

Chapter 5 – The Angel of Death

“-. Mercad Occitanier, Captain of Richard Angevin’s Ducal Guard .-“

The average Kul Tiran was expected to do his time in the navy if he had any amount of self-respect, and Mercad had more than his fair share. Which is why it was so vexing that he got sea sick within five minutes of stepping on a ship deck. Every time. The only exception was when the ship listed and his stomach decided it couldn’t wait even that long to start making tumbles.

This, unfortunately, meant that he had to settle for the army. The army which was a second-rate backup plan at best and everyone knew it. The commoners were dismissive. The nobility was patronising. The seamen he’d once dreamed of having as brothers were condescending pricks. The eternal navy-army rivalry was a joke that everyone pretended very badly not to know who was always on the wrong side of. And everyone in the army from the lowest grunt to the highest officer had a massive chip on their shoulder because of it.

Mercad lost all hopes of a normal career before his first month of training was even over, when it got out that he only enlisted after the navy didn’t work out. That people actually thought hazing would work on him was baffling, people of his size may not be unheard of back home like on the mainland, but he was by no means common so he towered over everyone else in his entire platoon. It destroyed what was left of the respect he had for his fellow man. Which was just a put-upon pretense anyway, one he played by rote because his parents hadn’t managed to instil the real thing into him despite their best efforts. Which made it all the more infuriating that putting all his bunkmates in the infirmary was still their victory in the end, as it landed him with a reputation as a savage unreliable brute that he never managed to shed.

He’d had to be very thorough in how he completed his duties in order to secure the barest scraps of advancement, and even then his career stalled well before his tour of duty finished. Part of it was his tendency towards ‘insubordination’, which was a thinly veiled way to say his superiors were complete morons whose orders could never be fulfilled without very creative interpretation. Also, the Kul Tiran Land Forces had far fewer prospects for promotion than the navy due to the much lower rate of attrition. Worst of all, the sheer state of the corps was such that they would probably fold at the first invasion. For all that they disdained them, the army

officers had no problem believing nothing would ever get past their navy rivals, and thus continued to happily grow lazy and fat at their expense.

All of which prompted Mercad to not enlist for a second tour so he could found a mercenary company instead. Only then did his competence and initiative begin getting him actual recognition, until he finally found an employer who rewarded good service with the appropriate amount of confidence, authority and coin. Mercad wasn't one to think loyal service could ever be more meaningful than that, nothing in life was really meaningful at the end of the day. But he could see how people like Duke Angevin might inspire the baseborn to believe there could be such a thing as meaningful death in his service. It helped that his principal didn't mock Mercad for his motion sickness even once. The duke even went to significant personal expense to procure potions that let him finally enjoy being out at sea. For that alone he'd honour his retainer contract no matter how good the counter offers, even beyond the practical considerations of not gaining a career-ending reputation as buyable turncoat.

Mercad would certainly much rather be out there with his principal right now, doing his part in the defeat in detail. He'd been a ranger, he knew woodland warfare better than anyone. Or if not that, then interrogating the prisoners while they were still shell-shocked and he could probably break one or three with just nail or tooth pulling. But the duke told him to stay behind and keep an eye on things because he wasn't as 'emotionally compromised.' Seeing as his principal had left his wife and sister both with unrestricted access to their guest, Mercad was forced to agree that he was the only one between the two of them with full command of his faculties. Especially since the duke was probably also right that their attackers had been after the ladies.

Mercad would play bodyguard if that was his wish. Personal taste rarely determined how he went about his job anyway, regardless of how much it overlapped (or not). Well, beyond choosing who to permanently bind himself with to begin with.

Still though, Mercad never imagined that the highest possible position for someone in his profession would circle all the way back to chaperoning love-struck teenagers. You'd think that just *one* of the pair being love-struck would soften the blow some, but the one making googly eyes was the duke's sister, instead of the suspiciously providential interloper that was far too good to be true. Mercad was thus cursed to live through that rare occasion where he could only hope for the best from a guest. Hope that he knew better than to put a foot out of line with the little lady. At least.

His principal would be upset if he returned from his mop-up action just to find his little sister tearfully woeful because Mercad was flaying their guest alive.

Divinely blessed or whatever he was.

