

The Book of Lies

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Chapter 1

There were a hundred monks in the Caldevan Monastery.

Taroc Radkel knew he'd have them all tortured and killed if need be.

He watched the walled structure come closer. Some said once you had seen a monastery you had seen them all, but after two years of travelling from one to another, Taroc knew that was not true. There were certain things every place had – a chapel for the daily sermons and prayers, the rooms where the brothers slept, the kitchen and dining hall – but beyond those each one was different. The gardens varied by area, some had fountains and cleanly laid gravel paths, others had fruit trees and colourful decorative plants. Some monasteries, like the Caldevan one, were built on the edge of a cliff. Taroc had heard the garden went right to the edge and you could look down on the town below.

But that amazing garden was not why he was there.

He tugged at the sleeve of his crimson robe and winced when the carriage hit a bump. His escort of ten men rode around it ensuring nothing would disturb him. Their armour glistened in the rain, but they had set down their spears because of the rumbles among the dark clouds above. It was a lesson learned through the many deaths of their comrades. Most priests would have chided the men for their lack of faith and told them that lightning struck only those who lacked faith, but Taroc was not in a position to lose a single man so he had ordered them to keep safety a priority. The long spears had been strapped on top of his carriage. He was of the opinion that if god wanted to strike him down he'd have the good sense of humour to do it when he was in a place where lightning was unlikely to strike.

The carriage took a while to climb up the hill and reach the monastery gates. Taroc watched as the captain of his guard pulled a rope by the gate, ringing a bell inside. He was a trustworthy man, captain Atomy Sais. Broad shoulders, a scar that ran down the side of his face, a nose that seemed too large compared to the rest of his face. He claimed the scar to be from a battle, but Taroc knew it had been the work of a whore he had gotten too rough with. No man was without sin and Atomy carried more than his share, but if you wanted killing done he was the

man you wanted doing it for you. It was why he had been saddled with Taroc and his men. They were the sort he needed in his work.

It took a moment for someone to come and open a small hatch on the gate. Words were exchanged, but Taroc could not hear them over the rain. But it didn't matter, the gate was opened soon enough and they rode in. He was pleased to see a large lip by the stable under which the carriage was directed. It went around the entire courtyard meaning there was no need to dredge through the rain.

Taroc climbed out from the carriage and straightened his robes. Across the cobblestone laden courtyard was a warehouse. The door was ajar, revealing rows of barrels. He dug him memory and remembered that the monastery was not only famous for its garden and library, but the mead it made as well. No doubt the locals bought it in large quantities and provided the brothers with some much needed extra money to keep food on the table.

Opposite to the gate was the main entrance and as Torac watched the door opened and a man hobbled down the three stairs that raised the building higher than the courtyard. Two more men followed him making it a good bet he was the abbot. They started to make their way to the stable under the protection of the extended roof that ran around the entire yard.

“Be on the lookout,” said Taroc as he walked up next to Atomy.

“Always,” replied the man in his coarse voice. Someone had once choked him for a good while with enough force to permanently break his voice. He calmed his horse and barked orders at the remaining men to dismount and secure the courtyard. Two nervous looking young monks appeared from inside the stable and started to take in the horses.

“Inquisitor,” greeted the man who Taroc could now confirm to be the abbot. He wore the pendant around his neck and no one else would dare to wear it. “This is an unexpected visit, you must forgive the lack of proper greeting.”

Taroc waved a dismissive hand. “I'm not here for greetings, abbot.. what was it again?”

“Tokim.”

“Very well, abbot Tokim. My name is Taroc Radkel. By special appointment of his holiness himself I am going from monastery to monastery, inspecting the

libraries. The details of it are better discussed in private.” He could tell the abbot felt uncomfortable at hearing it. Perhaps there was something to discover in the library.

“You will have our full assistance, inquisitor Taroc,” the abbot assured and glanced at the two brothers on either side of him. The younger one on his left had a black beard that seemed more suitable for a woodland ranger than a monk. The older one on the right was quickly growing bald and liver spots were taking over. Both looked nervous enough one might have thought they were facing his holiness himself.

“I expect nothing less,” said Taroc. Of course he'd have their full cooperation. Anything less and then men he'd brought with him would ensure they'd change their minds about it. Though that would mean a few dead bodies here and there and, while he had been given relatively free reign over how to conduct his mission, dead monks never looked good in a report.

“The brothers will look after your horses,” said the abbot and motioned towards the young ones who were already at work doing just that. “Why don't I show you to your rooms. Dinner is only an hour away.”

Taroc nodded. “My men will see to carrying my belongings.” There were things there that were fragile and best not seen by any brother in the monastery. Not that they were forbidden things to have, but they would cause undue nervousness in anyone.

“Brother Oesti, why don't you see to it that the inquisitors men are settled in the barracks?” the abbot gave the balding monk next to him a look.

“As you wish,” said the man in a wavering voice. The way he talked to the abbot made you think the roles should have been reversed in his opinion, but he hobbled on to where most of Taroc's men had gathered to talk after ensuring the courtyard held no dangers.

Taroc frowned as he watched the old man go. An attitude like his was bound to chafe at relations, but that was not why he was there. His old duties bubbling to the surface to distract him was not something that happened often.

“If it is all right, I will leave you in the hands of brother Elmund. He will show you to the guest room and see to anything else you might need. I,

unfortunately, have some administrative duties to tend to that were interrupted.” The abbot looked nervous after the words left his mouth. His choice of words had not come off as pleasant as it should have in his mind.

Taroc examined the bearded monk. You could tell he was not one of those that had been given to the monastery as a child. He had seen life outside and it had left scars. Men like him were the most likely to be involved in something that would not be able to handle daylight.

The monk made a slight bow before motioning for them to follow him. Taroc and Atomy followed along with one soldier from his guard. He'd be stationed outside his door to ensure no one would bother him and together with the captain they'd make the initial sweep to ensure there was nothing amiss.

As they walked it started to become obvious brother Elmund had something on his mind. He looked like a question was waiting to burst out from his chest. Walking under the extended roof kept them dry, but Taroc couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief when they entered the building. There were no fireplaces outside to give warmth against the chill of the rain.

“Brother Elmund, you look like a man who has a question,” said Taroc as they stopped in the hall for a moment. It wasn't much of a hall, more a room that had six doors leading out of it. A single fireplace kept the warmth and Taroc was quick to walk to it and drive away some of the chill that had crept past his robes. He motioned for the brother to join him, indicating there was no hurry to get into the rooms. He didn't have much to do before the meal anyway so finding out what the brothers of the monastery were thinking was worth the time.

“It is nothing, inquisitor,” said Elmund, but he did join him by the fireplace.

“Do not hesitate to ask, brother,” said Taroc. “The inquisition is happy to provide the faithful with answers.” He glanced to see Atomy standing close by, ready to jump in if need be while the one soldier brought with them was keeping an eye on the doors.

Elmund hesitated despite the encouragement, but finally decided it was safe to ask. “We are isolated here, but we do hear rumours and news now and then. A traveller stops by, the town folk who buy our mead talk. Is it true what they have been telling us about the Prebysterian Order and the city of Galeon?”

The corner of Taroc's mouth twitched. It was the same question he had heard in three previous monasteries. He'd heard it from innkeepers and others who he'd talked to. It was the talk of the kingdom. He gave the same reply he always did. "Grand Inquisitor Risinal marched his punitive force of twenty thousand to siege the city after reports that much of the local council men, and nobles, along with common people had converted to the teachings of the Prebysterian Order. Heresy like it can not be allowed to take hold. It must be rooted out like the weeds in your garden. The Grand Inquisitor gave the city the chance to surrender peacefully after surrounding it, but they refused. He was left with no choice but to use force to deal with the situation."

Taroc glanced at the brother. His expression didn't tell him anything, so he continued. "All the people in the city were killed. Men, women, children, all dead to prevent the heresy from spreading. If even one had gotten away they would have been free to pass their heresy on to others. It couldn't be allowed."

"But surely there were faithful among those people," said Elmund. Taroc could tell the idea bothered him. That his faith would so callously massacre people who followed the teachings.

"There were," admitted Taroc. "But Galeon was a city of ten thousand. Once the punitive force breached the gates there was nothing to be done about the killing. How were soldiers to tell apart the heretics from the faithful? The Grand Inquisitor was asked what they were to do and he replied, 'God knows his own. He will sort them out.'"

Brother Elmund shook his head. "It is good to be behind these walls, hidden from the evils of the world."

Taroc frowned. It was unclear whether he was referring to the Prebysterian Order or the actions of the Grand Inquisitor. He was a man to be kept an eye on. "The last piece of news I've heard had the Grand Inquisitor surrounding a fortress where the leaders of the Prebysterian Order have holed up in. I think they called it Eagle Fortress."

"Nasty place to siege that," said Atomy to both men's surprise. "I once rode past it. On top of a cliff, sheer ledge on one side, only one path to the fortress. Won't matter if you have ten thousand or twenty thousand men. You'll never

march them against the gate more than a few hundred at a time. The defender can pick them off with arrows like hunting for deer.”

“I am certain the Grand Inquisitor and his forces will be up to the task,” said Taroc and glanced at the captain. “God is on their side.”

“Of course,” Atomy agreed and said nothing more. He was not one to argue with Taroc unless it came to keeping him from doing something that put his life in jeopardy.

“Well, I'd best show you to your room now. Thank you for satisfying the curiosity of a lowly brother,” said Elmund and started towards one of the doors on the opposite side of the fireplace. Taroc and his entourage followed. They came to a corridor lined with doors. The rooms of the brothers, Taroc realized when they walked past an open door. It revealed a small chamber barely big enough to hold a bed and a small desk and chair. A small window let in what little light the gloomy day had to provide.

Elmund stopped to pull the door shut and shook his head. “Brother Straup always forgets to lock his door. The abbot has reminded him many times, but his mind wanders.”

They continued along the passage to the very end before turning a corner and arriving at a place where the doors were not as tightly packed together. Elmund opened one of the doors and motioned for Taroc to step inside. But it was Atomy and the soldier that went in first. It wasn't long before they stepped out and the captain nodded to Taroc, telling everything was in order.

The room was what he'd come to expect from monastery guest accommodations. The room was bigger than what the brothers had, but not by much. There was a small fireplace with two chairs in front of it for an evening conversation. The bed took up one wall and it was a bit wider than what a single person would need, adding to the comfort. There was a desk with a chair in front of it and an ink well and a quill so letters could be written. A large window ensured there would be plenty of light when needed and the weather co-operated, but if not there were plenty of candles about for light.

Taroc nodded with approval. It was what he had expected and after looking around, he turned towards Atomy. “Why don't you have the men bring my

belongings in?"

"Very well," said the man and nodded before leaving the room.

It left Taroc alone with the soldier that had come with him. He examined him for a brief moment. He always seemed to have a grim expression about him that made his blue eyes seem colder and the line of his jaw more sharp than it really was. It suited him. Jeder Lersay was his name and he was a sadistic bastard. His skills had come in useful during a visit to the Quildon abbey. The nuns there had been less than co-operative about the contents of their library and several had implicated themselves as heretics. Jeder had gotten the confessions from them. He'd used pliers, ripped off nipples and breasts, seared skin with hot metal and broken their bodies so they could no longer deny their sins.

He was an evil man, but sometimes you needed evil men to accomplish good things. Taroc trusted the creator of all would judge everyone fairly at the gates of heaven. And Jeder was the sort who'd be roasting in the fires of damnation for an eternity.

"It will take some time to go through this library," said Taroc and glanced at the man. "Hopefully your services will not be needed."

Jeder shrugged. "I get paid either way." His voice sounded like it had been burned by too much alcohol.

It was the one common thing with his guards. They were not men of the church, but hired mercenaries who held the coins in their pockets as the highest power over them. Of course, they believed in the creator of all, but with enough coins their beliefs could become flexible. Just the sort of men Taroc needed and could trust to do their job.

"Keep your ears open and tell the others to do the same," said Taroc and reached for a small log from a stack by the fireplace. He threw it in the fire. The crackles of sap burning soon filled the room. "And guard my door."

Jeder tipped his metal helmet. "Will do, sir." With that he left the room and took position by the door in the corridor. No brother would dare try to get past him and if they did they'd find their guts on the floor.

The soldiers soon carried Taroc's belongings into the room. There wasn't much there besides spare robes and a few books and other small items. The hour

left before the last meal of the day went by quickly as he found a place for everything. He knew getting to the library would have to wait for tomorrow. Better to get the initial introduction in sunlight instead of the unsteady light of candles.

One of the brothers arrived to inform him the food was ready and the abbot had asked him to join him at a table set aside for them for some private discussion. No doubt he was looking to find out what he had really come for. Taroc had no problem sharing those news. He left the room and headed for the dining hall followed by his guard.

The hall was much like any other in the countless monasteries he had been to. Dark wooden beams held up the white stone roof. Chandeliers with candles hung down to light up the room. Rows of tables and benches were filled with robed brothers enjoying their meals. A door leading to the kitchen was open, letting in the heat from the fires and the smells of cooked food.

Taroc made his way to the small table set aside. The abbot sat there with a plate full of food in front of him. There was a tankard of the famous mead in front of him.

“Inquisitor, please, sit,” said the abbot without standing up. He motioned to the chair opposite to him.

“Thank you,” said Taroc and took a seat. His guards went on standby not far from him. He noticed some of the brother glancing his way. They were curious. Some were nervous. It was what power did. A moment later one of the younger brothers brought a plate and tankard for him. There was some lamb on it along with gravy and potatoes and a large slice of dark crusted bread. The breadcrust stuck to his finger as he grabbed the slice. It would have a sweetness to it, Taroc realized.

“I hope you will enjoy the meagre meal we can offer you on such short notice,” said Tokim and took a bite out of his own slice of bread after dipping in in the gravy.

“It is more than enough,” said Taroc. “On the road it is difficult to get a meal as decent as this.” He took a bite of the bread. The crust had a crunch to it. Then the sweetness hit over the savoury inside.

“We are blessed with fields of grass for our sheep and sheltered places for

our bees,” said Tokim and smiled. “A fertile land that gives us everything we need. Truly a blessing from god.”

Taroc nodded. “The lord has provided us with what we need. It is up to us to make the most of it.”

“We each serve at his calling,” said the abbot and took a sip of mead. “Now, enough with the pleasantries. What brings you to this monastery, inquisitor?”

Taroc raised an eyebrow. So far none of the other abbots had been so straight with him. They had lathered him up with pleasantries in the hopes that would gain them favour. It never hurt to have a friend who could deem anyone a heretic at a moment notice and have them burned alive. “My task has been handed to me by the Protector of the Prophet himself.”

That got the abbot's attention. When the leader of the faith personally handed a task to someone it was something you did not argue against.

“I am here to ensure your library is free of texts that could be seen as heretical,” said Taroc. “Do not worry, we are not so strict as to consider educational works as heretical. It is important to understand the misguided beliefs so they can be combated with words as well as swords. But there are texts that are simply unacceptable to be in a monastery. I am here to ensure you do not have such pieces in your library.”

Tokim visibly relaxed. “We will help you in any way we can so the Protector's wish is filled.”

Taroc nodded. “I hope to start going through your collection tomorrow.”

“Of course. I will ensure the librarian is aware that you will be coming. He will do his utmost to help you in your work.”

“Thank you. I will ensure your co-operation is passed upward,” said Taroc and cut himself some of the lamb before sticking his fork through it and gathering up a piece of potato as well. The combination of flavours had his mouth watering.

“How long do you think it will take for the task to be complete?” asked the abbot.

“I don't know how large your library is,” Taroc replied and sipped the mead. He could tell the honey used had been high quality. “I've been to several

monasteries so far and it has usually taken me a month or two to go through everything. But they have been small places compared to Caldevan. It might take more than that.”

“Our library is extensive. There are books there that can't be found anywhere else,” said Tokim. He had finished his meal and was swirling the last of his mead in the tankard.

“Sounds like I have good reason to go through them all then,” said Taroc.

The expression on Tokim grew grimmer. He leaned forward. “You must understand this before you judge your findings. The library here is two hundred years old. Books have been brought in for preservation from all around the kingdoms. Not even our librarian knows what all the books contain and he's been at it for fifty years. There are books covered in dust that no one has touched in a century. I have no idea what you will find in some of the older books or even what language they are written in. I hope you will understand that and not judge any of the brothers here if something.. unsuitable is found.”

A small smile passed Taroc's lips. He didn't need to find anything to get rid of someone. The holy texts had thousands of pages in beautifully hand written and illustrated text that would be enough to get anyone for heresy. “Do not worry abbot. I am not an unreasonable man. If a book is covered in a thick layer of dust it's obvious no one has touched it in a long time. I'm not going to blame anyone for not knowing something they couldn't have possibly known. But if there are finger prints on that book, proof that it has been recently perused and it contains ideas of heresy, then I will do my job and find that person and punish them according to the edicts of the Protector of the Prophet.”

Tokim leaned back in his chair. “All is well then.”

Taroc ate the last of his meat and potatoes. He had to admit it had been a good meal. “Thank you for the meal. If this is how you eat every day then this place is truly blessed by the god.”

A pleased smile crept on the abbot's face. “We do our best to serve him. Perhaps he sees that and remembers us.”

“No good deed goes unseen,” said Taroc, quoting from the holy texts. “I must admit I am feeling tired.”

“Of course,” said the abbot and stood up. “How thoughtless of me. I will let you get to your room and rest.”

Taroc stood up as well and nodded a thank you. The guards followed him back to the room. He had not lied about being tired so he took off his robes and climbed into bed. He knew the coming weeks would involve plenty of work that would tire his mind more than his body.

Chapter 2

The library was more than Taroc had expected. The ones he'd been to so far had been nothing more than large rooms with a few bookshelves and desks for readers to put the heavy tomes on. The largest rooms had held maybe a thousand tomes.

The library of Caldevan was something else all together.

The large area reserved for the bookshelves might have put some of the smaller cathedrals of the faith to shame. The high ceiling ensured shelves could tower over anyone walking in and you needed a ladder to reach the highest rows of books. The biggest collection of books he had seen so far – apart from the main library in the holy capital – couldn't even fill a fifth of the room.

“Impressive,” Taroc muttered and looked around. There were windows in certain places so light could land on the desks reserved for examining the tomes. Much of the room was dark because of the shelves blocking light, but that was all well and good. Books liked the dark. Kept the pages from becoming brittle for longer.

“You've got your work cut out for you,” said Atomy from next to him. He couldn't hide his expression of awe. He might have been a brute, but he could appreciate a collection of knowledge and history as much as any man.

“Seems so,” said Taroc and walked onward. The large stone tiles that made up the floor were smooth and offered a perfectly flat surface on which to place the bookshelves. He spotted the large desk behind which sat the librarian. He was focused on a book in front of him. Coming closer Taroc recognized it as the second volume of the holy texts. Appropriate reading for a monk.

The man looked up when he heard the clatter Atomy made with his weapons and armour. He frowned at him for making the noise before turning to Taroc. His expression grew grim at the sight of his crimson robe. “You must be the inquisitor the abbot told me about.”

“My name is Taroc Radkel.” He examined the librarian. He was middle aged with a scruffy beard that was starting to turn white and grey from its brownish

colour. Wrinkles were starting to make their way on the man's face. His striking blue eyes had a life to them that made him seem younger.

"I am Gregory Pugh, the librarian. I have been here for thirty years, much of that time spent looking after these books. If there's anything you need to find I will probably be able to tell you exactly where it is. Unless we're talking about the old tomes stored below us. Only god knows all the books we have down there."

"The abbot assured me I would have your full co-operation," said Taroc and looked around once more. Most of the books in sight he recognized by their spine. That would help cut down on the books he needed to go through. He suspected many of the tomes on display would not warrant much more than a cursory examination to ensure no one had hidden anything inside a more respectable work. It wouldn't be the first time the leather cover lied about the contents.

"Anything for an esteemed inquisitor," said Gregory without a hint of irony in his voice. He was a true believer.

"Good. You said there were more books below us?"

The librarian nodded. "There is a basement than stretches well underneath other parts of the monastery. There are chambers filled with books no one has touched in decades, centuries even." He looked ashamed to admit it. "Most of our time is spent preserving and replicating the holy texts and works that are used more often. There aren't many of us who are able to dedicate our time solely to the books so a lot ends up being neglected with such a large collection."

Taroc nodded. "I am surprised by how large your collection is. The other monasteries I've been to had only a fraction of what you have here."

That seemed to make Gregory beam with pride. "We have been taking in books for centuries. We are one of the older monasteries so we have had a head start compared to many of the younger ones. In our early years we had abbots who were keen on gathering and preserving texts so that has played a part as well."

"It sounds like I should focus my time on going through the earlier pieces of your collection," said Taroc.

"That might be the best use of your time," Gregory agreed. "The books on this floor are more of the popular works and I know all of them. You should not

be finding anything questionable among those.”

“I would like to make a cursory examination just to be certain,” said Taroc.

“Of course,” said Gregory with a nod. “I would not expect an inquisitor to take my word for it.”

It was not the sort of work anyone could do. Few had the patience to sit by a desk for days on end and read through texts. Few knew how to read well enough and ever fewer knew more than one language. For three days Taroc sat in the library and went through tome after tome to ensure they were what the bindings told them to be. There was always at least one of his guards standing near by. By the second day Taroc arranged for them to have a chair to sit on and shuffled them off to a corner where they were not as visible, but could still react in time should anyone seek to interfere with the inquisitors work. Taroc didn't expect there to be any trouble. Monks rarely caused a scene. Even when they were being marched to the pyre.

There were no surprises in the texts he read through. The *Division of Power* by Isaias Monterry was as beautifully replicated as it should have been while the text was as droning a puddle of bad ideas and over simplifications as Taroc had always found it to be. There were no heretical texts to be found on the upper floors of the library.

On the fourth day he moved to the lower levels Gregory had alluded to.

“Careful now. The steps have some loose stones in them down at the bottom,” said Gregory as he led the way down with a lantern in hand. Taroc followed with a light source of his own, followed by Atomy close behind with a third source of light.

The spiralling staircase felt like it went in deeper than just one rooms height. Taroc kept the warning in mind and noticed the loose stones on the last few steps. Even being careful he could feel them shifting under his weight. Had he not known to look for them he could have easily found himself laying on his back, writhing in pain.

The staircase led to a corridor lined with wooden doors that looked like they'd been there for centuries. The air felt dry as opposed to the moisture Taroc had come to expect from most places underground. Who ever had built the place

had known what they were doing. He could see dust floating in the air, tickling his nose as he inhaled.

“The first few rooms have the more often requested works that we couldn't fit in the main library,” said Gregory as he took a few steps forward. The corridor was wide enough that all three of them could have stood side by side.

“Take me to the less used ones,” said Taroc. If he found nothing there it was unlikely there'd be anything questionable at the more frequently used tomes.

“Very well,” said Gregory and started onward.

“Good place to have someone killed,” said Atomy from next to Taroc. “Enough ground above us so no one will hear the screams.”

“Thank you for that bit of information,” said Taroc in a dry voice and headed onward. He missed Atomy shrugging before heading after him.

“Oh, what have you got there, girl? A fat juicy rat?”

Taroc stopped next to Gregory who had knelt down to pet a grey and white striped cat. It was purring and pushing against the monk. A dead rat laid on the floor not far from her. He had seen several cats in the monastery. Most of them laid around in the garden, enjoying the warm spots of sunlight. At times they could be seen sauntering around like they owned the place.

“You let them down here?” asked Taroc. There was no door at the top of the stairs, but they'd still have to be let into the library.

“Of course. No better way to keep the mice and rats away from the works. The darkness suits them.” Gregory stood up and the cat brushed against his leg one last time before going back to its catch. It grabbed the dead rodent in its jaws and trotted off towards the stairs.

“I suppose so,” said Taroc and followed the monk past a few more doors.

“Ah, here we are,” said Gregory and pushed open a door on the left side of the corridor. It opened silently despite the rusty looking hinges. Someone tended to them after all.

Taroc followed the monk inside. The lanterns lit a small chamber with a desk and a few chairs around it. There were no books in sight, but there were plenty of lanterns so the place could be lit up. Gregory went around lighting up most of them.

“You can use this chamber for reading,” said the monk as he lit the lanterns. With each one the room got brighter and soon it was bathed in a yellow light that made it easy to see the stone walls that had been chiselled straight into the rock that kept the entire monastery up. “No need to lug tomes up and down those stairs. Behind each door on the corridor there are rooms. Most bigger than this, some smaller, but all filled with books.”

Taroc nodded. The chamber was comfortable enough for what he was doing. “I would like to start with the oldest texts you have.”

Gregory lit the last lantern. “Those would be at the end of the corridor. Door on the right side. They're not really in any order there, barely on the shelves I fear. Feel free to go through them as you see best.”

“Thank you. Can you have my meals sent here?”

“I'll arrange it,” said Gregory. “Now if you will excuse me, I must get back to the upper floor. The younger brothers need a constant eye on them or they'll wreck my system.”

Taroc gave the man a feint smile as he disappeared into the corridor. Atomy peeked in through the doorway.

“Grab yourself a chair,” said Taroc. “Keep watch in the corridor.”

“All right,” said the man and grabbed himself a chair. Taroc followed him out the door and ventured in deeper with his lantern. Reaching the end of the corridor took longer than he had thought. The doors had started to look more worn. There were cracks here and there where the boards had swollen and some of the metal bracing was missing a nail here and there making him question whether the thing would hold together if he opened it. He took the risk and opened the last door.

The chamber behind it was larger than he had expected, but it was as full of books as Gregory's warnings had foretold. There was no order to them. They were laying in stacks on tables and chairs. The single bookshelf in the room was filled to the point where it looked like it would collapse at the slightest breath. The draft from the corridor kicked up dust in the air, forcing Taroc to lift his sleeve to cover his nose. He still sneezed.

It took him a while to examine some of the nearest books. Many of them

were written in languages he didn't know. He grabbed a few of the more interesting looking ones for closer examination. When he had a stack of them that he could barely carry he left for the chamber to examine what treasures he had found.

Days went by with Taroc sitting in the small chamber, looking through works he didn't really understand. He erred on the side of caution and put many of the books in a stack that would be disposed of. Just because he couldn't understand what was written in them didn't mean someone else wouldn't. And if they understood the books they were dangerous to begin with. If they gained the knowledge in the books there was no telling what that could cause. It was better to take out the risk completely and burn the books. If the case was that no one could understand them then what was the loss? No one would be getting the knowledge from them anyway.

Gregory stopped by to visit from time to time. Taroc didn't mind the interruptions. He even asked the librarian if he knew the language of the books, but he wasn't so lucky. After seeing the books and the mysterious language and markings used, Taroc had to spend some time calming the man down, assuring he wouldn't be blamed for the books being there.

The abbot came down to visit once. He looked uncomfortable with the dark underground and didn't stay for long. He simply wanted to ensure Taroc had everything he needed and that Gregory was co-operating with him fully. The look of relief on him when he had an excuse to leave made Taroc smirk. Even if it was a small thing, it never hurt to know what made a man uncomfortable. You could use that to your advantage when the need arose. Jeder liked to say the time arrived sooner or later for everyone.

For three days Taroc browsed through tome after tome. The paper had turned yellow in most of them while some were made entirely out of leather. It was near the end of the third day, and the last book in the stack he had gotten after enjoying a brief lunch. To his surprise it had a title written clearly in a language he understood. Written in red, wavering letters, the cover read *Book of Lies*. It wasn't a thick book, perhaps half of what most of the ones he'd been through were. The leather cover looked like it had been through a few rainy days.

Taroc opened the first page. The yellow page felt fragile between his fingers so he opened it carefully. The first page only had two lines written on it.

The First Lie

Unwavering faith will protect you from the evils of the world and lead to your salvation.

Taroc stared at the words for a minute with a deep frown. It wasn't the sort of text he was expecting. He turned the page. The two pages that were revealed were filled with runes of some sort. After carefully examining it he had to admit it was a language he couldn't understand. He let out a frustrated sigh. Another one for the pile to be destroyed.

He moved to close the book. His finger touched the first rune on the page. A shimmering light spread out to cover all the runes on the pages. Taroc gasped and left the book open.

“What in god's name..”

The shimmering runes shot up his finger, up his arm and underneath his robe. The page was quickly turning empty. Taroc stood up. The chair fell down behind him. His hand was off the page, but the runes still flowed. Through the air into his body like a stream of glowing silver. A tingling sensation ran up his arm. Pulling back his sleeve he could see the runes snaking around his arm, finding their place before settling down. The shimmer died down, leaving behind the black ink of the runes, forming around his arm, past his elbow, stopping just shy of his wrist. He looked to the book. The two pages were empty.

“Oh god. What have I been tainted with?”

“Everything all right, boss?”

Taroc quickly pulled down his sleeve to hide what had happened. He mustered a confident smile as Atomy peeked in through the door. “Yes. Everything is fine. Just ran into another book I have no hope of understanding. The frustration got the better of me. I guess I need a break.”

Atomy measured him, looking suspicious. He noted the fallen chair. He could see something had shocked the man who always seemed unshakeable. But

he knew better than to pry further. "All right. Just heard the noise and wanted to make sure."

"Yes, well done. Everything is fine." Taroc forced another smile out of himself. Atomy nodded and pulled back to the corridor.

Taroc lifted up the chair and sat down again. The empty pages of the book felt like they were mocking him. He pulled back the sleeve once more and examined the black runes. They were like the tattoos he'd seen on some of the people from across the ocean to the south. Hesitantly, he poked them with his other hand, but nothing happened. They continued to remain in place, spiralling up his arm.

He turned his attention back to the book. His hands moved forward, tingling with anticipation at turning to the next page. It took all his willpower to stop them from doing so. His eyes widened as the realization hit him. Something was trying to get a hold of him. He slammed shut the book and knelt down on the floor. He crossed his arms and started to pray.

"Blessed father, help me. Evil has touched me and I do not know if I have the strength to fight it off. It is dragging me away from your light and towards a dark unknown. Please, father, help me."

The brief prayer made him feel better. None of his prayers had ever been replied to or even come true, but there was still something re-assuring in doing so. It re-affirmed his own resolve if nothing else. He stood up and glared at the tome on the table. He felt the urge to open it up strike again.

"So you're not going to help me?" he looked up at the ceiling. As if the almighty could see his accusatory look through all the stone that separated him. More likely he wasn't even paying attention to someone as insignificant as Taroc. Looking around he spotted an old, empty sack crumbled up in one of the corners of the room. He grabbed it and shook off the worst of the dust before stashing the book inside it. He wrapped in around the tome tightly and immediately felt less of an urge to open it up. He started to go around the chamber, turning off the lanterns that had given him the light to read the cursed text.

He'd come to the conclusion it was too dangerous to leave the thing laying around where Gregory or some other monk could run across it. He'd keep it with

him at all times to ensure no one else would come under its influence. He hoped he'd find some way to cleanse himself of the effects. If nothing else he could return to the holy capital and subject his findings to the church. Someone there was bound to know what had happened to him. What had stained his body. It wasn't his fault, after all. He had been conducting a mission set forth by the holy one himself. He wouldn't be the first one to fall victim to darker forces in doing so. They'd help him, wouldn't they?

He chuckled to himself as he entered the corridor, the book stashed under one arm, the other holding a lantern.

If he came forward with what had happened they would more than likely burn him at the stake. He had his enemies that would make use of the situation to get rid of him.

"Taking some late night reading with you, boss?" asked Atomy as he stood up with a clank of his armour and weapon.

"No. No one should read this book," said Taroc and gave the man a stern look. "This is the sort of dangerous text we've come searching for. It will not leave my sight until the day it is destroyed. Can't have one of the brothers here accidentally read it. The risk is too great."

"Shouldn't we just burn it then?" asked Atomy and followed Taroc as he started towards the stairway. He hurried his step enough to get ahead of the inquisitor. Not that he expected anyone in the monastery to try and attack him, but it was a bad habit to develop. You always had someone walking in front of the man you were trying to protect.

"We can't," said Taroc, annoyed that his decision was being questioned by someone like Atomy. His duty was to guard and kill when asked to, not to think he knew better than an inquisitor when to destroy something. "It has some claim I need to investigate, as misguided as they are. They might lead me on the trail of something bigger if I can figure out the mysteries."

Atomy turned to give him a grin. "Hunting down some heretics, then? That would make Jeder happy. He's been complaining about the lack of torture lately."

That the topic moved on to the sadistic man made Taroc relax. "Maybe. Don't go getting his hopes up. You know what happened last time."

Even though Atomy had his back to him, he could tell from the shift in his posture that he remembered well that time. "I sometimes forget he's not all right in the head."

Torac couldn't help but grin. All right in the head? The man was as insane as anyone could be. He was a master of hiding it, but when he let loose there was no question about it. Sometimes Taroc questioned whether he was the creation of the one true god or the evils that opposed his will. "You would do well to remember it. He is your responsibility."

They had made it to the stairway and were climbing the first steps. "I will, sir."

"We don't want a repeat of that time," said Taroc to further drive home the point. It wasn't something he liked to remember. They had been chasing down a group he had believed to be heretics, but upon catching up to them they had turned out to be nothing more than a travelling troupe of good god fearing people. He had tried to find something to pin them with, but even he couldn't fault them for anything worthy of setting Jeder loose on them. It had not helped the troupe had been well known and several influential lords came to their defence for fear of losing their favourite source of entertainment.

Jeder had been beside himself for it. In the next village they had stayed at an inn. During the night the place had woken up to screams of pain. They had found Jeder down in the common room with the inn keepers daughter tied to a chair. He had already cut into her several times. She wouldn't live no matter what they did. The innkeeper had rushed to attack Jeder, but he'd been knocked down with a single punch.

So they had covered it up. It hadn't been hard. It turned out the daughter had a book in her room that was banned by the church. From there it was easy to justify killing her and burning her father at the stake. The rest of the villagers had even turned up and cheered and some had offered corroborating testimonies to support the case against him. Apparently people had envied him and saw the chance to get rid of him. It was how human nature worked.

That it turned out all right in the end did not excuse what had drawn them into it in the first place. Jeder was still a man who had his place, but since then

Taroc had been careful what he told him. Getting his hopes up and then disappointing could be dangerous.

"I will keep him in check," said Atomy as they climbed the stairway and came out to the main library. Taroc shuffled the book under his arm, hoping to pass Gregory without him seeing it. There were bookshelves that kept them out of sight for a long time, but they had to pass by his desk to get out the door. There was a small hope the man would be away, but that hope was shattered as the desk came to view. There the man sat, dutiful as always.

As soon as he heard the footsteps, Gregory looked up. His gaze honed in on the wrapped package under Taroc's arm. A worried expression washed over him.

"You found something, inquisitor?" Even his voice was nervous.

Taroc cursed in his mind and stopped. "Possibly." He glanced over at Atomy and hoped the man would not show he had told him something quite the opposite just a moment before. To his credit, his expression didn't change and he simply looked bored to be guarding him at such a safe place. He understood that there were difference in what people could be told.

"What is it?" asked Gregory.

"I don't know yet, for certain. I need to investigate it some more. It's better I keep it in my sight so none of the brothers accidentally stumble upon it."

The frown on the librarian grew deeper. "I told you I had no idea what could be in those old books."

Taroc smiled, hoping to clam down the man. "Do not worry. I am not going to blame you for this. It's obvious no one has been through these books in a long time."

It seemed to work. The nervousness in his voice lessened. "I will let the abbot know you may have found something."

"No. Not a word to anyone." Taroc slammed a hand on his desk and stared at the librarian intently. "No one is to know. I don't want rumours to spread. I don't want the younger brothers whispering among themselves, slowly building up fear and paranoia. That is not conducive to a peaceful monastery atmosphere. It could be I'm wrong and this is all for nothing. No reason to worry anyone."

"But the abbot.."

“Not even the abbot must know!” Taroc had raised his voice enough that if anyone else was in the library, they would have heard his outburst. He brought his voice down. “If you tell anyone about this I will find something in this library to burn you with.”

Gregory grew pale and looked around, panicked. “You have my word, inquisitor. I will tell no one. May god strike me down if I do.”

Taroc measured him from head to toe for a moment before nodding. “Good. Now let me get back to investigating this potential evil I have uncovered.”

“Of course,” said Gregory and returned to what ever he had been doing before spotting Taroc and his guard. He did so with shaky hands and a nervousness that had not been there before.

“That one's going to be trouble,” said Atomy as they left the library and entered the garden through which they had to walk to get to Taroc's room.

“You let me worry about that,” said Taroc. “You just make sure no one sticks a knife in my back.”

Atomy grunted in agreement and escorted Taroc back to his room.

Chapter 3

Taroc pulled his hand away from the book. He had been close to opening it again, but just as his fingers touched it he pulled away and wrapped it in its cloth again. He licked his lips and glared at the wrapped tome. He knew it was dangerous and that it should have been destroyed already, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. While the contents frightened him, it also intrigued him. He picked up the book and locked it in his travellers trunk that sat at the foot of his bed.

He looked down at his marked arm. It had been easy enough to keep it hidden from the brothers of the monastery. While he sometimes cursed the long sleeves of his robe they were now his best friend. The runes had not done anything since worming their way up his arm and burning themselves into his skin.

With a sigh, Taroc pulled his sleeve down and hid the markings. It was early morning and time for breakfast was almost upon him. He could already hear some footsteps as brothers walked past the door to his chamber. He walked to the door and took a last look around the room and himself. Nothing was left in view that would raise suspicion.

“Good morning,” said Jeder when Taroc entered the corridor. The man was leaning against the wall opposite to the door and looked as bored as the rest of his men. They didn't have much to do while their master was investigating. What kept them around was the gold and the hope he would discover something amiss that would require the use of violence.

“Is it?” asked Taroc and gave the man a look. It was obvious he had woken up early to take the last shift guarding.

Jeder shrugged. “I'm breathing, you're breathing, so I'd say it's a decent enough morning. Could be better, I'll admit. Not much happening in this snooze filled monastery.”

Taroc started down the corridor. Jeder grabbed his short spear and followed suit. “It is a place of god. If it weren't sedate and uneventful I would very much

think the abbot was doing a bad job of running the place.”

“Right you are, sir,” said Jeder. “But with you around, there's always a chance a bit of torture and violence might be called for.”

The hopeful tone in his voice had Taroc glance back at him. He got a grin in response. “Don't get your hopes up. So far I have found nothing to warrant such action.”

“The day is still young,” said Jeder, not wanting to give up his hopes. Taroc hoped he wouldn't turn out too disappointed or there might be trouble. He made a note of talking to Atomy about it once more. He couldn't afford an incident in a monastery. The abbot was not someone he'd be able to prevent from talking to people higher up the food chain.

They walked into the big dining hall in silence. The smell of porridge and freshly baked bread had their mouths salivating. Taroc headed for the table that was set aside for him. The rest of the brothers gathered by the long tables and benches. There were plenty of them there already with a few late comers still rushing in to find their place. Jeder took his place close to the table, but didn't sit down. He'd have some food later when his shift was over.

Once the abbot walked in the chatter died down and everyone settled in their seats. The food was carried to the tables in large platters from the kitchen and before anyone dug in there was the customary moment of prayer.

“Brother Mackey, I believe it is time for your first prayer,” said the abbot as he stood up from his seat and motioned towards one of the brothers.

“Yes, abbot,” replied a scrawny looking man with a beard that looked like it had been grown without care for years. Tarco examined the nervous man. It was obvious he had not been at the monastery for long. He wasn't young so he must have been a reformed criminal or some sort of outcast or another from some village.

With a nervous voice, Mackey started the prayer. He stuttered and butchered any and all pronunciation of the Latinum words. It was a hard language where a slight change in the weight of letters changed the meaning. He used wrong words here and there that made the entire prayer change its meaning.

Taroc felt a burning in his hand. He looked around before lifting his sleeve

ever so slightly. The runes on his hand had a dim glow to them. The first lie echoed in his mind. His hand rose and made a fist before banging down hard on the table. Before he realized, he was standing up and shouting. "Stop this blasphemy!"

Mackey stopped his prayer and everyone in the room turned to look at the enraged inquisitor. Nervously, the abbot stood up.

"Inquisitor, you must forgive brother Mackey. This was his first attempt at leading prayer. He is new and still learning the intricacies of latinum."

"Then he should have learned some more before blaspheming openly in front of the entire monastery and an inquisitor, no less," Taroc snapped back. The runes on his arm were burning hotter, flaming his zeal to see the young monk punished. "Jeder, take brother Mackey. I will investigate him and see that an appropriate punishment is handed out."

Whispers ran through the gathered brothers. Brother Mackey looked like someone had drained all the blood from him. Jeder quickly marched up to him and grabbed him by the shoulder. "Come along or get hurt. I'd actually prefer it if you didn't come along."

Mackey stood up and went along without trouble. Everyone could see the disappointed expression on Jeder which made the situation all the more tense.

"Valued inquisitor, I must protest this," said the abbot and left his table to come closer to Taroc. "We should talk this over before anything rash is done."

The burning in his hand started to die down, but it didn't go away completely. The runes remained warm, reminding him of what they wanted. He couldn't let the abbot come in the way of seeing it through. "We will talk," said Taroc and gave the abbot a look. "*After* I have talked with brother Mackey."

By then a few more of his men had arrived in the dining hall. Having armed men standing on either side of you was a good way to make someone do as you said. The abbot glanced at the two men before nodding in agreement. "I expect you to treat him well."

"As well as anyone under suspicion," replied Taroc and turned to leave. To his surprise the abbot said nothing more. Jeder had dragged the unfortunate monk to a chamber near Taroc's quarters. He found the two of them there along

with Atomy keeping a watch on both of them.

“A blasphemer, then?” asked Atomy and glanced at the monk. He was still pale, his head hung low and his lips were muttering silent prayers.

“Yes,” said Taroc and grabbed himself a chair. There was a small table on the other side by which Mackey had been seated. Jeder stood next to him while Atomy closed the door and took position by it in case anyone came in.

“Praying isn't going to help you,” said Taroc. “Only the truth will.”

Mackey stopped his silent prayer and looked up. The fear in his eyes was tangible enough that it could have jumped out and made a run for it. “I swear as god is my witness, I did not mean to blaspheme.”

“But you did,” said Taroc in a calm voice.

“It was my first time leading prayer. I haven't been here that long. I'm still learning latinum and it's hard. I make mistakes all the time when I practice with my senior. Please, it was a mistake.” Mackey gave Taroc a pleading look. As he spoke his voice got a more desperate and pleading tone by every word.

“It's one thing to make mistakes in private while learning,” said Taroc in a calm voice. The pleading had no effect on him. He'd seen it plenty of times before, done more convincingly and more enticingly. “You blasphemed in front of the entire monastery. In front of an inquisitor.”

“But I didn't mean to!” Mackey cried out. “Outside, I was a bad person. I robbed people, I disappointed others, I was driven from my village. My home. This place, it has saved me. Even in the short time I have been here I have become a better person. I have come to truly believe.”

Taroc could tell the man was being genuine. He had developed a knack for knowing when someone spoke from their heart. A small smile passed his lips. “Unwavering faith will not protect you from the evils of this world.” Taroc was surprised he had spoken the words. The First Lie. Modified to use. It revealed his true motive for taking such offence at the man. No one in the room seemed to notice anything amiss with his words. They didn't connect the fact he was the evil that would devour the man of faith.

“Please..”

Taroc gave the monk no quarter. “By your own admission you are not a man

of virtue. This blasphemy is but one more example of your spiritual degradation. There is only so much that can be forgiven before you must be put before god to be judged. Man does not get to make the final decision so we will send you before god.”

It took a moment for Mackey to realize what the words meant. His shoulders slumped and he began sobbing. “Please. Please. I don't want to die.”

“It is decided,” said Taroc and stood up.

“What? No torture?” asked Jeder.

“When it's time you can chop his head off, if that makes you feel better,” said Taroc. He saw the grin on him and turned around. He might not be completely satisfied with that, but it counted for something. Atomy opened the door for him and followed him out. All that remained was confronting the abbot.

“Bring the abbot to me,” he said to Atomy, who nodded in response and went off to find someone to do it or perhaps to carry out the orders himself. Taroc headed for his own chamber. On his way he realized they had left Mackey alone with Jeder. He doubted he'd kill him, but he might torture the man by recalling previous executions and torture trials.

Well, he was going to die anyway. He wouldn't be complaining to anyone about it.

Taroc barely had time to take a seat after arriving in his chamber before the door was opened and the abbot walked in looking ready for a fight.

“I hear you have finished your investigation?” the abbot asked, not bothering to look for a seat. Behind him, Atomy closed the door and remained inside.

“Yes. Given brother Mackey's past he will be executed. He has not denied any charges against him. He has admitted his guilt so there is nothing to favour a more lenient sentence.”

The abbot looked shocked. “You can not do this.”

Taroc glared at him. “You forget who I am and under whose orders I am. I can do what I deem necessary to keep the faith strong and pure.”

“I will protest this,” said the abbot. “A mistake by a novice does not deserve such harsh punishment. A caning at most, but death? No. Do not think just because I am an abbot at a monastery I do not have connections among the

higher ups at the holy capital.”

“Is that a threat?” asked Taroc, his voice gaining a dangerous edge to it.

“A statement of fact,” said the abbot without backing down.

Taroc stood up. He gave the abbot a stare. “I do not take well to threats. You think you are the only one with allies? How do you think I was handed this duty? You think just anyone gets this responsibility?”

“Those that gave you your duties can take them away if you abuse your powers,” said the abbot. “Now, I have letters to write.” With that the abbot turned around to leave, but Atomy stepped in front of him, blocking the way.

“Let him go,” said Taroc. For a brief moment he could see the fear in the abbot's stance. He knew who was in charge of the situation and all it had taken was one move from Atomy. The man let the abbot pass.

“He's going to cause trouble,” said Atomy as he closed the door.

Taroc waved a hand. “Nothing I can't handle.”

“I hope so,” said Atomy. “This is an easy gig. I'd hate go back to assaulting fortified castles. A man tends to get killed in those. I'd rather it's someone else doing the dying.”

“Speaking of killing, we've got an execution to see through. Gather up the monks and have them come outside the monastery. No point spilling blood inside this place. We'll chop off his head before mid-day.”

Atomy nodded. “I'll see to it.”

Taroc let out a sigh as the man left the room. The runes on his hand were starting to cool down. There had been moment when they'd warmed up again, but only slightly. They were happy with what he had done. The fact they seemed to have some sort of intellect to them frightened Taroc. He questioned how much of what he had done had been forced by them.

