to draw.

Errol darted to his right. He needed space. His eyes caught Weir's, and his hands slid to the ready position on his staff. Reynald's voice came from behind him.

“Please do, Lord Weir. The minute you bare steel in this yard you free him from restraint. Don't forget, he's an earl now.”

Weir slammed his sword back into its scabbard.

“He’ll always be a filthy peasant.” He spat and brushed past.

Errol watched him leave, didn’t relax his grip on the staff until Weir and his friends disappeared from the yard. “Why does he hate me so much?” he asked Adora.

“You have something he wants,” she said.

Before he could ask for an explanation, the crowd split and a wave of bows announced the arrival of a newcomer of importance. He pulled his gaze from Princess Adora with reluctance to see Enoch Sten, Illustra’s primus approaching. The set of his shoulders and the compressed line of his mouth hinted at displeasure. The pair of watchmen who trailed behind him kept their hands on their swords, ready to draw in an instant. Sarin’s treacherous legacy had left more than bloodstains in the hallways.

Errol bowed in greeting. “Primus.”

Enoch Sten stopped within arm’s reach and fanned his florid face with one hand. “I’m not made for haste, my boy. Haste is for younger men who can still afford notions of self-importance. Ah well. When the Judica commands haste, even the head of the conclave must hurry.” His shoulders bunched under his tunic with mirth, and he greeted Adora, the king’s niece, with a nod. “My dear, your radiance outshines the sun.” The primus simpered over the object of Errol’s affections for a moment before turning serious. His smile drained away. “Errol, you are commanded before the Judica.”

“Me?” His heart skipped like a calf. The proceedings of the benefices’ council stymied him. The church’s highest-ranking clergy were assembled to determine the process for choosing King Rodran’s successor. According to Martin they seemed more intent on ar-

guing arcane points of church law than in choosing the next king.

Enoch Sten, thin and gangly, like a scarecrow with tufts of gray hair that defied grooming, licked his lips. “They’re talking about you.”

Adora’s hand wormed its way into Errol’s, where it fluttered like a trapped bird. She paled. Her reaction frightened him more than Sten’s comment.

“What do I have to do with choosing the next king?”

An amused chuckle put a slight bend in Sten’s posture as it drifted up from his midsection. “Ah, Errol, your innocence becomes your youth, but it is a trait you can ill afford just now.” The primus turned toward Adora as he took Errol by the elbow. “Your Highness, will you excuse us?”

As they traced the winding route through native-granite hall-ways toward the hall of the Judica, Sten’s voice adopted a cadenced pattern, as if instructing a young group of postulantes to the conclave. “This isn’t flattery, Errol, though I can see that you might be flattered by the attention. You really don’t want churchmen talking about you.”

“Why would they be interested in me? What are they saying?”

Sten cleared his throat with a grimace. “Short questions with long answers, my boy.”

“But why me? Isn’t selecting Rodran’s successor more important?”

“Who knows the minds of men—especially the benefices. Sometimes it is easier to argue over the lesser concerns. But they will get to it eventually. Archbenefice Canon has the situation in hand.”

Primus Sten shook his head as if dispelling a fog. “Illustra might well fall apart without a strong, ready

leader, and the kingdom of Merakh would welcome such chaos. We must have a king. Even a bad king—and we've had our share of those—is better than none."

The process seemed a trifle ridiculous to Errol, like taking the long way around the Sprata instead of taking the Cripples when the stones were safe and dry. "Why doesn't the archbenefice just tell the rest of the benefices what to do? Isn't he the head of the church?"

The primus smiled and stroked the wayward grizzle on his chin. "He cannot. Think of the archbenefice as first among equals."

They left the halls of the watch and emerged onto the green that separated the kingdom's three powers—monarchy, conclave, and church. Up ahead the soaring cathedral and attached buildings loomed over the landscape proclaiming the preeminent power of the ecclesia. Errol shivered as they passed into the shadow of the spire.

