

The Destiny of the Damned Forthcoming

Note:

Note: *The Destiny of the Damned* has been in development for many, many years. Picking up immediately where *The Hounds of Harujin* left off, it follows a plethora of characters across the entire continent and beyond. New Zealand comes into the story, as does Australia's southeast.

On the drawing board, *Destiny* is going to be at least as long as *Harujin*. Currently, a few scattered chapters are written, meaning it will be many years before this becomes available.

This chapter follows Emmanuelleine Weirzebowski, schoolmarm at Luther Cobie's estate at Lake Darlot. After the pirate attack on Geraldton in *Harujin*, there's been an influx of refugees, among them orphans. A number of new students have been resettled at Darlot, some of them now in Emmanuelleine's class. One particular student, 17-year-old Sloane Bartlett, has been causing a number of disciplinary problems. And then desert bandits descend on Lake Darlot...

Please note, there are spoilers herein for *The Hounds of Harujin*. As with all Forthcoming selections, this chapter may be subject to revision.

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"You could hold it in the palm of your hand. Most people had one of these in their pocket or clipped to their belt, and with it you could talk to someone in Canada like they were standing next to you."

This seemed to get everyone's attention – even Sloane and Zeph. Sydney and AJ, thus far shaping up to be her star students in this class, were, as usual, completely absorbed. Kurt's curiosity had been piqued. Kenzie had that look like she hadn't heard the teacher correctly.

Putting her finger in the heavy textbook to mark the page, Emmanuelleine turned away from the text to speak directly to the class. Continuing, she said, "With the push of a button, you could order a package from Japan and have it delivered within three business days. Everything was paid for on this thing – and you could access all collective human knowledge in seconds."

"Bullshit," drawled Kurt in a slow, exaggerated retort. "Did it give you a handjob, too?"

"Kurt, language," she scolded.

Sydney was waving her hand high, excited to learn more. Emmanuelleine loved that look on a student's face. She pointed to the girl. Sydney said, "Like, what did they do with this magic thing?"

She looked down to the heavy textbook in her hand. Where her finger was, she opened it. She hadn't taught this before, and the subject was as alien to her as it was to the students. She said, "It seems it mostly had to do with pictures of cats."

Closing the book, she showed it to the class. "If you want to learn more about pre-Harujid technology, this will be in our library. The next time Ms Humberton is out this way, you can thank her for finding this for us."

Penelope was no longer at the estate. Not since...

"All right, everyone, close your books. Time for a surprise oral quiz."

There were collective groans throughout the classroom. Her new students were the exception to this. Donal eyed her curiously, still getting a sense of her as a teacher. Kenzie looked apprehensive, a little nervous at a sudden test. Sloane was indifferent. Gradually, all books were closed.

"This will not go towards your final grade," she stressed. "This is just to reinforce your knowledge, and might be a hint as to some of the things on a possible upcoming test."

More groans.

She said, "Let's start with the Kiwi conquest."

Kenzie drew in a breath sharply through her nose. Emmanuelleine had taught this subject, but it was over a month ago. Her guess was that Kenzie had not learned it before.

"For my Geraldton students, did they cover this on the coast?"

Kenzie just looked at her bug-eyed. Zeph said, "Yeah, a little."

"Good. Mr Keane, Who was the last prime minister of pre-conquest New Zealand?"

"Uhhh..." he stammered, "Hurt."

"Full name, Mr Keane."

"Harrah Hurt," he said, gaining a little confidence.

"And what became of her?"

"Invercargill."

"I won't accept one-word answers on a written test, Mr Keane."

"Died at Invercargill," he corrected.

Zeph Keane was sixteen. He was one of three new students from Geraldton. There was still a refugee situation there. Allen Helmuth had contacts on camel train, and the three of them showed up nine or ten days back. Kenzie was young, but both Sloane and Zeph were legally adults. Emmanuelleine wasn't about to turn them away, despite how short-handed the estate was at the moment. She was happy to have a few new faces here.

She tried not to think about the fact that Zeph and Kenzie sat at the former desks of Case and Balthazar.

