

Interlude 10.b: Odinsbane Reckoning

Brad Meadows paced amongst the overgrown grass, waiting impatiently under the summer moon. There was a kind of chill in the air, a cold humidity that clung to the skin and made him feel at once stifled and underdressed, in spite of the shirt that stretched tightly over his chest.

Not far away stood the rest of his group: Fenja, Stormtiger, and Cricket. Othala and Victor's absence was keenly felt, if only because it made their dwindling numbers and shrinking influence all the more obvious. Without them, they'd all had to be more careful, more cautious, because there was no longer a healer to take away any suspicious cuts or bruises or erase life-threatening wounds that would make a hospital ask too many questions.

Who the fuck even knew where Rune had gotten off to. None of them had heard anything from her since the Leviathan battle, although a few of the grunts had said something about being in contact. As far as he knew, she'd fucked off and abandoned them, and if she didn't want to stick with the Empire, then he'd carve his displeasure into her body next time he saw her.

Until then, he honestly didn't give a shit.

Brad grunted, and Hookwolf turned to his companions and said, "Any word, yet?"

"No," Fenja replied.

Brad looked up at the moon, at the sky that stretched overhead as an expanse of inky black and the stars that twinkled around it, then glanced at his watch. Almost midnight. If he were a different man, he might have spared a thought about how much clearer the sky was out in the countryside, but as it was, all he cared about was that Krieg and his group were keeping them waiting.

"Think they're even gonna come?" Stormtiger asked.

"They're in the same pile of shit we are," said Hookwolf. "Krieg's too smart not to know that the only way we're getting out of it is together."

"They might disavow us," said Stormtiger. "Turn us over to the PRT and claim they had nothing to do with the attack on their HQ."

Hookwolf snorted. "They'd be shooting themselves in the foot. They *need* us to have any shot at keeping hold of the Empire. They can't stop it falling apart with just the four of them."

Neither can we, he didn't say, but they all fucking knew it. The Empire was already starting to fracture, had already fractured and was still hemorrhaging unpowered mooks, and neither side could ignore it anymore.

"Sides, they wouldn't risk the safehouse by setting up the PRT to ambush us here. Might lead them to the one Krieg's group has been hiding at. Might even let those PRT dickwads track down *all* of our safehouses."

None of the others had a response to that, and Brad started pacing again, waiting impatiently for any sign of Krieg's group.

Brad was a simple man, and he knew it. Although, no, "simple" was the wrong word. Uncomplicated? Yeah, uncomplicated. He wasn't no fucking retard or anything, but he also wasn't one of those hoity toity, high society fuckwads who sat in high-backed chairs in front of a fireplace and sipped expensive wine out of a jewel-encrusted goblet.

No, none of that. Fuck no.

He wasn't a politician, either. He wasn't the kind of guy who liked to get in front of a crowd and give grand speeches. Those were Kaiser's thing, and the man was fucking good at it, Brad had to give him that. Max's tongue may have been brown from all the shit he'd been peddling, but that didn't mean it wasn't also silver-plated. Guy could've sold glasses to a blind man. Or condoms to a celibate monk. Heh.

Brad, he wasn't good at any of that. Not one bit. And that was perfectly fine by him — in fact, he preferred it that way. Simple man, remember? Uncomplicated. He wasn't a leader, wasn't one of the lieutenants in the Empire, because he could give grand speeches, he was a leader the same way an alpha wolf was. He was the biggest, baddest member of the pack, which meant you fucking *listened* to him or he'd beat you down until you did.

Some of his grunts and his group called that charisma. Brad just figured it was the law of the jungle. People were drawn to strength, to power, especially the weaklings who wanted to figure out how they could get some for themselves.

Brad showed them how, and if they didn't learn fast enough, then they were just more meat thrown into the grinder. If they couldn't hack it, then whatever happened to them was their own damn fault.

Things were pretty damn good, for a while. Simple. Uncomplicated. Brad had to pay lip service to the Empire's whole *whites are superior* schtick, blacks are criminals and rapists, *blab-blab-blab*, the chinks are scheming to whore out honest white girls, *blab-blab-blab*, spics are coming to take your jobs, *blab-blab-blab*, and sure, maybe they were and maybe that was all true in one way or another to some degree or other. Sure riled up the rank and file, gave them something to get excited about and someone to point them all at, and that kept everyone happy and satisfied on the day to day.

Brad just knew them as "acceptable targets." Who cared about all that bullshit? The only part of it that concerned Brad was that none of the Empire would get their panties in a twist if he roughed up any of those guys Kaiser was always calling homewreckers and delinquents. The PRT might care, but fuck them, what did those useless, impotent dickwads matter?

