

Flashpoint

by Kimberly A. Wajer-Scott

Quintus Attulus val'Virdan, Autocrat of the Swords of Nier and Governor of the Coryani Province of the Hinterlands, sat in his office in Nishanpur. Anger marred his ruddy complexion as he reviewed the reports which had arrived in the wake of the battle at Sicaris. A curse slipped past his lips as he threw aside the papers.

"Who is it you curse, Quintus? Your enemy or yourself?" The voice came from a stooped and wizened crone, dressed in threadbare red robes, who had entered unannounced. Basuhe val'Virdan, Revered Mother of the Sisters of Nier, regarded the Autocrat with a mixture of amusement and annoyance.

Quintus looked up with disgust. "Do not mock me, old woman. How is it you did not foresee this?" The Autocrat gestured to the scattered reports on his desk. "Attalus! After the Battle of Heliadaquae he vanished, and you could not find him then. But now! He reappears, with a val'Virdan airship no less, at Sicaris! He acts without orders, and vanishes again! So the Emperor is led to believe we support the pagan tribes of the wastelands! Our best ally is alienated, and it is *Menisis* who saves his precious garrison city..."

Quintus continued to rant, menace thick in his voice, "When I catch that traitor Attalus, I will have him impaled, right next to that annoyance Eremis... And speaking of Eremis, how is it that your vaunted powers of divination cannot find him either?"

"You are too quick with your condemnations, *boy*." The strength of the old woman's voice belied the frailty of her body. Despite her cataract-clouded eyes, she moved unerringly through the room to his side. "The future is not a page to be read, but rather a web, whose tangled threads do not always clearly show from whence they come, or where they go. And some threads are lost in knots of consequence and happenstance, unable to be seen."

"I did not ask for a lecture on fortune-telling..."

"Yet you seem to require one. You take my counsel for granted, Quintus. Your decision to bring our troops out of the Hinterlands was a calculated risk, and now fate has dealt you a setback. I cannot show you a clear path. You must see your gamble through, and make your own choices."

"They are *my* troops, not *ours*." The young Nierite leveled a dangerous look at Basuhe. "I need

no instruction in warcraft from you. My plans will go forward. But now I must make assurances to the Coryani Emperor that we have not betrayed him. Send in a scribe when you leave. I have a great deal of work to do..."

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In a windowless chamber somewhere in the city sat another man, his dour and scarred visage silhouetted by the light of a single candle. Over and over, he reviewed in his mind the information provided to him by his contacts. He knew time was growing short.

The Swords of Nier had withdrawn their troops in the Hinterlands, to the number of twenty thousand, and brought them into Canceri. This army would arrive in Nishanpur within days. The resulting debacle at Sicaris had only made matters worse; now pride would force the Autocrat to justify this withdrawal. Quintus would have to subjugate Canceri, or lose all in the face of his failure.

The underground was rallying, but they were not ready. Another year, even another few months, could have guaranteed a victory. But now... Scattered, untrained men and women, more adept at smuggling and sabotage than combat... Sarishan priests always demanding more for the "services" they provide... And still no word from the undead lords of the Nerothians. Their support could not be relied on. They would rather wait, and let time do their work for them.

Eremis val'Virdan stretched stiffly, and rose to light more candles. He would have to send a message out, and gather all the help he could muster. He knew that there were expatriates, still loyal to Canceri, who would return. And, with luck, he could kindle the flames of hatred that the Milandisians felt for the Swords as well... Last year's devastation might be enough to overcome the old memories. The more help Eremis could garner from abroad, the fewer of his own men would need to perish. And then there was this new ambassador, being entertained by the val'Mehens...

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Palic val'Mehen did not know what to think of this new ambassador that his father Kuros entertained. She was well spoken, true, and what she offered was much needed, but still... Palic

found himself unsettled by the perfection of her demeanor, the utter stillness and calm she possessed even in the heart of a foreign city, surrounded by potentially treacherous allies. Not even a val'Mehan Emissary could match it. Against her, he felt powerless, and that was what concerned him most.

Palic stared into the glass case with a sightless gaze. He fought down the urge to smash the tiny, perfect castle inside with his bare hands. So much work, so much planning... He could not let his temper overwhelm him now. All the pieces could still be made to fall into position; he just had to figure out how...

He needed Eremis. He knew that Eremis was active in the underground once again, rallying the people. But the val'Virdan did not answer to his call. If he could somehow find a way to bring Eremis to his side, then all the other pieces would fall into place. But Eremis was a true Nierite; so righteous, so headstrong... He would not compromise, would not break.

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The last of autumn's dead leaves blew through the Forum Coryanum in the grip of lazy wind devils as the messenger made his way up the broad marble staircase to the administrative complex attached to the Cathedral of the Pantheon. He dutifully passed on the letter to a scribe, and retreated gratefully. He did not relish the thought of personally handing this missive to its recipient.

That duty fell to Egnatius val'Assante', personal assistant to Licinius Abarcus val'Assante', High Inquisitor of the Mother Church. Licinius himself sat on the balcony adjoining his office, breaking his fast in the morning sunlight.

Egnatius handed the letter to his superior without a word. The orange seal on the communique was enough to raise one of Licinius' sandy eyebrows, but he opened it nonetheless, and began to read. Egnatius stood ready for a response, as Licinius' face reflected first indignant affront, then consideration. Finally the High Inquisitor tossed the missive to his scribe with a laugh.

'Ha! I only wish I could be the re myself to see Palic finally get what is coming to him! Remember, Egnatius, never trust a val'Mehen. Our own local example only proves that without a doubt. Now, take this down...'

The young assistant scrambled for a quill and parchment as his superior continued speaking.

'You presume much, and your self-interest is evident, but your intention is nevertheless

appropriate. Word will be circulated through the applicable circles, but time is short...'

