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At the topmost district of the city, in the heart of Niparsha, four greatly important buildings flanked the grand plaza. At night, the lights flared endlessly as if by magic. Two weeks after the celebration of Lord Kidane's name, the entertainers remained around the magnificent marble fountain that was an immense work of art on its own. In a night of wonders, the common citizen forgot about the intricate clockwork keeping it all alive underneath the streets, hidden deep under the city.

The governmental palace stood sentinel, members of the senate meeting late to deal with the increasing issues on savage incursions and the always-looming threat of the Green Gods of the East. The bell rang atop the tallest tower of the House of the Wise, announcing the time when our Lord Kidane gave his life for Valmedor. Hundreds gathered inside to remember that fateful day a thousand years past when Kidane defeated the Mad Emperor and saved them all. Across the plaza, it was time for the changing of the Shield Guard. A dozen men and women covered in loose-sleeved blue tunics, red leather cuirasses and feather-crested steel helmets retreated inside the ancient Citadel, a leftover from the time when Niparsha was no more than a fortress nested among the gemstone mines.

But if life persisted late at night in these places, it was only because of the fourth building, the Great Academy. It was their philosophers who allowed the artists their imagination, their professors who taught tomorrow's politicians, their historians who wrote Humankind's story and their inventors who created the tools of war.

The Great Academy of Valmedor was the largest repository of knowledge in all the continent of Akanisha and, some said, the entire world. Inside its labyrinthine halls, divided along three tall stories of shelves and glass boxes, were the treasures of ancient times: scrolls, books, and tablets dating back over two thousand years. Masks, armor, staffs, and more unusual objects of exquisite design, bearing signs in languages lost to humankind, were stored in special sections locked behind intricate seven-steps locks that few had access to. Artifacts

of time past, when Gods ruled the continent, the Valmedoran were forced to call home.

There was a reason Niparsha was known as the Jewel of Valmedor and the Mind of the Free City-States. No other of the smallish realms that had spawned after the fall of the Holy Empire had so much of its infrastructure designed for teaching and learning, to a point in which leaders of other cities, despite intrinsic enmities, sent their sons and daughters to study under the followers of Lord Kidane, the Wise.

Inside the Academy, life never halted.

“This is useless.”

Agatha’s voice echoed throughout the Ancient History section of the vast library, drawing the attention of the few other students who were up this late. Their tired looks over lamplights were enough reprimand for Agatha to lower her voice and slide slightly down in her cushioned chair.

Across the study table that served as their particular battlefield tonight, Yuli frowned. He closed the massive tome he had been reading—one of many—and adjusted his silver-framed spectacles.

“Yes, I’m pretty sure the whole Academy is. I wonder what you are doing here.”

“Listen to me,” said Agatha, again drawing angry looks. She lowered her voice and her head, drawing closer to Yuli. “I’m telling you, I’ve gone through a dozen books on the same topic, and it’s the same every time. Inconsistencies, hearsay, writings of what one read somewhere, but never references. Not to mention the atrocious writing. It’s all useless!”

Yuli crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. They had been in utter silence for the last two hours. Even with a faint smile on his face, Agatha noticed the twitching of the corner of his lips. Irritation due to the interruption, as she had come to learn. And, as usual, she did not care.

“All is a bit of an exaggeration,” he said, yawning.

“Copies of copies of copies!” Agatha opened her arms wide, as if to encompass the whole of the building. “Others in the Academy create new knowledge. These magnificent clockworks and the airships?”

A gigantic clock ticked nearby. A terrible irritation to most who would rather study elsewhere. Agatha learned to ignore it. At least it

didn't constantly whine and clunk like most of the clockwork she has seen in use. Or ring terribly at each passing hour, like the House's own clock tower.

"And ballista, crossbows..."

Someone shushed them, but Agatha did not stop.

"Weapons are an unexpected but required consequence. People have been trying to take over the Academy for decades now."

"Not because of our useless books, I figure."

Short, muffled laughter echoed. Someone else muttered a curse. A third student suggested she take her preaching to the plaza where people cared.

Yuli smiled, shaking his head. He got up and walked towards the table of returned books, where he placed the one he had just finished.

"You haven't been out of the library much, have you?"

