Paving Stones

by MaeWestKozi

Summary

The road to Hell is paved with good intentions, and Lord knows Gabriel Belmont had started his descent with the best of them.

(The main story in the Darkest Dragon series.)
Prelude: Zobek

When he was alive and whole, the wise Sage Zobek was a courageous and virtuous man. He was not the strongest or the fastest with weaponry - that role belonged to Cornell - nor was he as skilled in the ways of Healing and Light Magic as Carmilla was. But Zobek had a masterful grasp of Shadow Magic, and a strategic and creative mind. He was able to plan for the worst on the fly, and had the confidence and fortitude to face horrors many of the world would shun from. As one of the three founding members of the Brotherhood of Light, Zobek was a brave soul and a good man.

Zobek the necromancer is a coward.

He isn’t weak - he ruled the Land of the Dead as the most fearsome of Necromancers, and was easily the most feared and reviled of the three Lords of Shadow - but he is afraid. As much as his greed and ambition push him towards angling for the reclamation of power and assembling of the God Mask, he dares not attempt it himself. He finds a human - capable enough, and easily riled into dark moods. Gabriel Belmont is perfect to carry out the riskiest parts of his scheme for power.

He almost regrets his mad plan the second the Demon Mask latches onto the man’s face.

All men, no matter how pious, have darkness within them; a fact that Zobek is more aware of than most, given his own nature. But even he, for all his years and power, cannot help but feel he has made a grave error in judgment when Gabriel’s empty eyes lock onto him from behind the Mask’s cracked face. The man is human, and under the Relic’s influence he’s but a puppet to Zobek’s commands, but the necromancer can’t shake the feeling that some part of Gabriel is looking right at him.

The moment the murder of Marie Belmont is carried out, Zobek covers up his own involvement and departs for the Lake of Oblivion, abandoning his original intention to offer his aid and travel with Gabriel from the start. Throughout the quest he follows Gabriel from the shadows, aiding the man sparingly and limiting much of their interaction. He doesn’t feel secure in Gabriel’s presence until the Dark Gauntlet is bound to the man’s left arm.

That moment where he had been caught on fire, crushed beneath the heel of Lucifer’s naked foot had been his lowest - he had thought he would die there. But in the end, Zobek was not just a necromancer, and no mere sorcerer either. He was a lich, and his phylactery had not been destroyed, so neither had he. He doesn’t know what happened after that - Gabriel, that poor fool, had lain dead upon the plinth, and Satan had once more walked the earth. He had waited for weeks to see what would become of things with the Devil freed from Hell.

Nothing had happened.

It was worrying. There were no great calamities or earthquakes heralding the arrival of the Lord of the Damned. The seal on The Forgotten One had been broken as well - he felt it shatter - but that demon had failed to raze the world into molten slag as well. There were two possible scenarios. One, that the Great Evils were biding their time before inflicting their wrath upon an unsuspecting and complacent world. Or two - something, or someone, had stopped them in their tracks.

And Zobek the coward could not decide which was worse.

Zobek waits in the Land of the Dead. He may no longer be one of the Lords of Shadow - for that power was stripped from him by Satan - but his strength as a necromancer is still peerless, and he has
enough reputation to keep a hold of most of his servants. Currently, he waits while one of the more capable necromantic creatures he has raised has embarked upon a scouting mission to the northern and western regions of the continent.

He is alerted the moment his undead servant enters his domain and he stands tall, shedding his guise of a distinguished old man, for his skeletal true form, green flames spilling forth from empty eye sockets.

“Well? Report, worm,” he demands imperiously, voice acerbic as the lesser necromancer sheds its own disguise - that of a roughshod merchant - for its own linen-wrapped and mummified appearance.

“Lord Zobek,” it begins, head bowed in subservience. “The forces of Darkness are behaving... strangely. To the West, the human settlements are thriving now that they are no longer being constantly harried by the Lycan and Vampire armies - there is talk among the towns about expanding into the Agharta’s old borders.”

“...There’s no attacks against the settlements at all? I find this hard to believe - even deprived of Cornell and Carmilla’s leadership, perhaps even with their deaths, the lycans and the vampires should be more unruly than usual,” Zobek muses, skepticism obvious in his tone and in the tilt of his skull.

