

Defiant Peaks

Book Three of The Hadrupal Crisis

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Chapter One

Halferan Manor, Caladhria

Winter Solstice Festival, 3rd Day

In the 10th Year of Tadriol the Provident of Tormalin

SHE STOOD AMID the silent statues and contemplated the crystal urn holding her husband's ashes; footed with silver leaves and crowned with a five-petalled flower sparkling in the light of the shrine's candles.

The Archmage himself had fashioned the beautiful vessel from a humble tisane glass. Was this a tangible expression of Planir of Hadrupal's remorse? An apology for his obdurate insistence on observing the wizard isle's merciless edicts? Did he privately regret refusing to allow his mages to help the Halferan barony, when her lost beloved had begged for wizardly aid, time and again as this coast was plagued year after year by thieving corsairs sailing up from the southern seas?

Zurenne hadn't ever dared ask Planir such questions. Now she didn't think she ever would. Her husband, the father of her darling daughters, was dead. No answer could change that. No magic could bring him back. Besides, the corsairs were dead and gone; their whole island sunk beneath unknown Aldabreshin seas by the most terrifying wizardry after a renegade mage had dared to challenge Planir. If they wouldn't defend anyone else, it seemed the wizards would rip land and sea asunder to defend their own authority over magecraft. Well, that was no concern of hers.

'It's Neeny's birth festival, my love,' she said softly. 'You wouldn't credit how tall she has grown.'

Zurenne could scarcely believe that this was the sixth midwinter since their second daughter's joyous arrival. That carefree For-Winter season when she had been so happily pregnant seemed like a different lifetime. A life secure in her husband's love and in the manor's prosperity, with little Lysha so excited to welcome an infant brother or sister. After Halferan's heartbreaking troubles through this past handful of years, such peace seemed as remote and unreal as the Otherworld which the priests insisted lay beyond Saedrin's door.

Hooded Poldrion gazed down at the crystal urn set on the shrine table, the god's statue garlanded with myrtle, mistletoe and ivy. This was his festival; guard and guide of the dead, shepherding the pious and honest alongside the deceitful and worse, all to face Saedrin's judgement.

Zurenne didn't need festival or shrine to bring her beloved husband to mind. She communed every day with her memories. She contemplated the berries on the garlands; shining like pearls and dull as beads of jet, ripe with the promise of life to come.

Priests said that the shades of those truly remorseful for their errors or offences in life passed through Saedrin's doorway to blissfully ignorant rebirth in the Otherworld. The greatest of gods condemned the unrepentant to torment at Poldrion's demons' claws, though, until pain and contrition expiated their sins.

Zurenne's eyes prickled with tears as she imagined her lost husband's anguish, forced to admit the misjudgements which had been the death of him. Surely Saedrin would consider his honest intentions, his righteous devotion to the Halferan barony and to its people, even if his endeavours had ended in fatal miscalculation, trusting in a treacherous wizard who'd been as ready to betray him as he had betrayed all his oaths to Hadrupal.

She could not blame Planir for her husband's death, not entirely. Let Saedrin judge the Archmage whenever the wizard finally stood before the Doorkeeper. Winter Solstice marked the New Year and that was time to make a new beginning, leaving all grudges behind.

'You would be so proud of Lysha. She is determined to be the finest Lady of Halferan since the barony's foundation.'

Zurenne smiled even as she wondered how her husband was supposed to hear her, if he was already reborn to a new life with no memory of this world. No priest ever explained that.

The statues of the gods and goddesses offered no answers, silent on their plinths. The candles cast their shadows on the shrine's empty shelves behind them. With all remembrance of the manor's ancient dead swept away in the destruction wrought by the corsairs, the only funeral urn in the shrine was her husband's.

Long may it remain so, Zurenne prayed with silent fervour. She extricated a length of ivy from one of Poldrion's garlands and twisted it into an offering to lay before Maewelin's statue, for the sake of the very young and the very old alike under the Winter Hag's protection.

This For-Winter season had been mercifully mild. No funeral pyres had burned beside the brook beyond the manor's wall. No new urns would be set on these shelves tonight. That was one more thing for the household and the manor's demesne folk to celebrate on this Souls' Ease Night, highest and holiest day of the festival.

Noon's five chimes sounded from the timepiece now installed in the gable end of the restored kitchen buildings across the courtyard. Zurenne turned towards the shrine's inner door leading into the manor's great hall. Her business was with the living now and there was still a great deal to do before the revels began at dusk. She went through the doorway to the wooden dais raised above the long sweep of the hall's flagstone floor.

