

## Kingdom of the Light

The dead were lined up neatly before her. Their eyes were bright and alert, their breathing even, their pulses strong. No one looking would know that they were dead.

The queen stepped down from her dais, approaching the first of the men. He was a man just short of his middle years, powerfully built, with a scimitar hanging from each hip. He bowed down before her, and she placed a kiss upon his brow, sealing his sentence.

"The Kingdom of the Light welcomes your sacrifice. Go in the Light. Fight in the Light. Be one with the Light."

She continued down the line. Men and women of varying ages received her kiss and her blessing. They were the best fighters in the Kingdom, and they were now Assassins. Her kiss had placed an enchantment on them. They would be faster and more deadly now than any natural man or woman, but once they were deposited in the fight they would not be able to stop in their mission to kill the enemy king and as many of the royals around him as possible. Their minds would be consumed with their mission until nothing else remained.

The enchantment was a deadly one. From the moment the soldiers were imbued with the unnatural abilities, their body began to consume itself. The life-force that should carry them on for many more years was used up at an accelerated rate. No Assassin had ever lasted more than a month after receiving the kiss.

"We will serve the Light. We will fight for the Kingdom of the Light. We will die for the Light."

"Then go, my children," the queen said.

The dead filed out the side door to where they would meet a mage who could give them passage to the enemy palace in Maldor. The spell was draining, and it was unlikely that the mage would survive the experience, but he was another sacrifice to be made for the Light.

"Your Royal Highness," a man said, bowing low before his queen. He was dressed in the colors of the Kingdom: white for the Light, blue for loyalty, and red for blood.

Much blood was shed for the Light.

"Yes?" the queen asked. The man bowing before her was her advisor, and she wondered what new event might have occurred that he would need to see her now, the second time that day.

"A rider came in from the front lines," the man said. He was standing now, but he kept his eyes lowered in respect.

No man's eyes could meet the Light.

"What news?" she asked.

"More soldiers have arrived from Maldor, my queen. A legion, if the messenger is to be believed."

The queen's hand curled into a fist. The battle with Maldor was not going as hoped. The Kingdom was strong, and the war with Maldor was necessary to spread the Light across Saldicia, but Maldor was providing more resistance than the queen had expected.

No matter. The Light would prevail, as it always did. Sending the Assassins would ensure the outcome. With the king of Maldor dead, along with those closest to him, Maldor's resistance would crumble.

And the Light would spread to Maldor.

"Do our lines hold?" the queen asked. Her face was a mask, hiding

any anxiety she felt at the news. She unclenched her fist and waited for the answer with forced patience.

"Yes," the man said. "The lines are holding, though we are suffering losses."

"No man who dies for the Light dies in vain," the queen said. "We will hold a feast to honor them in three days time, and help them on their way to joining with the Light."

The man nodded. "I will see the feast arranged, Your Majesty." He hesitated, his shoulders hunching. "The rider...he said they feared Maldor might build siege machines. If the damage to the northern defenses is great, they might be able to overrun our men there."

Siege machines! It was nearly a week's ride from the front lines to the Queen's Palace. The defenses might already be under attack by trebuchets and other inventions of war. The northernmost defenses might already have fallen.

If that happened, the Light would demand another sacrifice.

"Bring me one of the mages," she commanded.

Temporarily alone, the queen could indulge in her tempestuous emotions. She struck the armrests with her fists and let out a quiet scream of frustration through clenched teeth. Transporting the Assassins to Maldor had cost her one mage, though his death had not officially been reported to her yet, and now she would lose another.

Sending a mage to fight was not as dangerous as having one transport a group of twenty Assassins two hundred leagues away, but the magicks the mage would need to use to defend against siege machines and greater enemy forces would be considerable. Mages were not sealed to

death as Assassins were, but they knew when they were sent from the palace for fighting that they would likely not return.

When her attendant returned to her, trailed by a pretty young woman in a long black robe, the queen once more looked cool and composed.

"I have brought you a mage," the attendant said unnecessarily.

The mage made a low bow. "I am Tiakoma, Your Majesty. How may I serve the Light?"

"You will go north toward Maldor and help in the defense of our forces there."

Tiakoma nodded seriously.

"You will focus your attentions on any siege machines or other machines of war brought to bear against the armies of the Light. You are not to drain yourself until and unless you see such machines." Mages were far too valuable to fall to a sword before fulfilling their purpose.

"Of course, My Queen."

"You will leave at once. A rider will be accompanying you. Go forth and serve the Light."

"I am pleased to be of service to the Light."

Tiakoma curtsied again and left the room straight-backed. The queen frowned after her.

The Assassins had been stoic, but each had volunteered for the mission, knowing when they did so that they would die performing their duty. They had been trained for it.

Tiakoma did not strike the queen as unintelligent, no one lacking intelligence could withstand the training necessary to become a mage, even if they did have inborn magical ability, but there was something about her

attitude...

The queen banished the thought. Tiakoma would go forth and fight for the Light. She would likely die, and her dying would be glorious, for she would die in service of the Light.

All was as it should be.

"Have the assassins been sent to Maldor?" the queen asked her advisor.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"And the mage?"

"He is dying, Your Majesty."

"He died in service to the Light," the queen said. "He will be remembered at the feast. Three days."

"Yes, Your Majesty." The man left and the queen retired to her sitting room shortly thereafter. She knew in her heart that the Light would prevail against Maldor. It was the destiny of the Kingdom of the Light to shine all across the continent.

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The queen arrived last to the feast. It was a calculated move to keep her subjects waiting. When she entered the room a hush fell over all those assembled. Her attendant announced her and there were bows and curtsies as she walked to the end of the table where dinner would be served.