“I thought it strange as well - and I found out why in the Northeast. There is a powerful Dark Creature that has taken roost in Carmilla’s old haunt, Bernhard Castle, and it’s been rallying all the creatures of Darkness and Shadow to its side, as well as dictated when and where attacks and raids on humans can take place. It has many of the creatures confused - it seems to be deliberately avoiding weaker targets, and the raids against human population - while successful - leave much in the way of destruction and casualties, but the amount of fatalities has definitely decreased from the ways things were before.”

Zobek is surprised, and unpleasantly so by this information. Either the demon beneath the Castle has truly broken free and is biding its time as he had feared, or there is something else afoot. Something, that is using its power to protect humanity while simultaneously consolidating the forces of Darkness.

“...Did you discover what this... Thing... ruling from Bernhard Castle is?”

“Lord Zobek... Its servants refer to it as a dragon!”
Prelude: The Brotherhood

Chapter Summary

“No one mentioned anything about a fucking Dark Army!”

“I just did, Albrecht. Suck it up.” Captain Gilmore, you are an ass.

Evrat Rawlins has been a member of the *Brotherhood of Light* for 25 years, and he’s gotten used to being surprised. It’s become part of his character - one day his eyebrows jumped up his forehead and never came back down, his fellow knights like to joke.

He’s constantly surprised by the fact he’s still alive.

He’s fought lycanthropes, goblins, vampires, ghouls, and manticores. He’s arrested criminals, delivered sermons, and eaten field rations for six months. And now he has found himself standing at the gates of a large castle - more a large walled city, based on its sheer size - that apparently grew itself out of the mountainside over the course of a fortnight.

The mission warrants a full squad, but the only one briefed on the specifics was Captain Gilmore, a career officer.

(And, thinks Evrat Rawlins, a career asshole.)

The squad consists of six members of the *Brotherhood* - the captain, a senior knight (Evrat), a Light Magic healer and battle-cleric (Sister Petrova), a Shadow Mage (Brother Carlton), and two more knights to fill out the ranks (Brother Albrecht, a master swordsman; and Sister Lynn, skilled with archery and throwing silver knives at range). They take a moment to stare incredulously up at the Castle.

“Captain,” Evrat asks the squad leader. “...What exactly are we hoping to do here?”

“...I suppose I might as well brief you before we go in, and get our collective asses handed to us,” Gilmore sighs, his usual condescending attitude absent.

(Shit, thinks Evrat Rawlins. This is really serious, then.)

Gilmore grimaces, turning to face his squad, the metal plates reinforcing his *Brotherhood* reds, clanking as he crosses his arms to level them all with a stern expression. It makes his craggy face look constipated.

“Here’s the situation. This is where our own Brother, Gabriel Belmont - may the lord watch over that poor bastard’s soul - allegedly killed the Vampire Lord of Shadow about six years back. The Castle’s gotten bigger over the last month, expanding down the mountainside into this monstrosity - this would point to some kind of creature taking up residence. Our job is *not* to engage the threat, but to find out just what the fuck is going on. Because we don’t know. No one knows.”

Gilmore nods towards Sister Petrova, and she adds her own two cents. “The seers we’ve consulted have seen nothing until a few days ago - right before we were deployed - that’s why its been such a rush to get out here,” she explains in her no-nonsense voice, lips pressed thinly with a frown. “And
they won’t speak of what they saw - but three of them slit their own throats the next morrow.”

“What the-!” Carlton's expletive is aborted by Lynn’s timely smack to the back of his armored helm.

“Now,” Gilmore continues. “What we are going to do is very simple - we are going to enter the Castle - Rawlin’s will be taking point as he has the most field experience, and we are going to stealth our way through this shit-hole and find out what is rallying every Dark creature on the continent under its banner.”

“Now hold up there - no one mentioned anything about a fucking Dark Army!”

“I just did, Albrecht. Suck it up.” Captain Gilmore, you are an ass.

The squad grumbles a bit more - psyching each other up. The griping is as much routine as checking the straps on their armor and the positioning of their weapons and gear one last time. And it’s into the proverbial Lion’s Den.

They’ve been wandering the corridors and hallways of the Castle for the the better part of an hour and a half, and its been eerily silent. It seems almost completely deserted - the legions of ghouls and mandragoras they had been expecting in the gardens had been absent. There have been no skeleton warriors, giant spiders, goblins, or even fairies (and those greenies are usually everywhere).

The Castle is clean - the floors are shiny, the ornaments and furniture polished and dust-free. The torches and chandeliers are all well-lit, the doors are all unlocked. It could almost be a normal seeming Castle if it weren’t so large, or so very empty.

