

The Arbitrator

A Story in Arvos

by Cerine Hero

The pre-dawn sky seemed to be stained red and smudged with smoke. The fire at the merchant's manse was put out, but the trouble was only beginning. No sooner had the excitement of the fire been extinguished did a sizable group of masked figures from the Veiled Citadel emerge out of the dark. They dispersed the crowd of wealthy onlookers in the upper district and erected a red cloth barrier twenty feet tall on all sides around the property, occluding all vision of what happened inside. Several of the masked figures, their faces hidden by red bands of fabric and lacquered black wood, stood silently before the constructed veil, warding away any curious glances while the others did their work inside. Everyone around here knew better than to poke their nose into the Way's business, however. The rich thrived on the security the Veiled Way brought with them but feared their gaze.

The streets were, then, utterly deserted when another figure came walking down them. Clattering armor announced their approach, and the dim outline of shadow melted out of the darkness before dawn. The arbitrator wore black armor banded here and there with red cloth. From their sash hung a razor-keen sickle and on their left arm were loops upon loops of scarlet, forming a thick brace around their gauntlet. On the arbitrator's breastplate, forged in blood-red iron, was the swaddled crescent symbol of the Veiled Way.

The guards in front of the sequestered property pulled back the crimson curtain before the arbitrator. Sparing them no mind, the armored figure ducked underneath the cloth and stepped into a hazy scene. The manor was rubble and embers; little was spared from the flames. From the soft glow of smoldering timbers and a few lanterns set throughout the lawn, several figures were gathered in a semicircle in front of the decorative fountain. Another silhouette was down on their knees between them all, shoulders slumped in defeat.

Approaching quietly, the arbitrator placed their taloned hand over the hilt of their sickle. It was hard to pick out the acolytes in the gloom and with the red curtain as a backdrop. Their scarlet robes seemed to blend together. In the darkness, the space beneath their hoods seemed to be empty voids, but they all wore identical onyx masks. The six of them stood in silence around the canin beneath them. His head was hung low. He didn't look up when the arbitrator loomed above him.

Sitting in the grass next to the canin were the flame-touched and soot-stained remains of a suit of arbitrator armor. Every piece had been diligently recovered from the wreckage of the house by the acolytes, as was proper. It would be ritualistically destroyed in the Citadel before the sun was at its zenith.

The arbitrator reached out with an armored foot and nudged the helmet laying in the charred grass before turning their gaze back towards the black-and-brown-furred canin. Their armored talons *click-click-clicked* as they flexed their fingers in amusement.

"I wasn't expecting you," the arbitrator teased darkly. Despite the light and playful tone, the helmet siphoned away all intonation of gender, species, or age, leaving the voice an eerie shell. "It seems you've made my morning. I was told you were out of town on business. A fair cover! "

The canin looked up. His eyes were dull and defeated, and dried out from the smoke. His clothing was askew, as if he'd gotten dressed in a hurry and had not had time since to straighten up. Even more out of place were the red bands binding his wrists, and the cloth tied snugly around his neck like a collar. "I was visiting a... paramour in the city. I hurried back as soon as I saw the smoke."

"Well," the arbitrator told their fellow, "I certainly hope it was worth it." They knelt down and picked up a pauldron from the grass. Flakes of burned metal drifted off from its edges. "You were discovered, you understand."

Blood finally seemed to pulse beneath the canin's neck where the red bindings didn't cover. "The fire started from inside the mansion," he said. "My guards were outside, but they were lax..."

Thieves, playing with fire, most likely. No one knew my affiliation-”

“Oh! *Thieves*, was it?” The arbitrator thrust out the pauldron to their side. An acolyte stepped forth to take it. “I do not see them laying here dead upon the grass, or their bodies among the remains of your humble home.” They walked a tight circle around the canin, cupping a taloned gauntlet around one of his ears. “Do you hear them? The whispers before the dawn in the seedy alleys of the lowtown, already passing from rat's lips to rat's ears. 'The canin on Fennel Street; did you know? He's an arbitrator!' Ah, but I forgot! It was your guards' fault and not your own. How silly of me.”

The arbitrator gripped the merchant's ear and twisted, wrenching his head to the side. “Do not embarrass yourself with arguments or complaints or excuses. Or do you think the Citadel merely sent me to bring tidings of condolence for your beautiful home? I'm certain it was quite lovely.”

When the arbitrator let go, the canin lowered his head, admitting defeat. The arbitrator stood up straight once again and slowly pulled the sickle from their sash, letting it hang loose in their talons. Standing behind the canin, they said, slowly, “Now recite the Tenets.” The taunting, playful tone was gone.

