

Chapter 4 – The Travails of Endangered Nobility

“- July 7, Year 580 of the King’s Calendar .-“

~ Richard Angevin, Duke of Hillsbrad ~

If he ever had to dress up and pussyfoot around his true feelings towards every last one of the attendees of King’s Perenolde’s summer ball, he might just pull his sword on someone. If he ever found which of them were in on the ‘tragic’ downfall of his ‘misguided’ family, there would be a reckoning. If he found out that all of them were involved or somehow partisan, there would be blood. And if he found out the King himself had confected it...

“Brother, are all balls going to be like that?”

Richard veered away from his treasonous thoughts and... didn’t smile at his young sister who was looking at him from the carriage window. He wouldn’t dissemble here, not with the only family he had left. “You didn’t enjoy yourself either then?” Richard wasn’t surprised. She’d not said anything all morning, and barely anything during the entire previous day of travel. Even though she charmed a wild raven into being her playmate, the girl who’d talked his ear off and nagged – *entreated* – the druids back in Kul Tiras to ‘teach her how to be a fairy tale princess’ was well and truly gone.

Richard thanked the Light every day that their parents saw the writing on the wall and shipped her off to visit him when they did. Four siblings, both their parents, even their only surviving grandfather had been hung in the city square less than a month later. They’d been seized right as they came out of Silver Cathedral after Noblegarden day service. If Annari had been here for the king’s ‘justice’, she’d be gone like the rest of them. Or worse, seeing as she was a comely maiden flowered for three years.

“Becoming a jaded senile old man already, husband?”

Richard glanced to where his newly-wed wife had opened the other window. “Don’t pretend you’re not vexed. This is the farthest thing from what you wanted your honeymoon to be.”

“True,” Lady Valeria Angevin nee Stormsong admitted easily. “Doesn’t change the fact that you still haven’t answered your sister’s question though.”

“I could nag him into it,” mused Annari aloud.

“Would you?” Richard didn’t even have to put effort into sounding hopeful. “Go ahead then, give me your best.”

“Aw, but that’s no fun if you like it,” Annari pouted.

Their laughter was brief, but it was the most honest thing they’d indulged in all month.

Richard soon sobered again though. “I’m afraid that Alterac social occasions are indeed all like that, sister. Don’t worry though, Kul Tiras won’t be nearly so bad.”

“I’ll say,” huffed Valeria. “I thought the Waycrest court was bad, but this was a completely different level of oily.”

“... What if I don’t want to go?”

Richard closed his eyes briefly, then looked at Annari soberly. “You can’t tell me you enjoyed any of it.”

“I didn’t, but... I don’t want to leave if you don’t come too. I-I want to stay with you.”

“Oh sister...” He wouldn’t pretend he didn’t see this coming, he was all she had left, but...

“You know it’s too dangerous to stay here.”

“And be honest,” Valeria tucked a loose strand of Anna’s hair behind her ear. “Do you think you’ll have a better time next time your many suitors descend on you like vultures?”

“Well no, but...”

If Dolos Vardus tries to smarm his way into my family one more time, I might just reconsider Sir Orman’s suit. That would throw the court into a tizzy, seeing as the man was not just a mere knight but one from Stromgarde. But with how quickly things are breaking down, I don’t expect her plight to be much improved there, even if Sir Orman is good to her. With the ‘banditry’ along the border, especially the mess in Durn, it would be a wonder if they saw winter without war breaking out. He’d not make his sister a hostage. No, the only option is to send her back to Kul Tiras. Lady Stormsong will find a good match, whatever happens.

King Perenolde would no doubt suspect treason even without the warmongering poison wafting in all the air he breathed, but at this point the man suspected treason of everyone. Richard reluctantly admitted Aiden Perenolde’s paranoia wasn’t entirely groundless, the man was a king at twenty-five years of age only because his father died ‘unexpectedly,’ an Alteraci euphemism for poison. But considering what the man did to him and his when Richard was

barely eighteen himself, that was as far as his sympathy went. You don't get to complain about the bed you make, especially when you go and slaughter the only high noble house in the nation that *isn't* just paying lip service to virtue.

