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Ascension

Voices carried on the wind. There were more whispers, rants, shrieks of terror and woe than the city was used to. Bloodgate was the hive of evil. No one disagreed with that. But tonight it was so much more. It was a safe haven from a War that was eating Mystyria around the edges like a festering disease. The streets of the commoner districts were lined with foreign merchant carts, makeshift tents, and noblemen who had never seen such conditions. War was driving people miles from home and somehow most of them had ended up *here*.

Bloodgate was a horrible city filled with terrible people and now, thanks to the weeks-old conflict, it was swimming with thousands more. There were so many vile and wicked corners of the world but the blackest spot on Mystyria was contained within a hundred-mile radius, in the confines of towering black walls. At least there was peace and quiet, for now.

Beris Parkes didn't like this place. He didn't like the Mydianites or the Drakin. He certainly didn't like their gods. It eluded him as to how he managed to be so well known here; how Gaston Rhizei had entrusted him with keeping the castle grounds free of the war-

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stricken newcomers. If he knew—if anyone knew the secrets Beris held—death would be a lucky fate.

So many things kept sleep from coming. The barracks were sweltering and the constant snores of his surrounding comrades made it difficult to get any rest. With the approaching summer, large mosquitoes were plentiful in the humid air. Even the voices of the patrolling guards could be heard with great clarity through the windows. Beris' mind groggily slipped in and out of slumber as he eyed the moon's silvery glow across the wooden floor.

“. . . sleeping inside with the rest of 'em,” a voice said from the outside, two floors below.

“. . . business at the temple, he does,” came another.

The last thing Beris heard was a pair of metal boots clinking off, completing the rounds of the barracks.

Suddenly there were hands on his shirt, pulling him upright in the bed. It was so dark in the sleeping quarters that he couldn't make out who it was, nor did he have time to count how many were standing over his attacker's shoulder. There were at least three, as far as he could tell, but the world suddenly closed up when a rancid, stifling sack was thrown over his head.

A thick cord was drawn tightly around his neck, probably to keep the bag from slipping off. Beris gasped for air and he tried to pull the makeshift noose away while his attacker fought to keep his hands down. Several men, ignoring his screams of anger—of humiliation, forced him back onto the bed and bound his hands and feet. He struggled to wrestle himself away but it was impossible in the dark, with little air, and with so many wanting to bind him.

His head quickly hit the floor as his assailants started to drag him away. He tried to kick—to roll around but a heavy, gauntleted fist slammed into his unsuspecting face.

“Settle down,” a deep voice called. He didn’t recognize it. Whoever his abductor was, he certainly wasn’t one of the regulars who patrolled the Atrium.

There was blood gushing from his ripped mouth but Beris couldn’t do anything about it. The lack of air, the musty smell of manure, and the violent blow to the head were starting to make him black out.

His body endured two more beatings as his attackers dragged him down twin sets of stairs. A grinding sound echoed as his back felt smooth wood turn to granite. With the gentle breeze came the realization that they were outside. There were hushed whispers all around. He could barely make them out but he knew their gawking faces were watching—standing on porches, gazing from windows, and wondering just what this man had done to deserve such a fate.

Beris knew, although in his heart he had done nothing wrong. There were gods up there who smiled down on him. He was just a good man in a crowd of evil ones.

“You’ve been misbehaving, Beris.” This was the deep voice that spoke earlier. “Lord Mydian is very displeased by your traitorous ways. What kind of fate do you think a wretch such as yourself deserves?”

He didn’t speak, and not because he thought the message wouldn’t carry through the manure sack. He had nothing to say. Of course Mydian wouldn’t be pleased. Beris was, after all, a Lylussian. There wasn’t a more loathed or dangerous title to be found in the city of the Black.

Once again, his head rattled as the men hauling him hurried up a long set of stairs. Beris recognized them—the thick marble strides, as well as the massive groaning that the doors made. They were taking him to the Temple of the Master.

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Easily the largest church on Mystyria devoted to Mydian, the Master's Temple could be seen from miles away, just like the Martax toward the north. The temple normally housed thirty thousand occupants during its most holy of rituals but tonight it was empty. Beris could sense the massive echo as his flailing, bound hands ricocheted off of marble pews.