Exhaling, the merchant closed his eyes. His voice shook as he rambled off the tenets of the Veiled Way. “Wrap a Veil around your heart and keep it hidden to one and all. Through coin, gain control, through control, gain power. Unite in power, seize control, and acquire the coin, but bear no face to the world-”

The sickle whistled through the air in one clean arc. A head and body fell to the grass in opposite directions. Between them fluttered the slashed, bloodstained halves of the red ribbon that had been tied about the canin's neck.

“The excommunication has been performed,” the arbitrator announced, holding out the sickle so it could be cleaned by one of the acolytes with a cloth. Once it was clean, the arbitrator placed it back in their sash. “Tidy this up. But first... a little bit of sympathy *from* the dead.”

The arbitrator unwound some of the cloth from their left arm and let it dangle from their gauntlet. Gingerly, they drew it across the blood-soaked grass until the end of it was damp. The arbitrator inclined their helmet and then flicked their wrist, sending the ribbon fluttering straight out in front of them. A ripple of arcane magic shuddered through the assembled acolytes as the ribbon hung eerily in mid-air. It twitched one way and then the other, as if tugged by an unseen wind, but it eventually settled on a single direction. As the acolytes bound the deceased merchant's head and body in red sheets, the arbitrator followed the enchanted ribbon towards the wall.

The stonework wall surrounding the merchant's home was just shy of ten feet tall. As the arbitrator approached, the ribbon tilted upwards, aiming towards the very top. Drawing their sickle again, the black-armored figure dug their clawed fingers into the mortar, got a foothold with their boot, and then threw themselves upwards, swinging hard with the sickle to catch the top of the wall and drag themselves upwards. The yard was filled with the sounds of metal scraping against stone, but the arbitrator was up on their elbows at the top of the wall in seconds.

They held out the ribbon, pinched just behind the blood-soaked tip, and followed its trail. There, caught in the gap between two of the stones, was a tuft of tannish-brown fur. The arbitrator plucked it from the wall and held it up to their eyeless, black visor. Short, soft marten fur, probably from an exposed belly. Jumping down, the arbitrator produced a glass flask from their belt and tucked the fur inside to keep the scent. Some thieves, the arbitrator thought. More like clumsy, would-be revolutionaries.

They placed the bottle in their belt once again and left the acolytes to finish the work of cleaning up the grounds. The sun was rising over the sea already, and the arbitrator's day was just beginning.

One of the two of them would relent eventually, but given how stubborn they could both be, it was mostly likely that the first to suffer would be the chair. Every morning, Sarelna made *three* plates

of food for Cerine, intent on making her gain weight in order to encourage her to train and work out harder, while Cerine adamantly refused to do so on some misguided personal principle.

The fox was running out of belt notches.

As Cerine continued to scarf down her over-sized breakfast, Zaress and Gray sat at another table in the guildhouse's dining room. An assortment of thick wood-cards were scattered between them, each with an intricate rune carved into the face and filled back in with dyed resin. Gray, sweeping his long, striped tail behind him, considered his options. He considered the cards in his paw and then decided to take another from the stack, drawing a red *hin* rune. Smirking, he placed it beside a yellow *hin* wood-card on the table, blocking the almost-finished chain of *kot* cards that Zaress was trying to build. The drake's eyes narrowed dangerously and there was a *crack* in the air as her muscular tail slapped the stone flooring hard.

Zaress snatched another card from the stack, and then she slapped down the *nul* rune card in gray resin down onto the one Gray had just played. Baring her snaggletoothed upper fangs in a self-satisfied grin, she began to reach for the last card she needed in her hand when the window above the table was drawn open from outside and a pair of booted feet dropped squarely on top of their game.

Mito glanced around the dining hall, seeing Cerine and Sarelma at the counter. Then she looked down and noticed Gray and Zaress at the table she was standing on. Her boots were disturbing the arrangement of the wood-cards. The drake lunged forward onto the table, but she wasn't quick enough to snatch the sprightly marten's ankles. A brown tail slapped against the tigyote's head and chest and then Mito leaped up into the rafters, wrapped bodily around one of the thick support beams.

"You mischievous little-" Zaress snarled, knocking over her chair as she swung her arms after the marten. Mito scurried away, scampering to the other side of the dining hall and hanging upside-down over Cerine. She got a nose nuzzle and a biscuit from the fox for being cute. Zaress huffed a pressurized stream of smoke from her nostrils. "I was about to win!"