“Good. Mr Struan, was that the end of New Zealand?”

Donal Struan was her fourth newcomer. He wasn’t a refugee from Geraldton, but rather from Leonora. He was brought in by Vic Tombs. Some sort of a surrogate uncle situation there. She never had gotten the full story from Vic. Donal was a good student, dedicated and knowledgeable. He immediately understood this was a loaded question. The fifteen-year-old said, “Yes and no. Qaidar’s forces had complete territorial control after Invercargill, but the Kiwi armed forces – and... and some civilians, too – retreated to Perth after.”

“Under whose command?”

“Van,” he replied instantly.

She didn’t change her facial expression, just looked at him. The kid swallowed. “Um...” he hesitantly said, his tone changing, “Nguyen Van?”

Sloane scoffed. “Nguyen Van – who in Umai’s vadge are you talking about–”

“Sloane, don’t interrupt.”

“I was trying to think of a Vietnamese name,” said Donal, quickly.

“It’s not Van, you wanker,” said Sloane. “The name’s Vane – and he’s as white as you are–”

“Ms Bartlett,” scolded Emmanuelleine, her voice raised now. Sloane went quiet. Donal looked embarrassed. Sloane was easily going to be the troublemaker this year. She was smart, but had a lot of material to catch up on. From the look of her – a sloppy mohawk, Māori-style tattoos on her shaven scalp and on both forearms,¹ piercings all along her one ear and a ring hanging from her septum – she exuded rebel without a cause. Yet Emmanuelleine knew she could push Sloane, and push her hard. She’d lost her parents in Geraldton, and now the rebel had a cause – namely, to become an Amazon. The odds were against her, because those positions usually went to the bastards of nobles, but if she worked hard, she could do it. Being a victim of piracy would help. Emmanuelleine would help the girl to the best of her ability.

She said, “See me after class, Ms Bartlett. Miss Wang, can you tell us who Admiral Vane was?”

Dutifully, Sydney said, “Conrad Ulysses Vane, rear admiral and generalissimo. Born 2049, on the same day Harujin executed UN Secretary Akariko, seven years before Temürid conquest began. He served as a volunteer fighter prior to Mount Zeil, and a pirate saboteur of the Temürid navy besieging Timor-Leste and Melville Island in the 2080s. Is alleged to have sunk Jirghadei Noyan’s ship off Dili, where he... um, raped two of the general’s concubines.” Quickly forcing herself to move on, she continued, “Returned to New Zealand after intelligence reports suggested Qaidarid forces were close to making landfall.”

“Thank you, Miss Wang,” cutting the girl off. “Ninety-five percent right. It wasn’t Jirghadei, but his second son, Dzhaaldei. And good job on the ‘alleged’ – the rape allegations are disputed.” She took a breath. “Let’s switch gears a little bit. Miss Quentin, who was the last British monarch?”

Harriet Quentin was one of the youngest students in the senior class, a mere twelve. Emmanuelleine still weighed the pros and cons of having bumped her up. “King Edward the Lucky,” she stated eagerly.

“Unlucky, dear. He was unlucky. He was Edward what number?”

“Uh...” the girl sputtered. “Oh, I know – it was X. What’s X? Five?”

“Ten, dear. Edward the Tenth. And do we know where and when he died?”

Harriet clearly didn’t, so she opened it to the class. Kenzie nervously put up her hand.

“Yes, Miss Logue?”

“Guyana, right? In South America?”

Emmanuelleine looked at the girl, wanting more.

“20... 2064?”

“62. Good guess. Mr Bjorkstrand, who was the last American president?”

“Alexandra Hanover,” AJ replied, just as dutifully as Sydney had.

“Alexandria Hanover,” Emmanuelleine corrected. “Half mark. When did she die?”

“2071, at the Battle of Hawai‘i.”

“No,” she corrected, regretfully. “You’re thinking of the second-to-last US president. Does anyone want to take a stab at it?” Sydney had her hand up. Emmanuelleine ignored her. “Mr Schraub?”

