

Terrus: Arcadia
By Andre Elias

Ch 1
The Hunt

Ablaze against the midnight sky, the crackling brush and firestones hissed inside roaring flames. Pulling the torch aside with relief, the watch-beast turned to fasten its war cloak and sheath its iron. Another feathered beast took to the star-filled sky, honking in distress back towards the city. Glancing across the darkness it took but seconds to spot the growing flare at the acropolis, signaling the oath fulfilled. The watch-beast then sped into action, bounding down the perilously vertical stone causeway, hoofs catching nimbly the grooves in the stone as it descended to the main courtyard. In moments, it had reached the bell tower where it hoisted the rope over its shoulder and began the steady ring of alarm. The armory clamored with activity and the guard was mobilized before the tenth toll. The watch-beast then bleated out the coordinates to a hovel in the far fields near where the watch-gander had lost its partner to a black arrow. The pack usually took more care in announcing itself, preferring an ambush far closer to the city walls. Hope grew from this news. The shield would hold with preparation.

Swords and spears were passed in ordered lines, equipping first a small unit of light cavalry scouts. Brisling nervously, Ferus tightened his chest-plate before taking up his weapons. He was a young stallion of noble lineage on his first watch, post-training. His ancestors stood immortalized in marble in the plaza of the Great War memorial and his sire had risen to constable with the favor of the Equine authority in the senate. He had dreamt of being a warrior and defending his species, but none of those fantasies had prepared him for the dread he faced in the humid summer night. His molars chattered as if a cold breeze swept over him.

"As sure as the sun sets!" roared the general from his stable.

"Bloody monsters don't learn their lessons! Shatter teeth with steel bucks!"

Echoing his call, the wooly tanks bellowed, joining the cadre of scouts in formation.

Lumbering into position, a veteran Wisent grinned down at Ferus, "Don't worry hoof-child, you will be far from the fray. Focus on your training, thoroughbred, don't stop moving. Time is your greatest weapon, and remember you are part of the herd." Strapped with bindings filled with weapons and supplies, the mobile fortress twitched its ears patiently. "I'll see you out there Ferus, and keep close to your brother."

With that, the gates snapped open and they were off. Despite being mid-summer, this would be one of the longest nights cast upon the free city of Ungelian.

-

Like wind across the plains, the scouts spread across the expanse in pairs looking for signs of stalking. Disruptions in the tall grass, scents on the wind, and panting sounds would be the only warning before jaws locked around their throats. "Look to the tree-lines and watch for ditches," said Xanthos while

patting his brother on the haunch with the butt of his spear. "Keep your blade low, it's not like these things can fly," he laughed. They approached a dark hovel ahead, surrounded by fields of crops with paths stamped down by the farmer's hooves that led into the darkness. The smell of blood brought them to the entry gate where wet streaks stained the wood. Pulling his hand back, the scent of iron and goat fur was fresh. "We need to move," whispered Xanthos. "Open ground now, but we'll cut around the field to see where they might have gone."

The hunters were not mindless killing machines, for they always came on the darkest summer night, where the white mare's eye closed and only its tears shone in the sky. They relied on scent and sound rather than sight, and struck with precision at exposed hamstrings, underbellies, and throats. As a young ungulate, Ferus was taught that speed and wits was the most effective counter to the savagery of the hunters. The very plains contracted under hoof. Time itself slowed by muscle and reflex. But this did not account for the blood, which would guide the monsters across great distances to their eventual kill. Only refuge behind the Denwalls could ensure escape once claw or tooth had found a vein.

Ferus was silent but for the sound of his hooves on the grass. This was his first hunt but he had seen the gashes and teeth-marks on other older guards. It sickened him to think that these wounds were not made in a duel for supremacy. No codes of honor, rules of engagement, or status to be gained. There was nothing noble about these insults to flesh. He glanced sideways at the scars across his brother's back. It was an act of devouring, of satiation that would subside as soon as the belly emptied. Xanthos had seen two hunting seasons and spoke of the gleaming eyes, razor sharp claws, and drooling maws of the monsters. Yet it seemed no more real than stories around the fires of the prytaneum. What he did know is that bodies were never found next morning. Those that failed, were gone but red stains across the grass.

Rounding on the stream bed, they leapt across what was only a trickle of water at this season. Hard hooves dug deep into the bank on the other side, cloven tracks left as a marker of patrol vectors. They continued across another field of tall grains. On the outskirts of the city, the plots were meticulously measured with planned irrigation. Little use were these techniques when the sky offered nothing. At least the drought had subdued the growth, providing few places for ambush.

"We'll take the northern side of the cornfield this time. Stay alert," muttered Xanthos. They stayed clear of the densely packed harvest. Dry and stunted cobs poked up above countless yellow stalks. The wind shifted and the entire plot hummed with the sound of dead chaparral. All Ferus could smell was sweet, dry corn and dust from the desiccated crops. Winter would be cold this year without those extra pounds and ale would surely fetch a premium at the local tabernae he mused.

"Steel down fool!" Grunted Xanthos.

The wind turned warm and the air took the taste of dog breath, yet sharper on the nose, rotten... From the darkness behind them came teeth, a snarl, and an armored body crashing into Ferus' flank, knocking him out of his gallop. Dazed, he saw the shape crash through tall grass as the hoof-steps of his brother receded from ear-shot followed by clashing of steel on steel.

Eyes blurred, he sought the sound of his foe as it circled him, holding his spear toward it. Another sound to the left, and ragged wheezing breaths joined from the right. He was surrounded with his back to the cornfield. Crouching low, the shadows did not reveal themselves from the grass, yet through growls and scrambling in the dirt, they nimbly manipulated Ferus' position. Darting low, a claw raked across Ferus' shin guard, causing him to pivot and strike at the blur of matted fur. Another came at chest-height and was deflected by a quick turn of his polearm. Expecting a third, Ferus ducked and spun his weapon skyward, connecting with blade strike from a bounding assailant.