The primus guided him toward the main entrance of a massive building beside the cathedral. The dressed blocks of stone rose above him as he approached, and he suddenly felt small and insignificant next to the giant gray slabs. An arched entrance, wide enough for ten broad-shouldered guards to march through abreast, awaited them. Just inside, four pair of church guards dressed in red with purple armbands stood with sharpened pikes. As Errol and the primus ventured to pass through, a functionary stepped from the shadows and raised his hand palm out, signaling them to stop.

"Your pardon, Primus." The man bowed, a marginal bend from the waist, less than what Errol would have expected the head of the conclave would receive.

If Enoch Sten noticed the slight, he gave no sign. "Is

there a problem? This is Earl Stone; we are commanded here by the archbenefice.”

The functionary nodded agreement, his dark eyes heavy-lidded. “The earl will have to surrender his staff. None but the watch and church guards may enter the Judica armed.”

Errol turned to present the black armband that proclaimed him an honorary captain of the watch. “Will this do?”

The functionary shook his head. “It will not. I am under orders to ensure you do not enter the Judica under arms.”

The hackles on Errol’s neck rose as alarm traced an icy finger down the nape of his neck. Why would they insist on making him defenseless? “Then I will not enter.”

Four of the guards closed in behind him, their pikes leveled at his back. “You are commanded before the Judica,” the man said. “You will attend.”

The primus clutched Errol’s arm just above the elbow. “There is no choice in this. Give them your staff.”

The churchman stepped forward and took the polished ash from him. His fingers ached at their sudden emptiness. Helpless, defenseless, he rounded on the head of his order. “Did you know they were going to take my staff?”

At Sten’s nod, he went on. “Why didn’t you warn me?”

“Because you might not have come, and whatever else we of the conclave may be, we are servants of the church.”

“Not we,” Errol said.

“Quiet, boy,” the primus snapped. “Any word you speak against the church can be used against you in

the Judica.”

Errol fumed. When he hesitated the guards moved closer, the points of their pikes now only inches from his back. With a snarl, he gave a curt nod of acquiescence to the functionary. The guards retreated a pace but kept their weapons leveled. Why was he being escorted like a prisoner?

He walked the long corridor toward the Judica’s meeting hall. Questions tumbled through his mind like lots in the drum. Why had the primus been sent to retrieve him? Where was Martin? Every time Errol dealt with the church in the past, Martin had been there to guide him—giving him the words to say, helping him to keep his tongue in check.

They rounded a sharp turn, and the doors to the domed hall of the Judica rose before him. The functionary stepped forward to speak with a detachment of guards at the entrance. The pikemen maintained their vigilance as if they expected Errol to bolt at any moment. Then the functionary gave a curt wave of his hand to motion him over.

Errol nodded and moved to step forward. The primus grabbed his arm, hauled him backward. “A word of warning, Errol. This isn’t the informality of the conclave or the camaraderie of the throne room. In many ways these churchmen run the kingdom. Most of them are good men, but some of them are sharks. With the king dying, they smell blood in the water. Speak only when you’re spoken to, be respectful, and don’t lose your temper.”

Trapped. He was trapped as surely as if Antil had locked him in the stocks. What did they want with him?

The doors opened, and a voice from within announced his presence before the archbenefice and the

Judica.

“So summoned, the accused, Errol Stone, has presented himself before the Judica.”

A chorus of voices, hundreds strong, replied, “Judica me, Deas.”

Accused?

What had he done?

2

A NECESSARY SACRIFICE

The guards behind him shouldered their pikes after a trio of church soldiers with bared swords came forward to escort Errol between the raised seats of the amphitheater to present him to the head of the church. A sea of implacable faces regarded him—some young, most old, all without a hint of acknowledgment or recognition.