'Mama!' Ilysh stood beside a high-backed chair golden with new varnish. Elegant though it was, it was no match for the ancient and ornate baronial seat which had once dominated the hall. That had burned, buried beneath the old roof's timbers when the corsairs had set fire to the manor and its buildings.

Ilysh's violet silk gown shone in the sunlight falling through the newly reglazed windows. While the style suited her maidenly years, the costly cloth and her gleaming gold necklace and rings proclaimed the resurgent barony's resources. Amethyst tipped pins adorned her light brown hair as befitted a wife, even though no one seeing her youth could doubt her virginity.

Zurenne's own modest gown of charcoal grey velvet befitted her dowager status as did the twist of lace securing her dark braid on the nape of her neck. She was merely the mother of the barony's lady now, for all that she was still young enough to have had hopes of bearing a son to inherit his father's honours before her husband had died in the barony's defence. But that was merely one more regret to leave on Poldrion's altar at this turn of the year.

'My lady.' The manor's steward covered the newly-finished oak of the high table with a maroon drape. The cloth was so fresh from the loom that Zurenne could smell the faint tang of dyestuff.

'Master Rauffe, have you recorded the accusations and pleas from the lesser assize to your satisfaction?'

Festivals at solstice and equinox saw the living judged as well as the dead so the steward had spent the morning in the village rising from the wreckage of houses, workshops and tithe barns beyond the brook. Those accused of minor infractions were called to answer in the market place, with their neighbours standing witness for good or ill.

'Mama!'

Zurenne braced herself for renewed argument. 'You may be Halferan's lady but you are still far too young to hear the quarrels and excuses of adulterers, drunkards and cheating tradesmen.'

When he returned from Caladhria's midwinter parliament in Duryea, Corrain could issue verdicts from Master Rauffe's written evidence of claim and counter claim. He might be Halferan's baron in name only but his previous career as a guard captain left him well prepared for this particular lordly duty. Better prepared than many born to noble rank.

'That's not what I want to talk about,' Ilysh said impatiently. 'Can we not at least forgive the people half of their tithe? We know full well how hard everyone is still toiling to recover their fortunes.'

Zurenne saw Master Rauffe's lips tighten and guessed that Lysha had already been arguing with him, presumably in hopes that his agreement would sway her mother.

'My lady Ilysh—' she saw her daughter's eyes widen at such formality—'we are only asking the people to give us a tenth share of what they might have over and above their own needs. If they have little or nothing to give at this season, so be it. The coin isn't important. Resuming the custom is what matters, to further restore Halferan's morale.'

She held out her hand to her daughter. 'Our people should be given this chance to prove to you, their liege lady, to their neighbours and to themselves that their hard work through Aft-Autumn and For-Winter has restored our peace and prosperity after all our grievous losses. Do you understand, Lysha?'

Ilysh nodded slowly, her hazel eyes thoughtful and so reminiscent of her father that Zurenne's heart twisted within her.

'I—' Whatever the girl might have said was lost as the tall door at the far end of the great hall opened. Torches already lit in their brackets in the shadows of the side aisles flickered in the draught.

'Mama? Mama?' Esnina's slippered footsteps were drowned out by her appeals as she ran the length of the hall. 'Why can't I stay up for the feast? It is my birth festival.' She halted below the dais, looking up with winsome hope. 'Please, Mama? I promise I'll be good.'

Zurenne reminded herself to lay some grateful acknowledgement before Drianon's statue, to thank the goddess of hearth, home and motherhood for this past season of peace and quiet. Restored to her home which she had known since birth, albeit so extensively rebuilt and remade, Neeny's tantrums were now few and far between. After the trials and tribulations of living with the entire household crammed into the Taw Ricks hunting lodge after the manor burned, everyone was thankful for that.

She looked at the young man following Esnina. Smartly liveried in pewter and maroon as befitted the newly-confirmed captain of Halferan's guard, Kusint had brought an iron-bound coffer up from the strong room below the muniment room of the baronial tower at the other end of the great hall.

Not so long ago, Zurenne reflected, Kusint's red hair, mark of his Forest blood, would have prompted suspicion if not outright hostility in Halferan. Chimney-corner wisdom condemned such wandering folk as thieves and deceivers. Now household and demesne folk alike accepted Kusint as one of their own, acknowledging their debt.