Turned around once again, the stalkers pressed him in a spiral, matching their steps and releasing gravel to confuse him in the darkness. Ferus tottered, sweat and dust stinging his eyes and preventing them from focusing clearly. His ears twitched, grasping for location. The circle was complete, sounds stunting his reactions. At once, two sets of fangs gnashed at his limbs. One caught his wooden vambrace and pulled his spear-arm down, another found the flesh of his other bicep. Searing pain was tempered by adrenaline as Ferus twisted to dislodge the teeth. Losing his spear, he used the carnivore's weight to slip the armor off his forearm. Then, brandished his own incisors, he clamped down on the snout that gripped him, preventing a further wrenching of muscle.

Locked together, Ferus looked into the lupine eyes. The wolf's expressive brows spoke of the desperation of hunger. The dark pupil twitched in a field of bloodshot white. Its arms flailed, scratching Ferus' back-plate and clawing into his thigh for leverage. Spitting out the splintered arm-guard, the other wolf pressed into the horse-soldier, dragging him down before letting out a piercing yowl of pain. A spear had buried itself into its flank just as the sound of pounding hooves returned. With one wolf crawling away limp, Ferus now found himself on top of the dog-pile. Reaching into his thigh scabbard he pulled a blade and jammed it into the side of the wolf's maw, crushing canines and cutting his own flesh in the process. Wolf and horse rolled away from each other and stood face to face. Ferus held his knife forward sensing his reinforcements behind him. Spitting out blood and bone shards, the wolf grinned, just before diving into the cornfields.

Bounding through the clearing, Xanthos launched one spear into the crops and lobbed another into Ferus' open hand. "Move or you're meat!" he yelled into his little brother's ear. Snapping out of his state, time slowed and Ferus' instincts took over. He leapt away, spinning his new spear behind his heels to ward off attacks from the rear. Shifting his torso with each great stride, he felt an arrow whiz by his ear in the darkness and another glance off his shield arm. He would not be a steady target tonight he thought as he galloped down the rows of corn keeping his head down. Matching pace, Xanthos sidled over to Ferus, "Nice moves. Push hard and straight now to outrun them. We need to return to den with their positions. I think I heard at least three back there, but it smelled like more."

They sped around the edge of the field and turned back to see the guard tower in the distance. Pausing for a moment, Xanthos turned to Ferus, "speak up brother, are you injured?" Looking down to his arm, it was soaked in blood. Ferus found himself getting dizzy as well, feeling a welt grow on the side of his head. "You must have gotten banged up at that first assault. That thing went high and knocked you

good." The horse kin slowed their pace and Xanthos unfurled a cloth to wrap Ferus' wound. As his heart settled the pain grew. His arm now in a make-shift sling he started to breathe deep and heavy, wincing with each inhale as his head began to throb. "Keep your hooves," ordered his brother, who leaned in to help Ferus return to pace. They had made it to the open field closest to the guard tower and he could see a tank lumbering towards their position.

From the darkness of the fields behind them emerged a sickening harmony of deep throated howls. Ferus' felt his chest tighten in horror. The sound penetrated his core, shaking his body and rendering him helpless from sheer terror. A swirl of images, of midnight horrors become real, clouded his already poor night-vision. Then, across the great plains, numerous fires burst forth spreading wildly through the dry wheat. Small shadows of the arsonists danced as the ashes floated into the air. Shining in the darkness from their patchwork armor and weapons, the monsters abandoned all pretense of surprise. No lessons from the general would have prepared the herd for this change in strategy. The wolves had harnessed their greatest weapon, fear.

Delirious, Ferus felt his body lifted high and placed across the broad bison shoulders of a tank veteran. Strapped down, his last conscious view was of hooved soldiers charging towards flames. The general, clad in great Bovine armor, hoisted his war-axe in steady advance, only to disappear behind smoke and ash. Away from the battle the bison lumbered, leaving a cache of weapons and provisions for the front line. Ferus' nose filled with smoke and his mind clouded into dream.

-

Leading the last of the Low-Beasts through the city gate, Bercerrio leaned on his staff and gazed out across the open plains to the watch tower beacon. He prayed that the garrison had acted quickly enough to slow the advance of the wolf-pack. In the times of migration, the hoof-beasts would run to the ends of the earth to escape the hunters. The daily task of survival, foraging and fleeing, never knowing the wisdom of aging and other fruits of civilization. Stroking his wiry goatee, he walked through the gate, bowing under the iron teeth of the slowly descending portcullis. Through the bars the midnight howl reached his ears, sending a shiver through the rest of the beasts amassed at the city entrance. "Move along to the agora!" bleated Bercerrio. "Make way for the den guards, their positions must hold!"

Stumbling up to his uncle in typical disarray, Bukard's oversized shin guards fell around his ankles, stuttering his eagerness, "what was that sound? Has the hunt begun? There's space on the southwest ramparts, I can -"

"No," interrupted Bercerrio, "you are far too young to face the danger Bukard. You haven't even completed your training."

"But I can fight uncle! I'm the fastest spear in my tribe-" protested the young Ibex.

"Please fur-child, until season's end you are still a kid," chided Bercerrio. "Be of use according to your years. Take a message to the Twisted-Horn stables: They are to prepare heavy units for possible breach of the walls."

"What?" stammered Bukard. The seriousness of the command shocked him, bringing the tension of the city more clearly into focus for the young recruit. Bukard looked up at his uncle and quickly corrected himself, "yes sir!" and bounded back into the growing movement of citizens and soldiers making their way through the busy agora.

Bercerrio stood to one side as a crew of spear-wielding badgers positioned themselves behind the gate to peer into the darkness with their keen sight. Gliding down from the parapet, Magistrate Grus landed silently beside Bercerrio. "What say you Praetor?"

"We don't have the luxury of flight dear Magistrate," grunted Bercerrio.