All to appease the nobles he didn't hang. To show them that he wasn't pursuing a vendetta, you see, not *all* the ones who hung were their friends. *He didn't even have the courtesy of conducting a proper smear campaign,* Richard thought contemptuously. *Not only is he a weak and evil king, he's also cheap.*

At least all the warmongering meant he could raise troops without drawing suspicion. Well, no more suspicion than everyone else.

The guilds would need to be very careful about who they hired to play Greatfather Winter this year. If they landed another drunk and he said something the king took the wrong way, it might be an entirely different class of bodies lining up for a short drop and a sudden stop.

Alterac was the worst.

At least there isn't any slavery.

His standards had gone to hell.

That was when lightning struck.

Crack-CRACK-BOOM.

“What the devil!?” Richard Angevin barely kept control of his spoked horse, watching open-mouthed as lightning came down from a clear sky and struck the cliff top high ahead with a thunderous roar. Dust and smoke billowed up in the air amidst a long, rumbling groan-

“ROCKSLIDE!”

The cry from ahead snapped Richard out of his shock. “AMBUSH!” He roared even louder, lightning on a clear day, it could only be magic! “Ware, magic is afoot!”

“Halt!” The shouts of his Guard Captain erupted over the din as a wave of boulders began rolling down the side of the cliff up ahead. “Halt the convoy, halt, HALT, stop NOW or we'll all be buried!”

“No,” Richard quietly said to himself as he watched the earthfall. “No, there's too few rocks.”

“Brother, what's happening?!”

“We might be under attack.” Despite his force of men-at-arms *200-strong*. “Valeria, keep her inside, don’t come out until I say so.”

“Right!” His wife, Light bless her, immediately pulled his sister inside and closed the windows, locking them tight and pulling the curtains shut.

A horse’s gallop heralded the sight of his Guard Captain skidding to a halt before him. “My Lord, did you see it? Lightning from the blue!”

“Mercad.” Richard wrestled with the impulse to relegate the giant Kul Tiran to be his wife and sister’s human shield. “Report!”

“Our scouts are overdue, there isn’t another way down and the path is too narrow to turn the carriage train around, we’re sitting ducks. If we’d been five minutes quicker, we’d have been caught right under it.”

“You don’t say.”

Zap-Screech-BOOM.

A second bolt of lightning came down, this time in the forest on the opposite side of their path. Cries of shock and pain came on the wind. They were faint, but they came from below and they were... “More than two.”

“Not ours,” Mercad realized the same moment. “More than one group?”

“And each with different orders. Mercad, I have the defence, you take two men and check left of the path as well as you can both ahead and behind us, and not just the top. Look for hooks and ropes.”

If anything good came from living in Alterac, it was that guards knew how to turn carriages into roadblocks and improvise barricades very quickly. He’d barely finished assigning the men defensive positions when Mercad ran back to him. “It took some doing, but we found over a dozen thick ropes fastened with iron spikes in the side of the rock just under the path, the ends trail down into the underbrush. We cut the ropes, but the spikes are no simple grapple hooks, it took real sledgehammers to ram those things in, this could only have been prepared beforehand.”

“Rockslides take a while to set up as well,” Richard said with a grim frown as the cries from around and above changed from panicked to angry. He dismounted. “Corral the horses, we really don’t want them lost or stolen.” There goes their greatest advantage.

“Yes, Lord.”

“See to the crossbowmen while you’re at it, reverse-w tactic two, be discreet about it.”

“But that’s for use against wildkin, not...” Mercad trailed off as the angry shouts of a less-than-controlled charge finally reached them both. There was just barely sufficient tree cover that they couldn’t see anything but brief blurs of motion. He could spot boiled leather and even mail, but those weren’t the sounds of an orderly attack.

“Just a gut feeling.” Richard and grabbed a halberd. “Get to it.”

“As you will.” Mercad took the reins of his horse and went to do as ordered.

Richard pulled down his helm. “SHIELD WALL!”

He expected his large stature to make him the most attractive target, and he was right. He expected his full plate armor to protect him from the worst of it, and he was proven correct there as well. But he expected the charging mass to be as disorganized as the shouting suggested, and he was wrong. This was Alterac, where everyone from conscripts to mercenaries had elevated the ‘pretend to be a bandit’ strategy to an art form.

The first charge stalled on their shields, but the ‘bandits’ neither broke nor ran. The second push was weaker, but it made sure all their effort went into pushing back, which left them open to the *arcane barrage*,

“They have mages!” cried footman Wilhelm before the arcane missiles blasted his face in. “Aaargh!”