Without the Forest youth's skills with a boat, he and Corrain would never have escaped from the corsairs who had enslaved them. If Corrain hadn't escaped and returned, the dogged guardsman would never have been able to force the Archmage's hand and secure Madam Jilseth's wizardry to save them all. At least, that's what the barony's folk believed, with a handful of different theories as to why the Archmage had changed his mind.

Only Corrain, Kusint and Zurenne knew the truth. That Corrain had defied Hadrimal to bring a renegade mage south from the unknown lands north of remote Solura. It was that mage who had defeated the corsairs only to enslave the remnants of their forces himself, threatening to renew their murderous attacks on the mainland, this time bolstered by his magic. That had compelled Planir to act.

'Where is Raselle?' Zurenne's personal maid should have been keeping Neeny busy in their

private apartments on the tower's top floor.

'Doratine sent word that she needed her in the kitchen.' Kusint climbed the three steps of the dais and set the heavy box down on the table.

'Thank you.' Master Rauffe was setting out his ledger, his pens and an impressive brass and enamel inkstand.

'I said I would bring Lady Esnina to ask your permission for a later bedtime.' Kusint fished in his breeches' pocket for the strongbox's key before turning to look at the little girl still waiting down below. 'She gave me her oath that she would abide by your decision.'

'I did.' Neeny looked up at her mother with mute appeal.

'Let her stay up, Mama.' Lysha narrowed her eyes at her little sister all the same. 'As long as she behaves.'

'I will, I will,' Neeny promised fervently before scrambling up the dais steps.

Zurenne could see the first of Halferan's loyal tenants appearing in the far doorway, summoned by the noon chimes.

'Very well, Neeny, as long as you are good.' She hoped her stern words left no room for doubt. Like Lysha, her younger daughter could twist any statement towards her own advantage.

'Come and sit here, chick.' Kusint led the little girl around the table to lift her onto a chair beside the heavier, more ornate seat prepared for Ilysh. He pulled the latter back. 'My lady of Halferan.'

'Thank you, Captain.' Ilysh settled her skirts, folding her hands modestly in her lap as he pushed her forwards.

Kusint straightened the matching chair beside her before walking to the far end of the table to stand guard beside Master Rauffe and the strongbox. Zurenne made no move to sit. That second carved seat was for the present Baron Halferan, even if Corrain only held his title by virtue of Lysha's marriage of convenience.

'Let all with tithes to pay approach and make themselves known.'

As the steward's words rang through the hall, the first of the dutiful tenantry began walking towards the dais and their young liege lady.

Had she done the right thing by her daughters and by the barony? Zurenne longed to ask her dead husband that question above all others. Binding Lysha in this charade of marriage to secure their freedom from whomever the Caladhrian parliament would have set in authority over them. In the absence of a true grant from her lost father, their guardian would have been one of the barony's neighbouring lords or Zurenne's older sisters' husbands. Because Caladhrian law couldn't countenance a widow and her orphan daughters living without a man to rule over them.

Zurenne resolutely reminded herself how her beloved husband had trusted Corrain, even knowing the guardsman's flaws and failings. He had believed in the man's worth, despite the scandal when Corrain had been caught seducing the former manor steward's wife. He had retained him, albeit stripped of rank, in the barony's troop.

Corrain had been the only man to offer Halferan any hope of salvation from the corsairs. Even if his scheming had seen the manor itself devastated while the wider barony had been saved.

A belated thought struck Zurenne. Should she have sent Madam Jilseth some festival gift or greeting? What of Master Tornauld and Madam Merenel? Did mages exchange such courtesies at the solstice and equinox seasons? It was strange to think of the mages who had slaughtered the corsairs' would-be wizardly tyrant and helped to rebuild Halferan celebrating like ordinary folk.

As Zurenne's hand strayed to the triangular silver pendant which she wore threaded on a black ribbon around her neck, she noticed the gazes of the first tenants to approach the dais fix on the necklace.

The device itself held no significance, beyond making up Zurenne's personal seal formed from

the three runes drawn by ancient custom at her birth, arrayed around the sun rune to show she had been born in the daytime. What mattered to Halferan's folk was knowing that the Archmage had given their widowed lady that pendant imbued with his very own magic. So she could call for his aid, if the corsairs who had murdered so many of their kith and kin ever reappeared.