"The feathered are not immune to this onslaught either, friend. Our alliance is not pure altruism. Some amongst my species have even forged genuine bonds with thine," chirped the elegant crane. In a somber tone he continued, "the black arrows have reached our wings tonight and tomorrow we will mourn as one."

"Yet we do not fight as one," retorted Bercerrio, turning towards the gate. "We do what our frail bodies allow. We have no horns or fur, nor muscled mass. We are your eyes, Ibex!" moaned the bird.

Just at that moment streaks of light poured through the iron lattice causing the badgers to gasp, fur bristling. Bercerrio moved to see the source, finding dozens of points along the plains rapidly converging into a great conflagration, smoke pouring into the already muted sky.

"What use are eyes from above with the skies filled with smoke and ash?" the Ibex bleated. "Flee to your nest and write your pretty words, bird, you're not needed here!"

With that Magistrate Grus took to the sky in frustration, knowing that this was no night to soften the Praetor's disposition. The fragile treaty between feather and hoof would only be reinforced by sacrifice. Gliding over the clamoring beasts gathered in the agora, Grus turned towards the grand basilica. In the upper levels of the impressive cupula, the ambassador's nest housed parliament delegates. Chirps, squawks, and warbles emanated from the central chamber where the Tribune held an urgent meeting.

"As we have in seasons past, we must hold our positions in good faith," declared the Tribune cardinal Carmine. "We must demonstrate solidarity if we wish to continue to roost in these lands."

Landing in a swirl of blue robes and feathers, Grus exclaimed, "I have no doubt our value in Ungelian has been questioned by the senate."

A garish dove wearing glittering chains interjected, "Damn your doubts Grus, do we not swell their coffers? Do we not bring them treasures from across the seas? The cows would be fools to ban us from their markets!"

Turning a wing towards the beacon at the acropolis across the city, "wealth and fineries are clearly not their concern master Cleal!" responded the crane.

"Neither is our prowess in battle," came a dulcet voice from the far end of the chamber. Gracefully crossing into the center of the circle, Anwen, the swan courtesan draped in pure white robes gently touched the magistrate's shoulder, bringing his wing down to the side. "We offer wisdom, knowledge, and information of a different threat to this great city. Be confident in our value here and leave them to their role as shields," she chided.

The clamor of disagreement once again rose in the nest. "Silence! We sound like a flock of salt-mad gulls! We must put this to a vote!" chirped the Crimson Tribune.

The gaggle quieted and ordered themselves into hierarchies within their clans with each group's chosen presenting a symbol of their authority to the gathering in the conclave. Arranged in a circle, crane, cardinal, swan, dove, shrike, sparrow, and goose all perched, displaying a gleaming medallion laced across their breasts.

"We must decide the course of action in parliament and persuade the ruminants of our goodwill and fellowship. Yet we must also prepare for flight if the city should fall!" spoke Carmine.

Turning to the assembled, the cardinal began, "What say you crane?"

Grus lurched his long neck forward, "I propose we stay in our roosts until dawn! These walls will hold back the wolves as they have before. What matters is how we contribute to the reconstruction. We can keep civility, the cleanliness of their spires, and spread seeds across the fields for their crops." The parliament was not moved save a few nods of approval.

"What say you dove?" asked Carmine.

"These sedentary beasts have abandoned their migration. They depend on us to keep their walls relevant to all other species. They offer no respect yet we are essential to the prosperity of their city. I say we do nothing that is unprofitable and leave if the threat breaches the gates!" Squawks of agreement were quickly silenced by a stare from the Tribune.

Bowing deeply to the courtesan, the Tribune inquired, "What say you swan?"

"I would evacuate all fledglings immediately under cover of night. Take the eggs in baskets to the forest canopy and hide them from the horrors," announced the Swan. "As for warfare, I defer to those more clever of tactics. But be warned," her eyes sharpened. "Loyalty is not to be bartered. We have cast out crow and raven for their guile, and I for one will not tolerate the undermining of our parliament!" Unease coursed through the assembled yet none dare a whisper.

Breaking the silence, the tribune looked towards the smallest representative, "What say you sparrow?"

Puffing up its chest, the sparrow steadied its beak, "We can be eyes in the darkness and dodge their arrows. If I could I would drive my beak into the very soul of these monsters. If we break in defense of our nests, then at least we did not fall useless like leaves in autumn." A ruffle erupted amongst the younger attendees, heartened by the bravery of one so small.

"What say you goose?" motioned Carmine with authority.

"Martyrdom is a fool's choice," grumbled the elder goose with an eye towards the sparrow.

Turning towards Grus, he retorted, "what then once night is ended? Do we fly at sunrise and become easy targets for arrows? Do we flee in plain sight of our allies, weaken their resolve and sow bitter seeds? We have built true friendships with the beasts of this city." Turning towards the dove, "perhaps you are too young to remember seasons past as we stood together against plague of insects and cold of winter. Or maybe still so fresh to these walls that you care little for the reciprocity of this civilization." Having

become quite sullen, the goose looked downward, "I, for one, am too old to return to the wandering. Courage is uncommon for our lot, but if the young take wing in darkness at least they have a chance."

"What say you shrike?"

"I say we take wing in darkness," exclaimed the stout shrike. "I have perched on the great shoulders of the bison and watched their training maneuvers. They value speed and agility just as much as force of brawn. We can be harriers to these wolves and confuse their scent and sound, and if necessary, risk our feathers in this conflict." Turning behind him, the shrike motioned towards a grizzled starling whose jet black feathers shone in the light of the conclave torches. "There are those of us who have known these winds long before these nests were built and who still have the strength to stand against their destruction. I will lead a brigade of hardened starlings to battle. Others may join if courage fills your breasts, for together we strike like a hurricane!" Gasps and squawks erupted throughout the conclave.