Then there was the abbot. While he had put on a brave face against him he couldn't dismiss the damage any protest letters from him might do. Depending on who his friends were he might be able to have Taroc summoned back to the Holy Capital and face an investigation into whether he'd abused his powers. It was something that could be survived, but would hurt his reputation and most of all it would bring a high chance of his tainted skin being revealed.

That was not something he could explain away. It would mean torture and likely death. He couldn't allow that to happen.

He glanced at the trunk at the foot of his bed. The temptation to take out the book and read more of it was strong and it took all his self-control not to do it. Now wasn't the time. It would never be time to take in more of that stain. Or so he tried to convince himself, but he was less than convinced that was a resolution he'd be able to keep.

Not wanting to think about it he decided to go down to his research chamber and drown himself in the old books. As he was walking there, followed by two of his guards, he realized the old book might be the way out. If he found something questionable and pinned it on the abbot and the librarian he'd be able to kill both of them without raising too many questions. No one would be able to dispute their responsibility. It would mean breaking his own word, but who would know that?

Those that did would be dead and his own men would never talk.

He was thankful the librarian was not at his desk so he could go down without being harassed. No doubt the abbot had summoned his closest to take advice on the matter. It didn't worry Taroc. If they wanted to talk things over there was nothing wrong with that. He had his plan now. It didn't matter what the monks decided to do. They wouldn't dare to rise up against him with any sort of physical violence. If they did it would be them ending up dead, not Taroc. His men would make certain of that.

He grabbed a lamp and made his way down to the cellars. Soon he had his chamber all lit up and a pile of books in front of him to go through. Every time he opened a book a part of him wanted it to read *The Second Lie*. He assumed there were more of them in the book. There had to be. But instead all he got was a book full of recipes written in old Sjanish. It was no wonder how it had ended up in the library given how old the books were. No doubt they had been moved from place to place without anyone ever bothering to look whether they were something that needed to be saved. The library was not meant only for holy texts, but a book some cook had scribbled his ideas in was not something that was appropriate to take up space.

It made Taroc rub his temples. He tossed the book aside, not caring how it landed on the floor. It was going to be removed and destroyed anyway. No point keeping rubbish like that among the gems of theology and divine research that made up most of the library.

He went through several more books before Atomy appeared in the doorway and made a discrete cough that would have had any servants in a kings palace jealous.

"It's time," he said as Taroc looked up from his latest tome.

"Very good." Taroc carefully closed the book. It was a magnificent rendition of the earliest texts of the faith. While the ink had faded in some places it was still in good condition given its age. A gem that needed to be saved and moved to the upper library where it deserved a special place.

"We've set it up just outside the monastery. The abbot insisted," Atomy advised him as they walked along the corridor with two of the guard in tow.

"I suppose it would have been in poor taste to spill blood all over that lovely garden," said Taroc in a dry voice. He understood the meaning places could have for people, but given how long the monastery had been around, this would not be the first time blood would have been spilled within its walls.

"If you can avoid killing in the place you live in most people would opt for that," said Atomy.

"True enough," Taroc admitted.

They climbed the stairway in silence and went through the empty library. All the way to the outside gate they saw no one. The reason became clear when they walked out the open gate. All the monks had been gathered by Taroc's men and they were huddled together, facing the piece of log that was to serve as the executioners work table.

The abbot stood in the front row along with the librarian. Both looked angry, though the brothers surrounding them had more fear in them than anything. They gave Taroc nervous looks as he strolled to the log. Jeder was standing next to it along with another guard. The unfortunate brother Mackey stood between the two men, his head drooping down like a flower that had not had enough rain.

Taroc gave the doomed brother a look over before turning to face the

gathered monks. "The saviour said faith would be our salvation. Believing in his teaching and living our lives according to them would pave the road to heaven." Taroc gave the monks a sweeping look. His voice carried through the air strong and filled with conviction. "He also said those that mock the heavenly father should be met with sword in hand, his name defended by those devoted to him so that he may judge those who have wronged him. Today we are here to answer that call. Brother Mackey has fallen off the road and in that process he has blasphemed. Today we send him in front of the heavenly father to be judged for that crime."

Some of the younger monks shuffled about nervously. Taroc focused on the abbot and met his cold stare. He had to smile a little at that which seemed to make him even more angry.

"Let this be a reminder to all of us what happens to those who stray from the road. Let us remember this day for the rest of our lives so it may guide us on the right path." With that Taroc motioned to Jeder and stepped away from the execution stump. No point standing too close. Some blood might spill on you.

Jeder and his fellow guard forced Mackey on his knees and positioned his neck against the wood. Jeder drew out his sword. It wasn't the customary way of executing someone, but it would do. Gathering a pyre took time and was a lot of work to clean up. And dead was dead, no matter the way you ended up that way.

Taroc could sense the change in the mood as Jeder started to raise his sword. Everyone's eyes were fixated on the blade. The sun gleamed off it and made Taroc wonder if the man had spent time polishing it just for the occasion. He couldn't put it past him.

He turned to look at Mackey. He could see his lips moving, no doubt in prayer. At least he had the good sense to do it quietly. Nothing ruined an execution like the wailing of the victim, begging for mercy. As he watched, the sword came down. The head fell to the ground and looked like it would roll down the slight slope, but the nose prevented it from rolling further. Blood spurted out the neck and made some of the monks let out sounds of disgust.

Jeder cleaned his sword on the dead monk's robe and put it back in its scabbard. He looked satisfied and gave Taroc a grinning nod.

“I trust you will take care of the burial,” said Taroc and turned to face the abbot. The anger had waned a bit at the sight of the execution, but it was still smouldering behind the façade.

“Of course,” said the abbot.

“Good. I must return to my work.” With that, Taroc marched away, followed by his guards.

Chapter 4

The mood at the monastery had turned sour after the execution. For Taroc that was a good thing. The librarian no longer bothered him every time he walked past. Instead, he got a gloomy glare that was quickly turned towards what ever papers the old man had in front of him at the time. The abbot had not deemed his little research chamber worth a visit, though Atomy reported several messenger pigeons had flown out. Taroc had little doubt they carried words that sought him removed.

It didn't matter. He had found his weapon that would see the abbot removed from life as well as the librarian and any other leading figure within the walls. No one would judge him for his actions.

Since the execution he'd had time to move from the older chambers to the somewhat newer ones, though many of the works there were still over a hundred years old. What had not been that old was the book he now had in front of him.

The Seventy-Five Theses on the Corrupt and Misguided.

He couldn't believe such a work was in the library, even if underground in a chamber few had ventured to. It wasn't an old book at all. It was relatively new. And the reason why the Holy One had tasked him with going through books around all corners of the world. It was the seminal work that was pushing a divide within the faith. If found it was to be burned and anyone found possessing it was to go into the same flames as the book.

Though calling it a book was a stretch. It was barely more than ten pieces of yellow parchment, poorly bound in covers that looked old so no one would notice it among the numerous other works.

But Taroc had found it.

And now he needed to find the person who had brought it there.

The runes on his arm were warm again. Indeed, it had been them that had guided him to the thin scriptures of heresy. He'd been going through the chamber and the runes had gone from cold to warm and then hot when his hand finally landed on the doomed pages. It made him feel uncomfortable, knowing his action

were being guided by a force he couldn't understand. It didn't help that it probably was something that would have got him burned alive if anyone found out. He worried the actions he took were not his own and that they went directly against his beliefs.

No. That couldn't be right. He still believed in the teachings that had guided his life since he had been five years old. Nothing he had done so far had been against his mandate. Maybe he had been harsh in his interpretations, but he had not stepped over the line. He was still filling his duty and doing the good work the Holy Prophet had sent him on.

“Jeder!” he shouted out. It didn't take long for the man to peek in through the open doorway. “Get me the librarian.”

“Yes, sir.”

Taroc watched the man turn away and listened to his footsteps disappear into the distance. Since the execution he had been in a better mood. Ready to jump into action on anything with an enthusiasm that had been lacking before. Maybe he hoped for more deaths. With a sigh, Taroc had to admit his expectations were not going to be let down with the discovery of the parchments he now held.

It didn't take long for Jeder to return with Gregory. He looked nervous like most of the monks did when facing Taroc now. They all worried who would be the next one to lose their head.

“You summoned me, inquisitor?” asked Gregory.

Taroc didn't say anything. He didn't even bother standing up from his seat by the small table. He simply handed the pieces of parchment to the man. He took them and started to read through them. It didn't take long for his eyes to widen. He gave Taroc a frightened look. A bead of sweat ran down the side of his face. He grew pale.

“Where.. where did you find this?” asked Gregory and with shaky hands put down the pieces of parchment onto the table. He wiped his hands on his robe as if merely touching the thing had somehow tainted them.

“Fifth chamber on the left from the back of the corridor,” said Taroc. “I need not tell you this is not an old work. Someone has brought it there.”

"It wasn't me!" The indignation in Gregory's voice was thick enough that a sword would have had trouble reaching through it.

"Who else has access to these chambers?" asked Taroc. He didn't think for a second the librarian was the one who had brought the work there.

"Anyone working in the library. I.."

"I need names!"

The sudden shout made Gregory stutter. He took a moment to gather himself. "Brothers Cooke and Castillo work here the most often."

"Are they the sort who would be tempted by these misguided ideas?" asked Taroc and poked at the stack of parchments with his finger while staring at the librarian.

"I've always thought them level headed," said Gregory, relaxing a bit as the accusation moved on from himself. "Cooke has been with us for years and few are the times I've had to reprimand him over something. Castillo is a more recent arrival, but he has been working diligently and even suggested some improvements to our systems that I'm seriously considering. Both are devout men who say their prayers and guide the younger monks to the best of their abilities, as needed."

"Well, we will need to interrogate them either way," said Taroc and looked past the librarian to Atomy. Ever since the execution the man had insisted on there being two guards with him at all times. "Go get them. And tell Jeder his services might be needed in the interrogations."

Atomy nodded and disappeared into the corridor to give the order.

Taroc returned his attention to Gregory. "I do not need to tell you how serious the situation is."

The monk shook his head. "No. This is unacceptable. That such a work is within these blessed walls. It must be thoroughly investigated."

"I am happy to hear we are in agreement," said Taroc and stood up. Now that he had some names there would be plenty to do besides looking through dusty old books. "I trust you will let the abbot know what I have found and that I'm questioning possible offenders?"

Gregory nodded. "I will. He will want this matter seen to just as much as you

do.”

The corners of Taroc's lips twitched as he hid a grin. He had little doubt the outcome of the investigation would be unpleasant for the abbot as well as the librarian. He left the small chamber without saying anything more and headed for his chambers. Having sent his two guards on errands he walked alone. Atomy would have protested, but Taroc was confident he could make the small journey without incident. He was right.

He suspected his men would have made use of the same room as before to set up a space for interrogations. He was not disappointed as he saw Jeder shoving a young monk into the room just as he arrived. Atomy was standing next to him, guarding against Jeder getting too enthused.

“Which one is that?”

“Castillo,” said Jeder with a grin. He looked to be in a good mood. “I've got the other one set up in the next chamber.”

“You've got your tools?” Taroc almost shuddered at the way the man's face lit up. It was like someone had thrown a bag of gold at the feet of a beggar.

“All laid out and ready on the table,” said Jeder. Even a deaf person could have heard the glee in his voice.

“Very well. Let's get started then,” said Taroc and entered the room. He eyed the young monk with an expression that sent him covering as deep in the chair he was sitting on as was possible. He was bald with no beard to mention. His nose was shaped like a malformed potato and the green eyes were sunk deep into his skull. All in all he looked like something you might have pulled up from a field.

Jeder had been thorough enough to tie him down by his hands and feet. He wasn't going anywhere even if someone beat him near death. He'd struggle, but it would be futile and only eat away his strength.

Taroc took a seat opposite to him and made a cursory observation of the tools Jeder had laid out. There were tongs and various shaped hooks and knives. Some of the more exotic tools were hard to decipher as to their purpose, but Taroc knew most of them were made to rip flesh while not killing someone. Anyone seeing them for the first time would be horrified just thinking of the

possible use of them.

All part of the tactic.

“Castillo, is it?” asked Taroc in a calm voice.

“Yes, honoured inquisitor. Beneth Castillo.”

“Do you know why you are here?”

The monk shook his head. His eyes were wide and darted around.

“We found a copy of *The Seventy-Five Theses on the Corrupt and Misguided* below the library.” Taroc paused to let the words sink in. He was pleased to see the panic grow inside the young monk.

“I..I have nothing to do with that!”

“So you claim,” said Taroc. “I have found people often deny their sins. They hope they will go undiscovered that way, but the all mighty has a way of bringing out those who he needs to judge.” He motioned to Jeder who grabbed a pair of tongs from the table. He opened and closed them with a grin on his face. The metal cling they let out every time they closed had Castillo flinching.

“I'm a true believer,” said Castillo in a pleading voice. “I would never even touch those filthy words. I would never bring that stain inside these blessed walls. You must believe me!”

“Must?” asked Taroc and smiled. He felt his arm tingle. “No. What I must do is find the truth. And that, my friend, involves being thorough. For you that means pain.” He nodded to Jeder.

The soldier grabbed one of the prisoners hands and set the tongs to the fingernail of his thumb.

“No! You can't do this!” Castillo tried to struggle away, but the restraints kept him in place. His protests turned into screams of pain as Jeder slowly pulled off the fingernail.

Taroc gave the monk a few moments to stop screaming and come to terms with the pain in his thumb. “You have nine more left, not to mention everything else we can do to you. You should tell us the truth. Did you bring that text into the monastery? If not, then who did? Was it your friend Cooke?”

“I don't know!” the man cried out. “It wasn't me! It wasn't Cooke!”

Taroc shook his head. “I'm disappointed.” He nodded to Jeder who proceeded

to pull out another fingernail. The first time Taroc had seen someone tortured the screams had bothered him. He had wished they would stop, that the one being tortured would give in and confess to what they were being charged with. Since then he had heard the screams enough times that they no longer had an effect on him. He could listen to it for days on end and sleep like a baby after it was over. He knew he was doing gods work and those he had tortured were working against the teachings that had been handed down to man.

Despite pulling out all the fingernails the monk maintained his innocence. He refused to implicate his friend in the crime. Taroc didn't know whether to applaud his tenacity or be annoyed by it. Either way, he needed the man to talk. The runes on his arm were heating up again, urging him to crack the pig headed man.

It took a while, but Jeder knew what he was doing. Fingers were cut, skin was removed and burned. It was the pear of anguish that finally had Cooke talking. Jeder didn't even have to push the metal device all the way up the man's ass before he was screaming out a confession. He pointed the accusations at his friend and that he had only been enticed by his poisonous words over time.

Satisfied that he had found the guilty one, Taroc had Castillo dragged out of the room. His mutilated body dripped blood all the way to the chamber he was locked in to await his final fate. It wasn't long before Cooke was dragged into the chamber and tied to the very same chair Castillo had been in a few moments before. The blood was still there as were the severed fingernails and pieces of skin. Taroc smiled as Cooke grew pale and wild eyed at the sight.

Additional fear always made things easier.

“Your friend didn't want to talk,” said Taroc as Jeder finished tying the last of the restraints. “But in the end he did. He told us everything. How you bough the text in town from a travelling merchant out of curiosity. How you brought it back to the monastery and hid it in the lower chambers under the library. How you slowly came to support the ideas in those misguided pages and tried to get him to see the same way. All with the blessing of the abbot and the librarian. It really is quite a damning testimony against all of you.”

Cooke glared at him with his blue eyes. A black stubble covered his chin. His

black hair looked like a blind man had cut it, so uneven it was, sticking out every which way. He had a refined nose that seemed to beg Taroc to order it broken.

“It would do well if you co-operated with us. Spare yourself all the pain.” Taroc used as sympathetic a voice as he could muster.

“You'll torture me even if I talk,” said Cooke. He had a thin voice that could have been a woman's with only a slight change in pitch.

“Why would we do that?” asked Taroc and looked genuinely surprised.

“It's what you inquisitors do,” said Cooke. “You claim to defend the faith, but in truth you're the very perversion of it that drives people to seek the truth from the text you've dragged me here for. Even if people tell you the truth you torture them just to be certain they have told you everything. You think you might get lucky. Maybe they'll give up someone else without even knowing it.”

“Who else could you possibly give up?” asked Taroc. “I already have the abbot and the librarian. Two of the most important people in the monastery.”

Cooke pondered it for a moment. He didn't reply.

“You might as well talk. You know you'll do it either way,” said Taroc. Looking at Jeder he could tell the man was eager to grab his tools once more.

The monk gave no response, but gave both men as defiant a look as someone who knew they would be in for hours and hours of pain because of it.

Taroc sighed. “Very well. Let's begin.”

The man that was dragged out of the room hours afterwards was hard to recognize as the one who walked in with his own two feet. He was a broken man with a body that would likely fail before his execution. Jeder had pulled out all the tricks and finally the man had talked. Taroc stepped out the room with a smug smile on his face. He had gotten everything he had wanted and with that he was done with the monastery. Now all he needed to do was tidy everything up and call someone else to comb through the books below the library. It was already established there was something there to be gotten rid of and that warranted the attention of more than a single inquisitor.

“Go arrest the abbot and the librarian.” Taroc gave Atomy a stern look. “Take enough men with you. The brothers might be upset over what we're about to do.”

“If they try to intervene, they will be sorry,” said Atomy and saluted him

before leaving to take care of the order. Taroc watched him go before retiring to his own chamber.

As soon as the door closed behind him he pulled up his sleeve and examined the runes. There was a faint glow to them. They felt warm. It wasn't the sort of burning that had urged him on before, but rather a satisfied and reassuring warmth you might have expected from a hug from your mother. He paced around the small chamber for a moment, eyeing the travellers trunk at the foot of the bed from time to time. The urge to reach in and pull out the book was hard to resist. Finally, he had to give in.

With feverish rush he opened the trunk and pulled out the wrapped tome. He sat down on the bed and opened it up to the empty pages where the first runes had been. For a moment he hesitated, the last of his free will making the stand against tainting his soul any further, but he was not strong enough. He turned the last empty page and read the title.

The Second Lie

A man without a woman is a man closer to salvation. A woman without a man is a woman closer to heaven.

Taroc's hand shook as he turned the page to reveal more runes. Immediately they lit up and jumped from the page. They snaked up his arms like the previous ones had. He watched them find their place next to the earlier markings. They intertwined and even though he didn't understand them he could tell they were forming something entirely new and different from what they had stood for on the pages. It didn't take long for the pages to be empty again and for the runes to settle down on his arm. He could still hide them under the sleeve of his robe. It almost seemed like they wanted to help stay hidden by staying out of exposed areas.

The warm embrace faded away and was replaced with the usual feel of his arm. For a long time Taroc stared at the runes, trying to see what the change was and whether he could gleam any information from it. He had to give up and roll down his sleeve. Closing the book was again a test of willpower, but this time

Taroc came out on top and wrapped the thing in its cloth and locked it inside the trunk. It was then that he had time to start digesting the words he had read.

It was obviously a direct attack on the institution he was currently in. The brothers in the monastery were expected to abstain from any relations with women. The same was expected of their counter parts among the fairer sex. It was done to allow them to fully devote themselves to serving god without any distractions. It was believed that was the only way to truly come close to god while still drawing your own breath. It was hoped that would bring about new revelations about his plans and wishes.

But what did that mean the runes wanted him to do?

So far they had sicked him on men with faith to prove it was no protection from evil. The runes had made him evil. Though some might have debated he had already been evil for what he had done in the name of protecting his faith. The heretics certainly had pointed that out many times, but who were they to decide whether the will of god was right or wrong?

Taroc shook his head and took a seat on the bed. He knew worrying about it was futile. The runes were on his arm now. They'd force him on the path they wanted no matter what. They'd guide him to the answer no matter how unpleasant it might be.

As that thought hit him he realized he was no longer a servant of the god he had been brought up to believe in. He now served a bunch of squiggly runes and a dusty old book that was slowly taking over his entire body as well as his mind. He knew there'd be a third lie and more after that.

Where would it stop?

Would it stop before his entire body was covered in the runes?

What would they make him do?

Questions he did not have answers to.

Chapter 5

The four men stood in line. Their tortured bodies struggled to stay upright. The monks of the monastery stood opposite to them like a herd of frightened sheep. The trickle of rain coming down from the dark clouds made it all seem ominous. Then again, executions rarely were a fair of laughter and joy.

“By their own confessions, these men have committed offences against our lord. Offences of the highest order and gravest consequence. It is our duty to punish them as the almighty has decreed, heavy as our hearts may be since many of you have known these men for a long time and thought them to be men of kind and true souls.” Taroc eyed the monks with what he hoped was the right mix of condemnation and compassion. You always had to have a bit of that in there. Without a hint of compassion people would think you were enjoying the killing instead of finding it an unfortunate, but necessary outcome supported by the evidence.

“I understand this is a black day for the monastery and you, the good brothers that have kept true to the faith. Losing a leader like you are today is never easy, but rest assured the church will see to it that you have all the support you need to keep your community alive and well. I have written to his holiness himself to appeal for a quick appointment as replacement abbot. In the meantime, brother Oesti will be taking care of you.”

He paused for a moment to let the words sink in. The old monk gave him a nod of approval while some of the brothers exchanged glances. None of them seemed like they wanted to contest the decision. Brother Oesti was one of the oldest in the monastery. Surely he knew how to keep things running. The brothers knew him to be a fair man. A man of god.

Taroc had taken the time to find out about him. What the brothers thought of him. He was the natural replacement for the soon to be headless abbot. He had written as much to his holiness with an appeal.

“Together with brother Oesti we have decided that the chambers underneath the library are to be off limits until such a time as a full inquisitory force can

come and go through it. We do not want the risk that any more come under the influence of texts that steer them off the righteous path.”

It was all Taroc had to say. He turned to Jeder and gave a nod to proceed. The other guards were quick to force the four men on their knees and set their heads against large logs. Jeder pulled out his sword and went to work. The thumps of severed heads hitting the ground was the only sound Taroc heard as he watched the man go about his gruesome task. For a moment he stared into the dead eyes of abbot Tokim before Jeder's foot stirred it and turned the dead eyes away from him.

The runes on his arm glowed a gentle warm.

He hated that they approved.

The last of the heads hit the ground.

For a moment no one moved. Everyone looked at the dead bodies. It was a sight the brothers would not forget. They would remember what straying from the path would mean. Taroc found himself fearing that might happen to him. He wasn't worried that they'd find out what had happened here. It was all in order with appropriate confessions and accusations recorded.

The abbot had confessed. No one would dispute that.

What he worried about was someone finding out he had been corrupted by something. That would get his head chopped off at the very least, though more likely they'd take the time to burn him. He told himself it was best not to think about it too much. It would only make him nervous. Focus on doing what ever was in front of him and keep in mind that he needed to be careful about some things.

Satisfied that the brothers had had enough time to take in the scene he stepped forward again.

“Justice has been served. Remember this day if you ever have doubts about the path you are on. Staying on it, seeking help when you are about to stray, is the best way to ensure your passage to the arms of our lord.” He could tell his words were falling on ears that didn't want to listen. He could understand that. He was a stranger that had walked into their lives and ripped away most of what had made it stable and safe. It was time to be compassionate.

He let his shoulders slump a bit and let out a sigh. "I know this has disrupted your community. What has taken place in the last few days has been horrible. I know I and my men are a constant reminder of it. To alleviate that, we are leaving today."

That got a reaction out of the monks. There were a few sighs of relief and some general chatter. Taroc let them have their moment before continuing with his most compassionate voice. "I know I am doing the work of god, but I can not turn my eyes from the fact that what I do causes pain to people who truly believe. It is not their fault and people who fall off the path often have family and friends who are unaware of their actions and still love them. It is never easy to enter any community and inflict the wounds my job often does. The healing begins when I leave so I do so as quickly as possible."

He gave the brothers a sympathetic look over. "You are a good community at the core. Brother Oesti has told me enough and I've been here long enough to see what you do here. You will heal this wound and be stronger for it."

He left them with those words and walked back inside the monastery. His men followed and were soon packing things up on the carriage. Horses were readied and new supplies loaded on courtesy of the monks. Taroc kept a close eye on the travel trunk. He didn't want anyone accidentally dropping it and spilling out the contents. Having a book wasn't going to alert anyone to anything suspicious, but none the less he worried about it. The fewer people saw the book the better.

"Where are we headed?" asked Atomy when he took a break from supervising the men and the two monks that were helping with saddling the horses and carrying things.

"Another monastery," said Taroc, unsure where the idea was coming from, but then the runes reminded him with a surge of heat. "Up north."

"St. Monchel?"

Taroc gave the man a surprised glance. It wasn't often that he could name a monastery. "Yes. Do you know the place?"

"You could say that," said Atomy. "My sister is there."

"A sister?" It was the first time his family had come up. For some reason

Taroc had always assumed he was an only child or that his parents had abandoned him at some point. Usually that was the case with men like him.

“Haven't seen her in a long time,” said Atomy and looked thoughtful.

“Why was she sent to the monastery?” there were few reasons for it so Taroc had a few good guesses in mind as to the reason.

Atomy chuckled. “If it moved, she fucked it. Didn't take long for every man in the village to have had a go at her and after that it was impossible to find anyone to marry her. Not even from near by villages. Her reputation had spread far. It tarnished the honour of my parents so to save it they sent her off to the monastery. A far away one to distance themselves from her as much as possible. They hoped the sisters there would be able to somehow fix her.”

“Doesn't sound like you care much about her.”

Atomy shrugged. “Why should I? She was always a selfish bitch. There are whores I care more for. She could be dead for all I know or kicked out of the place for seducing the other sisters.”

“Well, we'll find out, won't we?”

“I guess so,” said Atomy and shouted at one of the guards for dropping a wrapped up pile of weapons that clattered all over the cobblestone. Taroc left him to straighten it out and climbed aboard his coach. He was pleased to note his trunk had been carried aboard without any issues. Closing the door behind him shut out much of the noise and left him to his own thoughts.

He barely noticed when the carriage nudged forward and the men formed their guard around it. They'd pulled out their long lances again and tied the banners to them to tell anyone looking who it was they were guarding. Some might have argued it painted a big target on them. There were plenty of people who would love to kill an inquisitor after all. For the most part Taroc had found the banner made people steer well clear of them for fear of becoming the target of an investigation.

It was a boring first day of travel. The only thing remarkable was the weather. The rain from the morning soon passed and was replaced by a gentle breeze and sunshine from a clear sky that made the carriage feel unbearably hot. The moisture in the air did nothing to help the situation. It didn't take long for

Taroc to open up one of the side windows and put his head out to enjoy the wind that the horses managed to create by pulling the carriage. It didn't help much, but was better than nothing.

He wished his behind was strong enough to handle a horse ride, but every time he had given it a try the next day had been a painful one. It made him thank god for the genius that had come up with springs to smooth the ride in carriages. A decent road and you barely noticed the carriage sway around.

Unfortunately for him the road to the monastery was far from decent. There were bumps and holes that made the carriage jump around like a giant was under it, pushing up. It made for an uncomfortable journey and every night they stopped Taroc thanked the almighty for seeing him through another day of hardship. His guards didn't seem to notice the bumps, but then their asses were used to riding without much of a break.

There weren't many villages between them and the monastery. Most of the nights were spent outside in tents. It wasn't anything new. They'd done it plenty of times. The few nights they managed to find a tavern were more pleasant with better food and a bed that was more than a less rocky spot on the ground.

Still, when the bell tower of the monastery came to view, Taroc felt relief and dread. Relief that he'd be off the bouncy ride and back in a stable bed. Dread at the thought of what the runes would make him do. They had been dormant for the entire journey, but he had no doubt they would be waking up again.

The monastery of St. Monchel rested in a small valley surrounded by tree covered hills. The nearest village was a days ride away which was somewhat unusual for a monastery for only women. Most of the time they were built closer to afford some protection against marauding bandits and others that would seek to take advantage of the nuns and their kindness. But looking at the walls and the sturdy gates that surrounded the monastery Taroc could see they were a far better protection than any small village could ever hope to be.

The carriage rolled to a stop just outside the gate and Atomy rode onward to bang on the wooden gate door. Taroc had climbed out of the carriage and looked up at the walls. They were made of thick grey stone and would have served their purpose even against an army of moderate size. It was more like a small citadel

instead of a monastery.

A small hatch opened on the gate door and a face appeared. It was a wrinkly one and the voice that followed it was wavering. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"Good day, sister. My name is Atomy and I am the captain of Inquisitor Taroc's guard. We have come a long way and seek to stay within the shelter of your walls."

"Inquisitor?" asked the woman and peered past Atomy. She spotted Taroc in his robe. She didn't look impressed, but none the less shut the small hatch. For a long time nothing happened and Atomy looked ready to knock on the gate once more. But then they could hear heavy thuds and metal latches being opened. After a bit the gates were pushed open. Two sisters were pushing each of the heavy wooden constructs. There was no creaking from the hinges which told of the care the thing was given. Many places would have been letting out rusty screeches that would have warranted additional bodies to push the doors open.

The nuns wore their black robes and veils with a lining of white around the edges. All you could really see were their faces, but not even a hint of their hair or even a glimpse of their neck.

"Come on in," said the wrinkly faced woman that had opened the small hatch. She was hunched down and had not helped with opening the gate. That had been left to the younger sisters. Taroc made the small distance on his own two feet instead of climbing back into the carriage. His men rode in on their horses and dismounted in front of the small stable. It looked like it would barely have room for all the beasts.

The courtyard they arrived in was of beaten dirt and surrounded by stone buildings on all sides. You couldn't escape it without walking through one of the solid looking wooden doors that all the buildings had. Straight opposite to the gate was the main building that housed the chapel, library and sleeping quarters. To the left there was the stable and to the right a building which function was left a mystery from the outside.

"So you're the inquisitor."

Taroc turned to look at the wrinkly faced woman. She was a good heads

length shorten than him. “Yes. My name is Taroc Radkel.”

“What do you want with us?” Her green eyes stared up at him with a pierce that would have punctured the best of armours. She had no fear of his title nor the power it afforded him.

Taroc had faced old people like her before. They thought they'd lived long enough and anyone coming to give them shit would be met with the calm reality that they knew they might not wake up tomorrow anyway. They were not afraid to stand up to authority. He could feel the runes on his arm begin to tingle. “Nothing but food and shelter, good sister. I am not here to conduct any sort of investigation.”

The woman eyed him with those sharp eyes. She was not convinced.

“May I ask what is your name, good sister?” Taroc figured a bit of nonsensical conversation may help break down the barrier of suspicion that she had going on.

“I am sister Benedea. I'm the eldest of the monastery.”

Taroc glanced around. More sisters had gathered to welcome the visitors. There were some with a bucket of cold water that they were ladling into cups that then went to his guards. Others had some bread that they were breaking pieces off and handing out. It was a decent enough welcome for surprise visitors. The men were already removing saddles and guiding the horses to the fresh hay of the stable.

“Sister Benedea. You have given us a warm welcome despite no notice of our arrival. My men and I thank you and the rest of the sisters.” Taroc gave the woman a slight nod of his head and heart warming smile he had mastered over the years despite being cold as stone on the inside.

“Save your compliments on someone younger, inquisitor,” said Benedea and frowned at him. “I've heard all too many men say such things and then pull out a sword and start chopping off limbs.”

“I assure you, as a man of the church and faith, my words are my bond. May the almighty strike me down if I have lied to you.” Taroc resisted the temptation to look up at the sky for any dark clouds or lightning strike. His conscience was bugging him.

“How reassuring.” She did not sound convinced, but neither did she look to throw the men out. Not that she could have, now that the gates were open. “You're welcome to stay the night. But I want you gone tomorrow. It is not good for the sisters to have so many men around. They've been through all sorts of ordeals and some are very reluctant to interact with your kind.”

Taroc gave her a brief smile. “I am an inquisitor. No one looks forward to interacting with me or my men.”

“I bet,” replied the old nun in a dry voice. “You and your men will sleep in the guest house. While here you will abide by the monastery rules. You are not allowed within the main building nor the sleeping quarters of the sisters. Anyone found in those areas without proper permission will be subject to the harshest of punishments.”

Taroc raised an eyebrow. “Are you saying you claim power over me, an inquisitor?”

“Within these walls and as long as you are not here to conduct an official investigation, yes. You will abide by the rules or you will leave.”

There was no doubt in Taroc's mind that she was bluffing. She had nothing with which to throw anyone out. But there was no harm going along with her demands for now. Whether a day would be enough time for him to do what ever the runes had in mind was uncertain, but if it didn't, he'd come up with some reason to stay longer. “I will make certain my men understand the rules under which we are allowed to stay.”

“Good.” She raised and hand and lowered it. Taroc could hear hatches closing. When he looked around a number of sisters appeared from the surrounding buildings, many carrying crossbows that had been cocked at the ready.

“Weapons, sister?” asked Taroc, surprised. “Isn't that prohibited?”

“It's frowned upon,” the sister admitted. “But after you've seen the monastery burn down for the second time and seen your sisters raped by bandits you learn to give in some areas. So don't go thinking your men would have an easy time resisting if we decided to kick you out.”

“Do the local lords not protect you?” asked Taroc, this time genuinely

curious. Having monasteries ransacked by bandits was never something the church could look past. There had to be pressure coming down on the lords to hunt down the guilty and better protect the rebuilt monastery and its inhabitants. Such an event was a stain on any lords record.

“They try,” said Benedea. “But look around. Nothing but untouched wilderness around us. Ride past us and there's hundreds of miles of forest. Plenty of places to hide. You could hide an army in there and not have it found. The patrols come through here sometimes and sweep the forest. Sometimes they find a few, but most of the time they come back empty handed. So we've taken it upon ourselves to preserve this place and our own lives.”

“Very prudent,” said Taroc, happy that he now had a reason to take action if need be. When you entered a monastery you were supposed to swear off violence. Having crossbows and no doubt having used them, the sisters were guilty of breaking their vows. Benedea had tried to play it off as not an issue, but it was a clear violation of church edict. A thought occurred to him. “Tell me, do you have a sister Sais here?”

The woman gave him a stern look. “We do. Why do you ask?”

“Sister Sais might be interested to know his brother is the captain of my men.” It was customary that the sisters called themselves by their family names. First names were rarely if ever used. Unlike the monks, the sisters wanted to retain that connection back to their families. The thought of seeing the two siblings meet held a certain amount of amusement value for him.

A frown appeared on Benedea. She glanced around and surveyed the men who were still busy attending to their horses. “The two must not meet.”

“Why not?”

The sister grabbed him by the arm and guided him to the side where none of the other sisters nor Taroc's men could hear or see what was being said and how the reaction was to those words.

“Sister Sais is a.. delicate being. When she came to us she was a broken soul and it has taken years to mend it. She is still kept isolated from many of her fellow sisters. It is absolutely not the time to bring in her brother. It could set back everything she has worked for in her time here.”

“I see,” said Taroc. He could not hide his disappointment at being denied the entertainment he had hoped for. But he couldn't leave it at that. The runes on his arm were starting to get hotter. It was clear the sister had something to do with their plan. “Perhaps I could see her? Maybe relay a message. Her brother really was looking forward to seeing her again. They did not part under the best of circumstances, as I understand it.”

Benedea shook her head. “I can not allow it.”

There was no point trying to persuade her. She did not seem the sort of person who would easily change her mind once it had been set. Not when the well being of one of her sisters was involved. “As you say, sister. We will let her be.” Taroc glanced around. “Now, you said you had a place for me to stay the night?”

He followed the old woman to his quarters with no intention of leaving anyone alone.

Chapter 6

With lantern in hand, Taroc found himself standing in front of a door that was no different from any other in the monastery. The runes on his arm were almost burning hot. He had to bite down not to groan in pain. He was where they wanted him to be.

He had feigned the good guest while the sisters had been around and they had treated him and his men well. But that was no reason not to act. As soon as night had fallen and most of the women had retired to sleep Taroc had sneaked out of his quarters and roused up Atomy and his men. The instructions given had been simple. Find the weapons the nuns had stashed away and confiscate them. If anyone spotted them they were to take care of it with any means necessary to ensure no alarm would be sounded.

He had made certain Atomy was not with him. No guards either. He didn't want any of them seeing what was about to take place. Mostly because he had no clue himself on that.

Trying the handle, he found the door locked. Where the key was, he had no idea, but he didn't need one. The thin, hooked piece of iron he pulled out from his pocket would be enough.

He had not always been an inquisitor and even in those duties picking a lock now and then had proven a skill worth having. It had led to several high profile persecutions without having to conduct a lengthy investigation. When you could sneak in during the night and find incriminating evidence hidden in locked boxes without the owner being the wiser you had a clear advantage. You could come in the next morning and conduct a search in public view and find those incriminating bits.

A bit of fiddling and he heard the latch click. He stashed the lock pick in his pocket and carefully opened the door.

It was a small chamber, much like you'd find in any other part of the monastery, yet it was in a different building all together from where the rest of the sisters slept. There was a small barred window, a bed, a chair and a small table,

but nothing more. The floor was bare stone with nothing to soften it.

“Who's there?”

Taroc saw the figure sitting up on the bed. He closed the door behind him and stepped further into the room. He brought his lantern closer so the darkness didn't make it impossible to tell details.

“Who are you?” the voice demanded again. A female voice. It had a softness to it, even when frightened, that had the hairs on Taroc's arms standing up. The light revealed a delicate face that couldn't have been further from what Atomy looked like. The gentle chin continued into a thin neck that ended in very visible collar bones. The rest was covered up by a blanket she held tightly under her slender arms.

“You're not a sister,” she said and backed away. She was stopped by the wall behind her.

“No. No I'm not,” said Taroc and put the lantern down on the table and turned up its flame. It lit up the room enough for the two to see each other. “My name is Taroc and as you can see from my outfit, I am an inquisitor. I am here with your brother, Atomy.”

“Atty?” asked the woman. “He's here?”

Taroc nodded. “Sister Benedea did her best to keep him from seeing you. From me seeing you. Unfortunately for her, the rest of the sisters are not as tight lipped as she is. It was easy to find out where you were kept and get directions.”

“That old hag has kept me locked in here for years,” said the woman. Even the softness of her voice could not cut away the pure hate that shone through.

“Why?”

The woman let out a laugh. “Why? Because she thinks I am possessed by the devil. Like everyone else does. Maybe even me. My family certainly thought so. They're the ones who sent me here.”

Taroc had time to examine her more closely. She wasn't old, but not young either. Maybe in her thirties. Whether she was the younger or the older sister was not something you could tell by looking at the two siblings.

“And why does everyone think you're possessed by something evil?”

It was then that she seemed to realize for the first time she was talking to a

man. She measured him from head to toe and bit on her lower lip. The blanket she held dropped ever so slightly to reveal some cleavage. "I have..desires. Strong ones. I like fucking men. I really, really, like it. It's what got me here and why people think I'm possessed. They think locking me up in this room will somehow starve the demon, but I've still got my hand. They can't hope to cure me. No. I don't need to be cured. I'm fine the way I am."

Whether having the open debate with herself in plain view was the first sign of a mind slipping into lunacy or just her need to talk to someone, Taroc could not decide. But it wasn't important. What was important were the runes on his arm. They had gotten hotter. Enough so that he feared the sleeve of his robe would start smoking at any moment. He couldn't hide the discomfort of it. He staggered away from the bed.

"Are you all right?" asked the woman. "You look a little pale." She stood up from the bed and walked over to him, holding onto the blanket with one hand. She put the other hand on his forehead. Her touch felt like ice against his hot skin. The runes flared up at the point, hot enough to make Taroc scream. He watched the blue glowing scribbles jump from under his collar and wrap themselves around her arm. She screamed as well and her other arm let go of the blanket. She struggled to get away, but could not before the runes had done what they wanted.

Taroc watched the black and blue marks slither over her arm and around her neck. They made a necklace around her throat before splitting down and forming circles around her breasts. A line shot down from there to form a circle around her bellybutton and from there two lines shot down towards her legs before making a round around half way down her thighs. The blue glow lingered for a moment before disappearing. Both of them fell back onto the floor with heavy breaths.

The first thing he looked for was whether the runes were still on him. Pulling back his sleeve he was disappointed to see them still there. A deep breath and he turned his attention to her. The runes around her neck looked similar to the ones on his arm. Had they simply copied themselves onto her? His gaze wandered down. He had to admit she had good proportions. Not too small or big breasts.

Just the perfect size for her frame with a fullness to them that would have had any man's pulse rising. Now, the runes circled them, creating a contrast that seemed to make the two, dark nipple topped mounds, even more enticing.

Her back rested against the bed and her legs had been pulled up a bit. It made the skin on her stomach wrinkle up a bit which Taroc found especially appealing. As far as he could tell the runes that had latched onto her were the same ones that were on his arm. They had just decided to spread themselves more thin and take hold in a different configuration.

"Are you all right?" he managed to ask before having to take another deep breath. At least the pain was gone now.

Her breath wheezed as she inhaled. Her body shook a little. "Yes. I'm fine."

"Good. That's good." Taroc tried to stand up, but found he didn't have the strength for it. "What's your name?"

"Nell," she manage to say. Another deep breath. "What did you do to me?"

Taroc couldn't help but chuckle. "Me? Nothing. The runes acted on their own. Damned if I know what they're thinking."

"Runes? What runes?" Her eyes focused on Taroc. He motioned her to look down and her eyes widened as she saw the markings on her body. She looked up, her eyes wide. "What is this? What have you done to me?"

"It's the runes," said Taroc and pulled away the sleeve of his robe, showing her the same markings he had on him. "I don't know what they are, but they have a mind of their own. They've guided me here so there's something they want from you. Now that they've latched onto you they'll guide you. But one thing is certain. Let anyone besides me see those marking and you'll be burned alive after being tortured for days to find out where they came from."

"Now I really am possessed," said Nell and sighed.

"We both are," said Taroc and adjusted his position. He sat up more straight and examined her. Despite everything, she seemed to be taking it all very well.

"I'll be found out soon enough," said the woman and looked up at Taroc from the runes decorating her body. "I have to bathe with the others. There's no privacy for me here. If not that then the frequent lashings I get to heal me will certainly uncover everything."

"You're not going to stay here," said Taroc.

"Where else would I go? Not that it matters. They won't let me leave."

"You're coming with me. I can't let you out of my sight with what you know. You hold my life in your hands as much as I do yours."

She looked at him. The runes on both of them began to glow a pale blue. It over powered the light from the lamp. Taroc could feel the warmth. It wasn't the harsh one that had been guiding him so far today. It was a gentle warmth. He reached towards her with one hand and was rewarded with an even gentler warmth from the runes. He looked her straight in the eyes. He could tell the runes on her had given the same sort of response. He reached further until he could put a hand on her bare knee. He could feel a wave run from his hand to her body. It made her let out a small noise.

"Oh god," she muttered and before Taroc could do anything she lunged forward and pressed her lips against his. Her hands quickly pulled up his robe and threw it off. The runes pushed both of them onward with the passion, but it was her that led the way back up to the bed and onward. She took control.

It wasn't that Taroc had not been with women before. Despite finding faith as early as the age of five, his early years had included plenty of whores and women who had shared his bed, but after fully taking to the priestly cloth such encounters had been rare. Strictly speaking there shouldn't have been any, but who could really live such a life?

Erring was human after all and the lord of everything was forgiving for the weaknesses of humans.

And it felt good not being in control once in a while.

Especially when there was no downside to it.

It was passionate to the point where Taroc began to question whether he had never met the woman before. It was the sort of sex you had when you were in love and had mapped the others person body down to the last hair. The glow of the runes lit the room long after the lamp had ran out of oil and the only sounds were the heavy breathing and moans of the two people wrapped around each other.

Whether it was morning or the next night when the passion started to die down, neither of them could say. Nell laid on top of him, her head resting against

his shoulder. Both were covered in sweat.

“That..was exactly what I needed,” said Nell and raised her head to look him in the eyes. Her brown hair was a mess and framed her face like a waterfall. There was a healthy red on her cheeks and a spark in her eyes that had not been there before.

Taroc couldn't quite share the sentiment, but he wasn't going to complain. “I imagine you do not get the chance for it very often.”

She laughed. It was an infectious kind. “No. Been years since I last had a man.”

Their moment was interrupted by a knock on the door. It made Nell roll off from him and grab the blanket to cover herself with. She looked worried. Maybe she feared it was one of the sisters.

“Who is it?” asked Taroc in a loud voice. He suspected it was one of his men.

“It's Atomy, sir.”

“Right. Come in.” The words left his lips before his brain could scream. Just as the man opened the door and stepped in his brain kicked in. He had to stash his hand under the blanket to hide the runes which also led to the awkward positioning that made it look like he was fondling her breasts. The breasts of the man's sister who was entering the room.

“Atty!” Nell greeted the man, sounding happy enough to see him.

“Nell,” said Atomy in a less pleased voice. The fact his boss was laying naked in bed with her did not seem to phase him at all. “You should probably come outside, boss. Things are starting to get a bit out of control. It's been a day, after all.”

“Has it?” asked Taroc. Time really flew when you were having fun.

“Yes,” said Atomy and did his best to ignore his sister.

“I'm.. I'm sorry you had to walk in on us like this. I wasn't thinking.”

“It's all right, sir. I once walked in on her fucking the blacksmiths apprentice, the baker's apprentice and the town hooligan, all at the same time. Ain't nothing I haven't seen before. But if you would come outside, there are things needing your attention.”

“I'll get dressed,” said Taroc. He felt Nell shift by her and a hard nipple brush

against his hand. It took a lot of mental gymnastics not to get excited once more. That would have been the last straw in front of Atomy.

"I'll wait outside," said Atomy and turned to leave.

"It's nice to see you again, Atty," said Nell and received no response as the door closed behind the man. She let out a disappointed sigh. "I suppose you can't erase your past mistakes so easily."

Taroc sat up and started to look for his robe. "Was what he said true?"

"About the three men? Yes." She did not seem embarrassed by it at all. "I suppose there's no point in trying to deny who I am. Not when I've been taken over by these things." She'd let the blanket drop and frowned at the runes on her body.

Taroc found his robe in a pile on the floor and started putting it on. "Just don't go showing them off to strangers. It will get you killed."

"So now you're the only man I can sleep with? Good tactic you have." It was obvious from her tone of voice she was saying it in jest, but at the same time it was the truth. At least to an extent.

"It wasn't my intention," said Taroc and fastened his belt around his waist to tie down his robe. "You should get dressed as well. I don't want to let you out of my sight just yet."

