

# CHAPTER



Adamat wore his coat tight, top buttons fastened against a wet night air that seemed to want to drown him. He tugged at his sleeves, trying to coax more length, and picked at the front of the jacket where it was too close by far around the waist. It'd been half a decade since he'd even seen this jacket, but when summons came from the king at this hour, there was no time to get his good one from the tailor. Yet this summer coat provided no defense against the chill snaking through the carriage window.

The morning was not far off but dawn would have a hard time scattering the fog. Adamat could feel it. It was humid even for early spring in Adopest, and chillier than Novi's frozen toes. The soothsayers in Noman's Alley said it was a bad omen. Yet who listened to soothsayers these days? Adamat reasoned it would give him a cold and wondered why he had been summoned out on a pit-made night like this.

The carriage approached the front gate of Skyline and moved on without a stop. Adamat clutched at his pantlegs and peered out the window. The guards were not at their posts. Odder still, as they continued along the wide path amid the fountains, there were no lights. Skyline had so many lanterns, it could be seen all the way from the city even on the cloudiest night. Tonight the gardens were dark.

Adamat was fine with this. Manhouch used enough of their taxes for his personal amusement. Adamat stared out into the gardens at the black maws where the hedge mazes began and imagined shapes flitting back and forth in the lawn. What was... ah, just a sculpture. Adamat sat back, took a deep breath. He could hear his heart beating, thumping, frightened, his stomach tightening. Perhaps they *should* light the garden lanterns...

A little part of him, the part that had once been a police inspector, prowling nights such as these for the thieves and pickpockets in dark alleys, laughed out from inside. *Still your heart, old man*, he said to himself. *You were once the eyes staring back from the darkness.*

The carriage jerked to a stop. Adamat waited for the coachman to open the door. He might have waited all night. The driver rapped on the roof. "You're here," a gruff voice said.

Rude.

Adamat stepped from the coach, just having time to snatch his hat and cane before the driver flicked the reins and was off, clattering into the night. Adamat uttered a quiet curse after the man and turned around, looking up at Skyline.

The nobility called Skyline Palace "the Jewel of Adro." It rested on a high hill east of Adopest so that the sun rose above it every morning. One particularly bold newspaper had compared it to a starving pauper wearing a diamond ring. It was an apt comparison in these lean times. A king's pride doesn't fill the people's bellies.

He was at the main entrance. By day, it was a grand avenue of marbled walks and fountains, all leading to a pair of giant, silver-

plated doors, themselves dwarfed by the sheer façade of the biggest single building in Adro. Adamat listened for the soft footfalls of patrolling Hielmen. It was said the king's personal guard were everywhere in these gardens, watching every secluded corner, muskets always loaded, bayonets fixed, their gray-and-white sashes somber among the green-and-gold splendor. But there were no footfalls, nor were the fountains running. He'd heard once that the fountains only stopped for the death of the king. Surely he'd not have been summoned here if Manhouch were dead. He smoothed the front of his jacket. Here, next to the building, a few of the lanterns were lit.

A figure emerged from the darkness. Adamat tightened his grip on his cane, ready to draw the hidden sword inside at a moment's notice.

It was a man in uniform, but little could be discerned in such ill light. He held a rifle or a musket, trained loosely on Adamat, and wore a flat-topped forage cap with a stiff visor. Only one thing could be certain... he was not a Hielman. Their tall, plumed hats were easy to recognize, and they never went without them.

"You're alone?" a voice asked.

"Yes," Adamat said. He held up both hands and turned around.

"All right. Come on."

The soldier edged forward and yanked on one of the mighty silver doors. It rolled outward slowly, ponderously, despite the man putting his weight into it. Adamat moved closer and examined the soldier's jacket. It was dark blue with silver braiding. Adran military. In theory, the military reported to the king. In practice, one man held their leash: Field Marshal Tamas.

"Step back, friend," the soldier said. There was a note of impatience in his voice, some unseen stress—but that could have been the weight of the door. Adamat did as he was told, only coming forward again to slip through the entrance when the soldier gestured.

“Go ahead,” the soldier directed. “Take a right at the diadem and head through the Diamond Hall. Keep walking until you find yourself in the Answering Room.” The door inched shut behind him and closed with a muffled thump.