The meeting place of the Judica was an enormous half-circle composed of raised seats focused on the dais where sat Bertrand Canon, archbenefice of Erinon and mediator of the Judica. In front of each of the seven sections of the half circle a blue-robed reader waited, the implements of his craft and a stack of blanks ready for carving on a simple table next to him.

Errol searched for Martin, found him up and to the left. Yet when they locked gazes, the benefice showed no recognition, no gesture of support. The planes of his broad bluff face were closed to human emotion. Errol's stomach hollowed as his gaze drifted across the mass of scarlet and purple and came to rest again on his supposed friend.

By the three, what was the charge?

His breath came in short gasps as he surveyed the blue-robed readers and saw no sign of Luis. He knew

each and every one of the men chosen to cast lots if the need arose, but he could not count any of them as friend. Watchmen, officers all, guarded the doors and the archbenefice, but Cruk was not among them.

Someone—one of the church guards—prodded him into motion, steering him toward the raised dais. The archbenefice acknowledged him with a grave nod, the barest inclination of his head. His captors guided him to a simple wooden chair on the floor to the right and below the archbenefice, where he endured the scrutiny of the Judica.

“Who would speak?” the archbenefice intoned in a cadenced singsong.

A withered benefice with thin, bloodless lips rose. “I would speak.”

“Approach, Benefice Kell. Speak no word before the Judica that is untrue. Make no statement that is incomplete. You are adjured by Deas.”

Benefice Kell gave a perfunctory nod. “Judica me, Deas,” he said. Whispers of hair framed his head like the remnants of a halo as he approached the dais. When he gestured his accusation at Errol, the sleeve of his robe slid up to reveal a desiccated arm. His flesh hung slack on his body and parched face, yet his eyes burned in his skull. They burned.

“From his own mouth,” the benefice said, “Errol Stone has admitted traffic with herbwomen, those foul beings who consort with evil spirits.”

Mutters ran through the Judica. Some sounded re-proving while others verged on exasperated. Confusion rocked him. Hadn’t this been discussed and resolved already?

“I would speak.” A younger benefice popped up from his seat.

The archbenefice held up a hand, forestalling the new speaker. "Patience, Benefice Kerran." He regarded Benefice Kell with a sigh. "Have you any other accusation to bring?"

Kell's face mottled with indignation. Red blotches marred his waxy complexion and he lifted a finger that quivered with rage to point at Errol. "Any other? What else could be required? That fiend among us has defied the law of this body and must be punished."

The archbenefice looked like a man trying not to roll his eyes. "Benefice Kell, the Judica will weigh your charge, so please restrain your zeal and answer the question. Do you have any other charges to bring against Errol Stone?"

Benefice Kell looked on the verge of launching another tirade but instead shook his head and reseated himself with a growl.

Bertrand Canon addressed the body. "Who would speak?" he inquired again.

A benefice with red hair and white soft-looking hands rose with a delicate clearing of his throat. "Hmmm, yes, well, I would speak." He ducked his head as if the sudden attention of the Judica embarrassed him, and he gave a coy smile to the benefices seated to his right.

"Approach, Benefice Dane. Speak no word before the Judica that is untrue. Make no statement that is incomplete. You are adjured by Deas."

The benefice minced toward the stand. "Oh, yes, yes, of course. Judica me, Deas." The benefice stood in the accuser's box without speaking until the archbenefice sighed and prompted him.

"Your charge, Benefice Dane?"

"Hmmm? Oh my. Well, it's not a charge so much as a concern."

The archbenefice rubbed his temples. “The Judica is met, my dear benefice, to hear charges of a clerical nature against one of the nobility. So far, Earl Stone is accused of trafficking with herbwomen.”

“And evil spirits,” Benefice Kell yelled from his seat.

“Yes, yes, and evil spirits,” the archbenefice said in a resigned tone. “Now, Benefice Dane, do you have a charge to bring?”

The benefice looked on the verge of returning to his seat, but at the last minute some inner resolve seemed to embolden him. He straightened and his voice strengthened. “I accuse Errol Stone of conspiring with Benefice Martin Arwitten and Secundus Luis Montari to cast lots for the next king without authorization from the Judica.”