Which Mercad had far less cause than usual to scoff at, unfortunately. The way this Ferdinand used the Light was enough to move even his black heart. And just standing in his vicinity made you feel more alive. Literally. There was something unnatural at work there, but it didn't *feel* unnatural. Confound this boy.

"I get the general idea already," Ferdinand told Lady Annari after she finally stopped espousing the grand benefits of being an irresistible magnet to every wild creature under the sun, as if Mercad didn't already have enough trouble keeping her removed from his contempt for the general intelligence of humanity. "You're talking about being in tune with nature. But how exactly do you get the animals to realize you're in tune with nature? Or react positively? Nature is pretty bloody at the end of the day."

The raven cawed in Lady Anna's lap.

"Oh, now you're just being silly. It's not the animals that's important, or the plants even. You're not supposed to care about them any more than you care about gold. They come and go just as fast." Spoken every bit like a girl who never had to worry about gold her whole life. "It's like... like night follows day and winter follows spring. Well, eventually. Everything you see is born, grows and eventually goes back to where it came from. Only the nature of things stays the same. It has endless branches, but you're not supposed to *see* them any more you can see the thoughts in your mind. As long as it breathes and can grow from the warmth of sunlight or well, fire, you can be part of the growth of... well, anything. Trees, animals, people--"

"Weeds?"

"Yes, weeds too, you jerk," the Lady slapped their guest's arm, decorum was well and truly dead alongside her manners and proper vocabulary. "We all come out of nature and return to nature. But since we people can actually decide when and how to do some of these things, we can learn to extend this control to everything that doesn't have the self-awareness to, well, want things. Especially if it's helpful to them somehow. Want and instinct aren't the same thing, you see."

"Can you do it?"

“... No.” Truly, Lady Anna had mastered the art of looking dignified even while pouting.

Ferdinand waited for her to continue. When she didn't, he resumed writing in that notebook of his. Or drawing, now. Something. The raven seemed inordinately interested. Definitely unnatural.

Both of them.

“But I don't need to,” Lady Annari declared, she never did have the best patience. “I'm a lady, not a druid. I'll do my part so they can do theirs.”

“Your part being lording it over every critter and fowl through song and story?” Mercad carefully didn't react to that, or the way Lady Valeria covered her mouth to keep from laughing where she was sat nearby on a lounge. That was almost word for word what *she'd* told her sister-in-law, back when the latter's passion for ‘becoming a fairy tale princess’ proved more than a fleeting whim. “How does it work for beasts that aren't the familiar of a godlike being living in a fortress in the sky?”

Mercad carefully didn't let his mind jump back into *that* whole other kettle of worms either. Not the least because he couldn't just dismiss it out of hand as tall tales. He'll wait until his principal returned.

“It works just fine!” Lady Annari said hotly, standing up determinedly. “Here, I'll show you—”

Mercad cleared his throat. “Best not to wander off when bandits might still be about, milady.”

“You don't need to treat me like an idiot!” The young lady rounded on him next. “I know that. And I know they weren't bandits either.” *‘So there!’* was not thrown in at the end there, thankfully.

“I hope you don't plan to shout it from the rooftops when we get home too, sister-in-law,” Lady Valeria said idly. “Your brother has enough things to deal with as it is.”

Lady Anna blushed. It made for a striking contrast with her grey eyes, especially on such a pale skin, but she did not seem otherwise cowed.

This time, it was Ferdinand who cleared his throat. “So, plants. Can you make them grow faster?”

Blatantly knowing what the lad was doing, the lady nonetheless played along and sat back down on the hastily carved log bench with a huff. “No. My brother wouldn’t let me undergo those rites.”

“She means my husband wasn’t fool enough to let her drink unknown potions.”

Mercad had been there for when Lady Valeria still added ‘for a childish fancy’ at the end of that.

Lady Annari scowled. “He didn’t say anything about the other rites I took.”

“Because you made sure he wasn’t there when you went and inhaled magic fumes. Fool him once, shame on you. Don’t complain that you failed to fool him a second time, if he weren’t so observant we both might be dead or captive right now.”

“That’s emotional blackmail!”

“No, Anna. You’ll just have to wait until you’re of age and no longer subject to your brother’s authority. Then you can be entirely responsible for the consequences of your actions like the rest of us.”