The drake picked up her fallen cards and showed the green *kot* rune to Gray. The tigyote nodded solemnly, accepting her victory as he stacked his cards neatly in front of him. Some of the frustration melted out of Zaress's muscles and she exhaled, her bruised ego assuaged.

"So where have you been all night?" Gray asked, crossing his arms across his chest and looking towards where Mito was hanging upside-down from the rafters. Cerine was still using her as an effective outlet for the rest of her excess breakfast while Sarelma had her back turned.

"I was visiting a friend, nothing major," the marten replied as she finished a strip of bacon.

Sarelma came up behind her and plucked her off the timber by her scruff, setting her down on one of the seats beside Cerine. The well-muscled horse put down a plate of food in front of the marten to encourage her to stop eating Cerine's.

"And why do you smell like smoke?" the ungul asked, planting her hands on the counter and leaning over the marten.

"We made a bonfire," Mito answered. She wriggled her shoulders and readjusted her jacket as she ate a sausage link.

"In the city."

Mito smiled innocently and shrugged. "What? We know where we can not get in trouble. It was our job."

"And you know the three of you have a job today, don't you?" Sarelma pressed, looking down her long nose. "Wouldn't it have been prudent to rest up instead of spending the night causing trouble?"

"I don't actually *have* to sleep."

That answer didn't seem to sit well with Sarelma, but Cerine waved a paw through the air to cut off any more questions.

"Alright, quit interrogating her," the vixen told them. "She can barely breathe with all four of you down her throat anytime she does something."

"Thank you," Mito said. She swiped another piece of bacon from the chubby fox's plate and ate

it.

Gray exhaled sharply, still sitting with his arms crossed. The striped half-canin spared a glance towards Zaress, who simply offered a helpless shrug that said she'd tried already. "Some of us are just trying to ensure our newest member understands the importance of secrecy for our continued livelihood."

"I understand!" Mito protested. She twisted about in her seat and pushed back the dyed blue lock of hair from her eyes. "Look, I know when I'm being tailed or watched, okay? I did this kind of stuff for years."

"Fair enough," Gray offered. He sat back in his seat and lowered his arms. Across the dining hall, Sarelna whickered softly and relented, too. There wasn't any sense in pushing the issue, since the marten would argue and deflect until Cerine shut things down. As frustrating as it could be, the tigyote could admit to being too dismissive of the marten's skills.

He'd sparred with Mito on several occasions in the training room at the guildhouse, and every time the acolyte found himself overwhelmed by the spinning ends of her quarterstaff. It was only fair to recognize his own shortcomings – he had spent far too much time facing Zaress and Sarelna in the sparring ring, adapting his own fighting style against their slower, weightier movements. Cerine hadn't gone into the training hall in months, and while she had some skill with a sword, she wasn't a fair opponent against the others with their traditional training or raw strength. But Mito, weighing less than half of the heavy drake and in perfect fitness, was too fast for him to counter. In seconds, she'd have her staff under his shield and then whipped behind his ankle, dropping him to the mat. The only way he could match her in speed was to use a short blade, but then he was simply asking to be thrashed by her advantage of reach.

And her intensity was stunning. At first, Gray worried that she put *too much* of herself into sparring and was in danger of harming herself, but as time went on he realized she was doing it on purpose. With her regeneration, the marten had little incentive to hold back, and with her background any fight was life-or-death. She'd never *learned* to moderate.

It was hard to connect the fierce predator in the training hall with the disarming munchkin beside Cerine at the counter with her dark brown tail wrapped around the vixen's pink one.

"Well," the fox said, pushing her plate across the counter and rubbing her overfilled belly, "we should probably – urf – get going if we're going to have enough daylight. It takes a while to reach the exit through the waterways, after all."

Zaress climbed up from her seat, nodding. Giving the stoic tigyote a pat on his cheek as she walked past, the muscular drake stepped down the hallway and into the training hall to gather some things. Mito looked like she was still all ready to go, despite having just slipped back into the guildhouse a few minutes ago, so she followed the chubby vixen down to the alchemy lab.

There was a brief period of noise and chaos as the three of them got ready to leave. Gray wandered the halls, making sure they all had their supplies on them. Sarelna was busy cleaning the kitchen. Then they were gone, and the sounds of talking, chattering, backbiting, and bass grumbling were replaced with a tense silence.