Fear is a powerful deterrent for a bird. Instinct propels one airborne faster than thought, abandoning eggs and all. The bonds of family and friendship must be conditioned into a fledgling's erratic mind. If not, biology takes hold and all that was built will be abandoned. The avians have roosted for generations in the high towers of Ungelian with the knowledge that they would never be hunted by its rulers. Even then, brave words rarely stir a bird to fight. Flight, naturally, is preferable.

Having heard and synthesized the statements from each representative the Tribune came forth with the proposal, "We will decide then on dividing our nest in three. One group will take the fledglings and eggs to safety. A second group will stay in the city to give courage to our warriors through chorus. The third will follow master shrike to battle. What say you?"

"Aye" came the response in unison, each faction satisfied with their options. Tears wet the eyes of worried mothers, as unknown dangers awaited each path forward. With a flash, the shrike took a small torch in its talons and hovered above the conclave. "Out on those plains before us, smoke, flames, and gaping maws will surely greet us. But know no fear, for the wind is ours!"

With that the tribune nodded, dust and twigs stirred on the floor as dozens of avians took to the night sky.

Gazing upwards Bercerrio raised a brow, surprised at the murmuration taking form in the dim lights of the anxious city. A gust of wind followed as the birds headed towards the front line. Rethinking his terse exchange with the magistrate, he wondered if the avians could be trusted. Having always seen the species as vain, weak, and duplicitous, perhaps this time they had chosen fight over flight.

-

"Stand and fight mongrels!" roared the general. His steel plating had deflected dozens of arrows, although some had found the seams. The shafts protruded from these wounds, many black feathers burning in the hot wind. The wolves knew they stood no chance against the bovine warrior's mass and brutal swings of its twice bladed battle axe. Flitting in and out of the darkness set by unburned tall

grasses the wolves drew the front line towards them, carefully avoiding being trapped by the cultivated terrain. Wielding long thin blades, axes, and spiked cudgels, the dozens of wolf-warriors danced around their larger foes while surrounding and pressing back the General's attempts to gain ground in the dense fields. The fires they had set had brought a host of warriors from the watchtower that began to amass in the pasture in front of the growing flames.

With one last wide swing, General Mavryk pulled back to the pasture while the wolves set to notching their arrows behind the wall of flame. Behind the general assembled a phalanx of ovine soldiers with shields and spears. They opened ranks and closed around the great bull, whose great horned helmet could be seen peering above the formation. Another few volleys ricocheted harmlessly off the iron shell followed by return fire from a squad of Capra spear-beasts. Their javelins disappeared into the darkness through the flames, wasted on invisible targets. "Hold your spears," bleated a Capra commander with frustration.

Arrows ceased and the air stilled. The crackle of flames filled the pause of battle. "Filthy dogs," cursed General Mavryk. "Call back the scouts, and send them to the rear flanks. Ring the city with eyes, they'll surely attack again before dawn." Slowly pulling back through the pasture towards the watchtower, messengers departed before the shield formation stopped and opened in the center, giving space for strategic command to weigh their options.

"The fires are growing General, taking what poor harvest remains," pressed a senior Ovine soldier. "Yes, but burning crops makes for thin prey. This is a distraction." grimaced the General as he looked out over the plains. Smoking fields across the horizon clouded the sky, blocking out the stars and confusing their location. Ashes floated over their position and the smoke intensified. Soon, Mavryk realized that their path back to the watchtower could no longer be seen. The flames had surrounded them and soldiers began to cough and sputter behind their shields. "Damn their hides." muttered the General as a new volley of arrows rained down through the dense black clouds. Injured groans escaped hardened lips and desperation and confusion began to set in. "Keep your shields up, soldiers!" commanded the General, weighing his options.

With that, a thunderous clap of wings reached their ears, swiftly moving towards their position. A swirling mass of feathers carried ashes into the sky like a tornado. Wind whipped at fur, pulling off charcoal debris of battle. The phalanx breathed clear a sign of relief as the avian storm pushed back the smoke and flames, clearing the sky. The shrike leader Thorn, alighted onto the great shoulders of General Mavryk and chirped to attention, "we can contain the smoke General but you'll have to flush them out of their positions in any tall vegetation." Arrows began to fly again and the shield went back up. A few birds fell from the sky around the unit, pierced by the wolves' projectiles but most ascended out of reach. "Well-played feathered friend," said Mavryk.

With a clearer view of the fields, the attack allowed the Mavryk and his commanders to triangulate the Pack's position. A portly Cervus commander sidled over to the general, "Send our cavalry to the flanks and press them towards the southern slopes and open terrain."

"Yes, but that will be slow going through the dense crops where they have the advantage," replied the General.

Thorn piped up again, "A band of jays can dodge their arrows and signal their position, General."

"Good, take the spear-beasts to the front behind the shields, aim just below the glimmer made by the birds' metal necklaces." commanded Mavryk.

Thorn took off into the air and chirped instructions to the swirling mass of feathers above the phalanx. Pushing steadily forward and blocking each oncoming barrage, the plan went into motion as lightning fast blue jays dodged through flames and began circling over wolf targets. Javelins flew and a few yelps echoed from the darkness. Shuffling and growled commands could be heard faintly in the crops, and before another volley of javelins could be loosed, a dozen cones of liquid flames spewed into air, coating the brave avians. The wolves had resorted to spitting their fuel through freshly lit torches, scorching the jays, themselves and many rows of dry corn.

Grunting at the plan's failure, General Mavryk turned back to his commanders. "This has to end. They are toying with us." A startled lifting of hooves around the commanders gave way to unsavory groans and grumbles of "snakes" and "slime."

Scrambling up the broad back of the great Holstein, a black and turmeric colored salamander took Mavryk's ear in its tiny claws and hissed, "take the fire to them General." Little black eyes glimmered with light from the glowing ashes. A manic twitching tongue whispered incendiaries, widening the General's eyes to the consternation of his commanders.