"I have!" Agatha leaned across the table, grabbing her notebook with a mix of anger and frustration. She looked around, lowering her voice. "I went to the Exchange to talk to a hewa caravan master!"

Eyebrows raised, Yuli pushed his book to the side, interlacing his fingers. "You didn't."

"I did!" Excitement for her little deviation from the expected norm still made Agatha's heart pump. She remembered it so well she could almost smell the mix of mercenary sweat and tortoise dung. She didn't know those beasts grew so big, nor that they stank so much.

Agatha had to skip a lecture by Master Bodzár on pre-Migration islander cultures to take an early coach down the caravansary and return before lunch. She was expected to report her progress to Master Irshad while trying not to make a fool of herself eating moussaka and presenting her notebook. Irshad was a traditionalist and ate with his hands. Agatha shivered at the memory of him touching her notes with cheese-licked fingers.

"Well?" asked Yuli while Agatha absentmindedly tried to clean the stains from her notes.

"I didn't think I'd feel so much of an outsider in my own home. It was like visiting another city entirely."

"You never visited any other city?"

"Exactly! It all looks so ancient, but still so alive. They hang lamps everywhere and they cover the streets with huge banners."

“It’s because of the sun. It’s hot down there, without the cover of the mountain.”

“Hmm...” The shade was indeed very pleasant. She didn’t stop to consider it before. “Anyway, I asked around for foreign books...”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I did! People looked at me all wrong!” She made a voice as if pretending to be an old man. “What are you interested in foreign books for, young lady?”

Yuli shook his head, returning to his books. He drew another tome from his pile, examining the leather cover while he explained. “You’re lucky no one reported you to the Humanists.”

Agatha grabbed the book and slapped it close, nearly trapping Yuli’s fingers inside.

“Are you paying attention here?”

Yuli pulled the book closer to his chest and pushed his chair back. He opened the book again, far from his companion.

“You are not under arrest, nor were you expelled from the Academy, so I surmise your little adventure was far less interesting than you are trying to paint it.”

She sighed and rubbed her face. Yuli was a travelled guy, an outsider, son of a Trade Company captain, while she... Agatha shook her head, then pulled the satchel she had leaning by her feet, slid something out of it and placed it on the table.

Yuli’s eyes widened to the size of two moa eggs.

He looked around, to make sure no one could see it, then covered the book with his own.

“The Book of the Chalice?” he more mouthed than said it. “Are you crazy?”

“Did you know hewa are like this tall?” Agatha showed with her hand raised over the floor with exaggeration. “The one I bought the book from had to stand on a stool to talk to me.”

“Agatha, you need to get rid of this.”

“Once I finish reading it.”

“This is forbidden!”

Agatha pushed her chair back and got up, slamming her hands on the wooden table.

“Why?”

Someone threatened to call the head librarian. A chair was pushed away and someone left angrily.

Maybe it was a good idea to get out of the library. Yes, her quarters would be a better place to read a book that basically said everything the government professed was wrong. She removed Yuli's book from *The Book of the Chalice*, covering it with her own notebook and other tomes, and pushed them into her satchel. It looked about to burst with all the weight. Her friend grabbed her wrist. His eyes were pleading.

“Burn that thing.”

Frustrated, Agatha pulled away and hung her satchel across her torso, adjusting the strap over one shoulder. Yuli was right, of course, but she didn't have to like it.

“This,” she said, pointing at her satchel, “is what Historians do!”

Agatha left it at that, striding out of the library with echoing, heavy steps. Someone thanked Kidane for that.

Fact was that the young historian was stuck. Finding documents on the Great War was far more difficult than she was led to believe before deciding on the theme for her thesis. Most of what she found were second or third-hand witness statements and, in very rare cases, letters traded between governors and the emperor, which didn't say a lot. Most often, documents were contradictory at best.

The fall of the Holy Empire and the subsequent purge of everything marginally magical destroyed most of the evidence there ever was. Whatever was left either vanished or was taken by the warring city-states in more recent decades.

It was the job of the Great Academy to rediscover the truth.

Agatha realized the path she took to her room led her through the Hall of Paragons. Statues of the men and women of that era, human and otherwise, were placed on both sides of the hallway. Carved in granite, painted with colorful art, they stood high, life-sized atop stone blocks where their names and deeds were described in three different languages upon a golden plaque.