Kory, like Harriet, was quite young. He too had recently been bumped up from the younger grade. It might not have been fair to put this on him. Yet he answered correctly, saying, “2075, at Guam?” It came out as something of a question.

“Good. And for bonus points, who was the president that died in Hawai‘i?”

“Uhhh...” Kory just gaped, completely at a loss.

Sydney was waving her hand now. “All right, Miss Wang, who was it?”

“Augustine Jeffries.”

Before she could list his bio, an air horn went off. The window was open, a mild breeze fluttering the drapes, and the piercing shriek shot in like an arrow. As though finishing a sentence she’d already begun, Emmanuelleine, trying to keep her voice level and calm, seamlessly said, “Everyone to the cellar, now. Sloane, Zeph, Donal, Kenzie, remember our drills.”

They left the classroom like it was on fire. Out the west door was a large lounge room, three or four sofas and a

1 The rumour was that she also had spiderwebs tattooed onto her nipples, which only made Emmanuelleine cringe. Zeph was on course to confirm this before Kurt, despite the boasting of the latter.

handful of chairs, loose playing cards sitting on the table in the centre. The students half-ran through here. Emmanuelleine knew she should be telling them to take it slow, be calm and orderly, but she said nothing.

This had better not be a goddamned surprise drill, Tombs.

Zeph leaped over a couch, ran for the hallway on the far side. Down that hallway, to the right, into a storage room. Here was a staircase leading downstairs to a cellar. There was some minor pushing and shoving, but no one was thrust tumbling down the stone stairs. Emmanuelleine stayed behind the last of them, young Kory, keeping an eye on everyone. All she could think about was Emma.

In the distance, the air horn was going again.

Goddamned... fri... fucking bandits.

In the cellar, the old bookcase full of manuals and instruction booklets had been shoved aside. Behind it was a poorly lit, long tunnel with a low ceiling and a smell of mildew. Hugh Rockford stood just this side of the bookcase, holding a lantern in one hand. He was saying, "Come on, come on, young ones first."

Seeing Hugh waiting for them, Emmanuelleine knew her daughter had to be safe. Now she started dictating orders. "AJ, take the lantern and lead the way. Sydney, hold Kory's and Harriet's hands the entire way. Kurt, help your fath – Zeph, where in the hell do you think you're going? You help Mr Rockford as well."

Shamed, Zeph took two steps back out of the tunnel. "Everyone's in," Hugh was saying. Kurt was on one side of his father; Zeph took the other. Kenzie took hold of Hugh's crutches. Hugh's arms over their shoulders, the two boys carried the one-legged man down the hundred-or-so-meter-tunnel. Donal stayed behind them, his arm out in case the others lost balance.

"Sloane, help me with this bookcase." Wordlessly, the tattooed girl shoved the heavy wooden box halfway across the opening as Emmanuelleine pulled. Then Sloane entered the tunnel and both woman pulled on the handles. The tunnel sealed.

There was a crying child at the far end, a mid-sized block room with only wooden benches to sit on. All the younger students were already down here, along with a handful of women. Adjoining was a larger room, completely dark, with canned food and bottled water.

"Mummy!" exclaimed Emma, petrified. Karen Rockford held the girl firmly in her arms.

Emmanuelleine went to her daughter, hugged the girl tightly. "Everything's okay, Em. Don't be scared." To Karen, she mouthed a silent 'Thank you.'

"Of course, love," Karen whispered.

"Where's Kellan?" she asked.

"Up with the men," replied Karen.

"Christ, Karen. He's not well."

"He wouldn't listen."

"Itugen's—" she cut herself off.

"Who's got a sword? Not that thing – you expect me to swing that? There, the shorter one."

Karen was aghast. "Em, you're not going up th—"

"Mr and Mrs Rockford are in charge, everyone. No one leave this room until you get the all clear."

"I'm coming with," said Zeph, picking up the larger scimitar she'd passed over, a tone of urgent manly chivalry in voice.

"No you aren't," she commanded, the authority stronger than she was. She was not about to put her students in harm's way. "Kurt, do no let him leave. You're so ready to swing that thing, swing it if... the unthinkable happens."