Stunned silence covered the assembled. Men too dismayed to gasp stared at Errol as if he’d committed regicide while they slept. Errol tried to catch the eye of the primus, but Enoch Sten, pale and motionless, refused to look his way. Benefice Dane threw back his shoulders and preened at the effect of his words.

Then the hall erupted. Men old enough to be Errol’s father or grandfather started out of their seats to voice their shock and disapproval. Whether the target of their ire was him or Benefice Dane, Errol couldn’t tell—the cacophony of voices defied order. Many of those assembled turned to face Martin, their looks horrified, supportive, or dumbstruck. The archbenefice rose from his seat, yanked the metal-shod staff of office from its holder, and struck the floor, calling for order, but the din drowned his efforts. He signaled the guards, who drew swords and crossed blades.

The sound of steel did what the staff could not. By twos and threes, the benefices quieted, and the

archbenefice's voice rose above the din. "Sit down! Is this college nothing more than a collection of excitable boys that we should react so? My benefices, where is your self-control? Where is your sense of decorum?"

The head of the church gestured to the guards. "Seal the chamber." The archbenefice's order silenced throngs of benefices who moments before had threatened to riot within the dome. The muffled boom of the giant doors being barred echoed from the stone walls like a knell of Errol's doom. His fingers made seeking motions, twitching at the ends of his hands as they sought the comfort of a staff they no longer held. Dane's charge brought spots of darkness to his vision. Errol was innocent, but somehow the benefice had learned of Martin and Luis's cast.

How?

Plotches of emotion colored the archbenefice's face as he raised a finger to address Errol's accuser. "Benefice Dane, conspiring to usurp the authority of the Judica is a serious charge. Understand that you will be asked to provide corroboration to this charge. Perhaps your recent elevation to the orders of benefice has given you an undue enthusiasm for these proceedings?"

The archbenefice regarded Benefice Dane, and silence settled like a blanket over the hall as the Judica waited for its newest member to respond.

"Hmm? Oh my. Perhaps I've erred, Archbenefice. Does the Judica not have the right to examine any noble, including the king?"

It seemed some hint of danger or intent warned the arch-benefice. Errol watched the man's eyes narrow as his hands dropped to cradle his staff of office. He nodded assent before answering. "As much is written in

our law. However—”

“And does not each member,” Benefice Dane interrupted, “have the Deas-given right to pose a question, any question, to the accused?”

Bertrand Canon took a moment to resume his seat before answering. With fastidious care he arranged the fold of his robe and replaced his staff of office in its holder with a soft clank. Whispers filled the hall with expectancy in the silence of the archbenefice’s consideration.

“My compliments, Benefice Dane. Seldom do new benefices come to us with such . . . confidence in their ability to navigate the intricacies of church law. Yes, you do have the right to question the accused.”

Benefice Dane leaned forward, his eyes sparkling and his manner sharp. “Thank you, Archbenefice Canon. I would like to begin by—”

“However,” the archbenefice interrupted, “I am sure you are aware that we must take the charges in order. Benefice Kell’s charge of consorting with spirits must be heard first. And we have yet to hear from other esteemed members of the Judica who may wish to speak.”

A glimmer of hatred flashed in the look Dane directed at the archbenefice, but a moment later he fumbled with his stole of office, looking distracted and subservient once more. “Hmm? Of course, of course. Your pardon, Archbenefice.” He retreated up the stairs to resume his seat.

The archbenefice surveyed the hall before again offering the now-familiar intonation. “Who would speak?” Every line of his posture seemed to warn the remainder of the benefices against speaking. A moment passed that Errol measured in the still-panicked

beat of his heart before the archbenefice spoke again. "The Judica has spoken. The charges have been set before this body. Let none seek to swerve the arm of Deas from its quest for the truth."