Lord Kidane stood a few feet away from her, fully dressed in armor, a flowing cape down his back. One hand held his sword pointed down, his oblong shield leaning on his leg. Agatha had sat

below this statue so many times that she knew every detail of the intricate carving and often caught herself absentmindedly drawing the organic curves that detailed his chest plate like ever-growing vines. His face was what she saw every night as she closed her eyes. Young, a hawk-like nose, curly gold hair flowing down his shoulders. He looked young for a general of the Empire and had a distant look on his face. It was almost like he knew how the Great War would end, and how Valmedor would suffer.

Agatha wondered how accurate this depiction was. The golden plaque did not say when the statue had been carved, but current theories said it had been made just prior to the Great War. They were found deep into the understreets, miles under the city, in what the Academy called the Plaza of Heroes. Its painting had been restored and some cracks artfully hidden. Lord Kidane the Wise had been luckier than some. Wiraj of the Chalice had lost a hand and half his face by the time he was found a century ago. Even so, his angry appearance was still evident. It sent shivers down Agatha's spine. Whatever he did to be considered a hero to the Southern League, it was his hunting of magic that had led them all to this Age of Darkness.

How different these two were, who some insisted had once been brothers-in-arms.

With a sigh, Agatha once again walked down the hall. A historian's work was no easy feat. How could they ever reach the truth if they had no access to what really happened? Everything they knew of the past was based on hearsay and supposition.

Agatha went through The Book of the Chalice with a mix of surprise and outrage at what was professed as truth in southern Akanisha. It took Agatha over an hour to fall asleep in her lonely quarters and, when she finally did, Lord Kidane visited her in her dreams. They talked all night. By the time he was gone, she knew exactly what to write. What she had to say would change everything known so far about the Great War and the paragons.

When she woke up, she could not remember a thing.

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Agatha took a deep breath as she stared at the sun-and-sword icon built in gold atop the massive entrance of the House of the Wise. She was not a religious person. Unlike many, who worshiped gods, be they single entities or whole pantheons. Like many in Valmedor, Agatha believed in the teachings of Lord Kidane, a real man who seven hundred years ago sacrificed himself for the good of the empire and its people.

There was no belief in a mystical, immaterial, or imagined force in Valmedor and that, Agatha thought with a smile, was what allowed marvels like the Great Academy and the House of the Wise to become a reality. Humans were capable of everything, given the means to learn and excel.

Agatha crossed the threshold, skimming past men and women who exited the building. A look of awe and marvel was on the face of most of them, including those visibly from other lands. No wonder. Like most buildings in the newer part of Niparsha, the House of the Wise was a work of art inside and out. Massive glass windows allowed in the sun's light, meticulously calculated to cast a beautiful rainbow on the mosaics built out of the semi-precious stones decorating the floor. The walls were thin and most of them were entirely made of stained glass. The inside of the House soared several stories up to a ceiling of crisscrossed arcs, each descending long to form the walls and smaller arcs, every inch of them painted to represent the Age of Heroes and their greatest paragon: Lord Kidane the Wise.

A work of art. A work of humans. What once had been built by magic and divine intervention was now built by engineering.

Modern historians called it Humanism. The government called it the Faith of Man. Agatha favored calling it all historical documents, pieces of the puzzle that was the real Kidane, paladin of the Empire, general of the armies, hero of the Great War.

A secretary dressed in a long-faded orange tunic greeted the young historian and guided her through the House's inner hallways, where only government officials and guests were allowed. What

pomp was in the public areas was missing in this place. There were, of course, mosaics and a few statues, but nothing as grand as was found outside - at least not in the eyes of a common man. Agatha saw the nuances of each piece. Who created that work of art? Why? In what condition? And who paid for it?

She waited in an antechamber, seated on a cushioned wooden seat that was art taken form. A round window allowed light in through a glass sword pointed down, the setting sun behind it.

As in the last few hours since she woke up before sunup that day, Agatha mentally repeated her rehearsed request to Magister Riga. He was not the Exarch, as she hoped for in her dreams, but it was close enough. The man could give her access to the documents she needed.