Those attending the feast waited for the queen to take her seat before sitting, and then servants began bringing food out. No expense had been spared for the feast honoring the men and women who were dying in the fight against Maldor. The high born in attendance would have had some of these dishes at one time or another, but the people who had planned the

event had had the sense to invite those not of noble birth, and they would never have experienced such delicacies.

They were as awed by the sight of the food as they were by the queen herself.

"Before we begin," The queen said once they all were seated, "I would like to say a few words.

"We are at war against Maldor. It is a necessary war. We are the Kingdom of the Light, and it is our duty to spread the Light. As tragic as the losses our kingdom is suffering are, we can be sure that those who sacrifice themselves for the Light will be eternally rewarded. This feast is in honor of those who have fallen, and it is a reminder of why we fight."

There was cheering, and the queen granted her subjects a gracious smile. She was just reaching for her spoon when the doors at the far end of the room swung open and a black-robed figure walked in.

"Sorry to interrupt."

It was Tiakoma. The queen's shock shown clearly on her face in the moments it took her to regain control.

"What are you doing here?" Her surprise was still apparent in her voice, and under the tone of surprise was another tone, one that not even her closest attendants and advisors had ever heard from her.

Fear.

"This is where I am needed," Tiakoma said simply. Her face was smooth and expressionless except for her eyes. Her eyes seemed to be smiling, though the light in them was far from gentle.

"You are needed to help hold the lines against Maldor," the queen snapped. "I sent you to join the fight for the Light three days ago."

"I do fight for the Light," Tiakoma said. "And I have been fighting for it for longer than three days. I've read the Histories, you see."

The queen paled. "Get out!" she ordered. "Guards!"

Tiakoma held out a hand and the guards stopped, uncertain. They were to obey their queen, always, but to try and lay hands on a mage...who knew what kind of powers the black-robed woman might possess? Especially if she had been meant to join in the fighting.

"Seize her," the queen snapped, livid. Her scorching gaze scoured the line of feasters who eagerly watched the exchange.

The guards moved forward again, but this time it was Tiakoma's calm, practical voice that stopped them. "Do you fear what secrets I might reveal, My Queen? Is it not by your orders, and the orders of your father, that the Histories are forbidden?"

The curiosity in the room was palpable. It was enough to stop the guards from taking Tiakoma. They were afraid of her magicks, and they wanted to hear what she had to say.

"The Kingdom of the Light has rarely gone to war," Tiakoma continued in a mild lecturing tone. She was speaking to the whole room, but her eyes were locked on the queen's in a silent battle of wills. "It was a kingdom of peace and hope. Love. For those are the elements of the Light. The Light IS peace and hope and love.

"In that time, the Kingdom of the Light would go to war only against nations that oppressed their people, that took from them peace and hope, that showed them no love or respect."

"Maldor oppresses its people," the queen said. As soon as the words were out of her mouth she realized her mistake in engaging in a debate with

the mage. By doing so, she had acknowledged the existence of the Histories and thereby acknowledged Tiakoma might have a valid claim.

"I had never heard that said of Maldor," Tiakoma said. "But before starting this war, did you ever speak with the king of Maldor? In the Histories, the Kingdom of the Light never started a war until all other avenues were exhausted."

"That takes too long!"

"Surely spreading the Light is worthy of time and effort on your part," Tiakoma said. "If it is worth people's lives, surely exchanging messages and having controlled meetings under a sign of peace would be worth it."

The queen's lips moved into a snarl. "You know nothing. I am the queen of the Kingdom of the Light! All of my actions are dedicated to the Light and spreading the Light across Saldicia."

"All of your actions are made in a selfish bid for power which you justify by saying that you do it for the Light. If you truly worked for the Light then peace would be your goal."

"Take her to the dungeons!" the queen shrieked. Spittle flew from her mouth in rage, and blotchy hues of red were appearing on her face. "Take her now, or I'll have your heads!"

The guards grabbed Tiakoma by the arms and began to drag her out of the room. She did not put up a fight until they had reached the door. The magicks she used to free herself threw the guards to the ground where they remained, stunned by the power she had unleashed.

"I would submit myself to imprisonment and execution, as I'm sure you no doubt wish," Tiakoma told the queen, "but there is one last thing I must do in my fight for the Light."



She held her hands out in front of her and a ball of fire formed, twisting veins of yellows, oranges, and reds melding together like a flow of lava from one of the great mountains to the west.

The queen's eyes widened in understanding a moment before Tiakoma released the ball of flame, but it was too late. It shot out and consumed the queen, burning hot and fast so that the screams did not last long, though their echoes reverberated in the great hall.

Tiakoma hardly noticed the feasters still sitting at the tables, no doubt horrified by what had just happened. She hardly noticed the guards, who had recovered and now had her once again by the arms. Their hands were shaking, but they would do their jobs. Tiakoma doubted she would live to see the dawn.

She watched the burning queen, and knew that the twenty Assassins would be dying also. The kiss had sealed them to her in more ways than they had known. She felt no sorrow for the queen, who had acted out of a lust for power, but she felt for the Assassins. Though they would have killed until their last breaths, they truly had been fighting for the Light, or what they believed to be the Light.

Tiakoma would accept her death. Better to die than to live as a traitor. Her death would not matter. Before coming here she had spread the Histories to all of the mages and scholars in the kingdom. She had had copies of the Histories delivered to each of the noble houses. And these people here, assembled by the queen herself, had heard what the Histories contained.

The queen had no heir, and by the time the throne was once again filled, everyone in the country would know of the history and true purpose

of the Kingdom of the Light.

It was all Tiakoma could ask of life.