It was a three-hundred yard trek from the doorway to the altar. When the priests gave sermons, their voices were carried over by magical conveyers that hung from the balconies. The attackers were dragging him right to the spot where the greatest prophets and soothsayers of Mydian spoke and worshipped. If they were going to punish him, why would they bring him to such a place?

Low, resonating chants filled the temple with an almost hypnotic sound. It began very slowly, very deep. Suddenly, the crack of thunder vibrated the windows and the chorus of men joined its fury with surprising accuracy. To Beris, it seemed like they were drawing the storm in—singing an alluring melody that whispered to chaos.

Firm hands grabbed him around the ankles and forearms and hoisted him onto a very hard, very solid surface. His teeth rattled as his head banged against it. Blood was still spurting from his busted lip and he couldn't help but swallow a bit. Coupled with the smell of manure, he was starting to feel sick.

A knife cut the cord and the sack was yanked off. Blinding light made his eyes wince but as the massive temple and its occupants slowly drew into focus, he started to wish the smelly bag was still over his face.

The first thing he noticed was the bald man standing over him. His champion-like armor was thick and heavy, sporting Mydianite imagery all over, but his medallions and braided necklaces made him

look more like a priest. A cold stare shone in his eyes and his mouth was turned up in a vengeful grin.

Behind him were two guards—Mydianites who Beris didn't recognize. As a matter of fact, he'd never seen any of the men standing in the temple tonight. The war-priest, the guards, and the twenty or so chanting acolytes were new faces in a place Beris had been quite often.

Through the red-stained windows he could see the flashes of lightning as the storm grew closer. Oily lanterns hung from invisible lampposts along the ends of the pews and their magical glow stuttered with each boom of thunder. The musty smell of blood was ripe in the air. Offerings to Mydian were common, but there had been no service tonight.

"We know there is a Lylussian stronghold in Bloodgate," came the deep voice of the armored priest. "Where is it and how many of you are there?" His hands stayed clasped in front of him, his fixed grin never leaving.

"Enough to avenge what happens to me tonight," he said defiantly. In his heart, he was dead. He knew it as well as his murderous abductors. With his last ounce of life, he would hold the secrets of his friends and fellowship.

"There aren't enough Lylussians on Mystyria to avenge what will happen to you tonight, Beris. But do you really think we'd have gone through all this trouble just to kill you?" The priest pointed an armored finger toward the chanting acolytes.

"Peel his skin till he tells us!" said a guard over the priest's shoulder.

"You're wasting your breath," the armored one said. "Beris here knows many secrets and he's been taught all too well not to give

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them up. But we don't need him to." He approached a large statue of the Master.

It depicted an elderly man, Mydian's true form, with his hands raised above and his head thrown back, as if siphoning the very evil that lingered on the air. Jabbed in the heart of the statue was a black dagger with fire-red gems in the hilt. Thick cracks created webbing around the 'wound'. There was magic there—in both the knife and the stone effigy that pulsed with energy.

The armored man jerked the blade out and as he did, blood began to flow from the chest. A couple of chanting priests seemed oblivious as it rained down over them. Beris started to writhe on the table but the guards held him down—his back was flush against the cold, marble altar.

"You should feel honored," the priest said, dancing the blade over his chest. Beris held his breath, watching as the dark, crimson blood dripped onto his shirt. "There are people in this city who would give their lives for the privilege of being Mydian's carriage." The blade's tip pressed gently into the flesh over Beris' heart. Sweat was running down his brow, stinging his eyes but he didn't care. His attention was fixed on the priest's steady hands as he rested them both on the pommel of the dagger, as if to thrust it in.

The chanting had picked up, moving with such speed that the acolytes reciting it were dancing in place. A crack of thunder shook the temple and suddenly the lanterns fizzled out. It was eerily dark inside but with each flash of lightning, the church was cast in an ominous red glow filtered by the windows.