Turning to his makeshift war-cabinet, Mavryk laid plans for formation, "take them between two horns at the far end of the cornfield. Tanks and I will stay their advance here. We'll flush them out or burn their hides."

Nodding in agreement, the commanders returned to their units behind the front line.

Breaking the shield wall brought a flurry of black arrows that hampered the Bovine's maneuver but the phalanx held fast while a chattering congress of slithery arsonists lit fuses to their volatile cargo packs. Looking up to the towering general, the lead pyromander cracked a wicked grin, "bang bang furballs?" "Indeed," nodded Mavryk, a bit unsure of the consequences of his own command.

Wriggling ahead through ashes and burnt crops the payload was delivered within seconds. Yet a small eternity passed in Mavryk's thoughts as any who expects the fallout of grave decisions. Every leader, general, or beast with power foresees and calculates loss. At least those with conscience. Some become too familiar with the silence before the chaos. Anticipation slows time, bringing to mind memory and hope. Prayers and farewells pass through consciousness faster than arrows. Regrets linger as muscles contract in expectation. Taciturn would be too soft a description of Mavryk during times of peace. The pain of his decisions each summer never erased the past. They only added to the weight on his powerful shoulders.

The blast was larger than anybeast had prepared for. It flattened corn, knocked soldiers off their hooves, and stunned the birds out of the air. The entire field glowed, fur discarded for the ephemeral. Their souls ascended back to the beginning. The Ungulate priests believe that the world was created from a great

cosmic calf, born of wind and stars. Its body broken into millions of points of light that fill the sky each night. As it churns the horizon, comets fall to the ground giving the life spark to the creatures of Terrus. Whose hooves birthed ungulates, horns birthed scales, hair birthed feathers, and flesh birthed muscle. Now the flames sent back the poisoned minds of those canines. Teeth with no bite.

Mavryk picked himself up, eyes squinting through a lingering flash. Commanders and soldiers pleaded with worried eyes for direction. Reaching into his vast reservoirs of strength, Mavryk hoisted his great ax and turned the blade towards the blackened field. His bellow shook embers from still standing stalks. Charcoal figures fled across the fields from the impending charge before it filled the entire plains with dust.

-

Thoroughly singed and covered in ash, Torq exhaled sharply through his porcine nostrils. Around him were bodies of friend and foe. The lupine raiders had split his armor in three places with their blades and claws, drawing blood that had clotted in the smoke and dust. They were swift but he had anticipated their strikes, baiting them into arms reach where they stood no chance against his portly mass. He examined their vestment. Tattered remnants of cloth, iron, and leather from lands near and far. The scent of salt indicated they had crossed the Western ocean and had come directly to Ungelian from the coast. Under their crushed bodies he found their armaments: a quiver of black arrows fitted with crow feathers, impossible to see at night; an unstrung bow of ash, native to northlands; a rusted curved blade of low quality with a binding that smelled of camel leather; a balled up net spun from tough cords so drenched with seawater that their origins were impossible to ascertain. Similarly equipped, the other wolf had a branded scar across its chest-fur resembling an open maw with seven teeth, three on top, and four on the bottom. The mysterious lupine societies were clearly formed from hierarchies more complex than just alphas, betas, and family litters.

Torq was more of a fan of simplicity. Bash whatever comes to bite you. With a grunt, he pushed over the wolf bodies and went to see his slain comrades. Ungulates cared little to know their enemy beyond the flesh-eating that brought them across the seas. Perhaps that was a fatal mistake, he thought. Blood splattered across pale wool. A broken antler and twisted neck. The other sheep and steer in his unit weren't as lucky. Peering into their lifeless eyes, he took in their memory so that some part of them would survive the long night. Out on the far eastern flank of the central plain, Torq was far from the tank positions and could not return with their bodies before the Hunt took them in the darkness that still remained. He scrambled to collect more ash and cover his wounds as the blood would surely attract attention. With his back to the wind he set out towards the foothills and sparse tree cover. If the shield knew his position, he doubted they would send reinforcements, not for a pig. Especially one his age. He hadn't survived this long depending on others.

Glancing across the field he saw other skirmishes in the shadows of tall burning grass. Perking up his ears, the boar listened to the howling wind and the crackling of flames. Then suddenly, he heard splashes coming from the ravine that separated the northern forest from the sloping grasslands. The

wind was still, he knew the risk of moving towards the ridge for a look. Taking in the air through his great snout he found a nearby bramble of rosemary. Scraping the bristles clean from a large bush he quickly rubbed them all over his body, taking care to shove them into all the bits of his armor and equipment. Hopefully he wouldn't smell like dinner. He capped it off with a crushed ball of herbs and stuck it in his left cheek, slowly chewing them to mask the worst of his boar's breath.

As the wind picked up again he moved towards the sound of flowing water, stopping like stone each time the wind died. The babbling brook, the breeze, and the dry trees overhanging the ravine all blessed him in the darkness. He saw figures slowly wading through the shallows, almost invisible as they were covered with what seemed to be a carapace of reeds and grass. Torq waited patiently, fixing his eyes on a prominent boulder to measure the pace of the shadows. There were dozens of them, pushing slowly through the refuse that had gathered. The ravine was the dumping ground of the city, where all sorts of objects, evidence, and knowledge were sent to be forgotten. Expedience bore its tusks. He couldn't outrun a wolf pack, and he knew that there would be scant defenses at the northern wall of the city where the river led. With the battle off on the far plains, the fires were a powerful distraction.

Soft tweets twitched Torq's attention to the sky. Shadows crossed the stars. The avian colony was airborne and headed towards the tall forest past the slopes and beyond the ravine. Waters disturbed as the wolves spotted the retreating flocks, but they stayed the course steadily upstream towards the Denwalls. Torq figured the forest was not the pack's priority and gambled. He struck out past their position and away towards the birds.