Nell sighed and stood up from the bed. She stretched for a long time, forcing Taroc to watch her body tense up and relax in a mesmerizing display. He could feel blood rushing to his groin, but tried his best not to let that take over his mind. Atomy had asked him to come out. Something had happened that required his attention. He breathed a little easier once Nell had her nuns robe on her and the white cap covered her head along with her neck.

"Not a single word of any of this to my men," said Taroc with his hand on the door handle. Nell had stopped behind him and nodded when he looked back. Taroc nodded back and opened the door.

As he had promised Atomy was waiting in the corridor. There was enough sunlight coming in from the windows above him that there was no need for torches or lamps.

"So what's the problem?" asked Taroc and started to follow Atomy when he

pushed himself off the wall he had been leaning against and started walking towards the end of the corridor where the exit was.

“Well, we did as you told us to. We swept the place during the night, secured all the nuns and confiscated any weapons we found. A we found a lot. Could equip a small army with what these ladies have stored.”

“The bandits harass us from time to time,” said Nell and both men glanced at her. “We've been forced to know how to protect ourselves.”

“Maybe so,” said Atomy. “Doesn't make it any less strange to find a bunch of nuns armed to the teeth.”

“Atomy,” Taroc interjected. The conversation was getting off topic.

“Right, boss,” said the man and continued with the explanation. “Like I said, we had the nuns secured and tied down. Then the men happened to find the sacramental wines and popped open a barrel or two. Didn't see nothing wrong with it. Kept a sober head myself. Figured they'd earned a bit of loosening up. But with enough wine in them they started to get a bit rowdy.”

“How rowdy, exactly?” Taroc had a bad feeling. There were some men in the company that could get very nasty when the mood hit them.

“Bad.” Atomy opened the door and led the pair to the outside on the side where the garden was.

He didn't need to say more. The scene opening before them on the yard told the story better than any amount of words could have. One of Taroc's guards was passed out under a tree. His back rested against the trunk and his hand was wrapped around the naked body of one of the younger nuns. His palm rested firmly on a bare breast. The frightened woman stared at Taroc wild eyed. She looked like there had been no sleep for her all night. The terrified expression was enough to tell you the reason for it.

Taroc's gaze wandered off of there and onto the rest of the yard. There was a knocked over barrel not far from the terrified nun. Next to it stood another with the lid still on. A few more of his men were sprawled on the grass, looking like they had emptied the first barrel between the two of them. Taroc shook his head.

“It wasn't supposed to go like this,” said Taroc.

“It's my fault, sir,” said Atomy. “I didn't keep a close enough eye on them.”

Especially Jeder.”

“What did he do?” asked Taroc, knowing he would not like the answer. Atomy motioned for the pair to follow and so they did. Nell looked uncomfortable with everything she was witnessing. As they walked through the garden there were several more men sprawled about with more naked nuns with them. Some of the women were fast asleep, unconscious or dead. Taroc didn't stop to find out.

When he saw what Atomy had wanted to show them, Taroc was left with no doubt she was dead.

At least he assumed it was a she. It was hard to tell. The body was tied to a tree. All the skin had been peeled off, revealing muscle and tissue that should have been under cover of skin. There were clearly visible tears here and there on the chest which made Taroc think Jeder had used his favourite tool: the metal claw that was used to tear away the breasts. The flayed off skin was in a pile at her feet along with blood, pieces of muscle and guts that had been pulled out from her stomach. Though the body was under the shade of the tree, there were already flies buzzing around.

Nell let out a short gasp when she saw the display before turning around. Atomy glanced at her, but said nothing. It was hard to tell whether he cared or not.

“Where's Jeder?” asked Taroc. He was starting to understand the situation they were in. There would be no walking away from the monastery without doing some drastic things. Word could not get out that his men had acted in such a way.

“I have him locked up in one of the chambers,” said Atomy.

“How the hell could you let this happen?” Taroc turned to face the captain.

Atomy gave his neck an uncomfortable rub. “I may have enjoyed the wine a tad too much as well despite intending to keep a sober head.”

“You always did like the ale and wine,” said Nell in a quiet voice.

“Nothing wrong with that,” Atomy snapped back at her and gave her a glare, though it went unseen as she still had her back turned to the pair.

“There is if it gets you into fights and other trouble,” said Nell, not phased by the tone of her brother.

“Why are you even here?” asked Atomy and looked ready to walk over to her and do something he'd regret later.

“Enough!” Taroc glared at both of them. His words had been harsh enough that Nell had turned around and witnessed the full fury of his gaze. “This is already a disaster and I don't need you two siblings adding drama to it.” His thoughts raced. How to hide what had happened so the bishops and cardinals wouldn't be crying for his slow and painful death. It was a justified demand that Taroc couldn't really bring himself to blame anyone for having, but it didn't mean he would happily agree to be killed.

“What do you want to do, boss?” The silence had Atomy shifting uneasy.

“I'm still trying to decide,” said Taroc and sighed. At least the runes weren't trying to guide him. Maybe they were waiting to see what his own decision would be before stepping in to impose their will on him. “How's Jeder? Drunk out of his mind?”

“I'd imagine he's praying to god right now to get rid of the headache he must be having,” said Atomy with a grin.

“Good. Let's go make his day worse,” said Taroc and let Atomy lead the way. Nell followed without even being asked. She seemed eager to get away from the dead nun. It wasn't a long walk to the building where the madman had been locked up. Atomy pulled out a key as they walked the corridor leading to the room that had been turned into a short term cell. The doors along the way looked sturdy.

“This place looks like a prison,” said Taroc.

“It is,” said Nell. “This is where they hold the Broken Ones. Though there aren't any at the moment.”

“Ah,” said Taroc. Broken Ones. They were the crazy people no one else wanted to deal with. People who didn't deserve death, but could not be trusted to remain in what ever village had the misfortune of being their birth place. They weren't dangerous on most occasions, but the delusions that over took some could make them unpredictable. There were occasions when they turned violent, but most of the time the worst thing was having to listen to their ramblings. Most of them wound up in monasteries, looked after by the monks and nuns, while the

less fortunate ones found themselves lynched by their own village for being possessed by demons.

Atomy stopped by one of the doors and opened it up. The room beyond was small with barely enough room for the bed. The figure huddled on the rough mattress looked miserable enough and groaned at the screech the door made when it opened. After Taroc and Atomy made their way inside there was not much more room to move around.

“Please. No loud noises,” said the familiar though more miserable than usual voice of Jeder.

“Get up, Jeder!” Taroc used a loud voice to bring more misery to the hungover man. The man groaned and rolled out of the bed. He swayed from side to side when he stood up and the bloodshot eyes that tried to focus on Taroc struggled to stay open.

“Ah, the inquisitor himself,” Jeder muttered.

Taroc gave him a hard slap on the ear. It nearly sent the man tumbling down on the floor, but he managed to get support from the wall to stay upright. Taroc noticed the engraving on the wall. Some of the previous inhabitants had left their marks with crazy rants. “Do you have any idea what you have done?”

Jeder shook his head, though he looked to regret the motion as soon as he did so. “My memory of last night is a bit fuzzy.”

“You tortured and killed a nun!” Taroc screamed at him with all the anger he could muster over it.

Jeder looked stumped for a moment and blinked lazily a few times. “Sounds like something I’d do.”

“Do you have any idea the trouble that puts you in? Puts me in? Puts everyone under my command in?” Taroc’s voice was starting to calm down, though the underlying anger was still there.

“I’ll pay for it,” said Jeder.

“Pay for it?” Taroc demanded. “This isn’t something you can get out of with coins you fool!”

“A finger,” Jeder offered.

Taroc went silent for a moment. Jeder was of the old style mercenaries. If

they made a mistake they would pay for it with a part of their body. Fingers were common and valued ones since they directly affected how well one could perform their duties as a soldier. A man with three fingers per hand wasn't going to swing a sword like someone with a full hand. He was about to dismiss the idea as inadequate when the runes on his arms started to get warm. He glanced back and saw the wide eyes on Nell. She had backed herself against the wall opposite to the door and looked ready to scream. Taroc gave her a nod and she seemed to calm down a bit.

“All right, but one finger isn't going to be enough,” said Taroc and turned his attention back to Jeder.

Jeder grimaced. “Two fingers?”

“An ear,” said Taroc and felt the runes pulse. He could almost feel them creep up inside his head and push the portion that made people feel pleasure. It worried him that he was turning into a sadistic bastard like Jeder was.

“Eh, I don't listen much anyway,” said Jeder and shrugged. “A finger and an ear it is.”

“Now get yourself together and get outside and clean up your mess. We're going to have to do something very unpleasant to hide all of this and it needs to look right,” said Taroc and turned to leave. Atomy and Nell followed on his heels soon after.

“Is that it?” asked Atomy. He had clearly expected more. Perhaps even the death of Jeder.

“For Jeder, yes. I think there will be punishment enough for all of us in what we have to do now,” said Taroc. He pushed open the door and entered the garden once more. A few of his men were moving about now, looking bewildered and hungover.

“What is the plan?” asked Atomy.

Taroc bit down on his lower lip before letting out a sigh. “We're going to have to cover all of this up. The only way we can do that is to burn everything down. Kill all the nuns and make it look like bandits did it.” The moment the words left his lips the runes warmed up, signalling their approval. A glance at Nell and her shocked expression told him he needed to have a talk with her.

"That's a bit much, isn't it?" asked Atomy.

Taroc turned to regard the man. It was unusual for him to be concerned with going too far. "There isn't anything else we can hope to do. You know what will happen to us if the higher ups find out what has taken place here. It won't be just Jeder going to the stake to be burned."

Atomy let out a litany of curses that would have had a hardened sailor feeling proud. "All right. We'll do what we have to do."

Taroc nodded. "Get the men in order. Start killing the nuns, planting weapons on them and spreading the bodies around. It needs to look like there was an actual fight."

Atomy nodded and left with an expression that told he was not at all happy about the order.

"Are you all right?" asked Taroc and turned his attention to Nell.

She nodded. "It's not like I was here out of my own will. More a prisoner than anything. The nuns aren't my friends. They're my guards and torturers. They'd try and whip the evil out of me. I swear some of them enjoyed inflicting pain on me."

"Come on. This isn't going to be pretty. We'll get what ever belongings you have and you can go wait in my carriage." Taroc extended a hand to her.

"I'm coming with you?" she asked and looked into his eyes.

"Of course. The runes have chosen you."

There wasn't much she gathered up. Most of her worldly belongings had been burned once she had stepped inside the monastery. By the time Taroc led her to the carriage and closed the door on her his men were slaughtering the first of the nuns. They placed bodies near the gate and put swords in their hands. Those carrying bows were placed a bit further away. Some were shot with arrows, others had their bodies pierced by swords and some unlucky ones had a hand chopped off to give the impression that there had been an attempt to defend the place. Once the bodies were in place no one would have questioned whether they died fighting or while being held down by two men as a third one ended their life. There weren't many valuables to take, but some had to be taken to make it look like there had actually been bandits. Tarocs men stashed golden idols and other

small object in their own belongings while some of the few bigger ones were simply hidden where the nuns would have put them. It was reasonable to expect the bandits wouldn't find something carefully hidden.

The last thing to do was to set the place on fire. While much of the place was made of stone there were wooden support beams and ceiling structures that would easily burn. Black smoke rose to the sky when Taroc's carriage rolled out the gate, followed by his men.

"Are you all right?" asked Taroc and gave Nell a look. She sat opposite to him, looking pale.

"I'm fine," she said and gave him a small smile. Before he could say anything more she had moved from her seat to his lap, the hems of her robe hiked up. He could feel her hips grinding against his. She sighed. "Lord knows this isn't the time or the place, but you will have to keep me satisfied since you're the only one I can be with. Blame your runes."

"But..."

"Sssh," said Nell and kissed him. "I was in the monastery for a reason. They did their best to beat the demon out of me, but they failed. I can't fight who I am."

Her hands worked their way under Taroc's robe. He didn't say anything to discourage her.

Chapter 7

“Civilization,” said Taroc with no small amount of relief in his voice as he watched the city gates go past and the tall stone buildings come to view.

“Maybe I can have a hot bath,” said Nell with a longing in her voice. They had been on the road and camping for the past week and a half. Some of that time had been spent in the middle of the woods, letting time go by so the incident at the monastery would not be connected to them.

“I'm certain that can be arranged.” Taroc turned from the outside view and watched her. She still wore the nun robes and the headpiece that covered her hair. He had seen her without it enough times to remember every detail. She really was insatiable when it came to sex and in the past week Taroc had had her all over him more times than all the women combined before her. The death of the nuns and the destruction of the monastery had done nothing to sate her appetite for sex, though it didn't seem to bother her that much to begin with. Like she had said, they had not been her friends, but rather her prison guards.

His gaze went back to the carriage window just as Jeder rode past. His left ear was missing. The wound was still wrapped in cloth as was the missing finger on his left hand. He had delivered on his promised payment the day after they had left the monastery in ruins. He had brought the cut off parts to Taroc, wrapped in a piece of cloth. The wounds had still been bleeding and unwrapped. Atomy had taken him away and burned shut the wounds with hot iron and then applied some rudimentary healing lotion on it to hopefully stave off any infection.

“Berecor is a large city,” said Taroc, more to himself than Nell. “I'll have to visit the bishop. He's bound to have heard of my arrival and not meeting him would raise questions.”

“What if he has heard of the monastery?” asked Nell. News could have already travelled before them of the tragedy. They'd spent enough time waiting for that to happen.

“Don't you worry about that. That's my problem to take care of.”

“But I'm the only survivor,” said Nell. Her worried expression added weight to

her words.

Taroc leaned back in his seat. The cobblestone made the carriage stutter more than the beaten paths of the country roads. "Can you read?"

The question seemed to take Nell by surprise. "A little, but only in Adalachian."

"That's good enough," said Taroc. "If anyone asks, you are from the monastery, but left with me before the attack happened. You're here to help me go through books and become a member of the inquisition. That should satisfy anyone's curiosity."

"Am I here for that?" asked Nell. The carriage slowed down to make a turn around a tight corner. They left behind the main road that cut through the city and entered a narrower side street.

"Do you want to?" Taroc examined her. Despite spending much of his time with her naked and wrapped in each others bodies, he had come to the conclusion she had a sharp mind. The runes connected them in a way that could not be broken, but it wasn't the sum of their relationship, nor was her insatiable desire for sex.

"I would like to be of use," said Nell. "Maybe Atty won't give me those looks so much."

Taroc had to admit Atomy had taken things well all things considered. He knew full well his boss was fucking his sister, but it didn't seem to bother him that much. Perhaps it came down to knowing how she was. He had grown up seeing it develop into the problem that had sent her to the monastery. Still, he gave looks now and then that were full of resentment and judgement.

"Don't worry about Atomy," said Taroc. "He is paid to do a job and that's what he does. If I tell him to leave you be then that is what he will do."

Nell sighed. "I don't want him to leave me alone. I'm his sister. He's family. I would like to be closer with him. Can you understand that?"

Taroc shrugged. "I'm an orphan. Never had brothers or sister or even parents that I can remember. The monks raised me and later the inquisition. If the product of farmers is the grain from their fields then I'm the grain of the church."

"I feel sorry for you," said Nell. The look she gave him made Taroc's heart feel

tight at the sense of loss. What had he missed in his life for not having parents? What joys and sorrows had gone by without touching him. Had the monks raised him only to be their tool instead of a human being?

“Don't,” said Taroc. “I've done enough things in my life that I regret to make me beyond any pity. I'm a tool for the faith, nothing more and nothing less. You wouldn't feel sorry for the anvil of a blacksmith?”

Nell said nothing, but turned to look out the window. From the way she carried herself it was obvious she wanted to say something, but had decided it would be better to remain silent. Taroc was happy to leave it at that for now. The conversation had been heading down a path he did not wish to travel. The runes were already making him question things enough. No need to add in his own doubts about the motives the monks had had in raising him.

The carriage rolled to a stop. The familiar feather shaped sign felt welcoming to Taroc. It wasn't his first time staying at *The Feather*. It was a quality inn with good food and beds that were free from lice. But before getting to enjoy the freshly baked bread and meat stew the place was famous for, there was something he needed to see to.

“You get off here,” he said to Nell. “I must go see the bishop. He will want to see me eventually and the sooner I get that off my plate the better it will be for all of us.”

“Will you be long?” she asked.

“That's up to the bishop,” said Taroc. “I'll leave a few men with you. The innkeeper will look after you. Anything you need.”

“Maybe I'll get that bath,” said Nell with a feint smile and opened the carriage door. She stepped out with the help of one of the guards. As soon as the door was shut again the carriage nudged forward at Taroc's command. He didn't need to tell the destination. The driver had his instructions from the morning they'd started to travel.

The buildings they passed started to turn taller and fancier. The people on the street wore better fabrics and more colours, telling of their increased wealth compared to the common people that had populated much of the outer city. Finally, the carriage came to a halt in front of a black iron gate that guarded the

entrance to a walled off house. Taroc stepped out and took in the familiar sight. The bishop's residence was well guarded and from the inside it was as luxurious as any noble's residence would be.

It was only fitting for a man who wielded just as much power, if not more, than many of the landed nobles.

Looking through the gate he could see the fine gravel path that cut through the green grass and made its way to the front of the house. Trees lined it on both sides and beyond those trees laid the rest of the garden with its various flowerbeds and other beautifications.

He walked over to the gate and exchanged a few words with a guard through the gate. It didn't take long for the black gate to creak open and for a servant to come and guide him to the main house. Not that Taroc needed a guide. He knew the way after having taken it more times than he could remember.

There were more guards than one might have expected of a man of the church, but there were historical reasons for it. The faith had not always been as dominant as it was now. There had been times when leaders had been found lying in bed with a dagger sticking out of their chest. The policies of that time were still in place so a man of the stature of a bishop was bound by edict to have a certain amount of people protecting them.

"How has the bishop been lately?" asked Taroc of the servant guiding him. The young man pushed open the main door and stepped aside to let Taroc in while he held the door. His brown hair looked like someone had stuck a pot on his head and cut the hair around the edge of it.

"He is well," said the servant. His voice cracked which made him cringe. He closed the door and started to lead Taroc across the marble floor and up the staircase that was directly opposite to the door.

"That is good to hear," said Taroc as he looked up and admired the painting on the domed ceiling. It was in the style that many churches had and depicted the last meal the Holy One had had with his disciples. "I feared that I might not be in time to meet him again. The bishop was rather poorly the last time I was here."

"It is not really my place to be commenting on the details of the bishop's health," said the servant. He quickly added, "Inquisitor."

Taroc nodded, ignoring the fact the servant didn't have eyes on the back of his head. He had not lied about how badly off the bishop had been on his last visit. He had looked frail, laying in that large bed of his. The coughs had sounded like they'd dislodged his lungs and he had not been eating well. The healers had thought it to be the end, but it seemed that was not the case.

Not that the bishop being dead would have bothered Taroc much.

The servant boy led him to a door and knocked on it. A voice from inside welcomed them in so the boy opened the door and introduced Taroc.

"Taroc. This is a surprise," said the bishop from behind his desk. There were piles of papers in front of him. Being a bishop did require one to do some administrative work among other things.

"You flatter me, bishop," said Taroc as he stepped inside the room. There were a few chairs for guests to sit on, but the rest of the room was taken by bookshelves and books. "To think I managed to slip into the city without you hearing about it before me."

A smile passed the bishops lips. The many wrinkles of his face and the saggy skin made it hard to say what his expression was elsewhere. He motioned for Taroc to take a seat. "I may be old, but my hearing hasn't worsened."

"I must admit I'm pleased to see you are doing better, bishop. Last time I saw you you were under the weather." Taroc took the seat that had been pointed out to him. The bishop sat down in his comfy chair and leaned back.

"Come now, Taroc. You know you can call me Eaton."

"Not without you asking," said Taroc. Even if he knew the man for a long time, he was still a bishop and showing the proper respect was the only right thing to do. At least until told otherwise.

"But yes, I am better, for now," said Eaton. "But I fear age has nibbled away most of what keeps death away."

"It is how we were made," said Taroc. He could feel the runes warm up a bit on his arm. He prayed they wouldn't make him do anything.

"Indeed," said Eaton and gave Taroc a stern stare. "I hear you have been quite busy lately."

"I assume you're referring to what happened at the Caldevan monastery?"

The old man gave a nod.

“I must admit I was shocked at what I discovered there.” Taroc shifted in his seat. “Hard choices had to be made, but they were necessary. I stand by what I did there.”

“I knew the abbot quite well,” said Eaton.

Taroc could feel his throat tighten. While there was no malice in the bishops' voice, no accusation of wrong doing, he couldn't help but feel his ruse had been seen through as if it wasn't there.

“He ran that monastery well,” Eaton continued. “I was honestly surprised to read your report on what was going on. I suppose it only proves the necessity of what you are doing. If a man like him can stray from the path then there is no man beyond falling.”

Taroc felt a bit of relief at hearing the words. It seemed there was no reason to worry. The runes on his arm started to feel colder again. “It is a sad reality that our faith is under attack daily and even the most observant and pious of us are not safe from the temptations that entice us.”

“The Holy One was wise to set up the Inquisition. And you, Taroc. I'm hard pressed to think of a more hard working and trustworthy member of it.”

“You honour me with your words, bishop.” Taroc gave a small nod to acknowledge the praise. It was rare to hear it coming from Eaton. He was usually a strict man who gave out praise sparingly.

“Still, I am distressed to hear the latest news.”

“What news?” Taroc had a bad feeling he already knew what would be mentioned next. Nothing slipped past the old man.

“The St. Monchel monastery was sacked,” said Eaton and frowned with disgust. “No survivors. The state of some of the bodies suggests there was torture before it all got burned down.”

“That can't be,” said Taroc well aware he was on thin ice now. He had to play his part perfectly. “It was only a few days ago that I was there.”

“Really?” asked Eaton. To Taroc's relief the bishop looked genuinely surprised.

Taroc nodded. “I found myself needing a trustworthy assistant to go through

the books. It was a massive undertaking in Caldevan and had I had someone to help me it would have gone much quicker. One of my men mentioned his sister was at St. Monchel and could likely help so we went there to find out. Turned out she was exactly what I was looking for so she came with me. We must have left only a day or two before the attack.” He shook his head. “If we hadn't left we could have prevented it from happening.”

“Don't blame yourself for something others have done,” said the bishop. “It's all part of the plan. Thinking you or any man could alter it for their own good is the epitome of hubris.”

“Do we know who is behind the attack?” asked Taroc. He prayed for a favourable answer that would direct attention away from him and his men. The runes on his arms warmed up ever so slightly in anticipation. It was like they were preparing for a worst case scenario with an intelligence no simple marking should have.

Eaton shrugged. “The woods are crawling with bandits. Probably one of those groups. It's not the first time they've attacked the monastery, but it is the first time they've been so brutal about it. We can not let this go without setting an example.”

“Aren't the local lords handling the matter?”

The bishop snorted. “Those fools couldn't find a bandit even if you brought one tied up in front of them. No. We need someone with certain abilities to find those responsible and see that they are judged according to the laws of our god. I want you to handle this matter.”

It wasn't what Taroc had expected. It was rare for the church to step into the territory that belonged in the hands of the lords. Simple bandits were such a matter. Even more so, why waste an inquisitor on it even if a monastery had been attacked? He didn't have the men to take on a bunch of armed men that would certainly be needed to take down the well armed nuns.

The runes on his arms seemed to disagree as they got hotter when they sensed his reluctance.

“I must admit that hunting down criminals in the woods is not exactly my strong suit,” said Taroc. While he was good at hunting down people with

dissenting beliefs it was a different game from rummaging through the wilderness. That and his current amount of men were unlikely to be enough to handle the hunt since the bandit group was much more willing to fight back than monks and other ordinary people.

“But you know how to get people to talk,” said the bishop. “Hire a woodsman to do the tracking. Money is not going to be an issue. I will ensure that.”

Taroc was left with no choice. He nodded. “Very well. I will see to the matter, though I must warn you that I will be needing to hire some men.”

Eaton nodded and reached for a drawer on his desk. He pulled out a heavy looking pouch and tossed it over to Taroc. The weight of it surprised him, but the sound of coins clinging together told him it was exactly what he needed.

“If you need more all you have to do is ask. This matter is important. With everything that is going on we must look strong in matters such as these.” A frown appeared on Eaton when he spoke.

Taroc did not miss the concern that had crept into the bishop's voice. He had been travelling for a fair while now and it had been too long since he'd been up to date on the internal happenings of the faith. “Have the reformists grown bolder?”

Eaton sighed. “Last month a manifesto was nailed to the door of the Cathedral of Benevolence. Right at the heart of our faith!”

“What did it say?” asked Taroc even though he could guess the general gist of the content.

“It was a declaration of war,” said Eaton. “Or might as well have been. It laid out the basic tenets of the heretics and called for the Holy One to be cast out as a false god. Thankfully the message was caught quickly and removed. Few commoners had the time to see it, much less those who knew how to read it.”

“That must have ruffled some feathers,” said Taroc.

“You have no idea. The cardinals were shouting at the head inquisitor for hours to get this thing stomped out. They do not understand the difficulties of rooting out something like this.”

“Few can appreciate it before doing it,” said Taroc. He knew the bishop well enough to know he had been an inquisitor earlier in his life. He had a moderate amount of fame for catching a few notable lords for being heretics. It was what

had ultimately led to him becoming a bishop. He had to admit part of him was hoping that was the path he was on himself. Now, with the runes on his arms, he doubted that would ever happen.

“It's not just that declaration that has them on edge,” said Eaton. “Your report from the monastery has raised some eyebrows. They are starting to question whether the brothers living in isolation are straying from the path. They're thinking of ways to prevent that from happening. Harsh means.”

“There's a limit to what the lords will stand for,” said Taroc. It was an age old contest of power. The church and the nobles had been at odds ever since the Holy One managed to convince some kings to turn over land to the church. Traditionally religion had been kept out of the land owning and wielding earthly power, but that had been broken with that decision and some lords did not take it well.

“The lords will bend to the will of the church or they'll be torn to pieces by the peasantry,” said Eaton in a cold voice. “The cardinals are past playing nice. They want this situation resolved.”

“It is my experience that mistakes are made when you let emotions cloud your judgement. I worry that the cardinals will push things beyond a point where something will give.”

The bishop snorted. “I would not go spreading such thoughts outside this room. In the current climate that might land you in some trouble.”

Taroc realized he had said too much. “My apologies. The doubts rise to the top easily.”

Eaton waved a hand. “It's all right. I think I've kept you long enough. Go. Get what you need and hunt down those bandits.”

Taroc stood up and nodded. “I will keep you up to date on my progress.”

The bishop nodded and Taroc left the room. The servant escorted him out and all the way to the gate and watched him climb in before turning and leaving. Taroc instructed the driver to take him to the inn. He rested a cheek against his palm and watched the streets go past him. The runes were still ever so slightly warm which worried him a bit. It was the first time they had shown such a long but tepid response to anything.

“Dammit,” he muttered to himself. The job of hunting down bandits in the woods didn't sound like it would be a comfortable stint. It wouldn't be hard to find a group to pin the blame on, but there was always a risk of something slipping out. Especially when he'd need to bring in outside help. His own men he could trust to a certain extent to remain silent about things that weren't exactly above bar. Someone from the outside might turn out troublesome.

The carriage came to a halt at the inn and interrupted Taroc's worries. He climbed out and ordered the men to see to the horses and then get some rest.

Stepping inside he was greeted by a large common room with plenty of tables for customers to sit and enjoy their food and drink. There were a dozen or so people there doing just that on top of Atomy and the rest of the men. It looked like they had had time to enjoy more than a few pints of ale. There were scraps of a meal left on their plates. Judging by what was left it had been some bone in ham along with roasted root vegetables. Nell was not among the people in the room and that made Taroc curious. Though upon thinking about it she must have retired to her room or maybe she had not had time to finish that bath of hers.

“Atomy,” Taroc called for the captain and sat down at a table that was away from where the rest of the men were. Atomy walked over with a tankard in one hand and a piece of bread in the other. As he took a seat opposite to Taroc he dipped the bread in his tankard and took a bite of the now moistened dark bread.

“The bishop gave us a new mission,” said Taroc.

Atomy finished chewing his bite. “What do we need to do?”

“Hunt down the people who burned down the monastery.”

Atomy grew grim at hearing that. “How are you going to handle this?”

Taroc did not miss that the burden was put on him. There was no we when it came to getting everyone out of trouble. It always seemed to fall squarely on him. He pulled out the pouch of coins and set it on the table. The sound of coins hitting each other was unmistakable. “We're going to hire a guide, someone who knows the woods around there, and some additional men. Then we're going out there and we're going to find us some bandits. We'll make them confess, kill them and be done with it.”

Atomy gulped down some of what ever he had in his tankard and grimaced. "Well, it's not *that* different from what we usually do." Though he did not sound overly pleased about it.

"Take the coins and get what we need. I trust you to know better than I do," said Taroc.

Atomy took the pouch and weighed it before stashing it in a pocket that looked as safe as any place. "The bandit groups around there can grow pretty big. We might in for some tough times even with additional men."

"If you need more gold that can be arranged. The bishop assured me of that. Just get reliable men. The sort that don't ask too many questions or tell everyone what they've seen. We don't want any loose ends on this one."

Atomy nodded. "I'll see to it."

"Good." Taroc returned the nod and then turned his attention to other matters. "Where's Nell?"

"She took her sweet time in the bath and then after eating a bit of something she went up to your room." The words came out without judgement or any hint of how he felt about it. The man could be as hard to read as stone when he decided on it. It was an admirable feature in someone in his line of work, but sometimes it made Taroc worry more than feel at ease.

"The usual room?" asked Taroc.

Atomy nodded.

"Alright. I'm going to grab something to eat and then retire. Try to get everything sorted out by tomorrow, the day after tomorrow the latest. We need to act on this quickly."

"I'll do my best, boss. Finding good men can hard at times."

Taroc stood up. "I trust you will not disappoint me. You haven't so far." Before heading up to where the rooms were he stopped by the counter and asked for some food and drink to take with him. It wasn't much, a slice of bread with some cheese and meat on it along with a tankard of ale, but it was better than nothing. Up the stairs, to the left and he was soon standing in front of the door to his room. He hoped the door wouldn't be locked and pushed down the handle with his elbow. Both his hands were taken up by the food and drink. To his relief

the handle went down and the door swung open.

A decently sized room greeted him. There was a double bed which seemed like a rare thing for an inn to have. A single window let in light. It had actual glass on it. It was of high quality too, not that murky lead laden stuff that the glass master had deemed unsuitable for proper use and sold it on the cheap. A small desk and chair stood next to the window.

Nell was sitting on the bed. She was focused on the book in her lap. When he saw which book it was, Taroc quickly slammed the door shut behind him and rushed to place his food and drink on the desk. "What are you doing?" he demanded, almost frantic.

She jumped up, startled. The book fell on the floor. Her robe parted. It was clear she had been getting ready to turn in. It was getting late, but the sun still offered some light through the window.

"I was just... I don't know," said Nell and looked lost. "It was in your trunk. Even though it was wrapped up I was drawn to it. I had to dig it out. I had to take it out and touch it."

Taroc walked over to her and grabbed her by the shoulders. His grip was firm, but not enough to hurt her. He looked straight into her eyes. "Did you open it? Did you read it?"

Nell looked back at him, frightened. She shook her head. "No. I just held the book. I didn't even open it."

Taroc let out a breath of relief. He loosed his grip on her shoulders and instead started to stroke them in an effort to soothe her and himself. "Good. That's good. We don't need any more troubles. We're in plenty of it already."

"I know," said Nell in a quiet voice.

Both of them were startled when both their runes started glowing. They felt hot to the point of being painful. Taroc could see Nell struggle with crying out. He had to admit it was hard for him to keep silent as well. It was so sudden the shock alone had him wanting to cry out. It wasn't hard to determine what the runes wanted. He glanced at the book. Another lie waited for them. It wanted out. It wanted to be with its comrades.

"We can't," Taroc managed to breathe out.

“I want to,” said Nell and started reaching for the book. Taroc's mind told his body to stop her, but nothing happened. He watched her crouch down and pick up the cursed text. The power of the runes intensified and left him with no will to fight back. He reached out and grabbed the book from her. If nothing else, he would be the one to do the reading. He took a seat on the bed. Nell quickly joined him. She pressed close to him so she could see the pages as Taroc turned them. The empty ones went by fast, but at the last one he stopped. He remembered well how many pages there were. The next one held the next lie, the next set of runes that would etch onto their skin if he flipped forward and read it. Even as the burning intensified he hesitated. There would be no turning back, though it felt like that opportunity had long passed.

He was startled back from his thoughts when Nell put her hand on his. “We'll do it together,” she said and tightened her grip before guiding his hand to turn the page. The next lie was neatly written on the page, like the others had been.

The Third Lie

*One wheel is a child's play thing. Two can make a carriage, but a third
between the two brings about new possibilities.*

The page flipped by itself to reveal the following runes. They shot out from the page the instant they came to view and wrapped around both Taroc and Nell. All the runes on their skin came alive and started to re-arrange themselves. The burning intensified so that they both fell back on the bed and started to claw out of their robes. By the end of it they were both on the bed, naked, panting and sweaty. Taroc glanced over at her. Where the runes had previously wrapped around her breasts they now covered them, leaving only her nipples void of any markings. From each breast a line ran downward towards her belly, where the lines met up and formed a circle around her bellybutton.

Turning to look at himself Taroc was disappointed to see the runes were still on his arms. A separate cluster of them had appeared on his chest in the shape of a small spiral. It was as incomprehensible as it had been since the first day. The burning sensation was slowly fading away and the blue glow of the runes

was dying down.

“Are you all right?” Taroc's voice sounded like he'd been without drink for several days. His words ended in a cough.

Nell turned over him, her legs straddling him on either side as she sat up and looked down at him. There was a glimmer in her eyes that had not been there before. She smiled. “I'm great.” She leaned in and started a passionate kiss with him while grinding her pelvis against his. Taroc did nothing to fight the natural conclusion of the situation and after having made love with her he couldn't deny feeling slightly better.

They both laid on the bed in a daze. Nell had snuggled in his armpit and was tracing the runes on his chest with one hand. “What do you think these really are?”

“I don't know,” said Taroc. “And I haven't got the faintest idea where to start finding out. Most of the texts that would deal with something like this have been destroyed by my eager colleagues.”

“What are these runes going to do to us?” Nell stopped tracing the runes and had her hand wander further down.

“I don't know,” Taroc admitted. “I just.. don't know.”

“Will we die?” her hand wrapped around his manhood and started a gentle stroke.

“I hope not.” Her teasing had gone far enough. Taroc turned on her and silenced her with a passionate kiss. It was the perfect escape from the feeling of helplessness her questions had stirred inside him.

Chapter 8

The city was long behind them and the forests hiding the bandits loomed ahead of them. Taroc and Nell rode in the carriage while the rest surrounded them on their horses. New people had joined them out of necessity so they could do what the bishop had asked of them.

Somewhere Atomy had managed to find them a guide that knew the forests and likely places where bandits would hide. He was the sort of man you'd expect someone who spent most their time away from civilization to be. He didn't speak much and when he did the words were few and crass. His beard was bushy and unkempt and his skin had dirt on it here and there. His clothes were a practical mix of cloth and leather in a dull brown colour. He called himself Kalan. Whether he had a last name was unknown and Taroc had not bothered to find. The man seemed to know what he was doing.

Then there were the two additional swords. Young men who barely had hair on their faces. Tair Aring was the younger of the two. Light leather armour and a sword at his hip made him look like a real soldier along with the metal helmet. His large frame and height made him all the more imposing, but when he got to talking you couldn't help but feel he was a boy trapped in a man's body.

Zak Kalanor was the second man and while he wasn't as big as his friend Tair he wasn't the smallest of men either. His brown hair was cut short with no helmet to hide it. His leather armour had pieces of metal here and there to offer some extra protection. A scar ran down his chin all the way from his lower lip.

Atomy had tested them both and deemed their skills adequate enough. They hadn't asked for too much money and both seemed the sort who could keep their mouths shut. Neither one had a family so if they needed to be shut up the hard way no one would be missing them too much.

Taroc had approved his reasoning and hired them, though he had hoped a few more men could have been found, but when you were in a hurry there were limits to what you could ask for.

They entered the forest with a few hours of sunlight left. Hunting for men in

the dark when they knew the terrain better than you was not a smart thing to do so they stopped early and set up camp. They made no effort to hide their presence. Maybe the bandits would spot them and think they'd make a decent target.

Taroc had never much cared for forests. In the growing darkness the trees became foreboding and in the silence of the night the few noises of the animals became haunting and eerie. Grown men feared venturing deep into unknown woods and Taroc was firmly in that camp. Even when supported by his faith and the escorting soldiers there was a part of him screaming not to go beyond the glow of the camp fire.

“What's the plan then?”

Taroc looked up from the orange flame that had been hypnotising him. Atomy stood to his left and looked anxious. “I don't know. That's why I told you to find someone who knows the forest. They should have some ideas where the bandits could be hiding. Assuming there are any.”

“Oh, there's always bandits about these parts,” Atomy assured him before taking a deep breath and yelling, “Kalan!” He shouted loud enough for everyone in the camp to hear. There were two camp fires, one for the men and one for Taroc and Nell to enjoy in their own peace. The woodsman emerged from the darkness surrounding the camp site and made his way to the two men.

“You called?” Kalan had a rough voice and the way he pronounced words made you think he did not talk much nor have the opportunity to hear others speak.

“What do you think is our best chance of finding the bandits?” It was the second time Taroc talked to the man. The first time had been to welcome him to the group which had not involved much talking. He kept his eyes on the man to learn as much about him as he could.

Kalan stroked his beard with one hand while the other rested at the sturdy leather belt that wrapped around his stomach. “Plenty of places to hide in these woods. Some caves to the west, but the bears and big cats love those. No sane man would stay there. East there's some hard to pass terrain. Rocky hills. Plenty of cracks to crawl into there. But those are out of the way. No where close to

anything you'd want to rob. I'd wager they're not that far from the roads.”

“Any places close to this road where they might be hiding?” Atomy regarded the man with little surprise over how many words had come out of him. At the same time it was obvious he respected the man for being able to tell of such locations.

A shrug was all he got as a response.

“It's a forest,” said Taroc. “There's no shortage of places to hide. They could be a stones throw away from where we are, living happily in log cabins and we wouldn't even know it.”

Kalan nodded. “The inquisitor is right. A skilled man can disappear in these woods and all the kings men wouldn't be able to find them.”

Atomy raked a hand through his hair. “Then how are we supposed to do this?”

“I can help you find spots here and there and keep us from getting lost,” said Kalan. “Maybe track if they've left any trails. It'll take time.”

“We'll be stuck here until winter drives us out,” said Taroc and gave both men a cold stare. “There must be something we can do to make this go quicker.”

“We could try baiting them,” said Atomy. “But that has its risks.”

The risks were obvious. Death. Injury. They had no idea how many bandits there were in the group. Too few men guarding the bait and they'd be dead, too many and they'd be passed over as too difficult a target. Taroc shook his head. “It's too early for that gamble. Let's give Kalan the opportunity to prove his value. We'll let him do some tracking for a few days. See where that lands us.”

Kalan gave a slight nod of appreciation at the trust shown to his skills before turning around and disappearing into the darkness.

“Quite an assumption to think we were done,” said Taroc in a voice he hoped the woodsman wouldn't hear. Who knew how close he was listening in.

“Aren't we?” asked Atomy.

“I suppose so,” said Taroc. “Still, he should have asked permission to leave. I am paying him after all.”

“He's not much for formalities. If he gets the job done then does it matter?”

“It's the principle of it,” said Taroc and gave Atomy a glance. “You wouldn't

want one of your soldiers giving you lip even if he did his duty better than anyone.”

“Fair point,” Atomy admitted. “I’ll have a talk with him.”

“You do that,” said Taroc and stood up. It was late. The last meal of the day rested comfortably in his stomach and caused a yawn to escape his lips. “I think it’s time for some rest. Plenty of things to do tomorrow.”

“Good night,” said Atomy.

Taroc nodded and headed for the tent. Two men stood guard near by, not too close. They wouldn’t be able to hear what was said inside the tent. He was greeted with the flickering light of a lamp and the scent of Nell. He wondered when he had started to notice it, but she had an enticing aroma to her. It lingered after her where ever she went and if she remained in one place for long enough it started to become intoxicating to him. Now, she had occupied the tent ever since camp had been made only to emerge to grab a quick bite to eat.

“I worry if the runes are making me lose my mind,” said Taroc and gave the woman a look. She was resting on the pile of pillows that served as their shared bed. A large blanket underneath the pile extended to cover almost the entire area of the tent and protected them from the coldness of the ground while they walked around.

“Why?” Nell gave him a frightened look.

“Because I swear they are making me smell you.”

“Is that a hint that I should bathe?” she gave him an incredulous look.

Taroc chuckled. “No. I mean.. everywhere you are there is a scent. It’s not unpleasant. Anything but. It drives me nuts. Makes me want to rip your clothes off.”

Nell gave him a long look. “It’s a bit like what I’ve been dealing with all my life.”

“How so?”

“You know why they sent me to that monastery. It’s because I’d fuck anyone that came along. It’s not completely true. I won’t fuck just anyone. Only those that give off the scent.” She sighed. “Unfortunately that seems to be the majority of people.”

“So the runes are making me like you,” said Taroc. He walked over to the pile of pillows and sat down. “That's going to be rough.”

“It's not that bad,” said Nell and reached over to hold his hand. “Just means we have to keep each other satisfied.”

“Are you feeling any changes?” Taroc turned to give her a look. Her robe had hiked up her leg revealing the smooth bare skin.

“I don't know,” she replied and sat up. “Maybe. Things just seem to.. make more sense to me.”

Taroc considered her words for a moment before standing up and going to where his travellers trunk was. He pulled out a book and handed it to Nell. “Read it.”

She took the book and gave it a quick look through. “I don't know the language it's written in.” She looked up at Taroc, confused.

“Just give it a try,” said Taroc in a soft voice. He got a suspicious look from her in return, but she did as told and opened the book to its first page. She started reading the words and only after a few sentences she looked up at Taroc with eyes wide with surprise.

“I can read it. I *understand* it.”

Taroc threw himself onto the pillows again and sighed. “So the runes are giving you my knowledge.”

“Isn't that good?” Nell continued to read the book. “Means I can be of more help.”

“It's good,” Taroc admitted. But he had to continue. “I just don't like the fact the runes are doing this. Changing us in such a way.” Most of all it annoyed him that he seemed to be getting the short end of the stick in the exchange. Nothing but trouble could come from what was happening to him.

“Not much we can do about it,” said Nell and put down the book. She turned her attention to Taroc and snuggled up close to him. Her scent grew stronger and that alone was enough to make his blood rush to places.

“You're right. Focus on things we can do something about,” said Taroc and grabbed her and pulled her close so he could kiss her. The kiss turned into a passion filled entanglement of bodies that sent both of them off to sleep relaxed

and unencumbered by worries.

In the morning the camp was dismantled and the group ventured deeper into the woods. Kalan went ahead of the group in an effort to try and sniff out any clues about the bandits. They stuck to the road to allow the carriage to be useful instead of a hindrance, but by mid-day Taroc was starting to think they should abandon it. It was preventing them from going to the places where a bandit might hide.

The day went by without anything interesting taking place. The weather kept nice and warm and the forest kept being the anxiety inducing monstrosity that made Taroc want to leave. But he couldn't. There was a task to be completed and he had never left a mission from the faith go unfilled. So after a nights rest he called up Atomy and told they would leave the carriage behind and venture deeper into the woods, away from the roads travellers used. They had the extra horses so he and Nell could ride, though it did not make her pleased.

Her protests fell of deaf ears and a few hours later the carriage was safely tucked away and hidden underneath branches and dead leaves so that it was unlikely anyone would find it.

Taroc only hoped they would be able to find it again. Still, he ensured the cursed book was with him along with any other damning or valuable items.

Kalan led the way. He had mentioned finding some signs before having to stop for the night. He led them to broken twigs and trees with scraped bark. Something had passed through there. They found a piece of cloth that looked like it couldn't have been there for long. Small things an observant eye could spot led them deeper in the forest, away from the road and towards the danger that they would have to face.

The rest of the soldiers seemed to take everything in stride. They were alert, but not jumpy or scared like some might have expected. Taroc was the one who nearly jumped at every little noise.

"Relax," said Nell who rode next to him after a hare running off from a bush had made it apparent what stare of mind Taroc was in.

"I am," said Taroc.

"It's just a forest. It's not going to kill you with this many people around."

She spoke with a low enough voice that the men around them wouldn't hear.

“Easy for you to say. I was born in a city. I saw my first forest when I was grown up. They're not my kind of places. And need I remind you, we're hunting for bandits so it's very likely one of those green monstrosities could be hiding a man with a bow.”

“Where's the confident man that swept me away from the monastery?” asked Nell. Her voice had a light heartedness to it, but it stung none the less. Taroc did not reply to her and instead focused on being aware of their surroundings.

He was saved from further discussion when Kalan appeared from a thick bush. He spoke with Atomy for a brief moment. The captain waved Taroc over and he guided his horse to the two men.

“There's a camp,” said Kalan when Taroc got close enough.

“Bandits?” Taroc couldn't hide his excitement. If they were what the group was looking for then he'd be out of the woods and back to doing what he was supposed to. Maybe even finding a way to get rid of the runes.

Kalan shrugged his shoulders. “Hard to say. There's about twenty men that I could see. A couple of women on top of that and a few children.”

“Women and children don't sound like bandits,” said Taroc.

“Could well be,” said Atomy. “They could have captured the women on one of their raids and forced them to do what ever they wanted. The kids could be a result of that. It's not unheard of. They're still human after all.”

“How's the terrain? What's their camp like?” Taroc decided it was best to move on to practical things instead of wondering why there were women. Ultimately it did not matter. They'd either die if they resisted or they'd be rescued if they were prisoners. If they were willingly along then death was the only punishment that could befall them.

Kalan described the area and the camp they had. It was a clearing and they'd built a small fence around their camp, mostly to keep out animals. It didn't look like it was meant to keep out people, but it would certainly offer some protection and slow down anyone looking to attack them. There were several huts that housed them all and there were assigned guards who kept an eye on things and walked around the camp. Kalan drew it all into a rough map in the dirt to

give a better idea of it all.

"It'll be tough," said Atomy. "Our men might be better trained, but that's still around two to one odds for us. It's not unheard of for bandits to be former soldiers, deserters, so they could well be equally trained as we are. Though are we certain these are our bandits?"