Beris gritted his teeth as the priest uttered some sort of prayer or curse. In one quick motion, the blade jabbed right through his heart, snagging the altar beneath. His eyes glazed over and he screamed but for some reason, there was no pain. Surely the priest had damaged

a nerve—something that kept the terrible trauma from reaching his brain. But as quickly as that realization came, he started to feel heat.

There was an intense fire that emanated from the blade, igniting his insides and sending needles of pain through his fingertips. The guards continued to hold him down since his impulse was still to struggle and squirm. Beris watched the unholy blood from the blade drain into his body and he feared he understood what was happening.

A sharp pain hurt his temples. He felt great pressure behind his eyes, as if something was in his head, prying his brain out through the holes in his face. Blood was trickling down his cheeks like tears. Flashes of an angry, evil man stared at him but when he blinked, they were gone.

The chanting continued, as did the storm. Windows were shattered by flaming hunks of molten rock that seemed to fall from the sky. They landed in the temple and started burning whatever they touched. Beris didn't see any of it. His mind—his *soul*, was between worlds when the destruction on Mystyria began.

For a moment he seemed to hover above the priest and his acolytes but then, as quickly as he left his body, he was transported to another place. The temple, his broken remains, and all of Mystyria for that matter, was gone.

He was left standing in a dark room with a faint light in the distance. His body was naked, but healed. There was no hole in his heart, nor were there cuts on his lip. There was no taste of blood in his mouth or sound that he could hear. The dark abyss was devoid of anything remotely familiar.

This was Erolas. It was the purgatorial world between the heavens and Mystyria. Whenever the gods were bad, or the mortals

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for that matter, they spent a random duration of their afterlife in this place. Beris had a good soul and normally he would have questioned how he ended up in such a realm.

But he knew.

He also knew that he would stay here until the one manning his Mystyrian body either relinquished it, or lost it to the clutches of death. Beris sat on the unseen ground and rested his face on his knees. He had a feeling that Erolas was going to be his home for quite a while.



“The ritual has failed.”

“It hasn’t failed, just wait.”

A sensual, but awkward feeling swelled in his new bones. His hands balled into fists as his nose drew in the smoke-filled temple. With it came a disgusting odor of sweat, flesh, and fear. There was a mortal’s ear lingering just over his face—listening for signs of life, and inside the tight-fitting vessel was *plenty* of it.

The eyes of the Godflesh flew open and filled with carnal malice. With the smell of blood just a lick away, he sprung from the altar and wrapped strong fingers around the nearest man—a guard who had been surveying the success of the ritual. Fangs grew from his mouth, their points reaching past his chin. A final scream of surprise and horrid fear left the guard as his neck was shred like paper. A chorus of shrieks and murmurs echoed in the temple as the twitching Mydianite’s blood painted the altar and the god he’d just helped to revive.

Blood was the only thing that made the mortals worthy of anything, he thought. It was the only thing that the gods had in common with such insignificant creatures. He wiped the red mess

from his chin and allowed his fangs to shrink back. Glowing eyes with a renewed vigor looked the room over with scrutiny. He trusted no one.

“Lord Mydian!” came a joyous response from a priest standing to his side. “I am—”

“I know who you are, Magnus Kuglar.” Beris’ voice came out just like normal, but lacked any sense of emotion or humanity. “Tell me, why has the ritual taken so long to complete? I was supposed to be here two weeks ago.” He studied his mortal hands with great interest.

“We needed the Summoner’s Dagger, my lord. Supplies aren’t so easy to move about now with the War and all. The road to Xenthia grows more dangerous as the days pass.”

Mydian swung his body around and planted his bare feet on the cold marble. It was quite slippery now with three versions of blood; Beris’, his own from the divinity statue, and the guard he’d just fed upon. There was still a wide hole in his chest, but luckily his godly essence helped it to mend much faster than the mortal husk alone.

The body of Beris felt horrible. It was like wearing a very tight suit meant for a man two sizes smaller. His fingers were stiff and his eyes felt like they were looking through the holes of an uncomfortable mask. He pulled and tugged at his cheeks and chin, as if it would help to straighten the face. Luckily Beris had been a large man. Despite its shortcomings, the body was strong, brawny, and quite healthy. It was worthy to carry around the greatest mind the world had ever known.

