

The Head of the Beast

I am willing to wait for a great many staryears to see my plans come to fruition, but that does not mean I am a particularly patient person; especially when I am scheduled to be somewhere, and am waiting in a dingy, dark, secluded alley in the heart of Centris for a man that I am not fond of. It has made me impatient.

For I now stand on the precipice of a new age for Solaria and the worlds under its influence, and proud of my accomplishments; not proud of myself, but of how far we have come in such a short time.

It was a scant twenty-four staryears ago that I put the cogs in motion, that I took control and shaped the movement that would topple the old ways, and bring our people into a brighter dawn. A society no longer controlled solely by family blood, no longer discriminating by gender or wealth. A society where the destitute are no longer locked in cages where they could be conveniently hidden and eventually forgotten. A society that offered as much 'freedom' as can be truly granted when ruled by a governmental body. That was my vision, that was my dream.

I will never claim to be proud of what I have done; the people I have hurt, and even sent to die, in order to change the world around me. Good men, as well as wicked men, were a mass sacrifice that had to be made. It was what had to be done, for even the good men were part of the slowly consuming disease that threatened the whole.

Change had to happen. The pillars of Solaria had to be ripped down while there was still a foundation that a new era in our society could be built upon. That meant everything had to be purged, all had to be erased, even those with true nobility in their hearts. As long as they lived, my people could never move forward.

It honestly did not take much to shape the path that history would take. Our society was already on the inexorable path laid out in Bryan Honore's prophecy; I merely needed to shift the rails ever so slightly to reach my desired end. Setting the events of the Baramak Slaughter in motion, then helping to expose Solaria's role in the tragedy, guaranteed that what few Knights remained after the Second Battle of Mydor would be rendered impotent, hounded by the crimes of their superiors and unable to form a bloc of power that any Solarian would follow in large numbers.

My every slumbering moment is haunted by the cries of the innocent dead; lives snuffed out in a wave of nuclear fire. Faceless ghosts that steal the sleep from my eyes, and leave me on the verge of tears when exhaustion finally overcomes me.

I have done all I can in the two decades since to not learn anything about the people who died in the Slaughter; the few names I had no choice but to learn and already knew already weighed down my soul as it was. To learn more might cause such regret that I'd take my own life, and I can't afford that... not yet. While I have no doubt that one day my penance will come for me, it is a sentence I must stay as long as I can. There is far too much for me to do.

Yes, I used and indirectly sacrificed many people, turned their own dreams towards mine, even those who thought they were serving a far greater good than any mortal agency. Perhaps I regret using those who thought they were bringing the end of the old ways as the Creator's will. Those dreams served no will but mine, their sacrifices, both in time, money, and even their lives, certainly did not reach anything divine.

There's a part of me that feels somewhat sorrowed for a man like Horace Hightower; he devoted his every fiber of his being to bring forth the end of Bryan Honore's prophecy, truly believing that he was performing the role destined upon him by the Creator. He earnestly believed in his role, and that a

greater blessing awaited him. Misguided as he was, as depraved as what he thought the perfect Solarian Empire was, all he did was in service to a higher power, with little thought of his own wants. There is something of a nobility in that, and I somewhat regret using it for such dirty mortal designs.

There were some, however, who knew of the true purpose of the cult known as the Endtimers, and followed my design in the hopes of merely replacing the tired system that was slowly failing. For those people, I have no sympathy towards, no regrets using and bleeding their usefulness until there was nothing left, at which point I discarded them. They were no better than the corrupt, dying system they railed against, and would have done nothing good for the society I strove to better.

I am about to meet one of those people now.

Creator have mercy on his vacant soul.

Alex Datson was a sandscrub of a man; a hanger-on at best, using his family name as an easy access through life, even as his mediocre skills in both mind and body should not have afforded him much more than any layman.

He was short, even for the smaller stature of the Erani, and gangly. It was obvious why he did not survive the knighthood training, and wouldn't even now. His dark brown hair was oiled back so heavily that the sheen was visible even in the dim light of the alley I had chosen for this meeting. I'm not sure why or how Alex thought he should be seen looking like that.

His name made him useful, however, able to gather information gladly and candidly that would never have been granted to me even with my influence. My public persona was so above the board and proper that I would have been immediately distrusted, and none of the people I was searching for would respond to my alter ego at this point.

He was also remarkably stupid; so eager to attach onto any circle of power that he wantonly ignored all the warning signs about me. A person who had turned on the Knighthood of old, the cult I had formed, and the very crown of Solaria itself, would have no problems turning on the stale crust of a crippled noble family.

