The Troubled Accords

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Introduction

The accords were meant to be simple: a border fixed by a river, the return of three hostages, a winter levy commuted to coin, and a promise—sealed beneath the old cathedral’s ribs—that neither side would raise banner against the other without first submitting grievance to sworn arbitration. What followed was anything but simple. A spilled cup, a sharp word, and the clash of swords in the nave gave birth to a dozen deaths and a single question whispered in every hall thereafter: whose oath broke

first?

Into this muddle steps Aveline of Varyn, a woman who has made a craft of certainty in a world that prefers pageantry to proof. She is not beloved. Arbiters rarely are. They carry no banners and keep no retinues save for clerks and ink-stained knives. They ask for silence in rooms built for shouting. They move between keeps on letters of safe conduct that are honored chiefly because breaking them would oblige too many lords to answer too many awkward questions. In the wake of bloodshed at the signing, Aveline is summoned not to avenge but to untangle: to sit beneath tapestries of dead heroes and ask the living what, precisely, they swore.

This is a tale about the weight of words when steel is eager to do the heavier lifting. It is a story of feudal law as it breathes: of lieges and vassals bound not only by declarations of love and loyalty, but by the smaller, sharper bonds of reliefs and scutage, wardships and marriages, amercements and sureties. It is about how a promise becomes enforceable, how a lord may be compelled by the fear of dishonor, how a peasant’s testimony can topple a count’s alibi if the right relic is kissed and the right number of oath-helpers stand ready to answer for his soul.

You will find fewer pitched battles here than you might expect, though the clatter of armor is never far away. The true sieges occur in chambers thick with smoke, where memory is tested like a wall under ram-strikes. Did the river’s course in flood-season count as boundary? Did the hostages’ exchange require equal rank or merely equal number? Was the wax on the charter impressed before or after the candles sputtered in the draft? The answers are not hoarded in a scholar’s library alone; they live in custom, in what was done last year and the year before that, in the tale the shepherd tells about the manor bridge, and in the bruised pride of a knight who knows the difference between an insult and an injury.

To reconstruct the truth, Aveline gathers more than facts. She collects people, each with a version of events polished by fear and vanity. A herald swears he saw a seal changed hands twice; a scribe remembers a clause struck out and rewritten in a colder ink; a widow produces a dowry charter whose crease lines do not match its age. Witnesses arrive with their oath-helpers, men and women ready to risk their honor as collateral. In the hall of precedents, cracked spines yield rulings from forgotten disputes: a fishery quarrel that decides a lordship; a wedding feast grievance that becomes, in time, the backbone of a border law. Precedent is a living animal, Aveline knows, and it will bite those who try to leash it too tightly.

This book follows her work minute by minute as much as deed by deed. You will sit with her as she decides whether to take deposition by candlelight or to wait for sun, whether to permit compurgation or demand ordeal by hot iron’s civilized successor: the inquest and its jury of neighbors. You will walk behind her into courts where hospitality is law’s first test and last refuge—where bread and salt might guarantee

her tongue will not be cut out for asking the wrong question. You will see the care with which she guards the chain of custody on a single ribboned document and the peril that grows from a lord’s desire to win quickly rather than rightly.

The Troubled Accords is a fiction of procedure as much as passion. It aims to show how disputes are resolved when everyone is sure they are right and no one is sure they are safe. Here, oaths are weapons and shelters both, arbitration is a battlefield ringed with candles instead of spears, and the smallest custom—who speaks first, where a hand rests on the table, which relic lies beneath the cloth—can decide whether a kingdom spends its treasure on ink or blood. If these pages succeed, you will feel the pull of both choices and understand why the harder path is often the only one that allows people to live with what happens next.

And should you come to care for the people who must make these choices, know that caring has a cost. The accords are troubled not because men and women are cruel—though some are—but because they are human, and thus bound to their words more tightly than to their weapons. We have built a world of promises. Aveline’s task is to measure which promises still hold, and what must be paid for those that do not.