Soaring over the dark northern lands, Anwen had time to evaluate possibilities. Her flock had prospered in Ungelian. She herself had grown from a brash cygnet to a magistrate, on her own terms. Her presence in the conclave was respected. She led because of clear vision and compassion. Yet she also ruled the hearts of many in the aviary. The fledglings called her mother and she knew that she could rebuild if the Denwalls did not hold.

They landed on an ancient nest kept in the tallest treetops of the northern forest. Clutches were delivered to steady bows and wings settled. A branch within earshot manifested an informant.

"What say you, Passer?" whispered Anwen.

"A pig speaks of dangers to Denwall." chirped the sparrow. "It calls you by name."

Her gaze turned below and she folded her wings. "It is.... fragrant." whistled Passer.

Puzzlement brought Anwen's attention back to the empty branch. She huffed and dropped through the canopy to tend to her guest.

The boar was covered in mud, blood, and spices. "You are a filthy beast," mused Anwen.

"Stuff your clucking! Send your fastest courier. The pack stalks the ravine at the Denwall!" Torq squealed. Anwen held the distressing news on the tip of her wing. Were it lost to the wind, the conclave would fall. She saw the future and smirked, "Of course. Knowledge will fly." She called her swifts and set them to their tasks. In pairs they raced past the trees and into the valley below.

"You once again save your tormenters," teased the swan.

"They never try to eat me." snapped Torq.

"Just keep your belly full, friend," replied Anwen.

With that, Torq trudged off into the depths. The forest offered less conversation.

The courtesan's messengers arrived in the city within minutes. Veering through alleyways, over courtyards, and through tower windows, a word arrived to the Equine senator's chambers. The clades were gathered informally and in the throes of concern over the burning harvest.

Leaning into the informant's chitter, Accursio wrapped his hands steadily, preparing his gauntlet.

"You have my thanks, winged one."

The iron fist came down on the round table between the senators. Gasps, wide eyes, and a snort emerged from the others.

"Prepare the cavalry. To the ravine on the north wall. Speed to your hooves." he declared.

Two attendants had already prepared his chest plate and greaves.

The other senators turned to leave for their clade-halls.

"The herd needs your best, brothers." called out Accursio as a red fanned helmet settled down his head.

Through the stone chamber and down towards the stables, the Horse lord was joined by his elite blitz squad, the Steel Hooves. Taking his heavy lance he came to the courtyard to his commanders.

"We have the birds to thank. Call Mavryk back from the front immediately. Take the archers to the north wall. And wake those damn turtles," ordered the Senator.

Hooves on the pavement stirred the amassed low-beasts in the city agora. Making a path for the senator's cavalry, the front gates groaned open and they charged out into the Eastern plains before turning north towards the ravine.

Bercerrio watched the stallions depart, concern setting hard on his cashmere-covered chin. Something unforeseen had demanded an emergency response from the council. He set the civil servants out to keep the low-beasts corralled and started off towards the Capridae Cladehall. His sister Clarinde was the clade's chosen in the Senate. She was far better suited to the aggressive politics of the council and despite her lack of years, she commanded the allegiance of the city's goat-beasts.

"Brother, did you come in haste?" queried Clarinde from a balcony above the hall's great horned doorway.

"Don't play games sister, not tonight." yelled Bercerrio before entering the clade-hall.

In the large anteroom leading to a great spiral staircase the siblings exchanged news of the council, the stables, and the pastures.

"The Twisted-Horn have not yet returned from their range across the southern plains. I thought they might find some clues to the pack's movement." worried Clarinde. "It was a calculated risk approved by the senate," replied Bercerrio. "Now that the hunt is at the Denwall, we cannot rely on immediate reinforcement."

Turning back to the balcony window, Clarinde continued, "The canines have evolved, brother. They are better equipped and wield flames without fear. Has the white wolf been seen?"

"No sign, and there is chaos at the front sister, Mavryk has not returned yet. We have no credible sources unless your winged friends have offered more...." said Bercerrio.

"Nothing. The swan keeps knowledge to her advantage." muttered Clarinde. "These species we keep behind our walls do not care but for their own hides. The filth they eat and the stains they leave on our spires sicken me," exclaimed the Senator. "Let's not busy ourselves with sourness, sister. Take your guards to the spire and I will call our javelineers to their stations. Then, I will speed to the north wall with our remaining soldiers" calmed the Praetor. "Very well brother. So what shall we do with your herdlings?" she asked, still looking out over the city.

"The low-beasts remain in the agora." responded Bercerrio.

"Good, keep them safe and keep them clean." she said as she disappeared down the hallways.

Bercerrio turned to leave, pausing to sniff the air. Not to be bothered, he took off to his duties.

Peeking around the great staircase, young Bukard's hackles had risen. The battle had reached the denwalls. He waited a few moments so as to avoid his uncle and took his short spear before bounding into the night of the city now under siege.

-

Rounding on the Ravine in sight of the walls of Ungelian, Accursio slowed and regrouped the Steel Hooves. The ravine was steep and surrounded by gnarled trees that had grown misshapen as they were nourished by refuse. The waters that fed it emerged from the city drainage system and moat runoff, just beyond the dense growth and up a steep cliff. There were only a few terrapin guards surly enough to keep the mire past the falls.

Looking south, Accursio could see the watch-guard phalanx make their way back towards the main gates while a small contingent of cavalry broke off in their direction.

Soon their ranks swelled enough to brave the dense vegetation. Xanthos trotted up to the Senator a bit out of breath and covered in black ash, "my lord! The Wolves have been routed at the fields. The general returns to the city but he doubts the foe is rebuffed."

"Yes, they've become quite clever." snorted Accursio. "Winged words have brought us here, but we'll need to approach carefully." The senator ordered his units forward in small groups led by a large shield-bearer. Reaching the tree line without incident, each group dispersed, backs pressed against trunks and behind rocks that lined the ravine. Looking down, their worst fears were confirmed. Terrapin corpses on the far bank, their shells crack open, and dark reptilian blood oozing into the flowing stream. Suddenly arrows flew from the other side of the ravine followed by growls and hideous laughter.