Taroc gave him a glance that reminded him there weren't actually any bandits to hunt. Any group of people would do. Torture would ensure they told what they wanted. "We should approach carefully. Go in with the attitude they're going to fight back and be ready to kill anyone. Plan it and execute it. I don't care how. Just get them. Some alive, if at all possible. The bishop will want to hear from someone personally to be satisfied."

"I'll handle it," said Atomy and motioned for the men to gather around him. Taroc gave him the room. He wasn't going to be of much help in planning an attack. That's why Atomy was there. So he walked over to where Nell still sat on her horse.

"They found something?" she asked.

Taroc nodded. "A camp. Twenty or so men. They're planning the attack now."

"Then we might be out of the woods soon." She sounded relieved.

"I thought you liked the forest?"

"It's a nice place to visit for a few hours, but staying for long isn't something I enjoy. Especially under these circumstances."

"That must a bit of me seeping into you," said Taroc.

It shut Nell up and brought a slightly worried expression on her face, but Taroc soon forgot about it as his attention went to the men preparing their weapons. They soon disappeared into the woods, each going to the position Atomy had given them. Taroc and Nell followed the captain on foot so they'd have a place to watch the action. It was best to see if something went wrong instead of being surprised by it when someone bloodied ran to inform you of it.

They sneaked through bushes and past fallen tree trunks until the edge of the clearing came into view. Atomy led them both to a thick bush at the foot of a large tree. It offered plenty of shelter, but a decent view of the camp that took up most of the open area in front of them.

It was just as Kalan had described.

The fence was clearly made for keeping out animals. It was barely more than a collection of sticks tied together, but it obstructed the view into the camp and would have been enough to stop arrows shot at it. Taroc spotted several people walking around the camp outside the wall. They had weapons at their sides, a few of them had bows at hand ready to shoot the arrows from the quill at their hip.

As he watched a pair of the guards went down with arrows in their throats. The attack had started and his men were showing great skill in executing it. Another pair went down after being surprised from behind by Jeder and another man. The outside guards had been taken care of and his men emerged from the woods and made their way to the shoddy wall. It didn't keep them out for long. Atomy headed out as soon as the rest of the men, leaving Taroc and Nell to watch thing unfold by themselves. Not that they saw much, but they heard the sound of metal hitting metal once his men were inside the camp. There were screams now and then. It seemed to last longer than it really did.

When a silence finally fell on the clearing it felt haunting. Knowing that people had died made it feel oppressing. Atomy appeared at the entrance to the enclosed camp and waved for Taroc and Nell to come over. The two emerged from their hiding place and made the walk there. They kept looking around just in case they had missed someone.

"How did it go?" Taroc asked and peered inside. There were three bodies he could see from where he was. All men, all with weapons in hand.

"Well enough," said Atomy. "Tair got himself a pretty nasty cut, but other than that nothing but minor scrapes and bruises for us. These weren't well trained deserters. I doubt many of them had had much experience with weapons. But they are real to the bone bandits."

"How many dead?" Taroc looked around and spotted a woman being guarded by one of his men. They were by a hut not far from where they stood, though nothing was really that far away in the small camp.

"None of ours. About twenty bandits, men and women. We found one woman alive, she's over there." Atomy pointed to the woman Taroc had already spotted. "We got one of the men alive too. At least if he didn't get whacked on the head too

hard. None of the children survived. The men just killed them before we could stop it.”

“That's horrible,” Nell breathed out. She looked ready to leave the place, but Taroc grabbed her hand and held it firmly.

“Well, at least our mission is accomplished. Secure the man. Put the corpses in one of the huts and burn this place down.”

“What about the woman?” Atomy looked her way.

“Is she one of them?” Taroc examined her the best he could from the distance. She didn't look like a bandit, but more a slave that had been forced to serve them. Her clothes were worn and torn and it didn't look like they'd fed her very well.

“I don't think so,” said Atomy. “But maybe you should talk with her.”

Taroc nodded. “Bring her outside the camp. We'll talk with her.” With that he turned around and pulled Nell with him. He wasn't interested in seeing dead bodies or an unconscious man nor did the flames that were about to burst into being call to him. There was an air of death in the little settlement and escaping from it made both of them breath easier.

They walked almost to the edge of the forest and settled down on a fallen tree trunk that offered a serviceable seat. It didn't take long before Jeder came around with the woman walking in front of him. Her gaze was down on the ground and by the way she walked it looked like she was afraid of getting hit at any moment. She stopped in front of Taroc and Nell and gave both of them a quick look before looking down again. Her black hair was a tangled mess and looked like it had not seen a brush in a long time.

“Thank you, Jeder. Keep watch while we talk to this woman.” Taroc gave the man a nod. Jeder took the cue and took some steps to distance himself from the conversation that was about to take place. He remained close enough to jump in without too much delay if needed.

“What's your name?” Taroc asked in as pleasant a voice as he could muster. The woman clearly feared she would be hurt in some manner.

“Mary.” Her voice was fearful and thin. It was like she had no body to support her voice.

“Mary. How did you end up here with these bandits?”

“They took me,” said Mary and looked up. Taroc caught a glimpse of her blue eyes before she turned to stare at the ground again. “They attacked the farm. Killed everyone. My parents, my brothers. Me they took with them. For entertainment. To cook, to wash, to please.”

Before Taroc could stop her, Nell had stood up from the fallen tree trunk and made her way to Mary. She wrapped an arm around her shoulder and gave her a sympathetic look. “You don't need to worry any more. You're safe now. The bandits are all dead. We'll make sure you get to safety so you can start a new life.”

For a moment it looked like Mary would shrug her off, but in the end she settled down. The tension in her shoulders eased away. “Why? There's nothing out there for me. My family is dead.”

“There's always something worth living for,” said Nell and started to guide her to the tree trunk. She helped her sit down and lifted her head up by the chin so she could look her in the eyes. “My own family abandoned me. Sent me to a monastery so they could be rid of me. The nuns never treated me well. There were whippings, I was locked to my room most of the time, but I never thought I should stop living. There was always a chance something good would happen. And it did. He came for me. He set me free. And now I'm living on the outside, happier than in a long time.” Nell turned to look at Taroc when she spoke of him. He could tell she was speaking the truth of her own experiences.

“The church can be a great help for people looking for direction,” said Taroc. “We came after the bandits under orders from a bishop. I am certain he will be particularly interested in seeing you live a happy life after such an ordeal.”

“A bishop?” Mary asked and turned to look at Taroc. It was easy to see the malnourishment on her face. Cheek bones stuck out where there should have been soft skin. “Why would someone like him care about a bandit group like this?”

It was a question Taroc had feared would come, but it was one that needed to be sorted out. “Because they attacked and burned down a monastery.”

Mary shook her head. “They couldn't have. They'd have been boasting about

it, but I heard nothing..”

Nell grabbed Mary by both shoulders and forced her to look at her. “They attacked the monastery I was at. A day or two and I would have been there. I would have been raped and killed just as the other nuns. Killed just like your family was. Raped just like they've been raping you all this time. Do you think you owe them anything?”

Mary shook her head. “No.”

“Tell the story we want and you'll be looked after well,” said Taroc. He could only hope the woman would agree. If she didn't then it would be better for her to die.

“I remember now,” said Mary and gave them both a look. Her expression could only be described as seeking approval. “Not that long ago they came back boasting about a big haul. I think they mentioned a monastery. It's hard for me to tell for certain. All I heard were bits and pieces here and there. They didn't exactly invite me to hear what they talked about. Most of the time I was either washing clothes and cooking or getting fucked by one of those pigs.”

Nell gave her a smile before wrapping her hands around Mary and hugging her. When the runes on her body started to warm up she let go of her and gave Taroc a look. He simply gave a small nod. He'd felt it too. He could smell it as well. Earlier it had been covered by Nell and the intoxicating scent she always had, but it was now starting to get mixed in with something else. The scent from Mary that was not any less enticing.

Taroc could not help but sigh. Things would get complicated.

“All right. Now that that's settled why don't we get you something to eat and find some place where you can wash up and change into a fresh set of clothes?”

Mary gave him a look. “That'd be nice. There's a stream not far from the camp. I wasn't allowed there very often, but it's the perfect place to clean up.”

Taroc nodded. “Why don't you go with Nell. I'm sure she'd enjoy a wash as well.”

He watched the two women walk away and nodded to Jeder to follow the pair. No sense letting them go into the woods alone. Who knew what there could be waiting.

With the most urgent matter settled, Taroc headed for the camp to see what more could be done there before it was burned down.

Chapter 9

The huts burned with high flames. The orange light they cast drove away the darkness that had washed over the clearing. They had set up camp nearby to see the destruction through. The men were keeping guard that the fire didn't spread and burn down the whole forest. There were buckets full of water – filled from the stream Mary and Nell had gone to wash in – ready to be used to quell any isolated pockets that threatened to spread.

The wound Tair had gotten had looked worse than it had actually been. It was a gash that ran from his left shoulder down across his chest down to his hip. It had bled plenty, but only for a brief time. Now the man had it wrapped in clean cloth along with a herbal mix to ward off any possible infection. He stood with his friend, without a shirt or armour to make it easier on the wound, and watched the flames consume the bodies of the men who had caused the wound.

It had been a surprise that Kalan had good knowledge of treating wounds, but when thinking about it a man who loved to trek the woods alone was the sort who'd ensure they knew what to do if they were wounded. He'd wrapped up Tair's wound in no time and tended to the little scratches the others had suffered. It had earned him a few extra drinks and pats on the shoulder from all of them.

There was a barrel of ale open and the men dropped by from time to time to fill their tankards. No sense letting good things go to waste. The bandits had had plenty of stocks from dried meat and barrels of wine and ale to a freshly killed deer that was now roasting over a camp fire. It was a welcome change to the less than festive meals they'd been enjoying so far.

They'd set up tents and made a camp for themselves. None had wanted to make use of the huts the bandits had lived in. They might have offered more protection, but a warm summer night didn't call for much of it. The fact it was all being burned down also helped make the decision.

“How's our guest?” asked Taroc as Atomy walked his way with a tankard in hand. It was rare to see him drinking so openly.

“Breathing. He's got a bump on his head the size of an egg, but I'd wager he

makes it through. Going to have one hell of a headache when he comes to though.”

Taroc nodded. “Let's hope you're right.”

“Well, it's not like we need him. We've got that woman, right?” Atomy took a sip of the ale. It wasn't cool like something you'd get at an inn with a cellar, but it was better than drinking the water from the stream.

“Yes,” Taroc admitted. “Her story alone would be enough for the bishop, but I'd rather we had someone he can judge and execute as well. Makes for a more compelling display.”

“A confession from the horses mouth always goes over better,” Atomy admitted. He looked around. “Speaking of the woman, where is she?”

“With Nell,” said Taroc. He could smell both of them. They were together in his tent, not far from where the two men were standing and watching the fire burn. Every time the wind changed direction and carried the air from the tent Taroc could feel the runes on his skin pulse and grow warm. It made him reluctant to enter his own tent. The fear that the runes would force him to do something horrible nagged at him. But Nell was managing it so maybe nothing would happen. He struggled with the decision. At least he had a reason to be out. He turned his attention back to the burning camp.

“She's committed to her story?”

Taroc glanced at Atomy and nodded. “She'll say what we want her to say. She knows I can help her get a new life or I can take her current one away just as easily. Not like she owes her tormentors anything.”

Atomy nodded as well and sipped his ale. “You think the bishop will be content with what we have now?”

“I hope so,” said Taroc and watched the flames climb higher and dance. It was hard to pull your eyes away from the sight. It was like a snake charmer enticing his poisonous comrade. “I doubt he will show much interest in finding the truth. I'm in good standing and brought him a ready confession. I would wager he'll be most eager to conduct the public execution above all else.”

“Let's hope you're right,” said Atomy and emptied his tankard. He gave the empty vessel a sorrowful look before remembering there was a barrel of ale

waiting to refill it. "I better go see the men aren't getting too drunk."

The corner of Taroc's mouth twitched. "You do that." He watched the captain wander about for a moment, talking to men here and there to give the appearance he was looking after them, before he finally made it to the barrel and filled his empty tankard. He looked happy after the first sip and continued to wander about, keeping an eye on things.

Taroc watched the flames for a bit more. They were not as high as before. Most of the camp was stained black and turning to ash. It wouldn't burn much longer. The risk of the fire spreading was lower by the minute. Finally, he decided it was time to turn in for the night. They'd start making their way out of the forest the next day. An early start was on the schedule.

Walking up to the tent he could hear the two women talking. It made him realize they had not talked about sleeping arrangements. That thought was erased by the scent that oozed through the tent fabric. It made blood rush to all the wrong places. Without giving warning, he opened the tent flap and stepped inside.

Mary sat on the ground while Nell stood behind her with a brush in hand. She had already worked many of the tangles out of her now clean hair. All in all the woman looked to be doing much better. Her face still bore the marks of malnourishment as did the rest of her thin body, but there was something in her eyes that had not been there before. A glimmer of hope. Nell continued to brush her hair without looking up. It seemed to be calming both of them, though Mary did lock her eyes on Taroc and a worried look crept over her face.

"The camp is about burned down," said Taroc in a bid to kill the uncomfortable silence that had come over the tent. "We'll be heading out early tomorrow."

"See? Won't be long before you're back to civilization." Nell continued brushing Mary's hair.

"It has been years," said Mary and looked down. She seemed to have trouble shaking the learnt behaviour of deferring and not speaking. Her voice remained thin and quiet, but at least she had spoken.

Taroc struggled to keep the scent of both women from overwhelming him.

The runes grew warmer and by the way Nell reacted he could tell the same was happening to her. They wanted something from them.

Nell put down the brush and took Mary's hair in her hands. For a moment it looked like she was going to maybe start braiding it, but her hands soon let go of her hair and found their way to her shoulders and the back of her neck. It was the sort of sensual touch lover would share.

Mary was frozen in place, not daring to say anything or move.

Nell glanced over at Taroc and gave him a sly smile before leaning down and giving Mary's neck a soft kiss. The reaction was immediate. Mary jumped up to her feet and took a few steps to get away from Nell. She gave both of them a frightened look. "What are you doing?"

Nell gave her a calming smile. "Nothing that will hurt you." She took a step towards her. "Come, just go with it. Maybe you'll enjoy it." Another step and she was standing in front of Mary. Her hands reached around her and the kiss she gave her was not on the neck, but on her lips.

Taroc decided to keep his distance and simply watch. He could swear, as the two women parted their lips to catch a breath, that a rune sparkled in the air between them for a moment before disappearing. Perhaps that was why Mary seemed willing to go along with it. She offered no resistance when Nell grabbed her hand and pulled her to the pillows. They continued kissing, Nell in the lead as the one whose hands were roaming while Mary was the passive partner.

Taroc found himself a chair and sat down while watching Nell strip Mary of her clothes. While her bones shone through in places where they normally shouldn't have and her waist was overly accentuated she still had breasts that were bigger than Nell's. The women had forgotten he existed and Taroc was fine with it. Watching the two enjoy each other was far more exciting than he would have thought and it was a new experience. Instead of being in the middle of the heat he got to observe and notice small things that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Still, his heart skipped a beat when Nell straightened herself and undressed. The runes on her body were clear for Mary to see. The dim glow of them could not have gone unnoticed. Taroc could feel the runes on him heat up. The glow on

Nells body grew stronger. Mary stared at her eyes wide, but unable to say anything or turn away.

His mind was screaming against it. There was no way to undo what had been done and it terrified him. Still, he stood up and dis-robed, revealing his own rune covered body to the woman. The look of confusion was starting to turn into one of horror, but it all melted away when Taroc reached the two women and Mary was sandwiched between the two rune covered bodies. The light emanating from them grew stronger, the heat hot like the flames from the burning down camp outside.

Taroc pressed a kiss on Mary's neck. A blue glow was left behind on her skin that soon formed into a rune. Everywhere the two bodies came into contact with her the blue glow remained behind and followed the same pattern of rune forming. Only a minute later and her body had as many runes on it as Taroc's and Nell's. Taroc reached out and grabbed Nell by the hand, in his other he sought Mary's hand.

The moment they formed an uninterrupted chain the blue light became blinding. The heat washed over their bodies so hot it felt like someone was poking a piece of red hot iron at them. They all climbed to their knees and formed an unintentional circle. They screamed in pain.

From the middle of the circle, a swirling mix of blue light and runes started to form and shoot up through the tent roof. A wind followed that tossed around everything, even knocking down the chair Taroc had been seated in only a moment before.

Taroc couldn't comprehend what was going on. His mind wasn't there so he couldn't worry about the fact his men would without a doubt witness what was going on. They'd see the light, the runes and hear the screams. All he was capable of feeling was the burning of the runes and the frail hands he held. They squeezed so hard he feared bones would break. Nails dug into his flesh. But more than that he could feel the change happening. Something deep inside him, perhaps to his very soul, the runes were seeping in and changing him. It was like he was a piece of parchment and someone was slowly tearing it to tiny pieces and then reassembling them.

Images flashed before his eyes. From Nell's life as a nun. In one image she was in her chamber, all alone, crying against a pillow. In another she was getting caned by one of the other sisters, in another she was back home before being sent to the monastery, fooling around with the local smiths apprentice. Similar images from Mary flashed in front of him, from the time she was on her parents farm, of the attack by the bandits and witnessing the death of her father, of the abuse she had suffered after being made a slave to the bandits. Images from his own life mixed in with those of the two women.

The wind grew stronger. So strong that the tent around them was ripped from its place and sucked into the blue light in the middle. It disappeared with a cloud of blue, puffing out and then getting drawn in again. The pillar of light shone high into the sky. Taroc screamed and tried to get control of his body. It was futile. The runes had dug in deep into him and were now doing what they wanted with him.

Then it was over.

The blue light shimmered away. Taroc regained control of his body, though that didn't last long before he slumped to the ground unconscious. There was a brief moment that registered in his mind. He could see Nell and Mary slump to the ground just as he was. The runes on their bodies still glowed, but it was a soft warmth that would have kept them warm on a chilly night. What followed that was darkness.

When he came to the next time it was with the sun shining in to his eyes. He lifted a hand to shade his eyes. It took him a moment to get his bearings. He sat up and looked around. He had to squint because of the bright day. Nell and Mary were laying close to him on the ground. Both were naked and their rune covered bodies there for anyone to see. Taroc realized the case was much the same for him. A quick look at his hands and the rest of his body made it clear the runes had spread. They were on the back of his hand, on his finger and toes. He feared some might have even been on his face. Looking at Nell he could see a rune on her chin. Mary had some running up the side of her face, right past her ears. They seemed to continue under her hair. There would be no hiding them.

Taroc shook his head and looked around. The smouldering remains of the

camp were where they should have been. There was a small flame here and there, but most of it was nothing but char and soot that was still hot enough to make the air ripple above it. Then he spotted his men laying on the ground. They had fallen where they had stood when the runes had gone wild. Whether they were alive or dead he couldn't tell from where he was.

A shake of his head and Taroc pushed himself up to stand. He checked on the two women. Both were breathing, but even a vigorous shake didn't stir them. He couldn't really blame either of them. His own head still felt like someone had smashed it with a smiths hammer and his footing felt unsure with each step. What ever the runes had done to them it had taken a heavy toll.

The first man he got to was Tair. He was as naked as Taroc was. The fate of his clothes had likely been the same as the tents, but worse than that his body was covered in runes. They were different from the ones on Taroc and the pattern was more uniform, but they went all the way to his face and other areas that would be impossible to cover up. The bandage covering his wound was gone, but so was the wound.

“Fuck.” Taroc looked around and saw that all the other men were naked as well. The black runes covered their bodies with a slight blue radiance. Despair set in. This was it. The men would wake up and then they'd turn on him and the two women that had put them under the curse. Then they'd head for the city for help and end up killed by the faith they sought help from.

He sought out Atomy from all the fallen men. He spotted him not far from where he'd last seen him with his tankard of ale. The tankard laid on the ground next to him and he was covered in runes much like the rest of the men. Taroc crouched next to him and shook him by the shoulder. Atomy was the only man who would be able to keep the men in check, though there was a distinct possibility he would want to kill the man who had brought this fate upon them much like the rest.

“Wake up!” The runes on Atomy flared up dark blue for a moment before the man snapped to like a nightmare had woken him.

“Fuck. My head.” His words came out slightly slurred like he'd drank half the barrel of ale.

“At least you're alive,” said Taroc and helped the man get up. He looked around, baffled at what had taken place.

“What happened? All I remember is some blue light shooting up from your tent.” Atomy looked down and noticed he was naked. Then he noticed the runes. “What are these?” He tried to rub it off with one hand in the vain hope that it would come off, but when it didn't it was clear he was starting to panic.

Taroc had a difficult choice to make. Tell the man the truth or feign ignorance over what had happened. For a moment he considering laying all the blame on Mary. It would be easy. An unknown woman who had been in the tent. Framing her a witch would leave the men satisfied. They'd want her dead and that would be easy enough to arrange. The thought was quickly dismissed when the runes on his body showed their disapproval for the plan. She was tied to them now and going against the wishes of the runes was not something Taroc was willing to test.

So he played for time.

“Let's worry about that later. We've got to make sure all the men are still alive.” He'd examined two so far, Atomy being the third. They'd all been breathing, but given the state he'd woken up in it wouldn't have surprised him if some were dead.

For a moment it looked like Atomy might protest, but then he nodded and started to stand up. His feet were as uncertain as Taroc's had been so he helped him up and supported him for a while until he regained the sure footing of his usual self. While Atomy worked through the men, shaking them, sometimes even going as far as giving them a proper slap on the cheek to wake them up, Taroc went back to the two women and tried to wake them up. He'd need both of them when the men got over their initial confusion and started to put things together. That would inevitably lead to questions that demanded answers from all three of them.

While the blue light had soaked up the tent it had left behind the bedrolls and Taroc grabbed two of them so he could cover the two naked women. The men would have enough on their mind. The sight of a naked woman would only complicate things.

After shaking Nell by the shoulder hard enough that her head flopped around she finally started to come to. The first thing to leave her lips was a groan of pain and her hand quickly went to her head.

"I know. You feel like you've emptied a bucket full of wine. It's all right. You're alive and unhurt." Taroc made certain he was the first one she saw when she opened her eyes.

"What happened?" Nell asked and winced when she tried to get up.

"The runes went wild." It was the best description Taroc could come up with. "I don't know why, but it has changed our situation considerably. The light. It hit all the men outside the tent. They're knocked out like we were. And now they're covered in runes as well."

"That's not good," said Nell and grabbed the bedroll to stop it from slipping off as she moved to sit up. She let out a deep breath as the world started to spin with the sudden move of straightening herself upright.

"No, no it's not. There's going to be some questions. If we're unlucky we'll be dead in a few hours."

"That column of light. It must have been visible for miles. Someone must have seen it." Nell sounded more concerned about that fact than the prospect of getting killed soon.

"We can worry about that if we live to see tomorrow," said Taroc and moved on to Mary to shake her awake. It took a bit more roughness than for Nell, but in the end she started to come to with the same groans of pain as Nell.

"What happened? That blue light? What the hell are you?" Mary seemed to want to get away from Taroc and she did shuffle away from his touch, but in her state she couldn't move that far quickly.

"Look. Here's the situation. You and all the men that killed the bandits are now in the same boat as me and Nell. You're covered in runes of unknown origin. If the inquisitors get a hold of you you'd best be prepared for hours of torture and then a slow death at the stake. So you'd better play along if you want to live." Taroc gave Mary a stern stare. For a moment she met his gaze with defiance, but then turned to look down at the ground while holding the bedroll to her chest so hard her knuckles were turning white.

"It's a rough hand you've been dealt with. No doubt about that." Taroc kept his cold stare on the woman. She needed to be beaten into submission. At that moment he abandoned all plans of blaming her for the whole thing. It would not go through. The men weren't stupid. "But you're not alone. Nell is here. I am here. Together we will get to the bottom of this and get our lives back."

"If the men let us live."

Taroc gave Nell a sharp look for the remark. It shut her up. Looking around he could see quite a few of the men were already standing up. All of them looked confused. Some were examining their rune covered bodies with worried expressions. There wasn't much time left.

"Any moment now those men are going to stop looking at their hands like they're seeing them for the first time. They're going to be looking at me. They're going to be looking at you. And they're going to want answers. When that happens just follow my lead and keep your mouth shut. One wrong word and we're all dead. Understand?"

Mary didn't look up at him.

"Do you understand!?" Taroc's voice rose almost to a shout and he grabbed Mary by the hand with a strong grip. She tried to get away. It was clear he was hurting her.

Finally, she stopped trying to escape and nodded. "I'll say nothing."

Taroc nodded as well. He ignored the look he was getting from Nell and instead stood up and looked up at the sky. It was a beautiful day despite everything. No clouds in the sky. Blue as far as he could see. It was warm and the gentle breeze that somehow made it through the forest brought a refreshing breath now and then.

It's not a bad day to die, Taroc thought to himself before mentally slapping himself for despairing. There would be no death today if he had anything to say about it. Though it seemed the runes were now in control he had his doubts they were going to let their little subjects die so easily. There had to be a reason they'd spread so visibly and violently to his men.

Bringing his gaze down again he could see the men had all woken up. They'd gathered into a group and were giving him and the two women looks. They didn't

look happy. Fear and anger were the most common expressions Taroc could spot. Atomy parted from the group and started towards the trio. The rest of the men quickly followed.

“What the fuck is going on?” Atomy demanded.

“She cursed us all!” Jeder called out from behind him and pointed at Mary. “That witch caused this all. It started with her!” The men around him grumbled in agreement.

“Is that what happened, Taroc?” Atomy demanded. “Did we rescue her only to be cursed by her? What are these marks on all our bodies?”

Taroc glanced back and saw that Nell had walked over to Mary and put a hand around her shoulder like a protective mother would do for her child. The options ran through his mind. It would be easy to agree it was all her fault. They'd kill her, but that wouldn't get rid of the runes or the true source of them. The lie would eventually be revealed and the ramifications would be more severe.

No one liked being lied to.

Feigning ignorance was one option. Say he didn't know anything more than the men. That he'd been knocked out just like they had been. The trouble was the men had likely seen the pillar of blue light come out of the tent. They were unlikely to buy the story.

Then there was telling the truth. The route that would likely leave the men thirsty for his blood, but at the very least they'd see the two women as his victims as well. Atomy would ensure Nell would be safe. Mary would likely fall in with her and be safe. The only one who'd lose their life would be Taroc himself.

But in the end they would all die at the hands of the church.

“Well?” Atomy demanded, bringing Taroc back from his thoughts. It had taken too long. Now they thought he had something to hide. Looking at the men and their expression it didn't take a genius to realize their anger was quickly shifting towards him in light of his silence.

“Well, most important, is everyone all right?” Taroc gave Atomy a look.

“Yes. Everyone is fine. Better than before, actually. Tair had his wound completely healed and Jeder there grew back his finger.”

Taroc glanced at the bloodthirsty soldier who in turn was glaring at his now

once more intact finger. He looked unsure whether to be thankful or to grab his knife and chop it off again.

“Well, some good news then,” said Taroc and gave the men a smile, though his nakedness along with theirs made the moment feel more awkward than anything else. “I can see you have questions. I can't say that I have much in the way of answers. I don't know what happened last night. I don't know what triggered it. I don't know what these runes on us want from us. All I can say is that they have a mind of their own. A plan only they know and we are a part of.”

“Why don't we ask that cunt we saved?” Jeder demanded and gave Mary a cold stare and a grin that had her take a step back.

“No use bothering her. She's as much a victim as the rest of you.” Taroc took a deep breath. The choice had been made. “I'm the one who fell to the runes first. It was back at the monastery at Caldevan. I found a book in those cellars of their and it trapped me. After that it got Nell and now it has gotten all of you. If you wish to blame someone for this then blame me. I'm the one who said nothing and hoped to solve the mystery on my own.”

There was a moment of stunned silence before an all out shouting competition started. There were calls for his death, curses were thrown his way which Taroc found slightly ironic given the situation, and there was Atomy with his hands spread out trying to contain the men so they didn't rush in and beat the culprit of it all to death.

Taroc didn't budge, but raised his hands to quiet down the men. It took a while, but in the end they cooled down. “I can understand your anger. I've felt it myself many times since the runes jumped from the pages and etched onto my skin. I've struggled to decide what to do. I am an inquisitor. I know well what the fate would be had I gone to the priests and bishops. I'd have been tortured and burned at the stake for practising magic. Even though I am as much a victim as the rest of you. I did not want this. This is now the same fate you will meet if you go out in public. You will be hunted down, you will be tortured, you will be killed. Consider that before taking any action.”

“No reason not to kill you right now!” Who shouted it out Taroc couldn't tell, but he had to reply to it.

"I am your only hope of finding a way out of this. Who else amongst you can read ancient texts? That is where we will find answers. We just have to find the right books."

That silenced the lot for a moment. Thoughtful looks spread amongst them.

"Fuck that." It was Jeder. Taroc barely had time to turn and look at him before he rushed forward with clenched fists. Taroc lifted an arm to protect himself while shouting for the man to stop. He could hear Nell and Mary join his cry. The hit he expected to land never came.

Jeder had stopped in his tracks. The runes on him glowed an angry red while he clearly struggled to move his body. Not a single part of him moved. He was stuck mid stride like a statue. Everyone stared at him. Then they stared at Taroc and the two women that had now walked up on either side of him. Everyone looked equally surprised by the event.

It took Taroc a moment to gather himself. "Well. Um. I don't know what to say. I don't.. I just don't."

"He stopped when you ordered him to," said Atomy.

"No, he only stopped after the two women joined in," said Zak Kalanor. He sounded certain and his words were backed by nods from the men around him.

"Well, that's something we can test, at least," said Taroc and turned his attention to the frozen Jeder. "You're free to move again. Move."

By the way the man's eyes moved it was clear he made an effort, but not a muscle on his body moved.

"All right. Now you two say it with me," Taroc gave the two women a look. Together they told Jeder he could move again. The runes flared from red to blue before going back to their dull black. Jeder stumbled forward before coming to a halt.

"Well, isn't that convenient? The people who claim to be victims like us are now our masters." It was Tair talking this time. "You all saw it. Just a few words from these tree and we could all be taking our own lives."

"I assure you, this is as new to us as it is to you," said Taroc in as calm a voice as he could muster. At the very least it looked like the danger of getting killed was passing. If Nell and Mary agreed there was nothing the men could do

against them. "Last night changed everything and it was not by our design. It was the runes. I have no idea what they want from us or what their plan is. We are discovering these things as much as you are."

"Listen to him," Nell pleaded from next to Taroc. Though she still had only the bedroll to cover herself she sounded confident in her words. "There has been no plan from us. We didn't want the runes on anyone else. All we wanted was to solve the mystery so we could rid ourselves of them. I'm sorry that you have all been dragged into this."

Out of all the men Atomy seemed the most willing to listen to her. Not much of a surprise given their relations, but he wasn't the only one whose anger seemed to be dying down. Jeder had stepped back amongst the group, but he wasn't trying to agitate them to take action any more. He looked fearful. Taroc could understand why. He remembered the first time the runes had asserted their will over him. It could be terrifying.

"What's your plan then? How are we going to rid ourselves of these runes?" It was Atomy asking the question. He looked on the edge of making a decision. The answer to the question might be what decided how things were going to move forward.

Taroc sighed. "I've been searching for books on the matter everywhere we've gone. I haven't come across anything yet. The best plan I can offer is us continuing to do what we do. Go from monastery to monastery, library to library, and hope we find a book that tells us what to do."

"There can't be that many places with books on such a topic," said Atomy. "Not the way the church has been searching and burning them."

Taroc nodded. "It is the older libraries that we should focus on. They're the most likely to have stuff buried so deep any previous inquisitors have looked over them."

"Should we not then consider going to the one place the inquisitors are unlikely to have rummaged through, the one place that has a library that is considered one of the top amongst the world?" Atomy gave Taroc a firm stare.

It took Taroc a moment to understand what place he was referring to. In his mind he had already written it off as a lost cause, but times were more desperate

now. "Eagle Fortress," said Taroc for all to hear.

"How the hell are we going to get there? It's surrounded by the Head Inquisitors army and inside are a bunch of heretics that would kill us just as happily as those besieging the place." The men around the man who had spoken nodded and muttered. Taroc tried to remember who it was. Short cut brown hair, wrinkles on his face telling of his age, everything very average about him. Looking at him he could have blended in at any market, but given that he was with Taroc's men there was no doubt he knew how to handle a sword. Daris Mather. The name popped into his head.

"Daris is correct about the situation at the fortress," said Taroc. He wasn't all together certain himself that going there would be wise, but like Atomy had said, it seemed like the only viable place where they might find books on the runes. "But it's a start. If anyone has a better idea then speak. We would all love to hear it. If not, I would suggest we start finding ourselves some clothes to wear, weapons to wield and get ready to move out. We can't stay here. Someone will have seen the column of blue light. Someone will come looking and we don't want to be here when they do."

There was a moment of silence as the men tried to make up their minds. Some still looked like they wanted to rush Taroc and the two women and kill them. Other looked ready to follow the sketchy plan that had been presented.

"You heard the man. Let's go through things and see what we've got left," said Atomy and turned to the men. His look was enough to whip them all into action and do as ordered. Atomy turned to give Taroc a slight nod before joining them. If there had ever been a question whether the men listened and respected their captain that was now put to bed. He was obviously the man they would follow anywhere.

Taroc turned to Nell and Mary. "Come on. We should find some clothes as well."

Chapter 10

The blue light had not been as destructive as Taroc feared. It had made clothes worn disappear, but left everything else alone. He suspected it had something to do with the runes appearing on everyone. Most of the men had been out of their usual armour and their weapons had been off resting against trees and other places. No one had expected much trouble to be coming their way so only a few had been in full gear. They were now left without weapons and without armour, but at least the clothes in their backpacks were still intact. New weapons would be easy enough to get once they left the forest.

The initial report that no one had died had turned out wrong. No one had bothered to check on their prisoner, but when they did they found a single rune burned on his chest, right above his heart. It looked like it had burned several inches into his flesh. It must have been painful while it lasted. In the end it left the man dead. Why the runes had not wanted him was a mystery and left them without their proof to the bishop.

Not that it mattered.

They weren't going to go back to the city. Not with the way they were. Even with clothes on and hooded capes it would have been easy to spot the runes that crept onto the faces of many of the men. Someone was bound to report that and then the hunt would begin.

They left the dead body near the burned up camp. There was no point bothering with a proper burial for the corpse. The scavengers of the forest would soon pick the body to the bone and at that point no one would be able to claim anything mysterious about the body. It would be just another unlucky brigand who met his fate at the hands of the forest beasts.

It was well into afternoon before the group was ready to head out. Nell and Mary had managed to find themselves some acceptable clothes to wear and shared a horse with Nell at the reigns while Mary sat behind her, arms wrapped around her waist. Atmoy had whipped the men into shape and those that still had armour wore it while those that didn't wore what ever clothes they had found

in their packs. It was a mismatched group and the only thing that lent credence to them was Taroc in his inquisitors robe. He had plenty of them as they were about the only clothes he owned. Were it not for him they might as well had been the robbers they'd killed the previous day.

The group made its way through the forest in silence. Taroc kept close to the two women, but didn't talk with either of them. Everyone had plenty of things to work through on their own. Talking seemed like it could only spark further conflict. It was time to let them work on their emotions. Taroc had plenty of things to think about himself.

He'd found the book where he'd stashed it. He had not dared open it. Not past the pages that had already been read. Who knew what the next lie would bring with it. He had his hands full dealing with what was already out in the open.

Getting near Eagle Fortress should not have posed a big problem. There was plenty of empty farmland that would allow the group to travel without being seen or hassled much. There were isolated farmhouses that could be commandeered for the night or they could camp out. The problem was the army surrounding the fortress and the people inside the fortress. They would ask questions and see the runes. It was not a place where they would be able to stride in unnoticed.

As much as Taroc tried to think of a way he could not see them succeeding.

His mind was eased a bit when they found their carriage where they'd left it. No one had disturbed it and there were extra supplies they'd left with it. It didn't take long for them to have horses in front of then thing and the two women could climb in and enjoy a more comfortable ride. After brief consideration Taroc joined them. He nodded with approval as the men did their best to hide the runes on their bodies. They'd be on the open road soon and there was no telling when they'd run into someone. It was best not to let people see any more than they needed to.

Still, proudly flying the flag of the church with the inquisitor insignia meant few would dare to stop them or even get too close.

Inside the carriage he could let out a small breath of relief and for the first time properly talk with the two women who now seemed to be tied to the new

found power he had over his men.

“We're in a precarious situation,” said Taroc more to himself than anyone else.

Nell had found herself a shirt and trouser from somewhere. They were a bit big for her, but better than being wrapped in a bedroll. “I was certain we would be dead.”

“We should be dead,” said Mary from next to her. She'd found a similar attire for herself. The runes on both women were clearly visible in many places, but inside the carriage it didn't matter. No one would be peeking in without warning and they still had blankets next to them.

“No need to be so gloomy,” said Taroc and forced a smile. He needed the two to be strong and, most importantly, on his side. “You saw what happened with Jeder. The runes give us control over these men. Whether it's when all three of us will it or some other condition that needs to be met doesn't matter. We are the ones in control. They can't kill us. The runes will ensure that. I am certain of it.”

“I want no part in this,” said Mary. She gave both of them a worried look. “This is worse than being a slave to the bandits. This is certain death. At least with them I had a chance to live.”

Nell wrapped an arm around the woman's shoulder and leaned in to give her some comfort. “It's not that bad. Trust in Taroc. He'll sort this out. I'm certain of it. You're free now and once the runes are gone you're not bound to us.”

“Meanwhile the runes are my master. I don't know what they want from me. They could force me to do something without warning and I would not be able to say no. With the bandits there was always the option of saying no or killing myself. The runes.. I doubt they afford such freedom.”

Taroc searched for words to counter her worries, but found he shared them with her. It wasn't the first time he thought he'd lost his bodily autonomy. The road to being an inquisitor involved challenges and giving up a lot of things. Still, the runes were something completely different. They didn't share the same goals as he did. “It's true. These runes, we don't know what they want or what they will make us do.” Taroc glanced at the marking on his arms as he spoke. “But we can get rid of them. I am certain of that. But we need all three of us to do that. Only

the three of us can keep the men outside in check. So, please, Mary, help us. We're here for you no matter what.”

There was a moment of silence. Mary glanced at both of them while mostly looking at her own hands resting on her lap. Her fingers twitched and she entwined them from time to time only to untwist them a moment later. Finally, she nodded. “I'll go with you. Do what's needed. What other choice do I have?” The hopelessness in her voice was noticeable and made Taroc doubt whether she could be trusted to do what was necessary.

He didn't have time to delve more into it as there was a knock on the carriage door. Taroc reached out and cracked open the door. It was Atomy.

“Riders coming our way.”

“What sort?”

“Looks like a patrol,” Atomy replied in a grim voice. His hood did not do much to hide the runes covering his face. His armour and other garments covered the rest of his body just fine, but the face would always be a problem.

“Anything we can do to avoid them?”

Atomy shook his head. “They've seen us just as much as we've seen them.”

Taroc cursed. “Well, not much we can do then. Let's hope they just ride past us.”

“I doubt it,” said Atomy and pulled on the reigns of his horse to keep it at the same pace as the carriage. It had an abundance of energy from being tied down for so long and not getting proper exercise. “But we'll handle it somehow.”

“Let's pray for the best,” said Taroc and closed the door. He gave the two women a look. He didn't need to ask if they'd heard what was going on. Their expression told everything. He tried to give them a reassuring smile. “It'll be all right.”

They waited in silence.

The carriage creaked as it rolled from one bump to another. The horses outside whinnied every now and then. Then they heard the approaching rumble of new riders. Soon after the carriage came to a halt. They had not passed without stopping. The clear markings of an inquisitor had done nothing to deter them.

Taroc strained to hear what was being said outside.

“Who halts the journey of an inquisitor?” Atomy's voice was clear enough to recognize. He shouted loud enough that his words came through without being too hard to make sense of.

“We are lord Radightors men, tasked with ensuring the safety of this area,” came the reply in a calm and stern voice.

“What do lord Radightors men want with inquisitor Taroc Radkel?” There was no give in Atomy's voice. He was making it clear no one was to approach until given permission.

“We mean not to disrupt the inquisitors journey with any sort of malice. Last night there was a strange light seen from the direction you are coming from. My men and I are on our way to investigate and would be grateful if you have any information to share regarding it.”

A small smile passed Taroc's lips at the increased respect the man's voice suddenly had. Maybe it had been his name mentioned that had brought it about or the man finally realized he had stopped a man of the church and needed to act with a certain amount of decorum. What he worried was what Atomy would say in response.

“We saw the light as well,” said Atomy. “It came from the forest. The inquisitor is busy with a mission from the bishop so we did not have time to investigate, but we are pleased the good men of the lord will do so.”

Bringing in the bishop was a brilliant move from the man, Taroc had to admit. It added yet another person with a hefty title to the mix. It left the poor patrol leader with not much to go on. He knew full well that interfering with anyone working on an errand from the bishop would land him in hot water with not only his lord, but the church as well.

“You did not see anyone coming from that direction?” asked the man. He sounded about ready to give up his questioning and move on.

“No one,” said Atomy. “The light seemed to come quite deep from the forest. Could be the people that caused it never left or went the other direction.”

“I see,” said the man. The disappointment shone through clearly in his voice. “Thank you for your help and apologies for delaying you.”

Taroc could hear Atomy smile when he responded.

"It's quite all right. God's speed in your search."

The sound of horses riding past soon went away and the carriage nudged forward. They had managed to get through the encounter without having to fight.

Nell and Mary let out sighs of relief and gave each other nervous smiles to try and calm themselves down. They had been holding their breaths for nearly the entire exchange, too nervous to inhale.

There was a knock on the carriage door not long after they'd started moving again. Taroc opened it and came face to face with Atomy.

"You heard it all?" he asked.

Taroc nodded. "It'll take them a while to find the bandit camp, but as soon as they do it won't take them long to see that's the origin point of the light if they have any more witnesses to it."

"We didn't leave much to find," said Atomy.

"Still, let's try to be as far away from here when they do put it all together. They will remember running across an inquisitor and his men. They might decide there are more questions to ask."

Atomy nodded. "We'll keep a good pace."

With that the conversation was over and Taroc pulled the door shut.

Hours went by in silence. Nell and Mary had their own little conversations, but they were barely more than a few whispers here and there that Taroc didn't even bother trying to listen in on. There was enough going on in his own head to keep him busy. On top of the worries there were the memories that had flashed through his mind when the runes had gone wild.

It was an odd feeling. Remembering the hay as it tingled his back while the smith's apprentice was grunting on top of him. He knew it wasn't him getting fucked, but Nell. They were her memories. But it felt like he had taken her place. They were like his own memories. Taroc could remember every smell and sensation like he had been there himself. He could feel the pleasure a woman experienced when having sex. The weirdest parts were the memories where it was himself bringing that pleasure.

Taroc rubbed his temples as his head started to throb. It seemed digging too

much into the memories took a toll. He had to break the silence.

“During what happened,” he started and got the attention of the two women. “Did you see flashes? Memories from each other, from me? Do you still remember them?”

“If I think hard enough I can feel my fingers almost breaking when father Garedon hits them,” said Nell. “I also remember the softness of the bread that got me in that trouble. I think it was worth it.”

Taroc grimaced. “Father Garedon. Haven't though about him in a long time. Hopefully the bastard is burning in hell.”

“I remember as well,” said Mary. She still seemed timid at jumping into conversations. Now Taroc could understand why. He remembered the beatings the bandits had conditioned her with. “But if I dig around too much my head starts to hurt.”

“I noticed that as well,” said Taroc. “I suppose it's the effect of having three lifetimes worth of memories crammed into your head.”

“It's odd remembering things from your perspective,” said Nell. “Odd remembering fucking myself.”

“Odd remembering what it feels like for a woman,” said Taroc.

“Odd remembering what it feels like for a man,” added Mary. She managed to blush slightly while saying it.

Silence took over the carriage again. Uncomfortable glances were exchanged. The things being remembered were not all good. There were thoughts about each person there that would have been better off being not remembered. There were thoughts that hurt, but there were thoughts that made each of them feel special.

To say the three of them were confused would have been putting in mildly. But they did their best to remain level headed. Focusing on the now helped in doing that.

When the carriage came to a halt at the end of the day they were all happy to get outside and spend some time apart. There was plenty to do to get ready for the night and they all pitched in more than usual. The men maintained their distance to the trio the best they could. The looks of suspicion and discomfort were plain to see and it eventually drove the three to the confines of their tent.

"It's tense out there," said Taroc when he entered the tent. The two women were there. Nell was brushing Mary's hair while she sat on a bedroll in front of her.

"Can you blame them?" asked Nell without interrupting her work.

"Not really, no," Taroc agreed. He'd helped gather some wood for the fire. He brushed off a dead leaf from the sleeve of his robe. "They're cooking now. Shouldn't be too long before there's some food ready."

"Whose turn is it to cook?" asked Nell.

"That new guy," said Taroc. The name escaped him. "The one who injured the worst."

"Tair," said Mary.

"That's the one," Taroc agreed and found himself a stool to sit on. He sighed and rubbed his temples. The headache from the earlier remembrance had not faded away. Further more it seemed like some memories were harder to come by. Simple thing like the name of the newest addition to the group of soldiers.

"Haven't eaten his cooking yet. I hope it's not as bad as Atomy's," said Nell.

Just hearing her say it triggered a memory from their childhood. The sad sight of burnt meat and still raw potatoes Atomy had presented her with when he had had to cook food for the day because their parents were away at a market. It was the last time the parents left them alone with Atomy in charge of cooking.

He still wasn't much better at it, but at least he didn't burn the meat any more and the potatoes he'd served had mostly been cooked through.

With the memory came an increase in the headache.

"I sure hope I stop remembering all the things you two have experienced. Every time one of you says something a new memory surfaces and just makes my head hurt that much more." Taroc continued rubbing his temples. It helped a little which about all he could hope for at that moment.

"It's the same for us," said Nell and continued brushing Mary's hair. "What I wonder is why the runes have done this to us. Why share memories?"

"To make us understand each other," said Taroc in a tired voice. "To keep us together because we want to be, not because the runes force us. It's quite clever, I have to admit."

“And we still don't know what they want us to do,” said Nell. She put down the brush and stretched herself with a long yawn.

“And who they are,” said Mary in a quiet voice. “The people that came up with these runes. Who were they? Why did they make the book?”

