

“I have come to accept your surrender.” Richard’s brow drew down as he leaned an elbow on the padded leather arm of the massive chair he was in. He was more perplexed than troubled. The rotund man was wearing formal white robes ornately embroidered in gold designs that added an air of dignity to his pear shape. He stood patiently at the head of a line of supplicants stretching back into the distance of the enormous, vaulted room. Windows high up to the side let in streamers of hazy afternoon light that gave the vast room an almost spiritual quality. Fat black marble columns, variegated with red and gold veins, rose up in a tight row to each side of the long room. Gilded capitals atop the columns supported balconies where large crowds watched the proceedings along with the people on the main floor in the shadows behind the columns.

At the head of the room, behind Richard and Kahlan sitting in stately chairs at a heavy table on a raised platform, a ring of leaded-glass windows surrounded a two-story-high, carved white marble medallion depicting the long lineage of the House of Rahl. It was an impressive seat of power. Growing up in the woods of Hartland, Richard could never have imagined such a place, much less imagined himself sitting at the head of it.

Nearby, palace officials and their aides stood ready to assist with anything needed. Heavily armed men of the First File, between Richard and Kahlan and the rest of the roomful of people, did their best to remain inconspicuous, mostly staying out of the way toward the sides. Behind Richard and Kahlan, in front of the massive marble medallion, six Mord-Sith stood at ease.

Five of the Mord-Sith wore their white leather outfits. One, Vika, was wearing red. Richard had requested that they all wear white for the occasion so as to appear less menacing, it being a time of peace, after all. Vika had said that she was there to protect the Lord Rahl and if she looked menacing, all the better. Richard had long ago learned that life was easier if he let Mord-Sith have their way with petty issues. He knew that if it was vital, they would follow his orders. To the death if need be.

The people to each side on the main floor and up in the balconies, everyone from farmers to nobility, all fell silent as they waited to hear what the Lord Rahl would say in response to such an outlandish demand. The heavysset man in gold-embroidered white robes waited as well.

Beneath an elaborate white cloak pushed open in front by his substantial girth, silver chains around his neck just below the folds of false chins held a variety of small ornaments that reminded Richard of symbols of rank that army officers wore on their uniforms for formal occasions.

Richard remembered seeing similarly dressed people in an open tent down in the market at the base of the enormous plateau that supported the sprawling People’s Palace. The people down in the market and tent city had been gathering for weeks to have a chance to witness the kind of event that had never taken place in their life-times—or to profit from it.

“My surrender,” Richard repeated in a quiet voice into the hushed air. “My surrender of what?”

“Your world.”

Some of the nearby soldiers and court attendants chuckled. When they did, many of the people watching joined in to giggle with them. Or, at least they did until they saw that Richard was not amused.

His gaze flicked to Kahlan, seated beside him behind the table where supplicants could place maps, contracts, and other documents for their review. Besides the white dress of the Mother Confessor, he saw Kahlan was wearing her Confessor face. Her long hair gleamed in the light coming from the ring of windows behind them. He couldn't imagine a good spirit looking any more striking.

Her beautiful features revealed nothing of what she might be thinking. Despite how unreadable and dispassionate she may have appeared to others, Richard could read the fire in that calm expression. Were she a wolf, her ruff would be standing up.

Richard leaned toward her, wanting to know why she seemed to be seething. She finally broke eye contact with the man and leaned toward Richard to speak in a confidential tone.

“This man is from Estoria. The medals and awards around his neck mark him as the consul general.” She stole a brief look at the man. “I think I may have met him once or twice, long ago when he was less important.”

“What's Estoria?”

“It's one of the minor lands in the Midlands that I oversaw as Mother Confessor. For the most part the people there earn their living as professional diplomats for hire. The consul general would be the equivalent of a king.”

Richard frowned. “You mean they are diplomatic mercenaries?”

She nodded. “Strange as it sounds, there are those who need a diplomat to champion their cause. When they do have such a need, they will often hire an Estorian. Estorians sometimes argued the position of a patron before me on the council.”

Richard was still frowning. “Who would have need of such services?”

“You'd be surprised. Anyone from a wealthy individual having a dispute with a ruler to a kingdom on the verge of war. Skilled diplomacy can in some cases resolve a dispute, or at least stall armed conflict indefinitely while talks drag on and on. Estoria is considered neutral ground, so they often host the different sides in complicated negotiations. Putting up such important guests and their entourage is part of how the people there earn a living. The consul general will often host elaborate banquets for each side of the negotiations. At separate times, of course.