Three more fell in the same moment, and the second mage was charging an even bigger spell. Richard’s instinct screamed at him even before the cloaked figure tossed the glittering blue orb up instead of forward. “HEDGEHOG FORMATION!”

Another man fell when he couldn’t disengage quickly enough, but Richard managed to lock his shield in a dome with those who remained, just in time for the massive blizzard spikes to come down once, twice, thrice, the halberds started snapping on the fourth wave, the frost bit his arm on the fifth, his shield cracked on the seventh, and the ninth and final onslaught passed

with his pavise just barely holding together. The shield finally shattered when a mace smashed into it. Richard used the leftovers to bash his attacker in the face, dropped the snapped halberd pole, grabbed the second attacker and let himself fall down to the ground along with him. “CROSSBOWS!”

His crossbowmen emerged from where they’d hunkered down behind cover and unleashed a full volley right over their crouched forms into the enemy scrum.

The attackers fell in a drove, choking or yelling. Richard heard curses. He thought he heard the lightning a third time, but it seemed weak and far behind him. There was dust billowing in the air all around the battle as he drove his knife into the man’s eye and pushed back to stand. The enemies still came, but where was their counter-fire? “Reform the line!”

“Egrediuntur tela arcanis!”

Richard barely got the pavise of one of his fallen men up in time. It shattered a moment later, possibly along with his arm, the pain that erupted-agh-

“Procidens jubar sideru-“

BANG

Blood and brain burst from the mage’s head. The arcane missile storm misfired like a whirlwind in the midst of a typhoon. Assailants fell. More faltered. The assault stalled for a critical moment.

Richard pulled his throwing knife and hurled it at the other mage’s face.

“Fuck!” The *woman* cursed, an arcane shield springing up at the last second before she promptly teleported away.

The line finally reformed over their fallen brethren. “Your ambush has failed!” Richard shouted, hoping to at least buy time for the crossbows to finish reloading. “We found your ropes, there will be no reinforcements, this distraction has no purpose! Stand down!”

The attackers hesitated while Richard strained to survey what he could from the corner of his eye without giving himself away, *where’s their counter-fire?!*

Mercad’s horn sounded near the rear, conveying *Send Reinforcements, True Objective.*

Richard froze where he stood. *Annari! Valerie!*

To his surprise, the enemies in front of him faltered and broke at the sound.

Deciding not to question his good fortune, Richard passed leadership to the nearest lieutenant and ran to the rear with what reinforcements he could gather on the way. *But why did they break?* His mind whirled as he looked around. *They were obviously no bandits, they were enlisted troops or mercenaries that clearly knew tactical signals, they should have-* Richard's mind skipped a thought when his eyes registered the unnatural amount of dust in the air, around and *above* them, atop the ridge! *We use Kul Tiras signals,* his thought resolved itself even as his focus shifted. *They must have thought the horn call meant something else.* Even more dust was – there was wind blowing *against* the wind!

When he could barely see ten feet in front of him, Richard stopped behind the next to last carriage and blew his own horn in Maurice pattern. *Incoming Friendlies!*

After a tense few seconds, Mercad's horn responded. *Flank right.*

The scum must have him against the edge of the ravine. Richard thought as he quickly relayed orders, trying not to cough. *They must have come from even farther back and attacked from the rear, and maybe above as well.* The enemy was well prepared and not stupid, even had contingencies and these ones wore plate, not leather or mail like the others. But Richard was in position now. He signalled his men to change to warhammers. At the same time, the wind seemed to miraculously whirl around and in front of him, just enough to clear his line of sight up to where his foes waited for him. *Without* doing the same for them. "Whoever or whatever you are, thank you," Richard murmured under his breath, even if it probably wouldn't-

The wind brushed against his face, scalding hot in his eyes, but then it blew away and he blinked hard and wide, suddenly feeling alert and clean and no longer felt about to cough his lungs out. "... Alright."

With a hand signal, he launched his counter-ambush. "CHAAARGE!" He yelled just a moment too late for the scum to react properly.

The rear-most attackers barely had time to turn, and so they were caught in the worst possible position.