“All good questions,” Taroc agreed. He'd been asking those questions to himself. Whether Mary had remembered them from some of his memories or come up with them herself was up in the air, though in the end it didn't matter. She was now pondering those questions. “I hope the tomes in Eagle Fortress can offer us some answers. It has been under the control of Prebysterian Order for a long time and they have never allowed any inquisitor to rummage through it with the intention of disposing of a single book. If there is anywhere in these lands where we might find written work on this then it's that fortress.”

“What if there is nothing written on this?” asked Nell. “The book with the runes is all that is left. Everything else has been destroyed by time.”

“Then we will figure something out,” said Taroc and stretched on the chair.

“Or we let the runes do what they need to,” said Mary. She averted her eyes as both Nell and Taroc focused on her. She talked in an uncertain voice. “There must be a reason for why they're doing what they're doing. When that reason is gone then maybe we will be free.”

“But what will they make us do for that?” asked Nell. She hugged herself and shook her head. “Those things might be too high in cost for us to bear.”

“Let's just see what we find at the fortress,” said Taroc. “We can worry about what to do if we find nothing then.”

“You still haven't told us how we're going to get inside the fortress,” said Nell and gave him an inquisitive look.

Taroc grimaced. “When I know, I will tell you.”

It was a problem he did not have an easy solution to.

Chapter 11

The Eagle Fortress was a foreboding sight. Perched on a cliff like its name sake, it looked over a valley with a large village nestled right below it. A river flowed through near the village, trapping it behind it and the straight face of the cliff. There was only one way to the fortress. A narrow stretch of stone that wound up to where the fortress had been built. It was wide enough for a couple of wagons to go side by side, but made any sort of an assault nothing short of suicidal.

Even if the narrow pass allowed enough men to charge at the fortress, they would still need to contend with walls as high as seventy feet. The gates were an imposing collection of wood and iron and looked like they'd laugh off anything thrown at them.

All of that meant the besieging army had set up camp a fair way away from the fortress and looked content to simply ensure no one left it or got in. There were trebuches set up and occasionally they'd fling stones at the fortress. It didn't seem to result in any meaningful damage so it was understandable the enthusiasm to use them had died down.

The army had had several years to come to terms with the facts.

They weren't getting in, but no one was getting out either.

Taroc stood on top of the small hill that gave him a good view of the fortress up ahead as well as the army of tens of thousands camping between him and it. He saw no way into the fortress. Even if the army surrounding it would have allowed him to pass with his companions the people inside would never let them in. They'd see it as a trap. Sneaking in seemed an impossible task. The best bet was the rumour in the village that at times the people at the fortress lowered baskets down the cliff to receive some supplies from those who supported them.

It seemed unlikely that it happened or that people could be hauled up that way, but it was still more likely than getting through the army of tens of thousands.

"Any ideas?" Atomy stood not far from him taking in the same view. It was

the third day they were on the outskirts of the conflict area. Every day they'd climbed the hill, but every time they walked down none the wiser.

"Can't say that I do," said Taroc and looked up at the sky. There were dark clouds rolling in from the north. It would rain. Maybe there would even be thunder and lightning. He could already feel the wind picking up a bit.

"Time to think of another plan then. We'll be spotted if we keep doing this for too long." Atomy kept a close eye on the fortress and for any patrols that might come their way. The army had grown lax. There was nothing threatening it from the outside. The enemies were surrounded in their fortress. Still, they kept enough of a watch that no one would be sneaking in.

"There is no other place," Taroc snapped and gave the man a grim stare. "We have to get in there. There is nothing else. So we need to figure it out."

"We aren't going to get in," said Atomy not phased at all by Taroc's reaction. "We can't fight our way in. We can't sneak in. That whole food basket thing is nothing more than a rumour. Even if we did get in using that they'd just throw us off the cliff the moment they saw us. The people inside that fortress aren't going to take any risks."

Taroc sighed. "I know all that."

For a moment the two stood in silence on the hill and watched the dark clouds roll closer. The camp started to come alive as the soldiers prepared for the coming rain by taking things inside tents and more permanent shelters that had been built during the long siege.

"Couldn't the runes help us?" Atomy broke the silence.

"How?" asked Taroc.

"I don't know. Do the blue light thing again. Maybe it would wipe that army out. I'm sure the people inside the fortress would welcome us if we did that."

Taroc had to hold his laughter. Atomy didn't know the three of them had no clue how the runes worked or how to use them. Turth be told he didn't know if the runes could do what the man asked. Maybe they could. But what would the price for it be? Then again, there didn't seem to be a better way to get in. "I'll talk to Nell and Mary," Taroc found himself saying.

"Good. We should go now. They might spot us if we stay too long." Atomy

started down the hill and Taroc followed him. Their horses were waiting at the foot of the hill along with one of the men who was looking after them. The three of them rode on while keeping an eye out for any patrols. It was a fair way to the forest they'd set up camp in. The village below the fortress would have offered much more comfort, but the more people there were the more likely it was someone would notice the runes. With an army led by an inquisitor not far away it seemed like a bad idea to draw such attention.

The camp was well hidden behind closely grown trees and bushes. They'd had plenty of time to construct camouflage and obstructions for anyone looking to make their way to the tents. There were men on guard at all times to give warning if anyone got too close.

The men had seen the dark clouds and arranged the camp so it was ready to fend off the rain that would be coming. The first drops of rain fell just as Taroc arrived in the camp. He left his horse to be tended to by one of the men and wasted no time getting into his tent. The two women were there, deep into conversation about something.

"Atomy suggested we use the power of the runes to get into the fortress." He didn't see a point in hiding the fact from the two. They'd find out anyway. They'd discovered that every night their minds would synchronize. Memories of the past day would flow between all of them and they'd know what each of them had done that day. It was terrifying knowing there was no way to hide your thoughts, but at the same time it had created a bond that was impossible to break.

"How would we do that?" asked Nell.

"And what would the consequences be?" asked Mary. She had gotten braver with every passing day. Especially when it was just the three of them. She had become more comfortable with sharing her ideas. Some of the manners the bandits had beaten into her were starting to fade away. She did not look down as much and she did not seem ready to take a strike every time someone moved closer to her.

"I don't know," said Taroc and found himself a seat. "But I fear he's right. There isn't another way in."

"What about the basket thing?" asked Mary.

“It's just a rumour. Something the locals tell each other. I doubt it's true. Even if it is they'd throw us off the cliff the moment they hauled us up,” said Taroc. He was feeling like the conversation with Atomy was repeating itself with her. It frustrated him to no end. There had been enough talk in the days past. They needed action, not more words.

The distant rumble of thunder welcomed the first real drops of rain onto the tent. Soon there was the steady sound of water dripping from the trees and hitting the little ponds that had formed on the ground.

“We're going to do it now. Get your things together.” Taroc gave the two women a stern look.

“But it's raining,” Nell protested.

“Exactly. The soldiers will be in their tents and not looking out for us. Best cover we can hope for.” Taroc didn't stay to give the two a chance to protest. He wasn't exactly certain what they were going to do, but he was convinced doing it was the only thing that made sense. For a brief moment he wondered whether the runes had influenced him, but he had not felt them change temperature while coming to the decision. He left the tent and told Atomy and the rest to gather up what they needed. They were not coming back no matter how it turned out.

Either they'd be inside the fortress or the entire army would be after them.

The men went to work and Taroc went to gather up his own belongings. He strapped them on his horse. There would not be room for a carriage. It would be too slow and obvious for running away or riding through the camp. Having gotten his own belongings together he helped Nell and Mary strap their belonging on their horses. All the while the rain kept pouring down. Even with the hooded cape he had he could feel his robe getting wet underneath it.

It would be a miserable ride to the hill.

The rain had not died down at all when everything was ready. Taroc could see no one was happy about the situation. Riding in the rain was bad enough, but when you had metal armour on you it was even worse. Mary and Nell had wrapped themselves inside capes and hoisted themselves up on their horses. Still they looked miserable and by the time they'd get near the fortress the water would have seeped its way through their capes.

"Let's go," said Taroc to Atomy who ordered everyone on the move. They kept a good pace even if it made the rain hit them harder. They were all soaking wet when they reached the hill. Taroc helped Nell and Mary off their horses while Atomy went up the hill with a couple of the men to see what the situation was like. They returned a few moment later.

"The camp's holed up," said Atomy. "Just a few unlucky ones who are standing guard. Could barely see anything from this rain."

"All right." Taroc looked around. The dark clouds covered the entire sky. It didn't look like the rain was going to let out any time soon either. The sky was almost as dark as the expressions on the faces surrounding him. "All right. You two, let's get on that hill and see what we can do, shall we?" He gave the two women a look that didn't invite disagreement. They followed him up the hill and against the rain that kept pounding them. Taroc swore it had only gotten worse since they left their little camp.

It didn't take long for the trio to climb up the hill.

"Great view," said Nell in a dry voice when they reached the top. Looking around Taroc had to admit Atomy had been right. There were barely visible spots of light where a camp fires were still going. Everything else was hidden behind a veil of grey the rain produced.

Mary remained silent, though she peered into the distance trying to see the camp.

"All right. Let's get started," said Taroc after a while.

"What are we doing?" asked Nell and turned to regard him. Her question pulled Mary to look at him also.

"I don't know," said Taroc and shrugged. "What triggered the light the last time?"

A moment of silence passed. The raindrops hitting the ground was the only sound. "All three of us were touching each other," said Mary after a moment.

"So we hold hands," said Taroc and reached out to the two. After a bit of hesitation they took his hands. It naturally made them form a small circle as the two women grabbed each others hands.

Nothing happened.

“Now what?” asked Nell. Water was dripping down her nose. The hood of her cape couldn't keep the rain off from her face because of the gusts of wind that occasionally blew over the hill.

“Maybe we need to think of something we want to happen,” said Taroc.

“What do we want to happen?” asked Mary.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

The same thought ran through the minds of all of them. As suddenly as the idea had appeared in their minds the runes on them flared up. The blue light cast an eerie orb in the rain surrounding them. They could feel the runes grow warmer and warmer, to a point where the water hitting them started to sizzle. They all shared spooked looks with each other as they felt the power grow.

Taroc was surprised when Atomy appeared behind Nell. The runes on him were glowing as well and his eyes looked glazed over. Looking around he could see the rest of the men standing around them. They formed another circle around them. Their runes glowed as much as his own, but none of them looked like they were present in their own mind.

Then the surge of light shot up into the dark clouds above and Taroc felt himself being pulled out of his body. He saw himself standing in the circle of light, growing ever smaller. Then he entered the cloud and got pulled by the strands of blue light criss crossing across it. He couldn't help but feel a bit joy at the feeling. The speed, the fact he could feel Nell and Mary and all the men whisking past him.

Then suddenly he got pulled down. Before he could even realize it he was on ground level, in the middle of the camped army, shooting from one soldier to another. The looks of anguish flashed by quicker than a blink of an eye until replaced by the next one. Taroc could spot runes whisking by here and there. Sometimes, when he froze to stare at an anguished face for more than a blink of an eye, he could see a rune land on their face and start burning.

As suddenly as he'd been pulled down to the ground he'd shoot back into the clouds and gather momentum before making another trip down. How long he kept doing that along with the others he couldn't really tell. How many people he passed through he couldn't count. Despite the faces of pain he couldn't help but

feel exhilarated by what was happening. The sheer feeling of freedom and speed was intoxicating.

Then came the last trip down. He could see the double circle formed by the group. There was no mistaking it because of the glow of the runes on their skin. For a moment he felt terror as he closed on his own body. The thought that he'd end up just like the others he'd entered had the feeling of panic swelling up inside him.

Taroc took a sharp breath and realized he was back in his own body. More than anything he was acutely aware of the limitations his own body brought with it. He couldn't help but look up at the sky with some amount of longing. He realized the rain had stopped. The clouds above were a dull grey instead of the pitch black they had been when they'd started.

“That was amazing.”

Taroc turned to regard Jeder. Usually the man looked like he was sucking on a lemon no matter the situation, but now he looked genuinely in awe. The runes were still glowing on him as they were on the rest of the men and the two women. Equally, all of them looked to be in the same state as Jeder was. No one seemed terrified or afraid.

“That was something indeed,” said Taroc and turned his attention to the fortress and the army besieging it. Even from the distance he could tell a lot of people were dead. There were bodies strewn all around in a clear path to the fortress. Where the light from the sky had not done damage it had pushed the rest of the army away. It wasn't hard to understand why. Taroc had little doubt that if he'd witnessed what had taken place he'd have ran away as fast as his legs could carry him.

The army wasn't decimated in its entirety, but certainly a path to the fortress had been carved.

“Come on. We have to hurry. Ride to the fortress as quickly as we can while the runes on us still glow and the army is too afraid to close in on us.” Taroc started down the hill to the horses without waiting for the others to agree. He heard Atomy bark orders only a moment later so he was certain everyone would be doing as told. He jumped on his horse with speed and grace never displayed

before from him and hurried it into a fast gallop. A quick glance back and he could see the rest following. With the runes still glowing on all of them it was quite the sight.

Given that, he couldn't really blame the few soldiers that wandered close enough to them when they ran away as soon as they saw what was coming their way. Not that there were many soldiers around. Most had ran away from the destruction wrought against them from the heavens. There was a clear path through the camp with the army on either side. Dead bodies laid on the ground, tents were on fire and a lingering blue glow could be seen here and there where the light had hit.

What Taroc worried about was the fortress. There were clearly people on the walls. Some were running to their positions while others were pointing out things to their comrades. Nothing gave an indication that they were preparing to open the massive gates that had been keeping them safe for years.

Occasionally a plume of smoke blocked the view and riding through it left him wondering what would be on the other side. Maybe a group of soldiers had not run away or had been brave enough to come and investigate. The thought of being captured by the army was a distressing one. He knew the days of torture and eventually death would be horrible for all of them. But every time the smoke would clear nothing but the same laid to waste tents and men would be seen.

The ground changed from muddy grass to hard stone. The rain had made the rock slippery and Taroc had to slow down for fear of his horse tripping. Still, he kept a pace that was dangerously fast. The rest of the group followed him at equal speed. They dared not slow down much either. They were through the army now. Turning back would have meant riding to the arms of death.

The people inside the fortress seemed to come abuzz. There was lots of pointing and distant shouts could be heard. The glowing runes were sure to draw their attention. Now Taroc only hoped they'd let them in. He hoped they'd connect the runes to the display of power that had decimated a good portion of the army. He hoped they would see the enemy of their enemy as a friend.

A few hundred feet before the gate and Taroc started to have doubts. There was no sign of the gate opening. He started to reign in his horse to give more

time. Looking up at the imposing battlements had him feeling small and insignificant. There were broken ladders and other siege equipment laying around. He couldn't imagine the terror the soldiers must have felt when trying to take over the place.

When he started to hear the huge chains move and the gates start to open a wave of relief ran over him. He hurried his horse once more to close the distance as quickly as possible. A quick glance back told him his companions were following him still. For a moment it looked like the gate wouldn't open in time. The thought of slamming against the wooden gates at full speed on a horse sounded unpleasant and made Taroc think he should slow down, but a moment later he could see there would be enough of a crack for him to squeeze through.

A new sort of anxiety took over as he slipped inside and rode through the dozens of feet thick passage way that cut through the walls. Not only were they tall, but they had a thickness to them that ensured any rocks hurled at them by catapults would do little more than scrape the outside.

He had to pull his reins to stop the horse when he entered the courtyard beyond the tunnel like entrance. There was a half circle of men there with their spears squarely pointed at him. While they looked bewildered over his glow they looked ready to use their weapons if he did anything. Their apprehensions only grew as the rest of the group caught up with him.

Taroc gave Atomy a sharp look as the men started to draw their weapons. A few sharp orders from him and the swords remained in their sheaths.

"We are not here to cause you harm," Taroc declared in a loud voice that was followed by the heavy thud of the gate closing behind him. If the people in the fortress decided they had made a mistake there would be escaping their spears now. "We come seeking information and your help."

There was no response from the men pointing their spears at the group. A few nervous shifts here and there was all the response they got. Taroc wished the runes would stop glowing, but they seemed to have no intention of doing so. As much as they had helped them ride through the army without incident they now served to stir up mistrust and fear.

A quick look around saw everyone nervous, from his companions to the men

surrounding them. Taroc had to pull the reins of his horse to keep it under control. The nervousness was transferring itself to the animals. There were nervous whinnies from them.

“Who are you?”

Taroc turned around and looked up above the gate. He found a bald man standing there in a brown robe. There was nothing very distinctive about him besides the deep voice that made it easy to hone in on him.

“My name is Taroc.”

“Taroc Radkle the inquisitor?” asked the man.

“Yes, though recent events may have stricken me from the good graces of the church.” He could see the man's corner of the mouth twitch.

“I imagine you smashing their army in such a spectacular way is bound to make you a marked man.”

“I hope they do not figure out who it was,” said Taroc. No one had seen them so it shouldn't turn out to be a problem. “It is my hope your library will offer us a solution to the trouble we have found ourselves in.”

“Put down your weapons and surrender to us without a hassle and we will see what can be done,” said the man.

Taroc gave Atomy a quick look. He shook his head slightly. It didn't sound like a good idea to him either, but as he saw it they'd either give up their weapons or end up dead. At such close range and disorganized he doubted the runes would be enough to save them.

“Throw down your weapons,” Taroc ordered the group. There were a few defiant looks throw his way, but when Atomy repeated the order everyone obeyed. The spear wielding soldiers quickly gathered the discarded weapons and as the group dismounted they swarmed over them, binding their hands and in some cases even knocking out those who struggled too much.

Taroc gave the man on the wall a questioning look at the rough handling, but he was gone. The runes started to dim once more and as they were dragged deeper into the fortress they found themselves prisoners without a way out.

Chapter 12

“How long are they going to keep us locked up?”

“I'm sure they're trying to decide what to do with us,” said Taroc. He paced around the small room like a caged animal. At least he had managed to talk their captors to let Nell and Mary remain in the same quarters as him. They'd been in the same room for the past two days. Taroc had become familiar with the stone floor and the carpet that served as his only cushion against it while the two women shared the single bed. He'd have been welcome to join them, but there was a limit to the beds ability to hold people.

“At least they haven't thrown us off the cliff,” said Mary. Her mind was in grimmer territory than Nell's who seemed content to complain about not being allowed to leave the room. She sat on the bed while Nell stood at the single window that offered them a view of the outside. Not the battlefield side, but one looking over the valley below.

“If they wanted us dead we'd be dead already,” said Taroc. “As soon as the runes stopped glowing we became mere humans again and not some mysterious entities that made them forget cold steel would probably kill us just fine.”

“But they haven't even talked to any of us,” said Nell. “How can they be deciding what to do with us without talking to us?”

“Maybe they've talked to Atomy and rest of the men,” said Taroc. “Or maybe they're busy trying to figure out if the path we cut through the army offers them some way out of this situation. Plenty of reasons for them to be busy with other things than us.”

“If they've talked to any of the men then they know our story,” said Mary.

“How fanatical are these people? Are they like the inquisitors of the church, willing to burn anything heretical on sight? If they are then we're in trouble,” asked Nell, starting her way down the alley of dark thoughts.

“If anything they're more tolerant and understanding,” said Taroc. “They don't approve of the inquisition. They see it as a corrupt way of getting rid of political enemies instead of ensuring the purity of the faith. They believe in a live

and let live sort of way. They shouldn't kill us simply because we have weird markings on us. They might kill us if they end up thinking we're here to infiltrate them on the behalf of the army outside, but I don't see that happening given how many we killed getting in here.”

“Let's pray you're right,” said Nell.

The room fell silent and only the pacing of Taroc made sounds. Then voices started to be heard from the corridor outside. A few moments later the door swung open and the bald man that had stood atop the gate entered. His grey eyes passed over each one of them before fixing on Taroc.

“My name is Lim Ganabe. By grace of god I am the leader of the Prebysterian Order.”

It didn't take Taroc long to realize that in front of him stood the man that had divided the church single handedly and finally splintered off a group that had been holed up in the fortress for years while taunting the church and its full might. Had he still been an inquisitor at heart he'd have reached for a weapon and killed him and, while that would have led to his own death with absolute certainty, he would have gone to the afterlife with a smile on his face.

Now, he hoped he could sweet talk the man into letting him live and then perhaps granting access to their library.

“It is an honour to meet you,” said Taroc and gave the man a slight bow.

Lim waved a hand to dismiss such formalities. “Please, no need for that.” as he did that a couple of men dressed like monks entered the room and set up enough chairs for all of them to sit on. Lim motioned for the trio to take a seat and they did so. The man himself sat in a chair opposite to them while behind him the door remained open with several guards visible, ready to rush in if the need arose.

“Your entrance was quite remarkable,” said Lim in a calm voice. “There was a heated debate whether to let you in or leave you at the mercy of the inquisitor army.”

“We are very happy you decided to let us in,” said Nell. “In our current state we have no safe place.”

“I am not so certain you are safe here either,” said Lim. “They way you cut

through that army seems to have created quite a buzz. Outside and inside these walls. There are those who think we should burn you at the stake. That you are under the control of evil forces.”

“For all we know we might be,” Taroc replied. It did not seem wise to lie to the man. “Truth be told we don't know what we're under. I was hoping your library might hold some answers. It has not been raided by inquisitors as of yet so there might be tomes there that deal with this.”

“Your men seem to know very little,” Lim pointed out. “They couldn't really tell much of what had happened to them. They went on about a blue light and blamed you three for all of it.”

“In that they are correct,” Taroc admitted. “More to the point, it is all my fault. These two were dragged into it because of me. I found a book in one of the libraries I was inspecting and these markings simply jumped from the page on to me and started exerting their will upon me. I hope your men have kept away from that book as I told them to?”

“Oh, yes. The book is safely locked away. Do you truly believe our library might offer you answers?” Lim did not sound convinced.

“I hope so,” said Taroc.

Lim looked thoughtful for a moment before talking again. “Many people saw what you did to the army outside. They are nervous, but others are looking at this as an opportunity to settle this siege. They are suggesting we should use you to decimate the rest of the army as you did when you came to us.” The look he gave the three of them was a questioning one, looking for confirmation whether it could be done.

Taroc glanced at Mary and Nell. Neither one looked excited about the idea. He couldn't blame them. As elating as it had been to shoot through the clouds with such ease and freedom, they had killed people. Using the runes always had the risk of further allowing them power over them. He turned back to Lim with the most hesitation he'd ever had in his life. “We want to be rid of these things. We don't know what using their power does to us. How it strengthens the hold they have over us. What you are suggesting is dangerous to us. Dangerous to everyone.”

Lim sighed. "I feared it would be that way. Yet it is the only way I can allow you access to library. You must promise to use your powers to drive the inquisitor army away before getting rid of the power should you find a way to rid yourself of it."

"And if we do not find a way to get rid of the power?" It was the first question to come out of Nell's mouth during the conversation.

"Then would it not be in your best interests that this fortress not fall as we are the only ones who do not want to see you burned at the stake on sight?" There was nothing fancy about Lim's words. Just the brutal reality of the situation.

"What if we simply want to leave?" asked Mary.

The corner of Lim's mouth twitched. "You're free to do so, but I don't think the army outside would be that welcoming for you. So if you do decide to leave it will be to your own death or to the death of that army. I'd certainly prefer if it was the army that did the dying."

The trio sat in silence contemplating the options before them.

"I can see you need a bit of time. I'll let you have it." With that Lim stood up and walked out the door. The guards came in and removed the chairs, forcing the three of them back on their feet to seek a new place to sit. The door was locked once more when the guards were done.

Taroc let out a deep breath. "At least we were given a choice." He made his way to the single window and looked outside. The valley below looked calm. It was a stark contrast to the decimation that would have been visible in the opposite direction.

"Not much of a choice," said Nell. "I say we do what they want. Destroy that army. They would kill us on sight so why should we care what happens to them?"

"Because despite their intentions towards us they're human?" Mary gave both of them a nervous look. She still did that when ever presenting a more pointed opinion. "Are we the sort of people who have no problem killing scores of people? Are we no better than the inquisitors who burn people at the stake at the flimsiest piece of evidence?"

Taroc felt a slight sting at the accusation. He'd burned plenty of people alive

for tiny reasons, sometimes even made up reasons, purely because it served his own goals. "While they are humans and their lives are important to someone, I'm not that someone." Taroc gave the two women a look. "I care about my own life. I care about your lives. I care what happens to Atomy and the rest of the men. Even Jeder, as vile of a bastard as he is. I would much rather all of us live and the army outside die."

Nell nodded in agreement. "I think the same. I only have my own life and there isn't going to be another on this earth. If keeping it going means ending others then so be it." She hugged herself with her arms. The way she spoke sounded uncomfortable with the issue, but there was determination behind the words.

Mary seemed to shrink under the gaze of both of them. She bit down on her lower lip and avoided looking at either of them. She wrangled her hands in front of her. "I just can't get the faces out of my head. The people we already killed by coming here. I don't want more of them in my head."

"I have them as well," said Taroc. He did his best to sound sympathetic. "I've had them before as well. People I've condemned to death. Families I've broken. You can't get through life without some regrets, some secrets and bad deeds that haunt you. You simply have to live with them and come to terms with what you've done."

"But we could just not kill anyone," said Mary.

"If we don't then we'll die here. That army will breach this fortress at some point and then they will kill us. Don't you understand that? It's either kill or be killed for us." Nell started to sound impatient as she leaned on Mary. Taroc feared she might grow upset enough to start a real fight with her.

"Maybe it's better to die than to kill," said Mary and gave Nell a defiant look.

"Are you seriously saying that?" Nell demanded. Her voice rose a level and the disbelief was thick with it.

"Maybe I am," said Mary, though her tone seemed to tell another story. Hearing the words out loud had seemed to have made her realize the implications better.

"We're not going to die," said Taroc and stepped between the two women to

keep the situation from escalating. At least Nell looked ready to jump at her and go from words to throwing fists. “For now, let's say we will do it. We'll get rid of the army, but not until we've gone through the library. If we find a solution then we use it before telling Lim. That way we can't even help them if we wanted to.”

“Won't they be mad at us when they find out we've lost our powers?” asked Nell. “They might decide to kill us for that.”

“Do you have a better solution?” Taroc asked and gave her a sharp look.

For a moment it looked like she would say something, but then she simply shook her head. Taroc nodded and turned his attention to Mary. “I admire that you're willing to give your own life to not take another. In this world that's a rare thing even if we should all strive for it. But the situation we're in demands a bit of ruthlessness. The plan I laid out is the least ruthless we can go with. Don't you agree?”

Mary gave him an apprehensive glance before looking past him at Nell and then averting her eyes. “I suppose.” It was an agreement made with many reservations.

“Good. Then we all agree?” Taroc glanced at both of the women. They nodded. “Good.”

They waited in a tense silence for Lim to return so they could tell him their decision. It was a few hours before the man returned. He didn't bother with the chair this time. He simply stood at the door and listened to their decision.

“Very well,” he agreed upon hearing the proposal. “But you will be under guard at all times and your men will not be getting their weapons back. Your movement will be limited to the library, the dining hall, the inner garden and your own quarters.”

Taroc nodded. “We can agree to that.”

“Good. Then..” Lim was interrupted by a loud crash and thump. It was quickly followed by another and another. The man simply sighed.

“What is that?” asked Nell.

“The army surrounding us did not take kindly to the way you cut through them,” said Lim. “They've spent the past days regrouping and they've brought out their siege weapons once more. It seems they are done setting up and are now

bombarding us once more.”

“Should we worry?” asked Taroc.

“The walls will hold,” Lim assured them with a calm smile. “But it will be noisy so you might not get much sleep. And I'd stay out of the open areas as much as you can. Sometimes they get bored hurling large stones and instead shower us with smaller ones. Not much damage from those to the fortress, but they can kill you if they hit you.”

“We'll keep that in mind,” said Taroc. It was amazing how calm Lim was about the whole thing. Years of the same had likely dulled him to the prospect of getting hit on the head with a stone. “Can I have the book back? I might need it in my research.”

“Of course,” Lim replied. “Just don't go reading it.” He gave a stern look at him and Taroc nodded. He didn't need to be told to leave the book alone. It had brought him enough trouble to drive that lesson home all on its own.

“Can we go then?” asked Taroc.

“Of course. I will leave guards with you. They will show you the way around. The rest of your group has already been released and are enjoying a meal as we speak. Perhaps you would like to join them before going to the library?” Lim didn't stay to hear a response. He turned and walked away, leaving the question hanging in the air.

“Come on you two. Let's go read some books.” Taroc took a step towards the door, but when the two women made no effort to move he stopped to look back at them.

“What do you need us for?” asked Nell.

“You can help me go through books,” Taroc replied, but when he saw the looks on their faces he realized they didn't understand. “We've shared our memories. You should be able to remember all the teachings I've gone through to understand these texts. Maybe not now, but once you have something in front of you the memories will come and you will understand. The three of us can get things done much faster than just me alone. For once let's use the power we've given to advance our own cause in a positive way.”

The two looked embarrassed at not having realized the shared memories

offered such an opportunity. They followed him out without saying anything. The guards led them down the stairway and along many corridors before finally opening a door to a large hall that was stuffed full of bookshelves that were groaning under the weight of the tomes stacked on them. There was dust floating around and the smell of old parchment was thick in the air.

“We're supposed to find something in here?” asked Mary and looked around. Taroc realized it was the first time she had stepped into a library. Likely she had never seen more than a few books in her entire life.

“It may look daunting, but we'll find something,” said Taroc and stepped through a spot of sunlight that made it through one of the small windows. Someone had already prepared the area for reading with lit oil lamps giving enough illumination to make seeing comfortable.

Nell sneezed. “Doesn't anyone dust this place?”

“I imagine they've been busy with other things for the past few years,” said Taroc. As boring as a siege could get dusting books probably didn't land very high on the list of things to do. “And the Presbyterians aren't the library keepers. There was a monastic order here before them that tended to these books, but when the siege began they were driven out. Leaving behind all these books was painful for them. I remember hearing them gathering outside the walls for days, praying and begging to be let back in. The inquisitor army finally drove them away and relocated them.”

Mary grabbed a book and flipped through the pages. She stopped and focused on a page for a moment before her eyes widened. “I can read this.”

Taroc turned to give her a knowing smile. “I told you. Now put that silly thing down and help me find some of the older books. They might be in the basement.” He turned to regard the stairway leading underground at the far side of the hall.

The trio spent hours going through books. The underground level of the library was much the same as at the Caldevan monastery. There were small chambers with doors on them and signs above that tried to tell you what was inside. The books were divided by topic, but often times they found them not to be accurate. Books were disorganized. It made Taroc wish the hard stone

surrounding them could speak and tell what human neglect had made things such a mess.

Nell and Mary didn't seem to mind. Neither had read many books before and now that they had the ability to do so they found themselves drawn in by centuries of knowledge. They were slow to go through books because neither wanted to disregard a text before fully reading it. Taroc was quicker since he didn't really care much about information that didn't directly handle the runes. He allowed the two women the luxury of digging deeper into the texts. They were still making the search go quicker.

It was hunger that finally drove them out of the library. They'd gotten nowhere in finding texts to help them, but at least Lim had delivered on his promise and one of the guards had brought the cursed tome to him. Wrapped in its protective leather casing Taroc carried it with him while the trio made their way to the dining hall. They were just in time for the final meal of the day. Most of the people at the fortress had already eaten and only a few soldiers and monks remained at the rows of long tables. Atomy and a few of the others had one end of a table all to themselves. Taroc had all but forgotten about them. He realized he should have talked to at least Atomy before diving into the books.

He grabbed himself some bread, cheese and meat and headed for the table. The pot of stew standing at the table with the food was half empty and didn't look that appetising to him. Atomy nodded to him as he took a seat. Nell and Mary soon joined him. The two women had chosen to go for the stew along with bread. The first spoonfuls they ate made Taroc think he had made the right choice in not taking it.

"How's everyone?" Taroc asked after taking a bite out of his sandwich.

"Not as nervous as before," Atomy replied. "When we were locked up things were starting to heat up. One of us getting dragged out for questioning after another, not being allowed outside, not being told what was going on. It started to get to some. Things are calming down now that we've been let out. I assume you struck some sort of deal?"

"We did," said Taroc and explained the arrangement made with Lim. Atomy listened with a straight face, not letting his emotions show. Whether he approved

of the deal or was against it was impossible to tell.

“Have you found anything yet?” Atomy had a steady voice that didn't give away anything about his thoughts.

“Not yet.” Taroc took a last bite out of his piece of bread. “There are so many books in the library. It could take a while. Even with these two helping me.” He glanced at the two women. They both were staring at their bowls of stew with unsatisfied expressions. Half full still it looked like neither was in a hurry to finish eating it.

Atomy didn't comment on it despite giving the two a look. “Well, let's hope you find it quick. While we're allowed to move about somewhat this is going to eat away at some of the men.”

“Jeder?” Taroc gave Atomy a concerned look.

“He's getting jumpy,” Atomy admitted. “When we were locked up he didn't have much choice, but now that he's allowed to move about he's bound to get ideas. At least there aren't many women around or beer, but all the same he might get into some trouble.”

“Can you handle it?”

“I'll do my best, boss, but no guarantees. Find what you're looking for quick. That's the best thing for us all.” Atomy glanced at the runes covering his arms. “Get rid of these so we can go back to being normal people. Maybe we can even get out of here with our lives still with us.”

“We'll do our best,” Taroc assured the man. “Meanwhile try to keep the men in line.” He was interrupted by a loud crash that seemed to make the entire building shudder. Everyone at the table exchanged nervous glances. A moment later a deep thud had them relax.

“Damn siege weapons,” Atomy muttered. “Never much cared to be on the receiving end of them. Loved to watch them hurl those massive rocks though.”

“No one likes being at the pointy end of the sword,” said Taroc.

“True enough,” Atomy agreed.

“I hope the fortress holds,” said Mary.

“It's held up so far,” said Atomy. “From what I've seen it's built to last. We shouldn't have to worry about that.” He gave the woman an encouraging smile.

“We'll work fast so we can get out of here,” Taroc assured both her and Atomy. “That army outside will not be the end for any of us. I promise you that.”

Atomy grunted. “I'll see if I can make some friends with the soldiers here. Might learn something useful if we need to get out.”

Taroc nodded. “A good idea.”

With that the conversation drifted off to other matters. Having eaten the group dispersed each their own way to work towards getting out of the situation they were in.

Chapter 13

“The silence is the worst,” said the soldier.

Atomy nodded. “We're so used to the constant bombardment that when it stops it feels unnatural. Worst thing about sieges, that.”

“I don't know, the threat of death is pretty bad too,” said the soldier.

“You do sort of forget about it after a while, don't you Kalen?” Atomy gave the soldier a look as he passed the small clay pot filled with wine. He'd gone to great lengths to acquire it. Making friends with the kitchen staff had taken a while and scoring such a rarity had taken even longer. Beer was plentiful, but wine was harder to come by.

“This certainly helps,” said Kalen and raised the clay pot in slight salute before taking a swig.

Atomy turned to look beyond the battlement at the army surrounding them. It was night and the camp fires littered the field like the stars in the sky. The bombardment of rocks had ceased when sun set. In the early days since the group had broken through they'd kept the bombardment going during nights. In the weeks that had passed since then their enthusiasm had died down.

“Got to wonder if they'll make another assault attempt,” said Atomy and ducked back behind the battlement. He rested his back against it and surveyed the fortress. Lights could be seen here and there as some windows let out small strands of light through their shutters. Most of the people inside were asleep, but some stood guard, some of the leaders were having a sleepless night for who knew how many nights in a row.

“The last one nearly broke us,” said Kalen in a grim voice. “Thinned out our ranks severely. The commander doesn't want us to see it, but he's worried. The walls will hold, but only if there are men on them and we're running short on those.”

“Well, if you need extra bodies, I've got a few to spare. Keeping this fortress standing is in our best interest as well.” Atomy gave the man a reassuring grin, though he found it hard to keep a positive mind. He'd witnessed the last assault.

It had been brutal. Men were nothing more than straws of hay in front of a farmers sickle when they rushed to the wall. Arrows rained down on them, boiling pitch was poured down on those lucky who survived that far and then they were set on fire. Those than managed to set up ladders to climb the wall soon found themselves falling to their deaths. Still the army had advanced and nearly managed to capture a portion of the wall.

Too many defenders had died taking back that portion.

“You may regret making that offer,” said Kalen. He was a few steps further into adulthood than some of the other men standing at the wall. He was the sort who'd have just inherited the farm as their parents passed away due to old age. He looked like one too with his brownish beard that covered his chin and cheeks and the messy hair that had been cut here and there with what looked to be a dull knife. Appearances weren't that important when under siege.

“Well, we all got to die some day,” said Atomy and took a swig from the clay pot. It wasn't bad wine, but it wasn't good either. It had a bitterness to it that was on the verge of making you grimace.

Kalen eyed him for a moment before turning his attention back to the field of stars. “How did you end up being like that, anyway? Covered in those things.”

Atomy shook his head and chuckled. “Friend, I wish I knew. It's like someone sneaked up on me and hit me on the head with a club. I woke up and this is how I was.”

“Not a lot of the others want anything to do with your lot,” said Kalen. “They're starting to look at me funny for talking to you.”

“I don't want any trouble for you,” Atomy assured the man. “I can't really blame any of you for that, though. The way we entered this place must have spooked everyone.”

“Damn right it did,” said Kalen. He shifted his weight from one leg to another and tightened the grip on his spear. “Some of us thought the all mighty himself had descended on earth and was coming for us.”

“Don't think he has anything to do with what's afflicting us,” said Atomy with a slight grin.

Kalen grunted. “Some thought and still think you're straight from purgatory

sent to punish us. Can't blame them. The way you sliced through that army and left behind a river of dead. It's not hard to believe you might be here to drag us to hell."

"Do I seem the sort to do that?"

Kalen gave him a good look over. "Never seen a demon or anything else from the underworld. Wouldn't know what the lot would look like. Wouldn't know what they thought would be the best way to drag us with them. Maybe it's being friendly and normal. Luring us in by making us drop our guard."

"So that's why I'm sharing this wine with you instead of having it all to myself." Atomy grinned and took another swig of it.

"Could be," said Kalen. "Though I'm more inclined to think you're just a bunch of sorry folk who got cursed and are trying to find their way out of the mess."

"That does sound more plausible than us crawling out from the underworld just to cause trouble to you folk," said Atomy.

"Either way we're all probably dead."

"That's a bleak outlook you've got there," said Atomy with a frown. He didn't think the morale had gotten so low among the defenders. Not that he could blame them. Years under siege would eat away the morale of even the most motivated people.

"Not much to be happy about these days," said Kalen. "This whole thing has lost its meaning. We're stuck here for the rest of our lives. Even if the army outside leaves the world won't welcome us. If we leave the safety of these walls they'll hunt us down one by one and burn us at the stake."

"Could be," Atomy agreed. Having worked with Taroc he knew well the man was right. If the army decided to withdraw there would still be inquisitors laying in wait for anyone leaving the fortress. They'd be caught one by one, interrogated and finally burned alive, just like the man feared. Given that he started to wonder whether getting rid of the runes was such a good move. Without them they'd be easy targets. They'd likely meet the same fate as the defenders.

"Well, no use in me worrying about it. All on the higher ups that. I just got to keep my head down and not get hit with an arrow or a rock."

"That's enough worry for one man," said Atomy and took a swig of wine. He offered it to the soldier once more and he happily took it.

"Sure is," said Kalen and wiped some wine off his lips before returning it to Atomy.

The two stood in silence for a while, looking over the field of battle. They could see torches moving here and there, marking out the enemy patrols. It seemed to be a calm night.

"Still, I'm impressed you guys have managed to hold out this long. That's no small army trying to get in here."

"It's a fine fortress," said Kalen. His voice was starting to gain a softness brought on by the wine. "Thick walls. Tall walls. Only one side to attack from."

"Scaling that cliff would be quite a feat," Atomy agreed. He'd been to the sheer cliff that covered the other side of the fortress. He'd gotten to the edge and looked down and felt slightly light headed. A single man with enough courage and skill might make it up, but then they'd be face to face with the guards that still overlooked the area. No one was going to make any sort of attack from that direction.

"When this place was being built the lord announced a reward to scale that cliff. He wanted to know how likely it was anyone would make it up that way. Dozens fell to their deaths trying to claim the prize promised for making it. In the end no one did."

"Still, makes getting new supplies a bit tricky," said Atomy.

Kalen shrugged. "There's huge stocks of stuff below the fortress. Cool too so things don't rot so easily."

"Surely you're getting fresh supplies from somewhere." Atomy knew he was pushing on a delicate subject. He hoped he wouldn't be rebuffed.

"From time to time," Kalen admitted.

"How?" asked Atomy. "No one's going to slip through that army."

Kalen gave him a look. "That's not something I'm going to talk about."

Atomy gave the man a grin. "Of course. I shouldn't have asked."

"Right," Kalen muttered.

The silence that followed was uncomfortable. Atomy decided it was time to

end it for the night. "Well, thanks for the company. I think it's time for me to hit the sack."

Kalen nodded. "Thanks for the wine."

"Any time," Atomy replied and walked off. He cursed to himself silently. He shouldn't have pushed for the secret. Not yet. Though he had doubts whether Kalen was the sort of man who'd let things slip even after considerable softening. He seemed like a good soldier who kept to his orders.

Atomy took the staircase down from the battlement and walked across the courtyard. He nodded to a few of the guards he passed and recognized. Some ignored him, others nodded back. Kalen wasn't the only one he'd been getting friendly with. He'd met with some success, but some failure as well.

Walking past the library he could see light from one of the windows. It wasn't hard to guess why and who was there, but he decided to go and have a look. The heavy doors to the building let out a rusty creak as he opened them and the smell of dust and old paper hit him when he stepped inside. He could see the source of the light, a couple of lamps set about a table, and the hunched figure leafing through a book. He walked over, his steps echoing around the tall room despite all the shelves that were creaking under the weight of the books they held.

"How's the search going, boss?"

Taroc looked up from the book and squinted. He then shook his head. "Not so good. How's your search for friendship going?"

Atomy chuckled. "I've had some success. Haven't learned anything of importance yet, though." he looked around. "Where are the ladies?"

"Sleeping I would imagine," replied Taroc.

"Wouldn't hurt you to get some of that either," said Atomy. The dark pouches under the inquisitors eyes were growing larger by the day. It wasn't the first time he was working late into the night and neglecting himself.

"I'll rest when I find something," said Taroc and turned his attention back to the book.

"At least have something to drink," Atomy offered and put the wine on the table. It got Taroc to lift his gaze from the book again and examine the bottle.

"Where did you get this?" he asked as he grabbed the wine and smelled it.

"Pays to have friends," said Atomy with a feint smile. "Helps with making new ones too."

"I can imagine," said Taroc and took a sip. It had a sweetness to it that counteracted the sour taste. It wasn't bad at all. Certainly beat the plain water most meals were accompanied with. The warmth spreading down his throat made him feel drowsy.

"Maybe we shouldn't try to find a solution to our problem," said Atomy in a casual tone.

"What?" It took Taroc completely by surprise.

"I'm saying, maybe these runes aren't so bad. They're the only thing keeping us alive. If we get rid of them the chances of us dying go up."

"The chances of us being controlled by something other than ourselves also drastically reduces if we get rid of them," Taroc pointed out. "Who knows what the runes might make us do? It might be something worse than death."

"It might be there is no way to get rid of them," Atomy pointed out.

"That's a problem we'll deal with after exhausting all other options," said Taroc.

"As you say, boss." Atomy grabbed the wine and took a sip. He glanced around the library. The light from the lanterns didn't reach every corner and left much of it in darkness. Not that there was much to see besides books and more books.

Taroc flipped a page on the tome he was examining. He stopped for a moment to read it before looking up at Atomy. "Do you have dreams?"

Atomy gave him a weird look. "Everyone has dreams."

"No, I mean, what do you see in your dreams?" Taroc leaned back in his chair. It creaked which made him tense up. He relaxed after a moment when it didn't break down.

"People I've killed," said Atomy. "If they're nightmares. Which they often are. There are good dreams as well. I don't really remember those that well. The good things fade away, but the bad ones will always stick with you."

Taroc nodded. "That is how it tends to be."

"Why are you asking about my dreams?"

“Just making sure. The runes can seep into your dreams, but from what you said it doesn't seem to be the case for you.”

“Can't say I've had much related to them in my dreams,” Atomy agreed. “And speaking of dreams, I think it's time I went to try and catch some.”

“Good night,” said Taroc and hunched over the book once more. He listened to the footsteps as Atomy walked to the door and left. He let out a deep breath when the heavy thud from the door told the man was gone. He leaned back in the chair once more and rubbed his eyes.

He was happy with the answer given to his question. The runes were not giving the others the same sort of flashbacks of memories that happened between him, Nell and Mary.

But he was starting to get more of those from the rest of the group now.

They were not pleasant.

Most of the men working for him had seen some rough times. They had done some horrible things in their lives and now those memories were seeping into his mind. He had asked Nell about it. She had said the memories were coming to her as well.

“So we're the centre where everything comes,” Taroc muttered to himself. He hoped it would remain that way. If his own memories started to seep to the men there would be trouble. Likely violence as well. He returned to the book to get his mind off that possibility.

It was an old text. The ink had faded in parts of the yellow pages which made it that much harder to read. Sometimes a word would have faded so much it was impossible to tell what it had been. At that point it became a guessing game based on context which made for slow reading. It didn't help that the language it was written in wasn't one of his strong ones.

After a bit he slammed the tome shut and discarded into a pile of others he'd deemed useless.

A yawn forced him to realize that Atomy had been right. He needed sleep. He grabbed a lantern, blew out the rest of them and left the library. The fortress corridors could be a maze. Who ever had designed it had made certain even the insides of it would favour the defender. If the walls were breached the corridors

would still let the defender bleed the attacker so much they might even be pushed back. There were dead ends with secret doors. Small holes where arrows could be shot from safety. Every inch would be bought with blood and dead bodies.

Taroc gave none of that much notice as he made his way to the stairway that led to an upper floor. It was where all their rooms were. Two guards stood at the foot of it to ensure no one left without a shadow and that no one entered without being seen. Taroc had become a familiar sight to them so they nodded as he passed and he did the same in an effort to seem courteous.

The stairway had one window about half way up. It offered a view of the army besieging the place. Taroc stopped there for a moment. The window was barely above the fortress walls so he also got a view of them. The army beyond them seemed content to sleep that night. There were the usual campfires to keep the warmth and let those on guard duty see something. It gave him pause.