Adamat was alone in the palace vestibule. Adran military, he mused. Why would a soldier be here, on the grounds, without any sign of the Hielmen? The most frightening answer sprang to mind first. A power struggle. Had the military been called in to deal with a rebellion? There were a number of powerful factions within Adro: the Wings of Adom mercenaries, the royal cabal, the Mountain-watch, and the great noble families. Any one of them could have been giving Manhouch trouble. None of it made sense, though. If there had been a power struggle, the palace grounds would be a battlefield, or destroyed outright by the royal cabal.

Adamat passed the diadem—a giant facsimile of the Adran crown—and noted it was in as bad taste as rumor had it. He entered the Diamond Hall, where the walls and floor were of scarlet, accented in gold leaf, and thousands of tiny gems, which gave the room its name, glittered from the ceiling in the light of a single lit candelabra. The tiny flames of the candelabra flickered as if in the wind, and the room was cold.

Adamat’s sense of unease deepened as he neared the far end of the gallery. Not a sign of life, and the only sound came from his own echoing footfalls on the marble floor. A window had been shattered, explaining the chill. The result of one of the king’s famous temper tantrums? Or something else? He could hear his heart beating in his ears. There. Behind a curtain, a pair of boots? Adamat passed his hand before his eyes. A trick of the light. He stepped over to reassure himself and pulled back the curtain.

A body lay in the shadows. Adamat bent over it, touched the skin. It was warm, but the man was most certainly dead. He wore gray pants with a white stripe down the side and a matching jacket.

A tall hat with a white plume lay on the floor some ways away. A Hielman. The shadows played on a young, clean-shaven face, peaceful except for a single hole in the side of his skull and the dark, wet stain on the floor.

He'd been right. A struggle of some kind. Had the Hielmen rebelled, and the military been brought in to deal with them? Again, it didn't make any sense. The Hielmen were fanatically loyal to the king, and any matters within Skyline Palace would have been dealt with by the royal cabal.

Adamat cursed silently. Every question compounded itself. He suspected he'd find some answers soon enough.

Adamat left the body behind the curtain. He lifted his cane and twisted, bared a few inches of steel, and approached a tall doorway flanked by two hooded, scepter-wielding sculptures. He paused between the ancient statues and took a deep breath, letting his eyes wander over a set of arcane script scrawled into the portal. He entered.

The Answering Room made the Hall of Diamonds look small. A pair of staircases, one to either side of him and each as wide across as three coaches, led to a high gallery that ran the length of the room on both sides. Few outside the king and his cabal of Privileged sorcerers ever entered this room.

In the center of the room was a single chair, on a dais a hand-breadth off the floor, facing a collection of knee pillows, where the cabal acknowledged their liege. The room was well lit, though from no discernible source of light.

A man sat on the stairs to Adamat's right. He was older than Adamat, just into his sixtieth year with silver hair and a neatly trimmed mustache that still retained a hint of black. He had a strong but not overly large jaw and his cheekbones were well defined. His skin was darkened by the sun, and there were deep lines at the corners of his mouth and eyes. He wore a dark-blue

soldier's uniform with a silver representation of a powder keg pinned above the heart and nine gold service stripes sewn on the right breast, one for every five years in the Adran military. His uniform lacked an officer's epaulettes, but the weary experience in the man's brown eyes left no question that he'd led armies on the battlefield. There was a single pistol, hammer cocked, on the stair next to him. He leaned on a sheathed small sword and watched as a stream of blood slowly trickled down each step, a dark line on the yellow-and-white marble.

"Field Marshal Tamas," Adamat said. He sheathed his cane sword and twisted until it clicked shut.

The man looked up. "I don't believe we've ever met."

"We have," Adamat said. "Fourteen years ago. A charity ball thrown by Lord Aumen."

"I have a terrible time with faces," the field marshal said. "I apologize."

Adamat couldn't take his eyes off the rivulet of blood. "Sir. I was summoned here. I wasn't told by whom, or for what reason."

"Yes," Tamas said. "I summoned you. On the recommendation of one of my Marked. Cenka. He said you served together on the police force in the twelfth district."