Three raps of the archbenefice's staff upon the floor interrupted Benefice Kell's approach toward the questioner's box. Disappointment wreathed his features, and he chewed his lips in obvious frustration. The assembly rose as one. "The Judica will resume at the third hour after dawn tomorrow. The accused, Earl Errol Stone, is remanded to the watch until such time as the charges are disproven or penance prescribed."

The archbenefice scribbled a note before beckoning a pair of guards from the back of the chamber and passing the scrap of parchment to them. Two members of the watch, men whose names and handclasps were known to Errol, came forward to lead him away. Vladic, tall and dark-haired, made a gesture for him to follow without lifting his gaze above Errol's chest. Itara, short and bluff faced, fell in behind.

The crowd of benefices and their assistants thinned as the watchmen made their way toward the exit that would take them away from the church's compound and back toward the squat rectangular building that served as the quarters for the watch.

Behind Errol, Lieutenant Itara snorted. "Right waste of time this is. Takin' an honorary captain of the watch into custody on the say-so of some pampered little church toadie."

Vladic's and Itara's unrelieved black clothing comforted Errol. For too many years the red and purple of the church meant the stocks or another beating at Antil's hands, punishment for trying to drink away the memory of the death of his adoptive father, Warrel.

Though his situation remained unchanged from that of an accused prisoner, his removal from the benefices and their signature colors served to calm him. Now, if only he could devise some way to get his staff back, he would feel almost normal.

He slowed. "Lieutenant, would it be possible for us to retrieve my staff? The church guards stripped it from me on the way to the Judica. It's nothing special, but I've had it a long time now and I'd hate to lose it."

Vladic's eyes clouded at the request, but Itara merely shrugged and changed direction at the next corridor. "Can't see as that should be a problem, milord. This is all foolishness, anyways, far as I can see. I can't let you hold it, of course. The fellows in the Judica would have a frothing fit, they would."

Errol clenched his jaw and nodded. It had been a slim hope that Itara would let him have his staff—and slimmer still that it would have done him any good—but now any chance of escape was denied him.

Moments later, removed from the Judica and back in the familiar environs of the watch, Errol followed the lieutenant, who walked two paces in front of him with his staff tucked under one arm. He sighed. The church needed a scapegoat, and they would vent their collective wrath on whomever they wanted.

They wanted him, it seemed.

He tensed as they rounded a corner, recognition bringing him up short. "Itara, where are you taking me?"

"Eh? Oh, that. Right strange, that is. The archbenefice wanted me to deliver you to Cap'n Reynald's quarters. Told us to hold you inside."

Vladic rapped at the door and moved aside when the captain, the head of the watch, answered.

Reynald took in the presence of the three men, noted

Errol's position between the other two. His face hardened until it took on the aspect of weathered rock. With a sharp nod, he gestured them in.

Errol refused to take the bait. "Why am I here, Captain?"

Captain Reynald shrugged as if the question were trivial. "The archbenefice ordered you brought here. Too many eyes might witness you being escorted to his quarters."

The answer only raised more questions, questions he doubted the captain would answer. "What do we do now?"

"We wait."

3

DIVIDE AND . . .

Sweat covered Martin as if he were some wastrel seeking absolution. Perhaps in a sense he was. When dispatching Martin and Luis to find Illustra's heir more than five years ago, the archbenefice's imperative had been simple: Find the king; let no one find out.

Yet someone had found out, and though the accusation had come primarily against Errol, Dane had hit close enough to the mark to endanger not only Martin and Luis but the archbenefice and the primus as well.

Luis, newly elevated to secondus of the conclave, stood at his side. The reader's manner betrayed no hint of nerves. Then again, Luis had less to lose. Martin reflected on that for a moment and then amended the thought. No, if the wrong people discovered their purpose, they would all die, killed by the very people they sought to protect.

