

## == Newtons Sleep Prelude: *The Return of the King* ==

A week before his elevation, the president-elect comes to visit her bleak little House on the edge of the world. His mount is a sleek black machine that smells of leather and sweat; beneath the skin, its frame is a concatenation of muscle, bone and red biology; it has a narrow and ferocious crocodile-shape head, pocked with glass-bead eyes, crowned with thick black hair. It's so physical, this creature he's made for himself, but then so is he. He's the scouring storm, chosen by the colleges to reintroduce time and change to the Homeworld.

She admires him. Never before has the presidency worn its power so openly. She imagines how it will be in the citadel a week from now, when his election is confirmed. That will be a day of bright colours and banners; hopelessly they will try to drown him in pomp. Already his allies (he has no friends, except her) are calling him *Self-Ruler* and *Imperator*. [pause]

*One day they'd have called him War King.*

'Not then, though he was thinking about it.'

*Are you sure? There's no evidence of that in the registry.*

'I knew him better.'

*It's odd that you should have made this recording, given how much you mistrust registry.*

'I was a private resident then. It didn't seem important.'

*There's more to it than that, isn't there? Don't bother to answer. I know you.*

[resume] She watches his approach from the north window, certain that he's coming for her. There's nothing beyond this outpost but the southern mountains, and nothing in the mountains but hermits and feral cats. She swears and puts on her formal robes, academic colours that she's never worn at the schola, not even before her self-imposed exile. Ten years she's been here teaching, and learning.

Her oracle stays at the window, seething playfully below his hood. He has fiercely intelligent eyes, neither as sharp nor as bright as his scar. His mouth is a succulent white smile in a lightless face. His people have nothing but contempt for the rituals of the Great Houses. She's little better than prey to him, a bloodless snack for his long teeth and hungry mind. He breathes, honeyed air purring out of the cavities of his body. [pause]

*Your first oracle?*

'My last.'

*You think? But his kind were vanishing from the world.*

'They were escaping the War. They could see it coming.'

*And what fresh monsters filled the gaps they left behind? Grandiose pocket-cults like House Paradox? The renegade tendency? The paranoid labyrinths of interventionism? Tainted bloodlines and tainted presidencies? And you? Don't you think the War might be a cure for these new madnesses?*

'This is at your request. If you're going to keep on interrupting...'

[resume] The president-elect will want to talk about the War. He might want to start it.

He's waiting for her in the courtyard, almost ignored as the chatelaine and her retinue struggle to tame his impossible animal. He's not dressed formally, and she doesn't appear to rush. She lets him hug her and hold her. She lets him kiss her.

They're not really cousins, not in the strictest sense. [pause]

*I had cousins once, but I no longer see them. They must be dead now, or aborted, or neutered.*

[resume] She takes him into her schola, which was once a loomshed before this House was declared Barren and Lesser. She sits him in a student's chair and perches herself on her desk at the aleph. Her cousin smiles, recognising the parody she's made here but refusing to comment. Later, the chatelaine's staff will bring food fitting for a formal meeting, but *here, now*, there's none of that. She's banished ritual from the schola, along with myths and lies. This is the place where she shrives the bright young things.

She rejects the first two positions he offers her: chatelaine of the citadel or executive-general of the new House Military. These are dull to her. Forget the title – the job is the same, the job will always be the same. He needs allies within his presidency, who will be loyal to his philosophies if not always to his person. She has that quality. She is, he tells her fondly, a fanatic. She nods and accepts this as the compliment it's meant to be, but he knows, he *must* know, that if he falters then she'll be the one to judge him. He's inviting her to destroy him, when the time comes.

Her cousin has anticipated her rejections. He already knows what he can do with her. He knows above all what she wants to be. He outlines the idea of a new and secret order – the invisible hand of the body politic, an expansion of her work here to encompass the whole Homeworld. It entrances her. How could it not when it's so calculated? It isn't just that he's known her since she was woven into life on Dvora's shining silver looms; this goes beyond simple friendship and cousinly love. It's still a week before he'll be crowned and united with the noosphere, but he has presentiments of what it must be like to become *everything*. He *is* the Great Houses, their compact and their organising principle. The land and the king are one. [pause]

*For by art is created that great Leviathan called a Common Weal, which is but an artificial man.*

'If you insist'

*Did you live up to his high standards? Was he satisfied, do you think, when you shot off his jaw? What must he have thought when you brought his presidency down and cast him out of the Homeworld?*

'I did what was practical.'

*That moment will be on public registry, won't it? Go and look at his eyes. What will you find there? Pride, maybe? Go and see.*

'Enough. You've seen what I agreed to show you. Are you satisfied?'

*I might be. You're not. You think, because of the choice you made, the War became inevitable.*

'No. The War was far from certain, even then.'

*You know what I mean – That was the day that you won the War for the Great Houses.*

*Mother?*

*Mother!*

*Go then. I can wait. I could wait forever if I had to.*

*But I won't have to.*