Gray stood staring at the back of the guildhouse door for a while after the others left. Subconsciously, he reached up and touched the shield-shaped emblem tucked beneath his tunic. He wished he could do more, like they did. The impotence ate at him. It felt like there was a hole somewhere inside him where something was missing, though that was hardly a new feeling. Even in the days before the Veiled Way, when he spent his days aiding the sick and his nights studying texts in the temple of Koleo, the half-canin always felt like he wasn't enough. What right did he have to call himself an acolyte of the wolf god? Koleo accepted all canins into his service, even coyotes, but Gray was not fully canin. No matter what he did, his stripes set him apart from the others, or at least he thought so.

Licking his tongue across his teeth, he shook his head and turned back towards the dining hall.

Sarelma was wiping down the counter. He provided a paw in straightening the tables and picking up the wood-cards from his and Zaress's game.

"You look more sullen than usual," Sarelma said.

Gray didn't reply at first. Brushing back his long, granite-colored hair, he made a show of organizing and stacking the wood-cards and putting them back into their box.

"Tired of being in here," he grumbled eventually.

The horse nodded, slinging the cloth over one of her muscular shoulders. "Are you jealous of the stray?"

Was he? What was there to be jealous of? She got to go on jobs in and outside of the city with Cerine and Zaress. She was the alchemist's pet and rarely used her own quarters. She had her remarkable ability. Yes – he was fairly jealous.

"No," he lied, but he had never been a convincing liar. Sarelma cocked a blonde eyebrow and he shook his head. "Not that, not so much. I'm just frustrated. I want to do more than bandage cuts and play guard." Before the horse could remind him why, he grumbled. "I know it's a risk. The detection net and all. I'm just... complaining."

Sarelma motioned for him to come over to the counter. Curious, he did, crossing his arms across his chest and waiting. The older horse slipped her fingers down her blouse. Gray's eyebrows rose, but he watched intently as she withdrew a folded piece of paper, placing it into his paw. He unfolded it and scanned his eyes down the writing.

"A shopping list?"

The horse nodded. "Cerine's going through our stores quick."

"I would argue that *you* are the one responsible for that," Gray countered. He pictured the slim vixen from a month or so ago and the curvy, rounder one now. His mind wandered, thinking about how he hadn't been able to convince Cerine to spar with him in a while. He had no complaints about spending time with Zaress for fun, but there was something about a fellow canin, breathing hard after a sparring session, her pink fur glossy with sweat, adrenaline thundering through their veins. To get her like that, but thirty pounds heavier, he'd-

A soft cuff against his muzzle woke him from his thoughts. Gray didn't react except to work his tongue around the inside of his mouth. Sarelma was eyeing him with a flat expression, but her wise eyes were twinkling.

"Far more dog in you than cat," the horse said. She flicked the paper in his paw. "You want to get out for a while, there you go. Will give me time to get some other things finished around here."

"Fair enough," the tigyote replied. He tucked the paper into his trousers pocket.

Gray made his way through the southside market street, his nose buried in the handwritten shopping list that Sarelma had given him. He'd gotten most of it already, and the borrowed alchemist's satchel on his hip was bulging with cured meats and vegetables wrapped in parchment paper. It was getting harder, or at least more expensive, to find some of these items in the market. The Veiled Way taxed all trade, and made it difficult to move goods about the city without being pledged to them.

Many independent farmers and ranchers, most of whom had long-standing, ancestral holdings around the city, were driven out by the draconian changes in governance, or they had been forced to adopt the scarlet of the Veiled Way and sell at devastating margins to the city. Gray winced at the amounts he was paying for meats, but he left things to Sarelma's judgment. She handled the guildhouse's finances.

But as the former acolyte inspected a few spring gourds on a merchant's cart, he began to feel the fur on the nape of his neck crackle with tension. A full-body shiver went down his spine and he flexed his fingers to shrug it off. Someone was watching him. It took all of his effort to control his reactions so that he didn't give himself away too much. Pretending to continue to look at the gourds, the tigyote glanced sideways in either direction. He didn't immediately catch sight of anyone with too

much interest in him. The market was fairly busy, and there was a press of bodies moving along the street in both directions. But still, he wanted to leave.

Bidding farewell to the merchant, who made a loud show of offering him a significant discount, Gray slipped into the crowd. He couldn't hide too much with his tiger side giving him some height and bulk over the average canin. So unless he stepped within a herd of unguls, he was relatively easy to spot. He resisted the urge to glance back over his shoulder from time to time, even though the tingling sensation was only getting stronger.