Another trap and no way to cross without being an easy target. The wolves were hidden in the trees on the far side and there was no telling how many there were beyond the flight of projectiles.

Calling the cavalry back from the tree line, Accursio revised. "We'll split into two, cross the river a field downstream and flank them." Xanthos joined rank with his lord while the Cervus commander took his retinue to their task.

The senator then turned his attention to the long stretch of walls cordoning off the city. They were steep but not impenetrable. A breach would cause havoc in the dense winding alleyways of the slums leading to the merchant's quarter. The wall was sparsely guarded on this side of the city as all attention was turned south and east to the fires of the plains. No entrances or fortifications were built here as the hills

of granite formations wrapped around this side of the city. A small moat was all that separated jagged rocks and the falls that led to the ravine. One weakness did exist as the water tunnels from the aqueduct emptied into this side of the moat. Moreover, the iron bars blocking the sewage drains were old and their chains would be easy for the determined wolves to break.

In seconds they had rounded the ravine up the slopes and made it to the edge of the small moat where more corpses of aquatic guards littered the shallows. Steel Hooves moved into position. Xanthos' armored shoe touched still waters, sending a slow motion ripple across the pool.

Emerging from the dark waters at the wall, the canines pulled themselves up a line they had latched to the fortress rampart. With one paw pressed against the stone and another crooked behind rope they balanced their short bows and shot across the waters. Shields went up too late for the ambush and the horse-lord was struck in the shoulder. His guards fared worse. Some were felled into the moat and others found the ground, clutching hip and hamstring.

"Take their hides!" shouted Accursio. Xanthos and other more agile hoof-warriors charged forth, tearing off their heavy armor before diving underwater. Javelins flew, finding no fur. Some stuck to the wall, giving more footholds for the wolves. Another volley flew, ringing off mostly metal.

A dozen wolves had made it almost to the top of the undefended ramparts while their pack mates fended off the horse lord's troops at the moat.

Returning a barrage of projectiles, one wolf was taken off its perch. The splash in the water accentuated the chaos of the battle above the overgrown ravine.

Accursio ordered more troops into the water while pulling out the arrow. "Send word to guard the North wall, the pack may have breached the sewers!" he roared.

Halfway to the wall, the troops at the front found an underwater chain stretched across the moat at chest height. Their progress slowed as the chain went taught, giving warning to the hanging wolf-archers. This provided enough time for the pack to reach the top of the fortress walls. Following a last volley, a few wolves farther down unclipped their lines and dove down to the sewer gate.

Hooves don't fare well in water. Their gait cuts slowly through the muck. Horns give away position and drag in the currents, especially on floating debris. Not that the defenders of Ungelian weren't trained to swim, but they would generally prefer not to. What creatures evolve for each terrain depends not just on biology, but persistence. If a beast hoped to be invaluable to the herd, mastering the waters was one rare skill much in demand by the general. Some shaved down their horns. Those species without such encumbrance like horses and boars tended to excel. The pigs perhaps too much, earning a reputation of wallowing in the cool swamplands further downriver during the heat of summer. What was not expected that summer night were the wolves to take their assault aquatic.

In the dark waters of the city moat, Xanthos and other hooves were met with slashing claws. Only spears kept the dogs at bay until the attackers beat a retreat down to the sewer gate, which had been pried open. Following with trepidation, Xanthos dove down and swam through the twisted iron. From there the waterway continued under the great denwalls and slowly receded to a large collection chamber where trickling streams converged from various directions in the city. A few wolves were waiting with blades and teeth bared. Fighting lasted but a few frantic moments as sound and smell guided each blow. Soon the wolves had retreated in different directions down the sewage tunnels, splashes echoing.

Xanthos and his few companions that had made the dive split up and followed the wolves into the darkness. Hooves clattering down ancient tunnels full of trickling slime, Xanthos knew that he needed to track the wolves and find where they planned to emerge in the city. This infiltration of the city was an aberration. The early warnings, the fires in the fields, the approach in the ravine. None of it made sense. There was no feast for the wolves at the end of this tactic. What were they doing in Ungelian? He continued in the darkness, following what he thought were the clapping sounds of pawsteps in puddles.

Xanthos followed the smell of wet dog, turning at numerous intersections in the dark sewers. The long, dark tunnels went deep into the city to every quarter serving both high and low-beast alike. He came upon another opening with flowing water scented with oils and herbs. There, he lost the trail to the overwhelming odor of perfumes. These baths were not the public works open to anybeast. These were clearly a luxury of the elite.

Crawling up into the darkness, he continued on hands and knees through the trickle of water, grasping towards a dim torchlight far ahead. He could hear soft talking echoing across the water and stone. Before he could pull himself out of the heated pool a crushing blow dropped him back into the water. His body shuddered and his lungs filled with water. Slumping down, his limp body was pulled by the current back towards the large drain from which he emerged.

-

Running with all the speed they could muster, a collection of troops from the great clades of Ungelian took across the rampart paths towards the north end of the city. The wolves had breached the walls and were firing off volley after volley of arrows dipped in oil and lit with one of the stray torch fires that lined the walls. Flames spread across wooden and thatch roofs adding to the chaos. Screams could be heard from the beasts sheltering in their hovels. A few wooden shacks went up in a great conflagration, moving towards stores of food and the warehouses of the merchant class.

