

The Empty Throne

Soren Kael had buried an empress, a mentor, and more ministers than he cared to count, and in his experience the dead were far less trouble than the days right after they left.

He stood at the back of the Hall of Vigil with the rest of the Correctorate staff, wedged between a clerk who smelled of clove oil and a bailiff who had clearly not slept, and watched the Amber Throne sit empty under its canopy of gold thread. Seventeen days empty now, counted from the morning the bells announced her death. Long enough that people had stopped flinching when they looked at it and started, worse, getting used to it.

The Hall was built to hold ceremony the way a cathedral is built to hold sound — high enough that a single voice could fill it, wide enough that ten thousand grievances could be heard in a single sitting without anyone touching another. This morning it held perhaps four hundred people, and every one of them was watching a small black lacquered box on a stand before the throne.

Chamberlain Rufus Enderlin approached the box the way a much younger man might have approached a lit fuse. He was seventy-one years old, had served three sovereigns, and his hands, Soren noticed, were not steady.

“By the law of Regency Interim,” Enderlin announced, his voice thinned by age but pitched to carry, “in the absence of a proven successor to Her Late Majesty Empress Amara Virandis, the governance of this empire shall be conducted according to the instruments she prepared before her death, opened in the order and on the days she specified, and obeyed as though they carried

her own voice, until such time as the Named Successor is found and proven, or thirteen days are spent.”

He lifted the first scroll from the box. Soren watched four hundred people lean forward half an inch, as one animal.

The wax seal broke with a small, dry sound that should not have been audible across such a distance and somehow was.

“Order the First,” Enderlin read. “By my own hand and my own authority, I direct that Minister of the Treasury Yeva Sorrentine be stripped of office and exiled beyond the seven hills, for the diversion of one hundred and forty thousand crown-weights from the Ashen Legion’s winter pay into accounts held under false names in the Guild of Wool Factors. The evidence is lodged with the Correctorate. Let it be examined, and let the sentence stand if the examination confirms it. I do not ask to be believed. I ask to be checked.”

The last line was so unlike the rest — so plain, almost defensive — that a ripple of sound went through the Hall, something between a laugh and a gasp. Soren didn’t laugh. He was already thinking about the words *let it be examined*, because those words, as of that morning, were his problem.

Minister Sorrentine, three rows from the front in Treasury blue, had gone the color of old parchment. She did not protest. That, more than anything, told Soren the accusation would probably hold up, because innocent people protested, always, immediately, out of pure animal reflex, and guilty people went quiet and started doing arithmetic.

He found Magistrate Halden Voss afterward in the colonnade outside, where the Chief Examiner of the Correctorate was standing with his arms folded, watching the crowd disperse with the expression of a man counting how many of them were about to become his problem too.

“You heard the wording,” Voss said, without preamble.

“Examined and confirmed. Yes.”

“That’s you, Kael.”

“I assumed.”

“Twelve more of these are coming, one a morning, and every single one of them is going to want the same thing you just heard — checked, not believed. The Chancellor wants a name attached to that checking by noon. Someone the court will trust to have actually looked.” Voss’s mouth twisted. “Congratulations.”

Soren looked past him, across the colonnade, to where Lord Chancellor Dessin Halvorn stood in a knot of ministers, listening to something with the stillness of a man who has already decided what he thinks and is merely waiting for other people to finish talking. Halvorn had run the day-to-day business of the empire for the better part of a decade, first for the Empress and now, in the vacuum after her, for no one in particular but himself, with an ease that Soren had always found either reassuring or unsettling depending on the week.

Today he found it unsettling. He could not have said exactly why.

“Why me,” Soren said. It wasn’t really a question. He and Voss both knew the honest answer, which was that Soren Kael had a reputation for being slow, stubborn, and nearly impossible to buy, three qualities the Correctorate valued in public and found exhausting in private.

“Because you’re the only Examiner senior enough to be believed and junior enough to be spared,” Voss said. “If this goes badly, better it ends a career that’s already half wasted on honesty than one that still has somewhere to go.”

“Generous of you to think of my career’s feelings.”

“I think of very little else.” Voss finally looked at him directly. “The Chancellor’s office will assign you a clerk from the archive to help with the paper. Try not to lose them in the first week. It reflects badly on the office.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“You’ll do adequately, which is all anyone has ever asked of you, and it has somehow always been enough.” Voss turned to go, then stopped. “Thirteen mornings, Kael. Thirteen. Whatever this is — whoever wrote it — it ends whether we’re ready or not. Try to be ready.”

Soren watched him walk away through the thinning crowd, past the ministers, past the empty place at the center of everything where a throne sat under gold thread with no one in it, and thought, not for the first time that morning, that a woman who had been dead for seventeen days seemed remarkably determined to keep working.