

## V – Copper

The flowers on the grave bent slowly in the mild summer wind as Copper lowered his head to murmur a prayer. It was a shame that someone as wise and kind as King Richard, his dear uncle, should have to leave so soon. Not that 72 years were nothing...

It was the simple, but frightening fact that his death came so unexpected, which made Copper shudder inside. Up until the last day, no one would have thought the end was so close. But now, Richard was gone and he was king. And he prayed to any deity he knew that his dear uncle would help him keep Gladstone standing as it was now.

It was not a position that Copper had been fighting for. True, he had tried to gain respect and honour. And in the great scheme of things maybe one day he would have dreamt of being accepted as a Nobleman at the court of Gladstone. But – good gracious him – a king! That privilege was well beyond his wildest dreams.

And now he was facing it. The privilege and undoubtedly also the responsibilities of a King. His first day – the day of his crowning ceremony – had been great and then, it had started.

Duty here, duty there, duty this, duty that. Ceremony, protocol, meeting, meeting, ceremony, lunch, meeting, ceremony, jurisdiction, dinner. For two weeks his days had been restless, exhausting. He would even give them “terrible”.

There were times when he wished for a glimpse of his life before. Free of any responsibility beyond caring for his own good and resting his conscious. Free of all the rules of ceremony. Free of all the worries of one who had to look after a whole kingdom. Those had been the times when he would go where he wanted, when it pleased him and with whoever crossed his path.

The trials of society were quite the worst of it to him. He could no longer mingle with the commoners, as he had used to. Dash, his good friend from the Bacchanal, had not been seen since the closing of the portals. Not that he was an exception. To Copper it felt like the whole lower town had been declared a no-go-area to him. It saddened him. And it made him regret his decision at times.

A short gust ruffled through his black hair. He had to remember who he was. He was the son of Eric the White, nephew of Richard and therefore righteous heir of Gladstone and as such he had to make sacrifices. The country needed him.

Him, in whose veins the Dracoid blood still ran strong.

“Copper?” The bright bell voice was familiar to him now. Though Dawn still was the leading magician of Gladstone, Sioned had proven to be a very cunning and honourable warrior in battle against the hounds. She was now ranking Crown Mage and Copper was glad to call her one of his best friends. Besides, she belonged to the few people who hadn’t ditched his name for “Sire”.

“Copper, the meeting begins in a few minutes.”

“Have Fiann and his party arrived?”

“No, not yet.”

A smug smile crept across Copper’s face. Fiann was of Dracoid blood. One of the few Dracoids who publicly dared celebrating the old rites of their race and show pride in their achievements, while accepting that Belial’s era had been a mistake in itself. And it was only typically Dracoid to arrive precisely when ordered. Copper doubted Fiann or any of his people would be a minute too late or too early for the meeting. They would just arrive at the precise minute.

“I must be honest to someone, Sioned: I feel like walking straight into a wall piled with nasty, poisoned daggers. And I wish my uncle would have lived to take that burden of my shoulder.”

Sioned wanted to bend her lips into a smile, but it faded away quickly. Should she cry? Should she laugh? “No one can turn back the hands of time, Copper.” She finally answered with the most sympathetic voice she could put on. “But do you really think that he is gone? Do you really think your uncle would leave you alone with that burden. Not to mention your father and your mother.”

Confusion was easy to see in Copper's face. He knew Dawn was usually talking in riddles, but he hadn't expected Sioned to follow in her foot prints that perfectly. “I don't understand.”

And now, a smile flashed on Sioned's face, before she turned to leave again. “You will, my liege. But now you've got other problems to worry about.”

The Huline party was already seated in the conference room, when Copper took his place in the King's chair. Distrust and disapproval were easy to see in their eyes. The whole negotiation was a hazard itself and Copper knew all too well that neither Fiann's pride, nor Anjar's fiery change of moods would do it any good.

The case was as simple as it could get. For many, many years not a single Dracoid had dared setting foot on the Southern Continent again. Shame and the blame from the Hulines had prevented any of them to return to their old home. Nevertheless, it WAS their home, and Fiann and his people would not treat it for any other place in the world. The roots of tradition went too deep.

“Dracoid scum...” Anjar murmured absently. “Always too late.”

“Please don't say that, Anjar. I am sure they will --” The sound of the large maple door opening interrupted him, proving his statement just to the point “... arrive precisely on time.” Copper finished, as Fiann and two of his delegates entered the room to the sound of the bells. With a short bow towards both Copper and Anjar, the Dracoid leader sat down on the left side of the table, as to directly oppose his Huline counterpart. Shoving the snow tiger skin around his shoulders back, he folded his thin hands on the table and turned to Copper. “I hope you have not been waiting for us for too long.”

“Not at all.” Copper answered his dark voice, then turned to the parties again. There he went. A jump into the tiger's lair. “First of all, I would like to thank both parties for meeting here, under peaceful circumstances and without hostile intentions. I understand that the matter to be discussed today is a sensitive topic for both of your people and I want you to know that Gladstone will do all in its power to reach a satisfying compromise. Fiann...” Once again, he faced the man whom they had all been waiting for. He was as quiet as a summer's day. “Please name your request in full length.”