“This place is too damn quiet,” Carlton whispers, peering around the large ballroom they’ve found themselves in.

Evrat wants to punch him. But he’s not surprised - in every squad there’s an idiot that just has to say it.

And that’s when the vampire shows up. Right behind them. “I’m sorry you feel that way,” it says. Trained Knights and Battlemages, they are. Masters of stealth, and combat. Bodies and minds and hearts and souls, forged into the weapons that guard humanity. So of course, they practically all fall on top of each other as they whirl around and scramble away, screeching like little girls. Except for Evrat Rawlins - he punches Carlton in the arm.

“Ow! Goddamn it, Rawlins!”

“I am not the one that jinxed us,” Evrat gripes, brandishing his combat cross to hold the vampire at a distance while the recollect themselves.

It must be powerful - it looks almost entirely human, save for the paleness of its skin, the haunting red of its eyes, and the very visible fangs visible in its mouth as it smiles at them, amused and seemingly friendly. Tall, dark haired, and clad in a red armored greatcoat, the sheer presence the creature gives off is almost tangible. They were looking for the Master of this fortress - and it seems they’ve found it.

“There’s no need for any of that,” it states calmly, nodding towards the cross. “I have no intention towards killing you... I was hoping we might... talk.”

“Then talk, creature,” Sister Petrova hisses, her hands glowing blue with Light Magic.
The vampire has the nerve to roll its eyes. “Which one of you is the Captain,” it asks, looking at them one by one. Evrat shivers when those eyes meet his - they’re not just red, but orange and yellow as well, burning like fire with narrow catlike pupils. “…You?...I think I remember you, Rawlins... I was on a mission with you once or twice. Manticore’s out west.”

“W-what?! Gabriel?” Evrat cannot believe his eyes, but now that he’s made the connection, it cannot be unseen. The rest of the knights sort of fall into the background, watching with horrified confusion as the creature reveals itself to be one of their own. “We thought you were dead!”

The vampire crosses his arms and raises an eyebrow.

“Well... more dead,” Evrat amends. “…And its not that I’m not glad to see you... But you have to admit, seeing you back as a vampire, and in this place... It’s ringing some pretty bad bells in my mind right now.”

“Understandable,” Gabriel nods. “…I do not intend to cause problems for the Brotherhood directly... But there are some things that will need to be made clear. This is what I need to talk to you about. All of you,” he directs to the entire squad.

Captain Gilmore nods slowly. “We’ll go along with this for now,” he concedes, gesturing for Petrova and the others (who have all drawn weapons or activated magic of their own) to stand down. “What exactly do you have to say?”

“First of all, I will confirm with you that the three Lords of Shadow have been defeated, among other... enemies. I have here my field report that I would ask that you bring back to the Brotherhood compound in my stead.” He throws a thick package at Brother Carlton who catches it - it’s a worn Travel Book - the one given to Gabriel when he embarked on his quest to speak with Pan more than half a decade past. “Secondly... Things are going to change, for the Brotherhood, for humanity, and for the forces of Darkness. The monsters and demons of this world will be rallying here. There will likely be violence and raids - it is the nature of the Dark to give humanity a common enemy, so that there shall not be violence amongst God’s children,” the vampire continues, voice serious. “But there will not be the sort of horrors against the Light that we have seen in the past... Well,” the vampire shrugs, looking both ashamed and regretful, but also resolved. “…Some things cannot be helped, but I hope to keep things... almost civilized.”

“...What do you mean, ‘you hope to keep things’?” Sister Petrova has an inkling of where their former comrade’s allegiance lies, but the way he speaks about the forces of Darkness are not as an enemy.

(That is to be expected - vampirism is known to corrupt those afflicted with it; most victims become unrecognizable from their human selves in both looks and personality. It is a testament to Gabriel Belmont’s great strength of character and force of personality that he is still relatively unchanged in appearance and mannerism. Despite his vampirism, he still speaks of God with unabashed respect and reverence.)

-but he does not speak as if he is ‘one of them’, either. As if he is somehow separate, but not really, from the oncoming Dark Ages.

Gabriel grimaces at her question. “…Do you know, any of you, of a certain prophecy regarding the defeat of the Lords of Shadow?”