Adamat pictured Cenka in his mind. He was a short man with an unruly beard and a penchant for wines and fine food. He'd seen him last seven years ago. "I didn't know he was a powder mage."

"We try to find anyone with an affinity for it as soon as possible," Tamas said, "but Cenka was a late bloomer. In any case"—he waved a hand—"we've come upon a problem."

Adamat blinked. "You . . . want my help?"

The field marshal raised an eyebrow. "Is that such an unusual request? You were once a fine police investigator, a good servant of Adro, and Cenka tells me that you have a perfect memory."

"Still, sir."

"Eh?"

"I'm still an investigator. Not with the police, sir, but I still take jobs."

"Excellent. Then it's not so odd for me to seek your services?"

"Well, no," Adamat said, "but sir, this is Skyline Palace. There's a dead Hielman in the Diamond Hall and..." He pointed at the stream of blood on the stairs. "Where's the king?"

Tamas tilted his head to the side. "He's locked himself in the chapel."

"You've staged a coup," Adamat said. He caught a glimpse of movement with the corner of his eye, saw a soldier appear at the top of the stairs. The man was a Deliv, a dark-skinned northerner. He wore the same uniform as Tamas, with eight golden stripes on the right breast. The left breast of his uniform displayed a silver powder keg, the sign of a Marked. Another powder mage.

"We have a lot of bodies to move," the Deliv said.

Tamas gave his subordinate a glance. "I know, Sabon."

"Who's this?" Sabon asked.

"The inspector that Cenka requested."

"I don't like him being here," Sabon said. "It could compromise everything."

"Cenka trusted him."

"You've staged a coup," Adamat said again with certainty.

"I'll help with the bodies in a moment," Tamas said. "I'm old, I need some rest now and then." The Deliv gave a sharp nod and disappeared.

"Sir!" Adamat said. "What have you done?" He tightened his grip on his cane sword.

Tamas pursed his lips. "Some say the Adran royal cabal had the most powerful Privileged sorcerers in all the Nine Nations, second only to Kez," he said quietly. "Yet I've just slaughtered every one of them. Do you think I'd have trouble with an old inspector and his cane sword?"

Adamat loosened his grip. He felt ill. "I suppose not."

“Cenka led me to believe that you were pragmatic. If that is the case, I would like to employ your services. If not, I’ll kill you now and look for a solution elsewhere.”

“You’ve staged a coup,” Adamat said again.

Tamas sighed. “Must we keep coming back to that? Is it so shocking? Tell me, can you think of any fewer than a dozen factions within Adro with reason to dethrone the king?”

“I didn’t think any of them had the skill,” Adamat said. “Or the daring.” His eyes returned to the blood on the stairs, before his mind traveled to his wife and children, asleep in their beds. He looked at the field marshal. His hair was tousled; there were drops of blood on his jacket—a lot, now that he thought to look. Tamas might as well have been sprayed with it. There were dark circles under his eyes and a weariness that spoke of more than just age.

“I will not agree to a job blindly,” Adamat said. “Tell me what you want.”

“We killed them in their sleep,” Tamas said without preamble. “There’s no easy way to kill a Privileged, but that’s the best. A mistake was made and we had a fight on our hands.” Tamas looked pained for a moment, and Adamat suspected that the fight had not gone as well as Tamas would have liked. “We prevailed. Yet upon the lips of the dying was one phrase.”

Adamat waited.

“‘You can’t break Kresimir’s Promise,’” Tamas said. “That’s what the dying sorcerers said to me. Does it mean anything to you?”

Adamat smoothed the front of his coat and sought to recall old memories. “No. ‘Kresimir’s Promise’... ‘Break’... ‘Broken’... Wait—‘Kresimir’s Broken Promise.’” He looked up. “It was the name of a street gang. Twenty...twenty-two years ago. Cenka couldn’t remember that?”

Tamas continued. “Cenka thought it sounded familiar. He was certain you’d remember it.”

“I don’t forget things,” Adamat said. “Kresimir’s Broken Promise



was a street gang with forty-three members. They were all young, some of them no more than children, the oldest not yet twenty. We were trying to round up some of the leaders to put a stop to a string of thefts. They were an odd lot—they broke into churches and robbed priests.”