“I speak as an elected representative of all Dracoids currently resident in Gladstone. While we acknowledge the Huline superiority over the territory of the Southern Continent, we nevertheless consider it our god given right to return to our former home. We therefore demand that all territory north of the old cemetery and south of the Claw Mountains be our domain again. We hereby reassure that no hostile action shall ever be done towards the Hulines resident in the surrounding area again, except for cases that a fair trial under Gladstonian right would justify, such as murder, treason or comparable crimes. This legal code shall be the foundation of the new Dracoid home country.”

“Insolence.” The word slid silently of Anjar's tongue, but it was easy to see in his face. “And you expect my people to simply make way for new warmongery of yours? You have absolutely NO god given right to live in that area, unless the god you are referring to is Belial, the traitor.”

“We are NOT associated with that murderer anymore!” Wrath building quickly, Fiann slammed his fist on the table. Behind him, Copper could see his guards tense and brace for the

battle that was slowly coming nearer. “This has been 26 eras past. Don’t you think we would have learnt our lesson?”

“Indeed, I don’t.”

That topped it. Within a second, the room was filled with the raged calls of both Hulines and Dracoids. Insults in numerous languages were exchanged and although Copper only understood the Dracoid half, he was sure they were doing a good job offending each other. At the exit, his guards were waiting for his signal to interrupt the mess by force, before anyone’s fist hit something else but the table, but Copper winked them down. Brutal force was no alternative. Never.

“CUT – IT – OUT!” The words came out louder than he had imagined, but the effect was remarkably impressive. A minute passed and the room was silent as a grave again. In the faces of Fiann and Anjar Copper could read both the desire to kill and the forced calm of obedience, while their servants looked shocked out of their minds. Apparently, no king of Gladstone had ever done something like that before.

“I understand that every one of you could find a thousand good reasons to kill each other, but this room and this castle will not be the place where 26 areas of peace find their glorious end in a pool of blood! Did I make my case clear?”

He hesitated for a moment, but finally, Fiann swallowed the lump in his throat. “Yes, you have.” He glanced back at Anjar to look for his reaction and was relieved to find him nod in forced agreement. He had gotten too emotional. There was more at stake than just personal grudges. “Please. proceed. We are willing to hear Gladstone’s proposal.”

“Wonderful.” With a sarcastic snarl, Copper turned to Anjar again. The man still looked like he had just been dethroned. And he had thought Fiann would be hard to deal with. “Anjar, I understand your concern for your people. However, Fiann has a very good point here. 26 eras are a long time. Besides – as far as I have been informed by both Luther and Dawn, who have visited both parts of the Southern Continent – I understand that your domain mainly extends up to the river Bane and thus only encloses half of the Southern continent. The eastern half is populated by Hulines, true, but they call themselves the Savages and they have voluntarily delimited themselves from your dominion. Almost all of the land claimed by Fiann falls into THEIR dominion, so mark my question: Have you been informing them about the matter and have they made a decision?”

Stunned, Anjar let his head sink, before he looked at the waiting parties again. “There is no way of negotiating anything with them. They are not one of us.”

“I had been sent as a scout.” The woman behind him suddenly spoke. Her amber eyes showed the same fear that Copper could read in the faces of the other attendants. “I had been brought before their elders.”

“What did they say?”

She glanced shortly at her king before taking a deep breath. This sentence would most likely cost her her job and whatever reputation she had. “They are willing accept the Dracoid demands under the conditions that Gladstone may send delegates to observe and report for the first ten years.”

Nodding slowly, Copper took a look at all the parties again. This was a solution that probably no one had thought of. Fiann seemed relieved, as were his servants, while Anjar’s face was slowly turning red from anger. Behind him, Kelsrick – his personal guard – was shooting the woman a gaze to kill. Whatever he said now – someone would suffer.

“Is the Dracoid party agreeing to this proposal?” He finally asked and was glad to see Fiann bow in return. “Good, then I hereby acknowledge the Savage proposal. As for the rest of the demanded land...” He faced Anjar again, ready to see the king’s head explode from anger any minute. “I will grant you those ten years to reconsider. In addition...” Copper added quickly as he saw Anjar face his servant with rage “I want to have a word with you

about the future fate of your brave young assistant. Besides, I grant you a three days extension to apologise to Fiann and his delegation for your insult against his people.”

“We renounce voluntarily.” Fiann quickly mentioned with a smug grin on his lips. “After all, this shall be a peaceful conference, shall it not?”

“Then thus I end this conference for today. Please rejoin tomorrow at the same time so we can get done with the paperwork. Dismissed.” Finally, the room came back to life again. Soft murmuring from the Dracoids’ side could be heard, while Fiann left the room first, a triumphant smile on his lips. Copper could only understand half of what they were whispering, but what he heard made tears of joy come to his eyes. In some way, he really still belonged to them.