CHAPTER ONE: The Treaty at Sundbreak

The castle at Sundbreak perched on granite like a crow on a skull. It was not the grandest fortification in the March of Ashenwold—nor the oldest, nor the most defensible—but it occupied the one ford across the Grayvein River that did not require a ferry, and in matters of feudal law, geography spoke louder than architecture. Whoever held Sundbreak controlled the crossing, and whoever controlled the crossing controlled the bread supply for three counties downstream. This was the sort of fact that started wars and ended them, often in the same harvest season.

The great hall had been prepared for the signing with the nervous precision of a household expecting both guests and assassins. Tapestries depicting the Accord of Four Crowns hung along the eastern wall, their colors muted by decades of torch smoke but their message still legible: kings who share rivers prosper; kings who do not share rivers drown. The steward had ordered fresh rushes strewn across the flagstones despite the season, and the result was a carpet of green that smelled of bruised mint and damp earth. Whether this was meant to impress the delegations or mask older stains, no one asked.

Lord Aldric Venn sat at the head of the northern table, which had been positioned to catch the best light from the western windows. He was a broad man in the way that certain mountains are broad—solid, immovable, and unlikely to be moved by polite

suggestion. His surcoat bore the Venn lion, gold on black, and his fingers drummed a familiar pattern on the arm of his chair: thumb against index, index against middle, a loop that his household knew meant he was thinking and not yet pleased with what he was thinking about. Aldric had agreed to the treaty in principle six weeks ago, in letters carried back and forth by hired riders whose mounts died of exhaustion on the road between Thornhallow and Sundbreak. He had agreed because his grain stores were low, because the Grayvein floods had taken two mills from his eastern vassals, and because the alternative—raising his banner and marching south—would cost more coin than the mills were worth and more men than he could afford to bury come spring.

Opposite him, at the southern table, sat Lady Maren Dross. She was younger than Aldric by a full generation and carried herself with the particular stillness of someone who had learned early that movement invited attention and attention invited challenge. Her house sigil, a silver heron on blue, was embroidered small on her sleeve—smaller than protocol normally allowed, which some of Aldric's men had noted and decided to find insulting later. Maren's lands along the southern bank of the Grayvein had swollen over the past decade through a combination of advantageous marriages, aggressive drainage projects, and at least two minor skirmishes that the northern chroniclers still called raids and the southern ones called boundary adjustments. She had agreed to the treaty because her own western flank was exposed to the House of Korren, who had been watching the Grayvein dispute with the patient interest of wolves observing two dogs fight over a bone.

Between the two tables, at a slight remove that had been the subject of its own three-day negotiation, stood the signing desk. It was oak, plain but heavy, dragged up from the castle cellars for the occasion. A clerk from each side had spent the morning checking its surface for carvings, hidden compartments, or anything else that might suggest someone was planning to spring a trap from the furniture itself. The clerk from the north, a thin man named Werne, had tested every joint with a probe and declared the desk structurally sound and politically neutral. The clerk from the south, a woman whose name was never quite recorded in northern accounts—she went by Sable in the household rolls—had sniffed at the report and tested it anyway. She found nothing, but she found it loudly.

The terms had been drafted by intermediaries over the better part of two months. They were, in outline, straightforward. The Grayvein River would serve as the border from its source in the Ashen Hills to its mouth at Greymouth Bay, a distance of roughly forty leagues. Aldric's claim to the eastern bank south of the ford—which Maren's tenants had farmed for three generations—would be recognized as historical but subordinate to Maren's active cultivation rights, meaning the land would remain under southern management but northern subjects could cross to work ancestral burial plots without paying toll. Three hostages—Maren's second son and two of her household knights—would remain at Thornhallow until the following autumn as surety for Maren's

obligations. In return, Aldric's nephew, who had been detained after an ill-advised reconnaissance of the southern orchards, would be released with a formal apology and a horse. The winter levy that Aldric normally demanded from the river villages would be commuted to a cash payment of two hundred silver marks, payable in two installments. And both parties would swear, before witnesses and relics, to submit any future dispute to arbitration before raising arms—a clause that the northerners considered wise and the southerners considered necessary and both sides privately considered insulting.