“What happened to them?”

Adamat couldn't help but look at the blood on the stairs. “One day they disappeared, every one of them—including our informants. We found the whole lot a few days later, forty-three bodies jammed into a drain culvert like pickled pigs' feet. They'd been massacred by powerful sorceries, with excessive brutality. The marks of the king's royal cabal. The investigation ended there.” Adamat suppressed a shiver. He'd not once seen a thing like that, not before or since. He'd witnessed executions and riots and murder scenes that filled him with less dread.

The Deliv soldier appeared again at the top of the stairs. “We need you,” he said to Tamas.

“Find out why these mages would utter those words with their final breath,” Tamas said. “It may be connected to your street gang. Maybe not. Either way, find me an answer. I don't like the riddles of the dead.” He got to his feet quickly, moving like a man twenty years younger, and jogged up the stairs after the Deliv. His boot splashed in the blood, leaving behind red prints. “Also,” he called over his shoulder, “keep silent about what you have seen here until the execution. It will begin at noon.”

“But...” Adamat said. “Where do I start? Can I speak with Cenka?”

Tamas paused near the top of the stairs and turned. “If you can speak with the dead, you're welcome to.”

Adamat ground his teeth. “How did they say the words?” he said. “Was it a command, or a statement, or...?”

Tamas frowned. “An entreaty. As if the blood draining from their bodies was not their primary concern. I must go now.”

“One more thing,” Adamat said.

Tamas looked to be near the end of his patience.

“If I’m to help you, tell me why all of this?” He gestured to the blood on the stairs.

“I have things that require my attention,” Tamas warned.

Adamat felt his jaw tighten. “Did you do this for power?”

“I did this for me,” Tamas said. “And I did this for Adro. So that Manhouch wouldn’t sign us all into slavery to the Kez with the Accords. I did it because those grumbling students of philosophy at the university only play at rebellion. The age of kings is dead, Adamat, and I have killed it.”

Adamat examined Tamas’s face. The Accords was a treaty to be signed with the king of Kez that would absolve all Adran debt but impose strict tax and regulation on Adro, making it little more than a Kez vassal. The field marshal had been outspoken about the Accords. But then, that was expected. The Kez had executed Tamas’s late wife.

“It is,” Adamat said.

“Then get me some bloody answers.” The field marshal whirled and disappeared into the hallway above.

Adamat remembered the bodies of that street gang as they were being pulled from the drain in the wet and mud, remembered the horror etched upon their dead faces. *The answers may very well be bloody.*

## CHAPTER

# 2



Lajos is dying,” Sabon said.

Tamas entered the apartments of the Privileged who’d been Zakary the Beadle. He swept through the salon and entered the bedchamber—a room bigger than most merchants’ houses. The walls were indigo and covered with colorful paintings that displayed various Beadles in the history of Adro’s royal cabal. Doors led off to auxiliary rooms, such as the privy and Beadle’s kitchens. The door to the Beadle’s private brothel had been ripped apart, splinters no bigger than a finger scattered across the room.

The Beadle’s bed had been stripped of sheets, the Beadle’s body tossed aside for a wounded powder mage.

“How do you feel?” Tamas said.

Lajos managed a weak cough. Marked were tougher than most, and with the gunpowder Lajos had ingested, now coursing through his blood, he would feel little pain. It was little consolation as Tamas

gazed on his friend. Half of Lajos's right arm was gone—lengthwise—and a hole the size of a melon had been torn through his abdomen. It was a miracle he'd lived this long. They'd given him half a horn's worth of powder. That alone should have killed him.

"I've felt better," Lajos said. He coughed again, blood leaking from the corner of his mouth.

Tamas drew his handkerchief and dabbed the blood away. "It won't be much longer," he said.

"I know," Lajos said.

Tamas squeezed his friend's hand.

Lajos mouthed the words, "Thank you."

Tamas took a deep breath. It was suddenly hard to see. He blinked his eyes clear. Lajos's breathing came to a rasping stop. Tamas made to pull his hand away when Lajos gripped it suddenly. Lajos's eyes opened.