"I can fight."

"Sure you can. In here. You're not going up there and that's final." To her daughter, she said gently, "Stay with Mrs Rockford, okay Em? I'll be back in just a minute."

Taking the scimitar, she went through the dark storage room, ran up another tunnel, turned, came out under the barn. The hatch had hay jammed into the hinges, but she got it open. Coming around, she grabbed the heavy door, went to flip it back over—

A tattooed hand caught it.

"Sloane, what in the... get the hell back—"

"Letter of your orders – *Zeph* isn't here," the girl replied arrogantly.

"None of my students should be. Get back down there—"

"You ever actually been in combat?" the girl asked. "I have, so let me watch your back."

"You weren't in combat, you were besiege – ah, Christ, I'm closing this fucking door."

Sloane scrambled out of the hole. The door slammed down. The girl was now fully aware of her teacher's rage – Emmanuelleine never swore.

"My daughter's down there. Get yourself raped up here all you want, I am not leaving this open. Here, get some hay."

Quickly, they buried the door. Allen ran archery lessons with the students every day, and stored the bows and arrows in a room at the end of the barn. Sloane, if indifferent to history lessons, had really taken to the archery. The girl ran to grab a bow as Emmanuelleine stormed out.

The Donnager place was a large country estate more than a half-kilometre from where they stood. There was a large front yard and a white picket fence, the house sitting way back. The west wing of the place had collapsed years ago, a gaping hole in the side, and the rest of the structure was of questionable structural integrity. Lake Darlot itself was about

a kilometre behind the property. The Huntington place was a few kilometres in the other direction. The air horn had definitely come from the direction of the Donnager place.

The grass was tall here. Emmanuelleine told Sloane to keep herself low. "Remember," she whispered, "Don't get too jumpy with that bow. You still can hardly hit a target, and that's with no pressure from anyone. Kellan, Gabe, Allen, Vic, Kaleb – they're out here somewhere, and you're far more likely to hit one of them."

"Think before I shoot, got it."

Emmanuelleine grabbed the girl by the arm. "Not just think before you shoot – don't shoot *at all* unless some outlaw's on top of you. You hear me?"

"Yes sir," Sloane retorted, a slight roll of the eyes.

It was a tense but quick jaunt over to the Donnager place. Most of the grass was either trimmed by horses or absent, sparse with the aridity of the lake, but a swath of spinifex that circled down around the back side by the shore of the lake stood tall.

Three small camels were hitched to a downed strip of fence on the east side of the estate. A man was running after a fourth camel, which was clomping around freely. It was Gabe.

"Itugen's tits," muttered Sloane, a touch of horror in her voice. Emmanuelleine looked closer. There was a dead man on that camel, an arrow in his chest.

"Go back to the barn," she whispered to the younger woman.

"Fuck that, I'm here to—"

Emmanuelleine slammed the palm of her hand over Sloane's mouth. "Keep your voice down," she whispered.

Gabe got hold of the camel's reins. The two women, keeping low, moved closer to the three other camels. Gabe brought the fourth to them, pushed the dead body from the saddle in a clearing by the fence. They were ten meters from him.

Christ, she thought. Have to do this.

She stood up, waved an arm. Didn't make a sound.

Gabe twisted, his bow ready. She closed her eyes, but didn't move.

Suddenly Gabe was at her side, forcing her to squat once more. "Erlik's balls, Em, are you bloody mad?" he whispered.

Letting out her breath, she touched the crotch of her pants. Gabe looked at her curiously. "Making sure I didn't pee myself," she said in a low voice. Her fingers were shaking.

"Don't ever sneak up on me—"

She waved her hand, said, "Where are the others?"

"Inside. Three bandits, most likely. Picking through the place. Maybe camping out until dark to hit the house."

Three bandits – four with the dead bloke. Bloody hell. She bunched a fist at her side.

"Kellan?"

"With Vic."

"That's why I stood up," she said. "You wouldn't shoot, he would."

"The man's better with a bow than I could ever be."

"Not when he's high on opium," she seethed. "Christ, why would you let him go in there?"