Captain Gilmore swears loudly - he is the only one among them with high enough clearance for that sort of thing.
“...Captain, I would advise against blasphemy of that sort,” Gabriel states softly, but somehow terrifying. For all its grandness, the ballroom suddenly seems constricting and far too small - there’s a dark shadow of a great beast inching its way up the wall behind the vampire. “My not-so-recent experiences...” He shakes his head. “My apologies, I digress. But I have accepted my Fate, Captain. And I will fulfil God’s purpose for me in my own way... Would like to explain to your squad, or shall I?”

Gilmore swallows heavily. “...If it’s alright with you, I think they’ll take it better coming from me.”

Gabriel shrugs. “Fair enough. That door, there-” He points down the length of the ballroom, the torchlight glinting off the dark claws on his fingertips, towards a door that was not there earlier. “That will lead you outside the gates. Be well, Brothers and Sisters of Light.”

They back their way down the room, more than reluctant to turn their backs on a vampire, no matter how ‘friendly’ it has behaved, before heading out the door to return back and report on what they’ve found. The door shuts behind them with a resounding thud, but not before the vampire’s parting words echo in their ears-

“Despite the circumstances, it was good to see you, Evrat. Look out for my son, Trevor, won’t you?”

When they turn to look behind them, the wall is smooth stone.
Prelude: Wygol

Chapter Summary

“Fetch the village elder,” the coachman commanded of the people that peered out into night through the cracks in their shutters, through the barely open front doors of their houses. “Fetch him, so that the Prince may speak with him.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The village of Wygol was a simple settlement with a small, but hardy population. They were a hardy people, used to scarcity of food and clean water and goodwill. They were a wary people, having learned the hard way that outsiders and strangers rarely boded well for their continued livelihood. There had been few exceptions to this blanket distrust that the Wygol villagers and the farmers of what little arable land surrounding the land ascribed to newcomers in their midst. The most notable exception was still discussed among them, and remembered fondly, the man they had called God’s Chosen.

But now it had been years since that quiet man had passed through their lands on his journey to defeat a greater evil, and Wygol was once again a wary and insular community. Vampire attacks had stopped almost entirely for a short period after Carmilla had been defeated, but with the rebirth and the impossible reconstruction of the old Bernhard Castle ruins, such attacks against the people and the livestock had resumed - however, there was a strange fact colouring all their news and conjecture about the newly risen threat on their horizon.

No one had been killed.

There had been several men and women bitten by a vampire’s fangs. Graves had been uncovered, and the corpses of their ancestors stolen by creatures of the night. But the people had received no lasting damage beyond some lingering anemia in some of the more heavily afflicted. And once bitten, no villager was attacked twice. Children and youths under the age of eighteen years were eerily left alone.

It was a transition that took months to notice. Ashamed of the bites, and fearing the condemnation of their peers the people of Wygol at first hid the marks of fangs in their necks and wrists. And months after that before the people of Wygol adjusted. Almost a year and a half after the attacks began, they stopped.

And it was under the light of the first full moon after every adult citizen of Wygol bore the scars of fangs, that the carriage rolled into town.

It was made up of dark wood, varnished so thickly that it gleamed like black oil in the flickering torchlight of the village square. Great long-legged beasts that looked almost like horses pulled the carriage-

(-but their teeth were too sharp, their eyes too bright in the dimness of the light, their feet ending in birdlike talons instead of hooves-)
-their reins held in the hand of the driver sitting high on the seat near the roof and shrouded in a deep hooded cloak. “Fetch the village elder,” the coachman commanded of the people that peered out into night through the cracks in their shutters, through the barely open front doors of their houses. “Fetch him, so that the Prince may speak with him.”

“I am the village elder,” an old man would announce, greying and feeble looking save for the steely glare in his pale eyes, and the ragged scar - red and shiny and new - that peeked over the loose collar of his furred tunic.

“Then I will speak with you,” another voice asked, this coming from the carriage itself. The coachman remained seated, hunched in its cloak rather than descending to open the carriage doors as expected. The carriage doors did not open - the vehicle’s occupant simply appeared, as if a specter, melting out of the shadows cast by the moon at the coach’s back.

And so it was that the people of Wygol encountered Gabriel Belmont for a second time.

As the carriage pulled away, the village Elder fingered the scar across his clavicle, and how it felt warm and alive under his fingers. The village had not been attacked, it had been branded. Whether they liked it or not, now Wygol and its peoples were living beneath the shelter of a Dragon’s wings.