“So it does involve expanded consciousness,” Ferdinand cut in with that same perfect timing that reversed their ambush. “Well, I’ve already got that.” Obviously. “So what are the actual mechanics?”

Lady Anna tossed her hair in a huff, but nonetheless replied. “It’s all about likeness – well, not just likeness. It’s like... like every poison or venom usually has the cure somewhere within a stone’s throw. It’s like herbalism, ever notice how ribwort looks like a ribcage? It’s even in the name, and what does it do? It mends injuries even without making a potion out of it. It’s the same with a lot of things, beans look like kidneys, sunflowers look like the sun, walnuts basically improve thinking and I saw the druids use them as reagents to heal brainstorms, and guess what walnuts look like?”

Something seemed to dawn in Ferdinand’s gaze. “Huh. You’re saying it’s a mindset, except you use magic to make your view of things override causation by leveraging stuff you have in common. Or you charm spirits to do that for you. It’s basically you actively overriding causality with synchronicity, and vice versa as needed. And you can do that because things made by nature look and work like the other things in nature they can best affect. Or be affected by. My herbalism teacher never put it to me like that.”

“Your teacher? Is he a druid too?” Lady Anna asked, and Mercad decided to pay very close attention now. “Or an alchemist? A spirit medium of some sort perhaps?”

“She. And no, she’s not technically a herbalist herself. She just plays with herbs occasionally, when work on the farm is light.”

Wait what? A farm? He had to be joking-

“That’s very surprising of you to say.” Lady Anna said, looking and sounding exceedingly alarmed as if her hopes were about to be dashed on the rocks. “I thought you were an acolyte with the church at first, but then you wouldn’t be out adventuring and killing bandits. Especially not with your method for conveyance and interesting weaponry. I assumed... But surely a powerful man such as yourself can find better prospects than being a farmhand.”

“My father’s a cobbler,” the boy said dryly with not an ounce of shame. “Also, the farm is ours, so it’s not like I’m a guttersnipe or anything.”

“... Oh.” Lady Anna, if anything, seemed like she’d just been shot right in the heart.

Mercad carefully hid his relief. It wouldn’t do to show openly how glad he was to find out that his charge’s romantic notions were doomed from the start.

“Say, do you happen to have one?”

Lady Anna made a valiant, if ultimately futile, attempt to hide the emotional blow from the sudden and tragic death of her romance. “One what? A spirit? Does Mister Huginn count?”

“A walnut. There’s something I want to try all of a sudden.”

They did, in fact, have walnuts as part of their provisions. Mercad pre-empted Lady Anna’s request and made sure to pick one of the smart-mouthed slackers to get them. One or the other was perfectly fine, clever tongues made for good envoys and the lazy tended to come up with the most efficient ways to get the job done. But having both traits in the same person led all too easily to insubordination, so a good commander never wasted drudgework.

When the boy (*farmboy*) was presented with his handful of walnuts, he picked one up, brought it close to his eye for inspection and hummed. He then rubbed the walnut between his palms. His eyes took on a golden tint. Then they began to glow outright. Mercad should have tensed, but the Light, frustratingly, only made men feel peace.

Even killers.

“Talk me through it.”

Lady Anna was too star-struck to hear him. Again.

“Milady.”

Finally, the little lady snapped out of her daze. “I’m sorry, could you please repeat that, milord?”

What did she mean ‘milord’, he’s a-

“Talk me through it. How do you synchronise with a plant? What’s the first principle of druidism? How did the folks in Drustvar put it to you?”

The raven hopped out of her lap to watch from the closer vantage of the girl’s shoulder. Its dark plumage almost disappeared amidst her tresses.

“...Is a flower more beautiful than the other? Is a spring clearer than the other? Is a blade of grass taller than the other? Everything has its strength, beauty and feat. It is in the nature of things that the forest should have different kinds of trees, grass, flowers and animals. There is no finger from the same hand like the other, but all of them are needed to strike the iron. Is the apple tree wiser than the plum tree or the pear tree? Is the left hand better than the right? Differently sees the left eye from the right?”

“They do, actually.” The boy interrupted her with all the rudeness of the common man, maybe his claims as to his origin weren’t so outlandish. “But I think I see what you mean. The ones from above have their purpose and the ones below have theirs. The great have theirs and the small have theirs. The quick have theirs and the slow have theirs. The ones that were had their purpose and the ones that come will have theirs.”