"It's all right, my friend," Lajos said. "You've done what needed to be done. Have peace." His eyes focused elsewhere and then stilled. He was dead.

Tamas closed his friend's eyes with the tips of his fingers and turned to Sabon. The Deliv stood on the other side of the room, examining what was left of the door to the harem where it hung on the frame by one hinge. Tamas joined him and looked inside. The women had been corralled away an hour ago by his soldiers, taken to some other part of the palace with the rest of the Privileged's whores.

"The fury of a woman," Sabon murmured.

"Indeed," Tamas said.

"There's no way we could have planned for this."

"Tell that to them," Tamas said. He jerked his head at the row of four bodies on the floor, and the fifth that would soon be joining them. Five powder mages. Five friends. All because of one Privileged that had been unaccounted for. Tamas had just put a bullet in the Beadle's head—a man who he'd shaken hands with and spoken to on a regular basis. Tamas's Marked stood around him, ready in case the old man

had some fight in him. They were not ready for the other Privileged, the one hiding in the brothel. She'd sliced through that door like a guillotine blade through a melon, Privileged's gloves on her hands, fingers dancing as her sorcery tore Tamas's powder mages to shreds.

A powder mage could float a bullet over a mile and hit the bull's-eye every time. He could angle a bullet around corners with the power of his mind, and ingest black powder to make himself stronger and faster than other men. But he could do little to contest Privileged sorcery at close range.

Tamas, Sabon, and Lajos had been the only men with time to react, and they'd barely fought her off. She'd fled, echoes of sorcerous destruction following her through the palace as she went—probably nothing more than a show to keep them from following. Her parting shot had been Lajos's mortal wound, but it had been randomly flung. It very well could have been Sabon, or even Tamas himself, who'd died there on the bed a moment ago. The thought chilled Tamas's blood.

Tamas looked away from the door. "We'll have to follow her. Find her and kill her. She's dangerous on the loose."

"A job for the magebreaker?" Sabon said. "I wondered why you've kept him around."

"A contingency I didn't want to use," Tamas said. "I wish I had a mage to send with him."

"His partner is a Privileged," Sabon said. "A magebreaker and a Privileged should be more than a match for a single cabal Privileged." He gestured at the wrecked door.

"I don't like to fight fair when it comes to the royal cabal," Tamas said. "And remember, there's a difference between a member of the royal cabal and a hired thug."

"Who was she?" Sabon asked. There was a note in his voice, perhaps reproach.

"I have no idea," Tamas snapped. "I knew every one of the king's cabal. I've met them, dined with them. She was a stranger."

Sabon took Tamas's anger without comment. "A spy for another cabal?"

"Not likely. The brothel girls are all checked. She didn't look like a whore. She was strong, weathered. The Beadle's lover, maybe. I've never seen her before in my life."

"Could the Beadle have been training someone in secret?"

"Apprentices are never secret," Tamas said. "Privileged are too suspicious to allow that."

"Their suspicions are often well founded," Sabon said. "There has to be a reason for her presence."

"I know. We'll deal with her in good time."

"If the others had been here..." Sabon said.

"More of us would be dead," Tamas said. He counted the bodies again, as if there might be fewer this time. Five. Out of seventeen of his mages. "We split into two groups for precisely this reason." He turned away from the bodies. "Any word from Taniel?"

"He's in the city," Sabon said.

"Perfect. I'll send him with the magebreaker."

"Are you sure?" Sabon said. "He just got back from Fatrasta. He needs time to rest, to see his fiancée..."

"Is Vlora with him?"

Sabon shrugged.

"Let's hope she gets here soon. Our work is not yet done." He raised a hand to forestall protests. "And Taniel can rest when the coup's over."

"What must be done will be done," Sabon said quietly.

They both fell silent, regarding their fallen comrades. Moments passed before Tamas saw a smile spread on Sabon's wrinkled black face. The Deliv was tired and haggard, but with a hint of restrained joy. "We succeeded."

Tamas eyed the bodies of his friends—his soldiers—again. "Yes," he said. "We did." He forced himself to look away.