“Greetings, master. I have some of the information you requested.”

“Some?” I ask, the displeasure in my voice evident. “I did not ask you for 'some', I asked you for 'all.'”

“I'm sorry, master.” Alex says, whimpering like a beaten dog. “I did all I could. The Endtimers in SIA were very clever in covering their tracks, I learned of three of them, but it seems they were abandoned by the rest when they were compromised.”

“No doubt under Emmitt Fransisca's instruction.” I mutter disdainfully. Whether by cleverness, blind self-preservation, or dumb luck, Emmitt had escaped the Second Battle of Mydor with his life, and had the influence of the old ways to draw together the more secretive elements of the Endtimers, men that not even I had been able to identify when I had taken control of the cult.

“Did you at least determine if he was the one who stole my recording?” I query.

It really wasn't so much *my* recording, more that it had been in my possession. Just the fact that I had it at all could potentially be disastrous, much less how I went about acquiring such an ancient and potentially valuable recording from the non-progressed world that it had been hidden on.

I'm not sure how the Endtimers had even known where to find it, but they had considered the site sacrosanct. Learning that I had arranged for Nicolai's resting place to be defiled would not sit well with the Endtimers, or *any* agency for that matter.

Alex nods, “It would seem so. There was rumor floating around that he had... acquired... something of considerable value that 'changes everything we know about the faith.' Does that sound like what was on your recording?”

“It does.” I reply. It doesn't matter what I reveal at this point. Alex has outlived his usefulness. Now I know Francisca possesses Nicholai's secret prophecy, and that he thinks he'll be able to do something with it. He promises to be a thorn in my side, but not a fatal one. His anger and ire is turned towards the Sixth Prophet... and that is not a fight he is going to win.

“Will this be a problem, master?” Alex wonders. He doesn't like uncertainty... but then very few people do. It's why Solaria clung to its outdated structure thousands of staryears longer than it rightfully should have. The comfort that came with familiarity was more important than not being abused and mistreated.

“No. Of course not.” I answer. While the truth, it's meant to placate him in his final moments. A tense, panicking mind is not easy to kill silently, a subtlety I need at this moment.

“Very good.” Alex says, the worry dissipating. “We're just so close... you say the coming High Tenant is on board with our ideals?”

“Indeed she is.” I afford myself a knowing smile.

“To think, a mere staryear after all Solaria thinks us broken and lost to history... we will have in fact attained everything we sought!” He crows, and I swear I hear a giggle and snort escape his lips.

There is nothing to cheer in what has come to pass. It was necessary, not a victory. That Alex Datson thinks there is only gives me all the more reason to terminate him. I'm at the point where I no longer need to hide my disgust. “You seem to have a mistaken estimation of your worth in the eyes of this new world.” I at last say, the darkness in my voice only partially masked by the alteration program. “We have attained *nothing*. I have shaped this new world. I will be the one who guides it. *You* have no part in it.”

Alex, of course, was stunned by this betrayal, but he would not say another word before I silenced his existence with the threads of energy I had linked to his vital functions. He could not have had any inkling I knew such a technique, and thus the only reason it worked. Even the most feebly talented Erani could resist a Threading assassination if they suspected it was coming.

It was reserved generally for the highest ranking assassins in the SIA, never recorded and only taught orally, and one of many I had taken from the memory those unaware of what I was capable of. It would leave a man now identified as an Endtimer (due to the information I had leaked to peacekeepers earlier), and show no signs of foul play. It would be dismissed as a suicide by Peacekeepers with more important things to do, and no one else will give it much further thought.

I consult my PCU and determine that I need to move quickly if I'm going to be back where I'm supposed to be before someone comes to check on me.

I do not need to move far, which is to my advantage, as I really cannot move quickly in the heavy clothes I'm wearing. There are many capable psionics around, and I do not want to make too much “noise” for them to hear.

I turn to the back of the building, discarding my heavy robe and dropping the PCU onto the weighty black material. It feels good to be out of that ridiculous outfit, but it needed to be absurdly heavy to be laced with the metallic fibers that blocked technological and psionic scans.

But this is where it gets tricky, because I don't have those protections, and I'm going to need my power to dispose of the evidence.

I move quickly, folding the robe and the PCU on top of it into planetary orbit to get lost in the clutter. I wish I had the strength to fold it all the way into the sun's gravity well, but this would suit enough... anyone crazy enough to think I would be discarding evidence into the pre-interstellar travel clutter in high orbit would not have much luck either getting anyone to help search or find anything even if they did.