Gray slipped through an alleyway between the buildings, choosing to head away from the guildhouse instead of towards it. He left the market street and all of its noise and bustle behind, sticking to narrow spaces between buildings and picking his route mostly at random to not look like he was going anywhere in particular. He imagined that Mito was much better at this. Then again, unlike him, the marten could probably scale a wall and vanish in an instant. Another thing to be jealous of.

He slipped around a corner, held down the satchel at his hip, and peeked back along the path he just took. There was no one behind him, though he swore he spotted a flicker of red that slipped away before he got a good look. Now he was sure he was being tailed, but without knowing who or why, he couldn't press the issue. He led his tail on a winding path through the city, doubling back and picking out alternate routes, going well past the guildhouse towards the city docks. Few ships were docked down here anymore, and there was limited activity about. That was bad for cover but good for finding somewhere to hide out. Making sure he wasn't followed, Gray picked out an old shipping warehouse and slid inside. There was an observation gantry that he could climb up to and watch anyone entering the building from the ground floor. No one did. Taking off the heavy satchel, the tigyote sat and waited until nightfall so he could head back to the guildhouse under the cover of darkness.

Feeling secure that he'd given his tail the slip at some point, or they'd given up on tailing him when it got dark, Gray went in a roundabout pattern back to the guildhouse and slipped in through the rear entrance, where some tall, overgrown shrubs in the garden hid him from view. He pushed the door closed quietly and then finally relaxed, letting the tension out of his shoulders.

His shoulders were then pinned squarely against the wood grain of the door, his muzzle deflecting sideways until his cheek was squashed firmly and painfully. Someone huge and heavy had him pinned.

"It's me!" he hissed under his breath. "It's Gray!"

"Gray?" Sarelma let him go and grasped his face in both of her hands, looking at him in the dark. "Bolenna's hooves, boy, you scared me to death. When you didn't come back, I assumed the worst."

"It may well could have been," the tigyote said, pushing her hands away and massaging his cheek where he'd hit the door. "Someone tailed me in the market. I lost them and hid out before coming back so they wouldn't find the guildhouse."

Sarelma was taken back. The well-padded horse whickered and narrowed her eyes. "Do what? Why would someone trail you? Do you think they knew?"

"I have no idea." Gray shrugged off the satchel and gave it to her.

She took it and nodded solemnly. "We take care of this tonight."

"I would feel better if we had Zaress," the tigyote replied, shaking his head.

"Hmph. We can't always rely on her strength," Sarelma replied, leading him back into the kitchen and putting the satchel on the counter. "Besides, a drake is far too conspicuous. Maintaining secrecy is paramount."

Gray looked at his striped arm. "And I'm not?"

"Not in the dark," she told him.

He sighed, looking down. That empty ache was raw once again. Here was his chance to go do something, but... he felt himself faltering right here at the starting line. What was he supposed to do? "I wish I could call upon Koleo, then."

To his surprise, she turned, grasped him by the shoulders, and hugged him. He was too stunned to do anything back, but her voice took on a maternal tone that he only heard a few times before. “I know you feel lost. And scared. It's been a long time since you've had to be out in front for real. But it's not time for wishes or whining now.”

“I know.”

“Koleo is waiting for you to find your own strength.” Sarelina pushed him back to arm's length and nodded. Her face returned to that stony soldier's cast once more. “Get your things.”

Gray stood on the wharf again, with the looming warehouse he'd hidden in earlier standing tall nearby. The wind blew through his hair as it flowed back out to sea, chilling him slightly despite his padded arming coat and armor. The tigyote's breastplate, bracers, and greaves were all sanded to reduce their shine. He held up his arm and inspected his shield.

The followers of Koleo were taught to place defense above offense and to prioritize protecting others over delivering retribution. To that end, acolytes and clergy practiced with a heater shield to the point that they could wield it as effectively as a warrior bore a blade. Gray's shield was wooden, with a metal brace running along its edges and a hemisphere-shaped metal boss riveted to the center for structural support – and to add insult to injury when he swung it. Beneath the boss was a faded painting of a paw with its fingers wrapped about the edges of another shield. It was Koleo's symbol. Gray wore the shield sideways, with the flat top extending past his fist and the pointed bottom over his bracer.

As he stood alone in the dark, obviously out in the open, Sarelina's words continued to rock back and forth between his ears. He wanted to deny it, but that gaping wound he felt inside himself truly unnerved him. The tigyote felt like he was standing on a precipice with no rope tied about his waist. He'd spent so long relying upon the blessings of Koleo for aid that he wasn't sure how to cope without them. He wanted to be useful to everyone, but he wasn't.