A painting stood in the corner, a monstrosity with a gilded frame

on a silver tripod befitting a herald of the royal cabal. Tamas studied the painting briefly. It showed Zakary in his prime as a strong young man with broad shoulders and a stern frown.

A far cry from the old, bent body in the corner. The bullet had entered his brain in such a way as to kill him instantly, yet his lifeless throat had gasped the same words as the others: "You can't break Kresimir's Promise."

Cenka was white as a mummer's painted face after the first of the Privileged cried out as they died. He'd demanded that Tamas summon Adamat here, to the heart of their crime. Tamas hoped that Cenka was wrong. He hoped that the investigator found nothing.

Tamas left the cabal's wing of the palace, Sabon following close behind.

"I'll need a new bodyguard," Tamas said as they walked. It pained him to speak of it, with Lajos's body still cooling.

"A Marked?" Sabon asked.

"I can't spare one. Not now."

"I've had my eye on a Knacked," Sabon said. "A man named Olem."

"He's a soldier?" Tamas asked. He thought he knew the name. He held his hand just slightly below his eyes. "About this tall? Sandy hair?"

"Yes."

"What's his Knack?"

"He doesn't need sleep. Ever."

"That's useful," Tamas said.

"Quite. He has a strong third eye as well, so he can watch for Privileged. I'll have him briefed and by your side for the execution."

A Knacked wouldn't be as useful as a powder mage. Knacked were more common, and their abilities were more like a talent than a sorcerous power. But if he could use his third eye to see sorcery, he would be of some benefit.

Tamas approached the barred doors of the chapel. A pair of Tamas's soldiers emerged from the shadows by the wall, muskets at the ready. Tamas nodded to them and gestured at the door.

One of the soldiers removed a long knife from his belt and slid it between the doors to the chapels. "He flipped the Diocel's latch," said the soldier fiddling with the knife, "but he didn't even bother to stack anything in front of the door. Not very enterprising, if you ask me." He flipped up the lock and he and his companion pushed the doors open.

The chapel was large, as were all the rooms in the palace. Unlike the rest of the palace, however, it had been spared the seasonal remodeling customary of the king's whims and remained close to what it must have looked like two hundred years ago. The ceiling was vaulted impossibly high, with boxes for the royalty and high nobles set about halfway up the walls in between columns as wide across as an oxcart. The floor was tiled in marble designed in intricate mosaics of various shapes and sizes, while the ceiling contained paneled depictions of the saints as they founded the Nine Nations under the god Kresimir's fatherly gaze.

Two altars sat at the front of the chapel, raised slightly above the benches, next to a pulpit of blackwood. The first altar, smaller, closer to the people, was dedicated to Adro's founding saint, Adom. The second, larger altar, sided by marble and covered with satin, was dedicated to Kresimir. Beside this altar huddled Manhouch XII, sovereign of Adro, and his wife Natalija, Duchess of Tarony. Natalija stared behind and above the altar, her lips moving in silent prayer to Kresimir's Rope. Manhouch was pale, his eyes red, lips drawn to a thin line. He spoke in a desperate whisper to the Diocel. He stopped as Tamas approached.

"Wait," the Diocel called, one hand rising as the king jogged down the steps from the altar and stormed toward Tamas with purpose. The Diocel's old face was fraught, his robes wrinkled from a hasty rush to the chapel.



Tamas watched Manhouch march toward him. He noted the one hand held behind his back, the fury of emotions playing across Manhouch's aristocratic young face. Manhouch looked barely seventeen thanks to the high sorceries of his royal cabal, though in reality he was well into his thirties. It was supposed to reflect the monarchy's agelessness, but Tamas had always found it hard to take such a young-looking man seriously. Tamas stopped and regarded the king, watched him falter before coming closer.

Five paces away, Manhouch revealed his pistol. It came up swiftly. His aim was sure at that range—after all, Tamas himself had taught the king to shoot. It was an unfortunate reflection on his detachment from the world, however, that Manhouch attempted it at all. He pulled the trigger.

Tamas reached out mentally and absorbed the power of the powder blast. He felt the energy course through him, warming his body like a sip of fine spirits. He redirected the power of the blast harmlessly into the floor, cracking a marble tile beneath the king. Manhouch danced away from the cracked tile. The ball rolled from the barrel of his pistol and clattered to the ground, stopping by Tamas's feet.