Agatha heard a doorknob opening and reflexively stiffened, ready to blabber out her rehearsed speech incomprehensibly. The door to the Magister's office opened up to reveal a heavysset woman in Shield Guard uniform if not for the typical helmet, replaced by a cap under her arm, and a scroll case in her hand. She looked visibly troubled, but too much of a professional to do more than nod a thank you to the secretary as she passed by.

The secretary bowed to the woman, probably a Captain of the Guard from the citadel next door, then entered the office, closing the doors behind him.

Agatha leaned back with a sigh and bit her lower lip. She muttered under her breath. Not like she needed anything else to make herself more nervous.

She had been careful to come in her best shape. She had picked her cleanest tunic, a long olive piece with long embroidered sleeves, a moss-colored sash holding at the waist. She wished she had been given the silver scroll case that showed her mastery, but that was why she was here. She even braided her hair, which took considerable time due to her lack of care for her hair. Agatha considered wearing some sort of necklace but was afraid she would overdo it. Sleep, though, was quickly catching up with her.

The door finally opened several minutes later, the secretary smiling and waving her in.

“The Magister will see you now.”

It seemed like art became less apparent the more you entered the life of Humanism. In place of what one would expect a richly

decorated office, was something almost utilitarian. A trained eye for art, though, noticed the details. While there were few precious metals and stones, there were other kinds of treasures. The furniture was beautifully ornate, if discreetly so, and so were the objects on the desk. A gold-leaf ink pen, a now unlit lamp of exquisite design, a paper weight carved in the shape of a birdrider. Around the walls, maps as old as the Empire and a multitude of scroll cases and books perfectly catalogued and lined up on a wide bookshelf that took up one wall from top to bottom.

The old man behind the desk looked like a grandfather, with a serene smile, a bald head framed by short wooly white hair, dressed in a long tunic of faded red decorated with white flowers. He adjusted his office headdress, a simple flat-topped cone with little more than a thin golden chain as decoration. His eyes were a vivid honey that reminded Agatha of sweetness. She smiled, nervously. A man like this would never deny her request.

“Your Excellency.”

The Magister smiled and motioned for her to sit across from him.

“Please, I am not the Exarch. Just one of her many helpers.”

Agatha bit her lips from the inside, taking her seat on the high-backed chair. Despite its nearly celestial comfort, Agatha felt like she was sitting on a board of nails. Her first line was off. A splendid start.

She took a deep breath, looked at the Magister and, as she opened her mouth to speak, she drew a blank.

There was nothing, nothing at all. She could not remember a word she had rehearsed for the last several hours.

She opened and closed her mouth a few times like a fish dying out of water. Somehow the imagery took over, and she started thinking of the time when she saw her mother’s ornamental carps suffocate due to a broken mechanism on the pond. Agatha could suddenly feel sympathetic to those carps. It only made things worse.

The Magister, though, seemed in a good mood. His smile enlarged, and he patted her hand.

“It is always a pleasure to help the thinkers of the future.”

Somehow it made things better. She realized she had been holding her breath and quickly let it go. Her shoulders sagged, and she felt her body slide slightly on the chair. It was like removing a heavyweight out of her shoulders.

She swallowed to soothe her dry throat, and then finally spoke up.

“I... I believe Master Irshad spoke with you about me and my work?”

“I believe he did, yes, but I must confess that I record little. It has been a rather dreadful day for news.”

Agatha did not understand what he meant but did not find it the best of moments to ask about it. Somehow, she imagined it had something to do with the Shield Guard officer.

Putting it aside, she licked her lips that seemed as dry as old parchment out of a desert and explained.

“I am a student at the Academy, currently working to become a master of Ancient History.”

“Oh, how marvelous. It is always a pleasure to learn of young men and women interested in our past, present and future.”

History was greatly appreciated as an important subject in Niparsha. Philosophers, and Humanism itself, sustained that to be a better person, you must first understand where you came from. It was learning from the past that you could make a better future.

“What is the subject of your thesis?”

The Magister’s eyes seemed to shine as much as his smile. His body was slightly inclined forward. Agatha cast away all her doubts. The House would help her.

“The life of Lord Kidane.”

With a friendly laugh, the Magister clapped his hands together as if in prayer.

“But you need only read the Book of the Wise for such information, young one. It tells everything you must know of the Lord’s life.”