Cricket was much the same way. She was like him, a pit fighter. She didn't really give a damn about what color the people she beat on were, because they were all black, blue, and red by the time she was done. She just wanted the rush that came with your blood pounding in your ears, your heart racing in your chest, and your fists landing on someone else's body. She just chased that thrill, same as Brad.

He even had a couple of nicks from the times things had gotten too slow for too long and they'd gone at it to stave off the boredom. Not many, because he gave as good as he fucking got and he

wasn't stupid enough to leave his muscles and organs unprotected, even if he wasn't transformed, but she'd gotten a few good ones in on him before.

And then Kaiser died, and things got shot all to hell.

Krieg wasn't a bad boss, really. Hookwolf would've been fine with letting him take over, even. Krieg was like Kaiser, one of those hoity toity types that liked their plans and their speeches and knew something about leading a gang without having to punch out the pussies and weed out the weaklings. Hookwolf would've let him have the whole thing, really, because it kept his life simple and uncomplicated.

Trouble was, Krieg was too much of a follower. He didn't *want* to run the Empire. Didn't think he had what it took to be the man at the top. What Krieg wanted was someone else to take control, someone else to lead, someone else to be the big man.

Theo Anders wasn't that fucking guy.

Kid's balls hadn't even dropped, yet, and for all he was Kaiser's son, he had none of Kaiser's presence, none of Kaiser's charisma, none of Kaiser's *strength*. Krieg thought that all Theo needed was a push and the right guidance and he'd be all too ready to continue the dynasty started by *Kaiser's* father. That the second coming of Kaiser and Allfather combined was just *waiting* to be unleashed from that pudgy, timid sack of meat.

Krieg was smoking some strong fucking shit if he ever thought that brat could be *anything like* Kaiser.

That was why the Empire was split in half. Krieg and his group thought that Theo Anders or even *Purity* would be the next leader of the Empire. They wanted the dynasty to continue.

Hookwolf didn't want either one of those pussies giving him marching orders. Turned out, a lot more than half of the Empire had agreed with him. Especially when Purity fucked off and went to join the Protectorate instead of just *playing* at being a hero the way she had been since she originally left.

That was also the reason why they were here now, in this empty field, waiting for Krieg's group to show up. Because the Empire needed a good leader and a united front to survive, and the only way to do that was figure out how to fit their two groups back together again.

Before that Apocrypha bitch showed up and punted them each a new asshole.

Which might be partly his fault, and he'd never admit that out loud. He knew she wasn't the one who killed Victor and Othala, and most of the Empire's capes probably knew it, too, but Hookwolf wasn't about to cower in the alleys and wait for her to fucking decide she was going to come after them, next, and make a clean sweep of the Bay's gangs, fuck no. He was going to get the first shot in, give her a *reason* to come down on them and force the Empire back together.

He just hadn't expected Krieg to turtle up and hide his head in the sand for so long.

Hookwolf snapped back around to his group. "Anything?"

Stormtiger, whose aerokinesis would let him hear them the moment they got in range, shook his head. “Nothing. Not yet.”

Hookwolf grunted and went back to pacing, more agitated than before.

He’d said that Krieg wouldn’t take the risk of leaving them out to dry and siccing the Protectorate on them, but could he have been wrong? Had he screwed up by assuming that the others would see the Empire as more important than saving their own hides, and Krieg’s group had indeed decided to distance themselves from Hookwolf and his in order to avoid Apocrypha and the PRT’s wrath?

No way, he’d thought before. Krieg wasn’t the bravest and he wasn’t the strongest, but even he would understand that the only way the Empire survived was if the two groups put aside their differences and banded together. That was what Hookwolf had thought, and Krieg agreeing to meet had solidified it.

Could he have been wrong?

The metal under his skin shifted and thickened, and the blades creaked and groaned as he paced. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the shift in Stormtiger’s stance that told of how the sounds grated on his hearing, but he couldn’t be assed to care.

Was Krieg that much of a pussy? He wouldn’t have said so before, but without the ABB to take some of the brunt of the Protectorate’s focus and with so many of their members either leaving or dead, had Krieg gotten spooked and turned on them for his own survival?

“Wait.” Hookwolf stopped and swiveled around to face Stormtiger, who looked past him and down the road. “I hear something.”

For a long moment, there was only silence. Hookwolf and the others waited with baited breath, listening for something other than the crickets and the rest of the nightlife.

And then in the distance, lights flashed and the rumble of an approaching car reached them. Pulling off the main road and onto the beaten pathway that cut through the grassy field was a beat up old sedan, the kind of economy car driven by poor family farmers that no one who saw it would think out of place in this ass end of nowhere.