“Hurry up,” he grumbled irritably, his striped tail sweeping behind him in the moonlight.

His hunter didn't make him wait terribly long. A click of metal on stone above the constant low burble of waves against the docks drew his attention down the wharf. As he watched, gripping the handle of his shield tight, a patch of darkness seemed to disconnect and slip out of the greater gloom. It was shaped like an armored figure, and as it came closer, Gray began to notice the distinctively vivid red of cloth about the person's waist and arm. The figure held out one taloned gauntlet, wound tight with strips of scarlet cloth. A ribbon extended from the armored bracer, somehow hovering in the air in his direction.

Gray swallowed hard as the arbitrator came to a stop some thirty feet away. Their bleak, faceless helmet tipped slightly to one side, as if in amusement.

“This sounds like a joke,” the arbitrator teased. Their voice was light and melodic, lacking intonation of gender or species, but it was menacing all the same. “Stop me if you've heard it before. What kind of canin reeks of marten?”

Gray narrowed his green eyes. Why would he smell like marten? Koleo's beard – Mito had whacked him with her tail that morning, before he went out to the market. He *knew* the marten had been up to something the night before, but he wasn't expecting an arbitrator to be after her!

“I take it from your silence that you haven't,” the arbitrator continued. “After all, how could you? We haven't figured out the punchline yet...”

“What do you want?” Gray barked, panting his feet and raising his shield, pointing the painted face of it towards the black-armored figure.

“I'm looking for someone. They assaulted an arbitrator, you see, and for that, the punishment is death. And that extends to associates, conspirators, friends, lovers, and bystanders if I so choose.” The arbitrator's helmet dipped towards the shield. Gray swore he saw a smile crease that blank face mask, as impossible as it was. “A Kolean? Here?” They burst into soulless, wretched laughter. “I haven't killed one of you in ages! What are you doing, puppy-dog? Mercenary work? Selling your shield for

table scraps, are you?"

Rage boiled in Gray's heart, but he kept it locked inside. The arbitrator wanted him to be angry and snipe back, hoping he'd give up information for nothing. He wouldn't. The acolyte glared from over the edge of his shield.

"Sodden silent types, no fun at all," the arbitrator sighed, pulling a wickedly-sharp sickle from their belt. It seemed to unnaturally catch the moonlight and glimmer savagely. Spinning the red ribbon back around their bracer, the arbitrator stalked forward. "Well, then. You'll be shocked how quickly that tongue can loosen."

The fully-armored figure lunged once they were within reach, moving faster than Gray would have expected for someone in plate. He thrust upwards with his shield to catch the falling sickle. There was a squeal as the razor-like tip of the sickle scratched across the metal boss. It peeled away paint and left a gouge in the wood. The arbitrator kicked Gray in the breastplate while his guard was high, staggering him backwards. He feinted losing his balance as he brought his guard back inside, but then he pivoted his weight forward again, sweeping hard with the face of his shield. The arbitrator was overextended and took the bash against their arm and shoulder, weathering the blow with their heavy armor.

"What's this?" the arbitrator taunted, now looking at Gray up-close. The stripes on his cheeks were a giveaway of his heritage. "You're not even a canin, are you? Are they accepting cats out of desperation now?"

Gray ignored the taunt; he was busy deflecting sickle-blows, regardless. The arbitrator was more experienced and better trained, plus their weapon was light and quick. If it wasn't for the days spent sparring with Mito in the training hall, the tigyote never would have been able to keep up with the fleet slashes from the arbitrator's sickle.

But in truth, the armored figure was toying with him. If there was one disadvantage to a shield in a fight, it was that it could be grabbed and used against its wielder. Tutting after a near-miss from Gray's thrust with the flat top of his shield, the arbitrator hooked the tip of their sickle around the corner of his shield and twisted. Gray's arm went out wide, and a taloned gauntlet gripped his bicep. The arbitrator slung him to the ground, where metal screeched against the paving stones. A black boot stamped down on his breastplate, pinning him, and then the curve of the sickle was at his throat.

"About what I expected from the quality of Koleans these days," the arbitrator spat, crossing their arms over the top of their knee as they held Gray down. "All the good little dogs threw themselves at us already. Now it's just yipping puppies, old hounds who should know better, and *you*." The arbitrator dragged the sickle along the underside of Gray's muzzle and the razor edge shaved off some of his fur. "Tell you what, kitty-cat. Purr for me and I'll think about letting you live."

"Get off him!"