The next step is even more worrisome; because if someone happened to be looking in just the right way, they'd sense a fold coming from the direction of my suite, and that would prompt several questions I am not keen on answering. But at the same time, delaying would only increase such a chance. I close my eyes, and focus on the inside of the bathroom through the open window I had used to leave.

A couple of my guards had cocked an eyebrow when I had chosen the suite I did for my preparations. I had told them I still was a fairly modest personality and didn't want a bathroom looking out into the street. They had accepted that rationale as far as I could discern. It also didn't seem I had been detected, as there wasn't a cadre of armed Solarian Knights barging in looking for an intruder.

Comfortable that I had slipped back in safely, I focus on fixing up my appearance, smoothing out my hair, then the collar and waist of my blouse, as it had come free from under my skirt when I had shed my robe. I am satisfied that I once again look the part of a modest Solarian woman as I sense that someone has entered my suite. It is such a unique presence that I instantly know who it is before I even re-enter the living area.

She is the reason I took the initiatives I did when I first learned of the prophecies of Bryan Honore that had been deleted. The words of this woman's coming had given me the hope that I had needed to begin this long, arduous process.

Rumil Bonamede, the Sixth Prophet.

"You were in the restroom so long that your guards were getting worried." Rumil said, her smirk reflecting her amusement. "I offered to come in and check on you when it was clear they were worried they'd catch you indecent."

I sigh forlornly. Some attitudes clearly still needed some adjustment, even if it was of benefit to me in this case. "Well, as you can see, my dear. I am quite well. Just fussing over my hair."

"You look great." Rumil answers with a roll of her eyes.

It's easy for Rumil to say, she looks lovely wearing anything and in any style. Women such as myself have to work at it.

I genuinely like Rumil and respect her. I truly do. In many ways, she is everything I wish Solarian women to be one day; strong-willed, independent, capable, and able to rise to any challenge, be it something mundane as assisting in a factory to being a political leader. I am honored that was able to play a significant part in what has led her to her rightful place as the spiritual leader for the Erani in this new world that has been created, and would do anything for her to keep it that way, even if it meant my own life.

"Anyways, I suspect the guards were getting anxious because it is almost time for your confirmation." Rumil says. "Shall we?"

"After you, my dear." I answer, taking step behind her, only to shift to her left side once we left the suite and into the protective circle of Solarian Knights.

"Nervous?" Rumil asks me quietly.

I shake my head. "It's not like I've effectively held this position since the Second Battle of

Mydor. The official title changes nothing.”

She laughs half-bitterly at this. “I wish I had your courage.”

“You just think you don't.” I answer, then change the topic. “I'm glad you are here, by the way. Your presence tends to give my words legitimacy.”

Rumil's laugh this time is far more genuine. “Like you need me on that score.”

I then fake some regret as I speak next. “I'm just... disappointed that Timmy isn't able to see this.”

Broaching this topic was not accidental, nor was its timing. Rumil had carefully guarded her thoughts on this particular issue ever since that fateful battle, and gave me little to confirm what I already knew. This time, however, she was not prepared for the invoking of his name, and her reaction wasn't nearly as rehearsed. It takes a demitick too long for the practiced sorrow to form on her face as she assures me that he probably can.

She knows exactly what I do... that Timothy Honore is not gone from this material plane, even as the rank and file of the Erani believe he has returned to Annor with his mission complete.

I know that it isn't, and I wonder how much Rumil does. It can't be much... I can't imagine Rumil having that knowledge and accepting it, especially if much of what Nicolai had foreseen comes to pass.

I personally have an understanding most don't, so I am not inclined to try and ruin his designs. I know far too well that sometimes things must change, even if such change hurts at first. I, and fifty generations past mine, will be long gone when those plans come to fruition. My concern for my people has its limits. If the Erani are strong enough to survive the turmoil, they will.

We reach the end of our short jaunt, just backstage behind a thick red velvet curtain that hides us from the podium at the center of the stage. The stage itself is much like the real world; behind all the carefully crafted appearances there is a dark, damp, and sometimes smelly underbelly where function trumps form and where everything that happens in the light really gets done.

I've lived in both worlds, but mostly only as an observer, and despite my confidence I projected to Rumil, there is an invisible line I'm about to cross; the point where I officially make my announcement that I am going to be more than an observer. I am going to be someone who takes action.

I hear my name called, and an applause that could not have come only from noble hands follows.

Rumil smiles warmly, and gestures for me to take the lead this time. “Are you ready, Madam High Tenant?”

I return the smile. I've been ready for this for twenty-four staryears. “Absolutely.”

I step past the curtain, and cross the invisible line. I am now High Tenant Celine Honore, and I have a duty to perform.