Even though the mortal carriage had its limitations, Mydian still commanded some of his godly power. He had the full strength of the vampiric curse in his veins, with none of the irritating weakness. Most of all, he had his intellect and perception.

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“My things?” the dark lord commanded, looking the huddling, fearful inhabitants of the temple over. Magnus snatched a bag from an awestruck acolyte and approached his god. He unfolded a dark, crimson cloak embroidered with fire-rubies and golden crowns bearing the Master’s skull-torch symbol.

Next, he drew a long, silvery blade with a blackened crossguard and grip surrounded by large, pointy sapphires in the hilt. Its tip ended in jagged, metal teeth that could rip flesh and grind bone. The sword’s name was *Darfyntir*, which meant ‘*Blood-vixen*’ in Godspeech. Spirits long before man crafted the blade in the Underworld; its molten steel was poured before the first clock on Mystyria told the time.

Finally, Magnus produced a small jar and handed it to Mydian, a curious look in his eyes. The Master held the tiny glass container up to his ear and gave it a hefty shake and was satisfied by the powdery shuffle inside. Mydian strapped his sword around his waist, stuffed the jar in his pocket, and turned his eyes back to his temple.

Sadly, his grandest sanctuary on Mystyria was in ruin. As an aftereffect of the ritual, a violent storm swept through Bloodgate and settled just over the sparsely flaming church. Molten rock and brimstone had peppered the ceiling and filled the enormous foyer with the scent of sulfur and fire. Streaks of lightning could be seen through the patchy roof—brilliant blue fingers that reached across the heavens.

Many commoners would be coming to inspect the damage. Nosey mortals with nothing better to fill their empty lives, Mydian thought. He didn’t want to be seen by them and Magnus apparently knew it beforehand. With a wave of his hand, he pointed out the rear exit of the temple—the door that the priests used to slip past worshippers wishing to shake hands and ask for guidance.

It was surprisingly warm out, although it was nothing compared to the sweltering heat of his own world. Mystyria was seeing the final days of spring and comfortable evening and nights were winding down. At least the gentle breeze felt nice. Mydian wasn't used to a body that needed to sweat in order to cool off. This was the first time in ages that he'd assumed a living mortal. Up until now, his only visits to Mystyria had been in the shackles of a magical avatar that looked like his godly self.

Nestled beside the temple was a carriage with a driver patiently waiting up top. His visor was lifted and his mouth stood open, slack jawed. It was quite obvious that he knew whom he was going to be escorting away. Magnus gritted his teeth and shook his head. The driver quickly turned to face his mares and let the awestruck smile drop.

"If I may ask, lord Mydian, why are you here?" He held the door open and allowed his god to enter first.

"Why am I here?" he asked, taking a seat. "I'm here because I've put too much faith in servants like you. My dominion of this world is failing. But that is about to change." His voice turned noble, assuring. "I'm at the helm now." Magnus frowned as he climbed in.

The driver whipped the reins and the carriage lurched on. Mydian settled back into the hard seat and crossed his stiff legs.

They circled around the Master's Temple and noticed that only a few people had come to inspect the damage. Strange, he thought. Surely every man, woman, and child had heard the noise of the ritual, even if they didn't know what was happening. The pillars of smoke and spectacle of lighting still lingered above its steepled roof. Apparently the Atrium was keeping the common folk out.

Bloodgate was surrounded by towering walls that reached a hundred feet. Not an inch of the city was without their protection.

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Inside, it was segregated into seven districts, with another in the center known as the Atrium. The outer seven were made up of two military, two temple, a magical arts district, and two commoner districts known as Bloodtrap and Murderspike.

Commoners could move freely within the seven outer districts. Each one was passable through a giant metal gate that only closed twice a day. Not many people were lucky enough to see the Atrium. Although there were gates linking it to every district in Bloodgate, they were always locked and heavily guarded. Mydian's darkest secrets, most powerful weaponry, and most prized Mystyrian possessions were all in the Atrium.

Even Gaston Rhizei, Bloodgate's king had his lavish home here. It dominated several thousand square feet, only second in grandeur to the towering Martax.