Flesh tore. Bones crunched. Men screamed. Richard gave no quarter nor mercy. The Battle of the High Pass was decided in a bloody skirmish around the ladies' wheelhouse. Until, finally, Richard was standing amidst the silence of corpses broken only by the faint gasps of deep

weariness and – no. There was something else. A flash of light at the edge of vision made him turn to look up at the high rise where the dust cloud, now that he had time to notice, was the thickest.

“Mercad!”

“Here!” The large man had four crossbow bolts sticking out of his coat of armor, but he did not seem bothered. “Orders?”

“Take what men you can and find a way up there.” Lightning struck from nothing a third time, though it was followed by no thunder now. “Quickly! That must be their ranged support!”

“You, you and you lot, go back and see if there’s a path up that way. You lot, with me! We’re going to find whatever trail the bastards used to climb up and take out whatever of them are left.”

Richard watched them leave and was going to set about tallying his losses when something tugged at his awareness. That same instinct that led his tactics and sword arm through thick and thin. Following it, he found his sight casting forth and above where the dust cloud still billowed. A shrouded figure standing on the ledge. A man-shaped shadow staring straight at him from inside the dust devil. Richard opened his mouth to call the attention of his men, but the air seized in his throat, his face felt like it had just been scalded all over again, and suddenly it was as if he was face-to-face with whoever it was, two blue eyes flashing gold just as they met his.

Richard saw the darkest swamp he’d ever seen surrounding a blasted land scorched red, a simple table in the middle with a jenga tower rising up into infinity. In front of it a knight was fighting some sort of green-skinned brute, skill and will matching slaving savagery as dwarves, gnomes, several kinds of elves, and even some manner of man-goat thing were trampled underfoot. Above them a being of crystals and light matched Light against the Fel darkness of two great, horned demons while fiends and walking dead covered the earth, and dragons swarmed the sky from horizon to horizon. The Black ate the Blue. The Bronze ate their own tail. The Red languished in misery. The Blue hated the rest. Fleshy tentacles and tendrils of blood seeped up from the bedrock. Two burning eyes glared down from amidst the corpses of gods littering the Great Dark. The Fire burned. The Air screamed. The Water stank. The Earth shook. Each and every time the chaos churned, block upon blocks of the trembling tower fell down from heaven.

And right there in the middle, cross-legged on the table at the base of the jenga spire of time, sat a young man with blond hair and blue eyes who was taking blocks out of the tower's base, coating them in glue, then putting them back in place, one by one by one until a wholly new, unyielding foundation grew taller than his hands could reach. So he used the falling blocks to make a club instead.

Then he got up, bashed the greenskin over the head with all the force of wasted time, took the knight's sword and swung it hard at the tower, smashing everything upwards from his hard work apart.

The boy's eyes met his own as the future fell to pieces around them. The eyes were gone. There was only Light shining forth. Then the axe came down and smashed to bits even the table.

Richard Angevin reeled back from the vision with a gasp, one final image burned into his mind, of a new foundation planting itself deep into the fabric of the world, heedless of all the things fighting over it. His skin was clammy. His brain felt like it was alight. His mind drifted. His exhaustion caught up with him and muddled his blank thoughts. He cast about for the figure but he was gone, not even an afterimage in the fading dust cloud to mark his passing.

Light, what was that?

But Richard knew the answer even before the thought finished. The vision and all its bits and pieces were wrapped in knowledge and tenacity locked in a pledge. He knew what that felt like, once. It wasn't even so long ago that he thought he measured up to that same devotion. When was the last time he knelt to pray?

Light, how much greater than me and mine is the plight of the future?

Surrounded by battle-worn rattle and footfalls, Richard Angevin stood alone.

Then he went to his medic to have his broken arm bound, went to his dead, knelt at their side and prayed to the Light for their righteous reward in the afterlife.

“-.-“

His new clarity of mind stayed with him well after he finished his prayer, but it did not eliminate the demands that the rest of the world had on his time. He had threads to pull on, and the first one beckoned from the direction where the one wizard had been so abruptly neutralized before.

Looking around, Richard Angevin was glad to see most of the dead were enemies, his men around him going about securing the few survivors who hadn't managed to flee. After checking on the ladies and reassuring them that the situation was under control – though not necessarily safe, so no, Annari, you can't come out to experience the trauma of the battlefield yet – he set about reassessing the situation while tallying up casualties. Miraculously, only eight men had died, with about thirty more sustaining some manner of injury. Five of them would probably not see the next morning, so he memorised their names and listened to their last wishes. But of the remainder only eleven had a wound serious enough to put them out of action.