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Eremis put down his quill and reread the missive he just completed before blotting the ink dry. It was a call to arms, something to fire the souls of the faithful. He hoped it would be enough.

He summoned a young scribe, working in the adjoining chamber. 'Take this and have it fair-copied. See that the copies are sent out through all our channels. I want everyone to hear this.'

'Yes, sir.'

The scribe hurried off, reading over the text as he went...

"We live in a terrible era of history, but I believe there is yet justice to be found in it. The storms of war may blow, and the lands may be lashed with the fury of their gales, but in our own hearts we stand resolute. Our ways are ancient, and we have proved ourselves time and again in the crucibles of hardship and conflict. Now we are once more tested. We have been overrun by the persecutors of our faith, and turned upon by our own brethren.

"But we cannot, will not, be trodden upon forever. Our ways of worship have been proscribed, our temples overtaken, altars desecrated. Our people have been tortured, burned, impaled and enslaved. The very order of our lives has been overturned. But no longer!

"It is time that the enemy should be made to suffer in their own homelands something of the torment they have let loose upon their neighbors and upon the world. I believe it to be in our power to do this, to bring on a steadily rising tide of blood, month after month, year after year, until they are either exterminated by us or, better still, torn to pieces by their own people.

"We ask no mercy from the enemy. We seek from them no quarter. On the contrary, if tonight our people were asked to cast their vote whether a convocation should be called to stop the burning of the cities, and the crucifixion of the people, the overwhelming majority would cry, 'No! We will mete out to them the measure, and more than the measure, that they have meted out to us.' The people with one voice would say: 'You have committed every crime imaginable. It was you who began the indiscriminate burning. You who began this war. We will have no truce or parley with you, or the allies who work your wicked will. You do your worst - and we will do ours.'

‘The sun rises on a new dawn. It is our turn now. Go forth and arm yourselves, and be in readiness for the conflict; for it is better for us to perish in battle than to endure this outrage to our nation and our altars. And know that in so doing, we will not be alone, for there are those who will aid us in this righteous endeavor.’

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The declaration had come from Canceri, from the Autocrat of the Swords. Copies had begun to circulate through the Mother Church, and beyond.

‘The time of redemption for Canceri is at hand. In the past two years we have experienced miracles, something unique, something the like of which there has hardly been in all the history of the world. Nier’s Chosen returned here, to this place, to lead our people out of their long exile. He first allowed His Swords to be victorious, for a year, and then He abased them, abased us, laid upon us a period of shame, but now after another year of struggle, He has permitted us to bring that period to a close. It is a miracle that has been wrought for the benefit of all the peoples of Onara.

‘The gods have shown us that they have not deserted our people, and that they will receive us into their favor at the moment in which we rediscover them. And we must vow that our people shall never again lose themselves, as long as the gods give us the strength to carry on the fight against the evil that rises against us.

‘For even now, we must acknowledge that our time of testing has begun. The Godswall, that sacred barrier which for so many thousands of years sheltered the righteous and unrighteous alike from the horrors that lie beyond, has fallen. Hurrian, so long the quiet defender of the people, has unleashed His fury upon the land. Even the Emperor of the Coryani has been visited by the divine, and has at last seen that a fractured land cannot stand against the tides of darkness. He has admitted, nay, invited the true followers of Nier back into the folds of the Mother Church, from where for so long we had been exiled. The Purifying Flames of Judgment have at long last been returned to the bosom of the True Church.

‘If these are not to become the Last Days, we must stand united in faith. We do not judge our victory here by military or diplomatic standards, or even by purely aesthetic ones. We judge it by the spiritual energy which a people is capable of putting forth, which will enable it in a few years to recapture what it had lost in a thousand years of feuding and internecine warfare. We seek to lead

this land into a new dawning, a reforging of the ideals of the First Imperium! Into a victory that will endure for all time, and anyone who supports me in this battle is a fellow-fighter for a new divine creation!

‘Too long have the people of this country been denied the exercise of a free and true faith. Too long have those who have expressed true faith in the Pantheon been persecuted, their leaders condemned before tribunals, which in their unrelenting hypocrisy can only be described as blasphemous. Too long have the citizens of this benighted land been corrupted by the machinations of those who willingly hold congress with the Infernal. Too long have the people been led by evil, inhuman monstrosities, into crushing despair and hopelessness. That is the true face of this sanctimonious church, this so called ‘Dark Triumvirate’, that has placed itself between Man and the gods, motivated by selfishness, personal greed for recognition and gain, and the ambition to maintain their high-handed willfulness against the understanding of the necessity for a true community of belief spanning all nations.

‘The debased foulness of the Church of the Dark Triumvirate shall go unchallenged no longer. We must turn all the sentiments of these oppressed peoples, all their thinking, acting, and beliefs away from this smug individualism of the past, from the egotism and crass commercialization of faith. No longer can we afford to stand weak and divided in the face of what will come. No longer can we tolerate the gangrenous rot of this heretical ‘church’ eating away at the spiritual body of Onara.

‘Our only hope for the survival and victory of the races of men in the upcoming conflagration lies in the reunification of the shattered empires of Onara. The Imperium of Man shall be re-forged in the flames of Lord Nier starting here and now. I call upon all loyal sons and daughters of the Mother Church. Save your brethren from the oppression of heresy. End forever the threat of evil that comes from Canceri. Join us in our quest to reunite the lost children of the True Faith. Our previous attempts at a more peaceful resolution have gone unanswered, so now we will bring unity... by the Sword!’

The brown-robed figure allowed the pages to flutter to the ground behind him. He had waited a long time for this. Had anyone else been there to see it, they would have been hard pressed to recognize the horrific expression that spread across Shaitan val’Mordane’s face was a smile...