The sedan drove down the dirt road, tumbling along the uneven path, and eventually came to a stop. The headlights blinked and then stayed on as the engine sputtered off, and four people stepped out, closing their doors behind them.

Krieg, Crusader, Night, and Fog.

They were masked up, but otherwise dressed in common street clothes, like Hookwolf. Easier to just pull the mask off and hide it if they needed to, instead of coming dressed in full gear. Fenja was the only one who’d decided to come armored up, in part because she was the only one who wore armor to begin with, and working around her shield in their own cramped little sedan had been a pain in the ass.

“Krieg,” Hookwolf greeted as the others came closer.

“Hookwolf,” Krieg replied stiffly.

“You know why we’re here.”

Krieg nodded. “Yes. You intend to broker a peace between our factions for the sake of...*reunification*.”

“Don’t act like you don’t smell it on the winds, too,” said Hookwolf. “The Empire is dying. The longer we keep fighting about who should be in charge, the more people we lose.” He jerked his head back and over his shoulder to illustrate the empty spaces in his group. “We already lost Victor and Othala. Rune’s fucked off somewhere. Nobody’s heard from Alabaster in weeks. The mooks are starting to think our shit don’t smell too good anymore.”

“Crude, as always,” said Krieg. “But you do have something of a point. Our own group’s membership has been on the decline, recently. It isn’t just a matter of your...*winsome* personality.”

Hookwolf sneered. “Awful roundabout way to say you think I’m an asshole.”

“Quite,” Krieg said dryly. “Nonetheless, your point stands: the Empire is dying, and it isn’t *completely* your fault.”

“You mean *your* fault,” said Hookwolf. “You and your pansy ass shit waiting for Theo to grow a pair and take up his ‘rightful throne’ or whatever. Punk doesn’t even have *powers*.”

“No, I *meant* your fault,” Krieg snapped back. “Do you think your retreat to this quaint little countryside hotel was a question of your *mental health*? Your attack on the PRT did none of us any favors, *especially* as you almost killed *Panacea* in the process!”

Hookwolf scoffed. “What, and you think we would’ve been better off waiting? We needed to make a *statement*. That we weren’t weak, even though we lost Kaiser, Menja, Victor, and Othala. That bitch has *cultists*, now, and we needed to show that we weren’t afraid to take her on —”

“By attacking while she was out of town?” Krieg cut in. “Yes, certainly, that shows exactly how brave you — and by extension, the Empire — are. What courage to wait until your dreaded foe had *left the state* to attack the place of governmental authority where she was known to work! They’ll sing songs in Valhalla of your glory!”

“I didn’t see you with any better ideas!” snarled Hookwolf. “You and yours were just sitting around, twiddling your thumbs, waiting for Theo to grow a spine and grace you with his presence like the second coming! Newsflash, Krieg! Theo’s fucked off, too! He’s with Purity, traipsing around Boston or New York or wherever, and he doesn’t want anything to fucking do with us!”

Krieg took a step forward, a growl rumbling in his chest, and Brad’s lips curled under his metal mask as he took an answering step forward, shoulders tense and body ready to go, to *fight*, because fuck, that was what he fucking *lived for*.

But Krieg backed down and reined himself in, body tight and vibrating like a plucked cord as he pushed his anger away.

“This is getting us nowhere,” he said sourly. “What’s done is done. I can’t change what you did, so I just have to deal with it.”

Hookwolf backed down, too.

“We can’t stay separate,” he said. “The Empire’s gonna die if we do. I don’t know about you, but I don’t plan on letting that happen.”

Krieg nodded. “I agree. With things as they are, though, we may need to approach Gesellschaft to shore up some of our lost numbers.” Behind him, Crusader shifted unhappily, but didn’t speak up. “Victor, Alabaster, and Rune were all hard blows — and Kaiser, of course, harder still — but losing Othala was the hardest. If Gesellschaft could reinforce us with a Tinker or a Trump, or even another healer, then we would be in a much better position going forward.”

Hookwolf folded his arms. “I’m not letting some foreign fucks come in and take over.”

“And I’m not suggesting we do that at all,” Krieg said. “I don’t intend on letting Gesellschaft come in and make us their puppet Empire. That doesn’t mean we can’t *use* them, especially when they have something that we need.”

Hookwolf grunted. Hard to argue with it. Healers were a rare thing, and Othala had been a gem who almost single-handedly kept most of their cape roster in good enough shape that no one asked awkward questions. If those European fucks over in Gesellschaft could hook them up with another one, then he didn’t have any problems with it.

“Fine. Won’t argue with that.”