If only I knew how my numbers compare to the ones that ran, Richard thought grimly.

Before anything else, a stop by the bodies was in order. His men were well on the way to gathering up the attackers' corpses for a pyre, but since he'd not given leave for looting in order to ensure no important evidence was lost, they were all still unspoiled and intact. Insofar as their manner of death allowed at least.

When he found the mage and removed the man's mask and hood, he could only stare, completely taken aback at the sheer audacity of what was in front of him. "Dolos Vardus." All his tiredness washed away in the face of fury. "May the Light spare no pity or grace for you in the afterlife, you wretched whoreson."

How he wished he was back in Kul Tiras still. All his life, his entire purpose as the third son had been to leverage his family's relatively neglected seamanship interests in preparation of settling back in his mother's homeland. With all the male Ridgeley heirs lost at sea, he would take up her name so her House could continue. He'd been well on the way to doing just that too, despite minor frictions with the Tidesages over his Faith in the Light instead of the Tidemother. Then he suddenly found out he was now the only male heir of his *father's* family. If not for King Aiden Perenolde's polite 'invitation' to him *and* his sister, he'd have left her in Kul Tiras and possibly not come himself 'to surely redeem the Angevin name in the eyes of the Realm.'

But no, I wouldn't have lived with myself if I let this injustice stand without the slightest investigation, Richard thought darkly. *Never mind the dishonour of my family being not only wrongfully executed, but also dispossessed after such an 'admission of guilt.'*

But rage would just exhaust him further, so he forced himself not to throw Baron Vardus' corpse down the ravine. He got up and went to the spot where he died instead.

Once he was there, he began looking everywhere around the spot where the man and his perforated face had been felled. Here, at least, fate didn't work against him. The path was dry and earthy, with barely a blade of grass anywhere. Feeling along the ground eventually let him find a small hole in the path. It could easily have been dismissed as a crack from the many footfalls of the skirmish, but it was clean and deep and straight through solid rock. So deep he had to use his mace to break the stone and then his knife to dig through it. Finally, the sunlight glinted off something smooth and clear.

Richard picked it up and raised it to examine in the light. It was... some manner of projectile. Thinner than an arrowhead, but heavier. Thick and sharp, though also blunt compared to a bolt or arrow. Made of steel. *It came down with the sound of thunder.* And he distinctly remembered the *lack* of accompanying lightning. *Some manner of projectile shooting spell?*

Richard was still turning it between his fingertips when Mercad returned with their defeated foes in bonds and news of his scouts dead. A fair amount of their attackers had been struck down before Mercad and his men got to them, not by battle wounds but various incapacitating ailments. Like burst eardrums. And blindness. Uncontrollable jitters in most of them too. Richard thought back to the blast of steam he got to the face and made an effort not to grimace. Though when he went to see the prisoners, he found most of their eyes looking no worse for wear. Nothing that couldn't have been caused by fighting in a thick cloud of dust and sand for half an hour at least.

"I suppose they must have been too close to the thunder strike."

Mercad disagreed. "Maybe you didn't see it from where you were fighting, sir, but the lightning came down once or twice to help us too, and it didn't boom or scorch the earth or anything. Mostly it seemed to stun the bastards, though the couple who got it head on did get done in. What we did find was alchemical explosives."

"You're saying the lightning only set off whatever they had set up to bury us. Prematurely at that."

"Yes, sir."

"Come with me." Richard led the way to where the rockslide was being slowly dug through by the men in an effort to clear the path. "Tell me, does this amount of rock seem sufficient to you if they really wanted to kill us all?"

Mercad gave the rock pile a more thoughtful look than before. “You think they had a different objective?”

“Even if it caught us full on, at most it would have split us. Their forces weren’t significantly more numerous than ours either, and this place is not ideal for that sort of objective in any case, the path is easily narrow enough that we were able to form a chokepoint. Numeric superiority would have been useless regardless. For a while at least.”

“... But it could have sufficed as a decapitation strike.”

“It *could* have. Except the strongest forces concentrated on the rear.”