Being caught by that army would mean certain death for all of them. They'd be thoroughly interrogated, tortured and finally burned alive. That thought was enough to drive up his determination. He'd find the secret to getting rid of the runes.

With a sigh he continued climbing and made his way to the third door on the corridor that waited at the top. It was his room and his alone so he was surprised to see Nell and Mary curled up on the bed. They were both fast asleep. Their foreheads rested against each other. Their noses just barely didn't touch.

There wasn't much room left on the bed, but Taroc did his best not to wake the two. He peeled off his robe and slipped behind Nell. He barely fit, but when Nell shifted a tiny bit closer to Mary he got enough room to at least rest on his side. His face was buried in Nell's hair, but he didn't mind that. If anything the scent coming from it made him fall asleep quicker.

But his dreams were not the relaxing kind.

Visions once more assaulted him. Unlike previous times they weren't glimpses into multiple people, but rather a single, continuous event.

Buildings were burning. Children cried, men shouted and women wailed. Taroc had a sword in hand. He'd just ran it through a kid that could not have been much older than ten. The mother was crouched over the tiny body, crying.

His blade rose and ran through the woman's back. She slumped over the dead child, equally unmoving and lifeless. Taroc pulled out the blade and wiped the blood on her skirt before looking around.

What he had just done was being repeated all around the small village that was slowly burning to the ground. As he watched he parted from the body he had been in and got a view of who it was.

It was Jeder.

Contrary to what Taroc expected from the man, he was looking on with a horrified expression. It was obvious the event was long in the past. The man looked young, barely old enough to be wielding a sword for any army. Looked like his first foray into the cruel world that was the battlefield.

If you could call burning down a village a battlefield. Massacre seemed like a better term.

"Wake up, kid!"

An older soldier made his way next to Jeder and pulled him out of the trance he had been in. He gave the older a man a frightened look. "Sorry, sir!"

"Ain't no time to be day dreaming about the soft bosom of a woman. Get to killing! These heretics deserve worse than we can give them, but God will no doubt have his own judgement to cast on them."

"Yes, sir!" Jeder raised his blade and ran off to find his next victim. He spotted a young boy sprinting towards the edge of the forest. He chased after him. His long legs soon caught up to the boy and his blade swung down, cutting an angry red stripe across the boys back. The kid cried out and fell down to the ground. Jeder stood above him, staring down at him. The boy rolled on his back and raised his arms in a futile attempt to protect himself.

"Please, sir. I don't want to die. Please. Please."

Taroc could tell from the way Jeder's face contorted that it broke his heart to do what he did. His blade came down and sunk between the boys ribs. A shudder shook the tiny body before it went limp.

The smell of smoke grew stronger. The crackling of burning wood mixed in with the screams and shouts. There was the occasional sounds of laughter. Not everyone killing the villagers was doing it for the first time. They'd grown a tough

skin. Some had even grown to enjoy it.

Looking at Jeder, Taroc could understand the man a bit better. He was fighting tears now. It was his first time. That wasn't the man he was now. He'd have spared no thought on killing a boy. He might have even enjoyed it.

It was a testament to how much a person could change.

Ironically, it was the Church and its hunt for heretics that had created the monster Jeder now was. Taroc watched Jeder slowly make his way back to the burning village. The screams had died down somewhat. The wind had changed direction and was now pushing all the smoke right where Jeder was coming from. It made Taroc's eyes water.

He snapped awake and rubbed his eyes. They were moist. It was obvious his eyes had reacted to the vision just as if he had been there for real. His breathing was quick and he could feel his veins throb behind his ears as his heart was pumping blood with such force that it was almost hurting his chest. He calmed his breathing and felt his heart beat a little slower. He could swear the lingering scent of smoke was filling the room.

Nell snapped awake right next to him with a loud whimper. She looked around wide eyed. The runes on her were glowing ever so slightly. Now that Taroc noticed it, he looked at his own and realized they were doing the same.

Mary snapped awake in a more energetic manner than either of them. She rolled off the bed and landed on the floor with a loud thud that was accompanied by a yelp of pain. She scrambled to her feet and looked around, frantically. There were tears rolling down her cheeks and the runes on her were just as aglow as Nell's and Taroc's.

"Jeder?" Taroc asked and gave the two women a look as he still tried to calm down his heart beat. He wiped some sweat off his forehead.

"Yeah," Nell admitted.

Mary gave a silent nod.

"That's one vision I wouldn't have minded not seeing," said Taroc and stood up from the bed. He didn't even give the fact they were all naked any thought. It had happened often enough that it was past being embarrassing. They'd shared far more intimate things with each other through their visions.

“How can you have someone like that with you?” Mary finally asked, her voice shaking. She was hugging herself. Nell inched closer to her side of the bed and pulled her down to sit before wrapping her arms around her to give comfort.

“There are far worse men out there,” Taroc replied. “He was not born bad, like some are. He was made into what he is now. For all the good the church does in this world it also brings with it some evil.”

“You mean the devil?” asked Nell and stroked Mary’s arms in an attempt to calm her down. It seemed to serve a similar purpose for herself.

Taroc snorted. “I’m beginning to think there’s no such things. Only the church and us. The flawed humans who make bad choices and bring evil to this world. The church does what it can with its teaching to guide us to make better decisions, but not all hear or are willing to listen. Sometimes we simply forget.”

“Are we evil people?” Mary asked.

“We are people trying to survive a bad situation,” Taroc replied. “I don’t think anyone trying to survive is evil just because of that.” He walked over to the only window in the room and opened the wooden shutters. The morning sunlight hit him with a wave of warmth. He squinted to see. The window offered a view over the ridge and of the valley beyond. It gave way to the opposite direction in which the enemy army laid. Taroc suspected part of the reason they’d been put in such rooms was to prevent them from signalling the enemy directly.

“Let’s hope the others aren’t getting these visions,” said Nell and stood up from the bed as well. She searched the floor for her clothes and started putting them on. “If they are then we’re going to run into problems. Some things are not meant to be seen by others.”

“Agreed. I asked about it from Atomy last night and he had not seen any visions. We should be safe,” said Taroc and enjoyed the warm sunshine on his skin for a moment more. At times he had envied the simple farmers that got to spend their day out, working the fields, while he was stuck in dark and musty libraries perusing through pages and pages of text. Then he remember how easy his job was compared to theirs and how much more secure his life was doing what he did.

Sacrificing a bit of sunshine for that was not a bad trade-off.

Mary sighed and stood up from the bed as well. "Let's get to work. These runes are what are doing this. If we find a way to get rid of them then all this worry is for nothing."

Neither Taroc nor Nell could disagree with her and they all put on their clothes and headed for breakfast. It wasn't luxurious, just water, bread and some porridge, but it filled their stomachs and gave them the energy they needed to peruse through the books in the library.

Chapter 14

The torch flickered as a breeze blew through the corridor. Atomy stopped and looked around. He wasn't supposed to be there.

"Everything all right, boss?" Jeder asked with a whisper and nervously fondled the hilt of his sheathed sword.

"Fine. Let's keep going," Atomy muttered in an equally hushed tone. His guard friend had taken days to soften up, but he had finally let it slip. There was a network of tunnels under the fortress. A maze that would have anyone not careful lost and dead, but with the right directions offered a way out of the fortress and into the outside world. Apparently it was how they got supplies. Every now and then a group would venture out and bring back as much supplies as they could move without rousing suspicion.

It was that group the pair was trying to follow.

The torch was a risk, but beat fumbling around in the darkness. The group heading out was not being too careful. They were chatting loudly and laughing. Their footsteps were easy to follow. They could keep a couple of bends between them and the group and not risk them spotting the light from the torch.

The tunnels began deep in the cellars.

It had not been easy to slip past all the guards and follow the group in the cellars. They'd almost lost them when they'd opened the secret door that led to the underground tunnels. It was cleverly hidden inside one of the large wine basins that were stacked inside one of the cellar rooms. It wasn't a place anyone would think to look. They'd simply assume the large barrel was empty and leave it be.

"A left turn," Atomy muttered to Jeder. The man scribbled down an arrow to the left on the piece of parchment they had with them. It was the best they had managed in the short time they had to put together the operation. Atomy could only hope it would be enough to guide them back once they reached the exit. And that Jeder made the right markings.

The pair stopped and listened for a bit. The group ahead of them was still

walking and their voices carried back a lively conversation about how they were looking forward to visiting the outside world once more. One was boasting how he'd stop by the nearest tavern to enjoy a decent pint of ale. Another mused after the famous stew of a near by tavern.

Atomy motioned to Jeder and they rounded the corner just as the light from the group ahead of them disappeared behind a turn to the right. There was a tunnel going straight forward as well as another going left. It would have been easy to make the wrong choice.

Jeder recorded the turn once more and they continued to follow the group. The tunnels they went through were of various sizes. Some were naturally formed while others had tool marks on them telling of human hands that had dug them. Interestingly there was no connection between the tool marks and whether the group used a tunnel. It seemed plenty of decoy tunnels had been dug or they had been used for actual mining at some point or served another purpose entirely.

Several more turns later the flame on their torch started to flutter. The two exchanged looks. The exit was getting close.

"Come on, get the cover off."

Atomy signalled a halt and put out the torch as a ray of light hit the wall of the bend. It was obvious the group had reached the exit and were uncovering it from what ever camouflage it had.

"Ouch!"

"Watch the thorns."

"I know."

After a bit of time there were more shuffling sounds and grunts. The ray of light that had hit the bend went away. The two remained in their place for a good while before daring to venture beyond the bend to see what the exit looked like.

It was a wide cave, but the mouth of it narrowed down to a point where only a single person could move. The cover at the mouth of the entrance had a wooden frame with a canvas. It let in some light so what ever was covering the outside of it wasn't entirely blocking everything.

To the sides of the cave there were crates and a pile of hay along with some barrels. Thinking it best to check the outside first Atomy made his way to the

wooden framed piece of canvas. Jeder followed close behind and without saying a word grabbed the other side of it. It was easy enough to move with two people. In a pinch even a single person could have done it. They pushed it so it went to the left side of the entrance. It seemed there was more room in that direction. Sunlight greeted them as both men carefully peered outside.

The outside didn't offer much more room than the cave. On both sides there were large boulders and a bit further ahead a third boulder created a bend one had to go past to get out of the small protected area. There was no vegetation, just bare rock, so it was unlikely anyone would find the area based on tracks. Atomy crept ahead and as he glanced back he saw how the entrance had been covered. The outside of the canvas had thorny vines running up it that covered it almost completely. The colour of the canvas was such that it was hard to tell it apart from the surrounding stone.

All in all it was an impressive camouflage.

Atomy motioned Jeder to stay near the entrance in case they needed to make a run for it. The tunnels were the only way they'd be able to go. He sneaked towards the bend created by the boulders and peered around it. It opened up to a view of the valley. There were plenty of rocks and boulders making the area hard to travel. He could see the last of the men from the fortress climb over the rocks and disappear from view.

Looking around he tried to ascertain where they were. To the left he could see the sheer face of the cliff continue. In the distance, up high, he saw the fortress. It was hard to tell the distance, but he figured it was several miles off. Far enough that it was unlikely any army looking to siege would be paying attention to the area. As far as they knew the cliff bottled everyone in.

To the right the cliff started to grow shorter and slowly melded into flat ground. Atomy knew that was where the road leading up to the fortress was, but it was also miles away. The road led to the village at the foot of the cliff, but it steered clear of the tough rocky area. If the people at the fortress were careful with their movements it was unlikely anyone would find the secret entrance.

He pulled back and headed back to the entrance. "I think I've got us pinned down. We can get out this way if need be."

Jeder nodded. "Never hurts to have an escape route."

Atomy nodded in agreement. "I think the army will be doing an assault soon. After what we did their patience must be running thin."

"Fuck that," Jeder muttered. "I have no desire to be caught in an all out fight like that."

"Agreed. We've got a way out now. We'll make use of it if the situation comes to that." Atomy glanced around. "We'd better get back now. People will start to wonder if we're gone too long."

Jeder nodded and the pair set about putting back the entrance cover and doing their best to leave everything as it should have been. They re-lit their torch and started making their way back. Backtracking their steps took more effort than simply following a group ahead of them. More than once they had a small argument on whether they should go left or right.

"Something you want to ask?" Atomy gave Jeder a look. He looked anxious.

"How's the search going?" Jeder asked. "For getting rid of these cursed runes." He pulled his sleeve up just a tiny bit to reveal the dull black runes snaking up his arm.

"It's going," Atomy replied. "They haven't found anything yet, last I heard. But that was a few days ago and they've had time to go through a whole lot more books."

"Waste of time if you ask me," Jeder noted. "Ain't going to be no convenient way out of this mess."

"Doesn't hurt to look," Atomy said as they continue through the tunnels. They were still a fair way off from reaching the fortress. It was unlikely anyone else would be in the tunnels so he felt comfortable talking.

"We could be on our way out of the fortress and far away from the reach of the church," Jeder pointed out.

Atomy chuckled. "Away from the reach of the church? You know of such a place?"

"Beyond the ocean," said Jeder.

"Right into the arms of our worst enemies," Atomy pointed out. "Or have you forgotten their coastal raids? The numerous crusades we've fought against them?"

They're not going to be any more pleased to see us than the church would be."

"Got to be something in the world beyond them," Jeder said. "Has to be a place where the church and its tentacles don't reach."

"You're more optimistic than I am," Atomy noted while at the same time wondering why the tough as nails man was being so sentimental. "But if they don't find a way to get these runes off us then we might well need to get to the ends of the world to find a place where we're not instantly burned at the stake."

"Sure isn't what I expected to happen when I got my first sword handed to me," Jeder muttered.

"Was anything what you expected?" Atomy asked, remembering well what it had been like to him. The boyish images of valiant battles and glorious victories had quickly turned into what reality was. Sore wounds, innocents killed, crying faces and the ever present smell of burning flesh. It was a hard thing to shake off.

"No," Jeder admitted and avoided looking at him. "Shit's fucked."

"Shit's fucked," Atomy agreed. Some people wondered why soldiers ended up the way they did. It wasn't something that could be explained easily. It was something that needed to be experienced.

The two continued in silence. It took them a fair while to make it back to the starting point. It was a wooden door in the bedrock. It had a bit of an room like area around it for people to gather before heading to the narrower tunnels. They both stopped and listened carefully to ensure no one was on the other side of the door or in the tunnels with them.

The tunnels were silent.

Carefully, Atomy opened the door. Its hinges were silent. Who ever kept things in order down there did their job well. Careful not to make any noise, the two stuffed themselves inside the large barrel that served as cover for the door. Jeder closed the door behind them. It blended near seamlessly with the wood around it. Someone looking into the barrel would have had to come in and start knocking on wood to find it.

An unlikely inconvenience someone would bear.

The barrel had the scent of wine to it. It was big enough that both men could stand almost upright, only bending their necks just a little bit not to hit their

heads. Atomy made his way to the front of the barrel and pushed open the round end of it. It was on two hinges and required a stiff push to open. The door was a tight fit to keep the wine that had once been inside fresh.

The cellar room beyond it was lined with similar barrels. They were stacked three on top of each other, giving the room an unusual height for an underground storage. Ropes and winches hung from the beams that supported the ceiling. They had once been used to move the large barrels.

Jeder once again closed the door behind them. For a moment the pair stood there, listening for any signs that someone had heard them. The only sounds in the room were their breathing and slight crackle from their torch.

“Come on. Let’s go.” Atomy headed towards the door that led out into the corridor. He hoped it would be empty and they’d be able to make it towards the upper levels without getting noticed. They weren’t supposed to be down there and explaining it away would be difficult.

Before opening the door he put out the torch and put it on one of the empty iron holders on the wall. The light from it would give them away long before they saw anyone coming. It was better to strike it out in the dark, though most of the floors above them had lamps or torches lighting the corridors anyway.

Gently, he opened the door and stopped to listen once more. He then fully opened the door and made his way to the corridor. Jeder followed making sure to close the door again.

Together, they headed left, towards the stairway leading up. It wasn’t a long walk and only took a turn to the left and then a short walk to reach it. There were other doors lining the corridor, but now wasn’t the time to investigate them. Not that they were likely to contain much of interest. Most were storage rooms. It was that sort of an underground level, after all. The prison cells were in a different area.

They made their way up the stairway. It wasn’t a spiralling stairway. It went straight and had a width and small incline to it that helped with bringing goods up and down. At the top of the stairs there was a small chamber and a door that led out.

Atomy made them stop for a bit once more, to listen, but as they heard

nothing he made his way to the door and carefully cracked it open and gave the corridor beyond a look.

There was a guard to the left from the door.

Atomy pulled the door shut and withdrew. "A guard," he whispered to Jeder. The man nodded. There was no getting out while he was there. So they waited. Atomy peeked from time to time to see if the guard had moved. They knew there were no permanent stations there. It just happened the guard responsible for the floor had chosen that spot. Eventually they'd leave to make the round. That would be their chance to get away.

Footsteps outside made the two men tense up. They took positions on either side of the door and hoped it would not open. The footsteps came closer and then went further down the corridor. They waited for a bit before Atomy dared to crack the door once more and take a look.

The guard was gone and the corridor was empty both ways.

Quickly the pair left the chamber and walked to the intersection of corridors. They went right and hurried as much as they dared. They were now at a level in the fortress where their presence might possibly be explained away, but that wasn't something either one of them wanted to put to the test.

"Come on. Let's get on the ground level as quick as possible." Atomy glanced back at Jeder who simply nodded. The two men rushed as much as they dared in the maze of corridors and made their way to the stairway that led to the ground level. If they got there without being noticed they'd be safe.

To their surprise there were no guards on the way and they made it up the stairs without incident. The door let them out into the courtyard. Looking around it seemed like everyone was gathered at the walls. It was natural that in a fortress under siege most eyes would be looking outside, but when even the few that were supposed to keep an eye on the inside of the fortress were looking out you knew something big was happening.

"That's not good," Jeder muttered and looked around. "Must be one fucking show out there."

"Can't say I'm liking it either. Go meet up with the rest of the men. I'll try and find out what's going on." Atomy gave Jeder a stern look and got a nod back.

He watched the man walk across the courtyard and head to where the rest of the men likely were. Atomy headed towards the walls and hoped he'd find answers there. He climbed up the stairway leading to the battlement. Once up he tried to find a friendly face and a spot that offered a view of whatever was going on. He managed to find a place to the right from the main gate, a fair way off from where most of the soldiers and other followers trapped inside had packed into.

He saw the banners riding towards the army pinning them in.

It made his heart miss a beat. The appearance of the eagle on purple background signalled only one thing. The patience of the church had ran out and they had sent the most ruthless and effective units they had to call upon. The Crimson Eagles were as elite as they came. Tales of their deeds were enough to make most men reconsider any foolish thoughts they might have had about questioning the Church.

One way or another the siege would be ending soon.

Their arrival was also a substantial re-enforcement for the army surrounding them. He could see columns of men marching to the camp. At a glance he estimated there to be at least five thousand men that would add to the army. That was about what he could expect from the Crimson Eagles to begin with. Almost their entire force.

With what he had seen there was no need to talk with anyone. He probably knew the situation better than most of them. So he left the wall and headed to the library where he hoped he'd find Taroc.

The man needed to make a decision.

Chapter 15

It had not been a good day. Taroc had woken up with a headache that had him seeing colours when he closed his eyes. It had been another night of visions and little sleep. A part of him feared he'd go insane if things kept going the way they were.

Breakfast had helped him feel a bit better, but it was still painful to sit in the dimly lit library and peruse through pages and pages of books. It didn't help that it felt like they were making no progress. Nell and Mary were there with him, doing their best to help, but there was centuries worth of books there. More than some might be able to consume in their lifetime.

Though they could fairly easily dismiss a large portion of the books as being too new to contain what they were looking for.

Frustrated, he slammed shut yet another manuscript and tossed the thing onto a pile next to him. He was more rough with it than he should have been. The ancient pages were frail and he could see a few of them get damaged by what he did. He didn't care.

"Take a break," said Nell. She was sitting at a table not far from him. She had been focused on a text, but the loud slam had gotten her attention.

"Maybe I should," Taroc admitted and rubbed his eyes.

"The headache still bothering you?" asked Mary. She was sitting next to Nell with a manuscript of her own in front of her. Neither of them had any actual formal education, but the runes with its visions had given them enough that they could help Taroc. They still needed help from time to time with some of the more obscure words, but just getting the general gist of a text was enough to tell them whether it would be of any help to them.

"Nothing I can't handle," Taroc assured the two ladies while rubbing his temples and taking a sip of water from the tankard set on the side of the table. He grabbed another tome from the pile that was waiting to be inspected and got to work on it. It was centuries old. The first pages were dedicated to some images that were masterfully made. The first image was a stone circle with three men in

the middle of it. They had their eyes high to the sky. It was almost as if they were praying, but the fact their hands were forming rude gestures threw that idea out of the window.

The second image showed what appeared to be a man holding a spear. That image changed quickly as Taroc noticed his head was that of an ox. At its feet was a woman kneeling. Her clothes seemed to be torn and the creature had a hand on her head, seemingly pulling her towards its crotch.

Taroc frowned at the image.

It certainly was not something he'd expected to find.

With increasing curiosity he flipped the pages and read through the first few pages with text. It was written in an odd dialect, but the language was that of his own. It told of a group of pagans that had worshipped the stars and when the Church had raised its head they had mocked it and defied the almighty god above. As the book told the story they angered god so much that he laid a curse on them in the form of markings on their bodies. The markings would glow under certain circumstances, allowing the true believer to easily hunt down members of the cult.

It went on further to state that those that were not immediately caught turned into monstrous creatures over time that laid waste to villages. Taroc assumed the ox headed man was supposed to depict that. He couldn't hide his excitement about what he was reading. It was the first real text that offered any hint at the runes that had taken over their lives.

"You two, come. Help me go through this text!"

Taroc barely noticed as the two women arrived on either side of him and hunched over to see the text. He let them read on for a moment.

"That sounds like us," Nell noted after a moment. The excitement in her voice was hard to miss.

"We're going to turn into monsters?" asked Mary, her voice matching the worry of her words.

Taroc flipped the page and started reading. "No, we're not going to turn into monsters," he assured the woman even though he had nothing to base his claim on. If anything the book had more authority than he did.

The text continued on to describe some of the rites the cult had conducted and witness accounts of the horrific things done in them. There was animal sacrifice, hints at human sacrifice, sex acts that would have made the devil himself blush and an abundance of feasting and drinking. There was little more on the runes and what they did. Taroc continued to flip the pages as the two women read over his shoulder. Whether they finished as quickly as he did didn't concern him. He wanted to get through the text as quickly as possible.

"Slow down. We don't want to miss anything." Nell put a finger on the page to stop him from flipping it.

"Fine," Taroc muttered and let the ladies finish reading. He flipped the page when Nell lifted her finger off from it.

The page that appeared seemed more promising. It had several of the runes depicted on it. Some Taroc recognized. They were etched onto his own skin and he'd seen them on both Nell and Mary as well. From what he could gather they were part of the core that held together what ever it was the runes had built by etching onto their skins.

The text made similar assumptions about them, but offered no solution into how to get rid of them. Though that was somewhat to be expected as the entire book seemed to be about the evils of the cult that had used them and how to best kill the cult members. Saving them had never been much of a concern, it seemed.

Taroc flipped through a few more pages, but they offered no more help.

"Seems the only way to get rid of them is to die," Mary said in a quiet voice.

"Well, the people who wrote the book certainly made no effort to find another way," Nell countered and straightened herself. Her hands went to her lower back and rubbed it. She arched her back in an effort to ease the pain that had started to shoot through it.

"Death is not an option for us," Taroc said with a firm tone. "I refuse to accept that. There has to be something to get rid of them and if there isn't then we'll learn to live with them."

"I suppose there are worse things," Nell muttered. "At least I'm not being beaten by the nuns any more."

"Not a slave to the bandits any more," Mary added. "They've done some

good.”

Their talk was interrupted when the door slammed open. Atomy rushed in looking like the dogs of hell were nipping at his soles. He rushed over to them and started talking before any of them could even utter a question.

“We’ve got trouble. The Crimson Eagles have just arrived. They’re joining up with the army outside. Knowing them there will be an attack soon and given their reputation they won’t stop until this place falls.”

“That’s not good,” Taroc admitted. He knew the unit by reputation. Atomy was not exaggerating. The fortress would fall. Maybe not with the first attack, but they wouldn’t be content to try and starve the defenders out. They’d solve it with violence, no matter how many bodies piled up.

“Who are the Crimson Eagles?” Mary asked and gave each of them a confused look.

“The elite punishment force of the church,” Atomy replied and gave the woman a stern look. “They’re very good at what they do and they’re here to do this fortress in.”

“What are we going to do?” asked Nell and gave the two men a questioning look.

“The way I see it we’ve got three options,” said Atomy and after getting a nod of approval from Taroc he laid out the options. “First, we can do nothing and hope the fortress holds until you guys find the answers we’re looking for.”

None of the trio reacted to that suggestion so he moved on to the next one.

“Secondly, we could do what we promised. Wipe out the army outside. Now, I don’t know if that’s something we can actually do or if the runes will allow us, but it’s what we told these guys when we came in.”

The trio exchanged doubtful looks which prompted Atomy to move to the third option that had opened up to them just that day.

“The third option is that we leave.”

“I doubt they’re going to let us do that,” Taroc said and frowned at the man for making such a suggestion.

“I managed to find out how they get supplies in here,” Atomy said and caught the attention of all three of them. “There are tunnels below the fortress.

It's a real maze, but the right path leads to the outside. Just so happens me and Jeder followed a group that went on a supply run and marked down the correct path. We can leave any time we want."

It took a moment for Taroc to digest the news. He couldn't deny the appeal of the third option. "Good work. Can't have been easy with the way this place is locked up. But I don't know if we can just walk away. If we leave we leave behind this collection books we're just scraping the surface of. We just found a tome that referenced the runes. Who knows. There might be more sitting in this pile right here." Taroc patted the pile of books next to him. They were from the same place as the one that had detailed the runes so there was a good chance there might be more in the pile.

Atomy stomped around in frustration. "We can't stay here either. This place is going to fall and when that army storms in through those gates we're all going to be in for the first fires of hell."

"Then we destroy the army," said Nell in a surprisingly strong voice. Everyone in the room turned to look at her. For a moment she glared at them all before talking. "You remember what has happened to us. We can do this. Especially if we let the runes takes us more."

"Are you crazy?" Mary sounded terrified at the prospect. "We don't know what that would do to us. Might be we lose ourselves and be better off getting killed by the church."

"The book we just found seems to tell us an entire cult lived with those runes. The only thing that got them killed was the church. No doubt that text is filled with lies to make them seem worse than they truly were." Nell glanced at the book and reached to flip the page. It revealed yet another drawing, this time a naked man with runes all over his body. There were a few arrows drawn here and there, pointing at various parts of it, with small text to denote why those bits were being pointed out.

"We don't know what reading another quote from the book would do to us," Taroc said as he glanced at the picture that had been revealed. "Given what we're already going through I'm not too keen on finding out."

"Then we do it with what we have now," said Nell. She seemed determined to

wipe out the army.

“Those nuns must have really done some horrible things since you want to kill men of the church so badly,” Atomy gave his sister a look that was impossible to read. Maybe it was pity, maybe it was disgust or just a reflection of how confused his own feelings were on her.

“The church and all its followers can burn in hell as far as I care,” said Nell. It was a side of her none of them had really seen before. Taroc and Mary had seen glimpses of what she had gone through at the monastery, but what they had seen had not been bad enough to warrant such a strong reaction. The two exchanged concerned looks over her words.

“You two can stop worrying,” said Nell with a sharp tone. “Those nuns were monsters. Not only to me, but to a lot of other people. Just because they were women doesn’t make them saints. They can be just as disgusting and cruel as the worst of men. And they were. The worst of the worst.” She couldn’t help but bring her arms around herself in a hug as the words flowed out of her mouth. Her voice gained an anxiety that told of the memories she was drawing on as she badmouthed the nuns.

Taroc gave Atomy a glance. Neither man looked like they knew what to say. The silence grew longer until Taroc finally opened his mouth “All right. We don’t need to make an immediate decision. Even if the Eagles are here it will take them some time to get the army moving. Maybe they’ll assault tomorrow or the day after that. We have a bit of time to let things simmer.”

“But..”

Taroc raised a hand and shut Atomy up. “That doesn’t mean we’re not going to do anything. We will prepare. Atomy, you will get the men ready for the escape plan through the tunnels. Get whatever supplies you can together. Make sure the men know the route and try to make sure it’s actually something we can do at any time.”

Atomy gave a silent nod in agreement.

“Meanwhile we’ll continue perusing through the tomes here and see if reading another passage from the book would be an acceptable risk.” Taroc glanced behind him. Neither of the women seemed to have an objection to the

plan. Taroc knew it would be easy enough not to even open the Book of Lies. It wasn't something he was going to do, that was for certain.

"Just remember, the sand is running out of the hourglass," Atomy added in.

"I'm certain the army outside will ensure we don't forget about them," Taroc replied with a feint smile. "No doubt they'll barrage us with their trebuches before any assault is attempted."

"Yeah, we're not going to be getting much sleep," Atomy muttered. "I fucking hate sieges."

"Doubt anyone loves them," Nell said.

"We have our plans. let's focus on them," said Taroc and gave Atomy a nod.

"Right. I'll get to it." Atomy gave them a nod before turning around and heading towards where the men were.

Taroc let out a sigh and leaned back in his chair. "Last thing we needed right now."

Neither of the women had time to say anything before the door to the library opened once more. It wasn't Atomy coming back to ask something he had forgotten. It was Lim Ganabe and he looked like he was having one of the worst days of his life. His grey eyes fixed on the trio and he made his way to them in a huff. He had on a simple robe that wouldn't have made him stand out anywhere.

Taroc figured it was a safe choice of clothing if one ventured onto the fortifications to take a closer look at what was going on outside.

"Lim. What brings you to these dusty halls?" Taroc gave the man a pleasant enough smile. He scrapped the honorifics and used his first time to test the waters. If the man objected he didn't have too much on his mind. If he didn't then things were serious.

"Have you heard the news?" Lim asked and stopped next to the table. He took in a deep breath. By the redness of his cheeks it seemed he had been rushing more than he was used to.

"About the Eagles? Yes."

"Good. I won't have to bore you with the small things. While I have the utmost confidence in the men on the walls and, indeed, in the walls themselves to hold against anything thrown at them, I can't help but have some worries."

“Understandable,” Taroc agreed. “The Crimson Eagles don’t have a reputation for nothing.”

“Bastards the lot of them,” Lim muttered. “No god would approve of what they did in Belmery.” He shook his head in anger. “That was not the work of god fearing men. That was the work of the devil himself and the demons of hell.”

Taroc couldn’t help but grin briefly. “Most of the horrible things I have seen done have been done by what you would call god fearing men.”

Lim shook his head. “God is someone we must accept our selves. He can not force himself to us. There are those in the church whose hearts are gripped by the devil instead of being cradled by god. The church is run by humans, thus it makes human mistakes and commits atrocities. But I didn’t come here to debate with you.”

“Yes, the Crimson Eagles.” Taroc helped the man back on the right track. While at any other time he might have welcomed a spirited discussion with the man there was too much going on to afford such a luxury.

“Yes, them,” said Liam with a grateful smile. “They’re going to change the situation. The stalemate we’ve had for so long is threatened and not favourably to our side. It might be we will need you to fulfil your promise before you find what you’re looking for.”

Taroc leaned back in his seat once more. He felt a hand on his shoulder. Looking up he saw it was Nell. She gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze and a slight shake of her head. It wasn’t that she was against wiping out the army. She had advocated for it mere moments ago, after all. She didn’t trust Liam and Taroc couldn’t blame her for that. But there wasn’t much wiggle room for him. He had made a promise.

“I know I made a promise to you in exchange for getting a look at these books,” said Taroc and laid a hand on the pile of tomes on the desk. “But what you’re asking us to do is not a simple matter. It’s not without its risks for us. Especially since we have not found what we are looking for, yet.”

“Risks are a part of life,” said Liam in a stern voice. “The men on the wall risk their lives every single moment they stand there.”

Taroc felt like he’d been cornered. He had made a promise and now it

seemed it was time to pay up. “We don’t want to land in the hands of the Crimson Eagles any more than you do. So if they get to breaking this fortress we will do whatever is necessary to stay alive. That includes using the runes to defend ourselves and the people of this fortress. Just as promised. But you have to understand we don’t know much about the powers the runes give us. It might not be enough against an entire army. It might cost us and everyone in the fortress something more than our lives. Are you willing to take that risk? The risk your very soul might be tainted and sent to hell?”

Liam stared at him for a moment with those grey eyes. It was hard to tell what he was thinking, but it was obvious gears were turning inside his head as he considered what he had heard. “Yes, that’s a risk I’m willing to take,” he finally said. “Church be damned if I’ll let them snuff us out.”

Taroc sighed. It never stopped surprising him how easily people strayed onto the dangerous paths. It would have been so easy to stay on the safe road that held no surprises or dangers. “I can’t promise you anything more than that we’ll do our best when the situation calls for it.”

“All you can really ask of anyone, isn’t it?” Liam gave the trio a grateful smile.

“True enough,” Taroc admitted, though he had personally witnessed many high ranking church members asking for far more than that out of their subordinates. Admittedly, he had done it himself at times.

“Best be careful when you go outside. Who knows what will be raining on us in short order. I’d stay on the cliff side of buildings as well. Just to be safe.” Liam seemed to speak from experience. There was a slight bitterness to his words. It wasn’t hard to imagine why. No doubt he had seen many men and women crushed by boulders flung through the air. While the fortress had thick walls all around there were bound to be weak spots where a large boulder could smash through. Especially after sustained bombardment.

“We’ll keep safe,” Taroc assured the man. Liam simply nodded and turned to leave. The door closed behind before any of the trio uttered another word.

“What does that do for our plans?” Nell asked after the door closed and they were left with no outsiders listening in.

“Nothing. We go as we planned.” Taroc stood up to stretch his legs a bit. He walked past the desk and turned to face the two women. Nell was giving him an inquisitive look while Mary had her head turned slightly to the side, as if she was avoiding looking at either of them.

“We’d better get back to the books then,” said Mary in a quiet voice. She turned to regard the two. There was a moistness to her eyes. She was fighting back tears for some reason.

“Are you all right?” asked Nell and reached for her arm. She got a gentle grasp of her left arm and gave it a squeeze just to let her know she was there for whatever was bothering her.

“I’m fine,” Mary assured her and looked away, straight at Taroc.

Her eyes did not match the words coming out her mouth, that much Taroc could tell, but he had no desire to poke around her mind to find out what was truly bothering her. There was too much to do. He let Nell keep pestering her for it as the two ladies made their way back to their own desk. He stretched his legs for a bit more before returning to the books and trying to find more information on the runes.

Chapter 16

“There’s being knee deep in shit and then there’s what ever the hell we’re in.”

Atomy gave Daris a stern look.

“Got to agree with him,” said Jeder and took a gulp from the tankard of water he had in front of him. The rest of the men were nodding in approval around them.

“It’s not ideal, I’ll admit that,” said Atomy and let his gaze move over all the men around him. They were standing in a half circle in front of him. He had just informed them of the Crimson Eagles arrival and told the plan Taroc had given him to implement. The prospect of getting out of the fortress had offered a momentary reprieve from the bad news, but now that momentary ray of light was being swallowed up by dark clouds.

“But we’ve got a plan and we’ll get out of here safe,” Atomy continued and assured the men. “Now, what we need to do is gather supplies without being caught doing so. We need water, rations that will last a few days and we need to make sure we can get to our escape route without problems.”

“The water is easy enough,” said Jeder. “No one pays much attention to the well since it’s not running out any time soon.”

Atomy nodded. The well was indeed quite safe. It wasn’t really a traditional well in the sense that the water going to it actually came from an underground river. Looking down it you could see the water rushing by. As far as he could tell no one really knew where it started which made it a safe source of water. No one was going to poison it nor damn up its source.

A perfect fit for the fortress.

“The problem will be the food,” Atomy continued. “The rationing is pretty strict. Won’t be easy to get food, let alone something that would stay good for a few days. Can’t exactly stuff porridge in a bag and hope it stays good.”

“I’ve gotten pretty close with one of the cooks,” said Daris in a hesitant voice. Seeing the encouraging look Atomy gave him made him continue. “I might be able to sneak something out the kitchen with his help, but he’ll probably want

something in return.”

“Any idea what his vice is?” asked Jeder.

“He likes his drink,” Daris said. “Hard to come by enough wine to get you drunk. Even as a cook.”

“Might be something I can do about that,” said Atomy. “Talk to him. Find out what he can deliver us without arousing anyone’s attention.”

“Yes, sir.” Daris gave a brief salute.

It got a slight chuckle from the rest of the men.

“All right. No teasing the new guy,” said Atomy even though he couldn’t hide his smile. They had long moved past the formalities that had been in place while they’d been a proper unit of military men. They were all now connected to each other in ways that far surpassed any command chain that had been in place before. “That leaves securing the route. Ideas?”

The men fell silent. Atomy knew them well enough that most of them wouldn’t say anything. They were used to someone telling them what the plan was, what their part in it was and to simply fill that task. The veterans probably knew Atomy already had a plan and were just waiting for him to reveal it, though secretly they did appreciate the chance to voice their opinions. Not that any of them had the intention of making use of it.

“Right, here’s what I’ve been thinking,” Atomy said after a brief moment of waiting. He laid out the plan. The men would form pairs and stand near the major choke points for their route. They wouldn’t be able to secure the basement levels, but there weren’t that many guards there, certainly not enough to obstruct the entire group of them. He instructed the men to look like they were just having a conversation, resting their feet or having a walkabout. Do their best to avoid rousing suspicion.

“All right, that should do for planning,” Atomy said. He gave the men a look to see if anyone looked like they had something to say. His eyes landed on Jarvis Delacruz. His mouth was twitching behind his grey moustache. He was one of the oldest amongst the group.

“Jarvis, you look like you’ve got something on your mind.”

The man looked uncomfortable for a moment as all eyes focused on him. He

shifted his footing and adjusted the collar of his shirt. His sleeves were pulled up, giving a full view of the runes that covered them. “Well, what about the Crimson Eagles? They’re outside, ain’t they? They going to wait for us to be ready with all this?”

“Probably not,” Atomy admitted. “We just got to do the best we can with what time we have. Those bastards outside will make sure we’ll know when the sky’s coming down on us.”

“Rotten bastards they are,” Jarvis agreed. “I was with them for a bit, you know? A member. Twenty years ago or more. Was there when they torched the Flores manor.”

“Really?” Zak asked. While the older members of the group were rolling their eyes as they’d heard the story plenty of times, the new ones had not.

Jarvis nodded. “Was those times the inquisitors didn’t have their own troops yet. Well, most of them anyway. So the Crimson Eagles handled a lot of that stuff. Lord Flores turned out to be a heretic. Devil worshipper, even. We did discover some horrific stuff when we raided the place. There was a room where he had human skin hanging from the walls. Like hunting trophies they were. He got what he deserved when we burned him at the cross. What still haunts me to this day is what we did to his family. His servants.”

Despite having rolled their eyes previously even the older members were now listening to him. Even Atomy was listening to the story with new found interest. The group the man was talking about was outside the very walls, after all.

“Three daughters he had. Pretty little things. The oldest was fourteen, the youngest just seven. No doubt entirely unaware of what their father had been doing. Same for the wife. Denied any knowledge of the atrocities. Denounced his husband, cursed him to hell in front of everyone, did what a good god fearing woman should do. It didn’t matter. We still killed all four of them.”

The silence as the men listened to Jarvis talk was almost oppressing. There was a spark of anticipation in it to hear what sort of twisted end awaited the women.

“Started with the youngest. Tied her hands and legs to horses. Tore her limbs off all the while her older sisters and mother watched, crying and

screaming. Never going to forget those screams. I've done some horrible things since then, but never to innocent children. Not after that." Jarvis had to stop to swallow hard. Even if he was a seasoned veteran who had seen the worst humanity could muster out of itself, the story still got to him.

Atomy had had similar experiences during his years of service, but even he felt sick to his stomach at the thought of what Jarvis was telling. He had heard it before as well and it had never roused such disgust before. He'd just shrugged it off. A part of him thought it might be the runes doing.

"The middle daughter they tied to a table. Let the Butcher have her."

"The Butcher?" Daris asked, sounding confused.

Jarvis chuckled. "You young ones probably never heard of him. Us old ones, even if we never were with the Crimson Eagles, know that name. The Butcher was the man who cut people up while they were still alive. Very good at the horrible work he often did. Never seen anyone else cut so many pieces out of a human and still keep them alive and conscious. The little girl lasted for hours. Every piece he cut off he presented to the mother. The Crimson Eagles are a tough lot with barely a soul, but even some of them couldn't handle watching the Butcher at work. I sure didn't. Walked away before he even started. Just heard the screams and cries of the mother."

"Is he still with them?" Daris asked, now sounding nervous at the prospect of such a man getting his hands on him.

"Nah. Bastard caught an arrow in the face not longer after that. Ain't a safe job, being a soldier." Jarvis looked satisfied that the man had met such an end. "The eldest daughter was dealt with after that. It wasn't as gruesome. Just a simple beheading. Not sure why they let her off so much easier. Maybe they were getting bored with all the bloodsports. The mother was the last one left. A sobbing mess she was. I doubt her mind was all there any more at that point. Sure didn't seem like she was in this world. Just stared in front of her and didn't reach to anything. They tortured her, hoping for some reaction, but even that didn't work. In the end they just impaled her. Left her there for a slow death and for the crows to feed on."

The story was over. Atomy felt slightly surreal after hearing it. Like it had

severed his tie to reality. He coughed and shook his head slightly.

“That’s not going to happen to us, is it?” Zak asked. He wasn’t the only one looking nervous after the story. Even some of the veterans were shuffling their feet. It was one thing to hear a story when its main threat was separated from you only by a stone wall.

“I reckon we’ll have a quick death in battle if things get to that point,” said Atomy. “At least I would encourage all of you to seek that outcome should it get to fighting and all our plans fail.”

There was a silence. The men had grim looks on their faces. Atomy wished he had more encouraging words to share with them, but his well had ran dry. Instead, he stood up and stretched before giving the men a small smile. “Well, what are you all standing around for? Get to your jobs!”

There was some muttering as the men slowly dispersed and left Atomy on his own. He took a moment to try and relieve the tension that had built up in his shoulders during the gathering. Since he’d assigned most duties to the men there wasn’t much for him to do. For a moment he considered going to Taroc and giving him a report, but that seemed unnecessary. He’d run into him eventually. Not wanting to stay in the small common room that had been assigned to him and the men for use, he left the room and walked over to the courtyard.

He found the area mostly empty. Only the minimum of guards was present. They gave him friendly enough nods as he passed them. They’d gotten used to their visitors and the initial zeal with which they kept an eye on them was starting to wear thin. The arrival of a new enemy outside the gates likely played a role in it.

Atomy headed for the walls just for lack of a better destination. Getting another look at the threat they were facing was better than nothing. He was halfway up the stairway leading to the wall when a shadow passed over him. He barely had time to register it before a huge crash rocked the ground. Looking to the courtyard he saw a large boulder that had not been there before. It had skipped from the ground once before coming to a halt against the nearest wall.

For a moment all Atomy could do was stare at it. His mind was trying to make sense how something so big could have fallen from the sky. Then his

instincts and experience kicked. He rushed up the stairway and hoped the boulder had not hit anyone. From the place it had landed in there shouldn't have been anyone there, but one thing was certain. It wasn't the last of its kind to fall from the sky.

He could hear thuds as he rushed up two steps at a time. The bombardment had begun. He made his way up to the thick walled guardhouse at the top of the stairway. It wasn't the safest place to be, but beat the unprotected courtyard by miles. The walls were designed to take the merciless beating siege weapons could unleash. He wasn't the only one in the small room. Two guards were there, hunkered down and looking frightened.

The loud thuds and crashing sounds continued outside.

"Damn boulder nearly got me," Atomy muttered and gave the two soldiers a reassuring smile. "Didn't look like they hit anything with it. Still trying to find the right range."

"Going to be some shitty nights ahead," the older of the soldiers replied. He made a nervous peek through the small window. It faced the outside and gave a view of the army surrounding them.

"Mind if I take a peek?" Atomy asked. He wasn't going to risk going out on the wall. While the battlement offered some protections it wasn't perfect. A lucky hit or bounce from one of those stones flying through the air and people would end up dead.

"Go ahead," the soldier replied and made room for Atomy. "Not much to see out there."

Atomy walked over and peeked through the opening. The guardhouse stood to the right of the outside gate. To the left there was another guardhouse like it. The window was at the outer wall and offered a decent view of the field ahead.

The siege machines were in a neat line. He could see men operating them, loading the next heavy stone. He saw the arms swing on the machines and small objects hurl into the air. As he watched they grew larger and larger until finally crashing against the wall. He watched for a moment before seeing a pattern.

"They seem to be targeting the gate," he noted.

The older soldier nodded. "They usually do. Don't worry. We've got it fortified

good. Ain't going to give before the walls."

"If it does, we're all dead," said the younger soldier. It was obvious he wasn't as confident as his companion.

"You always worry too much, Bret," the older soldier accosted the younger one. "Have faith in your brothers that they have done their work properly. We've held out long enough to know what we're doing."

"I can't help it, Kal. I don't want to die."

"You're not going to die. None of us are. They'll bounce their stones off our walls for a bit and then they'll give up. It's what always happens. Have faith."

Atomy kept his eye on the outside as he listened to the two argue. Had it been any other unit than the Crimson Eagles he would have agreed with Kal, but as it stood he wasn't as confident about the situation as he was. The Eagles weren't the sort to give up. They'd find a way to bring the fortress down.

"Doesn't look like they're preparing for an assault," Atomy noted, hoping it would calm down the younger soldier. Having his doubts spread amongst the defenders wouldn't do anyone any good. "No one besides the siege crew moving out there."

"They'll come. Eventually," Bret said.

The kid was right, but Atomy wasn't going to tell him that. It would only serve to encourage his panic.

"They'll come," Kal agreed. "They'll come and hit their heads against our walls. We'll pour some hot tar on them and stick a few arrows in them and then they'll run away. Repeat a couple of times and they'll learn their lesson and give up."

The older soldier said his piece with enough confidence that even Atomy wanted to believe him. Bret seemed to buy it. His anxious hand moves lessened and finally stopped completely. He'd regained his confidence, at least on the surface. Atomy gave Kal an appraising look. The man knew the right words to say and he said them with conviction even if he didn't believe it himself.

