

The problem with leadership is that by the time you understand what the job entails, it's too late to run for the hills.

Once upon a time, I'd dreamed of this. Holding this power. Being strong enough that no one could hurt me, that no one dared to try.

Such a tragic comedy, I reflected. There was so often trauma in our pasts. We were so badly flawed, broken before we were made.

I picked the robe up off the stand by the door. The white fabric was lighter than it looked. Woven through with magic until the heavy velvet weighed no more than a wisp of silk.

It felt much heavier than that, like donning a coat of gilded lead, dragging me down with a weight that was nothing physical.

They said that crowns weighed heavy on the heads that wore them. I'd never worn a crown, but if the feeling was anything like draping that robe around my shoulders, I could sympathize with the heads of state. It was like carrying the weight of the world on my back.

Outside, I stepped up to my podium. It was smooth, dark wood, lined with weapons on the back side. I had all the implements I needed to lay waste to a small nation, ready to hand. The robe I wore was better than armor. Lacking any of the above, I would still be a force to be reckoned with, an army unto myself. It had been ages since anyone really threatened me. Nothing less than a demigod could do much to me, and even from most of them I could at least hold out long enough to flee.

The only monsters that really frightened me were the ones inside my skull.

I was the first to step on stage. I was usually the first. That was my task. To look forward, to guide our course through all its twists and turns. Foresight was both my nature and my name, for all that I lacked it. The future was as cloudy to me as anyone else.

Not for the first time, I thought that my long-ago predecessor had done me no favors by lending me her title. She'd had the true power of prophecy, magic that could look down the winding roads that branched out into the future, the power to make time itself her pet. Of all the Prophets that had followed her, through all the centuries since, perhaps two or three had shared that gift.

They'd been quite mad, of course. Or perhaps they were saner than the rest of us, but either way, they only barely existed in the same world as human beings. One does not violate something as fundamental to the nature of the world as causality without certain consequences. Towards the end, they didn't even share the most basic concepts with other people, even other mages.

The rest of us simply had to muddle our way through the murky waters.

Arbiter joined me on the stage, his robe of unrelieved black standing at the other end of the arc. He nodded politely to me as he stepped up to his own podium, with his own selection of weaponry. He

and I had always had a solid understanding of one another. We were in similar lines of work, broadly speaking. We were the ones who held things together when they would otherwise fly to pieces.

One by one the rest of the Conclave joined us.

Maker, in his indigo, looked like he was taking things seriously for once. Proof, if proof were needed, that this was a very serious matter. He blazed with magic, caged power on a scale that dwarfed even the rest of us. For all his considerable skill, I knew it wasn't his work I was sensing. He was carrying one of the first Maker's weapons, one of those that we couldn't use without breaking the world in ways we couldn't necessarily fix. He nodded to me as well, his face eerily calm. He didn't feel emotions, not the same way the rest of us did.

Keeper, dressed in warm honey-yellow, looked at Maker distastefully as she took her place. She had held that weapon in safekeeping for the entirety of her adult life. She knew better than any of us the destructive potential it held. Letting it out of her grasp must rankle. But she also knew why it had to be done, and her work had left her with a great understanding of necessity. This was not the only weapon that would be released from her keeping. Some of the most dangerous were being brought out of their cages and lockers even now.

Guide—the new Guide, not the old, and that I had to make that distinction still hurt on some level—looked overwhelmed, swamped in his green robe. This was his first crisis, and it wasn't one that I'd have wished on anyone in that position. He was fundamentally a political animal, appointed because of *who* more than *what* he knew. He was utterly unprepared for this.

Guard carried himself more confidently, wearing an immaculate suit under the red robe. He met my eye and opened his mouth, closed it without speaking. He'd often spoken of this day in terms that were not entirely unfavorable, but now that it had actually come to pass, he had nothing to say. He'd never really wanted this, whatever he might sometimes have said. I knew that.

Watcher stood beside Arbiter, looking small and frail in her violet robes. It was a miracle that she'd lasted as long as she had. She'd made the most enemies of any Conclave member that I could remember. To have held firm for so long, blind and crippled and with remarkable enmity even within the ranks of her own organization, had required incredible force of will. She showed that will now, nothing on her face but quiet resolution, though what had happened must be breaking her heart even more deeply than my own.

Caller and Walker were the last to arrive, wearing orange and blue respectively. They looked concerned and serious, but they lacked the masked horror and despair the rest of us exhibited. They had less to lose than we did. The nature of their positions was such that they had little investment in this situation. Their work was centered in other worlds, only tangentially related to this one.

As they took their places at last, I turned my attention to the audience. There were thousands of them. I didn't take the time to look past the surface. Time was a resource we did not have in abundance, and looking too deeply was painful when so many of them would die soon.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, hearing the whisper of translators in the crowd like rustling leaves. "We are at war."

Once upon a time, they'd burned us at the stake. Torches and pitchforks, drowning and hanging, had all been quite popular.

That had been a long time ago. Now they had guns. They had bombers and lasers. When they burned us now, they did it with nuclear fire.

And we retaliated in kind. How could we do less? We were as human as they, in some ways. We lashed out at them, the same as they lashed out at us. Our weapons were older and stranger, more abstract, but no less destructive in their own way.

We tore the world apart between us, and when we were finally done there was nothing left but ruins.

I blinked and looked away from the mirror.

Reminding myself of the worst-case scenario served two purposes. First, it reminded me how much worse things could be. The world wasn't broken. I wasn't going out to announce World War III. Things were tense between us and the normal humans, but it hadn't escalated nearly that far. This was just a routine meeting, adjusting the budget now that the gods had finally made their play.

Second, it reminded me of how much worse things could be. The scenario I had just played out in my head was an unlikely one, but not impossible. One false step and we could slip off the path into the quicksand. All it would take was one mistake at a critical moment.

I didn't have sole responsibility for that. But I might as well. As Prophet, I was the only member of the Conclave with no clearly defined role or job. The others had their areas of concern, their areas of influence, but I wasn't assigned anything in particular. My job was more to make sure that the rest stayed on the path. I was supposed to ensure that things didn't deteriorate to the point I'd just envisioned. We didn't have a ruler—there was no leader of the Conclave. But when we negotiated treaties, it was my signature on the dotted line.

When I'd dreamed of holding that kind of power, I hadn't realized quite what it entailed. I hadn't imagined the responsibility.

It never occurred to me, until it happened, what kind of burden it was to know that my choices could decide the fate of the entire world.