The negotiations had almost collapsed twice. The first time was over the wording of the boundary clause. Aldric's drafters had written "along the center of the Grayvein," which Maren's clerks pointed out was meaningless without specifying which channel in seasons when the river braided into three or four separate streams. Maren's counter-draft specified "the main channel as surveyed in the dry months of the third year under the reign of King Ormund," which Aldric's men rejected on the grounds that King Ormund's reign had included at least two floods that altered the river's course significantly. The compromise—"the channel most commonly identified as the Grayvein's primary course during the twelve months prior to signing"—satisfied no one but was accepted by both sides with the resigned air of people who have discovered that precision is a luxury available only to those who are not actually trying to govern anything.

The second near-collapse involved the hostages. Maren had initially offered her second son, her eldest daughter, and a senior household knight. Aldric's negotiators accepted the son and the knight but refused the daughter, not out of any concern for Maren's daughter herself—whom none of them had met—but because accepting a female hostage introduced questions of inheritance, marital eligibility, and court protocol that no one wanted to untangle at ten o'clock at night after a long day of arguing about river channels. Maren took the rejection personally, which was unfair but understandable, and withdrew her offer for six hours before relenting and substituting the second knight. This substitution would later become relevant, because the second knight, Sir Oren Vasek, had a history with the northern garrison at Foxford that the clerk Werne noticed but did not flag, distracted as he was by the desk inspection.

The witnesses had arrived ahead of schedule, as witnesses always do when they sense the possibility of entertainment. Lord Theobald Cray, a middling baron from the eastern marches, came with four sons and a chaplain, all of whom were prepared to provide oath-helpers should anyone demand compurgation on any point, the chaplain included, which was unusual and mildly heretical. Lady Astrid of Northmere brought her household steward and a single scribe, efficient and silent, the sort of witness who makes everyone nervous because she writes down what she sees rather than what she is told she saw. Representatives of the Bishop of Ashenmere attended as well, more as observers than participants, carrying a reliquary containing a fragment of the

finger of Saint Osgar, which would be used to sanctify the oath-swearing if either party requested it—a safeguard against perjury that both sides had agreed to in writing while privately doubting that either side would invoke it.

The morning of the signing was cold and bright, the kind of late-autumn day that looks like a painting and feels like a knife. Aldric arrived at the hall just after the second bell, his retinue filing in behind him in the order they had rehearsed the night before: standard-bearer, household knights, chaplain, personal squire carrying the treaty roll, and then Aldric himself, walking at a pace that suggested supreme confidence but was actually quite carefully calibrated to avoid appearing either rushed or reluctant. He took his seat, exchanged a formal nod with the bishop's representatives, and waited.

Maren arrived four minutes later. Four minutes was a deliberate choice. Arriving early would have suggested eagerness; arriving on time would have suggested equality; arriving slightly late suggested that she had been attending to matters of importance even at the risk of offending a man who commanded twice as many swords. She entered through the side passage that had been designated for the southern delegation—a logistical decision that some northerners interpreted as a slight and most historians have since agreed was just common sense, since the side passage was closer to the kitchens and Maren was known to manage her schedule around meals the way some men managed theirs around prayer.

The two lords regarded each other across the hall. They had met once before, at a harvest festival three years prior, where Aldric had complimented Maren's horses and Maren had thanked him for the compliment and changed the subject. That had been pleasant enough. This would not be pleasant. Both knew it. Their retinues knew it too, standing packed along the walls with the uneasy alertness of dogs who sense a storm before the sky changes color.