And here it was where Agatha would shine. No one would be more interested in these facts than a Magister of the House of the Wise. Maybe the Exarch only. However, Agatha was sure news of her study would soon reach the wisest of women.

“You see, I had come across several historical documents in the last few months. And they make no sense.”

“Oh?” The Magister frowned, still curious. “In what way?”

Agatha allowed herself a smile. She seemed to have caught his attention. She opened her satchel and drew out her notes, which she

had copied from various sources and made her own annotations. She picked one in particular and placed it over the desk, turning it sideways so that both the Magister and she might have a good look at it.

“For instance, The Book of the Wise mentions Kidane had raised an army of men and women from the united realms and marched across Valmedor to meet the host of the Green Gods at Korchovka, where the barbarians were repelled, but it is said in several official letters between the Emperor and his subject governors that the army was in fact routed and that Kidane was several miles northwest fighting riots. There is also the matter regarding the Battle of High Mesa. Southern League historians support that it was Wiraj the Resolute who led the imperial army and not Kidane, which seems to fit with what is said in three distinct sources, including The Book of the Chalice. Look, here.”

“Oh.”

Agatha looked up at the Magister. There was a slight twitch on the man’s face, near his eyes. The smile seemed to have broken up a bit. Bad sign.

Realizing the man’s eyes shifted from the scribbled pages to elsewhere, as if lost in thought, Agatha gathered her papers and withdrew them from the desk.

“I’m aware the Humanists keep their own library inside the House, which holds documents recovered during the expedition to the understreets and the Tear. I believe these documents may shed some light onto these inconsistencies.”

The Magister closed his eyes and rubbed his temples, as if a sudden headache had set in. He sighed and then placed his hands on the desk.

“I... see...” said the Magister, making an effort to keep his smile. “What family did you say you belong to?”

The change in subject caught Agatha by surprise. She was unsure of how to answer.

“Actually, I didn’t.”

“Oh? And which one would it be?”

The friendly grandfather seemed to have melted into a tired, worried bureaucrat. Face and shoulders sagged, both elbows leaning heavily on the armchairs. Agatha swallowed again.

“With all due respect, Magister, I do not see why my family would make a difference here.”

“Oh, but it would, of course!” The Magister leaned forward, placing his elbows on the desktop, the forced smile returning. “Niparsha is made up of so many cultures: the original Meldor from Myambe, the hewa who brought them here by sea, and pacified barbarian, like my ancestors! A person’s family says much about his personality and inclinations.”

That’s the problem, Agatha thought.

“I come from an unimportant family,” she lied.

“But if you are a student at a prestigious institution like the Academy, and with Master Irshad as your tutor, of all people, certainly you must come from an influential house.”

Agatha sighed, shifting uncomfortably in her chair. She bit her lip and muttered an answer.

“Lubi-Mauri.”

The Magister leaned closer, inclining his head sideways.

“Sorry, I couldn’t hear you.”

“Lubi-Mauri,” she repeated, louder. Her eyes met the Magister’s. “I’m Agatha ni Lubi-Mauri.”

“Oh,” said the Magister, pushing back from the desk. The fake smile was gone, replaced by a mix of terror and uncertainty. “Oh,” repeated, white brows twitching. “I... see.”

No, you don’t.

“Sir, I really need access to these documents.”

The Magister forced himself up, stepping away from the desk as if trying to escape a recently found plague-infested corpse.

“I... I must consult others regarding these... circumstances.”

Agatha felt all hope escape her. She slid further into her chair as if its cushioning could swallow her whole.

“What others?”

“Others,” said the Magister, walking from side to side, pretending he was looking for something, but visibly nervous. “Members of the party, of the faculty too, for that matter.”

And the Guard, probably. Agatha sighed.

“You must leave,” he finally said, turning towards the historian. He placed his hands atop the back of his chair, as if using it as a shield against an incoming horde. There was a bit more despair than necessary in his tone of voice. “I must gather my thoughts.”

Agatha bowed and exited the office without a word.

She had played her cards wrong and may have destroyed her chance of completing her work. She would have to talk to Master Irshad. Maybe he could help somehow.

Agatha left the House of the Wise, hands clenched in fists. People got out of her way as she strode towards the Academy across the plaza. She was furious, but not with herself or the Magister. She was furious with her mother and what she was. Once again, her family had got in the way of her work. One time too many.