“And one day,” the Dragon had spoke, a dark and covetous fire smoldering in its gaze. “One day you will perhaps come to understand why.”

“Adric, Adric,” one of the men of the village called out to the elder who just stood there, watching the Prince and his strange coach ride away. “Adric, what does that creature want with us?”

“...It is our Prince now. That thing. That poor child...”

“What...?”

“Gabriel Belmont once fought for our lives, for our very souls. Now...in marking us, they are his. And we are given our task from God’s Chosen.”

As the old man spoke, all those marked, the adults and grown men and women of the village found themselves drawn out of doors, and within earshot of the village Elder.

“The evil of men shall not be tolerated under his watchful eyes. We shall shepard towards his jaws the monsters clad in mortal flesh... so that the Prince of Darkness might build his throne upon the bones of the wicked.”

“Yes - I heard what he said. ...But Adric... what does that mean?”

“...I have no idea. ...But perhaps we will understand... someday.” The village elder sighed. “I know the look of men with nothing to lose, the look of men and monsters with evil in their hearts. Gabriel Belmont came to us once as a warrior and as a Savior. He has come to us a second time as a Prince and as a powerful creature of Darkness... but the look in his eyes is the same. We are his link... between the world of men, and the world of Darkness.

“...I do not think our new Lord of Shadows...is evil. And it has fallen to us, to keep it that way.”

The coach clattered along the stone and gravel road, heading back towards the Castle. The vampire would not have bothered with it, but he had not wanted to frighten the villagers - an approach by carriage, even if the coachman and the ‘horses’ that pulled it were strange, was more manageable
than a great Dragon swooping into their midst. But now was not the time for reminiscence - the journey down the mountain had a secondary purpose, after all - picking up a messenger.

“...Euryale... You have a report from your sister?”

The gorgon sat, knelt on the plush floor of the carriage next to her Lord’s feet, her head bowed in reverence. The youngest of the three serpentine sisters, she was the most in awe of him, and the most eager to listen to his commands. In turn, the Dragon found that he thought of her as her might have thought of a daughter. It was a strange family he was building for himself - and stranger still for he had not abandoned the blood-ties of his mortal self either.

One day, this Darkness would welcome his son.

“Yessss, my Prince. Stheno continues to guard the boy... And the Knights you sent back to The Brotherhood have not spoken to anyone about what they encountered. ...However... the Chaplain knows something.”

“...Father Peter was always gifted with limited foresight. ...Tell her to continue to keep an eye on the situation. Things are beginning to stir. ...Soon we will meet again, my old friend and I...

“Sooon.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone. Sorry for the delay in bringing this chapter to all of you - but I hope the knowledge that this is the last of the preludes makes up for it. Now, the setup is in place, and the main players will begin to converge. For more Castlevania stuff, I can be found lurking on tumblr. As always, thanks for reading!
The Road to Wygol

Chapter Summary

And so it was, in the middle of October, that a small squadron of Knights and their Squires, made an investigative expedition towards Wygol. Among these was Evrat Rawlins whom had been through the area before, and his Squire the teenaged Trevor Belmont.

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for your patience in putting this chapter together. There may be two or three more chapter’s planned before the conclusion of this segment, so please stay tuned! To those on tumblr and other medias that have been wondering just where the hell I vanished off to… it was my self-imposed exile from the internets and all computer gaming over the last three weeks that gave me the kick in the pants to finally get this chapter sorted out! I have missed all of you – I will be ‘back’ effective on Tuesday September 13th!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It takes three strands to weave a braid, and so it was that three strands of Fate wound themselves together to create the stage for the events to come.

From the North, Dracul's dark shadow began to stretch itself across the world - sneaking through the fringes and the edges of human societies, and swallowing whole the supernatural world under The Dragon's banner.

From the West, the Brotherhood of Light found itself floundering and planning in equal measures to deal with the surge of atypical behavior among the creatures if darkness and evil that they waged their constant war against. Trevor Belmont's training and lessons increased, as did his suspicions that the organization of Paladins and Priests was hiding something from him – both the Chaplain and one of the veteran Knights had taken a particular interest in his well-being and education.

And from the South, the Land of the Dead stirred as the Lord of the Necromancer's began reaching beyond his borders.