The preliminary oaths were administered first, as was customary. Each lord swore to negotiate in good faith, to honor the terms as written, to refrain from violence during the proceedings, and to accept the outcome as binding—subject to review by a neutral arbiter if either party could demonstrate procedural irregularity within thirty days. These oaths were sworn on relics provided by the bishop's delegation, which lent them a gravity that everyone understood was partly theatrical but no less real for being so. In this world, oaths sworn without relics were words in the air. Oaths sworn on saints' bones were commitments written into the order of the universe.

Aldric placed his hand on the reliquary and spoke the words clearly, his voice carrying the flat authority of a man accustomed to commanding fields and not caring whether they agreed. Maren followed, her voice lower but no less precise, each word placed like a stone in a wall. The bishop's clerk recorded both oaths in a separate register, which would be stored at Ashenmere Cathedral alongside other such records, forming a paper chain of accountability that stretched back decades and, if everyone was

honest, had never once actually prevented a war.

The treaty was unrolled. The clerks had copied it onto a single vellum sheet, the text dense and regular, with the terms arranged in two columns—northern obligations on the left, southern on the right—so that each lord could see at a glance what he or she was giving up and what was received in return. This was the work of Sable, the southern clerk, who had designed the layout herself and had been quietly proud of it, though she would never say so in front of Werne. The wax seal for the north would be Aldric's signet, a lion's head in red wax. The seal for the south would be Maren's heron, pressed in blue. Together, they would make the document whole, the way two keys turning in the same lock complete a mechanism that neither could operate alone.

Aldric dipped his signet. The red wax pooled thick and warm against the parchment. He pressed firmly—too firmly, Werne would later note, so that the lion's mane spread unevenly and one of the paws blurred—but the impression was legible and official. Cheers rose from the northern benches, restrained but genuine. Maren's household knights said nothing. One of them, Sir Oren Vasek, stood with his hands folded behind his back and his eyes fixed on the signing desk with an expression that Werne would later describe, in his deposition, as attentive.

Maren lifted the blue wax. She was about to press her seal when she paused—not dramatically, not for effect, but because she had noticed something in the final paragraph of the treaty that she had not seen in the draft she approved. The clause specified that the commutation of the winter levy applied "to the villages south of the Grayvein main channel as currently surveyed," and she knew, because her clerk had pointed it out that very morning, that the phrase "as currently surveyed" was not in her approved copy. Somewhere between the drafting and the final transcription, someone had added three words that shifted the meaning significantly, tying the commutation not to the agreed-upon boundary but to a survey that could be interpreted—and would be, almost certainly, by someone—to refer to a different map entirely.

She lowered the wax. She looked at Aldric. He looked back.

"This wording is not what we agreed to," she said.

Aldric's thumb stopped its loop against his fingers. The hall went very quiet, the way halls do when everyone realizes simultaneously that something has gone wrong and that they should stand very still until someone else decides what to do about it.

"It is the wording as drafted," Aldric said carefully.

"It is not. My clerks will attest that the phrase 'as currently surveyed' was absent from every copy we reviewed."

"Then perhaps your clerks missed something."

The temperature in the room dropped ten degrees. Not literally, of course, but the sensation was universal, felt by every witness, every clerk, every chaplain and servant pressed against the walls. Werne, who had been watching from behind his desk with the anxious neutrality of a man whose job was to watch and record things, reached for his ink pot and realized his hand was shaking.

It was Sir Oren Vasek who moved first. Whether he acted on his own or on some signal that no one else caught would be debated for months afterward, but the fact remained that he stepped forward, his hand going to the short ceremonial blade at his hip—the kind of weapon no one was supposed to draw inside a hall where bread had been broken and oaths had been sworn.

Lady Astrid of Northmere, whose scribe was already writing, wrote faster.

The bishop's chaplain reached for the reliquary.

And somewhere near the back of the hall, a northern knight laughed—a short, sharp sound that might have been nerves and might have been something else entirely—because the treaty of Sundbreak, designed to prevent bloodshed, had just taken its first step toward causing it.

But that is for the next chapter, where blood has a way of arriving before anyone has finished finding a clean page.