He wiped his hands on his cassock and lifted a blunt fist to announce himself on the thick oak planks of Enoch Sten's door. The entrance to the primus's private quarters bore mute testimony to the longevity of the office. Untold fists and knuckles had worn the finish where he pounded his presence to a deep honey color that contrasted with the age-darkened hue of the rest of

the wood.

The door opened to reveal the primus's secretary, a short waddle-throated man. Martin forced his mouth open in imitation of a smile. "Good evening, Willet. Is the primus in?"

Like any secretary, Willet guarded his employer's prestige. "A moment," he said with a half bow. "I will see if he is up to receiving guests."

A moment later, Sten appeared at the door, shooing the guardian of his image out as he beckoned Martin and Luis into his apartments. "I will see you tomorrow, Willet."

Martin inclined his head, respectful as Sten closed and bolted the door. "Will the archbenefice be joining us, Primus?"

Sten shook his head. "No. Bertrand considers the risk too great—as do I. You will both have to leave the island, of course." He sighed. "We can't risk Dane calling you to testify. I'm sorry, Martin. It means you'll no longer be entitled to the red of the Judica."

Martin waved a hand to indicate it was unimportant, but a stab of loss struck him even so. "It's not unexpected, Primus. You'll watch after them, won't you?"

Sten nodded. "Liam and Errol are too valuable to lose. Bertrand will think of something. And Errol is innocent, is he not? He didn't help with the cast, did he?"

Luis shook his head. "No, but it hardly matters. The boy is clever—he figured out what Martin and I were doing weeks ago. If Dane examines him, the truth will come out."

Sten blew air through the white wisps of his mustache. "Worse and worse. Will you cast for your destination?"

Luis gave a shy smile, the skin around his brown

eyes crinkling. “I already have. It didn’t take any great wit to see we would be forced to leave. There was no time to cast in stone, of course, but for this, wood suffices. We’re going back to Callowford. Errol and Liam’s village came up seventeen times out of twenty.”

Enoch Sten grunted. “I can’t say I’m surprised. It makes sense.” He paced the room. His old-man’s feet shuffled across the carpet in slippers. “We need to determine what makes Errol so blasted important. Have you cast for the person who holds the answer?”

Luis gave a brief shake. “Not yet. I’m taking blanks with me. We’ll have weeks on the road. I’ll fashion the lots as we go.”

The primus stalked the carpet like a caged animal, his frustration evident. Martin could hardly blame him. Years of planning and work had failed to provide the answer the kingdom desperately needed. The best readers in the conclave had failed. “Are you sure you didn’t misread the cast, Luis?”

Luis’s dark brown eyes clouded, and he rubbed the naked dome of his head with one hand before answering. “Those lots were as perfect as I could make them, Primus. I’ve never seen the like on a cast before—first Liam, then Errol, over and over again, as if the drum and the lots were spelled.”

“And your question?” the primus asked. “You cast for the soteregia—our savior and king? The question frames the answer.”

Luis nodded. “For five years I thought of little else.”

The primus uttered an uncharacteristic oath under his breath. Martin wanted to join in.

“I’m sorry, Primus,” Luis said. “In some fashion that escapes me, I’ve failed.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sten said with a snort. “You’re

the conclave's most skillful reader now that we've lost Sarin." He spat the renegade's name like an epithet.

"Other than yourself," Luis amended.

"I'm old, Luis. I can't hold the question and its possible answers the way I used to. My concentration slips."

Martin leaned forward in his chair to catch their attention. Blame and confession would not answer their questions. "I should have realized Errol's importance. Every attack on the way to Erinon came against the boy."

Sten shrugged his shoulders under the blue robe of his office. "What kind of king would Errol make?"

Martin snorted. "The boy? He's not going to be king, Primus." The idea was ridiculous. "Luis cast in wood first—Liam is our soteregia. But there is something about Errol we do not know, and I fear the enemy knows what that is."