"He's...?" he gaped.

"Not now. We just have to get him out of—"

The sound of glass breaking cut in. They all whipped their head to the side as a man tumbled out the second storey window in the east wing. He hit the roof, bounced, then twirled as he went sailing to the ground. He landed roughly on his feet, which broke at least one of his legs, but didn't kill him – this they knew from the stream of obscenities coming from the house.

Gabe stood up, bow in hand. Emmanuelleine quickly whispered to the younger woman, "Sloane, don't watch."

The tattooed girl did not turn away.

Suddenly, Gabe was stumbling back. He had an arrow in his gut. Sloane jumped, but Emmanuelleine managed to clamp her hand down over the girl's mouth before she could scream. Now more camels could be heard, their hooves moving quickly.

"Get out of here," Gabe grunted.

Sloane was blinking, aghast. Her mouth free, she just stammered, "Mr... Mr Lansdale..."

"Move," Emmanuelleine demanded, taking the girl by the wrist and pulling her along the fence. They kept themselves low, out of sight.

At least five more bandits were now approaching on fast-moving camels. Through the broken fence, Emmanuelleine saw a half-dozen arrows now embedded in the window shutters where the bandits' colleague had gone for a dive.

What the hell was happening in that house?

Two of the five new bandits charged for Gabe's position to finish him off. Quickly, Emmanuelleine said, "How good a shot are you?"

"I—" and the girl reached for an arrow.

"Do *not* give away our position unless you can hit them," she spat, glaring at the girl.

Sloane just gaped at her.

"I love Gabe, but he would not want us all killed."

Before she could finish, bandits were falling. Vic Tombs was on the back deck of the Donnager place, firing rapidly,

extra arrows clutched in his fingers at the ready. As soon as he loosed, he flicked the next in place and sent it home as well. One bandit fell – two, three. A few arrows went wide, flew off into space.

The two going for Gabe whirled, bought up their bows. Vic ducked back into the door just as arrows smashed against the brick. Emmanuelleine watched all this from some distant place.

An arrow dug into the ground near the two outlaws, who were now immobile on their camels. Kellan had appeared in an upstairs window. He was stoned. His aim was terrible.

As if it were happening in slow motion, Emmanuelleine watched as both bandits raised their bows. Kellan just stood there in the window, fumbling for another arrow. The bandits nocked their arrows, drew back–

The nearest of them jerked forward, his camel lurching. His arrow spat out out his bow. He slumped and fell from the saddle. An arrow was in his back.

Emmanuelleine whipped her head to the side.

Sloane had fired it.

The second bandit was now looking over, his arrow still aimed for Kellan in the window–

Vic got him right in the throat, the arrow coming out the back of him. He, too, fell from his saddle.

Emmanuelleine's knees nearly gave out beneath her. Realizing she hadn't been, she allowed herself to breath.

"All clear!" Vic was bellowing. "Everyone, all clear!"

It was over.

Sloane stood, frozen where she was, the bow clutched tightly in her one hand. Em went to the younger woman, took the bow from her, wrapped her arms around the girl. Clutched her tightly to her chest. "It's okay," she repeated again and again. "It's okay."

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It looked like Gabe would be okay. The arrow didn't puncture any part of his digestive tract, nor his liver. He lost a bit of blood, and would be bedridden for a bit. But, he told her and Vic, a grim smile on his face, he wasn't about to say no to spending some time with Elsa Harrow, who'd be changing his bandages.

Emmanuelleine tried to give him a smile as she squeezed his shoulder. Kaleb Schraub was keeping pressure on the wound, the arrow now removed. She got out of his way.

Kellan stood fifteen meters away with Allen Helmuth, standing guard in case more surprises came their way. Vic reported to her like she was commander in chief. "Three inside. We found the camels out here, scoped it out. Mild scuffle upstairs with the one – that was the bloke that went for a tumble – but everyone okay. These sods were nowhere to be seen when we went in."

All total there were four dead. Gabe was the only injury on their side. This was the third such outlawry incident in recent months – and the most deadly.