The arbitrator looked up in time to see the head of a war-maul come sweeping upwards from a low swing. The blunt weapon hit square against their breastplate and with all of the incredible force behind it, the arbitrator was bowled clean off of Gray, rolling head-over-heels across the wharf before coming to rest on their stomach. Sarelma stood over the fallen acolyte, flexing her numbed fingers around the haft of her maul. The force of the blow was enough that Gray felt it in the pit of his stomach, and his ears rung with the sound of the concussion.

The old soldier knelt down and grasped Gray's forearm, hauling him up to his feet. "Good work," she told him.

"You could have come out a little sooner," the tigyote replied, in between panting.

Sarelma shook her head. "I needed to make sure they were alone. You gave me a perfect shot, regardless." She slid her hand underneath the head of her hammer and looked towards the arbitrator. "Wasn't expecting *that*. Let's finish it and be gone from here before we stir up even more trouble."

Gray was almost certain that they were dead or close to it, but the arbitrator planted their taloned gauntlets on the ground and shoved themselves to their feet. There was a sizable dent in the

breastplate of their armor, but they seemed to pay it no mind. Slowly, the helmet turned to regard them. They seemed to inspect Sarelma, standing in her scratched and scarred leathers, before speaking. "A fine strike indeed, for an old work-horse. Army?"

Sarelma narrowed her eyes. "Aye."

"That's much more like it," the arbitrator replied, their voice seeming to have a twinge of respect. They lazily spun their left hand in circles, causing the long loops of red fabric wound about their gauntlet to fall until it nearly reached the ground. "Finally, something of interest. Allow me to even the field."

Sarelma moved first, and Gray followed her lead. Together, they separated in order to flank and surround the arbitrator. But the armored knight was ready for them. They whipped their left arm outwards and the red ribbon snapped into a sharp, rigid blade like a sword. It whistled through the air as the arbitrator swung it at Sarelma. She instinctively ducked back enough that the tip of the cloth only caught her armor, slicing open the outer layer of leather like a well-honed blade. The sickle fended away Gray's shield, and the arbitrator was a whirl of blades between the two of them, shifting from parrying to striking in an instant with both weapons. Neither the soldier nor the acolyte could get an opening to go on the offensive.

They were back-footed constantly by the arbitrator's ferocity. Sarelma's muscles flexed as she swung her mighty maul, but she only connected with air. Three consecutive thrusts from the ribbon-blade followed her last swing, forcing her to stumble backwards to avoid being skewered. Her hoof nearly slipped from the edge of the wharf as she was pushed into a corner. Beneath her was the sloshing, black water only a few feet below. There was no telling how deep it was here, but it was certainly enough to sink a warrior in armor to their doom.

The horse, pinned between the edge and the arbitrator, shouted and swept her hammer in a savage sweep to buy herself room for footing. But their opponent was ready. They parried with the ribbon-blade, and it instantly went limp. Red cloth looped around the haft of the maul, and they yanked it from Sarelma's hands. The momentum carried the hammer in a wide circle around the arbitrator, and they smashed it bodily against Gray's shield, knocking him from his feet. The spin continued all the way about, until the maul looped about Sarelma's waist. The arbitrator tugged her into a close embrace from behind and flipped the sickle over in their talon.

"Full marks for effort," they taunted.

They slashed the tip of the sickle across the horse's middle, and an arc of blood glittered in the moonlight as it flew from the curve of the arbitrator's weapon. They dropped Sarelma to the wharf with a heart-wrenching *thump*.

A scream broke the night's silence. The arbitrator turned and had their arm up to fend another blow from Gray, but the tigylote was leaping, shield-first, through the air. All of his weight crashed against the arbitrator, knocking them from their feet. They stumbled backwards, attempting to catch their footing, but their boot found nothing but empty air and they pitched over the side of the wharf. A plume of seawater burst into the air as the arbitrator disappeared under the waves. Gray landed on his side and began to tumble towards the edge himself, but a strong hand grasped the collar of his breastplate and held him firm.

Panting hard, Gray looked over the side of the wharf. He could see nothing but the lapping waves against the side of the quay. They were gone. That armor would drag them straight to the bottom. Gray turned his attention back to Sarelma, scrambling over and looking her over. The horse was on her back, one arm clutched around her wound. The cut across her middle was savage and fatal, but she looked at him with her customary, stony expression.

"Gray, go," she told him, still clutching the rim of his breast plate. "Leave me here."

"No." Tears welled in his eyes and he shook his head hard.

"You can't move me. Don't let them come catch you, too."