“There is, of course, still the matter of leadership,” Krieg said slyly. “Who will take control of the Empire. You’re right, Theo and Purity are out of reach, now, and we have no way of convincing them to come back.”

Hookwolf grunted again. “Just take it. I don’t have a problem with you in charge as long as you aren’t pining for someone else to come along and take the top spot.”

Krieg nodded. “That works fine with me. Then, we agree? Our two factions will merge back into the Empire, with me as the leader and you my right hand?”

Still have to take your cues from Kaiser, huh, Hookwolf did not say.

“Sure. Just don’t try to screw me over and things can go back to the way they were.”

Krieg inclined his head. “Then I’ll arrange a meeting with our European friends and see if we can’t pick up another couple of capes to fill our vacant slots. Until then, you may need to lay low for a little while longer.”

“Or,” a new voice said, “you could all give yourselves up and save me the trouble of beating you into the ground.”

They all whirled around towards the new voice, and in empty air, cloth fluttered as Apocrypha pulled a cloak down from off of her shoulders. How she'd snuck up on them when both Cricket and Stormtiger were *right there*, Brad didn't know.

"I'm hoping you don't, though," she went on confidently. "There are a couple of you I have a few bones to pick with."

Dead silence answered her. No one moved so much as an inch, as though there was supposed to be some kind of signal to tell them they should go on the attack. Hookwolf growled. "What the fuck are you waiting for?" he howled at the rest of them. "Fucking kill her, already!"

She vanished again, and there was a choked gasp from behind Krieg as Night went flying, tumbling along the ground like a ragdoll as her limbs flailed about. She came to a stop almost twenty feet away and stayed there, motionless. Apocrypha stood in her place, arm extended, fist out, body turned in the textbook definition of a solid right cross.

Finally, *finally*, that got the others to start moving, too. Crusaders ghosts sprang into existence around her, jabbing with their spears even as their master stepped back to get some distance — only the girl leapt straight into the air almost twenty feet and did an acrobatic flip that looked like something out of a martial arts movie instead of something the human body could actually do.

She landed on top of Stormtiger's shoulders, hooking her knees over them, and with a feat of upper body strength that even Hookwolf had to grudgingly admire, she bent him backwards, planted her hands on the ground, and then flipped him and slammed him into the dirt. Brad felt the thud of it even from ten feet away.

Cricket attacked next, but the girl spun around the blow and took hold of Cricket's extended arm, twisting it until she was forced to drop her kama, and then threw her into one of Crusader's advancing ghosts.

Unreal. This was unreal. She was fighting all of them and making it look *easy*.

Hookwolf snarled and charged at her, metal blades bursting out of his skin as he went, but she just turned to him, pushed his punch out of the way, and pressed one hand up against his chest in between his blades.

"Not yet," she said simply. "I'm saving you for last."

A freight train. He must have been hit by a freight train. That was the only thought in Hookwolf's head as she pushed him away, sending him flying back almost as far as she had Night. Wheezing, Hookwolf tried to pull himself back to his feet, but just that simple push had winded him, and he was having trouble focusing enough to change into his wolf form. Every breath he tried to take sent his lungs into a spasm.

He was still coherent enough to watch her fight the rest of them, though.

Fenja was already twice her normal size and still growing, brandishing her sword and shield defensively. She was their heaviest hitter, now, by sheer virtue of her raw strength and durability. She looked every part a Valkyrie, a Norse goddess of war.

Apocrypha took her down with a single punch.

She pulled her arm back, cocked her fist, focused as much power as she could into her hand. Hookwolf watched it. And then, she leapt upwards and over the swipe of Fenja's sword, then let loose and shouted something. Brad couldn't hear it over the resounding *CRACK* of Fenja's breastplate splintering into a dozen pieces.

Fenja went down, fell like a sack of bricks, and didn't get back up. She was already shrinking back to normal size.

When the girl landed, more of Crusader's ghosts were already there to meet her, but she danced around them like they were little more than gnats nipping at her ears. She advanced through them, making a beeline towards the rest of the group, stopping only long enough to intercept Cricket again and flip her over and onto the ground.

Krieg stepped up, now, but he didn't get the chance to do anything before Fog surged towards her, a dark miasma that would choke her out and finish her off.

Light flashed, and Apocrypha's costume changed into a purple gown, her hair into a pale blue, her mask gone.

She spoke a word that was not a word and Hookwolf struggled to understand even the slightest of the sound.

“Ατλας.”

A purple glow surrounded the miasma, and slowly, as though Fog himself were resisting some force pressing upon him, it was rearranged into the shape of a man. Perfectly, a captured likeness of Fog himself, with a fuzz around the edges the only sign that his power was really still active.