Tamas stepped forward, taking the pistol from the king by the barrel. He barely felt it burn his hand.

"How dare you," Manhouch said. His face was powdered, his cheeks blushed. His silk bedclothes were rumpled, soaked with sweat. "We trusted you to protect us." He trembled slightly.

Tamas looked past Manhouch to the Diocel still beside the altar. The old priest leaned against the wall, his tall, embroidered hat of office balanced precariously on his head. "I suppose," Tamas said, shaking the pistol, "he got this from you?"

"It wasn't meant for that," the Diocel wheezed. He stuck his chin up. "It was meant for the king. So he can take his life honorably and not be struck down by a godless traitor."

Tamas sent forth his senses, looking for more powder charges,

but there were none. “You only brought one pistol, with one bullet,” Tamas said. “It would have been kinder to bring two.” He glanced at the queen, still directing her prayers toward Kresimir’s Rope.

“You wouldn’t . . .” the Diocel said.

“He won’t!” Manhouch spoke over him. “He won’t kill us. He can’t. We are God’s chosen.” He took a deep, shaky breath.

Tamas felt a ripple of pity for the king. He knew Manhouch was older than he looked, but in reality he was nothing more than a child. It wasn’t all his fault. Greedy councillors, idiot tutors, indulgent sorcerers. There were any number of reasons he’d been a bad—no, terrible—king. He was, however, king. Tamas squashed the pity. Manhouch would face the consequences.

“Manhouch the Twelfth,” Tamas said, “you are under arrest for the utmost neglect of your people. You will be tried for treason, fraud, and murder through starvation.”

“A trial?” Manhouch whispered.

“Your trial is now,” Tamas said. “I am your judge and jury. You have been found guilty before the people and before Kresimir.”

“Don’t pretend to speak in God’s name!” the Diocel said. “Manhouch is our king! Sanctioned by Kresimir!”

Tamas laughed mirthlessly. “You’re quick enough to invoke Kresimir when it suits you. Is he on your mind when you’ve got a concubine wrapped in your silk sheets or when you eat a meal of delicacies that would have fed fifty peasants? Your place is not at the right hand of God, Diocel. The Church has sanctioned this coup.”

The Diocel’s eyes grew large. “I would have known.”

“Do the arch-diocels tell you everything? I thought not.”

Manhouch gathered his strength and matched Tamas’s gaze. “You have no evidence! No witnesses! This is not a trial.”

Tamas flung his hand out to the side. “My evidence is out there! The people are unemployed and starving. Your nobles whore and

hunt and fill their plates with meat and their glasses with wine while the common man starves in the gutter. Witnesses? You plan on signing the entire country over to the Kez next week with the Accords. You would make us all vassals to a foreign power simply to dissolve your debt.”

“Baseless claims, spoken by a traitor,” Manhouch whispered weakly.

Tamas shook his head. “You will be executed at noon along with your councillors, your queen, and many hundreds of your relatives.”

“My cabal will destroy you!”

“They’ve already been executed.”

The king paled further and began to shake violently, collapsing to the floor. The Diocel slowly made his way forward. Tamas looked down on Manhouch for a moment and pushed aside the unbidden image of a young prince, perhaps six or seven, bouncing on his knee.

The Diocel reached Manhouch’s side and knelt. He looked up at Tamas. “Is this because of your wife?”

*Yes.* Tamas said aloud, “No. It’s because Manhouch has proved that the lives of an entire nation shouldn’t be subject to the whims of a single inbred fool.”

“You would dethrone a God-sanctioned ruler and become a tyrant, and still claim to love Adro?” the Diocel said.

Tamas glanced at Manhouch. “God no longer sanctions this. If you weren’t so blinded by your gold-lined robes and young concubines, you’d see it is so. Manhouch deserves the pit for his neglect of Adro.”

“You’ll surely see him there,” the Diocel said.

“I don’t doubt it, Diocel. I’m sure the company will be anything but dull.” Tamas dropped the empty pistol at Manhouch’s feet. “You have until noon to make your peace with God.”