Luis demurred. "I think your preconceptions have blinded you, my friend. According to the lots, Errol may very well be our next king. He may not be Liam, but he has courage, and Erinon's past is littered with sovereigns who lacked even Errol's nominal statecraft."

Martin grunted to concede the point, then waved his hand to brush it aside. "The boy would be a disaster, Luis, and you know it. He has a deep-seated mistrust of the church."

"Can you blame him, Martin?" Luis asked.

A weight of regret settled onto his shoulders. Too many times he'd been too slow to act. "No, but speculation gets us nowhere."

The primus nodded his agreement. "Quite. If the Judica determines that we have already cast for the king, they will make an example of us that will make

readers and priests shiver for a hundred years.”

Sten turned his attention to Luis. “The boy is an omne. I shudder to think what will happen if he comes across your lots and finds he may be the next king. He’d run. I know I would.”

“He can’t,” Luis said. His eyes pinched and his voice dipped. “After the cast, I destroyed the lots. They are only so much dust now.”

An empathetic pang like an empty longing opened in Martin’s chest at Luis’s declaration. For five years, his dear friend had worked the stones to perfection, threescore lots as identical as craft and Deas’s gift could make them—his greatest work. Countless days and nights had been spent sculpting, shaping, and polishing the stones to ensure the cast would be unassailable.

And the cast had failed.

He rested his hand for a moment on Luis’s shoulder.

“When will you leave?” Sten asked.

Martin sighed. Going back to Callowford would be a step back in more ways than one. Church law prohibited any benefice from leaving the Judica until its stated purpose concluded. When his fellow benefices discovered his absence from the city, they would likely demote him to priest. His shoulders twitched with a mental shrug. “Before dawn. Cruk will come with us.”

W

Reynald stalked the edges of the carpet, each foot-step landing half on, half off the covering. “Well, he did it—curse the old fool.” He sounded as if he were chewing rocks. “Kell actually brought his charge.”

“Beggin’ your pardon, Captain,” Itara said. “But I

don't think Kell's the problem."

"No, he's not," a voice at the doorway said.

Errol turned to see the archbenefice filling the entrance to Captain Reynald's chambers. Behind him stood the primus.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," the archbenefice said to Itara. "You have performed your duty. You've earned yourself a nice drink after today's boring post of duty. I won't keep you from it. I think you can leave Earl Stone his staff as well."

Itara and Vladic bobbed their heads and retreated through the open doorway. Primus Sten closed the door after them and shot the bolt home. Errol restrained himself from bowing to the archbenefice or the primus. His anger wouldn't allow it.

"The boy's a quick study," the archbenefice said to the primus. "He's become as proud and arrogant as any other noble."

Reynald growled behind him. "Show the archbenefice some respect, boy."

"I'd be more inclined to bow and scrape if I weren't a prisoner," Errol shot back. "Now I'm accused of something I haven't done, and a roomful of churchmen are just waiting for the chance to throw me into prison. That's if Kell and Dane don't have their way and have me executed instead."

The archbenefice chuckled. "Well, at least you're perceptive, boy. Under the circumstances, I think we can forego the genuflections. It gets tiresome after a while, anyway. Do you have a place where we can sit and talk, Captain? I think we owe Errol an explanation of the day's events. And then, of course, we'll have to devise a means for keeping Benefice Dane at bay."

Errol followed the most powerful men of the church,

the conclave, and the watch to a small dining room deep in Captain Reynald's apartments. The furnishings reflected their owner in their straight-lined elegance and simplicity. A walnut table burnished to a satin glow dominated the room, cabinets of a red wood Errol couldn't identify flanked the table and chairs, and monochromatic paintings adorned the walls. Errol compared the room to Abbot Morin's decadent sumptuousness in the abbey at Windridge and found the captain's quarters to his liking. Everything spoke of a well-made functionality he appreciated.

"Have a seat, Earl," the archbenefice said. It took Errol a moment to realize Bertrand Canon had spoken to him. He seated himself and laid his staff across his lap, but under the table his hands clenched the ash wood as if he could wring comfort or security from it.