"Is the city secure?" Mydian asked, watching the winding road that led up to the northeast commoner district.

"Yes milord. As you can see, the Atrium is sealed, as are most of the districts. We only have to fear trouble from within."

"What is that supposed to mean?" he asked, troubled by his priest's casual tone.

"It's the Lylussians, my lord. They attack nearly each day. Our men can't seem to find their hive and their guerilla tactics are hard to combat." Magnus pointed out several plumes of smoke rising beyond the walls of the Atrium. So there was chaos in his city, after all.

"There are more of us than those festering liches," Mydian spat. "Hunt them down and hang them from our walls. Let Lyluss see what happens to her people who think they can come in my city and spy."

"There's been no word from the north for several days, lord. We've no idea what's become of Kersey's army."

“It’s no longer Kersey’s army. She’s not important now, but I can assure you this: the army still threatens us.” He reached his hand out the window and pointed north, just as the carriage reached the apex of the hill, the same elevation as Gaston’s castle. “It may be hundreds of miles that way but it is coming with an unrelenting fury.”

“What are your orders?” Magnus asked, straightening up and looking his lord in the eyes with undivided attention.

“I want Bloodgate on full alert. We have many enemies and far too much ground to protect. Block all portals from the outside.” He reached up and pulled the drawstrings of his hood tighter. “Did anyone see Beris’ face as you brought him into the temple?”

“No lord.”

“Good. I want no one to know of my ascension other than Drak, you, and Gaston.”

Magnus swallowed a lump in his throat and in a voice even deeper than his normal gritty tone asked, “What of the guards and acolytes?” His eyes drifted over Mydian’s shoulder and to the temple in the distance that was still expelling smoke.

“Kill them,” he said, emotionlessly. Then, as a new thought suddenly struck him, he pointed up to the driver and whispered, “And don’t forget about this one either.”

“Lord?”

“No one is to know of my ascension!” Mydian hissed. He settled back against the wood and in a calming voice added, “This body is weak and taxed. Please do not make me waste energy by repeating myself.”

Magnus’ eyes were tired, but stern. He didn’t seem like the kind of man who easily backed down, but things were certainly different when faced with a god. Mydian didn’t know much about him—only that the priests of Bloodgate deemed him worthy enough to rise to

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such a prestigious rank in the church. He drummed his fingers on the carriage's railing and said, "As you wish, my lord."

For a few moments, the journey from inside the wagon was silent. Outside, the rain hammered down on the roof and the dark, ominous buildings of Bloodgate's inner sanctum. The wheels of their carriage squeaked and groaned as the road turned steep, their path now straight along the route to Gaston's castle.

Magnus fished for something inside his belt pack and then pulled from it a crumpled scrap of paper. Mydian snatched it and quickly scanned the scribble of residences with little interest. "This is Beris' address," the priest said. "He lived over in Bloodtrap. These are the places he was seen lingering the last few days. If you're going to assume his identity, I suggest heading home tomorrow morning. His shift at the barracks ends at first light and his family will be expecting him."

"No, I want them killed as well," Mydian said, folding the scrap and shoving it into his pocket. "His whole family. Down to the last child, pet, and potted plant."

"Lord?" Magnus' eyes grew wide, sympathetic. "Beris was the only traitor, I assure you. His family worships at the Master's Temple no less than twice a week." The sweat forming on his brow suggested his hesitant fear.

Mydian leaned in and locked eyes with him. "Shall I repeat myself?"

"No, lord," Magnus said, settling back. He gazed out the window toward the Martax. "I'll see that it's done."

"Good."

After that, Magnus quieted down for the remainder of the trip. Mydian was lost in thought, pondering the next step to securing his foothold in the city. Such a notion almost made him laugh. This city

was already *his*. He just had to make sure all other gods knew their place and realized it was outside of Bloodgate.

Mydian wasn't the only god worshipped in the city. As large as Bloodgate was, it would have been impossible to religiously police every facet. Evil gods like Knashar and Whither were welcomed as long as they kept their temples small and tucked behind those of the Mydianites. Gods like Lyluss and Quillian were hidden, their temples and worshippers killed on sight.