Anna nodded peaceably. “You can be like the earth and everything it offers you, the sky with its rain that feeds the earth, the sun and its heat that lights your home and your land, the moon that brings peace to your sleep, even the stars who watch over it will heed the call of the spirit.”

“Thank the mountain for its teachings and its iron you gather from it, thank the forest for everything you take from there, thank the spring for the water you drink, thank the tree for the works it shows you.” Now it was the boy speaking as if repeating some long lost wisdom. “Thank the good man which brings you joy and a smile on your face.” Now that might be going a bit far- “I’m starting to remember reading something very similar to this, a long time ago. It’s

not quite what I was looking for, but I think I know where to start working in the mathematical ratios and sacred geometry now.”

Say what now?

“Thank you, milady. I may be some time.”

“... Alright?”

But the boy no longer had eyes for anything but the walnut. The walnut which he held right in front of his eyes. Glowing eyes. Intent. Unblinking.

After five minutes of that, Lady Anna huffed in annoyance. “Happy to help.”

The boy did not react.

Lady Valeria was at least more pragmatic. “Well, he did say he’d be some time.”

‘Some time’ turned out to be exceedingly accurate. The boy didn’t move or say anything for hours, all the way to late evening when the duke finally returned with news of victory. He was accompanied by the bulk of their men, with just four of their force too injured to walk by themselves. There were twice as many prisoners for Mercad to squeeze answers out of as well, later.

“Sir,” Mercad greeted him. “Welcome back. I see things went well?”

“Exceedingly.”

“And the... far seeing provided by our guest?”

“Not treachery, despite your earnest hopes.” Richard Angevin glanced to where their guest was still... doing whatever he was doing with that walnut. Alone, now, save for the raven grooming itself next to him. Lady Anna had joined Lady Valeria under the sunshade. “What have you learned?”

“Our guest refuses to do us the courtesy of being from some lofty church or noble heroic bloodline. He’s a farmboy.” For all that lady Anna was too easily given to friendship, she tended to entreat information with distressing ease. Easier than even Mercad could when his most effective tools were denied him. It was galling, but all a man could do was cope.

“Ah, so he’s not any mere hero, he’s a *fairy tale* hero.”

Mercad grimaced. His principal took far too much joy in pretending to have more in common with his sister than he actually did. How would a farmboy even afford such exotic equipment? Those boomsticks could only have come from the dwarves, Kul Tiras had been badgering them to help make cannons a reality for decades to no luck, how did this boy come by them?

“Cheer up, man, by the looks of him he’s completely out of it. His willingness to leave himself so vulnerable in your presence should tell you all you need to know.”

“... I don’t trust it.” He’d never forget the way that forcefield appeared between heartbeats and stopped him and all his men without even a blink from the boy. That had been galling as well, to be rendered impotent so completely. Mortifying too, when he realized what kind of ally his principal had gained. What ally he could have antagonised because he acted without orders. Could have deprived him of. Killed out of hand because he lost his *discipline*.

Today had not been a good day.

Duke Richard went to greet the ladies first, proving yet again worthy of Mercad’s service by masterfully persuading them to give them and their guest some privacy without needing to make it an order. When he came back, the two of them approached the young man.

That was when the boy came out of his trance – not as out of it as he seemed then? – looked at them, glanced over the injured, seemingly decided that none of them needed his intervention, and then turned to the bird that had been grooming itself next to him the whole time. Held out the walnut, which he cracked open to reveal a small nut-sized *brain*. “It’s the opposite extreme of what I was going for, but it’s something right?”

The raven stared at the child, then slowly began to nibble at the brain, the kid had turned the core of a walnut into a *brain*, what the fuck?

“I never bought the official story about Odyn and Helya.”

The raven snapped its head up so fast Mercad didn’t even see it move, only the blur of brain bits scattering everywhere.

Something changed in the world. The weight of some unseen regard descended upon them with the weight of ages. From one moment to the next Mercad felt coiled like a spring pressed under too much weight. Suddenly he couldn’t get his feet to move. Distantly, he realised his principal had also frozen stiff next to him.

Somewhere above and ahead, shadows flickered in the air, forming vague shifting shapes despite being out in the sunlight.