Their eyes met. Two veterans recognized the situation. No words needed to be said.

"What's the safest way back to the citadel?" Atomy asked. He didn't much

feel like going across the courtyard. The aim seemed to have gotten better with each hurled stone, but there was still a possibility of someone overshooting and he didn't feel like getting crushed.

"Off to the other guardhouse. They've got a path." Bret pointed to the door that led to the small piece of wall that connected the two guardhouses above the main gate.

"Thanks." Atomy gave the two a grateful nod and opened the door. He peeked out and towards the besieging army and tried to find a timing when most of the machines were reloading. A silent moment arrived and Atomy dashed across the wall and entered the second guardhouse. He slammed the door shut behind him just as a loud crash made the entire wall shake.

"That was a big one," said one of the men sitting by the table. There were cards laid out on it with four others sitting around. There were tankards on the table along with a lamp that gave them additional light since they had closed off most of the windows.

"Eh, we've had bigger," said a second man and put a card on the table. "Beat that."

"Now how'd you pull that off?" asked a third man. His helmet had a dent on it.

"Luck of the cards," replied the second man. He had a slight smugness to his voice. Judging by the pile of coins in front of him he'd won a few rounds already.

"Why doesn't anyone else at the table get that luck?" asked the fourth man. There was a sword resting against the table next to him. The third man put a card on the table and grinned. It made the fourth man furrow his brows and sigh. He placed all his cards on the table, face down. "I'm out."

Atomy was surprised by the contrast between the two guardhouses. Though he had to admit playing a game of cards was probably the better thing to do than to worry about the future. Distractions kept soldiers sane.

A crash shook the tower.

"Close that one," said the first soldier. He didn't sound at all worried.

Atomy could understand why. The walls of the guardhouse were thick and made up of large stones. Unlike many other fortresses that used smaller stones

and lots of mortar to keep it together, here the builders had used huge stones that seemed almost impossible to move by themselves. The mortar gluing each stone together was a special blend that was as tough as the stones themselves.

The only way the place would fall was if the enemy threw enough boulders at it to chip through each stone.

“Nothing to worry about,” said the second man and glanced at his cards.

“Um, is there a safe way back to the main fortress?” Atomy asked. It was the first time the men paid him notice. All four of them trained their eyes on him and assessed him from head to toe. The fourth man finally nodded and pointed towards a stairway leading down, off to the far left corner of the room.

“Take the stairs. It’ll lead you to a door. Just a short sprint from there to the safety of the main buildings. Ain’t no stone going to hit that small gap.”

“Thanks.” Atomy started to head for the stairway.

“You’re one of them, ain’t you?” asked the man who had folded his game. “One of them outsiders with the runes?”

“I am,” Atomy admitted and stopped at the top of the spiralling stairway. It was steep and not meant to be easy to traverse. Only one person could fit through it at a time. Holding off an enemy would be easy.

“There’s some talk. Some say it’s a curse by god and we should just burn you all.” The other men continued playing their game of cards as the one left out continued his prodding of Atomy.

“And what do you think?” Atomy asked, not feeling like answering the bit about being cursed. He knew it was true to some extent, but confirming that to the men seemed like a bad idea.

“I think you lot have some marks on your bodies,” the man replied. “And so far you haven’t given us any trouble. So what do I care? Besides, you’re supposed to save us all. Or so the rumour goes.”

“Lots of rumours around,” Atomy noted.

The man shrugged. “Not much to do in a place like this.”

Another loud crash shook the room.

“Right about that,” Atomy admitted and glanced down the stairway. “You’ve got nothing to worry about from us. Those people hurling rocks at us want us

dead just as much as they want you dead. I doubt either of us want that to happen.”

“Right about that,” the man admitted.

“So let’s work together to keep that from happening.”

“Got yourself a deal.”

Atomy glanced back and gave the group of men a smile before heading down the stairway. It went down the full height of the wall. The steps were steep which made the narrow passage a blessing. He could lean against a wall for support as he gingerly made his way down. The steepness of the steps was only made worse by the thin steps that left a good portion of his feet resting on thin air.

At the foot of the stairway was a small widening and a door that led out. It wasn’t much of a space. Maybe enough for two or three people as they waited their turn to go out or up the stairs. Atomy wasted no time opening the door a glancing outside.

The nearest building was less than fifty feet away with a door facing right against the one he was peeking out of. Looking to the sides he saw only wall and the stone of the buildings near by. To the left was the gate with the courtyard. As he watched a spray of shrapnel fell from the sky as another stone hurled against the wall skipped off. Where the stone itself landed he couldn’t tell and didn’t stay to find out. He darted out the door towards the safety of the building opposite. It was a short run, but by the time he opened and closed the door his heart was racing like he’d ran a mile.

The added danger had done wonders to get his heart pumping.

He took a moment to let his heartbeat calm down. It gave him an opportunity to get his bearings. It wasn’t a part of the building he had been in before, but he figured it was the same building where the kitchen and dining hall were. The door had led him to a corridor lined with doors and full plate armours standing on pedestals. Curious, he gave one of them a closer look.

The dark metal was void of rust and looked like someone took the time to regularly clean and oil them. It was well made with intricate engravings all around it. More ornamental than functional, Atomy figured. What caught his eyes was a set of patterns on the chest plate. He could swear he’d seen them before.

Then it hit him. He pulled up his sleeve and gave the runes a closer look. It was an intricate construct so making out separate parts of it could be difficult, but he spotted the familiar looking inscriptions. Just to be certain he raised his arm up right next to the chest plate and the figures on it.

The runes on his arm started to glow a pale blue.

The figures in the armour did the same.

Startled, Atomy pulled back his arm and took a few steps back. The light from the runes died and soon after the light on the armour did the same.

Atomy glanced around the corridor, fearing someone might have seen him. There was no one around. He returned his attention to the armour. Why was something like that there? More importantly, what was it? Why was there an armour with the same sort of runes on it as had taken over all their bodies?

The questions were something he figured would be better left for Taroc to solve.

With that in mind he started down the corridor. He stopped by each piece of armour to see if they had similar engravings. They all did. He even tested them by bringing his arm close to them. Some lit up while others didn't. Maybe time had broken them. All in all he counted a dozen of them just on the stretch of corridor he walked through. The corridor ended in a three way fork. There were more armours along the one direction while the rest didn't. Judging by the noises coming down the corridor leading to the right, it was where the kitchen and dining hall was.

It was no wonder none of them had stumbled over the armours before. None of them had had reason to walk past the dining hall and even if someone had the runes on the armours were easy enough to miss.

Now that he knew where he was Atomy started out to find Taroc.

Chapter 17

Taroc stared at the book. His fingers tingled with desire to touch it, to flip it open and turn through every page of it. He fought the urge. A part of his mind was egging him on. Do it. Do it. Do it. Another was crying in terror, pleading him not to. So far it had been an event match between the two, but he knew sooner or later he'd open that book and let loose whatever lies remained within it.

A loud crash pulled him out of his thoughts.

"What was that?" asked Mary. Her head popped out from under the blanket. She had been resting on the bed.

"I don't know," said Taroc and headed for the window. The view was that of the cliff and the lands beyond it. Nothing seemed amiss on that side. Still, he could hear it. The distant sound of large machines creaking under the stress they were being put under. The eerie moment of silence before their deadly missiles made it to their target.

A series of loud crashes and thuds confirmed his suspicion.

"They've started using their siege weapons again," Taroc said as he pulled back inside the room and closed the window shutters.

"Are we going to be all right?" Mary asked and sat up on the bed.

Her movements were enough to stir the other figure under the blanket. Nell's head soon popped up from under it. She yawned and glanced around with sleepy eyes. "What's going on?"

"They've started hurling stones at us," Taroc replied. "We should be fine. Will be tough to get any sleep and better to stay inside the buildings. Those rocks can bounce around or over shoot. Never know where they'll land. The buildings here were made to take the beating so they should be relatively safe."

"That's reassuring," Nell muttered and pulled the blanket over her head again.

Another loud crash made Mary jump. Her eyes were wide open and her knuckles were turning white from how hard she was squeezing the edge of the blanket.

“We’re safe here,” Taroc assured her. “I know sieges can be horrifying, but we’ve survived worse. This place was built to withstand it. I’ve been involved in sieges before. As the one hurling the stone through the air.”

Taroc made his way to the bed and sat down on the edge of it, not far from Mary. Close enough that she could grab onto him if she wanted to. “They never end quickly if the defender is at all prepared. I don’t think there’s a place in this world that’s better prepared than this one. They’ve been at it for years. Numerous attempts have been made to break it, but it’s still here, standing defiantly. It’s not going to fall to a few stones being hurled at it.”

Another thud seemed to shake the entire fortress.

“We should get out of here,” Mary said in a quiet voice.

“We will,” Taroc assured her and reached out to put a hand over hers. It eased the grip she had on the blanket somewhat. “It’s just going to take a bit of time.”

Mary took in a deep breath and let go of the blanket completely. It fell to her lap, leaving nothing but her nightgown to cover her upper body. “You’ve been eyeing the book for a while now.”

It wasn’t a question. Just a statement of fact. Taroc gave her a small smile. “It calls me, but I know that if I open it up something is going to happen. Something out of our control. Who knows where it would lead us. That always terrifies me.” Admitting it made him feel a bit better even if it was a silly thing to admit to someone he had just spent a good deal of effort to try and reassure nothing bad was going to happen.

“Who isn’t afraid of the unknown?” asked Mary. They both glanced over at Nell as she rolled under the blanket, but she seemed unwilling to join the conversation.

“It’s what brings people to the Church,” said Taroc. “The unknown. What happens after we die. The Church offers an answer. An appealing one at that. The good get to go to a place of happiness and mirth while the evil get cast into eternal torture. That has a strong appeal to anyone.”

“Too bad they use those teachings to create hell right here,” Mary said again in a quiet voice.

“I’m ashamed to admit I have played a part in that,” said Taroc. He’d lost count how many people he had ordered tortured and killed. And for what? That he was starting to question as hard as Mary seemed to be. Now that the Church was after him just as he had been after any heretics it felt wrong. The situation wasn’t his fault, but the Church would certainly not see things that way.

“Well, you can’t change the past.” said Taroc wistfully. He stood up from the bed and paced around for a bit in an attempt to shake off the feelings that had risen from the conversation.

Mary sat on the bed, silent. She kept her eyes on Taroc and followed him as he went around the room. At times she glanced to her side, at the figure under the blankets. She seemed torn as to what to do. Break the silence or join the woman under the blankets.

Not even thinking about it Taroc found himself standing in front of the table, opposite to the single window in the room. The book was resting in the middle of it. It was calling to him. Completely on its own, his hand reached for it. The runes on his skin started to glow ever so faintly. Just as his finger touched the cover he came to his senses and pulled back.

“You should have just opened it,” said Mary in a sour tone before pulling the blanket over herself. She joined Nell in the warm darkness in an attempt to fall asleep and forget about the stones falling from the sky.

Taroc started to respond, but decided it was better not to. Instead he grabbed his robe from the chair and put it on before leaving the room. He felt like he needed some space and, more importantly, some distance between himself and the book.

The guards at the foot of the stairway looked more nervous than usual, but Taroc didn’t have the patience to talk with them. Instead he headed for the library. A book to take your mind off a book had always worked and recently they had been running into some more informative tomes. The one they had found earlier had given some insight into things and now they’d run into several companions to it. While they had not given any information on how to get rid of the runes they had provided some history on them.

It was all from the perspective of the church so most of it was simply

decrying them as demonic markings and instruction on how to best torture anyone found with them. It was information the people outside the walls would find more helpful.

It was just outside the library that he ran into Atomy. The man looked worried and excited at the same time which made for an unnerving expression on his face.

“Boss, there’s something I need to show you,” Atomy said as soon as he got close enough to use the hushed tone. He didn’t want anyone hearing what they were talking about.

“What is it?” asked Taroc, slightly annoyed the man didn’t just come out and say what ever it was he wanted to show him.

“Got to do with the runes,” Atomy said and nudged towards the dining hall. “Found some engraved on pieces of armour. They’re just there in the corridor as decorations. No idea how anyone has missed them.”

“Show me.” Taroc couldn’t hide the excitement in his voice. Finding something new about the runes was always a rush. The two walked at a brisk pace and soon passed the doors leading to the dining hall before taking the turns to the less used corridor with the armours lining the way. Atomy took him from armour to armour and showed where the runes were hidden amongst the intricate engravings. He put his arm close to some of them so they lit up. Taroc tried it with his own rune covered arm and they lit up just the same, even some of the ones that had not reacted to Atomy in any way.

Looking at them Taroc could not help but feel like he was forgetting something he’d previously seen or read.

“Why would they have these things here?” Atomy asked. “Doesn’t seem like something the Church would let slide.”

“They probably just thought they were old armours,” Taroc said and shrugged. “The runes are pretty hard to spot. When they were originally placed here they were probably seen as trophies of a fallen foe. Who knows how long they’ve been here.”

“The fortress isn’t that old,” Atomy reminded him.

“But the ones who built it had a long history,” Taroc replied. “They probably

brought them here when the place was finished. You know how the old noble families can be. They lug around artefacts they claim belonged to someone who shook the hand of the son of god.”

“The Church tends to frown on a lot of it, doesn’t it?”

Taroc nodded. His mind was digging through the past few days. He was certain he’d seen something about the armour in one of the text. It didn’t intermediately connect with any particular tome. “I saw something about armours in the books we’ve been through. I’m certain of it. There was something about these there. I need to go back and find that text. Maybe it will unravel this mystery.”

“Should we just leave them be for now?” Atomy asked.

“Why not? They’ve been here without anyone raising an eyebrow. No reason to change that now.”

A loud thud reminded the pair of the barrage still ongoing outside.

“Better be quick about digging up that text,” said Atomy. “Our plans are still going ahead and the enemy isn’t putting theirs on halt.”

“I’ll get to it,” said Taroc. “Keep this between us for now. No reason to give the others more to worry about.”

“You’re the boss,” Atomy said and gave him a quick salute.

Taroc headed back towards the library, his mind racing to recall the text he was certain existed. He’d dismissed it as unimportant, presuming any artefacts from the time the runes had been prominent had been destroyed, just as those propagating the runes had been. He had not even considered the selfish nature of the nobles. It wouldn’t have been the first time one of them saw something valuable and kept it despite being heretical.

The greed of man afflicted those of the faith just as they did anyone else.

Though the value of a few armours was not that significant.

He was pleased to find the library empty. It was rare, but sometimes there would be someone there, reading and trying to get their minds off the misery of their being. He rushed to the stack of books on the table they’d commandeered for their use and started going through those that had been set aside as being read. He tried to remember what the book had looked like, what its title had been

or anything else that would give him a better chance at quickly finding it, but the details eluded him. So he went through all of them, reading a bit here and there to try and jog his memory.

Knowing it was not that long ago that he'd been through the text he focused on the books at the top of the pile. After going through three of them he started to question his own memory. Sometimes it was hard to keep straight what was his own memory and what came from Nell or Mary in the form of dreams. The books the two women had gone through were in a different pile. Maybe that was the one he should have been looking through.

Maybe he should have fetched the two to help.

Upon considering it Taroc decided against it. The two had looked like they could use the rest. Though a distant thud made him think they might not be getting much of it anyway. It was the fifth book that finally turned out to be the one he was looking for. He recognized the initial texts as they went through the basic information on the rune users and then started to veer off into more detailed territory on how they had organized themselves and how the church had fought against them.

Buried among all that information was the mention of the armours.

Taroc put the book down on the table and took a seat and adjusted the lamp to give him the best possible light for reading.

The runes are a stain on man's soul and will take over anyone with doubt in their heart, but they are not without guidance or a mind. The leaders kept themselves hidden which made our hunt for them difficult, but it was a duty given to us by god himself. We persevered and finally uncovered them. A dozen of them held together the entire cult. When we finally found them and sought to punish them we were met with a force we had not been prepared for.

We had tracked them to an isolated farmhouse. We had brought the full army of Lord Venderal, some two hundred men, and felt confident they would be more than enough to handle such a small number. The lord himself led the troops, confident the road ahead was paved with glory to our god. How wrong we were.

We did not find men in peasants clothes or robes. We found a dozen in a full

armour, covered in those cursed runes. They were like demons straight from hell. Even their blades and axes glowed with that unholy light. We never saw their faces.

We set the farmhouse on fire in the hopes of driving them out. It worked. The monsters emerged and tore through our troops. They were the wolves, we were the sheep. Lord Venderal barely escaped with his life. I ran with him, ashamed that my faith had not been strong enough to stand up against these vile creatures.

Out of two hundred only ten escaped.

It was our first encounter with the leaders, but not our last.

Taroc stopped reading and rubbed his eyes. The text was written in a decorative style that was made more for looks than actually reading. It was hard to tell apart some letters which had him guessing for the most likely word. It made for slow reading, but clearly there was information there he needed to get. The armours had obviously been important to the cult that had propagated the runes. The question was why were they in the fortress now? What powers did they have? The text didn't go into details, but if a dozen had beaten an army of two hundred then there had to be something miraculous going on.

Unfortunately the text didn't offer much more. Past the first encounter it seemed the writer had been pushed aside from the hunt for the leaders. The text went back to basics and told of the cult and how they hunted for its followers. Someone else had been put in charge of finding the leaders and there was no more mention of the armours.

With a sigh, Taroc closed the book and wished there had been more in it. As far as he could recall there had been no other mentions of the armours in the other books. Going through them again seemed like a waste of time.

Still, the armours were obviously strong and important. It made him want to try out what would happen if one of them was worn by someone with the runes. Maybe it would offer a solution to their current situation or, at the very least, it would make escaping the fortress a bit easier. They might not be enough to beat the army outside, but they would certainly be enough to let them escape through the tunnels. That is, if the text had been correct about their power.

The runes on him started to get warmer.

Knowing what that could lead to Taroc quickly got on his feet and started heading back to his room. He rushed through corridors and up the stairway, past the two guards who just nodded to him, unaware of the growing burn on his skin.

The thuds of the ongoing siege hastened his steps even more.

As soon as he got to his room he slammed shut the door and went for the book. The runes started to cool down the moment his hands grabbed it.

“What’s going on?” asked Nell. The door slamming had woken her and she peeked from under the blanket. Mary stirred next to her, her head popping out from under the blanket not long after. With both women giving him a questioning look Taroc found himself unable to keep himself from talking.

“We found something. Well, Atomy did. Armours with the same sort of runes we have. They react to us. Bring an arm close to them and they light up like a barn full of hay. They were mentioned in one of the books. Apparently they belonged to the leaders of the rune cult. And if the book is to be believed they’re quite powerful. Enough that a dozen wiped out an army of two hundred.”

“That why you’re reaching for the book?” asked Nell.

“Open it,” Mary egged him on immediately. She tossed aside the blanket, got on her knees and crept towards the foot of the bed to get closer to him. “Open it.”

“I.. I want to. The runes told me. Pushed me towards it.” Taroc gave the two women a pleading look. The part of him that didn’t want to do it fought against the part that did. Seeing the expression on the two made him give up. Not only was Mary looking at him with gleaming eyes while glancing at the book with a hunger, Nell was not giving a dissimilar look. She was more reserved about it, but it was obvious she wanted him to open the book, consequences be damned.

He couldn’t resist it.

He opened the book.

Seeing the first blank pages made a wave of joy rush through him. He flipped the pages with shaky hands. Nell and Mary jumped off the bed and walked over to him, both peering over his shoulder at the pages. The first page with text appeared. Taroc stopped and read the text.

The Fourth Lie

A shining armour tells of a hero, of goodness, of courage, of honour. It is the ultimate symbol of wealth and power beyond the peasantry.

With a shaky hand Taroc flipped the page to reveal the rune covered page following the clear text. The runes on it flared up just as the ones on his arms. Glancing back he could tell the same thing was happening with Mary and Nell.

The runes leapt from the page and swarmed the trio. They all screamed as the heat of them started to become unbearable. Taroc did his best to keep his eyes open and observe. He could see a stream of the runes leave them and slither under the door. He had little doubt it was seeking out Atomy and the rest of the men. They were going to be drawn into it as well and it wasn't going to go unnoticed by others in the fortress.

Just as he thought that the door slammed open and one of the guards at the foot of the stairs stepped in. His eyes widened and he quickly retreated from the room.

Taroc lost grasp on reality at that point and slumped to the floor. Nell and Mary collapsed at the same time.

He could tell the runes had reached the rest of the men. They were all there, connected and equally frightened and worried. He could still feel the burn on his flesh as new runes made their marks on it. All around him he saw nothing more than the blue glow. All he could hear were the combined screams of everyone. A part of him expected there to be more. Vision of the past, memories from the others. But there was nothing. Only pain and the blinding light.

Then it was over.

He found himself laying on the floor, panting like he'd ran up a mountain, covered in the sort of cold sweat only pain brought about. The runes were still glowing on his arms. As he tried to get up he found all the strength from his body gone. Even getting on all fours was a struggle and getting on his feet from there felt like a monumental task, but with some support from the near by table he managed it. The first thing he saw was the book on the table. The pages that had had runes on them were now empty.

Taroc reached out and closed the book, but he couldn't let go of it, so he picked it up and tucked it under his arm.

The two women on the floor started to stir. There were gasps for air and little moans of pain.

"Take it easy," Taroc said to them. "That took the strength out of me, but it's getting better now. Take your time."

Nell was the first one to manage to get on her hands and knees. She looked up at Taroc, who was still taking support from the table. There were now runes on her face and as they glowed it made her look like something out of a story meant to scare little children.

"What happened?" she managed to ask.

Taroc shrugged. "We got more runes on us." It was as much as he knew.

Mary rolled onto her back. Taroc could see the tears running down her face. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?" he asked, worried that something might have happened to her that had not affected him or Nell.

"No, I'm all right," Mary managed to say in between sobs. "It's just.. more of this same."

"Well, reading the book was unlikely to give us less of it," Taroc said, not forgetting she had been egging him on to open it. He held out a hand to help Nell on her feet. She faltered and leaned against the wall for support. Her feet were visibly shaking at the effort of keeping her upright.

"What is this feeling I'm having?" asked Mary, still laying on the floor, but her tears had stopped. She made a feeble attempt at getting up, but the strength wasn't there yet. "I feel like I need to be somewhere."

"I feel it too," said Nell and slightly shook her head. "But I don't have the strength to go anywhere."

"Me neither," Taroc agreed. He had not noticed it before Mary had mentioned it, but there was a feeling of needing to go somewhere. Where that somewhere was he couldn't say. The runes on his skin simply seemed to be pulling him to one direction. "It's the runes. We'd better get going as soon as we have the strength. Otherwise they'll start hurting."

"I can't even get up," Mary protested from the floor. She tried to roll on her

stomach and get on all fours, but only managed the roll. Her arms didn't have the strength to even push her half way up.

"Just give it a few," said Taroc and let go of the table. He could feel his feet protest, but he managed to stay upright. He heard the footsteps in the corridor. Following that was the wheezing sound of someone gasping for breath. The first guard that had entered the room peeked inside again with sword in hand.

"Out of the way," came the grumpy voice of Lim. He shoved the guard aside and entered the room. He stopped right at the door and surveyed the room and the three people in it. His eyebrows raised slightly at the sight of them. The glowing runes probably played a part in it as did their apparent struggle to even stand up. "I heard there was some trouble here, but you all seem like you've downed a barrel of wine."

Taroc grinned. "Something did happen."

Lim frowned at him. "I'm aware. Your men are laying on the ground all over the fortress. Some in places they should not have been to. What I would like to hear is an explanation."

"Well," Taroc started. He was starting to feel like his legs could hold him upright again. At the same time the urge to go grew stronger. What ever was pulling him towards it, it was not going to let him ignore it for long. "I opened the book. Read another lie. The runes did what they did."

"Why would you do that?" Lim asked and took a step to offer a helping hand to Mary, who was once again trying to get on her feet. That he showed no hesitation despite the glowing runes told of the sort of man he was.

"You're the one who asked us to help out with the army outside," Taroc reminded the man. "Figured it might help if we were further along in the book since it seems we grow stronger with every new set of runes." He stretched his legs a bit. Lim had helped Mary on her feet and she seemed to be able to stand on her own now.

"We didn't do this to cause you any harm or worry," said Nell from next to the wall. She seemed to be doing better as well. "If we did, we apologize."

"You certainly had many of the men nervous," said Lim. He didn't sound or look entirely convinced he was being told the full truth of the matter. "And you

look like someone poured a barrel of wine down your throats.”

“Almost feels like it too,” Mary managed to say. She had backed against the bed and was using it for a bit of support.

“We need to get going soon,” Taroc said. He could feel the urge grow stronger. Nell and Mary both nodded in agreement.

“I feel it too,” said Nell and pushed off the wall. While she wobbled a bit, her feet managed to keep her upright.

“It’s getting stronger,” Mary added and pushed off from the bed as well.

“What are you talking about?” asked Lim, now sounding suspicious.

Taroc couldn’t do anything but shrug. “We don’t know. We just know we need to go somewhere.”

“Sounds like you’re not in control, but something else is,” said Lim with a deep frown. He motioned for the guard to give them room. “But stopping you seems like it would be pointless. If you need to go somewhere, I will accompany you along with guards, as long as it is within the confines of this fortress.”

Taroc nodded in appreciation. While he didn’t particularly want the man tagging along with guard, there didn’t seem to be a more sensible option. “We appreciate it.” With that Taroc took a few steps and reached Nell. He put an arm under hers for support and the pair hobbled over to Mary and attached her to themselves in the same manner. With the three of them they managed a relatively stable walk.

The stairway down gave them some trouble.

“You’d think getting down the stairs would be easier,” Nell muttered. She could feel the back of her thighs complain and with each step she feared her leg might not be able to support her.

“It’s actually more difficult,” said Taroc. “At least from what I’ve heard from soldiers. They’ll run up the stairs to man the wall like it’s nothing, but getting down is harder. It’s why many stumble and fall going down, instead of up.”

Mary snorted from next to him. “I don’t think getting up would be easy in our state either.”

“Agreed,” Taroc admitted and focused on getting the three of them down without anyone falling and breaking their neck. Lim and his guards weren’t giving

them any assistance. From the looks on the guards the only way they'd touch any of them would be with the sharp end of their blade. The glowing runes were having a much more profound effect on them than on Lim.

At the foot of the stairway they stopped for a moment to catch their breath. They also needed to figure out where it was they were being drawn to. It took all three of them a bit of searching and concentration to pinpoint it, but when they did Taroc couldn't help but feel like he knew what was coming.

"Towards the dining hall," he muttered.

Mary nodded in agreement. "I get that as well."

"Me too," Nell added. Only in their nightgowns and with nothing to protect their feet from the cold stone floor they were both hugging themselves and shifting their pose to try and keep warm.

"Maybe we should get you some clothes before we go," Taroc suggested.

"No time for that," said Nell.

"I'm fine," Mary assured him.

"Well, let's go then," said Taroc and grabbed the two women. Lim and the guards followed them in silence. On their way they met up with Atomy and Jeder. Both men looked like they had spent a week going through the worst drink holes a port could offer.

"What did you do?" Atomy demanded from the trio while he sought support from a wall. Jeder was next to him, giving them glares like he wanted to stab them.

"Read the book, obviously," Taroc said, not bothering to hide it. They knew. "Not going to make excuses about it. I assume you're headed for the dining hall as well?"

Atomy nodded.

"Saw any others on the way?" Taroc asked, somewhat concerned they might have ran into trouble.

Atomy shook his head in silence.

"Do not worry. I ordered my men to keep an eye on yours, but not to interfere with them unless they were obviously going to do something they shouldn't." Lim said and stepped past Taroc. "If your men are coming here, my

men will be escorting them.”

Taroc gave the man a nod of thanks and started walking again. Nell and Mary followed him as did Atomy and Jeder. Seeing the company they were in neither man felt like complaining about the situation any further. Those were not words for outsiders to hear.

As the group continued on, more of Taroc’s men joined them. Some had their feet back and were walking like nothing had happened while others sought support from lent spears and comrades. All of them had the runes glowing on their skin and Lim’s men tailing them. By the time they got to the dining hall the entire group was together.

Taroc could feel the pull continue. He knew where they were supposed to go now. “A bit more,” he managed to say and continued on. Getting to the corridor with all the armours didn’t take them long. The moment they stepped into the corridor the armours lit up. The closest to Taroc was the first one to flare up, followed by another and then another. It was like a flame running up a stretch of lamp oil.

“What is this?” Lim demanded. He stepped in front of Taroc and glanced at the glowing armours and then him and then at the armours once more. With each glance his expression grew more worried.

“We found these just today,” Taroc said.

“I swear that is the truth,” Atomy added. “I was just escaping the bombardment from the wall and happened to run across these. Noticed the runes in them and informed him.” He nodded towards Taroc.

Lim gave them all some suspicious looks. “How could these be here? Such things should have been destroyed long ago.”

“You know how greedy some lords can be,” Taroc said and hobbled past him. Nell followed him. She was giving the armours curious looks. Mary was right behind her, holding her hands close to herself as if to keep every single rune on her skin hidden, but there were far too many to cover. The glow of them seemed to have grown stronger on all of them and the closer any of them go to a piece of armour the more intense the glow became on both. There seemed to be a stronger reaction to some. It was almost as if the armours were choosing their wearers.

“What are they?” Lim demanded as Taroc came to a stop in front of one of them.

Taroc turned to give the man a look. “They are the armours of the leaders.” Without saying more he reached and touched the armour in front of him. The glow of the runes grew into full bloom, enough so that it blinded everyone looking at him. Lim and his men let out shouts of surprise and fear. Nell, Mary, Atomy and the rest ignored it all and continued finding the armours that spoke to them the most. With each one found, each hand reaching out, a new blinding flash kept Lim and his men from interfering.

Finally it was over. Lim blinked furiously to regain his vision in the dimly lit corridor. The first thing he saw was a glowing figure walk towards him. Behind it he could see several more. He realized it was the armour Taroc had touched. It stopped in front of him and glared down at him with the glowing eyeholes of the helmet.

“Taroc?” Lim asked. He glanced around. His men were behind him, trying to regain their senses. Behind them there were several more armoured figures. All with those cursed runes, glowing as if to taunt and intimidate. He turned his attention back to the figure in front of him.

The only response he got was a hand reaching for the sword fastened to the waist of the armour. The blade slid out with a metal hiss. Even the blade had glowing runes on it.

“Taroc? What are you doing?” Lim managed to ask. His body was screaming for him to back off, but there was nowhere to go. He heard more of the metal hisses and bodies press against him as his own men tried to get away from the armours.

All Lim could do was watch the glowing sword come down at him.

Chapter 18

Watching the machines of war do their thing had always made Angelo feel at ease. There was something deeply reassuring knowing that boulders that could crush a house were raining down on the heretics. Maybe a few would get crushed and get the ultimate judgement in the hands of god.

He watched the crew of a nearby trebuchet load in another boulder and cranks winches to create the powers needed to hurl it through the air. Finally they let it loose and he watched the boulder arch into the sky and smash against the cursed walls of the fortress.

The fortress.

Angelo couldn't help but grin in disgust. For far too long the fortress had remained a thorn in the side of the church. Finally, the elders had had enough. They called on the Crimson Eagles knowing the unit was perfectly suited for such a task and the people in it would not stop until their duty had been fulfilled.

The fortress would fall.

"Inquisitor, the general wishes to speak with you."

Angelo glanced back at the soldier kneeling with his head bowed. "Very well. I assume he is at the command tent?"

"Yes, inquisitor."

"Good. Return to your duties."

The soldier rose up and bowed before walking away. Angelo gave the bombarded fortress one last look before turning. His crimson coloured robe dragged on the muddy ground. The hem was starting to accumulate quite a crust, but it was to be expected. No siege was ever mess free and a dirty hem was a small price to pay for burning heretics.

The command tent was not far away. The centre of the camp was on a small hill that offered a better view of everything around it and the command tent stood at its highest point. Angelo had only been a couple of tent spaces to the left of it.

Most of the tents were big and luxurious as they served to house the nobles commanding the initial army that had kept the fortress at bay for so long. Angelo

quickly walked past them and arrived at the largest of the tents. Two guards stood on either side of the entrance with several more dotted around it to keep all prying eyes away. The guards saluted as he walked past them and entered the tent.

The space was meant for meetings and discussing tactics and that showed. A large table took up most of the area with a map laid out on it along with small figures here and there to mark the position of units. There were several lamps around the area to keep it well lit. There were a few comfortable chairs dotted around so anyone feeling the need to rest their legs could do so during a long meeting. There was a smaller table to the side with some refreshments on it in the form of wine and ale.

Seven men all turned to regard Angelo when he stepped in. All bowed their heads slightly to greet him.

“You wanted to talk with me, general Craft?” Angelo walked to the head of the table, his back to the entrance, and surveyed the map. He noticed slight changes here and there, but nothing major.

“Yes, inquisitor,” said the general. He had a deep voice and the moustache on his upper lip gave him an air of refinement. “As we suspected the siege machines are having little effect on the fortress. It was well built, got to admit that.”

“And the search for how they get supplies?” Angelo asked.

“Nothing yet, inquisitor,” replied one of the men. Angelo regarded him. He was the oldest in the group. One of the local nobles that had been sieging the place for years. He was balding from the top and his hair made a half circle on the sides. He looked like he’d be better off resting at home than camping out.

“Lord Hawkins,” Angelo noted the man. “You’ve had years to discover how they get supplies yet nothing has ever been found. I can’t help but think you’re not doing your utmost to accomplish the task.” There were a lot of things about the siege that could receive the same verdict. Upon entering the camp it had been obvious to Angelo the men leading it had resigned to just keeping it up with minimum effort. He suspected some of it had to do with the monetary support the church had provided them. It seemed obvious not all of that support had gone to

the effort and had instead been pocketed by the lords.

But that was a matter to be resolved after the siege was over.

“I have patrols out looking,” Hawkins replied in a whiny tone a child might use against their parents. It was wholly unsuitable for a man of his age and stature. “But these heretics are clever. We believe they use tunnels of some sort, but where they come out we have no idea. The terrain is hard to travel along the areas where it might come out. We could spend a decade looking and not find it.”

“Haven’t you already spent nearly that amount?” asked one of the other men in an amused voice. Angelo glanced at the man. Lord Leus. A man in his thirties with a brown hair that was cut short. Blue eyes that had a spark in them. Someone the ladies of any court would have swooned over.

“Just let me do it and I’ll find those tunnels in no time,” Leus assured them all with the sort of confidence only arrogance could support.

“Hah! If you want to make a fool of yourself, be my guest,” Lord Hawkins replied. Angelo had no doubt he would have been relieved if the duty was taken off from him.

“Gentlemen. You have your duties. I expect you to fill them,” Angelo said in a stern voice and leaned on the table in front of him. He glared at the two quarrelling lords. Both of them looked put off by each other, but the inquisitors’ gaze was enough to shut them up and nod in agreement.

“The pressing issue are the walls. If our siege machines can’t damage it then we will have to outright assault it.” Angelo gave the general a questioning look.

“Past assaults have been costly and unsuccessful,” the general replied. He took a deep breath. “Even with our forces the casualties would be significant and there is no guarantee of success. Taking down the walls or even the gate would improve our chances significantly.”

“Can we take it without those?” Angelo asked.

“Only god knows,” Craft replied.

It was not the answer Angelo had hoped for. “We must believe god is on our side. We are doing his work. He would not allow the heretics to triumph over us.”

“So far he has not been favourable to us,” muttered the last man in the tent. He sipped some wine from a cup and gave them all a tired look. The black

pouches under his eyes told of sleepless nights.

“Perhaps that is because of a lack of faith in him, Lord Asarit,” Angelo noted.

Asarit shrugged. “I have put my life in his hands more than once and he has always carried me through. My faith in him could not be greater, but the faith of the men and others might persuade him to look the other way.” As he spoke, Asarit kept his eyes on lord Hawkins.

Angelo sighed. It was no wonder the siege had not made any progress. The lords bickered amongst themselves more than they did command their men or plan their assaults. It was common enough, but always disappointing to come across. If only men could put aside their personal motives and work for the common good. His thoughts were interrupted by a soldier rushing in.

“Sirs, you need to see this. Something is going on in the fortress.”

“Be more precise man!” Angelo snapped at the soldier.

“I.. I can’t explain it, sir,” the soldier stammered. The wild look on him was enough to convince everyone in the room they needed to go out and see for themselves. With some grumbling the group headed out.

All the grumbling stopped the moment they were outside and within sight of the fortress.

“What is that?” Lord Leus asked.

“God save us,” muttered lord Hawkins.

The rest watch silently at the bright light shining from the fortress. It waned and went out before lighting up again. It seemed to glow through the thick walls and put the sunlight above it to shame, almost completely displacing it with its own. The light pulsed several more times as the men watched.

Angelo glanced around him. The nervous looks on the noblemen were reflected on the faces of the nearby guards. The unknown never settled well with such types. This time, Angelo couldn’t blame them. The lights were unnerving. Such brightness was not made by mortal men.

Then it stopped.

Everyone waited anxiously for a while, but when nothing happened there were a few nervous laughs here and there and men started to wonder what they had seen. At least it had not ended anyone’s life so it couldn’t have been that bad.

“Seems the show is over,” Craft said.

“Wonder what that was,” Leus said and looked around. “Certainly spooked the men.”

“Not just them,” lord Hawkins muttered.

“Let’s try to remain calm,” said Angelo. “What ever it was it did not harm anyone. Just further proof that the heretics have tricks up their sleeve that play with the mind more than they do with the body.”

The men stood around in silence for a moment. General Craft pulled out a spying glass and aimed it at the fortress to try and see what was going on. After a bit he put down the spying lass and shook his head. “Can’t see anyone manning the walls any more.”

“Our chance to strike?” Angelo wondered.

“Even if they’re not on the walls it doesn’t take long to man them,” the general replied. He took another look at the fortress.

A feint cry carried over with the wind.

It made shivers run down everyone’s spines.

“That didn’t sound good,” Hawkins noted.

“Ssh,” Angelo hushed the man listened. He could hear more screams drift in with the wind. “Are those our men or are they coming from the fortress?”

The general surveyed the front lines. “Doesn’t look like anything is happening on our lines.” He brought his focus back on the fortress.

“A ritual gone wrong for the heretics? Who knows what they’re capable of doing.” Hawkins pulled out a piece of cloth and wiped some sweat off his forehead.

Angelo shook his head, but said nothing. He knew the heretics and their beliefs well enough to know they did not make any sort of nasty rituals. The differences came from differences in interpretations of the holy book. The core beliefs were the same, but they disagreed on some of the details, though those had turned into important ones over time.

“I see movement,” said the general and lowered the spying glass for a moment before lifting it up again to get a better look.

“What is it?” Angelo asked. “What’s going on over there?”

"It.. it looks like they're opening the gate!" the general replied and lowered the spying glass. He gave the men around him a bewildered look.

"Finally seeing the light and surrendering?" asked Leus, sounding more hopeful than he had the right to be.

"Doesn't make sense," lord Hawkins replied. "They've stood up for too long to just give up now."

The general used the spying glass again to see what was going on. The gate was indeed opening. The heavy door was slowly being pushed open. When the crack got big enough men started wiggling through. One, two, three, he counted as they came out and started running towards the army that wanted to kill them. As the first one got close enough for him to see his expression he had no doubt they were running from something that had spooked them more than the prospect of being burned at the stake.

"They look terrified," said Craff and lowered the spying glass. "They're running from something."

"We can't let this opportunity go to waste. Get the men moving. Attack and secure that gate!" Angelo barked out the order with conviction that over rode any questions they might have had of the situation.

Craft did not argue against him. He started barking out orders to the men close by and the nobles followed his lead. They all saw the same opportunity to end a siege that had taken up far too many years of their lives.

The camp around them came alive. Men rushed around with their gear to get in formation. The siege engines laid off on their fire and the first lines of men started entering the field, rushing towards the open gate. Those running from the fortress threw away their weapons and raised their arms as a sign of surrender when they came in contact with the first wave of attackers.

Angelo looked on from the hill with growing confidence as the army advanced. The mass of men moving onward was like an incoming tide. There would be no stopping it if the gate remained open.

"Someone's on the wall," Craft said. "I.. you should see this yourself." He handed the spying glass to Angelo.

He took it and aimed at the wall. It didn't offer a perfect view. The glass

distorted the image somewhat and added a cloudy layer to it, but he could make out the armoured figure easily. It stood on the wall, right above the open gate. It was hard to tell with the lighting, but it seemed like the armour was glowing, or at least parts of it were. As Angelo watched the figure, hoping to make out more details of it, another one joined the one already there. Then another. And another. By the time Angelo lowered the spying glass there were six figures on the wall and it looked like still more were joining them.

“What are those?” he asked and handed the spying glass back to the general who quickly took another look at them through it.

Craft shook his head. “I don’t know, but they’re not normal. You see that glow they have?”

Angelo nodded. “Gives me a bad feeling about them.”

“Should we cancel the attack?” Craft asked, though it was somewhat a moot point as the men advancing had also seen the figures and slowed down. It looked like many had stopped completely at the sight of the glowing armours.

“No. Of course not. Press on. It’s only a dozen men.” Angelo said the words with confidence, but in his heart he was having doubts. It was the sort of primal instinct that couldn’t be pushed away by rational thought.

Craft nodded, barked a few orders and raised the spying glass once more to take a look at the figures. They were standing on the wall, surveying the scene before them. It was obvious by the way they were moving that there was some talk going on. Whatever they had been discussing came to an end as the middle figure drew out its sword. The others followed the lead, pointing the tips of their blades towards the middle figure and its sword.

The glow around them grew stronger.

Soon it was so bright Craft had to put down the spying glass.

“It’s the same light,” Angelo noted and shaded his eyes. The bright, bluish light was starting to rival that of the sun above. It was starting to get to the point where looking at it directly caused physical pain.

“God help us,” Craft managed to mutter as he closed his eyes and looked away. His eyelids weren’t enough to block out all of the light. He put his hands over his eyes. He could hear men shouting and screaming. More panic than pain,

but the impact on morale would be devastating.

Angelo turned away from the light and tried to peek, but even with his back turned the light was blinding. Then he felt the heat. It was like sitting by a fire on a cold night. It felt pleasant for a moment, but then started to become unbearable. He took a few steps in a vain attempt to get away.

The heat got worse.

Knowing how far he was from the source he couldn't imagine what it was like closer. He feared his clothes might burst into flames from the heat. That his skin would turn into char.

Judging by the screams he heard some were meeting that fate.

Then the heat was gone.

The light was gone.

Angelo stood in place for a moment before daring to open his eyes. The world seemed darker than before. The few steps he'd taken had not led him far from where he'd been. Turning back he lost his breath at the view.

The walls of the fortress looked like a molten candle. Stone had flowed like hot wax. It was almost like a wave of water crashing on a beach. It wasn't just the walls that had suffered. The buildings inside them were in equally odd shapes. The ground in front of the walls was charred. As Angelo's gaze moved closer to the front line he started seeing corpses still on fire. The front lines of the troops had met the deadly heat and suffered a horrendous death by fire. It had reached the outskirts of the camp. There were tents on fire, men rushing about, shouting and cursing as they fought to put out the flames.

How many men had died, Angelo could not tell, but he knew it would not be a small number.

"Dear god."

Angelo turned to see the general coming to from the blinding light. He was taking in the scene looking as dumbfounded as Angelo felt.

"General, take control of the situation," Angelo managed to say. It seemed like he had not been heard. "General!"

Craft turned to look at him. At first it seemed like he didn't recognize him. "What?"

“Take control of the situation,” Angelo said again in a firm voice and looked the man straight in the eyes.

“Right. Of course.” Craft seemed to pull himself together and started barking out orders to the men near by.

Angelo sighed and rubbed his arm. His gaze went to the back of his hand. There was something on it. At first he assumed it was dirt, but rubbing didn't make it go away. He lifted his hand to get a better look at it. It looked like something out of an old book. It could have been a letter of some sort. Angelo tried to remove it again. He spat on, hoping it would help dissolve it, but still it remained there. He could only assume it was some sort of mark caused by the intense light.

He didn't spend more time on it. There were more important things to tend.

He followed the general as he ordered men around and the first units started to cautiously head towards the molten fortress.

Chapter 19

Taroc felt like someone had stomped on his head a couple of times. He dreaded the thought of opening his eyes. Instead, he moaned and tried if his hands moved. They did, but the joints hurt so bad he didn't really want to. He tested his legs and they seemed to work too, though the same joint pain was there as well. It shot through his entire body and if he'd had his eyes open he had little doubt his vision would have blurred and approached that darkness of unconsciousness.

He could hear others around him. They were letting out little moans of pain.

"Hello?" Taroc managed to ask. He still didn't want to open his eyes.

"Taroc?" It was Atomy.

"Atomy?"

"Yeah," the man replied. "You dared to open your eyes yet?"

"No."

"Me neither."

"It hurts so bad."

"Is that you, Nell?" Taroc asked.

"I think so," the woman replied.

"Shit." It was the familiar voice of Jeder.

Other voices started joining in. All of them moaning about how much everything hurt. Taroc tuned it out as best he could and focused on his own body. He wasn't wearing the armour any more. Somehow that had been taken off from him. He could feel a belt around his waist and the shape of a sword resting against his thigh. In his other hand he was holding a book. He'd been clutching it so hard his fingers were numb.

Finally, having gathered enough courage, he opened his eyes. He saw a blue sky and some tree branches. It was blindingly bright so he had to raise a hand to shade his eyes. His shoulder made some loud pops and pain shot through his body, but he pushed through it with a grimace. A deep breath and he looked around. Nell wasn't far from him, Mary was right next to her and past them he

saw familiar figures of his men. To the other side he saw Atomy and Jeder. None of them were wearing armours, but they all had weapons strapped to their waist or resting near them.

Looking behind him and in front of him all he could see was grass and some trees dotted here and there. There was no sign of the fortress or the army attacking them.

“Doesn’t look like we’re in danger,” Taroc said loud enough for everyone to hear.

“You opened your eyes? Damn. Wish I could keep mine closer forever,” Atomy muttered from next to him.

“What happened?” Nell asked.

“Last I remember is touching one of the armours,” Mary managed to say.

“We killed everyone,” Jeder managed to say.

Hearing that brought the memories flashing in for Taroc. “Poor Lim,” he managed to mutter.

“We killed everyone in the fortress,” Atomy said in a voice void of emotion.

“We *melted* the fucking place,” Jeder added.