There were many who wanted to bring him down. Gods, mortals, and great in-betweens wanted to claim the Underworld, Bloodgate, and Mystyria for themselves. Mydian wasn't going to let that happen. He had willfully climbed out of the safety of his realm and assumed the body of a mortal, all in the sake of making sure his rule remained steadfast. If he could hold back the armies of the north and south from his city until the experiments in the Martax were complete, he would be in total control.

The carriage pulled to a stop and the driver hopped off and opened the door.

"Here we are, my Master," came his cheery reply. He was shivering like a windswept branch from the chill brought on by the rain. "I hope to serve you again soon, lord." He dropped to one knee in the mud, still holding the door open.

"Perhaps in the next life," Mydian said, giving an uneasy Magnus a wink.

They were parked in the royal plaza, just down the road from the towering Castle Bloodiron, the home of Gaston Rhizei and all the previous rulers of Bloodgate. It was nothing compared to Mydian's Hiriam in the Underworld but it was still something marvelous by the mortals' standards. There were many guards lingering up on the steps by the door, out of the rain and luckily out of earshot.

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They didn't just hear the driver's praising so fortunately for them, they wouldn't have to die with him. Magnus asked his address and schedule should Mydian 'want to contact' him again.

"Lord Mydian, look." Magnus was pointing off to the south-east, miles away. Black smoke rose into the air and lightning seemed to dance over a spot that was obscured by the walls. Judging from the distance, Mydian guessed it came from one of the temple districts.

"It's Drak," the dark god said.

"The Dark Child? *Here?*" He ran a trembling hand over his smooth head.

"That's right. He's going to help us defend the city."

"I thought he was just a myth," Magnus admitted.

"As do most mortals. But take the word of a god, Magnus, he is *quite* real."

Drak was the god of evil, but then again all gods were inherently cold-hearted. Telsis always said it was the lack of human emotion, the absence of family and kinship that the mortals found quite easily. Even the good ones—Lyluss, Quillian, Willow and the like—would have turned bitter after the long, countless years in the heavens had they not huddled together like cold drifters around a campfire. The evil gods had trouble adjusting to such bonds and therefore remained distant, reclusive. Mydian and Drak were no different.

They had no family, no kinship. Both had done countless abhorrent things that were offensive in the eyes of their fellow gods. They found solace in the comfort of knowing the world hated them both. The only reason the worshippers put up with them was the pledge of a rewarding afterlife. If Mydian hadn't promised his servants wealth, power and all the golden in-betweens, they would have abandoned him long ago when they did Drak.

Relations had been strained between both gods, but Mydian hoped they could put aside their differences just long enough to work together. There were things that required Drak's attention and he wasn't sure how long he could put on a happy face. Although he was thankful that help had presented itself in the form of a fellow god, Mydian would eventually grow weary of him and want him out. It was the way it had always been.

Mydian started to walk off toward the plaza. He had some unfinished business to take care of before he settled in for the night. Gaston was expecting him and luckily 'Beris' had been granted an audience and a room at the keep.

"What do you want me to do, my lord?" Magnus asked to his back.

"I believe you have several murders that need to be tended to." He turned around and added, "I expect to see their corpses on the doorstep by morning." He pointed up where the guards were stationed.

"Yes lord," Magnus said before stepping into the carriage. The driver threw up a hand and a giddy smile as he started off.

Lightning flashed and caused a glint in the eyes of a pair of statues in the castle's plaza. They were covered in overgrown vinery and speckled with years of bird droppings and unkind abuse from the weather. They were life-sized and stood at stern attention, facing the Martax. Mydian smiled and stepped up to their pedestal—their undeserving platform built on lies and treachery that was buried over three centuries ago.

One was a man—a tall, lanky traitor wearing spiked armor that covered his chest, head, arms and legs like a porcupine. Several of the barbs had broken over the years, making the suit less than impressive. His visor was raised and a pair of maddened eyes peeked out. In one

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hand he held a thick broadsword and in the other, the raveled chains keeping his beast at bay.