“-. Richard Angevin, Duke of Hillsbrad .-“

When he was young, Richard Angevin wanted to be a priest.

“The story of Odyn and Helya contradicts prior histories and even current events. For another, it contradicts *itself*. The tale supposedly goes that Odyn needed Helya to do literally everything for him. She ripped the Halls of Valor from Ulduar, she lifted them into the sky, she moved them half-way across the ocean, she was apparently capable of doing the reverse or even crash them into a volcano whenever she wanted. Helya also created the ritual that empowered Odyn to see and act in the spirit world, meaning she was the ultimate authority on death and shadow magic between them. Later, after they became enemies because she became the willing minion of the literal devil, she was apparently capable of trapping Odyn and his entire army of ascended warriors in his Halls for eternity, without any object of power or even access to the place.”

Richard had attended service, honoured all the holidays and read all the scriptures cover to cover.

“By any reading, she was *always* the one with the power advantage in that relationship. Yet we’re supposed to believe she was still somehow completely helpless when Odyn supposedly killed her, shattered her spirit and twisted her into the first val’kyr. Took away her free will too, apparently, like that wasn’t *her* specialty as the great sorceress capable of binding even the Loa of Death. All for the high crime of opposing Odyn’s supposed plan to turn some of his worshippers into ghostly guides of the dead against their will. Because none of them would volunteer, the chronicle goes, as if the valkyra don’t exist. We’re talking about the same people who are going to volunteer *en masse* to ‘live as phantoms for all eternity’ just because some up-jumped necromancer will tell them to. And worse.”

Richard had then gone to whatever lengths a child could think of to entreat his parents to procure whatever apocryphal writings they could find as well.

“That the valkyra order exists is enough on its own to indicate that the writings were tampered with. That Helya has spent the past few thousand years doing everything her side of the story accuses Odyn of doing reads like projection. That only Odyn’s side of the story is criticised in the chronicle reads like gaslighting. I’d have had an easier time not assuming slander if they just made Odyn the villain outright. And to truly put the last nail in the coffin of this bizarre story, Helya was apparently able to escape her fate because Loken, of all people, supposedly restored her free will.”

What Richard was hearing now wasn’t in any of the texts.

“Loken. The minion of Yogg’Saron, the grand brainwasher himself. The one who needed the Titans themselves to imprison him after corrupting and brainwashing the entire world at the beginning of history. The idea that those who brainwashed all the *other* keepers would turn around and restore the free will of anyone is absolutely laughable.”

What he was hearing now made shivers go down his spine at the mountain of history that dwarfed ancient human history outright.

“Thorim only escaped that fate because he’s been sitting in the Temple of Storms for ages, contemplating his navel over losing his wife and everything else that happened. I suppose being made of metal and stone could make you lot a tad slow at processing emotions. Or anything else. I admit that immortality is a good tradeoff, but it’s sure inconvenient for us normal people when we’re the ones who have to deal with all the cataclysms caused by your mistakes.”

These names. Some of them made Richard dream of glory while others made his heart squeeze in his chest.

“Now, it’s not impossible that Odyn was naive in the extreme – in which case I seriously have to wonder what the Titans were thinking making him Prime Designate – but I think it more likely that his relationship with Helya as surrogate father and daughter was no empty claim. In fact, I’m inclined to believe it was fully reciprocated. I’m not *entirely* sure that Odyn’s version of events is a perfect mirror of reality either. But I’m willing to exclude malice. I’m even willing to exclude knowing lies. With all the aforementioned as the only alternative, I’ll err on the side of an agent of the Light any day.”

... Why was Ferdinand saying all this? With them there? Why had he *deliberately* waited until they were there – until Richard himself was there to hear all of it?

“What I do question, however, is whether Odyn’s memory can itself be trusted, and if he is otherwise of sound judgment.”

The raven’s gaze was far too intense to belong on an animal.

“The simple fact of the matter is that the barrier is still there. The chronicle I’ve read says Helya used the same magic that was used to seal off the elemental planes, but that’s just it – you can’t just *cast* those things. For one, she didn’t separate any planes, it’s all still here, on this one, so that’s already a suspect claim. And secondly, even if she did, the Titans made wards, rites, entire facilities to anchor works like that, *none* of which she could have leveraged without *being there*. The only way her spell could work is if it draws power from the Halls of Valor themselves. Or, since this has no doubt been checked ad nauseam, from *someone*. I trust you see where I’m going with this?”