The archbenefice took a chair at the head of the table flanked by Primus Sten on his right and Captain Reynald on his left. They arranged themselves as if their seating held some significance, but Errol couldn't discern the import.

"I need answers regarding Benefice Dane's charges, Earl Stone," the archbenefice said. "Truthful answers, or so help you, that jackal of a benefice, Duke Weir's sycophant, will have you in front of the headsman, and I will be powerless to prevent it."

Errol nodded but didn't speak. These three men wanted something from him, and that realization alone made him wary. Martin, Luis, and Cruk had made it plain that, though they liked him, in the end they considered him nothing more than a necessary sacrifice. He doubted their superiors would see things differently.

"Let's deal with Benefice Kell's charge first," Bertrand Canon said. "Perhaps we can use it to blunt Benefice

Dane's line of inquiry. Have you consorted with *herbwomen*?" The archbenefice's mouth twisted around the word as if he'd bitten into something bitter.

Errol's face heated. "Yes. As I have explained before, I hunted herbs for them." He locked eyes with the archbenefice. "They used them to help sick people in my village."

"Don't play games with me, boy," the archbenefice shot back. "I'm not interested in their deeds or your justifications. Were you touched by their spirit?"

Errol's back stiffened, and he glared at the men around the table. "Yes. And if I had to do it over again, I would welcome the embrace."

The archbenefice jerked, but before he could speak, the primus raised one hand to interject. "Perhaps we should hear the boy out, Bertrand."

The head of the church settled himself back into his chair and signaled Errol to speak with a curt nod.

"Somebody poisoned us—Pater Martin, Luis, and me—with moritweed. I went to Adele, but she couldn't figure out what poison had been used. I remember lying on her floor. I was dying. Then the herbwoman went out back and called out in a language that sounded like the sighing of trees. Then there was something there with me. It spoke to Adele in a voice of wind, told her how to cure me. She said it was *Aurae*."

The archbenefice's face pinched in disapproval. "Ridiculous. *Aurae* is unknowable. Of the three, only Deas and Eleison can be discerned. It must have been some other spirit, possibly even a *malus*. It would have been better had that thing never touched you."

Errol laced his voice with as much scorn as he could manage. "I'll try to remember that the next time I'm poisoned. Then I can die all nice and clean and pure."

The archbenefice jerked as if stung. His voice cracked across the space between them like a whip. “Boy, I’m trying to help you. Don’t you know I have the power to send you to the inquisitor?”

Errol’s staff clattered to the floor as he rose from his chair. Reynald mirrored him and drew his sword.

Errol jerked loose the laces of his shirt and slipped it over his head. Months of working with a weighted staff had added muscle to his frame, but he would always be leaner than most men. “We have our own inquisitor back in my village,” Errol said. “I don’t think he ever asked me why I was drunk. I’m pretty sure he didn’t care. He was too eager to get to the punishment.” Errol turned his back, let them see the network of old wounds that laced and relaced his skin with puckers and scars until almost no normal skin showed. “Our inquisitor’s name is Antil—Pater Antil.”

He jerked his shirt back into place. “I’m sure the church is very proud of him, Archbenefice. He’s a very zealous priest. When he would get done beating me, I’d walk or crawl to Radere, a cursed herbwoman, and she’d tend to my wounds.”

Errol dressed and seated himself, took in the ashen faces in front of him. With deliberate care, he retrieved his staff and placed it in the crook of one elbow.

Archbenefice Bertrand Canon stood and gave a slight bow of acknowledgment, bending from the waist, his movements oddly formal. “The church owes you recompense, Earl Stone. You have more than just cause to doubt her intentions, but I promise I will do whatever I can to keep you from harm.”

He turned to Captain Reynald. “Good captain, please summon a pair of the watch to escort Earl Stone to his quarters. I’m sure the events of the day have left him

fatigued.”