“Estorians have a long history as professional diplomats. They live to negotiate. They are very good at it. It is often said that an Estorian would try to negotiate with the Keeper of the underworld himself to try to come to an agreement on a later departure from life. That’s what they do—they negotiate.”

“So what has you so upset?”

Kahlan gave him a look, as if she couldn’t believe how dense he was being. “Don’t you see? Estorians negotiate. They don’t ever make demands. It’s not in their blood.”

Richard finally understood what had her hackles up. This man was certainly making a demand, and apparently such a thing was completely out of their nature.

He turned his attention back to the diplomat standing before the gate through the railing not far in front of them. A pair of guards in intimidating dark leather breastplates over chain mail stood at the railing to each side of the low gate to admit supplicants with documentation for review or anyone else Richard or Kahlan might gesture to come closer.

Inside the railing to either side were the phalanxes of palace officials in white or pale blue robes. They dealt with a diversity of matters within the People’s Palace and even D’Hara at large. They seemed to relish minutiae. Once a person had come before Richard and Kahlan to state their case, make a technical request, or ask for guidance, they were often directed to one of the variety of officials who could handle the details of their concern.

A number of the people waiting in the long line of supplicants were representatives of distant lands who had come, usually dressed in ceremonial attire, not to ask for anything but simply to swear their loyalty to the newly formed D’Haran Empire. They all wanted to look their best at the banquets planned for later. Peace greased the wheels of trade. Being a willing and cooperative part of the empire made trade with all parts of the empire easier.

The man in the gold-embroidered robes showed no emotion as he waited for Richard’s formal surrender.

“What are the proposed terms?” Richard asked out of curiosity, expecting some kind of diplomatic proposal that would turn out to be much less ominous-sounding and reveal what was really behind such an odd demand.

“There are no terms. The surrender must be unconditional.”

Richard arched an eyebrow. That didn’t sound like his idea of a diplomatic negotiation.

He sat up straighter. “What is your name?”

The man blinked, as if the question had been unexpected and totally irrelevant. For some reason he had difficulty looking directly at Richard. He averted his eyes whenever possible.

“My name has no bearing here and is unimportant in the matter before you,” he said, confirming the bewildered expression on his face.

“Important or not, I would like to know your name.”

Long bracelets dangled from the man’s thick wrists as he spread his plump hands. His droopy eyes searched absently left and right, as if he didn’t know what to do about the unexpected request. “I am only here with instructions to accept your surrender on behalf of my patron.”

“Who is this patron?”

“The goddess.”

Richard was taken aback. He had heard of goddesses only in mythology. He didn’t think goddesses, in mythology anyway, hired professional diplomats.

“We are gathered here to address the issues of those who come before us. This ‘goddess’ is not here. You are.” The patience left Richard’s voice. “Give me your name.”

The man hesitated, avoiding looking directly at Richard. He picked up a long lock of gray hair that had fallen forward over his dark eyes and placed it back down over the bald top of his head. He licked his finger and then smoothed the lock down to paste it in place.

“If it will help ensure that you comply with the demand of the goddess, my name is Nolodondri, but I am known by Nolo.”

“Tell me, Nolo, why has this goddess not come in person to request the surrender of the D’Haran Empire?”

The man lifted the freshly licked finger to make a correction. “Not your empire, Lord Rahl, your world. And it is not a request. It is a command.”

“Ah. My world. I stand corrected. And it is a command, not a request. Duly noted.” Richard rolled his hand. “So you worship this goddess, do you?”

Nolo’s brow twitched. “No, not exactly.”

“What does that mean?”

“Would the sky expect the veneration of the ants on the ground beneath it?”

“Well then, why would this goddess send an ant to do her bidding instead of coming herself to make such a monumentally important demand?”

Nolo bowed his head slightly. “The goddess does not bother with petty tasks such as the surrender of worlds, so she directed me to come here to command compliance with her wishes.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Richard could see Kahlan’s aura darkening.

“You say that this was her ‘command’—that I surrender my world?”

Nolo bowed his head deeper, as if Richard were dense. “Yes, of course. I thought that I had made that clear.”

Cassia’s white leather creaked as she leaned in from behind Richard’s right shoulder to whisper to him. “Please, Lord Rahl,” she said as she pulled her single blond braid forward over her shoulder as if holding her own leash, “I’m begging you. Let me kill him.”

Berdine, also in white leather, leaned in beside Cassia. “Lord Rahl, you left me here, unable to protect you, for ages. I think I deserve to be the one to kill him.”

“Maybe we can decide that later,” Richard said to them with a small smile. “For now, let me handle this?”

Both rolled their eyes as they straightened, but they released their Agiels, letting the weapons hang from their wrists on fine gold chains, always at the ready.

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