Richard suddenly wished he could dismiss everything as the ramblings of a boy given to fancies.

“Flaming beards aren’t scars, and the taint that the molluscs of yore infested the elementals with is transmissible.” What did *beards* have to do with anything, and molluscs of what? What taint? “More than that, history is rife with champions of the Light and Order being fooled and warped just through proximity to them or their agents until they become slavish minions. The Light works intuitively, so what happens when the intuition itself is impaired? If the Spirit is what nourishes all parts of the self *not* sustained by the physical form, what happens when it’s bled? Poisoned, maybe? Strategically trimmed, perhaps? Could just parts of the mind or memory be deprived of sustenance until they just.... wither and fade so slowly that their passing goes unnoticed? The ritual that empowered you to see into the Otherworld by ripping out your eye was Helya’s. Her power has been part of you all this time. What are the odds she even bound the same wraith to help her strike at you after her turn?”

... Richard wished he knew why this had anything to do with them. Should he step in and ask him? Ask something? Stop him? Could he even move if he wanted. The raven... Ferdinand was no longer talking to him like it was some intelligent beast, no, he wasn’t talking to the raven at all.

“It’s admittedly just a theory, but either you’ve already investigated it, or it never occurred to you and that says all there needs to be said.”

The pressure in the air seemed to spike as if... as if Richard was being stepped on by a giant that had only now put all his weight on the same foot.

Ferdinand regarded the bird. "I've been initiated in Alchemy recently." He did not seem to be tense at all, even as the air grew more and more severe with every word he spoke. "I'm not any good, but the Great Work apparently involves the essences of the ego and the shadow being reabsorbed, unifying the parts of the self. Sounds to me like you and Helya underwent the opposite. Maybe she's not the only one fallen. Or falling."

The sun seemed to dim. Richard's breath stalled. The air filled with *wrath*.

Ferdinand began ripping pages out of his pocketbook. "You probably know all these staves already but--"

The bird swallowed the pages fast as lightning and then the notebook itself was disappearing down its gullet-

SQUAWK

Ferdinand suddenly had the bird by the throat. "Your pardon but--"

A sword of shadow struck the Light with a gong.

The dimming world came alight. The mountain pass shook with the force of a death knell. The sound rattled Richard's bones. He fell to one knee with a gasp as the voices of his wife and sister and men rose in shock far behind him, the pressure in the air suddenly lifted – no, *diverted*-

The sword came down a second time. Light met shadow with the ringing of thunder.

Shadow lost.

The Light cascaded outwards across the earth, into the air, over *him* to soothe his aching lungs, calm his frantic mind, give strength back to his limbs and clarity to his sight and then he could see...

"- I simply *had* to know if you've a teleportation device or a proper pocket dimension in that craw of yours."

Richard saw...

The Light reveals.

He saw an angel.

“Impudence, indiscretion, hubris, and now you dare even maltreat my Lord’s own familiar, how much further will you overstep, *boy?*”

The Light outlined the shimmering form of an angel glaring down the length of her sword at the back of Ferdinand’s head while he was peering down the raven’s beak he forcefully held open.

Ferdinand let the raven go. His protective field caused the sword to scrape away from him as he rose. “Indiscretion, bloodthirst, sentimentality, and now you infringe on the realm of the living despite the very strict precepts of your office, should I throw your words back in your face, *val’kyr?*”

Val’kyr. Slain. To choose. Richard drew his sword before he could think better of it, but didn’t know who to aim it between the angel and their guest – he’d given him *guest right* only for him to... But did that count with angels? Should it? She was a giant, how would a mere man even fight something like that, could mortal weapons even touch her, she was see-through, a spectre of gold and deep sea hues. Choice of the slain? Or was she here to choose who would be slain, who to slay-?

“Stand back, brave men,” the woman commanded, though she didn’t look away from the boy. “This need not concern you.”

“Says the angel of death to the man she’s been stalking.”

“What?” Richard balked before he could think twice. “She’s-you’re here for me?”

“She’s-“

“Still your tongue, insolent whelp-“

Ferdinand turned and met her eyes.