“Burned a lot of the attacking army alive,” Jarvis added.

“Their screams,” Daris muttered. His voice sounded muffled, like he had his arm over his mouth.

Taroc grunted and pushed himself to a seated position. There was a tree right behind him, but not close enough for him to lean against it. It seemed like everyone was arranged around it in a circle. Looking around he counted. Everyone seemed to be there. None of them had bothered to sit up yet, but at least they were all moving and talking.

He glanced down at the book. It didn’t look harmed by any of the events. He was still wearing his own robe. Glancing to the side he could see Nell and Mary were in their nightgowns. Everyone seemed to be wearing whatever they had been before getting worn by the armours. He focused his attention on the sword at his waist. He recognized it. It was the one that had been with the armour. It made him think the armour wasn’t really gone.

A part of him wished the runes had disappeared from his skin, but they were

still there. It was the same for everyone. It wasn't over yet.

"Where are we?" asked Atomy. He had managed to get to a seated position and was looking around.

"No idea," Taroc replied. Looking in any direction there was nothing but grass and trees to be seen. No signs of humans laying hands on anything, no smoke in the sky telling of a village or even a single house. Birds chirping was the only noise besides the wind rustling leaves here and there.

Atomy looked around as well. "At least we're not under siege," he said with a slightly relieved voice.

"Those bastards must be trying to wash shit out of their pants about right now," Jeder muttered as he pushed up to a seated position. He grimaced and tried rolling his arm to test how bad the pain would be. It was enough to make him feel sick to his stomach so he quickly stopped.

"All right. Let's try to get ourselves in shape," Taroc managed to say before Jeder shared any more of his mind with them. "Can't have anyone finding us in this state."

"Doesn't look like we landed here with much equipment. Going to be tough." Atomy looked around and assessed the situation the best he could without moving about. "The ladies going to get cold."

"We'll manage," Nell assured him. She had managed to get into a seated position as well. Next to her Mary was still struggling to deal with the pain she was in. She wasn't the only one still unable to move. Some of the men were in a similar state. It seemed people had different tolerances for the toll their little display of power had taken.

"We need to figure out where we are," Taroc said and tried to get on his feet, but the pain and effort was still too much. He slumped back to the ground and took in a few heavy breaths before he could talk. "We'll need shelter for the night. A fire for warmth."

"Let's first focus on getting on our feet," Atomy added.

"Agreed," Taroc said.

It took them a while. Just getting on their feet was a challenge, but getting to the point where they could walk and move without support was an even longer

ordeal. By the time they were all able to move the sun was starting to set and darkness was taking over more of the land. They did their best to figure out the situation, but the men sent to scout the area came back with news of nothing but empty land. No sign of anyone living.

Crude shelters had been built around the tree they had woken under. They were not much more than a few young tree trunks sunken to the ground and tied together with strings of bark and covered with branches from the fallen trees. They'd keep the worst of the rain and wind away, though luckily it seemed the night would be calm and the temperature wouldn't drop that much.

Food was the part where they were the worst off. Despite scavenging and setting traps all they managed to gather were a handful of berries and a hare that didn't have much meat on it. With everyone feeling like they had not eaten for a week it made for a tense atmosphere as the hare cooked on a fire and Atomy sliced pieces of meat off it and rationed them.

Still, there was no denying the feeling of satisfaction even a tiny piece of meat brought with it.

It was certainly better than nothing at all.

The fire and the shelters made for a comfortable enough night, though they were all so tired and beat up that even under an open sky and a rainstorm they would have slept happily. In the morning most of the joint pains had subdued and everyone had more energy about them. Not wanting to stay in one place, they gathered what little they had and started to move.

A simple coin toss decided their direction since there was nothing to tell where they were or any signs of civilization.

Nell and Mary had it the worst. They only had their nightgowns and no shoes so they had to tread carefully. Most of the soldier had their full gear, though some were missing a shirt or some other piece of clothing. They didn't spend much time talking. Everyone was focused on surviving.

Most of the day went by as they walked through the sparse forest. They made a brief stop at a creek and enjoyed the cool water it provided. With no containers to fill with water they had no choice but to leave without a supply to tide them over until the next source of water.

By the time the sun was starting to set they stumbled upon a road. It looked to be well travelled, but as they started walking in one direction of it they met no one. Though most travellers would have stopped for the night already. They kept going as long as the light lasted in the hopes of coming across a town or even a road side tavern.

They had no such luck.

For the night they settle under a tree not far from the road. They took shifts guarding in case some late travellers happened upon them. The night passed with no incident and most of the next day they walked without eating or drinking. It was past mid day when they saw a small village ahead. Desperate for food and drink they didn't stop to consider how people would react to them simply walking in. With the runes on their skin they would garner a lot of attention, but attention beat starvation.

"Let's be careful," Taroc reminded everyone as they started walking towards the town.

"Let's find shoes," Nell muttered. "I'd be fine not walking for a week."

Atomy ignored his sister and instructed the men. While they didn't draw out their weapons they did tense up and become more alert.

They passed the first building without seeing anyone.

A well seemed to serve as the centre of town. There was a large beaten area around it, no doubt serving as a common gathering place and the area where the various harvesting festivities took place. It was surrounded from all sides by buildings. Most prominent was the tavern, the only two stories tall building in the entire village. There was a blacksmith opposite to it, on the other side of the clearing. A small church was between those two buildings, straight ahead of the group. It looked barely big enough to hold half the villagers in it, but it was a bad sign for the group. If the church was present then the welcome was unlikely to be friendly.

"Sure looks deserted," Taroc said, voicing the feeling all of them shared. Usually there was some sign a town was alive. Window shutters getting closed if the strangers looked to be trouble. Children on the street getting called home by their parents. Dogs running about, cats hunting for mice, all of that was missing.

Not sign of smoke from any of the chimneys. It was like the town was abandoned even though the buildings looked like they were well looked after.

“Haven’t seen anyone. Not even a rat,” Atomy said and looked around. His hand was on his sword. Every hair on his body was standing up.

Taroc stood still for a moment and listened. All he heard was the creak of the tavern sign as wind pushed it. “Well, let’s check out the tavern. Maybe everyone is just inside.”

“Doubt it,” Jeder muttered loud enough for everyone to hear. Atomy gave him a stern look before heading for the tavern door.

Instead of being greeted by a warm fire and the merry conversation of customers they were met with a thin layer of dust and dank coldness that told the building had not seen a lit fireplace in a while.

“Hello?” Taroc asked in a loud enough voice that anyone in the building would have heard him. There was no response. Atomy gave a few hand signs and the men spread out to search the building.

“No one here,” said Jeder as he came down the stairs. “Only empty rooms up there.”

“Same here,” said Atomy. “The kitchen, the owners rooms, the bath, all empty.”

“All right. So no one is here and it looks like they haven’t been for a while. Good for us.” Taroc gave them all a look. “We’ve got a roof over our head and we can probably find some food and clothes. So get to it. Search the town. We’ll see to it that this place is warm when you get back.”

Atomy left one man with Taroc, Nell and Mary. The trio started searching for food and lighting the fireplace while the rest of the men went out to see if they could find anyone still in town.

Taroc was happy with what found in the cellar. There were barrels of ale and wine and tucked away in a closed room there were meats hanging from hooks along with jarred goods and a big wheel of cheese. He also found sacks full of flour along with salt and various other spices. He lugged a lot of it up to the kitchen, though he had no idea how to make anything out of them.

He decided to find someone who could actually cook to look through the

items.

In the common room he found Nell and Mary. They'd managed to find some clothes for themselves from the inn owners room. The shirt and skirts didn't fit them perfectly, but beat walking around in their nightgowns. Now they looked like a normal pair of hard working women instead of someone who had been driven out of bed by a fire.

The two women had managed to dust some of the tables and light the fireplace which was slowly bringing a comfortable warmth to the room.

"I found some food," Taroc said.

Nell stopped wiping one of the tables and straightened herself up. "Good. We're all starving."

"I don't know how to cook anything," Taroc admitted to them.

"Of course you don't," said Mary and threw down the rag she had been using to wipe the counter. "I'll go take a look."

Taroc nodded. "Thanks."

Not really having anything more to do he went to sit at a table near the fireplace. It wasn't cold outside, but the stone building was not the sort to warm up easily. Even the summer sun kept the place relatively cool. Besides, they'd need the fire to cook things. It was obvious that despite there being a kitchen, a lot of the food had been prepared at the main fireplace. The large cauldron and other items near by told of that.

He watched Nell continue dusting off seats and tables. She looked like she fit right in. Like she had worked there for most of her life. There was even a small smile that passed her lips from time to time. Taroc could only guess what thoughts had made them appear. It was oddly comforting watching her. Though she wasn't doing anything special it had a normalcy to it that had been lacking from his life in recent weeks.

Time flew by so fast he was snapped out of it when the door opened and Atomy walked in with the entire group of men he had left with. Many of them were carrying stuff with them, ranging from clothes and boots to food supplies. It looked like they had gathered up all they could carry.

"How is it out there?" Taroc asked. "Find any villagers?"

“Not a soul in sight,” Atomy replied and put down a sack he’d thrown over his shoulder. “It’s creepy to be honest. We found houses with the table set. Food still in the process of being made. It’s like the people left so quickly and suddenly they didn’t have time to grab anything with them.”

Taroc frowned. “Not like people to run and leave behind everything they own. Most would stay and defend it against whatever was coming their way. They know how much it means.”

“Like I said. Creepy.” Atomy glanced around the common room. “We found some food. Where should we put it?”

“The kitchen. Mary is in there right now trying to figure out what she can make from what I found.” Taroc pointed towards the doorway behind the counter. A few men headed that way with the goods they were carrying.

“Found some clothes too. Boots and stuff. We’ll see what fits who and who needs what.” Atomy took a seat opposite to Taroc. “At least we’ll leave better equipped than we came here.”

“Once we get some food in our stomachs everything will feel a lot better.” Taroc was tempted to open up a barrel from the cellar, but he knew it was better to wait for actual food. Drinking ale or wine in an empty stomach could lead to some unpleasantness.

“We’re going to have some talking to do as well,” said Atomy and gave Taroc a stern look.

Taroc nodded in agreement. “Let’s get some food first.”

It wasn’t long before an enticing scent started coming from the kitchen. A bit later Mary walked out with a tray full of ingredients and Jeder followed her with a bucket of water. They set up the cauldron in the big fireplace and by the looks of it chucked in pretty much everything they could find, from pieces of sausage to beans and carrots. It looked to be a hearty stew that would feed them all and leave enough leftover to tide them in the morning.

It took a couple of hours before the meal was ready. Most of that time was spent in silent reflection. They all had things to sort out in their minds. They all knew there was going to be a discussion. A few of the men opened a barre of ale, but kept their drinking to the level of keeping their throats moist as they talked in

hushed tones at one of the tables. They were all thankful to rest their feet after all the walking.

The meal Mary had cooked with a bit of help from Jeder and finally Nell had their mouths watering once it was all set and done. There were loafs of freshly baked bread with a hard crust. The stew was thick and filled with chunks of goodness. They all dug in with an appetite of starving wolves and for a while all the sound in the room was the fire cracking and people munching on food accompanied by the occasional satisfied sigh as someone emptied a tankard of cool ale.

The fire had warmed up the room nicely to the point where it was starting to be almost too much, but not quite. It was comfortable and with full stomachs everyone felt relaxed and drowsy. Taroc surveyed the people at his table

Atomy looked relaxed enough. He was lazily taking bites from his last slice of bread that he was using to clean up his bowl. Nell was sitting next to Taroc. She looked like she wanted to just lean back, cross her hands on her stomach and close her eyes for a quick nap. Taroc couldn't deny feeling the same.

Mary sat opposite to Nell, looking just as drowsy, if not more so. She had spent a lot of time making the meal all of them had enjoyed. She had gotten plenty of thanks from the men for it. Taroc wouldn't have been surprised if the simple meal had been enough to ensure every single one of the soldiers would look after her more than anyone else. Filling someone's stomach could be a powerful tool in making them like and care for you.

Feeling like the moment was right, Taroc stood up and made a loud cough to get everyone to quiet down and pay attention. "Well, we started the day with empty stomachs, but now everyone seems to have had their fill. Things are looking up."

The words managed to bring a few brief smiles on the faces of his audience.

"As for our current situation, well, I honestly don't know what to say. You've seen this place we've arrived at. No idea where we are, why the village is empty or how we even ended up here. Not encouraging words, I know, but that is our situation."

"What were those armours?" Jeder asked. His voice had the starting signs of

drunkenness. Just a tiny bit too loud with more confidence than warranted.

Taroc nodded. "I'll tell you what I know." He told the story as he'd pieced it together from the various texts. Everyone listened with no interruption. The importance of the armours was not lost on anyone in the room.

"And here we are," Taroc said as he finished telling what he knew. "Given that we all still have the weapons I doubt the armours themselves have vanished. Given their nature I suspect they will appear when needed. There were hints towards that in the texts I saw."

"So we're the new leaders of this cult?" Nell asked. There were a few grunts from the men at the question. None of them were the sort to be excited about the prospect.

"I don't think we're anything more than we set out to be," Taroc replied. "We don't have to go around acting like leaders. We choose our path."

"Right until the runes decide otherwise," Atomy pointed out with grim nods of agreement from a few of the men.

Taroc had no counter to it. An uncomfortable silence grew and took over the room. A few tankards hitting the tables as they were emptied was the only sound to be heard along with the crackling of the fire.

"What we need to do is figure out where we go from here." Taroc finally broke the silence after it grew almost tangible. "The fortress is gone and with that our best chance of finding any books that would tell us more about our situation. The only other place I can think of that might hold such tomes is the main library of the Church, but I'm sceptical of that. The inquisitors have no doubt perused through it and burned what we're looking for."

Another stretch of silence took over the room. It was a lot to think on. Everyone knew the church wouldn't let them be, not after what had happened at the fortress. They'd hunt them where ever their reach could take them and that was most of the known world.

"At the very least we should stick together," Nell finally said. "Going our separate ways sounds like an easy way for us all to end up dead."

There were nods of agreement to it which was reassuring. It seemed no one wanted to take on the world alone. Taroc figured some likely thought the runes

would prevent anyone from separating from the group and he had to admit the possibility of that was high.

“No one is going at it alone,” Atomy agreed. “What ever comes we face it together. That’s our best chance of staying alive. The trouble is, where do we go from here? We could try to cross the ocean, but that would just land us in the hands of heretics who’d have no trouble killing us.”

“Not that different from our current situation then,” Jeder added in a dry voice.

“At least here we can talk with people. There the language is different. We’d stand out even more,” Taroc said as he did not like the idea at all. “For now the best idea might be to just find out where we are, exactly, and make plans after we find that out. If we’re far enough off we might have some time before word reaches the local lords and inquisition squads.”

“Well, that’s tomorrows work,” Atomy said and finished his tankard of ale. “We could all use some proper sleep.”

“Agreed,” said Taroc, though he couldn’t help but feel like the conversation had gotten them nowhere.

“Hold on. What about these armours?” Jeder stepped in. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but it makes me fucking nervous. I remember how it felt when that thing wrapped around me. Ain’t a feeling no man should suffer through. Now you’re saying they’re just out there, somewhere, tied to us, and they’ll appear when ever? I’m not good with that.”

Taroc sighed. “Not much I can say about the armours. I just don’t know. Not how they work, what they do, why they chose us, not much of anything. Best we can all do is test things. I could be entirely wrong and the armours are gone. We just have the weapons left.”

“So who’s going to try and get their armour to appear?” asked Atomy. He glanced back at the men. No one seemed to want to volunteer.

“I’ll do it.”

Everyone turned to regard Mary as she stood up. No one had expected her to be the one to volunteer. Truthfully no one had expected anyone to volunteer. They watched as she grabbed the sword that had been resting against the table. Now

that Taroc paid attention to that little detail, he looked around and saw that everyone had their weapons close by. Even Nell sitting next to him. Taroc noted even he had the blade right next to him, resting against the table. He had not given it a second thought. It had simply gone where he had.

Mary didn't seem to struggle with her blade despite the fact it was a heavy looking one. She pulled it out of its scabbard with ease and held it in her hands. Everyone looked at her with anticipation. She looked back at them with a confused expression. "What do I do?"

It felt like a silly question, but a valid one.

"We don't know," said Taroc as patiently as he could. "Maybe try closing your eyes and focus on the armour. Call it with your mind. Maybe that will work."

"All right." Mary closed her eyes, took a deep breath and seemed to sink deep into herself as she focused. The room was silent. People were holding their breaths in anticipation. For a while nothing happened, but then a slight glow started to creep into the blade in Mary's hand. It grew stronger and then a bright flash nearly blinded everyone. Once they regained their vision they saw Mary standing there, now engulfed in her armour.

With the glowing runes the armour looked almost as if it was made of silver instead of iron. It fit her perfectly and despite the bulk made her look every bit as feminine as she did with normal clothes. The helmet covering her head had a pair of wings on either side that swooped upwards. With one hand she raised the protective mask that covered her face and looked at them all with wide eyes.

"How does it feel?" Taroc asked.

"I.. I can't really describe it," Mary managed to say as she herself took a moment to inspect the armour. "Feels very light. It wasn't actually that hard to call it. It was there, waiting, just needed to reach for it."

The breast plate was almost flat. There was a slight slant to it so that any hit would be deflected away. There was chain-mail visible in the joints and other places where flexibility was needed. It wasn't the bulkiest of armours nor the most protective, but certainly enough to get the job done while still allowing for good mobility. The runes engraved on it gave it a more refined look than was to be expected.

“At least she’s in control,” Jeder added. “Last time it didn’t work like that.”

“Last time the runes had us under their control when we touched the armours,” Taroc added. “Doesn’t mean they’ll always be in control.”

“I’d rather they never had control of us,” Jeder countered and took a swig from his tankard.

“You’re not the only one who hopes that,” said Nell. She stood up and walked over to Mary and touched the armour. She ran her hand over it and came eye to eye with Mary. “We’d all give up a lot to go back and avoid the runes all together.”

She parted ways with Mary and grabbed her own sword from next to the table. She pulled it out, closed her eyes and focused. It happened quicker than with Mary. A bright flash once more blinded everyone and when they regained their vision Nell had her armour on.

The bluish glow of the runes made it look almost black, a stark contrast to the almost silver coloured Mary standing next to her. It was just as elegant as hers, save for the missing wings on the helmet. Instead there was a ring of leaves that circled the entire thing, almost like a tiara.

“Well, seems like it’s easy enough to summon those,” said Taroc.

“But can they get rid of them?” asked Jeder.

Taroc gave the two ladies a questioning look. He was certain they’d be able to make the armours disappear just as easily, though he feared they might feel a bit fatigued after it. Seemed like the armours sapped a lot of strength if they were used.

Mary pulled down the visor on her helmet and stood still for a moment. Taroc had expected a bright flash to occur again so he was as surprised as the rest of them when the armour started to slowly disappear. It disappeared from top to bottom in a series of sparks that shot upward. It was like a smith hammering a hot piece of iron. A most impressive sight.

“Smart,” said Atomy. “A bright flash as a first attack to blind the enemy and then an impressive display for the defeated enemy.”

It didn’t take long before Mary was standing in front of them in the clothes she had worn before. The only thing that remained of the piece of armour was the sword in her hand. She stashed it back in its scabbard and let out a sigh.

“You all right?” asked Nell.

Mary nodded. “You don’t feel it when you’re wearing it, but as soon as it’s gone you feel the energy it sapped from you. Best we all are careful how much we use them. I imagine if used for too long you might end up dead from exhaustion when you make the armour disappear.”

With that warning Nell made her own armours disappear. It went off in a similar show of sparks. When it was fully gone it was obvious she was struggling to stay upright. She quickly made her way to the table and sat down. She gave Mary a look. “I can see what you mean. If we’re going to be using these then we need to be properly rested and fed.”

As if to underscore her point her stomach let out a growl.

She chuckled. “I feel like I could eat another meal.”

“There’s plenty still left,” said Taroc and gave everyone in the room a look. “I suggest no one else tries to use the armours until we’re properly rested. Obviously the strain varies from person to person. Mary was relatively all right while Nell was far worse off. No need to risk anyone getting injured.”

“Like I’d use that thing even if my life depended on it,” Jeder muttered and got some agreeing nods.

“All right. That’s enough serious talk for tonight,” said Taroc. “Tomorrow we’ll try to find out where, exactly, we are. Everyone should eat their fill and get a good night’s sleep. Plenty of beds upstairs so everyone gets a comfy place to rest.”

With that the evening started to wind down. Atomy arranged for a few guards to keep an eye out for anything, but other than that most got a good night’s rest. Slowly, the common room emptied as people headed for bed. Mary and Nell ate a second helping to regain some of their strength and by the time they headed upstairs with Taroc the sun had set.

The night passed without incident.

Chapter 20

“Well, we’re fucked.”

Atomy felt like it wasn’t the first time he heard Jeder make the remark, but he couldn’t deny he was likely right. Looking on from the roof of the inn the cloud of dust coming closer told of their approaching doom. The banners clearly visible at the front labelled the troops that of the king of Francor.

It also told them clearly enough where they had landed.

In the midst of a war.

It was a war that had lasted for two years already. To have started from a simple land dispute along the border it had snowballed into something that had engulfed many more nations. Francor was pitted against a coalition of smaller kingdoms who, together, rivalled it in strength. There had been many bloody battles, land had been claimed and lost, farms burned down, fortresses besieged.

And it all had taken place on the other side of the continent from where the group had discovered the armours.

“No wonder this place was abandoned. Right in the middle of the god damn front,” Atomy muttered.

“That army looks like it’s headed straight for us,” Jeder pointed out.

“Unlikely they’ll stop,” Atomy said. “Maybe we can hide in the cellar.”

“You’re more hopeful than I am,” Jeder replied. “If they’ve been marching for long a village like this is a great stop for some rest. And soldiers tend to like to look around, especially the cellar of a tavern. Always wine and ale there to loot.”

Atomy took his spyglass and gave the army one more look. He had to admit the soldiers he could see looked like they’d been on the move for a while. He put the spyglass down and slid behind the protection of the roof. They had been peeking over its top to avoid getting spotted.

“Let’s get down. We’ll either need to move or hide. No way we’re going to let that army spot us.” Atomy tapped Jeder on the shoulder and the pair slid down to the window they’d gone through to get to the roof.

Before Atomy could enter Jeder put a hand on his shoulder and stopped

him. Atomy turned to regard him, but Jeder said nothing, simply pointed to the other side of the village. A cloud of dust was rising up from that direction as well.

Pulling out his spyglass once more Atomy peered at it in the hopes of seeing who it was, though he feared he already knew. A glimpse of the first banner told him all he needed to know.

“It’s the border kingdoms,” he said as he put down the spyglass.

“Sandwiched between two armies,” Jeder muttered. “I’d almost like to be back under siege at the fortress.”

“We best hurry before this place turns into a battlefield,” said Atomy and ducked in through the window.

The window led to one of the rooms and offered a view of the village centre. Rushing down to the common room they found everyone there. All eyes set on them as they made their way down the stairs.

“It’s an army all right,” said Atomy. “King of Francor by the banners.”

No one in the room spoke. They all knew the situation. They all made the connection that they had been flung far from home.

“They coming this way?” asked Taroc and broke the silence that had taken over the room.

Atomy nodded. “It’s not just them. The border kingdoms are coming from the south. Looks like this will be a battlefield soon.”

“We need to get out of here,” Nell said. She got plenty of mumbles and nods in support of that.

“Where can we go without being noticed?” asked Taroc.

“There’s a forest to the east,” said Jeder. “We scurry on over there and hide.”

“Do we have the time to do that?” asked Mary. “From the sounds of it those armies aren’t far away.”

“They’ve probably got scouts ahead of them too,” Zak added.

“Unlikely they’d chase a small group like us,” Atomy countered. “We could pass off as villagers making a late escape.”

“Well, at least that’s one mystery solved,” said Jarvis. “The villagers saw the fight coming and escaped or they were evacuated.”

“We do have one other option,” Taroc said and rose from his seat and started

pace back and forth in front of the fireplace. There was still a cauldron there with the remnants of their breakfast. "The war between Francor and the border kingdoms isn't quite as clear cut as it is publicly said to be. It is not just about land, but of religion as well."

"Aren't all involved faithful followers of the Church?" asked Mary.

Taroc shook his head. "It's not something the church wants to publicly parade, but the border kingdoms have never been fully in their grasp. There have always been pockets of heathens there who do not want to give up their old beliefs. It's why there are many inquisitors in those lands, but they haven't been able to stamp it all out."

"What does that have to do with the war?" Atomy asked.

"It was started over a land dispute between a lord who wasn't very supportive of the Church, but had sympathies for the heathens. The border kingdoms support that lord not only because of the land, but because they are not fans of the Church." Taroc stopped to regard them all. "It might be possible to join up with the border kingdoms. They might give us refuge."

"You sure you want to be all our lives on that?" Jeder asked.

"Sounds risky," Zak agreed.

"Wouldn't we just be putting the border kingdoms at more risk?" Nell asked.

"It's more risky for us if the other side catches us," Taroc noted. "The border kingdoms are already weary of the church and the enemy that supports them. It's our best chance of getting out of here alive *and* to get away from those who would eventually chase us."

There was silence, but no one objected to the idea. After a bit of time had passed Taroc made the assumption the silence was agreeing with him. "So that's what we'll do. Get our belongings together. Do your best to make yourselves look like normal people. We'll first try to get by as refugees who just want to avoid the coming battle. Hopefully that will work. If not, we'll try a priestly approach."

Everyone jumped into action and made the final packing go as fast as possible. There were sacks hoisted over shoulders with rope tied around their mouths for easy carrying. A couple of backpacks were filled to the brim and fastened to the backs of those who had the strength to carry them. Others hauled

smaller packs and whatever else they could carry. Their clothing was already a mismatch of whatever they had been able to scrounge up from the abandoned village. They'd pass for a bunch of peasants running quite easily. The only problem were the weapons each of them had. No one wanted to leave them nor did anyone want them too far off to be pulled out when needed. They did their best to hide what they could, but a couple of them had to keep them openly around their waists to buy some time for those whose weapons were hidden.

The problem was, all the swords were far too fancy looking for any peasant to own. The men wrapped some cloth around the hilts and pommels to hide the expensive looking bits and hoped that would be enough.

By the time everything was packed and they were ready to go they could almost hear the countless feet hitting the ground as the marching armies had gotten closer. Quickly, they slipped out of the tavern and headed where the border kingdoms were coming from. It was somewhat odd that neither army had stopped, but were marching on, despite the fact both armies no doubt had scouts out who had already spotted the enemy. Taroc figured they had chosen the village as a place for a battle. Sometimes things like that happened. Two sides agreed to a time and place and pitted whatever they could muster against each other.

A village was an odd place. Most of the time it was open ground that was chosen.

Rushing through the empty village. Atomy took the lead along with Jeder and Jarvis. Taroc, Mary and Nell made up the core along with Zak. The rest brought up the rear and saw to it that no one would jump them from the sides.

As they left the last house behind, they saw the army ahead of them. It was starting to form lines and setting up formation to meet their enemy. No doubt on the other side of the village similar manoeuvres were taking place.

The group hurried along the road, not trying to hide their presence from the army ahead. It seemed like the more likely way to get past them without getting shot full of arrows. Getting seen from afar would make it clear they were not enemies out to harm anyone. Not that the group was likely to be mistaken for something like that, not with the two women clearly visible in their skirts.

The war zone was not a place where one tended to run into women in skirts.

The closer they got the more nervous all of them started to get. There were glances over shoulders, fingers fondling the hilts of swords and hushed mumbles between men, sharing their doubts and fears of their plan.

The army took notice of them as well.

While they were still setting up their front lines, a group of riders broke through and headed for the group. The six men on their horses didn't seem like a group sent to run them down. In fact, they approached calmly and stopped a bit before the group and allowed them to walk the short distance to them.

The lead rider greeted them with a smile. His helmet was fastened to his saddle, the heavy armour he wore made his head seem smaller than it was, but there was no hiding the innate charisma the man had. His brown hair was cut short and the darker shade of his beard gave him an air of seniority. "Greetings, travellers. Quite the spot you have found yourselves in."

"Greeting, good sir," Taroc said and walked to the front of the group. He hoped the six men would not notice how the group formed the best defensive position as they could against men on horses. "Indeed. We did not expect to see a single army here, let alone two."

The man on the horse nodded. "The village was evacuated well in advance. I try to look after my subjects. It is a shame this place will soon be a battlefield."

"Unfortunately, us travellers do not get the benefits of early warnings. Before we get caught up in what's to come we would very much like to get out of here, sir.."

"Leopold van Harshen," the man replied. "Count of Harshenborg."

Taroc gave the man an appropriate bow to match his title. "Count van Harshen. We are but simple travellers caught in the middle of all of this. Please, allow us safe passage past your army so we may continue on our way."

"Where are you headed to?" the count asked and eyed the group. He noticed the two women for the first time. It seemed to give him some doubts. He did not seem to pay much attention to the runes visible on all of them.

Taroc had ran scenarios through his mind. What place would arouse the least suspicion, what would make sense? There was no clear cut answer and his knowledge of the border kingdoms was hazy at best. He knew the big, important

places and a few smaller ones here and there that he'd seen in reports, but beyond that the lands were a mystery to him. He took a gamble and chose the most obvious place he could think of.

"Our plan was to head to Vacelion," Taroc said. "We hear it is a place where one can start anew and live a life that offers more freedom than many other places."

Leopold nodded. "King Davord is a wise and just ruler. He has given many freedoms to his people and, despite some objections, it seems his way of doing things is working. Indeed, these border kingdoms that you call us are ever changing and expanding. Plenty of opportunity to go around. I wish you the best of luck on your journey. I will not keep you longer. Please, follow us and my men will see you past our army."

Taroc gave the man an appropriate bow of respect. "Thank you kindly, sir. We appreciate it."

The horsemen turned around and let the group walk in the middle of them while they covered them from each side. It was as much to protect them as it was to ensure none of them got lost. There were some nervous tugs at clothing to try and keep most of the runes hidden from view. A few on an arm or face could be explained away, but an entire body covered in them would raise questions.

There were a few glances from the riders as they had time to get a closer look at them. The swords that were not hidden did not go unnoticed. Taroc suspected his runes had caught attention when one of the riders stared at him a bit longer. He hoped that wasn't the case or that it wouldn't turn out to be an issue.

The group entered through the first lines of the army. The soldiers were busy setting up. There was nervous chatter, last minute checks as some ensured their armour was properly strapped on while others were silent, chewing on bits of dried meat or silently uttering prayers while fondling a religious symbol.

Past the front lines there were the archers and mounted troops. Beyond them were the supply wagons and command staff. There were men busy setting up the tent for the leaders. It wasn't just to give them shelter from the sun, but to give the messengers an easy place to find once the battle started.

The group got some curious looks as they walked past all that. Taroc caught

glimpse of what could have been a king dismounting from his horse and other lords rushing to them, but it was not something he paid much attention to. He was too busy trying to stay unseen by anyone with too keen an eye.

It didn't take long from there before they were past the army. Their escorts left them soon after that, leaving only a single man to watch them walk away.

"That went better than expected," Atomy said as soon as they were beyond hearing range. They kept walking at a brisk pace to put as much distance between them and the two armies.

"We should count ourselves lucky," Taroc said and glanced back. "I'm certain the runes were spotted on all of us. A small wonder no one brought it up while we were there. Probably too busy thinking of the battle ahead, but they might do so now as the men start talking."

"Best hurry the fuck up then," said Jeder as he glanced back at the army. "Those fuckers aren't going to be any more understanding of our situation than the church."

"Probably best we get off the road as soon as we're out of sight as well," Taroc said and looked around. Unfortunately it did not look like the forest was going to continue for long. From what he could recall the border countries were largely plains with some hills scattered here and there and most of its forests either closer to the inner kingdoms borders or the unexplored wilderness that was in the other direction. There were tales of kingdoms, even empires, beyond the wilderness, but if anyone had been there they had not bothered to make a believable account of them.

The group kept walking at a brisk pace.

"What's the plan for the future?" Nell asked as they got to a small hill that gave them a good view of the army behind then and, after going down it, would hide them from view.

"Despite all the conflict, the Church has a strong presence in the border kingdoms," Atomy reminded them all. "We can't be carefree here."

Taroc nodded in agreement. "What we can do is disappear into the wilderness," he said. "There's plenty of it here. We can find an isolated place where there's water and an easy source of food. Settle down and take the time to

figure out what's what."

"You think this is something time will unravel for us?" Jeder asked, sounding doubtful. "Fuck. I'm not the sort of man who'd settle down and start fishing or farming. I get itches that need scratching."

"There's a reason most of us are here instead of working the fields," Jarvis added.

"I'm not saying we settle down," Taroc said to quickly squash any such notion. "What I'm saying is we have the opportunity to take a breather. I think we should take that chance."

There was a brief moment of silence as everyone contemplated the idea. No one in the group could deny that recent times had been hectic and that a moment of normal life would have tasted sweeter than honey. The doubt remained.

"The question is, will we be allowed that?" Mary voiced the thoughts going through everyone's mind.

To that, no one had the answer.

"Best we can do is try," Taroc managed to say. "Every plan we make has that same flaw. We don't know what the runes will allow. They can rip us to a different direction at any time."

"You've given up on finding an answer from the books?" Atomy asked.

It was something Taroc had struggled with ever since they had been forced out of the fortress in such a spectacular manner. "I don't know. The best library I knew of, that we could access, was wiped out. There were hints there, but not the ultimate answer. I don't know. Maybe there is another place we could look for, but as of now I don't know where that might be."

"A bit of time to think sounds like the thing we need," Mary added to the conversation. "It's clear none of us have any idea what to do."

There were now accepting murmurs from the group.

"Not for too long," Jeder muttered.

"Just for a bit," Taroc agreed. "Let's keep walking and find a place we can use."

The group kept walking and departed from the road as soon as there was a convenient looking place for it. The tall grass of the plain meant the road was

soon out of view and if anyone travelled it they wouldn't see the group. There was the occasional gentle hill as well that added some more cover. The fact they didn't have much in the way of supplies drew them not far from the road as they held hope there might be a town near by where they'd be able to trade for what ever they were missing. They had plenty of useable goods, but little in the way of food and water.

They kept an eye out for anyone following them, but the tall grass made spotting anyone following a hard task if they knew what they were doing. Not that there was any sign to even suggest someone was after them.

By the time the sun started to set they'd held a few breaks to rest their feet and enjoyed some cold meals. All around them there was the same sort of scenery, nothing that stood out as a particularly good spot to spend the night. They stopped when they found an area with few rocks. Stamping down the surrounding grass into a softening mat made it a surprisingly comfortable place to rest. They didn't dare to set a fire for fear of it giving away their location as much as for the fact they were surrounded by a sea that could quickly turn into a burning inferno if things went wrong with an open fire.

Not a risk any of them were willing to make. Besides, the night seemed to be turning into a temperate one.

Taking stock of their current supplies it was obvious they needed to find some place where to trade. Hunting in the long grass would have been a time consuming endeavour and so far they had not seen much in the way of prey. No doubt there were hares and other small creatures hidden in the grass, but catching any would mean a long pause in their travel. Easier to find a place to trade.

When morning came they headed back towards the road and started following it.

It was a day later that they finally ran into a small village. There were farms off into the distance and a river that cut through the landscape dotted with fields filled with crops. Taroc sent a few of the men to the town with goods that seemed the sort the occupants would appreciate. The rest of the group remained out of the town proper and settled on the river bank, not far off from the first buildings

of the town.

It was a relaxing spot. A couple of the men tried their luck fishing the river while others just laid in the grass and looked up at the blue sky and enjoyed the warmth of the sun. A gentle breeze blew from down river and kept the air pleasantly warm. It was almost too perfect.

There was no hiding that brief moment of disappointment as the men returned from the town. That disappointment was soon washed away by the fact they had gotten nearly everything they had been missing. Apparently the town frequently saw travellers come through and because of that there was a store in town that sold most anything someone like that would want. They now had rations, a couple of sturdy tents, proper backpacks and even some sets of clothes that would tide them over should the weather turn colder. The store had been quite generous in its exchange rate for the goods they'd been offered in return.

"Got any better picture of the land ahead of us?" Taroc asked as the excitement over the new supplies had worn off a bit.

Jarvis nodded. He had led the group going to town. "Two days walk and the grass plains start to turn into forest. Apparently the plain goes more south to north than east to west."

"Any news of people living there?" Nell asked.

"We don't want too many neighbours," Atomy agreed.

"Mostly wilderness, by account of the store owner. Some forest men, trappers and such, but there's a mountain that's completely untouched. Locals tend to avoid it on the account of bears and such."

"Bears we can handle," Taroc assured the group. "Sounds like the place we need to get to."

"There's a river running down the mountains so we should be able to find a good spot to set up," Jarvis added and adjusted the backpack he was carrying. The group was ready to leave, after having distributed the goods for everyone to carry.

"Perfect. Let's get going then." Taroc gave the people around him a look. There were looks of hope, looks of indifference as well as looks of fear. What they all had in common was their focus on him. "If there's one thing for certain in this

world it's the fact we have earned a breather.”

With those words, the group started walking.

Epilogue

The success had been given to him despite Angelo being almost certain he had done nothing worthy of it. None the less the higher ups had praised the Eagles for taking down the fortress that had mocked the Church for so many years. They didn't care about the fact something strange had taken place.

Those that were there remembered. Two years later Angelo still played the events of that day through his mind, trying to understand what had happened. Divine intervention? What other power could melt a fortress that had withstood a bombardment from the most destructive machines man had created? He didn't have the answer. All he had were questions.

Sitting in the common room of the inn, surrounded by the men of the Eagles, he felt alone. Talking to anyone about the event had turned out to be futile. No one wanted to voice their opinion, not when it likely went against the official story of the Church. Not to an inquisitor of all people. Still, Angelo had seen for himself. Others had similar marks on their skin from the event. It was curious. Were they just regular burns he would have expected them to be of all shapes and sizes, but they were all relatively small, things that could be hidden easily, and they all had a similar shape.

Without closer inspection he couldn't say that they were exactly the same, but from a distance he couldn't see much difference to his own mark.

It raised questions whether they were simple burns from the blinding light that had melted the fortress.

With an absent mind Angelo finished his meal and left the table. Walking up the stairs towards his room he was escorted by the laughter of the men from the Eagles. They were as carefree as ever before once they got a few tankards of ale in them, but Angelo could tell the events at the fortress had changed some of them. They were more anxious. Like someone had reached inside them and ripped away a part of them.

Angelo shook his head and sighed. He walked the short distance from the stairs to the door of his room. It was at the end of the inn. He opened the door

and entered the large room. He closed the door behind him. There was still sunlight coming in through the large window that made up a significant part of the end wall.

“Greetings, Angelo Hays.”

The voice startled Angelo. He had not noticed the man sitting in the chair, off to the left from the door. He spun to face him. “Who are you? How did you get in here?”

The man in the chair chuckled. “My name is Taroc Radkel. Please, have a seat. We have a lot to talk about.”

“Taroc.. I know that name.” Angelo made no move to sit down. He glanced at the door he’d closed only a moment earlier. He could make it out no problem. His men would be downstairs and ready to apprehend him in no time.

“Don’t think about running,” said Taroc. “You wouldn’t want your men dying, would you?”

It was the simple tone of his voice that made Angelo realize he meant it. Everyone would die. Not sure how it was possible to get such certainty out of the few words he’d uttered, Angelo did as told and sat down on his bed. His mind had been working on the name and where he knew it from. It came to him. “You’re an inquisitor. You went missing a few years ago under circumstances that left a lot of questions.”

Taroc grinned. “No doubt. Questions are what we all have. I bet you have a few yourself. Of the rune burned to your skin, of what happened two years ago at the fortress.”

Angelo swallowed. “Rune?” He couldn’t help but bring his hand to the mark on his skin.

“Ah, yes, you do not even know that,” Taroc said with a small smile. “It is easier if I just show you.”

The feeling of dread that crept over Angelo only turned more intense when the man sitting in the chair started to glow a light blue. He could see the individual markings on his skin. The runes. He quickly glanced at his own mark and to his horror it was glowing as well. He could feel it getting warm. He looked back up at Taroc. “What is this? Sorcery?”

Taroc shrugged. "It's not important what it is. What's important is what it does and what it means for you and your men." For a brief moment the blue glow grew more intense. Angelo could now feel a burning pain from the mark. It made him groan. He could imagine it getting worse and worse, up to the point where he'd burst into flames. The pain and glow went away as quickly as they had started.

The glow around Taroc died down as well. "I believe that should be sufficient demonstration for now."

"How.."

Before Angelo could say more, Taroc interrupted him. "What's important is you know that burning pain. I can turn it on and off when ever I want. There's no way for you or your men to get rid of it. You are mine to control. And you will do whatever I ask of you or you will endure pain like you've never imagined."

Angelo licked his suddenly dry lips. His mind was making connections that had been unthinkable before. "It was you. You were the armoured people at the fortress. The ones who caused it to melt down."

Taroc smiled. "Guilty as charged. I have to admit it was not planned. Things just worked out that way. That you were blessed with the runes was a nice surprise to discover."

The laugh that escaped Angelo was one of disbelief and bewilderment at the sheer absurdity of the situation. "Blessed? A curse this is!"

"A matter of perspective," Taroc admitted. "But meaningless when it comes to what your options are. You could tell the church of it. They would examine the markings on your skin, on the skin of your men, and then they would deem it heresy. You would be burned at the stake to ensure it did not spread further."

Angelo wanted to protest, tell the man the Church would not punish those who had unwittingly been tainted, but he couldn't. He knew better. There would be no mercy. Just like he had never shown mercy to those he'd judged. It would be as the man said. Death for all.

"What do you want from me?" Angelo asked. A part of him still wanted to deny the situation, but an ever growing part of him held his own life and that of his men higher than the conviction he held for the Church and its teachings.

"It is quite simple," Taroc said and leaned back in his chair. "You are well regarded within the Church. You have access and with your reputation and status quite a bit of freedom to do what you want. I want you to use that freedom to search the library in the holy city."

Angelo frowned. "That's all?"

"For now."

Angelo shook his head. "If that's all you want. What am I looking for?"

"Books of a certain kind," Taroc said knowing this was where things got tricky. "Books that talk about these runes on you and me. Books that talk of the group who controls them. Books that might tell us how to get rid of them."

"You don't already know that?" Angelo asked, surprised. The man in front of him seemed to be in total control of them.

Taroc shook his head. "There's much we don't know. We're at the mercy of these runes as much as you are now, perhaps even more so." He gave the man a stern stare. "The runes have a mind of their own. They have some sort of plan, but we don't know what it is. Sometimes they guide us, quite forcibly, to do certain things. So far you have been spared from that, but it might change, especially now that I've made a connection with you. It might become more difficult to hide what you are."

A door opened in Angelo's mind. A door that revealed the full horror of what he had been dragged into. If the runes worked as the man claimed his body was no longer his own. His mind was infested by something foreign and there was no telling what it would compel him to do. The sins of those actions would fall on his soul and the punishment would be his to carry while what ever controlled him would be free of it all.

That thought was enough to make him swallow hard to try and keep the uncontrollable panic swelling inside him from running loose.

"Now you're understanding your situation," Taroc noted as he observed the man. He couldn't help but grin. "Fear not. You are not alone. We need you. We will do what we can to protect you and your men." Taroc paused for a moment. "Though I suppose they are now our men."

"We?" Angelo managed to ask as his mind grappled with the situation he

found himself in.

“There are many of us,” Taroc said. “We are the core of this.”

The immediate thought Angelo had was that all he needed to do was kill the group of people and he'd be free.

“Do not think killing us would get you out of the situation,” Taroc said, seemingly reading the man's mind. “The runes are on you and your men and they will remain whether we live or die. Not that killing us would be easy either. Remember. We made that fortress melt and that was two years ago. We've had time to hone our skills.”

“Right,” Angelo managed to mutter. His mind raced to find more solutions to the bind he was in, but none were quick to come to him. “It'll take a bit to sort out everything here without raising suspicion. I'll head for the library after that. I also can't do much if someone higher up orders the Eagles to do something that requires me to go with them. The border kingdoms have been up to something lately and the Church is starting to think it needs to get involved.”

“The border kingdoms aren't a concern,” Taroc said and stood up from the chair. “Plans are in motion whether we like it or not and they won't be stopped. Unless you find what I have asked for.”

A chill ran down Angelo's spine. The way the man spoke, with a mix of sad resignation and fear, told of a man who had fought and lost. Not that the bit about plans in motion sounded particularly promising either. Still, he made note to find out more about the situation with the border kingdoms. Obviously, something was brewing there. Something that the Church would have to pay attention to.

“I will do my best,” he assured Taroc and stood up as well. It was starting to seem like the meeting was over. He hoped it was. Spending any more time with the mysterious man would only lead to further concerns. He could actually feel the connection that had been made between them. It was not a mutual one. He was in control.

“I know you will,” Taroc said with the sort of certainty that could not be dismissed. “Expect to hear from me from time to time.”

“It's dangerous coming to meet me,” Angelo said. “There are many people

around me. You will get spotted.”

Taroc snorted. “It’s no concern.”

With those words he disappeared.

Angelo took a startled jump backwards. There had been nothing to draw attention. One moment the man had been there, the next he had shimmered into nothingness. No bright flash of light, no sound, nothing to alert anyone of him passing. A truly frightening power.

Feeling like his mouth had gone through a drought, Angelo sat back down on his bed. He couldn’t help but glance around the room nervously. Maybe the man had not gone after all.

The situation weighed heavily on him. So much so that he spent much of the night awake, worrying, trying to come up with solutions, but none came. Finally, he was too exhausted and fell asleep in his clothes.

A knock on the door woke him up. For a moment he hoped it had all been a dream, but a quick look at the rune on his skin cleared that suspicion right up. He could swear a residual heat remained in it.

“Yes,” he called out, inviting in who ever was at the door. He bounced up from the bed in a vain effort to hide the fact he’d slept in his clothes.

The door opened and one of the soldiers peeked in. “You asked to be woken.”

“Yes. Thanks you.” Angelo had forgotten all about it. He had not forgotten the promises made last night. “Find the scribe. I need to dictate a few letters. And inform the captain we will be leaving here as soon as a few things have been put in order.”

“Yes, inquisitor. Where will we be going?” the soldier slipped in the question in a casual manner, no doubt to satisfy his own curiosity.

“The holy capital,” Angelo replied with a knot in his stomach.