“Where we were,” Mercad concluded. “You think they were after the Ladies’ wheelhouse.”

“I don’t doubt my head would have been a fine bonus, but no. I am certain this was about taking hostages.” *Baron Vardus might have joined in a misguided attempt to get Annari despite my rejection, but who was the real mastermind? Who was the sorceress? And I’m a Duke, there is none higher in status than me save the King himself.* “I don’t much like what this is pointing to.”

A raven cawed nearby. Richard turned around and spotted it on the top of his own carriage that he only ever brought along as a decoy. It was hard to tell since ravens tended to look alike, but Richard rather thought it was the same one his sister had spent the prior day playing with. Maybe he should have taken it as an omen. “You won’t be feasting on our corpses today, damned bird.” Though the ‘bandits’ might be a different matter.

The raven didn’t care. It groomed its wing, then croaked once more and looked straight ahead, past him to where his men had finally dug a path to the other side of the rockslide. It would take another couple of hours to clear the whole mess, but that was fine. Richard could use the excuse to rest. The time to plan what to do next. Move on. Stay here. Go back.

Defeat in detail.

Whatever served to fill the time most usefully while his Lieutenants tallied the dead’s belongings. He’d let Mercad do his interrogations later, possibly leave him behind a ways so Annari couldn’t ‘happen’ upon the sight. Once they were sure the threat was truly past.

Giving truth to his worries, his wife and sister couldn’t take being cooped up in their carriage anymore and came looking for him. Whatever questions they had were answered by their own eyes well before they found him though.

“I-I’m sorry, Big Brother, if I hadn’t insisted on a last meet-up in the city, this wouldn’t have happened.”

Richard sighed. “Don’t be ridiculous, sister, not being allowed to say even goodbye to your only friends is no way to live.”

Annari didn’t seem convinced. “Well... they’re not all my friends.”

Richard didn’t have it in him to follow through on that conversation. Women may not be that hard to understand, but that didn’t necessarily mean that what you understood was always pleasant. The ladies of Alterac were every bit as venomous as the men. To Annari’s tragically belated horror, unfortunately.

There was a creaking.

Richard frowned and looked forward. What was that noise? It was the strangest sound he’d ever heard, like the bastard child of a drawing bowstring and a creaking floor board, except it never ended. He quickly had his wife and sister escorted back to their carriage at the rear of the convoy. Mercad drew his sword. His men formed around him, weapons drawn.

It appeared from beyond the bend.

... It was a single man.

“What the hell?” Mercad forgot himself next to him.

Richard could understand why, though. It was a man riding the most bizarre contraption he’d ever seen. Two wheels, impossibly thin and even thinner spokes, stuck to a frame one ahead of the other. The man was... spinning them forth by a pair of pedals? It was so thin and fragile, the thing’s profile was not even half a palm’s width thick if you ignored the front handles, what kind of balance – how did he not *crash*?

“What the hell is that thing?” Someone muttered before falling silent under Mercad’s glare because pot, meet kettle.

“Halt!” Mercad barked when the newcomer didn’t skip a single stroke on spotting the carnage.

“Who goes there?”

The man – no... That was no man, that was a *boy*, the boy... the boy from his vision! The boy... rode? Rode his contraption through the fresh split in the rockslide and turned to a stop just out of weapons reach. White shirt unbuttoned at the neck, dark leather jacket, masterwork

boots made of the same, brown suede trousers, the fairest skin Richard had ever seen, blond hair that gleamed in the sun, blue eyes that scanned them and everything around with mildness seemingly born of impossible experience. More than anything, though, stood out his unnatural stature. At least by mainlander standards. *This boy has Kul Tiran in him like me.* It was the only explanation, he was almost as tall as Richard already but it was obvious he was still growing. With good food he might even grow to match Mercad, which was saying something, the man was well over two meters tall. *And those weapons.* It was something he'd only ever seen on a dwarf, and never up close. Boomsticks, three of them, a small one on his hip, a double-piped monstrosity sheathed on his... contraption. But the thing on his back. Wood and steel polished to a sheen, long and deceptively unthreatening. Richard gripped tight on the projectile in his hand.

"Who are you?" Mercad barked, his own hand tense around his weapon hilt. He was wise not to drop his guard just because of the boy's age. "State your business."