Word of this ominous stirring in the southern parts of the continent reached the Brotherhood in fits and starts, beginning with a severe drought that carried from summer into fall. It was when the meager harvest that season needed to be supplemented with purchased produce from further north that the conclave first became aware that there was something odd going on in the North-East. The small and almost negligible townships and hamlets of the North – some which had been barely worth the name of such, being only a smattering of two or three scattered homesteads – were somehow producing and trading far more goods then they had ever been able to in the past.

Senior members of the Brotherhood spent many evenings in council, puzzling through this development. Could it be related to their fallen hero, the creature that had once been the best of
them?

Once voiced, such veins of inquiry needed to be followed upon. And so it was, in the middle of October, that a small squadron of Knights and their Squires, made an investigative expedition towards Wygol. Among these was Evrat Rawlins whom had been through the area before, and his Squire the teenaged Trevor Belmont.

And unknown to the party, dogging on their heels amidst their shadows, was the eldest of the gorgons.

The road to the North-East was different than it had been. In the time of the rule of the Lords of Shadow the ways had been fraught with werewolves, wargs, and countless colonies of goblins and trolls. The dark energy and absence of faith had served to infect the land and ecosystems of the continent, making even small journeys treacherous. The safest way to travel had been through the ruins of Agharta, though the ancient city was filled with its own dangers; its labyrinthine structure was the least of it.

Now that the plague of monsters and demonic beasts infesting the countryside had subsided in a dramatic change, the quicker roads around Agharta and through the sparsely populated and recovering provinces on the Northern side. The air was warmer than expected, making the trip almost pleasant save for the stern demeanor of the senior knights and priests in attendance. Trevor scowled to himself, fiddling with the leather straps and iron buckles that secured his bandolier of silver knives and the harness for his combat cross. Their mission was briefed as non-combat, and yet all the senior members and the squires were armed to the teeth.

“Master Rawlins,” Trevor started, urging his horse forward to where his teacher was in the convoy. “…Why did you insist I come? All the other squires have been apprenticed to a knight for years – you only took me on a few months ago.”

The grizzled knight looked at the boy – young man, almost – and grimaced. “…I made a promise to your father to look out for you. It was something I couldn’t do if I were to be made to go along on this mission and you were to remain behind.”

“My father?” Trevor’s scowl lessoned into a frown of confusion. He blew out a harsh exhale to shake the hair from his eyes – it had been growing longer and darker at an almost alarming pace as the teenager had similarly begun to grow taller. He was long of limb and lanky at the age of sixteen, but still coltish with his youth. “…My father’s been gone my whole life… and you only took me on as a squire recently. I never even knew you before then.”

Evrat Rawlins remained silent. He did not want to lie to the boy as the rest of the Senior members of the Brotherhood were, but at the same time he could not tell Trevor Belmont that Gabriel Belmont still lived. He had more than his fair share of reservations on the subject, and one of them was of severe regret and trepidation. Taking the young Belmont on this journey to Wygol made sense for the boy’s skill and standing in the Brotherhood of Light – a designated non-combat reconnaissance of formerly hostile territory was an almost perfect mission for a young squire. The problem lay in the fact that Wygol was the nearest human settlement towards that hellish Castle, and that bringing his blood so close to its walls would certainly garn the attention of the vampire that nested within its walls.

…Why had he thought this would be a good idea again?

“Master Rawlins?” Trevor called towards the knight.
The older man shook his head. “I was lost in thought for a moment.” He sighed. “In truth, Trevor… The promise I made to your father was one that I was afraid to keep. One that I was afraid to fail keeping. In some ways, I still am. That’s all I wish to say on the matter.” With a spur to the side of his own mount, the knight went further ahead to ride among his peers – a clear dismissal.

Trevor scoffed. When it came to his father, no one told him anything more than the tales from when he was young. Now, they all clammed up whenever he tried to mention it. The talked of his mother freely, but the young man wanted to know more about the man who loved his mother, about the man whom many of the Brotherhood regarded with respect. But the mission would last for several weeks, yet. And Wygol had been one of the villages Gabriel Belmont had passed through on his fabled quest. Someone would have to tell him something eventually.

They arrived in Wygol during the evening. The wind howled against them and cold rain soaked them through to the skin through the treated leather of their travelling cloaks. It was a wet and miserable contingent of Brotherhood Knights that arrived at the edge of the village – a village that seemed much larger and more vibrant than previous reports had indicated. Even through the grey sting of the rain it was visible how the once reputed poor and decrepit outpost was now flourishing. The buildings were new and constructed well, and the roads were hard and cobbled where one might have expected the slop of a mud track.