She muttered, "Banditry's getting worse." Blinking, shook her head. "Okay, good job Vic. How's...?"

"High as a kite. Helping no one. But he still thinks he's a tough guy. I told Kaleb to keep him close."

"We need to sort this out," she muttered.

"I'll be there when you want to confront him."

"Okay," she said absentmindedly. She realized her fingers were still jittery. Closed her eyes. "Keep on patrol. Keep Kellan with you. I'll let everyone know we're clear and send Elsa to take over for Kaleb."

"Aye. We'll dig graves this evening."

Sloane sat by herself five or so meters away from where Gabe was propped up. Emmanuelleine began marching back towards the Cobie estate. "Ms Bartlett, let's go."

The girl, after a second, dutifully obeyed.

The two women marched in silence until they were far enough away from the men, at which point Emmanuelleine turned to face Sloane. "Are you okay, dear?"

"Course," the girl replied, back to her arrogant, rebel-without-a-cause demeanour, her eyes down, an indignant look on her face. "Camel-fuckin' scum – the world is better off–"

"Language," Emmanuelleine scolded.

"Language?" Sloane replied, perplexed. "I just killed–"

"A man. A human being. Maybe he's a rapist and a bandit and the scourge of the sands, but he was a human being. That will hit you, if it hasn't already."

"Whatever," snorted the girl.

Emmanuelleine sighed. She couldn't have a long-winded shoulder crying session right now, couldn't get the girl to open up and face what had happened – there were terrified women and children in a cellar not knowing what was happening. She rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Tonight, you check in with Mr Toomey, he's going to need a hand grave-digging."

"What?" snarled the girl. "Emmanuelleine–"

"You'll refer to me as Ms Weirzebowski. Oh, and if you speak of Mr Kirkland's problem with anyone, you can walk yourself to Leinster and try and find a flat there. Do you understand me?"

Silence.

"Ms Bartlett?"

"I understand... Ms Weirzebowski."

“Good. Now let’s go tell the others they’re safe.”

*

“The khan is dead, Perth is under attack – Kimbers is getting more ambitious, thinks he can swallow us all up.”

There was something of an ascent to Abby Schraub’s words. Everyone was here, including the children – the only exceptions being the men and Elsa Harrow. They’d gathered in the lounge room to discuss. Karen had made tea for everyone, though not many people were drinking it.

Emmanuelleine knew her duty here. She had to keep everyone calm – a task her still-jittery fingers would make difficult. Stop them from running off to Kalgoorlie or Esperance or Geraldton, like so many had in July, after Luther had passed. She couldn’t allow a panic.

But she was no good at confronting a crowd.

Softly, she said, “Pedro Kimbers has been dead for years.”

“Well the Moon Panther or Pedro Jr or the fucking Sandstorm,” retorted Abby, clearly not hung up on the name.

Outlawry had always been a problem in the northern desert. This, she knew better than anyone else in this room.

Emmanuelleine wanted to stop that sort of language in front of the children, but let it pass. Most of the younger kids were drawing pictures in the corner, including Emma. As for the older kids, Kory sat with his mum, Kurt sat with his parents, Sydney kept close to Emmanuelleine, and the new students – Kenzie, Donal, Zeph – kept quiet by themselves. Sloane was in the corner, eyes away from everything.

“It is true that banditry has gotten worse,” she said, her words careful. “And we probably haven’t seen the end of it. Until things in Ikh Khulan and Perth get sorted, we’ll probably see more–”

“I’ll say it, if no one else will,” Abby cut in. She took a breath. “Maybe George and Moxie and the Buckleys had the right idea.”

“No one’s abandoning ship,” Hugh voiced. He put his arm around Karen’s shoulder. “We’ve been here for twenty-three years. My son was born here. We’ve had hard times, we’ve had good times. We’ve had great times. There’s banditry here, there’s banditry everywhere. We’ll weather the storm. We always have.”

“Gabe has got an arrow in his gut,” Abby argued.