His pet was a large war mastiff, one of the toughest, most aggressive animals ever bred on Mystyria. Its ears were at attention and its back was straight as it watched its unseen prey on the horizon. Large, jagged fangs surrounded a nasty, flat tongue.

This was Rastin and his dog Kaine. He was a traitor; a treacherous man that wronged Mydian during the second War of Balance. Over the years there had been many more, but none so influential and devastating as this one.

Mydian outstretched a drenched hand and said, "I will cast aside this curse if you do a job for me, Rastin." A bolt of lightning struck the ground a few feet from the statue and in its brilliant glow, the man and beast's eyes started to shine.

"I live to serve, my lord," Rastin said beneath the marble shell.

Mydian smirked. "Of course you do. I'm sure anyone would regain their loyalty after standing here for three centuries." Right after the second War ended, Mydian cursed Rastin and his mastiff into statues where they remained until tonight. They were mocked, spit upon, and ridiculed as the ones who dared to let the Lylussians into the most unholy city on Mystyria.

Mydian balled his hand into a fist and in a thunderous boom, the decrepit sculptures shattered, leaving the plaza with tiny grey raindrops that bounced and clinked where they landed. Standing on the pedestal was Rastin and Kaine, alive and well, looking Mystyria over with eyes unhindered by stone.

Rastin's armor had regenerated. The six-inch spikes grew back out and shined with a fresh glow. His visor slammed shut but a dim, yellow light could be seen between the peepholes. Rain danced off

his shoulders and broadsword as he fought to keep his mastiff from charging the dark god.

Kaine's fur was black, mangled, and missing several large patches. The thick chains wrapped around its throat dug into flesh, leaving large bloody rings. It snarled and pulled back its lips to show diseased, sickly teeth. Viscous saliva rolled down its chin and onto the ground as it continued to scrape at the pedestal in an attempt to maul the one that cursed it. So amusing, thought the dark god. Such mindless anger was a beautiful thing.

"What do you wish of me?" Rastin asked, his large, spiked gauntlet keeping the paddling dog at bay.

Without a word, Mydian tossed the small jar from his pocket. Rastin sank his blade into the pedestal and caught it. For a second he studied it but once he realized what was inside, his spiny hand crushed it. Ash spilled out and was picked up by the wind. He brought the pile of glass and speckled dust down so that Kaine could smell it.

Instantly, the dog's ears folded back and its face buried into the ash. After only a moment's inspection, it lifted its head and howled into the air. A puff of white expelled from its nostrils and it instantly turned to the north, back arched and legs tensed in anticipation of the hunt. Its mangy tail thrashed like a farmer's sickle.

Send a traitor to hunt a traitor.

"Find her," Mydian said to the dog's master. "Bring her back to me." It was a good thing he kept some of the ash before sending her back to Mystyria. If only he'd had such a luxury of Kersey Avonwood, perhaps she would have been killed long before she became a problem. This time Mydian was ready.

"In pieces, my lord?" Rastin asked, trying his best to maintain hold of Kaine.

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“*Alive*,” Mydian stressed. “She carries precious cargo. And if you let anything happen to her, you’ll wish for a fate as simple as being a statue.” Hopefully his servants spread throughout Mystyria wouldn’t get to her first.

Kersey had been the last woman to make him look a fool.

Thunder boomed and suddenly the ground next to the plaza burst open. Dirt, rock, mud and finally molten chunks spewed from the hole and piled to the side. A large blast of smoke snaked its way up and with it came a heat that rivaled anything on Mystyria.

A horse neighed from inside—a ghostly, phantasmal shriek that made Mydian’s skin break out in happy gooseflesh. There was a sputter of fire and then two stepped out onto the mound of dirt. Their bodies were encased in fire—manes waving like proud burning flags. Together they pulled a black carriage out of the hole that was trimmed in gold with flaming wheels.

Rastin pulled the door open and motioned for Kaine to step inside. Reluctantly and with a bitter growl, the beast did as its master instructed. “She’s to the north, my lord. Kaine will sniff her out.”

“Make sure,” Mydian said. “Dyne’s freewill is henceforth *revoked*.”