Gray grit his fangs and smashed his knuckles against the stones of the wharf over and over

again. This was his fault. He was the follower of Koleo, the protector. It was supposed to be him laying there. Tears streamed down his muzzle and dripped from his nose. But there was nothing he could do.

No.

The tigyote pushed Sarelma's hand away from his gorget and tucked his paw down inside his tunic. He grasped the symbol of Koleo he wore close to his heart and began to pull it out. But Sarelma grabbed his wrist.

"Don't," she whispered. "You'll trigger the--"

"I know," he said. He finished taking out the icon and yanked the chain from his neck. His fingers were wrapped around the golden ones depicting Koleo's, and both were clutching the tiny shield. "I'm not going to be useless anymore."

Gray touched the holy symbol to his forehead and then held it out over Sarelma's body. He whispered a prayer, beseeching his god for aid. It had been a long time since he'd been able to do so, but the power flowed through him like the embrace of a long-lost friend. Warmth filled his chest and rolled outward through his arm and fingers. A shining, golden radiance surrounded the symbol in his paw, and his fingertips shined with healing light.

He had only a moment to bask in the comforting power before a coursing, intense pain gripped him. The detection net seized his body like barbed wire, digging needles into his flesh all over. Gray growled in agony but refused to relent his prayer. As he wrenched his eyes shut and struggled against the pain, Sarelma's wound began to close. Blood vanished from where it had fallen to the stones beneath her, and it dried and disappeared from her fur and armor. Her flesh knit back together while Gray's smoldered and steamed. The tips of his fur glowed with tiny embers.

Sarelma reached up and grabbed Gray's paw, pulling it down. The healing light disappeared and and he half-collapsed when the crippling pain let him go. "Enough, boy, enough," she told him. Her injury was not completely healed, but it was little more than a cut now. It would leave a fair scar, all the same. Sarelma sat up and wrapped her arms about Gray, hugging him to her chest until the two of them were ready to stand.

The horse scooped up her maul from where it had fallen and looked down into the water. There was no sign of the arbitrator. "It's done," she said. "Let's go before the rest come."

Gray nodded and followed her away from the wharf, still feeling the aches all over from his brush with the detection net. But despite his outward pain, he was walking tall, still holding his holy symbol in his paw. That gaping hole inside him wasn't filled in, but it had grown smaller.

Minutes after they were gone, the seawater continued to lap endlessly at the stone side of the quay. Bubbles broke the surface and then a black talon emerged, digging its sharp fingertips around the edge of the wharf. The arbitrator, with ocean water streaming from their armor, hauled themselves up out of the sea. They gasped for breath and then stood tall, ripping strands of seaweed from their plates.

The wharf was totally bereft of life now. The acolyte and the horse were gone, and with practically no sign of their presence left over. There wasn't even blood left over from their duel. Sighing to themselves, the arbitrator lifted up the lank, red ribbon on their arm. The bloodhound's leash was soaking wet and dripping from its end. The blood from their former colleague was washed away, rendering the sympathetic magic woven into it useless. And with no more blood about to keep up the chase, the rebels were long out of their reach.

"Smart," they mused, winding the magic ribbon around their bracer once more, "or lucky. Either way... I like you."

Other arbitrators were emerging from the dark to the north, dispatched by the Veiled Citadel to investigate the prayers caught by the detection net. The waterlogged arbitrator just threw their head back and laughed.

The next day, Cerine, Zaress, and Mito returned from their trip. The chubby vixen went straight

to her quarters and collapsed in bed, sleeping through most of the afternoon. Zaress busied herself with her hobbies, carving little wooden figures with a sharpened stone blade in the common room of the guildhouse. None of them asked what had happened while they were away, and none of them had reason to. Gray and Sarelina kept things to themselves, and it was never surprising for the older horse or the tigyote to be stoic and aloof.

But at one point, Gray was walking down the upstairs hallway to the personal quarters as Mito was headed in the other direction, carrying her lute in one paw. He stopped and looked at her, making her pause and regard him quizzically from beneath her dyed bangs. For a moment, the acolyte considered lecturing the marten about her behavior, since everything that had transpired was her doing, after all. But then he reminded himself that it was because of her that he survived his scuffle with the arbitrator. And Cerine's snoring in the room nearby was reminder that the marten was, in all, an asset to their group. What was done was done.

He offered her a quick nod and stepped around her, shooting Cerine's door a quick glance as he continued on towards his room. Mito scrunched her muzzle in confusion, shrugged, and walked on.

* * * * *

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