“And they have four dead,” Emmanuelleine cut in. She held a certain authority in the room, much to her surprise, and eyes came back to her. She said, “Those men are not the vanguard of a bandit army. They are not scouts for Kimbers or the Sandstorm. They’re petty thieves and hungry lads in the desert. There are risks here, yes. I won’t pretend like Gabe isn’t injured. But we have a drill system, a defence plan, and those men out there are damned good at defending this place.” She didn’t want to put anyone on the spot, so she merely turned her gaze briefly to the new students – one of whom had been brought in by their newest defender, Vic. Everyone seemed to understand what she was trying to say. “We have a community here. We look out for each other, take care of each other. George, Moxie, Candice...” she put her hand on Sydney’s shoulder, who, in many ways, was as much a daughter to her as Emma herself, “well, I’m not like them. I’m not going anywhere.”

There was some more back and forth. Abby was spooked, clearly, but would probably calm down. After a time, Allen came in to give everyone an update – no new activity out there. The bandits carried bows, but there were no rubber arrows in their quivers, meaning they were most likely just hungry lads looking to swipe a couple horses rather than an organized band of rapers or human traffickers.

Emmanuelleine spoke to her students after a time, told them to stay indoors for the rest of the day, and that class would resume tomorrow. She didn’t assign the homework she’d planned to.

When the crowd began to break up, she went up to her oldest student, whispered to the girl, “Care to take a walk?”

Wordlessly, Sloane followed her teacher out of the lounge room and down the hall to the library. A room roughly equal in size to the lounge, it had bookshelves covering every wall, as well as a few freestanding in the centre, all now overflowing.

Gently, she said, “You doing okay, Sloane?”

Indignantly, the girl said, “I’m fine, Ms Weirzebowski. One less camel fucker in the world.”

Emmanuelleine sighed. “Tonight–”

“I’m going to go dig some graves with Vic Tombs. I kill, I bury.” She glowered at her teacher. “Would it bother you if I cut the one’s dick and balls off and stuffed them in his mouth before I buried him?”

Emmanuelleine stared back. “You have a really dirty mouth on you, you know that?”

Sloane stared at her.

“What were we learning today before this banditry scare?”

A crooked eyebrow, the girl answered, “Admiral Vane, Edward the Unlucky, and a sorcery box?”

“That’s right,” Emmanuelleine said. “So your homework is a five-thousand-word essay on Admiral Vane’s attack on Dzhaaldei Noyan.”

Sloane spat, “What–”

“I want it properly sourced. No fanciful tales of the assault on the noyan’s courtesans unless it’s coming from a reputable historian.”

“Emman... Ms Dub, that’s not fair–”

“Oh, and this thing,” she said, jabbing her finger at Sloane’s septum ring, “no more of that in my class. Part your hair in the middle and tie it back to cover your razor burn.”

“Ms Dub—” Sloane spat petulantly.

“Ace this essay and you can wear your hair how you like, but the nose thing is gone. And no more swearing. Am I clear?”

Sloane’s nostrils were flaring.

Emmanuelleine stared her down. “You can hand it in on Monday, because I know you’re helping Mr Toomey with grave-digging. Best to get something to eat and head there now. I’ll meet you there.”

“Meet...?”

“That’s what we do – help each other out. There’s four graves to dig, and Mr Lansdale isn’t exactly in any condition to be working a shovel. First, I need to write a letter to Mr Birch, informing the tax office of the banditry raid out here – and the valiant efforts of our defenders.”

The girl frowned. “The val...?”

“If you want to be an Amazon, a commendation from the local tax office isn’t going to hinder that venture.”

The girl was speechless. She stuttered, “I... I...”

“If and when you want to talk, about the man you killed, I’ll be here. Now go, get yourself something to eat.”

A flurry went across Sloane’s face. The girl was simultaneously furious, grateful, petulant and humbled. Above all, speechless. “Okay,” she said, meekly, and headed off for supper.

Emmanuelleine, at long last, collapsed into a nearby reading chair, and let all her breath drain out of her. She was exhausted, felt ten years older. She realized she hadn’t eaten, or drank, or gone to the bathroom in hours.

Adam, she thought, maybe we should have gone with you.

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