"My name is Ferdinand." Ferdinand. That was... it was a name fit for a king. "I sensed a disturbance in the Light." A disturbance in the Light? What was he talking about? "You're not anything I expected, but of course, I'm not going to ignore when such a plight crosses my path, mister...?"

A name fit for a king or a *saint*, he certainly had the voice of one.

But Mercad didn't relax. "Mind yourself, boy. You are before his noble grace, Richard of House Angevin, Duke of Hillsbrad."

"I know who *he* is, I was asking *you*. But it's fine, I can wait a while for the power of friendship to yield its returns." The absolutely insolent young man gave them and their still grimy and bloody appearance a cursory examination. Then he looked at Richard. "Apologies for the substandard lightning." The air came together in nine spheres that revolved like a great wheel behind him, arcs of blue shooting from one to the next like a nimbus of lightning, before they faded as fast as they appeared. "The little ones learn fast, but there's only so many ions they can handle at once even with the most exacting leverage of potential difference. They're still babies, you see. They kick up a mean dust cloud though."

Sword arms slackened. Mercad gaped. Richard stared. Some distant part of his mind wondered what the boy was even talking about because he didn't understand anyth-

The boy raised a hand glowing gold-

“Hah!” Mercad lunged forward with a wordless shout, but it was too late, the sphere of light-
The Light brushed Richard’s cheek on the way by like a soothing caress. A well of refulgent splendor erupted behind him, drawing startled shouts, cries of amazement, voices intermixed everywhere with sighs of relief. Wonder. One weak, single gasp of a man who thought he’d breathe his last only for fortune to decide otherwise at the last moment. In that one instant between a blink and the next when the Light coursed through him, Richard felt it all.

In front of him, the boy reached up to push aside the blade pressing against his shield of golden radiance. The Light poured forth to envelop Mercad, the men, Richard himself, everyone around.... The cuts and developing bruises on his sentries disappeared. The bolts sticking out of Mercad’s armor fell out. The giant man staggered back, mortified. The agony in Richard’s arm vanished as the bone realigned and fused back into proper place. His aches disappeared. His weariness dispersed like it was never there.

The Light... has the Light not forsaken me after all?

Richard looked at the impossibility facing him and asked himself if he should kneel. “.. So it was you.”

The boy dismounted his... contraption but did not reply.

“You were the one who ruined the ambush, if you hadn’t... are you a priest?” *Are you a holy man?* Either that or some manner of nobility himself, influential one too. Not even the best connected guildmaster could obtain such exotic equipment, those boomsticks could only have come from the dwarves, and last Richard heard they still weren’t sharing. Kul Tiras had been badgering them to help make cannons a reality for decades to no luck, how did this boy come by them? Why did he need them? How was he here? Did... *Did the Light send you?* But his words caught in his throat, he couldn’t-

“Only coincidentally I’m afraid.” The lad dismissed both his and their role in events with a bizarre mix of unrepentant chagrin and complete lack of humility. “I wouldn’t call what led me here a vision, exactly, and I’ll freely admit I initially assumed you were my goal, but apparently not. It’s that bird.”

What?

Turning around, Richard only met the sight of the same raven as before. “The raven?” *What?*

“Yes, it surprised me as well.”

The raven flew down from the carriage to land on the boulder nearest the lad, dark fathomless eyes peering at him. But somehow, impossibly, Richard knew with absolute certainty that the raven didn't understand anything either.

The lad gave it a sandwich.

The raven greedily snatched it from his hand and proceeded to gobble it up.

“That settles that then.”

That settled *what*? “I... don't understand.”

“The scrum was large, there's even a couple of bodies your men missed, and a bunch that rolled down the slopes back into the forest. If this were a normal raven he'd already be down there somewhere, gobbling up eyeballs. But instead he's here, eating my lunch. It's clearly a familiar.” The lad scratched the bird's chin.

The raven seemed to enjoy it. It even paused in its savage feasting to bask in the boy's touch in full, what in tarnation?

“So which are you, Huginn or Muninn?”

The raven croaked.

“Who?” Richard asked numbly.

“Huginn and Muninn. You know, Odyn's ravens that he uses to gather news from the rest of the world.”

Richard stared at the holy man who called on the Light as easily as he commanded the spirits of nature itself to do his bidding and had a single question making rounds in his head.

Who the hell is Odyn?!