Zurenne let her hand fall to her side. Saedrin send that she would never have to do such a thing, that Lysha would never need to use the ensorcelled pendant wrought from her own birth runes. Saedrin grant them all that blessing, and Dastennin god of storms and Raeponin god of justice and any other deity who might be listening. If there was any fair dealing from the gods, as this new year began, Halferan was done with magic.

The crowd was swelling in the manor's great hall. Kusint opened the brass-bound coffer to receive the baronial dues. Master Rauffe trimmed his quill's nib with a penknife and uncapped his inkwell, ready to inscribe names and sums in his ledger.

Both men looked expectantly at Zurenne. She drew a steadying breath, grateful for the elevation of the dais's three steps. Now she could look even the tallest men in the eye despite her own modest stature. She spared a moment to thank Halcarion, goddess of maidens, that Ilysh took after her father in the promise of elegant height when she was full grown as well as in her strong features.

The murmur of conversation died away as the tenantry realised that she awaited their attention. 'Fair festival to you all.'

Zurenne had barely spoken two words before exultant cheers rang up to the restored roof, echoing among the bare rafters unsoftened by the generations of hanging banners that had once proclaimed Lysha and Neeny's heritage. Like the ancient baronial chair, those standards had burned to ashes, never to be salvaged.

As the echoes died away, Zurenne continued. 'We have no need to hold any high assize—'

Once again, noisy approval drowned out her words, even though everyone knew that Kusint's guardsmen had no violent malefactors locked up in the barrack-hall's cellar.

The demesne folk and the tenantry had ensured that their maiden lady need not insist on her duty to sit in judgement even over murderers and rapists, compelled to condemn such evildoers to the gallows and the gibbet by the high road. They knew full well that Ilysh had only seen her thirteenth summer solstice this past year, however determined she might be to assume all of her dead father's responsibilities.

So, as Zurenne had learned, overhearing the maidservants gossiping, Halferan's villagers and yeomen had administered their own swift and rough justice whenever some villain had been discovered selfishly seeking to profit at others' expense while everyone else strove to rebuild their homes and to re-establish their flocks and herds.

She stole a glance at Kusint. He gazed blandly over the heads of the joyful throng, as if he'd never had to intervene to make sure that such punishment stopped just short of murder, when an egg-seller whose wares all proved addled had been pelted with filth and stones or a day-labourer caught sleeping under a hedge rather than work for his bread and ale had been stripped naked and beaten bloody. And Zurenne had no doubt those incidents were only the whiskers on that rat's nose.

Of course several neighbouring barons had seized on such incidents, claiming that Halferan was slipping into anarchy. Baron Karpis in particular didn't cease to prophesy disaster. How could any barony hope to prosper without the guiding hand of a nobleman reared to manage such responsibilities?

Upstairs in her sitting room, Zurenne had a box of letters from concerned lords' gracious wives offering their support when she came to her senses and sought to set Ilysh's scandalous marriage aside in favour of a more suitable alliance.

Such letters would go unanswered and if any noble lord thought to take advantage of Corrain's absence by arriving unannounced, intent on browbeating her, Zurenne would remind them how Baron

Karpis and his men had been so thoroughly humiliated when the magewoman Madam Jilseth had rusted their swords and armour to dust in the blink of an eye with her wizardry. Those lords weren't to know that Halferan had forsworn magic's aid henceforth.

As a smile of recollection curved her rose-petal lips, Zurenne realised that letting her thoughts wander had allowed the tenantry's cheers to subside into idle chatter and jovial exchanges of festival greetings. She must command this crowd's attention and respect, for her daughter's sake.

'Today—' Zurenne cleared her throat and repeated herself more loudly. 'Today we ask you to pay your fealty in coin, to enable your lord and baron to safeguard your interests through the year to come as his—as his oath to you all demands.'

With the cheers this time more respectfully muted, she noted Ilysh shifting on her seat.

Had her daughter caught that stumble in her words? Zurenne had so nearly repeated the form of words which her dead husband had always used, which his stewards had used on his behalf when he had been away attending the festival parliament.

Her lost beloved had laid claim to this seasonal levy both as his birthright and by virtue of his oath to Saedrin. He had been Baron Halferan by blood just as his father had been and countless grandsires before that.

Now it was Lady Ilysh who commanded these people's loyalty and their love. Zurenne's heart warmed to see the affection in their faces as they stepped up onto the dais, eagerly laying down their coin as tangible proof of their devotion.

Corrain would never be more than an erstwhile guard captain to these people, his sham marriage merely one more service he was rendering to the barony to keep their true lady safe.