Through the maze of small cobblestone streets, able-bodied beasts trudged with make-shift weapons and armor to defend their city. This quarter was host to a diverse range of species that had made their homes under the shield of the herd. Reptiles, birds, rodents and other small mammals scrambled in every direction to defend or flee their dens. Hopping through smoke and debris Bukard was determined to confront the attackers. Equipped with a spear and his bronze helmet given to him by his father, he made his way past the shops, the tavernae, and the warehouses to the large staircase to the northern walls. Fighting could be heard above as Bukard ducked behind a barrel at the base of the stairway. Just then a body of a mercenary scaleguard fell to the ground in front of him, throat torn away. The horror of fire, death and blood stunned the young ibex who clutched his diminutive spear while peering at the broken lizard. A feeling of shock crept over the young Ibex. His goat brain stiffened his muscles as the adrenaline gave him tunnel vision. He tottered backwards unsteady, gaze reaching up towards the fray on the wall. What Bukard saw next steadied his hooves and stirred his valor. As though legend stepped through flame with gleaming sword and horns, the great Cervus centurion, Redhart appeared at the

front of a phalanx to face the savagery of the pack. A howl of anguish erupted from an enemy above, slain by the great blade of Bukard's war hero.

Bukard leapt up in glory, taking to the large staircase. As he leapt up the first flight, he was energized by the sound of battle ringing off the stone. Then to his surprise, a pair of wolves had descended the steps to escape the centurion's wrath, and were coming directly towards him. Bukard raised his spear and threw with all his strength. The wolves easily dodged the projectile and came crashing into the young soldier. Bukard fell head over hooves, tumbling backwards down the stairs while the wolves used their claws for purchase on the staircase. Bounding past him the fiends disappeared into smoke and ashes. Bukard winced and touched his brow, finding blood and a growing welt beneath his now dented helmet. In a daze he watched as Redhart and his guard secured the wall before descending to his position. "Two," coughed Bukard before collapsing to the stone.

Running into the alleyways, Redhart took his troops to hunt down the raiders while one guard tended to Bukard. Gathering his things in one hand and taking the goat across his shoulder, the young bull named Urus plodded with care towards the valetudinaria, a prominent building near the gates dedicated to treating soldiers. As Urus delivered Bukard to the attendants for care they heard a loud flapping in the winds. Above their heads a swarm of hundreds of avians swooped overhead, letting drop small quantities of river water over the flaming buildings. Wave after wave of them persisted until just smoke and embers remained of the pack's siege.

Outside the walls, from the other side of the moat's runoff, the pack had crossed back towards the horse-lord's position with the Commander's cavalry on their heels. Pressed between two flanks of soldiers, the fighting continued in the shallows near the edge of the craggy cliff that opened into the ravine. Accursio's lance flew through the pack of mongrels, sending them flying down the falls. The raiders pushed back, breaking one flank and opening a path back to the depths of the wall. More wolves took to the water but were caught between soldiers who had emerged from the waterways empty-handed. Before skirmish had ceased, the savagery had colored the moat red in the starlight.

-

Gleaming in the light of hearth fire, Heorod's steel tipped antlers had been polished by his attendants to a fine mirror sheen. He spun his blade, loosening his shoulders and looked out from his stable to the cobbles of the main boulevard. There was no gate to defend, this would be a battle from street to street. The thought of having to duel a beast covered in manure disgusted the noble knight. Yet he was also amused by the thought of smashing dirty dogs each time their heads popped up from under the sewer covers. For now though, Heorod would wait. His clade was divided in a bitter feud, which would amount to each faction biding their time on the battlefield. He had no interest in risking his hide before his rivals, nor turning his back on the battlefield and being slain by his own in the chaos of battle. He also didn't want to just wait by the toilets for the dogs to come. Unease grew as each minute passed.

"What now?" he barked as his messenger stumbled into the stable. "The horse-lord has met the monsters at the edge of the city. The shell-guards were taken by surprise and it seems some have broken

through the drainage gate." Heorod's mind raced, the aqueduct, the thermae, even the nymphaeum across the city could be points of weakness to this siege. He sheathed his blade and took the cobbles, turning away from the main street and up towards the villas of the high born. Politics was always at play, even in war.

Sinking into the warm waters of the thermae, Senator Pontremo puffed out a plume of dense pipe smoke that blended into the steam in chaotic swirls. "It is agreed then," he spoke into the dimly lit chamber. Waters stirred as he shifted his great mass, resting his arm on the side of the pool. Tapping out the end of his pipe, Pontremo used a small blade to further crush the herbal mixture on a serving tray and scoop it onto the still glowing embers. Smoke again swirled towards the archway stones as he sighed and submerged himself up to his neck. A ripple in the water produced a small reptilian head. Spitting out a few small feathers, the informant hissed, "Swan informs clades. Dogs in sewers."

"and..." waited the giant cow.

"Horse take moat. Sheep talk. Goat at denwall. Deer..." startled by a loud knocking on the wooden door at the far end of the baths, the serpent disappeared.

"Senator, are you there? The pack has taken the waterways!" yelled a voice from outside.

"Tend to our noble knight," sighed Pontremo.

As if the very pillar came to life, a towering statue of a cow beast strode towards the door.

Unlocking bolts and pulling the large frame open a crack, it spoke in a gravelly low voice, "the Senator is tranquil."

"But... the thermae may be vulnerable!" protested Heorod in a voice of insincere concern.

"The Senator is protected," responded the great Senator's shield before slamming shut the door.

Pontremo considered the intrusion before clapping the water three times with his palm. Again appeared the snake. "The deer are..." suggested Pontremo, gesturing in a spiral. "Deer unpredictable," hissed the informant.

"Clearly," said the Senator. Scratching his chin with the edge of his pipe, he paused to weigh the options.

"Tell your sire to clean the waterways and keep open the aqueduct. Go now," he commanded.

With the informant gone to task, Pontremo took another deep puff from his pipe. The battle was over and reconstruction of the harvest fields would be the most pressing issue until end of season.

His vision for Ungelian was developing according to plan, yet many threads were still loose and flapping in the winds. Unless promises were kept, he would have to bring the clades together in cultivating the territory and setting up proper defenses before the next hunt. Trust between species was always tenuous, but he knew that self-interest could be driven towards his ultimate aims. Now to rest and let the hunt subside as it always did.