Several of the townsfolk watched them ride in through open doors and windows, eerily silent in their regard. The Brotherhood had sent messengers ahead to forewarn the townsfolk of their arrival and arrange accommodations, and so it was that the scouts regrouped with the main contingent and led them to the warm hearth and stables of a large inn.

“…This wasn’t here before,” Evrat pointed out quietly to one of the other knights.

They nodded solemnly in reply. “Wygol has never been much of a trading post or a waypoint for the common traveler. At least, not until now. It would make sense that they build something like this.”

“Hm. We’ll have to see what the village headman has to say on the morrow.”

Trevor watched his mentor and the other knights conversing quietly from across the room – they sat in the corner, nursing bowls of thick stew while he had perched himself on a stool by the fireside to dry out his socks. The people of the town were quiet and watched the knights carefully and from a distance – the inn was completely empty except for the owner and his family.

Another thing he noticed was that every one of the locals that he had seen wore a red or dark brown strip of fabric around their neck, tied in a manner that resembled a bandage. It was a curious item of fashion – not something that Trevor would normally take note of, save for that several of the people he had seen had tugged nervously at the edges if they noticed one of the delegation looking. The other knights and squires quickly settled into the inn, quickly demolishing their own portions of stew with tired gratitude for the warm food and hospitality, before retiring to the rooms that the scouts had arranged.

Trevor remained in his corner, watching the senior knights as they frowned and spoke solemnly. They had not retired with the others. He could not hear them, but from the way a few of them gestured towards their clavicles the teenager surmised that they had also noticed the strangeness of the neck-scarves. Perhaps such a thing would be explained on the morrow.

He watched as another knight moved to join his mentor and the senior knight’s group, noting as they introduced each other and then began catching up with some good cheer. But something about this
silver-haired knight made Trevor uneasy.

Stheno watched her charge from the shadows of the rafters, clinging to the ceiling and concealed by an amulet of illusion. She had watched Trevor Belmont grow from that frightened child she had first met into a young man of skill and sharp wit. It was nostalgic to her, reminding her almost of the past and watching the growth of her younger siblings before the Fall of Agharta and their subsequent changes. A bittersweet sort of feeling.

She had known that there were elements of the Brotherhood that knew of the young Belmont’s connection to her Prince, as well as the possibility of other dangers as the life of a warrior was one that tended to court casualty, and over the years she had done well in guarding Trevor from both enemies outside the Brotherhood, as well as short-sighted fanatics within. She knew that her charge’s mentor was one of the few knights with the knowledge of her Prince’s identity that could be regarded with minimal suspicion towards his intentions – Evrat would have been killed by Dracul, otherwise.

Thusly, she was surprised. She could never have predicted that the Brotherhood would permit the squire to travel so close to the Dark Domain of The Dragon.

Unless, it was a matter of insurance? With Trevor among their number, Dracul would not move to harm them and risk alienating his son while they travelled into the edges of his territories. Stheno nodded to herself with a slight hiss – such a tactic was sound.

“Ah, good evening gentlemen,” a new voice chimed in, deep and cultured. Stheno twisted herself about on the ceiling to get a closer look. There was a silver-haired man dressed in the uniform of the Brotherhood, but she could not recall him from the convoy.

“Bishop Jasper dispatched me out here a few months ago – I’ve been awaiting your arrival to check on the situation for quite some time. I am Knight Stewart,” he concluded amiably with a small smile, his dark eyes crinkling merrily at the corners.

The other knights greeted him, though some with some confusion at first.

“Ah, I didn’t realize the scout from the initial report was still in the town?”

“No, no – I have heard of Sir Stewart. He has a good reputation for his scholastic achievement.”

“Oh, now that you mention it, I am sorry I didn’t recognize you.”

Knight Stewart grinned, taking a seat among their number. “That’s quite alright. I certainly have that sort of face, I suppose.” He laughed, touching a hand to the Light Magic amulet he wore.

Stheno frowned. She had spied and concealed herself among the Brotherhood’s compound for the greater half of a decade and knew many of the knights by face and name. But Knight Stewart was not someone she could recall or recognize even vaguely from that time, though something about the man’s voice prodded at her memory.

Something was not right.

Chapter End Notes
I tried to make it obvious about Knight Stewart… hopefully I will not need to gift anyone with a dunce cap!

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