He flinched and fell to a knee, holding his head as his Shield of Light burst in a wave of sunspray.

The angel reeled back and fell down from the sky with a crash.

Richard stared at the rising dust cloud, blinking rapidly as the light motes cascaded over him, they felt like... not enough to count next to the Light that was already in him from the wave

before, blessing him with strength beyond strength and sight beyond the unseen. His sword moved from one figure to the other, not knowing what- who-

“Sir,” Mercad rasped at his side, his own sword pointing at the angel without hesitation. “I know you like to extol the ineffable virtues of the Light and its all-pervasiveness, but this is a bit on the nose, isn’t it?”

“Nngh...” Ahead of them, Ferdinand grunted. “That’s... quite a bit...” The boy climbed unsteadily to his feet with bleary eyes. “Geirrvif. The Watcher. Judge of Valhalas.”

“I am *not* that creature.” Across from the boy, the angel woman rose to stand somewhat more gracefully, but her wings stayed lowered and there was no lustre on her spectral skin. “I don’t know what you saw or how, Prophet, but I would never be caught presiding over such a poor excuse of an imitation of my Lord’s Trials, either alive or dead.”

Prophet-Angel-Prophet-Angel-*Prophet* the world felt strangely thin around Richard Angevin as the only wrath in the air was suddenly his own. “That’s it! Enough! What is *happening* here?” His grip went so tight on his sword hilt that his whole arm shook as he finally found himself at the end of his patience. There was a heat in his breast, a beating in his temples, his lungs felt thick and thin at the same time, and the colours of the world – they were changing, brighter, brilliant like the glory of divinity manifest, how could it be brought so low so easily? Why? “I will no longer be treated as a bystander in my own encampment! Explain yourselves! Both of you!” The world grew gold and bright at the edges and then further inward as he-

“She’s-“

“Do not speak of things you have no-“

The raven flew up to caw in the angel’s face and she stopped. “Lord Odyn, why would-?“ The world rippled around the bird like a veil and Richard couldn’t understand her words anymore, he could still hear them but for some reason couldn’t comprehend, yet it wasn’t a different tongue and he felt instinctively like he should still – *the Light reveals* – as long as he believed that, he should be able to-

“She’s a val’kyr. A chooser of the slain. Her purpose is to reap the souls of those fallen in battle and ascend the worthiest to the Halls of Valor.” Finally getting an answer to one of his many questions was enough – barely – to derail Richard’s train of thought. “There they will become val’kyr themselves or join Odyn’s army of heroes in golden stormforged bodies.”

The realisation came over Richard like a splash of ice water. “I was supposed to die today.” The warm pulse within him scattered but did not dissipate, coursing instead through him, uneven and raw, unrealised.

Ferdinand was watching him intently now, but did not deny it. “The number of val’kyr is limited, being there for the death of valorous souls would literally have to rely on some form of foresight. Light visions don’t necessarily lend themselves to the most accurate coordinates of space and time, but they are very good at leading people to people, down the best path to their ultimate purpose by their own reckoning. If anyone in this benighted land is worthy of ascension to Valholl it could only be you, Duke Lionheart.”

Richard Angevin stared at the child. He’d never been called by that moniker in his life. He’d never been called by any moniker. His grip on his sword had not slackened in the least but it was no longer painful, his arm didn’t shake anymore as if he’d been brought to the very edges of his strength, he felt brave and mighty but he wasn’t – he was barely eighteen, he hadn’t been *tested* yet, in any capacity.

“... My lord.”

Richard turned his head to look at his captain. The man was looking down at him with a bizarre mix of consternation and what might have been wonder on literally anyone else.

Away from him, the angel spoke. “... My lord vows He will repay this favour, Prophet, and I will pay mine.”

Richard didn’t turn. His gaze was stuck on his reflection in Mercad’s cuirass.

“I’ve more to convey to him. Another day. We shall see on which side the debt lies then.”

It was cloudy and dull, barely more than a foggy image, but the enamel gleamed with all the fastidiousness of a man who never failed to maintain his equipment.

“Another day, then.”

Out of his line of sight, the angel of death took to the sky and finally disappeared from his senses.

On the gleaming face of castle-forged steel, Richard Angevin’s own eyes looked back at him shining gold.