“Not so easy to disperse yourself when the weight of the entire sky is pressing in from all sides, is it?” Apocrypha asked mildly. “Υπνος.”

The miasma coalesced back into Fog, limp and lifeless in the purple glow, and then that purple glow faded, too, and Fog fell to the ground. She continued forward, and between one step and the next, the purple gown and blue hair were gone and she was back to normal.

She vanished again, and Crusader gasped and folded over as her fist buried into his stomach almost as though it had been there all along. He collapsed onto his knees, clutching his gut, and fell forward until his head was pressed against the ground. The sound of his desperate, gulping breaths was audible even from where Hookwolf lay, and without him to control them, one by one, his ghosts blinked out.

At last, she turned to Krieg, and Krieg eyed her for a still moment, then raised up his hands, put them on the back of his head, and sank to his knees without protest.

Apocrypha regarded him with something that might have been surprise. “You're surrendering?”

“I’m many things, but not stupid,” said Krieg. “You’ve beaten everyone else here using only the least of your powers. What chance do I have of succeeding where they’ve all failed?”

“None,” said Apocrypha. “Just wasn’t expecting you to actually realize it and give up.”

“If my defeat is inevitable, then I’ll choose the path that *doesn’t* land me a stay in the hospital.”

“Sensible of you.”

Coming up from behind her, Cricket charged, kamas brandished and poised to slash, but Apocrypha whipped around again and once more took hold of one of Cricket’s wrists.

“Excuse me a moment,” she said to Krieg.

With a twist and a sickening squelch, done with almost contemptuous ease, the arm she was holding was pulled from its socket, dislocated, and a ragged, half-muffled scream tore itself out of Cricket’s mouth as one of her kamas clattered to the ground.

“A part of me wants to do a whole lot more than just that,” Apocrypha said stonily. “Difference is, I understand the idea of *needless cruelty*, and I don’t intend on stooping to your level.”

Cricket, in spite of the pain she was in, managed to muster herself enough to turn and try to attack with her other kama, but Apocrypha stepped around it and behind Cricket, then delivered a lightning fast jab at a point on her upper back. Cricket stiffened, then collapsed to the ground like a puppet with severed strings.

“*That* one is courtesy of Panacea,” said Apocrypha. “Don’t worry, the paralysis is temporary. It’ll wear off in ten minutes or so.”

Seeing his chance, Hookwolf sprang into action, galloping forward as a huge, metal wolf made of blades. There was no chance of doing it stealthy, he made way too much noise for that. He just had to be fast enough to reach her before she could react.

Apocrypha, as though she had known he was about to attack, turned around, tucking one fist behind her, and unleashed it as he leapt towards her, fully intent on cutting her into ribbons.

“*Thunder Feat.*”

DEATH

The certainty of it shook Hookwolf almost more than her punch did.

If he took that attack full on, he would die.

If she punched him with that fist, he would die.

If she hit him at all with that attack, he would die.

There was no doubt about it. There was no room for any other possibility. If she meant to kill him with her fist, then he would die, as surely as the sun rose and the sky was blue.

Her fist slammed into him like a missile with the crack of displaced air, and he went flying back, again, to the clatter of dozens of blades shattering under the blow. For an eternity, he hung, weightless, numb from the terror and the shock of it, and then he crashed to the ground, tumbling, rolling, shedding more and more blades as he spun head over heels.

He wasn't quite sure when he finally came to a stop or how long he'd been rolling for. Seconds? Minutes? Hours? When his brain finally caught up to him, he found himself back in his normal body, Brad Meadows, staring listlessly up at the night sky. Every part of his body ached, like he was one, gigantic bruise, and if he tried to pull himself up and to his feet, he was sure that he'd collapse again before he got anywhere.

He had almost died.

That was the one thing he was absolutely certain of. If she had meant to kill him with that attack, he was sure he would have died. That was it. A simple punch, and she could have ended him with the same ease as he would a cockroach.

And if that was what she could do with just her fist...

Footsteps approached. Brad blinked, his mask slightly askew, and Apocrypha came up to him, looking down at his body. His *completely human* body.

"Your first mistake," she told him coldly, "was to attack my friends. Your second? Thinking that you could get away with it. Your third..."

She leaned over him. "Your third was staying to fight instead of trying to run."

She fished something out of her pocket, something small, round, and smooth, and she pressed it against his chest.

"I doubt you'll appreciate the irony of this," she went on, "but Tattletale got a kick out of it when I told her."

The cold stone of a river rock weighed down on him like a boulder.

"Suidigidir."

And ribbons of pink light surged.